

Tell Me All Your Lies SAMPLE

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A condition of the human experience is to unwaveringly crave to be remembered.

How we achieve that is perhaps the weightiest choice we must make. We each must ask ourselves: when we become nothing but a story, will we be a hero or a villain? And, in the scheme of things, does the distinction even matter, even exist?

We all crave to be remembered...and for some of us, that leads to extraordinary means to achieve the end.

Part I

“There is no exquisite beauty without some strangeness in the proportion.”

~Edgar Allan Poe

Chapter One

I wish I'd been in the room to see my mother bash in his brains. I wish I didn't have to imagine how his skull sounded when it cracked under the pressure or how the coagulating blood contrasted with the whites of his eyes.

Unlike most children, you see, my first memories are not of ice cream or a childhood book or petting a stray cat in the street—although she loved to pretend they were.

My first memories are of the blackish red splatters marring my mother's sunshine yellow dress, her bright red lips seeming to match perfectly. My memories are of the odd, metallic smell that filled the apartment only to be stripped away by the stinging chemicals. My first memories in that Parisian apartment are about how sometimes a person enters through the front door and leaves in pieces.

These are my memories because when I was three, my mother slaughtered the first man as I sat outside the room drawing. But all I saw, all I knew, was the aftermath. The red.

Red splatters, red dots, red all over her just like the crayon in the box she'd given me.

Even all these years later, I sometimes like to conjure up the actual act. I imagine the stunned look on his pathetic face as my delicate mother, pixie-like in her demeanor, turned his brains into mincemeat. I imagine her silky white hands gripping the wrench or the vase or whatever it was she used that day—I never asked her—and smashed his head once, twice, three times for good measure. I'm certain there was no hesitation, just pop-pop-pop, dead. Done. She was never one to wait around once she'd made up her mind. She also wasn't one to be reckless, however. Three violent hits, an examination to ensure his death, and that would be it. She would take inventory of the iron smell in the air, the red splatters on the bedspread, on her cheek, on her dress. And then, before she got to cleaning, she would have studied his face like I'd seen her do when I was older. All men are fools, in some sense of the word, she would say to herself before retrieving the bleach.

Of course, it's all speculation. I did not dare ask my mother too many details about that first one. She was closed off about him, perhaps because her incompetency back then embarrassed her. Killing then wasn't the sport it later became, the masterful showcase of her expertise and wisdom.

Thus, speculation and my limited recollections of the day aren't of how the skin flapped around the flesh wound or how the blood caked his eye sockets. Back then, I was different. Removed. Innocent perhaps.

My mother, after all, was a good woman. She did not let her young son witness such a grizzly act firsthand. She, like any good mother would, gave me crayons and placed me in the front room with instructions to leave her and the man alone in her bedroom. And somewhere between the moment she seduced him and the moment she murdered him, I colored a picture of the sun, the moon, and the woman I adored.

My mother killed her first victim when I was three—at least that's the story we've decided on. For aren't our memories, our family stories always a bit jaded by the truths we want to shine through? Time and circumstance distort reality sometimes. The blacks become reds and the screams become silences.

When I finally ensnare my first, however, it won't be up for debate. You'll know it was me because I'll leave a trail so dark and winding, you'll have no choice but to follow every perilous step. I'll splay the truths out for you as I splay open one after bloody one. You'll know how the carnage unfolded, how the skin felt slicing underneath my knife. You'll know how the blood splatter tasted on my lip when it splashed from her open skull and how the brain matter reminded me of that casserole Denny's wife made one time.

You won't have to fill in the blanks or paint the scenes because you'll bear witness to the diced skin, the pouring blood, and the mutilated body parts.

You just won't begin to understand why.

To uncover that, you'll have to know my story. The entire, bloody fucking mess of it all. But I'll warn you—it isn't for the weak who walk the streets of our society now. It's for men of a bolder time, of a stronger time. It's for men who aren't afraid to come face to face with a little darkness.

We're all made of stories, past and present. But the future relies on our choices. And my choice? Blood. Dizzying, bedazzling blood in all its sickening glory. In some ways, you might think I didn't have a choice at all after everything that happened. Sometimes, I tell myself that's the case. However, I know within my blackened soul we always have a choice. And this, well, this is mine. I own that, relish in it even.

Every family is a woven fabric of tales. They are threaded together by anecdotes of loss, of hardship, of triumph and dreams. The family crest adorns the quilt that they are all a patchwork piece of. Each generation hangs their hat on the hook above the quilt. They try to make it better, to mend the tattered edges and holes left by the adversities of those who went before them. Every family wants better for their offspring. Every family longs for a more regal story to tell.

My family is no different in this way. It consists of stories of heartbreak, of loss, of triumph, and of success. However, other elements also haunt our tale that most try to abate in their own—lies, deceit, treachery, and murder. It's so bad, I'm not even sure anymore if our tale is the story of us at all. Still, it's what we've got. Even if our story is a lie, it's mine to hold and ponder. It's mine to make right. And I'll do whatever I have to in order to set things right for myself, for us.

You see, my mother killed a man when I was three, if the story is to be believed. And from there, a whirlwind of romance, danger, and fear transposed itself on my flesh and etched out the sidewalk I would travel on.

And now I live in the shadow of that choice, of that story. It's my job to set it right. But the way things are going now, maybe not. Maybe, when the choice presents itself, it's mine to make wrong, to seal us into a web of infamy that's the thing of notorious legends.

A better generation, a better life, isn't always cleaner.

And even the devil has a backstory.

~Elliott Clairmont's Journal

Chapter Two

Paris, France

1950s

Snow White.

These were his first garbled words in their new Parisian home when he was a chubby-cheeked baby. Not “Mama,” and certainly not “Dada,” for there was no one to fit the secondary role. Not “no” or some other quirky word some children sputter.

Snow White—these were the first words he uttered as he looked up at his mother’s blue eyes, which promptly filled with tears. The name stuck, and more often than not when the boy was young, he called her Snow White. It was partially Lucy Clairmont’s fault because she read him the fairy tale, her favorite, every night before bed, even before he could speak. It was one of the few possessions she’d shoved in that black carry-on bag when they’d boarded the plane and made their great escape to the life she’d always wanted.

It didn’t help things that her curly, thick black hair looked like the woman in the picture book, which Elliott came to adore. It didn’t help, either, that the scarlet red streaks that sometimes tinged her face matched the bright red lips of the fairy tale vixen, either. And so, the name stuck through his first years of life, the name a garbled mess from the remnants of pastries or food stuck in his mouth when he spewed the words.

He said them often. He loved his mother, followed her everywhere around the little flat in the heart of Paris. His bare feet would plod on the splintery floor, chasing her about as she tried to renovate the pathetically boring housing and bring life to it, even as she snatched life out of it as well.

Of course, Elliott Clairmont did not remember calling his mother Snow White or the barren landscape that was their home when they moved in. He didn’t recall pointing at paintings she hung up and smiling, as she told him later. All of those first years in Paris were simply stories

passed down by a black-haired woman who looked like Snow White and who filled his life with love. Still, these were tales all the same, much like the words about the forest beauty who escaped into the trees after the Huntsman had let her live and the witch who died in the iron shoes. His mother didn't believe in the glossy fairy tales, after all. Life was much too dark for that.

His first memory in the Parisian flat? Red. Splatters of blackish red on the front of her apron, down the sleeves of her gorgeous, yellow dress. She'd wiped her forehead, and a smear of the color had melted into her perfectly pale skin as she closed up the suitcase. Elliot did not, of course, understand what the red was or where it had come from. He'd been awake when the shifty, black-haired man had been ushered inside. She'd taken him to the bedroom after giving Elliott some crayons and paper on the living room floor. He'd sung to himself as he colored a picture of the sun, green like the grass because that felt magical.

And then, a while later, she'd come out of the bedroom. The man had not. Snow White had put Elliott to rest on the couch in the living room, singing him to sleep. When he awakened a while later, his mother was streaked in red, standing over him with a couple suitcases in her delicate hands.

Many years later, he would realize what was in those suitcases that she'd casually dumped on the bank of the river in the middle of the night, Elliott talking animatedly about birds and the green sun as they walked, pulling the suitcases behind her on their enchanting nighttime adventure. He chattered on about fairies, wondering if they'd see any. His mother had been the pillar of calm, and so he'd thought nothing of the jaunt. He would realize later the other nighttime adventures involving dumped suitcases were filled with the same as the first, just a slightly different variety.

It was amazing she hadn't been caught, he would come to apprise. That first one, she would later tell him, she'd been inexperienced in things like poison, and she didn't have Frederick in her life, yet, to help

her. Like many flats in the area of the time, they had no bathroom, sharing one with the entire floor. It couldn't have been easy to clean-up, that first one. In fact, it seemed impossible. A woman so tiny, so delicate, dismembering a body? Awe-inspiring, Elliott would later label the event. His mother was much too humble, though, to adhere to such a title. She'd done what she had to, she would say. And her small frame and womanly curves were assets; for who would expect her to have killed? She'd gotten wiser, of course, later on. She'd found other methods, especially when he was older and could help.

But back then, he was still the naïve boy who believed his mother was Snow White and that the seven dwarves would show up any time to help them. He still believed in magic then, especially in the magic of his mother.

