When Stars Fall at Midnight

Chapter 1

ESTELLE

June 1921

My twin sister married on a warm afternoon in early June. The air smelled of lavender and tender grasses that made the music of love. She was a beautiful bride. Her dress had been designed and sewn over the course of a year. She floated down the aisle of the church on the arm of our father. My mother and I huddled together, fighting tears at the pure beauty of her.

Pierre Perrin waited for her patiently, his blue eyes fixed upon his bride, a smile playing at the corners of his lips. I was to think later after I'd been sent away, that I had never seen a man in love with his wife in such an absolute way. There was nothing she could have done to change his mind, other than death. And she was very much alive that June afternoon as she floated toward the man she loved with all her heart.

It was all so simple. Their love, I mean. My sister and I were the sun and the moon. She was warm and light, filled with the yellow glow of goodness. The moon filled me, silvery and mysterious and constantly changing. Sunlight is faithful and always there, even when behind clouds or during the dark hour of midnight when the stars serve as a reminder that the light is never far away. Our moon, though? She doesn't care to stay still, shape-shifting into a crescent or a circle or somewhere in between in her endless thirty-day cycle. One cannot harness the moon as one can the sun.

Later, at the reception in our sprawling, blooming garden, I stood aside, lingering under the shade of a great white oak. I was an observer more than a participant. I'd been demoted from best friend and confidant, to be replaced by a man. My sister's gaze did not search for me as it had all our lives. Instead, she only had eyes for Pierre. As it should be, everyone would have said, had I asked. Still, a sadness lurked in my heart. A bereft, cold feeling inside my chest that even the gloriousness of this day could not warm.

A glimpse into what it would be like to have been born good and lovely. God had not granted me a pure and simple heart as he had my sister. She took after my mother. I was like my father. Restless, ruthless, hardheaded.

One of our servants offered me a glass of champagne. I took it, grateful for the distraction and something to do with my hands besides clenching them into fists by my sides. The string quartet played in the background, drowning out the hum of the bees drawn to the lavender and early-blooming roses. I scanned the garden for my father but found only the eyes of a man I'd never seen before staring back at me. How long had he been watching me? I could not say. However, it felt as if it were no accident, this collision of gazes.

He wore a black suit and tie like the rest of the guests, but somehow, he stood apart. His elegant posture and dark hair slicked back with pomade might have looked like some of the other men at the

reception, but his piercing green eyes made it impossible to turn away. I've always loved beautiful objects, and he was certainly that.

Before I could understand what was transpiring, he was before me, bowing, his eyes alight with humor. Or was it disdain? I could never tell. When it came to men, I was often in the dark.

"Miss Sullivan, I presume?" English accent, crisp as white linen. He smelled of shaving soap and leather with a hint of tobacco.

"The only remaining Miss Sullivan, as of today. I'm Estelle. Estelle Sullivan, twin sister to the bride."

"It's a pleasure to meet you. I'm Constantine Harris."

"The pleasure's all mine, I'm sure, Mr. Harris." I gave him my hand. He brushed his lips against my knuckles without moving his gaze from my face. Despite the barrier of my gloves, his touch sent a wave of heat through me. I backed closer to the trunk of the oak, worried I might faint. A flush rose to my cheeks.

This had never happened before. Nothing made me lightheaded. Or fearful. Or particularly excited.

Constantine Harris did all of those things.

"You and your sister do not look alike," Constantine said.

It was true. My sister, blonde and petite. Me, brunette and tall. "We're not identical. Obviously," I said, flushing. I was the plain sister, whereas my sister was one of the most beautiful girls in our debutante class, if not the most beautiful. I was, quite simply, not— all angles and sharp edges, eyes too big for my face. A gap between my two front teeth, the crown jewel of great humiliation. Did I let anyone know how I felt about my appearance? No, that was not my way. I projected confidence and intelligence, even if inside I wondered why God had been so cruel to make one of us beautiful and the other homely.

