It's Beth Blake's final year at Netherfield Academy. Although she doesn't want to say goodbye to her four roommates, she can't wait to escape the stuffy upper class boarding school and return to the real world. But reaching the end of the school term won't be easy, not when the school is trialing co-ed classes with a group of guinea pigs from Pemberly Prep. Among them are Charlie Brackenwood and his best friend William Davies. It's hate at first sight for William and Beth, but romance might be on the horizon between our heroine and the handsome new student teacher; Gideon Wilson.

Or is it?

There's far more to Gideon than meets the eye, and none of it's good. To Beth's surprise, she might just find what she's looking for in a far more unlikely person.

An adaptation of the novel 'Pride and Prejudice', by Jane Austen.
Chapter 1

“It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man of good fortune, must be in want of a wife.”
~ Jane Austen, Pride and Prejudice.

Chapter One

“Rightful property of some one or other.”

“Oh my God!”

Beth Blake barely had both feet out of the car when she was set upon by a strawberry-blond ball of energy. It was the first day back at Netherfield Academy and Beth had hoped it would be a calm, relaxing, transitional day which would ease them into the new school year. She ought to have known that with friends such as hers, there was no such thing.

Luxury cars filled every parking space. Parents and personal staff aided students in lifting their trunks and cases from the vehicles. One would be forgiven for thinking some were moving in permanently from the sheer amount of luggage they’d brought along. Beth travelled light. Her suitcase, backpack, and guitar case had been hurled unceremoniously into the back of her father’s pickup truck before they’d made backside numbingly long journey from home to school.

Her father - Greg - had disappeared to help a chauffeur with his head under the bonnet to restart his vintage car. Had he not, Beth was sure that Lisa would have batted her long lashes at him and asked for assistance with her own cases. The two girls were so vastly different that it was difficult to picture them as friends. Yet - there they were - going on for seven years at that point. Beth stood with her arms outstretched to the sides while Lisa clung to her, her head against Beth’s chest, bouncing on her heels and making them both bob up and down as she did.

Beth patted Lisa awkwardly on the shoulder. “Okay. Good to see you too,” she said, noticing the way the new students were looking at the pair of them like they were crazy. “You’re crushing my tits, Lis’.”

“Oh, sorry!” Lisa removed herself only to cling to Beth’s arm instead. “I have the best news ever!”

“My summer was good, thanks. And yours?” Beth replied.


“I know.”

“Oh. Oh, right. Anyway; best news ever!”

“So you said.”

Lisa groaned. “Can you not at least pretend to be slightly interested?”

“I’m interested!” Beth assured her friend. “Interested and numb from the waist down.”
“Well, if you will drive in a crappy old -”

“Well, if you will drive in a crappy old -”

“Tell me, then.” Beth interrupted. She wasn’t about to listen to Lisa’s insensitive comments which always reminded her of the vast difference in their financial situations. Beth leaned back against the truck and twisted her dark wavy hair around over her shoulder so it wouldn’t catch any of the flaking, rusted patches of paint.

“Okay - so - you know we’re going co-ed, right?” Lisa prompted, her eyes as fiery as her hair.

“You know, I don’t think I noticed during any of the assemblies, meetings, or the open day, or even when we got the letters sent home about -”

“Shut up. I get it. You remember.”

“And I remember that it’s happening next year. You know, after we leave. Remember that part, Lis’? The part with the date? The datey part.”

A wicked smile played across Lisa’s plump lips. “Then I know something you don’t!”

Beth retorted, “First time for everything.”

Ignoring Beth’s attempts to detract from the sensational news, Lisa soldiered on with the announcement. “The boys are starting this term!”

Beth could well understand the excitement of the students of Netherfield Academy. Being in attendance at the school from around the age of five through to eighteen with only girls for company had to be an odd experience. It wasn’t one Beth could claim to share. Until the age of eleven she’d attended a normal day school with a vibrant mix of genders, ethnicities and backgrounds. To her, it was nothing new.

Lisa grasped Beth’s shoulders and looked her dead in the eyes. In each word that followed she tried to impress the full weight of their importance. “We could get boyfriends.”

Beth laughed so loudly she made a twelve year old girl nearby cling to her mother in fright. “Sorry. Sorry,” she apologised to Lisa. “I just... really? I’m pretty sure that’s the last thing on their minds.”

“Well… we’ll see. Don’t cry to me if you’re the only single person left at the end of the year.”

“I promise I won’t. Now, are you gonna help me carry this stuff inside?”

Lisa took one look at the battered suitcase and made her excuses to leave. Something about spreading the word. If the entire female student body wasn’t aware of the newcomers by evening, Beth would be very much surprised.

Silence and peace restored, Beth took a moment to draw in a deep breath through her nose. Netherfield always smelled of freshly cut grass and a sweet floral haze Beth was never sure she should attribute to the well kept grounds or the mix of perfumes adorning her classmates. Knowing that it was the last year she’d spend at the academy brought on a strong mix of emotions. Sadness at the thought of leaving somewhere she’d become so familiar with, and joy that she wouldn’t have to breathe the same air as the infamous Chantelle Brackenwood after the next July.

Her father had finished with the engine. He returned with motor oil on his hands - which he rubbed off on his jeans - before collecting his daughter’s luggage on her behalf. Beth was by no means a delicate flower of a girl, but he wouldn’t be deprived of the opportunity to carry her bags.
into the school one last time like the proud father he was.

Greg Blake was a reliable sort of man. The kind of man who was the first to offer up his help to anyone who might have need of it, whether they deserved it or not. Beth pushed herself off of the truck and stuffed her hands down into her jeans pockets. “Done?” she asked.

“Nothing I couldn’t handle.”

“Didn’t doubt you for a second.”

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Elly-bear.”

Beth winced. “Really? In public?”

“Just because you’re all grown up, it doesn’t make you any less my Elly-bear.”

Beth had to smile at her sentimental father even if she was cringing inside. “I know. Just - just not in front of my friends, okay?”

“Understood.”

Despite her sometimes abrupt way of speaking to her father, Beth really was fond of him. He was the only real parent in her life and, as such, they’d formed a bond that would be impossible for anyone to break. Being away from him for school had been a heartbreaking experience for Beth when she’d first been sent to Netherfield. But the education they were able to provide her was unrivalled. For the sake of her future, she and Greg had endured the separation.

After all, a certificate of education from Netherfield Academy was worth its weight in gold.

Which was just as well when one considered how much it cost every year.

As for Beth’s mother; she hadn’t died or anything nearly so tragic. They weren’t such a broken home that Greg spent rainy days staring wistfully out of the window longing for his late bride while weeping over a wedding photograph. No, his ex-wife was happily married to a man with an obscene income and occupied herself with spending his money in the south of France. It was during one of her infrequent bouts of parental concern (or perhaps a spontaneous burst of guilt after too much wine) that she’d wondered about the life of the daughter she’d left behind. Somehow she’d convinced her new husband to part with a sizeable amount of cash to provide an education for the child he’d never met, and Beth found herself thrust into a school full of the children of high society players and celebrities.

As Beth and her father crossed the grounds to enter the dormitories, Beth listened to the passing conversations of nervous new students who felt that they might not fit in. She’d been much the same when she’d joined the secondary education section of the school. Boarding wasn’t available to anyone under eleven years old, and living away from home at that age could be an intimidating prospect. Although Beth’s fears had been based on entirely different foundations than theirs; when she’d first arrived she’d been worried she’d be chased out by the manservants of her new classmates for being such an audacious commoner as to trespass in their hoity-toity school. It soon became apparent that such girls were in the minority. Besides the labels on their clothes, there were very few differences between the rich and the poor at that age. It helped that Beth had four very understanding and friendly roommates to rely on.

After seven years, they felt more like her sisters than her friends. So when Beth found her usual room, and that Jenny was already inside, she felt a rush of affection for her best friend. The girls made a noise so high pitched that only dogs and teenagers would be able to pick up on it as they embraced, Greg winced and left his daughter’s things on the bed beside Jenny’s.
“I missed you!” Beth declared.

Jenny replied, “I missed you too!”

“You two were together most of the summer,” Greg chuckled. “Which reminds me - Jenny - thank your mother for me. I was happy to get rid of Beth for a couple of weeks.”

“Cute,” Beth muttered.

“It’s no problem. You know she’d be on my back if I didn’t get Beth to stay over.”

“Ask if she wants to keep her next time. Then I can turn her bedroom into something useful.”

“Like a gym?” Beth suggested.

“I said useful. Not my worst nightmare.”

“Yeah, yeah. Don’t you need to get going?” Beth asked. It was a long journey, and the thought of her father being on the road when night fell was always one which left Beth feeling uneasy. His reflexes weren’t what they used to be, and the thought of him being in an accident was more than she could stand.

Greg opened his arms and beckoned Beth closer. She shuffled her feet along the carpet and made a show of groaning with displeasure when she was crushed against his chest in a bear hug. Jenny giggled softly. Coming from a single parent family herself, Jenny understood the close relationship one built with their guardian when it was the two of them against the world. She also understood the pains of that parent being humiliatingly clingy in public. Greg released Beth and announced, “Okay, I’m going. Try not to cry.”

“I’ll do my best,” Beth vowed, making her voice tremble as though she were about to burst into unruly tears. “I’ll be strong. For your sake.”

Greg gasped dramatically, gripping his chest. “You poor, brave soul! Say nothing more! I will away at once!”

“Good.”

“Ouch. So mean!” he swept in to kiss his daughter’s cheek. “Bye, Jenny. Try not to kill her before the end of the year.”

“Bye, Mr. Blake! Drive safe!”

He didn’t stick around for further farewells. Beth didn’t blame him. Drawing out their goodbyes would only make it harder on them both. Her eyes lingered on the door, a small hope still remained that he’d change his mind about leaving her there and take her home. It was a childish hope. The kind of feeling one had every time they had to leave someone they loved regardless of circumstance. It was quashed when Beth turned and instead focused on her case and backpack. Although it was a minimal amount of luggage, the prospect of unpacking was no more appealing. Sensing her friend’s reluctance, Jenny told her, “The sooner you start, the sooner you finish.”

“Easy for you to say. You’ve done all yours.”

“Because I don’t see the point in delaying the inevitable.”

“Wanna do it for me?” Beth asked.
“No.”

She groaned. “Fine. I’ll be mature and stuff.” Beth tipped up the backpack, emptying the contents across the sheets. As she sifted through the tangled pile of clothing she asked offhandedly, “Have you seen Lisa yet?”

“Are you trying to ask if I’ve heard about the boys? Or if Lisa's actually been by?”

“Bit of both.”

“Yes and yes.” Jenny smirked. “I think she’s already picked out her future husband.”

Beth snorted, “Poor git. He won’t know what’s hit him.”

Jenny perched on the edge of the bed, the mattress dipping only slightly under her weight. “Don’t be like that.”

“Like what?”

“Just let her have fun with it. The novelty will wear off soon.”

“Maybe. Anyway, they’ve got every girl in the school to choose from, and I doubt there’ll be many of them to start with. Odds are we won’t have anything to do with them at all.”

“Doesn’t mean Lisa isn’t going to try.”

“True. I just hope her trying doesn’t get us in trouble.”

Speak of the Devil and she will appear, flushed and still as over-excited as ever. “Talking about me?” Lisa asked as she bounded into the room, unperturbed by the prospect of being the subject of gossip among her friends. “Wait - did I miss your dad?” she asked Beth.

“He just left.”

“Aw man!” For a moment she appeared utterly crestfallen. “I love Greg. Something about the greasy mechanic is so -”

Beth interrupted, “If you say hot then I’m going to -”

“Hot.”

Beth swallowed hard. “I think I just threw up in my mouth a little.”

“You just don’t see it because you’re his daughter,” Lisa reasoned.

“And I’m pretty happy I don’t see it precisely because of that,” Beth agreed. “Anyway - did you see Meg or Chrissy on the way in?”

“Here I am!” Chrissy announced at the door. Every bit as silly as Lisa, the girls shrieked, embraced, and jumped up and down excitedly when they saw one another; thus fulfilling every stereotype about teenage girls in under a minute. Chrissy was the more mature of the pair in both manners and appearance. When she and Lisa weren’t joined at the hip, Chrissy was able to hold a sensible conversation with anyone she pleased. It was unfortunate that they were seldom out of one another’s company long enough for Beth and Jenny to enjoy such a privilege.

Chrissy was tall for her age. She was curvier than Jenny who could boast a similar height, but had a more willowy frame than her friend. Dark haired and blue eyed, Chrissy had an enchanting way
about her, and was able to appear alluring and mysterious when her mouth was closed for more than five minutes.

The final member of their company wandered past their room in a daze. Meg’s unruly curls bobbed by behind Chrissy, making the girl turn to watch her leave. The group exchanged concerned glances before Beth left to chase her down. Typically, Meg had her headphones on, her eyes half lidded as she succumbed to the hypnotic murmur of the audiobook which had her utterly distracted from her surroundings. It was only when Beth grasped her jacket hood that she realised where she was and turned to look her friend up and down. “Hi, Beth,” she greeted somewhat meekly while taking off the headphones. “When did you get here?”

“A while ago. Room’s back that way,” Beth said, motioning back over her shoulder.

“Sorry. I was just - you know - it’s a new book and I wanted to -”

“Say no more,” she smiled. “But, you know… Most people listen to music when they’re walking around.”

“I guess...”

“Wait,” Beth looked around Meg’s feet. “Where’s your stuff?”

“Huh?”

“Did you lose your bags again?”

Meg blushed, her dark skin igniting with a pinkish hue. “I - I didn’t -”

Beth held out a hand for her to take. “Come on. I’ll help you look for them.”

Meg obliged. Knowingly, she asked, “Are you trying to get out of unpacking.”

Beth cleared her throat. “I’ll do it later. Come on, let’s go.”

So much for a calm, quiet first night back at the academy.
Chapter Two

“Her report was highly favourable.”

When dawn broke over Netherfield Academy the very next morning, the girls blearily rejoining the world of the living did so with the knowledge that they would soon meet the objects of their desire; the hapless boys who’d been thrown - unprepared and unassuming - into their world. It was a merciless scramble for the showers followed by a stampede through the corridors to reach the school from the dormitories.

It was a crush Beth and her friends were happy to miss. Well - Beth, Meg, and Jenny at any rate. Lisa and Chrissy had woken with the sun and fought to be first in line for morning assembly, skipping out on breakfast in the house dining room all for the sake of those precious front row seats. Beth wasn’t sure she’d ever known the pair to willingly crawl out of bed before the hour had hit double digits in their long friendship. If the boys were able to inspire such a change in her behaviour, then they might not be as disruptive an influence on her friend as Beth feared.

Then again - Lisa had already suggested that they sneak over to their dorms and steal their underwear - so Beth felt some of Lisa's bad habits were too deeply ingrained to be changed by their male classmates.

The packed assembly was very much as Beth and Jenny predicted. That is to say - it involved their headmaster welcoming the new younger students and the male interlopers - and then turned to uproar when he rolled out the new school rules which included a ban on relationships between students. Beth could understand why they might wish to avoid such dramatics in an all girl school. Fighting with another girl for a boy wasn't something Beth had ever been inclined to do, but not everyone was the same. Bitter rivalries were not going to do anything to improve on an atmosphere which was already tense enough with the promise of final exams looming on the horizon. It didn't help that the test class of boys sent through were all in their final year. Perhaps the administrators and school board had hoped that with age there would also be a certain level of maturity, and that the girls and boys could mix without succumbing to their raging teenage hormones.

Fat chance.

They’d soon learn that it would have been much better to ship over boys too young and awkward to be considered desirable by the general female population. Introducing a group of young men who were almost finished with puberty was proven to be a mistake when they walked out on stage and a collective sigh of desire rose from the crowd. It had been such an unexpected sound that the headmaster had stumbled throughout the rest of his announcement, perturbed by the sea of hormonal girls he was suddenly so aware of.

It was just as well the older students didn't have classes for the day. Given the stress the teachers knew awaited their students when school was back in full swing, and the attention they'd need to provide to the newcomers who would take longer to settle, the staff allowed those in their final year to have one day of relaxation before they were thrust into their studies and revision. It was a day which ended with the annual celebratory dance in the evening. Every girl unable to attend because they were too young felt a rush of envy for their peers, one which was exacerbated by the
fact that - for the first time ever - there would be boys to dance with.

Now, anyone who had seen a teen movie with a makeover montage would be excused for believing the preparation for a party involved giggling, singing into hairbrushes, and the odd pillow fight. The fighting was about the only accurate part of the Hollywood version of the event. Everything else about it was ugly and brutal. Girls shrieked at anyone who took more than twenty minutes in the shower, fought over hairdryers, and wailed with despair when they suffered an unfortunate outbreak of acne that not even the best concealer could hide.

Beth was relieved that the process was far more subdued in her room. For Beth, having little interest in dolling up like a pampered princess had some perks. It meant she had perfected the art of looking halfway presentable with very little effort on her part. As such, she was able to dedicate her time to her friends, helping to bring out their best before the big night.

Beth clenched her teeth around the hair clips she'd stuck between them and dragged a brush through Meg's impossible curls. The poor girl winced and whimpered as each tangle was tackled, gripping the sheets and trying to keep her eyes from watering. Beth reached for a bottle of hairspray and gave Meg's hair another dousing. The bottle was getting low and she had a growing concern for the hole in the atmosphere she was making worse with each spritz. “Have you ever considered getting this chemically straightened?” Beth asked.

“No,” Meg answered quietly. “Should I?”

“For sure,” Lisa offered up her opinion without invitation. “Then it wouldn’t take so bloody long for Beth to do anything with it. She’s gotta do our hair too, you know?”

Beth retorted on Meg’s behalf, “That’s not why I suggested it! Her hair’s lovely as it is. Meg, I’m gonna go for clips because I can’t get it straight without turning you into a fire hazard. Five minutes, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Whatever,” Lisa said offhandedly, unconcerned with Meg’s suffering. Sweetly she asked, “Jen, can you zip me up?”

Jenny had made herself ready with expert efficiency. She was a role model to the other girls, that was for certain. In a beautiful powder blue gown, she floated like a mesmerising spirit across the room to Lisa, her golden locks cascading down over her back, decorated only with a simple silver circlet. Such natural, simple beauty was the envy of every young woman whether she admitted as much or not. Lisa was the polar opposite, but that was what suited her. She’d painted her face with make-up until it was a masterpiece which reflected the outrageous and confident young woman inside. Her dress was so incredibly tight it was practically a second skin. Jenny bit down on her lip in concentration as she tried to force the zip up her friend’s back, Lisa huffing and wiggling as if it might help.

After much struggling, Lisa was finally dressed. Her jubilation was interrupted by Chrissy announcing at the door upon her return, “That’s mine!”

“What is?” Lisa asked nonchalantly.

“That dress!” Chrissy persisted, clutching her towel around herself. “I was going to wear that! Take it off, you’re stretching it!”
“I look better in it than you do!” Lisa argued. “Besides, you have at least three more. Wear one of those.”

“That’s not the point!”

“Guys!” Beth shouted over them. The fighting came to an abrupt halt. In a bid to keep the peace, Beth suggested, “Why don’t you wear a different one for tonight? You can let her borrow it just this once.”

“Why are you taking her side?” Chrissy demanded.

“I’m taking my side!” Beth corrected. “The side that needs you dry and in a dress so I can sort your hair out in a minute.”

Defeated, but unwilling to lose the chance to have the last word, Chrissy told Lisa, “I’m not talking to you,” before rifling through her trunk to find something twice as beautiful to wear.

Beth busied herself with Meg’s hair while Jenny tried to distract Chrissy by helping her with her make-up and finding her shoes to match her dress. Lisa was too busy being involved with herself to care that she’d caused a moment of upset. The only thing on her mind was the boy she’d latch onto while at the dance, and how he would fall instantly in love with her as soon as he set eyes on her.

Beth had a more realistic expectation of the evening. Being the only girl not to come from a rich family, she knew she wouldn’t be of much interest to any of the young men who might prefer to make some solid alliances that would benefit them and their families. It gave her freedom in what she chose to wear. That said, when she was finally able to focus on herself instead of her friends, she was chewed out over her selection of clothes.

Jeans were not suitable, apparently.

Attacked by her well-meaning roommates, Beth was wrestled into submission, primped and preened until she resembled someone halfway decent. She drew the line at the extravagant ballgown Chrissy extracted from her trunk (now willing to offer one up to a friend if it meant that they would be embarrassed to be seen with her at such a high profile social event otherwise), instead opting for a pretty black knee length dress and a pair of black pumps.

The girls descended the stairs and were checked off their house-mother’s list as five persons eligible for the party. The girls in the common room groaned and stared enviously at the upper-classmen as they watched the gathered group depart once all were present. They returned to watching television, wrapped up in blankets and wearing their most comfortable pyjamas, prepared to spend the evening wallowing in their misery after being left out of the party. Suffice to say, the dorm kitchen had been stocked up with ice cream to help stem the tide of bad feelings amassed on such a night.

Beth linked arms with Jenny and Meg, standing between them as an escort into the room. Lisa and Chrissy retained their composure for all of three steps into the hall before they spotted a group of boys fearfully huddled together and felt that it was their duty to rush over and engage them in conversation. Beth snorted softly with laughter, reminded of a group of startled deer from the change in their expressions when her friends introduced themselves.

Intimidated by the atmosphere, Meg clutched tightly to Beth’s arm. She whispered, “Don’t leave me on my own.”

“Are you kidding? If I did that I wouldn’t have a date for the evening,” Beth replied.
Jenny turned her head, her eyes darting around at the crowd, mentally checking off the position of all the young men in attendance. “Looks like they’re all here. It’s barely enough for one class,” she observed.

“Maybe we won’t end up studying with any,” Beth said. “Lisa won’t be happy.”

“She’ll find them if they don’t find her. They all look terrified. Well - most of them.”

“Can’t say I blame them,” Meg whispered.

“Looks like you have something in common with them,” Beth teased.

The three giggled softly to themselves, slowly letting their guard down. It shot right back up when behind them a boy interrupted, “Excuse me.”

The girls tensed. Together they turned slowly on the spot, unsure of who or what they might find when they looked behind themselves. What they found was a rather attractive creature. He had a cute, boyish face, fair hair, and a handsome smile. The boy wrung his hands apprehensively. He realised that they needed some coaxing to return his address, therefore he introduced himself first, “I’m Charlie.”

“Beth,” Beth said. “Uh - Jenny, and Meg.”

“Nice to meet you,” he said with such genuine feeling that Meg squeaked and ran away. Jenny flushed pink, and Beth rubbed the back of her neck. Hardly a good start. Charlie continued, “Look - I - I’m not good at dancing or anything. It’s just, I saw you over here and wondered if you wanted to hang out, maybe? You’re the only girls who haven’t thrown yourselves at anyone.”

“Well, we’ve not been here five minutes yet,” Beth reasoned.

Charlie laughed, “True. Maybe I was a little quick to - well - anyway… How about it?”

Beth shrugged, “Sure. We can be your bodyguards for the evening. Right, Jen?” Jenny made a high pitched noise. Horrified, she clamped her hand down over her mouth. Beth explained hurriedly, “She’s shy. Not used to boys. Sorry about that.”

“No problem. I think that’s sort of sweet, actually,” Charlie said, his eyes alight with interest.

Beth wasn’t a fool. There was no denying the instant attraction Charlie felt for her friend. Beth felt a rush of pride. Well, who could resist someone like Jenny? She was perfection in high heels. And if she was going to leave her in the care of anyone, she would want it to be a guy like Charlie. Someone who could take initiative without being pushy or too forward.

A wicked idea popped into Beth’s head. She disentangled herself from Jenny. “I should go and find Meg. How about you two keep each other company until I come back?”

Beth didn’t wait for an answer to her suggestion. She was gone before Jenny could protest the arrangement. Not that she’d be able to find the words. Being in the company of a boy had rendered her utterly mute. Beth hoped that wasn’t going to last otherwise it would be an incredibly quiet school year.

She weaved through the crowds, keeping one eye out for Meg, and the other for Lisa and Chrissy. She was both relieved and surprised that they’d found a couple of boys as flirtatious as they were and seemed too distracted by them to cause any other trouble during the party. Beth looked back over her shoulder to see that Charlie was attempting to hold a conversation with Jenny. She
seemed pleased enough with him that she was able to smile and nod, but anything more complex than a one word answer was going to be beyond her until she was fully over the shock of his presence.

While on the hunt for Meg, Beth was oblivious to the girl striding towards her. Said girl bumped into Beth’s shoulder, making her stagger sideways. She turned as if to snap at her to watch where she was going when Chantelle Brackenwood spat, “Did you not get the memo about this being a formal party?”

Perfect from the toes of her designer shoes up to the top of her bleached blonde head, Chantelle was the girl that everyone both wanted to be and wanted to be away from in Netherfield Academy. Her family was obscenely wealthy and she did everything she could to remind everyone of that particular fact. Her dress was an example of this. The hand stitched embroidery and fine pearls adorning the bodice of the exquisite gown was unrivalled by the other outfits in the room. It didn’t stop Beth from replying waspishly, “Didn’t you?”

“This is a one off piece! Designed by -”

“Someone very fancy, I’m sure. It's not like I’m wearing a potato sack, Chantelle. Get over yourself.”

“You might as well be,” she retorted.

Beth didn’t have the energy to argue that she’d borrowed the dress and it was probably worth a great deal of money. It wasn’t worth being drawn into further conversation with Chantelle. She’d made no secret of the fact she didn’t think Beth belonged at their school. She’d gone as far as to petition to have her removed when she found out she’d been admitted. Thankfully her good grades and the good finances of her step-father had kept her a place at the school.

It was then that another boy approached them. Beth wasn’t vain enough to think that he was coming over for her sake. Chantelle was the second prettiest girl in the room (the first being Jenny) and Beth wouldn’t have been at all surprised if he wanted to dance with her. But when he spoke it became clear that he wanted nothing of the sort from anyone. “Chantelle, how long do we have to stay here? If one more desperate girl asks me to dance, I’m going to be sick.”

“What’s the matter?” Beth asked before she could stop herself, her mouth running off before her brain had a chance to catch up.

“You’re related?” he asked curtly.

“Beth Blake. Sorry that I’m not desperate enough to ask for a dance,” she added, feeling some measure of resentment for the boy’s dismissive attitude to the girls she was glad to count among her friends.

He replied with just as little courtesy, “Likewise. William Davies. Although, I will congratulate you on being one of the only girls in this asylum not trying to hang off me or one of my friends.”

Beth prickled. She felt the hairs on her arm stand on end as a buzz of hatred flowed through her after his comments. It was exciting to have boys there, and it was only natural that the girls were going to get a little carried away until they were used to them. It didn’t mean William had the right to look down on them for it. Unable to stand being in their company a moment longer, Beth succumbed to her temper and allowed it to take control of whatever words chose to tumble forth from her mouth. “If you’ll excuse me, I’d rather not be standing here when you rage-vomit all over the next poor girl who tries to strike up conversation with you. But here’s some free advice; try not to be a dick to everyone here. You’re in a room full of people you’re going to have to deal
with until the end of the year. Suck it up.”

Resuming her search for Meg, Beth abandoned the hateful pair so that they might wallow in their own bitterness and misery. The encounter had left an unpleasant taste in her mouth. It was one she tried to wash down with a drink from the tray of a passing waiter. Honestly, the rich really did have the right idea about school social gatherings. It wasn’t a punch bowl and buffet table kind of event.

Charlie and Jenny caught her eye, and Beth spared them a helpless smile. They were getting along far better than they would with her lingering around as Jenny’s wingman. It was a shame that leaving them meant she appeared to be something of a loner.

The situation was soon remedied when a girl said, “Hey, loser.”

Beth jumped and whipped around. She grinned from ear to ear when she set eyes upon a petite Asian girl in a pretty white dress. Beth threw her arms around her and the pair embraced excitedly. “Georgia! I missed you!”

“I missed you too! Sorry I didn’t get to see you guys over summer, but Grandma -”

Beth assured her, “It’s totally okay! And we have classes and lunch breaks for catching up, anyway. You have to tell me everything about Korea.”

“You bet. And I brought you back sweets, just like I promised.”

“You’re the best!” Beth left her glass on the tray of a passing waiter so she could clasp both of Georgia’s hands in hers. She looked down into her deep, dark eyes imploringly. “I need a favour.”

“What?”

“The gossip. If anyone knows, it’s you. Who’s who? Who should I be avoiding?”

“Ooooh. That,” she said coyly. “Okay, you know that guy talking to Jenny?”


“Minted. Completely minted. And you’ll never guess who his sister is.”

“Sister? Does she go here?”

“Oh yeah. It’s Chantelle.”

“Chantelle Brackenwood?! Upper-middle class Barbie is his sister?!”

“I swear. Blood relatives. Not even an adoption. He transferred in with his best friend. His name’s -”

“If you say it’s William Davies then I might cry.”

“How did you know?”

‘Typical,’ Beth thought to herself.

“I think I just completely humiliated myself in front of him, But he was being really rude. You’ll never guess what he said about -”

“What who said about what?” Charlie asked, no doubt having spotted Beth in the crowd with
another new face and thought he should introduce himself to all of Jenny’s friends. From the way he beamed and kept casting glances down at Jenny it was clear that he was already irrevocably smitten.

Beth opened and closed her mouth stupidly. She looked to Georgia for help, unsure if she ought to continue speaking ill of William in front of his friend. She decided not and opted for silence instead. It was the safer choice. Charlie continued to wait on an answer. Beth muttered, “I was just - you know - your friend William doesn’t seem happy about being at the party… Maybe he’s tired?”

“Will just doesn’t know how to have fun,” Charlie laughed. “And he hates dancing. My sister’s the only one who can make him do it.”

“Your sister goes here?” Jenny asked. Beth wondered exactly what they’d been talking about if they hadn’t discussed families thus far. “Do I know her?”

“It’s Chantelle,” Beth answered quickly. “Chantelle Brackenwood.”

“Oh! Oh. Well - well, she’s - she’s nice….”

To be precise, Chantelle was nice to people she thought it might be an advantage to know. Jenny was one of those people. They had old money and an even older reputation. No matter how wealthy Chantelle’s family was, they couldn’t buy good breeding or the kind of notoriety Jenny’s family enjoyed. Old money was something even Lisa’s family could claim, which meant she also enjoyed the benefit of Chantelle’s civility when they were in company.

Beth could boast no such claims for herself. She was from a broken home, lived in a small flat with her father, and had no relatives of note as far as she was aware. She made do with being a decent, sensible sort of person with enough brains about her to make use of a decent education. She was decidedly normal, and content to remain just so.

Oblivious to the feelings they all had for his sister, Charlie offered his arm to Jenny. She didn’t hesitate to take it, which was a bold move for her. “I’ll introduce you to William. I know he’d be happy to meet you.”

Beth wasn’t sure about that. Then again, William might be in a better mood to receive the conversation of a demure, polite girl like Jenny rather than someone as brash as Beth took herself to be. She nodded her encouragement so Jenny wouldn’t feel bad about leaving her again for the night. They usually battled their way through any social events at one another’s sides. It was rare for them to be parted, especially by a boy. But Beth felt she could tolerate Jenny’s departure so long as she was in Charlie’s company. And if William was cruel to her in any way, then she wouldn’t hesitate to track him down and kick him in the family jewels.

Beth took Georgia’s hand, “Let’s go find Meg before I make a prat of myself in front of any more boys.”

“Are you sure?” Georgia teased. “Not many boys here, so it wouldn’t take that long for you to totally humiliate yourself.”

“Tempting, but no thanks.”

She spared one more glance over her shoulder at Jenny before leaving to track down their elusive friend. Beth suspected Meg had fled back to the dorms, and she was more than happy to chase her all the way there so long as it meant she was far away from William Davies.
Chapter Three

“He is remarkably agreeable.”

Jenny had been late back to the dorm that night. Beth had waited up for her as best she could, but drifted off around midnight and woke the next morning to find that Jenny was already in her uniform and about to leave the room. She’d rushed to get ready for their first real day of school but had only found an opportunity to discuss the previous night when they were seated in English.

After dumping her books onto her desk and checking her hand mirror to make sure she wasn’t too much of a fright after rushing her morning routine, Beth turned to her ever immaculate friend and asked, “So…?”

With a serene smile one only achieved while in the throes of true love, Jenny confessed, “He’s really nice.”

“Nice?” Beth appeared disappointed by this reply. “You can’t even say you like his arse or anything?”

Jenny flushed with colour, “No!”

“So you don’t like his arse?”

“I didn’t look!” she hissed.

“Sure you didn’t.”

“Fine, I do,” Jenny adjusted her books to distract herself from her own lustful thoughts. “He’s just - I don’t even know. He’s not what I thought boys would be like,”

“You mean that he didn’t once scratch his balls or try to burp the alphabet?”

Jenny giggled, “Exactly. He’s sweet, and mature, and he was - attentive.”

“Creepy attentive, or gentlemanly attentive?”

“The second one.”

“Please tell me you’re going to ask him out,” Beth implored. It was only a matter of time before someone snagged a nice guy like Charlie and she felt her friend deserved to be first in line. They were so perfect when they were beside one another that she’d felt like she’d spent the night watching a painting.

“Shouldn’t he ask me?” Jenny wondered aloud.

“What century are you living in, Jane Austen? You have a mouth. Use it to ask him out. Then snog him. A lot.”

It was easy to forget that the girls had been segregated from the boys since a young age. Beth
sometimes thought of Netherfield Academy as a zoo for endangered species. The kind that reared them until they were ready to go out into the wild and be rehabilitated. Except the school bred wealthy, well educated, promising young women who were going to step into the jungle that was high society England.

Beth felt reassured that she wouldn’t be among the gaggle of girls clawing each other’s eyes out for the sake of a boy’s attention in the coming weeks. Having been exposed to them in her old schools, and having grown up with only a father to count on, she knew what to expect from them. Her hopes weren’t high. She didn’t have the same aspiration to find a boyfriend that Lisa did. She just wanted to finish the school year in one piece and move on with her life. But the rest of the school was going to be caught up in a whirlwind of first crushes and heartbreaks despite the rules against relationships. As much as Beth believed that Jenny and Charlie were a good fit, she did have some apprehensions about throwing her friend into the dating scene with so little understanding of what it might entail, and with so many other girls who would envy her for it. Charlie was going to be the object of many a desire, and anyone who felt spurned by him might target Jenny in their anger and frustration.

Choosing her words wisely, Beth advised, “If you’re going to spend time with him - even if you don’t ask him out - just do it carefully, okay?”

“One minute you’re asking if I like his arse, the next you’re acting like this is a sensitive operation. What’s going on with you?”

Beth lowered her voice, “I - I just don’t want you to get hurt. Physically or emotionally. You saw what Lisa was like. Everyone’s hyped up about the boys and loads of people will be into him. Just be careful. Please?”

“Beth, I can barely string a sentence together when I’m alone with him. I’ll be really, really careful.”

“Good.”

“Seats, everyone!” Their English teacher Mr. Hargreaves breezed into the room late and waved his hands to indicate that everyone should be at their desks already. A few boys trailed in after him, heads down, hands in their pockets. They settled on the edges of empty seats, trying to avoid eye contact with their female neighbours.

It hadn’t occurred to Beth that they would have quite so many in their class, nor that they would begin immediately. She thought it might be a slow introduction so that each side could become acclimatised to the other. Sort of like in those wildlife documentaries her father enjoyed watching.

In her head, Beth pleaded with any God that might be listening not to let William Davies be the next person through the door. Whichever deity had heard her prayer answered by making him the second next person through the door. The next had been Charlie. Chantelle followed but soon took the lead again, seeking out appropriate seats so that she could be close to her brother and William. Beth was reminded of a sherpa leading brave new explorers up the side of a mountain. The only thing missing was a yak.

Jenny was far happier to see them than her friend. She blushed when she made eye contact with Charlie, something which made him approach their desk at speed. Beth had the unhappy experience of doing the same with William, although he appeared less thrilled about catching her attention and promptly averted his eyes. Beth had come to understand that if two people had a poor first impression of one another then it seldom improved. She had no ideas of ever being friends with William Davies.
“Hi,” Charlie greeted them both, ignorant of any resentment between Beth and his friend. “Mind if I sit here?”

Jenny motioned to the seat at her side by way of answer and found herself sat between her two favourite people in the world; Beth and Charlie. It was something that placed Beth in an awkward position. She had no one sitting to her left, and with William approaching, she was afraid that he might have it in his head that he should occupy the place.

The classroom door opened and a worried looking Meg entered. She was always so busy being in her own little world that she was never on time for a single class. Beth stood up sharply and waved her over with her entire arm. “Meg! Here!”

William faltered in his steps, looking back to see that Meg had frozen in place, unsure whether she should take the seat her friend was desperately motioning to or if she should let William have it. Realising Meg’s hesitation, Beth persisted, “Hurry up! I have to borrow that book from you. You know - uh - hurry up!”

Mr. Hargreaves peered over his glasses at Beth. “Are you quite done, Miss. Blake?”

Beth nodded. Happy that he’d silenced her, Mr. Hargreaves turned his back and continued to write in his illegible cursive scrawl across the board at the front of the room. Meg shrank under William’s gaze. Meekly she asked, “Were you sitting here?”

William cleared his throat gently. “I was hoping -”

“No, he wasn’t. Sit. Down.”

William rubbed the back of his neck in a rather awkward fashion. “I wouldn’t hate sitting -”

“Meg, class is starting. Sorry, William. I have to study with Meg for this class,” Beth forced a smile, hoping that he wouldn’t question her. Meg shuffled around the boy and settled into the chair, taking her things out quickly and praying under her breath that he’d leave without scowling at her. Really it was Chantelle that the pair ought to have been worried about. If the girl glared at them any harder she’d burn holes into their faces.

Resigned to sitting beside his friend’s sister, William abandoned his pursuit of the chair and strode away, head high, cutting a proud figure despite the spectacle Beth had just made of his attempts to be civil to her. Chantelle welcomed him with a smile, one which turned into a smug triumphant smirk when she shot it in Beth’s direction. It was as if she felt she’d won a prize in securing his company. Well, she was welcome to him. Beth had no interest in being in the company of William Davies.

With Jenny so enamoured with Charlie throughout the lesson, Beth busied herself with whispering to Meg, discussing their notes and other meaningless things that teenage girls liked to chatter about. While Meg was wonderful company, she didn’t quite compare to Jenny. Mostly because she had a keen interest in the lesson and wasn’t easily distracted from the lecture. Jenny would happily be writing silly notes to Beth throughout. She was sure that she would even then if Beth attempted it, but she didn’t think it was right to distract her from Charlie. They had no idea how many classes they’d get to enjoy together, and Beth was certain that Chantelle wouldn’t let her brother spend lunch breaks with them.

It was just as well the pair stole furtive glances at one another when they thought no one was looking. Beth could see it. Each twitch of Jenny’s lips as she fought to hide her smile, each rise of colour in her pale cheeks, and each twirl of her hair around a finger gave away the measure of her affection for Charlie. As happy as Beth was for her friend, she did hope he wouldn’t break her
heart. Jenny wasn’t the kind of girl who could easily stand it. She was too gentle and too kind for that sort of thing. She wouldn’t be able to bring herself to hate him for it. Instead, it was likely she would blame herself if things went badly between them.

Beth sighed quietly to herself and resolved to pay attention for the rest of the class. It was a plan which stumbled somewhat when she caught the eye of someone she hadn’t expected. William had been staring at her quite openly when their gazes met. He wasn’t at all shy about the fact, and held her attention for a full minute before he returned to his work. Beth found herself caught off guard. She wasn’t sure what might encourage him to look at her in such a way. It might have been a tactic to intimidate her. That was something she could easily believe where William was concerned. She barely knew anything of him, but if he kept society with Chantelle then he couldn’t be the sort of person she wanted to befriend. In fact, Beth couldn’t imagine a person she’d hate to be enamoured with more.

Determined not to repeat the eye contact for the rest of the lesson, Beth made a solid, renewed effort to pay attention to her teacher. But the harder she stared at the board, the more difficult it became for her to take in a single word of the lecture. By the time the bell rang she realised she’d not made a single useful note, nor understood any measure of the lesson. It would be just her luck if everything discussed cropped up on their next exam.

A fear that proved to be valid when Mr. Hargreaves closed the lesson by announcing, “This will be important in your tests, so make sure you learn it!”

“What will be on the what what?” Beth asked Meg desperately.

“Weren’t you listening?” Meg asked.

“I – I wasn’t not listening…”

“That’s a double negative,” she said.

Beth groaned. “I’m so screwed.”

“You can borrow my notes later,” Meg offered.

Charlie rose from his seat and helped Jenny from hers. Some of their classmates who’d observed the gesture let out jealous little sighs. Beth thought she heard some ovaries explode at the same time. It was something straight out of a romance movie, and she didn’t blame them one bit for wishing they were in Jenny’s position. Charlie rounded the desk and asked Beth, “Would you like to help Jenny give me a tour of the school later when classes let out?”

“Wasn’t there already one of those?” Meg asked quietly.

Charlie smiled, “Yeah, but I thought it would be more interesting to know where you guys like to hang out.”

Beth understood better than Meg that Charlie was trying to ask Jenny on a date, but wanted to give the impression that he was comfortable with her friends joining them in case she was shy of attending alone. To save Jenny from the embarrassment of having two of her classmates traipsing after her like chaperones, she apologised, “Sorry, Meg and I already have plans. Why don’t you guys go together?”

“If you’re worried about us being an unbalanced group, we can invite Will along,” Charlie said, not quite getting the hint.

Beth had no chance to explain to him. It was at that moment that Chantelle swept in to rescue her
brother from such poor company. She linked her arm through his and asked, “Aren’t you walking to the next lesson with us?”

“Sure. I was just talking to Jenny about a tour of the school later.”

“Really?” Chantelle asked, plastering a sweet smile onto her face hastily for Jenny’s sake. “We’ll go together. The four of us. You two, me, and William.”

“Well, if Beth and Meg want to -”

Chantelle interrupted her brother, “That’s less a tour and more a parade!”

“It’s fine,” Beth interjected, not wanting to see Jenny placed in the awkward position of having to choose between Charlie and her friends. “Meg and I are going to go over a few things from English, so we’re going to be pretty busy. Don’t want to screw up right on top of exams or anything.”

“Don’t feel as if you’re not welcome,” Chantelle said, her eye twitching with the effort it took to maintain the impression of courtesy towards Beth. “I won’t stop you if you insist on joining us.”

“I have no objection to it either,” William agreed, surprising Beth with his sincerity.

It caught Beth so off guard that she wasn’t sure she could reciprocate the sentiment, nor could she find a way to convince herself that it wouldn’t be so bad after all. Instead she packed her things away, then took Meg’s hand. “Come on,” she urged her friend. “Let’s get to the next class before Chantelle strains something.”
Chapter Four

“An affection for her sister that is very pleasing.”

What had started out as one little tour around the school had turned into a daily ritual whereby Jenny was whisked away from Beth, Chrissy, Lisa and Meg to spend time with Charlie, Chantelle, and William. Despite all her assurances that it didn’t bother her, Beth couldn’t deny that she missed her friend’s company. It was still lively in their dorm room each night, but the serenity Jenny brought to their company was notably absent. Beth knew if she made her feelings known to her friend then she’d have no hesitation in dropping the trio in order to make her feel better. This was exactly why Beth kept her opinions and loneliness to herself. She loved Jenny too much to do anything that might hurt her, and she knew that losing Charlie would do just that.

It was on one of the few rare evenings a few weeks into the school term that Jenny detached herself from her new company in order to spend the night in the dorm with her friends. Beth suspected she was more interested in catching up on her homework than socialising with them, but Jenny made a concerted effort to do both at the same time, laughing along with the other girls between scribbling lines of her History essay and checking off the word count as she went. At around eleven her phone began to vibrate on the nightstand. Jenny was the last in the room to check her mobile. Most of the people she spoke to were present, and she wasn’t used to getting messages from anyone else.

Beth paused in strumming her guitar to watch Jenny read the message. She looked so befuddled by it that Beth reached over to snatch the handset and read it herself.

Grls goin 2 watch stars by lake. Want 2 come?

“A fortune in education, and she uses bingo lingo in her texts,” Beth muttered to herself.

“Uses what?” Jenny asked.

“Nothing,” Beth said, handing the phone back. “You should go. But don’t stay out too long. It’s meant to rain later.”

Jenny looked down at the phone, reading the message again. Beth resumed strumming on her guitar. She’d barely let out two notes when Jenny said, “You hate Chantelle.”

“Of course I do. She’s vile. But she’s only like that to me. There’s no reason you should hate her.”

“Are you really okay with me going?” Jenny persisted.

Beth set down the guitar. “Look, it’s not up to me if you go or not. I mean – you might as well, right? Charlie might be there, and I approve of him. He can’t help who he’s related to.”

“Maybe if you two got to know each other, you’d get along a little better.”
Beth couldn’t help laughing. “Sure, okay. You tell her that when she’s ready to stop looking at me like something she stepped in, I’ll be ready to talk to her with a civil tongue. Deal?”

“Fine, fine. I won’t stay out long,” Jenny said, rising from the bed to grab her coat and a pair of shoes.

Beth waited for her to go before she allowed an expression of disappointment appear upon her face. She wasn’t happy about how easily Jenny had accepted that she had no problem with her going. They were usually able to read each other well enough that they couldn’t conceal a single thing from one another. As soon as a boy was thrown into their lives it seemed their relationship was breaking down.

No. Beth wasn’t going to let herself think like that. She liked Charlie and on the few occasions she’d managed to speak to him without Chantelle getting in the way, he’d come across as a really nice guy. If he was going to be at the lake then she had no issue with the night time trip. And her friendship with Jenny could survive absolutely anything, even Chantelle Brackenwood.

There were curfews in place in the school for all students, but it was something of a given that the older few would break them now and again. The school was lenient so long as the students didn’t leave the grounds, and that they didn’t damage the property or cause a scandal with whatever they were doing. Of course, this flexibility and understanding had been all well and good when they had an all female population in Netherfield Academy. With boys lurking around at night, it might have been time for the school to re-evaluate their policies on nighttime escapades.

Beth put the guitar away, suddenly having lost inspiration for music now she was too consumed with worry about the poisonous things Chantelle might be saying to her dear friend down by the lake. She dropped back on the bed, staring at the tiled ceiling and willing her negative feelings away. It was their final year, and the last chance they had to be together all the time before they were separated by adulthood and responsibilities. Beth didn’t want to spend it resenting Chantelle or being envious of Charlie’s closeness to her friend. Nor did she want to spend a second more thinking about William Davies. Beth had realised that it was far too much effort to try to figure out what the boy was thinking, why he might have been staring at her that day in English, and why he had resumed his cold demeanour when in her company afterwards.

It wasn’t long before she drifted into a light, dreamless sleep. It was disturbed by the determined beating of wind and rain against the bedroom window. Beth opened one eye, finding the room dark and the others asleep. Well, all of them but Jenny. Beth checked the time on her phone. It was half past midnight and Jenny still hadn’t returned from her jaunt to the lake.

Beth rose from the bed to peer out through the window. She hoped that she might catch a glimpse of the girls running back to the dormitories in the light thrown out by the motion sensitive lights mounted to the outside of the building. That it was still so dark and peaceful outside (with the exception of the weather) made Beth’s stomach tighten with worry. A flash of lightning illuminated the sky, filling the room with a yellowish glow bright enough to disturb Meg’s sleep. She sat upright in her bed, confused and alarmed. “What was that?” she asked fearfully.

“Lightning. Go back to sleep,” Beth urged.

“Where’s Jenny?” Meg asked sleepily.

“Out.”

“In a storm?”

Beth couldn’t stand just sitting back and waiting. She had a horrible feeling that something had
happened to keep Jenny from returning. True, she might have been back in Chantelle’s room for the night, but she trusted that Jenny would have sent her a message to keep her from worrying needlessly. No, Beth couldn’t believe that she was tucked up safely in bed while her friends fretted about her whereabouts. Something was wrong.

“Bloody hell,” Beth cursed under her breath. She slipped on a pair of boots, grabbed her hoodie, and rushed out of the door. Pulling the jacket on over her pyjamas, she steeled herself against the cold which met her as soon as she was out of the building and in the open. Her phone had a torch application on it which she used to light her way. The deluge of rain assaulted Beth with such persistence that she was soon soaked through, her clothes clinging to her skin, cold and heavy around her.

