

## One: Winter ~ Lux

With Cantasian Colonies warring in the east and the west for their independence, the people living in coastal towns could not imagine life continuing beyond the battlefields. Brave soldiers of the guard fought and died, painting the shorelines red. Women and children were torn from their homes and forced into foster care or homelessness. Many left their homes to live with distant relatives with no imminent plans for return.

But life continued.

Women filled in where men abandoned their jobs to enlist. Children continued to be educated in overflowing schools. Men courted women, the wealthy held lavish parties, weddings, funerals and graduation ceremonies pushed life forward.

Life kept going.

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Standing in front of the vanity mirror, Lux Belanger finished doing up the white buttons on her red polka-dotted knee-length dress. Her younger sister, Myla, tapped her foot while she waited. Lux's eldest sister, Kaye, stood guard at the door listening for their mother's footsteps. Their parents were strict but not because they distrusted the girls; it was the world they didn't trust. Burke was a member of the guard. He knew what darkness lay in the world. Lux and Myla would have been shackled to the wall if their mother knew what they were doing.

"I... I changed my mind," Nikki, the second youngest, stammered. "It's... it's a bad idea."

"It's a great idea!" Myla exclaimed excitedly.

Myla had been ready since their mother went to bed, and was anxiously smoothing out the sheer black fabric of her dress. Her dress was simple. It had a high scoop neckline, and a waist belt with a red ribbon. It was knee-length, and she wore a pair of matching black shoes. Her jacket hung over her arm while she waited. She had done her dark blonde hair up in two combs with a twist. Myla looked beautiful and much older than her fifteen years.

"Shush!" Kaye hissed and flung back her blonde hair as she turned. "Unless you want to get caught."

Lux moved to the bed. She sat beside Nikki who looked scared. Lux put her arm around Nikki and squeezed her. Lux knew that Nikki longed to escape with her and Myla, but Nikki was scared of what their mother would do.

"You don't have to," Lux assured her. "You can stay with Kaye."

"I want to but.."

"Scaredy-cat, scaredy-cat!" Myla taunted.

"Myla!"

"Okay, okay, I'll meet you outside." Myla rolled her eyes.

Myla climbed out of the window, careful not to get her dress caught. Their mother would know something was amiss if there was a sudden tear in one of their nice dresses. She disappeared into the night and quietly crossed the lawn. Silence followed Myla's exit. Lux turned her attention back to Nikki.

"We'll tell you all about it," Lux hugged her.

"Be home by midnight," Kaye reminded.

Lux rose from the bed and crossed the room to the window. She climbed out and tiptoed across the snow-covered lawn to where her sister waited in the shadows of the old tree.

"Ready?" Myla asked her.

"Let's see how the rich like to party."

Lux led the way towards the dirt road, darting behind trees and bushes to hide their dark figures from light illuminating from the windows. The snow-covered ground provided enough reflection to help light their way across the road and through the snowy fields. Since arriving at their grandfather's, they had perfected the art of sneaking out of the house, and seldom got caught. It was all thanks to their sisters, and without them, Lux and Myla would have very short leashes.

Kincardie Hall was home to the wealthiest family in Belhaven County, and was roughly a two-mile walk from their grandfather's house. They would be late arriving and likely not have a lot of time to enjoy the party, if they could get inside. At these functions there was always someone at the door checking invitations upon arrival. Lux had made the assumption that this person would no longer be there if they showed up later. She had been right. There were two men outside enjoying a pipe. Lux held Myla back, waiting until they were ready to go inside. The two girls crept across the snowy lawns and followed close behind the men into the building.

"Excuse me," Lux spoke up and tapped one of the men on the shoulder. "Can you point me to where our coats go again? I always get turned around whenever I attend to functions here."

The man directed Lux and Myla to a room where the guests coats were being kept. She thanked him, and the sisters disappeared to discard their coats.

The theme of the party was Winter Wonderland. Snowflakes hung from the ceiling, and glittering lights illuminated the room from all directions. White cloths draped over the walls giving the room a clean look. In the corner, a fake snowman stood with iced-over trees and a bench beside him. A man took photographs of guests with the smiling snowman. A band played light classical music, and couples danced around the room while others remained at tables talking and laughing. No one noticed the young girls entering, and if they did, they took no notice.

"Just pretend..." Myla cut her off to race towards the dance floor. "Like you belong here."

With a shrug, Lux moved farther into the room. She took in everything as she made a loop around. Lux tried to mask her discomfort at the crowd of unrecognisable faces; they probably knew more about each other's social lives than the war. She stopped at a table with desserts on it and tucked a loose strand of light blonde hair back as her eyes moved around the room. With caution, Lux took a sugar cookie, and bit into it. It was divine, better than her mother's.

"I just come for the food," a voice informed her.

Lux looked over. A boy, roughly her age, stood beside her with a plate full of squares. He was tall and lean yet still appeared to look almost fragile in his posture. He had brown hair, which hung in his grey eyes. His face looked kind and handsome with angular features. He wore dress pants and a white shirt. She imagined he had a tie somewhere, but he probably ditched it when his parents weren't watching.

"My mum makes most of it," he added. "The food."

"Huh." Lux took a second bite of her cookie.

"Are you new in town?" he asked her.

"Not since summertime."

"How come I have never seen you around?"

"You probably look with your eyes closed."

He let out a laugh. "I'm Grant."

"Lux."

"Lux... do you have a last name?"

