



A NOVEL

USA TODAY BESTSELLER

FAIRYDALE

VERONICA
LANCET

Fairydale

Veronica Lancet

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Fairydale

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Preface

Dear Reader,

Fairydale is a mix of gothic, horror, fantasy, and paranormal fiction with a dash of history, but at its core it's simply a love story. It's quite possibly my favorite story that I've written, and I hope you will enjoy it as much as I did writing it.

Before proceeding, there are a few disclaimers to address.

If you're looking for a typical romance book, this isn't it.

This is a long journey (and by that, I mean almost 1000 pages), so if you're not a fan of complex narrative threads, lengthy books or extreme slow burns, then this will **not** be the book for you.

This is also **not** the book to skim, or you may find yourself lost in a sea of information, which is, at times, purposefully misleading. The plot is complicated, featuring a large cast of characters, and three different timelines.

Though the story contains alternating historical timelines, due to the nature of the topic at hand, this does not attempt to be a piece of authentic historical fiction. I've tried to make those sections as digestible as possible while still keeping some historical realism.

The story can get quite dark and emotional at times, so I urge you to check the content warnings carefully before proceeding.

I hope you enjoy it and *please* do not spoil the story for others!

Content Warnings: blood (gore), blood play & period play, death, derogatory terms, discrimination, drugs, graphic torture, graphic violence, graphic sexual situations (humanoid & non-humanoid), incestuous situations, infertility, kidnapping, murder, rape, weapons, PTSD, suicide.

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Prologue

The sun was setting and Lizette still could not bring herself to go back home. Not when her family would take one look at her and guess what had happened.

It hadn't been her fault—she was aware of that much. But she didn't think her family would agree. Certainly not her mother, who could barely stand the sight of her most days. If she knew, she would only have one more reason to hate her—potentially one more reason to send her away.

She was alone in the forest at night, a rather dangerous place to be in if you were female, but Lizette had already suffered the worst a woman could suffer. Even now, that place between her legs would not stop bleeding, no matter how much she tried to wipe it away with the material of her tattered sweater.

As she made her way towards the waterfall deep in the forest, her only thought was to wash away any trace of him off her body.

The sound of the water slowly reached her ears. Her cheeks were red, her tears already dried up. Yet as she came upon the waterfall, she couldn't help herself from crying anew.

She gently removed her clothing, careful of her wounds which still pained her a great deal. Neatly folding her dress on the ground, she neared the river bank as she dipped her toes into the water. The first chill caught her unawares, but then that's what she got for attempting to bathe in a river at the beginning of December.

Yet she still had one hidden weapon in her arsenal.

Rubbing her palms together, she willed the heat from her body to spread to the water in the river, making it the temperature she desired.

Lizette might not be as powerful as her mother, but she did have this one ability she was proud of—the ability to heat things up. Unfortunately, even that hadn't been enough to stop his attack.

When the water had warmed enough, Lizette submerged her entire body, scrubbing at her skin and wishing she could remove her memories as easily as she could his scent.

She spent moments on end in the river, dreading the fact that she would have to face reality when she was done.

Slowly, she got out of the water and for a moment simply stood on the river bank next to her dress, unable to bring herself to put on the garment again. Luckily, due to her ability, she could keep herself warm without the need for clothing.

Yet as she stood there contemplating her life, she noted a colorful butterfly flying close to the surface of the water.

She didn't know how any butterfly could survive a winter there, but she was too taken by the beautiful scene to question such a sighting.

The butterfly seemed to have a clear purpose as it headed straight for her, batting its brilliantly blue wings as it stopped right in front of her eyes. Before she realized what it meant to do, it went lower, settling on her lower stomach.

"What are you doing?"

She found the strength to smile anew as she thought herself so lucky that the beautiful butterfly had come to her.

"Of course you wouldn't answer back," she chided herself as she released a weary sigh.

As she stared at the butterfly, it suddenly turned with its head towards her, almost as if it understood her. Yet that was not the strangest thing.

In the blink of an eye, the butterfly slowly melted into her skin until nothing remained of its beautiful form.

Startled, Lizette stood up. She was afraid she might have harmed it with her abilities.

One day, she would realize that she hadn't killed the butterfly.
She'd given it life.

Part One

Chapter One

August 1955, Boston, Massachusetts

"Miss O'Sullivan, Miss O'Sullivan!

Turning my head in the direction of the voice calling my name, my mouth tugs up in a wide grin as I notice Stevie, one of my pupils, rush towards me.

