Chapter One

I had rehearsed my apology so many times that, by the time I stood in front of her, I no longer remembered what I was sorry for.

The words came easily, slipping from my tongue. I knew when to pause, when to lower my eyes, when to let my voice falter just enough to sound sincere. I knew that if I looked at her for too long she would begin to search my face for something I hadn't intended to show her, and that looking away too soon would make her think I had grown impatient.

There was a balance to these things. I had learnt it over the years, through practice and the occasional unpleasant consequence of getting it wrong.

It was a matter of knowing how much to give someone without giving them anything of consequence, of leaving them with the impression that you had listened, even when you had already decided what you were going to say. Most people were content with that, provided you made the effort to look as though you weren't.

I could have told her the truth, of course. But the truth had a way of turning ordinary mistakes into unforgivable ones, and I had made far too many mistakes to risk that.

People were much easier to manage when they were given something they could accept, and there was no particular reason to make a difficult conversation worse simply because I had the opportunity to be honest.

The worst part about lying was how quickly it became natural. I used to feel sick afterwards, replaying every conversation in my head, searching for the moment someone might have noticed. Now, I hardly thought about it at all. The lies came before the truth, instinctively, like a reflex I hadn't chosen to develop. It was only when I slept that things became difficult. The truth sometimes slipped out in my dreams, unfiltered and cruel, and I woke furious with myself, as though even my unconscious had become disloyal.

I couldn't afford to be honest. Not anymore.

Erin was standing near the windows, where the afternoon light fell across the carpet in long, pale rectangles. The curtains had been drawn back, leaving the room brighter than it needed to be, and the light caught on the glass of the cabinet beside the fireplace. She wore a blue dress I knew I'd seen before, though not when. Her hair was pinned back save for a few stray pieces near her ears that she kept tucking behind. It suited her well enough.

She had been turning the ring on her right hand throughout our conversation. It was a small, delicate thing, with a stone that caught the light whenever she moved.

Now she had stopped. Her hand rested at her side, and she seemed to have made a conscious effort to keep it there.

She was trying to observe me. I could tell by the careful stillness she had forced herself into. Her expression was composed, but her attention had sharpened. People were rarely as difficult to read as they liked to believe. Most of them practically begged to be understood. They wanted their anger noticed and their hurt acknowledged.

They wanted you to ask the right question, preferably one they had already decided how to answer.

It made conversation quite tedious.

“I suppose I just thought things would be different,” she said.

I wondered what she expected me to do with that. Apologise again? Promise her something I had no intention of keeping? I had already given her the necessary words, and if she wanted to mistake them for sincerity, that was hardly my responsibility.

“Different how?”

She looked at me for a moment, as though she had expected me to know. Her eyes moved over my face, then settled somewhere near my shoulder.

“You know how.”

“I'd rather you told me.”

Her mouth tightened. She looked towards the garden, where the last of the gardeners were gathering their tools beside the hedges. One of them was carrying a wheelbarrow towards the side of the house, while the other stood folding something away. I could hear the faint scrape of metal from where we were standing, though neither of us paid it much attention.

“I thought you might have been pleased to see me.”

“I am pleased to see you.”

“Altair.”

There was a warning in the way she said my name. I had heard it before, usually when one was trying to decide whether I was being deliberately unkind. She had a habit of saying it as though it were an accusation in itself, which I had never quite understood. It was only a name.

I sighed. “I'm sorry.”

“You've said that.”

“Would you like me to say it again?”

“No.”

“Then I'm not sure what else you want from me.”

She turned back towards me. “I want to know whether you actually mean any of it.”

I looked at her. For a moment, I considered giving her a proper answer. It would have been easier, perhaps, to tell her that I had never intended to make her promises, that I had no desire to spend my life pretending to feel something I didn't. But there was no reason to be unnecessarily cruel. Erin had done nothing to deserve it. She had been perfectly pleasant, for the most part, and I had no particular grievance against her. The difficulty was that pleasantness had very little to do with what was expected of us.

Besides, I had no particular objection to her.

“I don't dislike you,” I said.

She gave a small laugh, though there was little humour in it. She looked down briefly, then back at me.

“How reassuring.”

“I thought so.”

“Do you ever take anything seriously?”

“Quite a few things.”

“Such as?”

I glanced at the clock above the fireplace. The hands had moved further than I expected, and I found myself wondering how long we had been standing there. “My father's temper, for one.”

That made her smile, briefly. It was a small change in her expression, but enough to make the conversation feel, for a moment, less uncomfortable, although it disappeared almost as soon as it arrived.

