

THEY'RE WICKED.

SHE'S WORSE.



BOYS WITH SHARP TEETH

JENNI HOWELL



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*TO ALL THE ONES TOO MONSTROUS TO BE LOVED:
IT ISN'T TRUE.*

PROLOGUE

Mirrors are excellent liars.

Glance at them and see a face—skin, hair, eyes, lips, teeth teeth teeth—all arranged as expected. Familiar; maybe loved, maybe hated, maybe neither, just a pair of eyes looking back. Linger ... look more closely. Lean toward the glass, press fingers to skin and see its bend and warp. Let the mirror take its time to parse the dips and curves and divots into something its barbed claws can hook into.

Most people turn away before the claw marks widen. Before the lies sink deeper. Before the soul seeps through.

Adrian Hargraves is not most people.

He kneels before a mirror as broken as he is. Its gilded frame is warped and dark. A jagged crack sharp enough to bite runs across it, wider in the center than at the sides, the bared slice of backing charred. It should've been left to burn completely. Maybe he should have been, too.

A knife held steady against his arm, he waits for the small seam of darkness splitting his reflection to inevitably widen and swallow him whole. For every brutal hope and sin and need and hate to be laid bare for the feast. He wants to close his eyes. He needs to turn away.

He stares into his fractured reflection instead. A face so perfect even this mirror couldn't find a flaw to pierce through—until it bit deeper. There, it found the rot. There, it found the truth.

When the darkness begins to stir, Adrian does not flinch. This is where he belongs. This is what he deserves. This is the only thing he can do that has worth. He needs to turn away. He cannot. Not anymore.

The mirror was saved when it should have been damned.

So was the boy.

PART ONE

This freedom is only a dream.

—René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*
“The First Meditation”

CHAPTER 1

Hauntings take more than mist and mountains. More than dark corridors and twisting paths, more than shuttered windows and creaking floors. Hauntings take greed. Pride. And brokenness. Crouched at the top of its mountain, its gate guarded on either side by a snarling hound crushing a thistle beneath its crooked paw, Huntsworth Preparatory Academy would never admit to any flaws—but it is, most certainly, haunted.

In the narrow paved drive before this gate, a transfer student named Jamie Vane steps out of a black taxi and scrapes dark-dyed, freshly cut curls back from her face. Her ripped white jeans are new, and so is her phone. A leather bag heavy with curling irons, makeup, high heels, and books hangs from her fist. She looks up at the gates, then back at the cab she'd called in Sevierville. A sixty-minute ride spent staring out the window, studying the line of her jaw and trying to clench it to make it look disdainful and proud.

My jaw.

I am Jamie.

Over and over again, I've repeated that to myself, like if I just say it enough I'll get used to her fake name, her clothes, her past of blind privilege and pride even though all of it fits me as well as this ridiculous top. I pull up on the low, scalloped neck, making sure my mom's braided wedding ring is still there, more secure on the silver chain around my neck than in the dresser drawer I stole it from. Not that anyone will miss it.

I pass the driver a five-dollar bill, but his hand stays open. He expects more from someone whose parents can carry the weight of the school behind me, but I'm not actually a Huntsworth student. I'm a runaway looking for justice, and this is my last chance to come to my senses, get back in the cab, and tell him to take me home down the mountain.

"You need somethin', sugar?" he asks as I hesitate.

I need to get out of here. Not just this entrance, not just this school, but

the town below it, its suffocating smallness and expectations. I need to run—far from their measured stares, trying to figure out if I’m more my daddy’s good girl or my mother’s repeated mistake—like I was supposed to run with Sam. But my cousin is dead.

I need three days ago to have never happened.

I need to rip the threads of time and tell him *Yes, I’ll come to the party*. I need to have been there when he left; when they followed; when his head was held beneath the water. I need him to come home.

I need them to pay.

But you can’t say any of that to a stranger, not this close to Amberdeen, where everyone is someone’s second cousin once removed. So I say what I should, and leave everything else to fester.

“Don’t we all?” I sling the bag that costs more than my dad spends on groceries in a month over my shoulder and hand the driver my last ten-dollar bill. It takes him a second, but then the driver’s grin matches mine and his hand closes around the cash. He gives me a quick wink and then he’s gone.

I’m alone. Huntsworth behind me; my past in front of me. I can still run. Shed these heels and hike down the gravel road on foot, cutting around town on hillsides until I get far enough that people don’t know my dad’s name or my mom’s past. Pawn this stolen ring, catch as many cabs as it takes to get me to Nashville, and finally, finally be free. But that would mean passing right by the place where they loaded Sam’s body into an ambulance, white sheet already covering red hair and brown freckles, and telling his memory that they’re right, he didn’t matter, no one cares that he was murdered.

No one but me.

... Jamie.

Armed with a fake ID and a half-baked plan born of three A.M. logic and suffocating grief, I pivot and press the button marked INTERCOM. A voice comes out, as crisp and clear as if she were standing next to me. “Huntsworth Academy, please state your business.”

I lick my lips, but the lies don’t come. I thought it would be easier, this sinking into a made-up person’s skin. All it’s taken me before was the crack of a book’s spine, my imagination eagerly shaped beneath an author’s touch. I’ve been caged goddesses, immortal thieves, grieving mothers, and wayward sons with magic buried beneath their skin. I’ve lived a thousand lives, all of them more interesting than mine. I can do this. I can be her.

I clear my throat and palm the tiny book I'd slid into Jamie's back pocket. *Medea*, the same play I'd been reading the night they stole my cousin from me. My one homage to the life I'm leaving behind. A woman bent on murder.

If the glove fits, and all that.

"I'm Jamie Vane. The new transfer student. You should be expecting me." My voice sounds strange. Me, and yet not. I can't tell if it's just the fake name or how hard I'm pretending to not be afraid.

The comm is still silent. I imagine the disembodied voice turning to someone sitting at the desk behind her, asking if anyone knows about an incoming transfer. I wait, refusing to even adjust the strap of my bag, worried that they're watching me, looking for any nervous tic that will give me away as a scam. I'm playing a character, and she can never, ever break while they're looking.

Seconds pass. On campus, a bell rings. Not the electric ones we have at my public high school—a real bell, high in a slender tower on the building halfway up the sloping lawn. A heartbeat later, doors all across the campus start to open, spewing students. Logically, I know there aren't many of them. Far fewer than in even a single grade at East County High. But standing on the other side of the locked iron gates, it feels like an army.

I close my eyes and remember Sam's grin. One of those slow, tired ones that he had to work for. *You're sure somethin', Mar*, he'd say and I'd scowl at him, pretending to be annoyed, even though I heard the way he curved that *somethin'*, turning it from just a placeholder into a place at the table. He didn't always understand me, but that's what he loved about me. And that's what I loved about him—I didn't need to be who he expected. I didn't need to be anybody. I just needed to be there.

Having a cousin for a best friend was so easy. And nothing in my life has ever been easy. The hate that brought me here is softening far too fast into a hotter, tighter ball of loss at the base of my throat. It's safer to be angry than sad. Anger is a weapon. Sadness is a tomb.

I pull out the burner phone I'd stuffed in my back pocket. No minutes, no SIM card, just a full charge and a way to connect to the internet. It doesn't take any thought—*tap tap tap*—and the last photo Sam posted before he died fills the screen. It's a picture of him and three other people sitting on a roof, smaller brick buildings and trees dotting the background. The caption reads *no moon only moonshine*. empty0graves commented a single middle finger

emoji.

Sam sits on the ground at their feet, the phone stretched out in his hand to take the photo. Somewhere between two and four hours later, he was lying face down in a shallow stream, drowning. And one of the three people on the low roof wall behind him is responsible.

Their names come easily to me, memorized from weeks of listening to Sam sing their praises. Henry sits in the center. A fair-skinned boy with jet-black hair falling across his face, hiding his features. Long, elegant fingers hold a bottle to his lips. He ignores the photo to look out over the mountain instead. On his right side is Baz: a slight girl with tight, amber curls and uncertain eyes. On the left, sitting sideways with one foot propped up against Henry's hip and eyes looking straight at the camera, is the only one of the three I've ever met. Adrian.

Pale blue eyes, tan skin, and hair shaved close to his scalp, leaving nothing to soften the disgust curling his lips. He's stunning. And despicable.

I hated him the first moment we met, when he'd slid into the back seat of Sam's new-and-also-very-used car months ago. I've never had much in this life. A cousin for a best friend, a small wad of cash saved up for a down payment on a condo in Nashville, and a car we could drive as far as the gas money could get us. I tried to be okay with little dreams, little hopes, because at least they took me elsewhere. And I was, I think, until perfection came and curled his lip at me. That was all it took—a prep school boy, with his crisp white button-up rolled at the sleeves, his finger slid into one of the holes puncturing the fabric of the car's ceiling—and all I could see was its defects.

Sam had said, *Adrian's throwing a party. Come with us.*

Those eyes had met mine in the rearview mirror, and I'd said, *I'd rather die.*

A message from Faye pings across the top of my screen, like she was waiting to see my status go online. We all grew up together, Sam on one side and Faye on the other and me in the middle because that was how our houses stood. We were an *us* that never got chosen, just was. And now, wasn't.

Still ... if she's already figured out that I'm gone, she might know whether Dad is looking for me yet. It would help to know how much time I have. I tap on her message.

> you better come home for his funeral

I will not. I cannot. For so, so many reasons.

ping

> you can't bring him back by avoiding that he's gone, marey

The phone shakes in my hand. I grip it tighter, trying to resist the urge to smash it into a hundred pieces on the path in front of me. My eyes are dry; my jaw tight. I delete Faye's messages without a reply and smother the girl Adrian glimpsed in the rearview mirror deep enough beneath my anger so he won't see her until it's too late.

Bring him back.

I don't want to bring him back.

I want to burn them down.

The comm speaks so suddenly and clearly that I jump. "We apologize for the delay, Miss Vane. Please come in. Ms. Hobbins will meet you and guide you to the office."

The heavy gate clicks. The hound-and-thistle badge splits down the center. I have the strangest feeling that I'm about to be swallowed. If I follow this brick path into the school's heart, I'm not going to come back out. The gate doesn't care; it continues to drift open, revealing a woman walking toward me from the closest building. Her blond hair is combed back into a bun as tight and as smooth as the front of her pencil skirt. A red hound pin gleams from the collar of her turtleneck. The quickness of her gait must be unusual, because it draws eyes one after the other, and by the time she meets me it feels like half the school is watching.

I am Jamie Vane. Stare all you want. I scrape my hand through my hair again, unused to how my curls keep trying to sneak across my forehead when they're this short.

The woman's high heels come to a clacking halt not two feet away from me. She offers her hand. "Miss Vane," she says, and I think: *Me, that's me.* Her hand extends to grab mine from my side. I look down at it, waiting a beat before I take it. Long enough to make it clear I have a choice. "I'm Ms. Hobbins. I apologize again, on behalf of the admissions team. At Huntsworth, we have a strict policy of meeting new students at the gates and welcoming them in. It seems we have everything for you on file except your arrival date."

"My mother called," I say. My mother is gone; my mother has been gone

since I was seven and she's never, ever called. Not me, and not this school, but it's my life that's fake and Jamie's that has to be real. Jamie's mother would rain acid on anyone who slights her only daughter.

Hobbins smiles, less certain. I can see it in her eyes—the fear that this slipup will find its way back to her. Acid rain would cause issues for her porcelain complexion.

“Do you not keep records of phone calls, either?” I let cruelty creep into my tone, carving a knife edge along my smile. After all, it isn't me who's getting ready to walk through Huntsworth's hallowed gates. It's Jamie Vane. And this world has no clue about the demon that's about to slip her way inside. I am playing a character, being this girl, and it's unfortunate for everyone who meets her that the book I read while crafting her was *Medea*. Both of them loom large in my mind—Jamie and Medea—*beasts that lie down on the hounds' bodies and broken spears*.

I step forward, following Hobbins up the winding path. Boys touch shoulders as they jerk chins toward our slow walk uphill. Girls silently rate every aspect of my gait while they delicately fix one another's copy-and-paste hairstyles.

Late-afternoon fog creeps between the buildings, swirling around their ankles and reaching for their fingertips, reminding me of every story I've ever heard bantered around a bonfire back home about this place being haunted. And beneath, beyond, around all of us, the stone walls and creeping ivy, the brick paths and wooden doors and iron-barred windows of the school, demanding that I prove myself worthy of every step I take toward its hallowed heart.

I'm not. I never will be, not as myself, a small-town girl with a second-rate education and a dad who thinks the greatest thing she can ever be is good.

We stop in front of the largest building on campus, a three-story monstrosity of concrete and glass that sits like a bullet wound on these grounds. I can see myself, Marin James, in the reflection of the double glass doors. Skin that doesn't tan; it freckles in blotches across the top of my chest and the curves of my cheeks. Dark green eyes and wavy black hair that used to be blond. Not a remarkable beauty, not feminine, not with all that tension screwing tight the hard edges of my jaw. Ms. Hobbins jerks open the door in front of me, stripping away my image. She beckons me to enter before her.

“Welcome to Huntsworth, Miss Vane,” she says.

I am not good. I am not worthy. And I am not me.

I am Jamie Vane. At least until I find the three students who murdered my cousin—and make them pay.

CHAPTER 2

My breath fogs in front of my face as I walk up the hill behind Hobbins, making clouds between me and the early evening stars. Sam loved winter nights, when the stars came out just after dinner. We would lie side by side on the roof just outside his window with one of his mom's quilts and a bag of popcorn—half still-hard kernels, if he'd made it; half black-charred puffs, if I had. Neither of us knew the constellations. It didn't matter; we had everything we needed to make our own. One of his peeks over the trees cresting the mountain in front of me. "Ursula Major," a stick figure with a massive, square head and eight spindly, crooked legs.

I climbed onto that same roof last night. Women from all the churches had shown up for grief like mosquitoes to a porch light, bearing ham and rice coated in cheese as their ticket through the front door below me. Funny, that they didn't show up when my mom ran off, even though they all think drugs are to blame for both.

Opioid use is such an epidemic, Sheriff Barron had said. It hits harder when it's close to home. Sorry for your loss, Marey girl.

Always, always the same platitudes for me to choke down. I hate that place and its sorrys. Sorry has never fixed anything. It just bares the wound; it doesn't bind it.

My hand curls into a fist around the bag of uniforms Hobbins helped me get at the secondhand shop on campus, each purchase added to a student tab I have no plans of paying off. It bangs against my knee as I walk, swaying strangely on the brick path in these heels. We round a curve without speaking. Hobbins gave up on an official tour when I made sure her entire admissions team knew about the "mix-up." She promised to find a student guide to help me get settled in, even though I won't be here long enough for settling in to matter.

I came late on a Friday on purpose. Two days without schedules. Two

days to find out if Adrian remembers my face.

Two days to see if Dad reports me missing to the police. To see if Sheriff Barron cares more about a living girl than he did about one dead boy, or if he'll blame drugs for my loss, too.

Two days to find Henry, Baz, and Adrian and force them to tell me how Sam died. I know the story I was given isn't true. Even if it was, it still wouldn't explain the message I got the next morning.

Two Latin words answering fourteen versions of *Where are you?* Words I knew, immediately, were not from my cousin, a boy who dropped out of public school at sixteen to work as a night guard for Huntsworth and who had never even bothered to squint at a book unless he was forced to.