"It's for you, Miss O'Sullivan!" He stops by my side, huffing out a breath as he extends a thick brown envelope. "Mrs. Jennings said it's for you."

My brows furrow in confusion. But as I accept the envelope, I confirm that it has my name scribbled at the top in immaculate penmanship.

Miss Darcy O'Sullivan.

More odd is the fact that there is no sender, nor a return address.

"Thank you, Stevie. Why don't you go back to the others. Lunch will be served soon," I smile at him as I ruffle his thick locks.

His lips spread into a huge smile as he grabs my waist in a tight hug, whispering a muffled *I love you, Miss O'Sullivan*, before he dashes away, his cheeks already tinged with red.

Shaking my head at his little stunt, I place the envelope under my arm as I head back to my room in the staff quarters.

Saint Russell Boarding School is one of the top boarding schools in the country, and though a requirement of my position had been to live on its premises, I'd been more than happy to do so considering the generous remuneration.

Reaching the hallway, I walk down to the third door before I knock carefully three times.

I share my room with Allison, another teacher who'd joined at the same time I did. I'd been extremely lucky to share the room with only one other person.

As a young child, I'd always slept in the same room with my mother, and after her death when I was ten years old, I was entrusted to an orphanage. There, the rooms could have eight or ten people at a time. Compared to that, the lodgings at Saint Russell are spectacular.

"Come in," Allison calls out in a groggy voice.

I push the door open, and Allison shuffles in her bed in an attempt to get up.

"No," I immediately call out. "Don't move on my account."

"It seems that every day you see me only in bed," Allison adds dryly, her mouth quirking up.

"It's not your fault you caught the flu. In fact," I say as I put the envelope on my bed before going over to hers. Placing my hand on her forehead, I brush it across her skin, checking her temperature.

"You're not boiling anymore," I say, noting her chapped lips. Turning to the bed table, I pour her some water and hand her the glass. "Now you just need to hydrate yourself and you'll be as good as new."

"What would I do without you?" She smiles, shaking her head. "You should have applied for the nurse position, not the English teacher one. Everyone knows by now that you have a healing touch."

"You know I couldn't have," I flush lightly at her praise. "I didn't have the qualifications for that."

I'd been lucky enough that the sisters at the orphanage I grew up in had sponsored my training as a teacher, and upon finishing my course, they'd successfully placed me with Saint Russell.

Without them I would have never gotten where I am today and I am eternally grateful for everything they've done for me—particularly Sister Mary and Sister Anne. From the beginning they'd been my biggest champions, helping me succeed when the odds had been stacked against me.

"I can't imagine anyone being better than you. My fever didn't go down with all the medicine the doctor gave me, but it went away after that tea you made."

"Just lucky, I guess," I smile, smoothing her blanket around the edges.

I'd always been drawn to medicine and the art of healing, and at one point I might have entertained the thought of pursuing a career in it. But I couldn't have refused the sisters' offer knowing how hard they had looked out for me over the years. So I'd simply continued with teaching. As much as I enjoy preparing teas and tinctures, I love spending time with the kids and teaching them about the wonders of literature.

Any way I look at it, I can't help but feel like I've been continuously blessed with good fortune.

"What's that?" Allison points to the envelope.

"Oh, I forgot about it. I got mail," I quip enthusiastically. Except for the sisters, I don't have anyone who would send me anything, so my best estimate is that it's a package from them.

"I'm jealous. Those nuns of yours treat you better than my own mother treats me," Allison grumbles, but I know it's not with ill intent.

Sister Mary always sends me fabrics to make myself some clothes, while Sister Anne makes sure to send me a new book every month. It's their way of letting me

know I'm always in their thoughts. In return, I make sure to send them tinctures I make with local plants.

"They are lovely, aren't they?" I sigh absentmindedly. Despite being orphaned so young, I consider myself incredibly lucky. I have a job and people who care about me. I have a roof over my head, a place to sleep and warm food in my belly. Regardless of how you look at my situation, it's far above average—certainly more than a lot of people can boast about.

Perhaps that is why I am reluctant to confess that there is something missing.

I love and am loved in return, yet there is a gaping hole in my heart that seemingly bleeds invisible blood.

It's something I've lived with my entire life—this sense of missing something integral to my being. But it's also something I've never admitted to anyone else. To do so would make me seem ungrateful, and that is the last thing I am.