“Your father will be at dinner tonight,” she said.

“I know.”

“And mine.”

“I know that, too.”

“They've been speaking about it for weeks.”

It was difficult to imagine a conversation between our fathers that did not involve some form of negotiation. Her father had been a familiar presence in our house for as long as I could remember, usually appearing beside mine at functions or seated opposite him at the dining table. They had the sort of friendship that depended upon mutual advantage. I doubted either would know what to do with the other if that advantage disappeared.

Tonight's dinner was meant to be a celebration of their understanding. There would be wine, though neither of them drank much, and a great deal of talk about the country's future. The Winderlys would arrive at seven. My father had approved the menu and instructed the staff to bring out the good silver. Erin and I would sit together, close enough for everyone to observe us.

It had all been arranged with remarkable care.

“I know what they're expecting,” I said.

“Do you?”

“Yes.”

“And you're still going to behave like this?”

I looked at her ring. She had begun turning it again, rubbing her thumb over the stone before rotating it back into place.

“Like what?”

“Like none of it matters.”

I had an answer for that, though I wasn't sure she would have understood it.

It mattered precisely because it mattered so much to everyone else. My father had spent years arranging my future, deciding which people I should know, which families I should associate with and what sort of man I was expected to become. There was very little about my life that had not been considered in advance. Even the things I was permitted to choose tended to be choices he had already approved.

I had learnt not to object to every decision simply for the sake of it. It was easier to let him believe I agreed, to nod when necessary and keep whatever opinions I had to myself. But there were certain things I could not bring myself to accept, regardless of how often they were presented as inevitable.

Marriage was simply the next thing.

And I had no intention of allowing it.

It wasn't Erin's fault. If she had been someone else, I would have felt the same. I had never wanted to marry, and I had never wanted to fall in love. The thought of it made me uncomfortable in a way I could not easily explain.

There was something dreadful about the idea of giving another person so much of yourself that their absence could become your suffering. To depend on someone, to wait for them, to find that your own happiness had become tied to what they chose to give you.

It seemed an unreasonable arrangement, one that left very little room for dignity. I had never understood why people were so eager to put themselves in that position, or why they considered it something worth pursuing.

I had watched what it did to people. The way they softened around one another, the small humiliations they accepted, the terrible patience with which they waited to be loved in return. I had seen men who commanded rooms become foolish at the sight of a woman. I had seen people forgive things they would once have considered unforgivable, and make excuses for behaviour they would have condemned in anyone else.

It was difficult to reconcile with the way they spoke about love beforehand, as though it were something that made them better, when so often it seemed to make them less capable of thinking clearly.

I couldn't imagine choosing to make myself so vulnerable.

Perhaps that was cowardice, yet I had never been particularly interested in finding out.

“I don't want to get married,” I said.

Erin's eyes moved over my face. “You don't want to marry me?”

“I don't want to marry anyone.”

“That's a rather convenient distinction.”

“It's also the truth.”

She was quiet. I watched her take in the answer, watched her decide what it meant for her. I wondered whether she had been hoping I would say something different. Perhaps she had imagined that, given enough time, I might grow accustomed to the arrangement. That I might come to like her, or at least tolerate the idea of a life beside her.

It was possible. People changed their minds all the time.

I had no intention of becoming one of them.

“You can't spend your entire life avoiding things,” she said.

“Can't I?”

“No.”

I smiled a little. “That sounds inconvenient.”

She shook her head, and for the first time that afternoon she looked genuinely frustrated. Her hand fell away from the ring, and she folded her arms instead.

“Sometimes I think you don't know how to let anyone close to you.”

I felt something tighten beneath my ribs. It was a fleeting sensation, gone almost as soon as I noticed it. I disliked the remark more than I should have. There was no reason for it to bother me, and that was precisely what made it irritating. I had heard variations of it before, usually from people who thought they knew more about me than they did. I had never found it particularly useful to explain myself.

“That's a rather personal observation.”

“Perhaps you should try being a little more personal.”

“I don't think either of us would enjoy that.”

She looked away.

I had gone too far. I knew it from the sudden stillness of her hands, and from the way she pressed her lips together before speaking again. Her expression had changed, and I could tell she was trying not to let me see how much the remark had affected her. I could have taken it back. I could have said something gentle, something that would have allowed us to return to the easier conversation we'd been having before. There were any number of things I could have said, most of them perfectly ordinary, and I knew she would probably have accepted one of them.

Instead, I offered her my hand.