> *memento mori*

Remember that you will die.

There are only three people at this school close enough to Sam to know how to unlock his phone. One of them knew I was looking for him, knew what I'd find, and was sick enough to taunt me about it.

Henry. Baz. Adrian. Now I'm looking for you.

"This is Killary House, where all our students reside." Hobbins pulls me out of my thoughts, gesturing elegantly uphill at a mansion with whitewashed walls and line after line of windows, little shimmering squares of promise. *Behind me*, each one whispers, *lies something you want to know*. A second-floor window slams open and a head pops out, followed by a yell and a sweatshirt, sleeves snapping in a free fall as a girl on the lawn screeches and fumbles the catch. "West Wing hosts the lower classmen, East Wing the juniors, and our seniors reside in the most historic part of the accommodations, the Tower."

I walk slower the closer I get, scanning the long-limbed boys hanging from Killary's balconies and the girls perched aesthetically on tables scattered in front of them, looking for one of the three. I don't recognize any of them. I don't expect to, aside from Baz from the photo and Adrian from the car; after all, Huntsworth students rarely come down to town, because the only thing to do in Amberdeen is hang out in the parking lot of Derry's Gas 'n' Go.

One of these beautiful people killed Sam; maybe even all three. I know it. I don't need to *know* them to know I'm right. I can read them, as easy as a

book, by the way they hold their bodies. The way their eyes slide when they're talking to someone. The way they shape their words, where they put their hands, how they smile. And Huntsworth students are all saying the same thing: *I'm perfect. Trust me.*

Liars, every one of them.

"Come along, Miss Vane." Hobbins stands a few feet away from a thick cluster of students sitting on the steps at the house's main entrance. They sit scattered in a rough circle, arcing around two girls sitting side by side on the center step. One waits with her eyes closed and both sets of fingers crossed. The other has her head bent, tight amber curls falling forward over her eyes, studying something on the ground between them.

Baz. The girl whose name always made my cousin's cheeks blush red.

She's right in front of me.

There was a part of me that never believed I would make it this far. Everything I've planned, every way forward, has always been found and quietly shut down, my dreams shunted to the office in the back of my dad's mechanic garage where they belong. But I found her.

In the photos online she always had her hair pulled up and back, the sides shaved, the top worn long and a pen tucked into the temple of her glasses. But beneath the fall of curls, that's the same soft jaw, the same starched collar. She's laying a set of thick purple cards out in a cross, each card snapping down one by one by one ... while one by one by one students' faces slide up to look at Hobbins and me instead of her.

Finally, she seems to sense the shift in gravity. She looks at the girl next to her, then follows the line of everyone else's gazes to me. Her wide eyes and lopsided forehead curl say *Please, like me* as if she has no idea how much everyone already probably does. After all, she's rich, and she's one of them. I cross my arms. Guard my heart. *We must not think too much: People go mad if they think too much*, Medea whispers from my back pocket.

"Miss Hallward, this is our new transfer student, Miss Jamie Vane. As she's going to be living on the sixth floor, would you do the honors of showing her around?" Stilted, but Hobbins manages to act somewhat pleased that I exist.

Baz Hallward stands, scooping up the cards with a murmured apology and tucking them into a worn leather backpack made of pockets. "Of course, ma'am." She holds out one hand to me, fingers staying curled a moment too

long. Every action has a little hesitation with it, like she's checking to make sure being human still works. She looks easily persuaded. Easily used. "I'm Basile," she says. "But you can call me Baz. Or Bazie. Or B. Just not Basile. Only my mother calls me Basile."

"She's been placed in your senior capstone, Miss Hallward, as it's the only one with seating remaining," Hobbins says with a cold kind of glee. "Tonight, at eight o'clock, Miss Vane."

My first class is tonight, not Monday.

And Sam's Baz is my guide.

Baz smiles at me. She has no idea what I'm thinking about. No idea that I've been dreaming about finding her for days, ever since I had the sheriff on my front porch, sipping sweet tea, ignoring every clue I had for him. She swings her backpack over her chest, digging through it for something. A key chain dangles from one of the zippers crisscrossing the pack. There's a wild horse symbol on it, marked up to make the horse round, bucktoothed, with wonky legs and a cloud of gas. The brand name is carefully traced, the last two letters changed to say *Mustass*. It isn't hers.

I made that key chain. For Sam, and his ass-ugly car. He kept it on the set of keys he used here, where he worked as a night security guard. They went missing the night he died. They still haven't been found.

Baz pulls a slim, blue-bound book titled *Meditations* out of her bag and holds it toward me. Her mouth opens to form words I'm never going to hear because suddenly there's too much of me and far too little of Jamie. I need to get away. Now.

"Sorry. Can we—later? I have to—" My feet lurch onto a side path. Hobbins's shouted discontent chases me, but I hold my head down until I've rounded Killary's side, where the wing ends in a stone tower stretching taller than the trees that brush against it.

I stop and press my back to the wall as soon as her voice fades. It had all seemed so simple last night. Get in. Search their rooms; if necessary, the campus, too. Find the drugs they planted on Sam's body, and his phone they stole to send me that message. Find out if his security guard keys are still missing, and if so, what they wanted them for badly enough to kill him. Ask them the questions and get the evidence that Sheriff Barron wasn't willing to risk his campaign funds to get. Do it all before Hobbins and the central office realize that the tuition check with my name on it is forged.

It had seemed simple today, too, until I met her. None of her pieces whisper killer. That smile, that look in her eyes, the way her hand rose and fell as natural as breath, not once actually expecting me to reach for it.

They're good people. That was Sam's favorite thing to say about them, like if he just repeated it often enough, I'd believe him. And I know that, most of all, he meant her. Baz.

The girl with his key chain.

I close my eyes, breathing deep in the quiet dark.

Everything stills, and suddenly, I can hear it. The stream behind Killary, threading through tangled roots, messily stitching the woods to the rock-scarred mountainside above it. It runs under a locked gate and down the mountainside to a mossy cluster of boulders. There, the water swirls in a little pool, choking on weeds and rot before tumbling down toward town.

Sam and I used to play in that pool. Hike up the hill, a girl with unbrushed hair and a boy with enough Pop-Tarts for both of them, scraping our knees on slippery rocks and filling the woods with laughter. As we got older it became a place to run from homework and home. A quiet place to sit and skip rocks and not talk about much of anything. Three days ago, it became the spot where I found his body.

I scrub my hand against my thigh, trying to dry off the memory of loose skin sliding over muscles. Open my eyes wide, trying to blink out the memory of his hand, gone gray and pink from bloat. And the murky shadow in the water beside him—

Its hungry eyes—

Violin music tumbles down from above in a sudden, angry rush. It splashes over me, waking me and slicing through the water's secrets. *My* secrets. Things I'll never say to another living person, because I am not my mother. I know what is real, and what is just my imagination.

This is what is real. Sam didn't do drugs. Of course, Sheriff Barron wants to believe he did; they were in his pocket, and it's so nice, it's so tidy, to blame them. But even if he did, how did he end up there, in the woods, in the water—and who sent me that text? No, *no*. It wasn't him. None of it was him. He never touched drugs, he didn't walk himself into the woods, he didn't lie down to drown in shallow water, he didn't send me that message, and he didn't lose his keys.

Baz has the key chain because she took it off a set of keys stolen from a

dead boy. Because she wants to remember him. Because she wants to remember his death.

“Memento mori,” I whisper. She could be the one who sent the message.

The music staggers, catching on a sour note just as I push myself up with newfound clarity. A side door sits only a few feet away. I test the knob. It's unlocked. So, I won't enter through the front door. That's never been my style anyway. A quick tug to my outfit; a hand combed through my hair.

Jamie is as ready as she will ever be.

CHAPTER 3

Inside Killary's common room, a bronzed chandelier hangs low in the center of rounded, bookcase-covered walls. Lamps dot tables like will-o'-the-wisps. Candlelight sinks into soft chocolate rugs and leather armchairs. Books cover every surface, some glossy and anxious to be seen, others quietly tucked away in dull-etched bindings. Worlds, hearts, hurts hidden between all those pages, and the students here have enough to drown in. I could be anyone, with this many stories waiting for me. No, even more: I could be so many people, that maybe, just maybe, I could actually find myself.

The room is dark, and warm with the dying glow of a fire. Several students are scattered about it, a few talking quietly, most draped over or tucked into the curves of furniture, lost in a book or journal. Standing by the open door, I pick the closest book up for myself, not even seeing the title, just feeling the shape of it in my hand. No one tells me to put it down, or asks me why I'm here.

Sam was right. I could be happy here. Fade away into ink and wonder. Wander these halls, a novel in one hand, a coffee in the other, unaware and uncaring if it was midnight or midday. A place has never felt this much like home.

He was always right about the wrong things, and wrong about the important ones.

I set down the book. "I'm looking for my apartment," I say, my voice loud in the quiet space. I have to start somewhere, and these words will do. "Sixth floor. The Tower." Several armchair boys stir, shifting to crane their necks and look. They don't look at me for long, though. Their gazes slide off, like something about my question isn't theirs to answer.

Eventually, all of them are looking at one boy, near the back, in an oversize armchair. His black hair is drawn up into a short, loose ponytail, revealing a tattoo behind his ear, of an empty hourglass. A book is lying open

in his lap, one hand splayed across the pages, but he isn't reading it. He's staring out the window beside him. It opens out onto the back lawn, toward the stream.

I shift my feet. "Sixth floor? Anyone?"

Someone clears their throat. "Wu. That's your floor."

Finally, the boy turns his head. He looks toward me ... but I can't say that he sees me. His stare is glassy and unfocused. Looking beyond everything, lost somewhere in between this world and the one inside him. I know what that feels like, when the book becomes more than words on a page, blurring everything except what's being lived out inside my head.

The others in this room seem content to let him bewitch them, his stillness settling over the entire room. Not me. I kick the door shut. The latch closes with a *snap*. "Well, it's my floor, too, now, and I would appreciate if someone would act like a human and tell me how to get there."

At first, his expression doesn't change, as if I'm just a hallucination made of cotton and flesh. A breath, and then I watch myself dawn across his face. His sharp, hooded eyes quicken with interest. Awareness drifts down, the corners of his mouth lightening into a hint of a smile; lower, softening the tension in his shoulders.

Wu closes the book, slips it into the pocket of his school jacket, and stands. Face after face rises to watch as he passes. He ignores all of them, stopping close enough to me that I have to look up. He's taller by quite a few inches. I step back. Standing near him feels unbalanced, like the ground beneath his feet is moving at a different pace than that beneath mine.

He cocks his head. I realize I've been staring. I blink, hard, chasing away the afterimage of his silhouette against the firelight. He gestures toward the back of the common room. For a moment, I'm lost. Then it hits me. My room—I'd asked him about my room.

"I'm heading upstairs myself. Baz," he says, and she steps out from where she'd been standing tucked beside his chair, a few feet from the front door where I'd met her. She must have come inside when I left. A few minutes ago and she was all I could think about, but beside this boy she felt invisible. She waves at me, a furtive gesture before Wu speaks again. "Find some underclassmen to help you bring everything down. It's all in Holdman's office."

"Can't we just have it upstairs?" she asks, her voice lower and more

urgent than it had been outside.

“That wouldn’t be enough, and you know that,” he answers her. His voice smooths. “You have all weekend to set up.”

“Party supplies?” an armchair boy asks.

Baz hesitates, looking to Wu like she’s hoping one more time he’ll change his mind. He doesn’t. She finds a snap-on smile again. “For Monday. Help me?” she asks armchair boy.

“Hell yes!” He and another boy stand and howl in delight at each other.

A party, less than a week since my cousin died.

Since he was murdered, I correct myself. Any affection I felt for this room is erased by anger. I bite my tongue. Baz heads for a set of double doors near the back of the room, the two boys in her wake. Above it, a banner stretches. RELEASE OF THE HOUNDS: DECEMBER 21 scrolls across it in proud red-and-gray script. It gives no more details, but the fabric shimmers and the script is professionally printed, not painted like some senior spirit banner at my old school. Some eccentric private school event or other. It doesn’t matter. I found Baz. I’ll find the others—and their truth— before then. That knowledge settles me. I have a deadline.

Wu leads me to a narrow door at the back of the room with a wooden sign nailed to it. SENIORS ONLY, it reads. “What’s your name?” he asks as we step inside the stairwell.

“Jamie.” We climb the stairs, the light on the stone steps yellowed by the rippling, murky glass in each Tower window. The feverish notes of a violin sink from somewhere above, swirling around us as we climb. It sounds like the same one that I heard outside, and I wonder if the violinist knows how their music has marched in lockstep with my tortured heart.

“New?” Wu asks over his shoulder. We pass a couple knotted together in the door to the third floor. They pause, lips and cheeks flushed. The boy nods at Wu.

“First day.” I need to focus. Wu knows Baz, and from the way everyone acts like he’s walking on water, I’m positive he would know the other two. I’ve got a few short floors to get him on my side, but I don’t know how. I’ve never been good at forcing my way in from the outside. It was always Sam, reaching across the divide between me and them, drawing me in with a wink and a nudge.

“Room?” he asks.

“6A South.”

His laugh is warm in the way of a dream; heat, re-created in memory but not in fact. “Interesting,” he says.

There’s something in his tone that sets me on edge. Not a challenge, but just as taut. Almost like he’s collecting pieces of my puzzle, and he just found a very satisfying match. “Not particularly interesting, no.”

One finger raises. “Is it your job to decide what’s interesting to me?” The violin music grows louder; the staccato notes erratic, almost buzzing. “Are you inside my mind, judging and sorting the contents?”

I cough a laugh and start to argue, but he isn’t finished.

“Let yourself be interesting, Jamie.” He turns his head just enough that I can see he isn’t smiling.

It’s not a joke.

My steps falter on the stairs. No one’s ever called me interesting before and meant it as a compliment. It makes a perfect kind of sense that the moment I stop trying so hard to be me and force myself to become someone else that she’s finally, finally easy to like. He twists his finger, counting the erstwhile beats of music, moving on up the steps without me.

Without Jamie.

I hurry after him. He stops where the stairs end, at a wood door with the number six burned into its center. The burn marks are deep and perfectly smooth, with slighter, wandering scrolls searing out from the edges. He pushes open the door. We step into the center of the Tower’s sixth floor.

Two more doors branch off the hall. The one to my left stands open onto a small room, a dark brown armchair all I can see through the slit. He pushes it open, leading me into a study with two desks, two chairs, and no windows.

The violin music comes from a door near the back—louder now, the frantic notes filling the space like storm clouds, beating against one another, rising in tension until lightning strikes. I can almost see the violinist’s fingers flying over the strings, their head bent low over the instrument, eyes closed and forehead creased in focus.

I step forward. The notes rip, like the musician’s arm was suddenly torn from its socket. Someone groans. A mattress creaks. Then, into the quiet, the *plink plink* of strings plucked by wandering fingers. They sound ridiculously childlike after the deluge.

“This is your living room. Bedrooms off it, Jack-and-Jill bathroom shared.

You're 6A South, so technically, half of all this is yours now. But no one's matched his entrance score in three years, and he's used to having the extra space," Wu says, sweeping a lazy hand across the small, cluttered room in front of us. "Have fun taking it back."

