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A RISKY GAME

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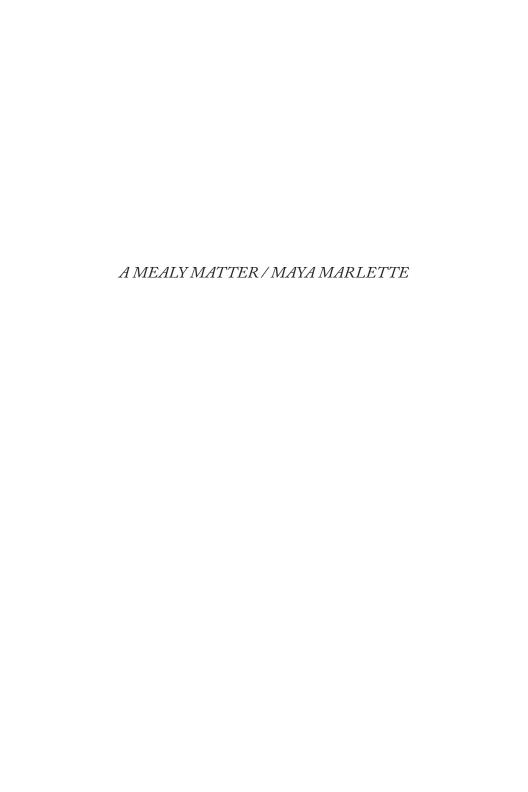
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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data available ISBN 978-1-338-85924-9

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

25 26 27 28 29

Printed in Italy 183
First edition, April 2025
Book design by Elizabeth B. Parisi



-CHAPTER 1-JACK

Toome from a long line of liars. My family, the Hunts, founded the oldest and most powerful secret society in the world, Last Heir. Rearrange the letters, and you get *The Liars*. But as I sit on the edge of my cousin Weatherby's hundred-year-old canopy bed, watching her root around in her new walk-in closet, I know she's one person I'll never lie to. I have to tell her the truth. "I don't get how your room is *this* messy. You haven't even lived here for two weeks."

"I've been busy," Weatherby says, stepping out from her closet, twirling a strand of her long brown hair. "Searching for clues."

I shoot Weatherby a look. "You're not going to find answers in here. My dad had this place scrubbed before you moved in."

Weatherby's eyes narrow. "Bishop House has been in our family for at least a century. I'm pretty sure it's impossible to disappear that many secrets in one cleaning." She slides on a gold-embroidered headband for the school gala tonight.

I glance quickly at the watch Dad gave me last week, a Patek that used to belong to my grandfather Kingman, and my heart picks up. We have fifteen minutes left to solve the puzzle in Weatherby's dad's letter. We need to figure out what's in the hidden message. We're certain the message is a way to uncover bigger secrets about our family and Last Heir. "Where'd you put the letter?" I ask, voice urgent.

Weatherby points to the old-fashioned desk. "In there."

It's been a few months since a messenger hand-delivered the letter to my house for Charles Hunt when no one else was home and I took it. I couldn't help myself, especially after I saw T > T/T > T—shorthand for the Last Heir oath, Trust Before Truth. Truth Before Tradition—scrawled on the envelope. I knew the letter was for my dad, but since I'm named after him, technically I'm Charles Hunt too.

The letter turned out to be from my uncle, Weatherby's dad. It's full of anagrams—words rearranged to conceal their true meanings, like W. MAINLANDERS OIL. The

company that covers up mistakes for Hunt International, our family chemical business run by my dad.

W. MAINLANDERS OIL is also an anagram that we can't solve. I might not be the best at anagrams, but Weatherby is.

I told my older brother, Ford, about the letter. He insisted I burn it. But I didn't. I know that someone searched my room for it when I wasn't home and that keeping the letter might be dangerous. Luckily, I'm not afraid of a little danger.

"Oh, and also, you're wrong." Weatherby glances at me. "I already found a clue."

I blink in surprise. "You did? What clue?"

Weatherby waves me over, and lifts up the empty shelf in her closet, careful not to wrinkle her white dress.

I try to ignore the ringing in my ears as my eyes land on the words hand-carved into the wood:

LANDSMAN WIRE OIL

-G

My pulse jumps. *Oil.* An eerie feeling washes over me as I stare at the letters, and they start to shift in my mind: W. M. A. I. N. . . . "Like W. MAINLANDERS OIL?"

