

CHAPTER 1

Autumn

No party of any kind is absent agenda. Every person who walks through the door has one. The agenda may be grand or petty, innocent or malicious, but it is always there. Guests know who they do or do not wish to speak with, where they want to sit, and the outcome they hope for from the occasion. Few look at it so clinically, or ruthlessly, but even the most gracious of guests has a reason that propelled them from the comfort of their own home to someone else's. Even if it is as simple as a free meal.

Samantha stood by the door, watching and greeting the dinner party guests as they arrived. She surveyed the room to ensure they were appropriately engaged and comfortable. She knew her brother's agenda for the evening; hers was to see it accomplished. George had remarked she would make a great event planner, and she didn't doubt it. While in grad school, the twenty-four-year-old had moved into her brother's home and became the majordomo. She made sure his life moved with minimal friction or inconvenience.

"Mr. Newcastle!" she greeted the guest of honor. "So happy you could come tonight."

“If I’m dragged back here for a wedding, you can’t imagine I wouldn’t visit my favorite author, do you?” he said with a smile.

With the magical summons made, George Austen, author of six New York Times best sellers, appeared like the genie from the lamp. “Henry, great to see you!”

The friends shook hands, and George led him away to the study. Both men knew why they were there and saw no reason to wait to conduct the business at hand.

“Samantha!” Helen Newcastle greeted the hostess upon appearing on the threshold.

“Helen,” Samantha said, mustering a smile. “So glad you could make it.”

“I’m sure.” Helen smirked. “I’ve invited a friend of mine to come along tonight, if that’s alright. Normally I wouldn’t, but she’s a good addition.”

Without missing a beat, Samantha replied, “There’s an extra setting at the table. I like to be prepared, just in case.”

“George and Daddy are already talking business?” Helen ventured.

“They have a half hour to hide away,” Samantha confirmed. “That was as long as George said he needed, so that’s what is on the schedule.”

Nodding, Helen surrendered her coat and began to mingle. Samantha didn’t know the daughter of George’s editor well, but well enough. Willowy, with dark hair cut at shoulder length and coal-black eyes, Helen Newcastle was striking, but cold as ice. As she was about to ponder Helen’s agenda for the night, Samantha’s phone

vibrated with a text message. Glancing at the screen, she smiled. Before the next guest could enter, she hastily sent a reply that she hoped would result in a smile on the other end.

In the study, Henry Newcastle sat across from George. Each held a small glass of whiskey with three ice cubes slowly melting into the amber alcohol. Whereas the rest of the house was neat and organized, George had made no effort to tidy his workspace.

“I see you have kept your sister away from here,” his guest observed, looking around at the papers scattered and open books balanced on every flat surface.

“Samantha’s greatest talent is knowing where to stop,” George agreed, taking a small sip as he reclined in his chair.

“I hope the... disorder,” the editor said tactfully, “implies there’s progress on the new book?”

“Where you see chaos, there is an order,” George defended himself. “Order that I alone may be aware of, but still exists. You only suffer from want of being me.”

“As we all do, I’m sure,” Henry said with a dry laugh.

“The book is almost finished,” George assured him. “I’m adding the final touches to the last chapters, some minor details to give it polish, then I’ll turn it over to your abattoir for the slicing.”

“I’d hardly compare a publisher to a butcher’s shop. Our aprons aren’t even stained with ink, let alone blood.”

“I was thinking more of the editing office, but I see your point.”

“What about the next one?” Henry asked, taking another sip. “That’s why we’re in here while you have face time with me, right?”

George smiled. The two men got along not just because of a shared history—Henry had mentored George in his early career—but because they each knew how to cut to a matter. “I’m not sure yet,” he admitted, “but I will be beginning it as soon as I turn in this one.”

“Any ideas?”

He shrugged. “Nothing in particular. I expect to have the idea by the time of writing, at least.”

“And this is supposed to comfort your editor instead of your agent?”

“My agent is already having epileptic fits. He’s just glad I’m waiting until this one is finished first before trying to sell the next one.”

“But you’re still talking to your editor about it?” Henry asked with a sly smile. “What do you want to hear from me?”

