EVEN YOUR BONES WOULD DO

CLAIRE SCHULTZ

Daphne Press

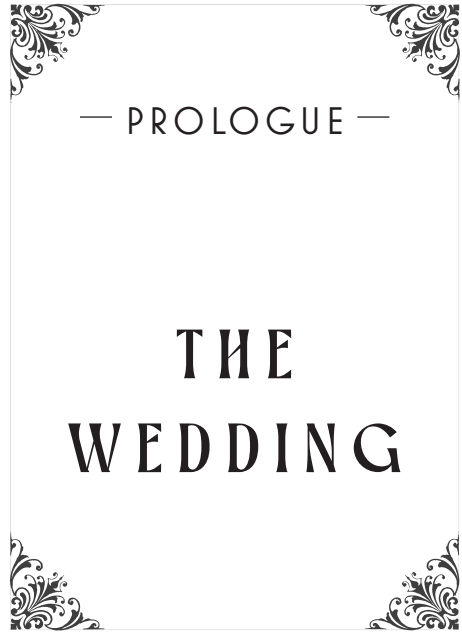
That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,
Looking as if she were alive. I call
That piece a wonder, now; Fra Pandolf's hands
Worked busily a day, and there she stands.
Will't please you sit and look at her?

——ROBERT BROWNING, "MY LAST DUCHESS"

She herself is a haunted house. She does not possess herself; her ancestors sometimes come and peer out of the windows of her eyes and that is very frightening. She has the mysterious solitude of ambiguous states; she hovers in a no-man's land between life and death. . . .

(One kiss, however, and only one, woke up the Sleeping Beauty in the Wood.)

——ANGELA CARTER, "THE LADY OF THE HOUSE OF LOVE"



PROLOGUE

THE WEDDING

They will all say the wedding was beautiful. Of course they will. They always say the wedding's beautiful when the bride is young and the church is heavy with the weight of flowers. A wedding has to be a special kind of extremely unpleasant for them not to call it beautiful, and even then they'll end up saying something like *how marvelous* or *very nice* or *the food was wonderful and we're so happy for you both.*

She's pretty, this last one. Her face is round and her hair is curly and she has eyes like springtime. She's not as pretty as the fourth, but no one is. The fourth one was an anomaly; we thought she'd be the last because there was no way he'd find another with a face that symmetrical and a chest that good. This last one is softer. Gentler. A kind, open lovely—not quite beauty, but something pleasantly close to it. When someone says she's a teacher, it makes sense. She'd look much more at home in a sensible cardigan than in this behemoth of silk and tulle. It was made for her, but it fits her poorly; the size is right, and it sits well on her shoulders, but she looks very small and lost and pale in it. The thick rope of diamonds at her throat strangles her, swallows her. Tomorrow, there will be a chain of bruises where the stones crush her today.

Her ring is a thing of beauty, or maybe it's hideous. It's a feat of craftsmanship, but it's garish, gaudy. He's never been one for subtlety.

You can see it from the far back row of the church—a diamond the size of a large beetle, a halo of other stones: ruby, sapphire, peridot, bloodstone. None of the colors match, and the sheen is uneven. It's beautiful only in the way that terrible things made of beautiful parts are beautiful.

It's unbearably heavy; the prongs of the setting dig into your finger until they bruise. It's nearly impossible to do anything with that ring on. I had to take it off just to comfortably hold a pen.

He gave it to me first. He gave it to all of us. I don't know if he's had it resized to fit each of us or if we've all had the same-size hands. Maybe that's been his criteria every time. We were that story of the servant girl who married a prince, only it wasn't a shoe he was looking to fit. It was a wedding band.

Maybe that horrible, hideous thing fit itself to us. Maybe it fit me, and only me, and every one of us since has worn it anyway, no matter the size. A small price to pay for his promises.

But while they'll talk about the ring in hushed tones of awe and admiration, they won't linger on it. They'll instead say how lucky she is, how blessed, how fortunate to have been chosen. *Can you imagine? She's just saved that poor family from ruin. They're not a laughingstock anymore.* They never were a laughingstock, actually; they just had a bad spell, a string of bad luck, but everyone always respected them, believed in them. Their daughter is so lucky; they're all so lucky. Say, isn't their son still looking to marry?

They won't notice that the bride has disappeared before the reception. They will stand around gorging themselves on cake and oysters and champagne, and not one of them will say a word about the fact that she's not with her husband, not mingling among the drunken revelers. They're at a party! And isn't this the best party, the most marvelous party, the most wonderful party? Have you ever seen a waterfall of red wine before? Have you tried the caviar? Have you *seen* the caviar? The groom must be even wealthier than they'd realized; what a lucky little girl.

They don't care what happens to her. Why should they? They didn't care what happened to me.



— PART ONE —

THE SPINSTER

CHAPTER ONE

APRIL

1936

JANUARY: FOUR DAYS BEFORE

He came on a Sunday. The holiest of days for the holiest of men, my mother said. She always said that good things happened on Sundays; if something happened on a Sunday—an offer, an invitation, an unexpected bill or visitor—then it was good and right and preordained. Maybe he knew this. She'd always been loud about her beliefs. Maybe he didn't.

