

MY DARLING CLEMENTINE

A romantic couple is shown from the back, sitting on a wooden deck. The woman is wearing a white lace wedding dress and has long, wavy brown hair. The man is wearing a white dress shirt, dark suspenders, and khaki pants. They are leaning their heads against each other and smiling. The background is a soft-focus outdoor setting with trees and sunlight filtering through the leaves.

A time-travel romance novella

By: Melissa McTernan

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Chapter 1:

There was a man in Clementine's bed. She had never had a man in her bed before and she wasn't quite sure what to do about it.

There had been the handsome horse trainer out behind the stables at the summer cottage and her dear friend Millie's brother after that wild New Year's party but in her own bed? Never. Imagine the scandal that would cause! Henry Whitford's only daughter in bed with a strange man. The horror! It would make her completely unfit for marriage and the thought brought a small smile to her lips.

She looked down at the man from where she stood on the side of the bed. She had been fast asleep when she felt movement beside her on the mattress and, cracking an eye open, found the man lightly snoring next to her. And he was still snoring as she stared at him. Where on God's green earth had he come from and how had he ended up here?

Perhaps he thought this was his house? Maybe he was a drunk? Clem leaned down and sniffed the man's breath. Minty. Not the slightest whiff of alcohol. She stood back up and continued her rumination. Another woman in her situation might have screamed for help, but Clementine had never been a typical woman and she found it difficult to find this man threatening.

He was actually quite endearing, so peacefully asleep. His golden hair was swept across his forehead, and his long eyelashes rested sweetly on his cheeks, rosy with sleep. His long straight nose was strong without overpowering his face, and his lips were pink and kissable.

Mae was asleep next door and Clem could already imagine her petite friend grasping the gold cross she wore around her neck and murmuring a prayer under her breath at the scandal Clementine was causing. She sighed and gave the man a small tap on his shoulder. He huffed a little but didn't wake. She shoved him harder until he opened his eyes and blinked sleepily at her.

Clementine was suddenly very aware of what she was wearing, or not wearing to be precise, and wrapped her silk dressing gown tighter around her shoulders. The man's eyes were still foggy with sleep, but he was slowly coming to his senses.

"Who are you?" His voice was charmingly raspy from disuse, but Clementine put on her best indignant lady act.

"Who am I? Who are you, sir? Crawling into women's beds in the middle of the night."

The man looked around the room. He rolled over and ran his hand over the bedside table.

"Where's my phone?"

"Your phone?" Clem could only assume he meant telephone. "I don't know where your telephone is sir, but ours is on the first floor." She was quite proud the home had one, but the man was looking at her like she had six heads.

She had turned on the small electric lamp by the bed, still amazed at the fact that she didn't need to light a candle, and she could see the confusion on the man's face quite well.

"Are you lost?" she asked.

"No, I'm not lost. What's going on?" He rose from the bed and was looking around the room, perhaps still searching for his lost telephone.

Now that he was upright, he was much taller than Clementine and quite broad too. She was starting to reconsider her idea of not waking up Mae and her brother James before dealing with this stranger.

The man narrowed his eyes at her and his pretty mouth turned up in one corner as though he finally got the joke. "Okay, quit screwing with me. Who sent you here?"

Clementine shook her head, slowly backing away from the man. She spoke in a calm, clear voice, a trick she had learned when attempting to de-escalate situations with her father's disgruntled factory workers.

"I assure you, sir, no one sent me. I am Clementine Whitford and this house belongs to my father, Henry Whitford, textile king of the northeast." She hoped throwing her father's name into things might straighten this man out, but he only looked more confused and more than a bit irritated.

"I don't understand. This is my room. I'm staying at this Inn."

"You must be mistaken. This is not an Inn. It is one of my father's houses."

"One of them?" This part seemed to catch the man's attention.

"Yes. My father owns quite a bit of property." She did not bother to mention that her father had recently disinherited her and if he found out she was staying here he would be none too pleased. This stranger certainly didn't need to know that.

The man was still looking around the room as though trying to unlock a mystery. "Where's all my stuff? I really need to find my phone." He pulled back the heavy curtains and peered out the window. He stopped abruptly.

"There are horses outside."

Clementine nodded. "Of course."

"In the street." The man said it with such awe in his voice that she was beginning to think maybe he had suffered some type of head injury. They had a man at the summer cottage that had been kicked in the head by an overexcited mare and he was never the same.

"Maybe if you tell me your name I could help you find your people," she offered helpfully, concerned for this poor, half-crazed man in her bedroom.

"Max," he answered distractedly, shaking his head as though to erase what he had seen. "Do you mind telling me the date?"

"Why, it's the sixteenth of August."

"What year?"

Clem blinked in surprise. He really was bad off. "1895."

Max knew for certain that he had lost his mind. 1895? He scrubbed a hand over his face, attempting to think. The woman who claimed this was her room continued to stare at him with wide eyes.

If he wasn't busy trying to piece together his sanity, he might have noticed that she was incredibly beautiful. Who was he kidding? Of course he noticed. Even with her hair up in some sort of rollers and while wearing an old lady nightgown, she was sexy as hell.

Fuck. Concentrate, Max. He looked around the room again. The decor was similar to when he went to sleep last night except for all the weird antique crap that had filled it no longer looked antique. It all looked oddly new. And there was the matter of all the horses and carriages outside the window and the suspicious lack of cars.

He began to pace. Maybe this was some sort of stress reaction to him losing all his money at the track yesterday. Maybe after that damn horse—that fucking horse, that he had put every last dime on—had lost on the final straightaway, his mind had simply checked out. He must be in some sort of dissociative state.

She had been a sure thing, *My Darling Clementine*. Favored to win big. And then he would have quit. He would have recouped his money and quit gambling for good. But instead, he had lost and now he owed a lot of people a lot of money.

Max groaned internally at the thought of his money and that damn horse and turned back toward the beautiful woman. She had inched closer to the door, her big brown eyes still tracking him across the room. She clutched a silk robe around her and it hung deliciously over her wide hips. Max suddenly wished he was having a different sort of dream.

She still hadn't called for help and while she looked curious about him, and maybe a little worried, she didn't look scared. He thought about what she had said about this Inn. It was one of her father's houses. And if the entire Inn belonged to them, it was a big fucking house. Max had spent enough time in Saratoga to know money when he saw it and this girl screamed money.

If he was really here then there must be a way to get back and if he could do it with a little extra cash in his pocket, then all the better. He put on his most charming smile and the woman eyed him suspiciously.

"What did you say your name was, sweetheart?"

"Clementine," she breathed and Max nearly laughed out loud. Maybe My Darling Clementine would come in a winner after all.

Chapter 2:

The stranger in her bedroom, Max, held his hands face up as though to show her he wasn't a threat, as though the hands themselves couldn't harm her. He smiled at her, and she knew his words would be lies before they even left his mouth.

"So here's the thing, sweetheart. I seem to have lost my way." He ran his hand sheepishly through his hair as though he were embarrassed by the entire situation. "I am supposed to be staying at a friend's home and I thought this was the address. Clearly, I was wrong, but now I am without a place to stay until I get things sorted out."

Clem made a small noise of feminine understanding and nodded her head sympathetically. Max went on with his story.

"I took the train here, and it seems my bags didn't make the trip with me. I'm in quite a tight spot with no place to go and none of my things." He peered up at her through the hair that had flopped over one eye, all innocence and charm. She had to admit he was a pretty good liar. But so was she.

"Oh, that is just awful! Of course, you are more than welcome to use our telephone to call your friend." She took momentary pleasure in watching Max squirm before she threw him a line, "Unless, of course, he doesn't have one."

"Right!" he said, too loudly. "Right, he doesn't have one yet. It will have to be a letter, which could take a while." He paused waiting for her to say something, but she stood batting her eyelashes, like the sweet girl that she was. Or that she needed him to think she was. She smiled in the way she knew men liked and watched his confidence build.

"Perhaps I could stay here for a few days. Just until I get things sorted out. I would really appreciate it, sweetheart."

She wanted to tell him to stop calling her sweetheart, but there were things she needed from him too. She took a deep breath and brushed away the feeling of Mae scolding her.

"That would be fine. I couldn't very well put you out on the street."

Max gave a visible sigh of relief. Clem kept going before he could get too comfortable. "There is the small matter of you being in my bedroom, and I am a single woman and all. It doesn't look right, does it?"

He shifted uncomfortably, unsure of what to say next. Clem charged forward with her plan.

"If you wouldn't mind, perhaps we could tell people we are engaged. Just for the moment. To deter any unwanted gossip that is. You know how people can be."

She watched Max's mouth open and close, but he seemed to be out of lies to tell her. She worried she had blown the whole thing. But the letter from her aunt's lawyer sat in her drawer, haunting her with its words. She needed a husband before she could receive her inheritance. Damn her aunt and her old-fashioned thinking. If Clem had that money she wouldn't have to worry about

her father anymore. She could have her own life. And this man, who quite literally fell into her lap, maybe he could be the answer to her problems.

“I...uh...I suppose that would be fine.” He finally managed to choke out and Clem beamed her sunniest smile his way.

She clasped her hands in front of her in female delight. And that she didn't fake. Maybe she just needed people to think they were married, or on their way to being married? How specific had her aunt been, exactly? She needed to speak with this lawyer. And if that didn't work, she would simply have to make this man fall in love with her. She had done it before. And she would do it again.

Max unfolded himself from the chair he had slept in and stretched his arms toward the ceiling. Clementine was no longer in the bed where he had last seen her curled up and peacefully asleep. He hadn't slept much at all. Apparently, they could pretend to be engaged but sleeping in the same bed was not included in the deal.

He scratched his head and ran a hand roughly over his face, trying to wake himself up. He had been quite relieved to discover the house had indoor plumbing and had used it already in the early hours of the morning. At least he hadn't gone back to a time before flushing toilets. He wasn't really a roughing-it kind of guy.

Back in time, Christ. How was that even possible? He had been hoping to wake up today and have everything be back to normal, but no luck. Clementine had laid out clothes for him on the bed and he was definitely not back in the 21st century.

Max pulled on the pants and shirt, rolling up the sleeves to reveal his forearms. He put on the vest, but a tie and jacket? In the middle of August? There was no way. Although he had to admit, as he inspected himself in the mirror, he didn't look half bad. Other than the circles under his eyes from lack of sleep, he looked pretty good in these old clothes. It made him miss his shorts and T-shirts a little less.

He made his way down the stairs and followed the smell of breakfast. He found Clementine in the dining room. Her hair was piled in loops and curls on her head, with a few loose strands hanging enticingly down her neck. The rest of her was covered in white lace.

The whole look was very prim and proper and yet his thoughts were certainly not. She was all buttoned up and he couldn't help but imagine what it would be like to unwrap her, to unpin her hair, and let it tumble down her back. To undo every tiny button that ran down the back of her dress from the nape of her neck to the top of her...

“Oh Max, there you are!” she exclaimed, rising to meet him and abruptly disrupting his daydream. She gave him a soft kiss on the cheek, and he had to resist pulling her in for more. Her sweet-scented touch stayed with him as she introduced him to her companion.

“This is Mae, my dear friend.” She pointed to a small woman, who happened to be carrying in a tray of food.

“Hello, Mae.” The woman gave him a slight nod, but couldn’t seem to meet his eye. She was young and frail, and he wondered how she hadn’t dropped the enormous tray she was holding.

“Here let me get that for you.” He stepped forward to take her heavy load.

“Oh yes. There is no need to serve us, Mae! Please, you are here as my guest, remember?” Clementine seemed to give this little speech as a reminder to herself as much as to her friend. Max looked over the nervous Mae again. If Clementine screamed money, this woman was surely as broke as he was. How did two women like that become friends?

