

Prologue

The fountain pen swished across the parchment-like paper in smooth, deliberate moves. Words curled and connected into one and then the other until they formed a sentence. There were only a few—sentences. When it was complete, the paper was rolled up like a miniature scroll and secured with a gold satin ribbon.



Alice knew she had cake on her face. It didn't bother her at all. She was sure that was proof it being the best day of her life so far and it was only three o'clock. The glass-domed trolleys of cake were circling round in her direction again and there was a bit of room left in her stomach for at least one more slice. Saturday afternoon in the gardens at Waldorf was lovely and so different from how the wedding weekend started.

The festivities began the night before with a masquerade ball. Anabelle had always wanted to attend a masked ball, so Brayden saw to it their wedding weekend began as such. The orchestra claimed a small section of the ballroom to allow plenty of room for all the ladies in their big dresses to be twirled during the dancing. Drinks were served adjacent, in the music room, and the doors separating it from the sitting room on the other side of the manor were opened so people could promenade in one very large oval on the ground floor. The back patio was lit with hundreds of candles in hurricane vases and candelabras that were allowed to drip with wax in the evening breeze for dramatic effect. Long satin gloves in every colour were on the hand of every lady. Some held masks up to their faces with a handle, whilst others wore them.

Alice went as a bunny. Her father didn't want her going as anything too ostentatious. After all, she was only twelve. She'd worn a mid-calf length white gown with pink ruffles along the hem and short, puffed sleeves. The white glitter bunny-like mask had elastic to ensure it stayed in place over the curls falling down her back. A petite set of pink and white ears attached to a band sat atop her head, whilst white tights and pink patent leather Mary Janes made the bunnyness quite convincing. Everyone else was in more *Phantom of the Opera* grown-up wear whilst Alice was quite happy to carelessly bounce about the ballroom in her own joyous world. Her father was getting married, and she would have a mother by Saturday at noon when the ceremony finished. The weekend had been highly anticipated by many people, but especially the newly forming James family unit.

Each day of the wedding weekend had a different guest list and dress code appropriate for the festivities. Some people had been invited to and were attending the whole weekend, whilst others were invited to one day or a combination of Friday, Saturday and Sunday. Alice had several dresses in order to be appropriately outfitted for everything and, since Waldorf was hosting every part of the celebrations except the ceremony, it meant people were coming and going, inside and out, up and down the staircase. Alice had gone up and down the grand staircase countless times, to show off her bedroom, and remind overnight guests the way to the second-floor staircase and their rooms. Also, to be tugged along by Celia when she required tidying up or to have her outfit changed. There were several outfit changes. At least one per day, if not two.

For those unfamiliar with consistent fine dining, meals at Waldorf were like visiting a Michelin-star restaurant or a flawless country hotel. It was normal to Alice, now. On Saturday morning, the guests who had stayed overnight were seated in the dining room for a two-course breakfast... everyone except Anabelle, because she didn't live there yet and hadn't stayed the night before the wedding. Ana and her parents were put up in a private manor house down the lane until after the wedding. The fairy-tale of Brayden and Ana's abstinence of anything except kissing (and disciplinary spanking) throughout their courtship continued right through to Saturday evening, when she finally joined her husband and newly acquired daughter at Waldorf.

Alice knew her father wouldn't get married in the suit he wore for breakfast—that one was charcoal grey with a waistcoat, burgundy and white striped shirt with a burgundy tie. Hand in hand and practically matching, Alice walked beside him in a burgundy velvet pinafore with a long-sleeved Peter Pan collared grey blouse. A floppy burgundy bow at the collar hung down the front of the pinafore with grey knee highs that matched her father's own socks. Brayden had squeezed her hand just before the double doors open as if to silently say, *we've come a long way, just you and me*. They entered the grand dining room to adoring smiles and polite clapping. It was only hours until the wedding but the anticipation was uninhibited. Some of the guests had been present at Alice's birthday party when she turned "twelve." Others had only ever heard of Alice being adopted and were meeting her for the first time at the wedding. In the various ways people had come to know the late Kathryn and Oliver James over the years before their passing, it couldn't be mistaken that there was great joy surrounding the renewing of their family line on the incredibly joyous occasion with Brayden, their surviving son, marrying.

As always, Alice sat to her father's left and he claimed his chair at the head of the gorgeously laid table. Meals at Waldorf were always formal but the staff had pulled out all the stops for the pre-wedding breakfast for their overnight guests. There was a short speech thanking everyone for their attendance by Brayden and then the guests were spoiled by his talented in-house private chefs.

When she saw Anabelle Greyson for the first and last time that morning, she thought she'd seen an angel. Alice was delivered to the manor house where Ana, her bridesmaids and her parents were staying just down the lane from Waldorf. She walked into the parlour with Celia and there, turning to face her from the full-length mirror and Harriet's dutiful dress-fluffing, was her new mother. The bridesmaids stopped chatting and turned, mimosas still in hand, to observe the girl who would make Ana an instant mother. Alice stared, realising it was the last time she would be Anabelle Greyson, the woman courting Brayden James. In less than an hour she would be Anabelle Sophia James. Mummy. And Alice would never forget how Ana looked at her—that tender adoration her brown eyes seemed to hold in never-ending quantities.

Ana's dress was hand-stitched by Harriet's team and it was indescribably perfect. The base was a lace applique bodice made of ivory satin gazar with a full underskirt trim, featuring a slim-line train until it reached the floor and blossomed out. There was a semi-bustle at her lower back with twenty glittering Swarovski crystal buttons fastened by rouleau loops up to the neck.

"Do you like my dress, darling?" Ana asked quietly after kissing her cheek.

