

A SINISTER GIFT

EXCERPT

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CHAPTER ONE

Was there ever a good circumstance for anyone to go to court?

On this bleak and freezing early February afternoon, Elenora Bello sat on a wooden bench in the third row on the prosecution's side of courtroom number three. Next to her, attorney Jean-Philippe Gendron sat stiffly, his breathing shallow. Despite his sharp dressing, the man, who was used to being on top of things—especially in a courtroom—looked like a lost boy. Elenora's heart ached for him.

As a social worker with the police, she went to court regularly with a victim or a witness to soothe their worries and put them at ease. But since she couldn't turn off her sense of empathy, she inadvertently absorbed her fair share of second-hand stress and anguish.

When a trial went well for a client, it brought her and them great joy and relief, a sentiment that some justice had been restored. But heartbreak, grief, and desperation were also frequent and devastating outcomes, regardless of the efforts made.

Elenora was used to accompanying unfortunate and disoriented souls from early on, from their first moment of crisis when the police had to intervene to break up a fight or a psychotic episode, to answer their call for help, or to take their statement. She listened to them, calmed them down, advised them in their decisions to get help or press charges.

More often than not, she felt like she made a bit of a difference in their life somewhere along the way, sometimes nudging them into changing the course of a severely broken path, helping them take a better, healthier direction. Sometimes leading them to forgiveness or redemption.

She made herself available to them and guided them as much as they would let her. It felt like a privilege to her, especially when someone asked her to help them face an abuser, always an excruciating experience for a victim.

Today was such an occasion.

Jean-Philippe Gendron's long fingers fidgeted against his thigh. He was a bundle of nerves under his cool facade.

How torturous it must be for him, Elenora thought, and she hoped he would heal regardless of the trial's outcome.

She put a gentle hand on his upper arm, and he took a deep breath. She offered him a sympathetic smile. He forced his lips to smile back, but his eyes betrayed his apprehension. She knew he had owned this very courtroom countless times. But today, she also knew there was no amount of confidence he could summon and no amount of acting he could do to feel like it was just a normal Friday.

Jean-Philippe Gendron himself was not on trial, but he was about to face the man who was, a man who had robbed him of his childhood and killed something inside of him a long time ago.

Father Albert Callahan.

The man sitting in the accused box.

Pushing eighty, the priest was frail and had the looks of a doting grandfather. Listening to the current testimony from one of his other victims, he appeared confused, shaking his head gently, as if he could not believe what he was hearing. Like this could only be a big mistake.

Jean-Philippe's fingers stopped fidgeting and balled into a fist. Elenora squeezed his hand to make him aware of how tense he was. He relaxed, but whispered sharply, "The bastard's gonna lie through his teeth. I just know it."

Elenora nodded. She, too, suspected the old man was putting on a show. A convincing one. And she knew that Jean-Philippe's main fear was not the embarrassment or uneasiness of admitting, in front of a room full of colleagues and strangers, that this man had sexually abused him when he was young. What he feared most was that the monster would get away with it, and he was afraid of how he'd react if that happened.

"You're doing the right thing," Elenora whispered back to him.

"I know." His gaze flicked to the ceiling. "I just hope my mother will forgive me."

"If she had known, she would have understood."

"If she had known, it would have destroyed her."

Father Callahan had been present in Jean-Philippe's life, not only at church when the lawyer was a choirboy but also at home when his mother became ill. The priest was there for her while she was on her deathbed. He helped give her a peaceful and dignified death.

Jean-Philippe had confided to Elenora that he was

ambivalent about testifying against the man and telling the world about his true nature. He felt it would diminish what the priest—as monstrous as he was—had done for his mother. And that this would somehow tarnish her memory.

Elenora understood where he was coming from and how torn he was. “Nothing will ever take away what that man did right for your mother,” she assured him. “Nothing can take that away. But he needs to be brought to justice for what he did to you and the other boys and to prevent him from striking again. I think your mother would understand.”

Elenora’s words had seemed to settle something in Jean-Philippe. His initial reluctance vanished, and he became determined to turn the page and help seek justice for everyone involved in the class-action suit.

And here he was, about to put himself out there against Father Callahan. Vulnerable and ready to bare his soul in front of his abuser. He shut his eyes and took in another deep breath. When he opened them, there was a new resolve in his gaze. His composure looked solid.

He was ready.

Elenora couldn’t help feeling admiration for this kind of courage in the face of evil.

A shiver went through her, and the most jarring thing happened: she felt a spark at her core, as if a bright light, a heatwave radiated inside of her. Like a miniature, internal big bang.

What the hell was that?

It didn’t feel like a gastric issue. Still, she thought about what she had for lunch. She and a colleague had gone to a new brunch place with cutely named items on the menu. Elenora had chosen the *Rays of Sunshine* breakfast—a plate

loaded with home-style potatoes and fruit with two sunny-side-up eggs in the middle, surrounded by strips of bacon strategically placed around the eggs to mimic sun rays. But unless there was anything radioactive on the plate, and as funny as it'd be to think the plate's name was literal, she couldn't see what could have caused this eerie disturbance inside of her.

Having recently turned forty, she hoped she was still a little young to have hot flashes.

As her mind tried to find a plausible explanation for the bizarre warmth still dispersing through her, she felt a light touch on her left arm, where no one had been sitting.

The touch was quickly followed by what felt like a hug. Someone was hugging her arm.