Therefore, after three nights of disposing of suitcases, his mother took him to look at art. Art in the big place, as he liked to call it. Walking around all of the treasures and sights, he forgot about the man and the red, the metallic odor covered by chemicals that smelled like the swimming pool they went to once. He forgot about the night walks and the suitcases. He forgot about everything except the woman who loved him, who admired his green sun drawing, and who saw beauty in the brush strokes, in the pencil drawings, almost as much as he did.

They were, he knew then, the perfect pair. They would always be the perfect pair.

Chapter Three

Once, after a particularly bloody ordeal—I'd heard the man whimper and plead for his life, to which my mother responded with an eerie cackle and another crack on the skull—I remember staring at a splotch of gummy red on her cheek, on her lip. She'd swiped at it, smearing it about on her face. I was mesmerized by how beautiful it complimented her skin.

"What does it taste like?" I'd asked her, my eyes transfixed by the sight of the drop on her lip, wanting her tongue to flick out and reach for it.

She'd paused and turned to me.

"What?" she'd asked, sweat already dripping down her brow from the labor as she wheeled out a suitcase from the bedroom. It was a river walk kind of night.

"The red." I gestured toward her face and watched her slink over to a mirror she kept nearby. She gasped, swiping violently at the marks on her. She did not respond, changing the subject to artwork and the river and how beautiful it would be tonight.

But all I could think about was how beautiful the red looked. I wondered what it tasted like. I imagined the strawberry jam my mother sometimes ordered on her croissant, the sweet, savory taste dancing on my tongue as I closed my eyes. I thought that was what the red tasted like.

When I killed the second one, I remember flicking out my tongue to see if there was a speck of red to taste. It didn't taste like the strawberry jam of my childhood, but it was still satisfying, beautiful.

Delicious. Killing has become delicious. I understand my mother so much better now.

~Elliott Clairmont's Journal

Chapter Four

Life went on in the Paris flat after his mother killed her first man, as life always did. Housing developments cropped up, but Lucy Clairmont thought it was too risky to leave the flat they'd grown to love together. Sometimes it was better to stay still, to go unnoticed, she told him. And so, they did just that.

Men and some women still filtered through the doorway at night, paying for a look into the great beyond, as his mother liked to describe it. Some of them left through the door they came in. Some did not. Elliott did not understand the difference then but assumed his mother was right and the cards had something to do with it.

Lucy Clairmont kept her work somewhat secretive, and those hustling and bustling on the Paris streets obliged. Dark magic was something to behold and whisper about with morbid curiosity to most; it was not something to actually pay for and take stock in, unless you were wealthy and hosting a tarot reading ironically to flash off your ability to do so. Most who were serious about the artform kept it tucked away, a secret in their family story. Lucy walked the middle line, as she often did. Word of mouth kept her in business, but a lack of a sign, a business, a true establishment gave her the freedom to pursue all of her artistic desires and passions. It made it easier for them to slip under the radar, which was just how Lucy liked it. She'd come from America, after all, so most of the residents on the street assumed she'd come from strange money and didn't ask questions. That's how they preferred it, too.

It was a happy childhood, the one Elliott lived. It was simple and quiet. At a time when most families dumped their children in front of televisions or radios, which were all the rage, Lucy Clairmont called them the devil's work and refused to sully their flat with such a device. Instead, she encouraged him to look out the one tiny window into the sometimes-dismal street. She assured him that if he were to look with an artist's eye, he would find much more beauty in the real world than on some box. He learned to do just that.

It was lonely sometimes, just the two of them, especially in the evenings when she was working. Infrequently, he played with the boy at the end of the corridor, a child who was quiet and grumpy but did just fine for things like tag and marbles. Lucy Clairmont even talked to Michael's mom sometimes at the market when they went for their daily trip.

Most days, they walked around the city, his mother noting various structures and pointing out the infallible beauty that was Paris, something he would never get in the states, she assured him. She seemed to be constantly convincing them both that Paris was where they belonged. As the years passed on, they both started to firmly, unabashedly believe it.

The weeks, the years, passed in a flurry of watercolor paintings, childhood fantasies, and laughter—for the most part. There were, of course, skinned knees, questions of where his father was, and wishes for a sibling he could whack over the head once in a while. But for the most part, he was content with his mother, and she with him. They'd grown quite fond of their Paris flat, which he realized later was quite dilapidated but still filled with a hominess he would later long for in life.

By the time he was nine, in fact, the flat looked almost unrecognizable.

For one, there was art absolutely everywhere. Cheap, gilded framed portraits of artists unknown. One piece his mother assured him had been a steal and worth the splurge. A few pieces he thought she may have actually stolen, and a few that had been donated in lieu of payment by her customers—some who left, and some who did not. And, of course, some of the artwork was actually his, watercolors and charcoal drawings she swore were museum worthy. He would turn red seeing his own inconsistent work hanging beside some truly great, worthy pieces, but his mother insisted they were in the exactly right spot. It made his heart secretly swell with pride.

The other thing that had changed in the flat by the time Elliott was nine was he understood more about their circumstances and what she did. The world of tarot had opened his eyes to her profession, and he realized why so many came to see his mother for advice. She had a gift, a way with the cards that spoke to their inner needs. It was more than that, though. Somehow, she saw deep inside, could lure out their deepest fears and intertwine them with their deepest desires. She could make them see these things for themselves, which was the true art of tarot, she told him.

She made sense of a senseless world in those cards. People would pay any amount of money for that comfort, no matter how unsteady, in a chaotic life.

At nine, he also realized money was something they needed. Traditional work was not for her, she'd said. She'd lived that life in America. Lucy Clairmont wanted freedom to follow her whims and explore, which was something she hadn't had before. Besides, she'd assured him they had money from their old life, a life she didn't like to talk about that often. They had money in the bank. All of the tarot money was extra—as was the other money she made.

Usually, the customers left the way they came in, especially the regulars or those she knew well. They would come, and she would do her work, summoning the future from the cards in her hands. Other times, when men came, it was on the pretense of seeing their future—but in actuality, all they wanted to see was the gorgeous, black-haired beauty who made them forget their present. She would often oblige them for she told him the money was too easy to make to pass up.

Sometimes, though, it was different. Sometimes, the customer did not leave, like that man when he was three who had left a streak of red on his mother's dress. At nine, he hadn't sorted out the pattern yet or the why. He didn't ask questions, either. He didn't feel the need to because his mother was not the villain; that he knew for certain. It was all he needed to know.

Eventually, though, curiosity got the better of him. Sipping their coffees at a café in the afternoon, he asked her whom she decided to kill and whom to let live. She told him she let the cards speak to that. He didn't understand that until one day, he did.

Chapter Five

“Mama, when is your Prince Charming coming?” he asked once when she’d been particularly busy with her bedroom work. He’d been experimenting at the small table in the living room with his watercolors, mastering a picture of the river landscape from memory. He’d even drawn the corner of a suitcase bobbing in the edge of the painting—although their suitcases did not bob. Rocks helped with that.

“Why, I don’t need one, Dear,” she’d replied. “There’s no poisoned apple in my throat, is there?” Her flushed cheeks and ruby red lips made her pale skin look even whiter. She’d brushed her hair back out of her face and walked behind him to eye the picture as the man left from the bedroom and walked out the front door. This one, a blond, was leaving. He wondered if it was because his mother liked blonds.

“Is Frederick your Prince Charming?” he asked then. His mother shook her head, smiling gently. Frederick was the garbage collector who sometimes stopped to help Elliott’s mother when the men were still in the bedroom late, late at night. He would help her carry out the men, sometimes in garbage bags, sometimes in rolled up rugs. Other times, they used all sorts of random containers he had available. Once, it had been a huge cardboard box.

She’d met Frederick one day while walking the Seine River alone for a smoke. Elliott wished he’d been there to see how it happened. He didn’t like being left out of anything in her life. Frederick was her savior, she would often say, which was what made Elliott wonder.

“No,” she replied now. “He’s a business partner. But remember, we do not talk about Frederick.”

His attention back to the conversation, Elliott shrugged, for this answer made sense. His mother was beautiful and fair, and he’d asked their mirror many times who the fairest was. Her image always came to mind. Still, sometimes, late at night, when his mother thought he was asleep, she looked saddened. She would stare into the looking glass hanging in

the bedroom and examine her face, her hair. Sometimes, she would talk to herself. And sometimes, he noticed tears slid down her face.

He sighed now, walking away and toward the window.

“What is it, Elliott?” she asked, reaching out for his arm.

He sighed, crossing the tiny living space to the even tinier window that looked out onto the busy street.

“I just worry that the prince won’t come for you. I want you to be happy.” He thought of all the men who had been through the flat. His mother always smiled pretty for them, but the happiness never stuck. He wanted her to have the happily-ever-after like Snow White did.

“I have my prince already,” she said, leaning down to kiss his cheek. Looking up at his beautiful mother, he knew then he would do anything he had to in order to protect her.