"Do you?"

He laughed again. "Westwood."

"Belanger."

"Well, Lux Belanger, do you want to find a table and help me devour these squares? Or are you going to tell me you're self-conscious about your eating habits?" he asked. It was a tempting offer. "You have crumbs on your lip, by the way."

"What?" She grabbed a cloth napkin and dabbed her mouth while he cheerfully added more to the plate.

"Come on," he grabbed her hand and tugged her towards an empty table. "I challenge you."

"To what?"

As curious as Lux was to know what he challenged her to, she could not ignore the sensation she felt with her hand nestled in his. Though the act of taking her hand was no more than an innocent gesture, Lux had never experienced unsupervised physical contact with a member of the opposite sex. Her hand felt warm in his, and beneath her skin she felt a tingling sensation.

"To help me eat all this," he threw himself into a chair. "It'll be fun, and after, if you need to puke, I'll hold your hair."

"Charming," she rolled her eyes but took the bait and sat down across from him. It was not an every day occurrence that Lux Belanger got to spend time with an attractive stranger. "On the count of three, we dig in?"

"Nah, we just eat, and you tell me about yourself," he picked up a marshmallow square. "I'll keep track of your intake, but I'll still win."

Lux watched him put the entire square into his mouth with wide eyes. How was his mouth large enough to fit the square without choking? His ability was distracting, and further proved that he could win. His confidence that he could beat her added to both his charm and her desire to prove him wrong. Unfortunately, she had a feeling he had a hollow leg to fill. She could already picture the following morning huddled near the toilet. Still, Lux plucked up a second sugar cookie and ate it with a challenge in her brown eyes. It made him grin foolishly and her heart fluttered. She knew she would regret this in the morning.

"Do you go to school?" he asked, taking another square, they were both at two now.

"Home school."

"Like sewing and cooking, and stuff like that?"

"Oh Grant, now you're getting personal," she joked. Lux couldn't believe how easy it was to joke with him.

"What? Huh?" he stared at her in confusion briefly. "Have another cookie. You're falling behind."

"You're going to make me fat."

"I know what you mean. I worry about my weight all the time, but I just can't help myself when it comes to sweets."

Lux was stunned into silence and stared at him. She wasn't sure if he was serious or joking until he chuckled. She let out a small laugh, and a sigh. He was making fun of her, that's what had just happened. And he did it so well she hadn't even realised it at first. She picked a marshmallow off a square and threw it at him. It hit him in the chest.

"Hey!"

"It's not nice to make fun of a lady."

"Aw Lux, I wasn't making fun of you," he assured her. "I like a woman with a little extra baggage. There's more to love."

He shifted the plate of sweets closer to her. "Have another."

Lux took another. They managed to plough through a quarter of the plate before Lux couldn't eat another thing. She'd eaten eight sweets, and Grant had devoured eleven. He was working on twelve with a winning smile. She couldn't see where Grant put that much food, he was all leg and wiry build. If she took one more bite, her stomach would explode, and he was quickly making his way to twenty.

"You'll have to practise for the next time," Grant shoved the twelfth dessert into his mouth.

"Next time?"

"Sure. Unless you're just good at pretending you like me."

"Oh... no, I just... I don't know if..." Lux stopped stammering for a moment to figure her thoughts out. "There might not be another time."

"You're not supposed to be here, are you?"

Lux averted her eyes from his. "No."

Grant made a face. She couldn't tell what it meant, but he masked it quickly with a smile. The moment when he realised she was socially beneath him, and they could no longer associate with one another was the moment she had been expecting. Lux took a deep breath and opened her mouth to apologise or say something to ward off the sudden awkwardness between them.

"So... I won't see you again?" he clarified, but before she could answer, he continued. "That's a terrifying idea."

"Wh-why?" She stammered and flushed at his comment, feeling something churn in her stomach.

"Because I haven't met any other girl who willingly has an eating competition with me."

"You're just spending time with the wrong girls," Lux rose. "Come with me."

"Where?"

"We're going to get our picture taken so that you can remember me."

He didn't look thrilled about the idea, but Lux grabbed his hand and dragged him out of the chair. If anything, she wanted a picture with him, so she didn't forget him. She had his face etched into

her mind but wanted some physical proof that meeting him wasn't just something she had dreamed up.

"You realise we have to pay for those pictures, and then they take time to be developed, and then you have to pick them up or pay extra to have them delivered," he filled her in.

Lux stopped. She hadn't thought of that. She couldn't afford pictures, and she certainly couldn't pick them up without drawing attention to herself. If they arrived at her grandfather's house, her mother would find them and throw them out. Then punish her for disobedience.

"Forget it, Mum will cover it," Grant gave in.

Lux looked over at him, relieved. "You'll have to pick them up too."

"I knew that was coming," he tugged her hand to continue towards the photographer. When they arrived, Grant pushed her onto the bench next to the snowman. "Smile."

Two flashes went off as the photographer took their picture. Lux was not ready for the bright lights, and she knew she was going to look horrendous in the photographs.

"Give me your address," Grant instructed. "I'll have one mailed to you once they are ready."

"Lux!" a female voice called out.

Looking up, Lux spotted her sister running over. She looked dishevelled. Her hair was falling out of place, and her lipstick smeared across her cheek. She was clutching a cloth napkin to her lips as she ran straight for them. Lux stole a look at Grant and then focused back on her sister.

"We have to... hi," Myla noticed Grant.

