



Chapter One

*“By the pricking of my thumbs,
Something wicked this way comes,”*
-William Shakespeare
Macbeth

154th Annual Commencement Ceremony, University of Maine, Present Day

The gentle breeze rustling our rented black gowns as we sat in the midday sun. The delicate fragrance of the rose bushes wafting through the air. The droning of the chancellor as he addressed the comatose assembly. The hateful glares of my peers bearing down on me like the midday sun. The nagging sense of dread pooling in my stomach.

This was the graduation ceremony I was trapped in. It was the last place on earth I wanted to be, even if it was my own.

All around me anticipation buzzed in the air, electric and palpable. But unlike my peers, who were practically glowing, I wasn't filled with this electric joy. There was a strange, knowing feeling in my gut that something terrible was looming on the horizon, just biding its time before it struck. The feeling had been gnawing at me all morning. No matter what I did, I couldn't shake it. Not even my brother Serge, who was rattling away in my ear, could chase the feeling away. It was one of the few times when I hated the fact that we were telepathic. I usually found it useful, as it granted the two of us, along with our cousins, James and Natasha, the ability to communicate with our thoughts just like the Jedi Knights in *Star Wars*. But I wasn't finding it useful at the moment. If anything, it was making me edgier than I already was.

“Your department is a total disappointment, Sis. Seriously. Are there any good looking babes in it?” he sighed, scanning the graduates from his seat buried somewhere within the throng of onlookers.

I crossed my arms over my chest, stifling a groan. *“You are such a douche sometimes. Don’t you have anything better to do than scan the crowd for girls?”* I fired another glance over my shoulder. *“And you’re being a little insulting, I might add. I’m part of this department, too,”* I huffed, turning my attention to the audience trying to spot him. Like most teenage boys, Serge had a one-track mind.

“I’ve got to do something to entertain myself while I’m here. This ceremony is ass-numbingly boring.”

He was right about the ceremony. Why the university couldn’t find a better speaker was beyond me. Other schools got famous actors, activists, and authors. We had our boring old chancellor doing what he did best: inducing a coma.

“Besides, you don’t factor into the hotness level of your department. You’re my sister,” he added after a beat.

“Oh, what a relief—not to be counted amongst the ugly and undatable because I’m your sister.” I leaned back in my seat with a snort, catching a few glares thrown my way. *Typical.* The other grads in my department were just as bored as I was, I could see it in their posture and restless limbs, but because it was *me* making a show of it, they acted like a cardinal sin had been committed.

“Oh come on,” Serge admonished, *“you know you’re not a dogface like the other girls in your department. You don’t need me to tell you that. Why did you pick this boring, ass-ugly subject anyway?”*

“You know full-well majoring in political science is a Moore family tradition, which means you’ll end up in this ass-ugly, boring department come fall,” I said, knowing it was true. Our grandmother was nothing if not traditional, and she did her best to make sure we all towed that line.

“Nah. I don’t think Gran’s gonna force it on me. I’m headed for the Marines and she knows it.”

I could definitely see Serge as a Marine. He was in the ROTC program at Washburn High and was on the Search-and-Rescue squad of the local sheriff’s department. His whole life had been dedicated to the pursuit. But in the end, none of that would matter to our grandmother. You didn’t break with tradition—not under her watch.

“Don’t kid yourself, Serge,” I replied. “You’re stuck with her and her traditions until you’re twenty-one and she no longer controls your bank accounts. But look on the bright side. School isn’t that bad. Remember what Aristotle said about education...”

“Ari-who?”

I pinched the bridge of my nose. *Seriously?*

“Ar-i-sto-tle... You know, famous Greek philosopher. He said that ‘education is bitter, but its fruit is sweet.’”

“I know who he is, Sis. I was joking,” he grumbled. “But as far I’m concerned, that ancient dude can suck it. He obviously never sat through some of the mind-numbing classes I have, where all you gain is a sore ass and a hand cramp. Believe me, school is overrated.”

I shook my head. For Serge, education was a prison he couldn’t wait to escape, but for me it was a haven—a distraction from the heartache and loneliness that had plagued my life for just over a decade. Now that it was coming to an end, I didn’t know what I would do.

“Your wit astounds me,” I retorted.

“Whatevs. I haven’t had any complaints about my wit yet. Hey, speaking of ugly departments, what’s the group after yours?”

I glanced over at the crowd situated behind us, wringing my hands. Why couldn’t I shake this nagging feeling?

“It’s environmental studies. Why?”