George smiled back. “The same as any other author does. You adore my writing and are going to be interested in wherever my thoughts take me.”

“There’s nothing to worry about,” Henry said, waving his hand. “We’ve been very pleased with your work and are excited to see what you write next.” He paused to finish his whiskey. “Now we’ve discussed work, what about you? Where’s your life these days?”

“On a steady upward trajectory,” Helen Newcastle said, letting herself into the study without ceremony.

“Helen,” George said, “glad you could make it tonight.”

“I’m sure you are,” Helen agreed, sarcastically. A flash in her dark eyes.

Henry laughed, allowing his glass to be refilled with a finger of whiskey.

Helen took in the room around her. It was much as she would have expected. Her eyes glanced across the shelves, the messy desk and side tables, hesitating a moment in their survey when they caught the title of a certain book lying dejectedly in the corner. Yes, very little about the room surprised her.

“If you’re casing the room for valuables, I keep the rare editions under lock and key,” George cautioned.

In response, Helen only smiled and said, “Your sister sent me to say your time is up, and I couldn’t agree more.”

It was a full table—the mark of a successful dinner party, George decided. He was seated at the head of the table, with Henry and his daughter to either side of him, while Samantha took the foot. Next to Helen was seated a young woman he was unacquainted with—not entirely shocking, but he thought he knew everyone on the guest list. He might not have noticed her at all, if she wasn’t the perfect contrast to Helen. The latter was raven haired, with dark eyes and skin as pale as ivory. The woman beside her had auburn hair, almost flaxen (if you knew what flax really looked like), and large brown doe eyes that took in everything. If Helen could be considered cold to look at, this girl had a warmth that you could almost feel radiating from her. It was a good description, George thought, and

filed it away. In fact, he decided to use it to describe the murdered woman at the end of his book.

At the other end of the table, he saw Samantha holding her own court. Talking animatedly about something, holding everyone enraptured. They were hanging on her every word, and exploded with laughter once she hit her punch line.

As the company around her giggled, Samantha checked her phone again.

It did not take long for the conversation around George to drift toward literary things. Henry was pondering trends in cover designs when Helen broke into the conversation. "What did you think of *Good Intentions*, George? I know Daddy sent you a copy to review."

"Romance is a worthless genre," George stated without hesitation. "I threw it into the corner the moment I opened it," he added casually, waving his hand in the air for emphasis.

"I couldn't help but notice it lying in the corner of the study," Helen commented. "Did you at least read any of it?"

"Why would I? Romance novels are not written for serious thinkers. They appeal primarily to the unsatisfied and lovelorn. For those who look for a fantasy to substitute reality and are desperate to feel for a moment, even if it's only on the page."

"Couldn't that be said of all fiction, that it appeals to those who wish to escape from their reality?" asked the young woman seated beside Helen.

"Perhaps in a broad sense," George conceded. "Romantic fiction, however, preys particularly on the intellectually weak and emotionally vulnerable."

“You didn’t read it at all?” Helen asked again with feigned surprise.

“Only the dust jacket. After which, it was flung into the corner,” George said unapologetically.

“It has sold very well,” Henry interjected hastily. “A top seller with great reviews.”

“I think it only proves my point about the hopeless state of the majority of readers in the world,” the author scoffed.

“Perhaps when your next book is published you’ll be so lucky as to find an audience lacking in literary taste,” the young woman said.

“I’m sorry,” Helen said, a malicious smile crossing her features, “I haven’t introduced the two of you. George Austen, meet Ms. Margaret Clarke, author of *Good Intentions*.”

Now George saw it, the jaws of the trap closing in that smile. “Congratulations at the success of your book, Ms. Clarke. I’m sure it’s well deserved,” he said. As sincere as he was, George sounded condescending, but he didn’t care. He wasn’t there to congratulate or coddle.

“I accept your congratulations,” Margaret said graciously, “but I am sorry to discover you have such a narrow view of literature.”

“Literature is broad, but my distaste for your genre of choice is personal,” George tried to deflect, his interest tired of this topic and ready for the next one.

