

A stylized, monochromatic illustration of a woman wearing a knit beanie and a turtleneck sweater. She has her hands pressed against her eyes, with her fingers spread, as if she is crying or trying to block out something. The background is filled with numerous white circles of varying sizes, representing snowflakes. The overall tone is somber and evocative.

**Elle  
McNicoll**

**Some Like  
it Cold**



WEDNESDAY BOOKS  
NEW YORK

## **Act One, Scene I: Jasper**

Coming home again brought on the snow.

Not a blizzard, just a firm, familiar fall.

The large roadside sign which read “Welcome to Lake Pristine” was as clean and as unmarred as the flakes that were beginning to form a blanket beneath it. It was not the kind of town to tolerate a dirty entrance greeting.

Jasper’s hands tightened on the wheel of her old Jeep. She had never liked perfect, unblemished things.

Her hometown was full of them.

Lake Pristine was aptly named, perfect for hopeless romantics and people who were incapable of minding their own business. Affluent and picturesque, the town sat by the large, glassy lake with which it shared a name. It comprised of Main Street, the gazebo, the ballet studio, the maze (a sweet little tourist trap), the bookshop, the vintage boutique Trimmings, the town hall, the square, the market (where one could find doorstops carved into woodland creatures as easily as a pint of milk), the haberdashery, one bar and the Lancaster family’s iconic cinema.

Unbeknownst to her, Jasper Montgomery’s homecoming had been quite the topic of discussion in Lake Pristine recently. The news had traveled from Ester by the lemons in the market to Doreen as she swept the church steps. There had even been a mention in the local newsletter:

Our girl is coming home! Jasper Montgomery will be returning for a long winter holiday following her first eighteen months at university in the big city, studying psychology. Her family tell us she will move on to Law School after graduation. While we are all immensely proud of her for chasing academic acclaim, we wait for the day when she will return home permanently. Readers may remember our shared dismay at her absence last holiday season. We have all spent over a year pining for our Jasper and if you, like the staff of this paper, wish to welcome her back to Lake Pristine then please make your way to the Lakehouse on the first of the month for a homecoming party. Canapés at 7 p.m. sharp!

Lake Pristine's very own golden girl was returning home. Jasper who carried neighbors' grocery bags; Jasper who got up early to help set up for the town meetings; Jasper who told the little ones how to cross the main road safely; Jasper who read to the elderly; Jasper who volunteered to hold a clipboard during vaccination season or a blood drive; Jasper who would rake leaves, shovel snow and bring water to the dehydrated during the summer months.

Jasper who never said no.

Jasper loved the drive home. Her license was as new as her rickety-rackety Jeep was old and they made a nice couple. She blasted showtunes and allowed herself a moment in-between, where she was neither the student nor the hometown girl.

She drove the old car further into the main part of town and, as she reached the square, she could see almost everyone that she knew gathered by the old bandstand. No mind was being paid

to the falling snow, because the townspeople were visibly ecstatic about something far more interesting than the cold weather.

“What the what?” Jasper muttered to herself, squinting at the strange scene before her. “What are they all doing?”

Christine, her older sister, was standing in fluffy snow boots, matching earmuffs and a faux-fur pink coat, holding court. Lake Pristine was a small pond and Christine was the biggest fish in it. As Jasper watched her sister smile out at the crowd of onlookers, she wondered for the most flickering of moments if this was a welcome party for her homecoming. Perhaps Christine had arranged a little gathering for her younger sister and invited most of the town.

Jasper quickly crushed that notion. Christine was always the celebration and Jasper was the one you called upon for help cleaning up. After seeing a little more of the world, Jasper had come to realize that in the waters of Lake Pristine, *she* would most likely be a sea urchin.

She slowed the Jeep to a crawl, squinting at the scene against the winter sunlight. Christine’s long-term, long-suffering boyfriend Kevin was now parading around in the small square of stone before the steps of the bandstand, where Christine stood. People were applauding him and, as Jasper drew a little nearer, she understood why.

He was reaching into the pocket of his visibly fancy suit to draw out a small velvet box.

