

THE WINGS
of POPPY
PENDLETON

MELANIE DOBSON

Praise for Melanie Dobson

The Wings of Poppy Pendleton

“On an atmospheric island with a ruined castle, a page-turning mystery unfolds. . . . Melanie Dobson writes with a heart bent toward healing, and again she delivers an intriguing story of the bonds of family, the mystery of time, and the power of love.”

PATTI CALLAHAN HENRY, *New York Times* bestselling author

“This captivating tale seamlessly weaves past and present for a layered tapestry you won’t want to miss. From the first page, I was hooked on this story of identities lost and found, of hearts broken and made new. I fell in love with the haunting setting, complex characters, and the ultimate redemption in *The Wings of Poppy Pendleton*.”

JOCELYN GREEN, Christy Award–winning author of *The Metropolitan Affair*

“Mystery at every turn threads *The Wings of Poppy Pendleton*, Melanie Dobson’s captivating family saga set amid the Thousand Islands in the St. Lawrence River. . . . Absolutely fascinating and beautifully written—I could not put this book down!”


CATHY GOHLKE, Christy Award Hall of Fame author of *Ladies of the Lake* and *Night Bird Calling*

“*The Wings of Poppy Pendleton* is a hauntingly beautiful time-slip mystery overflowing with hidden secrets that impact multiple generations. Dobson’s skillful artistry of words brings the Thousand Islands setting to life, weaving complex characters, page-turning intrigue, hints of romance, and inspiring faith-filled hope into both past and present.”


DARLENE PANZERA, award-winning author of *The Groom She Thought She’d Left Behind* (part of the Runaway Brides collection)

“Melanie Dobson creates a timeless time-slip mystery that bounces between the stories of two little girls and two troubled women, two different historical periods, and the mysteries surrounding their lives. Intriguing, and powerful, this is novel to experience, ponder, and share, where the twist and turns of beautiful phrases abound.”

SUSAN G. MATHIS, award-winning Thousand Islands Gilded Age author



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PROLOGUE



“ARE YOU COLD, MADAME?”

Her hands shook like the tremors from the ship’s bell, clattering against the shreds of wet fabric that hung at her sides, but she didn’t answer his question. Truth was, she felt neither hot nor cold. In fact, she felt nothing at all.

The man draped a blanket over what remained of her nightclothes and the weight of it anchored her to the ground.

“What’s your name?” he asked, a pocket notebook and pencil in hand. As if her answer might somehow capture the horror when no words would suffice.

“I need something . . .” She tugged the blanket taut across her chest, covering the purse that hung around her neck, but even then, the shaking wouldn’t stop. “Something to drink.”

A fur-cloaked woman poured tea from a thermos, the tin cup steaming in the night air.

A handful of skiffs had unloaded on this remote shore along the St. Lawrence, dozens of passengers now scattered on the crags, a crush of debris littering the rocks. Surely more people had been rescued. Hundreds had been on the ship. A thousand even.

She squinted into the fog, thick as paste, searching, but not even the burning kerosene in the lighthouses could be seen. How many more would still arrive on this dark shore? How many names for this man to collect?

Only one name mattered to her.

The tea melted away the ice in her mind, and then grief sprang from a fresh well, threatening to drown her heart and mind, stealing her breath.

She should have stayed frozen.

“Your name?” the man repeated, tapping his lead on paper as tea spilled over her cup.

Her name.

If only she could rid herself of it. Dump every letter overboard and let them sink to the bottom of this wretched river. “I don’t remember—”

“I only want to help you find your family,” he said.

“I have no family.”

“Your husband,” he persisted. “Children.”

“I had neither before the wreck.”

He lowered his pencil. “Then I suppose you can be glad of that.”

She felt the cold now, stealing up from her fingers, reminding her she was still alive. “I am glad of no such thing.”

His gaze wandered to the fog-laden river as if he could see the sunken ship. “The court will find out who caused this,” he said. “You’ll get money.”

He was trying to comfort her, she knew, but everything was wrecked, not just the steamer. “I don’t want their money.”

His eyes narrowed as if questioning the soundness of her mind. “You’ll be the only one who doesn’t.”