She looked at it, then at me. After a moment's hesitation, she took it. Her fingers were cool against mine. I gave her a small, reassuring smile, the sort that suggested I regretted the conversation and would behave better in future. Her grip was light, and she let go only after I had begun to withdraw my hand.

It was astonishing how little people required to be reassured. A few words, a familiar gesture, the suggestion that everything was still as it should be. I had been taught that long before I was old enough to understand why. It was hardly difficult to learn what people wanted from you, and once you knew, there was very little reason to give them anything else.

“I'll see you tonight,” I said.

She nodded.

“Seven o'clock.”

“I'll be there.”

“I suppose you will.”

I let go of her hand. She remained beside the windows as I crossed the room, and I did not look back until I reached the doorway. I could see her in the reflection of the glass, still standing in the same place, her attention turned towards the garden. She had begun turning the ring again, moving it slowly beneath her thumb, and I left before she noticed me looking.

The corridor outside was cooler. I closed the door behind me and continued towards my father's office, passing beneath the portraits that lined the walls. They were mostly men, all of them belonging to some branch of the family that had managed to remain important through war, political upheaval and the occasional change of government. Their faces had been painted in dark colours, their expressions grave. I had always thought the artists must have been instructed to make them look unpleasant.

My hand brushed the inside of my jacket.

The folded paper was still there.

It was absurdly small. Tully had written six words on it, in handwriting so hurried it was barely legible, and I had carried it around for three days as though it was worth keeping. The paper had softened along the folds. I had read it often enough that I no longer needed to look at it, yet I couldn't bring myself to throw it away.

I told myself it was because the message contained information I might need.

Tully had never possessed an ounce of self-preservation when it came to secrets, particularly the sort that could get him killed. He had a habit of knowing things before they happened, and an even worse habit of telling me about them as though I were someone he could trust. His visions had been troubling him for months. They came without warning, sometimes while he was speaking, sometimes in the middle of the night. Afterwards, he was often too exhausted to do much beyond lie in bed with the curtains drawn.

He had always been a poor liar. Even when he was well, his face gave him away.

Lately, there was hardly anything left to give away. He had grown pale, and his hands sometimes trembled so badly that he struggled to hold a glass. The doctors had offered explanations, though none of them seemed particularly convincing. My father had asked

questions. Tully had answered as best he could. It had become a familiar routine, and one I had grown tired of witnessing.

The last time I had visited him, he had been sitting against the headboard with a blanket over his legs. His room was dark, despite the afternoon sun outside. A glass of water stood untouched on the bedside table.

"You look terrible," I said, stopping near the foot of the bed with my hands in my pockets.

Tully let his head rest back against the wood and gave me a crooked, tired look. "And you're a vision yourself."

"I've always looked like this."

"That’s unfortunate," he murmured, his mouth twitching upwardbefore the smile slipped away. His gaze drifted toward the narrow gap in the curtains, his whole posture shifting into that sudden, distant stillness that meant something had caught hold of him. His breathing went shallow. I stayed quiet,watching the light shift across the floorboards while I waited for him to come back.

"Tully?" I asked after a long moment.

He blinked, his focus snapping back to the room with a faint start. "Sorry. Lost my place for a second."

"What did you see?" I stepped closer to the bed, lowering my voice.

"Nothing worth repeating," he said, looking down at the folds of the blanket rather than at me.

I studied the pale set of his jaw for a beat. "You know how much I hate that answer."

“I know.”

He had reached for the glass, but his hand shook against it. I took it from the table and passed it to him. He drank a little, then handed it back.

“Have you told Father?”

Tully looked at me.

“No.”

“Good.”

“I don't think he'd understand.”

I had almost laughed. “He doesn't understand most things.”

But Tully had not smiled.

A few minutes later, when I was leaving, he had caught my sleeve and pressed the folded paper into my hand.

“Don't lose it,” he had said.

“What is it?”

“Just keep it.”

“That's not particularly helpful.”

“I know.”

He had looked tired. More tired than I had ever seen him.

I had wanted to ask what he had seen, but something in his expression stopped me. Instead, I put the paper in my jacket and told him to get some sleep.

He had nodded, and I had left.

I had not asked about it again.

My father's office door stood at the end of the corridor. I stopped in front of it and straightened my cuffs, running my thumb along the edge of one sleeve until the fabric lay flat.

I could hear him speaking on the telephone.

“...the northern route.”

A pause.

“No. I want the report before the end of the day.”

Another pause. His voice grew sharper.

“Then find someone who can give me one.”

