

Chapter One

Present Day

Kentucky

The bright jingle of the shop bell rang out as the last customers left, each with a small bag of books. Lily Bennett waved and smiled until they were out of sight and then breathed out a sigh of relief. After three years of moving around, she'd been so certain that this was the place where she could feel at home, but as the late afternoon sun shone through the windows, lighting up the floating dust moats, Lily second-guessed herself. Again.

Bookhalla was a small, dusty bookstore filled to the ceiling with books new and old. Bright gold lettering on the front window beckoned to people browsing the small shops on Main Street. Stained wainscoting lined the lower walls with a muted green paint above, and stuffed club chairs invited guests to linger, read, and breathe in the comfortable scents of old paper and leather. With Lily's love of books, it should have been her dream job. Instead, it did little more than pay the rent on the ratty apartment that her landlord thought was a mansion. It certainly hadn't settled the restlessness that continually stirred in her chest. Corbin Kentucky and Bookhalla were supposed to fill that void, not crack it open wider.

She pushed away the pang of odd emotion and sat at the mahogany monstrosity that her boss called a desk. Cranks raised the desk top up and down to different heights, tilted a section into a drafters table, or raised a bank of drawers in the back that were otherwise hidden. It had more gears than her watch. Somehow, it suited Mr. Samuel perfectly, like his own personal Frankenstein.

Lily retrieved her cell phone from the purse that she'd stashed beneath the desk. Her belly fluttered as she turned it on. Despite her misgivings about Corbin, she'd mustered her courage, and the last of the money from the sale of her parents' home and put in an offer on a three-bedroom cabin on the river. It would be a new place for her to call home. A place that *felt* like home. Hopefully, it would be one that Archer and Bellamy would come back to as well. They needed to be a family again. Her brother and sister were all she had left.

She glanced at the glossy fashion magazine on the desk as she waited for the phone to start. Her little sister, Bellamy, graced the cover in a tiny, sapphire-blue Louis Vuitton bikini, splashing through clear aqua water in a tropical paradise. With long, blond hair, blue eyes, a willowy frame, and legs for miles, photographers practically salivated to book her.

Lily pushed her glasses up on her nose. At five feet three, even though she had a decent hourglass figure and wavy, caramel-brown hair, she'd always been invisible next to her sister. Not that it mattered. Bellamy lived in New York now. The last man to pay any attention to Lily had constantly picked at the way she looked and how she dressed. He wanted a beautiful, elegant woman to hang on his arm at parties, not a nerdy wallflower who still didn't know what she wanted to be when she grew up. A woman who found more excitement in her romance novels than she ever did in real life. He wanted a woman like Bellamy.

Lily stuffed those thoughts away with all the others that kept her awake at night and tucked the magazine into her purse. She was proud of her sister for reaching her dreams. If a bit of envy tinged that pride, she ignored it. Just as she dismissed the pangs she felt whenever she thought of the silly, childish dreams she once had. Besides, it was a waste of time to mourn a past that couldn't be changed. All she could do was see to the future. One that would hopefully bring her remaining family back together and settle the ache in her chest that left her feeling *lost*.

Lily jumped when her cell phone rang in her hand. For half a moment, she hoped it was her older brother, Archer, finally returning her calls. Last year, rebels attacked his Navy Seal team, and his physical injuries ended his military career. Lily didn't know any of the details, only that after months in the hospital, he was now stateside and refusing her every effort to talk to him. It appeared that now was no exception.

"Hello, Mr. Samuel," she said, hoping her boss didn't hear the disappointment in her voice.

"Lily, I forgot the rental contract for Mr. Pederson, and he's a bit put out. Can you find it and bring it to me?"

She pressed her lips together, trying not to laugh. Ely Samuel would forget his shoes if they weren't already on his feet. He owned the building and was attempting to rent out the space next door. "Of course. Where do you think you left it?"