A man with a shock of red hair and a face full of freckles entered the room before Max could ask any questions about how the women knew each other.

“And this is James, Mae’s brother. He is kindly acting as our chaperone.”

“Chaperone? You’re a grown woman. What do you need a chaperone for?” The question was out of Max’s mouth before he could stop it and by the expression on all the faces turned toward him, it was the wrong one.

However, before the look of horror that she now wore, for just a split second, he could have sworn he saw a flicker of something else on Clementine’s face. A smile perhaps?

“Well, surely you don’t think it would be proper for two unmarried ladies to be traveling alone?” she asked him.

“Where I’m from it’s done all the time.”

She raised a single groomed eyebrow as though to ask more, but James interrupted.

“And who did you say this was?”

Max held out a hand and shook James’ clammy one. He hadn’t been totally sold on Clementine’s engagement plan the night before, but if it gave him a place to stay until he got this all worked out then it seemed as good an idea as any. And once he figured out how to get back, there were plenty of little souvenirs he could take from this place that he was sure would go for big money back home. Not to mention the fact that he wouldn’t mind playing fiancé with the woman next to him for a while if it happened to involve the undoing of those buttons.

He met James’ eye and lied. “Clementine’s fiancé. Nice to meet you.”

He couldn’t hear the man’s response over the clattering of dishes falling from Mae’s hands.

Chapter 3:

They had picked up the last shards of porcelain from the shattered breakfast dishes and were now gathered in the parlor. Clementine took a breath before she explained. She had always been a risk-taker, much to her parents' horror, but this was a step farther than even she had gone before.

She glanced at Max from the corner of her eye. She had to admit he looked quite dashing in his borrowed clothes, but she knew absolutely nothing else about him. The fact that he hadn't murdered her in her sleep seemed to speak well for his character, but *not a murderer* was a fairly low bar.

And even if this stranger didn't end up hacking her to pieces, her fake engagement plan could backfire in a hundred ways she hadn't even finished considering yet. But the fact remained that she needed money and fast. Her great aunt left her a sizable sum. Why shouldn't she have it just because she didn't have a husband? Why couldn't she be left alone to do as she pleased with her life?

Max's words rang through her head. *You're a grown woman*. That one sentence had done a lot to improve her opinion of him, silly as it was. And she was a grown woman, damn it. She took another deep breath.

"Mae, James, this is Maxwell Bishop, my fiancé." Her face hurt from the fake smile she had plastered there.

She grabbed Mae's hands in hers, wanting to explain to her friend what was going on, but thought it best if no one knew the truth. Besides Mae would try to talk her out of it, especially if she knew Clem was doing it at least partly for her.

"We wanted to surprise you. I'm so sorry we startled you with the news."

Mae nodded weakly, but James ran an appraising eye over Max. "And where did you say you were from?"

"From out west. Ranchers. My family, that is." Max had hesitated only long enough that Clem knew he was lying again, but James seemed to buy it.

"You must be able to pick 'em good at the track then, knowing so much about horses." James smiled, already warming to the man. Max flinched at the mention of the track but he returned James' smile.

"I'm not much of a betting man, myself."

Clem pulled Mae aside while the men went on about horses and odds and other manly pursuits.

"Oh Mae, I hope you're not angry with me. I truly meant this to be a wonderful surprise."

"Well, I'm certainly surprised," her friend responded, her slight Irish lilt coming through. She coughed into her handkerchief and Clem was guilty all over again for upsetting her, especially in her condition.

"And your father approves? Does he know?" Mae's eyes were full of worry.

“Of course. Of course! Don’t worry Mae. This is good news.” Not to mention the only way she could think of to take care of her sick friend and herself, but she didn’t add that part.

Mae gave her a weak smile. “As long as you’re happy.” She played with the cross at her neck and Clem knew she was worried and more than a little scandalized that her fiancé had spent the night. But Mae had gone from employee to friend so recently Clem knew she wouldn’t argue further. And for once she was glad for the boundaries between them.

Max spent the rest of the morning talking horses with James and damn it if he didn’t feel the itch building under his skin to go to the track. Not that he had a single dime to bet, but that had never stopped him before.

It was his father that had taken him to the track for the first time when he was a boy, and it quickly became their thing. Especially after his mother left. When his father died a few years ago, Max returned to Saratoga for the first time in years, and now he couldn’t seem to stay away. Much to the detriment of his bank account.

He ran a tired hand over his face. The thought of his dad caused as much pain as it did on the day he found out about the heart attack. If he was going to go back in time, it would have been nice to return to a time when his father was alive and telling dirty jokes and smoking his favorite cigars on their back porch after a big win. But who was he to say how time travel worked.

He picked up a newspaper and scanned the headlines. The date in the corner of the front page confirmed what he had already come to accept. August 17, 1895. He suddenly wished he had paid more attention in history class.

The room around him was empty of people but crowded with things. Thick patterned curtains covered the windows and ornate rugs covered the floors. There were paintings and oddities everywhere, including a stuffed peacock on the mantle. He half expected to find little plaques next to each item giving the artist’s name and preferred medium.

He had a girlfriend once who went on and on about clean modern lines and minimalism in her ideal home. This place did not have those.

He wandered back up the curved staircase to find his fake fiancée. She had disappeared with Mae after their big announcement and he hadn’t seen her since.

He gave a small knock before entering their room, still not sure of the protocol for a turn of the century, the last century, romance. Did people sleep together before they got married? Was he allowed to kiss her? How would he actually get all those buttons undone in the heat of the moment? Maybe he could just lift her skirts and...

“Come in.” Clementine’s sweet voice interrupted his less than sweet thoughts once again. What was it about this woman that had him so intrigued? He opened the door and found her seated at a desk rifling through a pile of papers. She stuffed them in the drawer when he entered and smiled at him.

“Are you enjoying your stay so far?” she asked.

“Mae didn’t seem entirely thrilled about our engagement,” he said, cutting to the chase.

Clementine batted her eyelashes at him and he was growing tired of the act. “She was just surprised.”

Max perched on the edge of the bed, undoing his top two buttons. He needed some air. He couldn’t help but notice Clementine watching his hand open his collar.

“How do you and Mae know each other? It’s obvious you don’t run in the same circles.”

She looked as though she would dispute it, but she instead went with what finally felt like the truth. “She worked at one of my father’s factories. She and James. I befriended them both.”

He considered her answer, laying back on the bed and stretching his arms up overhead. He gave a sigh as his muscles relaxed. “And how does a pretty little heiress like you befriend factory workers exactly?”

He was facing the ceiling so he couldn’t see her face but he could hear the slight irritation in her voice. The first she had shown him since they hatched their little plan. He liked it. It was honest.

“If you must know, I helped them plan a strike and they were fired for it. It seemed only right to help them afterward.”

Max sat up and found Clementine standing over him, waiting for him to tell her she was wrong. Her hands were on her hips and she glared at him, ready for a fight.

“Wow. Impressive.”

“Impressive?” Her eyebrows rose.

“Yeah. Organizing a strike. That’s pretty amazing. Good for you.” He loved the half-shocked, half suspicious look that crossed her face.

“You don’t think it’s improper for a woman like me to get involved in labor disputes?”

“I don’t think most things are improper. In fact, I can’t remember the last time I thought anything was improper.”

She raised an eyebrow and wrapped her arms around herself. She opened her mouth to speak, but then closed it again. In the end, her curiosity won out.

“I’ve also marched for the right to vote.”

“As you should.”

Her perfect little mouth opened in surprise and then clamped shut again. Max grinned.

“How about riding a bicycle? I’ve done that too.”

He couldn’t help the laugh that escaped him. Bikes were improper? Where the hell had he landed? Clementine was studying him closely so he tried to reign in his merriment.

“Women ride bikes all the time where I’m from.”

“Out west that is?”

“Yeah. Out west” He couldn’t say more, because he had no idea what states were out west at this point. All of them? When was that damn Louisiana Purchase thing?

“Hmm...well it must be as wild as they say.” She had moved closer to him and her floral scent filled his nose. He wanted to pull her to stand between his legs, but if bicycle riding was scandalous he could only imagine she wouldn’t be amenable to what he had in mind.

“You will have your own room tonight.” She told him as though she had read his thoughts. “We shouldn’t have to keep up this little charade for too long, but I do appreciate you protecting my reputation.”

“Well you are already a known bike rider, we couldn’t very well add harlot to the list.” He meant it as a joke, but Clementine turned away from him and, even though her voice was cheerful, he had seen the hurt look that crossed it.

“Mae and I are going to the baths today.”

“The baths?”

“Yes, the mineral baths. From the spring water?”

“Umm...” Max was familiar with the weird, sulfur-flavored water from the fountains in the park, but bathing in them? He had no idea that was a thing.

“You men come for the horses, but we came to take the waters. I’m hoping it will help with Mae’s condition.”

“She’s sick?”

“Very.” Clementine met his eyes and for the first time she wasn’t chipper and cheerful. She had dropped the act and he saw a woman concerned for her friend, a woman who apparently bucked all sorts of societal norms to help her. And he realized that lying to her and stealing her stuff was about to get more complicated.

Chapter 4:

“Oh, I do wish you’d stay with me.” Mae clutched feebly at her hands.

“You’ll be fine! I promise tomorrow I will stay and drink all the spring water I can stomach, but today I do have a very important errand to run.” Clem pried her fingers free and nearly pushed Mae from the carriage. “I will send Gray back for you in a few hours. It is all on my father’s account so there is nothing for you to worry about. You will be feeling better in no time, my dear!”

Clem waved goodbye as Mae stood in front of the public baths, grasping at her cross necklace. She did feel a bit guilty leaving the poor girl, but she couldn’t stand another day of soaking in the bubbling waters. She preferred her bubbles in champagne.

And besides, Clementine needed to speak with her aunt’s lawyer immediately. It was only a matter of time before her father figured out she was still living off his money.

The carriage pulled up in front of her aunt’s imposing house on the hill. Her lawyer promised to meet her inside. She gathered her skirts and hustled up the front stairs, not bothering to knock. She was family after all.

The front hall was empty, but shuffling sounds came from the dining room. There she found William Hardy sorting through a pile of documents, his morning tea still in front of him.

“Ah, Miss Whitford.” He startled when she entered then studied her with pursed lips. She tucked a curl behind her ear. At least she remembered a hat today. “And what can I do for you?”

“I’ve come to discuss my aunt’s will. I received a letter...”

“It seems a bit premature to discuss your aunt’s will when the woman still lives.” He raised a haughty eyebrow, but Clem didn’t have time to register his disapproval.

“Still alive?” Her thoughts bumped clumsily into each other, all racing to be first. If her aunt was alive how would she get the money? Could she convince her to remove the marriage stipulation?

“Yes, miss. Your aunt is alive. That letter must have been sent prematurely. I will speak with my clerk about his mistake. Is there anything else?”

“I...uh...yes. Can I see her?” Clem peered up the winding staircase, assuming her aunt was resting upstairs. Probably stuffing herself full of spring water.

“Her nurse has not arrived yet, but I suppose it will be alright.” He peered at her through the tiny round spectacles that sat on the tip of his nose. If he tilted his head up any further, Clem was sure his neck would snap.

“Thank you, Mr. Hardy!” She was climbing the stairs before he could follow her, but his huffing and puffing echoed up the stairs.

Clem hesitated outside her aunt's door before she opened it. She mustn't seem too eager. The old witch wasn't yet in her grave. The door creaked on its hinges and her aunt's eyes flew open at the sound.

"Where are your gloves, dear?"

Apparently, whatever ailed her aunt did nothing to affect her keen eyesight and sense of propriety. Clem smoothed her bare hands over her skirt.