The gravel path crunched beneath her feet. As much as Beth hated the rain, she was glad it masked the noise so well. Although the teachers tolerated the odd late night walk, she was pushing her luck by being out after midnight. She didn’t want to be dragged back to her room before she’d reassured herself that Jenny was safe and well. It was that need for reassurance that made her press on despite how quickly she found herself suffering from the bitter cold. It was no short trek from the dorms to the lake, and she couldn’t lose heart so soon into her mission.

It wasn’t often a school could boast having such an enormous water feature. It was mostly used in P.E lessons, namely; sailing lessons. The students had the privilege of a heated indoor swimming pool for anything that required direct contact with the water. A short jetty reached from the shore to the water to allow for a quaint perch for anyone who simply wanted to pass the time looking out across the water, and a boat house where all of the school’s vessels were kept when not in use. Surrounding the lake, and indeed all across the grounds, were ancient trees which reached high into the sky. The canopies they provided in certain areas made for excellent hiding places when one was skipping lessons. Beth appreciated the natural touch usually, but found it frustrating that there were so many places Chantelle and her friends might have run off to when the downpour had begun.

She hurried to the boat house first, believing that this was the most likely shelter for anyone who might have been walking by the lake. The wooden building with its high arched glass panes was a majestic place to say it was little more than a glorified shed. Beth reached the door and tested the latch. The heavy iron padlock rattled but didn’t give way. She felt a weight sink in her stomach. They had to be hiding somewhere else.

“Excuse me?” Even through the din of the rain, Beth recognised Charlie’s voice. She turned and pushed her hair from her eyes with a sopping sleeve. Charlie looked startled at the sight of her. “Beth? You’re soaked!”

“You too,” she replied, teeth chattering. “What are you doing out here?”

“I got a call from Chantelle. What about you?”

“Jenny didn’t come back. I was worried.”

“They’re not in the boat house?” he asked.

“It’s locked. You go back that way around the lake, and I’ll check the equipment outbuilding, okay?”

Charlie nodded. “Got it. We’ll meet back here when we’re done and make another plan if we don’t find anyone.”

Beth waited for him to leave first. She wouldn’t have replied to a message from Chantelle,
personally, but she wasn’t related to her. It was a testament to Charlie that he could be so worried about his sister. She turned heel and ran to the outbuilding, shining the light from her phone here and there along the way in case she spotted anyone. Beth found herself completely alone on the grounds until she made it to the door of the shed. As soon as she opened it she found a group of trembling girls huddled together against the cold.

“There you are!” she said with relief. It was a short lived feeling, for Beth soon realised that Jenny wasn’t with the group. “Where’s Jenny?”

“She said she was going back before us, then the rain hit,” Chantelle said. “Where’s Charlie? I called for him, not you.”

“He’s looking for you. Just stay here and I’ll send him over. Which way did Jenny go?”

“How should we know?” Chantelle spat back.

“Jesus, fine! I’ll send Charlie, then look for her by myself. Just don’t move, okay?”

Beth didn’t have time to get dragged into an argument with Chantelle. Jenny had become lost somewhere between the lake and the dorm room, and that meant she might be hurt or something. Beth didn’t like the idea of that one bit. She hurried back to the meeting place, the cold air grating her throat and biting into her lungs with each passing breath.

Charlie was waiting on her when she arrived, pushing his fingers through his fair hair in worry. He reached out to stop Beth and steady her. “Did you find them?” he asked.

“The outbuilding. Jenny wasn’t there, but everyone else was.”

“Okay, I’ll take them back, then I’ll help you -”

“Just – just worry about them first, okay?” Beth asked. “I’ll find her. It’s okay.”

“You can’t search the whole school by yourself.”

“Give me your number,” Beth said, offering up her phone for him to type it in. The exchange was handled swiftly, time being of the essence where Jenny was concerned. Beth switched the torch back on when they were done, hoping that it wouldn’t completely drain the batteries before her search was complete. “If she’s back up at the dorms, let me know and I’ll come back. If not, text me and I’ll tell you if I’ve got her. Deal?”

“Deal. I’ll be in touch.”

Beth didn’t want to tell Charlie about Jenny’s inclination to catch every single cold and bug which passed through the school. Her health had never been the best in the world, and she worried about what state she might find her friend in when she came across her. Beth forced her tired legs back into motion once Charlie was gone. Jenny might well have crossed the lawns or sought out the shelter offered by the woodland trail from the lake to the school in a bid to hide from the rain.

The lawns were the easiest to check first. They were so open that she knew she’d spot Jenny immediately if she’d collapsed somewhere while crossing them. It was unfortunate then that this proved to be an error on Beth’s part. Jenny hadn’t tried to stumble across the grass to return to the dormitories.

Beth doubled back on herself and entered the woodland trail. “Jen?! Jenny! Answer me!” she called out, any concerns she had about being caught by a teacher paled in comparison to her worry for her friend. Beth pushed back her hood which had done little to protect her hair from
becoming heavy with water and sticking to her pale neck.

It was further down the path that she discovered her. Jenny had collapsed beside a tree, leaning up against the trunk, breathing heavily. From the state of her hair and clothes, Beth deduced that she’d been there some time and had fallen over a lot on the way. She was already unzipping her jacket as she ran to Jenny. Beth wrapped it around her shoulders, hoping the extra layer would provide her some brief respite from the cold. She tapped her cheek to try to rouse her, but it was no good.

“Hey, Jen? Jenny! Wake up, please?! Come on!” Beth begged, hugging her friend tightly, praying that she her body heat would help. She felt her phone vibrate in her hand and checked the rain spotted screen.

**J isn’t here.**

Charlie had certainly been quick in checking the dorms for Jenny. Beth supposed he must have sent Chantelle or one of her friends up to the room to take a peek. On the one hand, Beth didn’t want Charlie to have to run back out into the rain for their sake. On the other, Beth knew she couldn’t carry Jenny back by herself. She tapped out a reply rapidly, ignoring the typographical errors she knew must be riddled through it.

Unable to stand the waiting, Beth stood, bringing Jenny up with her. She pulled her arm across her shoulders and tried to bear the girl’s weight as she did. Jenny was thin, but all the water in her clothes and her unconscious state made her impossible to manoeuvre. Beth made it all of two steps before they both fell to the ground. Beth tried to protect Jenny in the fall as best she could, then curled around her to shield her from the rain and further harm.

“Hey!” Charlie called, splashing towards them. “Jen! Beth!”

He pulled Jenny up into his arms without a moment’s hesitation. Beth felt like a weakling for not being able to support her while Charlie made it seem as if Jenny was light as a feather. Relieved that it appeared Jenny had been rescued, Beth forced herself back to her feet. When she staggered, she was steadied by William. Surprised by his arrival, Beth pushed his hands away. “What are you doing here?”

“Helping,” he said, grasping her wrist and pulling her to his chest. “If that’s all right with you?”

Whether it was all right or not, William wasn’t going to take no for an answer. He brought Beth up into his arms, cradling her against his chest like a princess, and hurried back to the dormitories after Charlie. He ignored all of Beth’s protestations that she was perfectly capable of walking along the way. She wasn’t sure what she found more humiliating; that William was saving her, or that she was still wearing her pyjamas while he did it.
Chapter Five

“I have pleasure in many things.”

For obvious reasons, boys were prohibited from entering the girl’s dorms. It had been high on the list of new rules brought in to ensure that the students weren’t distracted by one another’s presence. It was something Charlie and William couldn’t avoid when they were carrying two very unwell young ladies back from their misadventures in the rain.

Their breathless, rushed return woke the rest of the girls from their slumber. Meg squeaked when she saw William and hid beneath the covers. Chrissy had the decency to pull her sheets up to her chin while she watched the events unfold. Lisa had little shame in being seen in her nightgown. She went so far as to climb out of bed to draw attention to herself, standing on her toes to get a better look at Jenny as she was brought in.

Beth wriggled out of William’s grip at last. He helped her to stand and asked, “Which one’s Jenny’s bed?”

Beth motioned to the bed she’d left unoccupied. She and William moved the homework and books strewn across it so Charlie could set her down comfortably on top of the sheets. Beth wrapped her arms around herself, her teeth chattering and shoulders shaking. William couldn’t stand to watch. He removed his coat and draped it around her shoulders, pulling it closed for her so as to protect what was left of her dignity. “I’m fine,” Beth told him firmly. “Stop fussing.”

“You’re soaked through and freezing cold. Which part of that is fine?”

“The part where I can deal with it,” Beth shot back, the chill making her comments sound far more scathing than she’d intended. She pushed her damp hair from her face. “I just – I -”

“You’re worried. I know,” he assured her. “Sit. I’ll go get someone.”

Bitterly, Beth had to murmur a, “Thank you,” to William. He nodded and left without another word. Beth told the girls, “Pretend to be asleep. You don’t have to get a detention for this.”

Lisa hopped back into bed and the three obliged in feigning snoring. They weren’t going to win acting awards any time soon, but it would do to ensure they were free of blame. Beth was more than ready to take full responsibility for what had happened so long as it meant Jenny would get medical help. Her lips were blue, her skin pallid, and her breathing far more laboured than Beth was comfortable with. Charlie clutched one of Jenny’s hands tightly, rubbing her fingers to bring some warmth back to them.

His voice wobbled when he said, “She’s so cold.”

Chrissy dared to peek out from under the covers. She whispered, “Is she hurt?”

“Sick. Go back to sleep. We’ll look after her.”

Jenny was so well loved that even Lisa was having a hard time resisting the urge to watch the trio
worriedly through the dark. When William returned he had the house-mother in tow, and she wasn’t pleased with what she found.

While Beth understood that the staff and students were tolerant of her presence despite her lower status, she also knew there was a certain expectation of her which made them believe she was more prone to breaking rules and ignoring etiquette. It was that tolerance that Beth hoped to play on when the house-mother barked, “Blake! What on Earth were you thinking by dragging this poor girl out in the rain at night?!”

William opened his mouth, and Beth feared he might attempt to clumsily defend her. Beth had no intention of letting Jenny’s reputation be ruined. She apologised quickly, “I’m sorry, Miss. I accept full responsibility.”

“I’m glad to hear it! Good God, girl! You could have killed her! I’m going to call her an ambulance at once. And you are confined to this room until I can talk to the headmaster about what’s best to do with you.”

Charlie stood, “Can I go with her to the hospital? She shouldn’t go on her own.”

“It’s bad enough that you two boys are in this room!”

“That’s my fault, too,” Beth lied. “I called William and Charlie because I couldn’t bring her back by myself. They did it for my sake.”

William watched Beth from the corner of his eye. His expression was difficult for her to read. His mouth was pressed closed tightly and his gaze was cold. She didn’t know if he was angry at her for deceiving the woman, or if he was affronted at the idea of her speaking on his behalf. Whatever his feelings on the matter, he did nothing to voice them, or to claim responsibility for his actions.

Deceived, the house-mother nodded to herself as though making a decision. She ordered, “Apologise to these boys, Miss. Blake. We will be having a very serious discussion with your father tomorrow, I can promise you that.”

Beth turned to face Charlie, finding that he was the easiest to make eye contact with for the sake of making her apology appear sincere. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have dragged either of you down to my level. It won’t happen again.”

“Beth -” Charlie began.

He was interrupted by the stern older woman. “Good. You boys return to your rooms. I will deal with the girls without any further involvement from the pair of you. Out. Now.”

“Yes, Miss,” they said in unison. Charlie was forcibly removed by William, the boy’s eyes lingering on poor Jenny until he was marched through the door.

Whatever the consequences might be, Beth felt that she could bear them all so long as Jenny was cared for properly in a hospital. She sat on the edge of the bed, the weight of her damp, cold clothes surrounding her. Despite all that had happened, she felt a strange source of comfort to help her through the rest of the night; the coat William had wrapped so securely around her shoulders. Even after she was gone, she sat in the dark and stared at the empty bed, the lump of worry which had risen in her throat threatening to choke her as it grew with each moment that passed without news of her condition.

It was a fortunate thing indeed for Beth that she and Jenny were such good friends. Jenny’s
mother was fond enough of the girl that she knew there had been some kind of a misunderstanding about the circumstances which had led to Jenny’s hospitalisation. The school had fallen over themselves to apologise to her after they realised their mistake, going so far as to permit Beth to skip certain afternoon elective classes in order to visit her friend in the hospital.

It was on one such day that she sat beside Jenny’s bed, a book in her hands, reading aloud to keep her friend from the horrors of terrestrial television channels. It was a private room, the bed a little larger than one might find in a public hospital. Flowers sat on the window sill and fruit baskets from well wishers had been left in their wrappings, totally untouched. Jenny complained, “I feel like some kind of terminally ill patient, here.”

Beth closed her battered copy of *A Room with a View* and asked, “Is my reading really that bad?”


“Well, I never said I had a future in acting,” Beth agreed.

“Anyway, it’s because you keep coming here to read to me. I’m starting to think it’s because I’m never going to leave.”

“Anxious to get back to Charlie?” Beth asked. “You’ll be back at school flirting with him before you know it.”

“I’m more worried that you don’t have anything better to do.”

“Better than watching you pretend like you hate those trashy daytime TV shows? That’s the best thing ever.”

“I’m serious!”

“If you’re that serious, then get better faster. I’m going to keep coming back until you recover.”

“Then… can you do me a favour?” Jenny asked.

“Depends on what it is. I’m not taking a love note to Charlie.”

“Can you smuggle me in some chocolate from the vending machine? I’m getting sick of all the healthy food mum’s got them bringing me.”

Beth smirked, “Okay. I can just about manage that.” She rose from her seat, taking her book with her. Before she left, Beth warned, “If I get caught, this was all your idea.”

“I can live with that,” Jenny agreed.

Beth didn’t like to leave Jenny for even a moment. There was nowhere better for her to be than in a private hospital that could tend to her every need, but that didn’t make it any easier on Beth. Despite the fact she had been reassured time and again that Jenny’s condition was not her fault, she felt the weight of the guilt heavily in her stomach. If she’d made her reservations about Jenny’s nighttime jaunt with Chantelle known earlier, Jenny wouldn’t have been out in the rain at all.

Beth took a moment to check the time when she was in the waiting room beside the vending machine. School would have concluded for the day. Chrissy, Lisa and Meg would be back in their room studying or gossiping with one another. A hospital was hardly the most thrilling place to be, and Beth did miss her other friends, but she was indebted to Jenny and her mother for saving her from expulsion. Besides, Beth never felt more at home than when she was with her best friend.
The chocolate bar thunked down into the tray at the bottom of the machine. No matter how much money one spent on their healthcare, they still wanted easy access to sugary snacks. Beth had likely consumed more chocolate from the one machine in the few days she’d spent with Jenny than she would otherwise eat in a month at school. She tried hard not to think about all the money she’d wasted, or the impact it would have on her body.

Beth was busy pondering what else she could afford to buy when Charlie’s familiar voice called out to her across the waiting room. “Beth! Thought I’d find you here!” he greeted, coming to slap her on the back.

Beth staggered forwards and put a hand on the glass so she wouldn’t collide with the machine. She looked him up and down as if hardly believing he was really there. After the entire incident she’d worked hard to avoid talking to both Charlie and William. She was eternally grateful to them both for saving Jenny, but she didn’t need to stir up more gossip than was already rife throughout Netherfield Academy. It was no secret that all four of them had been out of the dorms late at night. Many wondered exactly what had happened to lead to their meeting. All they knew was that the boys had been seen carrying Beth and Jenny back to their room, and that Jenny was now in the hospital for some reason. Even Chantelle had been tight lipped about the events of the evening. Beth supposed because she didn’t dare do or say anything that might ruin her brother’s good reputation. Implying that he’d befriended Beth would do just that.

“What are you doing here?” Beth asked, nonplussed. “Are you here to see Jen?”

Charlie blushed hotly. “I just – you know – I thought I should -”

“She’s in room forty-two. Did you come by yourself?”

“I brought Chantelle and Will with me. They’re taking their time.”

Beth hoped they’d continue to do so. The less time she spent in Chantelle’s company, the better. Beth also had to return William’s coat to him and thank him for all he’d done. It was a display of gratitude she was content to put off for as long as possible. She still didn’t understand what his regard for her was. He seemed all at once caring towards her and infuriated by her. William was just the kind of complicated person Beth tried to avoid.

Still, the pair were on good terms with Jenny, and she was glad she had more visitors to entertain her. “Don’t read to her. I’ve been working through classics and I’m boring her to death.”

“Any suggestions?” Charlie asked.

Beth placed the chocolate bar into his hand. “Sugar. Lots of it. And make her laugh.”

“Should be easy,” Chantelle pitched in, her heels clicking against the tile floor as she approached to save her brother from Beth’s company. “Jenny and I have so much in common, it’s easy to see that I’m the best company for her.”

Beth chose not to rise to her baiting. Proving that she was the barbaric, easily provoked commoner that Chantelle presumed her to be would do nothing to help. Instead, Beth smiled sweetly at the girl. All the while she mentally pictured herself snapping the heels off every single pair of designer shoes Chantelle owned while the girl wailed in despair. With this image lodged firmly in her mind, Beth managed to cheerily say, “She’ll be happy to see you. So long as you didn’t bring books.”

“Well, perhaps if you liked something other than reading you wouldn’t be such bad company,” Chantelle suggested, determined to stir up trouble.
“I like a lot of things. I’m capable of thinking about more than one thing at a time. It’s a skill,” Beth retorted before she could prevent herself. She realised then how awkward Charlie appeared. She knew she’d gone too far to behave so waspishly to his sister in his presence. Her polite demeanour returned, Beth added, “I’m gonna go read for a while. Knock before you go into her room, okay?”

Chantelle linked arms with her brother and didn’t hesitate to spirit him away. Beth was glad to see the back of her, but spared a smile for Charlie’s sake. They said that you couldn’t choose your relatives, and that friends were the family you picked for yourself. Beth supposed there was an element of truth to that. Being an only child, she couldn’t even begin to fathom the complexities of a sibling relationship. For all she knew, Chantelle was a completely different person when she was alone with Charlie. She might even be capable of genuine affection and courtesy.

Beth shuddered.

What a terrifying thought.

With no desire to ponder Chantelle any further, Beth left for the café. As a frequent visitor, she was instantly recognised by the young man working part time behind the counter. There was no lukewarm instant coffee in paper cups in such a high class hospital. Instead the barista took out a fine porcelain cup and saucer. He winked at Beth when she came to place her order, a smile on his face. He was at least two years her senior but it didn’t seem to bother him one bit. “Usual?” he asked.

“Hot, dark, and bitter,” she replied.

“Funny, I thought you’d want something sweet,” he said, making no attempt to mask his flirtatious intentions.

“Maybe later.”

William joined her at the counter. He looked less than impressed by the back and forth. “I’ll have the same.”

Beth snorted softly with laughter. She hoped he didn’t mean he wanted exactly the same, otherwise he’d be in for more than a coffee. Then again, perhaps that was his inclination. She shouldn’t judge. Even if that was William’s taste, the barista didn’t share it. He cleared his throat and set about making the drinks without making eye contact with his male customer. Beth dug into her wallet for the cash when William said, “I’ll pay.”

“Surprising though it may seem, I can actually afford my own coffee,” Beth told him.

“I don’t doubt it. But this is - well - I owe you.”

“For..?” Beth asked.

William rubbed the back of his neck, an awkward habit he and Beth seemed to share. She knew exactly what it meant and smirked, waiting patiently for him to find the right words. He settled for, “Stuff.”

“Glad that’s cleared up,” Beth said. It was against her better judgement that she allowed William to pay for her drink. Once the transaction was complete, she collected the porcelain cup and left to settle at a table with her book. She’d not expected William to follow, although she realised that she should have considered the possibility. He sat opposite her and looked her dead in the eyes. It unnerved her enough to prompt her to ask, “What?”
“Nothing.”

“Aren’t you going to see Jenny?”

“Do you want me to?” he asked.

Beth shrugged, “Doesn’t bother me.”

“But me sitting here does?”

“Little bit,” Beth confessed. She distracted herself by thumbing through the pages of her book. Without raising her gaze she asked, “Are you mad that I spoke up for you when you helped with Jen’?”

“No. Not sure why you felt the need to take the blame for it, though.”

Beth smiled. It was a sad sort of smile. The kind of expression one wore when they’d been utterly defeated by their situation in life and had come to accept it no matter how much they wished they didn’t have to. The kind of smile one made when there was nothing to do but smile. “They would’ve expected it to be my fault.”

“Why? Because you’re poor?”

She flinched at the word. “I guess.”

“Funny. I didn’t expect that of you,” he mused.

“For me to be poor, or for me to save you from getting shouted at?” Beth asked.

“For the girl who nearly bit my head off the first time we met to be such a doormat to a teacher just because she’s not well off.”

Beth opened her mouth to answer back, but promptly closed it. She didn’t have a good rebuttal. William was right that she was quick to snap at people, and that she was still wrestling with her self-esteem when confronted with the fact that she was looked upon for her social standing. He was sharp to have noticed, and Beth couldn’t bring herself to thank him for it. Instead she said, “You’re good at reading girls. You must have been popular at your last school.”

“It was an all boys school.”

“My assumption still stands. Just - you know - with guys.”

“I’m not gay!” William announced loudly.

Beth snorted with laughter while her companion blushed all the way to his ears. She couldn’t help feeling she’d achieved some kind of victory over him, and it was difficult to stop laughing once she’d started. Beth felt she’d not had much of a chance to do so since she’d returned to school. The dull ache in her sides from doing it too raucously was one she’d missed.

Humiliated and hoping to change the subject, William asked, “What were you reading to Jenny?” Beth wiped a tear from the corner of her eye and handed over the book. He turned it over to check the cover. “You read a lot?”

“I prefer music,” Beth said.

“Playing or listening?”
“Both.”

“Are you good?”

“It’s a matter of opinion,” Beth said.

“I hope I’ll get the chance to give mine.”

“I imagine you will whether I want you to or not.”

“Definitely.”

Beth couldn’t help a genuine smile at that. William didn’t dance around with his words. He was direct. It was one of the few things she liked about him. Perhaps the only thing. The moment of peace between them was over in a flash when Chantelle entered the cafe. Her brother in tow, the pair joined Beth and William without invitation. They’d barely been with Jenny a few minutes, to Beth’s mind. She asked, “Is something wrong?”

“She’s sleeping,” Charlie explained. “Didn’t think we should wake her. We can always come back.”

Beth nodded slowly. She didn’t want to wake Jenny either. Even if she said she was bored in the hospital, she was there to recover. To do that, she needed rest. Beth sipped slowly on her coffee. It was scalding but that was how she preferred it. “I should head back when I finish this.”

“Do you need a ride?” Charlie offered.

“There’s no room,” Chantelle said. “Not with the three of us already going back together.”

Beth and William both rolled their eyes. They understood what Chantelle was getting at even if Charlie appeared oblivious. He said, “But if she’s in the front and -”

“It’s fine,” Beth interrupted, hoping to avoid a fight. “Jenny’s mum is around somewhere. She’ll drop me off.”

William held out the book. “Don’t forget this.”

“Thanks,” Beth replied, taking the book, feeling the brush of his fingertips against hers for a second before he relinquished it. “Italy and all that. Can’t get enough.”

“Have you been?” Charlie asked.

“No. But I’ll get around to it.”

“Not for a while, I’m sure,” Chantelle said haughtily. “We can go whenever we want, of course. We have a holiday home there.”

Beth’s tongue failed to communicate with her brain again. She mocked, “Gosh, how awfully spiffing for you. You must be the toast of the country club!”

“Beth -” Charlie started.

She realised her error as soon as he said her name. Too proud to apologise - or perhaps too ashamed of herself - Beth stood abruptly from her seat. “I’m outta here. See you in school or whatever.”

Beth rushed out before she could be followed. She fell from a sprint into a brisk walk when she
was sure William and Charlie weren’t behind her. Wrapping her arms around herself, Beth felt the
guilt of causing such a scene gnaw at her insides. She hadn’t even thanked the boys for what
they’d done for her and Jenny, and instead had made fun of Chantelle. Not that she felt completely
bad about what she’d said when Chantelle was going out of her way to provoke her, but she hated
herself for rising to it.

People like Chantelle went through life without worrying about anything. They had enough
confidence in themselves and their social standing that it didn’t matter who they hurt or stepped
on, because they would never run out of friends or sycophants to be beside them. They never had
to fret about being despised, forgotten, or left behind. These were the things Beth feared all the
time. Once she was out of school, which of those rich girls would still want to be seen with her?
She was just the daughter of a mechanic who dabbled in music. She didn’t think she’d ever
amount to much of anything, and would only be faintly remembered as that poor kid who lucked
out and made it into an elite school. A stain on their otherwise flawless reputation.

Beth didn’t want money or fame. She didn’t want fake friends or designer shoes. In fact, she
didn’t want any of the material things that Chantelle would boast about owning. All she wanted
was to fit in and feel like an equal to her classmates.

That, and a house in Italy.
Chapter Six

“A failing, indeed.”

With Jenny’s impending release from hospital looming on the horizon, and Charlie’s frequent visits to her bedside once he’d been approved by her mother, Beth found that she no longer had a place there. She was certain she’d have been welcome if she chose to go along, but she’d lost confidence in her position as Jenny’s most important person in the entire world. When she was with Charlie, Beth felt like the third wheel. She’d elected to remove herself from that suffering and had spent more and more evenings wasting time in the school grounds instead.

It was on one such early evening that she sat with her back against a tree on a rare warm day, strumming on her guitar idly. The sound was a comfort even if it wasn’t much of a tune. It distracted her from the fact that she felt utterly alone and isolated without Jenny there to keep her company. She could have asked Meg, Chrissy or Lisa to spend time with her but they all had better things to do. Meg had lost herself to her studies, while Lisa and Chrissy were too preoccupied with boys to care much about Beth’s crisis. Georgia was the only other option but she took such an abundance of additional classes that sometimes weeks passed without them crossing each other’s paths. Beth didn’t like to bother her.

She stopped the strings with the palm of her hand, feeling them vibrate feebly until coming to a halt. It was dull to be alone. Sharing a room with four other girls hadn’t been easy at first because they were always in each other’s business. Before she knew it, Beth had become used to the constant invasions of her privacy. She’d forgotten how to be by herself.

Still, having no company was better than hanging out with Chantelle.

It was just as this thought crossed Beth’s mind that she saw the bane of her life approaching. Charlie waved at Beth with his whole arm. It was so enthusiastic a gesture that it shook his entire body. William appeared more reserved. He stuffed his hands down into his pockets and strode with his head high, an inescapably proud boy in every situation. Charlie threw down his jacket and Chantelle sat on it as if this was a practiced habit the pair had. He wasn’t against the idea of getting grass stains on his uniform and dropped down to sit beside Beth.

“You’re a musician?” Charlie asked.

Chantelle scoffed, “Most poor people have a guitar phase. She’s just trying to be cool.”

William said nothing. He shifted his weight between his feet for a moment as if wondering if he should slum it and sit in the dirt with the others. Beth raised a brow at him and he took it as a sign that he should join the three in the grass. Ignoring his sister, Charlie asked, “Do you write your own music?”

“I’m more of a dabbler,” she said.

“Which is why you’re not very good,” Chantelle said matter-of-factly. “William’s sister is a musician. She’s incredible.”
“Is she?” Beth asked, trying harder than ever to keep any bitterness out of her tone. She had no idea who William’s sister was and wasn’t about to judge her unfairly. For all she knew, this person might be perfectly nice, just like Charlie. It was just difficult for her to keep a civil tongue when she was within five feet of Chantelle.

“She takes it seriously,” William said. “Practices a lot.”

Jokingly, Beth commented, “If she’s anything like you, I can imagine she does. You take everything seriously.”

“What’s wrong with that?” Chantelle asked, gallantly leaping to William’s defence. “Being serious is a good thing. It’s one of Will’s strengths. In fact, he doesn’t have a single flaw.”

“No?” Beth asked. She turned to William, “Congrats on being totally perfect.”

“I’m not perfect,” he said. “I just don’t act in a way that gives people something to mock.”

“Because you’re too proud?” Beth asked.

“You say that like being proud is a bad thing.”

“No?” Beth asked. She turned to William, “Congrats on being totally perfect.”

“I’m not perfect,” he said. “I just don’t act in a way that gives people something to mock.”

“Because you’re too proud?” Beth asked.

“You say that like being proud is a bad thing.”

“Because it is,” Beth replied flatly.

William looked about to argue his point, but he thought better of it. Which was just as well when one considered the bile Beth was always ready to spew when she was riled up by someone like Chantelle. She really needed to learn to control her emotions and temper. It wasn’t going to endear her to anyone if she was so easily provoked. Perhaps she’d mellow out once she was out of the school. Or maybe when Jenny was back. Beth could easily believe that it was the worry she felt increase every day that she was in the hospital which was driving her bad attitude.

Feeling better prepared to continue with the conversation, William said, “I’m not perfect, I admit that. Not because I’m proud, but because I know I hold grudges sometimes. I’m not patient with people. And if I lose faith in someone, they can’t earn it back.”

“Maybe we should talk about something else,” Chantelle suggested, unhappy that William was speaking to Beth as if she was his equal.

“Good idea,” Charlie agreed. “You should hang out with us, Beth. Jenny wouldn’t like it if she knew you were alone all the time.”

“I’m pretty sure she wouldn’t mind.”

Chantelle gasped, drawing the attention of the group back to herself where it belonged. “You know what? You guys haven’t seen the library yet. It’s really quiet. We should go there.”


“Sounds familiar,” Beth muttered. She smiled at him, “It’s fine. If Chantelle wants to take you on another little tour that’s cool with me. I should get back to my room, anyway.”

“Why don’t you come with us?” Charlie asked.

Beth sighed softly. “Charlie - thanks - but it doesn’t take a genius to figure out your sister and I don’t exactly get along. I’m not going to cry over it, it’s fine. You guys go. Besides, I’m pretty sure William just made it clear he’s lost patience with me already.”
Shocked that she thought he’d meant she was one of those people he didn’t have a tolerance for, William declared, “I didn’t mean you! I -”

“Sure you didn’t,” Beth cut in. She gathered up her things and walked away as quickly as she could while still maintaining the illusion of being unperturbed by their intrusion on her solitude. With her guitar bouncing heavily against her back, Beth came to a halt in front of the main school building to adjust it.

It was as she fiddled with the strap that a car came rolling to a gentle stop beside her. The rumble of the engine told of a classic car, the kind that one had to really devote themselves to in order to keep them in pristine condition. Jenny’s mother had a taste for such vehicles. The driver - Bentley - climbed out and rounded the vehicle to open the rear passenger door. He was in his mid-fifties and happily situated in a job that allowed him to drive vehicles he’d never be able to afford himself. His pride in his work showed in his perfectly pressed black uniform with polished gold buttons. He helped Jenny out with such care it was as if she was made of porcelain. “I’ll fetch your bags, Miss. Jennifer,” he told her.

Jenny nodded, smiling when she saw Beth. The pair hugged tightly, over a week’s worth of worry dissipating in the embrace. Bentley returned with her bags and said, “I’ll carry these to your room, Miss. Jennifer.”

“I can do it,” Jenny replied.

Bentley faltered. He was an employee and working under instruction. If he didn’t do his job then he’d get into trouble. Beth was feeling charitable after her poor behaviour towards Charlie and the others. She took the bags from Bentley, “I’ll do it. I don’t care if I break a nail.”

“Thank you, Miss. Elisabeth,” he said, relieved.

“No problem, Ben. Hey, tell Jenny’s mum I said hi, would you?”

“Absolutely. Do you require anything else, Miss. Jennifer?”

“No. Thank you, Bentley,” she said.

“Very good,” Bently tipped his hat in parting and returned to the driver’s side of the car. Beth and Jenny stepped back to give him the space he needed to leave. It was only when he was halfway down the drive that the girls turned to walk back to the dorms. It was a trip they passed in silence, content to just be in one another’s company without distractions. It was these little moments that Beth had begun to miss. There was no need to say anything. The fact they were together was all the reassurance Beth needed to know that things hadn’t changed as much between them as she feared.

Jenny didn’t hesitate to drop onto her bed once they reached the dorm room, letting out a long, relieved sigh as she hugged the pillow. Beth left her bags inside the door and asked, “Are you really that happy to be back?”

“This is so much better than a hospital.”

“Yeah, I can see how sleeping and watching television could get old. Not.”

Jenny rolled over and threw the pillow at Beth. She dodged out of the way and Jenny laughed softly. “It was boring, okay? Seriously boring. I missed it here.”

Beth scooped up the pillow and dumped it on Jenny’s stomach. She disentangled herself from her guitar and corrected, “You mean that you missed Charlie.”
“I missed everyone.”

“Whatever you say.”

“Where are the others, anyway?” Jenny asked.

“Chrissy and Lisa are probably boy hunting.”

“Still?”

“What, you expected that to go away this side of Christmas? Anyway, Meg’s anyone’s guess. Library, I expect.”

“You hope.”

“Well, yeah. You know what she’s like. If she’s listening to one of those bloody audio books she might walk right into the lake,” Beth said. Meg did worry her. Of all of them, she was the one Beth felt would have the most difficulty adjusting to life outside of school. Socially awkward and more wrapped up in the world in her head than reality, moving on from their safe little group into the adult world would be a jarring experience.

“Your concern is showing all over your face,” Jenny said. Beth tried to fix her expression into a more neutral one. She perched on the edge of the bed and let out a long, slow breath. Realising that a change of subject was in order, Jenny asked, “Did anything exciting happen while I was away?”

“Alien invasion,” Beth said, still straight faced. “Giant man eating plants. Found an octopus in the lake and called him Bill.”

“Bill the octopus?”

“I was gonna go with Oliver, but I’m not a big fan of alliteration,” Beth reasoned.

“What about the second coming of Jesus?”

Beth shook her head, “Nope. He’s scheduled for the third wednesday in January. Keep your calendar free that day. He might want tea.”

“Always pictured him as more of a coffee man, myself,” Jenny mused.

“We’ll get both, just in case.”

“Good plan.”

“Anything else?”

“Chantelle spoke to me voluntarily today.” Beth added. “That’s pretty Earth shaking stuff, right? Charlie’s determined that we’re all going to be friends. Not happening, by the way.”

“You might actually like her if you spoke to her more often.”

“Believe me, I’ve spoken to her more in the past few weeks than I’m comfortable with. The less I see of her, the better.”

“And William?”
“What about William?” Beth asked, sitting up a little straighter at the mention of his name.

“Does he want to be your friend?”

Beth’s eyes pinched, “What are you implying?”

“You know...”

“How are you even - you don’t even know how to talk to boys, how can you even suggest - we’re not - I don’t even like him!”

“Then why have you still got his jacket?” she asked, indicating the garment Beth had carefully folded and left on top of her suitcase.

Beth flushed with colour, “I - I haven’t had a chance to give it back. Like I said, I don’t like him.”

“If you say so.”

“I do.”

“But you could try -”

“Look, if it’ll make your life with Charlie easier, I’ll try to be more civil to them. Okay? I mean - not civil - I don’t know. I’ll resist the urge to push them down the stairs or something.”

Jenny snorted softly with laughter. “Okay - well - that’s a good start.”

Beth knew she’d have to be a little more than civil if she was going to keep Chantelle from poisoning her brother against Jenny. The bond of siblings was going to be stronger than that of a first crush even if it was reciprocated. Beth would hate to think that she was the one responsible if her friend’s first relationship went south. Besides, it was exhausting to be so horribly bitchy all the time. She always left her confrontations with William and Chantelle hating herself for sinking to their level. It wasn’t who she really was, and she wasn’t giving the best impression of her personality by acting up.

Mischievously, Beth said, “If I’m going to be nice and everything, I need something in return.”

“Like what?”

“All the gossip about you and Charlie. Everything. Not a single detail missed out.”

“You can’t mean every-”

“Believe me, I do.”
Chapter Seven

“Do not talk of that odious man.”

Beth wasn’t enamoured with the idea of playing nice with William and Chantelle, but she’d do absolutely anything for the sake of her friends. She resisted the urge to trip either of them in the hall whenever they marched by, smiled when it was required, and even managed to keep a civil tongue in her head when they engaged her in conversation. Although most of her comments were trivial and required little effort, she felt they sufficed in fulfilling her promise to Jenny.

While Chantelle didn’t appear pleased to have so little to rile Beth up about, she seemed to make her peace with the situation so long as she had the privilege of hanging off William’s arm. The ceasefire between the girls had worked wonders for Jenny and Charlie’s relationship. They’d progressed to such a point whereby they were able to be alone in each other’s company without their friends or siblings acting as chaperones. And it appeared that Chantelle genuinely liked the idea of Jenny being with her brother. Beth had suggested this had more to do with money than a case of Chantelle having a sudden and complete personality transplant. It was a theory Jenny quickly shut down given Charlie was wealthy enough without forging a relationship with her.

Even if she’d been as poor as a church mouse, Beth knew he’d smile at Jenny as if she was an angel.

The relative peace lasted only a couple of weeks. The night it broke, the girls had been spending a quiet evening in their room, or at least as quiet an evening as one could have when sharing with Chrissy and Lisa. The pair flipped through glossy magazines, laughing raucously at celebrity scandals and loudly complimenting the photographs of male stars in swimming trunks on tropical islands. Meg had the right idea. She tuned out the din with yet another audio book. She’d make it through a collection the size of a library before the term ended. Jenny was more adept at ignoring the noise. She drummed her pen against her notebook, almost finished with her English essay. Beth, on the other hand, was busy scribbling down lyrics and notes in between strumming the guitar.

It was the sudden shrill ring of Beth’s phone that brought a resounding silence to the room. The only other person who might call was Beth’s father, and they had a strict routine for their calls unless it was an emergency. Beth snatched up the phone without checking the caller ID, “Hello?”

From the other end of the line, a bright female voice declared, “Lissy, darling! I missed you so much!”

“Mum?” Beth asked, sitting bolt upright. There was no hope of a quiet, private conversation now. The others were straining to hear what might be said between the pair. They were all too familiar with the flighty nature of Beth’s mother. So much so that they weren’t surprised when she asked, “Are you getting another divorce?”

“Of course not, darling. We’re like a couple of teenagers. The other night, in fact, we were -”

“Oh God! I don’t want to know! I just - no! I will need therapy forever.”
“Well, I suppose I should get to the point. I wanted to call and let you know that your brother is going to be joining you at school.”

Beth paused for a moment. “Are you drunk? I’m an only child, Mum.”

“I’m talking about Wyatt. You remember Wyatt, don’t you?”

Beth vaguely remembered Wyatt from a few visits here and there. He’d been the son of her mother’s first husband and couldn’t even be counted as a step-brother to Beth given his father and her mother were divorced. He was also significantly older than Beth. “Are you sure he’s - well - hasn’t he finished school already?”

“Well, of course he has. He and a classmate of his were in a student teacher position but they had to change schools due to cutbacks or budgets or something. I wasn’t really listening. You know how much I despise those words. Anyway, they’ll be starting at your school soon.”

“How do you even know this?” Beth asked. “Why are you even talking to Wyatt? Even I don’t talk to Wyatt.”

“Funniest thing, but he was struggling with his student loans, and -”

“Never mind. I figured it out.”

“He’s looking forward to seeing you again. I hope you’ll make friends with him and help him out any way you can.”

“You want me to babysit a grown man?” Beth repeated.

“Just be nice to him. He’s your brother. I’m not asking, Lissy, I’m telling you to do this.”

“Yeah, okay, no promises. I’m busy, I have to go. Later.”

Their relationship hadn’t always been a rocky one, but ever since she’d walked out, Beth had despised her mother. She turned her phone off in case she decided to call back, then pushed her fingers through her hair, working them through the tangles and groaning softly in despair. She should have known her mother would only call if she needed a favour. She wasn’t the sort of person to just check in on her own child to make sure everything was okay with her life.

Knowing that they needed to handle the situation with care and delicacy, the girls took a moment to consider their words. Lisa decided she knew precisely what to say. “Is Wyatt hot?” Chrissy kicked her off the bed. Lisa landed hard on the floor and complained, “That hurt!”

“Are you okay?” Meg asked meekly.


“Never take up acting,” Chrissy commented.

Jenny attempted some measure of diplomacy by asking, “Won’t it be nice to have him here? You’re family, after all.”

“Barely,” Beth scoffed. “Haven’t seen him in - God - I don’t even know. Years.”

“Maybe you’ll have something in common,” she persisted.
“I know what we have in common,” Beth replied.

“What’s that?”

“Both our fathers were stupid enough to marry my mother.”

“Get some sleep,” Jenny suggested. “You might feel different in the morning.”

Beth did not feel different in the morning.

The girls were pulled to yet another assembly and excitement buzzed through the crowd as they wondered if they were to receive yet more boys upon whom they could waste their time and infatuations. They weren’t entirely wrong. While Chrissy and Lisa whispered wild theories about murders and intrigues, their headmaster took to the stage to introduce the two new student teachers who’d been transferred over after some kind of issue with their previous school; an issue he didn’t choose to elaborate on which left Beth wondering what it might be,

The girl sank in her seat when Wyatt came onto the stage. He scanned the crowd, no doubt seeking her out so he could speak to her when the assembly came to an end. Beth was already making an escape plan in her head, wondering if she could beat the crowd and race to class before Wyatt clocked her presence. But her interest was regained when a second man joined him. While Wyatt was all stiffness and propriety, the second man was relaxed and easiness. He’d unbuttoned the top of his shirt and flashed charming smiles at the girls in the crowd. Beth could already tell which of the pair would be the most welcome addition to the institution.

Wyatt Collins was to be an assistant mathematics teacher. It suited him to the ground. Rigid, sensible, and all together dull. There was a smattering of applause after his introduction. If he’d lost the students already then there was no hope for him to regain it later in the year. It was in stark contrast to the welcome received by Gideon Wilson, the assistant music teacher. Beth felt her heart flutter in her chest. He was attractive and he was going to be leading some of her favourite lessons. For Beth, it was a dream come true, and a welcome distraction from William and Chantelle.

Perhaps Jenny had been right about Beth feeling differently in the morning after all.

Georgia leaned forwards in her chair to speak to Beth who’d sat directly in front of her. She teased in a whisper, “Are you blushing?”

“No!” Beth hissed back defensively. “I - I was just thinking that everyone’s going to go crazy over that guy.”

“What?” Jenny asked, having listened in on their whispered conversation. “Over Gideon?”

Nonchalantly Beth confirmed, “Yeah, if that was his name. I wasn’t paying that much attention.”

“He’s a teacher,” Jenny reminded her friend.

“A student teacher. They’re only - what - four years older than us? And we’re eighteen so it’s not like we’re kids or anything.”

“You’re giving this a lot of thought,” Georgia observed.

“I’m not! I’m just - you know - I’m just thinking about it logically. If I was interested - which I’m not - then it wouldn’t be such a big gap.”

“But you’re totally not interested,” Georgia repeated.
“Right.”

“Not interested in who?” Chrissy asked, her attention caught by their gossiping.

Georgia threw her friend to the wolves by saying, “Beth’s crushing on Gideon already.”

“Really?” Chrissy lit up like a kid at Christmas. “I didn’t know you even had normal hormones yet! Lis’, Lis’! You’ll never guess -”

Beth groaned and hid her glowing face in her hands. Even if it turned out she didn’t like Gideon all that much later, it wasn’t going to matter. The rumour was spreading and she wouldn’t hear the end of this moment of lust until she was in university. Suffice to say, she realised that the first music lesson she spent with Gideon wouldn’t be the haven of harmless, romantic flirtations that she’d been hoping for. It would likely be spent with her friends teasing her about her boyfriend while she wished her guitar strings would throttle her to spare her from the humiliation.

Fortunately, Beth didn’t have to worry about Gideon at first. She wasn’t due a music lesson so soon after the assembly, and managed to escape without speaking to Wyatt. It soon became clear that he had located her while searching the crowd when he caught Beth in the corridor on her way to lunch later that same day. Unable to answer back spitefully to someone who was first her teacher and only second her sort-of-slightly-step-brother, Beth was obliged to stop and hear him out.

Oblivious to the fact that Beth wanted to be a million miles away from him, Wyatt embraced her in a tight, brief hug. He held her at arm’s length to get a good look. “You’re so grown up!”

“Uh - thank you, Wyatt.”

“Let’s have lunch together,” he said. It was more an instruction than a request. Beth tried to make her excuses, but Wyatt steered her into the dining hall and she found herself suffering through his life story, tuning it out until it was little more than faint static.

Now, Wyatt wasn’t a bad person. He wasn’t malicious or cruel. Beth just found him to be tiring and somewhat ridiculous. She bore him no ill will, but he spoke so kindly of her mother that she soon realised they were never going to get along no matter how hard he might try.

It wasn’t until Wyatt asked, “Beth, are you listening?” that she realised she’d not taken in a single word for a good fifteen minutes. She blinked the glazed look from her eyes rapidly. Unoffended, he asked again, “What are your plans when you finish school?”

“Oh! Oh, I didn’t - you know, I’ve not thought about it much. Working with Dad, I suppose.”

Wyatt faltered, “With your father..?”

“Yeah, why?”

He smiled and continued in a patronising tone as if he was talking to a twelve year old, “I was thinking that you might consider moving in with your mother for a time. You’re a young girl, easily influenced by - well - by unfavourable people. France seems like a good place for you. Better society, more opportunities to marry well and settle down...”

“First - I don’t consider my Dad to be an unfavourable person. Second - I don’t want to think about marriage until I’m a lot older. Like, on my death bed. Third - I appreciate your concern, but I don’t need you to tell me what to do with the rest of my life.”

Wyatt sighed as if Beth was the most foolish of children. He reached out to pat her hand

Beth pulled her hand away from his and warned, “Don’t call me that. Ever.”

“But your mother -”

“Exactly,” she retorted sharply. “I’ll work out what’s best for me, thanks. Don’t trouble yourself with it.”

“It’s no trouble for me -”

“It’s trouble for me,” Beth said firmly, rising from her seat. “Just do me a favour, okay? Don’t talk to me unless it’s to do with school. Just because Mum said we have to get along, it doesn’t mean we have to do it.”

She hoped rather than believed that he would heed her words as she strode away, leaving behind a half eaten meal and a confused Wyatt upon her dramatic exit.
His appearance was greatly in his favour.

Chapter Eight

“His appearance was greatly in his favour.”

It had been a vain hope.

Beth had taken to using longer, more inventive routes to commute to and from her classes so as to avoid Wyatt. Thus far it had been working, but she knew it was only a matter of time before they came face to face again. She wasn’t sure why he was so interested in her life, but suspected it had something to do with how wealthy her mother suddenly was, and wanting to build bridges so as to secure his financial future. If that was the case then he was going about it all wrong. Beth didn’t want her mother’s money and she was the worst person to try to use for the sake of such a mission. Wyatt would have been far better off speaking to her mother himself and leaving Beth out of the equation all together.

It was while on one of these jaunts around the school that Beth found herself bumping into someone else entirely. She had been half way down a sloping lawn, her gentle dark curls whipping around her face courtesy of the strong breeze, when she slipped on the damp grass and found herself skidding out of control down into a man who’d been passing by on the path below. He fell onto his back, bringing his arms around Beth to hold her against his chest, shielding her from harm. Beth wasted no time in pushing herself up and apologising, “I am so sorry!”

Gideon sat up, Beth still astride his lap. Had he not been a teacher, she might not have minded the situation quite as much as she did. Although she imagined she’d have been just as humiliated had the man been her own age. One look into his bright green eyes made Beth leap to her feet, whereupon she set about gathering up the papers she’d knocked out of his hands.

“You don’t need to do that,” Gideon assured her. “Are you hurt?”

“No! No, I’m fine, thank you. And you - you’re not hurt, right?”

“I’m tougher than I look,”

Beth laughed. She wasn’t sure why. The noise escaped her lips before she had a chance to stop it. She closed her mouth quickly, wondering if Gideon would think she was completely mad. Frantically, she continued to collect the crumpled, damp papers, sorting them into some kind of a pile before pushing them against Gideon’s chest. “Sorry, again. It was an accident.”

“Naturally,” he said. “What else could it have been? Destiny, maybe?”

“Or a hill,” Beth suggested weakly.

“Yes, or a hill. Are you sure you’re not hurt?”

“Yes - I mean no - I - I’m fine, honest.”

“You’re Beth Blake, is that right?”