Weatherby nods, eyes wide.

"Do you think LANDSMAN WIRE OIL is the answer to the anagram?" I ask.

She shrugs. "It seems more like a second anagram hiding the same secret."

My stomach twists.

"I still can't solve either anagram," she grumbles.

"Not yet. We don't have all the information we need. But we will," I say. "Initiation has to start soon."

Weatherby and I have been tapped, or picked, to compete for a spot in Last Heir. We got the shiny gold letters three weeks ago, promising us a chance at power and security. Last Heir is a secret society of people with secrets. I need to get in. It's the only way I'll find out all the secrets my family has been keeping and Last Heir has been protecting since forever.

"You're right," Weatherby says quickly, like she knows she just needs to hang on a little longer. We both do. "Who's G?" she asks.

I run through a list of Hunt names in my head: *Albert*, *Charles*, *Cornelia*, *Edward*, *Hopkins*, *Jane*, *Kingman*, *Margaret*, *Richard*, *Weatherby*, *Warren*, *Yates* . . . "There are no G names in our family."

"That can't be right." Weatherby's forehead folds. "Who used to live here?"

"No one." I shake my head. "It's always been a guest house." I pick at my nails.

"Well, G was someone, and it seems like they lived here. It's strange," Weatherby says, an edge creeping into her voice. "To be sleeping in someone else's bed, sitting at their desk, finding their clues."

I've always lived in a house where everything used to belong to someone else. Weatherby is new to being a Hunt. She's never met her dad and didn't know she was related to us until recently. Now she's seeing what it's like to live in the shadow of this family.

Weatherby's eyes lock on mine, looking like she's just seen a ghost. Maybe something more than the Hunt legacy is freaking her out. "I can't shake the feeling that G matters to us."

"Then we better figure out who G was," I say. "I can ask my mom."

Weatherby hesitates. "No. Don't. You're not supposed to be here, remember?"

I roll my eyes. "How could I forget?"

After my parents found out about Weatherby being

their niece and my cousin, they felt obligated to provide her and her mom with "more suitable accommodations." Mom's words.

At first, Weatherby's mom said no. Then our family became national news, and my parents offered again, but her mom still refused. It wasn't until paparazzi broke into their house that her mom finally agreed to move, because we had security they couldn't get anywhere else.

Weatherby's mom doesn't want her over at my house, and my dad retaliated with the same rule, which normally wouldn't matter. I love the thrill of a dare. Weatherby isn't a risk-taker. She's afraid to get caught. But the staff has today off, so she said yes to me coming over, because there isn't anyone in her house who could be reporting back to my dad.

"Maybe there's something in the letter that can help us find G," she says, fiddling with one of her pearl earrings.

I pick at my nails as Weatherby slides open her desk drawer, presses down . . . and a hidden compartment, like the one in my desk, pops open. She takes out the letter and holds it up to the light, squinting at the words. "I've included more details on the back," she reads, then turns the letter over to the blank side.

"Just hear me out." I shift my weight, and the old floorboards creak beneath me. "What if *on the back* is a code, like we thought last week?"

She shakes her head. "We've been over all this. There's nothing at my house or yours with a hidden back that we haven't searched, and we've checked the perimeter of both houses."

"But the details could be hidden *on the back* of something we haven't already thought about until now . . ."

She arches a brow. "Like a random shelf?"

"Exactly," I say. "Yates could have carved the details on the back of his desk or bed when he was our age, when he wrote the journal he sent you."

Weatherby's maple-syrup eyes light up. I can see the wheels in her brain spinning. "My dad was obsessed with Revolutionary War spy craft. He wrote pages in his journal about codes and encrypted messages. He thought way too much about what he'd do if he were fighting in the war, but, like, he wasn't. The British weren't coming."

"Maybe not the British," I say. "But what if someone else, someone powerful, was onto him? It seems like even back then our dads had secrets to hide."

"Like spies," she says.

"Weatherby, honey, Jack," Weatherby's mom calls out to us from down the hall.

My pulse jumps.

Weatherby stuffs the letter from Yates into the desk and shuts the drawer with a thud.

A second later, her mom stands in the threshold, drumming her gold fingernails against the wall. She fixes her eyes on the desk.

Suddenly I'm nervous she overheard us talking about the letter. But then she turns to Weatherby, and her face softens. "You look beautiful."

