

CHAPTER 1:

I was buying loneliness when the most beautiful man I'd ever seen before walked in and sat down next to me. He ordered a Black Sambuca and soda, "lot's of ice," he said. I wet my bottom lip. I was drinking something boring: a house gin and ginger – not because I wanted to but because it's all I could afford. As of 10:07 that morning I had officially heard from my deep-pocketed father's lawyer, a man by the name of Walker Leroy Putterman who informed me of my new unfortunate circumstances. "You've been cut off," he said. "Your father loves you." Loving me meant leaving me destitute without prospects or a whole hell of a lot of experience in the world to dig my elbows in and work up a grease sweat. I gagged and sobbed more for appearances sake and for a salty release. My hands weren't fated for grime and I didn't want them to rust or chip like the blue-grey carvings of Michelangelo. I panicked as any heiress to a large fortune who'd just been financially decapitated would and took refuge in a boozier hole-in-the-wall called The Fontana.

Back at the bar, my thigh brushed against this man strategically. He didn't react which in my spoiled nature made me quite put out. I flagged the barman, who's name I didn't bother learning, for a top up. "Wait no," I said, "gimmie a White Sambuca and bubble-water please." Bulls-eye. The pretty boy looked left, left was me and I smiled my heart-ripper grin for him.

"What are you playing at?" He said.

"I'm not much for games, I always lose," I said.

"Not many people like liquorice," he said. "It's a very acquired taste."

"So am I," I said and smiled again, but only from the right.

My wit was winking and he seemed to be enjoying the banter. He ordered another round and began describing to me the process of distilling Sambuca, which I only partially paid any attention to. Inside the fretful part of my brain was uncoiling a string of thoughts connected to my foreboding homelessness. My digs cost roughly five thou, give or take a penny or two per month and that was just the rent. Life expenses ran a little deeper, but to look at me you wouldn't think I ate so well. I exist on more of a liquid diet, if you get my meaning and so far in life it's got me and the rest of the Raventhal's along just fine. Foo, I better pay attention in case he asks me a question.

"...so it is extracted all the way from there and surreptitiously brought here and wrought out to dry and wither like a raisin. That's why the flavour's so rich."

"Mmm," I mmm'ed.

"Bobbie?" A voice behind me called my name. Usually when this type of thing happens I stay as still as possible and make no sudden movements – like in the wild when an antelope doesn't want to be spotted by a carnivorous predator.

"Quick, play dead with me!" I said to Sambuca-Man.

"Bobbie Raventhal?" The call came again and it tagged-on my glorious last name which if any one knows means etiquette-wise I was slain. Jolly good show Old Boy, you win – must show good face and be cordial as to protect the Raventhal reputation. I spun around and feigned a happy front. Then a genuine happiness surprised me and I heard myself squeak: "Watney Corso!"

It took only Watney seeing my face to wrap his arms around my waist and nuzzle his smutty chin into my neck. He smelled me as he did. I felt a touch naked.

"I thought you were in London!" He exclaimed and beamed back at me.

"I thought you were in the shower," I said – little private joke – remind me to bring it up later on account of a scolding that needs to be done, but now's not the time nor the place.

"I like it when we're both wrong," he said and triple kissed my blushy cheeks.

The man I was flirting with before cleared his throat obnoxiously and I remembered my training: "Oh, Watney this is...uh...this is...."

"My name is..."

"Not important," interrupted Watney and I smacked his arm and told him not to be rude. He said, "Well he's not with you is he? Your body language is unfamiliar."

"How would you know?" I shot back, a little more indignant than intended.

"My name is Miller Fortinger and you, Sir, are quite the brute," said my handsome stranger and I giggled and apologized on his behalf. He tutted: "Don't do that for me, I thank you." But I ignored him and so did Fortinger. I looked at my prospect, thinking how funny it was that only seconds ago I had been the pursuer of this flirtation. I looked again, without all his talking he sure was handsome.