He paused, and in the background, she heard the clink of dishes and silverware and the dull conversation of a restaurant. "It must be in my desk. I couldn't have left it at home, could I?"

Anything was possible, she thought. "I'll find it. Where shall I bring it?"

He gave her the name of a restaurant in the nearby town of London and hung up.

She spent a couple of minutes searching the various drawers at the front of the desk before giving up and retrieving one of the metal cranks. At first, it didn't budge, but with some pushing, pulling, and a little bit of swearing, Lily turned the gears that lifted the back set of drawers into place. The first few held some paperclips, an old metal bottle cap, and a cat toy shaped like a mouse. The last drawer only opened an inch.

Lily frowned and stuck her finger into the gap, feeling for something that could jam the drawer. A plastic pen shifted, giving her another half inch. She put two fingers into the opening, feeling around the sides and top of the drawer. Her fingers brushed over cool metal on the left, and she pushed at it, though the angle was awkward and made the wood dig into her hand.

Click.

Lily paused. The metal piece had barely moved, yet she'd heard the sound distinctly. Still, the drawer wouldn't budge. She ran her fingers through the space one last time, telling herself that this was ridiculous. Mr. Samuel wouldn't go through all this effort to file a contract, would he? *Hmm. This was eccentric Mr. Samuel. He probably would.*

At last, she found the pen jammed against the top of the wood. A bit of maneuvering and it slipped down, freeing the drawer. Lily pulled it open. Inside lay the contract.

"Of course," she murmured. As she took it out, the back of the drawer caught her attention. She didn't see the metal piece she'd pressed and a chip in the wood of the back wall showed a dark space behind. On instinct, Lily pulled the drawer further out. She sucked in a surprised breath. The drawer had a false back wall that hid a compartment only four inches deep. In it lay a dusty, black velvet box.

It appeared to be a very old jewelry box of some kind. She should leave it alone and close the drawer, but curiosity trampled common sense faster than she could consider the consequences. Lily set the contract aside and picked up the box. Tingles raced over her arms as she imagined what treasure might lie within. A bauble for a lover? A medal from a war hero? She opened the lid and gasped. Nestled on a bed of black satin lay a small, red enamel egg with gold filigree. She lifted it out of the box, surprised at its weight. It was perhaps two inches tall

and an inch in diameter, easily fitting into her palm. Miniature gold hinges and narrow, vertical lines of gold hinted that the little egg opened down its center.

It was the loveliest thing she'd ever seen, much like the famous Fabergé eggs in its detail. Lily slipped a fingernail between the gold sections and gently opened the egg. Mauve silk lined the inside shell and revealed a gold clock face with two little figurines beneath. No, two *dancers* of considerable detail. A man in a suit with tails reached his arms toward a slim woman. One of her hands held the skirt of her gown to one side, and the other reached for the man. Behind them was a round opening where she could see the inner workings of the clock, and it appeared as though a metal bar moved the figures. Her breath caught. Did they dance together at a certain time? Maybe on the hour?

How long had this little egg been hidden in this drawer? Did Mr. Samuel know of it? It seemed unfortunate to leave it tucked away for years, never seen or admired for its unusual beauty. Breathless, Lily sat up straighter. Maybe she could finally repay him for his kindness. He'd been the only person in town willing to give her a job. The people of Corbin were friendly, but wary of strangers. She'd almost been forced to move on, and then Mr. Samuel offered her a part-time job.

A bookstore seemed so ideal. Books had been her only escape from the grief of losing her parents a week after graduating high school. With Archer on secret military assignments, she became the sole caretaker of a teenage Bellamy at the height of her rebellious years. The only way Lily could visit exotic places was in the pages of a book, preferably romance, where conflicts were resolved and everyone lived happily ever after.

Lily tucked the egg back into the velvet box, grabbed the contract, and put both into her purse. Gathering up her keys and phone, she locked up the store and headed for the restaurant in London to drop off the contract.

Probably the closest I'll ever get to the real London.

