



PROLOGUE

Rowan

I hate this place.

The estate lawyer's office with its sleek, dark wood and navy-blue accents that reminds me of an open casket—polished and with no purpose but for show.

Its owner, Henry Williams, with his stiff upper lip, his clasped hands, and his wire-framed glasses perched on the edge of his nose as he glances up at me.

The way the dust particles dance in the streams of light only to get lost when they find their way to the dark again.

More than anything, I loathe the reason we are all sitting here—the entire Rothschild family—waiting like a pack of rabid wolves. Because if we're here at the estate lawyer's office, then that means I finally have to accept the reality that Gran is gone.

And in losing her, I've lost the only person in my life who truly got me. My biggest cheerleader. The unyielding rule breaker. The woman who has encouraged me to follow in the path she forged even though it's against Westmore societal norms.

My gut twists right along with the heaviness in my heart.

Mr. Williams's sigh is heavy yet sympathetic as he unclasps his hands and flips to the next page from the folder on his desk. "As to the charities. Your grandmother bequeathed—"

"Can we get on with this?" my brother, Rhett, asks. His knee jogs, and his phone vibrates yet again as his impatient huff carries

through the room. “It’s been a week already. She’d want us to know what she left us.”

“Forgive him.” My mom’s lips pull tight in an apologetic smile with a quick glance to my brother. “Death makes him rather . . . unsettled.”

Unsettled? How about just admitting he’s an all-around prick in general?

Henry clears his throat. “As I was saying, your grandmother bequeathed a million dollars to the Humane Society. Another one-million-dollar donation to the Fairmont Revitalization Fund. And—”

“Jesus Christ. I don’t care what she left to charity.” Rhett stands and throws his hands out. “I want to know what she left me so I can get out of this fucking place. So . . . can we just cut to that part?”

My dad shifts uncomfortably and glances at my mom as Rhett’s impatience eats up the air in the room—but as usual, no one says anything. The golden child gets to throw his tantrum and the rest of us are just bystanders.

“Sure. Yes.” Henry’s smile is tight as he slowly flips through the pages of the will. He acts as if he hasn’t read it before when we all know damn well he has. “Here it is. ‘To Rhett, my grandson. Your last name alone is an inheritance in and of itself. Wield it wisely, for the continuity of the Rothschilds’ impact on the town of Westmore rests on your shoulders. In addition, I leave you your grandfather’s prized possession—his heirloom watch.’” He looks up, that smile frozen in place now.

“And?” Rhett prompts.

Henry looks down and studies the document again, his lips pinched when he looks back up to meet Rhett’s eyes. “She also leaves you your grandfather’s collection of golf tees from the courses he’s played around the world.”

“And?” Impatience edged with concern fills Rhett’s voice.

“And that’s it.”

“What?” Rhett explodes. “What the fuck do you mean, *that’s it?* I’m a goddamn Rothschild. I’m the lone grandson. I’m . . .”

“Exactly,” Henry says softly. “Those two things guarantee you success and status here in Westmore. I believe that was her point.”

Rhett seethes. It’s in the set of his shoulders, the grit of his jaw, and the flexing of his fists. He turns to face me, his glare malicious, as if I had anything to do with this. “This is fucking ridiculous,” he says before storming out.

“Rhett? Honey?” And there goes my mom right after him.

My dad looks at Henry and then me as he stands. Torn between what he wants to do and what he needs to do. He hesitates. “Excuse me, I need to go make sure he’s okay.”

Of course you do. We wouldn’t want Rhett to have a tantrum without an audience, now, would we?

Henry nods as my father hurries out before turning back to me, the only Rothschild left in the room, and lifts his eyebrows. “I think it’s best if we table the rest of this for another day. Any protest to that?”

“No. None at all.”

And now I can pretend for a bit longer that she’s still with us. Silly, but true.



ONE

Rowan

I tip the wineglass to the sky and empty the shiraz like a dehydrated woman stranded in a desert.