The day he came, the sun hung clear and bright in the midwinter sky, reflecting off the frozen-still gleam of the Merrimack, its deep waters nearly solid in the January cold. We had just come home from church, collars starched and hair combed (mine, of course, escaped from its braid at any opportunity), to find him in the foyer. His hand gripped the doorframe, and he tapped an ivory cane against the chipped marble. He was out of place here. Everything he wore was shiny, well fitted, in perfect condition, with no signs of frayed hems or repair. That was unusual for Carter these days. The whole town was crusted in a thin layer of grime, all the colors dulled in the Massachusetts winter frosts. What we called our Sunday best wouldn't have been anywhere near our best three years ago, four, five. I had mended my own skirt a half dozen times, my stitches painstaking but uneven along its seams.

Here is the story our guest couldn't know, because my parents wouldn't want me to tell it:

My father was a banker. He was good at it, I think. He'd always had money to spare. A grand old house, closets full of expensive jackets, a housekeeper, a chef. He had a cellar stocked with wine, and though he filled it every month, it was never full.

My mother was a farmer's daughter. She knew how to shear and slaughter a sheep, and she rode horses full straddle down the trails at the edges of our property every sunrise. My father won her over with tender eyes and beautiful things. They weren't happy, exactly, but they weren't unhappy, either. They had four children and the prettiest gardens this side of Providence, and no significant problems to speak of. Stable, stagnant.

And then the money was gone.

It was a bad investment, a freak accident, who could have seen the crash coming, it should have been safe. It had worked a hundred times before; no one would have possibly predicted this one. (It was a grift, a gamble, a coup, an act of God, anything but my father's fault.)

There was an old fairy story that started this way: A wealthy merchant lost all his fortune at sea, and he and his six sons and six daughters were forced to leave their mansion for a little cottage in the forest. There, his youngest daughter, the most beautiful, the kindest, the softest, the most fairy-tale heroine of the bunch, tended to a rose garden until the grass was thick with petals and the house's walls dripped with color and vines. We'd had a book of the story in the library when I was young, before my father lost his fortune and (although we didn't move into a cottage in a forest) we sold anything we could of value. I'd read it to pieces, until the leather of the cover was worn soft and the pages frayed, and it still went out with the rest when the crash hollowed our shelves. I didn't entirely remember how it ended; it was much too long. But I was pretty sure it went something like this:

The father got a letter one day telling him the ships had been recovered. He could get it all back; they could move back to the city; they could be rich and happy again. All he had to do was go to Paris. He promised to return with a new life and gifts for his children: laces and silks for his daughters, fine boots for his sons. But what his youngest

wanted, all she asked for, was a red rose. Her garden was lousy and lush with pinks and yellows, but there wasn't a single spot of red. Every seedling she'd tried to plant had wilted and died; the soil out in the forest wanted nothing to do with the crimsons and scarlets she remembered.

There was no money waiting in Paris. The ships' hulls had washed up off the coast of Brittany, but they were empty, and you weren't going to get much for some broken pieces of rotting wood. The father would return home without the lace and silk and boots, and as he left the city, he nearly forgot his youngest's single red rose.

As luck would have it, his carriage stranded him in a snowstorm outside a crumbling château inhabited by a horrible beast of a man. I didn't remember whether he had horns and a snout and a lion's mane, or if he just looked like the worst a man had to offer, hunched and snarling, with overlong clawlike nails and mossy yellow teeth. He might have been either. He might have been both. It was a long time ago.

But he was kind to the merchant and gave him a warm dinner and sheltered him and his horse from the cold until the storm passed. Everything would have been fine if the father hadn't seen a garden of red roses on the way down the front drive, their petals sparkling with frost but otherwise bright as midsummer. He remembered his daughter's wish, he remembered his promise, and he plucked a single rose. A thorn pricked his thumb as he did, and a bead of blood fell down the stem, landing against the snow.

And that was that.

The merchant would trade his daughter to the beast in exchange for the flower and a tidy fortune, and she would live in that dark, crumbling, snowed-in château for the rest of her life.

There was a version of the story where she learned that the beast wasn't as bad as all that, he was quite a nice man, really; he just needed to learn to love and take better care of himself. There was a version where her kiss, or maybe it was her declaration of love, or maybe it was her agreeing to marry him, turned him into a very handsome young prince, and they lived happily ever after.

And here he stood, shining and new and out of place. Like he had stepped in from out of time. Old-fashioned and unworn. He was tall, taller even than I was, and his hat nearly reached the ceiling, just where the plaster had begun to crumble away.

I was fascinated by his shoes. I'd never seen a pair so shiny and clean, without even the memory of a scuff. The buckles were perfect unscratched silver, worked into precise filigree. I couldn't make out the pattern too well, but it looked scaly, serpentine.

No one in Carter wore shoes like those.

The man who wore them wasn't beautiful, exactly. He wasn't handsome in any conventional way. Strong faced, with heavy eyebrows and deep, dark eyes. A sturdy nose, broad shoulders, thick wavy hair. His face would have been striking enough, but it was his beard that was most arresting. It was full and well-groomed, a black so dark it shimmered the blue green of raven feathers. I couldn't say how old he was—there was something youthful to the set of his eyebrows, but beards had a way of making any man look older.