And he did. By the next year, at age ten, he had learned some of the tools of the family business. She’d finally obliged and taught him about the cards—just the basics, though. Tarot was an art that took careful practice, she’d told him. She would not have him go too fast and bring dishonor to the art. He was an eager student, however. He loved the feel of the deck in his hands, loved the power that coursed through his blood at the mere possibility he had the answers for others. Most of all, he adored the pride in his mother when he recalled the meanings of cards or, as she claimed, he truly comprehended the practice. It was addicting, and he instantly understood why she loved it, even as she cautioned him of the responsibility that came with holding the cards.

“There’s so much darkness in the world,” she would say to him as she shuffled the deck, her eyes misty with some sort of magical yet palpable trace of wisdom. “But at least if you can prepare others for the darkness, can help them navigate it, then maybe at least you’re doing something worthwhile in this world. And sometimes, when the cards call for it, you can even obliterate a bit of darkness in favor of light.”

She, of course, didn’t just teach him the cards or how to dispose of a suitcase—lessons he was becoming more adept at as time went on. She

wanted him to be cultured and ready to take his own place in the world, so she taught him everything else, too. By the age of ten, their days were filled with math lessons and literature, writing and history. She taught him about the states, too, but mostly, she talked of Paris. They would go to the Louvre sometimes and browse the different exhibits, reading and learning and taking in all of the information. The world was your classroom, she always said to him. There was no need for stiff desks or teachers' rulers when the city had all you needed. When life had all you needed.

The children in their flat all went to the same school, but Lucy Clairmont had said school was for the sheep. She didn't want any son of hers to be a follower, so she kept him back. He liked that, of course. He couldn't imagine being away from her for a full school day, even if the kids did look at him weird for it. Besides, he couldn't imagine any teacher at school could possibly know more than his mother, who was the smartest person he ever knew.

Sometimes, as they walked by the river after lunch at the café on the corner, she would talk of his grandparents. Those became his favorite days because he got to piece together a photo of people he'd never seen or knew. She had no pictures of them—only details she divulged to him like breadcrumbs on a trail, never giving away too much at once. He greedily sucked in every single crumb, collecting it and gluing it on the canvas with the others, trying to make a picture of the people he didn't know but longed to. She usually talked fondly of her mother's apple pie, of her father coming home from the office. Sometimes, the stories were filled with melancholy—like of her father drinking too much, of the beatings, of her brother's mischief. He would listen, knowing his mother was talking to him then but not. In many ways, she would look misty-eyed, distant, as if she had been transported to a different time. He never wanted to break the spell, soaking in the information in silence and trying to picture his mother as anyone but his mother.

It was so strange to have a whole other life he did not know, an existence he did not get to experience. For a while, he wondered if she'd imagined that life elsewhere with the two people she swore would've loved him. Sometimes, on dark days, he wondered if she'd stuffed them into suitcases. But when she talked of how they loved her mother's apple pies with peach ice cream and how the abandoned barn at the edge of their property was her favorite sanctuary as a girl, he could see she was telling the truth. They existed somewhere out there. That would be good enough for him. It would have to be.

"If you can find one person who loves you in the world, you have a gift," she would tell him. And then, she would wrap her arms around her son, squeeze him tight. He would bask in that hug as she told him she loved him.

He was lucky. He was truly lucky.

Chapter Six

They were sitting at a table at La Closerie des Lilas one Saturday afternoon, the aroma of their tea wafting about with the smell of the fresh paper he was drawing on. On weekend afternoons, his mother always took time to stretch her legs and languidly walk through his favorite streets with him. Often, she would rent a table for them at the café, known for artists, for the afternoon hours. He would sit and work on his charcoal skills, the other artists at neighboring tables sometimes stopping to admire his work or offer some helpful hints. She would lounge and flip through her fashion magazine she treated herself to now and then, glancing at pretty dresses and peering over her cup to see his progress.

The atmosphere was what moved him, and he knew he was fortunate to have a mother to see that. It was worth the expenditure, she would say, to watch him so passionately drawing. The warm sun on this particular day fluttered over his arms, making his hands move with a superfluous nature that seemed palpable on the paper.

When he was done sketching the bird, he looked up at his mother, whose eyes were hidden behind large sunglasses. She sat with one of her legs crossed over her thigh, a bonnet wrapping her dark black hair and shielding her both from the sun and watchful eyes.

She was beautiful there in the café, a rosy gem in the middle of so much chaos. Even though she was certainly fashionable for the time and place she lived in, there was something exotic about her. Perhaps it was the way she incorporated fabrics and textures in her outfits, or simply the shape of her features. Regardless, she was a stunner, he knew. Everyone stopped to stare at them when they walked through. He wondered if in another life, she'd dreamed of being someone who was in the spotlight. It seemed a shame, sometimes, that their lives involved so much secrecy. Still, sitting there with her, now, he was grateful for his life. The bustling people on the streets nearby, the heartbeat of the city—it was all so whimsical, magical. He couldn't imagine living anywhere else.

But when he thought of anywhere else, he always wondered about the before. The ideas would creep in like a sinister stalker, waiting to dive in when the moment was too perfect. He would fight for himself to stay in the present, but his mind always meandered back to the question marks in his past. He pondered over those years clouded, shrouded in mystery of blackness and secrecy she would never divulge.

“Mother?” he asked, and she tilted her sunglasses to look at him. A man sat with an easel at the table next to them, painting an image of the busy street. Elliott perused his painting for a moment, admiring his handle of perspective. Then, he took a breath and turned back to his mother, afraid to taint the moment but his cycling mind unable to put it to rest.

Sometimes, she angered when he brought up the past. Sometimes, she seemed at peace with it and willing to disclose her darkest secrets. He wished he had a deck of cards now to figure out which mood it would be. Instead, he blindly trudged forward, the words spewing out before he could stop them.

“Why Paris?” he asked. It was a simple question, yet one he had not managed to ask in his twelve years of life. There were unspoken rules between them, which he knew by heart.

You did not bash art without first finding something to appreciate in it.

You did not talk about the men who did not leave the apartment, or even those who did.

You did not ask what was in the suitcase or where a streak of red came from.

You always used bleach to clean up the red, without fail.

You did not mention Frederick, and you always held the door for him.

You agreed with Mother when she said they had a lot of rats and that’s why she needed so much of the poison.

You did not talk about the before unless she brought it up.

Still, maybe it was the way the sunshine gleaned off the tea cup's surface, or maybe it was just the smell of spring in the air. Whatever it was, he felt the need to violate the rule today and pry into the life that was both his and was not.

She sighed, pulling the sunglasses off her face completely, revealing her gorgeous blue eyes. They were the color of topaz tinged with seaweed, a greenish blue that any artist would die to imitate but would never get quite right. He studied the way her almond-shaped eyes framed her perfect cheekbones in a true, auspicious glare of beauty. She bit her plump lip, twirling the sunglasses. She looked to her left, studying the bustling street. He thought he was losing her, was losing his chance at understanding.

And then she turned back, smiling at him. His heart stopped racing so insanely fast.

She shrugged. "I suppose I just wanted to live somewhere magical, where it felt like every day was special. I'd read about Paris as a child, and it's just somewhere that always seemed so sophisticated. Proper and full but also open to flights of fancy, of imagination. Mother always said it was a foolish city filled with lovesick weirdos who thought croissants were the pinnacle of life. Maybe that made me more curious. And when I decided to move here, well, I knew what kind of work I wanted to do. It helps that so many people come to Paris for love, with romance on the mind. Love makes you vulnerable, you see. So perhaps she at least got the lovesick part right."

He took in her words, let them dance in his head as he set down his charcoal.

"But you love me," he observed, more thinking out loud than purposefully inquiring and seeking an answer.

“Not that kind of love,” she answered quickly, leaning in. “That kind of love is different. Our love is unconditional. I’m talking about the kind of love that sets a woman’s eyes on fire and makes a man blind to reality. The kind of love that makes people desperate for the knowledge they can never quite have.”

“Do you love the men you take to the bedroom?” he asked her, trying to piece together the mystic secrets of it all.

“Of course not. They’re our source of income.” She pushed her sunglasses back on and returned to her magazine, a soft smile on her face. He knew that now. When he was young, he didn’t understand why she took them back to her room and shut the door. Now, he knew that there was money to be made in tarot readings—but the true cash influx came from selling other goods. It didn’t bother him. When his mother took them back to her room, he knew it was his time to work on his painting. His mother would finish the job. Sometimes, they would leave. Sometimes, there was other work to be done, Frederick kind of work. Ever since his birthday last month, she’d been letting him help with the final parts of the job, the hiding of the bodies. She taught him the things she’d learned over time. He longed to understand where she learned her skills but didn’t dare ask. He didn’t want to ruin the magic of it all, the magic of the knowledge she shared.

He finished his drawing now, knowing he’d pushed the envelope enough for one day. His finger traced the lines he’d drawn, eyeing his work critically. His mother leaned over, studying the piece. She stared at it for a long while. He always appreciated that about her. She was never quick to give compliments, instead languishing in his work with a critical eye. Her eyes traced every line, every curve of his piece. She looked up at him over the paper, and he realized he’d been holding his breath.

“Marvelous, my dear one. You’re really getting better. Your lines are so adept, and this shading is impeccable. Look at this,” she said, gesturing to the painter beside them. He eyed it and smiled, actually getting up

from his table to come closer and admire the work. Elliott felt his cheeks warm.