That's how much I'm looking forward to tonight's event—Westmore Country Club's Auction for Change. I have no problem with the charity aspect of it. It's more the watching of Westmore society's who's who strut around in their finest while not actually giving a damn about the charity they are here to support that is my issue.

My glass is promptly snatched from my hand, but before I can protest, my mom holds it out of my reach. "Wine is meant for sipping, Rowan, not for gulping—just as ladies are meant to worry about their place in society rather than which rung of the corporate ladder they're on."

Luckily, her back is turned when I roll my eyes, or I'd get another refrain about how ladies need to act proper or they'll never find a husband.

Which is fine by me.

I can stand on my own two feet. I am self-sufficient. The last thing I need or want is to depend on a man.

Been there. Done that. Bought the T-shirt.

But those are fighting words when it comes to my mother, and a fight isn't exactly what I want right now. Not when in mere minutes I'll be standing in a room full of women with much the same

mindset as her. It's either hold my tongue now or speak up. And the latter will no doubt reward me with constant remarks all night long. I can hear them all now.

See? Julie Edgemoor quit her job and look how happy she is being just a mom.

Did you hear Moira was nominated chair for the Westmore Society Women's League? What a dream come true for her. And to think she almost wasted her talent on being a corporate lawyer.

"Yes. Of course," I say and step my bare foot into a high heel. "How could I forget that a life of subservience is all that matters."

"Stop it," she says with a wave of her hand, dismissing my gender equality comments as she always does.

How often does she wish that it was me that night in the car instead of Cassie?

I push down the thought, bury it so the pang dulls and the ache is smothered.

My mom crosses the room and automatically reaches out to tuck the hint of my bra beneath the shoulder strap of my dress. I let her fuss while the wine begins to buzz in my head. It is my mom's birthday after all, which is one of the main reasons—well, the *only* reason I've agreed to do the pre-party thing with her tonight.

But when her fussing stops and her gaze turns scrutinizing, my dread returns. What is she going to pick apart this time?

"I really wish you hadn't done this." She reaches out and toys with one of my curls. A curl that's now a dark caramel color rather than the pale blond I was born with. "You're the face of the company, Rowan. Our brand." Her lips twist in that sour expression every kid hates to see regardless of age. The *tsk* that follows even more so.

"Yes, of course. The face and nothing else." Bitterness tinges my edges.

"Whatever possessed you to do this?" she asks as if I hadn't commented.

Gran's death? My world turned upside down? Take a guess.

“I needed a change,” I say softly.

“A change is choosing red for your toenail polish, not dyeing your hair.” The corners of her lips turn down in disapproval. “Well, it’s nothing a trip to Trina won’t fix,” she says of her longtime hairdresser.

A protest would be futile, so I don’t give one. Instead, I make a noncommittal sound, eyeing my empty wineglass with envy. “I like it.” I shrug.

“*Hmpf.*” Her smile doesn’t reach her eyes. “Is it so bad that I want you to settle down and be happy?”

I bark out a very unladylike laugh. “What does my hair color have to do with *settling down*?”

She plucks imaginary lint off my dress. “Men prefer blondes. You and I both know that.”

“Ah. Yes. I forgot. I think you left your free will and lack of judgment back at the altar when you married Dad.” I roll my eyes and continue before she starts the “you younger kids don’t understand” speech. “I’ve told you: I don’t need a man to be happy.”

A scowl flickers. “I don’t know why you keep fighting it, honey. We’ve known the Williamses forever. Chad is a good man. He’d be a caring husband and good provider for you.”

“Mmm.” It’s my only response to a conversation I could repeat in my sleep. While there’s nothing wrong with Chad . . . he’s *Chad*. A second brother of sorts. Kind and gentle and not exactly my type.

She meets my eyes and offers me an encouraging smile as her hand slides down to hold mine. “Excitement and passion ebb in a marriage. What you need is comfort and reliability. Someone who knows your ways and how you were brought up. Someone you don’t have to try so hard with. A man who understands our family, our place in this town, and who we are. Chadwick Williams is all that and then some. Plus, he’s been in love with you since second grade. That right there saves you the whole having-to-make-someone-love-you part.”

