

Chapter Twelve: The Final Curtain

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“Clay!” I exclaimed with relief as they stepped into the room.

They grinned at me before turning to Emilia. “You may sit down.”

Her expression was laced with fury. She gave them a venomous glare before taking her seat. Satisfied with her cooperation, Clay strolled casually to the head of the table, crossing their arms and looking at everyone. They had Grant’s backpack slung over their shoulder.

“Before I proceed, is there anything that anyone would like to confess?” The room was silent. “Very well. I’ll admit it was trying, but I think I’ve got it all figured out. Tell me if I’m wrong?”

I watched with curiosity as Clay set the bag down on the table, and carefully pulled out a stack of papers.

“Luckily, I stopped by Mr. Mason’s private study on my way down here,” Clay slammed a sheet of paper on the table chipped surface. “First on the agenda, Birdie isn’t a long lost friend of Mr. Mason, she’s his sister.”

My eyes widened and I couldn’t stifle my own gasp. How did Clay know? Was this the evidence that they had gone after? Why hadn’t they at least warned me first? But I already knew the answer to the last question. Dramatic flair. Clay was still an actor after all.

Birdie’s face lost color. “Where did you get that?”

An RSVP card was sitting on the table with Birdie’s handwritten note displayed for all of us to see.

Dearest Brother,

Thank you so much for inviting me to your retirement party this weekend. I will be sure to be in attendance. I can’t wait for us to catch up again. I know things have been complicated. I look forward to seeing you.

“It was on his desk,” Clay replied. “And if anyone needs more proof, there’s plenty of letters in the study from over the years.”

Flora turned to her. “Birdie, is this true?”

“Yes, it’s true,” She scowled, crossing her arms angrily. “August and I have never been close, and I wanted to make an effort to change that. It’s the only reason I came to this party in the first place.”

“Or was it because you learned from Mr. Mason’s lawyer that he had made a will, and you weren’t on it?”

Birdie’s mouth dropped open, but she didn’t answer.

“That’s okay, you don’t have to confirm, you don’t need to,” Clay gave her a charming smile. “But I’m sure you knew about Claude, right? That’s what Park and I overheard you talking about earlier. You were both pretty worried you weren’t on the will, huh?”

“That’s enough.”

“No, this is about the will. Please continue, *Sherlock*.” Emilia replied, suddenly interested.

“I found this in Mr. Mason’s private study,” Clay set down another piece of paper. “Here’s the DNA test that proves Claude’s parents aren’t related to Mr. Mason. I guess he really was a smart man, huh, Claude?”

My heart skipped a beat as soon as the words left their mouth. Claude wasn’t Mr. Mason’s grandson. Something was flashing in my mind. The realization hit me like a truck. I could see all of the evidence. Birdie and Claude’s conversation, the letter from Mr. Mason, the deeds to his theatre, and the location of all of his works. *If tonight goes as I hope, you will need it.* I turned to look at Clay, but I couldn’t see any acknowledgement in their face. Did they know?

“Claude?” Flora’s eyes were wide in shock.

“What are you playing at?” Claude spat angrily at Clay.

“The truth,” They crossed their arms. “Do you want to tell it or should I?”

Claude slammed his fist on the table. “Fine. It’s true. It was all a scam. My parents worked at his theatre, and knew he had a long lost grandkid. We needed money. They saw an opportunity and took it. We could’ve had everything we ever wanted.”

“The fact that they tried to scam *August Mason* of all people, speaks about how foolish they are.”

“Shut up!”

I instinctively moved toward Clay as Claude’s voice became more raised and angry.

Clay shrugged. "Alright. We can move on. Because you see, Park and I found Grant's bag in the house, which made us believe it was him, but I was wrong. Grant wasn't guilty of any of the crimes committed here tonight."

My breath caught in my throat. I was standing next to Clay and I could see that they were shaking slightly.

"You see, Grant's bag was stolen out of his car because his knife was in it. He was framed. But the knife that killed Grant wasn't bought by him. It was a gift for being chosen as the director, from none other than his assistant director, Emilia."

Flora grabbed her heart and turned in shock. "*You!*"

As if she knew exactly where this was going the moment Clay walked in, Emilia was leaning back in her chair, arms crossed, and a smug smile on her face. She laughed as everyone turned to stare at her. I had never wanted to hit someone over the head with a chair more than I did in that moment.