Jasper gasped, slamming her hand against the radio to stop Bernadette Peters from singing “Stay with Me.” And, as Kevin sank onto one knee, both sisters were so engrossed, the younger lost all focus—

And crashed into a ditch at the side of the road.

Jasper swore loudly as the airbag deployed in a slowly humiliating fashion, and she was forced to kick open her door and stagger out onto the woodland path. Muddy, slushy water coated the bottom of her jeans and she could only smile weakly as the entire town stared at her in shock and sympathy.

Her future brother-in-law was still on one knee, the ring in his outstretched hand, gaping. Christine's mouth was open in surprise, but her eyes were quickly filling with thunder. Their friends and family were all gathered, clearly to bear witness to the proposal. One of the Lancaster boys was even filming it on an old camcorder.

Jasper locked eyes with him for the briefest of moments before her gaze shot down to her wet feet.

Arthur Lancaster.

Gruff, taciturn and judgmental. An old foe, in some respects.

Jasper and Arthur had both grown up in Lake Pristine and gone to high school together. She hardly wished to see him on a normal day in Lake Pristine, let alone when she was embarrassed and covered in snow and slush. His face was unreadable, just watching her with his typical cold intensity.

Jasper was known for being sweet and pleasant to everyone.

Everyone, that was, except Arthur Lancaster.

As Jasper took in all of the stunned faces of the crowd, his was the only one to give any hint of disdain.

Apparently the whole town had come out in all of its finery to witness its princess, Christine of Lake Pristine, and her marriage proposal.

And Jasper Montgomery, Lake Pristine's very own neurodivergent sheep, had just accidentally ruined it.

## **Act One, Scene II: Arthur**

Earlier that same day, before Jasper Montgomery's dramatic arrival, Arthur had found his father's old camera in his former office.

He had very few memories of Tayo Lancaster ever using it. His father had never been one for stillness or standing on the edge. He had always been in the middle of things, creating whirlwinds of joy and exuberance. A camera would have anchored him too much.

Arthur was not that way.

He saw so many sparks of his father still glowing in his older brother, Henry, and his younger sister, Grace. Both had inherited Tayo's zest and his love of other human beings. His generosity and his enthusiasm.

Arthur had inherited his camera, barely used.

"Will it work? I obviously need it to work." This question came from Marcus, Arthur's cousin and best friend.

"Seems to work," Arthur replied. "What's this all for, anyhow?"

Marcus dropped his phone onto the kitchen counter between the two of them and zoomed in on an open email. "The National Archives will award ten grand for the best short film about small-town life," he said, excitement lighting up his features. "Something to do with rural communities losing out on arts funding and access to film and cinema. They're looking for projects showcasing 'the ever unobserved' in small towns. Finally! Living in this circus will be good for something."

Arthur smirked in spite of himself. Lake Pristine was an affluent place, full of people who preferred the word “comfortable” to “rich.” He and Marcus were from working families. They didn’t summer anywhere, there was no second house. And the grand Lake Pristine Arthouse was not just Arthur’s business, it was his home.

Earlier that year Arthur’s mother had passed managerial responsibilities onto her two sons, as well as the care of their younger sister. Now she was in India with her new husband, finding herself and forgetting Lake Pristine.

*And her dead first husband*, Arthur thought bitterly.

They were both due back in a couple of days, but Arthur and Henry were used to taking care of Grace over the holidays, no matter what their mother was up to. Their sister loved being at the Arthouse. The cinema had been their father’s pearl and he was alive still, living on in every inch of it. Arthur wanted to make all sorts of changes to the old cinema, he had vision for it, but whenever he voiced them, he felt guilt about altering his father’s legacy.

“Help me make a film, nailing this place to the wall? The ‘ever unobserved’ of Lake Pristine?” Marcus asked, nudging his cousin’s newly unearthed camera. Marcus was one of the Arthouse’s part-time ushers.

Arthur eyed him. “Ten grand?” To Arthur, it was a transformative figure.

“Split two ways. You film, I edit.”