“Very nicely done, Son. Keep working and you’ll have a true career,” he said.

His mother handed it back to him. She crossed her arms and leaned back in her chair, smiling.

“You’re good, Elliott. Really good. Keep studying, and your work will be in a museum somewhere.”

He beamed with pride. He could only hope he would be that good.

“Have you always loved art?” he asked her, realizing again how little he knew about her life before. Like Snow White, it was as if her life only started after she woke up in Paris. The previous part was a dull, cloudy dream.

“I did. We used to have art everywhere in our house when I lived with your grandparents. My father used to say art was the only place where beauty was still left in the world.”

“I like that,” he replied.

“Me too.”

He wanted to say he wished he could see the collection, the family legacy. That night, when she tucked him into his bed with his favorite red duvet, he drifted off thinking about what the house must look like and wondering if he’d ever get to see it.

Still, even if he didn’t, he knew what it was like to live in a house that was beautified by artwork. His mother made sure of that, and he knew he was lucky for it. He might not know all about his family, the distant one, but in a way, he supposed he was carrying out their memories anyway just by living with her.

Chapter Seven

I wish I had the courage to kill myself. I wish I really was my mother's son, confident in my choices of what to do in this life.

I wish I had never been born at all.

Even the devil has a backstory, but mine—is this really mine to carry out? What would the devil even do with a story like this?

Out of darkness, so many of us find light. But what if the darkness only leads us to find the darkness inside?

My hands are shaking. I need to feel something again. I need to awaken to a life that is mine, truly, unforgivably mine.

I remember that feel of the knife in my hand, the tearing of flesh, and the warmth of the blood.

I hunger to feel something again, good or bad.

Perhaps I am made of nothing but darkness after all.

~Elliott Clairmont's Journal

Chapter Eight

They were deciding whether to have fish or pork for dinner at the market one Tuesday afternoon when a familiar voice rang out.

“Lucy? Hello, how are you?”

Elliott and his mother turned to see Mrs. Frassier and her son, Michael, from their flat complex. Mrs. Frassier, with her vibrant red hair and oversized hat, always looked like a caricature to Elliott. Her scarf was always tied so tight, she looked like a bobbing head that talked way too loudly. Nevertheless, his mother smiled graciously as she approached.

“How are you, Darling?” she asked, kissing Lucy Clairmont on both cheeks. Lucy stood, tall and slender, and stared at Mrs. Frassier with an amicable grin. Small talk ensued for a moment, which his mother hated. She always said life was too busy to be bothered with trifling information such as the weather. Still, as the conversation went on, it became clear that Mrs. Frassier had sought her out on purpose.

“So, Darling, I have to confess. I came over here for a reason. I have an offer for you.”

“I’m listening,” Lucy said as she picked out a pear, clearly not fully listening. Elliott stared at Michael, who was studying his shoes bashfully. He wondered if perhaps they could talk about something but couldn’t decide on a topic that seemed fitting. Plus, he was curious what the offer was.

“My second cousin, Catherine Alexandria, you know, related to the fashion designer? I’ve talked about her before?”

Lucy Clairmont did not look up from the produce, simply nodding her head.

“She is having a dashing ball next month. Absolutely dashing, from what I’m hearing. Exclusive invite only. Chocolate fountains, top-notch entertainment.”

Mrs. Frassier paused, clearly expecting Lucy Clairmont to offer a jaw-dropping response or to start loudly clapping. His mother did not budge.

“I see,” she offered, still studying pears as if it were her life mission to select the perfect one.

“Well, the thing is, I mentioned how I knew someone who was into the dark arts, who could do some fortune telling. All the high class are into that sort of thing these days, you know, fun party tricks and all. And so, guess what? She’d love for you to come. She can’t pay you much, of course, but think of it—we could go together, get all decked out in fancy dresses. Would that be such a hoot?”

Elliott watched as his mother froze, mid pear perusing, and took a deep breath. His heart sank. He knew what the idiotic Mrs. Frassier did not—she had made several offensive assumptions in her monologue. Michael said something to him now about some stupid game or something, but Elliott’s attention was glued to his mother.

Lucy Clairmont took a deep breath, perhaps counting in her head to calm herself like she sometimes did aloud after dropping a glass or dealing with a stubborn body that wouldn’t disassemble properly. She looked Mrs. Frassier straight in the eye. And then, after a tense pause, she said with a too-wide grin, “I’m sorry, but no. I cannot. Thank you. Now come along, Elliott.”

Elliott had expected a more climactic conclusion to the delivery but obliged his mother in following her. He turned to see Mrs. Frassier, mouth agape, standing still by the produce, as if she’d just received the greatest blow one could receive. Michael stood dumbly, scraping his foot on the floor. Elliott smiled, thankful he came from better stock than that idiot.

His mother busied herself with conversation about dinner and recipes. Elliott wanted to know more, though.

“Mother, why did you tell her you couldn’t? Didn’t you want to go to the ball?” he asked as they headed toward the queue. Even if the woman had referred to his mother’s craft as dark arts and fortune telling, two things you did not call it, the ball sounded intriguing. He thought his mother could get out of the flat and do something spectacular.

Their basket was filled with items to make a salmon dinner, his mother chipper as if nothing had happened. She looked at him now and said nothing, but he knew what the silence meant. She unloaded their purchases in quietude and eventually engaged in small talk with the cashier—with a fake smile on her face. She even mentioned the weather, so Elliott knew she was desperate to distract.

When they were on their way home, walking down the street, she turned to him.

“I said no because money and ritzy parties, that’s not what our craft is about. It’s about so much more than that. It’s a way of speaking and listening to the universe. I will not be mocked in those hoity-toity circles, for any amount of money or promises of a fancy time.”

Money was not something they spoke of. Certainly, she worked for money, and she would mention time and again that the money in her craft helped them survive. He knew they had what she referred to as a safety net, but he did not know how much. It seemed that for his mother, money was a necessary means and not the goal of anything. It was an afterthought, like spitting out your toothpaste after brushing or cleaning up a few crumbs after dinner.

Tarot, now that was something sacred. Although she let him handle the deck now, he was under strict orders the cards were not a toy. Tarot was a sacred, universal language they could access due to their skills. She was always finetuning her reading abilities, working on clearing her mental palette, she would say. She wanted to be better, more accurate. She wanted to learn the cards and share them in a way that fulfilled her universal purpose. And she wanted to ascertain that she was receiving the correct message.

Still, thinking about it, he could not remember a time his mother did not know the ways of the cards. He pondered that for a while, all of it.

“How did you learn tarot? Who taught you?” he said as they sauntered down the street. The sun was shining, and it felt like the sky had

opened to the possibility. Nevertheless, it was a question that had never struck him.

She did not answer him immediately, walking in silence. He was used to quiet sometimes with his mother. She said the silent heart was the one that could truly listen, that the rest of the world was too busy filling space to hear the important sentiments. He did not stir or interrogate her as they walked on, street after street, until they reached the flat.

Inside, she unloaded the groceries and started a pan for dinner. He took a seat at the kitchen table, studying her, waiting for her to speak.

“Our housekeeper,” she finally murmured as she began preparing the salmon. She did not look at him, and he liked it that way. She worked while she talked, as if she were seeing the vision instead of filtering words for him. Genuine and raw, the story unfolded.

“When I was in my early teens, I discovered our housekeeper with her cards one day. She was spreading them out in her room. I had walked down to ask her if my sheets were washed yet when I saw her beside her candle, hunched over a spread. I walked closer. She tried to put them away, but I scampered over, studying them one by one. The artwork was exquisite. I loved the intricate, weird pictures. She’d apologized, perhaps afraid her job was going up in smoke if my parents found out. But I sat down and told her they were beautiful. ‘You see beauty?’ she asked, and I nodded. That was when it began. From there, I would sneak into her room every few nights and learn about the stories of the cards, the legends, the meaning. More than that, I learned about the universal heart-beat and consciousness, how to tap into it. I’d spent my life in a rat race of money and expectations, you see, so this was—freeing. Magical. Mystical. It brought purpose into my life.”

“Did Grandma and Grandpa know?” Elliott asked, and it was like she startled awake from a dream. Her smile tightened into a straight line.

“Not at first. They thought of anything like that as dark magic. They would not like it. So, we hid it. I learned and mastered. Mrs. Drearson said I had a real gift for it. I believed her. Eventually, though, my parents

found out. It was my fault. They'd come looking for me one evening to ask me a question about my horse-riding lesson when they found my room empty. They'd gone to Mrs. Drearson's room. We didn't have time to clean up the cards."

"What happened?" Elliott asked, leaning closer, entranced by the story. He was so baffled by the fact someone wouldn't approve of the cards. How couldn't they? It was such a beautiful gift.

"They fired her. I still feel bad about that to this day. But before she left, she slipped me the pack of cards. She told me to listen to the voices whispering in my heart, that they would guide me to my purpose. And I did. When I finally broke free of that golden prison, I found new teachers along the way. It was like my path always brought me back to the gift. Wherever I went, there was something to be learned."

"And it's not about money," he said, stating it as a fact. For he'd always known that, but now he truly understood.