Inside the bedroom on my left, the one he pointed to when he said 6A *South*, the violin notes stop completely. So, suitemates are assigned by entrance scores—and mine is a boy who hasn't been matched since freshman year, until I forged my way into his space. It was so easy to use Faye's mom's credentials from her summer job in admissions here to log in and download an accepted application. To change this and that in a photo editor, raising each score to a level I didn't think they'd be able to turn down, no matter how odd my entrance date was going to be.

Holding those scores as true in front of my suitemate is going to be much more difficult than changing an eight to a nine on a file. But I'm tired of being Marin James and blending in, hiding my nose in a book and waiting for the school day to end. I'm tired of being bored. Of pushing as hard as I can to get ahead and finding just another wall. Of letting myself be shoved into a box that isn't ... interesting.

Wu turns to leave. I stop him with a hand. "Wait. What's your first name?"

He studies me, taking in every detail and giving nothing back, and for a heartbeat I think that maybe, just this once, it won't be that hard to get to the inside. Then he answers. "Henry. Henry Wu."

Of course. Of course, he's Henry. I can hear Sam now, reaching his hand across the center console, tugging down on my sweatshirt strings and chanting *You—will—like—them*.

Henry, in front of me.

Downstairs, Baz.

I'm only missing one.

"Go on," Henry says with a smile I definitely don't trust. "Graves is waiting."

I found them. Or, they found me. Sam's friends.

Sam's killers.

CHAPTER 4

Graves is Adrian.

Moonlight streams in through the room's only window. He sits on its open ledge, one leg propped up at a right angle and that damned violin pinned against it. His jaw is clenched and he's shirtless, baring every angle of his profile to my view. I don't know why Henry calls him Graves, but the nickname fits. He's an unfinished headstone, his lines left rough-hewn and hard. It makes me want to hack at him. See if I have what it takes to make him crack.

I try to hold in my anger. Graves is the only one who's met me in person. It was once, a months-ago nighttime glance, my face tucked into a hoodie's deep cowl. Still, I have to sound him out, see if he recognizes me. If he does, everything's over before it even begins. And I cannot let that happen.

I pull my eyes from him, looking for a place to put my bags. The room is small, with one long, curved wall and two straight ones, forcing the furniture into awkward positions. A chair, a nightstand, two hip-height bookcases, all of them covered in books and cups, the insides of most still filled with some half-finished drink. A single bed is pushed unevenly against the curved wall below the window. His foot rests on it.

Sam had been so excited that he was invited to stay. He'd been to several parties, coming home from each one with twin hangovers of liquor and hopeless romanticism. But this was the first time they'd asked him to stay overnight—that *Adrian* had asked; I can't forget the way my cousin's grin spread as he said that name—and the bed in front of me is where Sam was supposed to sleep. It's covered in so many books that look so at home it's obvious that invitation was never meant to be carried through.

I told him that it wasn't real. That they didn't like anyone except themselves, and even that was iffy. That it wasn't friendship, it was opportunism: a rookie security guard, mooning over Baz—and the keys to the

castle, glimmering from the country bumpkin's security belt. Easy pickings.

He was wrong, but I was wrong, too. I knew they'd hurt him. I didn't think they'd kill him.

I've been standing here this whole time, and Graves still hasn't acknowledged I exist. I throw my bag onto the bed. It topples one of the stacks of books covering it. He pulls back his foot to avoid my little cataclysm and plucks at the strings on his violin, not even bothering to look up. I'm nothing, I'm no one, but that's not true because it isn't *me* standing here.

It's Jamie Vane.

I straighten my back. "Nice music."

"Not music," he says. His voice is more halting than Henry's. Almost as if he was forced into speaking by a gun pressed to his back. "Just notes."

A harsh scoff escapes my lips. I'd braced myself for pretentious assholes, coming to Huntsworth, but this is a whole new level. "It sounded like someone was dying."

He doesn't say anything. The silence feels purposeful. Like it means I'm right, and dying is exactly what he wanted it to sound like. I curl my lip. Thirty seconds in his presence and I'm ready to scream.

One deep breath. I'm not here to enjoy myself. I'm here for Sam. I reach out, pick up a book from the bed, looking for something to spark conversation. Beneath the book is a silver cell phone. The screen is dark, the battery dead, but it doesn't matter.

I know that phone.

Everything inside me is reeling as I turn the book to look at the cover—Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*. Scribbles black out the face on the front entirely.

"Didn't like Kant?" I ask, but all I'm thinking about is the phone. It's so, so easy to imagine the arrogant asshole in front of me picking it up, annoyed at my texts interrupting his silence. Thumbs typing like hammers to nails on a coffin, *Memento mori* an elegant *Shut up, no one cares*.

"Too much faith in man," he says.

"Hmm." Breathe. Speak. Don't scream. "Common failing. He should try woman instead."

He looks at me then, his eyes hard and questioning. His shaved head makes his dark eyebrows stand out like knife scars, slanted threats shadowing

his eyes. They scan my face dispassionately, making me wonder which parts of me he'd cross out in disgust.

Then the bare edge of a scowl cracks the facade.

Because he knows? I stare him down, daring him to spit out what he's thinking. Willing my hand to stay steady as I lay the book back down on the bed, covering the cell phone so I don't have to look at it. The slightest flinch would be weakness, and I will not be weak before him. He looked me in the eye, holding my gaze the night we met. But I was just a girl from Aberdeen then. No reason to notice me. No reason to remember me, months later.

"I'm Jamie Vane," I say. "Transfer."

His head cocks, like a bomb ticking ever so slightly closer to detonation. "We don't get many transfers."

"Yeah, well." I throw my arm out, gesturing at his room. "Not exactly the Ritz."

"No, it's not. And yet," he says, leaving the ending open. It sets me on edge.

"Sometimes you need to get as far away from home as possible," I say. There's enough truth to it to make it hurt coming out. I see it slice him.

He settles back. Slides his thumb along the violin's neck, pulling a low hum from it. I hate that I can't pin him down. That I can't tell if he's seen through my lies, and that's why he's being an asshole—or if that's just who he is. I need to push him enough that he'll let it slip if he recognizes me. I break eye contact with him, even though it feels dangerous to leave myself exposed for him to look anywhere he wants, and pick up a different pile of books from the bed. This time, the mattress beneath it is empty.

He speaks again, his voice calm. "What are you doing?"

What are you doing, not *What are you doing* here. "I'm your new suitemate." I set the books down on the floor in front of one of the bookshelves, toeing aside an empty cup to make space. I wait for him to correct me, to say no, you're that townie girl I saw in the car, but he doesn't. I push on. "And this is my bedroom."

"I don't have suitemates." His finger plucks at the string of his violin.

"Didn't," I correct.

He shifts, sliding off the windowsill, off the bed, and into my personal space in one fluid movement. It's jarring, how easily he moves, like watching stone ripple. Tension flows between us. He's testing me, seeing how far he

can push before I bend. I'm testing him, too. *Snap, Graves. Show me the boy who was with Sam that night. I know you aren't this controlled. Not with eyes like that.*

"You shouldn't be here," he says. His full lips barely move when he speaks.

He knows.

He knows who I am.

"Oh?" I lick my lips. I'm not giving up until he says it explicitly. I dig in my pocket and pull out the bronze key Hobbins gave me. It dangles from my fingers, leather 6A tag swaying between us. "Henry said you wouldn't like giving up your space. Guess you don't have a choice, though."

From far away, both of his eyes are bright lightning blue, but this close I can see two differing rings of color in them. The right has more gray; the left, more green, so that looking at him closely is almost unsettling. His pupils widen. Something in that shift hooks deep inside me. I want, desperately, to step back because there's a promise in his eyes that if I just don't move, if I just trust him, he'll bare everything I've ever hidden and let me know if it matters. If I matter.

Then he blinks, and I'm free, and I'm lost, and nothing was answered and I trust him even less. He grabs his violin and its case. I move toward him—he can't leave, not yet, not now, not when I don't know if those eyes see Jamie or Marin—and he pauses, halfway to the door, like we're opposite ends of a rope pulled far too taut.

"There's always a choice," he says.

"Getting along so well already," Henry drawls from behind Graves. It startles me to see him leaning against the doorframe, a black leather journal tucked in the crook of his arm, so close, so obvious, and yet unnoticed by me. "I knew you'd be Graves's type."

"She's not—"

"He's not—"

I clamp my mouth shut, refusing to sound like Graves's echo. He's not my type, and I'm not his, regardless of whether I'm Jamie or Marin right now.

Henry smirks. Baz appears in the door under Henry's shoulder. She starts asking for my room to be cleaned, about helping to move the books, and Graves is countering her, pointing at my lack of luggage, that I brought

hardly anything and haven't even unpacked and won't be using the space anyway. And while I notice that his voice sounds annoyed, I also notice everything he doesn't say.

He doesn't mention anything about me seeming familiar. Doesn't once ask why I'm here, what my real name is, don't I know Sam. Hasn't he seen me before, don't they know me, isn't she familiar, none of it springs to his tongue. I almost want to laugh—suddenly, there's something ridiculously humiliating about thinking he would remember me based on one quick, late-night glimpse of a townie girl. He doesn't know me. I barely know me.

"We're going to be late for seminar," Henry says. "Jamie?"

Me, that's me. "Give me a moment."

He nods, and they turn, and suddenly, just like that, the room is empty. The room is mine.

Whoever I am.

CHAPTER 5

Seminar, what Hobbins called my senior capstone course, is held in the conservatory, a greenhouse jewel of glass walls with a leafy, emerald heart. The path toward it is lit, but dimly, which means I can see them long before they see me. Shapes and spaces—Graves with his head tucked down, his expression hidden by his fist; Henry beside him, fingers drumming on the arm of Graves’s chair; and Baz, sitting apart with the notebook Henry had held spread across her lap, a page and a half already covered in perfect swirls of cursive. Beside her, an older male teacher leans in, trying to make himself their center and failing.

I thought I’d have the weekend to prepare myself. Two days to investigate before I had to even think about actually being the student I claimed Jamie was. Instead, there were two hours.

Sam’s phone is a molten brick in my back pocket. I want nothing more than to turn on my heel and walk back the way I’d come. I can use the time without them to search their rooms and scour his phone. It’s the wise thing to do—it’s what I came for. Get in, get the evidence, get out.

But they’re expecting me to join them. I slide my thumb into my mother’s ring, spinning it around and around.

A class of just three students, sitting in chairs in a circle in a room that looks pulled from a fairy tale. There are no computer screens, no dry-erase markers or black-and-white movies with fill-in-the-blank attention sheets still warm from the copier. The teacher braces his elbows on his knees, hands gesturing to either side of his face. Gold-rimmed glasses sit on top of his head, holding back blond hair streaked with silver. I push open the door and hear the end of his speech.

“He believed he was doing something of great worth. Think of Socrates—of Plato—of Epicurus. All these men pursued the study of thought not just because it was interesting but because to them ... it was necessary. Descartes

is no different—” He pauses, because Henry has shifted. He was looking at the teacher—and now he’s looking at me. His lips form into a slow, easy smile. *Finally*, that smile says. Like he’s been waiting, just for me.

And the teacher notices. “Ah,” the teacher says. “May I help you?”

“Jamie Vane.”

Amusement slips across his face. “Professor Leckey. And ... how may I help you, Miss Vane?”

My first time lying to a teacher. I keep my face calm. “I’m a transfer student. Senior year. I’ve been told a capstone course is required, and assigned to this one.”

Leckey’s chin lifts. I watch his eyes drift over me. This uniform is straight out of the bag, with chasms of wrinkles up and down my shirt. I tuck my fingers around the cuff, trying to pull at least one sleeve straight and clean. I didn’t even have time to try to figure out a tie.

He says, “Well.”

There are no empty chairs. I hesitate, trying to decide whether to lean against the wall here or shove myself into the middle of the circle and sit on the floor.

Baz clicks her pen closed and waves at me. A white-and-gold silicone bracelet with the medical star and snake hangs on her left wrist. I don’t see her backpack anywhere. “You can sit next to me. There are chairs in the back.”

Professor Leckey straightens, seeming to only then understand that I’m actually staying. “I’m sorry; I received no notice. You were taking philosophy at...?”

“Yes. My transcript is still processing.” I avoid his question—Jamie Vane is the kind of girl who doesn’t give details, preferring to let people make up their own stories about her. Besides, I don’t know how long I have until Hobbins decides the new transfer needs to provide complete paperwork and a tuition check that doesn’t bounce. Until then, I’ll bluff my way through this class. I’m not here to graduate.

“Well. Well then.” Leckey presses his fingers together in a peaked bridge. “We are past the Greeks, moving straight on to some of the great thinkers of the Enlightenment. Come see me if this doesn’t align with your former curriculum. Miss Hallward, Mr. Hargraves, make room. As Miss Hallward said, folding chairs are in the back.”

Baz shifts slightly closer to Leckey and looks at where Graves sits, leaned over the side of his chair, his head cradled so low it almost rests on his arm. He doesn't move. Leckey raps a knuckle on the arm of his chair. One foot slides out. Graves's chair grinds backward, making space by shoving himself away.

It's enough for Leckey, who doesn't wait, launching back into his speech while I wander down the rows of plants, looking for the chairs. The glass ceiling frames the cloud-smudged night, turning the night sky into a piece of commissioned artwork. I find a chair and drag it back, setting it with a clank in the new space. Graves ignores me, though he seems to ignore everything else in the room, too.

"Now, then," Leckey says, tapping the cover of a book in his lap. It's the same as the small blue one Baz tried to hand me when we met. "You've read the entirety of his argument in *Meditations on First Philosophy*. We'll be digging into each supposition in turn, but as a whole, what is Descartes trying to say?" He sits up straight, moving his gaze from one to the other of us. I fight to stay focused on why I walked in—time with them, unwinding who they are, can only help—but anxiety mixed with anticipation races through me. The way Leckey looks at each of us, eager for our input, is so different from back home.

"Mr. Hargraves?" he prompts.

Graves stirs, raising his head and one eyebrow. The apathy in his half-on uniform and stare clash with the pristine environment where we sit. I hate the way it feels like it would be more natural for the conservatory to remake itself around him than for him to straighten his tie and form the lines of his face into respect.

"He'd know if he wasn't hungover," Henry says. Graves's eyes cut to him. Henry's laugh shakes his shoulders gently, inspiring me. Maybe antagonism with Graves will be a way in with Henry. It certainly would be enjoyable.

"Who's to say he'd know sober," I press. Huntsworth boys are all the same. There's only one stop they ever make when they come to Aberdeen—the Brew Thru. "If it's not a shopping list for a liquor store, it might as well be in Greek."

"Εἶσαι ἕνα τίποτα." Graves's stare is a blade slid between my heartbeats. He straightens, raising himself till we're eye to eye. "You are nothing," he

translates quietly, confidently, taking the blade and twisting it deeper. *Nothing*, he mouths again.

Leckey clears his throat, taking Graves's taunt as an answer to his question. "Not quite, actually. Descartes was intent on proving there was very, very little about ourselves that could be held as true. *Nothing* is not where he lands, but it is an idea he lingers on."

But Graves wasn't talking about Descartes. "I'm not nothing. I'm here, aren't I?" I say, leaning toward him. I feel like a fool as soon as the words leave my mouth. They're a certainty. Of course I exist, even if Jamie Vane doesn't. I don't need to justify that to him.

"Prove it," Graves says.

"Excellent, both of you. Reproducing Descartes's fireside exploration." Leckey looks joyful. "Use your wit, Miss Vane. Dig deep. Prove that you exist."

