

The Davenports: More Than This

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CHAPTER 2

Olivia

Olivia Elise Davenport, smile wide, watched her best friend greet the other guests. The centerpieces were shades of red roses—splashes of Ruby's signature color everywhere. She will be someone's *wife*! Olivia shook her head. This was the desired outcome after all they'd learned from their mothers and governesses. Of course, it had been their parents' wish that the Tremaines and *Davenports* be united through marriage. And at one time, it had been Olivia's too. But to see the joy radiating from her friend—and to know her own heart too—Olivia understood that such things did not come from planning or plotting.

Her own course had been unexpected, yes, but Olivia knew her day would come. Just not yet.

From her spot under the tent, among the blooming pink flowers and neatly trimmed hedges, she watched the couple and allowed an image of Washington DeWight to fill her mind. His strong jaw, honey-colored eyes, and high cheekbones. She was transported back to their evening on the restaurant rooftop, not long before 14

he left Chicago. The air had been filled with the savory steam of food cooking below, and music from a nearby bar wafted on the crisp spring breeze. As the sun set, it filled the Chicago skyline with bright oranges and golds. He'd held her close, his cheek pressed against hers, as they'd danced to the faint rhythm. She recalled the heat that had bloomed under the palm of his hand, splayed across her back.

Her memory painted a clear picture, and his letters—the passion in them, each one ending with some declaration of his affection for her—convinced her the distance between them only existed in the physical sense. He signed them, *Until we dance again, WDW*, which always made her smile, recalling their first dance together—the glint in his eye, his mischief. How much their relationship had changed since they'd first met. She wondered if he kept her own letters.

"So strange," said Helen.

Olivia gasped. "Don't frighten me like that. Helen! How are you so quiet? I thought you went to get cake."

"The table is too crowded," Helen said, eyeing their parents, who had gathered around the desserts. Then her face split into a grin. "I'm quite like a cat. How else do you think I sneak off to the garage undetected?"

Olivia snorted. They both knew she'd been caught more than once.

Helen's eyes flitted across the spectacle. "To think—this was almost you, Livy. Good thing you have such discerning taste." She pretended to ignore Olivia's look. "Though I expect Mama and Daddy would have turned your engagement party into a circus." She sipped her sweet tea.¹⁵

Olivia stared at the sweating glass, her own throat dry. It was still hot, even as the sun lowered. And the crowd was large, consisting of Chicago's prominent families, all of them known to Mr. Tremaine in his efforts to run for mayor, and to the Davenports in their efforts to support him. All these people—at what might have been her wedding.

Olivia agreed with her sister about the circus part, but said, "I think they would have held mine at Freeport if I'd asked. In the ballroom. Maybe made it a more intimate affair."

"And forgo your own long-planned spectacle?" Helen handed Olivia her cold glass of tea. Olivia took a sip, grateful, and handed it back.

The idea of her childhood dreams made Olivia smile.

She glanced at her sister quickly. At one point she and Helen had shared an affection for the same gentleman—Jacob Lawrence, he of the neat mustache and London family fortune. Or so he'd led them to believe. Olivia's engagement to him had been expected, but she had moved on from Mr. Lawrence before the truth came out. She'd found the right person for her in Washington DeWight. The outspoken Southern lawyer surprised her, challenged her, from their very first meeting at Samson House when he'd passionately addressed the crowd. It was there that she'd begun working with Chicago's growing group of civil rights activists. But like she'd told Washington in her letters, she hadn't quite mustered the courage to take the stage as he did. For now, she followed the lead of others, and volunteered when she could at the community center. It was something.

Just not enough.

"Are you planning to leave now that Ruby is getting married? 16

To join Mr. DeWight in Washington, DC?" Helen's eyes had softened, but her gaze was steady.

Olivia took in her sister, who looked so much like their father—same proud nose and perceptive brown eyes. "No, not yet. He's only just arrived in Philadelphia, and my reasons for staying are still my reasons. Chicago is our home. There's so much work to be done and I want to be a part of it." Though Chicago was not segregated like the South, there were spaces where the color line was evident, where citizens' prejudice bled into her everyday life. *Like when simply shopping for fabric.*

"Life can't be just about work, Livy. What about love?"