She turned and was surprised to see a young girl smiling at her. Her appearance was striking, pigtailed hair so light as to appear white and eyes of a deep, blueberry-like blue. She appeared alone and unbothered by the cold, adult surroundings of the courtroom.

What was this kid doing here?

Before Elenora could ask the little girl if she needed help, she felt a tug on her other arm. The judge had called Jean-Philippe to testify.

"Wish me luck," he said to her in a poised voice.

"You won't need luck. You have the truth on your side. And my admiration." Elenora knew that the truth didn't always win in court by a long shot, but she meant it.

He gave her a nod and stood tall, ready to go into battle.

Elenora's gaze followed him for a moment before she turned her attention back to the little girl.

But the little girl was gone.



The court adjourned late in the afternoon. When Elenora emerged from the courthouse, darkness had already fallen, and the freezing air had become even more biting thanks to the merciless gusts of wind. She decided to take a cab instead of walking or waiting for the St-Laurent bus to travel the few long blocks to her small office at her downtown precinct.

Jean-Philippe had given a strong and heartfelt testimony and she felt proud of him, but she was also glad that the trial session was the last thing on her schedule for the week. That meant she could wrap up some paperwork while basking in pride and contentment before calling it a week.

In the quietness of the short, toasty cab ride, Elenora's mind went back to the little girl in the courtroom. Had she been real, or had she imagined her?

The kid had seemed real, and Elenora thought she couldn't have dreamed the touch on her arm. She was engrossed in Jean-Philippe's plight, and the touch had made her turn. How could it have gotten her attention if it had not been real?

Elenora thanked the driver and headed inside the station, her thoughts drifting back to the child again. She had a clear mental picture of her, like an afterimage engraved in her memory. Almost as if she knew her. Could she have met her before?

She considered the possibility and almost went through her past case files. But she met few young kids in her line of work, and they were all so memorable to her, she would have known instantly if she'd encountered this striking little girl before.

And if she had, given that the child couldn't have been more than four or five years of age, this would have happened recently.

How very odd.

"Busy figuring out the toppings?" A familiar teasing voice made her look up. Her husband, homicide detective Tom Madigan, was standing in the doorway with a smirk on his face.

Friday night was restaurant delivery night at their house, usually pizza. Elenora and Tom were both decent cooks, and most of the time she didn't mind cooking—unless she finished work late and cooking meant having to eat late and fast while exhausted. But she also deeply appreciated those times when she didn't have to prepare food. Man, did it ever taste good when she didn't have to make it.

She smiled at Tom's ribbing and reached for her cell phone, holding it up. "Caller's choice! I got my finger on speed dial," she teased back.

His smirk turned sheepish. "Well, the good news is...you get to pick whatever you want tonight."

Elenora wrinkled her nose. This meant he had to work late.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"Not your fault. I'll see if Pierre's available. It's been a while." Pierre Deveraux was a retired detective who had been in Elenora's life and a father figure to her ever since she was a young girl and had lost her father in a freak car accident.

"And if he's not, I'll grab some takeout on the way home," she added. The precinct was within a stone's throw of just

about any type of food, from fast to fancy. Finding something to eat was never a problem.

Tom rapped his knuckles a few times against the door-frame. “Sounds good. Try to have a cozy evening, okay? I love you.”

“Love you, too.”



“There should be red wine in the fridge,” Elenora said to Pierre as she left the kitchen to meet the delivery man at the front door.

Pierre took out plates and cutlery for the two of them and set them down on the table. Elenora waltzed back into the room with two large pizza boxes—one vegetarian and one *all dressed*. She was counting on leftovers.

“D’you want some?” Pierre asked, holding a wine glass in one hand while his other rested against the glasses and mugs shelf.

As Elenora was about to answer, the face of the little girl in the courtroom flashed in her mind, and a funny thought dawned on her: could she be pregnant? With a girl?

Is that what the weird internal fireworks had been?

She didn’t remember ever reading about women feeling anything specific, let alone spectacular, the moment they’d conceived. But somehow, she had a strange feeling this might be the case for her. And the timing added up: they’d made love two nights earlier, so it was a possibility. A very odd one since they’d tried to conceive unsuccessfully for ages. If she were pregnant now, it would be a pleasant yet daunting surprise.

“Wine shouldn’t be a matter of life and death. I apologize for the pressure,” Pierre joked.

“Sorry about that. I think I’ll pass.” *Just to be on the safe side.*

“Any news to share?” Pierre gave her a suspicious look. Even though he was no longer a cop, he was still unnervingly observant.

She was tempted to share with him her bizarre gut feeling and what had happened at the courthouse, but she caught herself before going down that rabbit hole with him. For years, Pierre seemed to have been waiting for—expecting even—something extraordinary to happen to her, when all she ever wanted was to live a normal life.

“Too early to tell?” Pierre read into her hesitation.

“I’m just tired. It’s been a long week.”

“All right.”

Elenora spent dinner and the rest of the evening obsessing over the little girl—and what this strange incident might mean for her—while trying to take part enough in the conversation so that Pierre wouldn’t feel the need to grill her. Good thing that his favorite TV shows were on, and as they watched them together, it allowed her to remain away from his scrutiny.

She might be pregnant, and that made her giddy. She wanted to tell Tom but feared she would sound crazy. And if this turned out to be a false alarm, like several times before, it’d be cruel to get his hopes up.

She decided to keep this unfounded news to herself for now and hope for the best.