I am just...restless.

Straining a smile, I take a seat on my bed as I open a drawer and rummage for a paper cutter. Carefully slicing the top of the envelope, I sneak my hand inside to pull the contents.

My eyes widen as I spot three different smaller envelopes—one very thick, and two other slim ones—together with a jewelry case.

"Is it the nuns?" Allison probes.

I shake my head slowly, blinking as I take in the contents. Once more, I turn the envelope around searching for the sender but there is none. Even the smaller ones are blank.

"Who is it then?"

"I don't know," I answer softly.

Curiosity gets the best of me as I open the thick envelope first, a gasp making its way past my lips as I see the green hue of the notes. And upon pulling them out, I'm shocked to see wads of cash unlike I've ever beheld in my life.

"Darcy, that's..."

"Who would send me so much money?" I whisper. My body is frozen in shock as I can't take my eyes off the money.

Allison is quicker than me as she comes to my side, taking a seat on the bed and counting the money.

"It's one thousand," she whispers, the awe in her voice mirroring my own. "One thousand dollars, Darcy. It's a quarter of what we make in a year."

"But how..."

"Check the letters," she points to the other two.

Using the paper cutter, I open the first envelope, fishing a neatly folded letter out of it and what looks to be a train ticket.

"So? What does it say?" Allison asks impatiently as my eyes scan the contents of the letter.

"It's from Mr. Vaughan. A lawyer," I mutter, unable to believe my eyes. "He claims he's writing on behalf of my biological father, Leo Pierce, who..." I swallow uncomfortably. "Recently passed away."

"Your biological father?" She frowns.

I'd already told her that I never knew who my father was. My mother had never revealed that information, and on the off-chance I asked about him, she would tell me he wasn't a good man.

"There's more," I whisper as I wet my lips. "He requests my presence at Leo Pierce's funeral, which will take place in three days, and for the reading of the will since I am included in it. But for that he wants me to come to my father's hometown—Fairydale."

"Fairydale," she frowns. "I've never heard of it."

"Apparently it's somewhere in Massachusetts," I say as I look at the train ticket.

It's labeled Boston-Fairydale, with a flexible date range of August 28th to August 31st.

"And he gave you a thousand dollars for what? It doesn't make sense," she comments.

"He says it's to make sure I have everything I need until I reach Fairydale."

And that's not everything.

Mr. Vaughan relates that I have other family members—two half-siblings. But going by their ages...

I barely stifle the gasp at the realization that not only am I illegitimate, but also most likely the product of an affair. And his wife will be there.

No, I couldn't possibly go knowing I would be unwelcome.

But as I read on, Mr. Vaughan assures me of the opposite.

"The family wishes to make your acquaintance as soon as possible," I read out loud.

"So you're going?" Allison asks, startling me from my daze. "You need to. If he gave you a thousand dollars for everything you need, then who knows what's in that will."

"I don't know..." I murmur, uncertainty clawing at me.

Once I finish the letter, I read it again. Something uncomfortable tugs at my chest, but I do not know what.

A thousand questions go through my mind at once.

Why now?

My father never bothered to contact me while he was still alive, so why would he go through the trouble of leaving me anything in his will?

But more than anything, how did this Mr. Vaughan track me to Saint Russell? How could he have known where I live unless...

"He must have known all along where I was," I whisper, blinking to chase away the sudden moisture coating my lashes.

My father, this Leo Pierce, must have known where I was all this time. And even knowing that, he left me to be raised by strangers, all alone in the world.

The realization leaves me reeling.

Instead of joy at finding out I have additional family, or that I may stand to inherit some good money, all I feel is unease.

Yet once that train of thought starts, nothing can stop it.

The money for my teaching course. My placement at Saint Russell. Was it all a farce, too? Were the sisters in on this as well?

I'd always wondered why me. Why was it that only I had been blessed to have so many things paid for when others could only dream of the same.

At the time, I'd thought I showed most promise, and it had been an entirely merit-based process. Now...the doubts are clamoring.

Allison takes the letter from my hand, quickly reading it from beginning to end.

"He's saying it's *mandatory* for you to go for the reading of the will," she points to the word mandatory in the letter—a word I'd skipped over as I was digesting everything.

"And if I don't?"

"Maybe they won't be able to read it? What if it's a condition for everyone to be there before they read it?"

"You're right," I sigh.

But before I can make a decision, I turn my attention to the other envelope and the jewelry case.