She thought about it for a while. "Right, dear one. Right. It's about finding meaning in this world around us, and in finding a way to leave a mark. Good or bad, we must leave a mark, Son. For the worst life lived isn't one that is filled with bad deeds or crimes. It's the one that goes unnoticed. Our legacies, both personal and familial, are all we have when we leave here. The cards help us help others find their legacies. And the cards, at least for me, are my legacy. It's my gift, my contribution. It's one of the things that says I was here."

"So, tarot and the men are your legacy?"

"And you. Mostly you."

"Me?" he asked, stunned.

"Yes, you. When I first laid eyes on you, dear one, I knew you were what Mrs. Drearson was talking about when she told me I would do good things in this world but at a great sacrifice. She told me I would live a life of beauty and excitement, but it would mean the traditional world might shun me. You were worth it, Darling. You are my legacy, and you will carry out your own legacy, which will be a part of my story as well."

He realized then how much responsibility that was. It frightened him, for at his age, he could not imagine finding a purpose and a path. He could not imagine having the courage to listen to only his heart and to know he understood. Always perceptive to his feelings, she looked down at him.

“Do not fret. I know it’s a lot of pressure to find one’s way in this world. But we have a gift. We have a different way of listening and seeing. We perceive exquisiteness even in the anguish of this lifetime. We are not afraid, you and me, to walk a different path if it’s what the universe wants for us. We are spirited enough to listen. You will find your way. Just listen here.” She tapped on his chest, and he felt it reverberate through him.

“What if I can’t hear as well as you?” he asked, truly concerned.

“Then listen anyway, for I will guide you, always. I will forever be a whisper away. I will listen for you when you can’t. That’s my job as your mother.”

And he hoped with everything in him that it would always be true.

Chapter Nine

Leaning in the doorway, I watched him make quick work of the carcass. The knife flayed open the skin, the red jam on the carcass's skin. It was artwork, the way he sliced and diced, the way his knife tore at the flesh.

Watching the butcher that day as a boy, I wondered what it would feel like to hold the knife, to peel away the skin from bone. I wondered if my mother could so effortlessly remove the skin from the carcasses in her bedroom.

Last night, standing over the stranger, the imagery flooded in like memories often do. I put my shaking hand in my pocket, imagining that luxurious feel of the knife's blade tearing through flesh, flaying through the layers in a perfect motion.

I steadied my hand. Patience. That's what my mother would tell me. You can't sacrifice the good of everything for the fantastical whims of your hand, of your darkened heart. Everything has a rhythm, has a time.

Still, I know tonight, when I fall asleep, I will be thinking about the skin on her eyelids, on her forearm, inside her thigh as the metal glides through, chunking away at who she is.

I will think about the butcher and the art form I always envied.

It's almost time now, I tell my shaking hands and my hungry darkness.

~Elliott Clairmont's Journal

Chapter Ten

In many ways, the flat was Elliott's whole universe. It was there that he learned about the world from his mother. He learned about the cards, about poisons, about hiding bodies. He studied math, his English, his French from her. In all of his twelve years of living, he still thought, she was the smartest person he'd ever known to exist.

Still, it was a little lonely sometimes. He would look out the window and see the other children in the building marching off with their backpacks to school, and once in a while, a sense of whimsy would strike him. He wondered what it would be like to sit in a desk and hear from someone who wasn't his mother. He wondered what it would be like to exchange an apple for a peach at lunch or to bring home papers to write. He wondered what it would be like to have friends.

When his mother was busy tidying the apartment or reading her magazines, sometimes he would wander outside. He was old enough at twelve to walk on the streets around the flat, she'd decided. It was good for a boy his age to have some space from his mother, she'd insisted. And so, he would stroll about, hands in his pockets, taking in the sights and thinking about his future. Mostly, it was lonely without her, though. She was his best friend. He hated being apart.

One spring day, he was leaning on the outside of the building as a few children jumped rope on the sidewalk nearby. A redheaded girl and a dark-haired boy laughed, the boy throwing pebbles into the street as the girl sang a song. Another boy stood behind the corner, smoking a cigarette and cursing in French. Elliott watched them, envying their easy banter and wishing he could belong to a group like that.

"What's up, weird one?" the swearing boy said, gesturing toward Elliott. "What are you staring at?"

Elliott found the words wouldn't come out smoothly. He hadn't wanted to draw attention to himself. He shook his head. The boy laughed, stomping out the cigarette on the ground and coughing.

“Did your whore of a mother let you out to play for a bit? Is she done fucking men in there?” he asked. Elliott’s cheeks reddened. He wanted to hit the boy for talking about his mother. Instead, he turned and ran into the flat, his cheeks burning. He rushed inside. His mother looked up from her magazine.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, instantly reading his face.

Tears were welling, and he didn’t know why. He looked at her, Snow White tucked away on the lounge.

“Are you a whore?” he asked because he didn’t know what else to say. His mother sighed.

“The boys outside, the ones from upstairs, they called you a whore.”

She shrugged in her typical fashion. “I suppose they would see it that way, maybe.”

“Isn’t that a bad thing?” he asked, hands in his pockets. He might not get out of the apartment much, but he wasn’t an idiot.

“I suppose to some. But not to me. The worst thing in this world, Elliott, is to lack power. You have to do what you can to keep power. That’s what this whole life is about. Those who have power have freedom of choice, and freedom of choice is everything.”

He stared at her, not really understanding what that had to do with her being a whore.

As if she could read his mind, which he often wondered if she could, she said, “Sex is a woman’s way of keeping power, Elliott. It’s how I keep mine. It’s how I provide for us and make sure we have choices in this world. Choices to be who we want and live how we want. So, I will never apologize for that.”

He nodded. It made some sense, the way she put it.

“But don’t worry, Son. As a man in this world, you’ll have more options to keep your power. You’ll have more freedoms at your fingertips. Your challenge will be to follow your passion. Don’t lose sight of what you want or who you are, not for anything in this world.”

“But how do you know if you’re choosing right? How do you know what life you’re supposed to lead?” Perhaps this was the mystics’ protégé’s dilemma: always considering the worth of one’s choices, of one’s life.

“Dear one, you will know. We’ve talked about this.”

“I know, I know. We have a gift. We hear the universe. But how do we know if our purpose is ultimately good? How do we know if we are doing good?”

She stopped, looking up as she did when she was thinking deeply. She smiled. “Do you remember that poem I always read to you as a boy?”

“O Me! O Life!” he said, nodding. How could he forget? It had taken over their bedtime ritual when she thought *Snow White* was too juvenile for him. He never admitted it, but he missed the *Snow White* days. He would’ve been fine reading that forever.

“That you are here. That life exists and identity. That the powerful play goes on, and you may contribute a verse,” she quoted, that lofty look in her eye whenever she read Whitman, her favorite poet.

“But what if Whitman got it wrong? What if it isn’t just about being here? What if it isn’t enough to just exist? What if we live out our wrong purpose?”

“To make a mark in this world, Elliott, is never wrong. Certainly, society tries to deem certain actions right and wrong. But that is through their filter. We live through the lens of the bigger picture, the bigger meaning. There is no good or bad card, right? There is no good or bad purpose. For each purpose, each choice, each action has an effect, good or bad. It is not for us to discern. You will be just fine in this world. Do you know how I know?”

“How?”

“Because you’re asking these questions. Those without true meaning do not ask such questions.”

He nodded again, soaking in what felt like monumental words from a wise woman, a kindred spirit. In that moment, as he headed to the table

to work on his art, he realized going to school, being a part of the other kids' groups, was all overrated. They weren't nearly as sage as his mother. Why would he want to spend any time with anyone else?

But soon after that conversation, as if the fates were mal-aligned against them, things took a turn for the worse, and he realized even his mother didn't have the power she once thought.

Chapter Eleven

Elliott didn't trust him from the moment he walked in. He'd seen plenty of characters welcomed through the door to the little bistro table in the living room where his mother did her work. He'd seen all sorts of people over the years, bathed and unbathed, scruffy and put together. Still, something about the black-haired man with the handlebar mustache bothered Elliott from the very first second.

Maybe it was in the eyes. Mother always believed in reading eyes, the windows to the soul and beyond. This man's were shifty, never settling on anything too long—except for Mother's bosom, Elliott noticed as he watched her sit down to work. Even before the cards were read, the man had leaned in and touched her hand, caressing her snow-white skin as if she were his treasure. Elliott felt his blood chill. Something was wrong.

Still, the man pulled out his wallet and made a show of his excess money. He paid for the reading, and then Mother, as she often would, leaned across the table, offering a coy grin. She whispered to him, and he grunted in response. She grabbed the man's too-large hands and pulled him toward the bedroom for the second round of work.

Elliott steadied his shaky hands, trying to perfect his landscape at the table and ignore the muffled sounds, the thumping noises coming from the bedroom. But, after ten minutes, it was clear something was very wrong.

First, there was the man's voice, surly and loud, swearing at his mother in French. Elliott leaped from the table, his mother responding in a muffled voice. Elliott stood still. She could take care of herself, and she'd told him from the time he was very young to never interrupt her work.

But then, Elliott heard a slap, and his mother emitted a muted scream.