"Wow, Sherlock, I have to say, I'm *very* impressed. I was beginning to think I'd get away with it too," She glanced at her neatly manicured hand. "It was so hard to keep things clean when I took care of Grant."

"Why?" Flora had started to sob. "Why would you kill Grant?"

Emilia's head tilted back as she laughed again. "How hypocritical coming from you, Flora. After seeing you with Claude, I really didn't think you cared about Grant at all."

Clay gave me a quizzical glance, but I nodded quickly and pointed discreetly toward Claude. Their eyes widened slightly. They clearly hadn't anticipated that twist in the mystery.

"You're cruel."

"Not cruel, darling, just resourceful," Emilia folded her hands in her lap. "Grant wasn't being fair. He wouldn't let anyone have a shot at the leads except for you, Flora, dear. He really liked you. I never wouldn't have gotten *anywhere* with him in the way."

Clay gave her a hard stare. "It wasn't just you though, was it, Emilia?"

"Nice thinking. You're right. It wasn't just me. I stole the bag and slashed the tires, then took care of the phones. It only takes me a few seconds to reapply makeup. I made it back just in time to see the old man fall. I could've taken care of Grant myself, but I took the help anyway. Speaking of which-Harvey, darling, would you like to say a few words?"

A chill ran up my spine. I turned toward where Harvey was standing against the wall, but my blood went cold. He was gone. Emilia started laughing, the noise sounding slightly hysteric. There were gasps and a few shouts of surprise as everyone stared at the now empty space. Clay whipped around toward the door and I moved in turn to see that it was opened, and muddy shoe prints ran along into the hall.

“Willa-watch Emilia.” Clay ordered, dashing out the doors.

My mind was racing with panic, but the only thought on my mind was that I had to follow Clay. They weren't going to face Harvey alone.

I ran into the hallway after them. The muddy shoe imprints became fainter the further they went, but it was clear where the trail was leading. Harvey was running in the same direction Flora had gone *toward the woods*. My heart was racing in my chest as I ran side-by-side with Clay.

The cold air flooded over my face as Clay threw open the large French doors. I was still wearing their suit jacket and was grateful for it as my breath came out in short puffs of air. Morning was almost here. The dark sky had lightened and was now tainted with bright purple and orange watercolors. It was one of those sunrises that was so magnificent it looked more like a painting that Mr. Mason would hang in his house.

The rising sun cast dim colored light over the yard. It was clear that Harvey had run down the cobblestone path. Rocks were strewn about and a few muddy prints covered the surface. My mind was still racing at the reveal. The realization had only hit me when Emilia had said his name. The coat closet was upstairs. He was the only one who could've been up there during that time. Even if Grant had gone to get Flora's purse, he would've already been in the library with her, and it was far from the staircase. He never would've had time to make it up there to push Mr. Mason.

Clay continued running toward the woods, only stopping to glance at a suit jacket laying in the yard. I knew it was Harvey's. I could recognize the distinct red lapels that differed from the rest of the black material. He must've shed it while he was running. The sky was continuing to get brighter, but as soon as we hit the trees, we were shrouded in darkness again. My shoes crunched over the layers of leaves. I was breathing heavily from running, and I glanced through the dark trunks surrounding me. Clay was yards ahead of me, weaving nimbly through the scattered branches and brush. I wiped the sweat off my brow and chased after them. The farther into the forest we went, the more debris that littered the ground. A cry escaped my throat as I tripped over a fallen branch and landed on my knees. A branch tore against my cheek, leaving a scratch that quickly began to bleed. Blood dripped onto my hands as I quickly clambered to my feet and kept running.

I wasn't sure how far in the woods we were. I wasn't even sure where we were going. Clay was yards ahead of me. They were trying to stay close so that we wouldn't separate. After a few more moments of running through the thick brush, Clay finally came to a stop. Their breath was coming out in deep gasps, and they set their hands on their knees.

“I don't know where he went, Park. I think we lost him.”

“Not quite.” The venomous voice came from behind us.

I flinched in shock at the voice, and Clay instinctively pulled me away so that I was behind them. There was a clicking sound of a gun being taken off of safety. My body tensed. Clay's face had gone white. I felt frozen as Harvey walked casually out from the trees, pointing a

black pistol at both of us. There were scratches on his face from the branches, but nothing could hide the look of hatred on his face.