"I must have forgotten them." She moved closer to the bed. Her aunt was covered in blankets and propped up on a pile of pillows. She looked small and frail, but Clem knew better. There was nothing weak about this woman. "How are you feeling, Aunt Viola?"

"I'm dying you silly girl," she muttered. "Have you come for my money?"

Clementine did her best to look shocked. "Aunt, how could you say such things! Of course not. I came to see you." She patted the old woman's arm. Viola pulled it away.

"I'm old, not stupid. And I've been having Mr. Hardy put my affairs in order." Viola ran an appraising eye over Clem and frowned. "As you well know, I was never blessed with any children of my own. It seems you, my dear, are my only heir."

Clem swallowed.

"You and that father of yours. He is my nephew after all."

The woman paused dramatically, causing Clem to lean forward in her seat and nearly fall onto the bed. If Viola left the money to her father, she would never see a penny.

"But I never did care for your father. So that leaves you." Another narrow-eyed glance and Clem felt like she was a racehorse up for auction. "Your father has told me of your exploits."

"Aunt, if you let me explain, I'm sure you'll understand."

"I understand perfectly," her aunt interrupted. "You are uncouth and undisciplined."

"But Aunt..."

"You need boundaries. You need a firm hand."

"Aunt Viola, I really must..."

"You need a husband."

Clementine huffed a sigh. The old bat closed her eyes and clasped her papery hands over her middle. Her chest still rose and fell. The battle wasn't over.

Clem cleared her throat. "Well, then I have good news." Her cheerfulness was forced. Viola's shrewd eyes reopened and focused on her niece. "I'm engaged!"

"How convenient."

"He's wonderful, really." Clem went on. "His family is from out west. He knows a lot about horses. I think you would like him."

Viola made a disapproving noise somewhere in her throat. Damn it if this wouldn't have been easier if she was dead. Mr. Hardy's snooty-ness had nothing on her aunt's withering stare.

"It's strange that I heard nothing about your engagement until today."

"I...well...it's all very new. You are one of the first people to know."

"I'm honored, niece. And I would love to meet this new fiancé of yours." She smirked. "It would do my heart good to know I was leaving my niece in good hands before I die."

Clem nearly choked. She coughed violently into her hand, and her aunt retreated to the other side of the bed.

"You should take the waters dear. That cough sounds horrible."

"Yes, Aunt Viola."

"And bring that fiance soon. I'm not long for this world."

"Yes, Aunt Viola."

The woman barreled into him as she tore down the steps from the house he was passing on his way back from the track. The bills folded up in his pocket were a comforting weight against his leg.

"Woah!" He caught her in his arms and she gave a startled gasp.

"Max!" She untangled herself from him. "It's you." She smoothed a hand over her hair and made a feeble attempt to right her hat that sat precariously on her head.

He smiled, amused at seeing her so flustered. "Fancy meeting you here." He raised an eyebrow to the house behind her. "How were the baths?"

"The baths?" Her cheeks were pink and she ran a hand across her brow. What had made her come so undone? "Oh yes, the baths. I...uh...well."

Max waited, still grinning as Clementine stalled.

"I left Mae to have her treatments done. I needed to make a few calls."

He studied the house while Clem continued to adjust her clothes and hair. It was big. Really big. Dollar signs flashed before his eyes.

"And you were at the track?" How did she know? "You stink like cigar smoke." She answered his unspoken question.

He cleared his throat. He had pocketed a few silver spoons from her house and sold them for betting money. It didn't matter the year, Max Bishop knew how to get money to feed his habit. Stealing was a first though. The heat rose to his face.

"I wanted to get a look at the horses." He tried to keep his tone casual.

Clementine had slid her arm in his, and they strolled side by side. She made one of her small agreeable noises. He was relieved to not look her in the eye as he spoke. How had she managed to turn the conversation from her obvious lie to his?

“Shall we walk home through the park? I sent the carriage to pick up Mae. The poor dear can’t walk far without having a coughing fit.”

“Through the park?” The park was crowded. Didn’t she want to avoid gossip? “Are we trying to convince the whole town that we are engaged or just your friend Mae?”

Clem’s hand tensed on his arm, but she spoke lightly. “Oh, Mae is a horrible gossip. I’m sure half the town knows by now anyway. We might as well keep up appearances a bit longer.”

“Yeah, Mae did strike me as the chatty type,” he said wryly as they turned down the path through Congress Park. Everything was eerily the same as it was when he walked through it in his own time. The small pavilions covering the fountains, the pond, and even the ducks were all here. If he could ignore the insane outfits everyone was wearing he could almost convince himself he was back.

He remembered the night of his big loss, stumbling through the darkened park. He had stopped to drink from one of the fountains, wishing it was spouting whiskey. He hadn’t even had enough money left for a real drink.

“So tell me again, what’s so special about this spring water?”

Clem sighed in relief at the change of subject. “It is said to have amazing healing properties. It was even considered sacred to the natives that lived here.”

“I’m sure they were thrilled to have all these spas and hotels built up over the top of it then,” he muttered.

“What?”

“Nothing.” He was clearly grasping at straws here, but the only things different about the night he woke up in Clem’s bed were betting on a horse with her name and drinking the fizzy water. “Does the water do anything other than healing?”

“Like what?” She peered up at him, her eyes honey brown in the sunlight.

He didn’t have time to expound further on his insane theory before they were surrounded by a bevy of chattering women. At least he assumed they were women. He could barely see them under their enormous hats. What was with all the hats?

“Clementine! We heard you were back in town!”

“Hazel, Eliza, Lily! So lovely to see you!” Her voice was sugary sweet, and Max wasn’t fooled for a second. He wondered if these women were.

“And who is this?” The women eyed him hungrily and Clem held tighter to his arm.

“This is Maxwell Bishop, my fiancé.” The women gasped so dramatically, that Max was forced to stifle a laugh. Was it so unheard of that the beautiful woman on his arm would have a fiancé? Must be all that scandalous bike riding she was known for.

He flashed the women his most charming smile. “Nice to meet you, ladies.” They twittered and held out their hands expectantly. It took a nudge from Clementine to realize he was supposed to kiss them. He ran his lips from

one gloved hand to the next and then straightened to find them all eyeing him suspiciously. Was he supposed to bow too?

“We really must be going.” Clementine tugged him along and away from the three gaping ladies.

“Friends of yours?” he asked when they were out of earshot. Clem’s cheeks were flushed again and her lips pressed in a tight line.

“I wouldn’t say that.”

“I guess they’ll be telling the other half of town that you’re engaged.”

“I suppose they will.”

“And that’s what you wanted.”

She sighed but didn’t answer.

“Any chance you’re going to tell me why?” They meandered past the second pond, attracting interested stares along the way. Apparently, Clementine was well known in town and they were causing quite a stir.

“Any chance you’re going to tell me why you’re so willing to go along with it?” she countered.

There was no way in hell he was going to do that. He didn’t answer.

“That’s what I thought. I have my reasons and you have yours. And we’ll just have to leave it at that for now.

Chapter 5:

Clem stared at the ceiling of her room, her mind refusing to rest. How had she let things get so out of control? Her father had disowned her, she was responsible for Mae's care, her vile aunt was somehow still alive, and she had a fake fiancé. She ran through the list for the hundredth time.

The last one weighed on her mind the most. A fake fiancé. A fake fiancé who was clearly lying just as much as she was, and she couldn't figure out why. It must be about the money. It always was.

Maybe she should tell him the truth. She could offer him a cut of her aunt's money if he agreed to marry her. She shook her head, her curls rustling against her pillowcase. If they actually married, he would have control over everything. She needed that money, and she certainly didn't need a husband telling her what to do with it.

Damn her Aunt Viola and her outdated thinking. They were on the verge of a new century! Certainly, a woman could control her own life! She needed to get that will changed before her aunt died. But until she figured out a way to do that she needed to keep Max. Just in case. Money and a husband was better than no money and destitute.

Somehow she had found the one man in the country who didn't know she was unmarriageable, who didn't seem to care if she was. She wasn't about to let him get away.

She yanked the blankets off and swung her legs out of bed. She was too worked up to sleep. Grabbing her dressing gown from the hook, she padded down the stairs to the library. The soft yellow light spilled out into the dark hallway. She wasn't the only one who couldn't sleep.

Max was in one of her father's worn leather chairs, a book in his lap and a glass of whiskey at his side. She stayed leaning in the doorway until he lifted his head from his book and noticed her. He smiled in that lazy way of his, and Clem would be lying if she said it didn't make her stomach flip.

Maybe she needed a little more insurance that Max wasn't going anywhere.

"I didn't imagine you'd be much of a reader."

He closed the book and took a swig of his drink, the ice clinking against the sides of the glass. "I'm insulted." His voice was husky from disuse. "But you're not wrong. I don't usually read, but I couldn't fall asleep."

She slunk into the room, feeling her silk nightgown brush against her thighs. He watched her, and the heat rose to her cheeks.

"Homesick?"

He shifted in his seat. She had hit on something there.

"You could say that."

She slid into the chair opposite him and reached for his glass. "Do you mind?"

He shook his head, so she took a swallow of the amber liquid. It burned all the way down. She licked her lips and his gaze followed her tongue.

“What’s it like? Your home?”

He tore his gaze away from her mouth and met her eyes. “Like a different world.”

“Do you plan to go back?” She held her breath waiting for the answer.

His brow furrowed and he ran a hand through his hair. His smile when he gave it was tinged with sadness. “If I can figure out a way.”

She nodded, pushing the hair behind her ear. It was down around her shoulders, the curls brushing her bare collar bones. She wrapped a strand around her finger.

“Is there anything I can do to make you stay more comfortable?”

He raised an eyebrow. “More comfortable?”

“Well, you are my fiancé, even if only for the moment. A fake engagement can come with real benefits.” She got up before she lost her nerve and stepped between his knees. His lips parted in shock.

Deep breath Clementine. A means to an end. She put her hands on his shoulders and pushed him back in his chair, planting her lips on his. He sat stunned before he brought his hands to frame her face and kissed her back.

Her lips were so damn soft. He groaned against her mouth. He wrapped his fingers in her lush curls as she lowered herself into his lap. His mind raced while his hands roved over her silk-clad body. Clearly, she was seducing him for a reason. This was nothing more than another lie. His body screamed at him not to care.

He pulled away but kept her face trapped in his hands. She was breathing heavily and her eyes were huge and bright. “What are you doing?” he asked. She ran her hands through his hair and squirmed a little in his lap.

She smiled a predatory smile. “I had hoped it was obvious.”

He bit back a groan and released her face. “Stop. Moving.” He held her hips steady, and she giggled as she nuzzled into his neck. An act. It was all an act.

“Why are you doing it?”

“Why?” She pulled her mouth from his neck and met his eye. “Why not?”

“You hardly know me.”

“I know enough.”

“You think I’m a liar.”

“You are a liar.” She raised an eyebrow. “Most men would not be arguing right now.”

“What happened to protecting your reputation?”

She laughed ruefully, and he saw genuine pain cross her face. “My reputation was ruined long ago. I thought you would have figured that out by now.” She was no longer squirming seductively and her cheeks were pink with something other than desire. He had embarrassed her.

“Look, I don’t really know the rules around here. But I don’t want you to get hurt.”

“I’m a big girl. I make my own choices.” Her eyes flashed in anger and she tried to get up, but he held tight to her hips.

“And you want to do this with me? Or is this fake too?” He held her stare, watching the emotions flicker across her face. “I like you, Clementine.” He knew she was studying his face for a lie, but she wouldn’t find one. He was telling the truth. This was a terrible idea, but he liked spending time with the little liar in his lap.

