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GLORIOUS RIVALS

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PENGUIN BOOKS

Chapter 1

LYRA

Kissing Grayson Hawthorne felt like stepping out of time. Nothing else existed. Not the ground beneath Lyra's feet. Not the ruins or the cliffs. Just *this*. Every place their bodies touched. His lips and hers. A jagged breath—*this*.

The right kind of disaster just waiting to happen, Odette's voice whispered in Lyra's memory. *A Hawthorne and a girl who has every reason to stay away from Hawthornes*.

As if he'd heard Lyra's thoughts, Grayson pulled his lips slowly back from hers. "I usually have more control than this," he said, his voice aching low.

"I usually have better sense," Lyra replied, keenly aware of just how close her lips still were to his—and how close the two of them were to a repeat performance. That kiss, their first, their only, had been earth-shattering.

It had also almost certainly been a mistake.

The wind off the ocean picked up behind Lyra, sending her

ponytail flying into her face—and his. Grayson tamed her long hair, pushing it back, and as he did, the wind calmed, too, so suddenly and completely that Lyra couldn't shake the illogical thought that *he* had calmed it through sheer force of will.

An alarm went off in the back of Lyra's mind. This was *Grayson Hawthorne*.

And even if he wasn't the cold, above-it-all, asshole rich boy she'd thought him to be twenty-four hours earlier, he was still a Hawthorne. His blood wasn't just blue; it was practically cerulean. And soon enough, the Grandest Game would be over, and promises or not, Lyra and Grayson Hawthorne would go back to being what they'd always been: little more than strangers...with *every reason* to stay away from each other.

Neither one of you knows what you think you know. Another of Odette's warnings echoed through Lyra's memory, but even that couldn't distract her from the fact that she was still so close to Grayson that she could feel his every breath on her skin.

"We should try to get some sleep before phase two," Lyra said. The words came out throaty and low. She'd been aiming for *practical*. They'd been given twelve hours to recover from the first phase of the game. So far, Lyra hadn't managed anything resembling respite.

"We should," Grayson agreed, but instead of putting even a modicum of space between them, he brushed the knuckles of his right hand lightly over her cheek, stealing her next breath like a born thief. "I meant what I said, Lyra. We'll figure this out—the game and all the rest."

The rest. That was the understatement of the century, and even just thinking the words had others ringing through Lyra's mind. *A Hawthorne did this.*

There are always three.

Lyra took a step back. Maybe with a little more distance, she'd be able to breathe, to think, to focus on what came next. The two of them were standing on what had once been the cliffside patio of a glorious mansion that was nothing but ruins now, a charred and visible reminder of the way even the grandest things could be reduced to ashes.

"Someone sent me here." Lyra focused on that. "Someone put me in this game, and whoever that person is—they know about my father. I'm someone's pawn." Lyra looked away from Grayson's pale and piercing eyes. "Or a weapon. Or a bomb."

That was the logical conclusion, wasn't it? That the person who'd sent her that ticket had put Lyra in the Grandest Game *because* of her history with the Hawthorne family? Because of her father's death.

Because of Alice Hawthorne's role in it.

"You are no one's weapon, Lyra," Grayson said, his tone making it perfectly clear just how rarely he lost arguments of any kind, "bomb or otherwise, and you are certainly not a pawn."

"Then what am I?" Lyra retorted, her gaze returning to his like a homing missile.

"You are lethal," Grayson said quietly, "in the best possible way."

Where did he get off saying something like that and sounding, for all the world, like he meant it? Lyra went to take another step back, but Grayson reached for her shoulder, and the next thing she knew, he'd reversed their positions. Now Grayson was the one standing with his back to the cliff's edge, and Lyra had the magnificent ocean view.

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He'd just put himself between her and the drop-off. "I don't need your protection, Hawthorne."

Grayson arched a brow. "Agree to disagree."

The wind off the ocean picked up again. *A front rolling in.* A slight shiver passed through Lyra's body. Eyeing her, Grayson undid the top button on the jacket of his fits-like-a-glove suit. The middle button was next.

"What are you doing?" Lyra asked. She wasn't just talking about his suit jacket, and he was perceptive enough to know that. *What are we doing?*

"I would think the answer apparent." Grayson undid the final button on his jacket, and then...

The jacket came off, and Lyra's body remembered: *My lips and yours. A jagged breath.*

"You'd better not be planning on offering me that jacket." Lyra steeled her voice.

"You're cold." Grayson's lips curved. "And I believe that I have already acquainted you with the fact that when I encounter a problem, I solve it."

This was about so much more than the damn jacket. It was about his family and hers and an unknown threat. It was about the fact that Odette Morales, the one person who might have known some fraction of the big picture here, had given up her spot in the Grandest Game—and her chance at millions—because of the danger that Lyra and Grayson somehow represented.

The right kind of disaster just waiting to happen.

"I don't need your jacket," Lyra told Grayson.

"Perhaps I need to give it to you," Grayson suggested. "Chivalry. It's a coping mechanism."

"I'm warning you, Hawthorne: If you try to put that jacket

around my shoulders, I'm taking mine off and giving it to you." To make her point, Lyra lifted a hand to the zipper on her own athletic jacket—which, to be fair, was more of an outer shirt.

Grayson took a moment to assess whether or not she was bluffing.

Lyra was not bluffing.

"Consider me warned," Grayson replied archly. He slipped his suit jacket back on.

Lyra narrowed her eyes. "Why do I feel like I lost this argument?" she said.

"Because," Grayson replied, "I'm still standing between you and the edge of the cliff."