"Don't tell me they sent you some expensive jewelry, too?" Allison groans. "Your father must have been rich as hell."

I don't reply as I carefully open the box, almost afraid of what the contents would reveal.

And just as I'd suspected, it's something that must be worth a fortune.

It's a swan brooch encrusted with diamonds—or at least what I assume to be diamonds. The back is entirely made of gold, while the white front must be some type of porcelain.

As my fingers brush over the smooth, luxuriant surface, a shiver of awareness travels down my back—almost as if I'd done the exact thing countless times before.

Both Allison and I are staring in awe at the little accessory, knowing we'd probably never seen anything as fine in our lives.

But as the shock soon wears off, a disappointment unlike any other settles in my bones.

Though I'd gotten wonderful opportunities throughout my life, I'd always felt as if I had worked for them. Yes, luck had factored in the equation, but I'd also done everything in my power to be deserving of my good fortune.

The letter from Mr. Vaughan, the monetary gift and now this priceless brooch I am staring at are telling me all the previous *luck* had been nothing more than calculated interventions.

"Open the letter," Allison places the small envelope in my hands.

With shaky fingers, I slice through the paper, in the process cutting myself.

"Ah," I startle as a drop of blood falls onto the white of the paper. Bringing my finger to my mouth, I suck on the small cut.

"You're emotional. It's normal," Allison assures me. "Let me help," she says as she takes out a square black carton and a key. My name is written in gold lettering on one side of the carton, while on the other it's an address—*12 Astor Place*.

"What's this?" My friend frowns. "A key to what?" she blinks.

"I honestly don't know, Allison. I can't make sense of any of this," I say honestly.

My heart is beating loudly in my chest, my head swarming with confusion the more I think of all the implications.

Today I found out I had a father. Today I also found out I *lost* a father.

And while neither seem to affect me much, the idea that Leo Pierce must have known about me—must have been keeping *track* of me—is unnerving.

"Why would he not take me in?" I voice out my utmost concern. "If he knew where I was—what I was doing—why not reach out? Why do I find out about him now, when he's already dead?"

Allison is silent for a moment, merely regarding me intently.

Though I'm not yet crying, frustration, anguish and pain must all be etched on my features.

"You can only find out why by going there."

I bring my teeth over my lower lip as I turn my gaze to everything I'd received—the information that had just turned my life upside down. At this point, money is the last of my worries, even though I've just been gifted one thousand dollars as if it was pocket change. I'm simply terrified of the truth, and how that would change everything I've known so far about my life.

"I don't know," I shake my head.

The truth is that I am scared about what I could find out. Yet if I don't go...the doubts will keep clawing at me.

Taking a deep breath, I gather all the files to put them back in the envelope, unwittingly smearing some blood from my finger on the black carton. I wipe it as best as I can before placing everything in my nightstand.

"I can't make such a decision now," I tell Allison. "I'm too conflicted," I purse my lips.

"Take your time, but I don't think you can take too long," she tells me carefully, and I know her words to be true.

Because if I *must* be present, my sense of responsibility tells me I can't *not* go.

I make Allison another cup of my special brew before I excuse myself, telling her I need some time to think things through.

My schedule is done for the day so I can go to my usual spot on the roof of Albert Hall. Only faculty have the keys to the roof, but no one ever goes there.

Dropping by the dining hall first to pack some food, I then sneak to the back stairs, making my way to the roof. Immediately, the fragrant, warm summer wind brushes against my face, lulling me into a deceptive sense of comfort.

Taking a seat on the ground, I rest my back against the wall and release a tired breath.

Though my body is relaxed at being in a familiar environment, my mind is continuously at war.

Why only now?

Why had Leo Pierce never reached before? Surely if he left me something in his will, then he must have held *some* affection for me.

The answer, though, is staring me right in the face—or, as much as I can make sense of it.

He was a married man when he took up with my mother and got her pregnant. At the time, he must have felt embarrassed by the fact, so he'd hidden it. Only in death did he have the courage to admit to the world that he had another child—one he'd never once looked in the eye. In the end, this only amounts to a dying man's regret.

Yet regardless of my feelings on the matter, it seems it's imperative I go—for the other members of the family who might be waiting for me to wrap things up, and also for my own state of mind.

I know myself.

Eventually, the what ifs would get to me, eroding at my subconscious until they'd bleed into my consciousness and never let me go. The more I'd try to bury this matter, the more it would try to resurface.