Half an hour later, after she had delivered the contract to Mr. Samuel, Lily parked her battered old Honda in front of her apartment and shut the car off. She did a quick search but didn't see anyone lurking nearby. With luck, she'd make it to her apartment without bumping into either her creepy landlord or her ex-boyfriend. Both hovered around her door more and more frequently. Even though it was an unseasonably warm day for October, a shiver tracked down her spine. She quickly locked the car, and all but sprinted to the stairs.

Two flights up, Lily let out a sigh of relief to see her doorway empty. Then her landlord stepped out of a shadowed alcove a few feet down from her. It was clear that he'd been waiting for her. Lily's stomach flipped over, and her mouth went dry. Squaring her shoulders, she power-walked to her door and ignored the man heading her way. Her fingers shook as she found the apartment key on her key chain. She stabbed the key into the lock and turned it just as the overwhelming smell of sweat, beer, and cigarettes hit her.

"Lily," her landlord rasped. He was only a few years older than her, probably in his early thirties, but his hair was thinning, and the lines on his face made him look closer to forty.

She thrust the door open and hurried inside, calling out, "Sorry, Dennis. I have to pee!" She slammed the door in his face and engaged the locks before sagging against the wall.

"Come see me, Lily," he called. Several horrible, phlegmy coughs sounded, then he added, "We need to talk."

God, she had to buy that cabin. She couldn't stay here any longer. Besides the exorbitant rent, the apartment was smaller than the bathroom in the house she'd grown up in. She had just enough room for a foldout bed, a small table with two chairs, and a bookshelf. The only closet was the linen closet in the bathroom, which was barely wide enough for a folded towel. The kitchen could be traversed in three steps and boasted such luxuries as a half-size stove with only two burners, a microwave that couldn't fit a big coffee mug, and a refrigerator not much wider than her hips.

Lily set her purse on the table, pulled her phone out, and checked her email. Unfortunately, there was no news from the realtor. What if she'd been outbid? What if the owners didn't want to sell to someone who hadn't lived in the town for more than a couple of months? No, she just had to be patient. This cabin would be a place of comfort, not just for her, but also for Archer and Bellamy. They needed that. *She* needed that.

Her stomach chose that moment to give a very loud rumble, reminding her that she'd only had an apple for lunch. She opened the freezer, moved the broken ice tray aside, and got out a microwave dinner. While it heated, she fished under the bed until she found the small parcel of tools. During her brief stay in Tennessee, she'd tried her hand at making jewelry to sell online for extra money. She hadn't made enough to even break even on the supplies. At least the tools might finally come in handy with the little clock.

She laid a soft cloth over the wood table, then carefully opened the velvet box and removed the delicate egg. The dim dining room light didn't diminish its beauty. It needed cleaning, but Lily feared ruining it. Instead, she opened the tool bag and selected a pair of tweezers. Pushing up her glasses, she opened the egg and carefully moved the clock hands. The

little dancers clicked but didn't move as the minute hand reached twelve. As she suspected, they should dance when the clock struck the hour.

She found the latch that exposed the inner workings of the clock and was surprised to find a small crystal at its center. *Hmm, maybe that's part of the decoration.* Lily studied the movement for a few moments, uncertain what she was looking for. She was about to close the clock case when she spotted the little bar under the female dancer. It should connect to the gear behind it as it had with the male dancer's, but had slipped off. With exquisite care, Lily used the tweezers to reconnect the bar and closed the case. Holding her breath, she wound the tiny spring and saw the gears begin to turn. The minute hand moved and the watch softly ticked.

Lily's fingers shook as she moved the minute hand around to just before twelve. With luck, the little dancers would come together. From the placement of their arms, it looked like they might stand close. Lily bit her lip and nudged the hour hand onto the twelve.

One second passed. Two.

Then the male dancer moved to the middle of the open space, and the female joined him. His arm raised up to take hers, and they slowly began to spin. She laughed in delight as the dancers whirled around on an invisible dance floor. White light glowed behind them, making the gold of their bodies shine. It pulsed brighter.