Beth felt her knees quake. He knew her name! Wait… Of course he knew her name. He was one
of her teachers. It was his job to know. The quaking stopped and Beth felt immeasurably stupid for a few seconds. She nodded, unable to form a decent verbal reply while she was dying on the inside.

“Wyatt’s sister?”

“How did you -”

“He talks about you a lot. I’m guessing that’s who you were avoiding..?”

“Yeah…”

“I don’t blame you. If I had the same luxury, I’d do it myself. It’s more difficult when you work together.”

“I thought you were friends,” Beth said.

“Classmates. Friends would be pushing it. Although… I’m sure Wyatt assumes we’re friends. It’s a bad habit of his to force his company on anyone unwilling to directly tell him to go away.”

“Tell me about it,” Beth huffed.

“But I didn’t have you down as the cross country adventure sort,” Gideon said, looking up at the hill Beth had flung herself down. “You’re so quiet in class.” That had everything to do with her friends teasing her. Beth found it difficult to speak up and converse with Gideon when everything she said and did could be attributed to her crush. The man seemed to be a mind-reader, or at least, had some knowledge of how attractive he was and how easily a girl might fall for him. He reached out and ruffled Beth’s hair affectionately, something that made her blush all the way to her ears. Amused, Gideon promised, “I’ll do what I can to keep Wyatt distracted from you, if you like. Although I’ll need something in return.”

“Like what?” Beth asked, feeling at that moment that she’d have agreed to just about anything Gideon might suggest.

He leaned in and breathed the words against her ear. Beth felt her chest constrict and her pulse quicken as his lips almost brushed her skin, feeling the warm beat of his breath tingling and dancing on her throat. “Don’t be so shy in my classes.”

Beth found the strength to nod which was impressive given all the blood in her body had rushed to her head. Her lungs struggled to fill with enough air, she felt the tips of her fingers buzzing with excitement. It wasn’t until that moment that Beth came to understand what it meant to have someone take one’s breath away. She felt that nothing could spoil that moment.

Nothing except perhaps the fact they were being watched.

It wasn’t until Gideon stood upright that Beth spotted Charlie and William who’d paused in their approach to observe them. Beth tried to will the blush out of her face but found it only made the situation worse. Gideon was much more composed about being discovered. Well, he was a teacher after all, and at perfect liberty to speak to his students if that was what he wanted to do. And they hadn’t done anything besides talk. Talk and hold each other on the ground. Beth hoped the boys hadn’t seen that part of the encounter.

“Afternoon, boys,” Gideon said. “Are you looking for someone?”

“No,” William retorted. It was a scathing tone. Beth felt it was quite uncalled for given William didn’t like her and that he barely knew Gideon. He continued bitterly, “There’s no one here I want
to look for.”

Beth felt a curious sting in her chest at his last remark. She didn’t think she deserved to be on the receiving end of his hatred at all, least of all when she was doing something perfectly innocent and - frankly - something that was none of his business. William turned heel and stormed away.

Charlie smiled at Beth briefly before he chased after him, muttering things Beth couldn’t make out, just as confused by his behaviour as she was. Gideon didn’t appear at all concerned by the display.

Every student had a teacher they didn’t particularly like, and Beth could at least understand that much of it. William was a fool to show it to the teacher’s face, in her opinion. For the sake of an easy life it was much better to smile and be courteous than to start a battle with someone who might be responsible for your grades later.

Beth tried to put his behaviour out of her mind. One could go mad trying to fathom what William was thinking. He was a changeable young man. One minute he was trying to be her friend and rescuing her in the rain, the next he was being cold and sarcastic to her. It was as if he had to personalities inside of him. The reasonable, normal William and the dramatic, overbearing, proud William who tended to be more present than the other.

All thoughts of the boy vanished when Lisa barrelled into Beth’s side. The girl had never quite figured out how to apply the brakes when she was excited. That, and she appeared keen to break up whatever was or wasn’t going on between Beth and Gideon. Chrissy followed at a more modest speed, slowing to a walk as she approached the group. Beth fought to steady Lisa and asked, “What’s going on? Is Jen’ okay?”

“What? Yeah,” Lisa turned to look back. Beth followed her gaze and saw that Jenny and Meg had followed at a sensible pace. “Did you forget?”

“Apparently so. What am I forgetting?” Beth asked.

“The party at Jenny’s house. Remember? To celebrate her getting better.”

“Oooh! Oh, right.” Beth turned to Gideon. “Sorry, Sir. I’ve got to get going.”

“Call me Gideon,” he said. “Sir makes me sound old.”

Lisa asked quickly, “Why don’t you come along, too?”

“Lis’, you can’t invite someone to someone else’s party,” Beth hissed.

Jenny didn’t take any issue with Lisa’s assumptions. She requested, “Please join us? It can also be a welcome party for you.”

“If you’re sure you don’t mind,” Gideon said.

“Don’t mind what?” Wyatt asked.

Beth cringed. She’d been standing still for much too long and it had allowed him the opportunity to track her down. She’d have to remember that constant motion was key to escaping him in future. Jenny ignored her friend’s discomfort to ask, “Would you like to join us, Mr. Collins? It’s just a party at my mother’s house but Gideon already said he’d come along.”

Wyatt puffed out his chest like a self-important peacock. “Perhaps I should. Lissy should have a chaperone, after all.”
“For a few friends?” Beth asked.

“And Gideon,” Wyatt said.

“A car is going to pick us up at six from the entrance,” Jenny told them. “We’ll meet you there.”

Wyatt actually bowed his head a little to Jenny when he said, “I look forward to it.”

Beth felt embarrassed on his behalf. The feeling dissipated when Gideon leaned in and whispered, “I’ll try to rescue you,” before he departed with Wyatt. She put a hand to her ear and tried to remember how to breathe like a normal person. No matter how hard she tried, it wasn’t coming back to her. Beth was certain that Gideon was trying to kill her.

“So… What did we just interrupt?” Jenny asked slyly.

“We interrupted something?” Meg asked worriedly. “Were you talking about school?”

“I doubt it,” Lisa pitched in. “Were you trying to hit on him without giving the rest of us a fair shot?”

“I knocked him over when I fell down the hill. Nothing exciting to report.”

“Good,” Lisa said. “But - God - he’s so hot, right?”

“What do you think he’ll wear?” Chrissy asked.

Lisa grabbed her friend’s hands, horror on her face. “Oh my God, what are we going to wear?!”

“I’m pretty sure you’ll find something,” Beth said. “You brought half a department store with you. Besides, it’s just a party.”

“A party with Gideon,” Lisa said, sighing dreamily. Chrissy giggled and the pair ran off to be first to rummage through their clothes to find something suitable.

Beth was content to walk at a leisurely pace, her arm linked through Jenny’s. Meg trailed behind the two girls, happy to be at the rear of their procession, lost once more to the world in her head. So long as she stayed on course then Beth and Jenny were content to leave her to her own devices. Jenny asked, “Are you serious about Gideon?”

“I’m not serious about anyone.”

“I’m worried about you,” Jenny confessed. “He’s a teacher, after all.”

“And I’m not going to ask him out. Look, the way I see it, I just need someone to look at. You have Charlie, right?”

“I suppose,” she agreed.

“Lisa and Chrissy have every male in the school with a pulse, and Meg has - well - Meg is just Meg. It’s only fair that I get to look at Gideon. But from a safe distance. And not with any idea of dating him.”

“So long as you’re sure that’s all it is,” Jenny pressed.

“Trust me, won’t you. I’m sure.”
We are not on friendly terms.

Chapter Nine

“We are not on friendly terms.”

It was one of the few occasions in her life that Beth found herself willing to be forced into something elegant. Jenny’s home was one she was so familiar with that she knew she wouldn’t be looked down upon for wearing casual clothes, and yet when she remembered that Gideon would also be in attendance, suddenly jeans didn’t feel quite enough.

A dark blue, knee length, simple evening dress was certainly a step up. With her pale skin and dark hair, Beth was a vision in the midnight wrap, although she remained modest and denied many of the compliments given to her by her friends. The shoes pinched around her toes because they were a size too small, but Beth was sure she could put up with it for one night. Such was the risk when one borrowed clothes. If she wasn’t so proud, she might have asked her mother to donate towards an overhaul of her wardrobe. Not that there was much point. As soon as the school year was out, Beth would no longer have the opportunity or reason to wear such elegant clothes.

“You could almost pass for a Lady,” Lisa observed as she fasted her gaudy gold and pearl earrings. “So long as you don’t talk to anyone.”

“She could always pass for a Lady,” Jenny countered.

“You’re the only one who thinks so,” Beth said.

“Exactly,” Lisa agreed. “Which is why you shouldn’t talk if you want Gideon to like you.”

“I’m not trying to get him to like me!” she protested, growing tired of such insinuations even if they were completely true.

“Yeah, right. It’s written all over your face.”

Beth turned to look in the mirror. She couldn’t see it, but her friends knew her facial expressions better than she did. If it was so obvious then she was going to have to do something about that. As much as she wished Gideon might like her, she didn’t want to put him in an awkward position by making her feelings for him known by the wider student population. Or by the teachers, for that matter.

She wondered if she might be able to convince him to wait until the end of the school year if by some miracle he did return said feelings. That way there’d be no problem. She would no longer be a student, and if he chose to carry on as a teacher then it wouldn’t ruin his career. Of course this was all fanciful nonsense. There was no way Gideon didn’t have a girlfriend already.

“Let’s go before we miss the car,” Jenny urged.

Beth’s appearance certainly took the two men by surprise. It was true that seeing her in a dress was as rare a sight as Aurora Borealis lighting up the night sky. Still, it made her uncomfortable to have Wyatt stare at her in the way that he did. She barely thought of him as a brother, but the
sibling connection was still there. It didn’t seem right for him to picture her as anything other than his little sister.

Three cars stood in a line, patiently waiting on their passengers. Jenny’s mother either assumed (quite rightly) that a limousine would be gaudy, or she was taking the opportunity to show off her impressive collection. Bentley stood at the front of the procession, holding open the passenger door for Jenny. He smiled at Beth and praised, “A fine change, Miss. Elisabeth, if I may say.”

“Cheers, Ben,” Beth replied with a smirk. “What’s with all the cars? Are we going drag racing?”

He looked horrified at the mere thought. “Miss. Elisabeth, these are precision machines! To spoil them with such pursuits would be -”

“Relax, Ben. I was kidding. Although the Merc’ could do with a few more dents.”

Bentley placed his hand protectively on the roof of the car. “You wouldn’t.”

Jenny pulled on Beth’s hand, guiding her into the back of the vehicle. “You shouldn’t tease him.”

“He knows I’m joking.”

“I’m not sure about that.”

“Oh God, is Wyatt coming over?” Beth asked, noticing his reflection in the car window. “Ben, shut the door and step on it!”

Bentley obliged, though he didn’t quite understand why. The other two drivers were instructed to convey the remaining passengers to their destination before he got into his precious, prized contraption and turned over the engine. They were on their way to the gate when Bentley asked, “Is there a reason we’re not taking the gentleman with us, Miss. Elisabeth?”

“I’m not a fan.”

“Ex-boyfriend, is he?”

“Step-brother. Sort of.”

“I wonder then - if I may be so impertinent - why it is you invited him in the first place.”

Beth shot Jenny a look that threw all of the blame for that decision in her direction. Jenny held her hands up and defended herself, “What was I meant to do? He heard me invite Gideon. I couldn’t ask him.”

“Not to worry,” Bentley reassured the pair. “When we arrive he’ll be much too preoccupied with the adults to bother any of you girls.”

Beth could well believe it. Wyatt had made a point of befriending every teacher in the school as soon as he’d arrived. Or at least, he’d tried. She had a sneaking suspicion that none of them liked him all that much. His intention to spend his life socially climbing to as high a point as was possible was clear to everyone. If there were some well-to-do chaperones present at the party then he’d want to make sure they all knew his name. Beth almost pitied them.

Willow Hall had been in Jenny’s family for more generations than the girls could follow. The gallery was full of portraits of aristocratic relatives who reclined in their luxurious surroundings, proud to be old money, and unabashed about who knew of their high status. It intimidated Jenny to know that one day the enormous estate would belong to her, and that she’d be responsible for
the upkeep and the lives of all the people they employed. In a way, Beth envied her. Although it was a frightening prospect, it was better than having to work every hour of the day just to scrape together enough for a deposit on a tiny flat like Beth would one day. She could have asked her mother to buy her a house if she was so inclined, but Beth had been brought up by a man who believed firmly in hard graft. They shared the belief that nothing worth having in life was gained easily.

The cars came to a stop outside of the house on the enormous gravel driveway. The building rivalled the grandeur of Netherfield Academy, with arched windows, gargoyles on the roof, and a beautifully carved white marble fountain out front. Beth left the vehicle before Bentley could open the door for her. He managed to help Jenny out and was visibly relieved that he’d done at least half of his job. The girls hurried up the steps to greet Ms. Ayers - Jenny’s mother - who was waiting on them. She held out her arms and hugged them both at the same time. “Oh, it feels like forever since you were both here,” she said, stepping back to take a look at them. “And a dress! Did they torture you into it?”

“No,” Beth laughed. “I volunteered.”

“Are you feeling all right?” Ms. Ayers asked.

“Fine, thanks.”

“Well - if you say so. Oh, and the whole rabble is here,” she said, noticing how Wyatt rushed about trying to assist Meg, Chrissy and Lisa from the cars. The latter rebuffed him, giggling over the handsome young drivers who were happy to escort them as far as the steps. They took them carefully, trying not to topple over in their ridiculous heels. Ms. Ayers welcomed them, “Lovely to see you three again. Meg, don’t you look wonderful in white!”

Meg stammered, “Th-thank you, Ms. Ayers.”

“And Chrissy, you look more like your mother every time I see you.”

“Really?” Chrissy asked, flattered by the comparison.

“Absolutely! She’ll have a rival in you soon enough. Lisa, I had no idea they made a dress quite so - so red.”

Lisa grinned, “It’s cool, right?”

“Incredibly. And who are these gentlemen escorting you?” she asked.

Jenny introduced them, “This is Wyatt, he’s our new mathematics student teacher. Gideon is teaching music. Is it okay that I invited them?”

“Of course, it’s your party, after all. A pleasure to meet you both.”

“The pleasure is all ours,” Wyatt assured her, bowing as if he was introducing himself to royalty.

Ms. Ayers was as taken back by his behaviour as Beth and the girls had been since he’d started at their school. Uncertain of how to continue, she addressed the group, “Girls, why don’t you head inside? And don’t even think about touching the alcohol. I’ve told the staff you’re not to have a drop.”

“What?” Lisa exclaimed. “Not even one glass of wine?!”

“Not even one.”
“God! So unfair!” she complained.

“Quite right, too,” Wyatt agreed. “I didn’t touch it until I was twenty-one. All this nonsense about drinking at eighteen -”

And he was off.

Gideon, Beth, Jenny, Meg, Chrissy and Lisa took advantage of his distraction to sneak into the property, leaving Ms. Ayers to tactfully handle Wyatt on her own. Beth felt some small measure of guilt for doing so, but she wasn’t about to take responsibility for the boy when she knew that doing so meant she’d be stuck with him the entire evening.

Once inside, the group were easily split up and lost among all the other well wishers and party goers who’d come out in their droves. Most probably had little idea they were there for Jenny’s sake and had instead felt the need to turn up so as to boast that they’d been at an event hosted by the illustrious Ayers family. The ballroom was lavishly decorated for what might otherwise have been an informal affair. Canopies of white lace had been strung up high in the arched ceiling, well dressed waiters took drinks to the patrons, and the long buffet table was set out like a banquet with more food than anyone there could ever eat. The din of chatter and the clinks of glasses being bumped gently together in toasts drowned out the serene classical music being played by a live strings section in the corner of the room.

Beth kept hold of Jenny’s hand and the two soon found themselves alone in a sea of people they barely recognised. “I’ll apologise to your mum later for Wyatt,” Beth vowed.

“Don’t worry about it. She’s used to handling people like that. By the way, she said you could stay the night if you wanted. She wants to take us shopping tomorrow.”

“I don’t have any clothes. Or money.”

“You can borrow mine and you know she’ll want to spoil you. You’re practically family.”

Beth hesitated. She didn’t like the idea of having Jenny’s mother waste her money on her. Even if they were close, it didn’t mean they were actually related. Beth worried that people would think she was only friends with Jenny so that she could take advantage of her fortune.

Jenny knew exactly what Beth was thinking. She grasped her friend’s shoulders and ordered, “You’re going shopping with us so that I don’t have to suffer alone. Understand?”

“Fine, fine. For your sake.”

“My hero.”

“I need some new socks, anyway,” Beth reasoned.

Gideon approached her from behind and agreed, “New socks are a worthy reason for one to suffer shopping, I find.”

Beth jumped and spun around. It was a sudden motion that she lost balance. Fortunately, Gideon was there to steady her. He brought her into his arms which was perhaps a little more than was necessary when he simply could have gripped her shoulders instead. Beth felt the rush of heat as all of her blood raced to reach her face, giving it a pinkish hue and making her dizzy.

Jenny wasn’t as blind as Beth had hoped she might be. She knew when her friend was in love and a wicked idea popped into her head. Much in the same way Beth had left Jenny alone with Charlie the first night the pair had met, she suggested, “Gideon, why don’t you escort Beth for a
while? I need to go and greet people. I’m worried if I leave her alone that she’ll go into hiding.”

It was typical that she would be comfortable enough speaking to boys after a couple of months in their company to stitch up her best friend, Beth thought. She watched Jenny leave over her shoulder and was then gently released by Gideon. He took the opportunity to kiss the back of Beth’s hand - something which did absolutely nothing to restore her balance - and told her, “You look beautiful. When you came out to the car I hardly recognised you.”

“Thanks… uh… I think?”

Beth wondered if that meant that Gideon didn’t consider her to be beautiful at any other time. Which was the way it ought to have been. It wasn’t right for a teacher to consider his students to be anything other than that; students. Still, the fact he considered her to be something more for a moment made Beth happier than she thought she’d ever been in her life. So when Gideon suggested they go somewhere to talk privately, she had no inclination to refuse the invitation.

The grounds of the house were immaculately kept. The lawns spanned acres and housed many beautiful flowers, old trees, fountains and a very pretty little gazebo. It was in this wooden structure that Gideon and Beth found a moment of solitude. He put his arm around her shoulders to protect her from the cold, and she basked in the warmth she felt from his body and his ever present smile. “What did you want to talk about?” she asked, any ideas she might have had for conversations having flown out of her head the minute he’d come to sit so closely to her.

“I wondered - that is - I wanted to know if you’re friends with the boys we met earlier at school.”


“I know Will quite well.”

“Really? He was acting like he hated you,” Beth said, recalling the expression Will had made when he saw the pair of them together.

“That’s not surprising. When I was a kid I lived on their estate. My parents worked for his family. When they died his Dad let me live in the house and get an education. He was a good guy.”

“Okay, so is William adopted or something? Because it doesn’t sound like this guy is his real father.”

Gideon laughed, “No, no! He’s his son. I think it just killed him having a brother in the house to share his Dad’s affection with. When the old man died not long after that it meant that his mother was caring for three children, and he didn’t think I had a right to share in what they were going through.”

“That’s not exactly fair,” Beth said. “You lost your parents and then he lost his Dad. He should have understood what you’d been through a little better.”

“Maybe, but kids don’t always think that logically. Especially not when they’re hurting. But I got along with his mother and sister - Amanda - she’s about nineteen now. They gave me a home and an education. I was happy there. But William just couldn’t let go of all his jealousy.”

“What did he do?” Beth asked, enthralled by the tale.

“He accused me of stealing. It made it next to impossible for me to find a placement anywhere because people wanted to take his word over mine. If your mother hadn’t vouched for me when she did Wyatt, I wouldn’t have a job right now.”
“That explains why you tolerate him.”

“If it hadn’t been for him, we wouldn’t have met,” Gideon said.

“That’s the only thing I like about him,” Beth decided. Perhaps Wyatt wasn’t all bad after all if he was able to do something so charitable for Gideon. She couldn’t believe that William would go out of his way to totally destroy someone’s career, but the evidence was right there. It explained why Gideon had started his placement so late in the year, and why the pair disliked each other so much. And she knew for a fact that William was the sort to look down on others from the way he spent his time with Chantelle who made no secret of her disdain for the poor.

“Couldn’t you have just called him out on it? It’s not like they could dismiss you without proof.”

“After his family had done so much for me, I didn’t want to cause a fuss and see their names dragged through the mud. It was better for me to step aside and let him have his victory.”

“You’re a nicer person than I am. I wouldn’t have let him get away with it.”

Gideon hugged Beth gently against his side. She flushed with colour and inwardly wondered if she had any blood left in the rest of her body. “You’re adorable,” Gideon said softly. “I'm glad I have someone like you on my side. It makes it all a lot easier to deal with.”

“It still sucks, though.”

“It does. And of course I’ve lost contact with his family. Amanda is in Switzerland in University, and his mother keeps her distance. I don’t blame either of them in all of this.”

Beth turned and looked up into Gideon’s eyes. It was difficult not to be trapped by him when they were so beautiful. She said quietly, “I’m sorry about your parents.”

The kiss that followed was so chaste that it was difficult for Beth to believe it had really happened. The lingering warmth on her lips was the only evidence that any contact had been made at all. Gideon examined her face and raised his hand so he could brush his fingers tenderly against the elegant curve of Beth’s jaw. She leaned into the touch, drinking in the contact, knowing that it wouldn’t last much longer. Gideon threw caution to the wind and swept in for another, this time pressing his mouth to Beth’s firmly, securely, pouring all the affection in the world into that wonderful, perfect moment between them. Beth pushed her fingers through his hair, closing her eyes and losing herself to the kiss.

It broke all too soon. The cold brush of air against her mouth made Beth shudder. She felt as if she’d lost something when Gideon detached himself from her. It was her understanding of his position that kept her from being offended by his wish to stand and break all physical contact. He was a teacher and she was a student. This was exactly the reason why she’d not seriously considered anything becoming of their mutual attraction. Still, she wished that it had lasted a second or two more so that she could commit every blissful second to her memory.

The romantic atmosphere vanished entirely when Wyatt left the house. It frightened Beth into realising what a mistake they’d been about to make. Had someone seen them, Gideon might have lost another job, and she could have been expelled. She didn’t like the idea of explaining it to her father should that unhappy event come to pass. Wyatt wasn’t the most observant of people. He ignored the gazebo and headed off towards a hedge maze. With any luck, he’d be stuck there for hours. “Idiot,” Beth muttered.

“I noticed that he’s still very attached to your mother.”

“I know. Isn’t that kind of creepy?” Beth asked.
“A little. What do you know about her latest husband?”

“Not a lot. He paid for me to go to school, but that’s about it,” Beth said. She’d made little effort to get to know her mother’s latest conquest. He had lasted longer than the rest, but that didn’t mean she was going to start holidaying with them every Christmas or anything.

“Wyatt talks about him a lot.”

“Can’t say I’m surprised.”

“And his sister-in-law.”

“Why would he care about who she is?” Beth asked, bemused.

“Because she’s William’s aunt from a previous marriage.”

The news gave Beth reason to pause. Family trees were so complicated that she couldn’t quite riddle out the connection in her head. Something which caused her to ask foolishly, “Does that mean William and I are related?”

Gideon laughed loudly, “Not at all! There’s less between you than there is between you and Wyatt. Too many steps and in-laws to count.”

“Thank God.”

“She’s an impressive woman, though. Well - scary. Last I heard of her she was trying to make matches for William. Even if they’re not attached by a marriage anymore, she still considers herself part of the family. And since she’s ex-aristocracy, she thinks a lot of herself. Only the best girl will do.”

“I guess that means Chantelle is out of the running?” Beth joked. “She won’t be happy about that.”

Wyatt called from a distance, “There you are!”

Beth groaned, “I suppose we should go back.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll look after you.”

“I’m sure you will,” Beth replied flirtatiously, linking her arm through Gideon's so they could return to the party together.
Chapter Ten

“The day of the invitation.”

As Beth and Jenny prepared for bed that night, Beth related the events of the evening to her stunned friend. Although Jenny was fully aware of Beth’s feelings, it was clear she’d never expected it to progress to kissing. Conflicted, she asked, “And you’re sure you can - you know - trust him?”

“Of course I can! Come on, after all he’s been through do you really think he’ll do anything to risk another job?”

“He did by kissing you.”

“Well, anything other than that.”

“I suppose not. But do you believe what he said?” Jenny asked. “Because I can’t believe Charlie would still be friends with William if he knew what he’d done.”

“Maybe Charlie doesn’t know. Or maybe he just really believes in William. I don’t blame Charlie or anything. It’s good that he’s loyal. I just find it easier to believe that William would lie to him about this than that Gideon would be forced to leave his job without good reason. I mean, it makes sense, doesn’t it?”

“I suppose so. Still, unless we hear both sides of the story it’s difficult to decide.”

“Not for me, it’s not,” Beth said resolutely.

“I think you’re a bit biased.”

“Maybe,” she confessed.

Beth had gone out of her way to think the worst of William ever since they’d met at the party on his first night in the school. He’d hardly helped his case by his choice of company in Chantelle and the way he appeared to look down on her for her station. It was far easier for her to accept that he was the villain in Gideon’s tales of woe.

“Even if it did happen, there’s a chance William didn’t start the rumour,” Jenny reasoned. “Things can get lost in translation. You know how gossip can be,”

“Maybe, but it doesn’t change the fact that William hates him for no good reason. Say whatever you want, but I can’t make myself like him.”

“I don’t think we should spread this around, anyway,” Jenny said. “We don’t know all the details and it would upset Charlie if he knew it came from us.”

“I know. I won’t tell anyone. Besides, Gideon made it sound like he wanted to keep it quiet. He’s a good guy.”
“And a good kisser?”

Beth smiled, “Maybe.”

The girls passed the rest of the night giggling about love, a subject they were only just learning to understand, but an idea they’d been infatuated with all their lives. At some point in the night they drifted into a deep slumber and were woken early by Ms. Ayers who flatly refused to give the staff the privilege of rousing her child whenever she was home.

It was a refreshing day for Beth. She didn’t have to negotiate her challenging escapes from Wyatt (who had been a pain in her neck for the entire party and not once let her out of his sight), and she didn’t have to think about anyone like Chantelle judging her for traipsing around high profile stores in jeans and a t-shirt. It wouldn’t matter that they belonged to Jenny. The minute such clothes touched Beth’s skin they were tainted by her background and became tacky in Chantelle’s opinion.

Beth had a history of bad shopping experiences. After so many trips to boutiques with her friends (which ended in Lisa and Chrissy fighting over a single pair of designer shoes, Meg getting lost in the nearest bookstore, and Jenny turning into the mother figure who tried to settle everyone down), she’d become less and less interested in it as a pastime. Ms. Ayers made her reconsider her opinion of it. She was a mature woman and doted on the two girls as if they were both her daughters. There were frequent breaks for coffee and tea, a variety of stores catering to both their tastes, and lots of photo opportunities as she tried to capture every moment and upload them onto social media.

It was after the three ladies had been lulled into a state of total relaxation at a beauty salon that they stopped for one last coffee. Primped, preened, and wearing new clothes, the three wouldn’t have looked out of place on the cover of a glossy magazine. As guilty as Beth felt knowing how much Ms. Ayers must have spent, she was still happy that she got to spend time with a woman who was every bit the mother she’d never had.

Ms. Ayers inspected a black dress she’d picked out for Beth and lamented, “I wish I had more daughters. There are so many more styles and fashions I could buy if I had five or six of you girls to cater for.”

“Well, if you’re ever interested in adopting me...” Beth joked.

“I’m not sure Greg would like that.”

“Are you kidding? He wants to trade me in for Jen’.”

Jenny giggled softly as she set her cup back down into the porcelain saucer. It barely made a sound. Everything she did was with such care and gentility that it made it clear which of the two had been raised in high society. Beth felt crass and coarse by comparison. She just didn’t have the same grace or class as her friend. She often felt that she was dragging Jenny down by just standing beside her when they were out in public.

As much as she loved her friend, Beth knew of the two of them, Jenny was the one who would end up going places. She’d take her education and do wonderful things with it. Perhaps found charities, trusts, or build hospitals. She’d make her mark on the world while Beth would be flung back into her social class and be left in Jenny’s shadow, obscured and forgotten. She wouldn’t have resented Jenny if she broke off all contact at the end of their time in Netherfield Academy. There was a chance their friendship would cause her some humiliation if it became widely known that someone of her acquaintance was the daughter of a mechanic.
It hurt her to think of such things, but with the end of the school year looming ever nearer they were real possibilities she had to consider. She had to start letting people go sooner or later. With Jenny and her closest friends, she hoped that would be later.

In the meantime, Beth would continue to bask in the glow she felt radiating from someone as bright as Jenny. She loved her dearly, and nothing would please her more than knowing that she was happy and successful, even if she had to congratulate her on it from a distance.

“Should we head back soon?” Ms. Ayers asked. “I don’t want to let you girls go, but you do have exams coming up.”

“One more hour?” Jenny pleaded.

“Well, how can I say no to that?”

The door of the coffee shop opened with a clang. The trio ignored the noise at first, disinterested in anyone beside themselves. That soon changed when they heard someone ask, “Jenny? Beth?” in a voice they were overly familiar with.

Charlie looked remarkably well considering he and William hadn’t appeared all that pleased with Beth the last time they’d met at school. He weaved through the tables to approach them and offered a hand to Jenny’s mother. “Nice to meet you. I’m Charlie Brackenwood. I go to school with Beth and Jenny.”

Ms. Ayers shook his hand, “Pleasure.”

“It’s so weird, I was just thinking how much I wanted to see you both and here you are!”

“Are you out alone?” Ms. Ayers asked.

“No, no. My friend and sister are with me. Ah, there they are now.”

Beth clutched her coffee cup tightly. Jenny reached out a hand and laid it over her friend’s wrist to calm her. They couldn’t do or say anything about Gideon’s story, and neither girl wanted to cause a scene in a public place that would humiliate both Charlie and Ms. Ayers. Beth counted to ten in her head and tried to keep a calm, even expression as the pair joined them.

Chantelle simpered, “Ms. Ayers? It’s so nice to see you. Jenny and I are great friends, now.”

The fact that she’d neglected to mention her relationship with Beth wasn’t missed by Ms. Ayers. She knew Beth as well as her own child and could tell she was unhappy to see the girl. Sweetly she replied, “Are you? She’s never mentioned you. Charlotte, was it?”

Chantelle faltered, “Um, no. Chantelle.”

“Oh, oh I see. I think I had a hairdresser once called Chantelle. Nice to meet you.”

“We’ve met before, actually,” Chantelle said. The poor girl was practically grovelling. Even Beth felt sorry for her when she was trying so hard. “At the hospital? I got you a coffee once.”

“Yes, yes I think I remember. And this young man was there, too,” she said, looking to William. “Wilbur, wasn’t it?”

Beth had chosen a poor time to sip her drink. She snorted into her cup, unable to mask her enjoyment. William cleared his throat and corrected, “William Davies, actually. A pleasure.”
“I’m sure it is,” Ms. Ayers agreed. “Girls, I think we should be going if we’re all done here. We need to get you both back to school.”

“Right,” Jenny agreed. Genuinely apologetic for her mother’s immature behaviour, she apologised to the trio, “Sorry, it’s been a long day. We’ll see you in class, okay?”

Beth only spared a smile for Charlie. She couldn’t look at Chantelle and William without wanting to laugh, and busied herself with gathering her things so she wouldn’t have to. The girls were hard on Ms. Ayers’ heels to leave the establishment and a good way down the street when Charlie caught up to them. He grasped Beth’s shoulder first, expecting perhaps that she wouldn’t find the contact as invasive as Jenny might. He was right, of course. Charlie had a good head on his shoulders and knew how to behave.

“What’s up?” Beth asked.

“Tomorrow’s my birthday. I was hoping you guys would come along to the party. I mean - if that’s okay?”

“Jenny, you mean?” Beth clarified, knowing full well that Chantelle would hate to have Beth setting foot in their family home.

Charlie looked to Jenny, then back to Beth. “Both of you. All of you, in fact. All the girls in your room. The more the merrier, right?”

Flustered at the idea of being at another party with Charlie, Jenny nodded, her cheeks bright pink. He smiled, relieved. The poor guy must have thought he was about to be shot down after the way Ms. Ayers had spoken to his sister and friend. Beth felt a little guilty for that. She asked, “What time?”

“Half six? We’ll send a car to collect you from school. Good?”

“Very good,” Beth laughed. “We’ve gotta go. See you tomorrow.”

“Right. Okay. Excellent!” he said, practically skipping away with glee.

“Wow, he’s got it pretty bad,” Ms. Ayers observed before herding the girls back in the direction of the car where Bentley was waiting.

Beth was glad Ms. Ayers had forced her to buy some dresses. She was getting tired of having to borrow clothes all the time and now had something of her own to wear to the party. The very next evening, they found themselves ready to set off again. The only downside was that someone (and Beth was going to kill whoever they were when she found them) mentioned the event to Wyatt. He couldn't support the idea of them going out without a chaperone, and forced himself into the limousine that collected the girls from outside of the school.

It was a nasty surprise to Chantelle and Charlie when he showed up at their door. Beth mouthed an apology to Charlie on the way inside, and was incredibly disappointed that it had been Wyatt to accompany her instead of Gideon. Then again, it was probably for the best. She didn't like to think what might happen if he and William came face to face away from the school. There, Gideon was forced to adopt a professional manner. In his own free time, he might not be so quiet about what had happened. Not that William didn't deserve to be openly put down, but it wasn't fair to do that to Charlie on his birthday.

They weren't the only students to be invited. Most of them were boys, all of whom had been forced to make the move to our school along with William and Charlie. They were probably happy to get away from the clamouring girls for a single night. Although, they weren't going to
get much peace with Lisa there. She and Chrissy vanished pretty quickly, and went stalking around, seeking out people they might be able to dance with. Beth wanted to stay close to Jenny, but she was swiftly claimed by Charlie. She did look sorry to leave. That might have had something to do with the fact that Wyatt took hold of Beth’s hand as soon as she did.

“What are you doing?” she asked him incredulously.

“I thought we should dance.”

Beth raised a brow, “Do you actually know how to dance?”

“It can’t be that hard.”

“Well, practice with someone else. It’s weird, and I’d rather talk with people my own age.”

“Do you know anyone else here well enough to talk to?” he asked.

Beth was about to concede that she didn’t when she spotted a familiar face in the crowd. Without offering Wyatt and parting words, she practically ran to Georgia. It was difficult in the heels Chrissy had made her wear, but she was really happy to see her. Beth tottered to a halt in front of her and beamed, “I am so glad you’re here!”

“Me too. I was running out of people to pretend to talk to,” she confessed.

Unfortunately, Beth hadn’t lost Wyatt. He stalked up behind her, and noisily cleared his throat. Although he was one of Georgia’s teachers, Beth knew that the proper rules of courtesy had to be observed in a place like Charlie’s house. She let out a soft sigh, and in monotone introduced,

“Georgia, this is Wyatt. Wyatt, this is Georgia. Wyatt is my ex-brother. He insisted on joining us this evening.”

Wyatt spared her a brief smile, that being all the civility he could muster while Beth was being so openly rude. He said firmly, “Lissy is under my care tonight, so she’ll be in my company. And I think we’re about to dance.”

She mouthed help at Georgia as she was dragged away. Unhelpfully, she laughed behind her hand. Of course she did, she was Beth’s friend after all. she might have done the same were Georgia in her place. That’s just how they were. Beth really wished we weren't, though. Then she might have been spared Wyatt’s clumsy feet and sweaty hands.

He really couldn’t dance. Not even slightly. Some people were just cutely out of time, and would make their apologies, then give up. Wyatt insisted on stepping on Beth’s toes for two whole songs, and not once said he was sorry for the agony he was causing her. By the time he was done, Beth had to go and find a place to sit down. Fortunately, it was close to a few good looking boys. They didn’t attend Netherfield Academy, and must have been Charlie’s friends from Pemberly. Well, at least they were better company than Wyatt. He’d found himself some adults to impose on, and they were more than welcome to him in Beth’s opinion.

“Here,” Georgia held out a drink when she arrived. “Sorry about before.”

“No you’re not.”

“No,” she grinned. “I’m not. How are your feet?”

“Swollen, I think. God, can you believe that idiot followed me here? I mean, some people have no sense of – well – anything!”
“It could be worse. You could have been dancing with William.”

“Yeah, true,” Beth muttered, rubbing her aching feet. “I imagine Chantelle will be stuck to him like glue. I mean, I don't like him, but no one deserves that.”

“Actually, the last I saw of him, he was talking to Jenny.”

“Poor her.”

Georgia shrugged, “I don't know. It looked like he was being pretty nice to her. Then again, Charlie was there.”

“Which will be the only reason why he's talking to her at all. Seriously, he should have stayed at his own school if he hates being around us so much.”

“He probably just wanted to be with his friend. Anyway, it's not like it's anything to us, right? Come on, why don't you come and dance with me?”

Beth suggested, “Slow dance? We could make some people really uncomfortable with that.”

Georgia laughed, “I was thinking more of a group of us. I'm way out of your league, you know that.”

Beth held a hand over her chest, “Oh God, right in my feelings! That hurts.”

“You're such a loser,” she joked.

“I know. Still, I'm not as bad as Wyatt.”

“I doubt there are many people as bad as he is,” William observed.

Beth nearly jumped out of her skin. She hadn't seen him walking over, but she was actively avoiding his company so hadn't even had him on her radar. Beth hoped that he hadn't heard any of the bad things she had to say about him. Not that she usually had any problem with openly stating her opinions of William, but Beth knew it wasn’t right to start a huge argument in Charlie's house. It would make things difficult for Jenny if she caused a rift between them.

Beth cleared her throat gently and said in a diplomatic tone, “It's a good party. Sorry that moron came along.”

“If you want to make it up to us, then you can come and dance with me.”

Did I hear that right? Beth wondered to herself.

Dumbfounded, she opened and closed my mouth a few times. She wasn't sure if he was joking or not. If he was, then she didn’t understand the punchline. It wasn't like he could humiliate her any more than Wyatt had. Plus, William was clearly concerned about his public image. If he wasn't, then he wouldn't willingly spend time in Chantelle's company. She was popular, and that was about the only advantage to being around her. And even that didn't seem quite worth it.

“Er – well – that's -”

“T’ll take that as a yes, shall I?” he asked, and offered his hand.

Georgia was quick to relieve Beth of her glass, and motioned in a completely unsubtle way that she should hurry. Beth was so nonplussed by the idea of dancing with him that she was on her
feet before she knew what she was doing. William closed his fingers around hers and led her into the throng of couples already swaying to a song. Beth thought she might be lucky enough to only spare a minute with him if it had been playing a while. But the music switched over just as they came to a halt, and then started up with a new rhythm.

Beth was prepared for the idea that the dance would involve the pair of them maintaining a certain distance. The sort of slow dance usually seen at weddings between awkward new in-laws was what she had in mind. William didn't. He pulled Beth so close that she almost fell onto him, and stepped purposefully in time with the music. She was so busy praying to whatever God might be present to let me get through it alive, that Beth barely registered him trying to engage me in conversation.

“Blake?”

“Huh?”

“Were you listening?”

“Not even slightly,” she said, unabashed at my disinterest in him.

William sighed. Beth thought he might snap at her, but he held himself together pretty well to say he hated her. After calming himself, he asked again, “Are you having a good evening?”

“It would be better if Wyatt would leave me alone.”

“I noticed that his dancing leaves a lot to be desired.”

“Yeah, I might need an x-ray on my feet tomorrow,” she agreed. “I can't believe I have to put up with him until the end of the school year. Wait – why am I even talking to you about this?”

“Because we're having a polite conversation.”

“What's that about?” she asked. “You hate me.”

He let out a short breath through his nose, “Hate is a strong word. You're not my favourite person in the world, but Charlie seems to like your company.”

“Wow. What a massive sacrifice you're making for your friend by dancing with me. I'll try not to make it too painful for you.”

“I don't mind talking to you, if that's a habit you have when you dance with people.”

“Given I don't usually dance with anyone, I can't say I have anything like a habit when I do. Usually I just hope that it'll be over pretty quickly.”

“In that case, I'm going to make you dance the next one with me as well.”

Lisa and Chrissy were making total spectacles of themselves on the dance floor. They skipped carelessly past Beth and William, bumping into Beth on the way. Foolishly, she fell against William's chest, and he brought his arms around her securely. The heat flew to her cheeks so quickly she felt light-headed. When Beth tried to ease herself away, Willam was too busy glaring after the idiots to notice. He muttered something under his breath she didn't quite catch. It can't have been anything polite, and Beth was glad she missed it.

“Think you could let me go?” Beth asked. “If Chantelle sees this, she's going to claw my eyes out.”
“Whether she sees it or not, it's not her business.”

“Yeah, but I'd still like to keep my eyes in my face,” she said, and wriggled free. Well, as free as she was going to get while they were still locked in the dance together. The pair returned to the gentle sway that seemed so popular with people who were using the music as an excuse for some physical contact with the opposite sex. Had Beth’s partner been Gideon, she wouldn't have minded it so much.

“So... Do you usually walk around the back routes of the school?”

“What?”

“When Charlie and I saw you, you were -”

“Oh, you mean when I was talking to Gideon?” Beth clarified. William visibly bristled. Beth couldn't resist adding, “Sorry, I should call him Mr. Wilson, but he asked me to use his first name. I sort of fell into him, and we just got chatting. He's a nice guy.”

“I suppose he would seem to be one if you don't know him that well.”

“Maybe I should get to know him better, then,” she mused aloud.

His eye twitched at the suggestion. Dancing with William hadn't been a total loss, after all. While Beth couldn't openly accuse him of anything, it was fun to hint that she knew something had happened between them. It felt like a victory was being scored on Gideon's behalf. If he wasn't prepared to stand up to someone like William, then this was the least Beth could do.

William looked away, “I suppose everyone has different tastes when it comes to the company they keep.”

“Are we still talking about Gideon, or are you talking about my other friends?”

“I wouldn't look down on Jenny, if that's what you're worried about. She and Charlie seem to have become fast friends already.”

“More than friends,” Beth muttered.

William caught on, and soon his gaze was fixed on Jenny and Charlie. Beth was sure he could oppose any attachment they felt to one another. She came from a good family. Perhaps she didn't have the same kind of superiority in her that Chantelle did, but Beth thought that was in her favour. She was a kind girl, and any guy would be lucky to have her. Not that she was forward enough to make a move on anyone. Beth was determined to push them to one another, though. She didn't think she'd find another guy that complimented her so well.

“I hope that you're not the type of person that judges people too quickly.”

“Obviously not,” William confirmed.

“And you wouldn't think less of anyone for stupid reasons.”

“No, I wouldn't.”

“So you wouldn't stoop to anything that might be beneath you, just to get back at someone. Right?”

“What's with all the questions?” William asked.
Beth shrugged nonchalantly, “I’m just trying to understand you better. Is that a crime?”

“It’s not. But I doubt you’re getting a good idea of the kind of person I am like that.”

“I’m getting enough. Plus, the music’s stopped. That means I’m free, doesn’t it?”

“I didn’t realise I was making you feel trapped. Thanks for the dance, Blake.”

Beth wasn't going to return his feelings of gratitude, not when he couldn't even address her by her first name. She couldn't get away from William fast enough, and walked straight into Chantelle during her escape. So much for the night being fun. It was turning into something from Beth’s nightmares.

“Blake,” she said with a false smile. “I heard that you've been talking with Gideon Wilson.”

“Yes, Chantelle. He's a teacher. It's hard to avoid at school, you know?”

She didn't take offense to Beth’s tone. In fact, she could have sworn that her annoyance only served to please Chantelle. She placed a hand on Beth’s shoulder in a consoling fashion. “I don’t really like you, Blake.”

“No! Really?”

“But I will give you some free advice. Don’t believe everything Gideon Wilson tells you. I don’t know all the details, but I know that there’s a damn good reason he didn't keep his last job. And he’s not even rich or anything. His parents worked for William’s father. From what I’ve heard, they weren't so bad, but he's nothing like them.”

“So – basically – I should ignore him because he's poor, and his parents were employed by someone? He told me all of that, and I didn't turn my nose up at it. Do you know why? Because I'm not a total snob.”

She narrowed her eyes, and pulled her hand away slowly, “Fine. Don't take my advice. I was just trying to help.”

“I seriously doubt that.”
Chapter Eleven

“The folly which he must have witnessed.”

Beth wished she could have boasted that the evening improved after she separated herself from William and Chantelle. Being away from them both was a step in the right direction but it didn't mean the ordeal was quite over. Beth stole Jenny away from Charlie. She felt guilty doing so, but it was clear that she needed those few minutes with her more than he did. Besides, he had to talk to his other guests, and he'd be accused of neglecting them if he didn't leave her side all night.

“Did you ask him anything?”

She shook her head, “Nothing really in depth. I don't think Charlie knows anything about what happened. Just that William did the right thing regarding Gideon.”

“The right thing?” Beth asked. “Look, I get that he's going to believe his friend. That does Charlie a serious amount of credit. But that doesn't mean William hasn't lied to him about what happened.”

“You're not going to change your opinion, are you?”

“Nope.”

Jenny let out a short, frustrated breath through her nose. Beth was sometimes accused of being too stubborn by her father, but she firmly believed William had condemned Gideon to his present situation. If he really had liked to Charlie about the series of events leading to Gideon’s recent dismissal from his previous job then it was all the more cruel. Charlie was going to be furious when he found out. Beth might have told him herself if she thought it was her place to do so.

Wyatt soon tracked the pair down, and asked Beth loudly over the music, “That boy you were dancing with, was that William Davies?”

“Yes...”

“Is he related to Mum's new husband?”

“Er... I think so,” Beth said uncertainly, recalling what Gideon had told her. “Not closely, though. Why?”

“I should introduce myself to him. His aunt is high up in society, and the last time I met her, she seemed impressed with me.”

“I really don't think he would care, Wyatt. Leave him alone.”

As much as Beth hated William, she wasn't going to subject him to the idiot in the middle of a party.

“No, he would definitely want to meet me,” Wyatt decided.
“If I pay you, will you stay away from him?” Beth pleaded. Apparently not. Wyatt ignored Beth for the first time since he’d arrived and strode to William. She couldn't stand to see the spectacle he was about to make of himself. Beth had no doubt that he’d tell William they were related (even though they technically weren't) and she’d be forced to suffer the same humiliation as her ex-step-brother as a by-product. In desperation, she took a firm hold of Jenny's hand and begged, “Dance with me? I can't watch this happen.”

Whether she wanted to or not, Beth was still going to hear it. Not that she could make out specific words, but Wyatt's voice was unmistakable. Beth threw herself into dancing with Jenny. It was a fast paced song, and that really helped to distract them both. Beth was hardly the best dancer in the world, but even she knew how to throw up her hands and shake her hips. Lisa and Chrissy were still racing around, bumping into people, and shrieking with laughter like a couple of children. The only one of the group who appeared to be behaving was Meg. She was walking around in a daze as usual, her headphones in as she listened to whichever audio book she was into at the time. If only she’d learned to look where she was going then Beth wouldn’t have worried about her at all.

It was typical that the person she walked straight into was Chantelle. It might not have been so terrible had she not been holding a glass of punch at the time. The drink was upset all over her beautiful white dress, leaving an ugly red stain across her chest. Meg froze like a deer in headlights when she saw what she'd done, and scuttled away before she could be shouted at. Other guests fussied over Chantelle, and Meg came to cower behind Jenny and Beth.

“Maybe it's time for us to leave,” Beth suggested. “I don't think it's possible for us to ruin this night any more than we have already, but I'd rather not take the risk.”

Jenny nodded in agreement. Finding Chrissy and Lisa wasn't hard. They just had to follow the sound of complete idiocy. Convincing them to go was more difficult, but when they saw the state of Chantelle, they were quick to join the others in their opinion that the night was over. Beth called us a cab in the hall and it was soon waiting at the gates to collect them.

“That was a total disaster,” Beth lamented in the back of the car as they made their getaway. “I'm never doing that again.”

“Dancing with William, you mean?” Lisa asked.

“You danced with him?” Jenny asked. “When did that happen?”

“While you were all over Charlie,” Chrissy said. “I saw it.”

“I wasn't all over him! We were just talking, that's all,” she said.

“Yeah, and you were about the only one of us that didn't make a total prat of herself.”