The question from her sister surprised Olivia, with Helen's own heart so recently broken.

Olivia thought about this city that had given her parents a second chance, the opportunity for her and her siblings to thrive—the booming downtown, the arts and culture. "Who said my decision wasn't for love?"

Before Helen could respond, Olivia saw John detach himself from a rowdy group of friends, his bearing serious. Gone were his easy smile and the dimple that set girls' hearts fluttering. "I'm

ready to leave,” he told his sisters. He shoved his hands in his pockets. His eyes searched the garden, looking for someone they all knew was not there.

“Thank goodness,” said Helen, tipping back the last of her sweet tea.

“Don’t you think *you* should stay?” he teased.

“If you leave me here, John, I’ll—”

“This is a party!” Olivia interrupted. “You *are* allowed to enjoy yourselves. You’re both being rude.”¹⁷

John held up his hands. “How am I being rude?”

Helen smirked and answered first. “Because you’re an eligible young man who hasn’t danced with a single girl here. All the mamas in the room are having fits!”

“My sincerest apologies to all the mamas, but I need to get out of here and back to the garage.” He looked toward the door.

Though they would not admit it, Olivia knew her brother and sister were throwing themselves into their interests instead of their feelings. A family trait, it would seem.

“And the sooner the better. Livy, enjoy yourself. Don’t forget to dance with your *date*.”

They all looked to Everett Stone, a Davenport Carriage Company lawyer, who now spoke with their parents at the desserts table. Olivia felt her face pinch. She wasn’t sure if Mr. Stone himself knew the strings her parents attempted to pull behind the scenes. His face was sharp, square angles—a chiseled sculpture of a young man who garnered almost as much attention in public as she did. And that was the last thing she wanted—more attention. But the challenge in her siblings’ eyes felt like a pebble in her shoe.

“You’re right,” said Olivia, smoothing her features and her pale yellow dress. “It would be *rude* not to.” With a pointed look to her brother, she walked to where Mr. Stone stood. He wore wire-framed eyeglasses and tracked her movements with a curious gaze under thick, powerful brows. Despite Mr. Everett Stone’s quiet appeal and striking good looks, her parents’ attempt at matchmaking hindered Olivia’s plans: Not only was she not enticed—and her mother knew it—but she’d thought she’d have more time to volunteer at the community center. Now she found herself at 18

square one—entertaining in the family parlor under her mother’s watchful gaze, which fell on her now.

Olivia felt rather than saw Mr. Stone rustle beside her. His arm brushed hers, warm and solid. She caught a whiff of mint. It was a calm and soothing scent. Despite her parents’ relaxed demeanor, goose bumps rose on Olivia’s arms. Nearly as soon as Mr. Lawrence’s letter had arrived for her family, excusing himself for the rest of the summer for an emergency back home in London, Everett Stone had appeared at the place setting next to hers at the Davenport dinner table.

Olivia suspected her mother took her choice to stay in Chicago as a sign that she and the Alabama lawyer, Mr. DeWight, were through, as thoroughly as she and Mr. Lawrence were through. But to Olivia, Washington's train pulling away was not the end of their story. She didn't know what the future held for them but . . . she knew her day would come, and she hoped when it did, it would be with Washington DeWight.

She folded her arms against her chest now, seeing the way her parents studied her and her new suitor. The first thing she'd noticed that initial evening at dinner was how deliberately Mr. Stone held his knife and fork. She later realized that he did everything this way. He was not impulsive or animated. He was a lawyer, like Washington; unlike Washington, he was a lawyer for the carriage company and other Black small business owners. Worthy work. But compared to Mr. DeWight, *The complete opposite*, she thought.