Huh. Nice to know it’s so hard to love me.

“With all due respect, Mom. We tried the dating thing, re-

member? He's a good guy—great in fact—but there was absolutely no spark—”

“Sparks burn out. Smolders last longer. You're going to be thirty soon, sweetie. You could just settle into the life you were meant to live—being a good wife, the wonderful mother I know you'll be—and become a committee chair at the Junior League. It could be yours in a heartbeat if that's what you wanted.”

Ah yes, the preordained life of a Rothschild woman. Of a Westmore society woman for that matter. The one that I'm told time and again so many are envious of and that I should appreciate.

First my hair. Then Chad. Can't wait to see what she brings up next.

“Enough about that, dear,” she says, batting the conversation away like it never happened. “You look absolutely stunning tonight. The picture of perfection—even if you did forget to bring earrings. Do you know what would go perfect with that dress? A pair of ruby pendants.” She reaches up and touches my earlobe as she tucks my hair behind my ear.

I roll my eyes. “Rubies?”

“Yes.” Another dreamy smile. “Perfectly subtle and ladylike. Such a romantic stone, don't you think?”

“Of course. Ruby earrings.” Just like the pair I overheard her and Chadwick's mom talking about a few weeks ago. What a coincidence.

Does she have anything better to do than try to marry me off?

The answer is, *she doesn't*. And she wouldn't be deemed a good Southern mother if she focused her attentions elsewhere.

“Oh, look. Where has the time gone?” Her smile transforms to one of excitement. “We wouldn't want to be late now, would we?”

I stare longingly at the half-empty bottle of wine across the hotel suite and sigh. It might do me a lot of good to drink the rest of it before I go upstairs, where I'll be expected to play the part of the perfect daughter of Emmaline and Rupert Rothschild.

Sister to their prized son and heir to the family *everything*, Rhett Rothschild.

Former debutante and society woman in waiting.

College educated but for no other reason than to be a well-rounded, future contributing member of the Westmore social circle—the unspoken but well-known elites of this town.

The face of our family-run business, TinSpirits. A company created by my great-great-grandfather that started out making signature spirits and that has since reinvented itself with canned cocktails. A place where I had to beg for a *real* position. One that didn't involve my looks or my body. One that had relevance and where I could utilize my intelligence.

Vice president of marketing.

A position I coveted until I finally earned it, only to learn it was merely a placeholder without any real power. Despite that—or maybe because of it—my desire to run the family business only intensified to the point that I've progressively expanded my position, taking on more and more tasks, for no other reason than to learn the company inside and out. To become invaluable.

Silence permeates the elevator as my mother and I stand a foot apart, her adjusting the way her fur coat drapes over her shoulders and me dreaming of all the other places I'd rather be right now.

But duty calls. A duty I'm trying my damndest to break free from despite all expectations.

The elevator dings as it passes each floor. *A countdown to impending doom.* Said doom being Westmore's biggest social event of the spring. The place to be seen and be noticed.

For me? It's the place to drink too many cocktails and roll my eyes at all the over-the-top ridiculousness.

"Just remember that we have enough gossip going on right now in regards to the family and the business," my mom says in a low, even tone. "The last thing we need is for you to cause more tonight with your nonsense. These people run in our circles, help make deals and connections for us that further our name and its legacy with their patronage. They are the support chain for our business."

My business.

Or at least the one I plan on taking over, come hell or high water.

“Mm-hm,” I murmur because if I don’t make promises, then I can’t break them.

“With Rhett’s possible run for city council, we all need to be putting our best foot forward, so make sure to mingle.” She adjusts the diamond rings on her fingers. “You never know who might be here.”

The elevator dings and the doors slide open. The noise hits us first. The hummed chatter accented by a loud laugh here and there. The room at the top floor of the District Hotel spreads out before us. People mill about with drinks in their hands, smiles on their faces, and adorned in their finest attire. Perfectly tailored tuxedos. Designer gowns in varying styles. Jewels worn like status symbols by the women who have them on and the men parading those women around.