“I didn't,” Meg said quietly.

“Until you ruined Chantelle's dress, you mean?” Beth asked.

Meg blushed, “I didn't mean to.”

“I know,” Beth looped an arm around her shoulders, and hugged her against her side. “But you still did it. I'm just glad we're going home. Wyatt was driving me nuts.”

“He's so clingy to you. Maybe he likes you?” Chrissy suggested.

Lisa flapped her hands at this revelation, “Oh my God! That has to be it! Eww, Wyatt likes you!”
“Eurgh, don't even joke about that,” Beth warned. “He thinks of me as a little sister.”

“I don't know,” Jenny mused. “He does follow you around a lot, and he wanted to dance with you. I don't think brothers are usually like that.”

“They're definitely not,” Chrissy said. “My brothers don't want anything to do with me.”

“Your brothers are both in Primary school,” Beth said. “Of course they don't want to talk to you. They think girls have germs.”

“Well, I'm sure he does,” Lisa insisted. “You'll see.”

“I'd rather not. Oh, and sorry you couldn't say goodnight to Charlie properly,” Beth apologised to Jenny when it dawned on her that they'd left too quickly to say anything. “We should apologise to him tomorrow.”

“For a lot of things,” she said, and looked pointedly at Lisa and Chrissy.

“What did we do?” they asked in unison.

“Nothing,” Beth said. “Besides acting like you were six years old. You were running around like you were in a zoo or something. What was that about?”

Lisa smirked, “Just having fun.”

“And showing us up.”

“Oh, please! It's not like you're meant to control what we do,” Lisa said. “We're not family, right?”

Perhaps not by blood, but it was clear from the sudden silence in the back of the car that the rest did consider them to be as close as friends could be without such ties. It stung Beth to think that Lisa could so easily discard their bonds just because she was a little angry that her behaviour was being called into question. By morning, Lisa wouldn’t recall she’d said anything hurtful at all. But for Beth, the memory would linger on in the back of her mind each time she considered their social differences and how quickly Lisa would sever ties with her once school was over.

Beth had been right to assume that they would hardly be popular the next time they saw Charlie, Chantelle and William. She’d hoped that Charlie might talk to them to give them a chance to apologise, but he snubbed them along with his sister and friend. The loss of their company didn’t do much to pain Beth, but it hurt her to see the way Jenny’s heart broke when he ignored her greeting to him in the morning. She held her hand tightly and refused to break eye contact with them until they caved in and left first. She was going to have to have a serious talk with her friends about the proper way to behave when in someone else’s home. Being their usual silly selves in Jenny’s house was one thing - her mother was used to it - but in front of all of Charlie’s friends and family? It wasn’t appropriate, and now Jenny was suffering for it.

They spent their lunch hour hiding in the music room. Beth strummed listlessly on her guitar while Jenny prodded in a depressed fashion at the keys of the grand piano. Lisa and Chrissy were content to eat and talk quietly between themselves while Meg lost herself to another audio book. They were interrupted by Wyatt barely ten minutes into their break. “Ladies,” he greeted as he entered the room. “Do you think I could talk to Lissy privately for a moment?”

“No, they don’t,” Beth said sternly.

“I need to go for a walk,” Meg said quietly, and practically bolted out of the room.
“Don't you dare,” Beth warned Jenny, terrified about what might happen if she was left alone with Wyatt.

“Sorry,” she said. “But I think it would be good for me to talk to Chantelle. I'll catch up with you in the next class, okay?”

No, it wasn't okay. But she was gone before Beth could stop her, Lisa and Chrissy giggling and hurrying out after her. Beth jumped up from her perch with the intention of following them, but was hampered in her escape by Wyatt. He stood resolutely in front of the door. Beth didn't like being alone with him at the best of times, and after the party she was sure he was going to lecture her about leaving him there. She didn't feel at all bad about abandoning him. After all, William hadn’t been the only boy she’d been trying to get away from.

“I'm getting the feeling you're going to say something I won't like.”

“Lissy, I'd never do that,” he assured her. “But I admit, I knew you'd be a little apprehensive. I'd be worried if you weren't. Just so you know, your mother already gave her blessing for this.”

“For what?”

“See, it's that I’m what? Beth thought to herself.

“For a long time, although I've called myself your brother, I haven't really felt that way. I know I've been pretty absent in your upbringing, and I think if I hadn't, it would have been difficult for these feelings to develop. When I knew I had a place at this school, and we met again, I realised that I couldn't hide it any longer.”

Beth opened her mouth to interject, and was swiftly interrupted.

“I know you're going to say it's sudden. I know it is for you, but for me this has been a long time coming. I wouldn't have acted at all, but when I was out in France last, I met with Madame Courtenay, and she was good enough to advise me in my future. She felt that I could be a Professor in some grand institution in a few years, but I needed to set myself up with a wife and family to prove I was reputable and respectable. That being the case, she urged me to find a woman to share my home.”

“... What?”

Wyatt closed the distance between them in two strides and crushed Beth clumsily against his chest. Panic alarms rang in her head. With her arms pinned against her sides she couldn’t push him off no matter how desperately she wanted to.

“I know that with your father not having much money, you might be worried about entering into the kind of society I aspire to, but I think being in this school will give you the advantage most other normal girls wouldn't be able to boast. Not to mention, your mother is in a good situation now. And if Madame Courtenay approves of her for her brother, she'll definitely approve of you. You'll have to learn to temper your sarcasm in her presence, but that shouldn't be too hard.”

“Wyatt, I don't -”

He held her at arm's length, “I should have said this first, but – I love you, Lissy.”

“Look, Wyatt... I -”

Whatever she was going to say to rebuff him was lost. Why? Because he stuck his tongue down
Beth’s throat. Her first thought was that he didn't have a lot of practice in doing anything like that, because he was a terrible kisser. The second was blind panic. Beth did the only logical thing; which was to knee him in the balls as hard as possible. His eyes bulged, and Wyatt staggered away a few steps, before he dropped to the ground.

“No!” she shouted at him. “To everything! No!”

“Lissy –”

“Are you totally insane?! I don't even like you as a family member! Why do you think I’d want to date you? And don't even mention marriage, because I swear I will kick you again!”

“I – I don't understand,” he gasped, trying to force down the feeling of agony that was likely coursing through him.

“Let me spell it out for you,” she said slowly, impressing the weight and seriousness of each word. “You and me, is never going to happen. Ever!”

Wyatt swallowed hard. He nodded just once as if he was convincing himself of something. With whatever thought he had lodged in his head, he said, “I know that sometimes girls refuse someone, because they don't want to seem easy. But they go out with them in the end, so -”

“This isn't one of those times, Wyatt. I won't go out with you, because I don't like you like that. In fact, I don't like you full stop. Why the hell do you think I've been avoiding you at every bloody turn?”

“Shyness?”

“Get out, Wyatt. Or at least let me leave. In fact, that's better. Because I need to gargle with some bleach.”

“Lissy –”

“Never call me that. And if you talk to me as anything other than a teacher from now on, I'll be reporting you for harassment.”

“Your mother -”

“Has nothing to do with my life, and doesn't get to make my decisions! Conversation over, Wyatt.”

Beth balled her hands into fists, digging her nails into her palms in the hope the pain might ground her. Inside her stomach was churning. Although they weren’t blood relatives, Beth had only ever thought of Wyatt as a brother. The idea of said brother kissing her was repulsive, and marriage was absolutely out of the question. How Wyatt had got it into his head that he had a chance she didn’t understand. The man was deluded.

With half a day of classes left, Beth knew she shouldn’t make a retreat to her room. It would seem suspicious if she did so. Besides, she had an afternoon lesson with Gideon and she was desperate to see him after their kiss. Unfortunately, she couldn’t make herself go through with it. The risk of running into Wyatt again was too great and she was in no hurry to hear another proposal. No, Beth felt it would be far safer to spend the rest of the day hiding under her covers in bed and praying that it had all been a dream.
Without any intention of coming back again.

Chapter Twelve

“Without any intention of coming back again.”

Despite Wyatt’s declarations of love, he was quick to transfer his affections to someone who wasn’t so repulsed by them. He spent the rest of the week regarding Beth with something akin to civility while focusing the rest of his attention on Georgia. Although she’d told her friend that she could do much better, Georgia assured Beth that she was merely being polite and that she had nothing to worry about. Beth had to trust that she was being sincere because she had enough on her hands with Jenny to take on any further drama.

Beth had never seen Jenny so cast down. There was upset, and then there was heartbroken. She hadn’t been inclined to discuss it at first, but Beth knew something was very wrong. Charlie hadn’t spoken to Jenny since the party and the chance to apologise had long since passed. It wasn’t until the half term break that she heard the rest of the story after Chantelle sent a text message to Jenny.

Goin 2 Swtzlnd 4 brk. C+W nt comin bk.

The girls had been packing their things when it arrived. In two sentences, Chantelle managed to reduce Jenny to a broken pile of nerves, heartache and tears on the floor. Beth snatched up the phone to read it over and over, hoping that it might make more sense if she tried to absorb it a few times. “What does she mean that they’re *not* coming back?” Beth asked, outraged. “They’ve only been here a few months! That’s so stupid, what was even the point?”

“I don’t know. Why Switzerland?” Jenny asked.

Beth remembered her conversation with Gideon. It was the only connection she could make. “It's where William's sister goes to University. I guess they could be seeing if there's an institute out there that'll take them on, but it's totally ridiculous. She has to be wrong. Charlie wouldn't just go and not tell you.”

“But he has. It is what it is, Beth. I can't do anything about it.”

At least Lisa and Chrissy had enough sense between them to keep quiet. It was for the best. If they'd said anything insensitive, Beth might have *accidentally* knocked their trunks down the stairs on the way out of the dorm. She hugged Jenny tightly, hoping that the embrace could express how bad she felt for her in place of words. It was hard to say anything that wouldn't come across as patronising in such a situation. “Maybe the break will be better for everyone. It could just be that he needs to cool down over how we all behaved at the party. After a couple of weeks, it'll be like this whole stupid thing never happened.”

“Do you think so?”

“Absolutely! I've seen the way Charlie looks at you. He's totally in love.” Beth had to sound
confident if only to deceive herself into believing what she was saying. The horrible fact of the matter was that, if Charlie’s parents had made their decision, he might not get a say in whether or not he returned to the school. “Look...” Beth rubbed her back gently. “If you want to come and stay at my place for a while, you’re welcome.”

“Really?”

“Of course! We can go to the beach and stuff. It'll be freezing, but at least it'll be empty. Want to?”

Jenny nodded, “Okay.”

“Right, you go home to your Mum for a couple of days, and then get Ben to drive you. I'll let Dad know, and I promise I won't let him cook for us.”

“Why can't I come to your house?” Lisa asked. “I love your Dad!”

“Yeah, in a totally creepy way. Besides, there's no room for all of us.”

“So mean.”

“So not sleeping on the floor just so you can both fit in my bed,” Beth corrected.

Meg cleared her throat so softly I nearly missed it. She observed, “I think that Charlie will come back, too. He's nice.”

“See? Even Meg knows it,” Beth elbowed Jenny gently. “Cheer up, and get packing. You're usually done by now.”

“That's so I can help you. You're terrible at folding anything.”

“Very true. And you're totally neglecting me right now. I don't know if I can forgive that.”

Jenny laughed despite the hurt Beth knew was building in her chest. If Charlie didn’t have a good explanation for what he was doing, she was going to find it hard to resist giving him a kick for making Jenny look so unhappy. Beth had faith that Charlie was the right boy for her friend, but it didn’t make sense to her that he would just up and leave without explanation after leading her along since the day they’d met.

Beth didn’t stop to ask Wyatt what he was doing during the break despite seeing him when she was on her way out. While she was waiting outside for a taxi to the train station, she happened to see Gideon chatting to another teacher. Their eyes met, and he made excuses to cut their chat short. He jogged over, and Beth tried not to be too happy that he seemed keen to be in her company. She smiled when he joined her and asked, “Did you think you were going to leave without saying goodbye to me?”

“Never,” he winked. “I wouldn't forget my favourite pupil.”

“Have you spoken to Wyatt?” Beth asked.

“I'd be lying if I said he wasn't – er – vocal about what happened between you. From what I understand, I should be wearing some kind of cup in your presence.”

She snorted with laughter, and clasped a hand over her mouth to stop herself. She couldn't help it. Beth knew that it could really be damaging to a guy to be struck in such a sensitive place, but he really had deserved it in her opinion. Any man who forced himself on a girl was asking for a serious injury. There was no excuse for it at all.
“Sorry,” she said, her voice still trembling with laughter. “I shouldn't -”

“No, by all means. Anyway, I'm happy he's not interested any more.”

“Why?”

“I just am.”

Beth blushed, “I – uh – I have to go home during the holidays. What about you?”

“I'll be staying with some friends. But I'm looking forward to spending more time with you when I get back. I'm impressed with your guitar playing.”

“Really? I'm not. I suck at it.”

“You're better than some people, but with practice, you could be brilliant. Maybe some private lessons are in order.”

Beth already felt like her heart was going to burst out of her chest when she and Gideon simply spoke in private. Having him directing her fingers over an instrument, and humming soft music to her in that beautiful voice of his was going to kill her. Still, Beth didn't object to the idea. In fact, it really gave her something to look forward to. She just wouldn't be able to tell Jenny about it. The thing was, she knew that if she did then she would be genuinely happy for her. Beth didn't want her to feel like she had to be all smiles when she was grieving a lost relationship. She deserved time to be miserable, and not have to put on a smile for other people.

“Look, if you're in Cornwall in the next couple of weeks, drop in and see me,” Beth said. “If not, I'll see you when I get back. And I’ll definitely take you up on those lessons.”

Gideon grinned, “It's a date.”

The taxi couldn't have arrived at a better time, because Beth really needed to sit down. Gideon was dangerous. He had a talent for taking the breath right out of her with just a flash of his dashing smile. It should have been illegal for anyone to be so attractive.

Greg had no objection to Jenny coming to stay. He loved her like she was his own daughter. Even though Beth’s house was pretty small, with only three bedrooms, and a large garage beneath it (a professional garage business with a lot of sweaty mechanics working in it), he was always willing to make room for her.

They resided in a small seaside town. Most of their trade came in the summer, when the tourists brought cars that weren't designed to cope with tight, winding cobbled roads. There were a lot of collisions, breakdowns, and nasty arguments with insurance companies to be had during those months. Greg was always on hand to come to the rescue, and he did pretty well out of it.

It wasn't what he'd wanted to do for a living, nor the career he'd started out in. But he still enjoyed it well enough to soldier on, and it paid a decent salary so they could live without having to rely on Beth’s absent mother.

“Hey, welcome back!” Eric greeted as Beth stepped out of her cab at the end of her journey. She was tired, but he didn't care. He wrapped her up so tightly in a hug that her feet left the floor and all the wind was crushed out of her. Eric was about Wyatt's age, but he hadn't bothered with university. He said that all he wanted in life was to earn enough to survive, and to be free to surf in his spare time. Well, there was no shortage of surf on the beach. The owners of the seaside café - Lana and Zeke - also had a store where visitors could rent boards.
Beth wriggled free of Eric and was immediately scooped up by Max. His mohawk was as bright as usual, with flecks of green in the black. Thankfully, his girlfriend Poppy was coming by to meet him. She called, “Put her down! You're scaring her, idiot!”

“Nah, I'm not,” he did let Beth go just in case, and then ruffled her hair with one of his oily hands. “Welcome home, missus. How's school?”

“Boring. Hi, Poppy! I missed you!” she said, and hugged her around the middle.

“Oh, I see,” her brother Lewis said. “You missed her, but not the rest of us?”

“Yeah, got a problem with that?”

“Of course you missed me. I'm the only sane person around here. Well, besides Lana. She said she's sorry she couldn't come by, but you know how newlyweds are.”

“Yeah, and I can't believe I missed the wedding! So unfair!”

Poppy patted Beth’s shoulder, “Don't worry. Joe took a million photographs, and I'm sure you'll be subjected to them before you go home.”

“I can't decide if that's a good or a bad thing.”

“Well, while you're thinking about it, why don't you go in and greet your Dad? He hasn't shut up about you coming home.”

Greg was in his office. He hated paperwork because it kept him away from the vehicles. All his life he'd been around cars. And now Beth was doing the same, though she wasn't sure she would follow the same career path. The garage was hers if she wanted it when she was older, but she had more of a creative mind. Beth knew Gideon was right when he said she had to apply herself to her music. She had at one time, but that felt like a distant memory to Beth since she'd changed schools. Long before that she'd become something of a realist, and had come to understand that she needed to find something she could rely on rather than her dreams of being rich and famous.

Beth rapped her knuckles on the door to get his attention. Greg was soon out of his seat, and lifted his daughter off the floor. He span her around a couple of times before he set her back down. At least he wasn't covered in grease and oil like Eric and Max. “Elly-bear! Look at you! You've grown since I dropped you off, I know it.”

“Dad, it's been a few months,” she flicked his cheek playfully.

“Which is way too long. Did Jenny come with you?”

“No, she'll be by tomorrow I think. Ben's going to drive her.”

“Really? Which car is he bringing?”

Beth smirked, “Typical. I'm going to dump my stuff and take a walk. I need to stretch my legs.”

“I'd have thought you'd want to call your Mum or something.”

She paused on her way back to the door. He never usually suggested that Beth made contact with her. There had to be a reason, and she tapped her foot a couple of times while she tried to think of it herself. If she just asked, he would try to lie. And the lie would be terrible and ridiculous, because he had no idea of how to conceal the truth from anyone.
“Did she call you?”

“She might have...”

“Was it about Wyatt, by any chance?”

“Uh – his name might have come up.”

“I’m not calling her,” Beth said decidedly. “She's been enough of a pain already.”

“Did something happen?”

Beth closed the door gently so as not to arouse the attention of the others. When she was sure no one else could hear, she admitted, “Wyatt asked me out. He said that Mum had already approved it. So I kneed him in the nuts.”

“ Saves me doing it.”

“You wouldn’t have.”

“No, but I might have punched him. What was he thinking?”

“I don’t want to know. I just know that I can’t brush my teeth enough times to get the taste of his tongue out of my mouth,” Beth shuddered at the mere memory.

Greg bristled at that, “He – he – he kissed you?!”

“Yeah, Dad. It's not the first time. I kissed Lewis when I was ten, you know?”

The pair weren't that far apart in age. Lewis was Poppy's younger brother. He'd gone to the same school as Beth before she'd transferred. A lot of girls liked him, but Beth thought of him as just a friend. Well, most of the time. They'd experimented a little in their youth.

“I didn't know! Where is he?!”

“Seriously?” Beth asked.

“Just because it's late, it doesn't mean it's not deserved.”

She rolled her eyes and left him to his own devices. If Lewis was lucky, then he'd have gone home already. Otherwise he'd end up with either a black eye, or a broken nose. Then again, he was good with words, so Beth was reassured he could talk Greg out of hitting him. She was sure things would be better when Jenny arrived. Between her and Poppy, they might manage to have some fun.

And she might be able to forget about William, Charlie, and Wyatt.
Chapter Thirteen

“The pain of separation.”

Two weeks of bracing sea air, freezing salt water, and girly conversation soon cheered Jenny up. It helped to put the troubles of school behind her, and for a short time the girls were able to forget about what was waiting for them. Beth hoped that Charlie would be there upon their return, but her predictions and assumptions about his affection had been seriously off.

Waiting in their room when Beth and Jenny arrived at Netherfield was Meg. She pointed out a note which had been delivered that morning. It was addressed to Jenny, and Beth felt a weight sink in her stomach when she recognised Chantelle's handwriting.

Inside of the envelope was a postcard. It depicted snowy mountains and clear blue skies. Apparently wherever they were was a haven, and they had no desire to leave it to return to school any time soon.

_Dear Jenny,_
_Switzerland is paradise. We’re all so happy here, that we’re going to stay until we get bored! We have private tutors, so won’t be back this term. Try not to miss us too much!_  
~ Chantelle

Beth read the card over and over. Jenny had put it down after just one attempt, and gone back to quietly unpacking her things. Beth didn't know how she could be so calm in the face of what was going on. She would have been calling Chantelle and shrieking at her in anger. Well, Beth wanted to do that most of the time anyway, but it was really justified in this case.

“This is a joke,” Beth said, brandishing the card at Jenny. “This can’t be true!”

“Clearly it is.”

“No, I'm not accepting this. Charlie had a massive crush on you! Things like that don't just disappear overnight!”

“Beth, please,” she begged. “Don't talk about it any more. I can't do anything to make them come back. I just have to accept that Charlie doesn't -”

“Don't even say it,” Beth said. “Not when you haven't tried. Jen', you can't just let things like this slide. If you find someone you really like, you should at least fight for them!”

“Who am I meant to be fighting?” she asked.

“Your own ideas of good behaviour, and social conventions would be a bloody good start! Look, Switzerland, right?”

“Yes. I read it.”

“Doesn't your Mum have a house out there?”
Jenny nodded, “Yeah. We only go out for the ski season, though.”

“Why not spend the winter break there this year? And if you accidentally bump into them, then that’s not your fault, is it?”

Jenny pouted, “Switzerland is a big place.”

“Then it'll be fate if you do see each other.”

“What are we talking about?” Lisa asked as she flew into the room, as full of energy as always.

“That, and it wasn’t right for her to get involved any more than she was already. Beth could nudge, and encourage, but she couldn’t force them together. If she wasn’t so totally convinced of Charlie’s feelings, then she wouldn’t have bothered to contrive such a stupid plan. But what else could Beth suggest? If he never came back, then she would have to watch Jenny suffer more and more. It didn’t make sense to Beth to have it all over before Jenny had even tried.

Beth squeezed Jenny's shoulder in a reassuring way. It might take some time for her to come around to the idea of going to Switzerland, especially if she was being so guarded. Beth understood that she wanted to emotionally protect herself. In her situation, she would have felt the same. But Beth also knew that people didn't get things without working for them, or without taking risks. Jenny was so shy and quiet, and that was part of her charm, but it did mean that she was likely to be ignored or overlooked. Beth thought Charlie had seen past that, but clearly she'd been wrong.

Beth had a few weeks to convince Jenny that her plan was a good one. She had faith in her abilities to do that. After all, who didn't listen to the advice of their best friend in the whole world? And, in the meantime, Beth had her music lessons with Gideon to look forward to.

“Okay, I think we should stop there for today,” Gideon said at the end of their final lesson on the following Friday.

Beth wasn't quite through, but she pressed her palm to the strings to stop the sound of the guitar. She knew she wasn't the best student in the world, and that had to be frustrating for him. Beth was going to apologise for her lack of talent, but found Gideon was smiling at her in that charming way of his.

“What?” she asked.

“That was good.”

“Seriously?”

“Well, I don't think you're going to sell out in Wembley or anything, but when you concentrate you're better than you think you are.”

Beth knew that if she applied herself, she could make some sort of a living out of music. But that
was just it; there was no chance she'd be able to survive on the money she made. A lot of people wanted to be in the spotlight, and make it big with their fifteen minutes of fame. Beth knew how competitive that was. Music could be her hobby (as disappointing as that might be) and she would do whatever put food on the table during the day.

Gently, Beth plucked at the strings again, finding some soothing solace in the sound. She stopped and let out a soft breath through her nose. Gideon appeared to sense there was something Beth wasn’t saying. He reached out to pat the top of her head.

She smiled sadly, “Is it that obvious that something’s bothering me?”

“It couldn’t be more obvious if you started singing about your feelings in an impromptu musical number.”

“Thankfully, that doesn’t happen outside of the movies.”

“Yes, that is a blessing,” he said. “What is it?”

“We’re friends, aren’t we?” Beth asked. She’d lost all hope of a relationship with Gideon. Since her return they’d not had a repeat of the kiss. She supposed it was solely down to the fact he’d felt vulnerable at the time and she’d been there. Beth was surprised that she was so okay with that. She thought she’d be broken up like Jenny. It had served to convince her that what she’d felt for Gideon wasn’t love, but a mere crush.

“Of course. Although, if another teacher asks, then no.”

“Fair enough. Look, do you really think it’s worth me pursuing this?”

“Do you enjoy it?”

“I guess so...”

“Then what’s the harm? If it’s something you like, then you should do it. It doesn’t mean you have to be the best person in the world at it. But it makes you happy, and that’s what matters most.”

It was probably the first time a teacher had given Beth any decent advice. Sure, she learnt a lot about the regular things at school like she was supposed to. To Beth, that was just an education, it wasn’t a life lesson. People her age needed more of those. She nodded, “True. Thanks, Gideon. I should get going.”

“Don’t be a stranger.”

Although Beth still thought he was attractive (because she wasn’t blind) she’d figured out that it wasn’t a good idea to push for more. Flirting was fun, and she enjoyed his company, but it wasn’t exactly making her heart race. In fact, Beth was starting to think she should be looking for someone her own age. Now that was a terrifying realisation.

She smiled when she saw a familiar face in the hall. Georgia and Beth hadn’t spoken much since the half term break. They were in different classes most of the times, and it was hard to meet one another. Plus, with everything going on with Jenny, Beth had felt like her best friend needed her company more. That didn’t stop her from sneaking up on Georgia, and scaring the life out of her when she grabbed her waist from behind.

“Jesus! Don’t do that!” she turned and hit Beth playfully.
“Sorry, I couldn’t resist.”

“You’re not sorry at all.”

“No, I’m not. How was your break?”

“Oh, you know,” she rubbed the back of her neck. “Nothing to report, really. I - uh - I started going out with someone.”

“That is a huge thing to report! Who is he? Does he live near you?”

“No. Actually, he’s from this school.”

“You’re kidding! What, like a new kid? Do I know him?”

“Yeah… Yeah, I think you do.”

Beth didn’t really talk to a lot of the boys unless she had to in class, and she was never actively rude enough to ignore them if they engaged her in conversation. She just had a hard time remembering names and faces. But if he’d transferred into a school like Netherfield, then he had to be pretty well off. Beth asked, “Will you point him out to me?”

“I think you’d know him by name.”

“I doubt it,” she said. “My memory is too bad for that.”

“No, you would. It’s Wyatt.”

It took a minute to process. Beth was trying hard to think if there were any other boys at the school with that name. She was desperate to come up with anyone besides the obvious. Georgia could see the pains Beth was going through as she denied it violently inside. Because no one was stupid enough to date that Wyatt. Certainly not Georgia. She had more sense than most people. No one sensible could accept Wyatt as a boyfriend.

“Okay, I knew I shouldn’t have told you,” she said.

“No - I - I just can’t quite - are you sure?”

“Yes, Beth. I think I know who my boyfriend is.”

“But - but why?!”

“Does there have to be a reason?”

“Yes. Yes there does. Is he blackmailing you? Tell me, and I’ll put a stop to it. I mean it, Georgia.”

She pinched the bridge of her nose in frustration, “I knew you were going to be like this. This is exactly why I didn’t want to tell you.”

“By this, I assume you mean totally reasonable. Because no one would want to go out with Wyatt willingly. Not ever. And I mean ever.”

“Just because you don’t like him, it doesn’t mean no one else does.”

“And you like him?” Beth asked. “Are you sure? Like, did he drug you? Or do you need a therapist?”
“Beth!”

She held her hands up, “I’m just saying that you can do better. I mean, a lot better.”

“We’re just dating. No one’s talking about marriage, or our entire lives. I haven’t had a boyfriend before, Beth, and he asked me. So I’m going to try, and I’ll get to know him. If it doesn’t work, then we’ll break up.”

“I still think you’re making a mistake, but okay, if that’s what you want.”

“Can’t you at least pretend to be happy for me?”

Beth groaned, “Do I have to?”

“Are you my friend?”

“Of course I am! And that’s why I can’t be brutally honest, and tell you that you’re making a massive mistake.”

“Beth, if you don’t like it, then at least try not to comment on it.”

That was easier said than done. How could she not comment on it? That was like telling me Beth wasn’t allowed to make fun of some of the ridiculous hats Chantelle wore at the weekends. It was physically impossible. She supposed she could just hold her tongue around Georgia, but Beth didn’t want her to think that she suddenly approved. Because she really, really didn’t.

At least she could talk with Jenny about it, and it would take her mind off what was happening with Charlie. Which was basically nothing. Beth found her hiding in their dorm, which is where she liked to retreat to when school was over. Although she’d always been kind of shy, at least she’d made an effort to talk with other people before. Now, she was becoming something of a hermit.

“Hey,” Beth said, forcing a smile as she entered the room. It wouldn’t do for her to come across as depressed when Jenny was suffering so much already.

She put down her phone. Beth guessed she was reading Chantelle’s texts again. She didn’t communicate with many people outside of school, so there was little chance she’d found some new friends somewhere. Beth pretended like she hadn’t noticed to spare her the need to explain. She too strained her mouth into the best smile she could manage, and asked, “Were you with Gideon?”


“And you didn’t invite her to join us?”

Beth laughed softly, “No, I think she’s pretty pissed with me right now.”

“What? Why?”

“I sort of insulted her boyfriend. Well - not sort of - I openly mocked him, and suggested she was mentally unstable.”

“Why would you do that?”

“It’s Wyatt.”
“Oh. Oh - well - he’s not - I mean - he -”

“Precisely my point,” Beth said, “He’s no good for her, and she knows he’s a total loser. But would she listen to me?”

“Beth,” Jenny said gently. “If it’s who she likes, then we can’t really judge them.”

“I fully intend to judge. Not to her face, but I am going to judge the hell out of that decision until she sees sense. Wyatt is a moron, and Georgia can do way better.”

“That’s not for us to decide. I don’t really like Wyatt after what he did to you, but there’s a chance that being with Georgia will help him to settle. We should be hoping that she’ll be happy, and wishing them both the best. I mean, she is our friend, isn’t she?”

Beth hated when Jenny was right sometimes. Georgia was her friend, and all Beth ever wanted for her friends was for them to be happy. That was why she was so angry at Charlie; because he’d stolen away Jenny’s smile. That was worth more to Beth than all the money in the world. Still, she knew it was going to be a total nightmare facing a smug Wyatt all the bloody time.

“Fine. I’ll try to play nice. Emphasis on the try.”

She laughed softly, and Beth’s heart melted a little. It was hard to stay angry and annoyed in Jenny’s presence. She managed it sometimes, but most of the time her sweetness won out. Greg often said she was the only person in the world who could tame Beth. She wasn’t sure quite what he meant by that, but he had a habit of saying weird things. Jenny’s mother usually agreed with him, and said that her daughter and Beth complimented each other as well as real sisters. It was too bad that that they weren’t. Beth would certainly miss her when they were making their own way in the world.

The door banged against the wall violently as it was flung open, and Lisa ran into the room. She barrelled into Beth so hard that she staggered a few steps. Not caring that she’d almost sent her to the ground, Lisa held tight around Beth’s waist and wailed, “He’s leaving!”

“Uh - who?” Beth asked.

“Gideon, obviously! I just overheard one of the teachers saying she got engaged to him over the holidays. She’s transferring to a new school, and he’s following her there!”

Beth was surprised that he hadn’t seen fit to tell her that himself, but maybe he thought it would hurt her feelings. She was going to miss him, because she was starting to enjoy their music lessons together, not because she was in love with him.

“Have you said congratulations to him?” Jenny asked.

“No! I don’t want him to go!” Lisa complained. “He’s the best looking person here, who else are we meant to look at?!?”

Beth snorted softly with laughter. she didn’t mean to, but Lisa was still so childish. Every music lesson was spent staring dreamily at Gideon, and probably having some really inappropriate fantasies about him. Beth knew because she’d done the same for a while. Then she got to know him, which is something Lisa had neglected to do. But she had a habit of seeing a pretty face and declaring that the person beneath was perfect for her. Beth thought she’d grow out it, not that she’d still be waiting for that to happen when she was almost eighteen.

“Lis’, there’s nothing you can do about it,” Beth said as she tried to pry her off. “If he’s going out with someone .-”
“I thought you liked him,” Jenny said.

“I did. But I don’t think it’s realistic.”

“What does realistic have to do with anything?” Lisa asked. “Love isn’t realistic!”

“You’re not in love with him, you just want to do a lot of really bad things to him,” she laughed. “Anyway, I’m happy if he is.”

“It’s a shame you can’t think that way about Georgia,” Jenny said.

“I know, I get it,” Beth agreed. “I promised I’d try, didn’t I?”

“Guys! Can’t you see that this is the worst thing to happen in the history of school ever? We have to stop him!”

“Or you could go and watch the boys play football. Seeing them in shorts should help you get over it.”

Lisa stopped her sniffling, and a glassy expression passed over her as she pictured it. A smile crept in, and she agreed, “Yeah, that might help.”

“If only if it was that easy for everyone,” Beth muttered.

Jenny didn’t hear her, or she was pretending not to. What Lisa had was just an infatuation. Beth was afraid to say it, but she thought Jenny might have really been in love with Charlie. It was hard to know when she wouldn’t be so vocal about her emotions. She’d suspected an attraction, but honest, pure, true love was a dangerous thing, especially for people their age. And it was all too easy to get hurt when people were that open with their hearts.
Chapter Fourteen

“With such a mother.”

Netherfield Academy returned to its usual dull state without Chantelle, Charlie and William around. Beth didn’t like to admit it, but she was starting to miss the three of them. The days rolled by, each very much the same, bringing the promise of Christmas ever closer with each new dawn. Jenny wasn’t completely convinced of the plan to go to Switzerland, and made a habit of questioning it whenever she was able. One call to her mother had ensured it was an inescapable plot. Ms. Ayers was just as keen as Beth to see her daughter happy, and more than willing to get up to a little mischief in the process.

Tears were shed as Gideon’s time to leave also loomed near. Beth was one of the few to sincerely wish him well. Anyone could see that he was nervous and she couldn’t say she blamed him one bit. Marriage was a big step, as was leaving a comfortable position in the school for somewhere new. So much change all at once had to be unnerving. Gideon seemed a resilient and sensible man. Beth knew he’d make his future wife happy, and himself.

The one thing she wasn’t looking forward to was her own plans for the holiday. Beth had hoped that she could spend Christmas with her father and her friends at home. Unfortunately her mother had other ideas.

France was a beautiful place with wonderful people. It was a pity that Beth didn’t count her relatives among them. Although she considered herself to have reached an age whereby her mother had no legal claim on her time (eighteen making her an adult in the eyes of the law), Beth’s father was of the opinion that she shouldn’t cut family ties. It was all well and good for him to say that when he wasn’t the one who would have to suffer her company.

There was only one thing about the entire experience that Beth could get on board with; Georgia was coming along, too. She’d pitied her at first, having perceived this to be an attempt by Wyatt to force Georgia to be in his company against her wishes. Then she found out that she was joining them willingly and saw fit to warn her of what was in store, and vow to protect her to the best of her ability. Beth wouldn’t wish her mother on anyone.

The flight was spent in blissful silence as Beth caught up with whatever sleep she could before the inevitable mayhem waiting in the airport. Georgia listened to Wyatt drone on and on about who knew what. Her expression became glassy after a while, and she wasn’t required to contribute much to the conversation. If she’d taken a nap of her own Wyatt probably wouldn’t have noticed.

Monsieur Courtenay was waiting on them at the airport, eager to meet the step-daughter he’d not made an effort to cross the water to meet since marrying his new wife. He kissed Beth’s cheeks in greeting and embraced her in a tight her, his bulging body rippling upon impact and his bristly beard scratching her face. Beth tensed in his grasp and staggered when she was released. Mrs. Courtenay was amused by her reaction and greeted her daughter with an equally awkward hug.

Mrs. Courtenay had an eye for wealthy men. One might wonder what she’d seen in Beth’s father, because he was certainly the anomaly when one examined the list of her previous marriages. Her current husband was far more in keeping with the rest. He was happy to give them a tour of his
expansive vineyard and villa, paying no mind to the way the girls dragged their feet, exhausted after the journey. Beth was determined to be civil if only for the sake of surviving the trip. Any desire she had to act like a mature adult vanished during dinner when he made light of her father’s work. Georgia had to grasp Beth’s wrist and dig her nails into her skin to keep her grounded. Still, there was no hiding the murderous glint in her eyes.

They were only confined to the house for a single night. In the morning the entire family packed up an ostentatiously large car and travelled to Paris. The city of love and lights. It was everything Beth hoped it would be. Full of pretty little street cafes, art, galleries, and more coffee than she could ever drink. The cobbled side streets spoke of charming bygone days and winding, hidden alleys full of adventure. A shame, then, that they passed right through it to an estate on the outskirts. Considering it was so close to the city, it was amazing the house was surrounded by so much land. Even more amazing was just how wasteful the owners were being with it. Not a fountain or orchard to be seen. Just lush green lawns, which was surprising given the European climate and the time of year.

The home belonged to Madame Courtenay, the woman Gideon had spoken so candidly about during his private evening with Beth. She had to admit, she was a little curious about the woman who doted on Wyatt and was so interested in the personal affairs of one William Davies. The stiff lipped staff opened the car doors and collected the luggage, carrying it away to deposit it in the guest bedrooms so as to save time. The butler led the procession through the gaudy house, past taxidermied animals and ugly vases standing on mahogany tables at a brisk pace. Madame Courtenay wasn’t a patient woman, and immediately demanded the presence of her guests.

She sat centrally on a red and gold sofa built for three, her enormous dress taking up the entire space and making her the focal point of the overdressed room. She looked down her nose at the new arrivals as if they had just traipsed in from the gutter to beg for scraps from her table. Her white hair had been piled on top of her head and set in place with emerald set hairpins which matched the large, ugly rings on her spindly fingers. She pursed her pink painted lips. “So, you are come at last,” she said in a heavy accent. Although she regarded the group with the same measure of disinterest, her expression became one of utmost displeasure upon taking in Beth’s attire. Her worn out boots and ripped jeans were as unwelcome in her home as a plague carrying rat.

When the silence became stifling, Beth greeted feebly, “Hi.”

“You are the daughter of Mrs. Courtenay, then? Elisabeth.”

“Yeah.”

“How brash you are,” she observed scathingly. She turned to Beth’s mother, “Her father raised her, you said?”

“Yes, Madame. She doesn’t have much exposure to society.”

“So I can see. You will have to fix that, Mrs. Courtenay. Otherwise I will never approve her.”

Beth could easily make peace with such a fate. She neither desired nor sought the approval of a woman who thought it was better to shoot and stuff wildlife than conserve it. The house stank of her pickled pets. She hoped she wasn’t going to have to sleep in a room full of the things.

It was only when Monsieur Courtenay observed, “You have guests already,” that Beth noticed the two young men in the room. She hadn’t considered herself to be an oblivious sort of person, but she couldn’t believe she’d missed them. William Davies stood beside a pretty, frail girl with cascades of golden curls in a dress more suited to a frilly Victorian doll. She clutched onto his arm and ignored the way he grimaced, as unhappy to be there as Beth was. The boy at his other side
had a charming, lopsided smile. He was the only bright thing in the entire room, and the only person who appeared genuinely pleased to have company.

“This is my nephew, William Davies. His cousin, Frederick Lambert. And, of course, my daughter Cosette,” Madame Courteny explained.

Wyatt was bold enough to step forward. “May I just say, Madame, it is a great honour to be asked to join you here. Not to mention, to have such distinguished company, it is truly beyond comprehension.”

“Beth and I have met, aunt,” William said, ignoring Wyatt’s simpering attempts to grovel. “We went to the same school for a short time.”

“Is that so? How interesting.” She didn’t sound at all interested in that piece of information. “Well, if she already knows you, then you won't have much else to discuss. Frederick, I'm trusting Elisabeth to your care while she's in Paris.”

“I look forward to it,” he said, winking at Beth when his aunt wasn’t looking.

They weren’t permitted to leave Madame Courtenay’s presence until she’d aired her opinions on her guests one by one, telling them exactly what was wrong with them and what they should instantly change in order to be worthy of the sort of society she kept. Beth tuned out what she could, wearing a glassy, vacant expression throughout the lecture. It was clear to see why Wyatt and Madame Courtenay got along. They were a similar pair, both happy to prattle on about nothing important without wishing for a response from anyone present. That, and he was a snivelling lap dog when near her, ready to offer up compliments and agreements so she felt her every word was validated.

Beth didn’t feel relaxed enough to breathe until she was in the guest bedroom. It was small to say they were in a mansion. She had a sneaking suspicion she’d been relegated to the most cramped of quarters so as to remind her of her place. That, or she was being paranoid. She heaved her case onto the double bed and contemplated unpacking. The only thing stopping her was the knowledge that - should she wish to make a quick getaway - it would be easier to do so if she left her things where they were.

She hunched over the bag and let out a long, depressed sounding sigh. She wished she was sharing a room with Georgia. Although it might have been cramped, at least she wouldn’t feel so isolated and would have had someone to keep her sane. She didn’t know how many days she could last under the watchful eye of the mistress of the house.

Someone rapped their knuckles against the door. Beth straightened up, smoothed out her clothes, and cross the room to see who might be calling on her. She thought at first it might be one of the household members of staff come to announce she was being called on by somebody. Imagine her surprise when she saw William on the other side. He forced his way into the room without invitation, prompting Beth to mutter, “Sure, come in, why don’t you?”

“What are you doing here?” he demanded.

Not in the mood for his attitude, Beth had no qualms in letting her sarcastic, immature nature shine through. She grasped his shoulders and shook him gently. “I’m not here, this is a dream. You’re in a coma, William! Come back to us, we miss you!”

He knocked Beth’s hands away irritably. “You’re being ridiculous.”

“No, what’s ridiculous is me having to be here in the first place. I was dragged here by my
mother, if you hadn’t guessed. It’s not as if I followed you.”

“I didn’t suggest that you had.”

“Good. Because you’d have to be pretty egotistical to think I was stalking you.”

He blushed angrily. “Just do us both a favour and stay out of my way while you’re here. This is going to be trying enough without dealing with you.”

“Says the guy that just barged into my room.”

William paused a moment as if he hadn’t considered what he was doing by coming all the way to Beth’s bedroom to confront her. He opened his mouth, closed it again to ponder his defense, then stated, “I came to give you a message.”

“To stay away from you, I know.”

“Right. No, not that. Freddie wants to meet you.”

“I volunteered.” William said. “I wanted to ask - uh - about your friends. How are they?”

“I’m sorry - what?” Beth asked, confused.

“Your friends.”

“No, I heard you. Where did that come from?”

“I’m being polite. Is that a crime?”


“It’s a big country.”

“True. Fine, we’ll go see Freddie, shall we?” Beth asked. Anything to get out of spending more time alone with William. She’d always thought he was odd but now she was convinced of it. One minute telling her to stay away, and the next trying to make polite conversation. If anyone needed to see a psychiatrist, it was him.

Beth walked two paces behind William, hurrying to keep up with his long strides. He must have visited the house many times in the past as he appeared far more familiar with the layout than a casual guest might. They left the main body of the building and headed for a recent extension. Inside was a games room of sorts with a pool table and a dart board. A football game played on the television and Freddie leaned back against the bar, eyes fixed on the screen. He didn’t look up when the pair entered the room, giving Beth a moment to appreciate his broad shoulders and slim waist which were hugged flattering by his white shirt, waistcoat, and black jeans respectively. He complained, “Why don’t they ever put subtitles on these games?”

“You’re French.” William said.

“But this is German.”

“Why are you watching in German?” he asked.

Freddie confessed, “I sat on the remote. Now there’s only German.” Beth wasn’t a shy girl. She moved around William to take the remote from Freddie’s hand and clicked rapidly through the
menu until the audio switched over to French. She placed it back into his hand with a look of triumph upon her face. Beaming, Freddie hugged her under one arm and declared, “I knew I liked you already.”

“You’re welcome.”

“You are Elisabeth, yes?”

“Beth.”

“Of course. It’s a pleasure to meet you at last. Will talks about you a lot. We are not alike, if that is what you are afraid of.”

“Happy to hear it,” Beth said. “He talks about me?”

“Very much.”

“All bad, I hope.”

William warned, “Enough, Fred.”

Freddie wasn’t intimidated by his cousin. He leaned in to whisper against Beth’s ear, “He said you were the only person worth dancing with at Charlie’s party.”

“Did he?”

“And that your musical abilities are impressive.”

“I said they weren’t bad,” William corrected. “And you need to change for dinner. If you wear jeans the old bag will have a fit.”

“That doesn’t really put me off,” Beth admitted.

“She’ll take it out on your mother,” William persisted.

“Still not really putting me off. Anyway, what’s the deal with that Cosette girl?” Beth asked. “She was so pale I thought I was looking at a ghost.”

Freddie gasped and looked down into Beth’s eyes, “You can see her too? I thought I was the only one!”

“You get the salt, and I’ll get the holy water,” Beth replied.

William groaned, “God, now I’m getting it in stereo.”

“Can’t you at least try to crack a smile?” Beth asked.

“I think he’s allergic to those. He laughed a few years ago by accident, and he was in bed for weeks. Even a smirk can cause really bad convulsions. He takes medication, now.”

“You’re aware that I am still in the room, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, duh,” she said.

“It’s no fun if you can’t hear us,” Freddie added.

“Can I sit next to you at dinner?” Beth asked Freddie. “That way, you can tell me embarrassing
“Why would you want to talk about me?” William asked.

“I need ammunition,” she explained. “I don’t know enough about you to totally ruin your reputation at school, yet. Freddie’s my new secret weapon. Is that cool, by the way?” she asked Freddie. “I can give you a code name, if you agree.”

“What kind of code name?”

“What, you want me to just improvise one?”

“You suggested it.”

“I’m surrounded by total morons,” William lamented just loudly enough for them to hear. He was ignored.

“Fitz?”

“That’s terrible,” Freddie complained. “You couldn’t have said double-oh-seven?”

“No, I really couldn’t.”

“Would you two please just come to dinner?” William begged.

“Is he always so whiny?” Beth asked.

“He’s usually worse, actually,” Freddie said. He offered Beth his arm to escort her from the room. “Don’t worry, I’ll make sure you don’t have to think about him for more than a second during your stay. After all, I’m meant to be looking after you.”

Well, Beth wasn’t about to complain about such an arrangement now she’d had a chance to talk to him. Freddie seemed nice enough. Almost as if he was the perfect balance between Charlie and William. All of Charlie’s easiness, friendliness, and good humour mixed with William’s good looks.

Not that she considered William to be attractive. At least… not that she’d ever admit it.
Entirely deceived.

Chapter Fifteen

“Entirely deceived.”

“Now *that* is a nice car,” Beth said as she walked down the stone steps at the grand entrance to the building the following morning.

Freddie beamed at her, leaning against the vehicle with his arms folded across his chest like he’d just stepped out of a dreamy romance movie. His auburn hair was swept back, the collar of his white shirt open, the tails tucked loosely into his black pressed trousers. He patted the door affectionately, “She’s a nineteen-”

“Nineteen-sixty-six *Alfa Romeo Spider Duetto*, I know.”

“How do you -”

“My Dad likes cars,” Beth explained. “Would you let me drive?”

“Do you have a license?”

“No.”

“Then, no,” Freddie opened the passenger door for her. “Come on, before someone tries to stop us escaping.”

There were a few people who might put a stop to their adventures. The first would be Beth’s mother. Although she liked the idea of her daughter spending time with a young man from a wealthy family, she didn’t think Freddie was the one she’d prefer to set her daughter up with. William was worth twice as much. A shame then that he was so determined to dislike Beth at every given moment. Given he had no interest in being her friend, she was surprised that he was also so often in her company. Beth and Freddie had barely been alone since she’d arrived at the house to visit a few days prior to their jaunt into Paris. Wyatt was too busy enjoying the company of Madame Courtenay to pay sufficient attention to Georgia. In a way, Beth wished that she would come along with them, or at least ask if she’d be welcome. She worried that she was neglecting her friend who’d barely left her room since their arrival unless Wyatt demanded it. But Georgia had persistently declined all of Beth’s offers of company, and she got the impression that she ought to leave her friend alone.

“So, what are we doing?” Beth asked they took off at high speed, leaving the dreary old house and its occupants far behind them.

“Museums?”

“Boring.”

“Really? Have you ever been to *The Louvre*?”

“No.”
“Then you don't know it's boring, do you?” he asked. “Indulge me with some culture, and then we'll go shopping or something.”

“Because that's all girls like to do, right?”

“Most, yes. What else did you have in mind?”

Beth shrugged. “Walking, I suppose? Are there many street performers in Paris?”

“Yeah, a lot.”

“I want to see them.”