She again pictured Washington, his disarming smile, smooth laugh, that Southern lilt that kept her and everyone entranced. Crowds had flocked to Samson House or the steps of the courthouse to hear him speak, and to stand at his side to demonstrate 19

their allegiance in discontent. Olivia had been one of them. In the days after he'd left, she had been inundated with letters from other activists who'd stayed in the city rather than traveling with Mr. DeWight to Philadelphia, and then on to Washington, DC. They had asked the same question she did: *What's next?*

Now, just as she settled beside her mother, Mr. Stone offered his hand. "Would you like to dance, Miss Davenport?" She glanced at her parents, who did a poor job at looking engrossed in conversation.

"I'd like that." She tried to sound convincing as she took his warm hand awkwardly in hers. They joined the other couples, including Ruby and Mr. Barton. Mr. Stone put a hand on her back and drew her into the gentle cloud of mint that enveloped him. His touch was light as he moved them smoothly over the uneven surface of the patio.

"Do you enjoy parties like this?"

"Yes," said Olivia. "I know some find them frivolous, but I do enjoy them." She followed Mr. Stone's gaze, which traveled around the space and settled back on her parents, her mother laughing at something her father must have said. When their eyes met again, the corners of Mr. Stone's perked up before focusing on where their hands met.

"This is my first at this level of"—he paused—"grandeur? It was kind of the Tremaines to invite me." Out the corner of her eye, Olivia saw him nod, as if to himself. "I wouldn't call it frivolous if it allows two people to find a moment of peace and happiness." He chuckled. "If I didn't know better, I'd say your mother blushed when your father kissed her hand earlier."

Olivia couldn't help but smile. She had observed more than a 20

few such moments over the years. When they thought no one was watching, her parents were more affectionate. *Maybe they're just trying to ensure I have the same?* she thought, though the idea didn't ease her mind, not given her present company.

"I think it's wonderful," Mr. Stone said, "that you are surrounded by close friends and family."

"I do count myself lucky." Speaking of, John and Helen were nowhere to be seen—not that Olivia needed them to witness her "fun."

Stop being so stiff, she chided herself. Olivia forced herself to relax to the music and follow Mr. Stone's lead. He seamlessly transitioned them from the slower number to the faster-paced song that followed. He was lighter on his feet than she'd imagined. For a moment, she lost track of the people around them and the warm night air that made her dress cling to her back. She let her thoughts fade and enjoyed the rhythm. When her heel caught a gap in the brick patio, Olivia stumbled, her world tilted—and came to a sudden stop.

Mr. Stone held her firmly in midair. His right hand splayed across her ribs while his other encircled her waist from behind. Olivia tilted her head up to see his brow furrowed above the brim of his wire-frame eyeglasses.

Her lips parted slightly, his touch sending an unexpected jolt down her spine.

"Miss Davenport?" His grip was firm and steady. Over his shoulder, she saw her parents studying this interaction. "Are you all right?" he asked. He lifted her, too high. Her toes grazed the ground.

"Yes," she said. "You may put me down."

He released her quickly. "Forgive me," he said. He withdrew 21

until only their hands touched, his still warm and assuring. He cleared his throat. "Are you enjoying the celebration?"

She nodded. "I am very happy for Ruby." Olivia felt her mind clear. She stood straighter and stiffer, glancing up at Mr. Stone, allowing him to tuck her hand into the crook of his arm and escort her to her parents. The mint and leather scent of him mixed with the vibrant scent of the centerpieces that floated on the summer breeze. Together they made a pleasant combination.

"I very much enjoyed our dance," he said, turning to her. He still held her hand, nestled in the crook of his elbow. He looked at her steadily.

Olivia straightened and, somewhat abruptly, slid her hand away. "Yes, a lovely dance. Thank you, Mr. Stone." She saw Ruby speaking to Agatha Leary and Bertha Wallace, plus an unfamiliar set—friends of Harrison's, no doubt. "If you'll excuse me," she said, ignoring the disappointment that alit briefly on Mr. Stone's face as she turned and made her way to the bride-to-be.

Pulling up the moonlit, tree-lined drive to Freeport always swayed Olivia into a sense of calm. The rest of the party had passed without incident, Olivia having decided to avoid the crowd after all, and make a temporary home of a settee under the starlight. Her feet ached from dancing. All she wanted now was to soak them in salts and fall into bed.