"This is my sister, Myla," Lux introduced them. "This is Grant."

"Hi."

"Nice to meet you, Lux, we have to go," Myla nodded and continued. "Some of the uh... gentlemen, are getting too frisky out there."

Lux stole a glance around her sister. An older gentleman with a bald spot on the back of his head had a younger woman in his arms. From Lux's perspective, she appeared to be attempting to escape but was not having any luck. There was no doubt in her mind that Myla had escaped the same kind of fate as the woman on the dance floor. Lucky for Myla, she was slippery as an eel when it came to avoiding uncomfortable situations. Their mother always said Myla lacked manners.

"Okay, okay, go get our jackets." Lux shoved Myla towards the door and turned to Grant. "I'm sorry... I have to..."

"Go? I got that."

"Yeah," Lux let out a small sigh and started to leave.

"Lux, wait!" Grant called. "The pictures?"

"Send them to the flower shop in Lilles," she informed him and waved. "Bye!"

## Two: Winter ~ Lux

For as long as Lux could recall, her grandparents insisted on Sunday night dinners with the family. Her grandmother did the cooking and always produced an enjoyable meal. With the war going on, meals had slowly changed from delicious and lavish, to stale and tasteless, like her mother was the cook instead. Dinner was served promptly at five-thirty; unless a guest was running late with sufficient reason, otherwise whoever was late did not eat. Lux had learned long ago how to survive these obscure rules and had discovered some of the best hiding places for a snack if someone missed a meal.

Since being relocated to their grandparents' home in Lilles, it had become expected that the girls took turns to help with meals and housework. At four forty-five in the afternoon, Lux was in the kitchen helping prepare vegetables from the garden for dinner. She had just finished peeling a carrot when there was a knock on the door.

"It's probably your uncle," her grandmother stated. "You'll answer it, won't you, dear?"

While her grandmother formed the request in a polite question, Lux knew better. It was an order disguised beautifully with manners. Lux wiped her hands on a towel before disappearing from the kitchen. She tried not to appear too eager to leave, but her grandmother always wore an overpowering amount of perfume, which made it difficult to breathe in close quarters. Her grandmother had a great sense of humour when it wasn't dampened by the expectations set upon her by society. She frowned more than she laughed.

Lux exited the kitchen to the large, highly decorated family room where her sisters sat together on a high-backed blush pink sofa with dark wooden arms. Their mother sat across



from them in a matching chair. Everyone held their needlepoint canvas and had various shades of wool on their laps. They sat upright, backs straight, and in complete silence. Lux felt immediately grateful she was peeling carrots with her grandmother. Needlepoint was not an expert area for her.

Through the family room was the foyer which the doors opened into. Lux drew the door open to reveal her uncle. He stood wrapped in his winter attire, except a hat, and shivering. Isaac, also known as Izzie Belanger, towered over most of the family except for Lux, who was exceptionally tall for a girl her age. He had dark blonde hair, which the wind had tousled on his way over, and frost had formed from the cold. He smiled down at Lux with dimples forming on his cheeks, and she could not help but beam back. Uncle Izzie had an infectious smile.

"Hello, my little dove." Izzie enveloped her in a hug, then whispered, "Climb out any windows lately?"

Lux let out a quiet giggle. "That's none of your business!"

"You'll tell me later then?"

"Yes."

Lux closed the door behind her uncle and took his jacket. She hung it in the wardrobe then waited as he removed his gloves, scarf and his boots. For some reason, Izzie never wore a hat, but he wore everything else to keep warm in the winter months. Lux didn't always understand him. When he was relieved of his winter gear, he stopped to look at her with an easy grin. Lux led her uncle back into the family room where Myla greeted him excitedly.

"Uncle Izzie!" she threw down her needlepoint and rushed into his embrace.

"Myla!" he exclaimed with equal excitement and hugged her tight.

"Isaac, you're causing a disruption, as always," Rhea informed him.

With a chuckle, he crossed the room to kiss her on the top of her head. "Every household needs a little disruption once in a while, dear sister-in-law."

Uncle Izzie shared a hug with Nikki and Kaye before he made himself comfortable on the remaining, empty couch. Myla gave up her needlepoint entirely to sit beside him while Rhea excused herself to the kitchen. While she had her rules, Rhea did not intervene with family bonding, especially since Izzie was the only uncle they had.

"Come sit." Uncle Izzie patted the couch cushion next to him once her mother was out of the room. "I have something for you."

That caught her attention. Lux had been trying to forget that she had given Uncle Izzie's shop address to Grant at the party, but it had been gnawing at her ever since. Part of her was saying he wasn't going to write and wanted nothing to do with her. The other part was telling her to be patient. He'd write when he had a chance. Lux didn't want to get too excited. She didn't want to risk disappointment when it wasn't what she expected.

"But before I give it to you," Uncle Izzie scrutinised her as she moved to the couch. "I have some questions."

Lux sat and stole a glance at Nikki, who shrugged. "Okay..."

Uncle Izzie produced an envelope from his vest pocket and held it out to Lux. "This arrived the other day, and I thought it must be a mistake."

Lux moved her eyes from the envelope to her uncle's face. He didn't look mad, that was a relief but looked interested and worried. Lux hated when he looked concerned. Uncle Izzie was the one adult in her life that she hated to worry. He did nothing but support them all. He was always on their side when it came to their parents' ridiculous rules. She inhaled and opened her mouth to speak, but no words came out.