Freddie chuckled, “You're a weird girl.”

“Why?”

“A hot guy picks you up, in a nice car, no less. You could do anything you want, money is no object at all, and you want to walk around looking at mimes and musicians.”

“Did you just refer to yourself as a hot guy?”

“...Maybe.”

She laughed so hard she had to hold an arm around her middle to keep it from aching. Beth had thought that Gideon might be the right man for her. That crush had been fleeting, culminating in one perfect kiss which then broke along with their relationship. It was only when she realised she wasn’t broken hearted that she understood it wasn’t love. Having never felt love herself, she couldn’t say she had a firm grasp of how one ought to feel when they found themselves in it. With Freddie she felt at ease. He was fun, understood her humour, and was happy to let her be herself in his company.

Well… mostly.

“You know,” he said, reaching over to tug lightly on the collar of Beth’s hooded jacket. “You can't really walk around Paris dressed like a boy.”

“What's wrong with it?”

“Nothing, but if you want a real Parisian experience, you should look like a Lady.”

She groaned, “I hate wearing heels.”

“I'll get you some flats.”

“Freddie, seriously? I don't want to. I hate shopping.”

“One store. Maybe two. It'll be quick and painless, I promise. And then we'll do whatever you want. Deal?”

“Fine,” Beth huffed, knowing that her attitude made her appear childish. It was only out of respect for the car that she hadn’t stamped her feet inside it to emphasise her point. Shopping with Ms. Ayers was one thing - the woman had enough experience of Beth to see the signs of her discomfort during a day traipsing around stores - but Freddie had no idea how to handle a girl like Beth who couldn’t stand to try on dress after dress until she found the perfect fit.

The rich often ignored rules observed by others. Freddie parked his beautiful car outside of a
fancy, quaint boutique with white birdcages containing shoes in the window display and a frilly white awning. In the midst of winter, Beth felt that it was sensible to wrap up in thick jackets and heavy denim jeans. They were certainly practical options. But - as Freddie was quick to point out - practicality had little to do with high fashion. A real Parisian lady (in his opinion) would be willing to make certain sacrifices for the sake of pleasing a woman like Madame Courtenay. Beth didn’t care a bit about making the woman happy, but was keen on the idea of giving her less to complain about when they were in one another’s company.

Freddie walked into the boutique with his head high, confident and commanding in his presence. In England most men would have stuffed their hands into their pockets and shuffled off to hide in a corner, humiliated to be seen looking at women’s clothes by other members of their sex. Not Freddie. No, he marched right up to the prettiest sales assistant, kissed the back of her hand, and flirted outrageously in fluent French while (presumably) asking her about what to buy Beth. He kissed her fingers again delicately before she left to fetch a few things, and returned to Beth’s side.

“Let me guess,” Beth said, having observed the entire exchange with a mixture of disdain and confusion. “She's your sister?”

“Funny,” Freddie dropped into an obliging floral armchair. “Are you jealous?”

“No, not even slightly.”

“I can’t help it if a pretty girl responds to my requests better if I – you know – deliver them in a more enticing package.”

“The less said about your enticing package, the better,” Beth muttered to herself.

After the young lady returned with an entire rail of outfits for Beth to try on, she almost fled the store. It was only when Freddie ordered the door be locked and the boutique temporarily closed for their private use that Beth realised she’d have to go through the entire ordeal before she had any hope of escaping.

She wasn’t sure it if twas intentional or not, but the only outfit Freddie approved of for their day together was exceptionally French. He was happy to purchase the rest despite Beth’s protests, but he knew which he wanted her to wear out of the store and on the streets of Paris. The long sleeved dress had a black skirt while the top half was covered in horizontal black and white stripes. Beth was glad Freddie hadn’t gone for something more revealing. She had a sneaking suspicion he’d been tempted by a lacy white dress which had looked more like a nightgown than something she should wear in public. Beth twisted and turned in front of the mirror, admiring the bow on her chest and the way the skirt puffed out over the netting to give it more movement. A double breasted black wool coat with a belt around the waist finished the look and served to protect Beth against the bracing December breeze.

“You need a hat,” Freddie said. He paused to pull the hair-band out from Beth’s hair, letting her natural dark waves loose.

“Does my hair look that bad?”

He smirked, “Stupid. The right hat can make it look better.”

Again, he babbled in French to the woman who had been admiring her work. She had been pulling Beth here and there for over an hour. Even though she’d shaved my legs, the woman insisted very loudly that Beth wear the flesh tone stockings she was thrusting at her. Beth supposed she’d be warmer with them, but had never been a fan of anything but socks. The assistant raced off, and tottered back on her ridiculous heels with a black wool micro-brim hat. It
had a similar bow to the dress Beth was wearing. Freddie took it from her, and set it on Beth’s head, paying no mind to the way she blushed as he teased her hair into place and Beth felt his fingers brush delicately against her skin.

“Perfect. Shoes?”

“Are you trying to kill me?”

“I couldn't kill someone so beautiful. But you're not wearing trainers with this outfit. It would be a crime.”

“If you bring over heels, I'll walk out barefoot,” Beth warned the shop assistant, who probably didn't understand her. The tone of the threat was clear. Mostly clear, at any rate. Freddie added a comment in French, and Beth hoped that he hadn't totally mistranslated her threat. As it happened, the woman did find a pair of ballet flats. They were mostly black, save for a few white, doily like accents. Beth couldn’t imagine many people would be looking at her feet, so she didn't care too much what they looked like, just so long as they weren't going to cut her heels to ribbons because they were new and in need of breaking in.

“Are we done, now?”

“You haven't cracked a single smile,” he scolded her. “I'll pay. You take a look in the mirror.”

Beth turned back to examine the finished piece. The hat did help, as loathe as she was to admit it, and the shoes went wonderfully with the entire ensemble. Beneath all the glamour she was the same Beth, but she felt far more confident in her ability to stand beside Freddie as an equal when she looked the part. Her clothes were folded and bagged for her. Gallantly, Freddie offered to carry the bags on her behalf for the few short feet between the store and his car where they were locked in the trunk.

It was the first real date Beth had ever found herself on. Freddie laced his fingers through hers and Beth understood why couples did it. The reassuring brush of their partner’s skin was irresistible, the feeling of security in their grip and reassurance that they were so close. He leaned in to kiss her cheek tenderly before they began their walk through the streets of Paris. So often Beth had taken joy in watching other couples pass her by, wondering about their stories, how they’d met and come to love one another. She realised when walking with Freddie that they had become one of the strange couples she used to enjoy seeing. Beth couldn’t help but feel curious as to whether she and Freddie were part of the fantasy of someone else who might be watching them walking by.

Rather than lead Beth to obvious tourist spots like the Eiffel Tower or Le Seine, he walked her through the little known back streets he’d become so familiar with having grown up in the city. She snapped pictures on her phone of the expansive murals and works of art that some might dismiss as graffiti and dragged Freddie into pokey bakeries packed full of fresh breads and pastries. They eventually stopped at a small cafe and sat outside. The cold didn’t bother Beth when there was so much to distract her from it. Street performers entertained tourists and locals, merchants peddled their wares from street stalls, moving on quickly when they suspected they might be caught by the police, and lovers idled by railings and on benches, basking in their love for one another.  

Freddie set the steaming cup of bitter coffee back into the saucer and asked, “So, what's with the music? You said you weren't good, William said you were. Who should I believe?”

“I dabble. Making a living out of it is just a dream. Things like that don't happen.”

“Clearly they do. Otherwise we'd have nothing to listen to.”
“They don't happen to people like me.”

“You have just as much chance as everyone else,” he said. “You don't seem the sort of girl to give up before she's even tried.”

“I don't seem like a lot of things, I imagine.”

“Know what? We're going to go and act like tourists. Watching you being depressed is no fun.”

“Isn't that going to be really boring for you?”

“Not if you're next to me.”

Beth laughed out loud, “Oh my God, does that line usually work for you?”

“You tell me.”

“Wow, you are so not like William.”

“Which is the best compliment you could give me. Shall we?”

So much for taking a walk off the beaten track. Admittedly, Beth did enjoy herself. At the top of the Eiffel Tower she remembered she wasn’t a fan of heights and clung to Freddie as they shuffled around the viewing platform, refusing to go too close to the edge in case she somehow fell off and to her death. His reassurances that this was impossible didn’t work, and he delighted himself with threatening to jump and leaning against the rails while Beth cowered and whimpered in terror. She was much happier on the ground and turned into a model of sorts for Freddie. He insisted on taking moody pictures of her on stone steps, by fountains and statues, loving her contemplative expressions.

As fun as it was, it was also exhausting. Beth understood why people went to Paris for several days rather than trying to take it all in with only a few hours on their hands. Freddie came to sit beside Beth on a park bench where she’d collapsed to rest her feet. He bumped his shoulder gently and affectionately against hers. “Hungry?”

“Starving.”

“What are you in the mood for?” he asked.

“Crepes?”

Freddie scoffed, “That won’t fill you up.”

“But it’s cheap.”

“I’ll pay for -”

“Everything, apparently,” Beth said. She appreciated his generosity but even she had to draw a line somewhere.

“Does it bother you that I’m rich, or does it bother you that you’re poor?”

A good question, and one to which Beth didn’t know she had a proper answer. “Both, I guess.”

“You shouldn’t be bothered by either. We are what we are. We are people, and we are friends. And there is no rich and poor between friends.”
“Never really thought about it like that,” Beth confessed.

“Well, you can think about it a little more over dinner. I know a good little bistro and a club we can go to when we’re done. Do you think you could join me?”

“Sounds kind of like a date,” Beth said.

“I thought this was a date.”

She laughed softly. Freddie leaned in to kiss her temple. She didn’t feel any fireworks at all. That wasn’t to say it was unpleasant or unwelcome. It just felt more like the touch of a friend than the love of her life. Perhaps she was trying too hard to find love with her male acquaintances. First Gideon, then Freddie. It was clear to Beth that she needed a lot more experience before she would recognise the real thing. Still, she wasn’t opposed to the idea of dinner. Nor was her stomach, as was clear in the way it gurgled impatiently at the mere thought of food.

After steadily working their way through three courses, Beth set down her dessert fork and leaned back in her chair feeling more full than she ever had in her life. She was almost glad she wasn’t wearing jeans. They tended to be more restrictive on the stomach after a hearty meal. The dress was far more forgiving. During the lull in conversation, Beth asked, “Do you know Charlie Brackenwood?”

“William's friend? Yeah, he and his sister have been hanging around him for years. Charlie's a good guy, if a little stupid sometimes.”

“He was going to our school, but apparently he's in Switzerland now,” Beth said as if she didn't know much about it.

Freddie took a slow sip of his drink, using the extra time to think carefully about how he should phrase what followed. “I heard that he was hanging out with a bad crowd there.”

“Excuse me?”

“I don’t know the details, or names, but William made it clear that the company he was keeping wasn’t that appropriate. So Charlie's parents thought it was best to move him away so he could get a bit of perspective. I think William went with him so he wouldn't feel lonely.”

Beth felt a rush of hatred for William. She’d tolerated him simply for the fact he was Charlie’s friend and - on occasion - he was capable of acting like a decent human being. His pride aside, he’d been open to dancing with Beth at Charlie’s party and had offered her his coat when she’d been soaked in the rain. A coat she was suddenly inclined to throw out as soon as she got back to school rather than returning it.

“Beth, are you okay?” Freddie asked, concerned by her silence and the seething expression playing across her face.

Freddie wasn’t to blame. He didn’t know the truth of the situation, or how William had come to his conclusion that she and her friends weren’t suitable company to keep. Even Beth was having trouble figuring that one out. She tried to force her face into a more neutral expression, hoping that she hadn’t scared Freddie off being her friend by her reaction.

“You mentioned a club, right?” Beth said, keeping her tone even and her mouth upturned in a gentle smile.

“Yeah...”
“Good. Because I really need a drink.”
Chapter Sixteen

“My feelings will not be repressed.”

In the heart of the city the heavy beats of a DJ’s bassline thudded through the night from the open door of the exclusive Club 51. A line had formed outside full of hopeful revellers all desperate to get inside. It was the kind of place that attracted lingering paparazzi who hoped to snap a shot of the celebrities they knew frequented it and were lurking in the VIP section inside, where anyone who wanted to be someone in Paris knew they had to go.

Beth hesitated beside Freddie, looking up at the pink neon sign above the door, then to the beautiful women who were being refused entry despite looking as if they were fresh from fashion week. She whispered to him quietly, “They’re not going to let me in. I look like a kid.”

“Head up and be confident. You’ll be fine. I’ll look after you, promise.”

It was all well and good for him to say that. If he wanted, Freddie could buy his way in. At least, she hoped he could. The bouncer on the door looked like he was working part time outside of a professional wrestling career. If things went awry then Freddie would wake up in hospital with a feeding tube. That would be an explosive end to their evening, but not the one Beth was hoping for.

As it happened, Freddie didn’t have to flash the cash or get into a fight. Without any attempt to check their identification or to question their reasons for jumping the queue, the bouncer let the pair straight through. Freddie strode into the club and took Beth down the velvet carpeted steps. He held his head high, looking as if he was proud to be there with such a girl on his arm, and was determined that everyone else acknowledged it.

“Did I mention that my father owns this place?” Freddie asked over the din.

Beth punched his arm. “You could have mentioned that before!”

“But you're so cute when you're scared.”

“You're a dick, Freddie.”

“Yeah, but you love me anyway. Come on, we can get into the VIP section.”

The canopy of the club was adorned with red neon light, casting a ruby glow down upon the patrons. Blue strobe flashes appeared in time with certain beats during the DJ’s set, and Beth was already tapping her feet in time to it when they took their seats on the plush sofas. There were a lot of the seating areas in the room, with some smaller dance floors between for private use. The larger, open dance space was meant for mingling and was by far the most crowded place in the club. Every table had a large glass flute shaped basin of ice with bottles of champagne or beer nestled in them.

“What are you drinking?” he asked.
“Aren't you driving later?”

“We'll get a cab. Come on, it's all on the house. Drink until you don't care about whatever I said to make you so annoyed.”

Beth wished she could tell him. The nagging fear that he’d hate her for being one of those girls William had dragged Charlie away from was enough to prevent her. He would just have to wonder about it. She was sure that William would reveal everything to him in time. He was probably waiting until Beth went home so he could do it behind her back.

Drinking to resolve one’s issues was never the best course of action. That said, Beth didn’t see how it could make them any worse. She’d be just as stuck in Paris drunk as she was sober, though with the added benefit of being inebriated enough to care about it less. Besides, if Freddie’s father owned the place then she wouldn’t have to worry about how much it was costing her. Only a fool would turn down a free bar. Especially with champagne on offer.

It took only a few glasses of dom perignon to relieve Beth of her inhibitions. Not usually one to take centre stage, she was convinced that they should spend the rest of the night dancing like they were the only ones in the club. Freddie had a better tolerance for alcohol but didn’t shut down Beth’s plan. He was pleased to see that she was finally relaxed enough to let go and have a little fun.

They danced closely throughout the first two songs until Freddie said he had to make a quick call. He brought Beth to the bar and instructed that they give her whatever she wanted and charged it to his father. They were happy to oblige, especially when he made it clear there was a tip in it for them if Beth had a good time. In hindsight, it had been a bad idea for Freddie to leave his date without a chaperone. Away from his watchful eye, Beth discovered the joy of knocking back a line of shots off the bar and mingled with some incredibly attractive men and women who’d lost all sense of spacial awareness back on the dance floor.

Like the gallant hero he aspired to be, Freddie returned in time to catch Beth when she stumbled mid-step, holding her against his chest and smiling down at her flushed face. He pushed some of her dark hair back from her face and suggested, “Why don’t you extend your stay?”

“I’m tempted,” Beth laughed.

“We don’t have to go back to the house tonight,” Freddie said. “I have an apartment nearby, and we could take a little walk along Le Seine. Romantic, don’t you think?”

It was romantic. So much so that Beth pressed her mouth to his in a clumsy kiss. Freddie was more than happy to return it, holding Beth at the small of her back with one hand while the other played with her hair. She clutched his collar, enjoying the warmth of his arms, the thrum of his heart in his chest, and the sweet promise of escape that might come of a night in his company. She forgot for a moment that she wasn’t in love with Freddie, and that she usually had more common sense than to spend all night away from her guardians without informing them first. The magic of Paris had her under its spell.

That warmth was cruelly snatched away when someone roughly disentangled the pair. Beth stayed upright, swaying a little with the force of the interruption and the amount of alcohol coursing through her veins. Freddie caught the receiving end of a powerful right hook and landed sprawled on the floor. The other dancers backed up to give them room rather than trying to get between the pair.

The identity of the interloper came as a surprise to Beth, though it appeared Freddie had expected his arrival. William balled his hands into fists at his sides and shouted down at his cousin, “Idiot!
Her mother is freaking out with worry!"

“It’s a date. She’s supposed to worry,” Freddie said calmly, picking himself up with a great deal of grace for a man who’d just been floored with one hit.

“I’m taking her back,” William decided.

“Don’t I get a say in this?” Beth asked.

“No!” William snapped at her. He let out a short breath through his nose. In a carefully measured tone he ordered, “Get your coat. We’re leaving.”

“Yes… No thanks,” Beth replied, feeling far more confident with half a bottle of tequila inside of her. “How about I go get some air while you ladies deal with this, hm? Freddie, I’ll be outside when you’re done. We can go for that walk.”

“What walk?” William demanded. Beth walked away to the VIP section to retrieve her things, not giving him an ounce of her attention. He shouted after her as she left the club, “Beth, what walk?! Get back here! Beth!”

Beth relished in her freedom for barely a minute, reaching the curb and breathing in the crisp, refreshing air. William had ignored her wish to be alone. He came storming back out of the club, bypassing the bouncer, and grabbed the back of Beth’s jacket. She jumped in fright and span around, knocking his hand away as she did. She staggered and choked. William wafted the smell of her breath away. “You’re drunk,” he observed.

“I resent that accusation.”

“Why, because it’s true?” he asked.

“… Sort of.”

William took her wrist, “I’m taking you back. Come on, I'll get us a cab.”

I pulled my arm out of his grip, “No! I'm here with Freddie, so you can – you know – scoot.”

“Scoot?”

“Yeah. Get lost. Go on, rich boy. Why don't you ask Chantelle on a date? She could get a helicopter to drop her off, right?”

“You're babbling.”

“I am not! You're just not listening right.”

William wasn’t in the mood to listen to any of Beth’s drunken ramblings. Nor was he of a mind to entertain her childish desire to cause a scene and head home with his cousin instead of going back to her family. Without her permission, William swept down and lifted Beth off her feet, holding her like a princess against his chest. Beth didn’t enjoy the rocking sensation with so much booze sloshing in her stomach. He ignored her protests and walked purposefully away from Club 51 and from Freddie who hadn’t emerged to stop them.

Beth wasn’t permitted to leave his arms until William put her in the back of a cab. He argued for some time in rapid French with the driver. Beth didn’t speak enough of the language to understand, but from the way the cabbie gestured at her she supposed it was to do with the state of her. There’d be a hefty cleaning bill if she threw up in the back. Eventually he negotiated a ride
home, and Beth was allowed to slide away from William to gain some space in the back of the vehicle. She pressed her forehead against the glass. The cold was sobering but the bumpy ride was less so. Beth closed her eyes and willed the nausea away. The last thing she wanted to do was throw up in front of William.

They were dropped at the gates of Madame Courtenay’s estate. The idea of walking from the car to the front door was unappealing to say the least. Beth could barely stand up straight, let alone trek all the way to her mother for a long lecture. Not that her mother had any right to talk to her about her behaviour or relationships. Not when she’d been married more times than Beth could count. She complained loudly, “I don’t want to walk! I’m tired.”

“Too bad. I’m not carrying you again.”


“And the first time I lost my favourite coat.”

“I still have that,” she recalled. “Might keep it. Might burn it. Not sure.”

William sighed heavily, as if he had a huge weight bearing down on him. “I don’t even know why I bothered coming to the rescue. Do you have any idea what you could’ve been talked into?”

“Obviously,” Beth said. “I was looking forward to it.”

“You were looking forward to a night with my cousin?” he asked, appalled. “Were you that eager to jump into bed with him?”

“I didn’t say I was going to sleep with him.”

“You were all over each other in the club!” William pointed out.

“And how is that your business?” Beth shot right back. “Ever since I’ve met you, all you’ve done is be mean to us!”

“Mean? We’re going with mean?”

She continued as if he hadn’t pointed out her drunken stumble. “One minute you’re all like - oh hey look at me saving you in the rain - and the next you’re all - I don’t approve of you and your friends. I don’t even get you. Are you like - are you a good guy? Or are you someone I have to hate? Because - because I could totally hate you right now. I could hate you a lot.”

William span Beth around and pushed against her back, marching her back to the house. He told her, “I know that you hate me. You’ve been determined to hate me ever since we met.”

“You make it so easy.” Beth smirked to herself. “If Freddie had come to school instead of you then I wouldn’t have hated him.”

“He’s too old.”

“Not for me.”

“No, but he’s too old for school,” William clarified. “And he’s not good for you. Freddie has a lot of girlfriends. You don’t want to be on that list.”

“Don’t tell me what I want,” Beth muttered. “You have no idea what I want.”

“Right. Because how could I know if even you don’t know.”
She stopped and turned. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing.”

“Seriously!”

“Okay - *seriously* - it means you have no idea what you want in life, or in a guy, or anything. Think about it; do you love Freddie? Gideon? Wyatt?” he asked.

“Okay - first - Wyatt shouldn’t be in that line of questioning. Ew. Second - why bring Gideon into this? Third - wait… Yeah - third - why does it matter if I love any of them?”

“It matters.”

“Well, I don’t,” she said flatly. “But that doesn’t mean I can’t have fun. Something you obviously know nothing about.”

“I can have fun!” William protested.

“Yeah, with Chantelle,” Beth scoffed.

“What’s she got to do with anything?”

“She’s your girlfriend, obviously,” Beth said. “Everyone knows it.”

William pushed his fingers through his hair, muttering curses under his breath while attempting to control his temper. He snapped at last and declared, “I can’t do this any more! I thought - I thought if I left then it would stop but - *God!*”

Beth took a step backwards. “Okay, crazy...”

He looked Beth dead in the eyes and said without ceremony, “I love you.”

“What?”

“I’ve tried to ignore it, and I thought if I went with Charlie to Switzerland then it would go away. But it didn't, and here you are again, like you're determined to be in my life.”

“I'm really not.”

He closed the distance between them and took hold of Beth’s shoulders. She knew she should have pushed him away, but she had no idea what was going to come next. As far as she understood it, William had always hated her. Besides the fact she'd made the worst possible impression on him at the opening night party, and then had continued to prove to him that she detested him more than any other person on the planet, there was nothing to hint at romantic notions between them. So the fact that he liked her just made no sense. Beth certainly hadn't worked to fuel such stirrings in him.

For a moment he didn't say anything at all. William was scrutinising and searching, like he was looking for a sign Beth was okay with his declaration. When he thought he'd found it, his arms wrapped around her and she was trapped in a tight hug. It was eerily reminiscent of the way Wyatt had treated her, and the encounter might just end the same way if William wasn't careful.

“After you threatened me at the party, I realised that you were different. I've been surrounded by girls like Chantelle my entire life, but you weren't afraid to talk back to me, like we were equals.
And I know that it'll be difficult for people to accept you. I mean, even I find it difficult,” he said, his head resting atop Beth’s with all the impressions of affection. It was too bad what was coming his mouth was completely toxic.

He continued, completely oblivious to Beth’s feelings, “You're not rich, and your mother is completely ridiculous, and you don't dress as you should, but that can be changed. The company you keep is a bit – well – questionable, but as soon as the school year is over you won't be seeing most of the girls in your dorm again anyway. Despite all of this, for some reason, I still love you.”

When he came in for a kiss, Beth found it was the perfect opportunity to strike. And strike she did. Not with a slap or anything so ladylike. Instead, Beth head-butted him as hard as she could in the nose. She took a pretty large amount of satisfaction from hearing him howl in pain. William backed off and held a hand over his nose which - amazingly - she'd managed to break. It was streaming blood in a very unbecoming way down over his chin. Although it served him right, she felt some measure of guilt. She’d only wanted to get him away from her. The bodily harm had been incidental. The bump she felt coming up on her head also made her think twice about ever repeating the action with William or anyone else.

“What is wrong with you?! I thought you'd be happy!” he cried.

“Happy? What, because you're such an amazing catch?”

“Yes!”

“Okay, first, I should point out that this means I don't feel the same way about you.”

“I can see that!”

“Good,” Beth said. “Second, I've never done anything to indicate I was into you, and if I did by mistake, then I didn’t mean to. And last, do you really think I'd want to go out with a total dick, who broke my friend's heart?”

“Your friend -?”

“Jenny! You decided that she wasn't good enough for Charlie, and you made his parents transfer him to Switzerland! Jesus, that's overkill by anyone's standards! She's the nicest, sweetest, most innocent person in the world, and she loved him! What the hell were you thinking?”

William confessed, “I was happy to get Charlie away from her, okay? Christ, I should have followed my own advice. All the girls you spend time with are idiots. It doesn't matter if they have money, they're still not fit to be seen in society! Charlie’s name would have been ruined if he'd been associated with any of you!”

“Wow. And you wonder why I'm not into you? I'm not even going to mention what you did to Gideon. Although I should, because you were a grade-A arse to him.”

“Gideon?” he asked, “I didn't think you'd be stupid enough to fall head over heels for -”

“I didn’t, but I like him as a friend and a teacher. He told me everything about when he worked in your school. You ruined his career, and he could have gone to prison. How can you treat anyone like that? What is wrong with you?!”

“And this is what you think about me?”

“This is why I hate you,” she confirmed. “And this is why I wouldn't have said yes, even if you hadn't asked me out in the middle of completely insulting me!”
“I was just telling the truth!”

“You were being spiteful!” Beth shouted. “Because you can’t say anything without turning it into something poisonous!”

“So, I should be happy that the girl I like is going to drag down people's opinions of me?”

Beth balled her hands so tightly that her nails dug into her palms. Knowing full well that it would do more harm than good in the eyes of their host if she hospitalised William, Beth swallowed down the desire. In a voice that wavered with the calm she forced into it, Beth told him, “I'm going inside, and I'm going to bed. In the morning, I'm leaving. And I never want to see you again.”

“Fine by me.”

Beth never thought she'd meet anyone so hateful, but there he was.

William-freaking-Davies.
Chapter Seventeen

“Excessively sorry to go.”

The few stern words from her mother were nothing to the shouting match Beth had experienced with William. She hid in her room, wide awake in the dark, playing over his words again and again in her head. Supposedly he loved her, and that was the most awful thing to ever happen to him. A sentiment she echoed.

She was joined in her bed in the early hours by Georgia. She crawled under the covers without a word and the girls cuddled up to sleep through the wee hours until dawn broke and light streamed through the open curtains. Beth was first out of bed and packing when Georgia stirred. She pushed her dark hair off her face and asked sleepily, “What are you doing?”

Beth paused in stuffing her few stray clothes that had escaped the case over the past few days back into place. She shrugged, “Leaving.”

“Our flight isn't for another couple of days.”

“I know. I can't be here, Georgia. Not without committing a major crime, or an international incident. You can stay on if you want.”

“No way,” she said. “If I have to spend another day with Wyatt's sweaty hand holding mine, I'm going to freak out.”

I smirked, “I told -”

“Don't even say it.”

“Come on, you have to let me have this one. I knew he was no good for you.”

“At least I tried,” she said. “But yes, you were right. So I'll go back with you. That way your Mum won't be so mad at us. Do you want me to tell her it was my idea?”

“Good plan,” Beth agreed. “If she thinks it's me, she'll try to play the strict parent.”

“I'll break up with Wyatt while I'm at it. I don't want him coming back thinking we're a thing.”

All in all, it was a pretty productive morning. For Georgia, at least. She wasn't at all gentle in dumping Wyatt. He didn't appear to accept it at first. When she slapped him, he got the message. Beth didn't laugh, not matter how much she wanted to. She was still reeling from her night out, and the way William had treated her.

Beth’s mother wasn't happy. When the girls made it sound like Beth was accompanying Georgia as a responsible friend, she came around to the idea of them flying without her or Wyatt. Freddie volunteered to be their driver and brought his car around while sporting a pair of dark glasses.

“Hungover?” Beth asked as they joined him outside.
“You have no idea. How are you not?” he asked. “You had twice the amount I did.”

“I worked it out of my system before I went to bed.”

To Beth’s horror, William came out to help load the cases into the boot of the car. Beth was tempted to tell him to leave it, but it wasn’t worth it. If he wanted to make himself useful, that was up to him. As far as Beth was concerned, it would just help them to get on their way quicker. He said nothing to her in the duration, and then stalked back into the house in complete silence. If she wasn’t so angry at him, Beth might have wondered what William’s problem was. As it happened, she already knew; her.

Beth decided then and there that she wasn’t going to give him another thought. Not ever. William was from a totally different world from Beth, and it was one she had no interest in occupying.

Freddie and Georgia chatted in as animated a way as was possible with his headache. Beth kept quiet, squashed into the front passenger seat beside Georgia, watching Paris fly by. It really was a beautiful place. It was too bad William had totally destroyed her impression of it with his attitude.

Freddie expected a kiss at the airport, but he didn't get one. She just couldn't bring herself to encourage someone who had such an irritating relative. Instead, Beth let him have a hug, because she couldn't find it in her to be cruel to him. He sensed something was off, but he was too polite to mention it. Beth and Freddie parted as friends, her last act before she and Georgia returned to England.

It was wet, and grey, and everything Beth thought it would be. The airport was busy with people heading home after visiting relatives in the country, or returning from more tropical climates to the dismal reality of their lives. In silence, the girls passed through baggage claim and the security checks. At the taxi rank, Beth asked her friend, “Do you want to come and stay a few days?”

“I shouldn't. But thanks.”

“See you at school?”

“Definitely,” she hugged Beth tight, and hopped into the waiting cab.

Beth headed back inside for a train. The cost of a taxi from London to Cornwall would have been enough to put her into debt until she retired. Rail tickets weren't much better, but at least Beth had enough cash for one of those. She found a single seat, and the one beside her was soon occupied by a man who fell asleep almost as soon as his backside was in the chair.

To distract herself from his snoring, she hit Greg's number on the speed-dial. He picked up after a few rings. He'd probably been in the middle of working instead of closing up for the holidays like any sane person would. Beth cleared my throat. She tried to mask her emotions, but the misery crept into her voice when she said, “I'm on my way home.”

“You're early.”

“Gold star, Dad. I know. Paris sucked.”

“You're mother won't be happy with me.”

“She'll get over it. Anyway, she paid for my flight. It's fine. I need to wash stuff before I go back, anyway. Have you got anything in for dinner?”

“Er...”

“Order a pizza or something. I'll go shopping tomorrow.”
“Okay, I'll see you in a few hours. Do you want me to meet you at the station?”

“I’m fine.”

“I can send one of the boys, if you'd rather.”

“No thanks. See you later, love you.”

“Love you too, Elly-bear.”

The phone beeped and the screen went black. Beth hadn’t thought to charge up the battery the night before. The only thing on her mind had been her escape. While digging through her bag in the cramped space for a charger she could plug into the wall, she closed her fingers around an envelope. Beth wrestled it out from beneath her poorly packed belongings and turned it over. There was no name on it but she guessed it was for her. With nothing else to occupy her time during the rest of the journey, she tore it open and read the letter.

Beth,

Don’t worry if you think I’m going to try to ask you out again. You made it pretty clear that you weren’t interested in me. My nose isn’t broken, by the way. Not that you would care. In fact, I imagine that’s a disappointment to you.

The reason I’m writing, is to address the things you accused me of last night.

First, yes, I broke up Charlie and your friend. I’ll come to this later, because I want you to finish reading this note before you tear it up.

Gideon is a liar.

You might think that I’m the liar, but I’ll tell you my side of the story.

He was a teacher at my school for a short time, but before that he’d grown up on our estate. His parents worked for mine, and we were often thrown together because we were all a similar age. He didn’t seem like a bad kid, but he changed after his parents died. My father wanted him to be looked after. When we lost him, my mother continued to honour his wishes. She helped give him a recommendation to my school after funding all of his studies.

Around that time he got into a relationship with my older sister. I thought this was strange, because we’d all be brought up like we
were siblings. But Amanda was happy, and I didn’t want to ruin that for her.

Then I walked in on him with another woman at school. A teacher, no less. He threatened me, and ordered me not to tell my sister. He said it would break her heart. To solidify his relationship with her, and to make it more difficult for me to tell the truth, he proposed to her.

Gideon wasn’t earning much, but he spent excessively, trying to create an image and a lifestyle he couldn’t afford. He borrowed money, and he gambled. While he kept all this from Amanda, it was plainly obvious to me that he was in desperate need of help.

How?

Because he asked me for money.

Yes. Me.

He thought that I could get it from my mother, and pretend it was for something I needed. Naturally, I refused. After that, it came to light that someone was stealing from the school. At first they were petty thefts from other teachers, and then cash boxes and savings went missing from the offices. Everything pointed to Gideon, and I finally told my mother the whole of it.

She paid off everything for him, but only on the condition that he stayed away from our family, and that included Amanda. After she heard about him cheating on her, she didn’t want anything to do with him.

I know that Gideon blames me entirely for what happened.

I hope, no matter what you think of me, you’ll at least not hold these events against me. I did what was right for my family, and we only didn’t take the matter to the police out of respect for my sister’s reputation. She was hurt enough, and being dragged through
that ordeal would have made it worse.

If you want to check any of these facts, you can talk to Freddie.

He knows everything about it.

Now, as for the issues with Jenny and Charlie.

Yes, I broke them up, and I was happy to do it.

It’s not because Jenny is a bad person, which I might have implied last night, but it’s because she’s doesn’t seem to like him as much as you say. I understand that she won’t just be after his money, and that her family is respectable, but she seems so quiet and unmoved by him, that it’s impossible to tell if she likes him as anything more than a friend.

But the attitudes of your friends on the night of Charlie’s birthday caused a huge amount of concern. Not just with me, but with his family, too. Lisa and Chrissy were completely out of control. It was like being at a zoo. They have no sense of social norms, and no idea how to behave as anything but five year old girls.

Meg ruined Chantelle’s dress and, while I accept that she isn’t the nicest girl in the world, she deserved an apology. Instead, you all ran from the party, and left her without any consideration.

I shouldn’t have to tell you how ridiculous Wyatt is. He made a spectacle of himself by talking to me so openly when I didn’t know him, and presumed that his slight connection to my aunt put him in the same sphere as me.

If I really hurt Jenny by what I did, then I am sorry for that.

I thought that she only had a crush on him, and it wouldn’t pain her to be parted from him. Clearly I was mistaken, and you would know better than I do how she behaves around boys. But now it’s done, and I can’t change that. Charlie will give up on Jenny, and I suggest you convince her to do the same.
Now, as you requested, we don’t need to ever see each other again.

~ William Davies
Chapter Eighteen

“How much I shall have to conceal.”

Beth had been expecting a warm welcome when she arrived home, only her father was working late on a car for a client, and all she found upstairs was a dark flat with heating that had cut out on them. Beth ordered in the dinner her father had forgotten to buy despite her phone call, washed the dishes in the sink, and reset the boiler pressure so it wouldn’t drop out on them in the middle of the night. Even when the radiators came back to life, Beth couldn’t shake the chill she felt. She supposed it was more to do with the numbness she felt after finding out that Gideon had lied to her.

Over the following few days the change in her was obvious. Greg didn’t comment on it even if he wanted to. Beth smiled and joked with him, but the light behind her eyes had dimmed. Something was weighing on her mind and she didn’t have the courage to discuss it with her father. Any parent would be worried when their child walked around with that kind of burden.

He drove Beth back to school, still none the wiser as to her worry. She hugged him tightly before he left, lingering to watch the truck go to make sure he didn’t think twice and come back to question her. As sad as she was to be separated from him again, it was a relief that she wouldn’t have to worry about what she was hiding or about lying to his face when she told him there was nothing wrong.

Jenny was already in their room when Beth returned, and the girl didn’t hesitate to hug her best friend in a suffocatingly firm grip. Jenny reciprocated the gesture, and the two sat in silence for a full minute before Beth found the courage to speak. She knew she couldn’t bring herself to tell her friend about William’s attempts to separate her from Charlie. If Jenny heard about it then she’d be even more heartbroken than she was already. It was one thing to think that Charlie simply didn’t love her, but quite another to realise it was all the doing of people she thought were her friends. Telling a part truth was better than lying completely.

“Jen’, can we go talk about something?”

“What's wrong with talking here?” she asked.

“I can't let anyone else hear this.”

“Okay... Library?”

Jenny was a smart girl. On the first day back after the holidays it wouldn’t be in use. Everyone would be so concerned with unpacking and boasting about their breaks that they’d avoid studying like the plague. The girls picked out an aisle of reference books at the back of the cavernous room and sat cross-legged on the floor. Beth leaned back against the shelves while Jenny rested her head on her friend’s shoulder. “I saw William Davies while I was in France. He was a total dick, as usual. How was your break?”

“That's all you have to say? You could have told me that in our room.”
“No, there's more. But I want to hear how your Christmas was, first.”

She closed her eyes. “I didn't see Charlie. I saw Chantelle, and she made it clear that she hated me. Like, she was really angry I was there. I told her that it was just a coincidence, but she was really sure I did it on purpose.”

“Sorry,” Beth said. “I shouldn't have convinced you to go.”

“Mum and I had a good time. She said you and your Dad should have come along.”

“My Dad on skis? He'd break every bone in his bod.,” Beth joked. She held her hand and gave it a gentle squeeze, “You guys should come to our place one year. It'll be cramped and awkward. You'll love it. I promise.”

“Maybe.”

“Oh, so there's something else that happened. And I'm only going to tell you if you think you want to hear it. Because if you don't, then it's fine. But it's about Gideon.”

“Obviously I want to hear it.”

“Turns out that Gideon is a big fat liar. He did steal from the school, and from a lot of other people by not paying debts. And he cheated on William's sister. The family paid off everything, but he had to get a new job. They were keeping it out of the papers so his sister wouldn't get humiliated.”

Jenny rubbed Beth’s arm gently to soothe her. She mistakenly believed that Beth had found it all incredibly upsetting. In a way, she had. Beth was more angry than anything else. She was sure Gideon had been laughing at her behind her back because she was just another stupid little girl he’d managed to win over with his sob story. Beth was glad he was gone, and she had no desire to see him again.

“Do you think we should tell anyone?” Jenny asked.

“No. He doesn't work here, now. That makes him someone else's problem.”

Perhaps it was selfish, but Beth had faith that his true character would be exposed soon enough. It was only a matter of time before his future wife realised the kind of man he was, or he slipped up and stole from his employers again. Assuming that the conversation was over, Jenny began to rise from her position. Beth reached up to yank her back down into place. She did so far more roughly than she intended, and Jenny’s backside hit the floor with a thud. “Okay, ouch,” she said, rubbing her posterior. “What?”

“Swear you won't tell anyone about this?”

“I already -”

“Not that,” Beth hissed. “William asked me out.”

“He what?!”

She clamped her hand over Jenny’s mouth, “God, really?!”

Jenny pushed Beth’s fingers away. “Sorry – but seriously, what?!”

“The guy is really unbalanced. I mean, I hate him, and he knows that. But he still asked.”

“What did you say?”
“Before or after I gave him a nose-bleed?”

“You didn’t!”

“Trust me, he deserved it. Mostly. Anyway, I said no. I didn’t do it all that politely, but I think I got my point across.”

“You can do better.”

“I did,” Beth said. “I – uh – I sort of snogged his cousin, Freddie. But William got in the way, like he always seems to. Anyway, it was a crazy couple of weeks. Let’s just try to forget about all of them, and we can have fun like we did last year. Sound good?”

“Yeah, it does. But you have to tell me all about Freddie.”

“Fair enough.”

Jenny demanded every detail, and Beth was happy to provide them. So long as it kept Jenny’s mind off Charlie then it was worth the time it took to talk her through the dates, Wyatt’s break up with Georgia, and the horrid company that was Madame Courtenay. She was glad their interaction had been brief because she couldn’t stand the idea of having to live with such a person. Beth almost felt sorry for her daughter.

The stories made Jenny smile and Beth realised that was the best thing to come out of her disastrous Christmas. Knowing that she had the power to make her friend light up again gave her hope for her future without Charlie. After her encounter with William, Beth knew there was no way he’d rush to recommend that his friend make contact with Jenny again.

The girls slipped back into a normal routine. It lasted for all of a week. Lisa and Chrissy were as ridiculous as ever, happy to shout about the expensive gifts they’d received and comparing all of their new clothes and accessories. Meg was much more reserved in discussing the books and gadgets she’d been given by her parents. Beth couldn’t boast such grand gestures, but was happy with the few trinkets she’d acquired. The best present she’d received was her early escape from Paris. That said; Chrissy and Lisa fell over themselves trying to sneak peeks at all the dresses Freddie had bought for Beth during their date.

Wyatt had returned to his teaching position in the school. Beth had hoped he might stay behind in France as Madame Courtenay’s personal lap dog. He’d been moody and distant with all of the girls since he’d come back. Georgia’s smiles and laughs did nothing to improve his mood. He could barely look her in the eyes. It was clear he was hurt and angry after the way they’d broken up. Beth couldn’t blame him. She didn’t wish that kind of pain on anyone, but she was also pleased that Georgia had seen the light so early and gotten away from someone who was so thoroughly unlikeable.

Surprisingly, he wasn’t the only student teacher to come back.

Beth could have gone through three lifetimes without seeing Gideon again and have been perfectly happy about it. The fact he’d returned to his position raised a lot of questions about the suitability of his future wife among the student body. They wondered if she’d dumped him or cheated, or if she’d perhaps decided men weren’t her preference. Beth and Jenny thought it much more likely that Gideon had shown his true colours and the woman had done the only sensible thing and run like the Devil was behind her.

Gideon put on a brave face and spun tales of woe to entertain the swooning masses. Jenny and Beth weren’t convinced by his stories about his devotion to the school and its students, or how he
simply couldn’t stand to be so far away from them all. It was on the way out of music class one day that he stopped her, blissfully unaware that Beth had heard the facts of his circumstances from a far more reputable source. “I was hoping that you'd want to continue practicing with me after school hours. I miss the time we spent together.”

*I bet you did, you creep,* Beth thought to herself.

“Sorry. I have exams coming up and everything. It's hard to make time for all the stuff I want to do. If I can work it into my schedule, I'll let you know.”

“It's a shame to let your talents go to waste.”

She forced a smile, “It's not really a waste. I just want to be able to get a job when this is over. There'll be loads of time for music in the school holidays.”

Gideon tilted his head, and reached out his hand as if to touch Beth’s face as he had before. She knocked it away without thinking. The idea of his fingers on her skin was repulsive to Beth, like the caress of a poisonous snake. She felt as if his touch was going to leave her tainted by him. He stood up straight, clearly offended by what Beth had done.

“Have I overstepped a boundary?”

“Oh -”

“I thought we were friends, Beth.”

“I just think we should be a teacher and student. Rumours, you know? I wouldn't want your job to be in danger again.”

“That’s true,” he said. “But I don't think that's actually the reason you're being like this. Has something happened? Do you want to talk to me about it?”

“Nothing. You're being paranoid.”

“I'm not sure I am. Beth, if -”

“I said it was nothing, Gideon! Just leave me alone, okay?”

Gideon was a lot of things, but not a fool. He understood that something was wrong well enough that he stepped aside, his hands up to show he intended her no harm. Beth hitched her bag up on her shoulder and hurried from the room, her head down, the only thing on her mind was her return to her room and the safety it provided from him. It was on her way back that she was tackled by Lisa, knocked into the wall, winded and bruised. Chrissy came running up behind her, stopping short of adding to the crush that would have left Beth seriously injured.

“Why do you keep doing this to me?” Beth groaned, half amused and half exasperated. Chrissy held up a flier advertising the upcoming trip to Italy. Beth scanned the notice quickly. She’d seen it before and didn’t particularly appreciate the reminder that she wasn’t going along with the others. “What about it?”

“It's going to be so much fun,” Chrissy beamed. “And the best part -”

“Gideon's going!” Lisa declared, cutting off her friend in her joy. “I mean, can you imagine taking a gondola ride with him? It's going to be amazing!”

“You'll have to tell me all about it when you get back. I'm not – wait, did you say that Gideon was
“Going?”

“Yeah, duh. He's a teacher, he's going to be supervising.”

Well, that couldn't possibly go wrong.

A man known for getting into debts, stealing, and sleeping around on an all girl's school trip to a foreign country. If Beth had possessed a shred of solid evidence to prove he was the same man he'd always been, she'd have petitioned the school to ban him from it. But she didn't, and Beth couldn't convince the school board of Gideon’s real personality without exposing William's sister to a lot of very nasty gossip.

“Maybe you guys should go on a different trip,” she suggested. “Or not at all. It's not like you can't go to Italy any time.”

“It's the last time we can all go together,” Chrissy said. She blushed and saw fit to add, “Without you, I mean. But you never go on the trips, so that's nothing new.”

“It's fine,” Beth lied, dying of envy on the inside. “Honest.”

“It's not that fine,” Lisa added. She threw her hair over her shoulder and said, “It's prom this year, right? And it's the last time we can all go to a party together. So you'd better call your Dad, and tell him you need a nice dress. I'm totally not going with you if you're going to wear jeans.”

“That's not really any of your concern, is it?” Beth asked. She had a lot of rather nice dresses courtesy of Freddie, so she would put in some small measure of effort.

“Exactly. And you never go on the trips. I get that you're poor - really - but you don't have to advertise it so much when there are boys around. You know that people talk about it behind your back, right? Well they talk about us sometimes, too. Like how we're only hanging out with you because you're a charity case, or like, how bad it is we have to get stuck with you.”

“Where the hell is all this attitude coming from?” Beth asked, hurt and caught off guard. “This hasn't ever bothered you before.”

“I don't want you to make us look bad in front of Gideon, okay? If you're not going to Italy then it doesn't matter, there. But I want him to talk to us at prom. You don't have to look better than me, but can you at least try for a while?”

“Lis', don't be like that,” Chrissy implored. “Beth's just not that interested. And you're being way dramatic.”

“I'm never dramatic,” she declared. She turned and stormed away, betraying her protests immediately.

Chrissy was ready to follow, but Beth reached out and held her in place. Once Lisa was out of sight she asked, “What did I miss?”

She scuffed her shoe on the floor, then confessed quietly, “Lisa likes Gideon. But she thinks he's more into you. She's just being jealous.”

“Well, she can do much better. I'm not interested in him, for the record.”

“I know. I'll talk to her when we're in Italy. You know what she's like. As soon as she's out there, she'll forget all of this.”
“She'll probably forget by morning,” Beth muttered. So Chrissy wouldn't think she held any animosity towards her she patted her shoulder gently. “Go after her. She's probably having a tantrum somewhere.”

Beth found it easy to forget that the pair were the same age as her. Meg too, for that matter. Sometimes she worried that she came across as patronising to them. Beth had always considered herself more mature because she’d had to grow up and take care of her father when they had no one else to rely on. The habit of wanting to take responsibility and be the parental figure to the people she loved hadn’t been easy to break. Beth had chipped away at it as best she could, but it was clear it was a part of her personality from the way she fought to protect her friends, taking responsibility for their actions and trying hard to avoid hurting their feelings.

After a short respite from the noise, Beth continued on her way to the dorms. She was reassured that - with exams and the trip coming up - Lisa wouldn’t have time to remember she was envious of Beth. At least - she hoped that was the case.

Time would tell.
After weeks of revision, the students were ready for the vacation offered by their school trips. The two week break served to ease some of the frayed nerves before the final exams which would measure the success of Netherfield Academy’s attempts to educate their young charges. Having spent this time glued to their books, the girls had little time to argue or to concern themselves with Gideon or any of the boys in their acquaintance. Beth was glad that Lisa had calmed a little. However, she couldn’t shake the nagging suspicion that something was going on with her. Lisa was seldom so quiet even if her grades relied on it. Had she had the luxury of free time, Beth might have given her change in behaviour the concern it deserved.

