



## TWO

**M**aybe he's destined to always feel like this: the wounded damsel from a fairy tale, stumbling away from the wolf. He hates it, hates that this is all anyone sees of him.  
Fragile. Delicate. *Falling apart.*

It only takes half a minute of rushing blindly through interconnected rooms crammed with expensive furniture, marble statues, and extravagantly thick rugs before he realizes he has no idea where the conservatory is. His bedroom is a decaying tooth in this sprawling monstrosity of a mansion, and it turns out the rest of the skeleton is unknown to him. He must have run these halls as a child, tagging along after Laurie like a devoted puppy, but nothing is familiar anymore.

Heat throbs behind his eyes and his cheeks flush with the shame of being driven to tears this easily. His lungs flutter like tremulous moths, unused to such exertion. This is why he should stay in the cushioned darkness of his bedroom where he belongs.

Where he can't hurt himself.

Or be hurt.

A scattering of leaves is the only thing that saves him. They lie desolate on a landing, and when he follows the trail, it leads into a tight corridor with carpet as thick as moss. No windows.

He feels his way to the end, where he finds a stained glass door accented with opulent rubies, the pulsing light beyond it sickly and cold.

The door whines open at the barest touch and then he's staring into a glass room with a domed ceiling, the riotous garden outside pressed against the walls.

He breathes in loam and overturned soil, the fresh, earthy smell of snapped stems and growing things. Compared to the unfettered wildness of the outdoor plants, the conservatory is neat, full of long tables of seedlings and cuttings, massive philodendrons lining the walls and ferns hanging like a cloud from the rafters. Spilled potting mix litters the tiled floor. Rusted green watering cans sit next to buckets of small trowels. The only light comes from golden globes hung like miniature suns, and there is a hushed quality to the room, as if it hides a secret.

Unease hooks under Evander's ribs and he can't quite catch his breath. He feels untethered, unsure if he wants to back away or plunge deeper into the conservatory. He needs to stop being pathetic.

But it's inside him, this unexplainable coil of dread.

He's so distracted by the overwhelming amount of plants that it takes him a moment to notice the wicker table surrounded by overgrown alocasia and the old man reclining in a matching chair as if it were a throne.

Byron Lennox-Hall cuts a severe figure in his deep brown suit, his jacket flung over the arm of his chair and his shirtsleeves rolled, pruners still in one hand with green sap dripping from

the blades like blood. Beheaded roses are at his feet, the table littered with stems in various states of being spliced.

He has been watching Evander this whole time, saying nothing.

Now he crooks a finger. *Come here.*

Evander slinks forward, feeling even sicker for his disobedient escape. He stops just out of reach of his guardian and rubs the tips of his fingers against his pajama pants. Looking like a disheveled mess is also very high on his guardian's disapproval list, and sickness does not negate class, as he's told, so if he's out of bed, he should dress properly.

*Be a gentleman. Be eloquent. Be sensible.*

"Someone is not where they should be." Mr. Lennox-Hall's hair is stripped of color, his features chiseled from aristocratic marble, and his eyebrows draw together like two white-capped waves of judgment. His voice is deep and rich and currently holds a note of danger that Evander knows well.

He used to thrash about with tantrums when he was little, wild and hateful of his ill body, and he had to be held down until he took his medicine. The grip had been bruising, remorseless.

"My . . . door was unlocked." Evander could not feel more childish.

There's a flicker of something on Mr. Lennox-Hall's face. Surprise, or maybe unease. Then it's quickly masked. "And what have you been up to during your ill-gotten travels? I suppose you found Laurie."

Evander wraps his arms around himself and nods, his eyes glued to the floor.

“Did anything happen?” Despite the casual tone, the warning is frigid. “I will deal with him for you, of course.”

An odd knot tightens Evander’s throat and he shakes his head, though why he doesn’t want to get Laurie in trouble is beyond him. Nothing, *nothing*, will ever be enough recompense for what he did to Evander.

His body split open. Kidneys damaged. Broken ribs puncturing his own lungs. Forehead swollen. Blood, blood, *so much blood*.

“I thought—” He swallows hard and loathes how whiny this sounds. “You’d come see me once you got back from your trip? It’s just I was waiting . . .” He gives up, his mouth a coffin for all the things he can’t say.

But Mr. Lennox-Hall doesn’t have a chance to answer, because the stained glass door swings open and Carrington appears with a tea tray. He hobbles forward at such speed, he doesn’t register Evander until he’s placed the tray on the wicker table. Then he catches sight of the escaped patient and his eyes go wide.

“Mister Evander. How—*When*—” Carrington’s voice has the reedy quaver of old age and his rheumy eyes look ready to pop out of his skull.

“Not to worry, Carrington.” Mr. Lennox-Hall’s voice is even. “We’ll postpone what you and I were speaking of earlier. It’s clearly not the right time. I’ll escort Evander back to his room myself. Have his nighttime meds prepared, would you?”

“Of course, sir.” Carrington casts one more dismayed look at Evander before scurrying off.

So it wasn’t Carrington who unlocked the bedroom door.

Mr. Lennox-Hall reaches for the tray and pours himself a cup of tea as red as watered-down blood. “Laurie will not be staying at Hazelthorn for the whole summer, if that’s worrying you. I’ll deal with that useless boy so he isn’t bothering anyone.”

Evander is a tiny bit thrilled to not be the useless boy for once.

“Hazelthorn will return to peace and quiet,” Mr. Lennox-Hall says. “Your health is my foremost concern, as always, and I’d rather you not feel stressed.”