Chapter 2

LYRA

Once upon a time, Lyra might have had it in her to let another person protect her, but that was *before*. Before the dreams had started. Before she'd realized that her entire life had been a lie.

For years, her parents had let her believe that she was normal. They'd let her just go on like the defining trauma of her life had never happened, like her biological father hadn't abducted her from preschool on her fourth birthday, like she hadn't witnessed his suicide. And once Lyra *had* remembered, it was like nothing about the life she'd lived fit anymore, like the person she'd been had never even been real. She hadn't wanted anyone to know why she'd changed, so she'd pretended that she hadn't. She'd faked it for as long as she could.

But there was no faking anything with Grayson Hawthorne. And these days, when it came to the possibility of being hurt in any way, Lyra had to face it head-on. She had to protect *herself*,

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and Grayson made that so very hard. He was a hand on the back of her neck, pulling her from the darkness, telling her that she did not have to be fine.

But she did.

So instead of letting Grayson escort her back to the puzzle-filled mansion on the north point to get some sleep, Lyra warned him not to follow her and took off on another run.

Even though she'd already pushed her body to its limits.

Even though she needed her mind sharp for what was to come.

Lyra ran because her thoughts were a mess. She ran to stop her body from remembering his. She ran because she *could*.

Grayson must have sensed that it *really* wouldn't be wise to follow, because he didn't, and eventually, once Lyra had pushed herself hard enough and long enough, the ghost of his touch left her, and the only thing that existed besides the burning in her muscles and her lungs was the island.

Lyra felt it like an extension of herself: wild and free, scarred and ruined, beautiful, sharp. Hawthorne Island was full of rocky shores and steep drops, native grass and soaring trees, cliffs upon cliffs, the occasional narrow slice of beach, all of it surrounded by ocean.

The day before, Lyra had been drawn again and again to the burned forest. Today, she stuck to the southern and eastern shores—the roughest terrain on the island by far. Uneven ground. Thorns. And very little else. Objectively, it didn't resemble the place where Lyra had grown up, but somehow, Mile's End and the most untouched parts of Hawthorne Island *felt* the same to her: unchanging, real in a way that nothing more developed ever was.

Lyra let that feeling fill her as she ran, her sense of purpose crystalizing. She'd entered the Grandest Game to save Mile's End. Everything—and *everyone*—else could wait.

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When Lyra finally reached the point where she could risk not running, where she could let herself stop, she stared up at the lone, breathtaking structure on the southeastern shore. Out on the water, massive stone arches that looked like they'd been lifted straight from ancient Rome cast outsized shadows on blue-green waters. Beneath those arches, there was a dock.

Breathing heavily, Lyra made her way onto a large boat slip that stood perpendicular to two smaller ones, a platform in between. Her body very nearly spent, she walked to the end of the dock, and as she stared out at the water, an odd feeling hit her, like calloused fingers skimming her shoulder blades. Lyra turned, casting her gaze back toward the island.

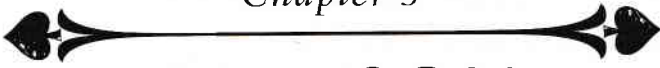
Nothing. She was alone.

Exhaling, Lyra turned to face the ocean. She tried to make out the mainland in the distance and couldn't. The real world was out there somewhere, but Lyra couldn't see it. She couldn't see anything other than water and shadows and a light fog on the ocean.

And still...

Still. As Lyra stood there, staring out at the Pacific, she had the strangest sense that she was being watched.

Chapter 3



GRAYSON

Grayson looked down at the smartwatch on his wrist. Given that each remaining player in the Grandest Game had been given one, it doubtlessly did more than tell time. A thorough assessment, however, revealed that the only thing Grayson could do with the watch at this juncture was toggle between the time and another symbol.

A spade.

In phase one of the game, the players had been divided into teams: Hearts, Diamonds, and Clubs. Grayson's mind made quick work of this fourth symbol. *Spades—for the people behind the scenes*. From the beginning, Grayson had been able to feel his brothers' and Avery's touches in every detail of the Grandest Game—including the fact that they'd made him a player. Grayson had fully intended to have a *conversation* with all four of them about that, but now there were more important conversations to be had.

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“Full of cravings. A little cranky,” Nash grinned. “Wholly incandescent.” He turned his head to shoot Grayson a knowing look. “I’m going to ask again, Gray: How far gone are you with this girl who’s not a threat?”

Grayson fixed his eyes back on the horizon. *Let it all come.* “Far enough.”

Nash let out a low whistle. “Jamie was right. This is gonna be fun.”

“Delighted to amuse,” Grayson said dryly. “But I didn’t call you here for *fun*. What do we know about the blackout last night?”

During phase one, the power had gone off—generator and backup generator both.

“Xander says the culprits appear to be squirrels,” Nash replied. “The collective noun of which he insists is also *squirrel*.”

“A squirrel of squirrels?” Grayson tone made it clear: His skepticism was not limited to Xander’s linguistic assertion.

“Island’s locked down tight,” Nash said.

“Either it’s not locked down as tight as you think or Lyra’s sponsor has another player in the game.” With characteristic efficiency, Grayson proceeded to tell Nash about the notes someone had left for Lyra in the burned forest, bearing her dead father’s names—his *aliases*. “You’ll also want to have someone keep tabs on Odette Morales now that she’s exited the game. She knows something.”

“What kind of something?”

Grayson saw no reason to dissemble. “The kind that involves our grandmother not being nearly as dead as advertised.”

Nash responded to that bombshell with trademark calm, removing his worn cowboy hat and running his thumb slowly over