

# PART I

## FALLING ONCE AGAIN

### *PROLOGUE: THE MOMENT IT ALL FELL APART*

I could still hear Kaeden's desperate words of reassurance long after he was gone and the light had faded from his eyes.

They lingered in the air and bounced off every surface of the Bodleian library even as his lips turned to stone. They echoed in my ears and the depths of my body even as the corners of the large ornate mirror that adorned the library wall grew hazy with a cloud of silver film, and they remained at the forefront of my mind as I dove forward, frantically pounding my fists against the glass in desperation, willing the realm of Wonderland to let me back in to no avail.

"Kaeden," I begged against the glass, desperate to stop him even as the last breath of air left his lips, fogging the glass. "Kaeden, please!" I begged, and yet I was still unable to stop it all.

Behind me, the Bodleian sat silently with no solutions in sight, the darkness of night masking what once seemed to be, to

a child of just six, a place of endless knowledge. Ironically all it offered to me now was an aching reminder of how things should have been—plain and ordinary without a hint of magic, a stark difference to how things were in Wonderland; fantastical and unbelievable, filled with impossible things that I had never once dared to imagine...

Those impossible things now sat on the other side of a thick glass mirror, just out of reach as, all around me, the very real reality of the Bodleian and England began to set in as the cold of the night sunk achingly into my bones.

No matter how hard I tried, no matter how desperately I screamed Kaeden's name, the haze that festered at the edges of the mirror grew and grew, spreading towards the center of the mirror in an indispersable fog. A fog that I tried desperately to swipe away and clear with each ring of the hollow scream that poured out of me. "Kaeden! Kaeden!" I called, slamming my hand against the glass right where his fingertips, the only part of him that remained untouched thus far by the stone that crawled up his body, remained. The glass beneath my fingertips despite his touch, the temperature of the mirror feeling almost as if he wasn't there at all and the shock of that realization stinging more than anything else. "Kaeden," I pleaded, and I swore he could hear me, he had to hear me. I could almost feel the pressure of his fingertips against my hand, surely the sound carried as well. But he would not let me back in.

He had trapped me, leaving me only with the cold memory of a kiss long gone.

"Kaeden, don't go, Kaeden, don't leave—" I began to murmur as my forehead pressed against the glass and my eyes desperately held onto him, willing him to snap out of it, to turn back to flesh and bone immediately. "Let me through," I whispered, knowing that if anyone could let me in again, it would be

him. “Kaeden, I can’t leave you,” I muttered, my fingernails sinking into the glass. “You don’t deserve to be alone,” I whispered.

I did not know the boundaries of Kaeden’s magic, but I did know the fact that he had pushed me through the glass. It only made sense that he could let me back in if he were there—if any inkling of him were there.

If behind the dull gleam of his glasses, there sat a soul within his stone-turned body.

“Please,” I said as my hand rested on the glass right above his collarbone, a place where I would desperately cling to him if given the opportunity. “Please, Kaeden, don’t do this to me,” I trembled, knowing what horrors could come next, when Kaeden was left all alone. “If we go, we go together, Kaeden,” I said, but sadly, words remained words more often than not. “Please, I love you,” I uttered, if only so that he would know. “Don’t make me be without you,” I said, “don’t let yourself be alone.”

Because I knew what came next. I knew what dangers awaited him, and what horrors could happen.

In the back of my mind, I still stood on a distant pavilion, the dust of a statue lingering on my skin; but in this reality, in this new portion of my life, it was not my father’s statue who laid broken into rubble—and I could hardly survive it being Kaeden’s.

Yet, there I was.

I could hear distant laughter this time. It was more than just some implied thing, a hidden subtext resting between the paragraphs of my life. The presence of the person who had turned a man I loved into stone was surely there at that moment, unlatching the door behind Kaeden and stepping into the light rather than watching me amongst the bushes and

waiting until it was the most opportune time to collect me. He was just in the corners of my vision, as I suspected he always had been, really.

His laughter had haunted me in my dreams before, and now it had returned, only to be heard faintly on the other side of the mirror where Kaeden stood.

And I knew then for sure, upon hearing that laughter and feeling the gaze of those once charming hazel eyes, exactly who had turned Reginald Grey to stone. Exactly who had caused him to crumble, who had done the King of Cards' dirty work, and somehow laid the trap for me to stumble further into madness and lose my way.