It was during one rare evening of rest that Beth was lying on her bed, staring up at the ceiling listlessly. Her guitar rested on her stomach where Beth plucked idly at the strings, letting her mind wander into blissful nothing. Meg was listening to another audio book, not at all interested in anything her friends were doing. If Beth thought she was bothering her, she’d have stopped. Since her music lessons with Gideon had ended she’d lost interest in pursuing music as anything other than a hobby.

“Hey,” Jenny said as she came through the door. “Aren’t you packing?”

“What?” Beth asked, snapping back to horrible reality with a jolt, sitting up so suddenly that the instrument almost found its way to the floor. Jenny motioned to the packed cases stood beside the other beds, ready to accompany their owners off to more exotic climes than Beth could boast. She groaned and dropped back down on the bed. “I’ll do it later.”

“Your cab is turning up at seven tomorrow.”

Beth looked at her watch. “Eh, I have time.”

“Is this because you’re not going to Italy?” Jenny asked, perching on the edge of Beth’s bed. “Mum said she’d pay for it if you wanted to go.”

“I remember.”

“Then why didn’t you take her up on it? She loves you like a daughter. She wouldn’t offer if it bothered her.”

“But I’m not her daughter, Jen’. You are. I’m fine with it, okay? I’ll go some other time.”

“You don’t seem fine.”

Beth sat back up, pushing her fingers through her dark curls to buy herself a few more seconds of thinking time. No, she wasn’t fine, and that much was obvious to anyone with eyes. Beth had always wanted to go to Italy. It was the backdrop to her favourite book and the epitome of romance and mystery to her mind. But she didn’t want to get there by being a charity case. She loved Jenny’s mother, and in a way that was half the problem, because it reminded Beth that Ms.
Ayers was exactly the sort of female role model she was missing in her life.

Rather than lie to her friend, Beth made her excuses to leave the room. Jenny knew better than to follow her. Whatever Beth was feeling, she needed to make sense of it by herself. Throughout the years she’d spent in Netherfield Academy, Beth had told herself that she didn’t feel any envy for the privileges enjoyed by her friends. Every day she’d convinced herself that she was better off than they were because she had her feet firmly on the ground, and an unrivalled awareness of the reality they would face once outside of the school.

The fact of the matter was, Beth always felt inferior to them.

Whether it was in matters of money, class, intellect or opportunity, Beth knew that their lives would exceed hers in every way. They’d move in better circles, shake all the right hands and kiss all the right cheeks, and they’d never give a second thought to the audacious poor girl who’d once shared a dorm room with them. Her determination to believe in their genuine affection for her had kept such feelings at bay for a long while. Now the end drew nearer, she couldn’t help letting them rise to the surface. Beth realised she needed to be more guarded in order to protect herself from the hurt she’d feel when they all parted ways. She needed to stop relying on her friends for so much support. Their time in Italy would test her resolve and her strength. Once it was over, Beth would know if she could stand the separation.

She discovered Lisa and Chrissy speaking in hushed tones in the corridor. Something about the conversation was giving Chrissy some measure of concern. Lisa, on the other hand, was smiling and animated which wasn’t out of the ordinary for her. Rather than intruding and demanding to know what the discussion regarded, Beth cleared her throat softly to announce herself. As she expected, the pair fell to such an immediate silence that it was almost deafening. Opting for a safer course, Beth asked, “Looking forward to Italy?”

“Yeah,” Chrissy replied quickly.

“Of course,” Lisa added.

“What’re you gonna do when you’re there?”

Chrissy remained quiet, pressing her lips together in a tight line. Lisa covered with a simple response, “Shopping.” She beamed, some idea sparking in her mind that gave her a great deal of amusement. “I’m going to make sure I come back with all of the best things,”

Not wanting to leave things as they were, Beth found the warmth of the friendship she’d always enjoyed with Lisa and said with genuine feeling, “I hope you have a great time.”

“We will,” Lisa said with certainty.

Beth sensed that the pair weren’t going to be forthcoming about their secrets. She respected that - after all - Beth had secrets of her own. She wouldn’t dare tell any of them about what she’d been thinking or feeling regarding their friendship over the past few weeks. Deciding better than to drag out the conversation, Beth turned to return to the room and face the packing that she’d rather not undertake. It was then that Lisa hugged her tightly from behind. Quietly, she confessed, “We’ll miss you.”

The words made Beth’s chest ache. She reached down to pat Lisa’s hands gently where her fingers had entwined over her stomach. “Miss you, too.”

“I’ll bring you back something, okay?” Lisa said, her voice a touch more cheerful.

“Chocolate,” Beth said. “No dresses.”
“Deal,” she laughed.

And just like that, their fight was forgotten. It was as if Lisa hadn’t ever said those bitter words to Beth, and she was happy to put it out of her mind. Lisa would soon get over her crush on Gideon when surrounded by so many attractive Italian men, and when the year ended so would their association with him.

Jenny took pity on Beth and helped her with her clothes. She didn’t have to take so much back with her, but while she was so conflicted about her feelings, Beth wanted to make the trip home feel like a permanent one. She needed to know whether or not she could handle it.

When she arrived home the next day after being seen off by her friends, Beth realised that the answer was; ‘not’. She’d gone straight to her room without any cheerful words of greeting for her father or friends and locked herself inside, brooding over the adventure her sisters were having without her. She’d furiously refused dinner that night, then spent the remainder of the evening hating herself for being so selfish and rude to her father. He’d only been trying to cheer her up, and she’d thrown it back in his face, much in the way she’d thrown the kindness of Ms. Ayers back in her face, and the consoling words of her friends. Beth was fast realising that the problems in the relationships she had was not down to other people, it was down to her own pride in her independence and resilience, in the stubbornness of her nature, and her inability to admit to herself that - ultimately - she was afraid of what the future held for her.

She woke relatively early the next day. The sun was up, but the hour wasn’t into the double digits. Beth showered, dressed, and headed downstairs with every intention of escaping to the beach. She hesitated in the garage, noticing that her father was getting ready to leave himself. Greg paused and their eyes met. Beth knew she had to apologise before anything else could be said. “Sorry about last night. I - I don’t have a good excuse...”

“You’re upset I couldn’t send you to Italy,” he assumed.

“No! Well - I’m sorry I can’t go, but that’s not - no, Dad.”

“Madeleine did offer to send you.”

Beth wasn’t sure when her father had such a relationship with Jenny’s mother that he could refer to her by her first name, but she didn’t think to question it. “I know she did.”

“But you don’t want to be a charity case. Right?”

“Pretty much.”

Greg wiped his hands on a nearby rag, likely getting more grease on them rather than making them cleaner. It was clear he was just trying to distract himself. Beth could see how he’d find it hurtful that she was somehow ashamed of their place in society. The Blake family was hardly bankrupt but their finances made it difficult for her to keep up with her classmates. Greg apologised, “Sorry that we can’t pay for - well - I don’t know what your mother was thinking sending you to a school like that when she knew we could hardly afford -”

“Dad, it’s really not that! I just - I don’t know... End of the school year, exams, not sure what I’m gonna do with myself in a few weeks...”

“I thought you said you wanted a year out,” Greg recalled.

“Only because I have zero clues about what I want to do later.”
“Don’t rush a decision like that.”

“I won’t, but still...”

“How about we take our minds off all those serious things, hm?”

“Got something in mind?” Beth asked.

“Had a call to go up to Pembroke Hall. They’ve got a duff mower and want me to take a look at it. The owners are due back in a few days and they need to sort out the lawns.”

“So - you want me to go watch you fix a tractor?”

“Mower.”

“Same difference,” Beth said. She thought about refusing and taking a long walk on the chilly beach instead. No one would blame her for wanting to be alone when she had so much to think about. Then again, some time with her father away from everything might be just what she needed. “Let me grab a jacket. And no singing on the way.”

“What’s wrong with my singing?”

“I could write a list,” Beth joked. She left when her father began belting out a power ballad to prove his skills and raced back up to her room to dig through her things. The only coat she found didn’t belong to her, but to William Davies. Jenny must have put it into her case by accident. It had been warm the last time she’d worn it, and it wasn’t like he’d know if she did. In fact, he’d probably forgotten she even had it after their argument in Paris. She didn’t see the harm in tugging on the oversized coat and leaving to join her father.

While the little town in which Beth and her father lived was coastal, it had a vast amount of countryside behind it. It was a perfect haven for anyone looking to escape the city. The beach offered surfing, sunbathing and swimming during the summer months, while autumn was ideal for exploring the patches of woodland and trekking through the narrow country lanes and camping in fields. There were a number of manor houses situated on the acres of land. A few were older than others and open to the public for tours, the rest were private residences for full-time locals or part-time wealthy second home owners who enjoyed their privacy while taking time away from their homes in the city.

Pembroke Hall employed staff all year round, and the family had invested heavily in the local community. Even if they were often absent, there was no denying the good they’d done for a town where jobs were scarce and the local youths struggled to find any work that wasn’t a horrific commute. The employees were welcome to live on site if they so wished, and for that the family was far more welcome than persons who might leave their holiday homes to fall into disrepair.

Beth and Greg were buzzed through the square, silver modern gates and onto the property. Pembroke Hall was the sort of name one would give to a grand old building that had once hosted the gentry of England, not the modern structure which sat in the middle of the grounds. A terrible fire had destroyed the house which had once stood on the estate. The new owners had bought the land, donated anything that could be saved to interested historical societies, then built a house more to their tastes in its place. Beth wasn’t opposed to modern homes, but she much preferred the feeling one had when walking through an old building, as if she was taking a step into the past and breathing in the history of the place. The clean lines and large windows let in the beautiful natural light and gave the inhabitants of the house uninterrupted views of the ocean. Beth could appreciate the architecture of it, if nothing else.
They drove around to the garages and hopped down from the truck’s cab where they were greeted by the man who’d hired them. James Hallson was the butler, and was happy to see the pair arrive. He wrung Greg’s hand and thanked him profusely for coming at such short notice, clearly worried about the state of the grounds which - as far as Beth could see - were immaculate even without a mower to go over them. A young man jogged over to them, adjusting his tie and breathless by the time he joined the group. His black hair was in disarray, his soft brown eyes alert with worry that he was about to get into trouble. Beth took a moment to appreciate the way his white shirt and black pressed trousers hugged around his lean frame. Distracting her, James explained, “This is my son, Henry. He’s still learning the ropes, but he’ll be a fine butler when he learns to get out of bed on time.”

“Sorry,” he apologised, still working to catch his breath and composure. “Nice to meet you both.”

“This is my daughter, Beth,” Greg introduced her. “She’s not learning the ropes, but I didn’t want to leave her home by herself. Is it all right if she takes a look around the gardens?”

“I can do one better,” Henry said, not at all opposed to her company. “I can give you a tour of the house. Sound good?”

“Fine by me,” Greg said. “James?”

“Absolutely. Henry, don’t go into the family’s personal rooms. Understood?”

“Yes, father.”

Beth didn’t mind either task, and spending a while with Henry wasn’t an idea she was opposed to. She had to wonder about her attitude towards boys. Beth caught herself thinking that Lisa was irresponsible and a flirt because of the way she openly chased the young men in their school, but she had found herself thrust into the company of a few attractive men in the past few months and hadn’t complained about it. In fact, Beth was sure she’d done more dating since the previous September than she had in all her life. Henry put his hand on Beth’s back to guide her towards the house, and the two remained silent until they were sure they were away from the watchful eyes of their parents. They entered through the back door and into the kitchen.

The house was open and modern. The spaces seemed to flow into one another, giving it a tranquil, natural feeling. The windows were huge, letting in streams of sunlight, and offering stunning views of the surrounding grounds. Situated happily in the middle of the large plot, there were woods, a small hedge maze with a fountain in the middle, and neatly kept lawns with pretty flowers just starting to bud. Everything was natural wood, sanded and polished to perfection, or sheets of glass which reflected the light into every corner. The furnishings were neutral in colour, all straight lines and square shapes, which was a stark contrast to the beautiful curves of the sweeping staircase.

“Nice, right?” Henry asked. “And this is just one floor. Most of it is what you see. Living room, kitchen in the back, and the dining area.”

“What, no ball room?” Beth asked sarcastically.

“I know, it's shocking. But this is just a country house. To them, this is like a cottage.”

“Big cottage.”

“Tell me about it. I mean, there are five bedrooms, and only three of them.”

“Just five? Man, how do they cope?”
“I think they drown their sorrows with whatever's in the wine cellar,” he whispered.

“Hey, do they at least have a music room? Like, with expensive guitars and stuff?”

“Not really, but there's a piano on the next floor. Come on, I'll show you.”

Beth kept her hand on the rail as they ascended the staircase, feeling the smooth caress of the bannister beneath her fingers, the gentle curve as it guided her up and into the upper floor of the house. They weren’t allowed into the private rooms but she was okay with that. Had it been Beth’s home, she’d have been upset to know someone had been poking around in her personal space in her absence. The piano in question was happily situated in a specially built bay on the landing. White sofas nearby provided any audiences a chance to relax and listen to the tunes the pianist played when so inclined. The floor to ceiling windows provided such an inspirational sight that she could easily understand why someone might want to create beautiful music while taking it in.

“Is that a Fazioli?”

“I don't know,” Henry said, “Is it?”

“Hell yeah. They have one of these at my school, but we're not allowed to touch it unless there's a really big recital going on. They're seriously expensive.”

“Do you want to try it?”

Beth span on her heel to face him, “Really? I can?”

“Sure. Who's going to know?”

“No one so long as you keep your mouth shut.”

“Deal.”

His phone began to ring in his pocket, and Henry motioned that Beth should go ahead without him. She wasn’t about to wait for him to change his mind. Henry mouthed that he'd be back soon, and headed downstairs. That was probably for the best, because Beth didn't like to with an audience. She wasn’t as good as others liked to tell her. Or so she said, in truth Beth had a natural talent. It was still raw, but with attention she could polish it and really go places with it. She sat down on the stool and carefully lifted the lid to see the gleaming keys. Even if it was just a show piece, someone was keeping it well, and it was in tune.

Before she could stop myself, Beth was well into the throes of a rendition of Beethoven's *Für Elise*. It wasn’t the easiest piece to play, especially without the sheet music to hand, but anything she couldn’t remember she bridged with improvisations. When she’d stepped up in her lessons to take on more complicated compositions it had become a fast favourite with her. That had been back in the days when her mother had been happy to pay for her lessons. Back before things got complicated in their family.

She skipped a key and soon lost her place. Beth paused, wondering if she should start from the beginning or head downstairs to find Henry. She hadn’t expected a young woman to congratulate her from behind with a comment of, “That wasn’t half bad.”

Beth stumbled in a bid to get off the stool before she got into trouble. She closed the lid on the piano keys and smoothed down her t-shirt awkwardly. The woman who’d met her was beautiful, with a sheet of perfectly straight brown hair and bright green eyes. Her white blouse was flattering, feminine, and everything Beth wasn’t. “Sorry, Henry said - well - I’m sorry, I shouldn’t
“Blake?” William asked, appearing behind his sister having come to see what the noise was about. “What are you doing here?”

“Me? What are you doing here?” Beth asked, shocked to see him again so soon.

“I live here.”

“What?” Beth asked stupidly.

“We live here,” the woman corrected. “This is our family’s holiday home. Who are you?”

“I - I’m no one,” Beth said, feeling as if she’d punched herself in the gut when she realised that was exactly how William saw her; as no one. She dodged around them and made a quick exit, hoping that neither would follow her or tell James that she’d been fooling around on their piano. She didn’t want him to get into trouble because of her.

If her P.E teacher could have seen the speed Beth reached in her bid to get away then he might have reconsidered the poor grade he’d given her the previous year. She raced past Henry and back onto the grounds, finding her father pondering over the engine of the ridiculous contraption he was meant to be repairing. He looked up in time to steady his daughter with his oily hands, holding her firmly while she gasped for air. “Elly, what’s wrong?” he asked worriedly. “Did something happen in the house?”

“We need to leave,” she said rapidly in her panicked state. “Now. Right now. Five minutes ago. Dad, can we go?”

“Did you break something?”

“No!”

“Do I need to break Henry?” he asked.

“No I just - I want to leave, okay?” Beth tried to impress the urgency of this request. “Now!”

“James, I'll need to order a part for this if I don't have one back at the garage. I'll call you. And if she broke anything, I'll take it off what you owe me. Deal?”

“Absolutely. I'm sure nothing's damaged, and if it is, the family won't be too upset by it. Ah, here is Master William, now.”

Beth squeaked. With no other option, she dove into the truck's cab and hid in the foot-well. It was cramped, but at least William wouldn't be able to see her. Beth figured that - either her deception had worked - or he was just respecting the fact she didn't want to talk to him when he bypassed the vehicle. Beth heard William approach Greg and ask, “You're Mr. Blake?”

“Greg, if you're a friend of my daughter's. Nice to meet you, William.”

“I was surprised to see her here,” William said. “Are you staying in this part of the country for long?”

Greg laughed, “I should hope so!”

“Mr. Blake and his daughter live in the town,” James explained. “They have a garage there. I called Mr. Blake to fix a piece of machinery. He was just on his way.”
“Will you stay for dinner?” William asked. “We'd be happy if you did.”

Beth couldn’t imagine anything was farther from the truth. In fact, she couldn’t picture William ever being happy in her company. Even when he’d said that he was in love with her he’d made it clear that he hated the thought. Oblivious to the how much the pair despised one another, Greg replied, “I don't think we can tonight. It's your first day here, and you should settle in. But, here's my card, Come by tomorrow at lunch. I'll make sure Beth's around.”

If her father thought for one second that Beth was going to sit in waiting on William Davies all day, then he had another thing coming.

“Thank you, Sir. I'll do that.”

“Call me Greg. Until tomorrow, then. James, I'll call about the part.”
Chapter Twenty

“A compliment of the highest kind.”

Beth made a point of setting her alarm so she was woken at some ungodly hour the next morning. Without waking her father, she gathered her things and left to join her friends for an early surfing session. Eric was always happy to receive a girl, and wrapped her up in a warm hug that lasted longer than was decent. Lewis was quick to do the same, but his shyness overcame him and he released Beth after a few seconds.

The waves weren’t high enough for the group to catch any real speed. It was far more suited to body-boarding, but they only had their full sized boards. Rather than taking a break from the water as would be sensible, they competed to see who could stand the longest and ride the miniscule waves into shore. This feat was made far more difficult when they tried to knock each other off the boards and into the water. The last one standing in their contest was the winner, and it was always Eric because he was the strongest. Beth was glad she was in board shorts and a rash shirt because it was far too cold to be sent flying into the waves in just a bikini.

As the morning flew by, Beth forgot all about the fact William was meant to be on his way to her house to visit her. The surfers were called out to by a man standing on the terrace of The Overlook Cafe, a family owned establishment built on stilts so as to defy the power of the waves should they ever charge up from the beach and attempt to flood the building. Beth dragged her board in the sand behind her, too tired to carry it properly, and collected her shoes and towel from the pile they’d made of their things in the sand. Eric looked keen to walk ahead until Poppy reminded him, “Lana’s married.”

“She’s still hot,” he argued.

“And pregnant,” Poppy added.

“What?” Beth asked, surprised. “When were you gonna tell me that?”


Max flushed, “Pop’, I’m right here.”

“I know,” she said. “You’re just so cute when you’re jealous.”

Lewis cleared his throat, “Say, Beth? I was thinking, maybe I -”

“Maybe you should keep quiet,” Eric suggested. “Beth wants to have a little lunch date with me. Right?”

“You were just saying you were going to hit on Lana,” Beth said.

“I can’t do both?”
“This is exactly why you can't get a girlfriend,” she told him. “You're such a perve.”

“I like to think of myself as a lovable rogue.”

“I bet you do,” she laughed.

Although the cafe was a regular surfer hangout, it didn’t mean the group wanted to leave puddles throughout the establishment. They dried off as best they could without the aid of hairdryers and radiators, shivering as the coastal breeze washed over their damp skin. The smell of salt clung to Beth’s hair. She would be glad to get into a hot shower to rinse it away. She paused in the middle of wringing it out when a boy approached them. He announced himself by calling across the beach, “Beth Blake!”

“Who's that?” Lewis asked.

“I don't know, but he's cute,” Poppy said.

Max put his arm around her shoulders possessively, “I don't like the look of him.”

“Me either,” Lewis added.

“Someone you know, Beth?” Eric asked.

“Unfortunately.”

“Hi,” William greeted the others once he was close enough. He looked rather awkward under their gaze. Beth wasn't surprised. When he was surrounded by his upper class friends, William was comfortable and at home. Among people he might otherwise consider a class beneath him, he was going to feel like an outsider.

“What are you doing here?” she asked. “And how did you know I'd be here?”

“Your Dad invited me over at lunch, and he said I'd probably find you here. You – uh – you're soaking wet.”

“That's an occupational hazard when you surf, kid,” Eric said. “Gotta be in the water to do it.”

William looked him up and down, before offering a hand to shake, “William Davies. You are?”

“We ain't big on doing last names with people around here. I'm Eric, I work for Beth's Dad. The blonde girly, here, is Poppy. The guy glarin' at you is her boyfriend Max. And the scrawny kid is her little bro', Lewis.”

“Nice to meet you all,” he said stiffly. “Beth, my sister was hoping you'd come up to the house for lunch.”

“You want to eat lunch inside a stuffy house when it's this nice out?” Poppy asked.

“Where else would we eat?”

She motioned to the café, “Ta-da!”

“What? No way,” Beth shut down the idea immediately. “Look, I know what Dad said, but it's fine. Don't make yourself hang around me, okay? I'm going to eat up there with the guys, so apologise to your sister for me, and -”
“I'll text her,” he said.

“Come again?”

He took his phone from his pocket, “I'll send her a message, and tell her to meet us here.”

Beth groaned. She’d never made any attempt to hide her disdain for William. She appreciated the few times he’d proven useful to her, but the bad far outweighed the good in their mutual history. She had no ill will towards his sister. She’d spoken only a handful of words to her and the woman hadn’t come across as rude or arrogant. Beth wondered if perhaps she and William were only half siblings, or if he just had some awful childhood trauma that had made him the way he was. She had to admit, since she’d seen him the day before he’d been nothing but nice to her father and friends. That said, he was yet to act in the same manner towards her.

There was no stopping him from contacting his sister or joining them for lunch. They could hardly ban him from an establishment they didn’t own. Beth picked up her things in her arms and made her way to the cafe at a run. Her friends trailed behind, William bringing up the rear of the procession. He didn’t seem at all bothered by her desperate attempt to flee him.

Joe was waiting at the top of the ramp to greet Beth. The old Hawaiian man hugged her tightly and warmly, telling her that he was happy to see her back before ushering her inside. It was still his cafe, but Joe was getting a little old to manage it all by himself. His grandson Zeke had wanted to be a chef somewhere he could find space and time to surf, so the cafe had been an opportunity he’d have been a fool to pass up on. It helped that it kept him close to his wife Lana who ran a shop renting out surfing equipment to locals and offering lessons for kids in the summer. When it was much too cold, or there was a lull in tourism, Lana hung around the cafe helping her husband with his work. She was ready to embrace Beth when the girl rushed inside. “Hey! What’s all this for?”

“I heard the news. Congrats!” Beth said, smiling up at her.

Lana laughed, “Oh, that! Thank you. I thought I would see you in here yesterday. Were you busy with your Dad?”

“Oh God, about that? There’s a guy coming in that I know, and he doesn't like me much. Please don't give him any ammo or anything, okay?”

“I'm not going to start spilling any secrets. Don't worry.”

“Can you make sure Zeke doesn't?”

The man in question poked his head around the door. His hands were covered in flour and bits of dough. Zeke grinned in a devilish way, revealing just how cuttingly handsome his sharp cheekbones were, “What am I not meant to be doing? I'll make sure I do it constantly.”

“Behave,” Lana warned.

“Oh, he isn't capable of that,” Joe said as he hobbled in. Lana went to help him into his usual chair, and he patted her hand gently in gratitude. Beth got the feeling that he'd still be behind the counter helping out if he was young enough. There were other waiters and waitresses to deal with the influx of customers during the holidays. Usually students home from school or university in desperate need of extra cash.

“Gramps, I can behave if I want to. I just don't want to, that's all,” Zeke winked at Beth. The others came through the door noisily. Eric didn't hesitate to sweep Lana off her feet and kiss her cheek. She didn't care since they were so used to one another. Zeke, on the other hand, looked
ready to vault the counter to rescue his wife. Given he was in his place of work, he settled for warning, “Take your hands of my wife, man. Don't think I won't snap your board in two.”


William hovered near the door. Beth supposed she should just get it over with. If he was planning on spending time with them, he couldn’t hang back and silently judge them. Perhaps he’d consider them all to be too crude to spend more time with during his stay in the area. If that were the case, then Beth supposed letting him stay for lunch wouldn’t be such a bad thing. She retrieved him from the door, holding his hand and pulling him further into the room. “Zeke, Lana, and Joe. This is William,” Beth said. “He went to school with me for a while.”

“Ohh, I should have known,” Eric clapped him hard on the back. “Rich boy, huh?”

“Guilty as charged,” William said. “It's nice to meet you all. My sister Amanda will be along shortly, and a friend of mine.”

“Is your sister cute?” Eric asked.

Beth pinched the bridge of her nose, “Jesus Christ, Eric. We're going to get you neutered if you don't learn to chill around girls.”

“I was blessed with this stunning body, and it’s my duty to share it with beautiful women.”

“Kind of like how it's my duty to share my fist with the faces of idiots?” she shot back without thinking.

“Ouch,” Poppy laughed, and punched Beth’s shoulder gently in a congratulatory way. “Nice one.”

“My girls,” Eric said to William. “They're so witty. And so violent.”

“You say that like it's a good thing,” he replied.

“I like them feisty.”

“And we like you silent,” Lana said.

“Awesome,” Beth laughed. Lana gave Beth a high-five. Childish, but appropriate.

William smirked at Beth, “And this is how you spend every day?”

“Only the days I'm around these idiots,” she replied. “Something wrong with that?”

“Not at all. It's good to see you acting like a normal person.”

“Excuse me,” Zeke said. “Kid, there's nothing normal about us. You take that back, now.”

“What are we taking back?” Amanda asked as she joined them.

“That I asked if you were cute, when I should have used the word radiant,” Eric said, pushing the others out of the way to approach her. He kissed the back of Amanda’s hand in greeting.

Max mimed being sick. Zeke said aloud, “I think I just pucked in my mouth a little.”

“Uh – Amanda?” William indicated that Beth was the one she was meant to meet. Amanda
politely excused herself from Eric and came to shake Beth’s hand. “This is Beth.”

“Yes, I remember you telling me. It was a shame you had to run off yesterday. I wanted to hear more of your piano playing.”

“Sorry, I should have asked before -”

“It's fine. Henry explained. And we weren't angry, so don't worry so much. My brother's told me a lot about you, so I feel like I know you already.”

“He told you about me, and you still want to talk to me?” she laughed. “Wow, you're brave.”

“It was only good things.”

“Then it was all lies.”

“It wasn't,” William said. “And it wasn't all good. I told her about you head-butting my nose.”

Amanda whispered, “That was a good thing. Trust me.”

“I thought so, too,” Beth whispered back.

“Didn't you say you had a friend coming along, young man?” Joe asked.

“Yeah, where is he?” William asked his sister.

“Relax. He was just taking a picture on the terrace. Look, there he is.”

Beth knew she’d have mixed feelings about Charlie the next time she saw him. He was the guy who broke Jenny’s heart, after all. Even though he’d been persuaded to leave by his friend and family, it didn’t change the fact that he hadn’t spoken up and gone against their wishes. That kind of feeble affection wasn’t good enough for Jenny. That said, he was still the person her best friend had fallen in love with. It was incredibly difficult to hate someone that Jenny adored. When he entered the cafe she saw that he’d not changed one bit. He was still the same Charlie who’d awkwardly introduced himself to her that first night at the party.

“Beth, it's been forever,” Charlie said when he saw her. He hugged her tightly, something which surprised her. She patted his back awkwardly, unsure of just how much affection she ought to display after all that had happened. He released Beth, looked her up and down, and decided, “You look like you're well. Are you here on your own?”

“On her own?” Max asked Poppy loudly. “What the hell are we?”

“Shush,” Poppy hissed back.

“The girls are all in Italy on the school trip,” Beth explained so as to spare any misunderstandings. “I couldn't afford it. Poor girl, you know?”

“Ah. Well, this is a great place to spend a couple of weeks. And these are your friends?”

“Guys, with is Charlie. Charlie, this is – well – everyone.” Beth wasn’t sure she could take any more introductions and trusted that the others were mature enough to undertake the task themselves. Instead asked, “Zeke, can I get a massive cookie and cream milkshake?”

“It'll go straight to your hips,” he teased.

“I'm a paying customer, you know? You’re meant to suck up to me.”
“I know, I know,” he said, laughing. “You need to calm down a little.”

“You shouldn't be lecturing anyone about that,” Lana said, and rounded the counter so she could forcefully encourage her husband back out to the kitchen. “Guys, sit down, and I'll come take your orders in a second.”

Joe was happy for the group to push a few tables together. The lack of customers meant no one was put out by it. He occupied himself with reading the paper at the counter. The old man had amazing focus if he could concentrate on it while such a raucous debate was going on behind him. William had been surprisingly polite to Beth’s friends, joining in with their jokes and bearing the brunt of a lot of comments about being the rich boy with good humour. Charlie seemed to get along with everyone, and the surfers were eager to accept him far more quickly than they did William. Soon they were lost to a discussion regarding the best sport. Beth lost Poppy’s emotional support when she got into a heated debate about roller-derby and how it was going to be the next big thing. Beth had watched William carefully, realising that she’d not seen him so relaxed in all the time they’d known one another. A few times, their gaze met, and Beth pretended to be incredibly interested in folding the napkin in front of her.

His distraction did give Amanda the opportunity to ask Beth quietly, “Are you and my brother going out?”

“No,” she said quickly. “We're not like that. We don't get on that well.”

“I don't think that's completely true.”

“It so is. I swear.”

“Is that why you two keep looking at each other? Don't think I didn't notice you peeking at him when you thought he wasn't looking.”

“I – I was just making sure he wasn't glaring at anyone, that's all,” Beth defended herself weakly.

“Will you and your Dad come to dinner at our house tonight? I told our Mum how good you were at the piano, and she really wants to hear it.”

She blushed, “I don't know. I mean, I don't usually play, and I was just fooling around. Plus, my Dad is really busy, and -”

“You're a bad liar,” Amanda laughed softly. “I like that. Come on, please? I need another girl to talk to. You can't make me put up with my brother by myself.”

“Isn't Chantelle there?” Beth asked, assuming that she’d have joined her brother.

“Unfortunately, yes. I like Charlie, but Chantelle is a little difficult to get along with. Like how she wouldn't join us for lunch today.”

“You invited her?”

“Only out of courtesy. She decided to stay with our mother, who I imagine is hiding somewhere in the grounds.”

Beth laughed despite herself. William glanced over at them, Beth asked rather more confrontationally than she’d intended, “What're you looking at?”

“I can't remember the last time I heard you laugh.”
“Now you're making me sound miserable,” Beth said. “And I'm totally not.”

“I didn't mean it like that,” he explained. “But the last time we met, you didn't have much to laugh about.”

Beth wanted to ask him who's fault he thought that was, but that meant revealing what had happened over Christmas to her friends. She hadn't even told Greg the whole truth, and the thought of giving the group more gossip was beyond anything Beth could bear.

“Good news,” Amanda said to break the silence. “Beth said she's coming to dinner with us.”

“Do I have to wear a dress?” she asked. “Because I don't own one.”

It wasn’t entirely true. Besides all the clothes that Ms. Ayers liked to buy her, Beth also had all of the glamorous outfits Freddie had given her in Paris. She’d not been able to unpack them to try them all out. There were too many bad memories tied to the garments, and they all made her think of William’s declaration of love.

“Just don't wear jeans, and you should be fine,” William said.

“No, totally wear jeans,” Amanda countered. “Then I can, too. Just come in casual clothes. It's fine. We don't dress in formal wear for a family dinner.”

“Seriously?” Beth asked.

“Yeah! You're perfect as you are. Right, Will?”

He looked away, and became interested in stirring his drink with his straw. Either the lighting needed adjusting, or he blushed when he said, “I've always thought so.”

Chapter End Notes

Note: The surfer characters in this book are from the book 'Sea Foam'. One Word From You takes place after the epilogue of Sea Foam, and gives some insight into the lives of the characters after those events.
A positive engagement.

Chapter Twenty-One

“A positive engagement.”

Amanda’s insistence that Beth wear casual clothes hadn’t prevented her from spending over an hour finding an outfit that didn’t scream poverty at the top of its artificial fibre lungs. She’d settled for a pair of jeans which lacked scuffs and holes, and a sweet white boat necked sweater she suspected Ms. Ayers had bought for her because the tags were still on it. Beth wasn’t much of a one for wearing white but she was willing to make an exception in this case. She only hoped she didn’t drop anything on it and leave a stain.

Really, Beth ought to have been more worried about her father. She’d sent him back twice to change before she’d taken charge and chosen a decent light blue shirt and a pair of black trousers for him. Eventually they found themselves back in the truck and on the way to the luxurious house. Beth hoped she wasn’t getting covered in grease, and leaned forwards in her seat, afraid to make contact with it.

Henry opened the door to the pair. He cast an appreciative glance over Beth before remembering that her father was present and wouldn’t hesitate to have strong words with him about his conduct. That, and he was working. Assuming a more professional tone, he said, “Welcome. May I show you inside?”

“You may,” Greg replied, guiding his daughter into the house and keeping a wary eye on Henry as he did so. Beth appreciated her father’s protective nature enough to know that it was out of love and concern, but she hoped that he wouldn’t breathe down the neck of any boy she thought to bring home for his approval. Greg wasn’t such an awful man that he’d compromise her happiness for the sake of proving he was the tougher specimen.

Henry cleared his throat gently to gain the attention of the room once they were inside. It looked as if they were all relaxed in one another’s company, a luxury one only enjoyed when all those present had known each other for so many years. In a clear voice, he announced, “Mr. Blake and Miss. Blake have arrived.”

“Finally,” Amanda pushed the fashion magazine off her lap, cutting off Chantelle who was in the middle of talking about something in the article. She almost ran to Beth to wrapped her arms around her shoulders. When she was free, Beth smiled at her. Amanda looked Beth up and down. She liked what she saw. “Love the jeans.”

“I like yours, too,” Beth said.

“You look like you made an effort.”

“Me?” she asked. “Nah. I just threw on any old thing.”

Chantelle sauntered over, “Well, that's obvious. I can't believe you had the gall to dress so casually, Blake. Where do you think you are?”

“Where I asked her to be,” Amanda said curtly. “Go back to your seat, Chantelle.”
Unable to bring herself to answer back to Amanda, Chantelle smiled as if she was unoffended and returned to her seat, refusing to make eye contact with anyone in the room until she’d regained her composure. Chantelle was used to being the most popular girl in the room. It didn’t matter if the person receiving the attention was Beth, Jenny, or anyone else. If the spotlight wasn’t on Chantelle then she had a great need to regain it somehow.

Amanda was courteous and enthusiastic about greeting Greg. He paid her the right compliments and spoke about how much he liked their house. Beth was proud of her father for being able to say everything so perfectly when he spent all his time up to his elbows in car engines and laughing with coarse mechanics. There was nothing to say that someone from a lower class background was incapable of being refined, just as there was no rule that said someone wealthy was able to be gentle. Chantelle was evidence enough of that. Beth felt that she was starting to see the world a little more clearly when mixing with both worlds at the same time. That maybe she was the one who perceived things in the wrong way.

It was the turn of William’s mother to introduce herself. If Beth had thought Amanda was beautiful, then her Mum was majestic. She’d aged gracefully, and although she wasn’t that old compared to a lot of people’s parents, she had a certain dignity about her that spoke of an underlying strength. With her husband having passed on, and her family being so distinguished, she must have fought hard to maintain their position in society. She was dressed modestly, but in that there was a certain elegance. She came to shake Beth’s hand, and she wasn’t sure if she was supposed to bow or curtsey. Her awkwardness endeared Beth to her somewhat, and she said, “My name is Harriet Davies. I’ve heard from my children that you’re a good friend of theirs. It’s nice to meet you at last.”

“Thank you for inviting us, Mrs. Davies,” Beth said as politely as she was able. “This is my Dad.”

“Greg,” he said, and shook her hand. “I have a garage in town.”

“Yes, I heard from James that we have you to thank for getting some of our equipment back up and running. It’s too bad this isn’t our main estate. I’d have asked you to look at some of our classic cars for us.”

“For cars, I’m always willing to commute,” he said.

Excluding a few snide comments from Chantelle, the dinner went swimmingly. Amanda was more than happy to include Beth and Greg in every conversation, asking about cards, surfing, and music. It seemed they all had more in common than Beth had first thought. Although she was more into riding horses than waves, Amanda was proficient in the violin. So much so, in fact, that while the group had retired from dinner and were drinking coffee, Harriet suggested that the girls perform a duet. At first, Beth had laughed it off as a joke. As she understood it, people didn't just do things like that in real life. She soon realised it had been a serious suggestion and only agreed to avoid offending William’s mother.

On the stairs Greg paused with his daughter. He whispered, “Are you sure you want to do this?”

“It's fine,” she said quietly. “It's just one song.”

“If you're sure you're all right with it.”

Beth nodded. She thought for a moment that William had been watching them talk. A moment later she looked at him and he seemed to be in deep conversation with Charlie. Beth supposed she was being paranoid. It was then that Amanda appeared with a violin, something which caused her mother to chuckle.
“What?” Beth asked.

“That was her old violin. She hasn't played that one since she was fourteen.”

“It's still in tune, Mum,” Amanda said haughtily. She plucked a string, and then adjusted it, “Mostly.”

Harriet showed Beth to the piano. She spoke to her in a voice low enough that no one else would hear. “I don't think it's the first time you've used this...”

“Sorry about that,” Beth replied.

“No need. I'm just disappointed I missed the show.”

“She's good,” William assured his mother. “Clumsy, but good.”

“I suppose that's all the private lessons she's been having,” Chantelle said, happy to be able to spread some malicious gossip. “Oh, don't think I haven't heard. I'm not that cut off from everyone. Gideon's the new music teacher, isn't he? I heard you were intimate.”

Amanda almost dropped her bow in shock. It was easy to forget just what Gideon had put her through when she was so cheerful. William stood quickly, “Mandy -”

“Me having lessons?” Beth asked, drawing the attention away from Amanda and all discussion of Gideon. “I don't play that well. I'm counting on Amanda to make me sound better than I am. It's a big challenge, but I'm sure she can do it.”

She smiled, relieved for the rescue. “You're putting yourself down too much. But you definitely need help.”

“So I keep telling her,” Greg said.

“How do you feel about Beethoven's *Spring Sonata*?” Amanda asked.

“I was hoping we could play *Born to be Wild*, but it's a good second choice.”

They might have thought Beth was being modest, but she relied heavily on Amanda for her support throughout the piece. Whenever Beth slipped up she improvised as best she could, and Amanda did an admirable job of changing her own tempo and pitch to cover the mistakes. It was hardly a faithful rendition but it still sounded wonderful. The sound filled the cavernous room and Beth found herself thinking that she could play a hundred sonatas if she got to do it while looking out upon an inky night sky blanketed with twinkling stars, especially if she got to duet with Amanda again. The girl was wonderfully talented. It was a crime that she wasn't playing on stage before a clamouring audience, having roses thrown at her feet as she took her final bows. If anything, it made Beth want to improve, and she felt the drive far more powerfully than she had during her lessons with Gideon.

“That was much better than spending a night in front of the television. You were fantastic, girls. Really,” Greg said, rising from his seat.

“Thanks, Mr. Blake,” Amanda said. “You haven't seen the house yet, right? How about a tour?”

“I'd love that, thank you.”

“And, you know, I don't think Beth got a chance to see the grounds the other day,” she winked at Beth. “I think William should show her.”
As William didn’t oppose the idea, Beth soon found herself out in the immaculately kept gardens as his companion. It was difficult to get a tour in the dark, with only the light from the house to illuminate their path, but she supposed that wasn’t really the point of their time alone. She wondered privately just how upset Chantelle was to be left behind with only Charlie to distract her. He must have had his hands full keeping his sister calm. Poor boy.

“Your friends seem fun,” he said at last, breaking the silence lingering between them.

“They are.”

“A lot of them are guys.”

“That is very true,” Beth agreed.

“Is that Lewis kid your boyfriend?”

She snorted softly with laughter, “No. We have a history.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. It was really heated, you know? So much passion, and we were going to run away, and get married. It was all so romantic.”

“You’re joking.”

“No. It’s all true,” Beth affirmed. “I mean, I was ten at the time, so I don’t think I really understood what all that stuff meant.”

“Funny. Very funny. You could have just said you didn’t have a boyfriend.”

“I never said that.”

“So you do?”

She grinned, “No. I’m incredibly single. And I think I’m going to stay that way for a long time.”

“Don’t you think anyone likes you?”

“Nah. It’s just that no one meets my standards. I’m a hell of a catch,” Beth joked.

“Okay, new subject. What was that with your Dad before?”

Beth had been hoping William hadn’t noticed. She stopped to lean against an obliging tree, hoping that there wasn’t any rain sitting on the leaves overhead in case she knocked it loose and was soaked in a deluge. William came to a halt, intrigued by the serious expression creeping across Beth’s face. “I used to take piano lessons when I was little. And guitar, and singing, and I’m pretty good with a triangle, but I don’t like showing off.”

“And you quit?”

“My teacher did. You met her, actually.”

It took him a second, then it all started coming together. He rose a brow, “Your Mum taught you?”

“She used to be a singer. Most of her stuff flopped, but she had enough one-hit-wonders that most of my Dad’s generation knows who she is. The money ran out fast, but she’s still riding her fame
where she can,” Beth shrugged as if it wasn’t incredibly painful for her to think about it. “I guess that's why she likes marrying rich guys.”

“Doesn't your Dad own a garage?”

“He was racer. Lots of sponsorship deals, world travel, and nice shiny trophies. Mum liked the lifestyle, and he liked having her waiting in the pits for him when he won. They had me, and he kept on racing. We had to stay home because I was too little to go along to the competitions. But Mum let me watch them on television. I remember the last race I saw him in,” Beth held her arms a little more tightly around herself. “It had been raining, and he was doing pretty well. Not great, but he could have made it onto the podium. Then a driver ahead of him lost control and rolled his car. Dad swerved to avoid it, and the car behind him couldn't change course in time. It shunted his so hard that it flipped, and then stopped at the barrier.”

“How old were you?”

“Six.”

“And your Dad?”

“He was too injured to ever race again. His legs were broken in a lot of places, and he broke his back. The doctors thought he might not even walk, and Mum couldn't cope with that. Instead of helping him, she just left. We lived with my Grandpa at his garage while Dad got it together. When I wasn't in school, I helped where I could. I mean - I was a kid, and I sucked, but I was better than her.”

“And your Grandpa?”

“He died and left the place to my Dad. He likes being close to cars, and all the trophies are in boxes. I think it hurts him to look at them.”

“Is that why you gave up music?” William asked. “Because you were busy helping your Dad?”

Beth scuffed her shoe in the dirt, using it as a distraction so she wouldn't have to look at him. She didn't want him to read the lie in her eyes when she said, “It was just something I played around with. I never took it that seriously.”

“I don't believe that.”

“Yeah, because you're stubborn,” she laughed. It was a pitiful noise. The sound of someone trying to deny the truth as vehemently as they possibly could. “You don't believe much of anything about me.”

“I believe you like playing the piano more than you let on.”

“I don’t want to turn into my mother. I’d rather be poor and have some morals, than be rich and selfish.”

“No one could ever accuse you of being selfish,” he said with more sincerity than she'd ever heard from him in their long acquaintance. “Thank you, by the way.”

“For what?”

“Not talking about Gideon in front of my sister.”

“Well, I'm not really part of his fan club, any more.”
“Good.”

She let out a short breath, “I'm sorry about your nose.”

“It healed.”

“So I see. Look, I'm going to be down at the beach again tomorrow.”

“Surfing?”

“No, it's too cold that early. I usually walk down to watch the sunrise.”

“Alone?”

“You ask a lot of questions,” Beth observed.

“Because I want to know the answers. It helps me to get to know you better.”

“Meet me at the café tomorrow morning at five, if you can wake up in time. You can see why I like it here so much.”
Beth bobbed her head in time to the music streaming in through her headphones, mouthing the words to the song while she waited for William to appear. She didn’t know if he’d be able to get out of bed so early, but she was willing to risk another few minutes to wait for him. She took William’s coat with her. It sat neatly folded in her lap. She was almost sorry to have to return it. It had served her well the few times she’d worn it. It even smelled like him a little. Not that she’d been checking that it did, of course. It was just something she’d happened to notice.

When she caught sight of him walking towards her, she turned off her music player and pulled out the ear-buds to receive him properly. She hated when people only half paid attention to a conversation. There was no reason to be so rude. “Didn’t think you’d make it,” she admitted.

“You’ve got no faith in me at all,” he said. Beth noticed the dark patches beneath his eyes but said nothing of them. She held out the coat. William was surprised to have it back. “Didn’t you say you were going to burn it?”

“I was drunk.”

“Still...”

“Thanks for lending it to me. I know Jenny would’ve been in trouble if you guys hadn’t turned up when you did.”

He took the coat in his hands and looked down at it. William rose his gaze to take in Beth’s appearance. Only jeans, a t-shirt, and a thin hooded jacket. He returned the coat. “You keep it. It looks better on you.”

“Well, I won’t disagree with that,” Beth quipped. She stood and held out a hand to take it back. Rather than simply giving it to her, William helped Beth to put the coat on. His fingers pressed against her arms and shoulders through the fabric and Beth felt a chill through her spine. It wasn’t an unpleasant feeling, but it was one that took her by surprise. The heat rushed to her cheeks and she cleared her throat softly, hoping the noise would snap her out of whatever odd thoughts were racing through her head.

“So, what are we here for?” William asked as if the contact hadn’t had the same effect on him.

“Sunrise. Ready to go?”

“We're not watching from here?”

“Nope, up there,” she said, pointing to a cliff. “There’s a path, so you don't have to climb or anything.”

“Even if we did have to climb, it wouldn't bother me.”

“Well, we can go to a higher point if you -”
“No. That one is fine.”

Beth laughed. She never thought William had the power to make her laugh, but it was an intoxicating, genuine, perfect noise. The kind she reserved for her friends and relatives. Beth pushed her hands deep into her pockets and motioned with her head that they ought to get going. They didn't have long until it happened, and Beth wanted to be at the top of the cliff by then. If the pair were still walking then they’d miss most of it. William's long legs allowed him to match Beth’s pace easily. Although they were silent during their short journey, it wasn't awkward. Talking might have been better, Beth supposed, but there was a certain serenity one could only find at the beach in the early hours. Idle conversation would have ruined the atmosphere.

Beth breathed in deeply. The smell of the sea air was so comforting. Having grown up with it, she missed it whenever she was taken away from the little town. The crowing of gulls as they emerged from their roosts and the scent of baking bread from the town bakery were simple, but delightful pleasures. They reminded Beth that she was in her safe, familiar world. The rich girls like Chantelle couldn't touch her with their snide remarks and hateful glances while she was there. Beth felt as if nothing bad could possible happen.

William began to lag as they clambered up the cliff. When Beth said there was a path, she was being generous in giving it such a name. It was more of an incline. It just happened to be a little smoother than the rest of the rock because so many people had used it over the course of the summer. They'd worn it into the cliff, and as such it was the preferred route.

“Wow,” William said when he joined Beth at the top. “This is amazing.”

“I know, right?”

“You can see for miles.”

“Imagine how much better the other cliff is.”

“We're not climbing it,” he told her resolutely.

She shrugged, “Maybe not today. But some other time I might convince you.”

“You won’t.”

“Stubborn.”

“Look who's talking,” he said. “This sunrise had better be worth it.”

“Obviously it will be. Don't you have any appreciation for nature?”

“I appreciate it enough.”

“Well, you'll feel that much better about it after you see this.”

The light began to break. Beth took up the best seat on offer, which was right on the edge of the cliff. William was understandably hesitant about being so near a potential plummet to the sea, but he didn't want to act like a coward in front of her. Beth could see right through him, but she didn't point out his moment of cowardice. She was tempted to tease him when it was over.