When my brother Jacob had grown one last year, a patchy mess of adolescent scruff, he'd aged a year and a half. The girls in town started to stare at him a little longer than necessary, a little too openly. It had, of course, gone right to his head. Our visitor's beard was much better than my brother's, and he wore it with more confidence. It was a permanent part of him, not just something new and exciting he was trying out.

"We weren't expecting you," my father said.

"That's all right," our visitor said. His voice was a low, deep growl, more echoes of stone than man. It was a voice very used to getting its way. "I tried to call ahead, but I couldn't get a hold of anyone to leave a message."

There was no way left to take a message. We'd long since let our housekeeper go, and my mother had elected to disconnect our telephone last month rather than juggle one more expense.

I opened my mouth to tell him this, but my mother swatted at my arm. *Don't tell this man who we really are.*

"It's fine," she said. "What can we do for you?"

He raised an eyebrow.

They took our visitor into the parlor. It was the only room my parents let guests in, and they weren't about to make him wait on the chipped tiles of our foyer. He sat on a love seat, looking very large and dark against its pale satin—I think it had once been blue, but it had long since faded to an indeterminate shade of off-gray. It was a perfectly nice room, by most standards. Not huge, not grand, but respectable. Clean. The marble mantlepiece gleamed, and a tidy fire blazed in the hearth. On the mantel there was a bunch of flowers in a crystal vase, their petals arranged to hide the chip on its top; a set of tarnished silver candlesticks with no candles inside; and a ceramic figurine of a lamb my grandmother had given my mother as a wedding gift. Above them hung a pastoral landscape my mother had painted years and years ago: our gardens, before we couldn't afford to maintain them anymore, when the hedge maze was still clipped clean and the trellises bloomed with lavender. She wasn't a particularly good artist, but no one had complained.

My father once told me he'd bought our home for its ceilings. They were tall, unusually so—as was my mother—and they had extensive ornamental plasterwork, scrolls and flowers and little cherubs that gaped down at you from above the stairs. If nothing else, the house had always been bright.

Our visitor fit in our room all wrong. The high ceiling hung too close to him, its decorative roses recoiling from his head. It was all thick and tight and airless, and I found myself breathing shallowly. My parents didn't seem to notice, and if they did, they didn't mind.

Instead, my mother brought him tea and the last of the scones Isobel had made, and then she and my father sat in the spindly armchairs

across from him. She gestured toward the space beside him on the love seat, which, until that moment, I hadn't realized was empty. The love seat had curled itself around him, or maybe he expanded to fit it, and although there was room for two on the cushions, it was only there begrudgingly. I shook my head and stood against the doorframe.

"*April*," hissed my mother. "*Sit. Down.*"

"No," I said. "Thank you. That's all right. I'm good standing."

My father cleared his throat, which he did when he was irritated but didn't want to make a scene, and my mother sighed and turned back to our guest.

As I had expected, my father spoke first. "What's this about?" He'd clutched his hands together and rested them on his knees as he leaned forward.

Our visitor smiled, and I felt my skin unfurling, my teeth grinding against each other. It was a cold, horrible smile and a cold, horrible feeling. It was chalk between my fingers, scratching across the blackboard at the front of my classroom.

Reaching into his coat pocket, he pulled out a sharp white business card, which he handed to my mother, arm lazily outstretched. "My name is Julius Thackeray," he said. He was an art dealer with galleries in the city. He traveled for work and didn't come this way often, but he had an estate just through the hills on the other side of town. He was a patron of the arts, he said. He wanted to support young, upcoming talent. He prided himself on his discoveries—some of the most exciting new voices on the East Coast, he said. "And," he said, "I think so highly of your daughter's work."

I blinked. "Excuse me?"

"Your stories," he said. "The one with the daffodils was a specific piece of genius."

My mother frowned. "You must be mistaken," she said. "April's not a writer."

I tried to ignore the pointed way she said it, the emphasis on the *not*. "I'm just a teacher."

Thackeray's mouth twitched with what might have been a half smile. His beard rippled with the effort. "No, you're not. Not 'just.' "

I was a teacher, that was true. But in my spare time, I'd sold a handful of short stories to a local newspaper for a few pennies apiece. They'd all been published under pseudonyms, and I'd had the checks mailed to the school, so there shouldn't have been any way to trace them back to me. It wasn't that my parents would have forbidden me from writing, exactly—they'd seen the notebooks full of childhood writings stacked high under my bed, even if I'd never let them read them—it was that they would have told me to use my time on something better than fairy stories. My parents had very clear ideas for our lives and the faces we showed to society. Pulpy fantasy writer wasn't on the list of lives they'd approved for me.

As I was the eldest child, their expectations hung heaviest around my neck, and I had carried them more or less willingly my entire life. The more time they spent fussing over my marriage prospects, my career, my education, my posture, my table manners, the less they had to smother my younger siblings. Jacob and Eloise didn't need my protection—Jacob, with his golden hair and golden smile, had charmed every well-off family this side of Boston, and could take his pick whenever he was ready; quiet Eloise had married Harry Wilson and his father's savings account last spring, and seemed perfectly happy about it. Isobel, though—she had just turned seventeen and was the smartest person I'd ever met. Where I buried myself in fairy tales and fiction, she looked to the sky. She was a scientist, an astronomer, a mad little genius who tied her hair up with spare bits of string and fell out of trees trying to chart constellations. If my parents didn't know what to do with me, they were completely lost with Bel. Even if I hadn't been able to finish college, even if I was pushing twenty-five and unmarried, they knew how to make sense of me, and I knew how to appease them. I'd had to hope that would be enough.

