

CHAPTER ONE

ELISE

January, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

History didn't haphazardly repeat itself in the chapters of Elise Malvern's life. It copy-and-pasted in the most irritating fashion. But if one were to flip through this proverbial book, most of the pages would be blank. Because important people—the ones who were supposed to fill her life—never showed up. Some bowed out even before day one.

It was a predictable story. One that Elise wouldn't five-star on Goodreads. Wouldn't recommend to her fellow book club members. And would abandon the book for a Netflix-binge, because who would torture themselves with such a repetitive narrative?

But today, she'd encountered a severe plot twist.

Someone had shown up. Most surprisingly.

Her boyfriend of five weeks suddenly appeared when she sat down on a frigid bench to inhale her lunch. Foster Trent was totally breaking trend, but he was doing way more than that.

"I know this seems fast." He flashed a handsome grin and lowered on bended knee right there on the busy sidewalk, his right hand holding out a ring that sparkled far too much under overcast skies. "But I can't wait any longer. Elise Layne Malvern, will you marry me?"

She squinted, her gaze transfixed on the prism exploding inside the solitaire-cut stone. This wasn't how she'd expected her lunch break to unfold. Her plans had included only her routine stalking of the taco truck on Penn Avenue followed by cramming enough MSG in her system to get through the long stretch of video editing at work. A proposal was not on the itinerary.

Rogue snowflakes pricked her face. Ugh. Forget cusses, snow was the worst four-letter word. She had a not-so-healthy hatred for the evil white stuff, but she couldn't let old memories cloud her focus. Her eyes connected with Foster's, and she rallied for courage. "We've only been on eight dates. No, seven." Her last boyfriend waited two-and-a-half years to pop the question. Over a hundred dates. She and Foster haven't even reached double digits.

"It's quick. I know." He switched to his salesman voice—that confident tone he employed to persuade clients to forgo any reservations and sign on the dotted line. But Elise wasn't purchasing a timeshare in Tahiti for a week. If she agreed to this deal, the terms were for life. "I got a good feeling about us."

The only feeling she had was a sharp pinch in her gut, squeezing her street taco back up her esophagus. Foster Trent could be "the one," but it was too soon to tell. She'd only known him for two months. "I—I need more time." Because no one second-guessed their second guesses more than her. Overthinking wasn't a pesky habit; it was her way of life.

His brown eyes dimmed. "I'd like an answer pretty quick." He abandoned the whole kneeling gig, grimacing at the wet spot on his jeans, and reclaimed his seat beside her. "There's a job opportunity in Dallas. I'm hoping to move by the end of next month."

So not only would she be getting married, she would be moving a thousand miles away as well? She fidgeted with the wispy ends of her scarf, the same shade as her pale green eyes. Eyes that no doubt betrayed her hesitation. "I don't know what to say." She'd heard of relationships that began as whirlwinds and lasted the long run, but she wasn't wired for impulsivity. No, her motherboard had a very slow processor. While the rest of the world made decisions at 5G speed, her pace was more AOL dial-up.

"Say yes. Come on this adventure with me."

Her gaze roamed the towering skyscrapers, the jagged lines of buildings poking the gray sky. "But then I'd have to leave Pittsburgh." Where her only remaining family lived. Where all her dreams were anchored. She interned at the legendary Heinz Hall as a creative marketer, but she wanted more. Since she was fifteen, it had been her hope to win a second violin seat in the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra. To play on the same stage as her mother.

If only she dared grab the chance to sign up for an audition. But no,

Elise Malvern didn't just have cold feet, they were frostbitten. Too frozen to run after anything out of her comfort zone.

A car horn blared in the distance, and she returned to the moment. This utterly absurd moment. She scrunched her nose. Shouldn't she be maniacally happy? Or excited? Something? Truth was, they'd bypassed key relationship markers. Such as, she'd never cooked for him at her apartment because she was a culinary failure. Did he know she ate cereal most nights for dinner? He'd never seen her without makeup or with unruly hair.