With such calm water, the orange and pink hues which lit up the sky were reflected in the gentle waves below. The higher it climbed, the brighter the day became, and those darker colours were banished from the air. It was all over in a matter of minutes. But every one had been precious, and
as beautiful as the last. Beth smiled, and began to swing her dangling legs back and forth gently. “Pretty, right?”

William smiled, “Yeah. It was worth it.”

“It's too bad there weren't any mermaids,” she lamented. “But they only appear during Midsummer sunrises. The rest of the time, they stay away from the shore.”

“Mermaids? Aren't you a little old to believe in that?”

“Everyone believes in them,” she said as if William was a fool to question it. “At least - here they do. Because they protect the surfers who come to our beach.”

Skeptically, he asked, “Why would they do that?”

“We respect the water, and it respects us. If a surfer is too far out, then they guide him back to shore. But if he's about to die, then they take him down into the water, and keep him as one of their own. Everyone knows that.”

“I didn't.”

“Only because you don't surf. If you did, then you'd get told the story. Oh, they sing, too.”

“Of course they do.”

“Well, I was going to sing their song to you, but now I don't think you'll bother. Don't you have any imagination or anything?”

“I – I just can't believe in that sort of thing.”

“Yeah, I can see that. It's because you're so boring.”

“I'm not boring!” he protested. “Sing the song, then.”

“Say please.”

“No.”

Beth folded her arms across my chest defiantly, “Then, no song for you.”

William grumbled something inaudible. Beth wasn't moved by his attitude. She knew he'd give in. He asked in as polite a voice as he was able, “Please will you sing?”

“Gladly. Fear not lonely traveller, For the ocean is here, We are her maidens, Your salvation is near. To the shore you shall sail, And land you will find, But if you be weary, Leave your country behind. Let the waves be your cradle, The depths be your home, Your heart will be coral, And your soul is sea foam.”

“That's – uh – well -”

“Childish?”

“No,” he rubbed the back of his neck. “You're a good singer.”

“That kind of song's easy to sing. There's not much to it.”

“Still, it wasn't bad.”
Beth couldn't help asking, “Do you have an evil twin?”

“What?”

“All of this - like since you got here - is as if you had a personality transplant. I just thought there might be two of you running around. I mean - I hope not - because one of you is way more than enough.”

“I'm one of a kind,” he professed.

“Yeah, you can say that again.”

“Freddie wasn't happy about you leaving when you did,” William said. “He liked spending time with you.”

“He's a nice guy.”

“Unlike me?”

“I didn't say that,” she pointed out. “But, yes. Mostly.”

“Okay, I deserve that,” he agreed. “You have to admit, though, you don't know me all that well either. So I might be nicer than you realise.”

“I think I have a pretty good measure of you, actually,” Beth said with certainty.

Her opinion of William had improved since her trip to France. She was still angry at the way he’d treated Jenny, and how he’d gone about telling her that he was in love with her. But she understood the situation regarding Gideon a little better. It made it easier for Beth to believe that William had simply misunderstood Jenny’s feelings. He’d gone about it in the wrong way, and taking Charlie so far from her was definitely going overboard, but it was something they could repair.

“Is there anything I can do to improve your opinion?”

“I don't know. Is there?”

William shuffled a little closer and dared to place his hand over Beth’s. William wasn’t known for being forward. At least, not in Beth’s experience with him. He’d tried to kiss her, but only after he’d wrestled with his own conscience for some time about whether he should do so. At that time, she hadn’t felt much of anything for him. But the gentle caress of his fingers against hers made her stomach fill with butterflies in a way she hadn’t felt with Gideon or Freddie. Beth had to wonder if this was the sign she’d been waiting for and - if it was - why on Earth it was happening with William of all people.

“William -”

“You can call me Will, if you want. William makes me sound like an old man or something.”

“Okay, Will. I was going to say that – uh – at Christmas I -”

Whatever Beth was poorly attempting to articulate was cut off when her phone began to ring. She usually kept it on silent, but she’d turned the volume up so she’d hear the alarm that morning. At first, she was tempted to ignore it and enjoy the moment. Beth didn't know what kind of moment it might turn into, but she was eager to find out. She paused upon checking the caller ID.
Beth hit the answer button quickly and held the handset to her ear, “Jenny?”

“Beth! Did I wake you?”

“No, you didn’t. What’s up? Miss me already?”

“I’m sorry, I know it’s early, but you were the first person I could think to call.”

The tone of her voice concerned Beth more than she’d like. She asked in a more serious voice, “Are you hurt?”

“I – I’m not, but... Is Lisa with you?”

“Last I heard she was still in Italy with you guys. Did she say she was flying back over or something?”

“I don’t want you to panic, but - but... Beth, what do I do?”

“Calm down, and tell me what’s going on. Why do you think Lisa might be here?”

“Everything was fine on the first night. And yesterday we all went to the markets together, and she disappeared during free time. But she came back! Then – then this morning – oh, Beth, she’s gone! She left a note for Chrissy, and none of us can find her anywhere!”

Jenny sobbed loudly into the phone. So much so that Beth had to hold it away from her ear so she could think. Lisa was legally an adult and allowed to do whatever she wanted. But if she disappeared while under the school’s care then they’d get into serious trouble. It also posed a problem if Chrissy knew something about it and was refusing to talk. But Beth’s most pressing concern wasn’t that Lisa would ruin her reputation and drag her friends down with her, it was that she might be seriously hurt or in real danger while missing.

“Beth? Are you still there?!”

“Yeah, I’m here. What did the note say? Do you have it?”

“Yeah, I do. One second – um – Chrissy, give me the note! Hang on...”

“Got it.”

“She said that she and Gideon are already bored of the trip, and they’re going to have some fun of their own. She also said not to be surprised if she hears that they’re eloping!”

“Eloping?! With Gideon?!?” Beth was horrified.

At the sound of his name, Will started paying much closer attention. So much so, in fact, that he snatched the phone out of Beth’s hand. Before she could take it back, he put it on speaker so they were both party to the information Jenny was giving.

“Jenny, which city are you in?” he asked, all seriousness.

“William? What are you doing there?”

“I’ll explain another time,” Beth said. “Answer him.”

“We’re in Rome.”

“And the name of the hotel?” Will pressed.
“Uh – Canvas De Italia. Why, what are you going to do?”

“Don't panic. We'll be on the first flight out there today, and we'll help bring her back,” Will vowed.

“Jen', you need to tell the teachers right now, okay? Let them know we're on the way, and have them call Lisa's parents.”

“I don't want to get her into trouble!”

“She's already in trouble! I know you want to be her friend, but they have a right to know what's going on. I'm coming out there with Will, and we'll find her before anything bad happens. I promise.”

“I'm sorry. This is all my fault! If I'd been honest with them about Gideon's nature -”

“I told you not to tell anyone, so it's not your fault. Jen', you have to keep calm, and take care of Chrissy and Meg. If you can get either of them to tell you anything we don't already know, then do it. I'll be there soon, and we'll find her together. Trust me.”

“I do. Thank you. Both of you. I'll text you and keep you updated until you arrive, okay?”

“Okay. We'll see you soon.”

Beth couldn’t shake the feeling that Lisa’s jaunt with Gideon wouldn’t end the way she wanted. She also felt like a fool for not realising sooner just how serious Lisa was about her crush on their teacher. If she’d spoken to her about it like a real friend instead of getting caught up in petty squabbles, this might never have happened. Beth’s stomach twisted uncomfortably. This was all her fault.

“I need to go home,” she said, clearly rattled by the call. “Dad can lend me the money to fly out there. I'll pay him back some other time. And I need to call Jenny’s mother, and pack a bag -”

“Hey, I meant it when I said that we'd both be going out there. You go home and pack, and tell your Dad the situation. Get him to drive you to our house, and we'll go from there.”

“I can't ask you to help. This is nothing to do with you.”

“Our family decided not to go public with Gideon's crimes, or his reputation. If we had, your school never would have employed him. And it wasn't just your mother who put in a good word, but mine because she wanted to give him a second chance. If anyone's to blame for putting him in Lisa's path, it's us.”

Beth couldn’t argue with that logic, no matter how much she wanted to. The last thing she felt she should do was to drag Will’s family back into contact with Gideon. But he was as stubborn as her, and he wasn’t going to let her deal with the catastrophe alone. Something Beth found she was profoundly grateful for.

It had been a long time since she'd run so fast. Will and Beth went their separate ways to inform their respective families of the situation. He had his own car to take him home, whereas Beth could easily run to the garage. She didn’t pause to greet any of the staff and burst into Greg’s office, slamming the door closed behind herself.

He was a little perplexed by her sudden appearance at first. When Beth was given time to explain what had happened, Greg didn't let her down. He and Ms. Ayers were on better terms than Beth
thought. Not only did he call her by her first name, but he had her number in his frequent contacts. Beth knew she missed out on a lot of the goings on while she was away at school, but she thought she would have noticed that before.

Beth knew she would have to ask for more details once they'd found Lisa.

On crime shows, they said that the first forty-eight hours were the most important in a missing person's case. Gideon didn't seem like the murdering type, and if Lisa had gone with him willingly, then it wasn't an abduction. Beth wasn't sure the police would be all that interested in their plight if they went to them with this case.

While Beth packed for both of them, Greg called around to the parents. Will hadn't said anything about flights, but Beth was guessing they would all travel together. The garage was left in Eric's capable hands, on the understanding that Greg hoped to only be gone a couple of days. Beth was prepared to stay out there longer if it was necessary. She loved Lisa like a sister. All siblings fought, but it didn't mean they stopped caring about one another.

God, she hoped they weren't too late.
Chapter Twenty-Three

“How are they even to be discovered?”

Beth might have enjoyed the experience of flying on a private jet a little more if she wasn’t so torn up with worry. With such short notice, it was impossible for them all to get tickets on commercial airlines. The concerned parents Greg had contacted were making their own way to Italy, while he, Beth, William, his family, Chantelle and Charlie packed into an overpriced hired craft to make the journey. Beth spent the duration tearing up the pamphlets stuffed into the back of the seat in front of her, leaving a pile of confetti in her lap as she stared resolutely out of the window and let a million terrible scenarios fly through her head. Lisa might have been locked up somewhere by Gideon, beaten, crying, perhaps - well - the less she thought about those things the better. Beth knew she had to face the situation with a clear head, but the panic made it almost impossible to do so.

Will wasn’t ignorant of Beth’s feelings. He took the seat beside her and dropped his arm around her shoulders. The reassuring warmth made Beth lean into him. Gently, Will squeezed her shoulder. “We’re going to find her. I promise. We won’t stop until she’s safe,” he said with such resolve that Beth believed him. He placed his other hand over both of hers, his large hand easily enveloping her trembling fingers. It was more than she could stand. Beth swallowed hard against the lump which had been sitting in the throat since she’d had the call, the ball of anguish that had threatened to choke her. Sensing her distress, Will held Beth tightly against his chest. She buried her face into the curve of his neck and permitted herself to cry, hoping that she’d get it out of her system before they touched down.

Canvas De Italia was one of the largest independently owned hotels in the country, priding itself on service, discretion, style, and security. It was for these reasons Netherfield Academy chose it as the only acceptable place to house their girls during the excursion. The hotel could hardly be blamed for Gideon’s actions when one considered that he was there as a representative of the same school, and statistically predators were going to be people familiar to potential victims, but it hardly stopped them from bending over backwards to be accommodating to the visiting parents, finding them rooms at lower prices and offering meals for free.

The foyer was an expansive room with hardwood floors, large landscape paintings of the city, and a high vaulted ceiling which had been lavishly decorated with a romantic mural which could have rivalled the Sistine Chapel. Meg and Chrissy sat together on one of the red velvet sofas, tapping their feet impatiently. Jenny had taken to pacing. There was no knowing how long they’d been waiting on their friend’s arrival, but Beth suspected it was ever since Jenny had made her phone call. She’d barely taken three steps into the building when she was set upon by her friends, pulled into suffocating hugs and thanked profusely for arriving. The other parents weren’t far behind, falling over themselves to get out of their taxis and privately hired cars to take action.

Will had enough respect for Beth and her friends to hang back and let them have a moment for their reunion. They’d only been apart for a few days but it felt like much longer given what had happened since they’d left the school. Beth kept both arms around Meg who seemed the most reluctant to let go, stroking her hair and trying to reassure her that it would all be okay. It wasn’t clear if she was only trying to reassure the one girl, or if Beth wanted to force herself to believe
her own declarations.

“And any news?” Greg asked, knowing that they didn’t have the luxury of wasting time. Jenny shook her head. Ms. Ayers came to hold her daughter, telling her over and over that it wasn’t her fault. No one would blame the trio for losing Lisa. She’d been determined to be alone with Gideon, and she wouldn’t have listened to anything they had to say on the matter. Greg saw fit to take charge. “You girls go back upstairs and stay put for now. If Lisa calls any of you, you come and tell us right away. Understood?”

Chrissy, Jenny and Meg were quick to comply. Beth was far too stubborn to sit on the sidelines after she’d flown all the way to Italy to help. “Dad, let us do something. She’s our friend!” she protested.

“And you’re all our children,” he said, very aware that there were a number of concerned parents with frayed nerves waiting for them to move. “We don’t want any more of you getting into danger. We’ll find out what we can from the teachers, arrange search parties, and approach this methodically. We can’t worry about you while we’re trying to find her. Madeleine, back me up on this,” he pleaded.

Ms. Ayers had to agree. “Greg’s right. I know you girls want to help, but you have already by bringing this to our attention. Go back upstairs, and let us know if you hear anything from her. It’ll help us to find her faster if you do.”

It was clear Beth was ready to continue arguing. It was what she was good at, after all. Will stepped in to take her hand. “I’ll make sure they’re safe,” he promised Greg. “I won’t let them out of my sight.”

“Thank you, William,” he said, clearly relieved.

Will had to drag Beth from the foyer and to the elevator. They all waited in silence by the golden doors, Amanda, Charlie and Chantelle sent away to hide along with them. It was only when the group were inside and travelling up to Jenny’s room that Beth demanded of Will, “What the hell was that? Why did you just shut me down?”

“Not here,” he said quietly, casting a deliberate look up to the security camera. Beth followed his gaze. Something in her gut told her that Will had a plan. She would have to trust him in order to know what it was. She nodded just once and remained silent for the rest of the climb through the floors.

Jenny led the way down the hall to the bedroom, waiting for everyone to pile inside before she started to close the door. A hand shot out to prevent her and Georgia slipped through the gap. She looked relieved to see Beth, but knew better than to waste time on hugs and sobs. Jenny crossed the room to perch on the window sill, doing her level best to ignore Charlie and avoid eye contact with him.

“We’re going after her, right?” Beth asked Will.

“Definitely. Got any ideas where she’d go?” he asked.

Beth pushed her fingers through her hair. She did, but she didn’t know the city well enough to just walk out into it in the hope she’d stumble across her friend. “We need a map of the city - uh - a notebook, pen, and Lisa’s note. Can we do that?”

“I have my homework stuff,” Meg said. Of course she did. Beth gave her shoulder a squeeze and Meg hurried to her suitcase to find what they needed.
“I bought a map on our first day,” Jenny added. She grabbed her backpack and fought to extract it from the depths.

Chantelle was the only one not on edge. Having been dragged along because she couldn’t stand being left alone when she could be off in Italy, she dropped onto Jenny’s bed and turned on the television. “I don’t see why we’re bothering. If your stupid friend wants to go off with some guy, then why should we -.”

It was Meg who shouted, “Shut up!” at her at such a volume that it made Beth jump. She hadn’t thought Meg could manage much more than a whisper. Collectively, the room gaped at the usually shy and cowardly little creature as if they had no idea who she was. Distraught and furious, Meg continued, “She’s our friend and we love her! If you don’t want to help, get out!”

“I second that,” Jenny said, squaring her shoulders with a confidence she so often lacked.

“Christ, what do they put in the water in this city?” Beth asked quietly.

Georgia was quick to add, “If you don’t want to help, no one’s going to make you. Just stay out of our way.”

“Whatever,” Chantelle said nonchalantly as if the outburst hadn’t affected her. The rising colour in her cheeks said otherwise. Beth wasn’t sure it was wise for Jenny and Meg to snap at Charlie’s sister right in front of him, but she still thought it was pretty awesome the pair were standing up to her.

Amanda clapped Beth on the shoulder. “Good. Now that’s all sorted, what can we do to help?”

Jenny spread the map out on the other bed and Meg handed Beth a red marker pen.

“They know Lisa better than anyone,” Will said. “And - sorry to say it Mandy - but you know Gideon.”

“Unfortunately,” she agreed.

“Here,” Beth said, pushing the pen into her hand first. “Anywhere on this map that he might want to go frequently - bars and clubs, that sort of thing - circle it. We’ll do the same for Lisa. Anything that overlaps will be our targets.”

“Knew you’d catch up,” Will said.

“Did you?” Beth asked. “Because I didn’t.”

“You just needed a little nudge,” he replied, reaching out to take her hand. He laced his fingers through hers, something which made Chantelle snort derisively. Beth ignored her for once. It was time she stopped being baited by her childish comments and moved on.

“This is just a map of Rome,” Amanda observed as she worked. “What about the rest of the country?”

“It’s fine,” Will assured her. “I don’t think they’ve left the city.”

“How do you know that?” Charlie asked.

“Because Gideon’s arrogant.”

Something clicked. “He wants to be able to see us all panic. This is just a game to him,” Beth said,
a whole new level of hatred for Gideon making her stomach churn in fury. She hurried to Meg’s bag and found a green marker pen. “Will, start on clothing and jewellery stores. Lisa would want to be close to some half decent shopping locations.”

“Not sure I’m qualified to pick those out,” he admitted.

“Right. Should’ve called Freddie,” Beth muttered.

“Ahh, he took you on the makeover date. Classic Freddie,” Amanda teased.

“Well, now I feel significantly less special,” Beth said.

Chantelle groaned and sat up. She snatched the pen out of Beth’s hand. “Fine, I’ll circle them so long as it’ll shut you all up for five minutes.”

Charlie smiled at his sister. “You can just say that you want to help.”

“She won’t,” Beth said knowingly. “She can’t.”

“Ever mention this to anyone and I’ll ruin you, Blake,” she shot back.

“Mention that you have a heart? Never.”

“Problem,” Georgia said. “If they were being smart, they’d know to avoid all of these places.”

“Lisa’s not being smart,” Chrissy said. Beth was surprised to hear her say it of all people. Chrissy knew how it sounded. “What I mean is - she doesn’t think she’s doing anything wrong. For her, this is all really romantic and everything. She’s not going to think she needs to hide from anyone. Only Gideon’s going to think that.”

“And Lisa’s not exactly the type to act - well - she likes to put on a show,” Charlie said, recalling the first night of the party and the way she’d behaved during his birthday.

“What about expensive hotels?” Meg asked. “They might book into somewhere for the night.”

Jenny paled at the notion, “Oh my God, what if he -”

“He won't. We'll find them before that happens,” Beth said with certainty.

“You don't know that,” Chantelle said unhelpfully.

“No, I don't. But as stupid as Lisa can be, she's not cheap. We have to get to her before Gideon can push her into anything.”

“Are you sure we should go on our own?” Jenny asked fretfully. “You're the one who said we should bring in our parents. Maybe we should tell them the plan?”

“They wouldn’t listen when we offered to help downstairs, so they won’t listen now. It was the right thing to tell them what had happened, but they’ve already said we can't leave the hotel. Don’t get me wrong, we'll let them know that we're helping. It's just that we'll have to do that after we've escaped.” Will said.

Someone knocked on the door. Amanda and Chantelle folded the map over in an attempt to conceal the plan. It was with some hesitation that Beth answered the door, suspecting that Greg and the others had considered their wayward offspring might attempt their own rescue while unsupervised. Their panic was entirely unnecessary it seemed. In the hall, Wyatt stood with a determined look on his face. He wasn’t alone, either. Almost every student who’d taken the trip
had joined him. Some appeared more anxious than others, but all waited upon an invitation to the room.

“What’s this?” Beth asked. “Revolution?”

“We want to help,” Wyatt announced.

She feigned ignorance, “With what?”

“Don’t give me that,” he retorted. “You’re going to find Lisa, aren’t you? She’s my pupil, I want to help.”

“No. We’re going to sit here like we were told. You should all go back to your rooms,” Beth lied.

“Either you let us help, or we’ll go out on our own,” he insisted.

“You’d risk the wrath of the school and parents by letting all these students walk out of here?” Beth asked.

Wyatt faltered. He looked past Beth to see Georgia inside. “I’ll take full responsibility, even if it costs me my job.”

Beth didn’t want to be held accountable for the fates of a bunch of teenage girls and boys as they ran free through Rome, and she didn’t want Wyatt to bear the brunt of that responsibility either. Will pulled the door open and told Wyatt, “You’re not coming with us and you’re not taking responsibility. But you can help us to get out of here.”

“What are you talking about?” Beth asked.

“Look, if we all go out, then they can’t punish one person. They’re not going to expel the entire year for this. One in, all in, understand?”

“Easy for you to say, you quit school,” Beth shot back.

“True, but it’s still going to work. Wyatt, I hope you like playing prisoner, because we’re leaving you here as a distraction. If they find you and ask, we overpowered you and left when you tried to stop us. Good?”

“If I must,” Wyatt consented.

Dividing up each section of the city was easier than Beth had first thought. Some groups were larger than others and - because there weren’t enough boys to go around - Beth added a few extra girls to account for that. She figured they’d be safer in larger groups. If they were approached by strangers who wanted to try their luck then the amount of people clumped together would put them off. If they found Gideon, he’d assume they were out enjoying their free time and would ignore them.

“Don’t go out through the lobby,” Will instructed. “They’ll be expecting that. We’re going to have to stagger it so we don’t draw attention to ourselves. There should be an exit through the kitchen,” he added, using the hotel map stuck to the back of the door for reference. “And another through the car park. Don’t go through fire exits, because that’ll set off alarms. Any questions?”

“What do we do if we find her?” Georgia asked.

“If she’s alone, convince her to come back to the hotel. If she won’t, then delay her from leaving you, and call Beth or Jenny. If she’s with Gideon then don’t approach them. Just keep them in
They nodded, and gradually began to leave the room in their assigned groups. Greg and the other parents wouldn’t be concerned about the other girls heading out if they perceived them to be uninterested in locating Lisa. It was only her closest friends they’d be looking out for. That was why it was important for Beth and the others to go last. Then, if they were prevented from joining the search, they’d already have teams out on the ground doing the work for them.

Beth was starting to believe that she and Will had futures in military strategy.

“Jen’, go with Charlie, Chrissy, Georgia and Meg,” Beth instructed.

“What about you?”

“I’ll go with Will and Amanda, and Chantelle if she’s up for helping us.”

“No,” she said as she finished tying Wyatt to a chair. “I’m staying here.”

“Big surprise,” Meg muttered.

She bristled at that, “Because if our parents knock, one of us should be here to cover for everyone else. They might not believe Wyatt, and I can wrap my parents around my little finger. They’ll trust every word I say.”

“That’s actually a good idea,” Beth said, making no effort to hide her surprise. “Okay, you stay. Text Charlie if they find us out.”

Charlie, Chrissy, Meg, Jenny and Georgia left them to it. Georgia cast an appreciative look back at the captive Wyatt before she disappeared into the corridor. Beth wondered if she’d been too quick to judge him and - by extension - his relationship with Georgia. Beth felt as if she’d made too many assumptions about her friends and, once Lisa was safe, she was going to have to make some changes to her attitude.

“Ready?” Will asked when they were the only few remaining.

“I am,” Amanda confirmed. “Beth?”

“Always.”
Chapter Twenty-Four

“Such an evil.”

Many of the groups had spread farther afield already, exploring the outskirts of the city before moving back in like a fishing net closing in around a shoal. Beth, Will and Amanda started from the inside and worked out. They began in the busy piazzas which were popular with tourists and locals. The beautiful architecture and statues made them the places to be seen on a night out. Lisa was a socialite, raised to be in the spotlight. If she was anywhere, it would be somewhere she could show off her handsome new toy and her happiness.

Beneath the lights gleaming off the statues around the Trevi Fountain, Beth stopped Will and Amanda. They weren't going to like what she had to say but that wasn't about to stop her. With renewed determination, she told them, “I want to look by myself.”

“What?” Amanda asked. “No way! You don't know your way around, and it's dark!”

“She's right. It's too dangerous,” Will agreed. “I'm not letting you.”

“I'm not asking for permission, Will. I only didn't say this in the hotel because I didn't want Jenny to lecture me. Besides, this way we'll cover more ground.”

“We can cover that same ground together,” Will persisted.

“Every hour, we'll meet back at the fountain, okay?”

“No, that's not – Beth!”

She didn’t wait to hear their protests. Beth knew it was a foolish idea, but checking in with them would help to reassure Will and Amanda that she was safe, and they could share any sightings with each other. Beth hugged Will’s coat tightly around herself as she fled the pair, concealing herself in the crowds until she was sure that they weren’t going to follow. The faster they found Lisa, the better. At least, this was what Beth told herself to try to justify heading off by herself in an unfamiliar city. In truth, she felt the crushing weight of guilt that came with the knowledge she’d let Lisa down. She’d let all her friends down. Beth had been so blinded by their differences that she’d not paused to reflect on their similarities. They were all friends, and they all trusted each other with their lives. If she’d gotten over her own issues for just a few seconds she would have stopped and talked to Lisa properly about her fixation on Gideon. She might have divulged the truths of his personality and spared her any hurt or danger.

Beth wasn’t about to make the same mistakes. She would find Lisa, apologise, and bring her to safety. After that, she was going to make sure that Gideon paid for all the hurt he’d caused, all the lies he’d told, and all the women he’d swindled.

It was no surprise that she was soon lost to the winding back streets of Rome. Beth didn’t know that she could fulfil her promise to return to the piazza when she was scarcely able to find herself. That was something she’d deal with when the time came. In the meantime, she had only a couple of hours to search before she had to find her way back to Will. But the more she walked through
the labyrinth, the more hopeless she felt. Every street looked the same in the darkness. Dingy little bars with dull light spilling out of the grimy windows, drunk locals and tourists staggering by with their hands all over one another, and swinging shop signs overheard which creaked and squeaked, scaring Beth out of her wits every time.

She paused and dug her phone out of her pocket to check on her messages. Nothing. The girls hadn’t found anyone, and that meant she couldn’t run scared from her task. A door banged open, clattering on the hinges as it struck the wall. Beth jumped and turned towards the sound, spying a man with a pretty Italian woman under his arm. Although they spoke the language, his accent was decidedly English. “Mi dispiace.” Gideon said to her. It might have been another man, but Beth knew the roll of his tongue even when it was being used to lure a woman to bed with crude Italian phrases. He walked right by without registering Beth’s presence, the alcohol in his system dulling his senses. It wasn’t his inclination towards this other woman that made Beth reach out and grasp his wrist tightly in her cold fingers. It was the fact that Lisa was absent from the scene.

Recognition flashed in Gideon’s eyes and he tore himself out of Beth’s grip, stumbling back a step with the force of it. He cast a furtive glance around, and soon understood that she was the only one there. The panic on his face subsided, and a lazy smirk crept over his face.

“Mi amore, chi è questo?” the woman on his arm asked curiously.

“Va via. Io non sono interessato a te ora,” he said to her with a smile.

Whatever it meant, the woman wasn’t best pleased with it. Not only did she slap Gideon hard across the cheek, she did the same to Beth. She held her stinging face in one hand, watching the volatile Italian lady strut away, nose in the air, swearing in her native tongue about the pair of them. She was glad she didn’t speak the language, because Beth didn’t want to know what was being said about her.

Gideon wasn’t in the least bit concerned with the strike. “Did you come all the way to Italy to get me back?” he asked. His breath was positively putrid. Beth didn't know how many hours he'd spent drinking, but any more booze and he could have peeled paint with it. When he leaned in, she thought she was going to choke on it. In a sultry voice, he continued, “Did it eat you up with jealousy when you heard I was playing with your friend?”

“Where's Lisa?” Beth demanded in a snarl, adamantly that she wouldn’t be intimidated by him.

“What have you done with her?”

He stood up straight and shrugged in an offhanded way. If he'd ditched her somewhere in the city, Beth knew they might never find her. Lisa was too damn proud to just walk back to the hotel and admit she'd been dumped.

“Tell me!” she shouted.

“I like when you're demanding,” Gideon purred. “Do it again.”

“I swear to God, Gideon -”

“Try swearing to me,” he suggested. “Better yet, why don’t you beg?”

“If you've done anything to her, I'll -”

Beth squeaked in shock. Gideon grasped her jacket collar and thrust her bodily up against the wall. Italians were passionate, and anyone watching probably thought the pair were having some kind of lover's tiff. Beth’s head collided painfully with the brickwork, and that wasn't even the worst of it. Gideon forced his knee against her thigh, effectively trapping her between the building
and his body.

“Step away, or I'll knee you so hard that you'll need retrieval surgery,” Beth warned, hoping she sounded braver than she felt.

“Lisa's pretty fun - and easy - but you know that already. I had my eye on you as soon as I got into the school. I've seen your type before. You're so desperate to prove you can take care of yourself, and girls like you are so fun to break. You're a challenge.”

“The only thing that's going to get broken here, is your nose.”

“You see?” he laughed. “That's what I'm talking about! All that tough talk, and all your sarcasm. I see through it, Beth. I know that you're desperate to be noticed, and to have someone approve of you. Someone like me. Do yourself a favour, and just enjoy it.”

Beth wasn’t the girl Gideon thought she was. Not anymore. She raised her hand quickly, intending to break Gideon's nose with the heel of her palm. He wasn't in the mood to entertain her feeble attempts to defend herself. Swiftly, he slammed Beth’s hand into the wall and gripped it so tight in his fingers she felt it them bruise down to the bone.

“You're not the only one who can play rough, Beth,” he whispered. “Did you really think you could hurt me?”

“Maybe not. But he can,” she said through her gritted teeth.

“Who can?”

“Me,” Will said. He grabbed the back of Gideon's coat and dragged him away from Beth forcefully. In his inebriated state, it didn't take much to make Gideon stagger. With a little encouragement from Will's fist, Gideon fell rather dramatically over a table and into the lap of another drunkard.

“Are you okay?” he asked Beth desperately, not hesitating to return to her when he considered Gideon to be incapacitated “Did he hurt you?”

“I'm fine,” Beth assured him. “But Lisa's not here.”

“Yeah, she is,” he said, and pointed over his shoulder with his thumb.

While Beth had been wandering aimlessly, he'd had much better luck in his search. Lisa only had one thing on her mind when she saw Gideon, and Beth didn't want to get in the way of it. Gideon was trying to work out which way was up when she kicked him in the back. He tumbled forwards again, and found himself on the dirty ground where he belonged.

“You son of a bitch!” Lisa shrieked at him with all the burning fire of a thousand suns. “I hate you! I can't believe you'd – I just – I hate you!”

“Please,” he said, sitting in the filth and smirking up at her. “You loved every second of being with me.”

There were no words to express her fury. Lisa shouted, cried, and beat Gideon with her handbag. As entertaining as that was to Beth, it wasn't going to help them change what had already been done. She walked to Lisa without Will's help and gently encouraged her friend away. Lisa wrapped her arms around Beth and sobbed her apologies against her shoulder, proving for anyone who cared to watch that the girl wasn’t as much the adult as she liked to think herself.
“I know,” Beth said soothingly, rubbing her back gently and trying to ignore the pain she was in. She wasn’t about to tell Lisa that she was crushing some very tender areas thanks to Gideon’s violent hand. She was just glad to have Lisa back. Will didn’t miss Beth’s winces. Infuriated, he advanced on Gideon, ready to turn their argument into a full blown brawl. She couldn’t allow him to tarnish his reputation by wrestling in the dirt with a man unworthy of their attention. “Leave it. We have Lisa. Let’s just go back.”

“What about him?” Will asked. “You can’t let him get away with it.”

“I won’t. I think it’s time you reported him for what he did at your old school. A nice long stint behind bars should sort him out, don’t you agree?”

“Sounds good to me,” Will agreed, turning his back on the disgraced teacher.

Being as familiar with the city as he was, Will had no trouble with leading the two girls back to their designated meeting spot. Amanda paced back and forth, chewing on her thumbnail, her brows furrowed with concern. Will called out to her when the trio arrived and her tense shoulders visibly sagged with relief. Their search had been a brief one, but it had felt like an exceptionally long day for everyone involved. Beth would be happy to call around to all of the teams to bring them back to the hotel. She was too happy that Lisa was safe and unharmed to care about all the trouble she’d be in with her father for disobeying him. Beth was sure that if they’d waited for the adults to formulate their plan, they wouldn’t have discovered her at all.

Beth helped Lisa to sit on the edge of the stone fountain and knelt in front of her, holding her hands and looking up into her eyes. The more she tried to reassure her that it would all be okay, the more Lisa sobbed and apologised. Amanda was feeling less forgiving towards Beth. Still unhappy about the way she’d taken off alone, she asked, “What the hell were you thinking? What if you’d been abducted? Or what if Gideon had gotten to you?”

“I was thinking that I wanted to find Lisa as quickly as possible.”

“You were?” Lisa asked, still sniffling. “But - but I thought you hated me. I was so mean to you and -”

“Friends fight, Lis’,” Beth said. “Doesn’t mean that we hate each other. If anything happened to you, I - I don’t even know what I’d do if it did.”

“I’m sorry!” Lisa wailed, throwing herself down onto Beth and sending the girl onto her backside. She held tightly to her friend, ignoring the fact she would have more bruises to add to her collection when she woke up. Bruises that would make it painful to sit down for a while.

With all the noise they were making, they were bound to attract some attention. The locals had conditioned themselves to ignore the disturbances made by rowdy tourists, having the common sense to move along and leave them to their own devices. Beth wasn’t ignorant of their surroundings, and she was aware that they’d simply walked away from Gideon rather than leaving him so incapacitated that he couldn’t follow them. As far as she knew, he wasn’t a dangerous man. A coward, a creep, a thief, and a liar - yes. While he’d had pressed Beth up against a wall, she assumed it was all bravado - the desperate attempts of a cornered man to take back control after she’d caught him by surprise. She hoped rather than believed that he’d leave things as they were and skulk off to hide under his rock to lick his wounds.

Amanda and Will texted the others to update them while Beth attempted to calm her friend. Almost as soon as Lisa was emotionally and physically stable enough to find her feet without support, Beth found herself being dragged backwards by her hair. The stench of stale whiskey was a difficult one to forget. Either another man had been drowning in cheap alcohol and thought
he would try his hand at abduction, or Gideon wasn’t quite through with the people who’d spoiled
his chance to get back at Will’s family through the person he cared about the most; Beth.

It was Lisa’s cry of, “Let her go!” that got Will and Amanda’s attention. They turned to look back
at the girls to see Gideon hauling Beth to her feet while she clawed at his fingers, trying
desperately to get them out of her thick, wavy locks.

Lisa was first to act. Small and frightened she might have been, but she could be fierce when she
had to be. The girl charged at Gideon but in such ridiculous shoes she was easily knocked away.
With one swing of his arm, Gideon sent Lisa to the ground. She landed hard on her side and cried
out, clutching her shoulder in her trembling fingers. Amanda tried to hurry to Lisa’s aid, but
Gideon put his hand around Beth’s throat and squeezed in warning. “Stay where you are,” he
said, his voice all menace and desperation. “Or I’ll be forced to do something you won’t like.”

“Let her go,” Will commanded.

It made Gideon laugh. A loud, barking, manic noise filled the air. It sent a chill down through
Beth’s body. She swallowed against the fingers pressing on her larynx, afraid to move lest he
decide that crushing her windpipe was the only option left for him. Amused by Will’s heroic
attempts to boss him around, Gideon taunted, “Why? Because you’re telling me not to? That
doesn’t actually make me change my mind. This isn’t a movie, William. This is real life. And in
real life, I’m going to get what I’m due. Because if I don’t... I’m going to take out my frustration on
your girlfriend.”

“Gideon, stop this!” Amanda begged.

“Shut up, Mandy!” he snapped. “If you’d just married me like I’d suggested, we could have shared
the money your stupid mother would have spent on us. It’s your fault I’m resorting to this. I bet
someone will be happy to trade her for something.”

“You won’t get a-anything from my D-Dad,” Beth gasped.

“Maybe not,” Gideon was still smiling despite this obvious fact. Greg would have sold everything
he owned to have his daughter returned to him, but it would be a pittance compared to what the
man would have enjoyed had he succeeded in tricking Amanda into marrying him. He bit Beth’s
earlobe hard enough to cause Beth to whimper in pain, but not enough to cause her lasting
damage. It didn’t matter when the effect was the same. It made Will ball his hands into fists at his
sides, his cheeks red with the anger he was fighting to keep in check for Beth’s sake. Gideon
whispered against Beth’s ear, “I’ll bet that dear William would be happy to pay up to keep you
safe.”

“What do you think?” Gideon asked his captive. “Do you want to go back to them? You’re like
me, Bethy. We’re the same.”

“I’m nothing like you!”

“No? We’re both poor, growing up in their world. Never accepted. Just tolerated. And we have to
sit and watch while they rub their wealth in our faces. That’s the life you’re going to have.
Whatever happens, no matter how hard you try, you won’t be one of them.” His lips brushed
Beth’s cheek with every vindictive declaration. “But - with me - we could share the money and
have so much fun... Face it, to them, you’ll never be good enough.”

“She’s already good enough!” Jenny was racing to join the group. Charlie was at her side, with
Meg, Georgia and Chrissy hard on their heels. Will put an arm out to stop Jenny, not prepared to risk Beth’s safety should she provoke Gideon into taking action. Jenny came to an uneasy halt. She looked ready to kill. If Gideon did release Beth then he’d have a lot of angry people out for his blood. Unable to stage a daring rescue herself, Jenny continued defiantly, “It doesn’t matter how much money she has! She’s our friend!”

“Friendship doesn’t pay the bills, though, does it?” Gideon asked.

“B-because it d-doesn’t have to.” Beth’s voice was quaking with the strain it took to be heard while his fingers clenched and crushed. “I c-can’t put a price on m-my f-friends. I w-won’t!”

“This is all sickeningly sweet,” Gideon said, unmoved. “But I’m getting bored.”

Beth could understand how Gideon’s circumstances had made him cold. When she’d almost lost her father she had been afraid of being alone. So afraid, in fact, that she found it difficult to let people in because there’d be a risk that they’d all have to say goodbye someday. While her trauma had made her feel a duty to her friends to protect them so they’d never have to part ways, all while protecting her own heart from them, Gideon had used his pain to put on a mask and manipulate others into being anything he wanted them to be. He’d stopped seeing them as people, and considered everyone he knew to be his toys. He was the centre of their universe, and it was only right that they should revolve around him.

Perhaps they were alike in their standing in society, and in thinking so little of themselves that they acted out at times, but that was where it ended.

Gideon began to drag Beth backwards. She dug in her heels, too stubborn to simply be carted off and held hostage by him. Frustrated with her efforts to stop him, Gideon moved his hand from Beth’s hair to hold her around the waist and lifted her feet from the floor. “I’ll send word about a time and place for the money,” he told Will. “Until then, I’ll be taking Beth for insurance. I suggest you don’t follow me. No need to make this any messier than it is already.”

“Stop!” Georgia ordered.

“I’m not letting you take her out of this square!” Will snarled.

“Neither am I!” Charlie barked.

“None of us will!” Meg added boldly.

“I’m not really giving you guys a choice,” Gideon mocked. “You stay. We go. I get what I want, and you have her back. You don’t have a say in how this game plays out.”

Maybe they didn’t, but Beth certainly did. She was hardly a highly skilled ninja assassin, but growing up with mostly male role models and friends had led her into a lot of scraps and fights she might have otherwise avoided. She swung both her legs back. One missed its target while the other caught Gideon in the shin. It didn’t hurt him enough to make him drop her, but made him angry enough to turn Beth around and raise a hand to her. The distraction lasted mere seconds as his hand swept in towards her face. She anticipated the slap but it never arrived.

Amanda held fast to Gideon’s wrist while Will pulled Beth away. Choking and gasping for air now that she was able to breathe without obstruction, Beth staggered to Jenny who held her tightly, afraid that if she let go then she’d lose her to Gideon again. Will proved to be surplus to requirement. Incensed, Amanda hit her ex-fiancé square in the cheek with a powerful punch, next in the nose, and followed up swiftly with an upper-cut to his gut. Still reeling, Gideon whimpered when Amanda’s knee made contact with his groin. Not done with taking out what Beth assumed
was many years of pent up rage, Amanda pushed him towards the fountain. The low perimeter wall around the basin of water came into contact with the back of Gideon's legs. Unable to find anything to help him regain his balance, he fell into the chilling pool with an impressive splash.


“There were self defence classes at my university,” Amanda said breathlessly. “I was a good student.”

“Brilliant, is more like it,” Beth said hoarsely.

Gideon wasn't going to be down for long. He staggered to his feet, and promptly fell over again with another powerful splash. Still drunk and overcome with rage, he was determined to carry on. Will and Charlie were quick to drag him out of the water and pinned him to the ground. The boys made him lie on his stomach and sat on his back, their combined weight making it impossible for Gideon to get back up no matter how hard he tried.

Lisa dusted herself off, taking care not to touch her shoulder if she could avoid it. Beth knew by morning she would have a few cuts and bruises, and hoped that she’d not broken anything when she’d fallen. Even if she had, the injuries were nothing to what could have happened. Beth couldn’t help notice that Amanda wasn’t entirely surprised by Gideon’s violent tendencies, and was glad that Lisa hadn’t had to endure a long enough relationship with him to find out just how sadistic he could be.

An audible slap cut the air. Chrissy glared hard at Lisa, her hand still hovering as if she was contemplating hitting her friend again. After a full five seconds of staring at each other, the pair broke down in tears and hugged tightly, Lisa repeating her apologies and Chrissy scolding her for her stupidity. Beth and Jenny held each other’s hands tightly, but soon found themselves caught up in the embrace when Georgia, Chrissy, Lisa and Meg came to join them.

It wasn’t quite the smooth rescue operation any of them had envisaged, but Beth was happy knowing they were all coming out of it relatively unharmed. When their parents discovered what they’d done they might not be able to boast the same, but Beth was ready to accept the consequences of her actions. Amanda put in the call to their parents, and the girls waited patiently for them to arrive, passing the time by watching Gideon squirm like a fish out of water beneath Will and Charlie.
His character was to speak for itself.

Chapter Twenty-Five

“His character was to speak for itself.”

Greg was a generally laid back sort of man, but when it came to his daughter, he was as stern and protective a father than any other. All at once relieved to have her back safe and furious that Beth had disobeyed him, Greg had no problem with dragging all of the kids involved into Jenny’s room and giving them a long lecture about the choices they’d made. No one was brave enough to interrupt his tirade, not even Will. At least, not at first.

Greg directed his anger at his daughter after half an hour. “And don’t think I don’t know that you were the mastermind behind this!”

“Me?!”

“Sir, please,” Will stood quickly. “It was my idea. The others just - I talked them into it.”

“It’s noble of you to try to take the fall, William, but I know my daughter. This has her reckless attitude all over it!”

Beth wouldn’t have minded the accusation so much if she’d been the one to spark the escape from the hotel. She was more the second in command. For once, she really wasn’t to blame. To her surprise, Jenny was quick to leap to her defense. “It’s true, Mr. Blake! I didn’t want to sit in and wait because that’s all we did all night. When Beth and Will got here I figured we were going to do something about it.”

“Jenny, sweetheart,” Greg sounded thoroughly exhausted. “This isn’t in your nature. Madeleine and I know that -”

“It’s true!” she insisted.

Amanda backed the pair up with batting an eye, “Beth had nothing to do with the decision, Mr. Blake. Will did all this for my sake. He knew my history with Gideon and I wanted to get back at him. We got separated, because Will and I were careless. Beth was only guilty of wanting to help Lisa, and we exploited that.”

Greg slumped down into an obliging chair, utterly defeated. It only got worse as the rest of Beth’s friends claimed responsibility. The only one not speaking up was Beth. Even if it didn’t convince her father, he was oddly reassured to know that she had so many people looking out for her. So often he left his daughter at school and wondered just how close she was to the friends she so often mentioned to him. Whether or not she could see past their differences and make lasting connections. She was a constant worry to him. At last it seemed she’d found somewhere she belonged, and Greg simply didn’t have the heart to do anything to get her thrown out of school. Ultimately, it had all turned out well. But he didn’t like the look of the bruises around his daughter’s throat, and made it clear that he never wanted anyone to do anything so stupid again.

It was late, and no one could argue the need to turn in for what was left of the night. Gideon was in police custody where he belonged, Lisa was with her parents, and everyone else retired to their
rooms. Beth was able to spare a smile for Wyatt and Chantelle when they passed by Jenny’s room on the way to their own lodgings. Wyatt returned it. Chantelle ignored her. Things were certainly well on the way to getting back to normal.

That night when Beth crawled into bed beside Jenny, the pair of them taking up hardly any space at all in the obscenely oversized piece of furniture, she let the fact that she’d almost died sink in. It was the first night in a long while - perhaps since her mother had abandoned them - that Beth had cried herself to sleep. With Jenny there to hold her and ground her, Beth felt reassured enough to drift off in the early hours. She hoped that when it came time for the rest of the girls to return to school from their trip that they could put the incident behind them and go back to the way they used to be.

In the morning it was time to leave. Beth hadn’t paid for a trip to Italy and just because she happened to be there it didn’t mean she was entitled to stay. Wearing the same clothes as the day before - including Will’s coat - she traipsed down to the foyer to meet her father. Greg was stood outside checking his watch, impatient to leave and return to the garage he was so familiar with. Beth didn’t think he even noticed her presence. Not until he asked, “Do you want to stay?”

“What?”

“I can tell from the look on your face. You've always wanted to come here, haven't you? If you want, we can stay until the end of the trip.”

“We can't afford it.”

“I've been putting some money away,” he said. “We're not exactly bankrupt.”

“I don't need a fancy holiday. I can come back another time.”

“Why wait?” Ms. Ayers asked. She descended the steps to join the pair and linked her arm through Greg’s. “You should stay. I imagine once you get home, Greg will ground you until you're twenty. So, have a little freedom before that happens.”

“Forty, actually,” he corrected.

Beth still wasn't sure she deserved the break, but after everything, she didn’t have the energy to argue. If Greg was happy for them to stay on in Italy a little while, then she'd go along with it. Besides, Beth didn’t want to leave her friends so soon after the trauma they’d all suffered. It didn’t matter that she hadn’t brought anything with her. She could borrow what she needed from her friends.

“Wait,” Beth said as they walked back through the lobby. “What about Will and Amanda?”

“They left early this morning,” Ms. Ayers said. “It sounded to me like they have a lot of damage control to do at home.”

Beth imagined there’d be a lot of negative press once Gideon’s story was released to the public. They’d want to know why no one had come forward to press charges against him sooner, and just why he’d been allowed to work at a school for girls with his temperament. Beth wondered if her own mother would be dragged down for putting in a good word. She was something of a stupid woman, so perhaps the news agencies would leave her be. Maybe they wouldn’t even hear of her involvement. When a family as powerful as Will’s was set up to be taken down a peg or two by the media, they seldom cared about anything or anyone else.

“Their friend left, too,” Ms. Ayers said.

“Dad, don't talk about Will like that. If it wasn't for him, we might not have found Lisa at all.”

“He put you in danger, and I'm not going to forgive that easily,” he said.

“But I'm fine!”

“Let's not talk about this, okay?” Ms. Ayers suggested. “Greg, I'm going to talk to the teachers about the rest of the itinerary for the trip. Why don't we let Beth go tell her friends she’s joining them for the trip? She can stay in Jenny's room.”

“All right. Go on, do as Maddie says.”

Beth paused for a second before she left. All the first names and the pet names, all the arm holding and affection… She hadn’t put it together before but had the nagging suspicion that there was something going on between Greg and Ms. Ayers. As far as she knew, the pair only talked when arranging something between Beth and Jenny during the summer. They lived far away from each other, too. She might have been reading into it too much. No, Beth didn’t want to think about her father out dating anyone. She hurried back to the room and pushed the door open expecting the others to be fast asleep. To her surprise, Jenny was already up and dressed.

“Hey,” Jenny waved Beth in as if she’d expected her. “What's the verdict? Are you staying?”

“Yeah, Dad said – wait – you knew he was going to let me finish the trip with all of you?”

“Mum hinted that she’d talk to him,” she said. “They get along, don’t they?”