I waited until the receiver was replaced before knocking.

“Come in.”

I opened the door.

His office was large, with high ceilings and dark wooden panelling that made the room seem smaller than it was. The windows overlooked the front gardens, and the heavy curtains had

been drawn halfway across them. A fire had been lit, though the weather was not particularly cold. My father disliked working in a room that felt anything other than comfortable.

His desk was covered in papers. Some were arranged in neat piles, others lay open beneath his hand. A map had been spread across one corner, weighted down at the edges with two guns. I caught sight of several markings along the northern border before he turned it over.

He looked at me.

“Where have you been?”

“With Erin.”

“I know that. I arranged it.”

“Then I imagine you know where I've been.”

His eyes narrowed slightly. I regretted the remark almost immediately, though not enough to apologise.

“Sit down.”

I took the chair opposite his desk.

He remained standing, looking through a file he had been reading before I arrived. My father had a particular way of making people wait. He never seemed hurried, even when he was angry. It was a habit that had served him well in government, where the ability to make other people uncomfortable was often mistaken for authority.

“How was she?”

“Fine.”

“That's all?”

“We spoke.”

“About tonight?”

“Among other things.”

He closed the file.

“Her father will be arriving at seven. I expect you to be presentable.”

“I generally am.”

“I expect you to be agreeable.”

“I generally am that, too.”

His expression did not change.

“Do not mistake this for a negotiation, Altair.”

“I wasn't aware I had.”

He moved around the desk and sat down. For a moment, he studied me in silence.

“You have been behaving strangely.”

“I wasn't aware.”

“Your mother used to say that was one of your more irritating qualities.”

I looked at him.

He rarely mentioned her. When he did, it was usually to make a point, and I had learnt not to ask what he meant by it.

“What has that got to do with anything?”

“Nothing. I was making an observation.”

He folded his hands on the desk.

“The Winderlys are important to this family. Their support has been valuable for years, and it will continue to be valuable. You understand that.”

“Yes.”

“Then I don't see why you insist on making this difficult.”

I looked towards the map, now turned face down.

“I don't intend to marry Erin.”

My father did not move.

For a moment, I thought he had not heard me. Then he placed his hands flat against the desk.

“What did you say?”

“I don't intend to marry her.”

“Would you care to explain why?”

I considered the question. There were several answers I could have given him, though none would have made much difference. I could have told him that I disliked being expected to spend my life with someone because it suited the family. I could have told him that the idea of marriage made me uncomfortable, that I had no wish to build a life around another person, or to spend years pretending that affection was something I could offer.

I could have told him that I had no intention of falling in love.

I kept that to myself.

“I don't want to.”

He stared at me.

“That is not an answer.”

“It's the only one I have.”

“You have been afforded every opportunity. You have been educated, housed, protected. You have never wanted for anything.”

“I haven't said that I have.”

“Then what exactly is it you think you're entitled to?”

“Nothing.”

“Clearly.”

He stood and walked around the desk. I watched him approach, keeping my hands still in my lap.

“Do you have any idea how many people would be grateful for the life you have been given?”

“I'm sure there are quite a few.”

“And you intend to throw it away because you don't feel like getting married?”

“I don't think that's quite what I said.”

“Then explain it to me.”

I looked at him.

He wanted a reason he could argue with. Something practical. Something he could dismantle until I was left with no choice but to agree. But there was no practical reason. I simply could not imagine allowing someone to become important enough to me that losing them would matter.

I had seen what happened when people allowed that sort of thing. They became careless. They made decisions for someone else's sake and called it devotion. They handed over the parts of themselves they had spent years protecting, then seemed surprised when those parts were used against them.

I would rather be alone.

It was a simple thing to say, and a more difficult thing to explain.

“Marriage is unnecessary,” I said.

“Marriage is an expectation.”

“Not mine.”

“It is now.”

He returned to the desk. His chair scraped against the floor as he pulled it out.

“You will attend dinner tonight. You will speak to Erin. You will be civil to her father, and you will not make a fool of yourself.”

“I wouldn't dream of it.”

He looked at me for a long moment.

“I mean it, Altair.”

“So do I.”

By seven, the house had taken on its evening appearance.

The lamps had been lit in the hall, the curtains drawn and the silver laid out along the dining table. A fire burned in the drawing room, and the staff moved quietly between the rooms with trays and folded napkins.

I stood before the mirror in my bedroom, fastening the final button of my jacket. I straightened the collar, smoothed a crease from one sleeve and looked at myself for a moment. Dark jacket, white shirt, hair neatly combed. My face had settled into its usual expression.