Weatherby smiles wide and twirls. Her silky white dress puffs out like an upside-down teacup. "Thanks, Mom. I love the earrings. They're perfect. Don't you think?"

"I do," her mom says, a hint of emotion in her tone, then she turns to me. "You look very handsome, Jack." She tucks her hair behind her ears. "Have fun at the party, and please stick together when it's over. I don't want either of you walking home alone in the dark."

"We'll be safe." Weatherby hugs her mom. "I love you."

"I love you too, sweetheart," she says with a smile.

We listen as her mom's shoes *click-clack* across the long hall and down the stairs.

"Your mom knows something's up," I say.

"Don't worry. She won't find the letter." Weatherby sounds so confident.

I don't get how she can be that sure, but I don't ask, because we need to stay focused on finding the rest of the message. "If you were a spy, where would you hide your secrets?"

Weatherby pulls the letter from the drawer and looks at it again. "This is pointless." She draws in a frustrated breath. "I'd be a horrible spy."

"I doubt that," I say. "Spying is in our blood. Ford told me a Hunt cousin invented invisible ink during the Rev War."

"Invisible ink," she says, sounding impressed. "Wait—what if my dad wrote the secret message on the back, just like he said, in invisible ink?"

"I don't know about that," I say. "It's probably too random."

Weatherby doesn't seem to hear me. She's already rummaging around the desk, looking for something, and stops when she finds a Harbour Club matchbook.

Before I can warn her about old houses and matches, she strikes one and carefully holds the flame near the letter.

In a flash, words appear, like magic.

I blink at her in disbelief.

Weatherby lets out a surprised half laugh. "I can't believe that actually worked."

Then I peer over her shoulder and read the message.

When you broke your promise to HERBS PIROGI, you picked your side, and I picked mine. Nothing between us has ever been the same.

We might be connected by Last Heir, the one loophole in our agreement, and bound by W. MAINLANDERS OIL and by the secrets we've been forced to keep since that tragic night. But I will never forget what really happened to HERBS PIROGI.

The family didn't move to Argentina. There was no urgent business that had to be handled. HERBS PIROGI was SO OPINED because of W. MAINLANDERS OIL.

Kingman made the truth and the tragedy disappear, and we went along with his version of the story, because You are who you say you are.

Kingman was right about what happens when lies multiply: They become facts. For WEARY BACKHAND JET, our lie is the only truth.

Yatesy

Weatherby gasps. "Do you know what this means? There's a loophole! Our dads are still connected through Last Heir. If I get in too, then I'll be connected to my dad, and I can finally meet him." Her eyes fill with a mix of panic and excitement. "I need to get into Last Heir."

"We'll get in," I say.

She nods, looking hopeful, but I can tell she's still worried. Then her dark brown eyes lock on mine. "What tragic night?"

The blood in my veins runs cold. "I don't know," I croak, heart pounding.

"What's big enough to divide brothers, but also keep them tied together?" she asks. "Do you think it's a crime?"

"Yes," I say, voice tight. "But not just any crime. Clearly Hunts can get away with some crimes. It has to be something big enough to take down the family."

"Like what?" she asks. "I don't even know what that could be."

I'm too scared to start guessing now even in my head.

I get the feeling Weatherby might be afraid of the answer too because her eyes drop to the floor, and she changes the subject. "What does he mean by 'you are who you say you are'?"

"It's the Hunt motto, the most important Hunt-ism. It

means you get to decide who you want to be. You're in charge of how you act and who you become." I repeat what Ford told me.

She gives me a look. "How is *that* more important than *Keep it in the family?*"

I shrug because it just is.

Weatherby takes a deep breath and stares at the letter again, brow pinched, like she's willing the anagrams to unscramble. "We need to figure out what this message means."

Ford told me we have to take the oath to know the family secrets. Last Heir is a rite of passage for Hunts. That's just the way Hunts have always done things. "I'm pretty sure the only way to decode this letter is to get into Last Heir."

"We'll make it happen. But there's something else." She looks nervous.

"What?" I ask, dread heavy in my stomach.

"WEARY BACKHAND JET is us—WEATHERBY AND JACK or JACK AND WEATHERBY."

Fear inches up my spine as I piece together what she just said and read the sentence with the correct words: "For Weatherby and Jack, our lie is the only truth."

Her eyes dart toward me. "Our only truth is a lie."

"Our dads aren't just lying." My breath catches. "They're lying to us about us."

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