My mother shook her head. "April, what's he talking about?"

"I don't know."

But I did. This was about the daffodils, about a short story I'd published pseudonymously in a Boston newspaper a few months before. I just didn't know how he knew it was mine.

We didn't have the kind of money that would allow me to be a writer, and so I hadn't become one. But that didn't mean I'd had to give up hoping. It didn't mean I'd had to give up writing, even if I'd done it in secret. In spare moments, on scraps of paper, for barely enough money to cover a cup of burnt coffee at the one restaurant in Carter. And I published it all without my name attached to spare my father the shame.

"Your daughter," said Thackeray, "is a brilliant writer. She sees things the rest of us can only imagine. I believe she has something truly special. I want to help her realize it."

My father was turning purple. My mother's mouth had flattened into a paper cut–thin line.

If Thackeray noticed their response, he didn't care. He just carried along, as if he hadn't so much as heard me. "She's new, but she has potential. With the right resources and support, I think she could be exceptional. I'd like to provide her with that. Workspace, the best resources money can buy. One day, very soon, she will be very, very famous."

"Are you looking to sponsor her?" my father asked. He clenched his hands tighter together, his knuckles turning white with tension.

"I would like to marry her, if you'll have me."

It was worryingly easy how quickly my parents agreed to marry me off to a man they'd met once. But he had a house and land and connections and money. So much money.

It was for my own good, they said. I'd be so much happier, they said. The town would stop staring at me, they said. If I wanted children, now was the time, they said. It didn't matter that I didn't want children, that I'd never shown interest in any of the other members of my graduating class, or that I'd turned down my childhood friend Nick enough times

to lose count. My mother wanted grandchildren, and she was going to get them.

My parents said it was for all those reasons, and they may have played a part, but it was really for the money. They never said it out loud, but they wouldn't deny it if you asked. Fortunately, no one ever asked.

We were very good at convincing the prying eyes of Carter that we were just fine. We still had our house, our names, our reputation, but the beautiful dresses were threadbare; our cabinets had only a few sets of chipped, faded dishes instead of wedding china; the paintings that once hung in our long hallways were gone, nothing left but the faded patches on the walls where they'd been. My parents put on a very good show and pretended that nothing had happened, and we weren't—as my mother liked to wail at night—ruined. Ours was a temporary setback, nothing more. Some sleight of hand and strategic marriages and drawing the curtains shut so no one could see the empty rooms, and we'd be just fine.

Yes, my parents would say. We would be just fine.

The ending of that fairy story, the one with the youngest daughter and her roses, never mattered much to me. It was the beginning I remembered. As a general rule, I thought that you should try to avoid the mistakes people made in fairy stories.

Unfortunately, my father had never read that tale.

Bravely pushing past the discovery that I'd been keeping a writing career (if you could call it that) a secret from him, my father agreed almost immediately. Thackeray had a firm handshake and a trustworthy mouth, he said. A good man. I wasn't about to do better.

My mother hesitated only a minute longer. "If it's what's best for April," she said.

Thackeray nodded. "Oh, of course. I promise I'll take care of your daughter," he said. "She'll come to no harm on my watch. I'll treat her

well, provide her with the life she deserves." He looked past my mother's chair and caught my eye. That knowing half smile tugged at his mouth again, crinkling the corners of his eyes. He was in on a secret, and he wanted me in on it, too.

"Wait," I said, before my father could hold out his hand and shake on it, brokering my life away like a business arrangement. "Mr. Thackeray. How did you know?"

"How did I know what?"

"My stories. How did you know that they were mine?"

He winked. "I have my ways."

"Please elaborate."

He ran a hand over his beard. "The editor is an old friend of mine," he said. "He was good for a bit of light detective work. There aren't very many teachers at the Carter school, you know."

"It's a small town."

He nodded. "So I can see."

He'd read my work. And he must have loved it so much that he'd come to find out who'd written it. Despite my better judgment, something deep in my chest fluttered at the thought. I wasn't immune to bald-faced flattery.

I tugged at a curl that had come loose from my braid and studied him. Beyond that terrible beard, he wasn't so bad looking. His forehead was unlined; he was younger than I had first thought. And I liked the way his eyes held secrets just for me.

"April," said my father, "let's get on with it. Dinner is getting cold."

Dinner was not getting cold. I hadn't even begun to prepare it.

"Well?" Thackeray arched an eyebrow and locked eyes with mine. Then I realized: He was asking for my consent.

"I—" I started, and my mother pointedly cleared her throat. "I need to think about it."

My father turned four shades of purple, but Thackeray nodded. "Very well," he said. "You can have three days."