She softened in his arms. “Why can’t you go home?” she asked quietly, pushing back a piece of hair that had fallen across his forehead.

“I just can’t.” His voice caught in his throat. “There’s no one left there for me anyway.” Her eyes filled with such sympathy, he knew she was lonely too.

She leaned closer and he ran the tip of his nose down her cheek. Her floral scent wrapped around him.

“I want to kiss you,” she whispered onto his lips. He nodded and she pressed her mouth to his, softly at first and then more, melting into him. And this time she was telling the truth.

Chapter 6:

Max stretched his arms overhead and leaned back in the rocking chair. His feet, still in borrowed shoes, were up on the porch railing, slowly rocking the chair back and forth. Clem sat next to him, stitching a small piece of fabric he couldn't possibly imagine the use for.

It was early and the porch was mercifully in the shade, but the air was already stifling. He had his sleeves rolled up and no coat, but the vest was mandatory. Clem had looked at him aghast when he came downstairs in just his shirtsleeves this morning. Sweat slid down his back, making his shirt cling to his skin.

At some point, a cook had arrived at the house and a girl to clean. He sipped the lemonade she had brought him. If he could get used to the clothes and lack of air conditioning, it might not be so bad here.

He took another sip of his drink and glanced at Clem. She smiled at him and continued her tiny sewing. He could relax around her now that he had her figured out.

It occurred to him after their walk in the park; Clem wanted to show all her stuck up friends that she had a fiancé. Prove to everyone she wasn't damaged goods. And he was happy to oblige. He didn't mind being arm candy for a bit, especially if it came with a household staff and Clem's mouth on his.

Not that she had kissed him again in the days since their meeting in the library, but he assumed it was only a matter of time.

“What are you thinking about?”

He choked a little on his drink. How did she do that? “Nothing really, why?”

“You're looking awfully smug.” She narrowed her eyes. “Just wondering why.”

He rocked back in his chair and closed his eyes. “I was thinking that this is a nice set-up you have here.” He could hear her shuffling things in her lap, rustling her skirts. She got restless when she lied. He knew that now.

“Yes, this is one of my favorite properties.” She didn't like to talk about her houses, or money, or her father. These were things he had learned so far. But he didn't need her to tell him how rich she was. He saw it all around.

He only hoped she had enough stuff that she wouldn't miss a few items here and there. The track was treating him kindly in this time. He had hit winner after winner since he'd been here. Now it was just a matter of how much he could take back with him.

Last time he went to sleep in his sweats with nothing in his pockets but his father's lucky penny. He still had the penny. It stood to reason if he filled his pockets with cash, it would come with him also. He could appear in his own time with enough money to pay all his debts and start fresh. If he could get there.

He ran a hand over his face. Thinking about how he got here and how he would get back gave him a headache. Maybe he would just stay. He glanced over at Clem again, and she was studying him with that shrewd look of hers. She was probably reading his mind right now.

“So what’s on the agenda today?” he asked. “More baths?”

Clem grimaced. “Not for me. I went with Mae yesterday and my fingers are still pruned.” She held up her hands as evidence. Her fingers were long and slender, and Max remembered them running through his hair.

“I was actually hoping you would come with me. I have someone I’d like you to meet.”

“Oh? More not-quite-friends of yours?”

“No. But my aunt is dying to meet you.”

Clem straightened his tie for the tenth time and pushed the hair off his face. He squirmed beneath her touch.

“Have I passed inspection yet?” he grumbled.

She sighed. “I’m sorry, it’s just that my aunt is a very particular woman.” She straightened her hat and pulled up her gloves. Her corset was pulled too tight, and the backs of her knees were sweating.

Max put a finger under her chin and lifted her face up to his. “Relax. What’s the big deal? I’m incredibly charming, remember?” He flashed his winning grin and Clem did relax a little. He was definitely handsome, but her aunt wasn’t stupid. She would see through this whole charade. Unless Clem could get her hands on those papers. Then it wouldn’t matter what her aunt thought of Max.

“Your aunt is ready now, miss.” The nurse scurried down the stairs, a frightened little mouse. Max looked at her sideways as she ran by.

“I told you.”

“Come on, darling. Let’s go.” He took her hand and pulled her up the wide, curving staircase. She hated to admit that she felt better when he held onto her. She should not need a man to feel better. She needed that money.

Max knocked on the door and her aunt called them in. She was propped up higher in bed today, her cheeks colored with a touch of pink. She pretended at life and vitality, but her hands shook and her breath rattled in her throat.

“So this is him,” she said without preamble or greeting.

“Yes. Aunt Viola, this is Maxwell Bishop. Max, this is my aunt, Viola Prescott.”

Max strode forward and held out his hand. Viola drew back as though it may bite her, eyes wide. He pulled it away and tucked it into his pocket. “Nice to meet you, ma’am.”

Viola’s eyes narrowed. “I’m sure it is.” She continued to study him, and Clem felt the sweat roll between her breasts and trickle down her back. But Max

stood tall under her aunt's appraising gaze. He even flashed his dazzling grin. Viola was unmoved.

"And you've agreed to marry our Clementine?" her aunt asked when she was done with her bold inventory of Max.

"Of course."

"And you're aware of her various exploits?"

Max lifted a wry eyebrow at Clementine and in her nervousness she nearly laughed. "I'm aware."

Her aunt gave a small noise of disapproval. "So you're after her father's money, then?"

Clem felt the heat rise to her cheeks at her aunt's insinuation. Never mind that it was the exact thing that Clementine had already assumed about Max. Was it so hard to believe that someone would actually want her?

Max rolled his shoulders back, filling more of the space beside her aunt's bed. He took Clem's hand in his and stared the old woman down.

"Actually, I knew nothing about Clem's family when I met her. But the moment I saw her, I knew I had to have her. I am only happy she agreed to marry me."

It was fake, an act he was putting on to help her out, but her stomach didn't seem to know that. It flipped over at his words and her foolish heart fluttered in her chest. How nice it would be if his words were true.

"Now, we really must be going. Come along, darling." He wrapped an arm around her waist and steered her from the room. Her aunt was too shocked to protest.

"What a bitch," he muttered as soon as they were out of earshot, and the hysterical laughter that had been building in Clem's throat bubbled over. He smiled at her as they hurried down the front staircase. They paused at the bottom.

"Thank you for that." Her heart still strummed loudly in her chest. It may have all been a lie, but he had done it for her.

His grin was lopsided and mischievous, and she suddenly remembered the way his lips felt on hers.

"Anytime. I love sticking it to mean old people." He pushed a stray curl behind her ear, lingering a little too long, brushing his hand across her cheek.

Clem cleared her throat, breaking the moment.

"Right, well should we go?" Max plowed ahead, pulling open the door into the heat of the day.

"I'll be right there. I think I dropped a glove."

Max shrugged and went out to wait for her on the porch. Clem took a quick look around and found no servants in sight. The dining room was back in order, her aunt's papers no longer strewn across the table. She crept into the study. The walls were covered in old books. A large desk stood by the window and Clem hurried to search the drawers.

The first one uncovered nothing but her uncle's old accounting papers. The second was a mess of rubber bands, racing stubs, and several half-empty cigar boxes. Her hand reached for the third.

"Can I help you with something, miss?"

Clem jerked upright, smoothing her skirts. "Oh...I...yes. I was just looking for an old book of my uncle's."

"Well, I don't think you'll find it in the desk," the butler said with a meaningful glance.

Clem stepped away from the desk as though it were on fire. "Of course. It's just...it was a very old book...I didn't think it would be on the shelves." She fixed her hat and pulled up her gloves. She couldn't seem to stop fidgeting.

"I assure you, miss. There is nothing for you in there."

"Yes. Well. I will be going then." Clem held her head high. She found righteous indignation was often enough to distract people from her lies.

"Your aunt asked I give you this before you leave." He held out a folded piece of paper in his gloved hand. Clem took it and hurried out of the study, unfolding the page as she went. Her aunt's signature lavender scent wafted from the page, a large gold V graced the top.

Clementine,

I do not trust that man for an instant. I don't know what games you are up to now, but if I get the slightest hint that your engagement is a farce, my money will go to my thoroughbreds. They are more respectful than you.

Yours,

Aunt V.

Damn it. Clem crumpled the paper in her fist and stuffed it into a potted fern on her way out.

Chapter 7:

The sound of Mae's cough reverberated through the hallway, waking Clementine from her fitful sleep. Again. The sound was so painful and desperate that Clem's own lungs tightened in response. The coughs were followed by a pitiful wheeze that Clementine could hear even from her own room. She had tried everything she could think of to ease her friend's discomfort, everything the doctor had suggested. And nothing was working.

She took several deep breaths in an effort to calm herself, but she couldn't swallow the lump that had formed in her throat, and her heart continued its panicked flutter in her chest.

Once her father found out they were staying here, she wouldn't even be able to provide her friend with a place to stay. The last time she had seen him, he was red-faced and sweating as the workers streamed from his factory.

His voice had been steely and calm as he informed her she was no longer his daughter. She would never see another dime of his money, and she could go live with the rabble she loved so much. Her mother stood quietly by his side, but her heartbreak was clear in her face.

Clem rolled over and squeezed her eyes shut, trying to forget the day, but her father's words were still fresh in her mind. She hadn't planned the strike, but apparently seeing his own daughter join the picket line was enough to push him over the edge. To be fair, she had been nudging him closer to it for years.

A last-minute reprieve from his decision did not seem likely.

She would be fine. She forced herself to breathe in the thought. Breathe out. Breath in. She would be fine. Her body softened into the mattress. In. Out. Just fine.

She still had some money left from the jewelry she sold to get them here, and she was resourceful. But what about Mae? James found work at the track, but his wages would never be enough to care for her. Clementine couldn't allow Mae to go live in the little shacks that barely passed as homes for the track workers. The horses lived better.

Mae started a fresh round of coughing and whatever small amount of calm Clem had found quickly evaporated. She rolled out of bed and padded down the hallway to Mae's room.

Max stood leaning against the wall, his eyes on her door. "What does she have?" he whispered, his brows drawn together.

"We're not sure." Clem's shoulders sagged in defeat.

"Clementine." The tone in Max's voice forced her to meet his eye. "Does she cough up blood?"

She winced, still not wanting to admit how bad things had gotten for her friend.

"It's consumption isn't it?"

“We don’t know that for sure.” Her voice was barely a rasp. She swallowed hard.

Max stepped closer, his large hands wrapping around her upper arms, squeezing until she was paying attention. “She can’t stay here, Clem. We could all get sick.”

She shook her head, trying to pull away. “You would have me put her out on the street?” The tears stung behind her eyelids.

“No. Of course not. But there must be somewhere she could go? Something you could do?”

Something she could do with all her heaps of money was what he meant. And there were places she could send Mae, places for her to recover. But she didn’t have heaps of money. And the springs here were the best she could do.

“I’m doing all I can.” She shook out of his grasp. “She’s my friend. I will see to her care.” She stormed back to her own room.

“Clementine!” Max hissed after her, but she didn’t stop until she was behind her door. The tears fell bitterly down her face. Frustration and anger and fear finally spilled out of her. She let herself cry.

He flinched when Clementine’s door slammed shut, leaving him alone in the dark hallway. Mae’s coughs continued behind her closed door.

Max often found himself awake in the middle of the night, but without the comforting blue light of technology to keep him company, he was at a loss. He sighed and ran a hand through his hair. Some nights, when he was tired of binge-watching Netflix, he would switch to PBS and watch documentaries.

And so now, as he stood outside of Mae’s room, all he could see was the black and white footage of body after wasted body succumbing to the illness he was sure Mae had. Tuberculosis. And thanks to his late-night history lessons, he knew there wasn’t a cure yet.