CHAPTER TWO

Pierre would never forget that deadly, late November night thirty-seven years ago in a mountainous part of the Mauricie region, when he first met a young Elenora, who was only three years old at the time.

The little girl and her family were driving home late at night along a sinuous road on a high embankment next to the St-Maurice River. Back then, lumber companies used the wide waterway from spring to fall to send logs cut by lumberjacks down the river to paper mills in towns settled downstream. The river was deep and its current powerful, ideal for this kind of activity.

The Bello family car was traveling down a deserted narrow road. The temperature had dropped, leading to intermittent freezing rain. Patches of black ice covered the pavement in random places, and now a dusting of snow added a layer of difficulty to the already treacherous road conditions.

The car had skidded a few times since they'd left a gathering in a neighboring town. Martin Bello, Elenora's dad, was

a cautious driver and took his sweet time to reassure his wife Muriel, Elenora's perpetually anxious mother.

Snow started to fall more heavily, and visibility reduced even further. However, it wasn't the snowstorm that would lead to tragedy but a deer appearing in the middle of the road.

Upon seeing the animal, Elenora's dad yanked the wheel just in time to avoid hitting it. But this course correction and the hairpin turn ahead brought the car right onto a patch of black ice at an unforgiving angle.

The car careened and hit a boulder by the side of the road, sending the vehicle spinning down a hill. Elenora's dad struggled to regain control, but it proved impossible.

Muriel's screams and the curious swaying of the car woke up Elenora, who had been asleep on the back seat. Before her little mind could process what was going on, the car plunged down a cliff and landed in the icy waters of the river, piercing through the thin layer of ice that had barely started to form at the surface.

A group of hunters playing cards in a nearby cabin heard the accident. One of them phoned the authorities while his friends rushed to the scene.

As a member of the Québec provincial police in charge of that territory, Pierre was dispatched to the scene. When he arrived, one of the hunters was fishing Muriel out of the water. She was barely conscious, her lips a deep purple from the frigid water, and her savior carried her to the cabin to warm up.

Moments later, another hunter brought Martin out of the river. Unlike Muriel, he was pronounced dead, no matter the effort to revive him.

Pierre would never forget that night, not only because of the man's death and the woman who had barely made it, but mostly because as paramedics did CPR on the man, a little girl—Elenora—showed up at Pierre's side.

Where she had come from would always be a total mystery to him. Her clothes and her hair were damp, and she shivered softly, supporting the theory that she'd been in the car when it plunged into the river. But none of the hunters had seen her, let alone saved her. How could a child so young have escaped by herself from such an extreme scenario unscathed?

Her collected demeanor, given the circumstances, also felt eerie to Pierre. He whisked his jacket off his back and wrapped it around her tiny shoulders. He scooped her up and jogged them to the cabin.

"What's wrong with my daddy?" Her little voice bounced along with Pierre's feet hitting the ground.

"That's your dad?"

Elenora nodded. "Where's my mom?"

"She's in there. You're gonna see her in a minute. And we're gonna get you warmed up, okay?"

At the sight of her daughter, Muriel broke into uncontrollable sobs, holding on to her in a tight grip while a paramedic attempted to examine the girl.

Pierre was itching to ask Elenora how she had escaped from the car, but he gave the grieving mother and daughter some privacy first and went back outside, where the other paramedics slipped the gurney with Martin Bello's body into the ambulance.

Pierre soon felt a tug on his sleeve and startled to see Elenora at his side, his enormous jacket engulfing her.

“What happened to the little boy?” she asked him.

“What boy? Do you have a brother?” Alarm took over Pierre. *Please, let there not be a dead child in the river.* Elenora’s mom, despite being deeply in shock, had not mentioned a missing son.

“I don’t have a brother,” Elenora replied with a small frown.

“Then who’s the boy?”

“The boy in the field at the bottom of the river.”

“The boy in the field at the bottom of the river?” Pierre repeated, puzzled. He thought she must have misused the word “field”—the most logical explanation. But the thought of a “boy at the bottom of the river” in itself was distressing enough, and if there was a boy down there, he sure as all hell wasn’t alive by now. What horror had this little girl seen?

“Was he...asleep?” he tried, not wanting to ask her bluntly if she had seen a dead kid.

Elenora frowned again. “He wanted to play with me.”

“He wanted to play with you... What did you tell him?”

“I told him I had to go. It’s past my bedtime.”

“And then what happened?”

“I think he was mad at me.”

Back then, Pierre was a young bachelor who seldom interacted with kids, both at work and in life in general. He couldn’t help wondering if conversations with three-year-olds were always this maddening.

“What makes you think that?”

“He pointed at me with mean eyes.”

“He pointed at you with mean eyes?”

Elenora nodded matter-of-factly.

“And then what happened?” Pierre asked.

“I came here.”

“You swam from the bottom of the river?”

She looked at Pierre like he had said the silliest thing.
“I’m not allowed to swim without my floaties.”

Pierre massaged his forehead. The child’s words made little sense, and yet she seemed to be telling the truth. It must have been the trauma talking.

“I see...” Pierre had rarely been this perplexed in his life.
“We’ll see what we can do about the boy.”

Pierre never found out who the mystery boy was—or found the body of a boy, for that matter. A team of divers had combed the bottom of the river extensively to find him, unsuccessfully. Pierre had also phoned around to find out more about the Bello family, but there was no boy to be found.

CHAPTER THREE

“Good morning, sweetie, and Happy Valentine’s Day!” Tom said, entering the bedroom with a latte in one hand and a red rose in the other.