My body tightens beneath the pressure. I can't back down. I haven't ever read Descartes, but if I fail to measure up, they won't believe Jamie's background. And I *want* to win even more. I'm no less than they are, just because someone hasn't been hand-tailoring the line of my shirt to the line of my jaw since I was two. But how do I prove that I exist? I could wave my arms. I could scream. I could slam my fist against the desk beside me. All of them feel wrong, like a child's tantrums.

"Fine." I raise a hand in front of my face. "I can see myself."

"Sight lies," Baz says. She sits with her legs drawn up and crossed beneath her in the chair, her black-and-red plaid skirt draped carefully over her lap. Her feet slip out to lie flat on the chair when Leckey glances at her. "We see things that aren't there all the time. A magician can make a person disappear, but they aren't gone. There's just a cleverly placed mirror. The disappearance is a lie our eyes tell us."

She's not wrong, but she's also not right. I smack my palms together, the slap echoing. "My other senses prove that sight is right. I don't just see myself. I feel. I hear. You hear."

"More lies," Graves says, nodding at Baz. "If one sense is wrong some of the time, what keeps them all from being wrong? If your sight can lie about a magician's assistant, why not touch? Why not hearing?"

I know it's only that I haven't done the reading, but I'm so tired of always, always being on the outside—and here, in the room that looks like

art, it stings more than it ever did down in town. I know that I could stand shoulder to shoulder with them if I'd been taught the same things, the same way. It isn't me who's failing here, it's my past. Marin's past.

"Excellent. Digging deeper into the inextricable problem. Never trust anything that has deceived us even once." Leckey speaks with practiced, familiar ease.

This, I can keep pace with. Lies have become second nature to me lately. "One thing being sometimes false doesn't mean that everything is always false. If I lie about one thing, I might tell the truth about the next."

Graves: "Might."

Leckey points at him. "Indeed. Might. How would you know? What if the liar has no predictable tells? If lying presents the exact same way as truth? Is there, then, any measurable difference between a lie and the truth? Every single one of you could be lying right now, and we wouldn't know."

"No," Graves says. "That's only Henry."

Henry snorts.

Leckey waves his hand, trying to draw them back in. "This is the heart of Descartes's argument. That if you can't tell the difference between a lie and the truth, you need to believe it is a lie until you can prove otherwise. He doesn't want supposition. *Maybe* is a terrible word. He wants infallibility."

Thoughts whirl, frustratingly hard to grasp. I've never danced with ideas like this and it's leaving me breathless. Graves is watching me, his eyes tight with that same light I saw earlier in Henry's. His interest is hungrier, though, like I'm prey and he's starving. I snatch on to something. Anything.

"And he was willing to doubt absolutely everything to get it." Leckey pitches his voice low, like he's sharing a secret.

This, I can argue with. Anyone, and everyone, can fail you, even your own mind—I've seen it myself. But there are still some things that will be true. There's still right and wrong. "How can doubting everything lead to infallibility? That sounds like infinite wrongs make a right."

"Doubt, so far as possible, all things," Graves echoes. "And find that nothing at all is true."

"Or," Leckey says, a note of caution in his voice, "find the one true thing at the heart of it all."

My hands shake. I wrap them around my knees. Leckey glances at me. His smile grows. He thinks I'm upset because of the discussion, and not

because of what lies behind it. Every time one of them speaks, it's another point proving they're exactly who I thought they were. Rich, entitled bastards who think they can bend truth itself to serve them. "How could you live like that?" I demand. "Like everything has to be doubted—and like that's okay? There are things that are right, and things that are wrong. That are true, and false. You'd go mad otherwise."

"You'd be a god," Henry says, his first words since we started.

I glare at him, shaken to find him looking back.

"More likely, insanity," Leckey says. The corner of Henry's mouth twitches, hinting at secret laughter. "It wouldn't be possible to sustain this level of disbelief outside the controlled environment of philosophical thought. But we needn't—Descartes has done it for us. Excellent discussion. Excellent recap. Begin your work memorizing the first three Meditations. Next week, we will review and dive into the Third. Be prepared to debate his conclusions. Miss Vane, you have your work cut out for you to catch up."

"I'll be fine," I say.

Leckey leaves, and so do Baz and Graves. Only Henry sits, looking at me. He doesn't say anything, and after a moment, I turn to leave. He follows me out. When the door shuts behind him, the other two are nowhere to be seen. We walk silently down the path. That class lingers beneath my skin, splitting me open, making it hard to talk. I've never been challenged like that. I'm not sure if I won or lost—only that I am already yearning to feel that way again.

It doesn't matter, though. It's not something I can have, because nothing about it was real.

You are nothing, Graves whispers.

I frown. I don't want his voice in my head. So what if it felt good to go to something labeled school and actually *think*? I can have that. I *will* have that, when I get what I need and get out of this town. I'll get a job and buy as many books as I want, on whatever I want to learn. I don't need a class, and I don't need anyone's permission.

I stop in a tightly knit cluster of trees, halfway back to Killary. Henry stops, too. For a moment, we stand in silence together. He isn't just escorting me back. The way he's looking at me is too intense, like class together gave him the key and he's just trying to find the lock. I don't like it. It doesn't matter how long I've wanted someone to take me seriously. It doesn't matter how often I've forced myself to fade into the background at East County,

knowing that if I spoke up, challenged *anything*, I'd be mocked. It doesn't matter that Sam, even Sam, never really wanted to understand me.

I'll be damned if it's these people who I let in. "What do you want, Henry?"

"Tell me why your eyes looked like that."

"Like what?" I say, taken aback.

"During the discussion. *There are things that are right, and things that are wrong*," he says, quoting me. His hands slide out of his pockets to lie quiet at his side. His words slow. "It's clear truth is ... important to you. When you lost it ... you fell apart. That wasn't just because Descartes had a pretty turn of phrase."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

The glow of light hits only the planes of his face. He steps closer, the dark hiding his imperfections, turning him from a real boy to a charcoal portrait. "Losing truth on purpose now," he says, soft enough that he could be mocking me, or dead serious. I can't see his eyes; can't read his expression. *You don't know me*, I want to shout, but his words hit home more than I'm ready to admit. How could he read me that easily from just one class? He doesn't look away. My skin prickles beneath his gaze.

"What are you so afraid of, Jamie?" he asks me.

So many things. That I'll be found out, tossed out, leave here shamed and without my answers. That I'll ask the wrong question, say the wrong thing, trigger something in Graves that leaves me scarred and him free, that when I go to sleep I'll see my cousin's empty eyes and bloated skin. That the one person I fit with perfectly is the only one I'm going to perfectly fail. That all my life I've wanted something I'm not even capable of. That I won't ever be more, because I couldn't even be enough.

He waits, his calm hands betrayed by his hungry eyes, and I realize what I fear more than anything is being honest with this Huntsworth boy. So, I say, "Nothing."

The dark steals all but the white teeth of his smile.

"Yet," he says, and it sounds like a promise.

CHAPTER 6

Lose everything to gain truth. It keeps going around and around in my head. It feels like Henry followed me out on purpose, like he wanted to pick me apart piece by piece. Find out what I was made of on the inside.

Questions, that's all he would find. Questions, and fear. I know they killed Sam. But I don't know which of them, or why, or how I'm ever going to prove it.

A few hours to steady myself after that class; that's all I need. I'm hiding in a little library I found tucked into the top floor of Killary's West Wing. It's small, more like a cubby with walls made of books and a fireplace and one cracked, gilded mirror than a true library. It's also blessedly empty, and when I sit in this window, I can see what must be Henry's and Baz's rooms across the courtyard. I'll wait for their lights to turn off before I head back, then start again with them tomorrow.

I pluck at the bottom hem of the white curtains framing this window seat. The steady pressure of my feet wedged up against the wall is the only thing keeping me from jumping up and pacing the room. I shouldn't have gone to class. I've lost too much time, and now I'm too frayed to interrogate them but too late to search their rooms. I wish I had someone I trusted here. Someone to sit knee to knee with and pick apart that class the way Henry wants to do to me. Baz would be the easiest, but I can't trust her. She has his key chain.

Lose everything; gain truth. Losing everything is a familiar feeling, thanks to the people here. It's the next step I'm struggling with.

My breath comes fast and ragged. My head dips between my knees, hands laced behind, wrapping my skull, then digging in, because if I just grip tightly enough I can hold the panic inside. What if there isn't truth to be had? What if there's only loss?

"No." I say it aloud. "No. It's okay." I breathe out, staring at the cushion between my feet. I'm in. I'm here. And I have a start. I let go of my head,

digging Sam's phone out of my pocket to grip it with both hands instead. I cover it with my palm, then press it to my forehead. Every action a rejection of how Graves let it lie forgotten.

I press firmly to turn on the phone, staring my reflection down until the screen lights up. Then I'm looking at Sam and me standing in front of the Mustass. He wore his cap pressed low over bedhead hair. His chin dug into my shoulder. I scowled out from beneath the hood of my dad's Johnny Cash sweatshirt, long blond hair wound into messy braids on either shoulder, eyes hidden by a pair of Faye's ridiculously oversize sunglasses. I wish I had been smiling. It would've made me look even less like Jamie.

I unlock the phone with his birthday, wondering bitterly if Graves knew that was what the passcode meant. Missed calls and unread messages clamor for attention. Several from Faye, harassing him about not inviting her to the party followed by a single broken heart. None of them are from the boys or Baz. No Huntsworth photos I haven't seen. No strange notes, no voice memos, no emails. Nothing to prove which of them sent that message. Nothing but loss.

Loss, truth. *Memento mori*.

A tight little laugh shakes my rib cage, too close to the start of a sob for my liking. I can't get myself to calm down. I shove my feet tighter against the wall, feeling the ache up through the back of my calves. The phone was in Graves's room, and as far as I know, only the three of them live on that floor. One of them had to have sent the message. I'm not going to find the answer by hiding.

I dart a glance. Baz's light is still on, though Henry's room is dark.

I can't sit here and panic any longer. Stand up. Slide Sam's phone back into my pocket. Stretch, and pick at the front of my shirt, already stale and worn even though it's brand-new to me. The little library is dark except for the table lamp I turned on when I came in. It sits on a low, round table in the center of four plush chairs.

A massive book lies open on the table, its goldenrod pages softly arcing. *The History of Philosophy* is written at the top of each page, with three columns of text filling the pages below. The quaking inside me slows as I sit on the edge of the chair in front of it and run a fingertip down its gold-stained edges.

I flip aimlessly through, looking for Descartes, when a graffiti-covered

page stops me in my tracks. The neat, martial order of the text itself stands in obscene contrast to the handwritten ink covering its margins. Arrows stab at an entire paragraph, their tails leading to marginalia.

It is the task of the enlightened not only to ascend to learning and to see the good, but to be willing to descend again to those prisoners and to share their troubles and their honors, whether they are worth having or not. And this they must do, even with the prospect of death.

if only it were this easy

I've never written in a book before; never even considered it. I touch the ink. It's so sure of itself, its sorrow so permanent. This is something I can have—a way I can make a mark even if everything else slips through my fingers. I pick up a pen from beside the book and, hand trembling, etch a note just beneath.

Death is the easiest thing in the world.

So real, those words in that stark black ink. I lay the pen down; close the book on top of it. It doesn't matter—it feels like the book is watching me. This picking apart of truth is different from my dream of sitting knee to knee with a study partner. Maybe it's even more intimate, since nothing said will be altered through the filter of speech. No cadence or tone to mask meaning, just ... our words.

I wonder if the original vandal is still here, still a student. If they also know what it feels like to have death work its bone-shard teeth in and rend your life, or if it's all just playing with ideas.

Suddenly, this room is too quiet. The only movement is my own reflection in the mirror above the fireplace. It's a strange choice to keep a mirror that broken in a school this expensive. The bottom of the gilded frame is shaped differently from the top, warped and melted, with black stains dulling what must have been once an almost-garish gleam. I don't know the person I see in its cracked glass. She's so different from the one on Sam's

phone, her hair too short, curls too dark, cheeks too pale, eyes burning and red. She glares at me, mouth twisting ever harder, tighter, like she's trying to suffocate herself by sheer force of will. She's a girl made of porcelain, and she's starting to break.

Something moves within my reflection. A bit of white—a hand? A claw?—reaching out from the center of the crack. No, not the crack. It can't be. There's someone or something hiding in the shadows of the room behind me.

I whirl.

Bookshelves, floor lamp, the window and its seat. Nothing moves. "Who's there?" I say to the empty room. "I know I saw you." That's a lie. I saw a slip of white. I didn't see a person. "Come out."

The room waits. I can feel terror fluttering, trapped inside my rib cage.

I am not my mother. There are things that are true, and there are things that are false, and no matter how much our senses deceive us, those truths cannot change. I'm not going to let this dark room and my loneliness lead me the way she did. There are no beautiful ends to the path she took. Just the madhouse or, in her case, oblivion hand-packed into grams of white powder.

She's so much like her mother, our neighbors would say. Something about my eyes, about the way I stared. It was never easy, trying to fit in, and having my slot in Amberdeen be the space she left just made it worse. *No*, I always said, knowing my dad was listening. *I'm not. I'm my father's girl.*

Ghosts aren't real.

It was just a reflection of someone. A person in the hallway. Just a hand, not the empty, swirling eyes I saw at the streamside; Sam's drowned eyes, half in, half out of the water, looking at that *other* face beside his—I grit my teeth, holding back laughter. Or tears. There isn't much difference anymore.

"This isn't funny." Nothing but my own ragged breath answers.

Out of the corner of my eye, I catch a bright light turning on in one of the rooms across the way. Yes; that was all it was. Light from another room, reflected oddly. I walk unsteadily to the window, tucking myself back into the seat, pulling the curtain around my shoulders, drawing my legs up under me because it doesn't matter if there's a rational explanation, my heart is still racing and I want to be as small, and as hidden, as possible.

The light comes from Henry's room. I see him walk past the window, no shirt on, just a towel draped around his neck and wet hair held back with a simple headband. I'm jealous of his shower and jealous of his calm.

I lay my head on my updrawn knees, watching as he pulls open a closet door to search inside. The towel falls from his shoulders, baring the skin beneath. His muscles are lean, barely obscuring his ribs. The slight lines of his body don't match the hollow depths of his stares, like an abyss is trapped inside a boy's fragile frame.

He pulls out a shirt. Hair slips from beneath the band, shadowing his face as he works at the buttons before sliding it off the hanger. His movements slow, then stop, the shirt hanging from one hand. A moment—my heart beating just as hard as before, but this time it races hot, not cold—and then his head turns, and he looks out the window and down. At me.

I don't move. Maybe, just maybe, the library light is too dim and he won't see me.

His head tilts and he turns to face the window, the shirt dropping out of view. My eyes follow it lower without thinking, but his chest isn't the smooth perfection I was expecting. Low, near the base of his rib cage, a massive scar puckers the skin. The old wound is so deep that I can see how the skin dips even from this distance. It looks like someone reached in and pulled part of him out, then stretched too-thin skin back over the hole.

He raises his hand, the shirt forgotten. One by one, he trips his fingers across the scar, playing the jagged edges of it like a harp. I drag in a sharp breath, realizing there's only one reason he would do that. I look up. Our eyes meet.

