
Chapter 1

The party was well underway, the flickering electric lights of which Father was so proud matching the merry stars above. A starlit night in western Washington, in October, nevertheless, was a rare enough event in itself. Falling on the night of the Jaegers' grand party, a cloudless night felt like Nature herself was christening their new house. Stars would light the family's path into an exciting future, full of all the wonders this still-young century had to offer.

For Oskar Jaeger, the future glittered with electricity, gadgetry, motorcars, aeroplanes and zeppelins, and a paradise of automation and convenience. Oskar's boundless, childlike enthusiasm for the wonders of modernity was reflected in the new house being celebrated that night: in addition to electric lights, his favorite feature, the lakeside mansion boasted countless touches both modern and luxurious. Guests marveled at accent windows of colored leaded glass, high ceilings embossed with lovingly detailed botanical motifs, a game room with humidors and walls of deepest red decorated in an Oriental theme, and on and on. The ultimate, however, was the full bathroom boasting

not only a massive claw-footed tub but also a stand-up shower. The latest porcelain features and pale pink color scheme elicited *oohs* and *ahhs* from the Jaegers' guests. Oskar and Johanne's fancy bathing apparatus would be the talk of the Lakes District for weeks to come.

While she appreciated the innovations her husband prized, Johanne was more enamored with the *site* of their new home. Rau Lake, and several other nearby lakes, had for nearly ten years served as an idyllic summer retreat for the wealthiest residents of the nearby city of Tacoma. But in the previous year or two, more and more members of Johanne's social circle were pulling up roots in the city and relocating year-round to the Lakes District. Johanne gazed out from the grand balcony and was surprised to feel a single tear trickle down her cheek—the starlight glittering on the surface of Rau Lake simply moved her beyond mere words.

Johanne's closest friend, Isobel Kendris, never suffered from a lack of words.

Gesturing broadly with her wine glass, Isobel said, "Truly, Jo, you made the right decision. The city's simply too..." Isobel bit her lip and considered. "Too *everything*. Out here there is peace, and water, and trees and deer and all of those lovely little details." Isobel sighed theatrically, took a sip of wine and looked fondly at Johanne.

"Yes," Johanne murmured in agreement. "It was a fine decision."

Johanne was startled out of her dreamy reverie by the sound of glass shattering on the mosaic tile floor of the foyer below.

Resigned, Johanne sighed. "Fleta."

Johanne's instincts were confirmed by a peal of shrieking laughter from the foyer—her daughter's all-too-familiar Champagne-sparkling laughter. Johanne took a deep breath, bristled at a knowing look of sympathy from Isobel and descended the

spiral staircase down to the foyer. There was Fleta, hand clasped over her mouth, shaking with laughter and red-faced with drink. At Fleta's feet glittered the shards that had, moments before, been one of the fine glasses Johanne received thirty years before when she married Oskar.

Face tight with control, Johanne spoke. "Fleta, dear? Are you all right?"

The circle of party guests gathered around Fleta Jaeger respectfully dispersed, conversations that had been interrupted by the dropping of the wine glass resumed, gazes averted from the minor spectacle unfolding in the foyer. Isobel remained on the balcony. Fleta and her mother were alone, or as alone as the pair could be in a house teeming with merrymakers.

Fleta was still chuckling, but the laughter faded when Johanne placed a hand lightly on Fleta's arm.

"Oh Mother," Fleta said, trying without much success to inject levity into her tone. She looked down at the broken glass and frowned. Her eyes weren't focusing terribly well.

"That glass was a gift from my grandmother. For thirty years we've managed to keep the set whole." Mother shook her head slowly, with great restraint, the only indication of her profound disappointment the flat line of her mouth.

Fleta let her head hang like a small child accepting a scolding, or a dog that sensed it was in trouble but didn't understand why. "I'm sorry, Mother. I'm sorry about the glass."