And she didn't know his hopes and dreams, if he wanted any children, or his method of changing a toilet paper roll. Important couples' details! They hadn't even exchanged "I love you's." *Did* she love him? How could she? She hardly knew him.

But what was most odd, besides the ring, was that Foster hardly showed any interest in her on their first few dates. He wasn't that into her. It wasn't until she accidentally spilled about—

Her spine straightened. The engagement stone sat between them on the bench, directly beside the remains of her beloved taco. She unclenched her teeth. "Okay, Foster. I'll marry you."

His smile stretched wide. "You just made me the happiest man alive."

"And I'm happy you don't mind that I'm broke. Probably will be for the foreseeable future, since I'm currently an intern with no other work experience." She forced a perky smile. "You'll have to support us both until I find a job. I'm thinking three or four years. Maybe longer. I'm extremely picky about my place of employment."

He jolted. "But—"

"But what?"

"I . . ." His gaze dwindled to the snowy sidewalk, a crease forming between his blond brows. "I thought you had a trust fund."

Ugh, knew it. "You did?"

He gave a stunned nod. "Or that you will." He rubbed the back of his neck. "Doesn't it become yours in March, when you turn twenty-five?"

"Oh, that?" She gave a careless shrug, gleaning from that one theater class she'd taken her sophomore year at Carnegie Mellon. "I can't touch a penny until all my college loans are paid off. Which is roughly the amount of the trust. After those are clear, I may have a few dollars left."

His jaw slacked.

"Of course, I'll have to use whatever's remaining toward a modest

wedding. What are your thoughts on imitation crushed velvet?”

“For your, uh, dress?”

“No, your tux. For my dress, I’m going to repurpose my prom gown. Do brides wear neon-pink zebra print?” She tapped her index finger on her chin. “Doesn’t matter. We’ll make it work.”

“Elise, I—I thought that—”

“Though we might need to postpone the honeymoon until we can afford one.” She gave his shoulder an exaggerated squeeze. “But I firmly believe our undying love for each other can get us through any financial strain.” Her attention shifted to the solitaire. “Or we can just return this gorgeous diamond. I don’t need a fancy, extravagant ring. We can live off the several thousand dollars it’s no doubt worth.” She made a play for the ring box, but he swiped it from reach.

He darted to his feet as if the park bench had grown fangs and bitten his backside. “You know, you’re right. We hardly know each other. I’ll just hold on to this.” He quickly shoved the box into the pocket of his puffer coat.

“Seems you know a lot about me already, Foster. My middle name, my favorite food truck.” Probably from being a social media creeper. “And when I break for lunch.” She didn’t want to contemplate how he’d obtained that information. “But what you failed to discover. . .” She leveled a gaze on him, abandoning her feigned flaky attitude. “Is that my family owns one of the leading auction houses in western Pennsylvania. That diamond is as phony as your proposal.”

His face blanched, and she was pretty sure the lady on the nearby bench lowered her magazine.

Elise recognized his *busted* look. She’d seen it repeatedly on the faces of those trying to pull one over on her grandfather. Many tried to pass off their paste jewelry as genuine. But Pap was sharp, and he’d taught her everything he knew. How to sift the fake from the authentic. If only she had that talent in selecting boyfriends, there wouldn’t even have been a second date with Foster-the-fortune-hunter.

His shoulders curled forward. “I’m sorry, Elise.”

“For what? Being a scammer? Offering up a dollar-store diamond?” It was a good fake; she’d give him that. But he’d picked the wrong girl to swindle.

“That business opportunity, the one I mentioned in Dallas. It’s for my

own travel agency. But I need eighty grand to buy it. The banks won’t loan me anything.”

“And you thought to take my dead mother’s money to finance it? How charming.” She snatched her purse. “Don’t call. Don’t text. Don’t come near me again. Because just like that ring, you’re worth nothing to me.”