I'm not hidden. And he knows exactly what I was staring at. My pulse pounds in my throat, every inch of me screaming that I need to run. *Run*, crawling across my skin. *Run*, flushing my cheeks. *Run*, drying out my lips, forcing me to draw my tongue across them while he stares. Henry smiles, slow and satisfied.

Maybe it isn't the scar he's playing with.

Maybe it's me.

CHAPTER 7

Huntsworth swallowed Saturday whole and spit me out into the sunset. I had so many plans for today, but at boarding school, Saturdays are not your own. My brain is a riot of syllabi and schedules, makeup assignments and group projects. Pages due, chapters to read, upcoming tests and midterms in two weeks, all delivered without the girl beside me—her name lost somewhere in the pile of due dates—taking a single breath as she led me on the tour around campus I was supposed to get from Baz but ran from. I now know everything about every public area on these grounds, and nothing about the ones I’m actually interested in.

“—a few weeks till terms. I should say till death, because terms are going to kill me. Revere gave me a C on the last paper; there’s no way I’m getting higher on a written exam. Are they making you do that one?”

I shrug.

“I stayed up all night, and a C! I bet your last school was easier than this hole. Anyway, there’s still a part of me that thinks Revere’s hot. The history guy on the horse, not our physics professor—”

So much noise, it almost makes me think the three of them—or maybe just Henry—set her on me on purpose, to keep me occupied. We’re nearly to the fifth floor. No one but Baz, Henry, Graves, and I live on the sixth. I came back just past dawn, after sleeping fitfully in the little library, as far from both the mirror and the window as I could get. I had time to change into casual clothes for the day, then found this girl waiting for me.

She opens the door to the fifth floor with a word of invitation. I wave, duck past, and run up the stairs, ignoring her shout behind me.

Just like it did this morning, my heart hits a fever pitch when my hand reaches for the doorknob to the sixth floor. And, just like it did last night, the sixth floor looks empty when I walk in. The living room for 6A is empty, again, too. From the quiet, it seems like all three of them are somewhere else.

Where, I don't know. I don't know any of their routines yet.

There's so much I don't know.

I lock 6A's door behind me and toss my bag onto one of the chairs. Papers spurt from its opening. I need to make sure I'm in Graves's path when he comes back, so I can force him to tell me about the night of the party. Use wanting to get to know people as an excuse to find out who was there.

I wedge my finger inside the collar of Huntsworth's "casual" weekend uniform, a soft polo shirt and athletic pants with tailored lines. It could be hours before he comes back. I'll change, and then carefully search his room. It'll be easy enough to look through one section, listening for the noise of the front lock while I work.

I start to pull off my polo as I walk into my room. A soft buzzing sound from the bathroom stops me, arms crossed, stomach bare. It doesn't stop, or change. I put on a tank top and walk toward the bathroom, careful and quiet.

The only sound in the suite is the electric hum. Graves is here, after all.

My hand pushes open the door before my thoughts catch up. He sits on the side of the bathtub, his head bent low over a small metal trash can, running an electric razor across the back of his head. A white tank top and a pair of gym shorts prove that he hasn't gone outside yet today, where the uniform I'd been wearing is mandatory until nightfall.

His arm doesn't stop moving, the muscles of his shoulder flexing with each arc. He knows I'm here. The tick in his jaw betrays him, even if he refuses to look at me.

This is what I wanted, I tell the slipshod beat of my heart. Him and I, alone. Answers.

"Getting ready for the party?"

He doesn't answer, just keeps running the blade back and forth across his head. The razor hums its one inane note. If he won't even acknowledge me, I'm not going to give him the satisfaction of thinking I came in here for him. I walk to the sink and turn on the water like I'm here to get ready, too, even though I haven't left so much as a hairband in this bathroom.

"No."

One word. That's all I need, though. I keep my back to him, wetting my hands and running them through my hair to calm imaginary fly aways. "I thought Henry said there was one soon. Monday, isn't it? Or was that last Monday?"

“It’s not a party.”

My eyebrows raise. I make a noncommittal humming sound and check his reflection behind me, but he’s still looking at the trash can instead of me. I wait, just a beat. There—his gaze touches mine then falls again. I smile like it didn’t burn.

“There isn’t much to do here on the weekends except drink, is there?” He’s not going to look up at me again, not now that I’ve caught him. I only just met Graves, but it’s obvious this is a boy who hates to lose *any* battle. I study him freely. He runs his hand over the curve of his skull, then follows it with the razor. “I heard someone died at one.”

He doesn’t flinch. Back and forth, back and forth.

I will make you lose, Graves. I turn off the water and shove the trash can to the side with my foot, then crouch down in front of him. The razor pauses. “Did you know him?”

“Yes.”

Finally: a truth, about Sam. Sam’s phone sits heavy in my back pocket. I’ve kept it with me, waiting for a moment like this. It was one of the three of them who sent that message. He’s my most likely suspect, but the phone lying, untouched, on his spare bed isn’t enough to make that fact. I could pull it out now and ask him if it’s his. But I want to see his eyes when I do.

There are only a few inches between us. I could grab his chin and force him to raise his face. I’d have to touch him to do that, though.

“Why don’t you use the mirror? It’s right there.” I’m even closer.

“I can’t see the back,” he says, “even if I do.”

I can’t. It’s not a particularly good answer. But it’s my way in—the slightest fracture in his facade. Not a weakness, not a flaw, just the words *I can’t*, a begrudging limitation, and I’ll be damned if I’m not going to take that tiny crack in this marble boy and force it open wide.

“I’ll be your mirror,” I say.

Tell me if it was you who sent that message. Tell me if it was you who held him down. Tell me if you know *me*, once and for all. Tell me that I’m real, and that I’m winning. Tell me the truth. Look at me, Graves.

He doesn’t say anything. The silence stretches, Marin-or-Jamie caught in the middle of it, held fast by the way his eyes still haven’t moved to meet mine. The razor hums in his hand, inches away from his skull. He lowers it, not giving it to me but not refusing it, either.

Slowly, like dawn chasing after night, I reach for it. My hand shakes, something I know more than see. I don't want to touch him. I don't want the memory of what his skin feels like mingling with the memory of Sam's bruises.

I have the photo. The phone. The message. The drugs. The keys. All of those are easy to think about, and easy to chase, because they lead to his killer without leading me back to that glade.

Red hair and water-swollen skin and blank, gray, dead eyes. Drowned in water two inches deep, less than half a mile from here as the crow flies, five miles by twisting mountain roads. Far enough no one heard him, if he struggled and screamed. Bruises up and down the back of each arm, proving that he did.

Even if I lose every other piece of evidence, I can't lose those. Someone held him down. Henry Wu. Basile Hallward. Or Adrian Hargraves.

Our fingers brush, his warm and unexpectedly soft. He flinches. The razor jumps in his hand and catches my skin. Pain slices hot and fast. A sliver of red wells up beside my nail. He and I stand at once. The razor hums where he dropped it between our feet. His fingers twitch, like he's thinking about reaching toward me to help. He looks at me. And for a moment, I'm frozen.

I've made a terrible mistake.

I put my finger in my mouth, quickly, tasting copper, before he can reach out and touch me again. His eyes chase the movement, landing on my lips. I start to speak—to say something, anything to move us past the way that just felt. His mouth flattens, pressing away an emotion I hadn't been fast enough to see. "I'm not into you."

"What—"

"You have the room next to mine by fact, not by choice. We live side by side, but I am not interested in you and never will be. So, you can stop trying so hard." He leans in, reaching past me to cut the razor's power with a tug to its cord. The bathroom falls silent, the only other sound the gentle *shush* of fabric as he pulls off his shirt and lets it drop to the floor. "Of course, you're welcome to stay and watch. Just as long as we're clear that's all this is."

Each word stings. "This is *nothing*, and never will be."

The water turns on in the shower. I'm already pivoting on my heel, heading back to my room, but the door isn't shut before I hear another brush of fabric. Hands shaking, I pull it closed and lock it from my side, leaning

against the thin wood. It doesn't block out the sound of his exhale as water hits bare skin. I close my eyes and listen to the water's whisper, just as haunted as the stream outside.

Hate. That's all this red-hot feeling is.

Let it grow. Let it swell.

Let them burn.

CHAPTER 8

Classes at Huntsworth are all held in the old guest cabins that dot the hillside. They each have names, engraved on brass plaques over the doorframes. Estabrook, Howard, Kulwicki; I recognize so few of them, another gap in my education that makes it hard to pretend to have privilege.

Baz walks beside me. Sam's key chain bounces on her backpack. We trail side by side down the hill after Graves, trapped in the awkward small talk phase of getting to know each other. I've made so, so little progress. I couldn't search their rooms, after all—Baz was gone all Sunday, but Henry and Graves weren't—so I scoured spots on campus instead. All day wandering, making up reasons to be places I was pretty sure I wasn't supposed to, and the most interesting thing I found was a locked shed that looked full of landscaping supplies. And that Sam's keys are still missing from the security office.

There's only a few yards left before we make it to class. I take a deep breath. I can't miss a single opportunity, if it's going to be this difficult. "I like your key chain."

She stiffens. I'm not imagining it. She's been holding both straps of her bag this whole walk, but now I can see the white of her knuckles. I reach out. Tap the key chain I made. Push more into her space, all with a calm smile on my face. "What's it mean?"

Mustass (n., sarcastic love): the ugliest car in the world, one door grafted on from some other breed, tires too small for its chest breadth, and big, glopping warts of metal holding its spoiler on. Owned by a dead boy who wanted to fix it up and run it in a race; now for sale online for less than he paid for it.

"I got it from a friend." Her voice is flat. They weren't friends.

"But you don't know what it means?" I laugh a little. She doesn't contradict me. "Must not have been very good friends, then. Did you steal it

from him?”

“No.” Her furrowed brow says yes.

“So, it was a boy.” I elbow her playfully. I feel sick. I feel elated. Sam would’ve wanted her to have it, so, so badly, but he didn’t give it to her. She took it. “Does he know you have this token of love?”

She looks at the ground. I almost don’t hear her. “Can you stop?”

My steps falter. She slows. Her hands flex on the backpack straps. She meets my eyes.

No. That’s not loss I see in her gaze. These people don’t *miss* Sam. She’s a liar with a stolen key chain. I look away, anywhere else, and point at the closest cabin. Small talk and avoiding that look—I can do both at once. “I know Taylor from *Roll of Thunder*, but who are the others? Poets?”

She follows my gesture, looking confused until her eyes land on the plaque. “Oh! The cabin names. No, not poets.”

“Dead kings?”

She glances at me, sees my forced smile, then meets it with a laugh just as fake. Both of us, agreeing to move on. “Dead friends. Huntsworth was a personal retreat for Albright Killary. He named each cabin after the friend he built it for. The school didn’t change them because history is made by average people, not just conquerors.”

I wouldn’t call having enough money to not only build myself a mansion but also build personal getaways for all my closest friends *average*. But Jamie would, so I make her scoff and ask why he didn’t make them bigger.

“I think it’s nice that they’re small. It means they’d have to come to him to be together. They’d remember why they were there, every time.”

“Because their friend was rich and controlling.”

She darts a glance at me. “Because he loved them.”

Of course, someone who’s always had money would see it differently. I messed up again. I smile awkwardly, hoping she doesn’t see through me, and spend the rest of the walk in silence.

English meets in a cabin close to the gates. A freestanding gas fireplace burns beside the teacher’s desk. Mrs. Temple stands in front of it, warming her hands as I file in behind Baz. Like everyone else, Baz places her essay, a sheaf of paper covered in scrawls because the teacher is a psychopath who makes cursive handwriting mandatory, on the desk. I walk straight past, my hands empty.

“Excuse me.” Temple looks at me over her shoulder. “Your assignment?”

I’m the only one left at the front of class. Baz sits in one of the many circles of chairs, her backpack thrown into an empty seat beside her. “I’m new,” I say. Someone snickers.

“We are all well aware that you are new,” Temple says, “and I am also well aware that Caroline delivered the coursework to you on Saturday, seeing as how I was one of the ones directed to spend my Friday evening preparing it for you. It seems, though, that your time is more valuable than mine.”

“No, I—”

“Two days is more than sufficient to complete the analysis.” She arches a brow at me, but I don’t have a reply. I had glanced at it, but even if I hadn’t spent all of Sunday investigating, I wouldn’t have been able to read and dissect, in a handwritten essay, the different perspectives on the nature of humanity in the first two acts of *The Tempest* by this morning.

“Professor Temple, please excuse Miss Vane. Ms. Hobbins assigned me to be her student liaison, and I neglected to share with her Huntsworth’s standards for makeup work.” Baz stands in front of her seat. Her eyes meet mine. She picks up the backpack off the seat beside her and glances at it.

She saved the seat for me.

Temple hums sourly. “To your seat, then, Miss Vane. Books open to act three. Read in discussion groups, challenging and supporting one another as we go, as always.”

She saved *me*.

I walk quickly toward her, before Temple changes her mind and makes me write the missing essay in blood. The chair legs make very little sound on the hardwood floor as I sit and turn it to face Baz and away from where Graves sits in the group beside us. “Thank you.”

“Temple is a hard-ass, but only while she’s setting her image. She’ll relent as soon as she thinks you’re afraid of her.” Baz gets a few knowing nods from our small group. “Did you at least bring your copy of the book?”

I dig it out from under the pile of syllabi and course journals I’d brought. My copy of *The Tempest* has a Huntsworth library card in the back, a battered, cartoon-style cover, and pages missing. The girl who gave me the tour and the book said not to worry, the school would order me my own set of class books soon. I look around, and see her in Graves’s group, a newly bound leather copy sitting atop her crossed legs.

Graves's lap and hands and desk are empty. He didn't even bring his book with him. The absolute arrogance. Around him, his group members start reading aloud. He digs his thumbnail into the wood surface of his desk over and over. The girl beside him pauses in her read. She glances at him; it's his turn. *Scrape. Scrape.* They skip over him. I want to scream.

"Act three."

Baz caught me staring at Graves. I feel my cheeks heat, but it isn't like I can explain to her what the flush she sees actually is. I open my book, still seething.

"We're on scene one."

The others start to read quietly, pausing now and again to lean toward one another to ask questions or point out a line in someone else's book. I wait for my turn. The room fills with quiet murmurs and the sound of pages turning. Temple sits at her desk, red pen striking across a page in front of her. Her eyes flick up. I look down at my book. The scene the others are reading is a love scene between Ferdinand and Miranda, yearning and tenderness exchanged while he stacks firewood. Someone's drawn lightning strikes all up and down the margins of my copy.

My English teacher showed us the movie version of Shakespeare's *Romeo + Juliet* and called it good. Everyone else agreed with him. They spent more time discussing the Hawaiian T-shirts than the actual story, but I fell in love with the way the words sounded. Like they were on the edges between reality and dream.

Here, all Ferdinand is doing is piling logs and confessing his love while Miranda's father watches in secret. But the words he picks make it sound like so much more. *The mistress which I serve quickens what's dead / And makes my labors pleasures.* I know this feeling. It's the rush I felt just earlier, when Baz let slip that key chain wasn't a gift.

Love might be Ferdinand's mistress, but justice is mine.

I need to ask Baz about any locked doors on campus. She told me about the key chain; if I'm careful, I bet I can find out from her what someone would need the keys for. I just have to wait for a chance.