Scattered around the space in various locations are pieces of art—sculptures, paintings, and a few other items—all placed behind velvet ropes and illuminated with lights. The proceeds from their auction will benefit Carolina Children’s Fund, a charity set up to help kids in need who live in cities on the other side of the river—Fairmont, Broadmore, Granville, Livingstone. The places the Westmore elite never dare venture to but that they can tout as recipients of our charity on their social résumés.

The minute my mom is called away by a fake smile and saccharine sweet greeting from one of her fellow Junior League members, a martini is thrust into my hand.

“Thought this might come in handy.”

“You’re a lifesaver.” I kiss the cheek of one of my best friends—and the only person who keeps me sane most days—Caroline. I make a show of looking her up and down. “Look at you.”

She curtsies with dramatic flair. Her strawberry-blond hair is swept up and her long black gown is probably worth more than a down payment on a luxury car. I love the woman to death, but her sense of reality is just a tad skewed. “You know us Vanderes.” She rolls her eyes and playfully adopts the matronly tone

my mother had seconds before. “Known for dressing the part and *being* the part.”

“Ah, yes.” We take sips of our martinis and sigh. “If they only knew you like I do.”

She bats her lashes and then laughs. “But they don’t, so my perfect reputation will remain intact.”

“Your secret is safe with me.”

She nods and when her eyes meet mine, she tilts her head and pauses. “Talk to me, Row. You hanging in there?”

I close my eyes and fight the swell of emotion that threatens to overtake me. It’s odd how a simple question like that brings back the crushing blow of grief. I clear my throat and muster a smile. “I’m okay.”

“Okay as in, you’re lying and full of shit? Or okay as in, I’m getting there but I need copious amounts of alcohol and laughter tonight?”

“The latter.”

“I can most definitely help you with that.”

“I knew you could.” I smile and tap my glass against hers as Caroline lifts her heels in her Manolos and surveys the crowd.

The room is spacious with open-faced brick walls that show a stylish amount of wear and high ceilings with ducting showing. It’s trendy and contemporary while the women in the room appear the exact opposite with their sequined, beaded, or feathered gowns. No doubt many are vying—and hoping—to be deemed best dressed in country club gossip tomorrow. The men stand around in overpriced tuxedos with their chests puffed and stories ready to exaggerate.

In other words, it’s a typical Westmore function. Pretentious and overdone. Flashy and superfluous.

“So, who are we watching tonight? Who would Gran shake her head at while wanting to call them out on their bullshit?”

I can picture Gran’s voice saying those exact words. Can see her searching the crowd and sighing.

“Everyone.” My remark draws a laugh from her.

“She was the best at that. Putting you in your place with a be-guiling smile so you didn’t even realize she was doing it.”

“She was.” My smile is bittersweet.

“Too bad she’s not here to manage Chad and how he will no doubt become your shadow at some point tonight as if that’s the proper way to charm a woman.”

“Him *and* his mother.”

“A double shadow.”

“Lucky me,” I say.

“Yes, it wouldn’t be a proper Westmore event if Mrs. Williams didn’t pile on the ‘you’re going to marry my son’ pressure. Publicly, I might add. Be warned, though, that Chief Williams might put out an APB for you if she presses him hard enough.”

“I’d love to say you’re full of shit, but we both know differently.” I shrug. “And I can run my own interference on that.”

“I know you can, but Gran always added a flair of ‘don’t fuck with me’ to her *suggestion* that people actually listened to.”

Here’s the thing with Caroline. She’s a Southern girl through and through. Cotillion Queen, engaged to a man their families matched her with years ago. A chair in the women’s club. A gracious host. She ascribes to everything that my mom wants me to be—and she’s perfectly okay with it. In fact, she wants it. And while we are wildly different in that respect, our opposites attract, and years of having grown up together only serve to help us have the best time together.

“Then there’s Rhett,” she says with a purse of her lips. “No doubt your gran would give him that cold-as-ice stare tonight when he tries to assert himself as being on equal footing with some of the big players in attendance.”