Thomas Caard. It had always been Thomas Caard.

From the very, very beginning I had suspected it, I just didn't know why. Nor how.

But I supposed I knew enough when I lifted my gaze and saw him standing there, with his hand upon Kaeden's shoulder and a hint of amusement flashing within his eyes. I knew enough when I saw him standing there, fully in front of the mirror, when his laughter came to a stop, his eyes trained on me and the realization that I was not there hitting him.

His hand tightened on Kaeden's shoulder. His eyes narrowed. A threat sat there, somewhere behind the way that he looked at me, blaming me. He had no clue who was really the cause of it all.

Just that someone had to pay.

"No," I gritted my teeth, slamming my hands harshly against the glass as his scowl became deeper and more distorted. I came to a conclusion then; the boldest one I'd ever have.

No matter what, Thomas Card could never know what Kaeden had done. That I hadn't tried to pull the King away.

No matter what.

“No, you can’t keep him! Do you hear me Caard? You can’t keep him!” I screamed, practically throwing myself at the glass as I beat it with the whole of my arms, the strength of my blows practically forcing me to fall against the glass as I struggled to stay upright. “He’s supposed to be with me—Don’t touch him,” I said, trying my best to keep breathing. “Put him through now,” I demanded, but I knew he never would. “It was my idea,” I lied, if only to save Kaeden. “It was my idea—do you hear me?”

I knew as his hand reached for the glass that I could only continue to beg Thomas and at the same time, do my best to deceive him.

“Please, please, push him through,” I stuttered in between sobs, the pounding of my fists against the glass slowing and the energy draining from me as I realized just how dull Kaeden’s eyes had become, and how every ounce of life that had ever existed within him had seemed to slowly fade away. “My idea, it was my idea. Please... just... push him,” I whispered as Thomas’s fingers reached the glass, and a small, petty part of my mind could not help but tell myself that this would be that moment, the exact one in fairytales, where magic returns once more and things go right, where Thomas pulled me back through and Kaeden was returned to flesh and bone, and everything ended beautifully.

But my life was very evidently not a fairytale.

“You,” was all Thomas said, and I could not help but think that perhaps then, that was all he was capable of thinking or saying as he stared through the doorway between worlds and tried to find a way to bring me back. “Finally home again,” he laughed, his eyes flickering with amusement. “But what does this mean for me...?” He hummed, his eyes dancing over my features. The revulsion hit me then. I hated him looking at me.

Just as I hated him touching Kaeden.

All I could do was beg in response. “Please,” I said, looking at him in earnest. “Please,” I spoke again, but I left out my final please, knowing that it would only cause more trouble than it was worth—I daren’t speak Kaeden’s name.

All I wanted was for Thomas’s fingers to hook around mine and pull me back in. But I could not have that, could I?

No, I could only barely brush the Joker’s skin, a spiteful, somewhat boyishly mischievous look blossoming upon his features as he regarded me, allowing my skin to slide over the glass barrier where his would be. “So funny, my Alice,” Thomas said as I placed my hand flat against the mirror, willing it to open. “But perhaps not funny enough.”

The moment I felt Thomas’s warmth, the mirror burst, shattering my view into the other world, causing the glass to erupt into a storm of diamonds that scattered across the old wooden floors of the Bodleian, every single pebble of glass bouncing against the panels and breaking further, until no real pieces remained.

A flimsy, watermarked piece of worn-down wood was all that stood within the frame. I pathetically clung to what little grains of the mirror remained as I dove forward to try to sift through the dust, the tiny shards of glass tearing holes into the worn, green skin of my hands.

“No, no, no,” I breathed, desperately sifting my way through what little remained, and yet finding nothing in the process. Nothing other than misfortune as my tears fell without my permission, mixing with the glass to cling to my skin, gluing miniscule specks of dust and glass to my face. “No,” I muttered, ignoring the pain and irritation of my burning eyes as I lurched forward, frantically clawing my way through the shards only to find the wooden flooring of the Duke’s library greeting me. “No, no, no, no!” I screamed, desperate to return. “Kaeden!

Claude!” I called, frantically digging at the floorboards and willing something to happen—Even though I knew it wouldn’t.

