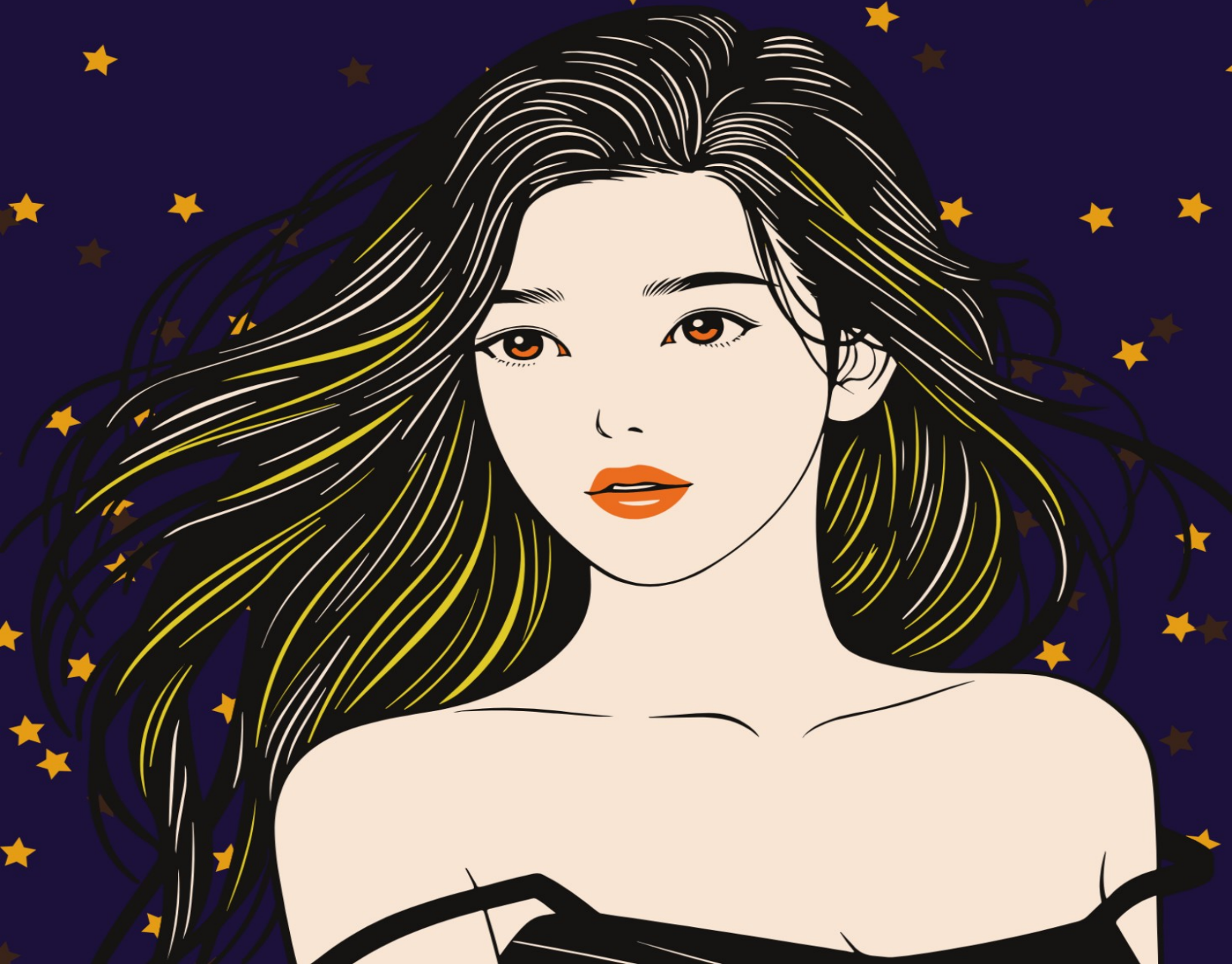


CHARLOTTE WILLOW

THE FRAGILE LEGACY

THE SHADOWS OF AMBITION
TRILOGY: BOOK I



The Shadows of Ambition Trilogy

Book I

∞

I dedicate this book to those who count steps, lines, and mistakes.

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Chapter 1 – Isolation and Contempt

The train lurched to a halt so abruptly that several suitcases clashed together like teeth on a morning that was just a shade too cold. Rose tightened her fingers around the leather handle of her bag and let the rest of the compartment spill out onto the platform.

The station offered nothing but a wet stone platform, a crooked clock, and a town sign with the paint peeling off in flakes – an ugly enough welcome to make sure no one could possibly mistake this place for anything pleasant.

Before she set her boot on the slick slab, she checked the folded reading list one more time, as if there were any chance that over the summer the canon had shifted into something kinder.

Behind her, someone called out a name; someone else threw themselves into a friend's arms. Rose edged sideways, slipping past the other pupils with a cool "sorry" that was never meant to imply she actually regretted anything.

St. Oswald's was not a school to her – it was a one-way ticket, and you did not waste tickets.

In the car park outside the station, the school bus was waiting: old, cream-and-green, the school crest on its side faded to the point where the lion on the shield looked more like a tired dog. A few boys in identical coats had already claimed the seats at the back, making noise and assuming that noise was a currency with which you could buy things here.

Rose sat halfway down, by the window, and dropped her bag onto the empty seat beside her – a more effective barrier than any words.

The Suffolk countryside slid past the glass in blurred bands: fields sliced by hedgerows, solitary trees, here and there the roofs of houses

pressed low into the earth.

The rain did not fall hard; it simply leaked, steadily, from the low sky, leaving thin streaks on the window, which Rose followed only so she would not have to look at her own reflection.

She pulled a copy of Horace from her bag – the same one whose margins had long since ceased to be margins, turned instead into a tight record of someone else’s bitterness, now faded. She had bought it in a second-hand bookshop already marked in pencil by its previous owner – “Lily Hartwell”, as the inscription on the first page declared. Now, stubbornly, she kept up that one-sided dialogue with a stranger, layering her own hopes over somebody’s old, merciless disappointments.