Sunlight fought free from the oppressing clouds and poured into the arched window, bathing the grand lobby of Heinz Hall with light.

Elise took in the scene through the lens of her camera. The fifty-foot vaulted Venetian ceiling hovered over marble floors and staircase, the gilded pillars lining the balcony like tall, decorated soldiers. This space always reminded Elise of a European palace. The classic and elegant atmosphere could rival any fancy ballroom depicted in a Jane Austen novel. And while Elise had always hoped she’d meet her Mr. Darcy, today she’d encountered a modern-day version of George Wickham—the villain who pursued heiresses—well, more like he pursued their fortunes.

She bottled a sigh, squeezing her fingers tighter on her camera. Then, keeping steady, she leaned back to fit both chandeliers in the frame. These sister pieces were original to the theater. Almost a hundred years old and weighed a ton each, yet breathtaking. They only proved weight and age never decided beauty. Elise snapped the shot then nodded her approval.

She switched to recording mode and panned out. Every inch of this space was a work of art from floor to ceiling. She stood for several long seconds in this regal spot. After her crazy lunch break breakup, she needed normalcy. She needed peace. She needed—

“Did you honestly wear a neon-pink zebra print gown to your prom?”

She needed to think twice before confiding so quickly in Kinley, fellow marketing intern, apartment roommate, and routine prier.

Elise lowered her camera. “This should be enough material.” She and Kinley were responsible for attaining footage of different areas of Heinz Hall for a quick educational video. “*A virtual field trip*,” her supervisor called it. “What do you think?”

“I think you’re ignoring me and my very important question about your awkward fashion choices.” Kinley crossed her arms with a huff.

“I never actually wore it.” Because Elise never went to her high school prom. She’d been stood up by Pierson Brooks. And while she received

an explanation from Pierson's grandmother, the stooder-upper hadn't reached out to her in the following days. . .or the following nine years. Which wouldn't have hurt so much if they hadn't been best friends.

Elise looked through her camera again. Maybe she could get a better angle. Not like she didn't have a million shots of these chandeliers already, but being behind the camera was her comfort. "And is that all you caught from my monologuing? There's a bigger factor here. Like the one where Foster tried to rip me off."

"For the record, I never liked him. He looks like a man who irons his socks." Kinley placed a hand on Elise's elbow, her brows lifting in concern. "How are you coping?"

She drew a calming breath. "I'm okay. Just weirded out by it all." She hadn't expected a proposal today any more than she'd planned on being dateless for tomorrow night. But since her plus-one had been Foster, she'd rather go solo to Dorothea Hart's elaborate birthday party. Not ideal, but she couldn't think about tomorrow. Or Dorothea's grandson. She'd spent enough time dwelling on him and her botched prom night. That was ages ago, she was past it, and even though they'd been close for a few years in their teens, he most likely didn't remember her now. And most likely wouldn't be at the party. "Did you contact those names of potential donors for our Theatre Throwback promo?"

"Didn't I tell you?" Kinley grabbed the camera bag and handed it to Elise. "I finished that two weeks ago. I got ahold of everyone on your list. Some have photos they'll scan and send, and others have playbills they're willing to donate."

"All from the Loew's Penn?" Elise couldn't hide the excitement in her voice. Theatre Throwback was her baby. Every Thursday, she posted a picture about Heinz Hall's history on Instagram. The account had gained popularity since she started highlighting the early years when the building was Loew's Penn Theatre. Back in the day, people came here by the thousands, and a fifty-cent admission secured hours of entertainment—a live stage show followed by the latest silent film.

"All from Loew's." She gave a triumphant smile. "We just have to keep our eye on the mail. Things should start pouring in soon."

Elise finished her work in the lobby and spent the rest of her shift editing footage from last night's symphony performance while shoving down the longing to perform on that stage rather than film it from

behind her camera. She closed her laptop and glanced at the calluses on her fingertips, resulting from her vigorous rehearsing. Like an athlete in pursuit of a championship, she drove herself to practice her violin day after day for hours on end.