"I asked myself then, why would my niece be receiving a letter from the Westwoods? Unless..."

"Unless what?" Lux asked with a little smile.

"Do you have a secret man in your life?"

"Not in the sense you're thinking," Lux replied. "We're just friends."

If this had been her mother asking, or her father, Lux would be trying to come up with lies. They didn't understand having male friends. The idea was as foreign as mixed schools and people who didn't attend church. Lux suddenly had herself wondering whether Grant attended church, but she shoved that thought aside. It wasn't necessary.

"Are you certain?" Uncle Izzie continued. "I'm all for you girls having gentleman callers so long as they do things the right way."

"Like to meet our parents and ask permission?" Nikki asked him with a hint of sarcasm. It rarely came out, but when it did Lux was always so proud.

With a chuckle, Uncle Izzie tugged Nikki into a tight hug. "No my little wallflower, meet your uncle and ask permission."

"You are the more reasonable adult in our lives." Lux poked him and received a high-pitched giggle.

He cleared his throat. "Yes, well. In this changing society, it's better to go with the flow instead of holding on to the past. Now, this friend..."

"Grant."

"Grant. Is he cute?"

Lux laughed and grabbed the envelope from his hands. "Wait, and you'll see."

Uncle Izzie let the envelope go. He settled back on the couch and waited. With a deep breath, Lux turned the envelope over in her hands. It was bulkier than she had anticipated it would be. Slowly, she opened the envelope, careful not to ruin it so that she might save the return address. The picture and a letter fell out onto her lap. Her uncle grabbed it before she had a chance to drop the envelope. He studied the image.

"Hmm... I suppose he is worth the secret." He turned it so Nikki could see. "What do you think, sweetheart?"

"Not bad," she grinned at Lux.

"If he's a gentleman, as he appears, I can approve." Uncle Izzie handed Lux back the picture.

She looked it over with a slow smile. Grant was just as cute as she remembered him being. Combined with what she knew of his personality, he might be her perfect match. She tucked the picture between the couch cushions temporarily and unfolded the letter. Her first thought was he had messy writing. She could barely make out if the first line even read "Dear Lux" or not. His lack of penmanship was soon forgotten as she skimmed the length of the letter. He'd taken the time to write.

He could have just mailed the picture, but he'd written her an actual letter, and even though she hadn't read a word of it yet, Lux already loved it.

As the clock chimed the hour, Rhea stepped out of the kitchen and spoke. "Myla, please come and set the table."

Myla groaned and pouted as she left the couch. Myla hated chores. They interfered with her plans of escaping and driving their parents crazy. Kaye offered to help, though Lux couldn't understand why she'd volunteer to spend more time with their overbearing mother and grandmother.

Uncle Izzie placed a hand on her shoulder. "Go put that somewhere private."

Lux tucked the letter around the picture and disappeared from the family room. She walked towards the front of the house where she and her sisters were staying. Lux took one more look at the picture and smiled before tucking it underneath her mattress. It was the only place she could think to hide it for now that her mother wouldn't immediately find. Lux would work on a better hiding place for his letters later. *Letters.* With a shake of her head, Lux started back to the family room. She wasn't even sure if there would be more letters. She was making assumptions again.

The conversation had moved from Lux's mysterious male friend onto a topic that Myla kept trying to divert back to the skirt Lux was attempting to make. Lux sunk into the couch and waited for the night to be over so she could return to her room and read Grant's letter. Her grandparents and mother had joined the party and were discussing the latest social scandals of the upper class. What, Lux realised, was making Myla uncomfortable was the recent Holiday party, and a certain young lady catching too much attention, and behaving inappropriately. Lux caught Myla's eye and grinned at her.

Whenever they would sneak out of the house, there was always some kind of gossip to follow.

For Lux, time seemed to be standing still, though the clock was ticking on the wall. Like any point in life when something exciting was around the corner, time seemed to pass slowly, but when there was something dreadful around the corner, time seemed to speed up. She couldn't wait for dinner to be ready. It meant that her night was coming to a close and she could be alone with Grant's letter. Lux couldn't recall a time where she was more anxious about something. Seconds ticked on. Her grandmother prodded at Kaye about the handsome young town guardsman, Adam Lindsay, that had been showing interest since they arrived in Lilles. Kaye had very little to say on the matter and perked up when their mother announced that dinner was ready.

Lux was the first one to move, not because she was hungry, but because she was anxious to get dinner over with and disappear. Eating would be a distraction for her though she'd still be thinking of the letter waiting unread under her mattress. She took her seat as the rest of the family followed. Her grandfather complained that he should be served wherever he sat. He was the eldest.

Though her grandmother had cooked most of the meal, Rhea placed the food on the table and said grace. When she finished, they began to pass the food around, filling their plates. Kaye's reprieve was short-lived as their grandmother continued to discuss Adam. Still, her attention focused on Rhea to determine if their mother had decided whether the young man would be suitable for Kaye. With Burke drafted into the war, that decision fell on Rhea.

"We'll have to have him over for dinner again soon," their grandfather suggested with authority.

Adam had been promoted to Town Guard in the last round of promotions before Burke, and those of similar and higher rank, had been sent away to fight in the civil war. He was the fifth man their mother had invited to spend time with Kaye, and the only one to attend more than one dinner. The rest of them had all liked Kaye. They had sent flowers and called about a second dinner, but Kaye had found reasons to convince their mother to decline. One suitor had smelled poorly while another had picked his teeth with his fork. One of her suitors had been more interested in Nikki, which led to the remaining daughters to enjoy their meal elsewhere. It was a real treat for Lux and her younger sisters. Kaye had no interest in marriage.