"You're the most beautiful princess I ever saw. Father is going to cry."

And he did. As with English weddings, Brayden and the groomsmen stood at the front of the church whilst Wilbur Greyson escorted his only daughter down the aisle. The three bridesmaids, including Alice, walked behind the bride and her father. When they reached the front, she saw her father's face when he looked at Anabelle. Wilbur placed his daughter's hand in Brayden's before leaving her with a kiss on the cheek. The bride and groom looked at each other

for what was only seconds, although it seemed much longer. Brayden had changed into a morning suit with coattails. It was black with white pinstripes. He wore a satin gold cravat and the top hat remained with the Fowlers for the service.

Alice kissed them each on the cheek and didn't miss the tears in Brayden's eyes when he returned to full height. They had come a long way just the two of them. He took Ana on his arm to face the minister and for the hour, Alice felt like she was in a dream. The service could have been in slow motion. She enjoyed every frame of the ceremony whereby Anabelle Greyson morphed into Mrs. Anabelle Sophia James. Applause startled her out of that dream-like state, and in what felt like an instant, they were family. Just like that, they became a family.

The parish church in Laitham held 368 people, all of whom either returned to or first arrived at Waldorf Manor for the gala reception: an opulent garden tea party. The extensive lawns were filled with tables dressed in white tablecloths featuring tiered china platters of scones, sandwiches and pastries. There was proper Devonshire clotted cream direct from Devonshire. Alice had insisted. Lemon curd and strawberry preserves lived in husky glass pots with gold demitasse spoons for dispersing, and white-gloved waiters were attentive in keeping silver-plated teapots at each table filled with hot water. The orchestra sat on Clairette wood traditional French accent chairs with graceful oval backs in neutral beige linen as they regaled the guests. Chittering and chattering accompanied clinking of champagne flutes and teacups returning to their saucers.

Alice had cake on her face. Vanilla bean (*with speckles, Father* as she'd requested months in advance) three-layer cake with gold frosting *to match the sash on my dress and your cravat* had been served and subsequently consumed in vast quantities. Brayden and Ana sat at the largest round table in the gardens with Alice and all five of the Fowlers, although the newlyweds remained seated for only half an hour. Brayden and Ana were adamant about visiting with their guests, half of whom were there for one day. Some people would return for brunch the next morning whilst others had been at the gala the night before, or were staying at the manor. Therefore, Alice took full advantage of her parents' good hosting manners and their busyness by consuming slice after slice, after slice, after slice of cake whenever the uniformed waiters rolled the glass-domed trolleys by. One circled round in her direction again and knowing she had room for at least one more, she put her finger up to catch the waiter's attention.

"I think you have had enough cake, Alice," was great uncle Jonathan's reply when he noticed the girl's index finger raised for the eighth time. She and Jonathan Fowler were the only ones seated at their table because everyone else had wandered off to chat and explore the gardens.

"But uncle Jonathan, it's afternoon tea. The bite-sized portions guarantee a most ladylike experience no matter how many I have."

He signalled for her to approach and Alice did. She walked round the back of the chairs of the four place settings that separated them.

"You have some around your mouth, which I can only guess you're saving for later."

"No, sir," she replied, and licked the corners of her mouth.

"Alice, run along and wash up properly," Bennett intervened when he and Elisabeth returned to the table holding hands.

Elisabeth chuckled whilst looking between the girl and her father-in-law. "How much cake have you eaten?"

"I shan't answer that, but I think she's had enough."

"Off you go. Wash your hands and face before you get it on your dress," Bennett added to the previous instruction. He was far more used to the girl's antics (and less amused by them) than great uncle Jon.

Alice was rather glad someone had stopped her. Surely, after another few pieces, she would have required carrying about the back gardens in her distended state. She almost wiped her frosting fingers on her white and gold satin-sashed frock when she saw aunty Evelyn, and subsequently ducked behind some topiary with twinkly lights. Whilst Evelyn Fowler was a reformed woman (somehow), she had not changed in one area: the fussing of her face pinching. It still occurred. The last thing the girl wanted was to be seen in need of assistance washing up because aunty Evelyn would be far too delighted with the opportunity. Up the grand staircase she ran with the gold satin bow flopping at her back. A look over her shoulder proved aunty Evelyn hadn't seen her.

One right turn at the top of the staircase and Alice's door on the right was already open. Her bedroom was on display all weekend, although she hadn't seen anyone take advantage of it. Guests accessing the second-floor staircase had to pass her room, so people were constantly coming and going. The high traffic felt like Waldorf had come back to life; as if the manor breathed in a sigh of thanksgiving for filling it once again with the buzz of conversation and fellowship. It was a house that ought to be filled with people and laughter. With 368 guests in attendance that day alone, the house certainly had its share of things to see and hear. Alice carelessly skipped across the beautiful, formal bedroom and into her en-suite at the far end. Her ivory patent leather Mary Janes clacked sweetly against the marble flooring until she stopped at the first sink. She hummed to herself as the water ran, and watched the frosting melt away under the sudsy motion as she scrubbed. The skirt of the knee-length dress was crisp, white tulle, and easily gave away the stain of gold frosting, which Alice cleaned as best she could. It mostly came out. She skipped out of the en-suite, through the massive bedroom with a careless glance at the window seats and her wardrobe to the left, the glass house on the right-hand bedside table, and out the open door.

"Oh, sorry. I'm sorry, sir," she apologised, after skipping right into the side of a man as he walked down the corridor. She hadn't been two metres out of her bedroom when the guest was passing at the same time.

"That's quite all right, Alice."

The thunderous shadow clutching her gut must have manifested across her face because she felt her entire demeanour darken.

"What are you doing here?"