

Chapter One: Parting is Such Sweet Sorrow

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I was putting on my coat just as the door rang, signaling that Clay had arrived to pick me up. Seeing that the knocking was loud and slightly frenzied, I knew that I was right in my assumption before I even opened the door. They were standing casually on my front porch with the painted sunset stretched out from behind them.

I glanced at them up and down. “You make me feel underdressed.”

Clay was decked out in a dark corduroy suit and a maroon tie that accentuated their copper tinted, curly hair and dark eyes. They smiled charmingly.

“Oh, don’t. You know I always dress up for events. Especially for an extravagant dinner party.”

“I do know. You aren’t exactly subtle.” I sighed, locking my door and stepping outside. “How many people are going to be there anyway?”

“I’m not sure, it’s hard to tell with Mr. Mason. Either way, the party’s bound to be interesting.”

“So I’ve heard.”

Our conversation had died off as I followed Clay to where they had their blue convertible parked in front of my house. I stumbled over the steps of my front porch, expecting Clay to laugh, but they simply steadied me and we kept walking. The late sun was shining brightly on their dark olive skin and deep honey colored hair. I wasn’t sure how to respond when they first invited me to the dinner party. I had heard enough about Clay’s mysterious family friend and theater professor, Mr. Mason, to be wary yet curious. However, I didn’t know much about him other than that he lived in a large mansion and had an inclination toward lavish parties. I supposed it was the actor in him. In all honesty, I wasn’t very fond of theatre myself.

Clay had majored in criminology, and had a career as a detective with our police department. Despite the criminology degree, they had also double majored in theatre. I wasn’t sure how involved Clay was in theatre now, but when they were, I had heard that my friend was rather good. That was the main reason I was going to the party with them tonight, the fact that they were a very dear friend of mine. Otherwise, I would’ve stayed far away from the secluded mansion full of theatre majors.

Mr. Mason’s house laid on the outskirts of our home town and was buried deep within the woods. That fact alone made me uneasy. I had seen enough horror movies to notice my palms start to sweat as we pulled into the heavily wooded drive.

“He lives here?” I gasped, peering out the window. “Now I *really* feel underdressed.”

Mr. Mason’s mansion loomed at the end of the long and winding driveway. It was much bigger than I anticipated and looked to be an old Victorian Gothic house. I was again reminded of the crumbling mansions seen in horror movies.

The outside was made of cracked grey and brown brick that was covered in a slow-creeping ivy. The architecture of the mansion was filled with strange curves and arches that gave the house an ancient and peculiar looking shape. There were small balconies and ledges surrounding the length of the building. Each was the color of decaying cinder blocks. There were too many windows to count around each curvature of the house. A golden glow shone from the clean glass and onto the freshly cut lawn.

I knew Mr. Mason was wealthy, but I didn’t realize he was *this* wealthy. A flash of insecurity crossed me as I glanced down at the Hawaiian-printed dress shirt I was wearing and my pair of black slacks. If I didn’t already stand out as a stranger, I certainly did now.

“It’s only a retirement party, Park.” Clay tried to reassure me as they parked their car among the many others in the driveway. “It’s really not that big of a deal.”

I sighed, giving them a pointed look. “There better at least be good food.”

Clay grinned, shaking their head with amusement as we both got out of their convertible. All the other cars in the driveway were empty, and it appeared that we were the last ones to arrive. My heart thumped loudly in my chest. The last thing I needed was a grand entrance.

With my hands becoming uncomfortably sweaty, I hesitantly followed to where Clay was waiting at the front door. As I got closer, I realized that it had been hand carved. I stared in awe at the intricate details that were spread out over the dark wood. A tree had been etched carefully into it. Each branch reached upwards toward the center of the door, and the leaves that covered them were so detailed that I could glimpse the veins stretching out in every one.

The most curious part about the door was the cast iron door knocker. It was in the shape of a giant raven. The beak was open in a scream, and each eye was plated with a red glittering gem. I shuddered at the sight of it. Unbothered, Clay pushed their glasses further up their nose as I approached, and gave a firm couple knocks at the door.

My heart nearly stopped when the door was immediately whisked open. However, instead of the elderly Mr. Mason whom I was expecting, I was instead greeted by a younger man. He had expressive almond eyes, a straight nose, and no smile. His long black hair was pulled neatly back into a low bun, with a few strands sticking out around his face.

“Mx. Easten, glad you could make it. Mr. Mason will be thrilled,” the man greeted Clay evenly, without batting an eye toward me. “We’re still waiting for a few others, but you can come on in with everyone else.”

Clay pulled us hesitantly through the open door. “Please, Oliver, it’s Clay. Still.”

“Yes, and I am *still* using formalities at the request of Mr. Mason,” Oliver closed the door behind us, but stopped abruptly as he realized I was there. “And who is this?”

“Parker-, uh, Mx. Finn.” I stammered awkwardly.

“Nice to meet your acquaintance. I can take your coat, and then Mx. Easten can show you to the parlor.”