Lily blinked against the glow. Then light flared from inside the watch, blinding her. She tried to stand, to back away, but her feet tangled in the legs of the chair and she fell backward. Scrabbling to catch herself, she reached out blindly but found only air. Pain shot up through her backside as she hit the floor, and before she could process it, her head struck the corner of the bookcase. Her vision blurred. Then darkness took hold and dragged her under.

Steady pounding roused Lily back to consciousness. She blinked and shielded her eyes from the light. Thick, gray clouds covered the sun, yet it seemed unusually bright and turned her stomach. She heard several voices but couldn't make out their words. The stench of rotten garbage filled her nose and mouth, making her gag. She tried to turn away from the smell, but tilting her body that way made her fall to her hands and knees. The pounding was louder here. Taking a shaky, shallow breath, she blinked to clear her vision. Several pairs of leather shoes moved past, but none stopped.

Lily forced herself back onto her heels and looked around. Everything was fuzzy and a bit blurred. Her head throbbed, and she felt nauseated. A woman and a young girl hurried by, wearing flowered bonnets and cloaks over colorful gowns.

What the... where...?

She turned her head to look around, but the sudden movement made her want to vomit. She breathed through the pain until her brain could right itself enough to make sense of what she was looking at. Lily knelt on a sidewalk between two shops. The buildings were either brick or simple wood structures. The alley behind her was the source of the rotting stench. Men in suits with long coats and beaver hats walked beside women in long gowns. Several buggies were parked along the street, and a horse and carriage rolled by. A few people cast her alarmed glances, then rushed past. The skies chose that moment to open up, and cold, fat raindrops sank into her clothes and skin.

Lily pushed to her feet, swayed, and found her balance. It took longer to settle her stomach, and she pressed her fingers to the throbbing in her temple. Another pounding ache was making itself known at the back of her head. She lifted her other hand and winced when she

found a large knot and her fingers came away red with blood. As she watched, the steady rain rinsed her fingers clean.

Nearby, a loud, clattering sound made her jump. Lily spun toward the noise, stumbled on unsteady legs, and stepped into the road. A horse whinnied. Someone shouted, and the black blur of a horse and coach heading directly for her finally registered in her sluggish brain. She threw herself back toward the sidewalk and landed in a crumpled heap. Pain shot through her arm. Her stomach heaved from the sudden movement, and she swallowed several times to hold back the bile.

Lily sucked in a deep breath. Before she could right herself, a crowd had gathered, and a pair of blurry white boots stopped beside her.

She looked up, winced, and grabbed the back of her head. Two images of a woman appeared, wavering until they merged into one person, a young woman, looking down at her with alarm.

She said something, but Lily couldn't make out the words. Her ears rang, and her head throbbed. She tried to shake her head, but that only made the nausea worse. The woman reached down and gripped her arm, helping her to stand. A man wearing some sort of blue uniform was at her side in seconds, and between the two, they loaded Lily into the black carriage.

“Wha...?” she slurred.

The coach lurched forward, jarring her abused body. Dark spots danced before her eyes until the carriage faded into a gray, blurring sea of pain.

*October 1813
Hawthorne Hall
England*

Gabriel Hawthorne, the fourth Earl of Rothden, placed the last shotgun back in the case with the others and closed the glass door. He'd cleaned all twelve in anticipation of the house party, though some of his guests would bring their own. Particularly Somersby, who could expound on the merits of a good hunting weapon for hours at a time.

"Reginald." Gabriel's steward would be hovering just outside his study about now, no doubt hoping that Gabriel would ring for tea or some such nonsense.

"Yes, my lord," the older man replied, stepping into the study almost immediately. His thinning black hair showed far more gray than black at his temples, and he had a long, narrow face and prominent nose. He wore the dignity of an earl's steward like a shield.