CHAPTER TWO

APRIL

1936

JANUARY: THREE DAYS BEFORE

I'd laughed when Thackeray told me I had three days to decide whether to marry myself off to a stranger. It was an inconvenient amount of time, a fairy-tale amount of time: not long enough to think logically, get to know him, fake my death, and run away to Chicago, but long enough that I had time to stew and wallow in my own indecision. Instead of getting it over with before I could think about what I was doing, I had exactly the right amount of time to regret every choice that had led me here. He'd probably done this on purpose. He was clever.

I'd laughed then, and I'd taken some sort of pleasure in the look of shock and horror on my parents' faces, and the strange knowing smirk our visitor had given me in exchange, but I wasn't laughing now. What had felt so funny in the moment wasn't funny in the stone-cold daylight. Now it was just an impossible choice.

Thackeray left in a beautiful car, driven by a man in a well-pressed suit. I watched them pull down our drive until they were nothing but a pinpoint on the horizon, and then, wordlessly, I slipped away. I abandoned my dinner duties and retreated to my top-floor bedroom, finding myself a blissful, if rare, sliver of the day uninterrupted. No family, no strangers, no looming fairy-tale bargains. Just silence and the howling wind. When no one had come to bother me, I'd even let myself

fall asleep and dream of a world without a strange man's proposal looming over me. In the quiet, I managed to let myself sleep not just through the night but well into the next day.

It was a beautiful, fragile bubble of time. Far too easily burst.

Isobel barged into my room with a "get dressed" in place of a knock. She was wearing her warmest coat, a hand-me-down I had long since outgrown that fit her tiny, birdlike frame perfectly. Her short red hair peeked out from underneath a woolen cap Eloise had given her for Christmas last year. I was still wearing my pajamas, my blanket wrapped around me, my hair a mess of untamed curls.

"Good morning to you, too," I said.

"It's two in the afternoon."

"Good two in the afternoon to you, then."

Isobel sighed, but the dimple at the corner of her mouth twitched. "Get dressed," she said again. "Get up, come on, let's go."

"All right," I started, because Isobel clearly had a plan, and there was no point getting between Isobel and one of her plans. "Just give me a second. Let me finish this chapter."

But before I knew what was happening, she had taken the book out of my hands and pulled the blanket off my shoulders, tossing the both of them back onto my bed. She seemed about thirty seconds from throwing open my wardrobe and dressing me herself.

"Easy, Bel, where's the fire?"

She did, in fact, open my wardrobe, and started rifling through my clothes—a few dour skirts, a handful of identical cardigans, a single party dress nearly ten years out of date—so I got up and shut the closet door before she turned me into a doll.

"Hurry up," she said. "We're going sledding. I want to get out there while the snow's still fresh, before it gets all worn out or melty. Jacob said you had five minutes or he was leaving without you."

Sledding. We hadn't been sledding in years. Not since before Eloise had gotten married, since before I'd gone off to my short, ill-fated stint at college. I'd thought we'd sold our sled with the rest of our things,

but maybe it had been gathering dust all these years in the empty garden shed.

"*Jacob*'s coming?" Even though he was three years younger than me, my brother had decided he was too old and too good for childish activities—like sledding—long before the rest of us. I'd figured he'd rather be caught dead than seen enjoying himself on a snow day.

Bel tapped at an invisible watch. "Not if you don't hurry up, he isn't."

"*Yes, all right.*" I grabbed her by the shoulders and pushed her out of the room. It was easy enough, since, even nearly fully grown, Isobel was about half my size. "I'll get dressed. Just give me a minute. And tell him not to get into any trouble until I get there."

The sled, as it turned out, had not been sold. As I'd guessed, it had been wasting away in the garden shed, playing host to a family of spiders and a colony of mice. Isobel had found it recently on one of her "research walks" of our grounds (these entailed looking for interesting insects or strange views of the night sky to sketch), and spent the past week meticulously repairing it to usable shape. She'd replaced the rope and buffed the wood to a shine, but the once-red runners were a rusted brown and the boards were chipped with age. At least it didn't have any visible spiders in it.

Despite Jacob's moaning and my trepidation—we were, after all, more or less grown adults, and the thing had been built for children fifteen years ago—the sled held well. Isobel did most of the actual riding; Jacob and I mostly stood at the top of the hill with a Thermos of watery hot chocolate and cheered her on. I shivered in my too-thin gloves, and Jacob, for his part, took exactly one turn and didn't complain (much) about falling off the sled and landing in a snowbank.

But Bel was having the time of her life. She was the youngest; she'd gotten the least of this kind of carefree childhood before everything collapsed. I'd done my best to shelter her and make sure she never had

to worry about what she could or couldn't have, what she could or couldn't be. But she was smart. Too smart. She'd known from the very start what was going on, and what it meant for us—for her. While Jacob had coped with women and alcohol, and Eloise had gotten married and gotten out as soon as she could, Bel had coped by never allowing herself to want more than we could give her.

It was a fairy-tale cliché: the beautiful, kind youngest sibling, perfect and sheltered, while her elders were defective in some way. Destined for great things but held back by her father's cruelty. Isobel was *brilliant*, and I don't toss that term around lightly. She had been a tiny little scientist from the moment she was born, her eyes giant and hungry to understand the world. She'd studied the stars for as long as she'd known there *were* stars. She had a secondhand telescope in her room, and she stayed up late into the night watching the sky—I'd caught her with lamplight under her bedroom door on many a school night. Every time I came in to tell her to go to sleep, I found her at her telescope, staring at the stars.