Even though I knew that this was Oxford, and not Wonderland, and that wondrous fantastic things hardly happened in places such as Oxford, England. Talking cats and timepiece keeping rabbits were hardly a part of the world that I had grown up in. Magic and mystery were not in Oxford’s repertoire.

All that resided in Oxford were logical, sensical things. No talking animals or magic doors.

And yet, I tried anyway. I cried anyway. I wished and I wanted.

I tried and I tried— digging at the floorboards until my hands were worn and bloodied—and nothing came out of it. Nothing ever came out of it, and though I dug until my hands were riddled with glass and I had not a single tear left to shed, I could not stop what had happened. I could not go back.

Wonderland was lost to me.

All I could do was sit there and try to collect myself, holding myself tightly throughout the night until a librarian named Birdie came to unlock the Bodleian the very next day. All I could do was watch as her eyes widened when she discovered me, my skin torn and my face marred by a million different scratches.

Birdie didn’t ask me my name, nor how I had gotten there. She simply pulled her cardigan from her shoulders and draped it around me, her eyes scanning every inch of the library until she found but a single aide to call to, one who paused in the center of the stacks to gawk as she stared down the rows and rows of shelves at us.

“Don’t just stare, Emily, phone the police, it’s Alice Grey,” The librarian in front of me called down the rows, just as

quickly looking back at me as if she were making sure that I was still there, a shrunken, shivering mess. “You need to stay here, love, they’ll phone your mother too—” She said with a heavy urgency in her voice before turning away, almost as if the mere sight of me were too much for her to bear. “Nine months,” She whispered, her mind obviously racing miles ahead as, behind her, my mind also continued to race miles ahead, and I found myself gripping at the now almost sand-like remains of the mirror as I processed what she had said. “Nine months,” she repeated, if only for herself. “Everyone thought you were dead,” the librarian said, and in another life, that statement would have mattered.

In another life, my return to Oxford would have been quite the occasion. But now?

“My mother,” I stated, knowing that would have felt like a boon once before, long ago. Now it felt different, now it inspired a sort of fear, one of the ordinary and the life I had before, a life that would only be further cemented by the sight of my mother.

A life that I wished even then to escape. I should have appreciated Wonderland for what it was when I was there. I shouldn’t have wanted to go back.

Now the thought of my mother, of the policemen and Mary, of the neighbors and the city of Oxford itself—all of that felt like too much. All of it felt far too overwhelming.

I could only focus on one thing.

“Wonderland,” I whispered, gripping onto the shards of glass which had, by then, turned to sand within my palms harder, completely unaware of the fact that just a second later, the librarian would look back at me and force me to release it when she realized there was blood dripping from my hands. She’d pull my hand from my body and pry the fingers apart, wiping the blood away with her hankie before letting out a

shocked scream as her eyes beheld a peculiar sight, and she had no idea how to address it.

“The hospital as well,” She called as she looked down in terror at my hands. “Call the hospital right away as well, Emily! Her fingers are green!” She shouted as I spread out my moss green fingers in front of myself and tried to examine them, only to find them wrapped by the hair ribbon the librarian tore from her head but a moment later. “Your mother,” she said again, “they will call your mother,” she murmured in reassurance, more for herself than me as I stared blankly at the fabric that covered my green digits. “Something horrible must have happened to you,” she whispered, terrified of how I looked then.

Perhaps it may have disturbed her, but to me, that green served as a reminder of the fact that it was all real, it had to be real, and so long as that green persisted, then I knew that Wonderland existed. I never wanted it to fade.

Across from me, the librarian continued to blabber on, muttering that I must have run off with an Irish lad or something of the sort, because that’s what they all assumed had happened. The other rumor, that I had ended up with an American soldier who had been turned away from the war, had been proven wrong already just by my being there, and the bulk of people on the Oxford campus didn’t want to assume the worst for what could have happened to me. An unhappy ending, they decided, one in which I turned down Gilbert Glenshire and ran off with my secret lover.

I stayed quiet as she rambled on in front of me, and became quieter still when she was replaced with the policemen, who cared little for the physician who was trying to evaluate me at the same time and began to grill me with an assortment of questions.