Then there's the curiosity.

I have...siblings.

Bringing my finger to my lips, I absentmindedly trail my tongue around the cut in an attempt to soothe the light sting.

Mr. Vaughan had mentioned two half-siblings—a brother, August, and a sister, Grace.

It's hard to believe that there are other people out there who share the same blood—the idea almost surreal.

Though I'd had some friends at the orphanage, jealousy and distance had ultimately cut all ties. I no longer kept in contact with anyone, and I'd be lying if that hadn't hurt me.

Allison had been a godsend, and in her I'd found a good friend.

Still, August and Grace are my siblings. My only living relatives.

Could I go on my entire life without knowing them? Maybe I could have, before I was aware of their existence. But now that I know, I can't simply ignore that too.

The more I dwell on it, the more my mind is made up.

I need to go to Fairydale. But I also need to make sure the claims in these letters are legitimate, and for that I need to have a discussion with Sister Mary and Sister Anne.

The following day, I start putting my affairs in order so I may leave soon.

I speak with the headmistress and she grants me a one month leave—with deducted pay, of course. Then I pack some of my clothes and necessities in a small suitcase.

Though the train ticket I'd gotten had been from Boston to Fairydale, I'm going to take a small detour by going to the orphanage in Worcester first to have a conversation with the sisters. If they confirm the information in the letters is accurate, I will travel straight to Fairydale via Boston. It might be a longer journey, but I'd rather be safe. I've read of a number of inheritance scams in the newspaper, and though I doubt scammers would give me one thousand dollars upfront, the reality is that I am an unmarried woman with no immediate family, which could make me an ideal target.

"You're awfully brave to do this," Allison comments as she watches me fold my clothes in my suitcase. "But smart to check with the nuns too. I would have jumped at the first chance of some extra money," she states candidly.

"It is a lot of money," I nod, thinking the contents of the will must involve much more than I'd already been given. "But I've never been concerned about that. I am comfortable as I am," I shrug slightly. "I like my job, and I don't have any personal expenses that would necessitate a lot of money."

"Maybe because it's all you've ever known," Allison points out. "Think about all the things you could buy—the dresses, the purses, the *shoes*," she exclaims dreamily. "Or think about the trips you could make. Didn't you say you'd like to visit Europe one day?"

I nod.

I've been dying to visit England since the first time I read *Jane Eyre*. But I've also been aware all along what a foolish dream that is.

I am a teacher. And while I might have a comfortable yearly wage, it's nowhere near what one would need to afford an overseas trip.

"You might be able to if they give you a lot of money," Allison giggles. "You could go to London. See those fancy palaces. Maybe fall in love with an Englishman," she winks at me.

I blush, looking away as I feel myself redden from head to toe.

Allison has a beau she visits on the weekends. He's a banker at the Bank of Boston, in his late twenties, and thoroughly set for success. They've been talking about marriage for a while, and Allison is convinced he is going to propose soon.

Through her, though, I've gotten to experience vicariously what it means to be in love and have a relationship. And despite my protests at times, she'd even shared details about their intimate life.

To my virgin ears it had all sounded so scandalous, yet I couldn't help but feel the allure of it—of finding that one person you could share all of yourself with.

Although I am content with my life as it is, I have to admit that I've always dreamed of meeting my own prince charming. Maybe some charming Mr. Rochester or a brooding Heathcliff. Yet despite that, I've never made an effort to date.

I've been to some social events, and I've even been asked out by some handsome gentlemen. Every time, for some unknown reason, I turned them down.

Here I am, twenty-four and I have never been on a date.

But even if I were to come into some money, would my life change so drastically?

Would I finally have the courage to go out into the world and do the things I've always wanted to do? Somehow, I doubt that.

Still, at least I'll have the option.

"Maybe," I mumble. "Money can certainly buy a lot of things."

But there's the unspoken. Can it really buy happiness?

I know Allison would answer positively in a second, and objectively, I should agree. But there's something niggling at my conscience. The same restlessness I've always encountered makes me think there's something more. A freedom unlike any other that has nothing to do with the material, maybe not even the corporeal.

Somewhere in the world, there's a certain happiness that calls to me—something ineffable that speaks to my soul rather than my mind. Perhaps I do not know what it is now, but there's something within me that tells me I will—when I am ready, I will.

"I hope you won't forget about me if you suddenly become a millionaire," Allison jokes, and I shake my head in amusement.