Elliott sprang into action. The knives were in the drawer to his left. He practically dove across the kitchen to grab one. Then, without further thought, he dashed across the tiny flat and flung open the bedroom door.

There was a great scuffling going on in the bedroom as the man turned to eye Elliott. His mother, wrapped in nothing but a sheet, was against the corner of the bedroom, looking both terrified but also shocked to see Elliott. There wasn't time to think. The large man stalked over to Elliott in a couple of steps. Elliott held up the knife and plunged it into the man's stomach as hard as he could.

It wasn't as he expected it, the feel of tearing flesh at the mercy of the blade. As a child, he'd once studied a butcher at work. The way the knife flayed the skin methodically, almost poetically had struck him as gorgeous. This was different, though. Blood spurting out instantly, Elliott continued tearing at the skin, widening the wound. It felt both satisfying but also like something to resist. It felt like a nightmarish dream.

The man yelled out, and before things could progress, there was a crash. A pottery piece breaking over the man's head stunned Elliott. He froze, the man slipping to the ground with a thud. Before Elliott could make another move, his mother was on top of the man, pulling out the knife and plunging it back in his body again, again, again. Blood splatters coated her pale body, the sheet having fallen to the ground. He stood in a daze, watching as she kept slashing at the man, the red still spreading wildly. Tears fell from her face when she finally stopped. A thick fog of tension, of red, of quietude spread. Elliott stood in the corner, wordless, sucking in the reality of the scene in a way he never had before. His mother crossed the room and reclaimed the sheet, cocooning herself in the stained remnants of it. She peered at him, bloody, her lip quivering.

"I'm sorry you had to see that," she replied, her tears falling haphazardly now. She'd never before been apologetic about her work. This was different, though. The air stung with the darkness of what they'd both witnessed.

"Are you okay? Are you hurt?" he asked, his concern for her.

She shook her head. Still, he could see the mark on her face. He wanted to ask what happened, what went wrong. But there was work to

be done now, he knew. He steadied his shaking hands and trembling, ragged breaths.

“Will the neighbors investigate?” he asked. His mother was always much quieter about it. Oftentimes, Elliott didn’t even know the deed had been done until his mother emerged from the bedroom and wordlessly ushered him in to help with the removal. Since skilled poison usage had been added to her repertoire, killing was more artistic and less messy. Sometimes, Elliott had to admit, though, he missed the splashes of blood she used to leave, the dreary paintings that told the story.

“The flat’s always so loud this time of day. I don’t think so. But we should make quick work of it just in case.” She had already pulled herself together, the business-like side of her taking over the emotionality of the situation.

She was right. Luckily for them, the flat was hardly a shining image of familial harmony. Fights often broke out in the living quarters next door, the one above them, the one across the corridor. Being on the ground floor was a blessing for ridding themselves of the dead bodies, but it was a curse in the way there was always a hectic quality about them. Still, he was now thankful for that. Kids running rampant, drunk men getting into fights. The flat was far from a dream to live in, but it served them well for their purposes.

There was less to clean when you used poison. But Elliott had ruined that sentiment, and the room was now a gushing, bloody mess. They got to work, an efficient assembly line process of chopping, moving, plastic sheeting to catch the blood. It was a messy job anyway, but this one was a large man. He would take more work to condense, and since there was already blood to clean, his mother felt they should just finish the job. Too many large rugs and bags moved was risky, and she didn’t like to use Frederick more than once every couple of months. She didn’t want a neighbor to get suspicious. Thus, thanks to Elliott, they would have to take care of this one on their own. It would be a river dump kind of night, and Elliott’s arms ached at the thought of lugging all of the bags.

Still, working beside his mother, he was thankful they were a unit. It was a privilege to be her son, to work so closely with her on her passion. It was all worth it for her.

Thus, he trudged on, cutting, dicing, and cleaning to cover their tracks like the best of them.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

“Of course,” he replied over his cup of tea the next morning.

“There’s no going back, now,” she said. “Once you kill a man.”

“He knew the enormity the downward stroke would be,” Elliott muttered, quoting *Lord of the Flies*, which his mother had ironically had him read just last month as part of his literary studies. And it was true, he thought, staring into this tea, thinking about the look on the mustached man’s face. He didn’t feel guilt, of course. He had it coming, and Elliott would do it again and again to protect his mother. Still, there was no going back. He could feel it in his tepid blood. His hands had felt the tearing of flesh at his fingertips. And although it was unexpected and terrifying in the moment, there was something else about it— he had buzzed with joy.

He tamped the feeling down, looking over at his mother. Perhaps the joy was from the fact he could understand her better, the pull of the killing. They were connected on an even deeper level. He shouldn’t be surprised he would kill, he realized. It was in his blood. These sorts of things were passed down, weren’t they?

“You have to be careful, Elliott. This isn’t a game. You have to plan, to be patient when you kill. Because one wrong move, and you’re done. The stakes are high. Never forget that.”

He wanted to tell her the stakes were always high, that he’d known that all along. That was life, wasn’t it? He simply nodded instead, thinking about what a splendid day it had been after all. Still, when he settled in for the night, visions of the day swirled around him.

He couldn't stop picturing his mother's battered face, and he couldn't stop worrying about the harsh reality that perhaps had led him to the killing: he couldn't protect her. He was too weak to shield her.

Chapter Twelve

An abrupt knock at the door the next morning startled Elliott awake from his slumber on the divan. It was too early for a customer; his mother always waited until after noon to take work, preferring languorous mornings, coffee, and sometimes even a stroll to her favorite local spots.

Elliott sat up sleepily, his heart racing. He thought of the man from the day before, his fingers wrapping around an imaginary knife and reliving the kill. His mother sauntered sleepily, warily to the door. He stood from the sofa, walking over to see who was there.

A police officer stood at the door, his uniform denoting his position. Elliott's heart fell. He knew he'd made a mistake stepping in. They had been too loud in their workings. Someone had reported them. Panic grabbed ahold of him and didn't let go as his eyes darted about for an answer that was nowhere to be found.

His mother, who thankfully seemed calm and unaffected by the appearance of authority, ushered the officer inside. He said he had a few questions for her. Elliott did not look him in the eye, terrified the officer would be able to see his guilt written on his face. His mother, though, shrugged non-committedly, as if this were no big deal at all. He realized for the first time his mother would've made an excellent actress. She offered him the sweet, Snow White smile.

The officer pulled out a photograph and held it out for Lucy Clairmont to see.

"Have you seen this man?"

Elliott did not want to look at the picture, the man's face from yesterday flashing in his mind. He did not want to give it away. He stared at the floor.

"No, I haven't, Officer. Is he in some sort of trouble?" she asked sweetly, a hint of concern in her voice. Elliott knew it was fake. He hoped the officer did not.

"His wife reported him missing. And someone reported they saw him at your flat yesterday."

Elliott swallowed the lump in his throat at the realization they had been betrayed. What else had they told? And who had turned them in? His mind raced with unrelenting fears, but his mother thankfully stayed levelheaded.

“I haven’t seen him in my life. They must’ve been mistaken.” She put a hand on her chest, and he realized his powerful, strong mother who was able to chop up grown men somehow made herself look weak and small in that moment.

“Ms. Clairmont, there have been quite a few reports of gentleman callers coming here. I would hate to see a gorgeous woman like you get caught up in something that could lead to trouble.”

His mother walked slowly across the space, closing the gap between the officer and herself. She offered him a coy smile, the one Elliott had seen her use at the café to get free coffees and on the men who came for readings. It seemed risky now, and Elliott held his breath. If it didn’t work, their entire lives could crumble.

“Now, Officer. I’m sure we could come to some kind of understanding here. You know what it’s like, working hard to make a living only to have others look at you a certain way. I would hate for you to think scandalous things about me, after all. You’re such an upstanding, handsome officer of the law.” She inched even closer and calculatingly put a hand on his shoulder. From her smile to her gentle touch, she emanated demureness. Elliott felt his face flame. He wanted to look away, but like a train wreck, the scene that teetered on perilous drew him in. He was terrified that at any moment, his mother would be in trouble with the law and it would all be detonated.

The officer, though, started to blush. He tucked away his notepad he’d been writing on in the front pocket of his uniform. “I’m sure we could come to some sort of agreement. I bet, Ms. Clairmont, you could convince me your words are true.”

“I’m certain I can,” she whispered, grabbing his hand and leading him back to the room. Elliott exhaled as the door shut, but nerves continued to ransack his body.

It felt like an eternity passed from the time his mother shut the door and opened it again. He’d been sitting at attention, unable to even paint, afraid things would go south and he’d have to step in again. His hands shook the entire time, his fingers clenching the knife that wasn’t there but felt so real. Should he step in? Should he make the decision for them, take over as man of the house and take the reins? Perhaps they should kill this officer who knew too much.

He debated, wanting to take the lead but admiring his mother too much to take the power from her. She had a brilliant mind. She would know how to handle this.

The officer did not look at Elliott, keeping his head down as he exited the flat. He cleared his throat as he finished up the last button on his shirt. Elliott’s hands shook after the officer left. For a while, he considered perhaps the police officer would leave in a suitcase or a garbage bag.