“We don’t even have a story. Plus,” Arthur scrolled down to the submission date on the bottom of the email, which was highlighted with a red font, “it says entries must be in by January. That’s no time at all.”

“This loopy town *is* the story,” Marcus insisted, snatching back

his phone. He was clearly not about to let Arthur Lancaster influence him with pessimism.

Marcus's eyes were dancing; the idea of exacting some kind of revenge upon Lake Pristine was too much to resist. Arthur supposed it was understandable; his cousin had been mercilessly bullied at the high school and most of the elders disliked him because of his brief time spent as a graffiti artist when they were kids. Arthur had always rescued Marcus from his tormentors and now, at eighteen, the middle Lancaster sibling was still a deterrent to most aggressors, with his regular scowl and his six feet and four inches of height.

He was, in a word, unapproachable. He quite enjoyed being so.

"We can start today. This totally spontaneous proposal, that can be the opening scene," Marcus insisted.

"I'm not going to watch that," scoffed Arthur. He lifted his father's old camera and felt a quick, sharp nick of pain in his heart. He wished Tayo Lancaster himself was there to tell Arthur to go to the square and see what all the fuss was about.

But he wasn't. He wouldn't ever be again.

He quickly placed the camera back down on the table and as he did, he knocked over a pile of newspapers, bills and other items of paper that his older brother Henry had neglected to clean up. As he scraped them back into an ordered pile, he spotted the front page of the locally run, barely staffed town newsletter: *The Lake Pristine Courier*.

Marcus looked at what he was staring at and read out the headline. "'Golden Girl, Jasper Montgomery, to return home to Lake Pristine.' Huh. Slow news day, as ever."

Arthur said nothing. He simply stared down at the small photograph attached to the article. It was of her, during their senior year



of high school. It was probably taken just before the last day of classes, the summer of the previous year. Before she packed everything into her parents' car and disappeared off to the city for her psychology degree. She was smiling warmly at whomever was behind the lens.

"I'll come for a bit, actually," Arthur said to Marcus, still looking down at the newsletter.

"Cool. We should head there soon, then."

"Should I take it to the square?" Arthur asked, lifting the camera up once more.

His siblings appeared in the doorway of the Lancaster family's dining room, both putting on scarves and hats for the new flurry of snow. Henry was the one who had informed them of Kevin's plans to propose to Christine Montgomery and Grace was the only one who actually cared to go.

"If you film it and do a decent job, you can charge Christine for the footage," Marcus pointed out, as the four of them made their way out of the back door.

Arthur familiarized himself with the camera as they all walked from the old, glamorous cinema to the center of Lake Pristine. Henry, who had never really cared for Marcus and his somewhat jarring sense of humor, walked ahead with Grace.

"I mean it," Marcus said to Arthur, picking the conversation back up with a cheerful intrusiveness. "Film it. Charge her. Heck, film the whole town and let's win ten grand."

Arthur stopped walking for a moment. He toed the newly fallen snow on the ground with his boot and rewound Marcus's words in his mind.

"A film? You really want to do this?"

“Yeah,” Marcus said, gleefully. “I don’t know. Something. We can just film and wait for a story to appear, or we can—”

“We’re not going to miss out on a good view because you’re both too slow,” Henry called over his shoulder, his eyes landing briefly on Marcus and darkening a touch.

“Fine,” Arthur called back, jogging to catch up to his siblings.

Many townsfolk were gathered around the square and the bandstand, which was now adorned with fairy lights in preparation for the upcoming winter carnival. The town became histrionic during the holiday season and always descended into camp levels of twee-ness. People wore pastel colors and faux-fur earmuffs and said things like “hot-choccy.” It was, in Arthur’s opinion, unspeakably awful.

He looked down at the video camera he was still holding. His grip tightened and loosened upon it as he considered an epiphany.

Lake Pristine only seemed normal to the majority of its inhabitants because they had lived their lives in the pan while the water slowly grew hotter. They saw no strangeness in the town’s obsession with order, soft colors and its regular campaigns to ban any alcohol besides that which could be used in eggnog.