He should have thought of it sooner, seeing how pale and gaunt the woman was, her cough always wracking her small body. A sudden panicked fear seized his chest that she had already infected them all.

He crept back down the hall, not breathing deeply until he was away from the cloud of germs he now imagined lingered outside of Mae’s room.

He knocked softly at the next door. “Clementine?”

A pause. And then, “Go away.”

“Just let me in.” His voice was gentle. He tried the knob, and it was unlocked so he pushed a little. He heard shuffling and found Clementine in a heap on the floor, her eyes red and her cheeks stained with tears.

“Hey, shh...I didn’t mean to make you cry.” He dropped to the floor beside her, and she allowed herself to be pulled into his arms. He spoke into the top of her head, her damp cheek resting on his chest. “It’ll be okay. We’ll figure something out.”

She shook her head against him and sniffled. “No. It won’t. I thought I could help her. I promised...” Her voice was swallowed by a hiccuping sob, and Max wrapped his arms tighter around her waist.

“And my father...and the money...” she wailed.

He rubbed her back in consoling circles until her sobs returned to sniffles. She sat up and rubbed the tears from her eyes. “I’m sorry. It just all hit me at once.” She pushed the hair away from her face.

“You don’t have to apologize.”

“I shouldn’t burden you with all this.” Her legs were still draped over his and even as she wiped her face and fixed her hair, she made no move to untangle herself from his lap. Her creamy nightgown spread over his legs. His pajamas were more formal than his usual clothes, with a button-down top and pants. Clementine ran her fingers absentmindedly over the buttons one by one.

“It’s not a burden. Your friend is sick.” He brushed an errant curl from her cheek, and she leaned into his hand. He ran a thumb across her face. She sighed.

“But we do need to figure something out. I don’t want you getting sick too.”

“You’re worried about me?” A small smile tilted her perfect mouth.

“Of course. I worry about all my fake wives.”

She laughed and smacked him playfully on the shoulder. “We’re not married yet. I’m only your fake fiancée for now.”

“I know this is a strange situation we’re in.” The teasing had left his voice and Clem gazed at him intently. “But I wouldn’t want anything to happen to you.”

Clementine lowered her eyes and stared at her hands. Her cheeks were pink even in the dim light of the room.

“Do you want to tell me what else is going on?” he asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Parading me around for everyone to see, meeting your aunt... You shouldn’t worry so much about what all these narrow-minded assholes think of you.”

She rolled her shoulders back and faced him, her stubborn determination returning. “I don’t worry about it, but unfortunately the things they think of me directly affect my ability to live the life I want to live.”

“And here I thought you needed me to show everyone you could find a suitable husband.”

“Well, partly. Too bad no one thinks you’re suitable.” Her tone was light and teasing again, the charm turned back on. “And you’re still here because...”

“I like you. I want to help you.” She shifted closer to him, and he leaned in so he could whisper in her ear. “So if it’s okay with you, I’ll stick around until you get this life you want to live sorted out.”

She breathed out as though relieved he was agreeing to stay longer. As if he would go now when she felt heavenly in his lap. Why rush home? To what?

His inevitable eviction notice, his debts, his pissed-off friends and coworkers?

Clementine's breath was warm on his neck, her arms wrapped around him, fingers running through the back of his hair. No, this was much better than all that.

"Will you stay with me tonight?" Her voice in his ear sent shivers through his body.

"Seems a little premature to consummate the marriage."

Her teeth nipped at his ear and he groaned, his resolve not to dig himself in any deeper weakening. The scent of flowers surrounded him, and she was so warm and soft in his arms.

"You're not a suitable husband, anyway. And I'm unmarriageable. What harm could it do?" She kissed along his jawline until she reached his lips. She quirked an eyebrow as though asking permission.

He leaned forward and pressed his mouth to hers, feeling her smile against him. She kissed him back, deeper and he could taste the minty sweetness of her.

She broke the kiss to stand and pulled him to his feet. Not letting go of his hand, she led him to the bed. He followed the delicious sway of her hips in that flimsy nightgown, pushing every reason this was a bad idea out of his head.

He was here and she wanted him. What more did he need to know? She stopped and turned to him, reaching for the buttons of his shirt, her gaze not meeting his eye. She did want him, right? Doubt crept in, crowding out the lust-filled haze blocking his vision. He grabbed Clementine's chin and lifted her face.

Her cheeks were splashed with pink, her eyes wide. And for once she didn't bat her eyelashes at him, didn't throw him a flirtatious smile. She just stared back at him, her face open, her lips slightly parted.

Max's breath left him in a long sigh. He didn't know what bizarre tear in the world had brought him here, but at the moment he was really damn glad it did.

"One thing," he said, his voice tight. Clem continued unbuttoning his shirt, even as her eyes never left his face. She slid her hands inside and he bit back a groan. "When it's the two of us, like this..." His hands skated over the silky fabric covering her hips. "Nothing is fake. Okay?"

Her lips tipped up into a small smile. Her hands slid over the contours of his back. "Deal," she said before he captured her mouth again, stealing the word from her lips. That's what he did. Steal and lie and lose. But not tonight. Tonight he would give Clementine everything. He wouldn't lie to her about this.

He pulled down one strap of her nightgown and then the other, letting the fabric pool around her feet. She shivered under his touch and shimmied closer to him, making it impossible to get a good look at her. He nearly groaned in frustration, but let his hands explore her body instead.

Her skin was warm and soft beneath his fingers, every inch of her exposed to his touch. She sighed, her arms around his neck, her lips on his as he traced the curve of her hips, the indent of her waist, the softness of her stomach.

His fingers caressed the bottom of her full breasts and she let out a breathy gasp against his lips.

She pushed the shirt from his shoulders and he shrugged it off. Her hands ran up and down his biceps and across his back, doing their own exploring. She pressed in closer and the feel of her silky skin against his left him breathless. Left him wanting to toss her onto the bed and dive between her thighs, but...

“You’ve done this before?” he asked, pulling away from her kiss.

Something like embarrassment crossed her face. She dropped her arms and the small step she took away from him felt cavernous, earth splitting.

“I have.” A furious blush worked its way up her cheeks. “I understand if you don’t want to anymore. I thought you assumed...”

“It’s fine.” His words were rushed and sloppy. “I mean, I don’t care.” He grabbed her hands wanting that closeness again, but she kept the space between them. It took all his strength to keep his eyes on her face even as she stood naked in front of him.

He started again. “I only wanted to make sure it was good for you. I didn’t want to hurt you.”

“Oh.”

He hated how small and sad and surprised that one damn syllable sounded from her mouth. Like no one had ever bothered to make sure she was having a good time. Like no one had ever taken care of her.

“Clementine.” He let his gaze drop and he couldn’t contain the primal noise that escaped his lips. “Let me make you feel good.”

“Yes.” This breathy syllable was so much better than the last one.

Max grabbed her, pulling her tight against him again. Yes. This was where she belonged. With him. He refused to let the impossibility of that thought tamp down his need for her in this moment. Maybe it wasn’t impossible. Maybe he could stay.

There was no time to think about that now. Not when Clem’s hands were tugging at his pants, her lips and teeth on his neck. She dragged him onto the bed with her and he braced himself over her, loving how she squirmed beneath him. Her legs were wrapped around his back, her hot core pressed into him. But even as she kissed him back, even as her fingernails raked up and down his back something wasn’t right. It was as though she was...bracing herself.

He looked down at her and she gave a small smile. A brave smile?

“I’m ready,” she said. “I mean, I’m ready when you are.”

Goddamnit. She thought this was it? He had the sudden urge to find the bastard who had left Clementine believing this was good sex.

He kissed that damn brave smile off her lips. “No, darling. I’m not ready yet.” He kissed her sweet lips once more and then her neck, sucking on the soft patch of skin where her neck met her shoulder. She gasped and he smiled against her skin.

Max worked his way down Clementine’s body until every inch of her had been kissed or licked or bitten. Her fingers were threaded through his hair when

he settled between her thighs.

She peered down at him with wide eyes. “What are you—”

He stopped her question with one flick of his tongue. Clem’s head fell back and her legs splayed open. He let out a low laugh against her sensitive flesh and she moaned.

“More,” she breathed. And he had to admit he was starting to love these one-word responses. He licked her again, his tongue broad and flat, and then another soft flick, alternating until Clem’s thighs were quivering.

She skated her hand down her own stomach, her fingers pausing on the soft patch of curls like she wanted something more but was too afraid to ask.

“Do it.” Max pulled away just far enough to watch her delicate fingers slip between her legs and rub against her swollen clit. She groaned and Max grinned, waiting until she was close, her back arching off the bed.

“Max, I—” Her hand dropped away, her breath coming in fast, needy pants. Max slid one finger, and then two inside her. Her muscles clenched around him as he thrust in slowly and then faster. He leaned forward and licked until Clem cried out his name. Until her voice was hoarse and her legs were trembling. Only then did he work his way back up her body to find her soft and sated.

She smiled at him dreamily. “Well, you are just full of surprises.”

If only she knew.

She tugged him closer, kissing along his jaw. “We’re not done, are we?” she whispered. He shuddered under her touch, his cock still hard and aching and pressed against her stomach. He wanted to be inside her more than he wanted his next breath, but seeing her like this, so soft and undone. So vulnerable. It cracked something open inside him. Something he didn’t think could be glued back together.

“Max?” Another small, questioning syllable. She wrapped her legs around him, inviting him in. And he couldn’t seem to say no. He thrust into her and the noise she made was somewhere between a moan and a sigh. A sigh of relief.

He pressed his forehead against hers. That’s what it was, a relief. A break from the lies and the bullshit. He rocked into her again and again until she was arching and clawing his back, until she came apart again. It wasn’t until the last second that a stray thought about birth control in 1895 had him pull out of her and spill onto the sheets instead.

Chapter 8:

Clementine would like to say she was lying next to this man she hardly knew as part of some grand seduction plan. She would like to say she had a plan at all. But she couldn't. Max had taken any plans she'd had and turned them all inside out and upside down. Max with his soft lips and his strong hands and all his other lovely body parts.

Sex had never been like this before. A man had never been like this before. None that she'd ever met, anyway. And now she had no idea what to do with him. Other than sleeping with him as much as possible. It was the one time she was truly honest with him, the one time she held nothing back. She knew it was the same for him. She felt it. And it felt amazing and freeing and incredibly dangerous.

She rolled over to face him and brushed a few strands of hair off his forehead. He sighed. He didn't sleep well at night, but by morning, his body finally exhausted, he slept like the dead. She collected these little details about him and tucked them away for later use, or maybe just so she could feel closer to him.

Clem was running out of ideas. She hadn't been able to get back into her aunt's house without the watchful gaze of the staff following her. It had been weeks since she arrived here, and Mae's condition was worsening. She ran a finger across Max's cheek and down the line of his nose. She might actually have to marry this man. It alarmed her how little that thought bothered her.

He opened one sky blue eye. "Hey." His voice was gravelly from sleep, but he spoke strangely no matter the time of day.

"Good morning."

He stretched his arms overhead, unfolding himself from his curled-up sleeping position. His chest was still bare, and the sheets slid down to his waist. Clem kept her side pulled up to her chin.

He rolled toward her, grinning. "You know I've already seen everything." He tugged at the sheets. "Several times now."

She held tight to her shield. "It's different in the morning."

He planted a kiss on her cheek and returned to his side of the bed. "Back to acting proper. I got it." He closed his eyes, an arm draped over them to keep out the sunlight. Clem pricked at his comment and wondered, not for the first time, where he had come from.

"I have a favor to ask."