Elenora stretched in bed, a smile lighting up her face. “Oh, that’s lovely.” She took the mug and the flower and inhaled both of their enticing perfume. “Thank you.”

Tom slipped back under the covers and gave her a tender kiss on the lips.

She put the coffee and the rose down on her nightstand before opening the top drawer and retrieving a small, gift-wrapped box. “I’ve got a surprise for you too.” She handed him the box.

He quickly unwrapped it, uncovering a box of After Eight chocolate mints. “My favorites!”

She chuckled. “Every chocolate out there is your favorite.”

“Anything wrong with that?”

“Absolutely nothing.”

Tom made a mock frown and shook the box to guess its

weight. “Hmm. The plastic wrap is missing, and this sure feels light for a full box. Have you eaten half of it already?” he teased.

“God, no. I wouldn’t eat what’s in there.”

“Oh?” Tom’s brows shot up with curiosity, and he opened the box. There was a pregnancy test stick in it, with a little plus sign announcing it was positive.

“Happy Valentine’s Day, daddy,” Elenora said with a big grin. Her courthouse insight that she was pregnant turned out to be true, whether by fluke or otherwise, whatever *otherwise* would mean.

It took Tom a moment to register what this meant. “For real?” His eyes were twinkling.

“For real.”

“When did you find out?” he asked quietly, as if he couldn’t yet believe the news.

“I took the test late last night before bed. I tried to stay awake until you came home to surprise you, but I fell asleep.”

Tom looked at her with so much love in his eyes. “Come here.” He pulled Elenora into an embrace, nestling his head into the crook of her neck. “That’s such wonderful news. I’m so happy.” He pulled back. “Though a bit bummed I’m not getting chocolate...”

She slapped him playfully on the arm. “Want me to take it back?”

He moved the After Eight box away from her, well out of her reach. “No way in hell.”

She laughed.

“How are you feeling?” He resumed his embrace.

“Very happy. And not feeling sick yet. So, very happy.” After a pause, she couldn’t help adding, “I think I saw her.”

But the moment the words escaped her lips, she regretted it. There was no way to tell Tom about her vision without sounding like a loon or making him freak out if he believed her.

Or both.

“Who?”

Now she didn’t have a choice but to give him something and hope she didn’t dig herself into a deeper hole. “Our daughter.”

“We’re having a daughter?”

“I think so.”

“Isn’t it a bit early to know?”

“Not for a gut feeling, apparently,” she replied with a light laugh.

“And your gut’s often right, so I won’t be betting against it.”

He kissed her. “What is she like?”

“What do you mean?”

“You said you saw her. What does she look like?”

Dammit.

“She’s beautiful and has light hair.” She didn’t say “almost white” on the off chance he’d remember that detail and their daughter did turn out to have white hair, as unlikely as it was since they both had dark hair. Elenora’s was a deep brown bordering on black, a few shades darker than Tom’s.

“Her face is round, like mine, and she has blue eyes.” She should stop talking now, keep her predictions vague.

“I’m sure she’ll be lovely no matter what she looks like,” he said, amused, not taking her seriously for a minute.

“You *do* dare question my gut!” she feigned offense, happy to have dodged a bullet.

He kissed her again. “Can we start sharing the news? Or should we wait to be on the safe side?” he asked.

She suspected he was dying as much as her to tell the world, but erring on the side of caution was probably wise.

He must have read her mind. “Okay, let’s wait. It won’t be easy, but that sounds best.”

Elenora nodded. “Pierre will figure it out, so we might as well tell him. But just him.” Her face darkened. “And my mom. It’s not like she’s gonna understand what’s going on or remember.”

“Or tell anyone,” Tom added softly.

Elenora snorted to cover a pang of bitterness. “Right. And, on the bright side, we can break the news to her as many times as we feel like.”

Tom hugged her again and didn’t let go for a long time.



“Mom, you’re going to be a grandmother. We’re going to have a baby. Isn’t that the greatest news?” Elenora held her mother’s hands in her own. Her voice was warm and tinged with cautious enthusiasm. She knew better than to expect a reaction from her mother, but saying out loud that she was pregnant filled her with joy. She could at least savor that.

Her mother had never quite recovered from the shock of the accident that took her husband’s life. Back then, despite being struck with grief, Muriel Bello had managed to keep taking care of Elenora by herself for a while. But her mental health deteriorated, and she became distracted and distant. At times neglectful. Often uncommunicative. It became more and more apparent—to both Pierre and the staff at

Elenora's school—that the mother's state of mind was worsening and that her daughter would need external care.

Muriel soon ended up as an in-patient in a psychiatric ward, and Pierre helped find a good home for Elenora. She was placed with a loving older couple he knew well. He kept in touch with the new family throughout the years, as much as his hectic career as an investigator allowed, becoming a steady and reassuring presence in the girl's life. The bond between him and Elenora grew strong, and she soon considered him a father.

In the past decade, Muriel's mental health had further declined, and she was now heavily medicated. She was too deeply gone into her own world to react to anything happening outside of her or move much of a muscle, let alone have an opinion on something. She never gave any sign that she understood or was even aware of anything happening around her, that she even knew who her own daughter was. But even so, whenever they visited, Elenora and Tom interacted with her as if she knew they were there and could hear them, especially since there was no hard evidence confirming that Muriel could no longer be reached.

"Elenora thinks it's a girl," Tom added, with the same restrained enthusiasm as Elenora's.