She opened at a poem she nearly knew by heart and began counting its lines instead of the miles between her and home. Since June, she had worked out, she had come back to “happy the man” seven times. Her mother claimed this was not normal, but her mother measured normality in a different set of units – in the number of invitations, weddings, and smiles aimed at people whose names Rose never remembered.

The bus jolted over a pothole and the book slipped on her knees, revealing the corner of a letter bearing the school crest.

“We are pleased to inform you that you have been selected for preliminary consideration for the Cavendish Grant” – she knew that line by heart, just as she knew the amount covered by the fund. She had never written the figure down, but she felt it in her body like a fever: a budget that was the price of her freedom, provided she did not make a mistake.

When the bus turned off the main road onto a narrower, rutted lane, the conversations inside fell quiet, as if everyone had suddenly remembered they were not travelling to friends but to an institution. Beyond the window a forest rose up; branches leaned over the road.

The first glimpse of St. Oswald's came without warning – a sudden, heavy shadow of a building against a horizon that was just beginning to lighten.

Gothic towers, dark stone slick with rain, a row of identical windows with no lights yet burning behind them – the architecture of the place did not so much invite one inside as issue a challenge to anyone who crossed its threshold.

A castle, she thought, though the brochures insisted on calling it a “campus”.

Rose folded the reading list in half, folding a promise with it; if this place meant to swallow her, she would at least be the hardest mouthful St. Oswald's had ever had to choke down.

*

The bus stopped on the gravel drive with such a shriek of brakes that for a moment Rose thought even the machines were protesting against the place. The doors swung open and a draught of cold, damp air swept in, smelling of wet stone and something else – something heavy, like incense without the smoke. The pupils poured out in clusters, spontaneously forming drab little groups of uniforms, like herds that instinctively knew where they belonged.

Rose got off among the last. St. Oswald's looked even worse up close than it had from the bus: the stone steps worn down in the middle by generations of feet, the brass handle on the main door polished bright by the hands of people whose names now hung on

the benefactors' boards. She glanced at those boards for only a second. It was enough to catch the repeating surnames, identical letters, the same coats of arms.

St. Oswald's was a place where genealogy mattered more than grammar.

*

The hall smelled of wax, old wood, and something Rose immediately identified as dust that no one bothered to clean because it had already become part of the tradition. Rows of benches filled quickly; the hum of voices bounced off the high ceiling and returned with a slight delay, giving the impression that the building weighed every utterance before it allowed it to settle. Rose took a seat in the middle row, close enough to the dais to catch every word and far enough not to draw attention.

On the dais stood the headmaster – tall, in academic robes, with a face on which a smile would have looked like a printing error. He ran his eyes over his notes, letting the murmur in the hall ebb away. Rose opened her notebook, even though she knew the welcome speech sounded the same every year; she had no intention of wasting an opportunity to note where the emphasis fell.

“St. Oswald's College,” the headmaster began, “is not a place for those who merely wish to finish school.”

A pause. His gaze slid across the room. Rose felt several eyes snag on her, but none lingered. Good.

“We are not here to raise you. We are here to test you.”

Only then did she feel another gaze on her. It was not intrusive; more like a warning scribbled in a margin. She lifted her eyes,

pretending to check the space above the noticeboard. She saw him in the third row, slightly to the side.

He sat with a kind of careless ease, as if the bench had been designed specifically to fit his spine. His uniform was buttoned incorrectly – one button skipped, tie loosened; most likely an attempt to show that even the school rules did not quite apply to him. His hair was a little too long for the school code; he embodied the sort of carelessness only afforded to those whose surnames appeared on the walls. He was looking straight at her.

Rose pressed her lips together and realised the headmaster was still speaking:

“This year, once again, St. Oswald’s has the honour of selecting one among you for the Cavendish Grant.”

The words dropped heavily over the hall, then began to circle, amplified by whispers. Rose caught snatches of conversation: “Cavendish”, “Oxford”, “Cambridge”, “fund”. To her, it carried a different weight: not a name, but a specific figure standing between her and a flat whose very walls knew how old she was meant to be when she married.

The headmaster went on in the tone of a man who never needed to raise his voice to sound threatening:

“The Cavendish Grant is not a prize for being talented. Talent is a basic requirement. What distinguishes the recipient from the rest is the capacity for sacrifice. For renunciation.”

Rose wrote a single word in her notebook: sacrifice. After a moment she added beside it: “of whom?”

When she looked up, he was still watching her. Without curiosity, without warmth. Rather with a faint, bored assessment, as if

checking whether the rumours about “the provincial girl who made the Cavendish shortlist” really referred to her. His gaze flicked to her notebook and the corner of his mouth twitched; he looked as though he wanted to laugh but had changed his mind at the last second.

Only then did someone whisper behind her:

“Whitby’s back.”

The name hung over her like a draught under a door. She knew it all too well – from the benefactors’ boards, from the Cavendish letter, and from that single dry mention in a report from two years ago, where her own details had appeared just below his initials.

She did not turn around. Instead, she pressed her pen harder into the paper.

The headmaster began to list rules, regulations, penalty points for lateness, but Rose was no longer listening. Instead she felt something she disliked naming: a kind of cold current under the skin when a reader reaches the first sentence of a book that is going to consume them.

Whitby ended up in her notes as well: Cavendish Grant at the top of the page, their names somewhere between the lines.

*

The corridor leading from the hall to the dormitory wing was far too narrow for the crowd now flooding through it. Conversations, bursts of laughter, the jangle of keys and metal ID tags – everything blurred into one murky noise. Rose kept to the right-hand side, counting steps upwards instead of people around her. Forty-two to the first turn.

On the landing, the stream of pupils suddenly narrowed to a single passage. Rose looked up and understood why. In the middle stood

someone who had no intention of moving aside.