“Oh. That explains it.”

“Explains what?”

“It explains why they’re even uglier than your group—something I thought impossible. They’ve got the whole granola look goin’ on and some seriously nasty hair—facial and otherwise. Only people majoring in environmental studies would go around looking like that. It totally fits.”

I slapped a hand over my mouth, stifling a choking fit. *“I can’t believe you just said that! It’s...wrong...on so many levels.”*

“I’m not wrong. Look at them,” he chuckled. “Jesus, they’re all big and burly like a pack of Wookiees. Wookiees into recycling and driving those crappy-ass hybrid things.”

I pulled myself together, thinking he was cruel, but not completely off base about the Wookiee comparison: the ES kids *were* on the large and hairy side. Meanwhile, graduates nearby shot me more glares while grumbling some choice curses under their breath.

I straightened in my chair and plastered a somber look on my face. “*Will you get out of my head already? It’s tough to hide my annoyance at your comments, and the people in my department are starting to stare.*”

Normally, I was good at concealing it when someone was prattling away in my head, but the dark cloud of worry looming over me was throwing off my game—a game our family had been playing since we were little.

“*That’s not why they’re staring at you. They’re staring at Alana Moore’s eighteen-year-old granddaughter and wondering how she managed to turn out so well, despite being raised by a murderous pyro,*” Serge said.

I rolled my shoulders, muttering a few choice curse words under my breath. The move earned me more glares from the graduates around me who thought I was quietly cussing *them* out and not the boy jabbering away in my head. I faked a yawn, playing the *I’m so over this ceremony* card, trying to smooth their ruffled feathers, but it fell flat. For all my efforts, I got more dirty looks and curses.

Jerks.

I balled my hands into tight fists. Rather than attempting to placate them like usual, I should’ve told them what I thought of their dirty looks *and* their assumptions. Told them they had the story that had turned them all against me backwards: the golden boy they admired nearly ruined *me*, not the other way around; but I didn’t. Instead, I took the safe, well-practiced route of keeping what I thought to myself. Our family didn’t need any more negative attention. We’d had more than our fair share over the last eleven years, my grandmother and me especially.

Serge wasn’t accurate in his assumption about *this* particular crowd, either. They had no idea who Gran was or about the rumors that had circulated around her since our parents died. No. They had other, more twisted reasons for treating me like the Antichrist.

“*Whatever. Just stay out of my head until the ceremony is over, okay?*” I bit out. My patience was quickly evaporating thanks to him, the nagging feeling, and the tainted jury surrounding me.

“Whoa! What’s with the bad attitude?” he gasped in mock horror. “I thought you’d be happy today, of all days. You’re graduating from college, for Christ’s sake. Can’t you just relax and soak up the celebratory mood around you for once? I swear you take life way too seriously.”

I let out a slow breath. I did take life seriously, maybe *too* seriously much of the time, but that wasn’t entirely my fault or my choice. As the eldest in our family, I bore a heavy responsibility, which wasn’t an easy thing to carry under normal circumstances, and my life had been anything *but* normal. I guess the weight of it all made me a little more uptight than an eighteen year old should be—even on a day like today.

I looked across the sea of grads with envious eyes. Sitting there, seeing them smiling, laughing, looking buoyant, was a harsh reminder of the social bystander I’d been. My entire life had been spent on the sidelines, always wanting to join in with my peers but never being able to take that final step, relegating myself to a childhood and adolescence of isolation and longing.

Ugh. I was such a cliché.

“Uh, Sis? Earth to Alexa? You Okay?” Serge asked when I didn’t come back with one of my trademark retorts.

I blinked away the maudlin thoughts that would serve no purpose other than to depress me. *“Sorry...I’m fine. I was just...thinking.”*

“Nice. Now, not only are you in a downer of a mood, but you’re lying on top of it. Let’s try this again. Are. You. Okay?”

I grumbled something nasty under my breath. I wasn’t going to mention this, but hiding *anything* from him was impossible. Serge could always tell when someone was lying. It was like living with a walking lie detector.

“Fine,” I snarled, telling him about the nagging feeling I’d had all day.

When I was finished he said, *“So, you’re wound tighter than a drum because of a bad feeling? Wow. You really need to find something to help you relax. Something like a boyfriend would probably do the trick.”*

“Thanks for the advice.”

“Hey, I’m sorry, but you know I’m right. If you had more of a life than studying and reading all those books you’re always buried in, you’d have something to keep your mind occupied.”