"Have you been following the details on the war?" their grandfather asked Uncle Izzie. "A civil warship crashed on the southern coast near Aberchuck. The king sent soldiers to investigate the crash hoping for some details on their next plan of attack. The news wasn't too specific."

"What do you suppose they hope to find?" Uncle Izzie responded curiously.

"Weapons, plans, an ambush of soldiers. I don't know, but highly doubt the rebels would let anything major out of sight," their grandfather replied.

"I heard the situation was getting desperate, and they were considering going outside the military for more soldiers, but that was just gossip in town. Have you heard anything of the sort, Isaac?" Rhea questioned.

Uncle Izzie worked in town at the flower shop. Gossip was his area of expertise, but this particular conversation had him grown eerily quiet. Uncle Izzie looked down shamefully then. It was a look that he often had when he was keeping something from the family. Silence filled the table as everyone looked at him and waited, knowing he had something to say.

Uncle Izzie slowly looked up at everyone, his eyes moving around the table with a smile to show it was all right. Lux knew that smile meant more. It was how he attempted to reassure them all, but it never worked for her, or her sisters. They knew him better.

"I have, actually," he answered quietly. "I've been called to the lines, every able-bodied man between the age of eighteen and sixty-five have been called upon. I leave next week."

"What?" Lux and Myla exclaimed together.

"You can't!" Lux added.

"Girls, please," Rhea instructed them to relax. "It's an honour to fight for your country, isn't it, Isaac?"

"Yes, of course."

Lux glanced at him. His face was hard, but she knew him better. He was masking a lot beneath that hard expression he wore. She didn't know what, but she knew there was something he was leaving unsaid. He probably didn't want to worry anyone. He was playing it up that everything would be all right. She looked down at her plate, not hungry anymore and wanting to excuse herself, but also wanting to remain. This dinner was their last dinner with Uncle Izzie for a long time.

"That's why you asked Kaye and Lux to help out in the flower shop," the grandfather put the pieces together. "You already knew you'd be leaving and needed someone to run the shop while you're gone."

Uncle Izzie nodded. "I should have told you then, but I was still processing."



The atmosphere around the dinner table was suddenly very gloomy. Nikki was the first one to be excused. Lux could see her fighting off tears as she left the table, and her footsteps disappeared down the hallway. Kaye followed her shortly after. Lux wasn't sure if she left because she was upset or if she was more worried about Nikki. One by one, the dinner table emptied, as everyone went to deal with their own emotions on the matter. When Uncle Izzie left, Lux hugged him extra tight and longer than usual, trying hard not to cry, but as soon as the door closed behind him, the tears fell.

She could hear her mother cleaning up the kitchen, and Lux knew she should offer to help her, but she couldn't face her mother. Instead, she made her way to her room, wiping tears from her eyes. She could hear Myla and Nikki in their room. There was a whimper of Nikki crying, but Myla throwing things and slamming things around in anger mostly drowned it out. It wasn't fair that he had to go to war, Lux thought as she entered her room. Uncle Izzie had no skill in fighting. He was going to get himself killed, she realised, and the tears fell harder.

She fell onto her bed and hugged her pillow tight as she gave in to the need to cry. It would not do any good. Her tears would not stop Uncle Izzie from leaving, but it felt good to let that emotion out. When the tears dried up, and Lux had nothing left to cry out, she sat up and looked around the dark room. There was no sign of Kaye in the bed next to her. Lux flicked on the lamp and dug the letter from beneath her mattress. It didn't seem so pressing that she read it now that there were bigger things in her life, but perhaps it would make her feel better.

*Dear Lux,*

*I hope this gets to you. I assume the flower shop is a decoy of some sort and you have fancy connections; otherwise, I expect some rude response from the owner for my letter.*

*The pictures turned out great, but I didn't think about my mum having questions when they arrived. So, if you suddenly find yourself stalked by a pretty red-haired woman covered in powdered sugar, it's probably my mum. She's harmless.*

*Not that you care, but since the war has been taking its toll on the country, I've acquired roommates, and a few of them have been considering trying to create fake identity cards so they can sign up to fight. I heard the military was getting desperate for more soldiers and modified the requirements to sign up. The guys here think it would be glorious. They sound like my brother when he was preparing to join the guard. I think it's likely a lot of nasty business, and then you get shot. Not for me. Getting fake identity cards seems like a lot of work. I'll just wait until they grow more desperate and force my hand.*

*Do you think you will still like me if I go to war and return with missing limbs?*

*I tried writing this letter in the privacy of my room, but, as I mentioned, I've acquired roommates. The one sharing my space is a fine fellow, but we have these other two who have a knack for showing up at the most inopportune moments. I'd gotten one line written before James stole your picture and determined you were "delicious-looking eye candy." He'd like to court you, but I discouraged it. Unless you're looking for a lover? I could encourage it. Let me know!*

*Sincerely,  
Grant Westwood*

Lux read the letter one more time before she folded it back up and held it to her chest. The dark weight that formed seemed to have temporarily lifted. She leaned back on her bed, still holding Grant's letter and let herself drift off to sleep.