Matthew Whitby was leaning his shoulder against the banister, turning the staircase into his private balcony. The others slowed instinctively as they passed him, tilting their heads slightly, glancing up; someone murmured something to him, someone else greeted him. He replied with short, lazy smiles. A corridor formed around him of its own accord – invisible, yet more effective than any rope.

For a moment Rose wanted to turn back to the hall, take a different staircase, find some side corridor.

Except that side corridors were a luxury reserved for people who did not count their steps to the Cavendish Grant. She tightened her grip on her bag's strap and climbed the next few steps.

He saw her before she reached him. She could tell from the slight shift in his weight, from the fractional lift of his eyebrows. He did not move.

When she drew level with him, close enough to notice the misbuttoned collar, he was the only obstacle on the way up. Someone coughed impatiently behind her, but no one shoved her. St. Oswald's liked to watch.

"Excuse me," she said calmly.

He did not stir. He looked at her with the same expression he had worn in the hall: as if she were a footnote presumptuous enough to attach itself to his text.

"Rose," he said at last, slowly. "You've surprised me. Already rushing off to sign up?"

She hesitated only long enough to give nothing away.

"Sign up for what?" She lifted one shoulder in a faint shrug.

“The Cavendish shortlist,” he replied, as though he were referring to something as self-evident as a form room number. “Everyone here knows who arrived with a preliminary recommendation letter.”

His voice was neither confrontational nor friendly; it sounded like a dry analysis. Rose could feel he would make room for her on one condition: if she let herself be classified.

“Funny,” she said. “I was under the impression grants were awarded for results, not for whoever has the best background check on file.”

Someone behind her snorted with stifled laughter. Whitby did not look towards the source of the sound. He kept his eyes on Rose, testing how many times she could be hit with a word before she showed anything other than polite coolness.

“Results?” he echoed, mildly surprised. “Oh, of course. Naturally.” He tilted his head. “Forgive me, but you may not have noticed: the surnames on the benefactors’ board are results as well. Multi-generational ones.”

“Yours,” she said slowly, “is impressive. Especially in the field of appropriating public space.”

For a second his mouth curled into something that might have been a smile, if not for the fact it never reached his eyes.

“Please.” At last he shifted aside by exactly the width of a single step, barely symbolically, and gestured her past. “If that ticket is one-way, I would hate to delay the journey.”

That word – “ticket” – arrested her for a fraction of a second. She had no idea whether it was a coincidence, an echo of a thought overheard at the platform, or whether he remembered that conversation from a few years ago. She walked past him without a

word, feeling his cold gaze on the back of her neck all the way to the next turn.

Only when he vanished from her field of vision did she realise her palms were slightly damp.

Chapter 2 – Mechanisms

Their room in the girls' wing was far too bright for Rose's mood. Two large, almost identical wardrobes, two desks lined up against the wall, two beds separated by a narrow strip of carpet – everything in beige and washed-out green, as if someone had chosen the colours specifically to suit the belief that emotions were unnecessary. The only element that contradicted that idea was Caroline.

She was standing on her bed in just socks and a T-shirt, trying to stick up photos from her summer holidays. She was laughing because the tape kept peeling away. Scattered around her on the duvet lay magazines, cassette tapes, colourful hair clips, and a dress catalogue that someone should have thrown out long ago.

When Rose came in, Caroline turned at once; she had been waiting for that sound of the door handle for hours.

“At last!” She jumped off the bed, not caring that one of the photos immediately fell to the floor. “I thought they'd kidnapped you on the way and returned you to some more serious school.”

She hugged her so tightly that Rose lost her breath for a second. Caroline smelled of the same cheap apple body spray as always and of hairspray that had very little to do with St. Oswald's regulations. Rose returned the hug, but less enthusiastically. Caroline noticed it in the brief hesitation of her arms, in the way they slackened for a heartbeat before regaining their usual energy.

“The train was delayed,” Rose said with a shrug. “And there was the speech in the hall.”

“I know, I heard it was as boring as ever. My father insisted on driving me because ‘it's on the way’, which in his language meant two hours late and an argument about whether I should bring an extra

trunk of shoes. I rushed into school just as the headmaster was finishing his droning on about ‘testing us’.” Caroline waved a hand. “I tried to spot you in that crowd, but you always sit where no one can see you. Anyway. You’re here. I have so much to tell you I’ll have to talk in my sleep if I’m going to get through it all before the end of term.”

She dropped onto her bed and patted the space beside her. Rose put her bag down by the wall, lined up more neatly than necessary. The movement took her a fraction of a second longer than it needed to – she was buying herself time.

“How was it at home?” she asked, sitting on the edge of Caroline’s bed. “After exams?”

“Dull.” Caroline rolled her eyes. “Mum went to stay with my aunt, Dad worked, and I got stuck at parties where everyone kept asking if ‘that friend of yours from boarding school is coming as well’.” She put on a thin, breathy voice, imitating her aunt. “Honestly, Rose, if you knew how many times I heard your name said like you were some exotic pet.”

Rose’s mouth tightened slightly.

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” Caroline snorted. “Thanks to you, at least I had something to show off about. ‘My friend made the Cavendish Grant shortlist,’” she drawled theatrically. “You should have seen their faces. As if I’d started hanging around with the royal family.”

Silence settled over the room for a moment, filled only by muffled voices from the corridor and a door slamming somewhere in the neighbouring dormitory. Rose felt the word “friend” land between

them, heavier than all the suitcases she had carried that day. She was not sure she still had the right to wear it.

“That’s nothing,” Caroline went on, oblivious to her quiet. “I saw the list. Guess who else is on it.”

“I can guess,” Rose said. “The benefactors’ boards spoke to me today.”

Caroline burst out laughing at once.

“Victor Ashby, Olivia Taylor. And Matt Whitby,” she announced with satisfaction. “I told you this was how it would end. They’re on every list. Born finalists. First his brother, now him. It’s like a family tradition, right next to fox-hunting and tax avoidance.”

