

Prologue  
*Thorn Manor*

*Ten years ago*

Hazel Bridget stared up at the looming double doors of the Thorn's manor house. She knew they were a wealthy family – her best friend Ophelia Thorn had proven that with her expensive dress taste – yet, as Hazel stood there, pulling at the slightly frayed hem of her T-shirt, she couldn't help but feel out of place compared to the grandness of it all.

A fountain sat in the driveway, buzzing in the otherwise quiet air as water sprayed out from a fish statue in the centre. Engraved on the marble of the fountain was a foreign language that Hazel couldn't decipher.

The manor house itself was a sight for sore eyes. Ivory white bricks were coated in vines and rose bushes that ran up to the second floor windows. Despite the unlikely possibility of window washers willing to travel out this far, the glass was glistening and spotless in the faint spring sunlight.

Thorn Manor wasn't exactly part of Hazel's hometown, Aramoor Bridge. It was on the outskirts, up in the forest that overlooked the small British town. The woods stretched out for miles, and the Thorn estate took advantage of the natural concealment, hiding away from the rest of the town.

Hazel had been met with the black iron gates surrounding the manor and immediately took them as a challenge. Sure, her hands were raw and her knees hurt from the jump, but her determination outweighed anything else.

The giant timber door seemed to swallow her melodic knocking, and she took a step back to wait for it to open. After a moment of silence, she frowned.

Hazel fumbled with her sleeves, blowing out an awkward breath as she let her head roll onto her shoulders to study her surroundings a little more. The pathway leading to the front door was adorned with pebbles, each one carefully arranged to highlight the shape of the glossy black driveway on which sat an outdated, but very expensive looking car.

They had agreed on noon, it was now almost two. Hazel was losing patience. This wasn't the first time her headstrong best friend had been late. The girl was probably redoing her pigtails or changing her outfit for the fifth time – Ophelia Thorn was pretty high maintenance for an eight-year-old. This was, however, the first time Hazel had been impatient enough to actually come to her best friend's house.

It was odd. There was an elegance to the manor, but at the same time it gave Hazel an off feeling. It was almost too perfect. They didn't seem open to visitors, as the locked gate suggested, but it was more

than that too, she felt like she was being watched, and the feeling caused the hairs on the back of her neck to stand up. For a second, she almost turned around, though the door opened before she could.

Hazel turned back to the front door to see Caleb Thorn standing in front of her, with a mixture of amusement and confusion coating his face.

She jumped slightly, biting back the small squeal that threatened to escape her lips as she scrunched her nose at the blonde boy, making him chuckle under his breath.

Caleb was Ophelia's older brother. Even though he was barely a year older than his sister and only a few months older than Hazel, he rarely hung out with them, mainly because the Thorns avoided each other like the plague at school, as siblings usually did.

"Dominique?" he asked, with a sweet smile, holding the giant oak door close to his chest and subsequently blocking Hazel's view of the hallway inside.

"It's Hazel. Dominique's just my name on the register at school, it's not my real name," she replied with a raise of her shoulders.

Caleb leaned his head onto the doorframe and let out a soft hum. "It's not your real name? Are you undercover? Like a spy?" he asked, wiggling his eyebrows.

She blinked at him in return.

"Are you here for information?" he whispered, bending forwards with a smirk before his expression fell. "Wait, *are you* here for information?"

Hazel pouted. "No! I just don't like my first name! My middle name is better. Even my mum calls me Hazel."

Caleb snickered. "Hazel suits you more. It's a nice colour, brown and green, just like your hair," he said, pointing at the bunched-up ponytail at the top of her head before reaching over and picking out a leaf.

"Huh? Oh," Hazel blurted, widening her eyes at the leaf in his palm. It must have tangled into her hair during her climb.

Caleb let his head fall back against the side of the door as he crossed his arms. "So, *Hazel*, what are you doing here?"

Hazel straightened out her face and let the remaining leaves fall out of her hair with a shuffle. "Ophelia was supposed to meet me at the park hours ago. My mum already dropped me off and I got bored waiting," she explained, looking over Caleb's shoulder and into the house.

Caleb followed her line of sight, then subtly pulled the door closer to his chest. Hazel frowned and opened her mouth to speak, but he got there first. "Oh, well, I'm not that surprised. If she were on time, the world would implode." He blew out an over-enthusiastic breath, mimicking an explosion as she stared, blinking at him, then he pointed behind her. "Climbed the gate?" he asked, although the humoured look on his face suggested he already knew the answer.

Hazel nodded, and Caleb let out another pleased sound that grew into a curious hum.

“How did you find us? I mean, no one ever knows where we live.”

She shrugged and pointed towards the road leading into the forest. “Well, Ophelia always gets us to drop her off up the road there, so I followed it. This is the only house around.”

Caleb raised an eyebrow. “You followed it? Up from the road? All this way?”

With a nod, Hazel pointed to her sticker-covered bike that she’d left leaning against the other side of the gate. “I don’t know how Ophelia walks all that way. It took me ages to ride here. Almost burst a tire.” She shrugged.

Caleb smirked, leaning closer to speak again when his smile suddenly faded.

Hazel narrowed her eyes as he glanced behind the door, whispered to someone on the other side, and then peered back over, looking past her. His eyes flicked to the ground a few feet away from where she was standing and he gulped, moving back between the doors again.

The wind screeched through the trees, bleeding into the buzzing of the water fountain as Hazel spun to see what Caleb was looking at, but her best friend’s cheery voice grabbed her attention before she could see what it was.

“Hazy! So sorry I’m late. Come on, let’s go before anyone takes our swings!” Ophelia chimed, almost knocking her brother over as she skipped past him, grabbing onto Hazel’s arm.

“Wait, what about Caleb—” As Hazel spun back around, she realised the door was now closed and the boy was gone. She blinked at the speed of it all and let out a confused breath, but before she could question it any further, Ophelia pulled at her arm, dragging her away from the manor.

As her friend guided her toward the gate – quite roughly at that – Hazel snuck another glance at the spot Caleb had been staring at. There was a dark stain on the pebbles leading to the front door, sunlight glistened off the trail, almost as if the pebbles were wet. Nearby was a small clear plastic bag. It was torn down the middle with some sort of sticker on the front. She never got to read the writing on it, or question the puddle it left, before being dragged out through the black iron gates.

That was the first and last time Hazel had been to Thorn Manor, until now.