“Whatever. Are you going to get out of my head or what?” I didn’t want to talk about this now or with Serge. Ever. Talking about my love life, or lack thereof, wasn’t on my list of subjects to broach with my little brother.

Serge chuckled. “Okay, I’ll leave. I didn’t mean to upset you. I was just trying to cheer you up and make a lame ceremony a little more interesting.”

“Well, let me give you a piece of advice: The next time you want to cheer someone up, try behaving like a human being and not a raging hormone on legs. And leave out the dating advice while you’re at it. I can hardly take relationship tips from someone who hasn’t had one for longer than a weekend.”

“See! It’s working already. I’ve got the old know-it-all Alexa back!” he cackled. After a beat, he continued, his voice growing thoughtful. “All jokes aside, I just want you to be happy. I know you’ve had some serious shit to deal with on top of everything else our family’s been through, but you gotta let all that go. It’s time—time for you to relax, enjoy life. You’ve earned it, Alexa.”

A pang of guilt pierced my heart. My little brother wasn’t giving me a bad time. He was just trying to be there for me in his own, albeit immature, way. As much as he got under my skin, Serge was a wonderful brother—a girl couldn’t ask for better. And maybe he was right. Maybe my unease today was the product of a hyper-focused mind. Well, that *and* pure exhaustion. The last few weeks of school were beyond brutal.

“You’re right, Serge. I’m sorry I was snippy.”

“No worries. I’ll see you after the ceremony.”

I let out a quiet sigh of relief at his *exit* and stood as the chancellor called the graduates forward. Maybe relaxation and fun was just what the doctor ordered. I’d spent too many years doing just the opposite, and frankly, I was too young to be like this. If I kept it up, I was going to go gray before I was twenty.

A few minutes later, the line of graduates began its measured ascent up the stairs toward the stage. After what felt like an eternity roasting in my rented graduation gown, the chancellor beckoned me forward.

“Alexandra Elena Moore, summa cum laude,” he hailed from his perch, igniting a buzz amongst the crowd seated just below the stage.

I strode across the platform to the sounds of Serge and my cousins cheering in my head, while harsh whispers from the crowd below swelled around me. Smiling cordially, I accepted my diploma and returned to my seat, refusing to make eye contact with anyone in the immediate audience. The front section was reserved for prominent families—many of which were from our little town of Washburn, Maine—who'd donated hefty amounts of money to the university.

My family, though wealthy *and* generous enough to be counted among these people, was still not considered good enough to sit up front with the other prominent guests from our town. In fact, I don't even think they were considered good enough to sit buried in the back forty where they were at the moment. Not that we'd want to sit with this bunch of pompous jerks anyway. There was no love lost between my family and the well-to-do citizens of Washburn in attendance this morning. It was no secret that we despised a good deal of them. They'd put Gran through hell ever since my parents died, and it was something none of us could forgive.

I sat through the remainder of the ceremony listening to the names of graduates roll off one by one, glancing over my shoulder every few minutes. When the chancellor reached the end of the last department, shadows descended on the gardens, chasing away the beautiful weather we'd had all morning. The sudden shift in climate sent a new wave of dread through my veins. I looked around to see if anyone else was bothered by it, but they didn't seem to notice anything. I slouched down into my chair further, trying to shake the uneasy feelings, when I heard a strange cawing coming from the trellises at the edge of the garden. I turned toward the eerie sound and saw hundreds of ravens roosting along the ledges, their obsidian eyes all trained on one thing: Me.

An icy finger dragged itself up my spine as I sat there, trapped in a stare down with the birds. Someone—besides the inky flock—was watching me, but not the way people usually did. Someone was watching me with an intensity that bored deep into my consciousness, niggling at me to find the source.

Pulling my gaze from the ravens, I scanned the rear of the gardens. That's when I saw him: a man dressed in black standing beneath the trellis where the ravens were perched. I couldn't make out his face; it was concealed by the shadows and a pair of dark glasses, but I *knew* he was watching me. I could *feel* it. The idea of a strange man staring at me was enough to set off my warning bells, but the intensity of his stare sent me teetering near DEFCON V levels.

To make matters worse, instead of averting my eyes and ignoring him as common sense would dictate, I stared right back. There was something hypnotic about all of it.

Moments later, I was startled back to reality when graduates on all sides of me leapt into the air in a chorus of joy and soaring black caps.

“Yikes!” I screeched, narrowly dodging a graduation cap flying at me.

I rose from my seat, dodging more caps and graduates, and looked back through the chaos to where the man had been standing only to find that he and the ravens were gone.