Truth is, as handsome as he was, and he was, I wanted nothing more than to whisk Watney away into a deep dark speakeasy and gab for as long as the night would hold out. Manners are manners though and I had a name to guard. The Raventhals are a very stubborn, proud, tight bunch of neanderthals in dripping diamonds. If I'd fancied myself a Maid Marion, Watney was Robin Hood – though sadly, the fairy-tale remained only on the pages and actually Watney's more of a King Richard kind of cat. Then came a sinking in the pit of my stomach as a girl prettier than me walked in and weaved her slender arm into the crook of my Watney's elbow. But I'm a Raventhal and as that's true I have a poker-face even ole Bugsy couldn't crack his pistol into. I faked one of my best smiles and tilted my head cordially as he pronounced her name to the pulled air: "This is Amiretta Applegate Price," he said then added, "And this is Bob," introducing me. If I weren't a Raventhal I might've withered like Fortinger's dried up liquorice sticks. She giggled at my expense and to save face I laughed at myself too, a wonderful little tactic taught to me by Mummy, and one I use often in terrible times like these. If you laugh the loudest, people won't see you're made of Swiss cheese.

"Did your parent's really name you Bob?" She asked, stupidly but before I could insult her with wit that she wouldn't understand, Watney was a quicker draw to reveal me: "She hates it when I call her that but isn't she gorgeous when she's red-

faced and squirmy." Fortinger, an obvious gentleman almost objected on my honour but I pressed his shoulder back down and shook my head that it was all right.

"The drink is such a silent Devil, is it not?" I said.

Watney leaned over the bar and stuck his finger up for the barkeep and asked for a Gin and Tonic with Cucumber if he happened to have it. Amiretta looked at me the way a person looks at a frog about to be dissected; I curled my eyes up.

"Watney?" She asked and he turned his head and I was happy to see not all the way around. A man who really likes a doll will turn his whole body if she's important. "You didn't introduce Miss...Bob's...date..." she finished.

"That's because he isn't that. They've only just met and I don't like the look of him much." He said. "Golly! Our arrival may have just shifted the course of history. If not for the interjection he might've become the future Mrs. Raventhal!" He laughed loudly, and it cut through the place.

"It's true," I began, "This is Mister Miller Fortinger, did I say that right? And he and I have only just been acquainted. He has quite the thorough knowledge of Sambuca spirits."

I could feel Watney's incredulous eyes on my face, but I didn't dare give him the satisfaction of eye contact. Amiretta shook Sambuca-Boy's hand and they both said how-do-you-do and charmed-to-make-your-acquaintance as is customary. They were the same level of attractiveness and I found it interesting that neither of them seemed to notice.

"How is it you two met one another?" I asked Amiretta and watched her face light up in the way one does when they're broadsided by infatuation.

"Well, see, my father Lord Hockney Applegate Price owns Applegate Price Laudnam and Brine. And—"

"I work for the man," interjected Watney. "We met because I spilled wine on my trousers and she dabbed my inner upper thigh with a wet towel."

Amiretta's lips parted and I supposed she wasn't ready for Watney to be so honest. She lowered her eyes and clutched at her little purse and I jabbed Watney in the ribs when she wasn't looking.

"What a charming meet-cute," I said. "Just charming."

"I think I'll step outside for some air," she said and made for the door.

Fortinger slid over a business card with his name and telephone number on it and stood up from his bar stool, "That's about all the absurdity I can tolerate for tonight. It seems I'm interrupting some kind of strange reunion, I feel it might be best to leave you to it. Miss, it was a pleasure to meet you." Then he turned to look at Watney, "You on the other hand..."

"Ariva-dirche, Mick" Watney said with a wink.

"It's Miller," he said.

"Yeah whatever," said Watney and I placed a hand on Fortinger's arm so he wouldn't use it for violence. "G'bye, Miller. And thank you. I but almost thought chivalry was dead." I put his card in my purse with no intention of ever using it.

"Call me if you'd like to improve your company," he said and then turned on his heel and left.

“You’d better go check on the prim,” I said and Watney leaned close to me. Close so that his lips were swallowed in my hair, “Why didn’t you tell me you were back in town?” He whispered softly. “You could’ve called.”

I shrugged. The truth is, I didn’t know why I didn’t. Sometimes it’s just in a person’s nature to disappear.