In her head, Rose corrected her roommate’s words: born participants, not finalists.

There could only ever be one finalist.

Out loud she said only, “I saw him.”

Caroline immediately leaned closer.

“And?” Her eyes sparkled the way they had last year when they eavesdropped on the prefects outside the head of house’s office. “Is he as awful as he used to be, or worse?”

The image of Whitby on the stairs flashed in Rose’s mind with uncomfortable precision: the button he had not done up, the tie that served no purpose except to demonstrate his contempt for rules, that single word “ticket,” tossed offhandedly and landing exactly where it should not. She could have told Caroline the truth. Instead, she chose the safer route.

“He’s... predictable,” she said. “Exactly what you’d expect when you see a name engraved in brass. Too sure of himself, too loud, too —”

“Handsome?” Caroline suggested with a grin.

Rose hesitated only a moment.

“Too used to everyone looking at him,” she finished. “That’s dangerous enough.”

Caroline rolled her eyes.

“Oh, Rose. You really can kill any romantic subplot before it begins.” She got up and went over to Rose’s still-unpacked bag. “Speaking of murder: if I see you in the same school skirt as last year, I will personally strangle you with Whitby’s tie. Show me what you brought.”

Rose automatically shifted the bag closer to her.

“Just books. And notes.” She bit her tongue before she added “as usual.”

“I know.” Caroline smiled, but there was the faintest trace of something in her voice that Rose could not name – disappointment, weariness. “That’s why I like you.” She paused. “But this year you really do have to leave the room sometimes. I am not spending our final year at St. Oswald’s watching my best friend turn into a footnote in the library catalogue.”

Rose felt a stab of guilt, sharp and sudden, like a finger pressing straight into a wound she had been pretending not to notice. Caroline said “my”, “best”, “friend” with such ease that the words seemed weightless in her mouth. For Rose, they meant everything, and at the same time they were a luxury she was not sure she could afford.

“We’ll see,” she said quietly. “I have more duties this year. Volunteering, the library... that whole ‘engagement programme’ if I want them to take me seriously for Cavendish at all.”

Caroline snorted.

“Engagement’. I love how they dress up exploiting pupils in pretty words.” She went to the window and pulled back the heavy curtains. “But fine. You’ll be the library lady, I’ll be the party lady. Between us we’ll look after this tragic year group.”

She turned back with a wide smile, clearly expecting Rose to join in the joke. Rose tried. She managed to lift the corners of her mouth. She had no idea if it was enough.

She knew only this: the higher Caroline bobbed on the waves of school life, the more firmly Rose pressed herself into the seabed, counting every step, every point, every percentage. And the further they went into this year, the more clearly she felt they could no longer move at the same pace, even if they still shared the same room.

*

The St. Oswald’s office had always been a place where paper had more rights than people. Metal filing cabinets lined the walls, ring binders were arranged alphabetically by surname, and the air was thick with the smell of toner and tea that had long since gone cold. Rose joined the queue for the desk, clutching an envelope with her documents like a pass to something she had not yet named.

“Next,” the secretary said, without looking up from her stack of forms.

It was the same woman as always: middle-aged, hair scraped back tightly, glasses on a chain. Rose had the feeling she did not age so much as yellow, like a sheet of paper on which new names were added every year.

“Rose Hartley,” she said, handing over the envelope.

The secretary opened it in a single, practised movement. Her eyes skimmed the papers, lingered on something, narrowed slightly.

“Hartley...” she muttered. “Yes, we have you.”

Rose heard that “have” – impersonal, institutional. Here, she was not a person, just a file.

“Accommodation unchanged.” The secretary ticked something on a list. “Tutorial group the same as last year. And...” She reached for another stack of pages. “Assignment to the community engagement programme.”

She slid a thin form across the desk, the heading printed in block capitals: “Volunteering – Library and Archive”. Underneath, in the box marked “Working pair assignment”, someone had written two names by hand, in neat, even ink.

Rose read her own name, and beside it: Victor Ashby.

Her rival for the grant.

“Is there a problem?” the secretary asked, seeing that Rose did not immediately take the form.

“No,” she said quickly. “I just... don’t remember us being in the same group.”

“Because you aren’t.” The woman shrugged. “Ashby is a year above, but he has an unfulfilled library component.” She picked up a pen and drew a small cross in the box marked “Acknowledged”. “Report to the archive today at five p.m. sharp. Professor Llewellyn does not like anyone being late to ‘the privilege of communing with the school’s history’.”

In her mouth, “privilege” sounded like “punishment”. Rose nodded.

“I understand.”

As she stepped away from the desk, she nearly walked straight into Caroline, who had apparently decided the corridor behind the office was the perfect place to lie in wait.

“And?” Caroline practically blocked her path. “Tell me they gave you something sensible. You’re not going to be wiping tables in the dining hall, are you?”

“Library and archive,” Rose said, handing her the form.

Caroline’s eyes flicked over the heading and she grimaced.

“Of course.” She passed it back. “Where else would they put you?”

“You can always count books,” Rose replied. “They count towards engagement too.”

“It’s just that books won’t invite you to the Cavendish Hall Ball,” Caroline shot back, but there was more concern than malice in her voice. “Victor Ashby...” she mused, smiling. “Quiet. Proper. The sort who never gets detention because simply living by the rulebook is reward enough for the school.”

“Sounds... safe,” Rose said, although “safe” was not the word she wanted for this year.

Caroline glanced at the clock above the office door.

“You’ve got two hours until your ‘privilege of communing with history’.” She grinned. “Perfect amount of time to drop by the common room. Apparently someone’s smuggled in real wine. You need to let people actually see you before you disappear into dust and catalogues.”

“Caroline...” Rose began.

“Don’t say ‘no’ straight away,” her friend cut in. “Half an hour. I promise, no spin-the-bottle, no weird questions. Just some music, a

few stupid holiday stories. You can even bring Horace if you like and we'll pretend it's a literary discussion group."