She stepped carefully on another rock, her feet bare. Had she been wearing her slippers when the steamer began to list? She still couldn’t feel her toes.

Another rowboat arrived at the water’s edge, its steel bow flashing in

the lantern light. And something else. A shimmer of gold on the stony shore.

She picked up the watch case and traced her fingers across the flowers engraved on the front. The gilded stamp on the back with the Pendleton name.

“Where are you going?” the man called as she shuffled over the stones, rushing toward the rowboat.

“I have to find someone.”

“But you said—”

She waded into the icy water, searching the faces of those who’d survived, hoping for a miracle on one hand but afraid of who she might find.

She didn’t recognize anyone on board.

The survivors were escorted into a church basement and buried under shells of blankets as they awaited news of their loved ones. And they continued waiting as dozens of coffins were brought through the door.

Hours later, another man appeared at her side, one with a ledger, inquiring again of her name.

“Sister,” she finally said.

He looked up, and she could see a glimmer of compassion on his hardened face.

“You’re a nun?”

She didn’t know who she was anymore.

“I have to record everyone’s name.” His forehead crested with wrinkles as he contemplated the gravity of his work. “So we can account for the missing.”

She dug through the attic of her mind, searching for names in the dusty travel trunks that she’d long forgotten. He needed a name, but she couldn’t give him the one inscribed in the ship’s manifest.

A picture emerged in her head of a woman immortalized in stained glass, her story woven through the Scriptures. A deceived woman who became the deceiver. A woman who received a new name after her servant bore her a son.

“Sarah,” she told him, and he scribbled her new name into the ledger. “Sister Sarah.”

From a dark corner, she watched as more survivors stepped into the cramped basement, all of them drenched in river water. Watched the wooden coffins pile up at the side of the room, no respecter of age or class. Watched and waited even as her heart longed for the impossible.

In spite of Sarah's doubt, in spite of her deception, God had redeemed her life.

Perhaps it wasn't too late for her.

Perhaps He'd still give her a miracle.

A girl clung to one of the coffins until the man with the registration book guided the child to the shadows. "Sister Sarah can pray with you."

But she wasn't qualified to pray for anyone.

"She needs you," he begged, and with those words, she did what she once thought foolish.

Sarah cradled the girl's hand and begged for God's mercy on her.

In the morning hours, Sarah wandered along the shore again as dawn finally broke through the haze. Then she dug the Pendleton timepiece out of her pocket, and with a loud cry, she hurled it back into the St. Lawrence.

The shifting river sands, she hoped, would forever bury its curse.



PART I

Dark clouds bring waters, when the bright bring none.

The Pilgrim's Progress,
JOHN BUNYAN (1678)



1
CHLOE



KOSTER ISLE, NEW YORK
APRIL 1992

Waves battered Chloe Ridell's motorboat as she steered around the imposing ruins on Koster Isle, the roof of the old boathouse draped precariously low. The castle above it had been built on granite, withstanding almost a century of storms, but one swift uppercut of wind could overturn her and *Lolli*, the mahogany runabout that her grandfather had built forty years ago.

In good weather, it only took fifteen minutes to cross from the village of Clayton to her island, but she'd already been battling the river for a half hour. Soon, she hoped, she'd be tucked away in her cottage with a mug of hot chocolate and a crackling fire and two sweet dogs who slept on her bedroom floor. Even if they lost electricity, her home was a safe place in a gale.

But the river wasn't safe, especially on a night like this. The St. Lawrence threw punches on all sides as its steel-blue waters curled and snaked between island pods. While river rats like her had learned to respect the whims of its fists, it still took every bit of concentration to duck its nasty hooks and the jabs aimed at *Lolli's* hull.

If she fell tonight, Grandpa Cade's runabout would join the vast graveyard of ships below the surface, buried in the St. Lawrence sand, and it would take everything within her to climb the rocks on the shoreline. Like a musk turtle, she thought, shimmying up to sun.