"Yes, so it seems," Constantine said.

"Are you enjoying the party?" I asked, taking in his strong jaw and long, thin nose. A full mouth that I suspected had once naturally curved into a smile but now seemed less inclined to do so. Despite the beauty of his emerald-green eyes, a sadness lingered there. The war, I suspected. It had taken so many of our boys. The ones who had come home were not the same as when they departed, full of vim and vigor.

"Very much. I've only recently arrived in America and am quite taken with the gardens. Your father's estate is perhaps the most impressive of all."

"How do you know my father?" I asked, curious. "Or is it my mother with whom you're acquainted?"

"No, I'm afraid neither is the case. I'm a friend of the groom's. Pierre's brother is married to my cousin Louisa."

"Ah yes. Thomas." I could not say his name without smiling. Pierre's brother Thomas and his wife Louisa had been at all the pre-wedding functions. My mother referred to him as a card. I'd found him larger than life, with his loud laugh, quick wit, and charming personality. "He livens up any event."

“Yes, that he does. Louisa’s a patient woman.”

“How have I not met you before now?” I asked. “Have you managed to avoid the tedious parties over the last month or so?”

“As I mentioned, I’ve only just arrived. Before this, I had a rather long convalescence after the war.”

“I’m sorry to hear of your troubles.” The war, just as I’d suspected. “Are you feeling well now?” “I’m alive. Which means I’m well enough. Regardless of the scars left by the enemy.”

“Scars? I can see none, Mr. Harris.” A slight note of flirtation had crept into my voice. Another thing I did not do before making Mr. Harris’s acquaintance. “An indifferent beauty, perhaps?”

“You’re too kind.” He tugged at the collar of his shirt, exposing his neck. “But you’ve not seen all of me.” I stifled a gasp at the sight of leathery, waxy-looking skin. “I suffered a burn on one side of my torso. It’s made me look rather like a monster. I’ve had to rely solely on my personality ever since.”

“Beauty such as yours cannot be marred by scarring. It’s the kind that comes from here.” I patted the lapel of his jacket to indicate his heart.

“My fiancée did not feel this way, I’m afraid.” His eyes dimmed. “If you were to see for yourself what the war did to me, you might think otherwise. I’m afraid it is only lonely bachelorhood I have to look forward to.”

“Surely not.” I swept a hand toward the guests mingling on the lawn. “You have only to look below the surface to see that most of the men here are monsters in one way or another. Scars and imperfections are not only physical.”

“Tell me more.” His eyes twinkled. “Take him, for instance.”

He’d discreetly pointed at a friend of my father’s, Mr. Lower.

“Oh yes, Mr. Matthew Lower. At first glance, one might see only a clever businessman with six children, given to him by his loyal wife. Yet it is not enough. He has a mistress who is in attendance this very afternoon, despite his wife’s presence.”

“What a shame. Does the wife know, do you think?”

“I wonder that myself.” I glanced up through the leaves of the oak to the blue sky. “I wonder so many things.”

“About why a man would have a mistress?”

“Yes, that, among other things. You’re European. Perhaps you do not care about such things? The social circles my family exist within are not so forgiving. Scandal is something we fear more than anything else.”

“A pity, if you ask me. When there are so many things that matter more.”

“Like what?”

“Kindness. Humility. Survival.”

I met his gaze. Those crystal-clear green eyes looked right into mine, shaking me into a mass of trembling nerves. What did it mean? I'd never felt this tingle of recognition or attraction before. He was like looking at the subject of my deepest desires and wishes.

"Of what age are you?" Mr. Harris asked me.

"Twenty. Last month was our birthday." My glass of champagne was empty. I didn't even remember drinking it.

"Our birthday. What an interesting concept. You've never had a birthday of your own."