In theory, she could agree. Half an hour was not much. Half an hour was a few pages, a handful of lines of notes, a single example of how to interpret a poem. In practice, it was the difference between walking into the archive with her mind already submerged in the task, and walking in still carrying scraps of laughter and wine.

"If I'm late for the first session, Professor Llewellyn will remember it all year," she said at last. "And I can't afford for anyone here to remember me for that."

Caroline sighed theatrically.

"You and your reputation." She shook her head, but there was no real anger. "Fine. Go to your ghosts in the archive. But promise you'll come tomorrow. After Latin. We'll have a little start-of-year celebration. You can even explain what's so great about this Horace person."

Rose hesitated. "Promise" was a strong word. Too strong for something that, in her head, lost to the Cavendish Grant in every possible comparison.

"I'll see how my timetable looks," she answered noncommittally.

Caroline finally stepped aside, hands raised in mock surrender.

"One day you'll write all this in some boring diary," she said with a smile. "And I'll be that colourful background character everyone likes but says, 'shame she's in it so little'."

"I don't think you're background," Rose said honestly.

Caroline did not believe her, but she smiled as if she wanted to.

When Rose left the office, she was gripping the form so tightly the paper had creased slightly. Victor Ashby. Archive. Five p.m. She had

a feeling that line, not the wine in the common room, was what would matter in the “results” column at the end of the year.

And at St. Oswald’s, results were recorded in marble.

*

The entrance to the library basement was easy to miss. Wedged between a shelf of encyclopaedias and the noticeboard, it looked more like a door to a mop cupboard than a gateway to “the heart of St. Oswald’s tradition”, as some overzealous alumnus had once called it in a brochure. Narrow, heavy, panelled in dark wood. The handle was cold even through her glove.

Rose arrived five minutes early. Habit.

For a moment she thought she was first. Only when she came closer did she see someone already there. Leaning against the wall, hands sunk into the pockets of his blazer, head bowed. He stood so still he almost blended into the stone.

Victor Ashby looked up only when the sound of her steps echoed off the flagstones.

“Rose Hartley?” he checked, though she was sure he knew.

She nodded.

“Victor,” he said. “We’ll be working together in the archive.”

He spoke calmly, in the tone used for stating facts, not starting friendships.

“You’re early,” he added after a moment.

“I prefer it that way,” she replied. “Lateness looks bad on paper.”

The corner of his mouth shifted, barely.

“In this school, ink matters more than the truth,” he said. “It’s a good place for people who care about boxes and columns.”

Only then did Rose notice the faint stains of ink on his shirt cuff. His tie was straight, his buttons done up; the only untidiness was the ink itself, like a mark left by holding a pen more often than a cigarette.

“Have you been to the archive before?” he asked.

“No,” she admitted. “Just the ordinary part of the library.”

“Good.” He reached into his pocket for a key. “People who come here too often start talking about ‘the soul of the school’.”

She heard no mockery in it, only a light irony aimed at the building rather than at her. That, at least, was a relief.

He unlocked the door. Cold air spilled out, smelling of dust, old paper, and damp stone. The stairs down were narrow, the steps worn unevenly.

“First the stairs,” he said quietly. “Then the catalogue. Then you get used to it.”

They descended in silence. Rose counted the steps, as always. Twenty-three. By the twentieth she could already feel the temperature drop. On either side of the corridor beyond the stairs, rows of doors stretched away, but Victor passed them without comment.

“Here.” He stopped at a door with a small plaque that read “Archive – by permission only”. “Llewellyn will be here soon. For now, we’ll just go in.”

The room beyond was half-dark. If there were any windows, they must have been high up, at the bottom of deep stone wells; at this time of day they let in only thin, dirty ribbons of light that barely dented the gloom. Most of the work would have to be done under the desk lamps lined up along a long table that looked like an altar laid

across the room. Metal shelves along the walls were stacked with cardboard boxes, each labelled with a date and a dry abbreviation.

“You can leave your things here.” Victor indicated a chair by the nearest desk. “No food, no drinks, and you’re not allowed to breathe too loudly.”

She glanced sideways at him, wondering if he was serious. Again that minimal movement at the corner of his mouth.

“I’m joking,” he added, before she could ask. “About the breathing.”

She put down her bag and took out a notebook and pen. She did not yet know what she would need, but without them she felt exposed.

For a moment they stood side by side, unsure what to do with their hands. Then Professor Llewellyn walked in – a tall woman in her fifties, grey jumper, tartan skirt. She gave them a brief once-over.

“Hartley. Ashby.” She nodded. “Good. We’ll start with the simplest task, which will still be too much for you. Sorting.”

She rattled off a few brisk instructions, pointing out the shelves they were allowed to touch and those they were not. When she left, they were alone with the boxes of years that made up the school’s spine.

For the first few minutes they worked without speaking. Rose passed boxes, Victor loaded them onto the trolley; then they swapped roles. The air was filled only by the rustle of paper and the distant hum of the heating.

It was a different sort of silence than in the room with Caroline. That silence had been a kind of tension, an unspoken plea for Rose to

stop planning her escape for a moment. This silence did not ask for anything.

“Your handwriting is clear,” Victor said eventually, setting down a card on which she had just scribbled something.

She looked at him, slightly taken aback. She had expected a remark about how quickly she worked, or a question about why she was in such a hurry. Instead, she got an observation with no obvious judgement attached.

“Is that a compliment?” she asked cautiously.

He considered before answering.

“It’s a statement,” he said at last. “But if you like, you can treat it as a compliment. Archives like things that can still be read after twenty years.”

She was quiet for a while, shifting another file. There was no mockery or admiration in his voice. There was something she could not quite place – perhaps simple notice, perhaps the beginnings of respect.

“So is yours,” she said after a moment, nodding at the labels he was writing on the new boxes. The letters were even, with no unnecessary flourishes.

He shrugged.

“My father says it’s the only thing I do carefully,” he muttered. “So at least the archive will be pleased.”

