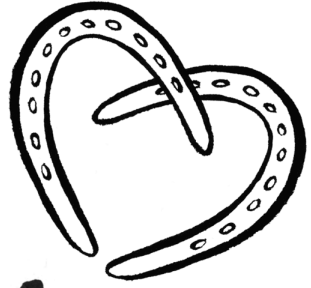


One Silver
Summer

rachel
hickman



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For my family

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Why is summer mist romantic and autumn mist just sad?

—Dodie Smith, *I Capture the Castle*

You understand now . . . how simple life becomes when
things like mirrors are forgotten.

—Daphne du Maurier, *Frenchman's Creek*

One

ALEXANDER

Alex squared his shoulders in the hand-me-down, black tailcoat that tugged across his back because he was broader than his father. He loosened his white tie and too-tight collar and ran a hand through his crumpled hair, still damp from the shower. He was dreading the party below him.

Music poured in from the main hall, and a shriek of laughter carried up the great staircase: hairspray meeting the whiff of old sports gear.

So this was it, the Summer Ball. The one night a year when the girls from across the river were allowed inside these ancient boys-school walls. At the foot of the stairs, Alex could see Plum waiting, pretending that she wasn't, ruffling her hair and laughing too obviously with her friends. Plum Benoist. Ben wah. Her name sounded like the air kiss that would soon skim past his ear. He knew why the best-looking girl at the ball was standing there, and it had nothing to do with him. Not the real him.

Alex wished he could clear his head, but a jumble of thoughts

kept going around and around. What he'd learned from the reporter with the hard red smile who'd stalked him from the riverbank that day: "Alexander, is your mother heartbroken at the split with your father?" He'd stopped rowing, the boat rocking a little as a jolt of pain passed through him. The anger came later, when his father called him. Too late. Alex should've been told first, before it got out. Was it really so hard for his parents to remember they had a son?

So there he was now, hands in his pockets, scuffing his way down, expected to carry on and pretend that nothing was wrong. So bloody British. With every step, he could feel the eyes of the crowd below. The girls fluttered like moths as Plum stepped into the light to meet him. Her hair smelled of perfume and her grip was small and viselike.

"At last." She blinked up at him, her lashes sweeping the room behind his shoulder. "Come on, let's dance before we get surrounded."

"I don't feel like . . ."

Almond eyes took him in, narrowing slightly. They glinted like a cat's, as if to say he should be pleased that she'd waited. And he was, he supposed. His mate Gully winked at him from behind Plum's back. No help there. Alex glanced at Plum again, took a deep breath, and kept it together. She looked amazing. And she was rescuing him from himself, which was a good thing. Brooding never got him anywhere.

"Okay, why not? I like this song." At school, music was his escape, along with rowing. Only riding a horse was better than the reach and dip of oars, and the run of a boat over water.

“Oh?” Plum wasn’t listening. “What’s playing? I hadn’t noticed.” She swished her hair.

Alex looked down at her. Her skin was flawless, unless it was her makeup. Blonde hair fell about her shoulders and a slight smile flitted on her lips as everyone parted to let them through. Alex could almost hear the murmurs as he shunted her clumsily toward the darker edges of the dance floor and pulled her closer than he intended. From the corner of his eye, a master stepped forward, saw it was Alex, and stepped back.

“Feeling better now?” Plum asked, her mouth so close to his ear that the music briefly stuttered.

“Yeah. Sorry I was late.” He made a bigger effort to speak. “Parent stuff, you know?”

Plum had been there when that reporter screeched across the water. The first girl to ever steer the first VIII boat since their own cox got suspended.

“Divorce,” she said with a knowing smile. “You get used to it, and there is an upside, you know?”

“What’s that?”

“You can ask them for almost anything, and”—she looked up and locked eyes—“you can confide in me.”

Arms around his neck, she wriggled closer. Did she expect him to kiss her in front of everyone? He took a clumsy step back, hitting a wall. It would be so easy to give in, body over brain. He could feel the heat of her skin . . . and yet it didn’t feel right. He swallowed. It was too public. And just . . . wrong.

As the clock struck midnight, the girls piled back on their coach. Plum was the last, and Alex still hadn’t made a move, so she

leaned up and kissed him on the mouth to a chorus of wolf whistles. Surprised, he didn't close his eyes, and all he remembered later were the blinding flashes from the cameras camped at the school gates.

It was as if he'd mistakenly stumbled on a stage and the audience had clapped. Back in his study bedroom, he didn't bother to change, but slumped on his bed with his whole world spinning. How could he face them all tomorrow? He couldn't stand another minute in this place. The ball had been the final straw. People might dream of sending their sons here, but for him it was all wrong. The pressure to be someone he wasn't. Pressure to impress. Pressure to stand out. Pressure to be smarter, row faster, pass the ball, hit a six . . .

He sat up and swung his legs over the side of the bed. Why didn't he just go? Get up and walk out before term ended? Find his own way home. He could already hear the sea in his ears.