"Ask away." The arm hadn't moved and she was glad he wasn't looking at her, assessing her for lies.

"There's a big party at The Grand Union Hotel this weekend. Everyone will be there." She paused, waiting for some kind of reaction, but he merely lay listening. Calm and cool as ever. She had yet to see a crack in his facade, except when he was braced over her, whispering all manner of sweet and filthy things in her ear. Then it seemed she could see straight through to his soul.

She cleared her throat. "I think we should go. Together. I think people would find it odd if we didn't." Her aunt would find it odd, she meant. Odd and suspicious.

His arm slid away and he looked at her. "Sure." His face was unreadable.

"Lovely. You will need evening attire. I'll have a suit altered for you if that's okay."

"Works for me." Still, his expression was placid. Another game of chicken. Would this be how they played it right up to the altar? Eventually, she would have to admit she was broke and disowned. And he would have to confess he had only been with her for her money. The money she didn't have. Right?

She sighed a little, and he ran a hand down her bare arm. He tugged her closer and she nestled into his side. He kissed the top of her head. "It'll be fun," he murmured.

Her feelings for him were tangled up with the lies, and she could no longer separate them. How much of Max was real and how much was part of the act? She ran a hand through the soft hairs on his chest. For just a little bit longer, she wanted to pretend this was him. She wanted to pretend that he wanted her. So she nuzzled in closer and didn't ask any more questions.

Max caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror as he waited for Clem to grace him with her presence. He had never been so formally dressed in his life. He turned to the side, admiring the suit, wondering what his friends would say to see him like this. They would definitely have something to say about the top hat. He ran a finger around the brim, feeling a bit like he was playing dress-up. But Clem had declared him dashing when he modeled it for her, so that was good enough for him.

For once his hair stayed out of his eyes, thanks to whatever Clem had given him to slick through it. He barely recognized himself. Maybe that was a good thing. Clementine's footsteps on the stairs disrupted the inspection of his reflection.

She was wrapped in a pale pink confection that hugged all of her curves on its way down to the cascade of ruffles around her feet. Her arms were bare except for a small puffed sleeve over each pale shoulder, and her neckline scooped low, revealing enough cleavage to make Max groan a little as she swept closer. A tiered silk train trailed down the stairs behind her. Her hair was swept up off her neck, and Max couldn't help but lean in and place a kiss on her bare skin.

She shivered a little and veered away from his touch.

"You look..." He couldn't seem to find a word sufficient enough to describe how delectable she looked. A perfectly arched eyebrow lifted as she waited for him to complete his thought. "You look good enough to eat."

Her rose-tinted mouth opened in shock but then turned up in a playful smile. "Shall we?" She slipped her arm through his, and they walked out into

the sultry August evening.

The carriage ride was short, but Max couldn't stop fidgeting. Sweat dripped from his brow. Clementine missed none of this.

"Are you alright?"

"Of course. Just an awfully hot evening." Max used his handkerchief to wipe his face and gave Clem his most convincing smile. But inside his stomach was twisted with nerves, something he hadn't felt in years. He had felt plenty of desperation, loss, anger, and the complete devastation of losing everything, but nervousness wasn't something he was used to feeling.

He didn't want to screw this up. He didn't want to embarrass Clementine. And not because he didn't want to be found out, but because he didn't want to hurt her. That realization made the knots in his stomach cinch even tighter.

They pulled up in front of a hotel that spanned the entire city block. Streams of people flowed into it from all directions. The women created a sea of colors, dressed in frothy layers of silk and satin. The men in their black tuxedos weaved in between the large skirts. Max had never seen anything like it.

He took Clem's arm and followed the crowd. Her body was tense next to his, her hand rigid on his arm. When he cut a sideways glance at her, her face was frozen in an imitation of a smile.

"It's going to be fine." He leaned in to whisper. She nodded stiffly. He hated that she cared so much about what these people thought of her.

He led her into the ballroom, hung with crystal chandeliers so big he could have climbed into one and taken a nap. Laughter and music filled the enormous space. They stood stuck to the spot forcing the crowd to split around them like water around a rock in a stream, neither sure what to do next.

"I'm not much of a dancer," he told her, nearly shouting over the music. "Should we get a drink?"

Clem nodded, and they waded through the revelers to the bar. They made it halfway before they were stopped by a tall woman in pale yellow. Her nose was too large for her face, and she wore a yellow feather in her hair. The whole look reminded Max of a large duckling.

"Tabitha! How are you?" Clem stopped and kissed the woman lightly on the cheek. The woman ran an appraising eye up Clementine and Max. Judging by the sour look on her face, Max could only assume they came up lacking.

"And this must be your fiancé." She held out a hand to Max, and he forced himself to kiss it.

"Max Bishop. Nice to meet you."

Tabitha smiled but somehow it did nothing to soften her features. "Clementine, my father was surprised to hear you were in town." Clem tensed by his side.

"He spoke to your father. Such a shame what happened between you two," the duck woman went on and Clem paled. Her eyes darted to his and then back to the woman blocking the booze.

“Just a little family disagreement. Nothing we can’t work out. Now if you’ll excuse us…” She grabbed Max’s arm and tugged him toward the bar.

“I do hope you work things out with your father, Clementine!” Tabitha yelled over the din of the crowd, turning several heads toward them. Max pulled her close and hurried her along. He got two glasses of champagne and joined Clem in a quiet corner tucked between an upholstered loveseat and a potted plant.

“What was that about?” he asked after taking a few gulps of champagne. Clem did the same.

“Nothing really. My father and I don’t always see eye to eye.” It wasn’t a lie, but she wrapped a loose curl around her finger and wouldn’t meet his gaze. There was more she wasn’t telling him.

“Families can be tricky.” He knocked back the rest of his drink and scanned the room. “I wish my dad was still around to fight with though.”

Clem leaned in and ran a hand down his cheek. It was nothing really, but something loosened in his chest.

“We don’t have to stay.”

“Not stay? I didn’t get all dolled up for nothing.” He pulled her closer. “Now show me some of these fancy dance steps so we can get in there and show everyone we’re here.”

The smile that crossed her face pleased him more than he would care to admit.

Chapter 9:

They tumbled into the house, giggles fizzing out of them like champagne bubbles.

“A duck! I’m telling you that woman looked like a giant baby duck!”

Clementine doubled over in laughter. She couldn’t remember the last time she laughed so much or had so much fun at a party. Even with all the sidelong glances people were giving them, she and Max spent the entire night in their own little bubble of happiness.

After teaching him the steps in a private alcove, he led her around the dance floor. He was a horrible dancer, but that only made Clem laugh more. And now her cheeks ached as he did impression after impression of all the society women and their horrid husbands.

“And that other one, what was her name? Ruby? Emerald?”

“Pearl!”

“Right Pearl. She was a real piece of work...” Max’s voice trailed off as his gaze caught on a figure at the top of the stairs.

James stood looking down at them, his face pale and drawn.

“James! What is it? Is it Mae? Is she alright?” Clem was up the stairs as fast as she could go with her skirts rucked up around her knees. The questions flew out of her mouth before poor James could form any answers.

Max was right behind her, a steady hand on the small of her back.

“She’s gotten worse. She can barely speak without breaking into a fit.” James wrung his hands in front of him, his brow furrowed in worry. Mae was his only family. The rest of his siblings had stayed behind in Ireland and both his parents were long dead.

Clem took one of his hands in hers. “You’ve been remembering to cover your face when you’re with her?” she asked. Max had insisted they all do it.

“Yes, Miss Whitford. I just don’t know what to do.”

Oh God neither did she! She promised to help and she couldn’t. Her mouth opened and closed uselessly as James looked on with round, trusting eyes.

“Come with me, James.” Max stepped toward the man and patted his back. “I’ll get you a drink, and we’ll say a little prayer for your sister.” James relaxed under Max’s touch. “And Clem, why don’t you get Mae some of that tea the doctor left for her.” He nodded gently at her, and she found her feet moving, happy to have direction, happy to have someone else share the burden for a minute.

She watched as Max led James down the stairs and into the study, his arm draped around the man’s shoulders in a friendly embrace. He spoke quietly to him, and James nodded and murmured in return. She didn’t know what he was saying, but she was glad he was here to say it.

Max dumped the last of his winnings out onto the bed. Mae had finally stopped coughing long enough to sleep. It was nearly dawn, but Max didn't want to wait any longer.

Clementine stood staring at the pile of bills, her mouth agape. "What is all this?"

"I want you to use it for Mae. To send her somewhere to get well." He undid the buttons of his shirt as he spoke, happy to be shedding all his layers, wanting to have something to do with his hands.

"I don't understand." Clem's hands were on her hips, clad only in her silk slip.

"Look, I don't know what is going on with your Dad, but if you need money for Mae, here it is. I want you to have it."

"Max, I can't take this."

He wished she would. He really wished she would take it all off the bed and hide it because seeing it all laid out in front of him was making him have serious doubts. It was enough to pay back his debts and then some.

But he couldn't stand seeing Clem in pain. It was obvious her father controlled the money around here. He couldn't stand by and do nothing.

"You can take it. I insist."

She huffed a little and looked down at the cash. He watched as her mind worked, and knew the exact moment she figured it out. "Where did you get all this?"

And this was where it would all come undone. He breathed. "The track. I hit a lucky streak."

"Where did you get money to bet? You told me you had nothing."

"That wasn't a lie."

Her stare burned through him, turning him to ash. "So where did you get the money, Max?"

There was no use lying to her. She would know. She always knew. "I took a few things from the house and sold them."

She laughed. She actually threw back her head and laughed. "You stole from me? I opened my house to you and you stole from me? I let you stay when you had nothing and nowhere to go and that is how you treat me?"

She rounded the bed until she stood directly in front of him. "How dare you?"

"I'm trying to make it right! I shouldn't have stolen from you. Obviously. I just..."

"You just what? Didn't feel like waiting long enough to marry me so you could get your hands on my father's money? So you thought you would get a head start?" She pushed her hands into his chest, and he grabbed her wrists, pinning her to him.

“I never wanted your father’s money. The whole engagement thing was your idea, remember? I just needed a way out of here.”

At that, her face fell, and she wrenched herself free of his grasp.

“Well, thank you for the money. You’re free to go.” Her back was to him, and she sat on the edge of the bed.

“Clem, come on.”

“No, you’re right. This was my idea and it was a bad one. You should go.”

He stalked around the edge of the bed and knelt in front of her, lifting her chin with his fingers. “I don’t want to go now.”

“Don’t be absurd.” She turned her head away, so he moved closer and trapped her face in his palms.

“I’m serious. This isn’t fake anymore. I don’t want to leave. This money is our clean slate.”

“And you think I should trust you?” Her voice was suspicious but her eyes hopeful.

“You knew when I was lying from the start.” He held her gaze. “I want to be with you, Clementine. And I don’t give a shit about your father’s money. Do you believe me?” He could hardly believe it himself. He wanted her. He would give up everything to be with her. The truth of it slammed into him, stealing his breath.

She paused like she had something to say, her own confession to make, but it never came. He almost asked, wondering what it was he saw flicker across her face, but then she wrapped her arms around his neck and whispered, “Stay.”

So he did.

Chapter 10:

Clem hadn't seen her father in months, and now here he stood, blustering like a thunder cloud about to burst in her foyer. She knew it was coming, knew he would find out she was here sooner or later. She had only hoped it would be later. Later than the morning after Max told her he wanted to stay.

Max followed her down the stairs, both of them in their robes, hair tousled from sleep even though it was well into the afternoon.

Her father looked them up and down with such blatant disgust, Clem flinched. But Max's strong hand was at her back, and she forced herself to meet her father's eye.