She did not press. Normally, she would have used a crack like that to peer into someone’s history, to inhale information like air. Now she simply filed it away. A note in the margin.

They worked on. Every so often their hands brushed over the same box; then one of them would pull back reflexively. No nervous jokes,

no race to see who could carry more. Just a rhythm: reach, shift, set down, record.

After an hour, Rose realised this was the first time since arriving that she was not thinking about Whitby, the Cavendish Grant, or exactly how many percentage points still separated her from safety. She was thinking about the dates on the boxes, about the even letters on the labels, about the fact that someone here had once decided the year 1976 deserved its own crate.

Victor stepped away from the shelf, brushing dust from his sleeve.

“That’s enough for the first day,” he said quietly. “If we keep this up, Professor Llewellyn will be the least of our problems.”

“What will be the biggest?” she asked, more out of habit than curiosity.

He looked at the row of untouched boxes.

“What’s inside,” he said.

He did not dramatise it; he spoke like someone who understood that an archive was not just a heap of papers, but a storehouse of other people’s mistakes.

For the first time, Rose thought that perhaps it was a good thing she had not been sent here alone.

*

Victor was the last to leave the library. The lights in the reading room were already dimmed; the windows reflected only the silhouettes of shelves and the outlines of lamps. The corridor towards the exit was empty; most pupils had long since moved on to dinner or the common rooms. He turned instead towards the garden.

At this hour, the courtyard belonged to stone and cold. Damp seeped through his clothes, and the air smelled of wet grass and

smoke that had not yet found its fire. Only after a moment did Victor notice a small point of glowing orange in the half-dark, rising and falling like a stubborn little star.

Matt was sitting on the low wall by the hedge, back against a stone pillar, one leg stretched carelessly out on the gravel. In one hand he held a cigarette; in the other, a scrunched-up piece of paper that he kept folding and unfolding.

“Ashby,” he said without looking away from the sky. “For someone who doesn’t live in the library, you leave it suspiciously late.”

Victor stopped a few steps away.

“For someone with a million things to lose, you’re smoking in a spot lit from three sides,” he replied evenly. “The groundsman isn’t blind.”

Matt gave a brief smile.

“The groundsman sees what he’s paid to see.”

He flicked ash onto the gravel.

“She was with you,” he added after a moment, as if changing the subject, though they both knew that was the point. “Hartley.”

Victor leaned against the pillar on the other side of the archway, making it look casual. He slid his hands into his pockets so it wouldn’t show that they were slightly cold.

“We’re assigned together in the archive,” he said. “Regulations. Engagement programme.”

“Of course.” Matt snorted. “Even exploitation sounds like an honour here.”

They were quiet for a while. Victor watched the smoke rise from the cigarette. It dispersed so quickly it was hard to believe that only

hours earlier in this same school someone had been delivering a speech about the inevitability of fate.

“Still the same martyr to learning as two years ago?” Matt asked at last. “Or is that just a phase on the way to becoming head librarian?”

Victor looked at him carefully.

“It’s not martyrdom,” he said quietly. “She just knows what she wants in return.”

Matt let out a laugh with no mirth in it.

“We all know what we want: the scholarship, the surname, peace and quiet. The difference is who cries when they don’t get it.”

“She won’t cry,” Victor said. “She’ll crack on the inside and no one will see it. That’s worse.”

Matt finally turned his head. For a heartbeat their gazes met without the masks they both wore so stubbornly for everyone else.

“You say that like you care,” he observed.

“I say it because I’ve watched how she works for years,” Victor answered. “You see it too. You just pretend you don’t.”

Matt drew deeply on the cigarette until the tip flared brighter.

“She has ambition,” he said. “I have an ultimatum.”

The paper in his hand trembled. Victor caught a glimpse of the letterhead – the Whitby crest.

“Your father?” he asked, though he knew.

Matt laughed once, dryly.

“Who else?” He uncurled his fingers, letting the page flatten for a moment. “If you don’t prove this year that you can maintain the Whitby standard, we’ll have to reconsider the structure of inheritance.” He quoted in a voice that was meant to sound indifferent. “Elegant, isn’t it? Almost like a line from a tragedy.”

Victor did not smile.

“That’s not tragedy,” he said. “That’s blackmail.”

“At this school they don’t bother with the difference.” Matt shrugged. “Both look good carved in stone.”

Victor took a step away from the pillar.

“You’re asking about Rose,” he said slowly. “So I’ll tell you. She has more determination than you. Not more talent, not more luck. More determination. And less to lose.”

The words hung between them. Matt stayed silent for a heartbeat, then stubbed the cigarette out on the stone and dropped the butt in a nearby bin – one rule he always followed correctly.

“I know,” Matt said. The embers glowed briefly in the dark. “My father sent a note. Apparently the headmaster ‘mentioned’ that competition this year is unusually close.”

Victor frowned, leaning his shoulder back against the stone.

“Close?”

“It’s code, Ashby. It’s easier to tell someone to win when you give them a specific face they’re meant to beat.” Matt glanced towards the dark windows of the library. “I’ve been warned: if Cavendish goes to Hartley, the name Whitby stops being an investment for my father. And he doesn’t keep losing assets.”

There was no drama in his voice, only a tired sort of coolness.

“And what are you going to do about it?” Victor asked.

Matt’s shrug this time was heavy, as if the blazer weighed a ton.

“What I always do,” he said. “Play my part until the curtain comes down. You’re on that list too, the committee likes you, and even so my father doesn’t see you. To him, you’re part of the school’s

furniture. The real fight is between the blue blood and the girl who dared walk onto our grounds without an invitation.”

He looked at Victor more sharply.

“You’re the one who watches, Ashby. The one who knows what goes on backstage. Don’t pretend you don’t see how they’re training us.”

Victor was quiet for a moment.

“I see it,” he said at last. “That’s why I’m telling you this: she’s not here to be a pawn in your family war. She’s here to win her own.”