## Three: Winter ~ Grant

The Blackthorn Institute for Boys in Belhaven had recently expanded its classroom sizes to accommodate the rising population of students who required an education. Many had travelled from as far as Mupling, on the western coast of Cantasia, to escape civil war attacks. The Ancient History class had been relocated to the auditorium due to its growing numbers. Grant lay sprawled over three seats with one leg hanging off the edge and dangling on the floor barely listening as Professor Carmichael delighted them with a tale of the Isle of Rumpitur.

Grant knew he should be paying more attention to the lesson but history bored him. He'd enrolled in the class because he needed the credit, not because he had an interest in Ancient History. Professor Carmichael was doing his best to make the lesson more entertaining, and it might have worked for Grant if he thought he would ever need this particular knowledge in the future. Grant's future was already established. He would graduate and go to work at Westwood Furniture until the day his father retired and handed the business over to him. The knowledge he required was in accounting, management, and business.

Grant yawned and closed his eyes. His mind drifted to girl; one he could not get out of his head since meeting her over the holidays. Lux Belanger; a pretty blonde in a red and white polka-dotted dress who could eat as heartily as he could. He had to keep reminding himself that she was just a girl. His mother could, and had, introduced him to plenty of girls. And there was Rosalind Parker. Smart, beautiful, and talent Rosalind whom he spent stolen moments in quiet corners kissing. Rosalind was here, present, and available. He didn't need to entertain thoughts of pretty blondes when he had the most desirable girl in Belhaven within his grasps.

Rosalind was interested in more than a friendship with Grant. He was intelligent enough to know he had only to ask, and Rosalind would be his exclusively. Their parents already approved of the match, and while betrothal wasn't common in Cantasia, Grant had overheard his mother and Mrs. Parker discussing the possibilities of a union between him and Rosalind. Grant had no real reason to hesitate. Rosalind was everything a man could want in a partner, not to mention he always had a preference for brunettes. He liked the kissing, enjoyed the touching, and although he had not gone as far as bedding her, Grant knew if they stayed together it was only a matter of time before they landed there.

Thoughts of Rosalind in compromising positions began to pop up in his mind as Grant blatantly ignored the lesson. He could fantasize about her round bottom and tiny waist trapped beneath his hands for hours with a growing arousal. He'd seen her in less than her school uniform, or those party dresses she wore to functions. He knew what lay beneath her clothing and didn't have to work hard to imagine all the things he would discover beneath the articles of clothing he hadn't yet gotten off her in their heated moments.

Yes. Rosalind was enough for him. Besides their obvious physical attraction to one another, they had grown up together. They were friends. There were no secrets, no mysteries, and no reason to hold onto the possibility of someone else when he had the perfect girl already. Except Grant was doing just that. He was thinking of someone else. As much as he adored Rosalind, something about Lux Belanger had attached itself to him and he could not shake her from his thoughts. Thoughts of her managed to sneak up on him when he least expected it. He knew it would not be fair to finalize his relationship with Rosalind so long as he was thinking about another girl.

Someone nudged him, stirring Grant from his thoughts, and he sat up.

“You're starting to drool,” Andrew Stockholm, the recently acquired roommate, informed Grant.

He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “Thanks. That's rather embarrassing.”

“I won't tell your girlfriend.”

“Ahem!” A stern voice interrupted their banter. “Westwood, Stockholm, is my lesson interrupting your gossip time, gentlemen?”

Andrew's face flushed and he muttered a quiet apology. Grant glanced around the room of mix-matched faces of students he had known his whole life, and others who had recently joined their numbers. Everyone in the room had their attention on the two of them. Andrew might have found it uncomfortable, and as Grant had learned early on, Andrew did not like being singled out. Grant was used to this sort of behaviour.

“No, Sir,” Grant replied.

“Good. Then why don't you tell me what King Lydas of Rumpitur sent the Meander to the Uncharted Lands in search of?”

Crap, Grant thought to himself. He knew this answer. Everyone knew the answer to this question. The myth was a famed one on Cantasia but for some reason, Grant could not think of the answer. It felt as if his mind had gone completely blank. He stumbled.

“Uh... um...” Grant glanced at Andrew for help but noticed another student looking around suspiciously while pulling on his golden wristwatch. “Shackles...?”

The room erupted in laughter.

“No, I mean gold. Gold. He was looking for gold,” Grant remembered immediately after embarrassing himself.

“Very good. You were either paying attention or retained something from your studies,” Professor Carmichael mocked him. “Unlike its name suggests, the Meander was the fastest ship of its time and should have been able to sail to the Uncharted Lands and back within a month, which is suggested to be a week shorter than any other ship. When the Meander did not return on its expected date, King Lydas became worrisome and furious...”

Grant sighed. His time in the spotlight seemed to be over as Professor Carmichael continued with their lesson. He could continue to spend the period thinking about girls instead of warships and kings hungry for gold. He preferred thoughts of girls in their short skirts with their dark curls bouncing around as they walked. Grant leaned back in his chair and let his thoughts of Rosalind take over. He was relieved to find himself thinking of her instead of Lux.

He tried to pay attention, knowing that this lecture would be part of their final exam, but as Professor Carmichael detailed the voyage of the Meander, Grant began to daydream about being a member of the crew with Rosalind standing in a long, billowing dress at the front of the ship as wind tousled her dark curls. As if the Gods had been reading his mind, Grant was pulled out of his fantasy by the sound of the auditorium door opening and female voices echoing off the acoustics. He sat straight up once more as a handful of girls, including Rosalind, from the Elderwood Institute arrived.