I hesitantly slipped off my coat and handed it to Oliver, who then disappeared down the long hall. I couldn't help but look around in awe as Clay began to lead down the right side of the hall that the front hallway forked off into. It was the opposite direction that Oliver had gone.

The walls were painted a dark maroon, and the floors were all a polished wood. There were paintings on the wall, and I promised myself to come back and inspect them before Clay and I left this evening.

However, I was even more shocked when Clay opened another ornate door to the parlor. I was instantly hit with the wave of chatter and music from the party guests and a record playing in the background. The parlor was painted the same deep maroon as the halls but was lined with a decorated white trim and filled with countless pieces of expensive furniture. There was a large stone fireplace mounted in the corner of the room by the stand for the record player, and the bright orange flames crackled precariously in it. The parlor was filled with a collection of different people, none of whom I knew, all spread out over the room and in discussions with each other.

My face heated as I realized that they were all dressed in formal attire- expensive suits and long satin dresses. The only exception to that matter, besides myself, was an older woman with white hair who was wearing a rusty orange bohemian dress that ended in ruffles touching the floor. She stood in the corner with another woman who had soft blonde hair reaching her shoulders, and she was dressed much more expensively, in a scarlet dress.

“Oh would you look who's arrived, it's the ragamuffin,” The older woman crowed cheerfully. “And they've brought a friend for once.”

“Good evening, Birdie,” Clay said politely, pushing me further into the room. “This is Park. They're my guest for the night.”

The woman beside her rolled her eyes, and took another sip of the champagne she was holding. “As if we need any more people.”

“Aw, darling Emilia. Play nice for once.” A man in a mustard yellow suit teased from across the room.

The room split off into more chatter, but Clay ignored them and dragged me off toward a rose-patterned couch in the corner of the room. My heart was pounding in my chest as I glanced at the many faces filling the room. Clay didn't seem bothered by the endless noise and sat comfortably on the couch beside me. I quickly looked over the people in the room, trying to memorize the faces and names I had never seen before. There was no one in the room that

matched Mr. Mason's description, and I wondered where he could be before someone mentioned that he was preparing things in the dining room. Other than Clay and I, there were six people in the parlour, and seven after the last person Oliver said we were awaiting showed up.

I allowed my eyes to travel around the room, as Clay quietly pointed out who each of the other guests were.

The older woman in the orange dress, who spoke when we arrived, was Birdie. I didn't ask if that was her real name or simply a nickname everyone called her. She was the oldest here, except maybe for Mr. Mason. She left her long white hair down, and it almost reached to her waist. Birdie was clearly the life of the party and flitted cheerfully around the room with endless chatter.

Beside her, the other woman, Emilia, was much different. She was reserved and kept near the glass table at the edge of the room with the champagne. Her platinum blonde hair was cut into a bob and curled neatly around her shoulders. She was wearing a lot of makeup and had perfect red nails-the same color as her calf length dress.

I learned that the man in the dark yellow suit was named Grant. He had long hair like Oliver, but his was a dark blonde, and hung loosely around his shoulders. He had a thick beard and a thin scar on his right cheek. He had his arm around a shorter woman beside him, who was wearing a floor length ocean blue dress. Her name was Flora, and she had hair as red as the sunset. She had her makeup done lightly to show the freckles that covered her face and arms.

There were two younger looking people in attendance, who seemed to be of Clay and I's age. Clay pointed out that the girl, Willa, had gone to college with them. Her dark curly hair was pulled up in a high bun at the top of her head. She had left a few ringlets of curls to frame her face. Her skin was a warm brown and she had a dusting of freckles over her nose. Willa was wearing a black suit and tie, and I overheard that she had tailored it herself. Claude was the quietest of the bunch, except for myself. He was wearing a gray turtleneck and khaki pants. Dark hair curled around his ears, that stuck out a little. His face was thin and his expression downcast. I was slightly surprised when Clay explained that he was Mr. Mason's grandson. I wasn't even aware Mr. Mason had a grandson, but then again, I wasn't very familiar with Mr. Mason.

The person who showed up last went by Harvey and was a tall middle-aged man with dark, slicked-back hair. He was wearing a suit that looked far more expensive than everyone else's. It was made of black satin material, and had bold red lapels. He had sharp features and a smile that was more of a thin line on his face, and went straight to the table with the champagne.

Only a few moments after Harvey arrived, Oliver returned to the room. Despite being a person of *'formality'*, Oliver was dressed casually. He was wearing a dark navy sweater with a white dress shirt on underneath.

"There's been a slight issue with dinner and a bit of fire, but it's all under control now. Mr. Mason is upstairs changing. He wishes for you all to meet in the dining room in twenty minutes. Until then, make yourselves comfortable."

Oliver disappeared again, and I watched in surprise as most of the people in the parlor began to vacate the room. I turned questioningly toward Clay, but they just shrugged.

I stood from the couch. “Do you mind if we go look at the paintings while we wait?”

“Not at all,” They grinned, standing a moment later. “I figured you would want to. You always had an eye for art.”