"Make sure to seat Somersby at the other end of the table at dinner during the house party. I want to enjoy these last two weeks." Gabriel sat at his desk and opened his correspondence.

"Then why did you invite him, my lord?"

"Impertinent," Gabriel groused halfheartedly. He didn't give a whit what Reginald asked. The man had been the Hawthorne family steward for over two decades. Were he ever to fire the cantankerous old fatwit, he'd likely lose more than half of his staff for the effort. "I'm hoping he'll be my proxy in Parliament. A man can only stand so much posturing and ridiculous debate, but Somersby seems to relish it."

"Little wonder," Reginald muttered. Then louder, "Are we also expecting Lady Montrose?"

"No. We've ended our arrangement."

"Very good, my lord." Reginald's tone brightened considerably with that news. Apparently, Gabriel wasn't the only man disenchanted with the voluptuous widow.

“You still plan to leave for London on All Saints’ Day?” the steward inquired.

He grimaced at the thought. “Or the following. Is everything ready for my guests’ arrival?”

Reginald huffed. “Yes, my lord. The rooms are aired, and Cook is already preparing menus.”

“Thank you, Reginald.”

Dismissed, the man left the study.

Gabriel relaxed back in his chair and smiled. His guests would arrive in two days’ time for what he hoped would be an enjoyable house party. Besides plans for hunting and shooting, he had planned card games, and a musicale for the ladies, all culminating in a masquerade ball. He could have done without the last, but his sister Violet had begged and pleaded for it. He’d relented simply to make her happy.

Regardless, this was his last respite before journeying back to London for another God-awful Season. Even if he could secure a proxy for Parliament, the next eight months were going to be his own version of hell. Endless invitations to dinners and balls, simpering chits and their money-hungry mothers who hovered about him looking for weakness so they could pounce. A parade of suitors for Violet’s hand in marriage.

Gabriel’s stomach sank, and his chest felt heavy. She was of age, he reminded himself. After coming out last Season, young bucks had relentlessly pursued her until Gabriel had insisted on attending every event as her chaperone. Violet had not been happy. To this day, she bemoaned how many of her friends were already married. Gabriel no longer had an excuse. He would find a suitable match for Violet, even though it meant she would leave to live with her

husband. The Season would begin soon enough. Until then, he had one last respite, and he intended to enjoy every moment of his freedom.

No sooner had the thought crossed his mind when a ruckus of banging doors and loud voices sounded from the entry hall. Gabriel rose and strode out of his study. From the top of the stairs, he could see Violet and Reginald practically yelling at one another while one of his footmen held a limp person in his arms. His housekeeper and a maid hovered around them.

“Violet, please tell me you didn’t kill someone while out shopping today,” he said as he descended into the chaos.

His sister rounded on him and put her hands on her hips. Her amber eyes flashed. Her green bonnet was askew, and water dripped from her limp, dark brown curls. When had it started to rain? “Of course not. I’d save that honor for someone I knew.”

The way she stated it implied he might hold that honor in the future.

“Did the milliner have a sale on strangers, then?”

Violet huffed as he reached her side. “She stepped out in front of the carriage. We didn’t run her down, but she took quite a fall.”

“She’s sleeping again,” the footman added.

She? “Why did you bring her here?” he asked as he leaned closer to have a look at the woman in the footman’s arms. Long, brown hair was plastered to her head so he couldn’t see much of her face. Her skin was pale, and he glimpsed soft, pink lips. A few freckles dotted her nose and the cheek he could see.

“Should I have left her in the street after nearly running her over? Is that proper etiquette for these situations? I don’t recall reading about that in *The Mirror of Graces*.”

Gabriel shot her a dark look, then turned his attention back to their unexpected guest.

The footman adjusted her in his arms. "Seems she has a head injury, my lord."

"Oh?"

"Oy, she's bled on me good."

Now that the man mentioned it, Gabriel detected a faint coppery scent in the air. He closed his eyes for a moment, summoning patience before he turned back to Violet.