Jenna, her best friend and business partner, had begged her to spend the night in the apartment that Chloe kept over Cade's Candy Shop, but in spite of the dark clouds, the rumble of thunder downstream, she'd needed to return to her cottage on the island. While she couldn't explain the urgency, she'd learned over the past thirty years to follow the whispers inside her head.

God whispers, Nana had called them. But she hadn't expected His whisper to lead her straight into a storm.

Chloe throttled back to surf over an icy wave as it battered her slicker, soaking her face and hands. Neither the voices nor this gale would take her down tonight. "C'mon, *Lolli*," she shouted as they rode another wave.

Locals liked to name their boats for the whimsical, perhaps in an effort to ward off fear. *The Good Ship Lollipop* was what Grandpa Cade had christened his prized speedboat with the red candy-striped vinyl seats, named for a trip to the candy shop that Shirley Temple sang about on the silver screen.

Decades ago, when custom boats were prized as works of art as well as modes of transportation, Ridell Boats had constructed scores of beautifully crafted and varnished runabouts in Clayton. But most people wanted fiberglass now or aluminum or even inflatable boats. Easy to maintain. Reliable. Quick to sell for a good price. People didn't care like they used to about craftsmanship. Before her grandfather had died, he wanted to build one last boat to call his own. Then he'd passed ole *Lolli* on to her.

A shudder quaked across her chest as another hulking wave roiled toward her, black water sparking green in the sidelight. One hand

clutching the wheel, the other on her throttle, she and *Lolli* had been flung back into the ring.

As the storm pressed against her, trying to corner them against the island's rocky shoreline, Chloe shoved the throttle so the wind wouldn't pin her against the rocks or plunge her into the frigid bay or push her into Canadian waters. With winds blowing northeast toward the Atlantic, a thousand miles upriver, she'd be halfway to Montreal by morning if she didn't fight back with a fury.

The gale frothed around the bow and whipped off the hood of her slicker, unfurling it like a sail. Her drenched hair wrapped around her head like a turban, but she wouldn't release the wheel or throttle to untangle it. Only a few more minutes now, and she'd be home.

Another bend ahead, and she swept around the island before throttling down. Ducking, she glided under the elbow of a beech tree and then she guided the boat between a curtain of vines that covered the entrance to her lagoon.

Here, in the shelter of trees, stormy waves tempered back into a slow boil.

Here she didn't have to be afraid.

With a deep breath, Chloe wiped the soaked strands of hair off her face, and the frantic pounding in her chest began to calm as she skirted a garden of marsh grass that swayed with the current. Grandpa Cade had built a shingled boathouse along this shore many years ago. A home for *Lolli* with its open front and narrow dock and a workshop for him overhead.

As *Lolli* nudged the bumpers with her nose, Chloe killed the motor and reached for the dock. "Steady now," she said as if the boat had ears. Then she unraveled the line.

Docking's a lot like sewing, her grandpa used to say. Chloe was no good as a seamstress, but her grandma had taught her the basics of stitching.

Lasso the piling, that's what Grandpa Cade always said. *Lasso, loop, and then thread the needle twice*. With a firm tug, no storm in these islands could detach her bowline from the wooden anchor.

The boat secure, Chloe unlatched the chipped hold and removed her leather tote, wrapping it quickly in a plastic bag to protect the shop's

ledger and her foil-wrapped burger that she'd picked up from Jake's BBQ. Everything else could remain in the boat until morning.

On a night like this, no one would be scrounging around in her lagoon.

At the end of the boathouse was a narrow path that her grandfather had paved to his cottage when he was the caretaker of Koster Isle—or Ghost Island, as locals called it. The celebrity guests back at the turn of the century would arrive at the grand boathouse with its towering ceilings and intricate fretwork on the other side of the island and cross over a stone bridge before a member of the family or staff would escort them up through a covered passage to Poppy's Castle.

The official castle name was Pendleton, but Grandpa Cade had always referred to it as Poppy's. As if the girl who disappeared almost a hundred years ago might still be hiding inside.

Grandpa Cade passed away back in 1977, and her grandma died just two months ago, stepping into heaven almost fifteen years after he was gone. Nana never talked with her about the old castle or mystery that shrouded it. It was as if she'd carved a line across this small island in her mind and set the port side adrift. In Nana's mind, the castle and its stories were gladly buried in the sands of time.