“Too risky,” his mother said after the officer had left, reading his thoughts as always. “He would be missed quickly.”

Elliott said nothing, sitting and staring at the table. It was his fault. He had caused this dilemma.

“It’s not your fault,” she said, still in tune with his thoughts. She crossed the room and cradled his chin in her soft, sweet hands. She lifted his face so he had to look at her. “I would’ve killed him anyway. You didn’t cause this. And besides, we’re fine. That officer’s not very smart. I knew I could win him over. He won’t be back for some time. And if he is, I’ll be able to take care of him.”

His mother walked over to the couch and reached to the side table for her cards. She shuffled the deck, flipping through them aimlessly, as if her hands needed to stay busy.

“Come, sit, my son.”

He obeyed, trying to put the last twenty-four hours out of his youthful, naïve mind. He sat next to her on the sofa, watching her delicate fingers flip comfortably through the deck as if they were always made to hold the cards.

She split the deck and pulled the card off the top, smiling as if it had happened just as she wanted. She flashed him the Five of Cups, and he knew why she beamed. It was her favorite card, and it was becoming his, too, perhaps because of what it meant to her.

“Do you know what this one means, Son?” she asked. From time to time, she liked to quiz him on the common interpretations and legends of the cards. Certainly, as she’d taught him, a card by itself did not carry meaning. It was only in the hands of someone, in the destiny of someone, that the stories made any sense at all. Still, each card had a predisposition, a standard meaning built into its foundation. The backstory, the interpretation would change depending on who you were reading and what stood out, what messages you saw at the moment. But it was helpful to know the basics. And this one, well, how could he not know the full story? It meant everything to her.

“Inheritance. In its basic interpretation, it often refers to a cross-generational legacy of tragedies,” he recited, beaming as she nodded. “It deals with layers of sadness and anxiety. Still, there’s always a way out of the tunnel of hardship.”

“Yes, and upside down?”

“It reads as a paradox. The Five of Cups, when drawn inversely, means the worst thing that happens to you will create a better reality. It’s fulfillment that blooms from anguish, in a sense. It bridges the gap, in a way, from your current circumstance to the next. But life takes some suffering to truly change.”

She ruffled his hair and then stared at the card.

“And do you know why it is my favorite, Elliott?”

He did. It was a rhetorical question. From the time he could understand the meaning of the cards, she'd told him about the Five of Cups. It was as if it was his own destiny she was reading, their collective destiny.

"Because we make the best out of difficult situations. Our happiness often comes from unfortunate events."

He recited the words, and she nodded, her expression telling him she'd drifted away for a bit, to a time he didn't know or recognize. He never quite understood the phrase. He wanted to ask his mother what the unfortunate circumstances were that had led them here. Sometimes, he thought there must be a deeper story there, them coming to America alone. He thought it odd they never had anyone back in America they talked to. He thought it peculiar he'd never known his father, and his mother never talked of him.

Unsettling, but not unbearable. For she was right. Out of those circumstances, the two had built a beautiful life in Paris.

"Even when bad things happen, Elliott, you have to know that fulfillment sometimes comes from them. You have to believe that even when things look really bad, beautiful things can be up ahead. Always remember that, my beloved son."

He peered over her shoulder as her fingers traced the outline of the card. She didn't dare flip it over, but she didn't have to. Elliott knew what was scrawled on the back, and, thus, he knew she must.

An address. An Illinois address. America.

His grandparents' address? His father's? He wanted to ask but didn't dare. He'd made that mistake once before and was only met with an icy stare and a response of: "I'll tell you when you're older. And not a day before."

He wondered how old he'd have to be. He speculated what secret she would reveal.

It didn't matter, though, in some ways. For if his mother was in Paris, that was where his heart was, too. Illinois meant nothing to him. It never would, he told himself.

His mother tucked the cards away, instructed him to get his coat, and they left the flat to stroll by the river and talk about the brighter days ahead.

Chapter Thirteen

Goodness is a lie. Passion is a lie.

There is only ugliness and hideousness in the fucking world.

To love is to lose. That's what they say.

I think to love is to awaken the potential for hate, for sinister actions, and for revenge.

For to love and to lose is to stir the darkest anger you can't even begin to fathom.

I want vengeance. I want purpose. I want to feel lives ruined at my hand.

Sometimes, tragedy turns us outward, looking for beauty and goodness.

For me, it has turned me inward, to examine the dreadful beast that is my soul.

I wish I could kill myself, but I don't have the courage.

I still can't disappoint her, even though my mother is no longer who I thought she was.

Who was that woman with the black-hair and red lips who used to be my rock? Where has she gone?

I am left floundering, alone in the cement city, my lungs filled with the ash of the memories I incinerate day by day.

I am lost. I am whole. I am gone.

I am lie after lie after lie, drowning in a sea of hidden truths.

Unearth me. Swallow me whole. Drown me in blood and wring me out.

My backstory is being born again.

~Elliott Clairmont's Journal

Chapter Fourteen

She'd made up her mind that he needed to get out of the flat and get some fresh air.

"It's raining, though," he'd argued.

"I don't care. Boys your age need to experience the world, to breathe in the fresh air. Let's go."

He'd groaned but knew it was no use. She always got her way—and usually, even if he didn't always admit it, she was right.

He'd followed her, hood of his jacket over his head as they walked down the street, puddles inviting him in. She pulled his hood off his head.

"What, will you melt?" she asked, teasing him.

It was a ridiculous thing to say.

The gray day washed over them as she led him toward the Seine, their sacred spot. In a clearing, she pulled something out of her pocket.

"What's that for?" he asked.

"To jump."

He raised an eyebrow. "Why would we do that?"

"To be alive. Because it's fun. Come on. Humor me."

"Is this something from a poem again?" he asked, and she laughed. She'd made him read Whitman, her favorite poet, last week and had him sit in the grass while they read *Leaves of Grass*. He'd found it ridiculous, yet also stunning somehow. Her passion for reading was akin to his passion for art, and so, he always humored her.

"No. It's from my childhood. My brother and I used to love jumping rope. My mother hated it for us, especially when it was raining. She never wanted us to get muddy, and said children of our circumstance shouldn't be out like peasants in the rain."

Elliott paused at this. She'd only mentioned her brother once or twice in passing. Now, he was curious, as he always was when she shared morsels from her past. "What was he like?"

She tapped her chin for a moment, thinking. "He was smart. Stubborn, too. Always had to be right."

Elliott thought about that, about his mother having a sibling.

"I wish I had a brother," he said, and instantly regretted it. Her eyes looked faraway. He'd pushed it.

“Well, come on. For today, you have me. And I’m going to show you how to jump rope like a champion.”

And she did. In spite of the people staring and the rain, she showed him how to jump and how to do some basic tricks. He tripped a few times, but he stuck with it, all the while thinking about what a marvelous childhood she must have had—and wondering why they were here if it was so good.

Maybe to jump in mud puddles, he decided.

And so, they jumped and jumped, mud everywhere.

“Life is better messy,” she said. And he thought she might be right.

Chapter Fifteen

The thing about death is that when you aren't looking, it wraps its bony fingers around you and twists. He'd been no stranger to death, of course, thanks to his mother's ways. Still, those men who perished in the apartment, the streaks of blood or their blue faces when they were heaved into the disposal truck—that meant nothing to Elliott. They were simply a means to subsistence for their family, a means to an end. The cards had chosen them.

But the cards hadn't chosen his mother. He refused to believe it. That wouldn't happen because his mother was too good of a person, for one. She lived her life with confidence and passion. His mother, the woman who was like Snow White with her dark hair and gorgeous smile, the woman who soothed his soul and believed in him, would never be picked by the cards. She was too important to him.

Still, at twelve, he learned that not everything follows a pattern or justice when it comes to life and death. It was a lesson we all are dredged through at one point or another; for Elliott, that time came perhaps all too soon. If things had just waited a few more years, if he'd had a chance to establish a more summative view of life, things could've been different. That is, unfortunately, the side effect of the human condition, though: the constant questioning of what if...

They were coming home from their walk at the river a few days after the officer's visit, a day after the jumping rope in the rain. They'd been strolling by couples walking and kids running in the park, talking about the future and paintings and what they'd do this summer in the city. He'd looked over at his mother's bright smile and knew nothing would ruin their perfect life, not even a messed-up murder. She'd make sure of it. She was astute enough to ensure they turned out okay.

Enough time had passed that the mustached man had been all but wiped out his mind. He knew he'd carry the weight of that death forever, but he was able to distance himself from it. It had been a necessity. He'd taken care of it for his mother. And when the officer had shown up, she'd

taken care of it for him. They'd looked out for each other, and now they were on the other side of it all. Life was back to normal—café visits and walks by the Seine, artwork and card readings. Life fell back into the familiar rhythm, not to be disturbed again by something so silly as an unplanned murder.

Or so they thought.

They'd come home to the flat, the neighbors carrying on in French and the television blaring next door. His mother had popped open the door to their flat, still talking animatedly about the new café she wanted to try, when he looked up to see them standing there. Two men were planted in front of them, and the biggest one pointed a gun at their faces.

His mother grabbed his arm to pull him back outside, but before they could make their getaway, the third set of hands grabbed him from inside the doorway. Elliott felt the metal scraping against his neck.