“You belittled everyone who has ever opened a romance novel. Ascribing to each an inability to find love or affection beyond the pages of a book. Do you enjoy *Ivanhoe* by Scott, or maybe *Lorna*

Doone? These are romances. Even *The Three Musketeers* is a romance in the true sense. When you write off an entire genre, you are discounting the best simply because you dislike the worst.”

Helen didn't bother to hide her grin. George repressed his scowl, and surprise.

When dinner was eaten, most of the guests began to leave. It didn't take long for only the core of the gathering to remain: Henry Newcastle's party and the Austen family. It was here George intended on reasserting his control over the conversation, which he expected wouldn't be too hard. He opened his mouth to begin a lecture on something he found fascinating and naturally assumed everyone else would also. But before he could speak, Helen Newcastle did.

“Samantha, why are you blushing so?”

“Well,” Samantha said, her cheeks flushed with slight embarrassment, “Margaret's practically a female Sherlock Holmes.”

“It's really nothing,” Margaret insisted. “I simply made a few observations that Samantha didn't expect.”

“You can't leave us there,” Mrs. Austen declared. “What did you say to cause Samantha to turn as pink as a poppy?”

“She said she knew there was a man in my life, recently added,” Samantha admitted.

The news surprised George, but apparently not his mother. “That's remarkable!” Mrs. Austen said. “How did you know?”

“It's really nothing,” Margaret said with a laugh. “A parlor trick at best. The amount of times she would look at her phone, and

the expression she would have when reading or sending a message, suggested a romantic connection recently developed.”

“Since we are in the closest thing to a parlor for miles around,” Henry said with a chuckle, “perhaps we could induce you to repeat the trick for the rest of us.”

“Since I happen to know something of how this works,” Helen interjected, “I know it requires the observation of someone’s appearance and actions. Could you give as accurate a read on someone who has a manufactured persona?”

Margaret considered a moment before replying, “I can only observe what is there to be seen, but no matter how much effort we take in managing our appearances, there is usually something about ourselves left to see.”

“George is a man who takes care with how he dresses and presents himself. What can you see about him?” Helen prompted.

“Oh yes,” Mrs. Austen encouraged her, “what about George can you learn by looking at him?”

George felt Margaret’s eyes fix on him and rake across every inch, from the bottom to the top. He kept his expression neutral; there was little point in doing anything else. She appeared to evaluate him from every angle, her eyes shifting almost imperceptibly. George knew this form of observation was possible. He also knew just as well it was a trick employed by charlatans and mediums throughout history. Yet, she had been able to notice something about Samantha even he didn’t know.

Her findings finished, Margaret closed her eyes a brief second and let out a breath. “He is studied in his appearance,” she reported,

“but attempts to do it in a way that appears natural, making up for this with an aggressive ease in the company of others. Mr. Austen makes it a habit of forgetting meals when working on a literary project. He is more athletic than he lets you believe. Life for him is a problem to solve, not an experience to live. When in the company of others”—she paused a moment—“he uses a veneer of sociability to prevent people from thinking him cold and heartless, though he knows it doesn’t always work.”

The room fell silent. Henry, Samantha, and Mrs. Austen all stared at George. Even Helen Newcastle watched him, waiting for a reaction. His face was hardened; his teacup hovered midair halfway between his mouth and the end table beside him. Quickly, he recovered. He replaced the cup on the table, resumed his nonchalance, and gave a wry smile. “Impressive,” he said, “although, usually *I’m* the one warned not to trust first impressions. Henry, I came across a book I wanted your thoughts on.”

Without any further discussion, the topic of conversation was redirected and no one ventured to bring it back to where it started.

After everyone had left for the night, George was sprawled on the couch. Head reclined, eyes fixed on the ceiling above him, eyebrows knit together in consideration. He thought a cigarette would suit the moment, but the prospect of lung cancer weighed stronger than the image of coolness he might capture for an instant. The whiskey was good though, two fingers of Jack Daniel’s Sinatra Select over three ice cubes. The cool liquid warmed his mouth as he took a sip.

“Whiskey post-party.” Samantha observed, taking a seat across from him. “It was a good night for all of us.” It wasn’t unusual for her to find her brother like this after a party; in fact, it had become something of a tradition. George would be taxed after a large social gathering, and as he recovered from his “social hangover” they would postmortem the night’s activities. There wasn’t a chance in hell she was going to miss this one if she was paid to. With a cup of hot tea in one hand and a bag of microwave popcorn in the other, she was settled in for the entertainment.