I opened the drawer beside the bed and took out Tully's note. I unfolded it, read the six words once more, then folded it carefully and slipped it into my inside pocket. I wasn't sure why I did that. I had no intention of mentioning it to anyone, and it was hardly the sort of thing one needed to carry to dinner. Still, I checked that it was secure before leaving the room.

When I reached the dining room, the Winderlys had already arrived.

Erin was seated beside her father, dressed in pale grey. Her hair had been arranged more carefully than it had that afternoon, and a pair of small earrings caught the light when she turned her head.

“Altair,” she said.

“Erin.”

I smiled, and she returned it. Her father stood, extending a hand.

“Good to see you.”

“Mr Winderly.”

“Your father tells me you've been keeping busy.”

“Not particularly.”

He laughed as though I had made a joke. At the head of the table, my father or Callahan watched the exchange.

“Come along,” he said. “We're about to begin.”

I shook Mr Winderly's hand and took the seat beside Erin. A servant moved behind me to pull out my chair, then poured wine into my glass before returning to the sideboard. My father waited until we were all seated before taking his own place.

“Have you been to the northern offices recently?” Mr Winderly asked as the first course was served.

“Not for several weeks,” my father replied. “There's been little reason to.”

“I heard the latest supply figures were worse than expected.”

“They were. Though not as bad as some people would have us believe.”

Mr Winderly gave a quiet laugh. “I imagine that's a familiar problem.”

“It is becoming one.”

I cut into my food while they continued. Their conversation moved between government appointments, supply allocations and the condition of the northern territories, each man offering just enough information to demonstrate that he knew more than he was saying. Occasionally, one of them turned to me.

“And what do you make of the situation, Altair?” Mr Winderly asked.

I looked up. “I'm afraid I haven't given it much thought.”

“Perhaps you should.”

Hmm “Perhaps.”

My father glanced at me, though he made no comment. I returned to my plate.

Erin said very little. I noticed her looking at me once or twice, but whenever I turned towards her she lowered her eyes. There was something different about her that evening. She seemed unusually careful, as though she were waiting for the right moment to say something. I tried not to pay much attention to it.

A servant cleared the first course and replaced our plates. My father was in an unusually good mood. He had laughed twice, both times at something Mr Winderly had said, and his shoulders had relaxed slightly against the back of his chair. He even seemed willing to let the conversation drift, rather than steering it back towards whatever business he had intended to discuss.

It was almost pleasant.

Then Mr Winderly set down his glass.

“There is something I thought we might discuss tonight,” he said.

My father glanced at him. “Of course.”

Erin's fork stopped halfway to her mouth. She lowered it to her plate, then glanced at her father, who gave her a small, encouraging nod.

I looked between them. The conversation had changed, though nobody had said anything particularly revealing. My father's attention had sharpened. Mr Winderly had turned his chair slightly towards us.

I knew what was coming.

I looked down at my plate and tried to think of something else. The note in my inside pocket pressed against my chest when I shifted in my chair. I thought of Tully upstairs, alone with whatever he had seen, and wished, quite suddenly, that I were anywhere but there.

“Erin and I have spoken at some length about the future,” Mr Winderly continued. “And I think we've reached a point where it would be sensible to make certain things rather more definite.”

My father smiled. “I agree. We've been waiting for the right moment.”

I felt my stomach tighten. I reached for my glass, but my hand was unsteady enough that it touched the stem awkwardly against the table. I set it down again.

Mr Winderly turned towards his daughter. “Would you like to say something?”

Erin looked at me.

I wanted her not to. I wanted her to look at her father, to say she had changed her mind, to find some reason to leave it until another evening. I knew it was unfair. She had done nothing wrong. She was nervous, and from the way my father was watching her, she had clearly been encouraged to believe this would go well.

But I could already feel the room closing around me.

“Altair,” she began.

I looked at her because not looking would have been worse.

“I know we've spoken about this before,” she said. “And I know things haven't always been easy between us.”

My father watched me over the table. I kept my expression still, though I could feel my heart beating hard in my throat.

Erin continued. “But I don't think we need to spend the rest of our lives wondering what might have happened if we'd tried. I know our families have been discussing it for some time, and perhaps that isn't the way either of us would have chosen to begin something like this. But I do think we could make it work.”

She paused and drew a careful breath. Her father gave her another encouraging nod.

“I would like to marry you, Altair.”

Nobody moved.