Arthur had to acknowledge that it would be the perfect subject for a documentary. He could either expose the rigid oppressiveness of the place, or uncover something deeper and darker. A short film exploring the shades of gray in a town that wanted to be pale pink.

He had forgone university in order to stay and run his father’s cinema and his dating life was a mausoleum. So, outside of work, he had the time.

As Christine Montgomery took to the steps of the town bandstand, feigning nonchalance, Arthur started to record. He silently allowed his father's old camera to drink in the scene. As Kevin stepped forward, people began to cheer and gasp. Arthur watched Henry's shoulders stiffen, but chose not to catch it on camera.

A wide shot captured the swarm of Lake Pristine residents, their curiosity and elation. Arthur panned across the crowd, bringing into focus the bubble they all lived inside.

Christine and Kevin had been Lake Pristine's golden pair for some time. They were well-suited. Kevin was mild-mannered and temperate. He remembered the names of people he had only met briefly. He asked about their families. He walked old ladies to their cars when it was icy. He was considerate and romantic, with a reputation for being a friend to just about everyone. Arthur had a lot of time for the man.

Christine would click her fingers at the waitress before demanding the food be taken back to the kitchen and prepared again.

*Balance*, Arthur thought. That was the only positive way to explain it.

Just as Kevin began to kneel, there was a shout and the sound of a collision. Arthur's eyes darted to Mrs. Lafferty, who had cried out. Then his gaze moved further, to the road leading in and out of town.

"Jasper!" Grace yelled in a mixture of delight and concern, her eyes sparking and her sweet face lighting up at the sight of the younger Montgomery sister. The one Arthur's age. The one who had been at college in the city for eighteen months without a single visit home. The one whose old, beat-up Jeep was now blasting showtunes and had a deployed airbag in the driver's seat, as it sat wedged in a ditch.

The sight alarmed Arthur. He was a safety obsessive in general, so when he saw Jasper exit the vehicle, he exhaled. She was shuffling out of said car and smiling tightly at her older sister, who looked highly unimpressed. Jasper, who hid behind Dior sunglasses. Jasper who had once been the town's greatest ballerina, which was why Grace adored her. Jasper who wore leopard-print ankle boots that made Christine hiss. Jasper who still carried an iPod. Jasper who had been popular in high school. Jasper, whose friends had tormented Arthur and Marcus in the cafeteria while she looked on, indifferent.

"So," Marcus said silkily, watching the scene unfold from Arthur's right side. "Jasper really is back."

There was a prodding nature to his tone that Arthur ignored.

Before Jasper could become the main focus of the gathering, Christine shooed her younger sister toward their parents and tried to get back into character. She fluffed her hair and pinched her cheeks and turned toward her kneeling boyfriend, who looked bewildered and distracted. However, he quickly snapped back to what he had been intending to do.

"Christine," he said, his voice easily heard among the silent on-lookers. "Since the moment we met, I knew you were someone special."

Arthur let the camera stay close to the scene, which was intimate and public all at once.

"Christine, I've loved you since the night I asked you to turn your awful music down during a college party you were hosting and you threatened to have me thrown off the roof of the building."

Arthur watched Christine's beatific smile freeze while the crowd laughed receptively. Arthur focused the shot a little more and

zoomed in on her expression. The clear duality of it all, the orchestrated trying to pass as spontaneous. It was fascinating to Arthur.

“Will you marry me?”

Despite Kevin’s apparent deviation from the agreed line-reading, Christine loudly said “yes.”

Arthur glanced over at Lake Pristine’s newest arrival. Jasper looked dazed, as though this proposal was a surprise to her.

Every time Arthur saw Jasper Montgomery, he wanted to look for a long time without really understanding why. But he was always aware that her sister might appear a moment later to make a scene, so he did not.

Plus, he and Jasper had yelled at each other plenty of times, and he was the only person in town she seemed to dislike. Her popularity was a nettle to him. He was constantly being loaned out for errands, odd jobs and handywork in town, but the minute someone saw Jasper, they would gently push him to one side in order to converse with her instead.