“Margaret Clarke is... morbidly fascinating,” George pronounced, declaring it like a king pronouncing life or death.

“Morbidly fascinating,” Samantha mused. “How every woman longs to be described.”

He silently ignored her.

“She read you like a book. How did that make you feel?” she asked with a little too much enthusiasm. Who could blame her? So used to command, to being unflustered, her brother rarely appeared anything less than perfectly put together.

“Like I should probably read her book.” George sighed. He explained how he had unknowingly belittled Margaret’s work and readership. “Knowing she was there wouldn’t change my opinions, but I might have been a little less harsh.”

When there was no response, George peered over to find she was intently texting. “Have you heard a word I said?”

Samantha held up a finger. Finishing her text, she returned her attention to George.

“That was him, wasn’t it?” he asked irritably.

She ignored the question. “You acted condescending to a new author about a genre you avoid like the plague. Somehow you think you’d have acted differently if you had known you were talking to the author of the book,” she summarized, popping a kernel in her mouth. “I think you would have said the exact same thing, maybe with more humor, but she’s smart enough to have heard the exact same thing.”

He knew she was right, even if he didn’t want to admit it aloud. He took another sip of the Sinatra. He wasn’t unfamiliar with putting his foot in his mouth; it happened. People usually forgave words uttered in haste sooner than he would regret saying them.

Margaret’s assessment of him rankled, but was bearable. He’d heard it said the truth was often more bitter than lies, and this might be one of those cases. Helen, the manipulative wench, had engineered the encounter, luring him into speaking about *Good Intentions*. She had been the one to direct Margaret’s assessment too. He considered what his best options for retaliation might be. A few ideas presented themselves, but none that could be immediately taken. Best to take his licks now and wait for time to present the best opportunity for revenge in the future.

“She’s pretty, you know,” Samantha observed, breaking her brother’s reverie.

“Who?”

“Margaret Clarke,” she replied dryly. “Her eyes are rather fetching,” she teased.

“Yes, she is,” George agreed matter-of-factly. “As many women are. And if you expect me to say more on the matter, you have less wit than I credited you with.”

Samantha laughed. “I’m not unrealistic,” she argued, “but I’m still hopeful to see my brother live happily ever after.”

“That! That is the problem!” George declared, rising from his reclined position on the couch. “Why is it the only ‘happily ever after’ comes with love, romance, wife, and the like? Is it not conceivable to anyone a man could live contentedly without these things, spending his time as he likes, living the way he chooses and never venturing to the altar?”

“On a different note,” Samantha said, changing the subject from one she had no interest in hearing about, “what’s the beef between you and Helen anyway?”

George sighed and swirled the ice in his whiskey. “Who knows,” he replied. “She’s jealous of my success, she thinks she’s competing for her father’s affections, she’s a sadist who delights in the pain of others... Take your pick. It could be anything, or nothing. Neither of us can probably remember or care.”

It wasn’t a satisfactory answer for the younger sister, but it was the only one she was going to get.

The Austen siblings were not the only ones who reviewed the dinner party later that night. Helen and Margaret discussed the company’s conversation and activities at length. Helen praised the concise appraisal of George Austen that Margaret had made, enjoying the discomfort it must have occasioned her jousting opponent.

This didn't matter to Margaret, whose ears were still stinging from the tactless way George had "written off" her writing. Writing that came from hours of deliberate work and mattered to her as all words matter to a writer of care.

"It was ungenerous of him to say," she declared.

"He is not known for being anything less than he is," Helen observed knowingly.

"Hardly an excuse," Margaret fumed, ignoring for the moment how the entire conversation had been prompted by her friend. "A calloused heart," she decided. "He's like a vampire who lives off the blood of his victims."

"I think there's a far less colorful explanation," Helen corrected, remembering a past best left to the past.

"I prefer the vampire story, it's more dramatic."

The two young women giggled, leaving George to his judgments—obviously incorrect ones, given the warm reception *Good Intentions* had enjoyed universally.