As Chloe climbed the stone path, passing by the old icehouse and an abandoned chapel and a dilapidated powerhouse filled with rusty switches and dials, she longed to set several things in her own mind adrift, but the pieces always seemed to float back, often in glass bottles that shattered when they crashed into shore. Sometimes she felt like a fraud, living on an island built by another family, living in the shadow of their castle that had been abandoned since the early 1900s. But this was her grandparents' home—her home now—and she desperately wanted to keep the memories that they'd cultivated here alive.

The rain had stopped, and as darkness settled over the island, Chloe's flashlight cut through the haze. A few years after Grandpa Cade had died, she and *Lolli* had gotten lost in one of those creeper fogs that snuck up behind her and tossed a gray blanket over her head. The floodlight had glared back at her that night, reflecting her stupidity like a mirror. For hours she'd dodged shoals, trying to find her way back to Clayton, until the tank ran dry. Marsh grass had trapped her and *Lolli*

near Toothpick Island until another river rat delivered a can of gasoline and a tumbler of coffee in the light of morning, along with a memorable scolding to keep Chloe off the water in a storm.

The path rose steeply up the side of the cliff, water slapping against the sandstone below, a tangled wall of branches and vines that protected the island and fifty thousand square feet of castle to her left. Raindrops clung to the braids of ivy, glistening in the light beam. Only in the winter, after the leaves were swept away in the winds, was Poppy's Castle visible from this trail.

Pine needles showered down as Chloe neared the end of the path. Her cottage was cocooned in a dip on the north shore, wreathed in sumac and balsam fir. The house had been built in the early 1900s like the castle on the hill, and with her grandparents' tender care, the cottage had ridden out the storms, just like they'd loved her through the emotional storms of adolescence and protected her from the many storms that raged through the North Country. How she missed her grandpa's laughter, her grandma's open arms and mugs of hot chocolate whenever Chloe came home.

They had spent their lives protecting and caring for this island, and now she was the only one left in the Ridell family to continue their legacy. She'd promised herself that she would care well for their home and candy shop after they passed on, but now that they were both gone, she didn't have nearly enough money to do either. The store brought so many people joy, but it was floundering financially and she didn't have enough income even to renovate what remained.

It was hard enough to think of selling the candy store, but it would wreck her heart if someone tore down the castle and cottage on her island and built a shiny mansion in their place. She'd keep fighting to preserve this small island and all its stories. Drop an anchor in the only place that she'd ever called home.

Then she'd never be swept away in life's storms again.

Strands of brown hair stuck to Chloe's cheeks in the wind, framing her lips as she whistled for her dogs tonight, watching for the two Labradors who always raced out from their shed to greet her. Stopping for a moment, she listened for their barks, the cracking of sticks and scattering of stones under paws, but she didn't hear anything except the shudder of branches along the path.

“Maple?” she called first to the older dog. Then she shouted for Sugar.

Moonlight slipped between a crease in the clouds as she waited, spilling over her island. Then a bolt shot straight up her spine.

Where were her dogs?

A hundred scenarios smashed into her brain, none of them good. A slip off a cliff. A broken floorboard in the boathouse. Bald eagles hunting for food.

No sense pondering the possibilities.

Nana’s voice smoothed over some of the worry tethering her, and she tried to set her fears adrift with mental scissors that had grown rusty from use.

There were no dangerous animals or snakes on her island—the only animals besides her dogs were the hare and skunk and red squirrel who crossed over the ice in the winter and became stranded in the thaw. No guests would visit without an invitation. No intruders, to her knowledge, had trespassed in years. And no ghosts haunted the walls except those kept alive by tour boat guides to entertain their guests.

It was the immaterial that brought tourists by her island in droves. All the stories about the tragic death of Mr. Pendleton and the disappearance of his only daughter.

The only telephone on the island was in her cottage, and Jenna had told her to call this evening. But her best friend knew that service would be spotty in a gale. Chloe would meet up with her first thing tomorrow.