“So you figured out the mystery, eh kids,” He chuckled. “It was Harvey now wasn’t it? A little bit of a surprise, huh? I thought I’d lead you away with that Miss. Flora comment, but I guess not.”

I stared at him in shock. “Why’d you do it?”

“Ah, I thought it’d be Clay to ask first. It’s a long story, kid. No one would think that good ole stage manager Harvey would want more, eh?” His jaw twitched in anger. “Do you know how many years I worked for *nothing*? Years of being underappreciated, underpaid, underutilized. All I wanted was to work my way up in the theatre. I wanted to be something big. I only took this job to get there. I wanted to be a director. Mr. Mason promised I’d get my chance, but he lied. Just like everyone else in this business.”

“You wanted the inheritance,” Emotion flickered over Clay’s face. “Then you could run the theatre your way.”

Harvey smiled. “Exactly. I knew he wouldn’t give me the chance. As soon as I knew he was giving it up in a will, I knew I wouldn’t be on it. He wouldn’t pass up giving it to his grandchild.”

“Claude’s not his grandson.”

“Oh, oh my,” Harvey started laughing. “After your big demonstration in there, I thought you would’ve known.”

“Known what?”

“Clay, didn’t you ever wonder why Mr. Mason was your adopted parent’s *family friend*? The adoption was closed, but your parents knew their old theatre teacher well. Of course they’d let him see his grandchild. They’d just have to tell a few fibs, eh?”

Clay’s mouth had dropped open in shock. I turned toward them, my body still shaking. As soon as I realized Claude wasn’t Mr. Mason’s grandson, I had guessed. I was just surprised that Clay hadn’t, but he was close to Mr. Mason, and that can make a person blind to the truth.

“It won’t matter for long though,” Harvey glanced between us, cocking the gun. “That secret will die with the two of you.”

My heart skipped a beat as I realized what he meant. I looked back to Clay. They were staring at me as the heavy notion finally reached both of us. My eyes began to water as I looked at my dearest friend. Their white shirt was torn and covered in scuff marks. Their hair was a mess, and they had taken off their tie a long time ago. We were only a few paces from each other. Tears were now running down my cheeks as Clay mouthed two words; *I’m sorry*. I nodded, blinking past my tears and looking toward the morning sky spread out behind them.

It was beautiful really. The world was painted in oranges and pinks, a great golden orb slowly rising from the delicate clouds. What a magnificent sight for the end of a party.

“Any *last* words?”

Before either of us could open our mouths, a loud wail of sirens began sounding from the distance.

It was a moment’s mistake. Harvey turned away from us and toward the noise, but it was enough. A scream escaped my throat as Clay lunged at him. I ran forward as they wrestled Harvey to the ground.

He was shouting at Clay and using a variety of curse words, as they struggled to knock the gun out of his hands. The sound of the sirens were growing louder. I scrambled forward, ignoring the panic coursing through my body. A loud bang suddenly echoed through the trees. I froze, watching in shock as Clay lurched backward. No. *No*. Crimson splotches were beginning to stain their white shirt near their left shoulder.

I rushed forward without thinking. The adrenaline was coursing through my body. I could feel the blood rushing in my ears. Harvey whipped around as he heard my shoes on the crinkling leaves. It was enough time. Clay dove toward Harvey. He yelled out furiously. There was a loud clatter as they knocked the gun out of Harvey’s hands. It landed roughly in a pile of leaves.

My head was spinning as I leaped across the ground where the gun was lying. Without warning a rough hand grabbed my ankle, pulling me back from the weapon. I screamed, falling forcefully on my hands and knees in front of the gun. I couldn’t breathe as I struggled to shake Harvey’s grip. Clay shouted for me, and a moment later there was a loud thud and a string of curse words. I wasn’t sure what Clay did but the grip immediately released.

Tears of panic were streaming from my eyes as I grabbed the gun, jumping shakily to my feet. I had turned in time to see Clay punch Harvey squarely in the jaw. His head lurched backward slightly before he toppled to the ground.

I turned toward Clay, inhaling sharply when I saw them. They were shaking on their feet from where they were standing. All of the color was drained from Clay’s face. I froze as my eyes trailed to their shoulder. Blood was still streaming down from the wound and onto their shirt.

“P-Parker...”