The boy across from me is still reading. I try to find where he is. A page comes loose as I turn. It hangs partially out of the book. I turn to it, curious, and the movement releases whatever tiny threads held it in place. The page slips to the floor. I pick it up. Dark ink nearly obscures the script, annotating

Shakespeare with curt words: *spawn, a lie, never*, and a question mark so furiously traced and retraced it almost obliterates Stephano's question. One section, though, was left clear, a ring of black around it as if that and that alone saved it from the punishment inflicted on the others.

CALIBAN: Be not afeard. This isle is full of noises,
Sounds and sweet airs that give delight and hurt not.
Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments
Will hum about mine ears, and sometime voices
That, if I then had waked after long sleep,
Will make me sleep again; and then, in dreaming,
The clouds methought would open, and show riches
Ready to drop upon me, that when I waked
I cried to dream again.

I know this feeling, too, the yearning to hide in dreaming, the way I hid inside my books in Amberdeen—and even here, hiding in the little library. But not all nightmares stay in dreams. Some follow you to waking. My fingers trace the black ink. It stands out, so much more bold and fluid than the printed text, reminding me of the marginalia in *The History of Philosophy*.

“Oh, what happened to your book?” Baz asks. Everyone else is quiet. I missed some kind of cue ending the read aloud, and have no idea what we're supposed to be doing.

I slide the page back inside and try to find where we were. “It's a library copy. My personal set is on the way.” Though, whether it will make it before I'm gone is still a question.

“I hate when people write in books,” Baz says. “Especially ones that aren't theirs. Can you still make out the text?”

“There's a boy, and there's a girl. She likes the way his muscles move while he's stacking firewood, and he likes that she's never met another man to compare him to, and apparently that's enough to set her father at ease about enslaving him.”

Her laugh is like Christmas, all bells and warmth. “That's one reason to fall in love, I guess.”

“You don't go for muscles?”

She lowers her eyes. “Looks start things, the same way they did for Miranda and Ferdinand. But asking them to keep love strong is like”—she

hesitates, carefully looking only at her book—“asking a fire to keep burning on only air.”

I hate that she has Sam’s key chain but is so, so obviously not thinking about him. “Fires need air.”

She smiles at me. “They need wood, too.”

The girl beside me snorts. Baz blushes bright red, fast as flames. “I didn’t —” She buries her face in her book. Laughter erupts more loudly from the others in our group. Even I can’t help but smile, at her unwitting joke and at the innocent way she reacted.

Temple stands. Everyone quiets at once. She sits again, satisfied, and I see that Baz is at least telling me the truth about this teacher.

Around us, the others are reading independently. I take advantage of the quiet. “Are there any places on campus we aren’t supposed to go?” She shoots me a strange look. I point my chin at Temple. “I messed up once already today. I can’t say I was paying attention to anything the girl”—*Caroline*, Baz mouths to me, but I don’t care—“told me on the tour. I don’t want to mess up again. Are there any locked doors that I shouldn’t even try to open?”

“If it’s locked, why would you...” She trails off with a sigh when I cock my eyebrow. “Besides the staff offices on the third floor of Admin, there’s the groundskeeper’s shed, the back gate, and the door to the roof of Killary. But I don’t think you’ll stumble into any of those.”

Three of these I knew already. But the fourth—Killary’s roof—I didn’t. I try to picture the layout of campus in my head, wondering if that roof is the place where the photo on Sam’s page was taken. Maybe the last place he was seen alive. Maybe, even, where one of them decided he needed to die.

“How do you get to the roof door?”

“It’s locked.” She turns to face me more fully. I have to go gentle into that good night, or I won’t leave with this one’s trust. And her trust is proving far too useful to lose.

“But not welded shut.”

“You said you were trying to *avoid* trouble.”

I shrug and lean closer, my eyes bright, just a new girl looking for adventure. I *know* she’s been on that roof before. I’ve seen the proof. “Doesn’t it make it more exciting when you’re somewhere you know you’re not supposed to be? Doesn’t it make everything a touch more real?”

She waits just long enough to answer that I'm worried I've pushed too hard, too soon. We aren't even friends yet. Then, finally, she speaks. "I can see why Henry likes you."

"What—"

The door to the classroom opens. Winter air rushes in, forcing aside all the warmth the fire had steadily built. A tall, severe woman in a white pantsuit walks through with a nod at Temple. Her eyes scrape through us, pausing momentarily on me—no, on Baz. "Tie, Hallward."

Baz's hands jump to her tie. She straightens it, erasing a defect I hadn't even noticed. "Sorry, ma'am."

Then the woman's eyes latch on me and I realize I never would've mistaken the feeling of being pinned by them. I try to resist the urge to cover the mess of my own tie with my hands, but she only inclines her chin. "Welcome to Huntsworth."

She knows who I am. I smooth my tie. "Thank you."

Henry comes inside after her, walking past to place a single bright red sticky note on the pile of papers on Temple's desk. Scribbles cover it. It can't be what he's turning in for his essay, but Temple merely shuffles it to the side with the stack.

"Mr. Wu, English is a mandatory subject whether or not you already speak it," the woman at the door says.

"If you say so, Headmistress," Henry drawls.

So, she's in charge of this school. I study her again, more interested now. Her only jewelry is a pair of silver drop earrings that glimmer against her light brown skin. Her hair is pulled back, her suit spotless. She stares at Henry dispassionately. "Professor Temple, please inform me of each of Mr. Wu's absences. I would like a report on my desk."

"It would be easier to give you a report of his presences," Temple says.

The headmistress's eyes roll, the perfection breaking into humanity. I love her at once. Maybe, I think, if Sheriff Barron won't listen to the evidence I find, she will. The door closes behind her. Henry winks at Baz—no, at me *and* Baz—then kicks the chair of the boy next to Graves, forcing him to move so he can take his spot. I watch as they lean toward each other, touching shoulders. Henry says something too low for me to hear. Graves almost smiles.

"Why do you call him Graves?" I ask Baz, but it's Henry who answers.

He turns around, his chin resting on Graves's shoulder. He wants me to know he can hear us. "Because he's dead inside."

"Because Adrian Edvard Hargraves the Fourth is a mouthful," Baz says, shooting Henry a look over her shoulder, "and Hens is a bastard."

I snort, and it makes Baz smile in a way that feels dangerously close to sharing something.

"Miss Vane, since you seem to understand the text well enough to find humor in it, please recite to us the passage that inspired mirth." Temple stands over me.

I hadn't even noticed her walking toward us. None of us had.

"Poor worm, thou art infected. This visitation shows it," Henry says. I take that back—he definitely noticed Temple coming, and now he's mocking me.

"We are waiting, Miss Vane."

Flustered, I reopen my book. A few pages fall onto the floor. Someone laughs. I bend to pick them up, wishing my hair was still long enough to hide the embarrassment I feel tainting my skin. At least the headmistress isn't here to see this.

"I see." Temple turns on her heel, giving up on me. I have never had a worst first day of class.

"Wherefore weep you?" says Graves, his eye on the frosted window. No mirth in that voice; only coldness that deepens as he speaks, cracking his final word into despair. "At mine unworthiness, that dare not offer what I desire to give, and much less take what I shall die to want. But this is trifling, and all the more it seeks to hide itself, the bigger bulk it shows..."

Every line was from the passage she'd assigned us, but not once had he opened or even held the book. His lips move like he means to keep speaking, and something deep inside me wants him to. It isn't his magic; it's Shakespeare's, and yet we all have fallen under it. The soft hush of the fireplace at the front of the room is the only sound until Temple clears her throat. "Beautifully recited, Mr. Hargraves, but I fail to see the humor."

"They fell in love." Graves cracks his neck. Glares at me. "What's more absurd than that?"

Everything I'd heard when he was reciting, everything I'd felt, vanishes.

Temple's fingernails tap on the book she cradles in her hands. Then she nods. "Miss Vane, that is the standard expected of Huntsworth students. I

believe a session in afternoon detention will force you to take ample time from your social schedule to be properly prepared for the next class.”

Baz didn’t save me, after all. *Damn you, Graves.*

CHAPTER 9

I'm dreaming.

I know this, but it doesn't help.

There's no light. The space is narrow, boulders set close enough that as soon as I stray away from one, I can feel the other. My long hair catches on the wet stones. Their damp chill seeps into my skin. There's nowhere to go but forward, into the deeper dark. Where the water calls.

I don't want to be here. The cold air turns my breath into its own ghost. The floor is slick with a thin layer of mud that creeps around my feet, between my toes. I move slowly, inching forward, terrified of slipping and touching anything around me with more than my feet. It will keep me here if I do.

"Sam," I whisper. "I'm trying." The water answers me with a rattle of drops against the boulders. It closes in around me. A drop splashes on my shoulder. I shudder as it spreads, liquid ice crawling across my skin. I stumble forward.

My toes bump up against something rounded and warm, a relief in the never-ending cold. I step forward hurriedly. My foot sinks into it. It swells, then pops. Warmth gushes across my bare skin. I gasp at the wrongness of the blend: the heat an embrace, the viscous slide a horror. Its tendrils creep up my ankle. I want to be covered in it. I want to scrape it off my bones, even if it takes my skin with it.

I look down into the water.

A clawed hand wraps around my leg. Too bloated to grip; one finger tears, the bone slipping out of sodden skin to pierce into mine. The pain is sudden and swift. I scream. My kick sends me stumbling back into the rock. Lichen sucks against my skin with a thousand tiny freezing mouths. The hand won't let go, digging deeper, bone grinding against bone. The arm stretches, dragging the rest of him out of the water after it. His face rises last, but this

time, his eyes aren't holes. They're there, horrible and swollen and sightless. He opens his mouth, trying to talk. Wetness spews from between his lips, not warm anymore, but cold, ice-cold, the winter stream pouring from his mouth, racing up my leg, my waist, my chest, my face—

“You're screaming,” a girl says.

I slam out of sleep.

Real, the voice is real and not Sam. Sam can't speak; he's dead and that was all just a nightmare. The wet wasn't a stream, the fear from only a girl, not a monster.

Music pounds. Laughter in the room outside. My bedroom is dark, but I can see light under the door, bright and strobing with passing feet. I can still feel the way his bones moved beneath my foot.

“And already drunk.” Graves fills the doorway to our bathroom, uniform exchanged for a pair of dark jeans and a lazily buttoned cardigan with no shirt beneath. A girl—the one who spoke?—has her fingers playing with his jawline, her head on his shoulder, her lipstick on his neck. Too real. Too here. I don't want him standing there, watching me try to wake up. One slip of her fingers would undo his entire sweater.

“No,” I mutter, though I feel like I should be. Drunk. Not ... undoing ...

“You should be,” he says.

Someone turns up the music so loud the walls pulse with it. *The party.* Henry's party. That was tonight. There isn't enough time for anything at this school. Not enough time to investigate, to study, to sleep, to live. I came straight here from detention, meaning to study before eating because I can't afford any more detentions but fell asleep instead. I don't know what time it is or how long I've slept.

Another girl appears in the bathroom beside Graves. He smiles down at her. She grabs his arm and pulls him away, the first girl a trained dog following after. I force myself up and walk toward the empty door. Our bathroom is long and narrow, the standing tub and the toilet and the sink vying for floor space that isn't there. The tub is full of ice and bottles. A boy I don't know rummages through it, looking up when I turn on the sink. Before he can speak, I stick my head under the faucet, hissing at the chill. Most of the water runs down my face, except for one cold drop sliding down my back. *It's real*, I remind myself.

I grab a towel and squeeze the ends of my hair as I straighten. The tendrils

drip, drip, drip, and my hands are shaking. The Sam in my nightmare was different from the ghost in the stream. The eyes, mostly. Dead, not voids. No, no, both were just shadows. Just dreams, one sleeping, one waking.

I wish my dreams didn't have such sharp teeth.

The party rubs against the walls of the small dorm, music and laughter blistering hardwood. It works its way beneath my skin as one person after another makes for the tub, sidling past me with questions in their eyes while I slowly wipe dripping mascara off.

I hear Graves in the other room, his low voice distinct above the others. Shouts follow. The music cranks louder.

One week. It's been less than one week. I'm no closer to anything except insanity, and it's all my fault. I have to push. Tonight. Sheriff Barron was right to focus in on the drugs. Everything else is circumstantial, but if I can pin one of Sam's three down as the source of the pills they found on him, well ... at least I'll have a possession charge.

In the mirror, my eye makeup is a battlefield lost, with dark bruises smudged around my eyes and my shirt clinging to my collar and back. I look like my mom. Shattered and lost. At least I know they'll believe me when I ask for drugs. They believed it of her.

I work my way to the hall, following a boy with a cluster of bottles clutched to his chest. The crowd thickens, bodies pressing up against one another in motions that could be called dancing. Judging by the way the girl beside me is holding up the wall, her smile loose and matching the one on the boy with his hands on her waist, I slept through the whole first half of this ... party.

I catch a glimpse of Graves through the open door across the hall. His back is to me, that sweater pulled tight by someone in front of him, drawing him toward two girls dancing on top of the sofa in Baz and Henry's living room. Then the crowd shifts, and I lose sight of him. A boy with his belt raised high in his hand elbows me. He snaps his wrist, and his belt whips across the heads of two shorter boys. One yelps, clutching his ear. I duck sideways when he raises his fist again, and run straight into Baz.

The door to the stairs opens again and another crew pushes their way inside. "Are all your parties this crowded?" I ask as she tugs me into her common room.

"Only the best ones," Baz says.

Laughter—proud, hateful laughter, *Graves's* laughter—echoes down the hall. I cling to its sound, trying to keep my head above the rage roiling inside me. The sooner I get what I need tonight, the sooner I can leave. “The best ones don’t just have alcohol.” My smile is a grenade with the pin pulled out. She frowns at me. I push on. “Come on. I know you know what I’m talking about.”

“It’s not that kind of party.”

“So, you mean I missed the good one? What was it, two weeks ago? The one that security guard was murdered at?” *Seven days ago*, I correct myself. But it isn’t like Baz cared enough to keep track.

“Seven days ago,” she says, and now it’s my turn to gape. “But he wasn’t murdered. I don’t know where you heard about that. Sam got drunk and drowned. Nobody *murdered* him.”

“Sam,” I say, just to take my cousin’s name back from her.

Her face clouds. She’s shutting me out. I pushed too hard, too fast, and all I got in return were the same lies I already knew. “The security guard,” she says. “Listen, you should at least know his name if you’re at his—”

A loud crash and a rush of curses interrupts her. Everyone turns toward the room at the end of the hall except me. I’m staring at her, trying to decide how to find my way back to where she was beginning to trust me.

Baz starts to walk away from me; I grab her wrist and force her to take me with her. She only hesitates a little before her hand wraps around mine. At the far end of the hall, Graves and Henry stand in an empty space, kept clear by the shattered glass scattered across the floor. Graves holds a broken bottle in one hand. Henry stands beside him, wet dots splattered across the front of his shirt. He steps forward and Graves sinks back against the wall, turning himself into Henry’s shadow.

We’re close to the front. Baz reaches into her pocket and pulls out her phone. She taps on it, and the music stops. She shakes off my hand and glances at me over her shoulder. *Wait here*, that look says.

Not broken between us, then. There’s at least one thing I’ve learned tonight: Basile Hallward isn’t easy to scare off.

