Chapter 1: Thanksgiving Night 2016

It was a long time coming. After seven months of dating my “It” girl, I was engaged, two months shy of my thirty-first birthday. Earlier tonight, my proposal went smoothly, and now I was ready to sleep.

I turned on my sound machine since it drowned out urban noise and helped me relax, playing a symphony of wildlife from courting cicadas, whistling nightingales, and a trickling river.

I recited the Lord’s Prayer like I do every night. “Our Father who art in Heaven…” Then, when I got to: “Your will be done—”

A flash of white light illuminated the darkness. How could lightning hit without a storm? Before I could investigate, a young woman in a cherry-red, off-the-shoulder gown appeared. A golden haze shrouded her face. Her flowing blonde hair fanned in all directions like gilded lupines in the wind. Her slender arms extended toward me, and I catapulted upright.

On her wrist was… Granny Mason‘s bracelet. Four-strand Akoya pearls and a yellow gold clasp of emeralds, sapphires, citrines, rubies, and diamonds. I reached out to grab the heirloom, but I clutched only air. Who was she?

I stood, bare feet touching the sheepskin rug. I turned on the lamp and turned off the sound machine. I was alone. The reclaimed oak floors showed no ghostly impressions of footsteps. The blackout forest-green shades were still pulled down. Everything was in its place. No projectors streamed from outside, not that I’d expect anyone to prank me at this age; my former frat brothers were too domesticated now as they tucked their kids into bed, kissed their wives good night, and fell sound asleep.

Yet my solitude didn’t slow my heightened pulse. The last time I experienced a vision, I was in addiction recovery at a rehab center. A white light had filled the room but disappeared within seconds. As of tonight, I’d been sober for years, so I didn’t have an explanation. That disturbed me.

I sauntered to the living room, turning on the picture light above a 11x14 gilded framed photograph I had taken of Granny. Donned in an emerald-green gown, she sat on her wingback chair. The bracelet on her white gloves added a layer of color and texture. She gifted this picture to Gramps for their sixtieth wedding anniversary.

I touched the glass as if I could grab the bracelet. I hadn’t seen the heirloom for five years (shortly after Granny died) since I kept it at my parents’ for now. The bracelet embodied Granny, so I didn’t want it with me, afraid I’d miss her too much.

Every anniversary, Gramps bragged about how he stole Granny’s heart from her rich beau. How Gramps got drafted to fight the bastard Nazis while her steady paid someone off, so he could stay home. Gramps wrote Granny almost every day. When he returned from war, he drained his savings to commission the bracelet to seal the deal. Granny would pipe up, saying through his letters, she fell in love. What I’d do to hear them tell that story again.

“You would’ve loved Pres. She’s classy, poised, and beautiful, like you. I wish you could attend our wedding.”

It hit me. Pres could wear it for her "something borrowed", incorporating Granny. I winked at “Granny,” thanking her for the “tip.”

I sat on the sectional near the picture, and I rested my head on the padded back. Within a few minutes, my eyes closed, and I drifted off to sleep.

My phone playing Pres’s ring tone woke me up. Was she okay? I sprinted to the bedroom where it charged on the nightstand.

“Hey, what’s going on?” I asked, squeezing the phone tight.

“I can’t sleep.” To my relief, she was upbeat. This night took me on a wilder emotional ride than alcohol ever did. “My mind’s buzzing about wedding planning. When were you thinking we should marry? Maybe in a year?”

I should’ve known. An obsessive planner, Pres scheduled life a week, a month, a quarter at a time, so I never winged a date, but gave her at least a few days’ notice. Now, I hesitated to spring this summer on her, but I couldn’t endure a long engagement.

“Are you there?” she asked.

“Let’s look at July when I book my vacation.” I cleared my throat, hoping she’d run with it, just this once.

“But that only gives us eight months.”

“That’s plenty of time, especially for an intimate wedding.”

“If a guest list of two hundred and fifty is small, I’m all for it, but anything less risks omitting close friends. But let’s consider this July…” Her voice trailed off; she must be upset or stressed. Once something was planned, she marched onward to the front lines.

“Our families will help.” I sat on the edge of the bed, fighting frustration and fatigue.

“You say that, but how will we wedding plan in Michigan? We’ll be spending all that time with your family—”

“You’re on overload. Let’s get some sleep and then talk about all things wedding on Monday.”

We both had Mondays off.

“Trust me, I want to bask in the glow of our engagement, but if we want a summer wedding, we must plan now. The holidays are peak engagement times. We need to secure a date, a venue, and vendors immediately.” She gave orders like a coach on the sidelines.

I looked on top of the dresser at a 5x7 photo of my family. Mom would want to offer input on the venue. “Let’s talk to our families first.”

“But they’ll support whatever decisions we make.”

“Like I said…” I exhaled so I wouldn’t lose my cool. “Let’s talk on Monday.”

“You’re right. I better get to sleep. I love you and can’t wait to be your wife!”

“Love you too.” After I hung up the phone, I reached into my nightstand drawer and grabbed a chocolate bar. Thank God, we only had eight months until we’d marry.