"His family lives in a town called Fairydale. I doubt that's a popular destination for millionaires," I say as I fold a couple of clean shirts.

On a whim, we'd spread a map and tried to pinpoint Fairydale. It's a historic town in north-eastern Massachusetts, about an hour east of Ipswich, but we couldn't find much information about it.

"Besides, I will have to split the money with his other children, who are probably more deserving than I am based on the fact that they are legitimate and..."

"Stop right there," Allison suddenly stands up, before sitting down again as a wave of dizziness assaults her.

I make to move to her side but she puts her hand up, stopping me.

"Why would you be less deserving? If anything, he should give you more because he was never there for you. At least his other children got to spend time with him. What did you get?"

I purse my lips.

Her words have merit. But there's a discomfort inside of me every time I think about the money—almost as if it isn't mine to take, regardless of whether it's been given to me. It's the same discomfort I feel every time I think about the thousand dollars I'd placed at the bottom of my suitcase.

"Do you think they will hate me?" I ask on a whisper.

How could they not, though? I was the product of an affair, and I was coming to their home to take some of their money. Regardless of the fact that Mr. Vaughan had assured me the family knew of my existence and desired to get to know me, I'm still a little wary about it.

"Who knows," Allison shrugs. "They might, or they might not. You're going there to find out."

I chuckle nervously. Sometimes her honesty hurts. I'm already taking the risk of a lifetime by going to a foreign location. I don't want to think that I might end up the most hated person in that town.

"All done," I take a deep breath when my suitcase is closed.

I don't own many items, but because I'm meeting these people for the first time, I want to make a good impression. As such, I've packed up only the more qualitative pieces of clothing I own—a couple of shirts and a pair of trousers, a skirt, two dresses, a nightgown and some underthings.

The following day, I break my fast with Allison before I leave for the train station.

"Be careful. Give me a call if you're able to," she says as she wraps her arms around me in a warm hug.

"Of course. Who else would I tell anything to, if not you?" I smile, kissing her cheek.

"Safe travels, Darcy. I know you'll find what you're looking for."

Waving goodbye, I get on the train. The journey to Worcester takes close to two hours. I'd already phoned Sister Mary and Sister Anne to let them know I was coming, and they'd promised they would be waiting at the station for me.

Sure enough, the moment I get off the train, they are there, looking as bright and beautiful as ever.

"My dear Darcy," Sister Anne exclaims as she draws me into a big hug. "I didn't think we'd see you so soon."

"Thank you so much for waiting for me."

"Nonsense. We see each other so rarely now, of course we'd come for our favorite girl," Sister Mary said.

Giving them a sweet smile, we start chatting as we make our way to the main street to hail a cab, which I insist on paying for. They are a little peeved at me, but soon our interactions go back to normal as they tell me about their newcomers and that they'd used some donations to build another wing in the dormitory, which they offer to show to me as soon as we get to the orphanage.

It's only a few hours later that we close ourselves in their office to have the *serious* talk I'd requested. And as we take our seats at the small table, I belatedly recognize the worry marring their faces and the fact that all this idle chat had been nothing but stalling.

"We know why you're here," Sister Anne says without preliminaries.

My eyes widen as I slide my gaze from one woman to another.

With their lips pursed, their features stern, they look guilty.

"How..." I whisper.

Sister Mary rises from her chair, going to one of her cabinets and removing a small box from a hidden compartment.

Bringing the box in front of me, she opens it, presenting the contents to me.

I freeze as I spot an exact replica of the swan brooch I'd received in the mail from Mr. Vaughan.

But more than anything, I feel myself growing cold as all the pieces fall into place, this one piece of jewelry the confirmation I needed.

"You knew who my father was," I whisper, slowly looking up.

Sister Mary purses her lips, but eventually gives me a light nod.

"Your mother knew she was dying when she asked us to take care of you," she starts, taking her seat across from me once more. "She was sick and penniless and she didn't know what else to do. All she had left was that brooch, part of an identical set from what I gathered later on. She didn't say much about your father at the time. She didn't even mention he might be an option for your custody so we didn't pry."

"After she died, we were to sell the brooch and use the funds to provide for you and your education," Sister Anne continued. "Knowing it could fetch a pretty dollar, I went to get the brooch appraised by a professional, and while we were waiting for an answer from the jeweler we got an anonymous message inquiring where we had gotten the brooch from. We corresponded back and forth for a while before a lawyer, Mr. Vaughan, appeared to personally look at the brooch. It was then that he showed us the twin brooch and recounted that they were custom made and the only one who could have had the second one was your mother. When we told him about Lisette and you, he was shocked."