In a fair world, a just world, a world with a fairy-tale ending, Isobel would get to go to college. She'd get to study astronomy, she'd win every award in the book, she'd change the world as we knew it. But while I got to at least start a literature degree before the money ran out, Bel had never spoken seriously about school. I think she knew what our parents would say: We couldn't afford it, especially not for a girl who wanted to be a scientist.

I knew she thought about it; she used to ask me about my time at Wellesley: what the campus looked like, what I studied, what I wore, if I had many friends, if the library was as amazing as I'd imagined, if I wanted to go back, if I wished I'd finished. I never knew how to tell her that I'd barely been at school long enough to make an impression, but I missed it every day. It was another life for another person entirely. It wasn't me. The April Harker who got out of Carter and never came back put her name on her stories, wore beautiful shoes, didn't have a hollow in her chest where her hope had been. She was perfect. She didn't exist.

I couldn't let that happen to Isobel.

As she bounded up the hill, dragging the sled behind her, her nose and cheeks were flushed as red as her hair. She'd lost her hat somewhere en route, and I made a note to go find it before we went back inside.

"You want to take a turn?" she asked me.

I shook my head. "I'm good for now, thanks."

"Coward," said Jacob. I elbowed him in the side, which caused the open Thermos of hot chocolate to spill all over him. He swore. "Hey, uncalled for. Belly, push her down the hill."

"Absolutely not." I plucked the Thermos out of his hands and offered it to Isobel. It was mostly empty and sticky with hot chocolate, but at least it was warm. "Hot chocolate, kiddo?"

Bel accepted it and took a swig. It left a thick chocolate mustache above her upper lip, which both Jacob and I neglected to mention. "Thanks." She brushed the snow off the sled, set it perpendicular to the hill, sat down on it like a chair, and proceeded to drain the container. I could feel Jacob glowering beside me.

"Does that mean you're done for the day?" I asked. "It's cold out."

Bel shrugged. "I don't know. I could go again. I'm not ready to go back inside yet."

"Can't blame you," said Jacob, who, as it turned out, had spent the morning in a fight with our father about yet another girl he'd been caught with in town. I'd missed the screaming match only because my room was on the top floor, at the back of the house, as far from the parlor as you could get.

"Then we don't have to go back," I said. I wrapped my arms around myself, tucking my hands in to keep them warm. I could feel my lips turning blue.

"No, we can stay out here until we freeze while you tell us about every star in the sky in *excruciating* detail," said Jacob.

Bel shot him a look. "It's daytime."

"Your point?"

"How much do you actually want to know about the sun?"

Jacob stroked his beard as dramatically as he could, considering how incredibly unimpressive a beard it was. "I don't see the connection."

Isobel threw a snowball at him.

He threw one back, but she was already dodging, rolling onto her stomach and rotating her sled so it faced downhill. Jacob's snowball hit her square in the back as she was flying away. I heard her yelp as she barreled downhill.

"You can't run from me, Belly," called Jacob after her, so I scooped up a handful of snow, feeling the cold seep through my already freezing gloves, and lobbed it at his face. That earned me an "Et tu, April?" and a crudely shaped snowball landing splat against the side of my head.

Bel, lugging her sled behind her—and her hat back on her head, if crooked—returned the favor from halfway back up the hill (it wasn't a very large hill). She missed, but the shock of it was enough to throw Jacob off his game. I landed one more snowball to his gut before running to take cover behind Isobel, laughing at the absurdity of using my five-foot-nothing little sister as a human shield.

"Truce!" she yelled.

"You hear that, Jacob? Truce."

"No truces," said Jacob. "We die like men."

Bel straightened her hat and finally wiped the chocolate off her face with the back of her glove. "But I don't want to die today," she said. "Like a man or not."

I nodded in agreement and wrapped an arm around her. "You think Dad's mad at you now? Imagine the trouble you'll be in when you have to tell him you killed your sisters in a snowball fight to the death."

Jacob shrugged. "They'll still have Eloise."

"Elly doesn't count," said Bel. "She's never here."

"Yeah. She's too busy being married and keeping out of their hair." I watched Jacob as he realized what he was saying, his stare moving up from Isobel and fixing firmly on me. "Speaking of," he said, "are you going to say yes?"

Despite the freezing cold weather, my face flushed hot. "How do you know about that?"

"The walls have ears," he said.

"Mom brought it up at dinner," said Isobel.

Oh. Bel must have cooked, because I'd skipped dinner and gone right to bed.

"I don't know," I said.

My siblings stared at me. Jacob's face was impassive, but it was usually impassive. Bel's was wide open and full of—what, exactly? Hope? Fear? Determination? I wanted to give her the right answer, wanted to tell her what she was looking to hear, but I didn't know what she was looking for. Would she think I was turning down an offer of marriage to stay and protect her? Would she be upset if I left, like Eloise had, never to be seen again? Would she think I was getting out, leaving her behind?

Unless.