"That's correct. Until Pierre, there was no experience we did not share. He's taken my sister from me." I smiled to let him know I was speaking in jest. Even though just moments ago I'd been feeling so very alone and sorry for myself. With him near, the loss seemed less acute. The natural order of things, I thought, for the first time. Sisters, even twins, eventually had to leave each other and become a man's wife.

"It's hard to let go," Mr. Harris said, "of what you've known all your life."

"I was just standing here pitying myself a great deal."

"No, you mustn't. You're too lovely to be sad on such a fine day."

Lovely? Other than my giraffe legs and the neck to go with them.

"You do not know, do you?" Constantine asked. "How beautiful you are?"

"You're kind to say so."

"We'll have to speak more of this false impression of yourself," he said.

"Would you like to see more of the gardens?" I shall never be able to explain what made me ask the question. Was it a sense of foreshadowing? Did I know somewhere deep down that we were only to have a short time together? Was that the reason I seized the moment? Invited him into my arms?

"I would enjoy that very much." He offered his arm. "Shall we?"

"Wait just a moment, please. I'm going to steal a bottle of champagne and another glass." I gestured with my chin toward the stone path that led to another garden. "I'll meet you there."

"As you wish."

I scampered away, feeling lighter than I had in months. Was this what Mauve felt for Pierre? This skittering heartbeat? These damp palms? A throbbing of desire deep within?

If so, I suddenly understood what all the fuss was about.

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I led him down the path, lavender scenting the way until we reached a thick wooden door that led into the secret garden. It wasn't really secret, of course. However, being fanciful and imaginative, my sister and I had referred to it that way after reading Frances Hodgson Burnett's book. We'd been eleven at the time, possibly our most romantic of ages. Surrounded by tall walls and a locked gate, it was only Mauve

and me and the gardener who ever set foot inside. Mother had not had the heart to visit since Robbie died. Father didn't care for the wild nature of creeping vines, tall grasses, blueberry bushes, and fragrant rosemary. Or at least that's what he said. He might have been more like Mother, not able to bear spending time in a garden meant for his little boy. The son who had died before he reached the age of two, leaving only Mauve and me. A sorry substitute for a beloved son.

Mauve and I were drawn to the overrun garden. Our little Robbie was still here, reminding us of his presence each time the breeze rustled leaves, or we smelled the scent of wet dirt or saw the bloom of peonies and wild roses. After we lost Robbie, it had become a place where we could breathe, outside the confines of our house, bloated and stifling from grief.

As children, Mauve and I had played imaginary games for hours and hours with no one to please but each other. Until recently, my sister and I had spent afternoons under the shade of the maple tree near the far right corner, speaking of our dreams and wishes for the years to come. She wanted to be a wife and a mother. I craved freedom, like a pirate free to roam the earth and sea, exploring new lands and cultures. Living by my own rules, not those of society.

"I've never brought anyone here," I said, unlocking the gate. "It's private. No one will bother us here."

While I'd been stealing the bottle of champagne, Mr. Harris had managed to come away with a pile of tea sandwiches. He shrugged out of his coat and spread it out over the grass in the shade of the largest maple. "Please, use my coat. I'd hate to see your lovely dress stained."

"Thank you." I dropped first to my knees, lifting my skirts to arrange myself against the trunk of the tree.

"What a heavenly place." Mr. Harris sat on the grass next to me, his legs stretched out long in front of him.

"The garden was meant for our little brother." I never spoke of Robbie. Doing so now felt a little like making up a story. "A gift from Father, so that he might have a place to run and play without troubling anyone. Our father was raised in the countryside and spent time in the outdoors every day of his life. When he found success, he wanted very much to have a house in the country. Mother wasn't as fond of the idea at first, but soon she grew to love the quiet, surrounded by nature and gardens. They live part of the year in the city. We have an apartment there, but Mother almost never leaves here."

"I can understand why," he said. "One's soul can find peace here."

"After Robbie died, Mother was not the same. She'd been lively and vivacious. One of the most sought-after debutantes of her year. She chose Father even though he had only the promise of his dreams to woo her hand."