"No one moves," the man clutching him said. His mother put up her hands as the other hefty man with a gun crossed the floor to shut the door.

Elliott felt like he would wet himself, he was so terrified. But he kept his eyes focused on his mother, staring into her soft blue-green eyes.

I love you, they said.

And his said that back. At least he hoped.

Words were shouted in French about a missing associate and how he'd come to see some whore in this flat number before they made their way back. His mother didn't budge, staring calmly at them and denying any association. Elliott's stomach sank. The man he'd killed had come back to haunt them. The downward stroke *had* been an enormity, but in a way they'd never anticipated.

"Let my son go. This has nothing to do with him," Lucy Clairmont murmured. The man holding Elliott squeezed tighter as if to exert his power through his refusal.

Elliott thought in that moment he would die. It wasn't fading away that scared him, though. It was the thought of his mother being alone in

the world, left to deal with the grief of his loss and the chaos of the aftermath. He'd never considered it up until that point that something could happen to tear them apart. He hadn't wanted to face the possibility.

"Tell me where Sven is, and we'll see about letting the boy live," the man bellowed. Elliott breathed in cigar smoke and oil from his leather jacket. He tried not to cough, afraid even a slight movement would lead to a slit throat. As it was, he could feel the sting of the knife, drops of hot, sticky blood dribbling down his neck. He tried to steady his breathing.

"I don't know what you're talking about." His mother extended her hands out in front of her. Delicate hands. Breathtaking, Snow White hands.

Elliott was ready to speak, to tell them it was all him. To demand they let his mother go. He couldn't bear the thought of her paying for his stupid mistakes, and he didn't think she could charm their way out of this one. The three gruff men standing in the flat didn't seem like the type to be easily duped like other men who had graced their flat with their miniscule presences.

"You stupid cunt," the man shouted then, and before Elliott could even react, it had happened.

The squirrely man had thrown Elliott to the side, the knife mercifully moving at the exact moment to avoid slitting his throat. He choked against the wall, wondering if his neck had been cut and he simply could not tell from the shock of it all. His hands automatically clutched at his skin, feeling for a tear. They found dabbles of blood but overall, his neck seemed to be whole.

A scuffle ensued as the other two men shouted the name "Gino," as Elliott heard his mother scream, gurgle, choke, and then go quiet. The world was spinning, perhaps from the chaos of it all and the gash on his throat and the fear. It happened so fast. That was what he would think of when he looked back: how fast it all unraveled. The fact, however, would not alleviate the culpability he had felt. Why had he been so worried about his own neck? Why hadn't he pulled a move from those films they

had seen, had stopped them all with quick thinking and hands? As I said, the what-ifs are the true detriment of the human condition.

Elliott regained his wits about him enough to stand up just in time to see the weasel of a man still stabbing his mother in the chest once, twice, three times. Blood splattered all about the flat. Elliott threw himself on the man, shrieking and wailing. He needed to save his mother. He tackled the man, stretching for the knife.

One of the other two imbeciles got involved, yanking the man from Elliott. He ignored them, crawling to his mother, examining her wounds and trying to save her.

“Mother,” he cried, his breathing labored as he studied her chest, her neck, her blue-green eyes.

But it was too late. There was nothing left. She was still as a slab of stone, Snow White having gone to sleep one last time. The apple had been bitten. There was no Prince coming to save her.

“Mama, please,” he cried, not caring about the henchmen behind him or the shouts. He shrieked into her blood-soaked chest, sobbing and half hoping he was next to be stabbed so he could end the incessant stabbing in his chest.

A hand shook him.

“Kid, come on,” he said. “Come on, we need to get out of here.”

Elliott turned, confused, to see the big guy, the one with a gun, looking at him with soft eyes. The gun was put away. Behind him, the squirrely man who had stabbed his mother was dead on the ground, his throat cut. The third man who had been quiet for most of the time stood with his hands in his pockets, his eyes darting about as if he’d never seen a scene like this.

“I’m sorry, Kid. Wasn’t supposed to happen like that. I swear. Wasn’t the plan to kill anyone here, just to scare you and get answers about Sven. Life is tough.” The big guy’s words echoed in the silence of the scene, mixing with the blood on the floor. Agony and rage swirled within Elliott’s veins as his hands shook. He hungered to kill them both. They’d come

here. They'd been the reason his mother was dead. But looking up at the big guy with a gun, he knew it was pointless. He couldn't overpower the man, and it wouldn't bring his mother back. It was all futile now.

"You killed my mother," Elliott whispered.

"No, that dumbass did. We were just coming to look for Sven. He'd told us he was coming here the other day to get some tail before we headed out of Paris. Had heard someone talk about this witchy whore." He stopped and looked at Lucy Clairmont on the floor. "Sorry. But look, Kid, it wasn't supposed to go down like this. I'm sorry."

Elliott stared at him, not knowing whether he should believe him. Not knowing if it mattered. Did anything anymore?

The other guy, who seemed to snap out of his stupor now, stepped forward. "Boss, we got to go before someone sends the police after all the screams. We don't want to get caught in all this."

The big guy nodded. He turned back to Elliott.

"Do you have a family?"

"No." The admission stung. His family was bleeding out on the floor, her lifeless body a reminder of all that he'd lost.

"Where will you go? What will you do now?"

Elliott looked around the flat, shock still paralyzing him. He shrugged blankly.

The man sighed. "Come with us."

Elliott squinted. "What?"

"You can't stay here. They're not going to believe you, especially after Sven disappeared. It's only a matter of time. Do you want to fry for this? Come on. We'll take you with us."

"Boss, we can't take some kid with us," the scrawny guy argued.

"Shut the fuck up, Tony. We owe him that much."

"We don't owe him shit."

The Boss man punched Tony straight in the cheek. "I say what we do and don't owe. Got me?"

Elliott studied them. Two criminals who were involved in who knew what. They'd led to his mother's death. What would she want him to do? He stood at a crossroads. The tarot cards were across the room. He closed his eyes and imagined the ink under his fingers, willing them to send him a message. He tried to hear his mother's voice, to know what she would tell him. He didn't want to go with these men, murderers and perhaps worse. But looking around the flat, he knew there was nothing there for him. And he knew the big guy was probably right—the police had already been there. It wouldn't take much for them to come after him.

He no longer wanted to live, it was true. But his mother wouldn't want him to just die, either. She would want him to be brave.

"Because we make the best out of difficult situations. Our happiness often comes from unfortunate events." The words flooded back to him, as if she were still alive and whispering in his ear.

He looked around the blood-soaked flat. What was left for him in Paris other than memories? He got to his feet, weak and wobbly. He crossed the room, trying not to look at his mother's lifeless body. He willed himself to stay strong as he reached for the deck. Just feeling them in his hands made him stronger, steadier.

"We don't have all day, Son," the big guy said. Elliott flipped through the deck. He looked down, and there it was. Her favorite card. He saw the Illinois address. Glencoe, to be exact.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"Back to the states," the Boss said.

The states. He'd never been to America. He looked at the address. It was as if the cards knew. The decision was made. He nodded.

"One thing, real quick, please," Elliott begged, tucking the cards in the pocket of a jacket he had nearby. He didn't turn to see his mother in a pool of red. He wanted to remember her as beautiful, not like this.

"Hurry up," he ordered.

Elliott dashed to the kitchen, where she'd framed it. The charcoal drawing from that day at La Closerie des Lilas. It had been a beautiful

day, one he wanted to remember. He took the picture from the frame and tucked it in his pocket. He grabbed a bag with a few items of clothing, a few photographs from his mother's room, and then he dashed to the door. He didn't know the details of where they were going or how they were getting there. It didn't matter, though. None of it mattered.

His chest heaved as they walked out into the spring air. He didn't turn back to look at his mother. He hoped the landlady would see to his mother's burial. He wished he had the means to buy her a glass coffin with gold letters, like she deserved. But he couldn't. There was no time.

He clung to the stack of cards as she followed the two men. He told himself to be brave. He was going to the states. Maybe he could find the address from the card, and could uncover his mother's past. Maybe, just maybe, he could find the family they used to have.

Until then, he'd have to trust in the cards, in his fate, and in the fact his mother had taught him well.

The story is just getting started! To keep reading, be sure to order *Tell Me All Your Lie* by L.A. Detwiler.

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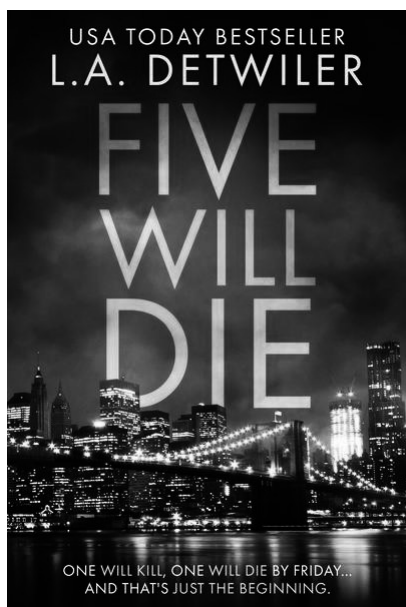
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