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# OUR PERFECT STORM

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## P R O L O G U E

*We Were Eight*

I met George Saint James the day my mom vanished. The night before, I fell asleep the same way I always did—wishing for something extraordinary to happen. At eight years old, I was certain of one thing: I was destined for great adventures.

In the morning, a heavy spring rain attacked the last of the snow, liberating purple and white crocus blossoms from their icy beds. My older brothers and I knelt by the window, watching tire grooves fill with heaven-sent tears. Mom's station wagon was missing.

Our dad barely spoke when we roused him, but as he sipped his first cup of coffee, he told us our mother had gone home. Only Darwin, who was twelve, seemed to understand what that meant. Moby was ten, and I could tell he was as confused as me.

*This was our house. Wasn't this home?*

Dad couldn't say how long Mom would be gone, but he

assured us she'd come back, and we had no choice but to believe him.

As soon as the rain tapered to a drizzle, we were kicked outside. Without Mom to patiently comb out the tangles, my hair was a ratty mass. I was still wearing my nightgown, but Darwin made sure I put on my rubber boots and yellow raincoat. Moby fetched the basketball.

I wanted to play, but my brothers wouldn't pass to me. They *never* passed to me. I yelled and stomped in puddles, but they kept chucking the ball over my head. Fed up, I grabbed the green butterfly net from the mudroom and set about trying to capture a creature in the thicket at the edge of the field. A worm, a grasshopper, maybe even a frog.

Instead, I found something far more exciting—a pale brown rabbit sitting in the fresh blades of grass. It had long velvety ears and a twitching pink nose. I was going to catch it, and oh, how jealous Darwin and Moby would be.

But patience had always eluded me. I charged after the rabbit, twigs cracking beneath my feet, and off it went, bounding across the field. I chased it all the way to the cedar hedge that bordered the neighboring property. The rabbit didn't know what I did: The woman who lived in the Big House next door was a witch. And witches had all sorts of uses for rabbits. I had to save it.

I followed the dense wall of evergreen to a gap wide enough to slip through. I peered through the branches and gasped when I saw a pair of dark blue eyes squinting at me from the other side.

I'd never seen the boy before. He was winter pale with

round, rosy cheeks and dark eyelashes. His hair was buzzed short. Freckles dotted his little nose, and he was the same height as me. He was nothing to be afraid of.

"Hello, I'm Francesca." I stuck out my palm, like Dad taught me. "But you can call me Frankie."

The boy blinked, and I wondered if he might run away. But then his hand shot out suddenly, and he took mine in his.

"I'm George."

Hands on hips, I gave him a thorough inspection. He had no rubber boots, no raincoat, and his pants had a hole in the knee. All he had to keep him warm was a hooded sweatshirt with a stain on the sleeve.

"Were you watching me?" I asked.

"No." He blushed. "Well, not for long."

"What are you doing over there?" The Big House was no place for a boy, especially one as soft-looking as George. He'd need defending. Maybe even rescuing. My toes curled at the thrill of it.

"I live here now," he said, sounding resigned.

I gaped at him. "You live there?" I pointed at the imposing stone house behind him. "With the witch?"

"She's not a witch. She's my grandmother."

"I hate to tell you this, George," I said, relishing the moment, "but your grandmother is definitely a witch."

How did he not know? The gardens were overgrown. The old greenhouse was full of plants for potions. She rarely went outside, and she was always dressed in swathes of black. Plus, Darwin swore he'd seen her chanting over a large, bubbling pot one night when he went spying.

"She is not," George said.

I narrowed my eyes. "Prove it," I said. "Take me inside, and if there's no cauldron or lizard tails or newt eyes, I'll believe you."

"There are none of those things. It's just a normal house."

My disappointment was swift. "Oh."

"But there's a black cat," he said quickly. "His name is Baryshnikov."

"Really?"

"Yeah, but that's it. I've never seen anything witchy."

George might *think* the Big House was normal, but there had to be secrets lurking inside, waiting to be uncovered.

"Can you show me?"

"You want to come over?" I could tell he couldn't believe it—that he thought I might change my mind.

"Yes!" I said. "I've been waiting *ages* for something interesting to happen."

"I'm not interesting." His blush ripened like summer berries.

"I'll be the judge of that," I said. "Please. I'm utterly desperate for an adventure."

He laughed—a bright, bursting sound, like bubble gum popping. "You're utterly desperate for an adventure?" he asked.

"Yes," I told him. "Aren't you?"

He looked at me, considering, and nodded. "Come on, then. Follow me."

So I did. I followed George into the Big House, and nothing was ever the same.

For either of us.

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**THE MANOR**

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## CHAPTER ONE

Everything glitters tonight. The ornate crystal chandeliers with their shimmering teardrops. The fairy lights strung in the trees outside. Even me.

I'm surrounded by my most cherished friends and family members, seated like a queen among her subjects, in the elegant dining room of a historic country manor. The table before me is laid with French linens, golden cutlery, and dozens of votive candles, each ringed in a glowing halo. I watch their flickering reflection in the brass urns that brim with peonies.

My eyelids are gilded, my honey-blond hair is freshly highlighted, and my dress is made from champagne silk as light as meringue. On my left hand is a colossal pale yellow diamond I haven't had time to get used to. I'm as polished as an opal, but I feel like I can't breathe.

I never thought I'd get married, yet here I am, two days before my second wedding.