Though no one had called for her, trusted Jaeger family housekeeper Jeanette appeared and silently swept up the shards of glass. A pang of guilt pricked at Fleta's heart to see Jeanette cleaning up a mess she'd made. She supposed, vaguely, that she should feel even worse about breaking Mother's wine glass, but her head was all foggy for some reason. She'd feel bad about it later, maybe.

Mother's hand on Fleta's arm was light as a feather, even as

she steered her daughter from the foyer and down the hall. Fleta was wobbly on her feet, teetering on her new high-heeled satin shoes. It must be the high heels making her wobbly. They made her feel so dainty, though, like a ballerina dancing the *La Sylphide* en pointe...

“Fleta.” Mother’s voice was heavy with disappointment, but not surprise.

“Yes, Mother?” Fleta, with some effort, fixed her gaze on Johanne’s face. It was difficult to look Mother in the eye, but it felt important to do so, and so Fleta managed. Oh, but if she could only sit down for a moment, perhaps rest her head on her folded arms and take the tiniest nap...

“Fleta!” Now Mother was hissing. Fleta sensed Mother would raise her voice if doing so wouldn’t risk drawing the attention of partygoers. The two of them stood in the hallway just outside Fleta’s lovely new pale-green bedroom. Fleta fought down a childish urge to dash inside, slam the door and lock it, and throw herself on the bed.

Mother continued, “Will you do your best to pay attention?”

“Y-yes, I’m paying attention!”

“I’d so hoped you’d behave yourself tonight. I’d hoped that your better instincts would guide you, that knowing how important tonight is to your father and me would outweigh your fondness for wine and hunger for hilarity.” All delivered with devastating coldness. Mother was furious but, as ever, she delivered her anger in tiny parcels with little fanfare. If only *just once* Mother would throw a real fit, then Fleta could let loose herself. But as long as Mother was, well, *Mother* about everything it was all but impossible for Fleta to fight for herself.

Fleta mumbled an apology that bumbled its way into an explanation, or rather, an excuse. “It’s just that Samantha Matthews told the funniest story—you know how Samantha is, she’s a regular Rose Francis—and *everyone* was laughing. It’s a party! People laugh at parties, you know. So Samantha told the

funniest story about their driver, Biggins, and her little sister's pony, and we were all laughing, and, uh, laughing, you know, and I guess my hand just sort of slipped?"

"You're drunk," Mother hissed.

"I am not."

"Fleta." Mother's face crumpled like a dropped handkerchief. With sadness a thousand times harder to face than raw anger would have been, she continued, "You can barely stay upright."

"It's these shoes, Mother, I'm not used to—"

"You never lied to me when you were a little girl, you know. Father and I were so proud of what an honest creature you were. Remember when you and your cousins were romping around Aunt Millicent's drawing room and you knocked over her favorite Chinese vase? We didn't have to interrogate any of you children, since you came to Aunt Millicent immediately to apologize."

Fleta rolled her eyes. "This is simply melodrama!" She hiccupped once, and then again. She clapped her hand over her mouth, mortified.

Mother shook her head. "No arguing. I will not be a party to you ruining this night for your father. He's given us—he's given *you*, Fleta, and Richard—everything. Tonight all he wants is to celebrate with our friends, and he shouldn't have to worry about his only daughter making a drunken spectacle of herself."

Fleta's mouth opened and shut like a carp. Words deserted her. She blinked, and then hiccupped again.

"Come along," Mother said, easing open the door to Fleta's bedroom. "You're going down for the night."

"This is silly," Fleta protested feebly.

Mother sat Fleta on the bed. She pulled off Fleta's pretty satin shoes, undid the buttons of her gown and gingerly removed it, helped her out of her corset, unpinned her hair, helped her into a flannel nightgown, and tucked her daughter into bed under a green coverlet. All the while, Fleta was dumb and heavy-limbed as a giant doll.

After Mother retreated, leaving Fleta in the oppressive darkness of her room, her words echoed in Fleta's head: *drunken spectacle, drunken spectacle, drunken spectacle*. As a throbbing headache annihilated conscious thought, Fleta's final wish for the night was one last glass of Champagne.