Matt grimaced but did not contradict him.

“We’ll see. Fate likes people like that.”

“Fate has nothing to do with it,” Victor replied.

He turned and started back towards the dormitory. He could feel Matt’s gaze on his back, as heavy as the rain that was about to fall. If there was any loyalty at St. Oswald’s, it was this kind: the loyalty of shadows that saw the actors rotting on stage and stayed in the audience anyway.

Chapter 3 – Ancient Tragedy

The literature classroom was one of the few rooms at St. Oswald's that pretended to remember another age. Tall, narrow windows let in only the grey Suffolk light, smudged by panes scratched by years of rain and the fingernails of generations of pupils. A row of heavy wooden desks ran all the way up to the blackboard, where Professor Llewellyn was just writing the last words of the lesson's topic: "The decline of morals and the inevitability of fate in ancient tragedy".

The chalk squealed on the word "inevitability", as if even it had doubts.

Rose sat in the front row, closer to the desk than to the windows. Her notebook lay open at a clean page, pen aligned neatly with the margin. At the top she wrote the title of the lesson, leaving a space for the date she had not added yet. She liked to see it only once the class had truly begun – a way of putting off the moment the day was locked into a single number.

"Tragedy," the professor began, still facing the board, "assumes that certain things happen not because the hero is foolish, but because the world is unrelenting."

As always, Rose took notes. Between "world" and "unrelenting" she left a small gap. She liked leaving herself pockets of space for doubt.

The door opened only once the topic had moved on from definitions to the names of tragedians. The hinge squeaked loudly enough for several heads to turn. Rose did not have to look. She heard the familiar drawn-out thud of a bag being dropped onto a back-row desk.

Matt Whitby.

Professor Llewellyn broke off mid-sentence but did not comment on the lateness. At St. Oswald's, some people had the right to squeaking doors.

Rose tensed, barely, but kept writing, noting down the name "Aeschylus" more carefully than usual so her hand wouldn't betray a twitch.

She heard Matt take a seat at the back, the chair protesting as he leaned too heavily against it. A moment later came the tiresome sound. Click. Pause. Click.

The teacher began to read an extract from a tragedy about a hero who breaks the law of the gods, convinced that he is in the right. Llewellyn's voice was even, stripped of pathos, as if she were analysing a medical case rather than rebellion against destiny.

Rose wrote down quotations, dates, short prompts: "hubris", "hamartia", "tragic guilt – flaw or error?". The clicking sound kept returning like the ticking of a clock no one could see.

She gave in and glanced sideways, pretending only to be looking at the glass case by the window that held framed old photographs. In the reflection she could make out the back row.

Matt sat slouched, one leg stuck out into the aisle, deliberately taking up more space than he was entitled to. His textbook lay shut at the edge of the desk. Instead, he held an old, scratched lighter in his hand, rolling it between his fingers, thumb pressing the wheel from time to time without striking a flame. Click. Pause. Click.

His face was turned vaguely towards the board, but his gaze kept sliding away – to the windows, the ceiling, the place where Rose sat. In the reflection, his eyes were only dark smudges, yet she recognised

the look from the hall and the staircase: absent and too present at the same time.

She felt something inside her respond – not fear, exactly. Irritation.

She turned back to her notebook just as Professor Llewellyn tapped the board with the chalk and called her name.

“Hartley.”

Rose raised her head.

“Give us, in one sentence, your definition of the tragic fault,” the professor said. “Without reading the textbook.”

She did not need the book.

“It’s the moment the hero makes a choice believing he is doing the right thing,” she said. “But his limitations – his nature, pride, fear – mean he chooses the worst possible way. And only then does it turn out that fate was less cruel to him than he was to himself.”

Llewellyn smiled, satisfied.

“Good.” She nodded. “Remember this: fate is a convenient excuse. The tragic fault is less romantic, but more truthful.” She set the chalk down. “Mr Whitby?”

The click of the lighter stopped.

“How would you respond to Miss Hartley’s definition?”

This time the silence in the room was thicker. Rose could feel eyes on the back of her neck. From behind came the faint rustle of movement as Matt straightened up, like someone who disliked being called on but knew he had no choice.

“With all due respect to Miss Hartley,” he said, and his voice flowed through the classroom smooth and unhurried, “I’d say

tragedy is less about a bad decision and more about having no way out.”

Rose’s fingers tightened on her pen. She did not look back, but she wrote down every word of his answer almost automatically.

“The hero,” Matt went on, “is born into a role he never chose. Everyone tells him who he is supposed to be: the gods, his family, the city. At some point he has to play the scene, even if he hates the script. He can speak louder, swear, improvise. But the act still ends exactly where someone wrote the stage directions.”

A few people snickered at “stage directions”; it sounded too textbookish in his mouth.

“So in your opinion,” the professor interjected, “the hero is not responsible for anything?”

Matt was quiet for a heartbeat.

“He’s responsible for the way he breaks,” he said at last. “Not for the fact that he breaks.”

Rose felt the cold from the windows slide under her skin. His words did not sound like a clever line for a lesson. They sounded like a sentence he had been repeating to himself for a long time.

Professor Llewellyn leaned back against the desk.

“An interesting perspective,” she said dryly. “Although we did ask for an interpretation of ancient tragedy, not your autobiography, Mr Whitby.”

The laughter that followed was louder this time. Matt did not react. In the window’s reflection Rose saw him sit back down and reach once more for the lighter. Click. Pause. Click.

Her own definition now rang in her head like a learned formula. His sounded like an accusation.

She did not yet know that this was the lesson that would stay with her longer than most quotations from the plays.

*

Matt rested his back against the cold corridor wall. Now he smelled of rain and chalk, but it took only a moment's effort to conjure a different scent – chlorine, cheap whisky, disinfectant.

Two years ago, St. Oswald's had looked the same. Only his surname had a slightly better reputation.