The moment he said the word "girl," Muriel's fingers bunched into a fist and a sharp expression flashed in her eyes.

Both Elenora and Tom noticed this very unexpected response. But before they could interpret it, Muriel's fingers relaxed and went back to being limp, her gaze as dull as ever.

"Mom?" Elenora asked. "Is there anything wrong?"

No number of questions and no rephrasing got anything more out of Muriel, leaving Elenora and Tom perplexed. The

rest of the visit was painful, filled with awkward silences and small talk.

“Do you think she disapproves?” Elenora asked Tom bitterly as they drove back home.

Tom took a while to answer. “How could she disapprove, sweetie? Perhaps she wishes she could be there for you and the baby, and this reminded her that she’s trapped. She’s going to be a grandmother. And yet, she’ll never be able to truly be one. If she’s conscious but unable to express herself, it must be overwhelming and very frustrating for her.”

Elenora suspected he was playing devil’s advocate to make her feel better and wanted to believe he was right. She often reflected on how tragic and unfair it would be if her mother was in fact aware, if her soul was trapped inside a prison of bone and flesh, unable to communicate with the outside world, no matter how hard she tried. A lonely onlooker of her own existence.

While that prospect was gut-wrenching, so was the thought that her own mother might not approve of her daughter having a baby, let alone a girl.

“Perhaps we should see this microscopic reaction she had as a good sign,” Tom tried. “An awkward sign, for sure, but still a sign that she can hear us. That she’s trying to tell us something. We’ve been wondering all these years. What if this is the beginning of her emerging from her current state?”

“Right.” Elenora was not convinced of Tom’s theory, but she clung to his positive outlook to put an end to this sense of unease and disappointment that had been punching her in the gut since her mother’s odd response.

Maybe Tom was right. Maybe this was a positive sign.

Even though something about it didn’t feel right.

CHAPTER FOUR

Montréal, 1847

Twenty-seven-year-old Rolland Carmichael was a tall drink of water with the tortured looks of a romantic poet. He was used to provoking two strong types of reaction: either a sneer and stink-eye combo from the men he beat at card games, especially when he took a small fortune from them, or intensely lustful stares from women of most ages—and the occasional man as well.

However, this was the first time he had received a sneer and stink-eye special from a woman. But there was no mistaking that the sharp eyes of Mrs. Penelope McDowell, a well-off and elegant, self-entitled piece of work, had been shooting angry daggers his way all evening from across the room.

“What have you done to poor Mrs. McDowell?” Rolland’s good friend Charles Ferrier asked him, hiding a smirk behind a sip of sherry. They stood drinking lazily by

the roaring fireplace in the dining room, slightly apart from the soirée in full swing in the next room.

“Nothing. Absolutely nothing, I assure you,” Rolland replied. *And that is why she is so irate*, he thought to himself.

Two days earlier, Mrs. McDowell had summoned Rolland under a false pretense to her mansion in the old part of town and thrown herself at him, trying to, at first, entice him—then badger him—to accept a very lucrative, indecent proposal. Rolland had to turn her down. Not only did she have a reputation as a high maintenance busybody—a trait Rolland avoided like the plague to keep his intimate services discreetly under the radar—but her aggressive behavior and refusal to take no for an answer had turned him off beyond a point of no return. He even had to use force to extricate himself from her and fight his way out of her house.

Rolland had some pride, but mostly rules to protect himself. While he was a risk-taker at the card table, he didn’t like to gamble too much when it came to biology and angry husbands. His first rule was to get involved mainly with widows and spinsters of a certain age, preferably past child-bearing years. As a fan of every female form, he didn’t mind that they could be his mother or grandmother even, nor did he care much about their looks. Aside from the money, the appreciation he received for showering them with attention was hard to beat. He understood that there was no age too old for wanting to be desired.

These women knew and honored Rolland’s wishes to not get romantically involved past some friendly tenderness. He was a businessman, and the deal was physical. His clientele was fiercely independent of mind and wealth, and the arrangement suited them just fine.

In his personal life, Rolland was also not interested in young ingénues looking for a husband, knowing too well he wasn't a good catch nor husband material. His romantic activities with older women allowed him to scratch an itch while leaving his mind and heart in peace, and his life devoid of unnecessary drama. As long as he kept away from the likes of the devious and repulsive Mrs. McDowell.

"She seems to think otherwise," Charles fished again.

Rolland gave Mrs. McDowell a sideways glance. She still looked intent on getting his attention and making him pay for refusing her. He would have to watch his back, as the woman was capable of anything.

"Care to share what she's thinking?" Charles was getting desperate to know.

Rolland didn't take his friend's bait, sucking on the inside of his cheek to suppress a laugh. As a gentleman to his core, he was determined not to kiss and tell—or in this case: not kiss, fight off, reject with as much decorum as possible, and tell.

A tray of hors d'oeuvres appeared between him and Charles. They each picked one at random. Rolland surveyed the variety, knowing he would likely bring some leftovers home.

"Thank you, Adam," Charles said to the servant, dismissing him with a kind nod.

They were in Charles's family mansion on Beaver Hall Street, filled with the city's business elite. Most of the wealthy businessmen Rolland played cards with were here at the swanky gathering. Soirées at the Ferriers were always sought-after events, and tonight was no exception. Everyone was dressed in the latest fashion, including Rolland, despite

the very modest world from which he came and in which he still lived most of the time.