My eyes darted around the gardens, but I couldn't spot him in the frothing sea of graduates. A beach ball struck me on the shoulder a half-second later, bringing my attention back to where I was: close to drowning in a sea of black-clad bodies.

I shook my head to clear it, releasing a disgusted breath, as a group of giddy theater grads danced past me. I was letting my paranoia mess with my head. There wasn't anything eerie about the man *or* the birds. Logic told me he was a latecomer to the ceremony who was staring because he mistook me for someone else. It would be easy to do in a crowd this size with everyone clad in identical garb. As for the ravens, Maine, rural as it is, is no stranger to wildlife, so their presence shouldn't have surprised me either. I yanked off my cap, grumbled at myself for being an idiot, and made my way out of the swelling sea of black to find my family.

Rounding the corner of the rose garden a few minutes later, I found them all smiling and waving the moment they caught sight of me. People were staring, but that was nothing new. Our family had a knack for garnering attention thanks to our elegant features, graceful mannerisms, and proud demeanor. Beauty and intelligence came naturally to all the Moores and were attributes people once admired, especially those in Washburn who knew us. But that changed when our parents died. Afterward, all most people in our little hamlet could see were four orphans forced to live with a grandmother who was the lead suspect in their parents' deaths.

Serge was the first to greet me as I reached them. Losing our parents had forged a titanium bond between us, despite our differences and endless bickering. He strode over to me, wearing a pair of low-slung jeans and a crisp, navy Oxford with the sleeves rolled up over his muscular forearms. Behind him, James was directing Wookiee noises at the environmental studies group. He was behaving like a clown, as the two of them often did when together, but I had to admit it was pretty funny.

“Hey, Sis!” he cheered, sweeping me into a bone-crushing embrace. Standing a towering 6’2”, Serge was infamous for his backbreaking hugs. “I see you’re laughing at James, so I’m guessing you’ve finally relaxed.”

“Hi.” I let out a strangled cough. “Yeah, I’ve relaxed, but I’m not *Gumby*, so watch it!” I winced, pulling away and rubbing at my back.

He gave me a contrite smile. “Oops, sorry. I forget how delicate you are.”

“*Delicate?* Please! She’s Bruce Lee in a skirt, dude,” James scoffed, his Wookiee calls silenced for the moment as he wrapped me in a tender hug. “Congratulations, cuz. We’re all really proud of you.” James and Serge were equal in size, but James was far gentler. He wanted to be a doctor one day, and handling us with kid gloves was practice for his work with future patients.

I squeezed him back. “Thanks. You’ll be here before you know it.”

James and I were only a year apart, but I was able to sail through school much faster, skipping two additional grades. It’s not that I was any smarter than him or the rest of my family, for that matter. I simply had a lot more time on my hands to study than they did. Of the four of us, I was the only one completely devoid of a social-life. James and the others all had full lives with friends, parties, dances—normal teenage things. My life hadn’t been so full—at least not in the traditional sense. Instead of friends and parties, I had my studies and the countless books I found myself lost in to fill my days. This abundance of time, and a keen photographic memory, simplified my schoolwork tremendously, allowing me to propel ahead.

Natasha danced over to me then, dressed in her typical, dark array looking like a Gothic pixie. “Nice work, Alexa. Only you could pull-off graduating from college at eighteen!” she cheered, slinging her arm around my shoulders.

“Thanks, cuz. It helps when you have no life.”

“Eh.” She squeezed my shoulder, her spiky black bob dancing as she spoke. “That’s all going to change now. You’ll see. You’ll have a life before you know it.”

I nudged her with my shoulder, grateful for her enthusiasm. Natasha was someone you could always count on to cheer you up when you were down. The girl had more gusto than the Energizer Bunny, but somehow I didn’t think the *change* she spoke of would be as easy as she made it sound.

Gran moved toward me then in her typical, regal manner, pulling me into an embrace. “My darling girl, this is such a momentous day for you...for us *all*,” she said, her voice taking on a wistful tone. I looked into her eyes as she released me, seeing pride shining through unshed tears and then a flash of something else: something painful, raw. In that brief instant, words passed silently between us—words that echoed a deep, agonizing loss we never spoke of, but one we had felt each and every day since.