Thackeray had money. That was the one unarguable fact here: A very, very wealthy man had asked to marry me. And money solved problems.

We hadn't had the money to see me through college. We didn't have the money to send Isobel at all. Not right now, anyway. Not if things stayed the way they were, the three of us trapped in this house with nothing and no way out. Eloise was gone; Jacob would probably get chased out of town after being caught with the mayor's daughter one of these days. There was still a chance for Bel.

And with the luxuries of time, money, and space, and that strange niggling feeling in my stomach that this might all be an *adventure*—things I did not have in Carter—there might even be a chance for me, too.

CHAPTER THREE

APRIL

1936

JANUARY: TWO DAYS BEFORE

Two days before Thackeray's deadline, it snowed so heavily that the world stood still. Roads were closed and impassable, school was canceled, and nearly every business in town was shut for the day. Snow, of course, was normal for midwinter Massachusetts, but by late January, we were usually more into deep freeze season than preparing for new snowfall.

It snowed through the night and all through the morning, and when the deluge finally started to let up around midday, the drifts were several feet deep and sparkling clean. The whole world lit up like a new snow globe, and, with no lessons to teach, I spent the day curled in the overstuffed, threadbare chair by my bedroom window, alternately rereading novels and watching the snow blanket the garden outside.

Ordinarily, at least one if not both of my parents would have found an excuse to drag me downstairs at sunup—bread needed baking or curtains needed dusting or clothes needed mending or a younger sibling needed tutoring. Today they left me alone. Maybe they wanted to give me more time uninterrupted to consider Thackeray's offer (and eventually realize why I should say yes); maybe they knew I was in no shape to talk to them; maybe they were dealing with another one of Jacob's messes. Whatever the reason, it was a small mercy.

When the snowfall had abated and the sun was high in the sky, I

exchanged my slippers for a pair of worn-in boots I kept by the kitchen door, bundled myself in a thick woolen scarf, and went outside to brave the bitter cold.

The wind bit at my nose and the snow puddled around my ankles where my boots left them exposed, but I didn't have far to go. The Barnes property abutted ours a few hundred paces from the kitchen door, where a tall fence rose up in between our gardens. I followed the well-worn path through the snow until I reached the old magnolia tree, its branches bare and slick with frost this time of year. Its longest limbs reached out and over the fence, providing a gentle slope and a short drop down to the other side. The Barneses had a similar tree of their own beside it, and Nick and I had learned young that the two made for a good shortcut back and forth to each other's houses. I sometimes wondered if the trees had been planted like that on purpose, or if someone had intentionally split them apart.

I shimmied my way up the branches, along the fence, and dropped down on the other side. In the spring, I would probably find Nick in his family's gazebo with a sketch pad and some pastels. I'd hoped I might find him there today anyway, despite the cold. Unfortunately, Nick Barnes had slightly more common sense than I did, so I'd have to brave the house.

His family's home was bigger than ours, and its kitchen still bustled with staff. The housekeeper, Mrs. Dodds, knew to expect me turning up at their back door like a stray kitten, and knew to direct me to Nick, but she didn't have to be happy about it. *It weren't right when you was a girl*, she'd grumble, *and it aren't right now you're a woman*, but she'd offer me a mug of tea and let me in out of the cold.

Today I found Nick in the library. Like ours, his family's library stood two stories high, with a rolling ladder around the sides to reach the tallest shelves. Unlike ours, his was still full. The shelves were heavy with thick leather-bound books, the floor covered in oriental rugs and plush couches and potted trees. On the ceiling, a cluster of sculpted cherubs ringed a stained-glass skylight. Mr. Barnes liked to

showcase his wealth and taste (or lack thereof). He'd traveled Europe in his youth and come back to Massachusetts dead set on building his own castle with no regard for history, geography, or common sense. As far as I knew, at least one of the bookshelves in here opened onto a secret servants' passage, best used for sneaking snacks in from the kitchen or playing hide-and-seek.

Nick was sitting in his favorite seat, a green velvet chaise in front of the fireplace. For a moment, I was struck by how handsome he looked from this angle: the strong slope of his brow, his delicate nose, the firelight turning his ruddy blond curls a warm copper. He was bent down over his sketchbook, long lashes shading his eyes. For a moment, I didn't see him as the gangly boy I'd grown up with, my best friend, my second brother (my favorite brother, when Jacob was being particularly bratty). I saw the man he'd grown into, and I remembered that all my life, people had wanted us to get married. I wished I'd wanted that, too. It would have made the whole thing so much easier.

I took a sip of my tea and grimaced. It was still too hot to drink, so I rolled the mug between my hands and waited for Nick to notice me. He didn't. I cleared my throat. "Hey, stranger."

He looked up. He had a graphite smudge down the bridge of his nose. It stretched crookedly when he grinned at me, the smile splitting his face. He still had a chip in his front tooth from falling out of the magnolia tree when we were teenagers. It was good; it stopped his face from being too symmetrical.

"April," he said. "I wasn't expecting you."