A nervous rustling spreads through the hall as everyone waits for Henry to speak. He’s the only one wearing his school uniform shirt, the red Huntsworth hound rampant on the right chest and sleeves loosely rolled, showing his bare forearms. His eyes are unfocused again. It makes me want

to shout out his name, just to see them snap into focus on me. I cross my arms and lean against the wall beside me, refusing to play his game.

He blinks, slowly, light coming back to his eyes as he opens them. The hall quiets. "You all know why we're here tonight," he says.

Because you're heartless bastards, I think, and my cousin was just a disposable way to get a set of keys to the roof.

Baz bends and picks up a bottle of Fireball from the floor. She moves to stand by Henry, then lifts the bottle like a torch, her medical bracelet sliding down her arm. She glances at me. "Remembering."

Graves taps his broken bottle against Baz's, sending another shard to the floor.

"*Memento mori*," he says. His eyes meet mine.

The hall answers as one, voices mingling in a low rumble, not allowing me even a moment to think. "*Dedescio mori*."

The ancient words want to pull me under. I bend my neck, looking down, concentrating on nothing but my own breathing. Grief is a rip current hiding in smooth waters, always just one step away from dragging me out to drown. I blink hard, forcing my eyes to stay clear. Breathe in. Out. I refuse to fall apart here. Not with him staring at me.

Someone else's words, I'd told the sheriff. Adrian Hargraves's words.

I knew he was the one who sent that message.

"*Memento mori!*" Graves roars, discontented with the crowd's answer. I need him to stop saying that, or I'm going to scream.

"*Dedescio mori!*" they shout. The hall starts to pulse as the energy shifts. Movements grow rougher, wilder, ocean currents trapped inside the Tower's sixth floor. "*Dedescio mori!*"

I don't know what the first word of their answer means, but Graves taught me the second. Death.

I'm surrounded by murderers at a party where they're getting off on death itself. A silent laugh shakes my shoulders. Cry, or laugh. Fall apart, or go insane. I feed that laugh with my anger, stoking its heat until all the grief is ashes and I'm alone, in the middle of the current, laughing.

I blink away the blur of tears and find Graves still staring at me. I want to look away, but the longer he stares, the easier it is to breathe. Everything falls away except him, and me, and the barbed-wire hate tying us together. This time, Graves breaks first. I don't blame him. My skin is on fire. I could burn

down this tower with a scream. I hope I hurt to look at.

Henry wraps around him from behind, touching him so easily. He whispers in Graves's ear. Whatever he says makes Graves close his eyes. When he opens them, they meet mine again. The heat in his eyes is different. Looser. It won't cling to mine anymore, spreading out from me until the whole hall is touched by it. He sheds versions of himself so easily. Are any of them true?

"Sam was innocent," he says. The words are slow as summer rain, steaming against my skin, sinking in deep and disappearing before I have a chance to brush them away. "I've never been more jealous of someone. I've never been happier to have someone as a friend."

Around me, I hear boys murmuring *hear, hear*. I bite my lip. I will not cry for lies.

"He thought I was good. He thought I was worthy." Graves stops. Clears his throat. The energy in the room gentles, movements softening from waves to ripples. He's playing us as expertly as his violin, dragging out swells of grief with every word. This boy—this one has to be the lie. "He was wrong about that, and I think he knew it and didn't care. It wasn't important to him. He lived life like it was a play, where all his lines were happy ones."

This isn't right. Every word is true, and that can't be right.

He can't know Sam this well.

Henry's arms tighten where they wrap around Graves's neck. "Until the playwright took him from us."

The mood shifts darker. I hate how much I need them to keep talking. Back home, Sam's funeral is this weekend. I'll be here, where I need to be—where they *should* be—while his mom, my dad, and people from school surround a hole in the ground and say *The end*. But it's not the end of anything, not until the ones who did this to him pay. Their words will mean nothing more than *I failed you*. Graves, Henry—they're both saying *I knew you*.

"To Sam!" Graves shouts. "We forget death. Not you!"

"To Sam!" the people around me shout. Bottles and glasses lift with their fists. They smash them together, spilling golden liquid as they shout again. "*Dedescio mori!*"

There was no East County party like this. No wake shaking Amberdeen's bones, shouting his name loud enough that it has its own life, darting through

the air around me, pounding in my ears. The room shifts, righting them—and upending me.

I was wrong. They're here for a party. But not to ignore Sam. *For Sam.*

I want more. I want this to never stop. *Stronger than lover's love is lover's hate. Incurable, in each, the wounds they make,* Medea says. Hate and love twine together inside me right now. I can't tell anymore which is which.

"Who will keep him with us?" Henry asks. His eyes rove the crowd.

Graves steps back again, his part played. This is Henry's stage now. Henry's choice. Beside me, a boy in a yellow polo raises his hand, one of many popping up like belladonna blooms. My hand stays down. It doesn't matter. Henry's eyes fix on me anyway.

"No," Graves says. He takes Henry by the shoulder and says something directly into his ear. I almost step forward, desperate to know what he's saying; then stop, angry at myself for wanting *anything* from him. For a moment, Henry leans into the words. Then he cocks his head away, scanning Graves. Looks from him ... to me. His smile grows, mouth opening like he's not just enjoying the tension, he's devouring it. "Yes," he says. "She's perfect."

"No," Graves repeats.

"Transfer!" Henry shouts. He thrusts his fist in the air, then opens it. A set of keys hangs from his ring finger, clanking against his palm. "Will you help us remember Sam Bullvane?"

The keys. I can't stop staring at those keys. They can't be Sam's; they have to be Sam's. I knew I was right, but knowing it is one thing and seeing it is poison. Henry's wastrel eyes are watching me, weighing me, drawing something deep and vital off me, and it's all I can do to look away because hot, angry tears are threatening to flood my eyes and I can't let him see. I'm just a transfer, just a girl, and none of this means anything to me.

It means the world.

It means nothing. I'm here for the truth, not a pretty show.

I meet his eyes and nod.

"Bring her to the forest," he says, and the Tower explodes in cheers.

CHAPTER 10

Shadows wait in front of Huntsworth's gates. For me. The girl with the keys. The set that I threw in Sam's face as the only thing these people could want from him, but they're mine now and we're heading to the forest, not to a roof at the school they've been craving to keep unlocked. I don't understand.

Henry just ... gave them to me.

I have had no time to calm myself. He placed the keys in my hand, grabbed Baz by the waist, and ran. The crowd followed him, jostling me along, pushing me first toward the darkness then toward Graves, singing a song in Latin that sounds for all the world like they're summoning Satan to come and take his due.

Sam's keys jostle in my hand. I'm not one of them. But I'm not me, either. My place is a porch step crammed in between Faye's house and Sam's. Where you eat pizza every Thursday because it's two dollars off in honor of the Junior Varsity game two towns over and the skeleton from Halloween is holding a sign that says JESUS LOVES DRY BONES big enough to read before you even pull up into the Gas 'n' Go. I'm from accents thick as mayonnaise spreading gossip in front of the sweet tea cooler and I've never stopped wanting to be someone else, somewhere else, but I'd always hoped that somehow I'd still be me. Not whoever I am now, running through the dark like the keys in my hand will unlock the grave.

We reach the gates. Henry's car, a bright red convertible, idles beside it. Henry jumps inside the car, Baz following him, slamming the doors *bang bang*. Chaos runs hot beneath my skin. I'm leaving Huntsworth with the ones I think killed Sam. The ones who seem to know him. The ones who want to mourn him. Maybe the devil should wake up and come along.

"*Dedescio mori!*" Henry shouts, standing up out the driver's window. The crowd cheers. A boy climbs on top of the gate.

Beside it, Graves leans against a motorcycle built like a dare. *Try me*, it

taunts the pavement, its rider vulnerable above it, one wrong turn, one hard flinch away from losing everything. They're a pair, this bike and that boy.

He holds out his hand. An invitation, even though his stare is warning me away.

The air smells like exhaust and winter. Jamie would get on the bike. Marin should run the other direction. I have no idea which girl holds the keys. Here with this silent boy and his outstretched hand, the pull is just a little too much. I can feel the seam between them struggling to hold.

"Henry asked me to come to the forest," I say. His hand falls at the sound of Henry's name. "He didn't say I had to ride with you."

He swings his leg over the bike and sits. "Walk, then."

The gate starts to swing open, the boy on top riding it with a *whoop*. Graves revs once. The opening widens. Henry's car slips through, disappearing down the road.

The bike revs again, a warning roar.

There's only one reason I'm here: to find out exactly what happened to Sam. It doesn't matter how it makes me feel—if I don't go, I'm stepping away from them and I can't let myself do that. Deeper in is the only way out. I shove the keys into my pocket and slide into place behind him.

It's just a ride.

His hips move between mine as he hands me a helmet. I shove it on. Hold on to his shoulders.

He grips my wrists and forces my hands lower, around his waist. My thumb catches on his cardigan. A button pops open and suddenly I'm touching smooth, hard skin instead of fabric. He stiffens. I tear my hand out and lock my hands around my wrists, touching him as little as possible.

"You'll fall," he says. I can hear *and* feel his voice.

"Try me," I growl.

He kicks into gear, not bothering to put a helmet on himself. The gate swings wider and we lurch forward and suddenly, before I can stop them, our bodies collide. The whine of the engine trembles in my legs, lowering every time he shifts. I try to sit up and force that sliver of space between my chest and his back, but these roads and this speed are dancing too fast and I can't find my balance. I let go of my wrist with a curse and wrap my hands around his stomach. The space between us disappears. I feel every movement—every time his arm jerks the clutch, every flex to hold steady around a bend,

every aching deep breath he takes.

The road clings to the side of the mountain like a cottonmouth, all sinuous curves and promises of a quick death if you flinch. Graves turns so tight metal scrapes against the asphalt. Sparks fly. My fingers keep finding the holes between his buttons. *This is dangerous*, my heart murmurs frantically, and even I don't know if it's worried about the speed or the boy.

Graves doesn't slow when we hit Amberdeen's edge. The bike's engine echoes off the sides of the houses, hemmed in, our shadow lengthening then breaking off in each porch light. My street—Sam's house, my house, Faye's house—rushes by. I see blue-screen TVs and hear snatches of voices, muffled by the helmet's thick padding. My real life is just a blur of meaningless noise.

Graves's hand latches on to my arm. He pulls it against him, his arm layering on top of mine, my head pressed into his back. I buck. It was one thing for me to hold on or fall, but this is tighter, and closer, and far too like an embrace. I can't break out. Each pull against him only makes him hold me harder. He twists the handlebars and skids us to a stop in the middle of the intersection. I shout. His grip holds me against the whiplash.

The bike's roar quiets. He lets go. My hands dart away from his stomach. I shove his back. He rolls his shoulders. Sits up, his hands on his knees like he's waiting for something. But there's nothing to wait for in the center of town. The Gas 'n' Go is on our right, the diner in front of us, CLOSED sign hanging catawampus on the doorknob. There's no reason for him to stop here.

Unless ... I turn my head to the other side and see the bright blue lights of the Brew Thru. Faye and her elder brother, Dickie, sit side by side on a concrete bulwark in the front parking lot, Dickie—full name Richard Ebenezer Cowan, which is why everyone calls him Dickie—smoking a cigarette his mom would kill him for and Faye—full name Faye Cowan, which is why she's convinced their parents love Dickie more—touching up her lip gloss as she eyes the boy on the bike in front of me.

There's an empty space beside them. The bulwark's large enough for three. A bored, lonely townie who can't sit easy even with people she's known her entire life belongs in that space. She's going nowhere, has no plans for her life except to leave. The girl Graves would have seen when he drove down our main street with Sam.

The reason he stopped here.

“Last chance, Vane.” I can barely hear him over the engine. Last chance to get off and walk over to my spot beside the two people sitting in the parking lot. Or, maybe, last chance to get off and walk back to Huntsworth. I don’t know which he means, and I can’t ask without giving away that I’m thinking about the one Jamie Vane would never.

Dickie waves. Faye stands and flicks dust off her midriff in a way I know she only does to make the sequins near her hips sparkle. It would be so easy to slide off his bike and walk to them. Faye would whoop and I’d go down in history in her book as having pulled the greatest con into a Huntsworth party she’d ever heard of. And Dad’s back door is always unlocked; I could sleep in my own bed and pretend I really am his daughter, and not Mom’s.

I was. I wanted to be. I tried so hard. But in the end, all I am is me. And that means this moment isn’t a choice at all. I can never, ever go home.

In the quiet, Graves twists to look at me. I don’t belong here with him. But I’ve never belonged in that empty space on the bulwark, either, and I’m done trying to fit in someone else’s slot. I stretch my arms up and out, arching into the feeling as my lower back cracks. His eyes are charcoal soaked in kerosene as, inch by excruciating inch, I slide myself into place against him.

The diner’s darkened windows stare at me like a pastor in church. I hear Dickie shout at Faye. Hear her shout back, falling easily into their nightly rhythm. I lace my fingers together over his stomach and rest my chin on his shoulder, pulling off the helmet only when I know he’s blocking me from view. Each move, I make slowly, forcing him to feel it. Giving him time to catch fire.

“Last chance for what?” I whisper, setting the helmet in his lap.

His jaw ticks, like he wants away from how close my lips are to his ear. I wait. If he knows who I am, and that’s why we stopped, it’s all going to come pouring out now. There’s no one to interrupt; no one to listen in and hold him back. This is it. If I pass this test, I know for sure he doesn’t recognize me. His hands flex on the handlebars. I see the moment they settle, and he makes a decision.

“I can do what Henry wants by myself. Take you back to school,” he says.

My hands don’t shake, despite the rush of relief. Where we stopped means nothing to him. It was just the place his foot came down. I’m inside, I’m with them, and I’m not going anywhere until I’ve got the truth. But still,

there's something about what he said that itches at me.

He's trying to keep me from the glade, and I don't know why. It feels almost like ... he's protecting me.

That's impossible. "What are you worried about?"

"Not what," he mutters.

Who.

He doesn't understand that I already know exactly the type of people I'm dealing with. Including him. I spread my fingers, working the final button free, and cover his stomach with my palm. His skin is kissed chill by the wind. I feel it rise, sharp and sudden as his breath.

He should be warning his friends about who he's bringing. Not warning me.

"Drive," I whisper.

CHAPTER 11

Graves stops the motorcycle just off the side of the road, halfway up the back of the mountain. Much higher, and we'd pass the spot the deputy picked me up after I found Sam, then make a sharp turn and head down the other side, toward Del Rio and the banks of the French Broad. But here, there's only Henry's Porsche half in the ditch and Graves's shoulders disappearing into the night-dark woods.

I tug on my mother's ring, wishing it had one large diamond that could bite into my skin and hurt instead of the small ones nestled inside each twist of its silver braid. This feels too close to my nightmares to be easy. "Where are you going?"

He doesn't turn. "Henry."

I curse under my breath, tuck the ring inside my shirt, and follow him. This late at night, we are the loudest things in the woods. He turns on his phone flashlight and finds a hidden path of broken branches and skid marks from something dragged through the dirt. The farther in we walk, the closer the woods draw. The slower my feet move. A branch strikes my cheek. The small cut stings. Any step now, the ground will get slick beneath my feet.

I know where we're going. Our drive circled the mountain, coming in over its shoulders where the walk in from the road is straight and sure. Above the trees, Killary's spire stretches for the moon's spine. If I broke off from Graves and headed north, I'd find myself once more on the wrong side of Huntsworth's locked gate. If I keep following him, in a few more yards, we'll hit the stream.