Rolland was ten years old when his mother died of scarlet fever, leaving him to fend for himself and take care of his then seven-year-old brother, Rory, whose health had been fragile from birth. Their father had been killed in a construction-related accident when Rory was a baby.

Rolland was a strikingly beautiful child, and he took advantage of his looks as a beggar and an errand boy to get money from richer urban dwellers, while Rory, who was more of an introvert and amazing with his hands, made custom furniture for clients or to sell at the market.

Growing up, the Carmichael brothers were not rich, but they looked after one another and usually managed to have enough food to eat and keep a roof over their heads. It helped that they'd inherited the little wood house in the Faubourg St-Laurent their father had built. It was tiny and drafty, but it was home for the two boys.

Once Rolland reached adolescence, he became a favorite of higher society ladies, who came up with ridiculous reasons to employ him, mostly so that they could have him around. His presence in those circles allowed him to meet his good friend Charles, whose family took an honest shining to him.

Charles's father, who only had one son and felt outnumbered at home on the gender front, had been too happy to take Rolland under his wing. He taught him countless things, including how to play cards, and Rolland proved particularly talented at strategy and reading his opponents. He soon was invited to join the men's card games.

Rolland quickly realized that while he could shark the men with his eyes closed, it was a greater payoff to play the

long game and not alienate powerful men, his cash cows. So, he would pace himself and win big only when he needed to.

“Ah, there they are,” Charles exclaimed, looking at a group of young women in their early twenties decked out in opulent evening gowns.

“Your sister has new friends?”

“Indeed. A new friend and one of Miss Hargrave’s cousins, I believe. Let’s introduce ourselves, shall we?”

Feeling Mrs. McDowell’s death stare boring into him, Rolland followed his friend toward the group of young ladies. He already knew Ophelia Ferrier, the youngest of Charles’s sisters, whom he considered his own sister. Next to her stood her best friend Millicent Hargrave, who Rolland also already knew, and two other young women. One had dark auburn hair and the straightness of her posture suggested she could take on the world all by herself. The other one...

Rolland’s eyes fell on the other girl, and everything else in the room ceased to exist. She was beautiful, but there was more to her delicate presence that attracted him to her. A mysterious charisma. He felt a twinge of trepidation at the thought of making her acquaintance—a first for him.

The group of young women was engrossed in a lively conversation. As Rolland and Charles approached, the women noticed them and stopped talking, sneaking glances at them. “I gather Mr. Carmichael must be near,” Ophelia said before turning, a smirk appearing on her lips.

“Good evening, ladies. We apologize for the interruption. I am Charles, Ophelia’s only and favorite brother. And this is my good friend Rolland Carmichael. We are pleased to make your acquaintance.”

Charles gave them all a bow, and Rolland followed suit,

his eyes lingering on the young lady who had caught his attention.

“Rolland, you already know my good friend Millicent. And this is Miss Barton, her cousin,” Ophelia said about the girl with the fiery hair and disposition. She gave him an amicable smile.

“Miss Barton. It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance.” Rolland kissed her gloved hand.

“And this is Miss Deschamps,” Ophelia said of the intriguing girl.

“Delphine,” Miss Deschamps added.

Delphine. What a pretty name.

“She and her family recently moved here from Québec City,” Millicent volunteered.

“Delphine...” the name caught in Rolland’s throat before he kissed her hand awkwardly. Their eyes met, and her gaze held his, showing an assurance and a boldness that took him off guard. Feeling an inappropriate flush of heat come over him, he let go of her hand and looked away. His own reaction puzzled him, and he couldn’t tell whether this was good or bad. He did feel rather thrilled and alive, but perhaps it was the sherry.

“Dear sister, you seemed to be discussing a passionate topic before we rudely interrupted your lively exchange,” Charles said.

Rolland knew this was a prompt for Ophelia to either resume the topic at hand and include him and Charles in the conversation or tell her brother to go check on Mary in the kitchen, her way of dismissing the boys. If she chose the latter, Charles would apologize and propose a new, irresistible topic as an attempt to muscle himself into the discus-

sion, unless he didn't feel like being a part of it. Rolland prayed his friend didn't mind mingling with the group.

"We were discussing the literary merits of the recent works of American writers compared to penny dreadfuls," Ophelia said while still giving Charles an eye roll.

"Emerson's essays? Hawthorne's tales?" Rolland surprised himself. He didn't think his mouth had enough saliva left to produce a sound, let alone clear and coherent words.

"You've read Hawthorne?" Delphine inquired, delighted.

"I have. I think he is a fine storyteller." His eyes stayed on her until he reached the limits of propriety.

"Though not as fine as Alcott, if you ask me," he added in a conspiratorial whisper, making a show of looking over his shoulder at the sea of gentlemen present, as if worried they would question his manhood should they hear he'd been reading a female fiction writer. He turned back and offered the young women a knee-weakening smile. They all blushed to various degrees.

"We lived in New England for a while," Miss Barton said boldly. "I might be impartial, but I think it's a hotbed of interesting ideas and activities."

"I agree. Please tell us more about your experience," Rolland asked with genuine interest.

As part of his efforts to blend into high society, aside from wearing the trendy garments his brother Rory made for him, Rolland was a big reader of everything he could put his hands on, both for his own enjoyment and to keep up in conversations with businessmen and educated women. He enjoyed wit and was disappointed whenever discussions in educated circles turned out dull or ignorant, barely better than those he

suffered through at the tavern, where he sometimes played cards with drunken, newly arrived European immigrants.