I set my mug of too-hot tea on a bar cart, untied my scarf, draped it over a particularly ugly statue of a dog, and then threw my jacket on top of its twin, which immediately whined and shook it off. Not a statue after all but the Barnes family's ancient shepherd. "Sorry, Horatio," I said, scratching him between his ears, then placed my jacket on top of my scarf and took the overstuffed chair beside Nick's chaise. "I had to get out of that house."

He grimaced. "Hurricane Jacob again?"

"No." I shook my head. "Two days ago—we had a visitor, but it wasn't for Jacob."

"Oh?" Nick ran a hand through his hair, leaving another smudge of graphite across his forehead in the process. He was left-handed like me, which meant his pencils always smeared along the side of his hand, spreading wherever he touched. I wanted to grab a cloth and wipe it off his face; didn't think he'd notice until he was covered in the stuff.

I stared at that smudge on his forehead while I told him about Thackeray, about his proposal, how he knew about my writing, how he'd given me three days to upend my life.

The muscles in Nick's jaw flexed as he clenched his teeth, considering what to say. "What are you going to do?"

"I don't know."

"Do you love him?"

"I *just* met him."

"Isn't that how it works in your books? What's it called, love at first sight?" For someone who fancied himself an artist, Nick had never been particularly interested in stories. He had always been more literal, copying his work from real life, reading the occasional book of history or philosophy, when he bothered to read at all. Still, he had to be pretending here. I didn't think he was *that* hopeless.

"Those are fairy tales, Nick. This is my real life."

The smudge on his forehead had flattened out as he stared at me, pale blue eyes narrowed. "Why are you here, April?"

Why was I here? This was a bad idea, I'd known this was a bad idea, but I hadn't known who else to talk to. Here was the problem: Nick Barnes was my best friend, the only person other than my siblings who knew what went on in our house. He had known me before the crash, and he hadn't left me after he'd found out. There was always a place for me at his family's table, and he'd never told anyone a word of the truth. He was the only person I trusted with my life. He was also hopelessly in love with me.

We didn't talk about it, of course. But we both knew it, and he knew I knew it. Even though everyone had wanted us to get married, I had

brushed it off as a ridiculous dream, because it really would be like marrying Jacob. But I knew that Nick had wanted it, too. I'd rejected him formally once when we were sixteen and twice when we were eighteen, and he'd gone on to leave Carter and finish school and come back because he wanted to, not because he had to, and we never talked about it again.

And besides, now he had Elaine Terry, an elfin Vassar girl with eyes bigger and bluer than Nick's. She was eight inches shorter than me, had a wicked sense of humor, and had gotten engaged to Nick on Halloween night. I liked her immensely, and had been hoping against hope that Nick had gotten over himself enough to get over me before their wedding day.

That was looking less likely now.

My life would have been so much easier if I could just love Nick. But there was no part of me that wanted to take his face in my hands or see what his body looked like beneath his clothes or lie in bed beside him, skin to skin, limbs tangled in each other, for the rest of our lives. I wished I did; I wished I could. But I had never felt that sort of desire before, not for a man, not for anyone. I wasn't sure I was able to. (And some small part of me wondered if I might at last find it with Thackeray. My life had been so small until now; maybe all I needed was someone I had never seen as a brother.)

"Is anyone *making* you do this?" he said.

I shook my head. "Not technically, no. He said it's my choice, but."

"But."

"*But* Lord and Lady Harker have made it very clear that this isn't an offer I'm supposed to turn down."

"Ah, yes, of course. You have to carry on the family bloodline."

I frowned. "Something like that."

Horatio had shambled his way across the room and stretched himself in front of the fire, between our two chairs. He had probably been a puppy when I'd first met him, but I couldn't remember him as anything other than ancient, his snout graying and his walk lumbering and slow. Nick bent down and scratched the scruff of his neck. His tail wagged happily.

"April," Nick said, "you don't have to do this."

I heard what he wasn't saying; it hung in the air. That was the thing about Nick Barnes: He was always easy to read. "But?"

"But. You're here, aren't you? You wouldn't be here if you'd already made up your mind, one way or another."

"Maybe I just wanted to see Horatio." I held out my hand for the dog to sniff, but he growled at me and turned back to Nick. *Touché, Horatio.* "What would you do?"

Instead of meeting my gaze, Nick stared into the fire. The flames cast long dancing shadows along his face, obscuring the crystal clear blue of his eyes, the transparent set of his features. He sat silently for a long while, as if calculating what he was going to say. "If it were up to me, I'd offer to marry you and get this whole damn thing over with."

"Nick."

"I know, I have Elaine. But if I didn't—"

"*Nick*."

He turned away from the fire and was a boy again, my childhood best friend, no longer playacting at some sort of gothic hero. "You need to get out of that house. You need to get out of this *town*. You said he has money?"

"*So much money*. My parents wouldn't let him through the door if he didn't. It's enough to cover Bel's college."

"And he lives in the city?"

"I think so. He definitely works in the city, and he sure doesn't live in Carter."

Horatio thumped his tail in approval. Nick gave me one of the looks he'd been giving me our whole lives, the ones that said he knew what I was thinking long before I did. "I know you like being indecisive, but I think you know what you want here, don't you?" I screwed up my mouth and dipped my chin, just the slightest of nods. Nick grinned. "Then I think it's high time you got the hell out of here, April Harker. And this might just be your ticket."