"I sent for the doctor already," she blurted. "We should settle her someplace warm."

"The drawing room," Gabriel ground out and followed behind the small party.

They lay the woman on a chaise lounge, and Violet tucked a pillow under her head. They hadn't used the drawing room much today and, as a result, there was a chill in the air. Gabriel set to stoking the fire.

"Someone get her a blanket," he said as he returned to the chaise and looked down at the woman. Now that her hair had been pushed off her face, he could see that she had delicate features. Pale skin and those pretty, pink lips. She wore tortoiseshell spectacles. He wondered what color her eyes were as he scanned the rest of her body. She wasn't tall, that was certain. She wore a thin, black shirt with capped sleeves. The wet material clung to her form, outlining every luscious inch of her breasts. He swallowed and dragged his gaze away, only to startle at her legs.

"Good God, are those trousers?"

Violet grinned, eyes shining with undisguised glee. "Scandalous, isn't it? I think we'll be the best of friends."

Gabriel tilted his head back and looked at the plaster ceiling with its intricate carvings.

"Violet..."

"She needs our help, Gabriel."

"And we shall give it to her. The doctor is on the way?"

His sister nodded.

Good. With the jostling of her as they settled on the chaise, the woman should have roused. He noted the rise and fall of her chest as she drew steady breaths, the damp fabric stretching tightly with every move. Where the hell was that blanket? The next county over?

Before he could inquire, her eyes fluttered open. His heart thudded at the sight. Her eyes, framed by thick, dark lashes, were the most unusual shade, somewhere between blue and green.

She blinked and raised a hand to run her fingertips over his stubbled jaw. A slight smile teased her lips, and she hummed.

Gabriel cleared his throat and stepped back to keep a respectable distance between them. She latched onto his hand instead, her cool fingers wrapping around his palm. When he looked into her eyes again, they were clouded with pain and appeared unfocused. He didn't have the heart to tug his hand away. She seemed to need the comfort.

Violet put her hand on his arm, drawing his attention. "Thank you, Gabriel. I know we have guests arriving, but she looked so lost when I tried to help her."

"You spoke to her?" Violet nodded. "What did she say?"

"Nothing. She seemed disoriented, so I brought her here. Looking like she does, I wasn't sure..."

If anyone else would help her. The words, though unspoken, rang true. A woman wearing trousers was likely to find the wrong attention, even in a small village like Marston.

"You did well, Vi."

She beamed at him and wrapped her arms around his waist. "She won't be any trouble, I promise."

Gabriel glanced back at the woman. Somehow, he doubted that. Especially with Violet around. As much as he loved his sister, she was willful, mischievous, and often drove him mad. God help him if there were two women like that living under his roof.

“When do people arrive?” Violet asked, dragging him out of his thoughts.

“Thursday.”

“Will Christian be here?”

“By God, he better, or I’ll drag him out of his house myself.” Gabriel had written to the man three times about it. With every year that passed, Christian retreated further from society. Even country house parties like this one. It didn’t matter that he’d become the Earl of Huntington. So long as someone else could see to his estates, Christian was happy to spend hours in his workshop with his gadgets. They’d been friends for over a decade and a half, since schooling at Eton. Gabriel had no intention of letting the man become a complete recluse. If he had to suffer through a Season, then he’d make damn sure that Christian was right there to suffer with him. It’s what friends did.

Violet giggled. “I’m awfully glad that you’re not my best friend, Gabriel.”

“As am I, Vi.” He said the words but didn’t mean them. In his heart, he knew he’d miss Violet terribly when she wed and moved away. Perhaps he could wait a little longer to find her a suitable match. It was selfish of him, but he couldn’t regret the thought. The house would be too quiet without her.

A carriage pulled into the drive then, the clip clop of the horse’s hooves muted by the windows and light rain.

“That’ll be the doctor,” Reginald said.

Gabriel nodded. “Show him in.”