

Behind every great fortune there is a crime.
— Honoré de Balzac

BEFORE FROZEN MOONLIGHT

No thief likes a full moon. Like mushrooms and owls, they do their best work in the dark.

There it is, a fat, satisfied moon, bright and silvery white, tracing a line on the dark lake that leads right to three thieves, who have paused to examine the loot.

It has been the perfect heist. In and out, a hot knife through sweet butter. Months of planning, practice runs, disagreements that ballooned into fights. Two of the thieves are barely speaking to the third.

In the end, it didn't matter.

In the end, they got the goods.

A priceless emerald brooch owned by Catherine the Great.

The Crack in the Sky, the world's most famous turquoise.

The sixty-carat Makepeace Diamond, said to be the most brilliant gem in the history of the world.

The stones are all notorious. Cursed. Rumored to have caused more deaths, bankruptcies, suicides, and indigestion than any moldering mummy could even hope to inspire.

The owner of all these jewels? Carlotta Grimstone, one of the richest women on the planet. Early on in her career as a socialite, she found herself competing with prettier, sillier girls for attention. She liked getting her picture in the paper. So, with Daddy's permission, she decided to make a name for herself by collecting all of the world's cursed stones. She

even dreamed up a nickname and hired a publicist to drop it to any media outlet that would listen and print it. But "Fate's Tempress" never stuck.

Thieves don't believe in curses. How can something worth so much be cursed? It's a ticket to a sweet life. The only people who say money can't buy happiness are the poor suckers shining a billionaire's shoes.

The stones wink at them from a flat rock, catching the moonlight.

Hello, sweet life, they are all thinking.

But even a perfect heist has its pitfalls.

The third thief has violated their agreement. He has snatched up a pretty necklace for his girlfriend. It's a bauble, not nearly worth what the other stones are. He wants to keep it.

There are objections. They don't know what these seven moonstones in the necklace are worth, but they look unusually fine. Since he violated the terms of the heist, why should he get the spoils?

Fine, the third thief says, snatching up the necklace and twirling it around his finger in an arc. Then fence it with the others. Sell it to another crook for less than it's worth, if it makes you happy.

The clasp breaks, the gold links falling away, and the moonstones seem to hover in the air — how is *that* possible? — before falling onto the rocky beach.

The stones form a perfect circle. It's as though drops of moonlight have frozen on the ground. They glow with a light that is not quite blue, not quite white, not quite silver.

It is the most beautiful sight the three thieves have ever seen.

So beautiful that they cannot move. They can't look away.

Then there comes a shock to their bodies, so electric it takes their breath. Dread runs through them like ice through rock. They might shatter from it.

The third thief sees himself captured. *You will be caught tonight and made to pay.*

The second thief receives a death sentence. *Death by water, before the moon is set.*

The first thief sees the worst vision of all. *Before the passage of thirteen years, the two birthed together will die together.*

The sound of a helicopter wakes them up out of what feels like a trance.

The searchlight sweeps the water and the path of light hits the beach. It lands on the third thief.

He snarls the curses that people who have been unlucky enough to find themselves caught use. He blames the other two. *Betrayed!*

With quicker reflexes, the other two have dived behind a boulder, flattened against it, pressing themselves into shadow. The third thief — the angry one — is closest to the emerald brooch and the Crack in the Sky. The Makepeace Diamond rolls away from his fingers. He grabs the other two gems and runs full tilt toward any shadow he can find. The searchlight follows him.

The circle of moonstones is just inches away from the two thieves. Pressed against the shadow, one thief dares to reach out and scoop up the stones. The two dash through the boulders toward the line of trees.

They have practiced this route many times, and they know it well. Through the woods, around the lake, to the cliff. They scramble up the cliff quickly, knowing each handhold. Vaulting over the top, they race to the cover of the pines. They slip into the entrance to the cave.

Even in early summer, the cave glitters with ice. The mist cools their skin.

They know each other so well. They don't need to exchange a word. One glance does it.

Coincidence. It won't happen to us. No such thing as prophecies.

How can you be so sure?

Because I'm rational.

According to who? You're standing in an ice cave with a bag of moonstones and the police are after you. That's rational?

It's amazing what you can do with your eyes.

The fall of water against the cave wall is like a mirror reflecting darkness. They drop on their hands and knees

and half-crawl, half-slithe through a crack in the wall.

They inch out slowly to the open air. They are high above the lake now. The thunder of the waterfall surprises them, so much more powerful than they'd seen before. The stones under their feet are slick and glitter with ice.

The second thief turns, smiles, is ready to say something. Slips on the slick, wet rock.

This is not part of the plan.

The thief goes over backward, swept into the torrent. The first thief's cry is an anguished howl.