While Miss Barton talked passionately about Boston's literary and artistic scenes, Rolland made an extraordinary effort to not stare at Delphine, despite his interest in what was being said. Their gazes occasionally crossed. Was she struggling to keep her eyes off him, too?

"What do you think of Poe?" Rolland asked Miss Barton. Something about her made him suspect she might enjoy a good blood-curdling tale.

"I think he's a delight," she replied, faking an innocent smile.

"You mean a delightful menace." Ophelia shuddered.

"I once read him before sleeping, and I will never make that dreadful mistake again." Delphine's voice was full of self-derision, making the group laugh.

"Nevermore?" Rolland retorted with a cheeky grin. He got an amused smile out of her, and once again, she held his gaze. Direct and intense.

Right there and then, he wanted to know more about this girl. He wanted to know everything.

"There you are, my dear," a male voice announced, making Delphine's smile twitch. It was a subtle movement, but Rolland caught it. A lanky young man wedged himself between Delphine and Ophelia. He acted good-natured and confident, but his body language suggested something unpleasant was lurking underneath the sugar-coated exterior.

Rolland straightened his posture and took a sip of sherry. The man was already scrutinizing him.

"Delphine, will you introduce me to your friends?" the man said, barely hiding a hint of irritation.

Delphine forced a pleasant smile and flatly declared, "Everyone, this is Mr. Leopold Christie."

When she didn't continue, he prompted her, "And...?"

"And Mr. Christie is the heir to his family business."

Once again, she added nothing else. Rolland guessed she was doing this on purpose, out of displeasure or to get a rise out of him. Likely both in this case, judging from Mr. Christie's impatient reaction.

"And fortune," Christie added for her. "And Ms. Deschamps forgot to mention the best part. Or perhaps she's already shared the good news that she is betrothed to me."

"Our fathers thought we would be a judicious match," Delphine justified coolly, at the limit of impertinence.

A slight malaise traveled through the group. As a gracious hostess, Ophelia chimed in, "We are honored to have you here tonight, Mr. Christie. I am Ophelia and this is my brother, Charles. Welcome to our home."

Christie took Ophelia's hand and kissed it with a flourish. "It's my most sincere and honored pleasure to make your acquaintance, Miss Ferrier." He turned to Charles and gave him a perfunctory nod. "Mr. Ferrier."

Christie's gaze snapped back to Rolland. "And you are?"

Rolland knew what would happen next. It was tedious and always the same, him being identified as "romantic rival number one." A threat. To the fiancés he encountered in the presence of their beloved, he always appeared a threat.

"This is my good friend, Rolland Carmichael," Charles said. He too was used to this aggressive charade toward Rolland, and he always put himself in his friend's corner.

"Ah. And what do you do, Mr. Carmichael?" Christie

puffed himself up, confident his opponent couldn't beat him in that department.

It doesn't matter what I do, you will discount me regardless of my answer. 'What do you do?' was always the inevitable second question, and Rolland never tried to embellish the answer. There was no point in it. He didn't care to impress strangers. His small circle of friends knew who he was and accepted him for it, and that was all that mattered.

But tonight, in front of Delphine, who looked mortified of Mr. Christie's presence and ready to go hide in the butler's pantry, Rolland wished he had something impressive and grand to retort, to put the insufferable man in his place. And impress Delphine. Which was a bad thing. He'd never wanted to wish he could impress a woman, especially one with romantic ties, and he certainly didn't want to start now. This could only lead down a dangerous path.

"Mr. Carmichael is a businessman in several trades," Ophelia said on Rolland's behalf. "A valuable contact within the business community. He is a bridge between the rich and the poor. Which I find admirable." Her voice dripped with pride as she listed Rolland's more proper business activities.

Rolland worked hard to support his artisan brother and find homes for his products, but the brothers were also community-minded and helped those less fortunate than them whenever they could. But even with hard work and frugal living, it was often a challenge to make ends meet when Rory's medical issues flared up. The cost of medical care and medication took a serious toll on their finances. This was where Rolland's more lucrative extracurricular activities

of card sharking and bedsheet warming made a substantial difference.

“Hmm,” was all Christie replied to Ophelia’s glowing portrait of Rolland. A little smirk of disdain appeared on his lips, dismissing his imagined rival as a man worth anything.

His predictable reaction didn’t faze Rolland at all. If anything, he couldn’t help responding with a slight smirk of his own, which destabilized Christie, and momentarily wiped the arrogance off his punchable face.

Christie grabbed Delphine by the arm, making her wince. Rolland stiffened and his right hand balled into a fist, ready to intervene. His temper could be short at times, and few things got under his skin faster than a brute being rough with a lady.

Rolland felt Charles’s hand on his upper back, telling him not to engage. In his youth, Rolland often had to defend himself, and his fighting style could be described as scrappy. While he rarely itched for a fight nowadays, the desire to react in the face of injustice could easily resurface.

“It’s late, my dear. I will escort you home.” Christie’s tone left no room for Delphine to argue. Before she could reply anything, he was already pulling her away.

Rolland watched them leave and caught the desperate glance Delphine shot him over her shoulder.

That glance would forever be seared into his memory, despite him not wanting to welcome the effect this young woman had on him.

He cursed in his head.



Rolland left the *soirée* earlier than he usually would have with a bag of leftovers. The odd resentment he felt after meeting the sweet Delphine and her unsavory fiancé, coupled with Mrs. McDowell's unrelenting stare, had worn him out, and he needed fresh air.