Where had I been? What had I believed? Had I so much as

made eye contact with a German chap—I knew what they did, didn't I? What about the IRA? The Irish? Had I run off with an Irish bloke? Were they coming to Oxford?

I remained silent for the most part, at least until the grey sky of the early morning began to turn blue, and the questions began to age as well.

“—Please, do not call my mother,” I said more than once, my mind swimming with horrible thoughts, and the reality of an England that I had left behind. “Please, I swear that I am fine,” I lied, because sometimes, lying is the best thing one can do.

The remains of my nails dug into my skin, and I gritted my teeth as I tried to make sense of it all, but the policemen were relentless, asking again and again and again as they tried their best to get what little information they could out of me before Eleanor Grey arrived, and all would stop.

Everyone knew that the world always stopped for Eleanor Grey.

It did not so much as pause for Mary, nor Peter. Nor even the crowd of harried students who had complained at the library doors, their many faces filling the square just outside of the doors to the Bodleian. But it always stopped for Eleanor Grey, with not a soul daring to so much as breathe as she breezed on by.

I knew the moment she grew near because the hustle and bustle of the students outside stopped, and the backs of the police officers went straight. I knew when she opened the doors to the building, because her heels echoed; and I knew the moment that she reached my floor because Mary and Peter's voices quietened, and I watched as their eyes drifted across rows and rows of books to find her.

And then she arrived.

Eleanor Grey. And the moment that she was there, the second that all eyes in the room fell on her, it was like all of the air had been let out, and nothing had ever existed there, in that time or place, other than Eleanor Grey. I expected to look over just as they all did and be just as taken in and obsessed as the rest of them were, as captivated and encapsulated by her mere presence as those poor passing souls that stumbled upon her always were. She was my mum, after all, and I had not seen her in so very long.

But my mother was not as I had ever seen her before.

My mum— who had not seen me for almost a year, and who had scarcely cared to further discuss my disappearance, nor even call the policemen at first (much to Mary's frustration, I was later informed)— needed no introduction as she stood in between the stacks, her eyes narrowed and her breathing hard. She simply was, and for Eleanor Grey that was more than enough.

Standing in her dressing gown and curlers, she had arrived and she hardly cared to speak to the police officers, nor fret over her appearance as she pushed her way through the entry of the Duke's Reading Room, nodding along to all the things that a university official said about Oxford covering the costs to replace the mirror and all of that—everything that they mumbled about my father and how they were happy to see her tragedy come to an end, really.

My mother pushed past them all, the policemen and the Oxford employees and all the students who tried far too hard to peek into the library and see what all the fuss was about; she carried on by them and she looked across the room at me, staring like I was some magical, wondrous thing that she could not believe existed...

But she did not look surprised to see me alive.

She did not look surprised to see me sitting there covered in dust and the remains of a centuries old mirror.

She did not look surprised to see me sitting there with red rimmed eyes, an unfamiliar dress upon my person, and green skin gracing the tips of my fingers that the medical personnel who had been called in could not, for the life of them, remove.

She looked across the Bodleian and she looked as if, at that very moment, she had lived that very same moment a thousand times before. Like she had seen the same scene play out a million times before and had never thought twice about it. Like people falling through rabbit holes and ending up on the other side of mirrors roughly a year later were forever regarded as part of a certain normalcy for her.

And yet, she said nothing.

She simply crossed the long expanse of the Duke's room and swept me up into her arms wordlessly, resting her head upon my shoulders and holding me tightly, her voice a soft echo of the past as she whispered that one, all consuming word to me. "Alice," she said as if she were welcoming me home, and yet, little did my mother know, Oxford was never my true home, and in England, I would never find peace.

Not when Wonderland existed.

If I had my wits about me, I would have thought twice about my mother's reaction. If I could have thought of anything other than Wonderland at that moment, I would have been able to put two and two together as I laid in my bed that night—and if she had allowed me to look at her for even more than a second before she gathered me in her arms at that very moment, I likely would have had the sense to figure it all out right then with just the simplest glance at her features.

She knew. She knew it all. She'd always known; she'd just kept it from me.

And four weeks later, when I stood in my father's office

leaving her no other choice but to tell me the truth, she would finally admit it, her eyes never resting on me but, instead on a single photograph; that of Reginald Grey in his prime with his newly declared wife in hand.

The war that she waged ended shortly after that.