“When does he not?” I snort. The image of him throwing a tantrum the other day at the lawyer’s office is still fresh in my mind.

“Especially now that he’s thinking of running for office . . . he’s going to be insufferable.”

“You mean more than he already is?” I roll my eyes, hating this new development in Rothschild land. “Is that even possible?”

“What do you want to bet that he’s going to make a scene trying to win the featured item tonight? He’ll do some kind of bidding war or cause a commotion so that all eyes are on him.”

I open my mouth to refute her, to defend my brother, but know she’s spot-on. “I’m not taking that bet. We both know that’s exactly what’s going to happen,” I concede as we both glance toward the painting she’s referring to. “It’s hideous.”

“It is.” She grins. “It looks like someone swallowed five colors that have no business being together and then sneezed onto the canvas.”

“No shit.”

“Just think. When he wins it, he’ll most likely hang it in the office so everyone can see just how rich and important he is.”

“Oh, Jesus.”

“Yup. How else is he going to cement his status as the Rothschild in charge now? Poor guy is so sick of everyone telling him how *Daddy* used to run the place when *Daddy* stepped down well over two years ago.” She tips her glass in my brother’s direction where he just so happens to be standing beside our father—carbon copies of each other right down to the drinks in their hands and the puff to their chests. “In his eyes, though, buying the prized painting might just do that.”

“That’s a very sad but true observation.”

“Then there’s you, who could run TinSpirits blindfolded with your hands tied behind your back, and no grandiose statement needed to hide your inadequacies behind because you don’t have any.” She taps her glass to mine as a warmth of appreciation spreads throughout my body.

“Thank you. That means a lot coming from you.” *Is it sad that my close friends recognize my capabilities when my own family doesn’t?*

She nods. “You know I believe in you. I’m sorry that belief isn’t going to save you from your mom pushing you to stand beside Rhett, though, while he’s bidding.”

I groan.

“Yep. She’ll make sure a photographer is lined up, front and center, to capture your undying love and support for your brother.”

She’s right, and I hate that she is. *The Rothschilds stand together*. My mom’s motto makes an unwelcome appearance in my thoughts.

“I think I’ll hide in the corner at that point of the evening.”

“At least that will keep you safe from Chad and the APB the chief puts out for you.”

I snort. “Always looking for the positive.”

“Always.”

I catch a glimpse of a feathered dress in the corner and lift my chin, welcoming a change in topic. “Looks like Muffy Johnson is on the hunt again for a new husband.”

“Would that be number six—”

“Seven,” I correct.

“Seven. Wow. Bless her endurance. Or rather”—she holds a finger up—“bless whoever she snags this time around because they’re going to need it.”

“No doubt.” I laugh. It feels so good to have someone to commiserate with who understands this screwy world we live in.

“I know you’re going to argue on this one, but we should probably mingle some before the official auction starts.”

“Caroline,” I groan.

“I know, but ooohhhh . . .” she purrs. “Who do we have here? *Hello, gorgeous.*”

“Who?” I ask casually because anyone who is new to our society circle garners that response from her. But when I follow her gaze, the martini I’m lifting falters midway to my lips. “*Oh.*”

“*Oh* is most definitely right,” she murmurs as I take in the man who has captured not only my but the entire room’s attention.

He’s tall with broad shoulders, dark hair, and an immaculately tailored suit that stands out in a room full of them. Even at this distance, it’s clear he’s handsome in every sense of the word, but it’s the air about him—brooding, aloof, untouchable, regal—that has me instinctively taking a step closer.

He's standing alone, swirling a glass of amber liquid in his hand, his attention on a scrap metal sculpture that's on the auction block.

He looks like something I'm not supposed to have, and that makes me attracted to him all the more.

A quiet murmur has spread throughout the room as everybody else begins to take notice of the outsider. They feign interest in the auction item he's studying, needing to stare a little longer at the man whose presence is overshadowing it.

"Who is he?" I ask.

"*Damn. Oh . . . it's him.*"

"*Him?*" I ask, clueless but unable to take my eyes off him.