I forced the sorrow I felt rising back down into the place I’d constructed to keep it buried—a place that had held my grief in check since I was small. Today was not a day for sadness and loss. It was a day for celebrating as Serge had said. My graduation marked the countdown to Serge and Natasha’s own high school graduations and the end of James’s first year in college. These were milestones in each of our lives, and I didn’t want to tarnish them with the sadness I felt because my parents were gone. I wouldn’t spoil their happiness—not for anything in the world.

“Come on, Gran, don’t cry. This is a celebration. I’m not going away or anything,” I said, knowing that wasn’t entirely true. I would be leaving Washburn at some point, and part of me was hoping it would be sooner, rather than later.

Gran gave me a watery smile, her voice a tight whisper as she spoke. “I know, darling. I’m not sad. I’m proud. You’ve achieved so much in spite of everything you’ve been through. I hope you remain on this path and continue to make our family proud as you always have.”

I blinked at her. It was the most emotion she’d shown openly in years. Gran was always very pulled together, proving the English weren’t the only group with a stiff-upper-lip. She showed the world that the Irish could be just as stoic.

Her plea made my stomach churn with a new sense of worry. I loved Gran dearly, and as the eldest grandchild, I’d always worked hard to please her—even when it meant sacrificing things I wanted. All of my choices had been directed by what *she* thought was best for me, which was fine when I was younger. But now that I was older, it was time for me to start making my own choices. I just hoped that when I made those choices, whatever they were, Gran would understand and be proud of me even if she disagreed with them.

“Don’t worry, Gran. I’ll do my best,” I whispered, hoping I did just that.

“Okay, you two, that’s enough.” Serge could see something was going on and stepped in to redirect Gran and get us home. “Let’s get back to the manor. I’m starving.”

“What else is new? I swear, you and James are going to eat us out of house and home,” Natasha snickered.

“Give us a break, *Gothra*. We’re growing boys, and growing boys need food, so let’s go!” he cracked, steering us out of the gardens and toward the main drive where Gran’s Mercedes was parked.

We reached the car a few minutes later, after winding our way through the jubilant crowd listening to James and Serge rate the girls who passed by—all of whom seemed equally interested in the two of them. They were rarely without dates, despite their antics. Their good looks always seemed to make up for their dearth of maturity.

James helped me out of my gown, placing it in the trunk with my cap and diploma before we left. As he closed the lid, I heard a familiar call echo from above. I looked up to the willow trees lining Campus Drive and felt a chill ripple through me: there were ravens perched in the trees with their eyes trained on me as they cawed—just like at the ceremony.

James placed a hand on my shoulder. “What’s up? Someone’s cap get stuck in a tree?”

I shook my head. “No. It’s those ravens.” I waved at the flock. “They were at the ceremony and now they’re here. It’s weird. It’s almost like they followed me over here,” I said, rubbing at the gooseflesh that had erupted along my arms.

James looked from the trees to me with an eyebrow arched. “Uh...I think you’re reading into things. They’re just birds. I wouldn’t worry about it unless they start chanting *nevermore*.”

I was too focused on the hundreds of beady black eyes all boring into me to respond. James knew I was a huge fan of Poe and assumed his reference to *The Raven* would brighten my spirits, but it didn’t. The last thing I wanted was to play the lost *Lenore* to this nasty flock. They gave me a serious case of the heebie-jeebies.

Seeing this, he tightened his grip on my shoulder, breaking my focus on the birds. “Alexa, come on. They’re just birds. It’s not like they’re minions of the devil. I think you’re overreacting.”

The ravens burst into a wild frenzy, flapping their wings riotously after he spoke.

“Are you sure about that?” I grumbled, looking from him to the noisy creatures and back, feeling a little too much like Tippi Hedren for comfort.

“I’m sure. Now let’s get going before Serge and I starve to death, or he gets clocked by one of the ES grads he keeps insulting. I think they’re big enough to take him,” he chuckled,

nudging me toward the passenger side of the car as Serge let out one last Wookiee cry at a group of ES grads. They gave him arctic stares in return as they cracked their hairy knuckles.

Forcing a smile, I nodded and got into the car still trading stares with the ravens. When I heard James shut the door behind me, I glanced back at Gran and my stomach churned. Just like me, she too was watching the ravens with a suspicious look. Swallowing thickly, I turned around in my seat chanting to myself that they were birds, end of story. I needed to stop wiggling out and get a grip.

Serge slid into the driver's seat, laughing at the angry and insulted ES grads, and started the car, easing it down the main drive toward the highway. The manor was over an hour from the University's campus, so I made myself comfortable and turned on the radio to relax me on the ride home, leaving the ravens and my suspicions about them behind.