“Welcome ladies, take a seat please,” Professor Carmichael instructed.

Grant leaned closer to Andrew as the girls dispersed among the seats. "What is going on?"

Andrew shook his head.

Grant shrugged. His eyes fell on Rosalind as she bounced along the rows of seats. Instinctively, he lifted his hand to wave her over. A lazy grin spread over his face when she acknowledged his wave and headed for his row of seats. Grant elbowed Andrew to move over so Rosalind could sit next to him. When she reached him, and sat, Grant was enveloped in a pleasant smell of something he had yet to identify and a hint of lemon. Whatever the scent of her perfume was, it was oddly alluring and Grant felt the muscles in his stomach clench with desire.

"The famous Rosalind," Andrew bowed his head.

Grant reached around behind Rosalind to swat his friend and rested his arm on the back of her seat. He pulled her a little closer. Rosalind smelled so sweetly. The curls of her brown hair bounced against his arm, tickling him. His hand rose and he twirled a lock of hair around his finger, affectionately giving it a tug. He adored the way the curls bounced back into place whenever they were pulled out. Grant could tug on her hair all day, even with knowing it would get on her nerves.

"Famous, am I?" Rosalind responded to Andrew sweetly but the look she gave Grant said something else. "I'm surprised he has time to talk about me when he's entertaining mysterious blondes."

Grant's eyes bulged. How did Rosalind know about Lux? He hadn't told her. Their interaction had been nothing but innocent the entire party. There was nothing to concern Rosalind. Who would have shared such news? There had been plenty of people at the party in which the Westwoods and Parkers were mutual friends of, but Grant felt there were

more things going on at that party that nosey gossips would be discussing besides his blonde companion.

“Don't look so shocked, Grant,” Rosalind teased him. “Blanche Whitehorse had tea with Mum and told her all about it. Who is she?”

Feeling trapped, Grant knew there was only one thing he could do. Tell Rosalind the truth. There was nothing going on between himself and Lux therefore Rosalind had nothing to worry about where their relationship was concerned. He shrugged, like their entire conversation was no big deal.

“Just someone to pass the time with while you were out sick,” he responded.

“Really?” Rosalind's perfectly sculpted brows rose curiously. “Blanche said you spent the entire evening with her and had your picture taken. Can I see the picture?”

“I don't have it with me,” Grant retorted.

“But you did spend the whole evening with her and had your picture taken?”

“More like an hour,” he clarified casually.

“Huh...” Rosalind turned her attention to the front of the auditorium, ending their discussion like she always did, with authority.

Grant looked over her head at Andrew. His roommate shrugged and looked at the front of the auditorium as well. Grant had no choice but to direct his attention to Professor Carmichael. The professor was welcoming the ladies from the Elderwood Institute and Grant noted he was holding a book in his hand. He groaned. They were doing group studies again. He hated group studies.



“The ladies from Elderwood have joined us to participate in performing *The Broken Isle*,” Professor Carmichael informed them. “In light of the terrors of war, Belhaven City Council has given us the okay to conduct the play for the community.”

Grant made a face and raised his hand.

“Yes, Mr. Westwood, I have already planned on your hands in making sets,” the professor assured him.

“Phew,” Grant sighed.

He was not acting type but could fully understand why Rosalind was present with her classmates. She thrived in the spotlight. He glanced over at her focused face and wished they weren't fighting. It may have not seemed like it to outsiders but their previous conversation before she dismissed him was a fight. Rosalind didn't argue or yell, she ignored, and was damned good at. Rosalind could ignore so hard that Grant had crawled back to her begging for forgiveness in the most embarrassing of ways in the past. Hopefully, this fight would not end the same way.

Professor Carmichael instructed everyone interested to remain now that class had ended and they could pick up their scripts. Grant rose immediately, having no interest in sticking around, but quickly changed his mind when Rosalind remained along with Andrew. Perhaps sticking around wouldn't be so bad, Grant thought to himself and sat back in his seat. Rosalind shot him a questioning look and he shrugged. She knew he had no interest in a career in theatre.

“I like to watch you work,” Grant informed Rosalind.

He was not lying. He enjoyed watching Rosalind perform. She did a beautiful job of playing the Goddess Bestia in Belhaven's production of *Alaric the Wolf*. He could already picture her in

an elegant crown and on the arm of a proud King Lydas as she played the role of his queen. Grant assumed she would want to be the queen. Every girl wanted to be a princess, and one day a queen.

“You flatter me...” she leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. “But you're still in trouble.”

He frowned. Her kiss had been too short, too friendly. He was in trouble. Rosalind wasn't pleased he had spent an evening with another girl while she wasn't around to ensure he kept his hands to himself. They were not an exclusive item but Grant had never tried or considered engaging in any physical intimacy with another girl. Rosalind was the only one he wanted in such a fashion.

Thinking quick, Grant answered her. “Mum is having a Beat the Winter Blues party next month.”

“I know, she told me.”

“Oh.” He'd hoped to beat his mother to it but instead would have to change tactics. “Are you auditioning for King Lydas' wife? Every girl wants to be a queen, doesn't she?”

“The Siren, actually,” Rosalind slipped passed him to make her way to the front of the auditorium with Andrew scooting behind her. “I think every girl would rather be thought as highly desirable and viciously unattainable making their man work for every touch...”