She turned off the main path, into a narrow corridor between trees as the rain poured again, the front light of her cottage glowing ahead. Boughs brushed her slicker and bag as she yelled one more time for her dogs, but all she heard was the crash of a falling branch, the rattle of her front door.

Perhaps she’d forgotten to let Sugar and Maple out this morning. If so, her home would be foamed and frothed and muddied by eight rowdy paws in search of trouble.

Swinging the leather bag to her other shoulder, Chloe unlocked the aluminum storm door and turned the knob for the wooden door behind it. With a flip of a switch, electric light flooded the pine floor and mint-green walls in the entryway.

The submerged cables that connected her to the mainland were something she'd never stopped being thankful for, but her thankfulness was short-lived tonight. When neither Maple nor Sugar greeted her inside, she quickly extinguished the overhead.

If someone else was on her island, it made no sense to announce she was home.

She dropped the tote on the dining table and tiptoed through the kitchen and living room. On the other side of the back door was a covered patio with two chairs chained to the cement floor beside a half cord of wood. Instead of opening the door, she sidestepped to glance through the picture window that framed Eel Bay in the daylight, the Canadian shore shimmering in the distance.

But all Chloe saw tonight was a dark mound on the floor.

AMELIA

JULY 1907

A wave of indigo and pink swirled across Pendleton Castle, flower petals cresting in the sunlight. *Papaver somniferum* was the Latin name for the elegant blossoms beaded with pearls, but her husband preferred to call them poppies. A common name, Amelia thought, for a man who typically snubbed commonality.

Leslie Pendleton was known for his grandiosity. The gilded walls of their mansion on Fifth Avenue. The opulence of their new summer castle in the Thousand Islands. The diamond watches that he distributed to the upper crust and the pricey tonic that he sold as a miracle cure for children in pain. All of it made him, made them, just as wealthy as the Astors or any of the New York elite, but the Pendleton money was unfashionably new. The crumbling pillars of society would rather dust

off their dwindling assets, wallow together in what they had left, than embrace the nouveau riche.

Amelia ran her hand across the stone balustrade as servants raced between the veranda and the manicured gardens and terrace below. The old guard of New York might snub the Pendletons, but most politicians and poets and businessmen orbited like planets around Leslie, basking in the light, and she was quite willing to accommodate her husband's need to shine. Happy to live in the safety of his shadow.

As long as Leslie was firmly in the center of her world, the Pendleton sun would continue to shine.

The carpet of poppies lay beyond the clothed dinner tables, the platform for a magnificent view of the bay. Amelia had thought it irresponsible to flaunt what many considered a vice. She'd even warned Leslie that poppies would never root in soil frozen solid from the winter snows or flower in the winds that battered their cliff. But she'd been wrong about the growing. The flowers decided to bloom right where they were planted, just in time for their daughter's fifth birthday.

Everything was going exactly as Leslie had planned.

A hundred guests from across New York would crowd the veranda and lawn tonight, but when the guests and family were gone for the season, when only the caretaker remained, a row of marble statues watched over the flowers and waterfront as if they were guarding the island from pirates of old.

While she'd envisioned an island retreat for privacy, her husband had wanted to populate it with the masses ready to unfurl their sails in hopes of riding the Pendleton wind. And he was planning to ride these same winds to the Senate first and then on to the White House.

Leslie had been raised in a moderate family, but these days he ranked moderation up there with commonality. Neither was a good means to his end.

"It's the perfect afternoon for our soiree!" Leslie had stolen up behind her, already dressed in a swallowtail coat, his black hair and mustache tamed by a shiny pomade.

With a quick glance, he critiqued Amelia's silk kimono and bare toes that soaked in the warmth of the tile. "You look like you're about to retire for the night."

"I haven't had time yet to prepare myself."

"The guests will start arriving by five."

"I'll be ready." All she needed was an hour with her lady's maid, and they still had at least two. Enough time to make sure the tables were set to Pendleton standards.

"A reporter from the *Post-Standard* is coming."

"You already told me—"

"Fool of a man," Leslie spat. "Hearst should have sent someone from the *Journal*."