"I am so glad you've made yourself comfortable in my home." His voice was like steel, cold and hard. But he didn't yell. Her father never yelled. He didn't need volume to be terrifying.

Max held out his hand. "Maxwell Bishop, sir. Happy to finally meet you."

Her father looked at his hand like it was something filthy. Max didn't pull it away until the famous Henry Whitford shook it.

"Max is my fiancé, father." Clem rushed to explain, as though their engagement would erase everything her father was angry about.

Her father's eyes narrowed and a smirk crossed his handsome face. "You're engaged to be married. How convenient." And at that moment Clem knew why her father was here. He knew. He knew about the inheritance and her aunt's stipulation. She opened her mouth to speak, to stop him from saying what he was about to say, to tell Max everything she should have told him last night but it was too late.

"Your fiancé must know about your aunt's money."

Max cut in. "Sir, I know I want to marry your daughter. I don't care about anyone's money." He echoed his words from last night and they cut through Clem like a knife. He had been so honest and had promised her this was real. And she had still kept her secret. She had messed this up too.

Henry's laugh was more like a hiss than anything joyful. "Where did you find this one, Clem?"

"Father, please."

He held up a hand to stop her from speaking. She obeyed out of habit. "You'll be happy to know Clementine, your Aunt Viola died last night in her sleep. Once you marry this poor sap, the money will be yours."

Max's hand stilled on her back. She watched the realization settle on his face. A muscle twitched in his jaw, but he didn't speak.

"Congratulations to the happy couple." Her father smoothed his waistcoat and turned to leave, but before he did, he added, "As soon as that money comes in, I want you out of here Clementine." The door closed behind him with a click that echoed through the room.

As soon as her father was out the door, Max's hand fell from her back.

“Max, I can explain.”

“There’s nothing to explain, darling.” His face was a mask, his emotions skillfully hidden. But Clem could see the clench in his jaw and the pain in his eyes. “I was using you and you were using me. That was the deal from the beginning.”

He pushed past her to climb back upstairs, but she grabbed his arm and made him face her. “I had no other choice. My father disowned me after the strike. I promised to take care of Mae. I had to do something.”

“And manipulating me was easy.”

His words were like a slap to the face. Her breath caught in her throat. “You said it yourself! You were using me too! But then things changed, Max. I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

“Funny how when I was making my little confession last night, none of this came up.” His eyes flashed angrily behind the hair that had flopped over his forehead.

“I was going to tell you!” She clung to him, her fingers digging into his wrist, but he pulled it away.

“When? On our wedding day?”

The words fell between them. Was that her plan? Did she think she could marry him and be happy and get her aunt’s money? God, she was such a fool.

Max turned and continued climbing the stairs, away from her, and she didn’t know how to get him back.

The money was stacked neatly on the desk. For a moment, he was tempted to take it and get the hell out of here, but he wouldn’t do that to Mae. He paced the room, trapped. If he had any idea how to get home, he would go.

A clean slate. That’s what he told her last night. He returned what he stole and then some, confessed his true feelings. He had fallen for this girl, had actually considered staying here in this backward time just so he could be with her!

And still, she lied. Continued to lie to get her hands on more money! The bile rose up in his throat, and his stomach burned in embarrassment. She must have thought he was an idiot.

“Max.” She entered without a knock. It was her room after all. Her eyes were red from crying, and he hated that he wanted to make her feel better. “Please, I’m sorry.”

He sat heavily on the edge of the bed. There was only one solution here that didn’t make him feel destined for hell. “I’m going to marry you.”

“What?” She stepped toward him, her face momentarily hopeful.

“For the money.” The severity of his voice stopped her in her tracks. “I’ll marry you. You can get your aunt’s money. And then I’ll be on my way.” He cleared his throat, not letting his voice break on the last words. He had given her too much of himself and now he wanted it back.

“Oh.” Her voice was small. She was ruffled and mussed from their late night, angry and sad from her father’s visit. The urge to pull her into his arms was so strong he clenched his fists in his lap to fight it.

“You don’t have to do that,” she said.

“And what am I supposed to do, Clem? Leave you here with nothing? What will you do? Go get a job in one of your father’s factories?” The thought of her trying to make her way in this world that apparently made it impossible for women to do so made him sick to his stomach.

“I could figure something out.” She rolled her shoulders back, trying to convince him she was strong. But he could see the fear in her eyes. She had nowhere else to go.

He paused, taking her in. Her curls were wild around her head, her cheeks pink and her eyes shining with tears. He waited for just a moment. For a breath. For enough time for Clementine to say anything to convince him to stay.

But she didn’t. She didn’t say anything at all. There was nothing left for him here.

He shook his head. “No. We’ll meet your aunt’s little marriage stipulation, and you’ll get your inheritance.” He sighed, running his hand through his sticky hair. “And then I’m leaving.”

Chapter 11:

Clementine's wedding day was nothing like she'd imagined it would be. For one, she was alone. Mae and James had gone upstate to the Adirondacks to breathe the fresh air, thanks to Max's winnings. Clementine had insisted she leave right away. It was the only thing she could do for the friend she'd failed to help. If it hadn't been for Max...

She pushed the thought from her mind. Just further proof that her life was nothing but a string of bad decisions. Her parents were right. She'd made a complete mess of things once again. And this time she'd pushed everyone too far.

Of course, neither of her parents would be in attendance for today's happy occasion. Clementine's mother wouldn't dare cross her father regardless of what her own feelings on the matter were, but Clem had seen her mother's disappointed face enough times to know how she felt about her only daughter.

And it wasn't until now, as she did up her own hair and clasped a string of pearls around her own neck that she realized she never had any friends. Not really. She had people who wanted to be around her, to reap the benefits of being near her. But once she was no longer her father's daughter, those friends had evaporated into thin air.

She sighed, her thoughts wandering to the man waiting for her. She should have told him it wasn't about the money anymore, told him that she wanted him. But what right did she have to keep him here? After everything she'd done? He deserved far better than her. He deserved to get back to his real life, wherever that was.

She took one last glance at herself in the mirror before joining Max. He stood waiting for her at the bottom of the stairs. For a moment, Clem saw how it could have been. Max beaming up at his bride, her running into his arms. But the hint of love that had flickered across his face was quickly hidden. With a curt nod, he opened the door for her. She stood in front of him for a heartbeat and another, her heart in her throat. His gaze flicked to hers, the hurt in his eyes was enough to take her breath away. She'd done that. He'd be better off without her. She forced herself out into the heat of the day.

They rode to the courthouse in silence, more like prisoners to their death than a bride and groom to their big day. They signed the papers, Max's signature a big scrawling tangle of letters and Clem's a delicate looping and swirling script.

If the magistrate noticed how stiffly they stood next to each other, or how they left their hands at their sides instead of wrapped with each other's, he didn't comment. Plenty of people married for reasons other than love. They weren't the first.

When he pronounced them husband and wife, Clem's breath caught in her throat. It was done. She stole a glance at her new husband. He stood staring straight ahead, as though he was responsible for holding up the wall in front of

them with his eyes. With another curt nod at the old man who married them, their wedding day was over.

In another life, Max would have swept her off her feet and kissed her wildly as they hurried back to the carriage. They would have spent the rest of the day in bed, drinking champagne and celebrating. But it wasn't like that at all. They left the courthouse and Max announced he was going to the track. Clementine went home alone.

Max spun the gold band around his finger one last time before he took it off and laid it on the pawnshop counter. It would fetch enough money to place a few bets today, but there was only one that mattered.

He was sure he had it figured out now. The trick to getting home. He simply had to bet the only thing he had left. He had to lose everything. And the moment he found out Clem didn't love him, he had.

The air was sticky, but a cooler breeze hinted at the end of summer. He had been here just over a month. It felt like a lifetime.

When he got to the track, the man at the betting window eyed his elegant suit and a smile lit his haggard face. Max laid the money from his wedding ring on the counter.

"There's No Place Like Home, to win please."

The man raised a gray eyebrow. "Odds aren't great on that one."

"I know. Place the bet."

He took the money with a shrug and handed Max his ticket. Max wandered toward the track, marveling at how similar it all was. Of course, the closed-circuit TVs that would someday fill the grounds weren't there yet, but the rest of it was all comfortingly familiar.

As expected the horse lost by a mile. Max sighed in relief and wandered out with his pockets empty. On the way back to the Clementine's he lingered in the park until the stars peeked out. There were so many more than he was used to.

He stopped at the same fountain he drank from last time and gulped down the sulfur-flavored water.

By the time he got home, Clementine was curled up asleep, her own gold ring glinting in the moonlight. He stripped off his suit and found the sweats he had been wearing when he arrived. He pulled on a T-shirt and found he already missed his formal pajamas.

Clem sighed a little in her sleep as he climbed into bed. He hadn't slept in her room in days, but it seemed necessary for his plan to work. Her flowery scent washed over him, and he wondered if he had made a mistake. He rolled over and pressed his face into the back of her neck, kissing her lightly through her curls.

If he couldn't have her, there was no reason for him to stay. He turned onto his back and stared at the ceiling, waiting for sleep to come.

Chapter 12:

A car alarm blared relentlessly outside his window. Max stretched out a hand to pull Clementine closer to him but the bed beside him was empty. He opened his eyes. The room was so similar to its original decor, for a moment he thought maybe he was still in the past.

Car engines rumbled on the street below and a flat-screen TV hung on the wall opposite the bed. It worked. He was back. He had put 125 years between him and the woman he loved. His stomach lurched, and he made it to the attached bathroom before emptying his guts into the toilet. What the hell had he done?

He looked around the small space, but his toothbrush was nowhere to be found. He rinsed his mouth with water and returned to the bedroom. Clementine's desk had been replaced with a dresser and the bed was completely new. The wallpaper and lamps matched the Victorian decor, but he didn't recognize them.

He glanced at the crystal doorknob on the bathroom door and remembered the Innkeeper telling him they were original to the house. He wrapped his hand around it and held it tight. She had touched these doorknobs. The room seemed to spin around him; *deja vu* and vertigo and something much worse, regret, threatening to make him puke again.

Max pinched the bridge of his nose between his fingers and waited for the world to stop tilting. When he could breathe enough to think, he looked down at his wrinkled t-shirt and old sweats. He smelled faintly of vomit. Whatever he was going to do next, he would need his things back.

They must have removed his luggage from the room when he hadn't returned in a month. God, had it only been a month?

He forced himself to release the doorknob and scrubbed his hands down his face. First things first, he needed his clothes. He wandered into the hall and down the stairs, still feeling like his legs could give out at any moment. It was all so similar and yet completely different because she wasn't here.

He ran his hand along the well-worn banister as he made his way to the main floor. Memories of Clementine floating down them in her pink gown nearly floored him, but he steadied himself with a deep breath.

The old woman at the desk looked up in surprise when he made his way to the foyer. "Mr. Bishop! You're back!"

"I am." His voice was shaky. He cleared his throat. "Any chance you still have my luggage?"

"Oh my. Yes, we do." She scuttled off to the back office and returned with his bag. "You're lucky you came back now. We were about to donate everything to the men's shelter!"

"I'm really sorry to leave like that. It was...uh...unexpected."

The woman peered at him from behind thick glasses. "Well, there is the little matter of the bill."

“About that. I’m in a bit of a financial situation at the moment.” He swallowed his inclination to lie. “Is there any way I could work off my debt?”

Her eyes widened at the suggestion, but he must have looked truly pitiful because she gave him a small smile. “I suppose we could arrange something. I have been looking for someone to help with the gardens.”

“Whatever you like. I’ll clean the toilets if I need to.”

She clasped her wrinkled hands in front of her. “Oh, wonderful!”