"It seems he made those dreams come true?"

"So, he did. He invested in the right enterprises at the right time. Before they had Mauve and me, they were already rich. By the time Robbie came, we'd moved out here. Mauve and I were eight when he was born— ten when he died. Mother was devastated. She hasn't been the same since."

"Losing a child isn't something one gets over. No matter how much time passes."

“Mauve and I adored him too. She called him our little pet. We took him all around the estate in a little wagon, but we always ended up here. Mauve would sit in the swing there with him in her lap while I pushed them.” I smiled, recalling the way the sunshine had made their yellow curls glisten. “Robbie had golden hair and big blue eyes that seemed… too old for his little face. An old soul, perhaps? I’ve always thought he was too good for this world. God wanted him home with him.”

“May I ask what happened?”

I nodded, stomach clenched. Even after all these years, it was hard to talk about. “He woke one day running a high fever. Forty-eight hours later, he was gone.” I could recall it as if it were yesterday; the feverish look in his eyes and the way he’d thrashed about in delirium had been forever stitched into my brain. During those terrible hours when we did not know if he would survive, I’d prayed to God to relieve him of pain and restore him to us. He’d not answered my prayers.

“I feel close to Robbie here,” I said quietly. “Sometimes I hear his little laugh in the rustle of the grasses or leaves. I’d have thought it would cause me pain to think of him so often— to imagine I hear him— but it’s the opposite. His memory provides consolation.”

“I’ve lost enough people to know there’s comfort in our memories, even when the pain feels almost unbearable.”

“Father never speaks of him. As if he never existed.” This hurt Mauve and me more than I could say. We wanted to hear him spoken of as if he were a part of the family, not some figment of our imaginations. Even this morning, when I’d helped to fasten the buttons of Mauve’s gown, we’d talked of him, wondering out loud what he would be like as a teenage boy.

“I imagine he thinks of Robbie, even if he doesn’t speak of him aloud,” Constantine said. “When it comes to expressing emotion, women are far superior. Men are afraid to show the deep chasms of pain that are inevitable in this lifetime.”

We were quiet, eating the sandwiches chased with cold, fizzy mouthfuls of champagne.

“How long will you be in America?” I asked. “Where are you residing during your visit?”

“As of now, I plan to make a new life for myself here. I have little to go back to, unfortunately. My parents are no longer alive. Besides my cousin Louisa, there is no more family left.”

“I hope you’ll stay here as long as it pleases you,” I said. “God knows we have enough rooms.”

“Your family’s most generous. In fact, your father’s extended an invitation to stay the rest of the summer. He’s under the impression you might grow lonely with your sister on her honeymoon.”

“Father said that?” I asked, surprised. “Not specifically, but I gathered as much.”

He was incorrect, but I didn’t bother to explain. Father was concerned about me because he didn’t think any man would fall in love with the likes of me. “Mauve and I have never been apart. It will be a strange adjustment. One that I expected, of course. The moment we were presented to society, I knew she would be gobbled up.”

“Gobble?” He chuckled. “That’s an interesting verb to use.”

“I find it appropriate. Isn’t that what happens? A man takes his wife from her family and everything she’s known, gobbling her up until there’s nothing left.”

“Have you a beau of your own, or has this interesting perspective kept the young men away?”

“I have no beau. I don’t usually share my viewpoint, so I doubt it’s that particular quality that keeps them from noticing me. Such a shame that I was not blessed with my sister’s prettiness.”

His mouth twitched into a sympathetic smile. “Ah, there it is again. You think you’re not as pretty as your sister.”

“There’s no thinking about it, Mr. Harris. It’s obvious to everyone.”

“Not to me,” he said, looking me directly in the eyes.

I swallowed my nervousness, utterly speechless. Was it true that he thought me attractive? Pretty even? Dare I hope?