Kinley chatted the entire walk home, not seeming to pause for breath until they reached their apartment door, where a box was propped against it.

Elise stooped and read the label. "It's for me."

"Who from?"

"There's no return address." She shifted her purse on her shoulder and lifted the package, which was surprisingly light for its size. Elise moved aside as Kinley opened the door, and they filed inside.

Elise stepped out of her heels, and her pinky toes sang in relief. After discarding her coat and scarf, she eyed the box. Who would send her anything? It wasn't her birthday, and it couldn't be anything she'd purchased. She'd cut back on retail therapy after finally getting her credit cards under control from her Christmas shopping last month. The package was a mystery. And just like surprises, she didn't like mysteries.

Kinley now sat cross-legged on the carpet beside the package. "The scissors are in the drawer under the silverware."

Chuckling at her friend's impatience, Elise located the orange-handled scissors and sliced through the packaging tape. Placing the box between them, she lifted the flaps and removed the packing filler, only to discover a stack of papers. "It's playbills."

"Old ones!" Kinley picked one up carefully and inspected the yellowed, warbled program. "It's from a stage show."

Elise leaned in. "Look right there." She pointed to the black-inked letters. "Loew's Penn Theatre." But it didn't make any sense. Had Kinley accidentally given the donors their home address? Elise zeroed her gaze on the playbill's date. "This is from 1927." Her excitement tripled. "You know what that means, right?"

"That this paper is really old?"

"The Loew's Penn Theatre opened in 1927. These are inaugural playbills." Her mind started exploding with ideas on how to incorporate these gems for Theatre Throwback. With delicate movements, Elise opened the playbill and read the cast list. Unfortunately, she didn't recognize any of the actors' names.

“There’s more in the box.” Kinley dug deeper into the cardboard pit and withdrew what looked like a strange sort of coat. While tugging it free, something else tumbled out of the box.

A miniature violin.

Unlike the ancient playbills, the trinket looked new. Elise picked it up. She smiled at the curved, wooden body complete with four strings attached to tiny tuning pegs. It was as if someone had taken her instrument and shrunk it. A yellow ribbon was attached at either end, causing her to realize it was a Christmas tree ornament.

But Christmas was three weeks ago. If this wasn’t an antique or didn’t have any connection to the Loew’s Penn, why had someone put it in the package? She turned it over and found an engraving.

You’re never without my love ~ your father

She almost dropped the ornament.

It couldn’t be. Yet the box was addressed to her. Did that mean this was from *her* father? The man who’d been absent from her life from the get-go? Almost twenty-five years without a word from him. No cards on birthdays. No present on holidays. No attendance at any of her graduations. Her gaze dropped to the engraving, her chest burning hot. Never without his love? Yeah, right. If that was love, she wanted no part of it.

“What’s wrong?” Kinley’s voice bled through her thoughts. “You should see your face right now.”

Elise shook her head. She didn’t want to discuss the ornament or her AWOL birth father. “Is there a note or anything?”

Kinley gently rustled through the blank newsprint used for packing. “Nope.”

Okay, why hadn’t her father left a note? Maybe the inscription was the message he wanted to send. She inspected the mini violin again. The present year was etched under the words, confirming its newness. Yet it stirred old feelings of rejection. Caging a sigh, she returned the ornament to the box. This was why she hated surprises.

“What do you make of this?” Kinley all but shoved the jacket into Elise’s hands.

With what transpired over the past few minutes, Elise had forgotten about the bulky coat. The seams were long, and the fur was fake. It had all the makings of a stage costume. “I wonder if this was used for the live show.” She searched through the pockets. Nothing. And then she opened the coat to search for a tag. But instead of a tag naming a designer, there

was a small, yellowed paper pinned to the inside of the collar. “There’s something written here.”

“Really?”

“It says ‘Sophie Walters.’”