“Would it be alright if I stayed here a bit longer?” He hadn’t planned on saying it, but he couldn’t bear the thought of leaving. He cleared his throat again. “Until I get back on my feet. Working for my room of course.”

“I think that can be arranged. Let me just get some paperwork for you to fill out Mr. Bishop.” She toddled back into the office, and Max glanced around the entrance, taking in the differences to the original. He could almost imagine Clementine sweeping through the front door, with her hat askance, cheeks pink from the summer heat. His throat burned with unspent tears.

A glass case stood in the hall filled with old memorabilia, pictures of the house, and former owners. He scoured them for evidence of Clementine but couldn’t find her. In the corner of the case lay an old journal filled with a delicate script.

“What’s this?” he asked the clerk when she returned from the office.

“Oh, that is the journal of one of the original owners.”

“Who?” He nearly shouted the question, and the old woman’s eyes widened. He tried a smile. Her face softened as she hustled toward the case and launched into her well-rehearsed history lesson.

“Her name was Clementine Whitford. Lived here at the turn of the last century. Oh, it must have been a grand time...” Max didn’t hear the woman waxing poetic about the gilded age. He couldn’t hear anything over the buzzing in his ears and the thudding of his heart. Clementine’s journal. Right there in front of him, the pages yellowed with age. The worn book reminded him that Clementine was long dead. The thought nearly brought him to his knees. He had just seen her, just kissed her yesterday. How was it possible that she was gone?

The woman was still twittering about the history of Saratoga, but Max had only one question about the journal. Was he in it?

He held the journal gingerly in his hands, careful not to tear the ancient pages. He wasn’t proud of himself for picking the lock of the display case and bringing the book to his room, but there were things he needed to know. He laid the journal out in front of him and began to read.

September 20, 1895

I’ve been married for two days and can’t find my husband. Ha! Isn’t that a sad sentence to write? Of course, he said he would leave, but I hoped he would at least say goodbye first. I guess I’m the fool.

October 17, 1895

I miss him. There I said it. Or wrote it at least. I miss him. I miss his odd way of speaking and his aversion to wearing a jacket. I miss the way he always stood up for me.

For the briefest of moments, I had someone who cared for me just as I am and I let him go. I should have told him I wanted him to stay. I couldn't swallow my pride long enough to do it. Now it's too late. The will has been settled and the money is in my account. I could go anywhere, but I stay here in case Max returns.

November 8, 1895

My father has taken pity on me, or else my mother finally stood up to him, but he hasn't kicked me out of this house. And so I remain, reliving my mistakes.

January 16, 1896

I love him. I only wish I had told him.

Love. She loved him. And he left her.

He flipped to the next page but there was nothing. The journal ended abruptly. What did that mean? Did she leave the house and leave this behind? What happened to her? He placed the journal on the nightstand and flopped back in the pillows, pressing his palms into his eyelids until he saw stars.

Max was not a wise man. But he now knew three things for certain. One, he needed to pay his hotel bill. Two, he had royally fucked things up with Clementine. And three, he needed to get back to her as soon as possible.

Chapter 13:

Clem rolled over and snuggled closer to Max. She nuzzled into the space between his neck and shoulder and breathed him in. His heartbeat was steady under her hand, his body warm next to hers. She smiled and her eyes fluttered open, taking in his strong profile in the dim morning light. And then it hit her. The room tilted on its axis. *Max.* Max was here. In her bed.

She sat up and peered down at him, her heart racing. He snored peacefully, his hair flopping over his forehead. She hadn't seen him in nearly a year. What the hell was he doing here?

"Max," she whispered. "Max, wake up."

He opened his eyes and breathed her name. "Clementine." He reached up to cup her face, but she dodged his hands and smacked him hard across the cheek.

"Shit! What was that for?" He sat up, rubbing his face.

"What was that for? How about the year you left me here worrying about you?" She flung off the covers and jumped up, her hand stinging from the impact with his stupidly handsome face. She paced the room filled with furious energy. All the pain from the last year barreled into her. How dare he waltz back into her life! Into her bed! How dare he still be so handsome!

No. Just no. This was not happening. Not after she worked so hard to forget him. It hadn't worked, but that was beside the point.

"Just let me explain." Max sat up, holding both hands up as though he was worried she might hit him again. A good move because she just might.

"Yes. Please explain why the hell you are back here after a year. You never even said goodbye." Her voice cracked on the word and Max sprang from the bed, landing in her path. He grabbed her arms, forcing her to stop moving and look up into his face. A face she'd missed and dreamt about for months despite her best efforts. A face she never expected to see again.

"I tried!" His eyes were wide, not a trace of the cool charmer she'd known before. Her skin prickled with unease.

"You tried? And what happened? You got lost? You decided to rob another unsuspecting woman?"

His jaw clenched tight beneath the shadow of stubble covering it. "That's not fair, Clem. And you know it."

She swallowed hard. She did know it. It was all she thought about some days. The things she'd done to Max, the things she'd never said. Her long lists of regrets.

Max took a deep breath as though steadying himself. His fingers still dug into her arms but she didn't try to get free. Didn't want to.

"I've been trying to get back to you," he went on, his voice rough and his words choked. "I'm not from here."

“I know. Out west...” she began, but he was shaking his head. “Max, what is going on?”

“I need you to believe me. I need you to understand.” He was trembling. Clem shook free from his grasp and led him back to the bed, suddenly frightened of whatever he might say next. The small hairs stood up on her bare arms and it wasn’t from the morning chill. Max sat heavily on the edge of the mattress, and she stood in front of him, waiting.

She swallowed hard, her anger quickly dissolving into fear. “Just tell me.”

He shook his head, a dry huff of a laugh escaping his lips. “This isn’t my time, Clem. I shouldn’t be here, but I am. I was born in 1990.”

She blinked, waiting for his teasing grin, but it never came. He was serious.

“I know it sounds crazy, but it’s true. I ended up here after I bet on a horse with your name. And I drank that damn spring water.”

She swallowed a laugh, suddenly feeling hysterical. What was he saying? A horse with her name? 1990? Oh, her poor dear Max! He’d clearly gone mad. She took a step back and another until her back was against the door.

Max raised a hand as though to reach for her, but dropped it in his lap. He leaned forward, both forearms on his knees, his shoulders hunched. “I thought you didn’t want me. I thought you only needed me for the money, so I went back. But I found your journal.”

Clementine froze. She remembered what she wrote in the days after he left, the days that she still held onto the hope that he would return. Silly, sentimental things no one was ever supposed to read. How could Max possibly know about it? Had he somehow stolen that too?

“You missed me.” He stood suddenly, stalking toward her. “You regretted not telling me your true feelings.” He stopped right in front of her. So close, Clem could see the clarity in his eyes, no lies, no games. How could he possibly know? “You love me, Clementine. Or you did anyway.”

He didn’t touch her, but he held her gaze, his words, his story hanging between them. Impossible. It was all impossible.

“You expect me to believe all this?” She tilted her chin up, a hand on her hip. Her haughtiest pose. Her armor. She chose to ignore the fact that she was in her nightgown and her hair was up in rollers.

Max shook his head. “Don’t do that, Clem. Not with me. Not anymore. Please.” His breath tickled her skin, and the door was firm against her back. Nowhere to go.

She put a hand on his chest, ignored the thrumming heart beneath her palm, and pushed him back. He didn’t fight her, just stood aside and let her open the door and tear down the stairs away from him, away from this insanity. But he followed.

“Does it matter where I was?” he asked, following her through the sitting room and into the kitchen.

She spun to face him. “Of course it does! How can I possibly believe any of it?”

“You don’t have to believe it. All that matters is I’m back. And I love you.”

It was the first time he’d said that to her. In her wildest dreams she’d never imagined it would be like this when he finally did. She braced herself on the counter, her fingers gripping tight to the wood edge.

“You love me?”

“Yes.” No charming smile, no quirked eyebrow, no lies.

“And what am I supposed to do with that, Max? You left me.” Clem hated the wounded sound to her voice echoing off the cold tiles of the kitchen. Why was she in here anyway? She stormed back out, leaving Max to trail after her again. This time she led them to the library and the whisky. She poured herself a glass, not bothering to turn at the sound of Max’s footsteps behind her.

“Don’t pretend it was all my fault, Clementine. You let me believe it was all about the money. I told you I was all in. I confessed to my crimes, but you let me leave.”

She stiffened at his tone, his words. The fact that he was right.

“Why did you let me leave?” he asked, the heartbreak in his voice hard to ignore.

Clementine turned to face him, ready to defend herself, ready to tell Max he was wrong, ready to demand he go away, but the pain in his eyes destroyed her desire to be rid of him.

“I thought you would be better off without me.” The truth surprised her more than it surprised Max. He didn’t budge from his place in front of her, only the furrow between his brows deepened.

“Well, I wasn’t.” His lips tipped into a small smile. “Were you better off without me?”

Clem opened her mouth to answer but then snapped it shut.

Max took another step forward. “If you can tell me your life is better without me in it, I will walk out that door for good.”

Had she been better off without him? She’d gotten her aunt’s money. She had a home, a life. She’d managed to make a few friends, real ones that cared about her. Mae was getting stronger every day according to her letters although she’d probably never fully recover. Clem could at least take heart in the fact that she had done her best for her friend.

Clem had even attended a few women’s suffrage meetings, giving her life a sense of purpose. A fact she was sure Max would find perfectly reasonable and not scandalous at all. How irksome.

But was she better off without him? Wouldn’t all the things in her life be sweeter with someone to share it with? Clem took a swig of whisky, steeling herself. She’d done this wrong before. She wasn’t going to let happiness slip away again.

All the times she had imagined his return, none of them looked like this. “Max, I...” She swallowed hard, the emotions clogging her throat. She’d let guilt and pride stand in her way the last time.

He stepped closer and she let him. She didn’t back up, didn’t run away. She let Max put his hands on her hips, let him tug her close, let him rest his forehead against hers.

“I don’t know if I can believe your story,” she said.

“You only have to believe I love you.”

She sighed resting her hands on his chest. “I can hardly believe you’re here,” she whispered.

“Me neither. It’s all impossible, Clem, but somehow it’s true. I don’t want to lose you again.”

Impossible but true. That’s what their love was. And she wasn’t going to let it go.

Clem wrapped her arms around Max’s neck and a jagged sigh escaped his lips. She pulled him closer and nuzzled against his neck.

“I love you, too, Max. I’m sorry...for...for everything.”

He wrapped his arms around her and lifted her feet off the ground. “No more apologies. No more lies.” He grabbed her ass and lifted her until her legs wrapped around his hips. She looked down into his bright blue eyes. “Just you and me, darling.”

Clem couldn’t help the grin that spread across her face. She leaned down and kissed him, her lips instantly remembering the taste of him, the feel of him. “Take me back to bed, Max.”

She felt his lips curve into a smile against hers. “Gladly,” he said, carrying her from the room and not stopping until he tossed her onto her bed. Their bed. Where they easily bridged the gap of the last year, or the last one hundred and twenty five years, depending on who you believed.

But Clementine’s heart didn’t care about plausibility. And her traitorous body only wanted Max next to her and on top of her and inside of her. The fact that he was here, holding her and kissing her and loving her, seemed to be the only thing that mattered, and she gave into it completely.

After, when they lay together, limbs and sheets tangled, she asked, “What horse did you bet on to get back to me?”

“Well, I was getting pretty desperate.”

She raised an eyebrow, waiting.

“The horse’s name was *Lost And Gone Forever*.” He lifted their intertwined hands and kissed her ring finger where her gold wedding band still sat.

She snuggled in closer. “Well, I’m not. I’m right here with you.”

Impossible but true.

THE END

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