“Yeah. When did that happen?” Beth asked.

“I don't know. We miss too much when we're away. Maybe they're secretly meeting to talk about us when we're not around.”

“I think they both have better things to do. Hey, Meg,” Beth greeted her when she finally noticed she was sat on her bed. She'd been so vocal the previous night, and then had dropped back into being her usual shy self. Beth wasn’t sure which one she preferred. That said, they were all Meg. All she knew for sure was that she never wanted to get on the girl’s bad side.

Beth dropped onto Jenny's bed and pushed her fingers through her tangled hair. Jenny sensed something was on her. mind. She hit the nail on the head when she commented, “It's too bad Charlie and Will had to leave. It was heroic of him to come all the way here to help, don't you think?”

“Yeah. Will really .”

“I meant Charlie,” she said.

“Oh! Right. Yeah, that was so -”

“Are you into Will?” Jenny asked.


“Yes, I do. But I thought you might have forgotten.”

She had.
Beth hugged her knees to her chest, “Is this how you feel when you see Charlie?”

“What?”

She shook her head. It was difficult for Beth to put it into words. Jenny raised a brow, encouraging her to continue. Beth inwardly cringed. She felt like an eight year old with a crush on the kid who gave her a poorly drawn Christmas card. Jenny might have been her best friend, but Beth still worried that she’d be mocked into next week if she confessed to liking the guy she’d once openly insulted at a school dance.

“Beth,” Meg said quietly. “Are you in love with William?”

“You are?!” Lisa asked upon bursting into the room without invitation, her arm in a sling that she’d already covered with badges and buttons in a bid to brighten it up.

Chrissy closed the door behind them, and hurried over to sit beside Beth on the bed. She wasn’t going to miss out on any gossip. “Are you, seriously?”

“I – I just don't totally hate him. What are you all doing in here, anyway?”

“I told them we should come and find you,” Georgia said, joining the group last, and doing so with a great deal more serenity than the others. She let the door close carefully with a tap, and leaned back against it. “You’re staying, right?”

“Yeah. Dad said it was okay.”

“My parents said that so long as I stick with you guys, I'm allowed to go out of the hotel,” Lisa announced. “So we can't do anything boring, and we have to buy loads of clothes.”

“You have enough clothes to open your own mall,” Beth joked. “Why do you need more?”

“Duh, the end of year dance is coming up.”

“Yeah, after exams,” Beth reminded her. “Which you haven't studied for at all.”

“I'm going to wing it,” she said.

“Or... We could go back a couple of days early, and lock you in the library,” Jenny suggested.

“God, you're so mean! Anyway, I want to know about the person Beth loves.”

“Like I said, I don't love him! I just like him a bit better. I mean, he's still a snob.”

“You're a snob,” Georgia countered. “You take offence to people just because they're rich. It's not like they can help it.”

“I – I don’t.”

“Hey, can I ask something?” Lisa said. “Why did Gideon say that you're the same?”

“He was just trying to get me on his side. It didn't mean anything.”

Jenny winced as if she understood the truth more than she’d allowed herself to believe in the past, and it caused her physical pain to think of it. “That's not totally true, is it?”

“What?”
“Beth, just because you don't have as much money as the rest of us, it doesn't mean we're different. I mean, we might have started out just being friends because we were sharing a room. But now... it's more than that. I think you know that, otherwise you wouldn't have flown out here to help when I called. Society, class, and that kind of thing don't matter. If we're friends now, we always will be.”

Beth smiled. She tried to deflect from her own emotions with humour. “That was beautiful. I feel sick.”

“Idiot,” Jenny slapped her gently on the arm. “I was trying to be nice.”

“No, I got that,” Beth said. “Is it okay if I cry?”

“Shut up!”

“Fine,” Beth conceded. “You guys know what my Mum's like. Because of her, it's just difficult to get close to people. Just in case they ditch you, for whatever reason. Like because I'm poor, for example. I'm sorry.”

“We wouldn't ditch you for that,” Lisa said. “Maybe for not coordinating your accessories, but never because you were poor.”

“Thanks... I think.”

Chrissy hugged Beth’s arm tightly, “You don’t let loose enough, but that doesn't mean we hate you or anything.”

“Excuse you,” she said, feigning insult. “I can let loose. I ran around Rome trying to save someone's scrawny backside, remember?”

Chrissy clarified, “I'm talking about having fun.”

“Watching Amanda wipe out Gideon was pretty fun.”

Meg giggled, “His face when he fell in the water...”

“He deserved it,” Lisa said. “All of it. As if I would seriously run away with someone so ugly.”

“Oh, he's ugly, now?” Beth asked.

“Older guys always are. They have hair in their ears,” she shrugged. “I don't know what people see in them.”

“Me either,” Beth agreed. “Then again, most of my friends are older than me, so -”


“I don't think you should be looking for a new boyfriend any time soon,” Beth told her.

“But if they’re your friends, then they've got to be better than Gideon.”

“Only if you like greasy mechanics.”

“Oh, they'd be so sweaty and gorgeous,” Lisa almost swooned.

“Okay. I think that's a sign that someone needs a little air.”
The others laughed, and the tension Beth so often felt in her heart was somewhat eased. They’d never really looked down on her, she’d just been looking down on herself. It had been her own prejudice against people of higher social standing that had been in the way of Beth connecting with her friends as she’d always wanted to. She vowed to herself that she wouldn’t be so guarded around them again. That she wouldn’t cut herself off and risk relationships with people she loved just so she could convince herself that she was safe.

If only Beth had thought the same way when she first met Will, they might have had a very different relationship.
Chapter Twenty-Six

“If he wants our society, let him seek it.”

As it happened, no one had been joking when they’d considered returning to school a few days early. Lisa complained about it persistently until they were back in the comfort of their dorm. Beth could instantly see the full weight of her actions coming down on her, and the group put off revision for the day in order to be there to help her through. Greg sent on Beth’s things so she wasn’t without clothes, and she busied herself with unpacking the bags, putting things in their proper place, and generally finding any small task to occupy herself with so she could avoid thinking about all that had happened in Italy.

Lisa was a bright, vibrant spirit and she couldn’t let anything keep her down for long. Once she was back into the routine of revising and preparing for her exams, she’d gone back to shirking off her school work and gossiping with Chrissy about the boys of their own age who were soon due back from the trip. Beth had to trust that Lisa had learned a valuable lesson about running off with men she hardly knew, because she and her friends might not be there the next time to come to the rescue, although she knew they’d all try their hardest if Lisa ever called upon them for help.

It was on the morning of the first day of lessons that Beth woke with a crushing weight on top of her. She tried to pull the covers over her head, but they were stuck beneath whatever had just dumped itself on top of her. Lisa grumbled groggily from over in her own bed, and Beth reluctantly opened her eyes to find Chrissy sitting on her. “Morning,” she said brightly. “First day of school! Ready?”

“You're heavy,” Beth complained.

“You're going to be late,” she said. “Come on! I want to see the boys coming back!”

“Eurgh. Go away,” Beth begged.

Jenny pulled the pillow out from beneath Beth’s head, “She's right. Get out of bed!”

“God,” she groaned, still not a morning person. “I hate you both.”

Lisa rolled off the mattress and landed on the floor with a dull thud. Beth couldn't bring herself to be happy about it being the first day of school. Not only because that meant she had to get back to real, structured work, but because it didn’t matter to her that the boys were returning. Charlie and Will wouldn’t be among them, and Beth desperately wanted to see the latter to apologise for her father shouting at him. Also - perhaps - to tell him that she was in love with him. For Jenny’s sake, she hoped that Charlie would return. That was the very least Will could do; confess his meddling to his friend and let him decide for himself who he was in love with.

It was all wishful thinking. The school wasn’t going to allow the pair to just hop in and out of the facility whenever they pleased.

Beth dressed as slowly as she possibly could without making it look like she was purposefully delaying the inevitable. The girls left together in a group and Beth was reminded of their early
years together when their only concerns had been nail polish and what was on the lunch menu that day. No thoughts of boys, eloping, or mad adventures across Europe. In a way, she wanted to go back to those days so she could do it right and knock down the barrier before she’d had a chance to build it too high.

It was as the group entered the main school building that they noticed the other students staring. News of Gideon’s upcoming incarceration must have reached them all, as would the events which led to it. Everyone in their year knew the finer details and had little to gossip about. It was soon that Beth realised the stares weren’t for her sake. Nor were they for Lisa’s. Everyone appeared to be watching Jenny and whispering behind their hands, giggling, smiling, then running off to the windows.

“Did you do something I don’t know about?” Beth asked, worried that they’d have yet another drama on their hands.

“No. I have no idea what they're -”

“I do,” Chrissy said. She ran to the window to see what everyone else had been staring at. It looked out onto the broad driveway at the front of the school’s main entrance. Some people were arriving a little late, and would miss their first classes in doing so. Beth didn’t have a lot of interest in the stragglers. That is, until Chrissy said, “He's back! It's Charlie!”

“You're joking!” Beth moved her out of the way and peered through the glass. “Oh my God, he is!”

“I want to see!” Lisa declared.

“Me too!” Meg joined them.

Jenny hung back, processing this arrival. She’d seen Charlie in Italy but it had been a brief encounter. He’d left so early the next day that there’d been little time for them to talk about anything, let alone their feelings. It took all of three seconds for Jenny to decide that she wanted to see him. The girls pressed their faces to the glass. They knew they looked ridiculous and obvious but they didn’t care. They weren’t going to miss a second of the reunion.

It was impossible to hear what they were saying. Fortunately, most of their discussion wasn’t conducted with words. After a brief exchange, Jenny grabbed Charlie’s collar and pulled him into a passionate kiss. Everyone had forgotten the rules about no dating, it seemed. That, or Jenny had simply stopped caring. Charlie brought her into his arms, kissing her as if he couldn’t breathe without her.

After a few minutes, it got a little awkward. To give Jenny some privacy - at least from her friends - Beth moved the other girls along. The door opened in front of them, cutting off their escape. In came Jenny, Charlie, and Chantelle. Beth hesitated, part of her still wanting to leave so that she didn’t get in the way. She didn’t need to worry. Charlie smiled and hugged Jenny to his side, looking like he’d won every lottery in the world at once. Despite herself, Beth reached up to ruffle his hair. She was happy for them both, but still warned him, “If you ever hurt her, I'll have your nuts for earrings.”

“Deal,” he said. “But I'm not going to.”

“No, I don't think you are.”

Chantelle approached Beth. She tried hard not to be on the defensive, but old habits died hard. Beth took a step back. Chantelle understood and paused. She folded her arms across her chest. “I
didn’t think I’d be coming back here.”

“So, why did you?”

“He’s happier with her,” she admitted. “No matter what you think of me, Blake, I do care about
my brother.”

“I know,” Beth said. “I can see that. Just do me a favour, and don’t make Jenny miserable.”

“I can’t even if I want to. Charlie already lectured me about it.”

“Good.”

She rolled her eyes, “If you think that Will is going to get out of the car, then you’re mistaken.
There’s nothing else out here for you to see.”

“I didn’t really expect him to come back,” Beth admitted. “There’s not much for him here.”

“As long as you know that,” she retorted sniffily.

Chantelle had no more time for Beth. She went about congratulating Jenny on her relationship
with Charlie and acted like she’d wanted it the whole time. Jenny smiled and accepted the
compliments, but it was done warily. Chantelle had shown us her true nature, and people didn’t
change quite so easily. If she wanted to repair her friendship with Jenny, then it was going to take
a lot of time, and far more sincerity than Beth thought she was capable of. It was up to Jenny if
she was willing to go through all of that again.

Beth tore herself away from the jovial group and found solace in walking through the halls by
herself. She took the longest possible route to class. The silence helped her to get her thoughts in
order. Beth was pleased to see Charlie. But she was also disappointed that he hadn’t brought Will.
Even though she’d said that she hadn’t expected it - and that was true - Beth wanted to be
surprised by him.

“And of course, you must renovate the auditorium. It is shocking that you hold performances with
such poor acoustics,” a horribly familiar voice was telling a man in a crisp suit. He was on the
board of directors. Beth recognised him from the portraits hanging in the halls. But it was the
person with the man that Beth knew best. She stopped in her tracks at the sight of me. A flash of
utter abhorrence crossed her face. It swiftly turned into a polite smile.

Madame Courtenay.

“Uh – morning?” Beth greeted with uncertainty.

“Young lady, why aren’t you in class?” the man asked.

“I was just on my way -”

“May I have a moment with this girl?” Madame Courtenay asked him sweetly. “I would like very
much to have her opinion on our plans.”

“Of course. This classroom looks to be free,” he said, and motioned to a nearby door.

“Ten minutes should do,” she told him.

As soon as Beth was inside the room, Madame Courtenay shut him out and motioned through the
glass that he ought to find some other employment for his time. Beth had a funny feeling that the
woman wasn't pleased to see her. She'd not exactly left Madame Courtenay’s house on good terms at Christmas. She’d thought that if her mother was there then she could smooth things over. Beth had almost broken Will's nose, after all, and she was really interested in his life, and what he did, and with who.

“It's nice to see you again,” Beth lied.

“You must know why I'm here,” she said.

“Acoustics?”

Madame Courteny bristled. “No. That is just an excuse to come here with Mrs. Davies.”

“Well, I haven't seen Wyatt, so -”

“Do not speak to me of that boy,” she said. “I can do well without his simpering today. No, it is you that I came here to see.”

Beth blinked, “What?”

“It is pardon, you ignorant child. Oh, when I think that I allowed a creature such as you into my house – anyway – that is not the reason I have come here. I need you to confirm or deny some terrible news that has reached me.”

“And you couldn't have called me?”

“I shall be blunt,” she said, her eye twitching at the effort it took to maintain a mildly civil tone. “I heard a rumour that, while in Italy, you came to some kind of an understanding with my dear William.”

“Eh?”

“That you are dating him, you foolish girl! I couldn't believe that he would throw himself away on an impoverished girl like you, and had to come immediately to this place to make sure it was a lie.”

“If you couldn't believe it, then it makes me wonder what the point was in you coming here,” Beth said. “It just looks like you wasted a trip.”

“The point was, that I wanted to look into your eyes as you denied it. There's no way it could be true!”

“Even if the rumour existed in the first place - which I don't believe - then by coming here, doesn't it make it look like you think it's true?”

“Even if it existed?!” she bellowed. “It's clearly something you started! No doubt you are trying to make it appear as if you have enough standing in society to catch his eye. Make no mistake, you are so insignificant to that boy, that he would never look your way!”

“Okay. If that's how you feel,” Beth said in an off-handed way.

“Then deny it!”

“Why?” Beth almost laughed. “This is so stupid. You just said he wouldn't even look at me, so that should be enough for you.”

“You might have seduced him with your flirtations. Oh, yes, I know what you common girls are
capable of. Dressing and acting in a way totally unsuitable to the fairer sex. Just as you led Freddie into throwing his time and money away on you, you must have done the same to William!"

It was Beth’s turn to get annoyed. “Even if any of that was true, I wouldn't tell you!”

“Do you know who I am?!”

“Yes. And even if you think that you have a right to know Will's business, you don't have a right to know mine.”

“Understand this,” she said haughtily. “Whatever you might want with William can never come to pass. He is going to be with daughter. There! What can you say to that?”

“Then, if he feels the same, you have nothing to worry about.”

She hesitated, and admitted, “He hasn't agreed to the match, yet. But it can only be a matter of time. It would have happened much faster, I am sure, if you hadn't put yourself before him.”

“You can’t hold me accountable for his choices. He has a brain, you know?”

“Should he choose you, of all the girls available to him, then you would both be despised by all of us. Yes, even his mother, I am sure! You have no status, no money, and don’t think news of your exploits in Rome haven't reached me. I know it all! Your friend running off with that disgraceful teacher, and the spectacle you made of yourself trying to find her! Not to mention, the shame of forcing poor Amanda to reveal the scandals he brought upon their family!”

“Do you really think that telling me you'd hate me would change anything at all?”

“I will not be spoken to in such a manner!” she declared. “And I will have what I want! You are never to make a match with him. I will not leave here disappointed, do you hear me?”

“I hear you, but I don’t care,” Beth snapped, any restraint she had on her temper gone. “If Will did decide that he wanted to be with me, then I wouldn't do anything to stop him.”

“Don't interrupt! I will not have our families ruined because of a money grabbing little girl! If you had any sense at all, you wouldn't want to climb out of the gutter of society. You should stay where you were brought up, as should we!”

“I am your equal!” Beth shouted at her. “Just because you have money, and a big house, it doesn’t make you better than me. We're all the same, Madame, with the exception of snobs like you. Because, as far as decent humans go, you're on the bottom rung of that ladder.”

“Say it,” she demanded. “Are you in a relationship with him?!”

“No!”

She seemed somewhat pleased by this declaration. Madame Courtenay smoothed down her coat, and raised her head with pride. She asked, “And will you agree to never be with him in such a way?”

“No,” Beth repeated in a snarl. “And I think you should leave.”

“It is not for you to dismiss me!”

The door opened and a well turned out woman entered. She smiled at Madame Courtenay, and suggested, “Perhaps I ought to be the one to do that.”
“Ah, my dear Harriet,” Madame Courtenay greeted her. “I was beginning to wonder where you were.”

“I seriously doubt that,” she said.

“Are we due in a meeting? I was just asking this girl what she thought about -”

“I heard what you were saying.” Mrs. Davies told her. “And I think you've done enough talking. Go to the office, and I'll be with you shortly.”

Madame Courtenay spared Beth a scowl before she left. She was like a yapping dog. All aggression in the face of someone she thought too small to defend themselves, only to turn into a cowering wreck when her master appeared. Beth had shared dinner with Mrs. Davies and had thought her different from the likes of Madame Courtenay. It was difficult to get a measure of a person in just one night, but she trusted her gut instinct. If Beth ever was dating her son, then she wouldn't have the same issues with it as Madame Courtenay.

“Hi,” Beth greeted, still fuming after the confrontation and forcing her nerves to settle. “Are you here for the acoustics, too?”

“I have to say, they're pretty impressive in this room. That was some beautiful shouting, I heard.”

“Well, she deserved it,” Beth said.

“Quite. Amanda told me to pass on her best wishes for you, should I see you while I was here.”

“How is she?” Beth asked.

“It's difficult to bring up the past. But she knows it's for the best. I think it's a weight off her shoulders, to tell the truth. I thought I should come by. Charlie's parents are still in Switzerland, and they asked me to escort their children back to school.”

“Jenny's happy about it,” she said. “Is that okay with you?”

“It's not for us to decide what makes our children happy,” she winked. “Any of them.”

After the way she'd rebuffed him before, Beth didn't expect that Will would ever return and ask her to be his girlfriend. Beth hoped if they met again that they could be friends. It was better than nothing. And she was reassured that whatever relationship they maintained, his family wouldn't take issue with it.

Madame Courtenay was just bitter because Will didn't like her daughter. She'd accused Beth of hanging around him because she assumed all she wanted was money. Beth was starting to wonder if Madame Courtenay had made that assumption because it was what she was doing herself. Some of the happiest people Beth had ever met had very little to their names. And some of the greediest appeared to have more than they could ever want, and it still wasn't enough.

Madame Courtenay was just such a person.

“Can you tell Will something for me?” Beth asked.

“Anything.”

Beth weighed her words carefully, “Tell him – uh – tell him that he's a good friend. For Italy, and everything.”
“Is that all?”

Beth nodded, “It's all he needs to hear.”

“Are you sure?”

No.

“Yes,” Beth lied. “I’m sure.”
I thought only of you.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

“I thought only of you.”

Beth tried not to speak about what had happened with Madame Courtenay. The fact that she hadn’t told the woman she’d never get into a relationship with Will spoke volumes about her feelings for him. Even if she was ready to admit that to herself, it didn’t matter if he wasn’t there. Talking about it to her friends would only remind her of the fact that she’d lost him. Will might have been ready to play the hero for her sake, but he was also quick to leave her behind. Perhaps it was just his one last act of friendship to make amends for all the wrongs he’d committed before he walked out of her life forever.

Discussing her problems would only be a burden to Jenny. She spent most of her time enjoying dates on the school grounds with Charlie, hiding from teachers and stealing kisses. Beth knew better than to taint that with her misery. Instead she focussed on her exams, but even they didn’t last long enough to drive Will from her mind. Before she knew it, prom was upon them, and with it came the end of the school year.

“Beth?” Meg asked quietly as she joined Beth on her bed. She looked up from her music notes. Beth had already had the theory exam, but she still needed to perform a recital on the final day. It was the very last test she needed to get through. Meg wrung her hands, “Um... Could you help me get ready before prom, please?”

“Sure.”

“I mean,” she blushed. “I want to straighten my hair.”

“Oh. Are you sure? It'll take a long time.”

“I know. But it's the last party, and I want to look good.”

Lisa threw a pillow over to get their attention, “That's why we're going to a salon.”

“I haven't booked into a salon,” Beth said. “And I don't need to. I'll just be wearing jeans or something.”

“Don't even think about it,” Lisa warned. “Like Meg said - it's the last party. And you don't have to. My parents wanted to thank you guys for helping find me, so it's all on them. Mum designed our dresses, as well. They're from her new line, and we'll get to try them before anyone else. Isn't that cool?”

“I was going to help Georgia get ready. I can't just abandon her.”

“Mum can help her, too. I'll call her. We're all going together anyway, right?”

“I think you'll find that Jenny has a date,” Beth pointed out.

“A date for what?” she asked, blushing hotly as she came through the door. Honestly, the timing of Beth’s friends was impeccable at times. They always seemed to know when someone was
talking about them.

“Prom,” Beth answered. “You're going with Charlie, right?”

“I'm meeting him there. I thought we could all turn up together.”

“Oh.”

“You're not trying to get out of some pampering, are you?” she asked knowingly. “Like it or not, you're going to look like a real lady tomorrow night.”

“I still have an exam to finish,” Beth said. “I haven't got time.”

“The practical test is going to finished by one. That's plenty of time.” Lisa waved a piece of paper. “I stole your schedule to make sure it wouldn't clash.”

“I've been looking for that!”

“Well, it's done now,” she said. “Come on! It's not going to kill you.”

“I've seen your dress already,” Chrissy added. “It's super pretty. So's Meg's. I'm jealous.”

“It's not like we're making you wear a potato sack,” Lisa told her. “God, you can't have every dress for yourself.”

“I know, but they're so cool and I want them!” she complained.

Beth gave up the last minute revision as a bad job. If she didn’t know what she was doing already, then reading over the sheet notes over and over wasn't going to do her much good. She just had to trust that all the practice she’d put in every day was enough to see her through.

The composition was one of her own design. She’d put her heart and soul into the song, humming it to herself every day, making changes to the tune, and asking her friends to listen in on it to tell her what did and didn’t work. Her teacher had been surprisingly helpful. After Gideon had left Beth had believed there wouldn’t be anyone else who would take an interest in her skills. It just went to show that when Beth decided to give other people a chance the could surprise her. She wasn’t sure she’d have made it through without their additional coaching.

With that in mind, Beth had applied for a course at the Royal Academy of Music. She didn't know if she would even get in, but it was worth a shot. Beth knew that if she didn't try, then she wouldn't succeed.

Beth felt as if she’d held her breath throughout the entire exam the following day. When she was finally allowed out of the room, she felt like she couldn't fill her lungs fast enough. Until the results were posted she was determined not to worry about how well she’d done. It was much too late to go back and change her score. Fate would decide the rest.

There was no time for Beth to go and change, and very little point. If she was going to spend the rest of the day being made up into a princess, it wouldn't signify what she wore. Her uniform would be thrown off to make way for the dress and never seen again. At least, not until graduation, and even then it would be hidden under her robes. Such formal ceremonies was held at the end of University when graduates collected their diplomas. Because Netherfield Academy kept girls from such an early age, they’d felt like it was a good way to round off the year, and to say goodbye as the students stepped out into adulthood.

There was room for a prom on the school grounds. The main hall was more than suited to the task,
but it took away from some of the excitement of it all for the girls. As such, the ballroom at a nearby hotel had been booked for the occasion. Beth was glad she wasn't on the decorating committee. They'd been working tirelessly all year on the themes and design. It seemed like a lot for just one night, but each to their own. Beth was glad she only had to turn up, and wasn't responsible for the position of every balloon or place setting.

As loathe as Beth was to admit it, she really needed to be pampered. She'd anticipated that they'd be painfully pulled around by beauticians, but it was so much more than that. A short work out, massages, a sauna, and facials were just the beginning. If Beth had been any more relaxed after all of that, she'd have been dead. In fact, she was in such a good mood by the end of it that she didn't care what colour her nails were being painted, or what kind of eye-shadow or lipstick she was having slapped onto her face.

“Holy -”

“I know,” Lisa said, zipping the back of Beth’s dress for her. “Weird, right?”

“Yeah, and then some.”

It was a red flared dress, the hem of which came just above the knee. There was a black lace panel over Beth’s chest that was so decorative she had no need for a necklace. Her shoes were high heels, She hadn't been all that happy about it at first given her lack of coordination in such things. They were so low that, once they were on, they felt like a pair of flats. The red was the same pigment as her dress, and the dark silver bejewelled buckle on each gave them a little extra flourish. Beth couldn't have coordinated it any better herself. Even the clutch bag was the same red, with similar jewels across half of it to tie it in with her footwear.

The jewellery was, thankfully, inexpensive. Had Lisa’s parents decked Beth out in diamonds on loan from some expensive store, she'd have been too frightened to move in case she lost them. The black toned cubic-zirconia earrings matched her shoes perfectly. On one wrist Beth wore a collection of black and silver bracelets. Some where metal, and others were braided leather. On her other arm the silver beaded cuff felt rather more weighty, but she could get used to it.

Beth always felt naked without any make-up on. She had a tendency to go a little vampire at the school parties when not under strict supervision. With her usual outfits, sultry red lipstick and smoky eyes were considered to be fairly gothic. But when paired with a pretty dress, they were kind of sexy. It was too bad Will wasn’t going to see it, she thought. His impression of Beth had to be of a tom-boy who didn't care what she did with herself. This new look would change his mind on that score.

Beth raised a hand to touch her hair. Lisa slapped it down for fear she'd ruin it. She was right to be concerned. The braids and curls had been positioned perfectly. Beth’s long hair had been tamed into submission, and gathered in a magical looking bun at the back of her head. Beth had no idea how she was going to take all the pins out before bed, but it looked wonderful.

“Are we all ready?” Jenny asked.

“Mum wants a picture,” Lisa said, and ushered Beth back through to join the others.

They whistled and made cat-calls like a group of rowdy workmen on a building site. Beth turned on the spot when instructed, and burst out laughing when Chrissy called, “Shake it, baby!”

Beth was able to ignore the dull ache in her chest born from the knowledge that it was their last big event together while she was laughing. It was a warm, wonderful sound that she hoped to keep with her forever. The photographs might fade, but her memories of prom would live on for
many years after that happened.

The group arrived at the hotel in the same car. Limousines might have been gaudy, but conveying six young ladies to their destination was made far easier in such a large vehicle. The attendants waiting outside the hotel helped the party goers out of their cars and led them to the foyer where teachers were waiting to direct their students for their final dance.

It was clear that no expense had been spared. The large space had been turned into an enchanted forest. Fake trees stood from floor to ceiling, the branches wrapped with white fairy lights which cast a gentle glow down onto the tables below, each with a golden leaf centrepiece and bronze coloured settings. A grand buffet table laden with bite sized snacks, drinks and desserts was at one side of the room, away from the dance floor to allow more space for the students who wanted to spend the night on their feet. Waiters carried glasses of champagne for anyone unwilling to serve themselves, and a moon shaped light hung above the dancefloor to illuminate it with a white glow.

“Wow,” Jenny said, gazing at the room, her arm linked through Beth’s. “I was expecting something a little simpler.”

“I love it,” Meg announced.

“Me too. Although, they could have gone for a few more balloons,” Georgia said. “I was going to take one as a souvenir.”

“You could just take a leaf,” Beth suggested. “Or a boyfriend. Because I see a lot of guys without dates.”

“Not the one coming over,” Chrissy said, and gave Jenny a little nudge. “Go on.”

“But we agreed to do this as friends,” she said.

Beth turned her so that they were looking into one another's eyes. “Jen’, I order you to go and dance with your boyfriend.”

“O-Okay...”

It was clear that Jenny worried about how her friends might feel if she left them alone. Rather, Beth wondered if Jenny understood she missed Will and was hoping to keep Beth company in his stead. It was a sweet consideration, but entirely unnecessary. Beth would have much rather seen Jenny happy and dancing with Charlie all night, than miserable and casting him glances when she thought Beth wasn’t paying attention.

It seemed that Beth wasn’t the only one missing someone. Wyatt had to attend the dance due to his position, but it was clear even from a distance that his eyes kept finding Georgia. He wasn’t alone. Georgia was actively trying to pick him out of the crowd. “He’s by the chocolate fountain,” Beth said when she couldn’t stand it any longer. “Go ask him to dance.”

“I don’t know who you -”

“Wyatt. I’m sorry,” Beth apologised. “I shouldn’t have tried to turn you against him. The way you ended things wasn’t fair on either of you. Talk to him and sort it out. If you get back together then - then I’ll be happy for you. Not miserable.”

“You sure?” Georgia asked.

“Positive.”
“Thanks, Beth!”

Once she departed, Beth asked the others, “Well…? Aren't you going to go snag some boys before they're all gone?”

“I don't know,” Lisa said. “What if -”

“They’re not Gideon, and it's just for one night. No one's asking you to marry them.”

“Chris’,” Lisa held her hand. “How about if we go and dance the first few?”

“Can I come?” Meg asked.

“What, you're going to leave me here by myself?” Beth asked, suddenly realising the downside to her selfless acts. “Thanks a lot.”

“No, but I think someone else is about to ask you,” Lisa pointed over Beth’s shoulder to the entrance.

The boy who’d entered wasn’t the same Will Davies who’d taken such an instant dislike to Beth during their first dance. Nor was he the same Will Davies who'd nose had been broken after his abysmal attempt at confessing his love. It was the Will Davies who’d watched a sunrise from atop a cliff with Beth when she’d felt lonely and isolated from her friends. It was the very same Will Davies who’d taken a moonlight stroll through the gardens with her and had let Beth bare her most personal thoughts.

The most perfect, wonderful Will Davies who’d taken her to Italy without a second thought to save someone Beth loved.

To say it was a prom, Will was dressed in remarkably casual attire. A white dress shirt and a pair of black jeans. She’d always pictured him as a suit and tie sort of a guy when it was a formal function. Beth felt oddly overdressed as he came to hold her hands, looking down into her eyes as if he’d found something he’d spent a lifetime searching for. “You look beautiful,” he told her.

“You look underdressed,” Beth retorted, unable to conceal her amusement.

“Considering the way you usually - well - I thought we might match if I did this,” he admitted.

“Even I wouldn’t wear jeans to prom.”

“Dare I ask if this is for the sake of some guy?”

“It is now,” Beth confessed.

Will was delighted to hear it. He bowed his head and brought her fingers to his lips, kissing them tenderly in a gentlemanly fashion. It didn’t matter that there were teachers nearby who’d made the rules about not dating. Soon the students weren’t going to be their problem, and any rules they broke wouldn’t apply come morning. Besides, Will had resigned from Netherfield Academy and no one had told Beth she couldn’t date someone who wasn’t her classmate.

He led her to the dancefloor without having to ask. There was no one in the room she wanted to spend her night with more than Will. His hand found her waist, the other cradling her fingers as he guided her in a slow, simple waltz. They passed other couples without sparing them a second glance. In Beth’s eyes, the world was empty except for her and Will. She could barely even hear the music over the sound of his calm, steady breathing, or the rhythmic beat of his pulse where their fingers touched.
“Thank you,” she said as they danced. “For what you did for Lisa. Not many guys would want to fly all the way to Italy to save one girl.”

“Even though I'm happy she's okay, I didn't do it for her. I saw the way you looked when you got that call. You were terrified, and upset. I couldn't stand seeing you like that. So, yes, I helped her. But I was only thinking about you when I did it,” he confessed. There was no denying the sincerity in Will's eyes. Beth found herself completely unable to tease him for being such a romantic - if indeed that was what he'd intended. Will looked as if he was preparing himself for the worst when he said, “Please, don't lead me on if you feel the same as you did at Christmas. I still love you, Beth. But just one word from you, and I'll never say it again.”

“I love you, too,” Beth said. She wasn’t going to make him wait any longer to hear it. She saw fit to add, “And I'm still really sorry I nearly broke your nose.”

“You did,” he said. “I was just too proud to admit it in that letter.”

“I knew it,” she giggled. “I can't believe you lied to me!”

“I won't do it again, I swear. If you break any of my bones in future, I'll tell you right away.”

“I'm not going to.”

“Good.”

“Why didn't you come back with Charlie?” Beth asked. “You didn't have to wait this long. I loved you since that evening at your house, you know?”

“I was scared you'd turn me down again. I know, that's not cool of me to admit. But after you said you'd never want to date me, I didn't want to press you, even if your attitude had changed around me in Italy.”

“So what changed your mind?”

“I – well – I heard from Mum that you put Madame Courtenay in her place.”

“She told you?” Beth asked, aghast.

“Yeah. In detail. Lots of shouting, am I right?”

“God, that is so embarrassing,” she groaned.

Will hugged Beth snugly against his chest. “No, don't be like that! I thought it was amazing. If you'd completely hated me, you would have just told her as much, and that would have been an end to it. I realised that I couldn't just let you walk out of my life at that point.”

“You know, you said in your letter that you'd never see me again. I've read it so many times since Christmas, it's ingrained in my memory.”

“You still have it?”

“Well, yeah...”

“Chuck it out,” he said. “The person who wrote that wasn't me. I don't want to think of the way I spoke to you that night. I was cruel, and rude, and it was all out of misplaced pride. I thought way too much of myself.”
“Yeah, well so did I, to a point,” Beth admitted. “But, like I said to Madame, we're equal.”

“Not yet. But I'll work hard to match up to you,” he said.

Charmer.

“Did you convince Charlie's parents to let him come back here?” Beth asked when she spied him dancing with Jenny not so far from them.

“I might have had my mother put in a good word. He looks happy.”

“So does she. Thank you,” Beth said.

“Would you stop thanking me? I was just putting something right. I had no business getting between them in the first place. I saw in Italy just how strong your friend could be, and how much Charlie had missed her company. In fact, I saw just how wrong I'd been about all of your classmates. You really do love each other, don't you?”

“Friends take care of each other. No matter what.”

“Sounds like fun.”

“Well, that includes you, too. There's no getting out of it, now. If you love me, you have to put up with the girls as well.”

“I think I can cope with that. Just about.”

“There's one last thing...”

“What?”

“You haven't kissed me, yet. What kind of guy just turns up at prom, dances, and doesn't -!”

Will had no objection to interrupting Beth in order to grant her wish. She pushed her fingers through his hair, and smiled against his lips as they embraced. It had definitely been worth the wait. Beth was resolved to make up for lost time as soon as they were alone.

The other dancers erupted in applause. Startled, Will and Beth ended the kiss abruptly. Beth blushed profusely and sought out Jenny in the crowd in the hopes of some protection from the taunting. She soon discovered that she was the ringleader when Jenny called, “About time!”

“Finally, you loser!” Georgia joined in, making no attempt to hide the way she was leaning into Wyatt's side. He looked quite pleased with himself.

Rather than give the pair some space to regain their composure, Chrissy, Lisa, and Meg crashed into them. Will wasn't going to escape being hugged in joy by Beth's friends. They shrieked and squealed with delight, reminding Beth of how she had denied liking Will right up until the last moment. Jenny finally took pity on them and shooed the others away, encouraging everyone to return to dancing.

Will didn't need to be told twice. He twirled Beth around and caught her when she staggered back against him.

“Go out with me?” he asked.

“Yes.”
Epilogue

“A woman may take liberties with her husband.”

The end of the school year wasn’t really the end for Beth and her friends. People often said that when one door closed, another one opened. For Beth, this was very much the case.

For a long time, Beth and Jenny had speculated as to the nature of the relationship between their parents. They were oddly close for two people whose only connection was their children. It soon became clear to the girls that they’d missed a great deal when they’d been away at school. So much so, in fact, that a wedding was soon upon them.

While the girls were overjoyed by the prospect of finally becoming real sisters, they did air their concerns about it being rushed and too soon. Greg revealed that he often commuted to meet with Madeleine while the girls were at school, and she spoke candidly about excusing herself from meetings to call him whenever they were apart. Most teenagers would be appalled to hear their parents were acting like - well - teenagers. Jenny and Beth took the opportunity to make a mockery of their mutual affection, but were happy to see that they were finally resolved to make things official.

The wedding was meant to be a small event with close friends and family. After Greg had asked to have the ceremony in the grounds at Pembroke Hall, Mrs. Davies had offered a few suggestions and things had gradually spiralled out of control. Beth was roped in as a bridesmaid and didn’t once complain about trying on dress after dress for the sake of looking perfect on their big day. After Madeleine had told her that she could call her ‘Mum’, Beth felt she could never refuse the woman anything ever again.

The ultimate bonus (as far as Beth could see) to having the wedding nearby, was that Will and Amanda had decided to return for it. Greg couldn’t in good conscience use their home for the event and then refuse them an invitation. Besides, he saw how happy it made Beth to know that her boyfriend would be nearby. Not wanting to leave her out, they’d also asked Charlie to join them. Of course that meant Chantelle would be in attendance. Hardly a happy notion, but the girl seemed to be far more accepting of Beth since her father had decided to marry into money.

It was in mid-August that the day finally arrived. Jenny and Beth stood patiently at the bottom of the sweeping staircase waiting for the bride. Their sheer silver dresses with bejewelled straps were elegantly simple, accessorised with a single silver bracelet on their wrists which had been a gift to thank them for all of their help. While Madeleine had fawned over how wonderful the pair looked when trying on the dresses, the girls knew they were nothing to the beautiful bride who carefully made her way down to join them.

Her blonde hair had been swept up into romantic curls, and her long train hemmed with silver to match the bridesmaid’s dresses. The bejewelled bodice had been painstakingly hand decorated,
but the adornments were used sparingly, keeping in tune with Madeleine’s effortless beauty. “Ready?” she asked, breathless with excitement.

One advantage of walking down the aisle behind the bride, was that Beth and Jenny got to see the way Greg lit up with joy when he saw her. Everyone else was looking at the bride, but the girls had the perfect view of the groom, and the two people who were turning them into a family at last. Beth reached for Jenny’s hand, and the pair all but floated down the aisle after their mother. Throughout the ceremony they stood beside one another, watching the pair read their vows and waiting for the perfect moment when they’d be announced man and wife.

There were tears, cheers, and a standing ovation for the happy couple when they left the ceremony with the bridesmaids in tow. Beth winked at Will when she saw him standing with their friends, hoping that they could share a dance or two when they began the reception. All they had to do was get through a hundred photographs before they could.

Although refined, the party was wonderfully clean and simple. Fresh white tablecloths and white folding chairs around circular tables. White china place settings, modest floral arrangements, and hand written place cards. The meal was over in a flash, the speeches applauded and raucously laughed at in the right places. Beth and Jenny made their toasts to their parents and were hugged tightly, so happy to have the parent they’d long missed in their lives.

Beth let Jenny have the first father-daughter dance. She’d enjoyed a life of them, and felt it was only right that Jenny should have that honour. Beth was happy to share a waltz with her mother and tried desperately to avoid standing on her dress, conscious of every tiny step she made. She was soon caught by Eric who span her away, leaving Madeleine to be escorted by one of her friends. Other couples joined in on the dancefloor, and Georgia led a nervous Wyatt out to slow dance with him, their relationship vastly improved over the previous weeks.

“You know,” Eric began tentatively as they danced. “There’s a tradition.”

“Yeah?” Beth asked. “What’s that?”

“Best man gets to snog a bridesmaid.”

“Too bad we both have boyfriends, right?” Beth asked, hoping to remind him that both Will and Charlie would be glad to keep an eye on him.

“Tell me about it.”

Another guest tapped Eric on the shoulder. The pair stopped and Beth peered around him to see Freddie. “Oh my God, you made it!”

“Didn’t think I’d miss this, did you? Mind if I cut in?” he asked.

“No at all,” Eric lied, stepping aside to allow them to continue. He wasn’t upset about the interruption for long. Eric soon located Amanda and seemed determined to do whatever he could to make her forget all about her history with Gideon. She looked to be inclined to allow him to try, and Beth was happy that she wasn’t being left out.

“I heard that you were seeing Will,” Freddie said conversationally as they danced in a small, slow circle. “And that if I flirt with you, he might give me a black eye.”

“Still upset about the kiss, huh?” Beth asked.

“Looks like it.”
“Well, he doesn’t have anything to worry about, right?”

“Not at all. In fact, I quite like the look of your friend over there...”

Beth turned her head to see who Freddie had his sights set on. She was surprised to find Meg was the object of his affections. “She’s quiet, and timid, and if you terrify her I won’t ever forgive you,” Beth warned.

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Don’t hurt her, Freddie. She’s not just someone you can have fun with.”

Freddie leaned in to whisper against Beth’s ear, “I’ll tell you a secret about guys like me >em>mon petit. When we find the right girl, we would sooner die than hurt her.” He kissed Beth’s cheek in a brotherly fashion and left her to introduce himself to Meg. The girl blushed so brightly when Freddie kissed her hand that Beth was worried she might get light headed and pass out. She suspected that if Meg swooned, Freddie would be quick to catch her.

Finished with her dance, Jenny approached Beth. She made a noise of utter delight upon seeing Meg and Freddie. “That’s so cute!”

“I know,” Beth hugged her arm. “How perfect would they be together? He would make her so much more confident!”

“Didn’t you kiss him at Christmas?”

“Yeah, and she is going to love that. I mean, if it happens. He was really good.”

“Good at what?” Will asked.


“Jenny, do you mind if I borrow my girlfriend? Charlie's looking for you. He's worried that Eric might steal you away, I think.”

“Really? He's so sweet,” she said. Before she left, she pecked Beth’s cheek and promised, “I'll see you in a little bit, okay?”

“Okay, have fun!”

“So, what is my cousin good at?” Will asked.

“I told you, I just meant dancing! Anyway, how do I look?”

“Gorgeous, as always,” he said. “I still want to know -”

“If I kiss you, will you shut up?”

“I'll think about it.”

“Then I’m not going to do it,” Beth teased.

They were interrupted by a crash. Someone had tripped and knocked over a waiter carrying glasses of champagne. Chrissy apologised profusely to him, flushed with embarrassment. He assured her that it was no big deal at all. While she was trying to brush the spilt drink from her
dress, a young man came to her aid. Henry dabbed gently at a splash on her cheek. Their eyes met, and Beth had the feeling another couple had been made. He was a little older than her, but not so much that it wouldn't work. Besides, Henry had seemed like a good guy to Beth. She hoped that his employers didn't mind him dancing on the job, because Chrissy quickly dragged him off to do just that.

“What is it about weddings?” Will asked.

“Huh?”

“Everyone gets it into their heads that they should pair off.”

“Romantic setting?” Beth asked, noticing that Lisa was happily chatting to Lewis. “Or maybe it's just a good place for people to meet.”

“I'd better not see my sister kissing your friend. I'll need therapy for the rest of my life.”

“Don't be so grouchy,” Beth chided. “It's sweet. Look at them! I haven't seen Lisa look that genuinely happy in forever, and Meg is actually talking to someone besides us.”

“Okay, it's cool. Just don't let them know I said that.”

“Yeah, your life would be so over if they knew you had feelings,” she joked.

“I know!” he agreed sarcastically. “I meant to ask, where are you going to live?”

“Uh, above the garage,” she said. “At my house.”

“Is there room?”

“Room for what?” Jenny had returned with Charlie. “We noticed you weren't dancing. We were going to tell you to stop being miserable. Are you actually talking about something important?”

“You guys are coming to live at our house, right?” Beth asked. “I know your place is bigger, but we have a beach.”

“I wondered when you girls were going to start thinking about that,” Greg said, his arm around Madeleine's waist possessively.

She smiled at him, “Can I tell them, now?”

“Go ahead.”

“Mrs. Davies – uh – Harriet,” he said, realising that Will’s mother was within earshot and wouldn’t approve him using such a formal address. “Has kindly agreed to sell us this place.”

“What, here?” Beth asked. “This house?”

“Seriously?” Jenny asked. “We can live near the beach?”

“I know it's smaller than our current house. But there's only the two of us in that place, and I thought it might be time to downsize. This way, Greg can still go to work, and we can all live together.”

“And we're going to get a smaller house in the town,” Mrs. Davies added. “Just in case you kids were worried that we were going to stop visiting this part of the country.”
“Is that okay, girls?” Greg asked.

Jenny hugged him tightly, “Thank you!”

“Well, your sister won't have space for a piano in our current place, anyway.”

“What would I need a piano for?” Beth asked.

“Don't be mad,” he said warily. “But there was a phone call for you. I took a message. You got into the Royal Academy of Music. I thought you might need a place to practice when you came home to visit.”

“I – I what?! I got in?! Oh my God!” Beth hugged Will so suddenly that he almost fell over. He wrapped his arms around her, laughing as she shrieked completely unintelligible words in her excitement.

“I guess that means we're going to see a lot of each other,” he said. “I got into the London Business School. So you can't get bored of me, and find someone else.”

“You're joking!”

“No, you really can't find someone else.”

“You know that's not what I meant,” Beth laughed. “Oh my God, this is so cool!”

Jenny pouted, “Now I wish I was in London.”

“You're going to Oxford, it's not that far away. If I had brains like yours, I'd totally go there. Anyway, we'll see each other at weekends.”

“Maybe we should have waited to buy a house,” Greg said. “You girls are only going to enjoy it for a few weeks.”

“Or we should have a few more kids,” Madeleine suggested.

“Oh, ew,” Beth covered her eyes. “I didn't need that image.”

“Me either,” Jenny professed. “Charlie, let's go dance, okay?”

“Yeah, Will, I have to get away from them before I hear something I’ll need therapy to forget,” Beth complained.

They left the happy couple to rejoin their friends, all of them coming together to talk excitedly about what the future might hold for them. For once, Beth didn’t feel afraid of what was waiting around the corner. It was all at once intimidating and exciting. Knowing that she wasn’t going to experience it all alone made her confident she could face any challenge coming her way. She’d realised - with a lot of help from her friends in the past few weeks - that sharing her experiences with them was far better than trying to protect herself and spare herself any pain she imagined she might feel should the worst happen. Hoping for the best was a much better use of her time, and she hoped for the best life she could have with all of them in her company.

“What are you smiling about?” Will asked.

“I was just thinking that… I'm proud of us.”

“Us?”
“All of us. We made it, and we're going to keep on making it.”

“Isn't pride a fault?”

“I guess it is, if it makes people prejudiced. But being proud of good things can't be a fault.”

“Does that make me one of the good things?” he asked.

“No,” she said. “You're one of the best things. After my sister, obviously.”

“Anything I can do to get to the top of the list?”

“How about that kiss?” Beth suggested.

Snogging her boyfriend in the middle of her father’s wedding probably wasn’t the best thing for Beth to do, but life was too short to worry about things like that. They said that young love didn’t last forever. Beth supposed that much might be true. Then again, as Will held her and she felt the touch of his lips on hers, she felt as if she’d never love anyone so much ever again in all her life. She wanted to be deeply and passionately in love with him every day that she could and not fret about when it might be over. It had taken Beth a long time to realise that she should take each day as it came, see the positive, and be proud of her own achievements instead of trying to shy away from them. Now that her eyes were open to her potential and all of life’s possibilities, she never wanted to close them again.

She was proud of her friends.

She was proud of her sister.

She was proud of her parents.

She was proud of her boyfriend.

And, most of all, she was proud of herself.

So, pride really was a kind of virtue after all, and she would never let it lead her to be prejudiced of anyone ever again.

Chapter End Notes

And that's the end!

I want to thank you all for reading the story so far. It's nice to put a book out there for free, especially when it's enjoyed by fellow Pride and Prejudice fans.

The town featured in this book - as well as some of the cast of characters - are taken from my story Sea Foam which is all about how Lana and Zeke of the cafe met and fell in love. It's currently undergoing rewrites but the first edition is available on Amazon kindle.

But really, thank you all so much for your patience (I know I'm slow to update), kudos, and comments. I hope you enjoyed the ending!

~Natalie
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!