I rolled my eyes and Clay showed me the way from the parlor back to where the paintings were. The hallway was empty by the time we got there, and I wondered where everyone else had gone. It was a big mansion though, and one that everyone was familiar with but me.

Clay stood along the opposing wall with their hands in their pockets as I inspected each of the paintings that were displayed. We had been to art museums together before, and I knew it amused them how focused I was when it came to art.

Mr. Mason had a large collection of paintings. They all looked rather old and I wondered if perhaps he had purchased them while antiquing. Some of the paint was chipped on a few, and the frames were beginning to rust. I moved carefully through each piece, which were mostly depictions of various theater interiors. A few frames on the walls weren't pictures at all, but were instead framed playbills and show posters. I knew that Mr. Mason was a theater fanatic, you had to be to teach it, but this was a little excessive. My favorite painting was a serene picture of a willow tree surrounded by a sea of lavender, and a small winding stream. It was the only one that wasn't related to theatre.

“Hey, where do you think Mr. Mason got this-“ I started to ask, but was cut off by a loud crash from somewhere in the house.

My heart skipped a beat as Clay's eyes widened. “That sounded like it came from the staircase.”

Before we could say another word there was a loud scream. Without thinking, Clay and I both jumped into action. My heart was thudding loudly in my chest as they ran down the hall, and all I knew was to follow them.

There was another ornate door waiting at the very end, and Clay threw it open to reveal a hallway with a large wooden staircase. The guests from the parlor were swarming the area, and I stopped as soon as I made it through the door. An old man in a rumpled maroon suit was lying at the bottom of the stairs.

I was frozen to the spot. Clay was at his side in a moment, looking for a pulse.

“Someone dial 911.” They ordered.

Emilia ran out the room, followed by Grant. Everyone else was panicking, and I struggled to block out the noise. My mind was whirling. I wanted to run but I couldn't. Clay was doing CPR. My heart was still racing in my chest. A few feet from me Flora was starting to sob.

I covered my eyes with my hands as the time passed in agonizing minutes. I didn't know how long we all stood frozen in that hallway.

When Grant and Emilia returned, his voice was filled with panic. "The landline has been cut, and the cell phone signal is gone. We can't call anyone."

Flora began to sob louder. The room split off into horrified whispers. I stared blankly in shock as Clay continued to do CPR. It was then that I noticed the way the man's head and body was angled from falling. He was already gone. As if coming to the same conclusion I had, Oliver took a few hesitant steps toward Clay.

He put a hand on their shoulder. "Mx. Easten. He's dead."

It was then that Clay finally sat back, a look of horror and sadness lined in every feature of their face. With that, it finally dawned on me who was laying at the bottom of the stairs. It was Mr. Mason.

"The phones are dead," Grant muttered, running a hand through his long hair. "And I checked all the cars. There's nothing we can do to fix them enough to be driveable."

We were back in the parlor. All of us, including Oliver, who was standing by the door with a solemn look on his face. I didn't know what to think. My palms felt sweaty. I was sitting on the couch in the parlor alone, while everyone else paced the room anxiously. Clay was standing a few feet from me. Their face was scrunched up in thought and they had been silent since Mr. Mason was declared dead.

Everything happened so fast. Emilia had tried to call for an ambulance, but the cell phone signal was gone and the landline had been cut. It had clearly been tampered with. There was no way we could leave the mansion now either. Grant had gone outside to check the landline and see if he could get signal outside. The tires on all of our cars were slashed and the brake lines cut.

My hands were shaking as I sat quietly in my seat. Someone had done this on purpose. Someone wanted us trapped here.

"What are we going to do?" Flora said, biting her nails nervously.

Emilia took a long drink of champagne. "Find a way to call the police and get out of here. What else is there to do?"

"I think we have more pressing matters," Clay spoke for the first time, and held up a thin envelope. "I found this in Mr. Mason's pocket."

"What is that?" Claude immediately came forward.

"It's a letter from Mr. Mason. And our first clue."

Grant's eyes flashed with confusion. "What do you mean, *clue*?"

"Look for yourself," Clay handed off the letter. My heart skipped a beat at their next words. "It appears that Mr. Mason didn't fall down the stairs, he was pushed."

I watched in silence as the letter was passed around to everyone, and the looks of shock and horror that soon followed. My heart was racing by the time the envelope reached me, and my hands were shaking as I looked upon the words of the man I had never met.

Dear beloved guests,

I thank you for attending my retirement dinner party, but if you're reading this, then it means that I'm already dead. The culprit I cannot say on paper, but they are at this very party.

And for that, I offer you, my guests, a little game. What's the prize you ask? Why, the prize is precisely what I worked so hard to acquire. Whoever can solve the clues I've set up, will be able to find my prepared will. My inheritance includes my beloved mansion, my theatre, and of course the position I just retired from as director and producer. You all have a chance at my inheritance, if you are able to solve not only the clues, but also find my murderer. You have until tomorrow morning.

But be wary my dear guests. I am not the only thing the murderer is after.

Break a Leg.

-August Mason

Out from the envelope rolled two handmade dice. However, each side had been sanded over so all that remained were snake eyes. The first clue.