“You’re unlike anyone else,” he said. He tapped his middle finger between his own eyebrows. “Your mark there— a kiss from your guardian angel— proves me right. You’re rare and special. Marked for greatness.”

Not many people noticed the pink birthmark between my eyebrows. I’d hoped it would fade, but unfortunately, the flat pink mark had remained.

“I’ve never thought of it that way. I’ve wished it away a thousand times.”

“Could it be that our true beauty is found in what we see as imperfections? These details we focus on are not in fact the measure of anything, but somehow, they help us to find who we’re truly meant to be.”

I didn’t know what to say. His words moved me profoundly, like answers written on a holy grail. “I’ve wished only that Mauve and I looked the same. Like her, obviously.”

“Would it please you to know I studied you intently over the last few days?” Mr. Harris asked.

I flushed with warmth, feeling it rise to my cheeks. A trickle of perspiration traveled down the back of my spine. “Yes, it would please me. Very much so, Mr. Harris.”

“Please, call me Constantine.”

“I’ve shown you my special garden, Constantine, so you may call me Estelle.”

He poured more champagne into our glasses. The bottle sweated in the warm afternoon. Overhead, birdsong provided a sweet serenade.

“What have you left behind in England?” I asked. “That leaves you starting anew in America?”

“There’s nothing to leave behind, which I suppose answers your question. Louisa’s like a sister to me. My mother and father took her in when she was orphaned at only twelve years old. With Thomas and Louisa living in New York now, I feel the tug to be close to them. In America, I hope to make my way. Find direction and purpose. I’ve come out of a dark time and like a moth, I seek light.”

“What did you do before the war?” I asked. Like so many, he’d obviously put his life on hold to fight against tyranny.

“My family owned a bookstore, which I ran in the years after my father’s death— before I was called to serve. Not the most lucrative of professions, but one I loved. Without a profession or experience in anything but selling books, it seemed wise to pursue a new life in America. As I said, I have nothing left to lose. Our store was destroyed during the war. Without many options left to me, I took Louisa up on her kind offer to come to the States. Your father has put me in touch with several businessmen in need of private secretaries. My talents would be well-used in such a position.”

I studied him for a moment. He seemed meant for more than the assistant to some arrogant man, but who was I to say? I’d never done anything remotely difficult in my life. I was a wealthy heiress expected to marry well and have children. “If I were a man, I’d have liked to go to school and acquire the skills for a profession.”

“If you were a man, you’d have a position in your father’s firm.”

I lifted one shoulder. “I suppose.”

“Are you interested in marrying any of the young men currently pining over you?”

I laughed, shaking my head. “They’re interested in my father’s money, not me.”

“Why do you say so?”

“I know what they say about me when they think I can’t hear them,” I said. “They call me headstrong and tiresome with too many opinions and homely as an old goat.”

“I think that’s more a commentary on them than you.”

I lifted my gaze to meet his, suddenly shy. His attention intoxicated me. Or was it the champagne? No, it was the man.

“If I were not poor as a pauper, I would put my hat in the ring,” Constantine said. “But alas, I have nothing to offer you.”

“But I have money. If you were to marry me, then you would have money too. In fact, it would be your money then.”

“Isn’t that a shame? That being a man affords me such luxuries?”

For a moment, I thought he was teasing, but his eyes had flattened, and his mouth set in a serious line. “Well, there’s nothing to be done about it,” I said. “This is the world in which we live. Anyway, as Mauve would point out if she were here, I should be grateful for a life of ease into which I’ve been lucky enough to be born. She doesn’t fret over the same things as I. There is no gnashing of teeth or loosening of corsets for my sister.”

“Be that as it may, I can’t imagine she’s nearly as interesting as you. Tell me, Miss Sullivan, what would you do if you could? If there was nothing restricting you?”

I blinked, surprised at the question. However, I'd certainly thought about it enough times in my twenty years on earth to provide an answer. "If I could do anything in the world, I would like to write a book. Or books."