Andrew shrugged at Grant while he sat there staring after Rosalind, trying to unravel what her words meant. He could think of a girl that did not want to be thought of as desirable and likely didn't have a single vicious bone in her body. Lux came to mind. A vision of her dressed as some seductive siren amused him greatly. He didn't think she would be comfortable on stage in front of a crowd with little clothing to cover

herself. Rosalind, on the other hand, he could see her getting a thrill out of exposing herself in such a way. She certainly had the figure for it. Grant watched her flaunt her way towards Professor Carmichael and silently hoped she did not get her desired part. He didn't want anyone else seeing what lay beneath her uniform. That was for him.

Grant sat bored in the dark auditorium, while Andrew and Rosalind discussed with Professor Carmichael and the other interested parties the logistics of the production. He could have left but what would he do at home? He might as well wait on Rosalind and Andrew then head home with them. His eyes trailed to Rosalind. Before him was the ideal woman who fit right into the lifestyle he was used to living so why was he thinking about another?

"You're not getting anywhere from back here," James Winters, one of the twins his mother had taken in, plopped down beside him.

Grant made a face at him. "I'm saving my energy for later."

Richard Winters sat sideways in the row ahead of them and turned his head. Two pairs of piercing blue eyes stared Grant down, questioning him. If it weren't for Richard's lazy eye, Grant would not be able to tell the twins apart. They had identical blonde haircuts, pale skin and freckles, and they were the same height. Everything but the lazy eye was a direct replication of the other, including their personalities.

"Unless you're not interested anymore," Richard commented.

Both twins had been present when the mail arrived which contained the pictures from the Christmas party. They had seen the pictures of him and Lux and tormented him for days about the new woman in his life. Grant had denied their accusations, but they had him thinking all sorts of things he knew he shouldn't think about Lux. They'd gone as far as

comparing him to Liam. As much as Grant loved his older brother, who was off fighting in the war, he didn't like the way Liam bounced from girl to girl and left behind a trail of broken hearts. Grant did not want to do that with Lux and Rosalind.

"Here," Richard tossed Grant an envelope. "We went to the post office to see if there was any news from Mum. There wasn't, but this had arrived for you."

Grant turned over the envelope. He didn't recognise the handwriting, but an address from Lilles told him who it was from before he opened the letter. His heart skipped an excited beat. He hadn't expected to hear from her so soon after he'd sent the pictures, or at all. A flowery scent assaulted him as he opened the envelope, and petals fell out. If he were a girl, the gesture would flatter him. He found it charming, though he wasn't sure what it meant. He opened the letter and read.

*Dear Grant,*

*Wow! Your handwriting is terrible! I thought I was going to have to take it somewhere and get the entire letter deciphered because it was in some code you never taught me!*

*My uncle owns the flower shop, so no fancy connections and no rude letters. Just a lot of questions, you know the sort protective uncles get when their nieces suddenly have a boy in their life. Do not worry. I assured him we are only friends. He gave you his stamp of approval on the cuteness factor. He wants to know if you are as gentlemanly as you look in the picture. Gentlemanly, is that a word? Maybe I will look it up and get back to you on it.*

*You know, I was wondering about that woman standing outside my house last night. Thankfully, my sister is sort of seeing a member of the guard, and he took care of her. I am so sorry.*

*Don't ruin your face, and I'm sure I will still like you. I can live if you lose an arm or a leg. Besides, peg legs are pretty attractive. All you would need is an eye patch, maybe grow a beard.*

*I will stop there. You do not need to know my wicked fantasies about pirates.*

*I have some news, though it's not all good news. I am going to be working/running the flower shop with my sister, Kaye, which means less sneaking around with your letters. It should be fun as I've helped out around there enough. Uncle Izzie has been commissioned to fight in the war. I think it's a terrible mistake. The guy can barely handle a pair of scissors without cutting himself, and the government is going to put a gun in his hands. I'm afraid he won't come back, but you don't need a letter full of my worries. I'll stop myself before I start blubbering.*

*If you care to know, my mother is currently shopping for my future husband. Seventeen is the age to be engaged. She wants me sold off before my birthday even comes. Nothing like letting me enjoy my teenage years, right? Do you think she suspects I climb out my window at night and attend functions unsupervised, or is this just a coincidence that you and I met, and like a month later my mother is looking for my intended suitor? Perhaps she is afraid I will run off with some unknown boy and never write, or worse, not invite her to the wedding? Blasphemy!*

*Okay, I am over-dramatic about this whole ordeal, right? She did, and still is doing, the same thing to Kaye and hasn't been successful. I do not know what hope she has for me. Kaye is an obedient child.*

*Oh! Here is an idea! Perhaps I shall suggest she marry one of us off to your brother? Who do you think he would prefer, Kaye or me? Does he prefer a shy, quiet girl who gets excited about the smell of dog poop and doesn't like to be touched, or me? I suppose, if you think he'd like me better, I COULD wait until the*

*war ended to marry him. Does he have a beard? I already spilt my secret fondness for beards. It's settled then. When you come of age and head off to war, you can tell your brother you have found him a wife to return home to. That's enough incentive not to get killed, right?*

*I think I will suggest that to her right now. I will write you back again and let you know what she says.*

*Much Love,  
Lux.*

Grant read the letter twice more in amusement before realising the auditorium had grown quiet and students were filing out into the cold winter sunshine. Grant stuffed the letter into his pocket and gathered his belongings to catch up with Rosalind and Andrew.