I stared at her. Her words were perfectly reasonable. The arrangement made sense. Our families had been discussing it for months, and there were obvious advantages to bringing them together. I understood all of that. I had never been confused about what my father wanted from the marriage, or why he considered it a good match.

That wasn't what frightened me.

I thought of my father telling me, years ago, that love made people stupid. That it made them careless with their judgement and gave other people something to use against them. He had never spoken of it as something worth having. In his house, affection was something to be withheld, and needing another person was a failure of discipline. I had learnt the lesson long before I understood why he was so determined to teach it.

I had no intention of proving him right. I would not give someone the chance to matter enough to hurt me. I would not find myself waiting for a person to come home, or wondering what they

thought of me, or discovering that their happiness could ruin my own. It was bad enough that I knew what my father could do to the people he claimed to care about. I couldn't bear the thought of becoming like that, or of giving someone the power to make me feel as helpless as he had made me feel.

And yet marriage meant the possibility of love, however unlikely I thought it was. It meant allowing someone close. It meant that, eventually, I might have to care.

I looked at Erin's hand, resting beside her plate. She was waiting for me to take it.

For a brief, unpleasant moment, I couldn't speak. I could feel my father's expectation, Mr Winderly's satisfaction, Erin's nervous hope. They had all decided what this evening meant before I had even entered the room.

“No,” I said.

The word fell out my mouth.

Erin blinked. Her hand remained where it was, though her fingers had gone still.

My father did not move. “Altair.”

I ignored him. Erin turned slightly towards me, as if she thought she might have misheard.

“I—”

“No,” I repeated. “I- I don't think you understand.”

Mr Winderly shifted in his chair. His smile had disappeared, and he glanced briefly towards my father before looking back at me.

“Perhaps we should—”

“I don't want to marry you.”

The silence that followed was different from the first. Mr Winderly sat back, his jaw tightening, while Erin slowly withdrew her hand from the table. Her face had gone pale.

My father placed his knife beside his plate with deliberate care. The small sound of metal against china seemed much louder than it should have.

“Altair. That's enough.”

I looked at him. His expression had barely changed, but the pleasantness had gone out of it. I knew that look. I had seen it across breakfast tables, in his office, constantly throughout my childhood. It was a warning, and it was meant for me alone.

For a moment, I considered stopping. I could still take it back, or at least pretend to. A simple apology would be enough to get us through the rest of dinner. My father could speak to me afterwards, and the Winderlys could leave believing there had been some unfortunate misunderstanding.

I knew how to do that. I had been doing it all my life.

But I couldn't agree to something that frightened me this much just to avoid an argument. I couldn't promise myself to Erin and hope that I would never feel anything for her. I couldn't make that promise to anyone. The thought of falling in love was enough to make me want to get away from the table, and I hated that my father had managed to put that fear in me so thoroughly that even the possibility felt so threatening.

Erin was still looking at me. There was hurt in her expression now, though she was trying to hide it. I knew I was making this worse for her. I knew I could have been kinder. But I couldn't make myself say something that might be mistaken for hope.

“I've told you before,” I said. “I don't want to get married.”

“Not now,” my father replied. His voice was measured, almost conversational. “We can discuss this privately.”

“Why? It isn't a secret.”

“Altair.”

He said it again, more quietly this time. Mr Winderly looked between us, and Erin lowered her eyes to her plate. I could hear the faint movement of a servant near the doorway, followed by the soft click of a dish being set down.

“I don't love her,” I said.

Erin flinched. It was slight, almost imperceptible, but I saw it. Her father drew in a breath and began to lean forward.

“There's no need to—”

“I don't intend to love anyone.”

I heard how it sounded as soon as I said it. Too blunt, too final. But it was true. I had spent years making sure there was no room for that sort of feeling in my life. My father had taught me what happened when people cared too much, and I had believed him. Perhaps that was the worst part. I couldn't tell whether I had always felt this way or whether I had simply learnt to be afraid before I had the chance to feel anything at all.

My father stood. His chair moved back against the floor, and the sound cut through the room. He didn't raise his voice. He didn't need to. The anger in his face was enough to make the servant by the doorway look down at once.

“Get out.”

For a moment, I stayed where I was. I could feel the edge of the table beneath my fingers, and I realised I had been gripping it hard enough for my knuckles to ache.

I looked at my father. “Gladly”

“Now, Altair.”

There was no room left for misunderstanding. I pushed my chair back, and its legs scraped loudly across the floor. Mr Winderly had gone completely still. Erin was staring down at the table, one hand closed around the edge of her napkin.