It wouldn't benefit her to disagree, but she was certain that Hearst's men were more concerned with scooping Pulitzer in the tangled politics of New York City than covering a party eight hours north via train even if President Theodore and Edith Roosevelt were the honored guests.

Leslie and the president had been friends for almost two decades, starting back when Teddy—as his friends called him—began exposing the corruption in New York. Both men were in their early twenties at the time, just beginning to lay the foundation for their future careers. These days, Teddy preferred wilderness to New York or Washington, and Leslie planned to take his old friend fishing on their grand schooner in the morning. He'd thought that alone newsworthy.

But the reason for the invitation ran much deeper than fishing and friendship. Last year Teddy had worked to pass the Pure Food and Drug Act, which called out opium as a dangerous drug. Leslie needed to make sure their loyalty to each other remained stronger than the law.

"Will you give the reporter a tour?" Leslie asked. "His name's Harry."

"If I must." She preferred entertaining their guests, but she'd do everything in her power to make this evening a success.

"Just keep him away from—"

"Mr. Pendleton!"

They both turned to see Cade, the island's caretaker, jogging toward them. When he stopped, Cade swiped back his unruly bangs and caged them in a cap.

Leslie stepped forward, brushing down wrinkles in both sleeves. "What is it?"

"A boat has arrived."

"A yacht?"

“No, sir.” Cade glanced across the veranda as if he could see the boathouse through the curtain of trees. “A sailing skiff.”

Leslie stepped up beside the man who had breathed life into Koster Isle. “It’s too early for guests.”

Cade straightened the sleeves of his work shirt. He was more than a decade younger than Leslie but equally as smart, Amelia thought. Without his knowledge of everything from carpentry and boat maintenance to horticulture and the electric dials in their powerhouse, the Pendleton family wouldn’t be able to live on this island. Cade was a magician, really, fixing all the broken things. And he didn’t orbit around Leslie. Whether or not her husband recognized it, Cade had his own galaxy.

“Should I ask them to wait in the boathouse?” Cade asked.

“No.” Pivoting on his toes, Leslie pointed Amelia toward the French doors. “Go get dressed!”

Cade had the courtesy to look away, but the servants scurrying below stopped to watch, their heads tilted back like baby birds ready to feed. Blast all of them, Leslie included. They’d have to fill their bellies with gossip from someplace else.

Her head high, Amelia moved with the elegance of Princess Beatrice toward the doors, minding her own pace. Royalty never rushed, that’s what her mother used to say. No matter the chaos in the world around them, royalty breathed calm.

Inside the grand hall, Amelia’s shoulders caved as she moved swiftly up the carpeted staircase that rose like an elephant’s sturdy trunk and then bridged out on the second level before climbing three more floors. A corridor on the second floor of their castle ribbed together the private rooms of the Pendleton family, and along every wall, from the grand hall to the family quarters, were Pendleton clocks. Dozens of them in various colors and sizes, an orchestra of ticking and chimes. A reminder that nothing could stop time from moving forward.

Her sanctuary overlooked the aviary and a forest of trees. In the distance, from the window near her vanity, she could see the roof of Cade’s house and the river beyond. Once the guests were gone, she planned to sit on the davenport for hours, rest her feet and sketch her birds. No one except Penelope and Leslie would disturb her here.

Rose, a woman barely eighteen, waited inside Amelia's dressing room with an ivory gown in hand. The lacework puffed like clouds on the shoulders and then flowed down each arm, an emerald ribbon cinching the midsection. Amelia's corset would have to be wound tighter than a spool of thread for her to fit inside.

Rose hung the dress beside the vanity as Amelia fixed herself in a small velvet chair, the door behind cracked open so she could hear the passing conversations and any word from below. Clusters of tinted colors and creams crowded the vanity, beaded combs, hairbrushes, and a vase with flowers from the gardens. Amelia had purchased the ivory brush, made with the smoothest of horsehair, in London. The silver hairbrush, stubbled with boar bristles, had been imported from India.

Like Cade fixing every broken thing on their property, Rose could work magic with these tools.