John's automobile was parked at the bottom of the porch stairs. He and Helen had traveled home together, arriving well before Olivia and their parents.

As the carriage rolled to a stop, Mr. Davenport shook his head. 22

"I don't understand why he leaves that thing all over the place like an overgrown toy." He closed his eyes and rubbed the bridge of his proud nose. Then, bracing himself with his cane, he exited the carriage and extended his hand to his wife. Olivia descended quickly after them, and relaxed as she approached the grand staircase of Freeport Manor's wraparound porch and ornate entrance.

Home, at last.

"Olivia," her mother called from inside. "A word before you go to bed."

Unable to stand the throbbing in her toes, she kicked off her shoes, relishing the cool polished parquet beneath her feet, and followed her parents to the library.

"I think you should sit, dear."

"Is this about missing the charity luncheon? I promised my afternoon to Mrs. Woodard." A friend of the reverend, Mrs. Woodard organized many of the community events. She and her mother were members of some of the same social clubs, and both placed a good deal of importance on charitable work.

"It's not that," said Mrs. Davenport.

Dread tingled along Olivia's scalp. Her mother only called her "dear" when unpleasant news was on the horizon. Mr. Davenport walked to one of the high-backed chairs beside the empty fireplace. He held on to his knee, his other hand braced on his cane to lower himself to the seat. Olivia sank into the chair opposite. Her eyes found her mother, now standing at her father's side. They looked like a portrait.

Mr. Davenport cleared his throat. "We understand, Olivia, that Mr. Lawrence left quite an impression on you before he departed for London. He is an intelligent, sophisticated young man." Her 23

father's words came out deliberately and . . . reluctantly, Olivia thought. She studied him. She had long since abandoned thoughts of Jacob Lawrence, of course, as her feelings for Mr. DeWight had grown. But her father didn't know any of that. Brief eye contact with her mother confirmed it. Mrs. Davenport had not shared her daughter's wishes—nor her previous plan—to leave with Washington DeWight the night of the campaign party three weeks ago.

"With him out of the picture," continued Mr. Davenport, "we would like you to refocus."

"Daddy," she said, shocked.

Mrs. Davenport took a step closer to Olivia. "Hope visits us in many forms. So does happiness. We couldn't help see the chemistry between you and Mr. Stone this evening. He has expressed an interest in getting to know you better. And," she said, raising her voice slightly, silencing Olivia's protests, "we think this is the best match for you."

"Match? But I—thought I would get to choose." Hadn't she found her match in Mr. DeWight? Hadn't she told her mother that very thing? Hadn't this pairing been just a temporary show to keep up appearances?

“Olivia,” her mother continued, “Everett Stone is a very eligible bachelor, and after the broken engagement with Mr. Lawrence, we don’t see”—here her mother gave her a pointed look—“another option. Mr. Stone will make a kind and caring husband.”

Olivia did. She saw another option. But he was in Philadelphia, en route to the nation’s capital.

“No,” she said, shaking her head. Her vision was suddenly blurry. Her nose stung. She would not entertain the idea of another engagement, not with a person she didn’t want.²⁴

“You must marry. Someone,” her father said.

“No,” Olivia said, a desperate ring to her voice.

“Be reasonable,” said her mother.

“I am *always* reasonable.” Olivia stood. She felt her fists shaking at her sides. She turned and, to her own astonishment, left the library without another word.

I said no. When have I ever said no? Olivia couldn’t remember a time when she had so openly defied her parents.

She stumbled through the dimly lit halls, her feet taking her to her room, her mind elsewhere. She wasn’t sure how much time passed. Vaguely, she remembered her siblings poking their heads through her cracked door, brows furrowed, faces there, then retreating. At some point, she’d settled at her desk. Now with a trembling hand, she pulled a fresh sheet of paper from under Washington’s letters in her desk. She stared at the blank sheet. The last thing she wanted was to make him worry. Or distract him from his work. From deep inside the desk, she retrieved her journal and used the silk ribbon to reveal a fresh page.

I cannot believe this is happening again.