I stood, straightened my jacket and looked at her once more. I wanted to say something, though I couldn't have said what. I was sorry she had been put in this position? I was sorry that she had thought I might want the same things she did? But I couldn't apologise for refusing, and I couldn't give her an explanation that would make any sense to her.

So I said nothing and I left the room.

I made it halfway up the stairs before my hands began to shake. I kept them close to my sides, fingers curled into my palms, and continued walking. The dining room was still occupied. Every so often, laughter rose through the stairwell, followed by the sound of speech or the tinkering of glass.

By the time I reached my bedroom, I was having difficulty with my fingers and by extension, the door handle. I stood inside for a moment, listening, then turned the key. My tie had tightened against my throat. I pulled at it until the knot gave way, leaving the collar of my shirt crooked, and dropped it over the dressing table.

The candle beside my bed had burned low enough that the wax was beginning to collect around its base. I lit the lamp, then sat down and tried to steady my hand.

I had made a mess of things. There was no use disputing that. Erin had been embarrassed, her father insulted, and my own father left with the unpleasant task of making my behaviour seem less offensive than it had been. I could have spared him the trouble. I could have found a better time, a better way of saying it, or simply kept my mouth shut until the evening was over.

I had done none of those things.

I pressed my fingers against my eyes, but the sensation behind them only worsened. I was tired, and my chest felt strangely tight. A ridiculous reaction to an evening that, while unpleasant, hardly warranted it. I had been rude. I had been obstinate. I would be expected to apologise, and I would do so. There was nothing particularly complicated about it.

I got up and went to the window, adjusting the curtain where it had fallen unevenly across the sill. My reflection was faint in the glass. I thought of Tully. His pale face, his hands trembling against the glass, the note he had pressed into my palm. I had carried it for three days without asking him what it meant. I had intended to visit him again, though I had not decided when. I kept putting it off, and each time I did, I found some perfectly reasonable excuse.

I had been so preoccupied with my own affairs that I had managed to make his illness another thing I was reluctant to deal with.

I could go now. It was late, but he might still be awake. I could knock on his door and sit with him for a while.

I looked at the clock. Tomorrow, I decided.

I had just begun to unfasten my cuffs when someone knocked.

“Altair.”

My father.

I went to the dressing table, looked at myself in the mirror, and turned away. My eyes were beginning to sting, and I was not going to stand there crying. I washed my face, dried it, and waited a few seconds before opening the door.

Callahan stepped inside without greeting me. He removed his gloves and placed them on the dressing table, beside my tie, then looked around the room as though something in it had offended him.

“You embarrassed me tonight.”

“I know, Father.”

“Do you?”

I closed the door.

“You made a spectacle of yourself in front of the Winderlys. Do you understand the position you have put me in?”

“Yes.”

“Then why did you do it?”

“I didn't wish to marry Erin.”

“That was not the question.”

I stood beside the door, my hands clasped loosely in front of me. He was looking at me with an expression I had seen often enough to know that answering carelessly would only make things worse.

“You could have approached this matter sensibly,” he said. “Instead, you chose to insult her in front of her family, and now I am expected to account for your behaviour.”

“I apologise.”

“To whom?”

“The Winderlys.”

“And?”

“Erin.”

He gave a short, humourless laugh.

“You seem to think that is sufficient.”

I lowered my eyes. He had not asked me anything else, and I was beginning to wish I had not answered at all.

“You have been afforded every opportunity to make something of yourself,” he continued. “You have never been expected to concern yourself with anything beyond your own comfort, and still you manage to make a nuisance of yourself at the first opportunity.”

“I didn't mean to cause—”

“Don't interrupt me.”

I stopped speaking.

He walked towards the desk, where a few papers had been left beside the candle. His eyes moved over them without interest.

“You have no sense of responsibility. You have no appreciation for what is expected of you. And you have the audacity to sit at my table and behave as though the entire arrangement is beneath you.”

I said nothing.

“Look at me when I am speaking to you.”

I did.

He came closer, stopping directly in front of me. I could see the irritation in his face, the slight tightening around his mouth.

“You will apologise tomorrow,” he said. “You will speak to Erin, and you will make it clear that tonight was an unfortunate lapse in judgement. You will do the same with her father.”

“Yes, Father.”

“And you will stop behaving as though you are entitled to decide which obligations you intend to honour.”

I hesitated.

“I don't want to marry her.”

His hand caught the side of my head. My hair pulled painfully beneath his fingers, and I instinctively reached for his wrist before remembering myself. I let go almost immediately.