That evening had started with laughter in the dormitory. With a bottle of whisky pulled from a tennis bag and the word "farewell" spoken with exaggerated solemnity. Matt had not been the one who suggested the party. He was the one they watched as the bottle went around. Whitby. The boy who would "cope with anything".

Then the corridor, whispered jokes, stumbles on the stairs. The lake beyond the playing fields, cold water, someone singing badly out of tune. The images blurred; what remained was the weight in his skull and the knowledge that nobody important should see any of it.

The next day, there was no laughter. There was a summons to the headmaster's office. His father was already inside.

He sat at the desk like an extra piece of furniture that did not match the rest – too expensive, too perfectly made. He smelled of cologne that clashed with the room's polish.

The headmaster spoke at length, in a flat voice, about "conduct unworthy of the name", "betrayed trust", "the necessity of decisive action". Matt caught isolated words; the rest drowned in the rush of blood in his ears. His father said nothing. The silence was always worst.

Then came a name he had not expected.

“Hartley.”

The headmaster opened a slim file. Matt saw his own name, the list of offences, the dates. Only after a moment did he notice the attachment: a prefect’s report, a handful of short notes, one sentence underlined in a different pen.

“Following a suggestion by Rose Hartley, who reported a suspected instance of alcohol being brought into the dormitory...”

Suggestion. Suspected. Reported.

Those words landed heavier than all the accusations put together. They stood out more sharply than the headmaster’s face.

“Everyone drinks at St. Oswald’s,” his father said calmly at last, still not looking at him. “The difference lies in whether the wrong people get to see it.”

He did not need to add that “someone” had just made sure they did.

The decision came in the form of a brochure. A school with a “stricter regime”, a euphemism so clumsy it was almost transparent. Uniforms more military than academic, photographs of smiling boys who, in reality, ought to have been bruised.

His father ran a finger over the crest on the cover.

“If you’re going to learn that a name carries obligations,” he said, “you might as well learn it there.”

There was no shouting. Only signatures, stamps, dates. In the report Matt glimpsed, “Whitby” appeared alongside the phrase “immediate action taken to protect the school’s reputation”. And just beside it, in brackets: “report: R. Hartley (Form V)”.

Only then did he remember a detail from the day before.

The corridor, still before exams. Him laughing at some stupid joke, his friends making too much noise over the bottle sticking out of the bag. Rose Hartley walking past with an armful of books. A brief glance – cool, assessing, more annoyed by the noise than anything else.

And her voice, addressed to the duty teacher by the door:

“Miss, I think someone’s bringing alcohol into the dormitory. It might be worth checking before lights-out.”

Nothing more. No names, no pointing fingers. He had barely noticed then. Now every word sounded like a signature under a sentence.

Two years later he sat in the back row, turning a lighter between his fingers instead of a pen. His eyes on the back of Rose’s head. On the perfectly even handwriting, the immaculate margins, the calm profile of someone who was always on time and always had an answer.

Maybe she had done it out of a sense of duty. Maybe because their noise had disturbed her revision. Or maybe simply because someone had told her this was what you did if you wanted to be “a good pupil”.

He did not know. He knew only that without her intervention his father would not have had such a convenient pretext.

That was enough to turn his hatred from childish to logical.

*

When the bell rang for the end of the last lesson, the classroom exhaled noise like a breath held too long. Chairs scraped, someone swore after catching a bag on a desk, someone else immediately launched into a joke about Odysseus and family therapy. Rose closed her notebook a little too carefully – evenly, slowly, as if the precision

of the movement might keep anything from this lesson from scattering.

The name “Hartley” still hung in the air, spoken moments before by the teacher in a purely academic tone. It sounded different on paper.

In the report from two years ago, there was no “Miss Hartley”. There was “R. Hartley (Form V)”. A dry bracket tacked onto a long line of charges against Matt. Report.

She gathered her things and left the room among the last. The corridor was already crowded. A group of older boys stood by the wall – jackets undone one button too far, laughter too loud. As she walked past, their conversation broke off a fraction of a second too quickly to be coincidence. Someone snorted.

She did not look back. She did not quicken her pace either. She had practised this indifference for so many years that it was almost convincing.

The dining hall was no different. At the table where she had once sat with a knot of girls from her year, trays and bags now claimed the seats before anyone could. Caroline waved to her from the far end of the room, but by the time Rose reached her, the chairs around her friend were taken. So she edged a little further along, sitting on the margin, like a footnote too long to fit on the page.

She did not need to ask what they were saying behind her back. At boarding school, gossip travelled along fixed routes.

Two years ago: “Hartley turned Whitby in.”

Later: “She reported him because she likes telling on people.”

The most recent version: “If she could do that to him, she’ll do it to us.”

Caroline was the only one who never repeated it. Perhaps because she truly took nothing seriously, or perhaps because she liked having someone she could call “my best friend with a shot at the Cavendish Grant”. More and more often, Rose felt like she was both a person and a trophy.

The truth was less dramatic, but nobody wanted to hear it. That evening she really had gone to the duty teacher only because the noise was wrecking her revision. Alcohol had been the argument the rulebook understood best. She had not yet known the full price of the word “report”.

She did now. Every time she saw Matt, she could feel it under her skin.

She did not hate him for drinking, or for disturbing her work. There had been plenty of other charges in that report that did not need her help. She hated that because of him she had stepped out of the one role in which she felt safe: invisible, correct, harmless. She had become someone people could call “the one who tells on others”.

That was why now, when he was back, every step he took along the corridor sounded like a reminder. Every glance – like a promise of possible revenge. She did not know whether Matt was planning anything, but she knew he had a right to it that others did not.

Ambition, then, was not only a way out. It was a shield. If she was good enough, beyond question, no one would be able to say she had ruined Whitby out of jealousy. They would have to call it “consistency of character”. Or, better still, “the proper response to a breach of rules”.

For the moment, though, when she sat in the dining hall with a book open beside her plate, it looked less like strategy and more like

a loneliness someone had mistaken for a choice.