“I’m so glad she’s back,” Grace said dreamily. “I heard a rumor she was casting *The Nutcracker* this year, for her mum.”

“Oh, yeah?” Arthur said testily. “What other rumors have you heard, bean?”

“Well, one of the ballet girls said that, before she left in the summer, she had this, not like a *fight*, but, like, a strongly worded discussion with her mum in the ballet studio.”

Arthur looked at his sister, hoping he would remember to cut their conversation out of the background of any footage. “About what?”

“Maybe something to do with college?”

That wouldn’t have shocked Arthur. Jasper had always been a

darling in the art classroom at Lake Pristine High School and she had designed a lot of the musical theater club's sets and costumes. He had been surprised when her graduation destination revealed a degree in psychology. The Montgomerys were famously quite strict. They were a beloved family in the community, but the girls had always been held to curfews and regulations.

Perhaps that was why Christine, now twenty-three, was so wild.

As he watched the town instantly forget the dramatic entrance of the youngest princess, too preoccupied with celebrating and congratulating the elder, Arthur slowly lowered the camera.

Jasper was back.

She glanced over at him for the most fleeting of moments and then away again. He was used to that. He had never been within her notice. She had floated above him in school and there was nothing for them to be friendly about. He had probably snapped at her one too many times, and she had remained loyal to her terrible friends.

Still. She was conspicuous in Lake Pristine. The little town that nobody ever left.

Arthur raised the camera and directed it toward his older brother.

"So," he said gruffly, his breath visible in the crisp air. "What do *you* think about Lake Pristine? And what don't you love? Be as candid as you like because we're making a documentary."

## **Act One, Scene III: The House by the Lake**

Jasper stood awkwardly on the edge of the town square as Christine and Kevin were enveloped by well-wishers and excited town members. Her parents, of course, joined them.

She wanted to speak to her family. It had been months since they had last said goodbye, over a year of secrecy at university and lying to them on the telephone. She wanted to celebrate her surprising new development with them—her decision to end her degree after eighteen months. She wanted to cross the square and tell her parents and Christine everything, because the truth was starting to feel like poison and it just needed to come out.

Yet the family picture looked so complete without her. It always did.

“Jasper!”

A Lake Pristine elder, and one of the *Courier* volunteers, smacked a loud and loving kiss on Jasper’s left cheek.

“Nice to see you again, Mrs. Calloway,” Jasper said warmly.

“Oh, we’ve *missed* you,” gasped the older woman. “Please say you’ll be done with your studies soon. I haven’t seen you in two years!”

“Only eighteen months, Mrs. Calloway,” Jasper corrected gently.

“But you’re moving back permanently after graduation? Your parents said as much,” Mrs. Calloway said firmly, as if this was already decided and agreed upon among the wider community.

In a way, it probably was. Teenagers who left Lake Pristine for

their studies always returned. They graduated, they came home, they started working for their parents or friends of their parents, they got married, they had children and then they started volunteering for the newsletter or the council after retirement. That was the way of things.

That was the path Christine was on. It was the path they wanted for Jasper.

"You'll move back, of course," Mrs. Calloway prompted when Jasper did not answer.

Jasper slid her hand into her denim pocket. A small but significant scrap of paper was tucked away inside and touching the strip made her feel easier.

"It's lovely to be home," was all she said.

She glanced back at her car and inwardly cursed her own clumsiness. It had taken her seven attempts to get her license and she had never had anything close to an accident since finally passing her test.

She returned to the Jeep, glad to see that there was no long-lasting damage: the only injury was her pride, bruised by the humiliating return to her tiny, talkative hometown.

"Hey, you."

Her father's voice surprised her. She peered over the roof of the Jeep and smiled sheepishly at him. "Sorry about pulling the focus, Dad."

He pulled her under his arm and she gave him a sideways hug as he steered her toward the crowd of people. "Don't apologize, we'll all find it funny one day."

"Someday." She didn't believe Christine would ever see the humorous side of it, but she kept that to herself.