Despite lazy flurries, the late March night was mild enough that he politely declined Charles's offer of a ride home in his family's carriage in favor of walking. It was only a twenty-minute walk from the Ferrier mansion to Rolland's modest home.

The first half of the route was on well-maintained cobblestone streets, but once the rich part of town was behind him, the roads became rougher and less maintained, in the image of the common dwellings lining them and their inhabitants.

Rolland didn't mind the change of scenery. He was as appreciative of the beautiful architecture of the rich neighborhoods as he was of the atmosphere of hard work and bootstrapping ingenuity that permeated the poorer parts where he lived.

His world.

Along the familiar walk, the snow-muffled sounds of the city took a back seat as Rolland tried to figure out what had happened to him earlier that evening and why the fresh memory of Delphine was already haunting him.

Why her?

Why now?

What was it about her that made him feel so confused? What made him wish she'd been the one to proposition him instead of the awful Mrs. McDowell?

A wave of desire washed over him. How he would love to...

No. He couldn't entertain such a thought. She was engaged. And even if she hadn't been, he had nothing to offer her.

He would have to forget her, the sooner the better. And he hoped that she and her intolerable fiancé would not become regulars at the Ferriers. He hoped their paths would never cross again.

As he neared his home, it surprised him to see a faint light glowing from one window. What was Rory doing up at this hour of the night? His brother was an early riser and usually in bed by now.

Entering the house quietly in case Rory was asleep, Rolland took off his boots and went to investigate the source of the flickering light. It was coming from Rory's workshop in the back. His brother was not the type to leave a burning candle unattended. He was responsible to a fault about every aspect of his life and well aware of the flammability of the wooden structure of their home. A house fire was the last thing they needed.

Approaching the doorway of the workshop, Rolland spotted a pair of legs on the ground. His heart skipped a beat, and he rushed inside the room.

His brother lay unconscious on the floor next to his stool and workbench.

Rolland checked for a pulse. It was weak, but thank God, there was one.

"Rory?" He touched his brother's face, caressed his cheek, and checked for bumps on his head. "Rory?"

Rory's eyes fluttered open. "Is it morning?" he mumbled, confusingly taking in his surroundings.

"You must have fainted while working."

“I must have.”

“You were working late?” There was a hint of accusation in Rolland’s tone. He couldn’t help being protective of his brother and couldn’t stand it when Rory unnecessarily pushed himself to exertion, something he would do way too frequently if it were entirely up to him. Rory felt guilty to impose such an important financial stress on them, and if he had a say, he would work himself to death every day to make up for it. Fortunately, Rolland was usually around to force him to pace himself.

“Help me up,” Rory said.

Rolland gave him a hand, and Rory teetered to a standing position. He struggled to remain upright but pretended like everything was fine.

“Let’s get you to bed,” Rolland said.

Rory didn’t argue, and they trudged up the stairs to a tiny room with a tiny bed. It was barely bigger than a closet, but both brothers had their own closet-sized bedroom, which they considered a luxury.

“We lost the Mulbrays,” Rory blurted out. “Fernand came by after you left. The shop was closed this morning when the workers showed up. It won’t reopen.”

The Mulbray brewery was a family business that had brought a sizable amount of carpentry work to the Carmichael brothers. Losing their business was a major hit for them, as it would also be for the many other families who depended on the brewery for their survival.

Rolland let out a groan. Would this awful evening end already? He didn’t think he could take any more trials or bad news. “Did you tell him we’d find a way to help?”

“I did.”

“Good. I will call on him tomorrow and see what the needs are.”

Rolland was already thinking of the new Beaulieu bakery, how they seemed open to bartering. Perhaps he could help with bread-making in exchange for a few loaves for the families in need. That wouldn't be much, but that'd be a start and help keep their fellow workers from starving while they got back on their feet.

“Good night,” Rolland mumbled to the room, his brother already asleep.

He went to get the candle that was still burning on the workbench and headed back upstairs to his room with it, his mind revving. If only Mrs. McDowell wasn't such a...

Ugh.

He shouldn't even entertain the idea. In what world would he be able to take the handsome sum of money she was offering him without retching? What could he possibly do to pleasure her without his body betraying him, broadcasting loudly and clearly that he would rather be cleaning up a gallows platform than touching her?

That wouldn't go well, now, would it?

Rolland let out a long sigh of frustration. Why couldn't this new offer have come from someone else?

Rory barked a nasty string of coughs, reminding Rolland that his brother's health was steadily getting worse.

And they had lost the Mulbray account.

They could really use Mrs. McDowell's money.

Rolland reached for the candle, and his eye caught a mouse silently scurrying across the hall. He blew on the flame and the room went dark. The rodent could no longer be seen.

What if he didn't see her? Didn't have to look at her? Pretend she was someone else? Like Delphine?

Delphine...

Could he think of Delphine and distract himself enough if he and Mrs. McDowell were in pitch-black darkness?

The woman would have to remain quiet, too. That'd be ideal but unlikely that she'd accept these kinds of conditions.

Another parade of coughs from the other room made his blood pressure rise a little more.

What if he could convince her to wear a bag over her head as some kind of naughty game?

A blindfold?

Perhaps *he* could wear a blindfold.

And stuff his ears with something to not hear a peep from her poison-laden tongue.

As Rolland drifted into an exhausted sleep, he took the resolve to make things work. He'd put his pride aside and crawl back to the rich hag on his knees if he had to.

Pride was yet another thing he couldn't afford.