His eyebrows raised. "Is that so? What kind of book would you write?"

"Something wholly unimportant but addictively clever and intriguing. Stories with mystery and romance. Forbidden love. Unlikely heroines and men who do not care if they're different or unusual. If only I had anything from which to draw. Instead, I'm trapped here with nothing to do but hope a suitable man decides he wants to marry me."

"What about an unsuitable one?" Constantine waved away a fly that threatened to perch on my hand.

"Do you have anyone in mind?" I held my breath, hoping… hoping he would offer himself up to me.

"Ah yes, I certainly do. It could be me. I would offer you my devotion and the promise to make something of myself so that you might respect me. I'd not burden you with the heaviness that comes from pretending to be anything other than yourself. You could write your books and I would be your humble muse." "Since we've only just met, this is a big promise."

"Indeed. But I'm a man of my word. Only death could keep me from fulfilling whatever promises I've made to you."

"You have a golden tongue, Mr. Constantine Harris. Perhaps you should be the one to write the books?"

"No, I'm content to be a reader. In fact, I could be your reader. The first one anyway, before you send it out to the masses."

I shook my head, reaching over to pluck a breadcrumb from his shirtsleeve. "What a lovely picture you've made for me. Much like the dreams my sister and I spoke of when were still young and naive. Hers all came true today when she married Pierre. He's good— kind and considerate. He'll make a wonderful father and husband." I sighed, a dart of joy expanding my chest at the thought of Mauve and Pierre starting their life together. "He adores her. Just as she is."

"You deserve the same."

"I don't know. I'm not good like Mauve. I have way too many contrarian thoughts."

He laughed, part bark, part giggle. I'd never heard any sound as delightful. "How about you let me be the judge of that. Tell me one of these contrary thoughts."

I hesitated, questioning myself. Should I be so bold as to suggest he court me? What would Father think of such a match? He'd been poor once too. Maybe he would see the potential in Constantine and give him an opportunity. "I would like to be courted by someone like you, regardless of your station in life. In fact, I would like to be courted by you."

A smile spread across his handsome face, lighting up the already bright day. "I would agree it's a most pleasant idea. But your father would never agree to it, would he?"

"Father was not born rich. He might see something in you that others wouldn't. As I do."

He set aside his glass of champagne. “I’ll do my best to convince him.”

A niggling thought intruded. Father had invited him to say at the estate. The invitation in itself was not unusual. Father could be a generous man, especially when he wanted something in return for his favors. Yet what could be the reason to offer our home to a stranger? Had he seen something in Constantine Harris that he wanted?

Or had he bribed Constantine Harris to woo me? If something seemed too good to be true, then it probably was.

“Tell me, Constantine. Did my father put you up to this? Give you money to woo me and possibly marry me?”

He looked at me, aghast. “My dear, what an imagination you have. I have told you my honest thoughts and opinions. If you were to see yourself as I do, all your questions would dissipate, and you would see a man smitten and intrigued. Do not let your false assumptions and doubts cloud what is before you. I beg of you.”

I gazed at him for a moment, and a feeling I’d never had before in my life washed over me. This man had been made for me and I for him. I knew it with a clarity I’d not before encountered. “No need to beg. I believe you,” I said, laughing and singing at once. “I have no earthly idea how to explain what’s happening to me.”

“Does it need to be explained? He picked up my left hand and brushed his mouth against my knuckles. “There’s so much bad in the world. Can’t we simply look upon this as a gift?”

“I suppose we could.”

“May I kiss you?”

“No, not today. Perhaps another? When you’ve asked my father’s permission to court me.”

“I shall be patient, then.” He lifted his glass. “Shall we toast?”

“To what?”

“Do you really need to ask?”

“No, I don’t. Not really.”

We grinned at each other, lost for a moment, until a crow interrupted our picnic by swooping in to take one of the sandwiches, flying off with a great flutter of his black wings and a sandwich clutched in his beak.