“Yes, a long time from now.”

Her father obviously knew what she was thinking.

Jasper grimaced. “Okay. Why didn’t you tell me this proposal thing was happening? I would have come back earlier.”

“No, no, none of that. Besides, this was all very unplanned.”

Jasper snorted. “Sure.”

“We’re throwing you a homecoming party at the Lakehouse tonight, so if you need to conserve your small talk, I would suggest heading home now.”

Jasper’s heart lurched at the prospect of having a party in her honor. For all of her childhood, her parents had thrown parties like they were socialites. But none had ever been for Jasper.

She held onto her good spirits as she unpacked back at the Lakehouse. Her room was untouched. Vintage film posters still adorned the walls. There was even a little powder left on one of her puffs on the vanity. The bed was made and she collapsed onto it, allowing herself to forget about her secrets. College, the course from hell and the overly pushy welfare team. It was almost good to be home again, if she could just pretend that none of that had happened.

She noticed a stack of unread copies of *Architectural Digest* by the door, neatly placed there by her father, no doubt. Her chest tightened at the sight. Design. Creativity. Beautiful interiors and artistic expression, it all felt so far away from Lake Pristine, her science degree and her family’s expectations.

When she heard clattering voices, shoes being kicked off and the front door slamming, Jasper obediently left her room and moved downstairs. Her family all glanced up at her as she appeared on the stairs.

“Nice fucking entrance,” Christine spat, finally free of spectators and able to wear her usual look of disappointment.

“Christine,” Andrea chided her eldest, but her eyes were irate as she glared at her youngest. “Language.”

“I didn’t mean to crash my car during your public proposal, Christine,” Jasper said flatly, her tone as dry as a piece of sandpaper. “Sorry.”

“She’s not sorry,” whined Christine before her father interjected.

“We’ve got most of the town due here in an hour, team,” he said briskly. “I suggest we start prepping canapés. Unless you want me to serve them my famous cheese sculptures.”

“Let’s not expose anyone to that travesty,” Andrea said glibly, removing her coat and leaving it in the entryway, along with all traces of the almost-argument.

Christine and Jasper were alone by the front door.

“Congratulations,” Jasper whispered.

Christine’s scowl softened into a grateful, fragile expression. “Thanks.”

An uncomfortable silence shrouded the two sisters.

“I’m so happy for you,” Jasper said.

Christine could obviously sense the genuine joy in her younger sister for she smiled demurely and murmured another thank you.

“You know what I can be like,” she told Jasper softly. “I’m going to be worse over the next while.”

“Got it,” Jasper noted, her voice gentle. “Weddings are stressful. I hear you.”

“I might be meaner than I intend to be.”

“I know.”

“And things may come out, not how I mean to say them.”

Jasper shrugged, still smiling. “No one gets that more than I do.”

"This morning, I told Kevin I'd call the police on him because he scolded me for putting the toast knife back in the butter," Christine admitted, staring at her younger sister in vulnerable disbelief.

Jasper knew Christine's ways. When she was stressed, when she felt backed into a corner, she became a Hyde. She would experience rages and outbursts and have very little memory of them once they were finished. While she was their mother's favorite, Christine still bore the burden of being the eldest daughter.

"It's okay, he obviously forgives you," Jasper said soothingly. "He just asked you to marry him."

"It's exciting but . . . it's a lot."

"Chris," Jasper spoke softly, as though Christine were a wild horse she was trying to calm. "It's fine. It's good. You're not going to be yourself while you're planning. I get it."

Christine nodded, seemingly satisfied. Her disclaimers were spoken with firmness, but Jasper could sense the helplessness beneath them.

"Can I see the ring?" she asked brightly, changing the subject and forcing herself to look overly enthusiastic.

Being autistic often meant that Jasper's expressions were misread. She was sometimes called "stand-offish" when she was shy. "Judgmental" when she was daydreaming. When she was feeling positive or passionate, it never seemed to come across to other people the way Jasper wanted it to.