“I’m not stressed,” Evander says, his fingers tapping and flicking behind his back due to, perhaps, stress.

Mr. Lennox-Hall eyes him and then downs half his cup of tea. “You do understand why you can’t go wandering, don’t you?”

Agreement is on the tip of Evander’s tongue, because his reward for compliance is always a fond smile.

But something brackish spills out instead and he’s surprised at his own ungrateful daring. “I actually haven’t had an episode in a long time.” His fingertips rub faster and faster against his pants. “And I feel fine. I—I think maybe I should walk around more—”

“No.” Mr. Lennox-Hall throws back the last of his tea and claps the cup down hard enough to rattle the tray. He refills it, not looking at Evander. “Pushing yourself will send you backward and you need your strength for your next surgery. I know it’s hard to accept, but you’ve still a long, long road of recovery ahead.”

“But I don’t *feel*—”

“That’s enough. You’re getting yourself worked up.” Mr. Lennox-Hall coughs and pulls a handkerchief from his pocket

to wipe at his mouth. “Damn this dry throat. Look, I understand you’ve become a bit, shall we say, root-bound as you’ve grown up.” He gives a thin smile and Evander slides a sideways glance at the worktable littered with plants pulled from too-small pots, their roots in matted knots. “But you have to understand your health conditions worsen as you age. I swore by your parents’ graves to give you the best care possible and I will.”

The car accident took all four of them, Evander’s parents and Laurie’s. Four deaths. Two children, orphaned. It should’ve made them close, him and Laurie, and instead it set their teeth at the other’s throat.

But it’s hard not to argue, to push back. “I don’t want another surgery.”

*I don’t understand why I need it.*

*I don’t understand what’s still wrong with me.*

*I don’t understand—*

Another coughing fit hits Mr. Lennox-Hall and he bends double, hacking into his handkerchief before using it to wipe his suddenly sweaty brow. He looks confused by the attack, reproachful at his empty teacup for not soothing his throat.

“We don’t want to trigger an episode,” Mr. Lennox-Hall says. “So let’s get you back to your room and into bed—” He cuts off, his hand going to his throat, and for a stretched minute, he struggles to swallow. His fingers prod at his neck and something moves beneath his larynx. Something that shifts, pushes, *settles*.

Evander’s heartbeat speeds up, his eyes snapping up to stare at his guardian. “Are you okay?”

“I’m—” But Mr. Lennox-Hall’s voice has turned to a serrated

rasp, sweat beading on his forehead. A waxy sheen crosses his eyes.

Panic leaps across Evander's skin.

Then Mr. Lennox-Hall spasms.

It happens fast, his regal position on his wicker throne crumpling as his body convulses and he topples to the gritty floor. Evander leaps forward in confusion, but he's too slow. The old man collapses oddly, his fingers curled into gargoyle claws and his face spasmed in a rictus of pain. His eyes bulge, his mouth turning purple.

He's choking.

Evander throws himself down by the old man's side, grabbing his arm, though he has no idea what to do.

Mr. Lennox-Hall's throat bulges again, that *thing* moving, pulsing, *growing*. When he opens his mouth for a soundless scream, black mucus starts frothing up his throat around the furred outline of what looks like—

Leaves.

No, that isn't possible. None of this is possible—

Scream. Yell for help. *Do something, goddamn it.*

But Evander is paralyzed in mindless horror as he watches another convulsion shudder through Mr. Lennox-Hall's body. His guardian's hand shoots out and snatches Evander, tightening until his wrist bones crunch together in bright, white pain.

"I don't know—" Evander's voice is high with terror. "I don't know what to do! I—I *don't know whattodo*—"

"Do not—" Mr. Lennox-Hall's voice is all gravel as more

black froth bubbles from his mouth and sluices down his chin. The veins around his forehead have popped out and they look—  
black.

He can't breathe. He's choking. He's *choking*.

"Do not—" Each syllable drags like rusted metal. His body begins to shake, violent, unstoppable. "*Do not* go into the gardens. *Swear to me, Evander.*"

But Evander tears free of the gnarled grip and surges for the conservatory door. He has no idea what he's screaming, but it doesn't feel loud enough until, from somewhere deep in the mansion, footsteps begin to pound.

Evander runs back to Mr. Lennox-Hall. He grabs at his convulsing body and tries to roll him on his side. He can't remember the rules of CPR. He doesn't know he doesn't know *whatwhat-what* to do—

By the time the conservatory door bursts open and Laurie explodes inside, Evander is trying to do chest compressions.

He's trying.

Tears pattern the old man's white shirt before Evander realizes he's crying so hard he can barely breathe. He can't think, can't feel, can't even react when arms wrap around his middle and yank him away, someone yelling, "*What the hell did you do!*"

Byron Lennox-Hall's eyes have gone blank long before his body stops seizing, and it is only later, as Evander sits discarded where he was shoved away, that he sees his own hands are covered in a slick, strange oil. It stains the half-moons of his fingernails. He stares as a high-pitched ringing crescendos in his ears.

He doesn't remember when Carrington arrives, barely hears the feeble wail that spills from the man as he tries to help his employer. Laurie bolts from the room and returns with a phone, but they all know it's too late. The Hazelthorn Estate lies deep within the steep green hills of New England, miles from any town.

*Something is growing in his throat*, Evander means to say. *We should root it out so he can breathe again*. But he can't remember how to speak.

He sits there, numb, as he stares at the overturned teacup and then into Byron Lennox-Hall's dead, dead eyes.