“Have you become so accustomed to being indulged that you cannot understand a simple instruction?”

“Father, I—”

He struck me, and I stumbled against the wardrobe. The corner caught my shoulder. I straightened almost at once, more out of instinct than anything else, and stood looking at him.

“You will do as you are told,” he said. “I will not have you making a mockery of this family because you cannot manage the most basic expectations placed upon you.”

“Yes, Father.”

My voice sounded strange. I cleared my throat.

He glanced towards the dressing table, where the candle was still burning. He picked it up, turned it briefly in his hand, then looked at me.

“You seem to have mistaken my patience for permission.”

I did not answer.

He caught my wrist when I moved, holding it firmly enough that I stopped trying to pull away. I looked at his hand, then at him, but he had already brought the candle close. I understood what he intended a moment before he did it.

I tried to draw back.

“Hold still.”

The pain was immediate. I made a sound I would have been ashamed of under any other circumstances, and he released me only when I had stopped struggling.

“Perhaps that will encourage you to think before you speak.”

He set the candle down.

I stood with my arm held close to my body, unable to look at him. My eyes had begun to water, and I blinked repeatedly, trying to clear them. I could feel my face growing hot with the humiliation of it.

“You will attend to this in the morning,” he said. “Until then, I suggest you think very carefully about the position you have put yourself in.”

I nodded.

“We will talk in the morning.”

He left.

The door closed, and I remained standing in the same place, listening to his footsteps disappear. I waited a little longer than necessary, then looked down at my hand.

I went to the dressing table and poured the water from the glass beside the lamp over the burn. I hadn't thought to bring a basin. The water ran over my hand and down my wrist, spilling onto the floor, and I set the glass down before I dropped it. I refilled it, slower this time, and held my hand beneath the water until I could no longer bear the cold.

My eyes began to blur.

I turned off the tap and stood there with my head bowed, water dripping from my fingers onto the porcelain. I could hear myself breathing, and I hated the sound. I tried to swallow, but my throat had tightened. I wiped my face with my sleeve, once, then again, though it made little difference.

I was crying.

I pressed my lips together so tightly they began to hurt. It was an absurd thing to do, standing in front of a washbasin trying to force myself to stop, as though I could discipline the rest of my body into behaving. I had been struck before. I knew what to do. I knew not to argue, not to move too quickly, not to give him any further reason to be angry. I had known all of that before I walked into the room.

And still I had managed to make it worse.

I looked at my hand again and felt a fresh wave of shame, so sudden that I had to grip the edge of the basin. I had been unable to keep my mouth shut at dinner, unable to answer my father properly, unable even to stand still when he told me to. I had made him angry, and now I was crying about it, as though I had any right to be surprised.

I wiped my face, but the tears kept coming. I bent my head and tried to make less noise, my shoulders stiff with the effort. I couldn't bear the thought of someone hearing me. I couldn't bear the thought of anyone seeing me like this, least of all my father. The idea that he might return and find me crying was so intolerable that I tried harder, which only made it worse.

Eventually, I managed to stop.

I dried my hand and went back to the bedroom. The candle had left a small pool of wax on the dressing table. I picked it up, set it aside, and wiped the wax away with a cloth. My tie was still lying there. I folded it and put it in the drawer, then straightened the papers I had left beside the lamp.

I changed my shirt. The one I had been wearing was slightly damp at the collar, and I could not stand to put it back on. I folded it over the chair and smoothed it once before leaving it alone.

When I climbed into bed, I kept my injured hand above the covers. My cheek had begun to ache as well, and I turned onto my other side. The house was gradually quieting. There were footsteps downstairs, the front door opening and closing, the sound of a car starting in the drive.

I wondered whether Erin had cried. I wondered what her father had said to mine, and whether my father had managed to make the evening sound like something other than what it was. I imagined him sitting at the table, speaking calmly, and found myself wishing I had been less difficult. It would have spared everyone the trouble.

I pulled the covers up and closed my eyes.

I could apologise in the morning. I could speak to Erin, speak to her father, and do whatever else was required of me. I would have to be more careful. There was no reason to make matters worse.

My hand began to throb beneath the covers. I moved it, then held it still against my chest. I turned onto my back.

The candle had gone out, leaving a thin trail of smoke that I could smell faintly from the bed. I tried to keep my eyes open, not wanting to wake in the morning, not wanting to sleep, not wanting to be anywhere in particular.

When I finally heard footsteps in the corridor, I sat up at once.

They stopped outside my door.

Chapter 2