Her smile is a slow crawl across her lips. "The man everyone is talking about. Men and women alike. *Holden Knight*. Now I can see why."

As if on cue, the object of our attention looks up and meets my eyes from across the room. I smile reflexively but receive nothing more than a stoic, assessing stare in return.

Well, well, well. I don't think my mom has to worry about me being the center of gossip tonight. It looks like someone else just took that crown for the time being.



T W O

Holden

They all want to know who I am.

This outsider in their otherwise insular world.

It's in their furtive glances. Their whispered murmurs. The subtle lift of their chins in my direction. They're supposed to be paying attention to the auction. To the money being raised for the charity they claim to support.

But mystery sells better.

Intrigue has a stronger pull.

Who is he?

Where is he from?

How'd he get an invitation?

Who does he know to get in here?

No doubt their list of questions and speculations is long, but they'll know soon enough.

I glance around again as bidding begins on the final item of the evening, and my gaze lingers on the woman who caught my eye earlier. She's stunning and I'm more than intrigued. Or maybe my intrigue has to do with the fact that I'm not exactly sure how she fits into all of this just yet.

Soon enough, though, I will.

As the auctioneer begins, I focus my attention where everyone's should be—on the painting displayed at the front of the room.

Much like the people in this room, it's an eyesore of contrasting

colors, bright and clashing, flashy but meaningless. The lights shining on it, highlighting it, do it no favors, and it evokes absolutely nothing from me other than revulsion.

The *oohs* and *ahs* cutting through the room around me as paddles are raised to bid on it say otherwise.

It's just like the people here to put a ridiculous value on something that doesn't matter. On something that elevates their social status but does nothing for their moral compass.

Then again, who am I to talk, especially with the events I'm here to set into motion? The events I've been planning for years.

"Two," a man calls out from across the room.

I know who he is. I know *what* he is. He's arrogant, immature, and I know the money he just bid isn't exactly his.

He's already in my sights. Unfortunately for him, he doesn't even know it yet.

But why should he? He's a Rothschild. An untouchable figure in this town.

If anyone knows that, it's me.

Well . . . that's all about to change.

The auctioneer scans the room to see if there are any more bidders for the painting. His gavel lifts. He glances around again, giving one final chance. He begins to lower it as all gazes shift to Rhett Rothschild and his apparent winning bid.

Smug fucker.

"Three million." My voice is clear. Commanding. Unwavering. And offering a million more than the last bid. *Rhett's bid.*

Gasps replace the murmured whispers that have been following me all night.

The glances that were sly for the better part of the evening now become unapologetically blatant.

Rhett glares at me. *That's right. I'm stealing your thunder.*

"Three million?" the auctioneer asks, astonishment painting the edges of his tone.

"Three."

He starts to talk but then looks my way again as if to make sure

I didn't misspeak. I nod to let him know I didn't. "Do I hear three million one thousand?" he asks, his gavel already raised as silence permeates the room. "Sold, to one Mr. . . . ?"

"Holden. Holden Knight."

It's my turn to look now. To ignore the auctioneer's stare and scan the room that is completely focused on me, the new man in town who's made sure his name is already known. The one who's paid top dollar to rent out the penthouse at Indigo Towers, the most exclusive building in town due to its steep price tag, endless views, and prime location. The newest member of the Westmore Country Club. The one who has made a point to be seen dining with every important politician in town.

I meet the eyes of those who I know want to meet mine, waiting for a flicker of recognition on their faces or a pause of hesitancy. Neither comes.

Why would they remember someone like me?

Their lax lips morph into warm smiles. Women's cleavages are adjusted. Men's chests are puffed out. The need to suddenly cozy up to the wealthy outsider paramount.

As I expected.

It's amazing what money can do. How it changes perceptions. How it can open doors. *How it can ruin your life.*

I return the smiles now given openly with nods as I make my way through the crowd that parts for me.

That revenge I've been waiting years to exact?

That starts now.

And the man they're all suddenly wanting to know?

They forget that they already do.