"From what we gathered, your mother left your father while she was still pregnant and he couldn't find her," Sister Mary adds.

I blink, slowly taking in the information. My mother had run away from my father?

There are vague memories in which she'd remind me my father was a bad man, but she'd never told me why. And I never asked for more. Sensing her discomfort with the subject, I'd simply acted as if I didn't have a father—and never wanted one either.

Could it be that she didn't know he was married? That she found out after the affair had already been consummated? It would make sense why she'd brand him as a bad man for stepping out on his vows and potentially deceiving her in the process.

As soon as that train of thought surfaces, a calm settles over me.

I may not have too many memories of my mother, but she was a fine woman who did her best to raise me despite her circumstances. She'd been unmarried and on the verge of poverty and still, she'd managed to give me love and a safe environment to grow up in. I'm happy there is a high possibility she didn't willingly participate in the affair—or, at least did not know it *was* an affair.

"That doesn't explain why he never came for me," I speak slowly, doing my best to remain rational despite my emotions running high. To say the last couple of days have been a whirlpool of emotions would be an understatement.

Sister Mary and Sister Anne share a knowing look before Sister Anne speaks.

"He was married and already had a family. He thought you would be better off with us," she explains, though I fail to see the logic of it.

Who could possibly be better off at an orphanage over a family? Despite my luck at having found the two sisters, I know my case is a fortunate one. Most orphanages are devoid of love and warmth or any semblance of a familial feeling.

"He did promise to provide for you, and he made several donations to the orphanage as well as continuous payments for your personal needs and education," Sister Mary confirms what I'd been suspecting all along—that nothing was earned.

"Everything?" I ask in a soft voice.

They nod.

"He wanted you to have the best despite not being able to be there for you," she gives me a sad smile. "And he did hope that you could meet at some point when you grew up."

"Not anymore," I add, and their expressions don't change.

They know.

"We received a letter from his lawyer that he'd passed, and that you were included in his will. Mr. Vaughan knew it might come as a shock to you, so he sent you the brooch as proof."

I nod slowly.

Everything seems to fit in place well—*too* well. And though there are no holes in the narrative that I can immediately identify, there's something too coincidental about this scenario for my liking.

Sister Mary and Sister Anne had raised me to be judicious and always question everything. Despite that, they are now looking me in the eye and expecting me to believe everything.

If he hoped he might meet me as an adult, then why did he never communicate after I turned eighteen? Or after I got my teaching position? There were many opportunities for him to reach out, just as there were many years of me being *grown up*.

Somehow, I can't wrap my mind around the explanation.

Just as doubts start drowning me, I shake myself.

These are my mentors—my surrogate mothers. I can't just doubt them. If they say that's how it happened, then it must be how it happened.

"You must go, dear Darcy," Sister Mary takes my hands in hers. "I'm terribly sorry you had to find out like this and that you won't get to meet your father. But at least you can meet your other family?" she adds on a hopeful tone.

"Did you ever meet him?"

"No," she sighs. "We met Mr. Vaughan, and we corresponded with your father but we never personally met."

"I see," I slowly nod, forcing a smile. "If you assure me that it's the right thing to do, then I'm going."

"Wonderful," both sisters exclaim in unison.

"One other thing," I remember to inquire. "Do you know anything about Fairydale, his hometown? It's farther than I've ever traveled and..."

"It's just a town. Don't worry too much," Sister Mary interrupts, waving her hand dismissively. "From what I gathered, it is a haven for rich people who want to spend some time away from civilization. And you know those rich people. They value their privacy," she adds, almost jokingly.

"Indeed," I reply dryly.

"But if you encounter any hardship, you know we're one phone call away, dear," Sister Anne adds, giving the other nun a harsh look.

I force a smile, refraining from adding that I doubt a small town would have many functional telephones.

We spend the rest of the day chatting, and they offer me a place to sleep for the night before catching the first train in the morning.

It seems that I am bound for Fairydale, after all.

And as I board the train the following day, I try to cheer myself up on my new adventure and put my doubts aside.

Allison was right. I need to look at the bright side. Most likely I will be coming into some money—a sizable amount according to the nuns—and I will also get to meet my half-siblings.

What could possibly go wrong in a town that rhymes with fairytale?