So while her fervent expressions and exaggerated tone of voice felt insincere and cartoonish to Jasper, it seemed to satisfy other people.

"It's being resized," Christine replied, only just managing to conceal her irritation at that fact.

“Well, that’s a good thing,” Jasper persevered. “Nothing worse than when something . . . doesn’t fit.”

Christine sniffed, looking her younger sister up and down casually. “Mm.”

They did not speak another word to each other until the guests started to arrive.

“Arthur, look!”

Arthur Lancaster’s little sister pointed ahead of them. A short line of people were already queuing to get into the Montgomery party. As they ascended the gravel path to the Lakehouse, it became clear that this was not going to be a small or quiet gathering.

It was the first time they had been invited to one of the Montgomery parties and Grace was struggling to contain her excitement. Their parents had often gone to previous evenings at the Lakehouse, but this was a ceremonial moment for both Arthur and Grace.

“Do I look all right?” murmured Grace.

Arthur looked at his sister. At thirteen, she didn’t smile in pictures anymore because of her braces. She would obsessively cover up her one blemish on her chin with make-up. She flitted from one social media platform to the next, trying on different versions of herself. Not seeming to realize that they all came together to make up one of the best people he had ever known.

“You’re going to be the most beautiful person in there,” he told her, trying to keep her calm.

“After Jasper,” Grace said dreamily.

Arthur looked away quickly and did not respond.

As they approached the front entrance, he could see Christine greeting guests with her best friend Rebecca and Rebecca's younger sister, Saffron. The latter had been in his year at school, he vaguely remembered her. He saw her around town occasionally. She was friendly with Odette, Jasper's best friend from childhood, and Odette's terrible boyfriend, Craig.

"Oh," Christine's smile tightened as she noticed them. "Hello."

"Hello," Arthur said, peering into the house which was now teeming with guests. "Thank you for inviting us."

"I didn't, my father did," she replied bluntly, looking behind them for someone more interesting to talk to.

"Hey, Arthur!"

Saffron was beaming at him and leaning a little too close.

He nodded in greeting and gently steered Grace forward, into the party.

"That girl likes you, Art," Grace told him when they were a safe distance away.

"Yeah, even I got that hint," he said conspiratorially, poking her between her shoulder blades, making her laugh.

He glanced around the spacious home they were now standing in. Varnished floors, expensive lighting and the back half of the house looking out through large windows and sliding doors onto the vast Lake Pristine.

He regarded the walls—and then he saw it.

A photograph of her.

Most of the black-and-white portrait photographs on the wall were professionally taken shots of Christine. But there was one of Jasper. She was taking a bow, following one of her ballet performances. Her legs were positioned in a way that looked so

uncomfortable and yet so natural, and her eyes were lowered as she accepted applause. Her face so serious.

“Her last *Swan Lake*.”

He swung around to see Odette sitting on the stairs, pointing at the photograph.

“Oh,” he said, a little stupidly. “Cool. I was just thinking how sore that position must be.”

Odette had been in the popular group at school with Jasper. She, like Jasper, was friendly with most, but unlike Jasper, she had a darker side. She had been going out with Craig, one of Marcus’s worst bullies, for a few years.

“All ballet is sore,” laughed Odette. She looked to Grace. “Hey, kid. Haven’t seen you in the shop for a while.” Odette’s family ran Trimmings, the vintage clothing store.

Grace grinned and looked away, shyly. “I’m saving up my money.”

Arthur didn’t know a whole lot about her and Jasper’s relationship, but he did know Odette had not lived up to her dancer’s name. While her mother had desperately tried to get her into Andrea Montgomery’s dance company, six-year-old Odette had staunchly refused. Arthur had always liked her, despite her sharper side.

He had been so used to seeing the two of them together, when they were all in school. Jasper and Odette would laugh their way around town, arms linked and sides glued together. The two of them had started the first LGBTQIA+ club at the Lake Pristine High School, opening with sessions about bi visibility, and then they petitioned to have the sexist kissing booth charity event retired.

Arthur wondered how their friendship was coping now that Jasper was away.

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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