Not that the first one counted.

A pianist in a tuxedo and bow tie is playing something gentle on the Steinway, but for a moment, all of it falls away. Time slips, and I'm at that first wedding under the apple tree.

We recited our vows beneath its branches, a confetti of fallen fruit at our feet. My gown: fashioned from an old curtain as if I were a von Trapp child. My bouquet: a posy of violets plucked from the garden, stems tied with kitchen twine. There was a thumbprint-sized stain on his sweater from my mother's apple-berry crisp—he was always eating and always making a mess of himself. I remember studying that tiny purple splotch before he started speaking.

*Frankie, I promise . . .*

A cool hand settles on my wrist.

"Frankie?"

I blink back to the present. I feel the scaffolding of bobby pins digging into my skull as they hold my lion's mane in a polite French twist. Taste the sticky cotton candy flavor of my lip gloss. Feel the slide of silk over my thighs. Sense my bridesmaid's concerned gaze.

"Frankie?" Aurora says again, her espresso eyes narrowed on me. "Are you all right?" Her fingers are like five tiny icicles against my skin. I swear she's half lizard—she's always cold.

Her braids are swept off her face on one side, a waterfall of black morphing to purple and then pastel pink. Her lips are painted in a blush similar to her one-shouldered dress. Aside from the tattoos that cover one arm, she looks like woodland creatures and a fairy godmother helped her dress this evening.

"I'm fine," I say. My gaze shifts to the empty chair, and the knots in my stomach tighten. "I'll be back in a minute."

I don't wait for her response before I duck out to the hallway. I find a dark nook under the mahogany staircase and call him. It goes straight to voicemail. I lean my forehead on the brocade wallpaper and leave another message.

"It's me. Again. The front desk says you still haven't checked in. Please tell me you'll be here. I need you, George. I don't think I can do this without you."

I shut my eyes and take a deep inhale, pushing down my dread.

I return to my seat—Aurora and her girlfriend, Betty, on one side and my fiancé on the other. I lean into Nate, squeezing his hand as he kisses my cheek.

Tonight's six-course welcome dinner is the beginning of our wedding festivities, and I want to enjoy myself. Not *enjoy myself* to the degree I would have at the height of my unbridled twenties, but *enjoy myself* in a manner befitting a responsible thirty-year-old woman about to wed a prizewinning mathematics professor.

Nate's sixteen years older than me, but his head of thick ginger hair makes him look far younger than forty-six. He has swirling hazel eyes, and although he's clean-shaven for the wedding, he's often sporting a few days of stubble. His smile comes effortlessly and often. Tonight, he's dressed in a navy suit, but it's easier to picture him in a kilt, trekking across the Scottish Highlands, than teaching probability theory in a lecture hall.

I look around the room, avoiding the empty chair beside

George's grandmother, Mimi. I never dreamed of being a bride, but if I had, I wouldn't have envisioned a wedding this elaborate. Darlington Manor and its estate sprawl over one hundred acres of forest and meadows an hour east of Toronto. For the next few days, its antiques-appointed guest rooms, immaculately landscaped gardens, Michelin-starred restaurant, and scenic hiking trails are at our disposal.

Nate was a broke grad student when he got married the first time—he and his ex had a city hall ceremony and met their friends at a pub afterward. The bride wore jeans. That sounded pretty great to me, but Nate wanted to go big. Celebrate. *Feast*. He'd said that last word with a fair brow cocked, knowing exactly how to capture my interest.

I've thrown myself into planning the menus with the chef, discussing each dish, tasting every morsel. Tomorrow, as more guests arrive, there will be a number of experiences to choose from, with good food at the center of each. They can hunt for morels, wild leeks, and fiddleheads with an expert forager or take a horseback ride into the woods for a picnic lunch cooked over an open fire. There's a wine-tasting session in the estate's stunning one-hundred-year-old cellar, accompanied by artisanal cheeses and preserves. In the evening, a smaller group will gather for the wedding rehearsal, followed by a dinner for all of our friends.

The crescendo is, of course, Saturday's ceremony and reception. Our guest list is one hundred and twenty people deep. My dress was the price of a small car. For the processional, a string quartet has learned "Orchard House," the theme from 1994's

*Little Women*—the greatest film of all time. (I will hear no arguments to the contrary.)

I've always related to Jo March. I'm stubborn, hotheaded, and independent. I never wanted a partner, until I did. I'm not particularly vain, except when it comes to my hair. I used to hate the part in the movie when Jo turned down Laurie's proposal—I thought Professor Bhaer was too old and boring. Then I grew up, and I met Nate.

He caught me checking him out in line at the coffee shop. I'd recently quit my job as a sous chef in a blaze of fury and burn-out, and I was two weeks into a career change and a more balanced routine when I saw him. Nate smiled, and the rest of his face followed. The corners of his eyes. The lines around his mouth. It was like watching a time-lapse video of a flower blooming. He struck up a conversation, asked for my number, and sent a text an hour later.

*Have dinner with me Saturday.*

The period at the end of the sentence enthralled me. I was impressed by how direct he was and how easily he stated what he wanted. There were no games. No pretense. No bad pickup lines. Nate was a *man*. And I wanted to grow up.

Aurora thinks all the times I've read and watched *Little Women* were something of a manifestation. I was finally ready for a serious relationship, and the universe sent me a professor, just like Jo.

"He's probably the one," Aurora said before our first date.