I started running to them, but they were already on the ground when I reached them. The sirens were blaring now, the sound so loud that it practically drowned out every other thought. Panic was filling me. I couldn’t breathe. I collapsed on the leaves beside them. The sky was now drenched in bright colors, casting golden rays over the bloodstained ground. I ripped off the suit jacket I was still wearing, pressing it to their shoulder.

“Clay? Clay can you hear me?” I was sobbing.

“Park?”

“Clay,” I breathed with relief, upon seeing their open hazel eyes. “It’s going to be okay. The police are coming. Help is coming. We’re going to be okay. We made it.”

Their face was contorted with pain, but they nodded. “We made it.”

*** One Year Later ***

I waited among the crowds of people in the lobby, clutching the bundle of roses in my hands. There were people everywhere, it was opening night after all. I searched the crowd for Willa, but she had disappeared to talk to Oliver. Both of them had come with me tonight because of my front row tickets. Though I’m guessing they both would’ve come regardless of the good seats. I sighed and glanced at my watch. It was a gift from Clay. Payback for surviving the party and for climbing down the balcony.

My mind flickered back to that night. Next week would mark one year since it happened. I thought of it often. I never expected life to go back to normal afterward, and it hadn’t, in big ways and small.

Clay was luckily only grazed by the bullet. If it had gone through their shoulder, it could’ve been a much more serious wound. However, it still left them stuck in the hospital for a few weeks. I had stayed by their side the whole recovery process.

Emilia and Harvey were locked up. With their confessions, lots of evidence, and plenty of witnesses, it was ensured that they would be in prison for a long time.

It was Clay who found the will after all. Turns out the prop skull, *Yorick*, was worth more than we thought. They realized there was a latch on the bottom, that opened up to the secret compartment with the will. I was pleased to find that it was addressed to Clay Jesse Easten, and Mr. Mason’s kind lawyer was able to confirm.

Clay had inherited Mr. Mason’s-his grandfather’s- money, estate, and theatre. Clay used the money to support their family and myself, before giving some to the theatre, and the rest to charity. Neither of us could stomach going back to the estate. It was out of the question to live there, and Clay had turned it over to Oliver and his spouse, Alex. They had turned it into a youth shelter.

However, prison and an inheritance wasn’t enough to heal all of the wounds the party from hell had caused. Clay and I, along with many of the other party guests, were still in therapy. There were still many nights where I would wake up covered in sweat by the haunting dreams of the mansion in the woods. Clay quit their job as a detective. They said they couldn’t handle any more mysteries. Even though so much time had passed, Oliver would still call us once a week to make sure we were alright. Just the other day when Willa went with Clay and I to lunch, we had to calm her from a panic attack when the table next to us was talking about a murder mystery book they were reading.

As much as we struggled, there were still good things in our lives. Willa became the theatre's stage manager, although she still oversaw the costuming department. Clay, of course, took over running Mr. Mason's theatre. However, they took on a few more job responsibilities besides director.

"Park!" Their voice came from across the room.

I turned, feeling a rush of emotion flood me as I glanced toward them. Clay was standing a few feet from the cast and crew entrance, dressed in their *Hamlet* costume. It was all black. They had trousers, boots, and a historical shirt that had gold buttons and puffed sleeves. A fake sword was still strapped to their belt.

"Why, if it isn't the Prince of Denmark!" I laughed, running across the room toward them.

"I'm so glad you decided to come!" They pulled me into a hug.

"As if I wouldn't! I'd never miss opening night!" I exclaimed, hugging them back before handing them the roses. "You were amazing!"

"You think so?"

"I know so. Your grandfather would've been proud."

Clay smiled. "I just hope I didn't butcher his favorite show."

"Don't be ridiculous! It was fantastic!"

"Thank you, Park," They hugged me again. "And by the way, nice suit."

"Right!" I made Willa help me pick it out for tonight. It was a light blush pink. "Now who's the underdressed one."

"Ha ha, very funny. For your information, *I* am in costume."

"I know, now go change. We're going out to dinner with Willa, Oliver, and Alex. To celebrate your grand debut."

"Are you sure you don't want me to come like this?" They joked.

"I'm sure. I'll meet you at the car."

They started toward the door leading back to the dressing rooms. "You better not have parked far."

"I didn't," I called, and then added after a moment. "You did an amazing job. He really would've been proud, Clay."

They paused. "I think he would have been too."