"I won't let you down, Mrs. Pendleton," Rose said with a British accent that matched Amelia's. While she was barely out of her youth, Rose had been reared in London and was a master of all the latest fashions.

"I should hope not."

"We could roll and sweep your hair up like this." Rose demonstrated in the mirror. "Then braid it around the top like a crown."

Rose twisted and tugged at the raven-colored strands until they circled the top of Amelia's head. After she critiqued the new style in the glass, Amelia pointed at the bouquet that decorated her vanity. "We should weave a few of the summer flowers into the braid."

"Of course," Rose said. "You'll be on the front page of all the papers when we're done. The belle of this ball."

Amelia eyed the door's reflection in her mirror. Some days she wanted nothing more than to challenge the formidable Astor and Vanderbilt families, the *crème de la crème* of New York's decadent crop, but other days, she wanted to slip away with Penelope and hide from all those who were trying to take down the Pendletons.

How long would it take Leslie to find her if she ran away?

The house was full of winding passageways hidden behind the walls. Leslie had designed them so the servants could move secretly between rooms like elves who toiled through the night hours, and the family, he'd

said, could use the tunnels to sneak down to the boathouse. Escape, if necessary.

Leslie had plenty of friends in his world, but he'd also accumulated a fleet of enemies along the way. Pendleton Castle was more fortress than retreat, and in that moment, she wondered who Leslie was hiding from here.

She'd never leave her husband, of course. He'd divorce her in days if she disappeared, and she was nothing without the Pendleton name.

In the mirror, she caught a glimpse of her daughter's jade eyes peeking around the doorpost, watching Rose with her brush and mouthful of hairpins. Penelope needed no iron to curl her locks. The blonde spirals bounced over her thin shoulders like rays of sun at first light, the choice shades reserved for dawn. Amelia had to send Penelope's nursemaid away before they came to the island, but her daughter would have a tutor and governess when they returned to the city. Leslie spared no expense when it came to their only child.

"Would you like me to take Poppy back to the nursery?" Rose asked.

"No." Amelia waved her hand to Penelope. "Come join us."

Penelope tiptoed over the rug, her pink dress fluttering like petals in the breeze. Timid when Amelia so wanted her to be strong. She'd need it in a few years when it was time for her to swim upstream with all the heirs and heiresses who saw her as competition instead of as a friend.

How Amelia longed for a friend for both of them.

"Mummy," Penelope whispered as she studied the colorful jars. Then she looked up at the four members of the Koster family framed together on the wall. Amelia was only four when her father commissioned the portrait, her sister six. A few years before, he had begun searching for a replacement for his wife. He'd never divorced their mum in England, but he might as well have when he decided a mistress was more in vogue.

The mistress was quite agreeable to the arrangement until Lord Koster lost his fortune and the Koster family manor home and all that wonderful land where Amelia had ridden horses as a child. When all he had left was the lordship title, a wife residing at the Holloway Sanatorium in Surrey, and two daughters in his care, the mistress took a carriage back to London.

Cade had thought Amelia would want her family's portrait featured in her private space, but she would have preferred to hide it in the basement. Burn it, for that matter, or throw it off their fancy boat and let the sturgeon nibble away.

When Penelope's eyes lingered on the portrait, Amelia tapped her shoulder. "What is it, love?"

Her gaze fell to the floor, hiding in the shadows too. "I'm scared of the party."

Penelope loved to watch from afar, but she hated it when adults critiqued her clothing and hair. Finding fault with Mr. Pendleton's daughter made his opposition feel as if they had power over the entire Pendleton family.

"You'll win all of them over," Amelia said.

"I want to hide."

"Look at me, Penelope."

The girl slowly raised her head.

"Don't ever let anyone force you to attend a party," Amelia said, "or stay anywhere, for that matter, when you know it's time to leave."

A shift behind them, and when Amelia looked up at the vanity, Leslie had stepped into the reflection, a sheer wall of black and white across the frame. His cheeks were patched with pink, his hair still glued in its perfect state, as if nothing could ever ruffle it. And Rose blushed when Leslie glanced at her in the mirror.

