

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### DYLAN

“Dylan, Dylan.”

“What?” Dylan opened his eyes. This wasn’t his room or his bed. It felt as if he was sitting on a comfy chair, but where and why? Oh, right, he was on a chartered plane flying to the family estate. Just another ordinary day, ha!

“You should buckle up. We’re landing soon,” Townsend said.

He shifted and did as suggested. “I could get used to this way of traveling. Sure beats flying coach. Is the estate in Orlando?”

“Not exactly. It’s technically in Marian, a town about a forty-five-minute drive away. The closest airfield is in Orlando.”

Soon, they were walking toward a vehicle where a chauffeur waited with the door open. Dylan kept reminding himself this was a once-in-a-lifetime experience for him. He’d come here to satisfy his curiosity. That was it. Heck, it might even be a dream. He feared that as soon as he closed his eyes and opened them again, he would wake up in his crappy apartment. But the leather seat felt real, as did the directional signs to Universal Studios and Disney World that he saw on the way.

They didn’t talk during the ride. Townsend was busy on his phone.

Dylan kept wondering about his grandmother’s appearance. The pictures he had seen were old pictures. He figured she would have to be

around seventy. Would she resemble his mother?

Before long, he saw the town welcome sign. The car passed by what he thought was the main street with shops and restaurants. He wondered if this was an everybody-knows-everybody kind of town.

Not even five minutes passed before the driver said, “We made good time. It’s just around the corner.”

His eyes grew wide as they rounded a bend in the road, and the estate came into view. It wasn’t as big as the Biltmore Estate—he’d had the opportunity to attend a business conference at the Biltmore House and been left in awe of the magnificence—but this certainly reminded him of that location’s ambience. He could see three buildings in the distance. One appeared to be the main house, since it was the biggest. He wondered about the purpose of the other two.

The view approaching the main gate looked familiar. Had he seen it before? He knew he couldn’t have, but it reminded him of some movie set; he just couldn’t remember which. Or it could be his imagination. Trees lined both sides of the road, providing natural shade from the sun.

Security was rather high tech: The driver had to punch in a code to open the gate, and then he waved, presumably at a camera.

“Here we are,” Townsend said.

The chauffeur stopped the car, got out, and swiftly opened the door for him. *Wow. Royalty treatment all the way.*

The double doors opened as soon as he and Townsend stepped up to them. A butler, he assumed, stood there to greet them.

“Mr. Townsend.” The man, who seemed to be in his sixties, nodded at the attorney, then turned to Dylan. “You must be Mr. Roche.”

“Yes, Dylan will do.” He stuck his hand out.

The butler stared at the outstretched hand for a moment, as if deciding whether to take it. Finally, he did. “I’m the majordomo. Max, at your service.”

## CHAPTER NINE

DYLAN

Dylan picked up the piece of paper.

*You don't belong here. Go home!*

He quickly opened the door, but no one was there. “What the heck? Is this some sick joke?”

He'd only arrived that day. So far, everyone was friendly and welcoming. Not that he had any burning desire to stay, but who wanted him gone? He had every intention of taking advantage of his short stay here—Lorraine's cooking, the lake, the beach, and everything else. Most of all, he wanted to find out about the key.

Someone tapped at the door. He had left it ajar.

He pulled the door wide open immediately, expecting to see the person who had left the note. Instead, he found Carol. “Oh, hi.”

“Sean told me he would give you a grand tour and maybe you two would go swimming tomorrow,” she said. “But do you think you could spare an old woman some time for a visit?”

“Sure,” he said, and stepped aside. “You wanna come in?”

“Let's go down to the kitchen.”

“Okay.” He stepped out. “Sean took me to the restaurant his parents operate in the next building. Lorraine’s cooking is amazing.”

“Yes. It wasn’t always a restaurant. I offered to let them use it. I’ve always known she could cook. The timing was right, and things worked out.”

She escorted him to the casual dining table next to the kitchen.

Max showed up with a tray of tea and cookies and addressed Dylan. “Would you rather have coffee instead?”

“Decaf, if you have it, please. And sweetener.”

The butler nodded, retreated for a moment, and returned with a carafe, sweetener, and creamer. After he set everything on the table, he departed again.

“Tell me about Maggie—your mother,” Carol said.

“Oh, she went by Mimi.”

“She was always Maggie here. I heard it was breast cancer.”

“Yes, she waited too long to see the doctor. By the time they confirmed the diagnosis...” He had to stop for a moment. “It was stage four, inoperable. After the first round of treatment, the doctors were hopeful the cancer would stop spreading and she would have more time. But it wasn’t meant to be. She fought hard, though.”

Together, they shared a moment of silence, each lost in their own thoughts.

“Do you know why Mom ran away? Actually, I have no idea if she did... I grew up believing that her family had all died—that she was all alone.”

After a heavy sigh, Carol said, “I don’t blame her for keeping us a secret. I’m sure she believed it was for your protection. And she might be right. Ralph, your grandfather, passed just about two years ago. I was hoping that she would come home then, but she didn’t.”

## CHAPTER TEN

DYLAN

“This is unbelievable!” Dylan said to Tommy over video chat. He had carried his laptop onto the balcony.

“Oh, man, M&M Enterprises. Wow, you’d better not forget little old me.”

“She didn’t exactly...”

“But she was going to. Why else would she find you? She’s old. You’re her intended heir.”

“This is just too much.”

“Wow, nice view,” Tommy said. “Pan around. I want to see better. Hey, don’t stop.”

But Dylan had stopped rotating the laptop, instead he was searching in his pocket for the note so that he could hold it in front of the camera.

“What’s that?” Tommy asked.

“This was on the floor when I came out of the bathroom.”

“That’s creepy. Wait, was this before or after your grandma offered you the kingdom?”

“Nobody offered me anything. But it was before our conversation.”

“Maybe someone doesn’t want you there to upset the apple cart. Maybe someone was going to inherit and then you showed up. In lots of crime shows, that’s a motive for murder.”

“Please don’t tell me someone is plotting to kill me.”

“What? You have that look.”

“Well...” Dylan wasn’t sure if the stress from recent events caused him to be extra paranoid.

“Spit it out.”

“I have this feeling I’m being watched. I think someone’s spying on me.” As he said it, he swiveled his head around, trying to catch the figure he thought he’d seen earlier.

“There you go. I’d hire a bodyguard if I were you.”

“I have enough stress as it is. You don’t need to make me more nervous,” Dylan said. “I just want to meet my mom’s family, not get a target on my back.”

“Dude, news flash, the rich and famous always have targets on their backs. Hey, gotta go. Stay safe.”



Dylan had never slept in a more comfortable bed before. Whether it was from exhaustion or anxiety, or for other reasons entirely, he fell asleep almost as soon as his head hit the pillow.

*“Dylan, can you hear me?”*

He woke up suddenly, thinking his mother was talking to him. He listened but heard nothing. He sighed heavily. In his half-asleep state, he thought it had to be a dream. He closed his eyes again, turned to his side, and covered his head with the pillow, hoping to drown out the noise or, more likely, his imagination.

*“Remember what I told you?”*

There it was again. Of course, he remembered. But he still had no idea what the key was for. And what secrets? *Oh, why, Mom, why couldn’t you have stayed alert long enough to explain?*