Penelope scrambled across the dressing room, her arms outstretched until Leslie lifted her with one arm and swung her around before setting her stockinged feet back on the tile floor.

"Of course you're going to the party," he said.

"But Papa—"

"I'll take good care of you, Poppy," he said as if she were a flower instead of a child. Amelia had pleaded with him to call their daughter by her given name, but he refused. "We must respect our guests by greeting them, but then you can tuck yourself away in the nursery."

"Yes, Papa."

"And you have to join us because I have a grand surprise planned for your birthday."

Her eyes widened as if she needed extra space to take it in. "What is it?"

Leslie held up a magazine with the Roosevelts on the cover. “How would you like to meet the president of the United States?”

He wanted her to be impressed—Amelia could see the expectation on his face—but Penelope didn’t care about a president. She’d rather go fishing with her father.

“Is Teddy here?” Amelia asked as Penelope’s eyes narrowed to shut out this unwanted surprise.

“He should arrive soon.”

“The president has a son about your age,” Amelia told her. “I bet he’d like to see your baby warbler.”

A smile began to warm her face again. “What’s his name?”

“Quentin.”

Penelope pressed herself up on her toes as if she might fly. “I hope he likes birds.”

“I’m sure he will like yours.” Hopefully she and the Roosevelt boy would play well together. Penelope needed someone her age to celebrate with her.

“He will like every one of your little flock,” Leslie pronounced.

“Who was on the skiff?” Amelia asked.

“The reporter from Syracuse. He wanted to look around the island before anyone else arrived.”

Amelia winced when Rose stabbed her scalp with one of the pins. “And you’re letting him roam freely?”

His gaze flitted toward Rose. “I don’t have anything to hide.”

Amelia’s chin rose slowly until she met the gray critic in Leslie’s gaze. And she knew he was lying. They’d become quite adept at hiding things from each other.

“Take her to the nursery,” he told Rose, his eyes lingering on the maid as she guided Penelope out of the room.

“What is happening to us, Leslie?” Amelia’s voice sounded like leather, tanned and hardened over the years.

He focused back on her. “This is not the time to discuss it.”

“I’m right here and yet you can’t keep your eyes off my maid.”

Laughter lodged in his throat. “Of course my eyes are wandering. You can barely get yourself dressed, Amelia, before the event of the summer, and now you’re wearing a strange assortment of foliage in your hair.”

She plucked out the flowers and tossed them on the ground. “That’s a pitiful excuse.”

“Ever since Poppy—”

She interrupted him. “Your wandering started long before Penelope was born.”

“Poppy,” he growled. “Why do you insist on calling her that blasted British name?”

“Because poppies represent all that is bad in our lives.”

She thought he’d storm out then, leave her alone, but he didn’t move. “Opium has provided for your every need.”

“The clock company has provided—”

“Clocks don’t provide enough income for a house filled with fancy birds that are costing me a fortune in food and electric heat. I had to negotiate an alternate source.”

She would not allow him to blame her for their financial situation. He was the one who bought an entire island without discussing it with her and then built them a castle to host extravagant parties. Never once had he confided their financial obligations.

“What do you want to tell me?” she asked.

“Everyone knows our marriage is a sham. The women whisper and the men—”

“I don’t care what anyone says about us.”

“They mock me, Amelia.”

“That’s what happens when a husband is philandering with the women of society and their servants alike. But we are not a sham. I am your wife and will be for the rest of your life. All I’ve ever wanted was for us to be a family.”

“That’s a lie you tell yourself.” He wiped a hand over his stiff hair. “You love your birds more than you ever loved me.”

“I love you and our daughter.”

“You love no one but yourself, Amelia.”

She wanted to reach out and slap him like he was one of the servants. “You don’t know anything about me.”

A knock on the door, and he turned toward it. “We’ll finish talking after the party.”

He wouldn't really divorce her, would he? Not with the White House in sight.

"I don't want to discuss it anymore," she said. "For Penelope's sake."

"Sometimes I wonder if Poppy is even my daughter."

"Leslie—"

"Is she?"

At her silence, he whirled on his heels, gone before she could reply.

And her heart broke like a wave against the craggy shore.