I know where I am. I just don't know why he's taking me here, of all places, and suddenly, not knowing feels terrifying. I'm alone in the woods with one of Sam's boys. He likes me even less than he ever liked Sam. I ignored his warning. And I won't stop asking questions.

It would be easy to make me disappear, too.

My hand digs my ring back out. Graves keeps walking. I'm about to turn around when a sheen of light sifts through tangled branches. I can see the boulders. I can hear the stream. My eyes tell me it's beautiful, bathed in gentleness, but my heart is pounding like I'm about to die and the dissonance makes me queasy.

I don't want to hear the water. I don't want to see the rocks. I don't want to be here, anywhere close to here. I am my mother's daughter, and I'm losing control.

Graves turns off the flashlight, leaving only the glow to guide us forward. A few steps more, and I'll stand on the same ground. They moved the body. I know. I saw the police gurney and its obscene, shrouded lumps. He isn't here. The ground will be empty. But will the water be?

Yes. There was nothing in the water. Just a reflection, like the hand in the library's mirror. Ghosts aren't real.

Dry leaves crunch as Graves turns to face me. His hand wraps around my wrist. I pull back against it and force him to hold me tighter. This I can feel. This is true. "You had a choice." He jerks me toward him. "Now you don't."

He ducks beneath the outstretched arms of a pine and pulls me stumbling after him into the grove. As soon as I'm past the tree, he drops my wrist. Twinkle lights hang from every branch, trailing down boulders, pooling in glowing mounds on top of blankets scattered across the forest floor. Henry lies on his side atop the tallest boulder, a crown of thin pine branches with spiky needles on his hair. Baz sits in the crook of his hips, a second pine crown on her lap. A hazy golden light covers everything, neither bright nor dark, light nor shadow, but something in between, like they've taken this glade and dipped it in the River Styx. I can almost pretend I'm somewhere else, if I just don't look at the water.

"Graves." Henry's seen him. "Slow enough." He sits up, shifting to sit with one leg on either side of Baz.

"Do you like it?" she asks me, her arms raised toward the twinkle lights.

"You did this?" That's why it feels so warm.

She slides haphazardly down the side of the rock and places the pine crown on my head. "Henry asked me to."

"When he shall die, take him and cut him out in little stars." Henry wraps the end of a string of lights around his wrist and jumps step-by-step across the top of the rock face, dragging the lights off the tree as he goes. They pool

at his feet, little stars torn and dying in the mud. “Did you bring the keys?”

I tuck my hand into the pocket but don’t draw them out. They aren’t Henry’s; they’re Sam’s, and suddenly, it feels like if I let them go this golden glade will break, and death will come pouring up out of all the cracks.

Just don’t look at the water. “This is where he died. The security guard.”
Sam. I said his name over and over when I found him, and I hated the sound of it. *Sam Sam Sam Sam Sam*—

Henry cocks his head like he doesn’t know what I want him to say.

Graves shifts behind me. I can feel his eyes on me. I hate how I can always feel *him* when he’s looking at me. “Yes.”

It had been raining. He’d only been gone one day, but he’d missed work, and he never, ever did that. His mom looked in town. My dad along the roads. I had followed the stream down from the school. He’d only been gone a day. He’d asked me to go with him, and I said no.

I’m here now, Sam. My fingers close around the keys. “Why are we here? Why did you decorate the spot someone”—*SAM*, that day I said it over and over until I was screaming it—“died?”

“Died,” Henry echoes. He steps back from the edge, arms spreading. “Dead. Dead, dead, dead. Such a small word, tightly tucked between the d’s. Six feet under but not six letters long, dead. You don’t even have to move your mouth to say it. But yes, you could say that he—Sam, Sam Bullvane, now that’s a larger word, that’s one I have to stretch around—*died* here. Or you could say that he split.”

“Split?” I grab on to that, the last thing he said in that tumble of words.

Henry twists his hands, pretending to rend the air. “Yes, split. Sever one to two.”

That’s not how Sam died. “Are you saying he was ... in pieces?”

“The body? No. The boy? Maybe. It depends on whether you think souls and bodies are the same thing.”

He sounds unhinged. He can tell. He bites his lip, holding back laughter. “If you pull the soul from the body, and the body dies but the soul does not, has there been a death? Can you be a man without a body? Can you be a man if all you are is body, if the soul is lost, or broken, or—”

“Sam is dead,” Graves interrupts. “But we’re alive,” he says, his voice raising, words and shoulders and stare marching in lockstep confidence. I hate how grateful I am that he spoke and spoke so simply. Henry is making

my head spin, making all this feel even less real. It's like listening to a famine, empty of everything but a promise that he's going to consume me whole. Graves grounds me.

"Let's fucking act like it!" Graves shouts.

I can't let him be the one who grounds me.

It's Sam at the heart of this. Sam I need to remember. I slide off my shoes and step in the water. The cold bites when I wish it would rend and tear, rip the flesh from me and make me scream.

Behind me, Graves tries to scale the rock and Henry kicks at him, pouring alcohol down in bursts for him to try to catch with his mouth. Baz comes to stand at my side, just out of the water's reach on an exposed rock. Her cheeks are white with cold.

"It was right here, wasn't it. Where he ... drowned." I know the answer, but Jamie Vane doesn't and I need, I *need* her to. I look down. The pine crown falls. It swirls slowly in the current. In its center, the water calms. A tiny mirror, showing the night sky. There is no face. There is no body, either.

"Did you want to see him?" Baz asks.

"*What?*" The word whips her. She recoils from me.

The water is empty, but it wasn't that day. He lay face down in the stream, his white T-shirt turned see-through by the water lapping up and over the small of his back. His legs were bent, the toes dug deep into the bare patch of sandy mud in between the boulders. Bruises wrapped around the back of each arm, like lurid purple handcuffs. Only his red hair moved, waving wildly as the current tried to tug it downstream.

I ran, sliding in the mud at his feet, grabbing at his face to pull it above water. He stared at me, his eyes wide and glassy, his cheek covered in small scratches blooming bright against his bloodless face.

No. No, no, no.

A beetle scurried across his neck. I laid his head down, turned so his mouth stayed above the water. I had to get him out. *Just wait. Just wait. It's okay. I'll get you out.*

He was so heavy. There was a bitter tang in the air that I couldn't—*wouldn't*—name, heavier and sweeter than the bright smell of alcohol coming from his shirt. I grabbed him under the shoulders and tried to turn him over. He slipped from my grasp. Everything about the way he felt was wrong. My hands skittered back on their own.

Sam. Sam, help me. You have to move. I couldn't breathe.

He was so still. I was shaking on my knees beside him, my hands ghosting over his body, not touching anything, just desperately searching for something I could fix. I brushed a piece of hair away from his face. His forehead was cold; his skin, loose. *I told you not to go. I hate you. I hate you.*

The other face watched us from the stream.

It's empty of both of them now. Baz has left, too, drawing back and away from me to safer ground. My eyes burn. My feet sting. My hands tremble. Maybe there's a part of me that wishes Henry was right, and we could split, body from soul, when we die. That my mom was right, and ghosts are real and Sam isn't actually gone. I pull out the keys. The only thing I have left of him that's real.

"Jamie knows how to honor the dead," Henry crows behind me. "Lay out the tribute. Drown it in his place, put to rest forever beneath the shimmering waters. His soul is gone—but is it?" I sway, and Henry wheels, fixing on Graves, not speaking again until Graves, jaw tight, eyes hard, nods. "Gone, then, yes, floated away, but the memory stays. Bury the king with his treasure!"

He loves the sound of his voice. But not as much, I see, as his eyes latch on mine and bear down, as he loves watching me hear it. This boy wants to make me squirm, and he thinks he's found the way to do it. He doesn't know me, though. He doesn't know that it isn't just his words that haunt my mind.

I jangle the keys against my palm. Solid, real sounds, unlike my own voice. "Aren't these useful? We could keep them. The school would be ours."

Henry smiles slowly. "You think I don't have my own keys to this castle?"

Suddenly, I'm adrift. They don't need his keys.

They never needed his keys. Which means I was wrong about why they wanted him close, wrong about what they wanted him for. If it wasn't because he was the security guard, the boy who could and would open any door just to see them smile at him—if they threw him a wake—if they're leaving a memorial—then ...

No. It doesn't matter if they liked him. He's dead because of them. Sam wouldn't choose this. Not after what happened to my mom. He wouldn't do that to me.

There are things that *have* to be true.

Graves drags my hand out over the water. I wish I wasn't aware of every inch of skin they covered as his fingers shift, moving to twine with mine, holding the keys. Holding me. Then waiting. All of us are too tight, too still, only Henry free to move like he's put everyone else in a choke hold. He reaches out and lays his hand on the back of Graves's neck. A brother's touch, but Graves's veins are standing out beneath it.

"Let go," Graves says, talking to me, talking to Henry.

My fingers part. Sam's keys disappear with barely a splash, their dull metal almost invisible on the rocky riverbed. Graves drops my hand and wheels around, footsteps splashing as he walks back to the bank.

"You know what does have six letters," Henry says, almost too quiet for me to hear. "*Graves*."

Then his eyes raise from the water to mine, and I know it wasn't almost too quiet—it was just loud enough. He's toying with all of us, and he loves it.

"Let's play a game!" Henry shouts.

"Henry—" Baz starts, but nothing more.

"Enough," Graves says.

"No," Henry says, but there's something strange about the word. Almost like it means a ragged kind of *please*, dyed red and garish with its neediness.

I turn toward him, intrigued, and catch Graves fracturing. His features shift back to stone, but not before I'd seen what was there before. Desperation, if it were painted blind, the lines struggling to find their proper places.

Henry mouths the word once more. *No*.

Graves stares at him, and I have the strangest feeling that he's only doing it to keep from looking at me. He never wanted me here, he tried to keep me away, and maybe, maybe this moment was why. If so, then it's exactly what I want.

"A game sounds nice." It still doesn't sound like my voice.

His eyes drag themselves to me. I'm going to regret this, they promise, every speck of icy spite in them. "Fine. Tell us what you want to play, Henry."

"A murder game." Henry points at me. "Baz told me you think our Sam was murdered. I think that's brilliant. I want to know how."

I step forward out of the water.

"It happened here. He was drunk. He went the wrong way. The gate was

locked, but”—Henry shapes his fingers in an O, his lips in a smile, and I realize I’m not ready for this—“he had the keys. Down the mountain, not down the road. Looking for home. He slipped, and fell.” Henry’s shadow is a smudge in the hazy light. In the slices between light and dark, I can almost see Sam stumbling along with him.

The same story I told myself when my aunt called and said he’d never come home. The one that sent me hiking up, and then back down, scouring the hollows and banks while I shouted his name. An accident, that was all, and he was somewhere, out there, waiting for me. It sounds just as weak now as it did then.

“He didn’t have his keys.” I point at Henry. “You did.”

He claps once. “The game’s afoot. A point for Jamie. I stole the keys—did I do more?”

“You didn’t steal them. He gave them to you,” Baz says. “To open the roof door. But you said he fell face-first into the water—and then what? Never bothered to stand up? It’s so shallow here.”

She’s speaking the questions that drove me to them. She was at the party but not at the stream, if she’s asking like that, but that doesn’t mean the boys weren’t. Unless she’s an even bigger liar than they are. My breath is coming in quick, short gasps. I try to slow it, to pretend I’m Jamie, not Marin, and that every word they’re saying isn’t everything I’ve been desperate to know.

“Someone else opened the gate. Someone held him down.” Graves slips the words daggerlike into my ears.

“A point for Graves!” Henry shouts.

Baz ignores him. “He drowned in an accident; he wasn’t murdered—”

“He had bruises ringing his upper arms.” Graves says it with the same cadence as *once upon a time*. I can see it settle into her: just a ghost story, told around a death site instead of a campfire. She turns toward the stream.

But he shouldn’t know about the bruises. They weren’t in any of the articles. Sam Bullvane died of accidental drowning. Sam Bullvane, latest victim in the opioid epidemic. Sam Bullvane, tragic case of alcohol abuse among teenagers. Not a single one of them mentioned the bruises I saw, even though I threw them in Sheriff Barron’s face. “What bruises?”

“You’re forgetting this is a game, aren’t you, Jamie? Two points to Graves, for being so convincing.”

“It’s not a game,” I say to Henry. Not for me. But is it for Graves? Did he

make up the bruises to please Henry—or did he see them?

I shiver. Henry winks at me. “You’re good at this, aren’t you. Watch her closely, Graves; there’s something damned inside that one. She could steal this from you. Second round, everyone: Take it to the next level and earn five points, redeemable at your local Brew Thru.” No one moves. “Come. We are surrounded by our canvas—we are *in* the game. A rock? Bash the head? Make a mess, but then you must clean it. Ten rocks to make a dam, raise the water levels, wash away your footprints and his breath? Snap a branch, trip him from a distance? Jack no Jill, down the hill. Be creative. It’ll put you ahead of Graves.” His sigh is as short and feverish as each word. I can’t tell if any of us are still playing, or if this is as real for them as it is for me. “All right, for the viewers. Needs must. Baz, come here.”

“Henry—” Graves and I say at once.

He ignores us, snapping his fingers at Baz. She looks up from where she crouches beside the stream. Tears shimmer at the corners of her eyes. In the water at her feet, near where I dropped the keys, lies something dark brown and silver. “Is that his key chain?”

She looks at me, shocked, but before she can answer, Henry reaches out and grabs her by the back of the neck, tugging her tripping close to him. The key chain tumbles downstream. A memento? An apology? Both; neither. The game’s not done. Henry forces her mouth open for his half-full bottle. Her throat pumps, one hand resting on Henry’s arm, fingers slowly tightening until the sleeve is bunched beneath them.

“Stop,” Graves growls from beside me. Baz steps back, even though Henry hasn’t dropped the bottle. Liquor soaks her front, its scent slashing through the cold air. Only alcohol, no drugs, just like Sam. It’s impossible to tell what they know and what they’re making up.

No, that’s not true. Baz’s tears are real. And Henry didn’t ask her to leave that token. Her questions, too; they’re just like mine. Maybe I can trust her. I’m scared how much I want her to miss him for real; how easy it is to make what might be the wrong choice.

Henry leans in and whispers something in Baz’s ear. She coughs, scraping a hand across her chin, then bends her neck forward and extends her arms back, ready to be bound. Not once does she look any of us in the eye.

I should stop this, and I’m not.

“Three points for Baz,” Henry says. “*Memento mori.*” Then he kicks her

feet out from beneath her and shoves her face-first toward the icy water. She shouts. Her feet scrape into the dirt and rock beneath her. Did he do this to Sam? She isn't Sam. Her hips buck; Henry presses his knee into them, pinning her to the ground. She's his *friend*, not an outsider. He won't hurt her. I don't think. Her hand fumbles through the water, grabbing a rock. Henry slaps it away, then tightens his grip on the back of her neck. Beside me, Graves's hands close into fists.

I need to stop him. I can't let this happen again.

Graves is frozen.

How long does it take to drown?

"Don't!" I lurch forward. I grab Henry by the shoulders and tug him backward, the weight and feel of him against my chest sickeningly similar to Sam. He lets me, falling back with a thud. We sit sprawled, mud creeping up every inch of bare skin, his shoulder digging into my stomach and his head nestled in the crook of my arm. For just a moment, the eyes staring up at me are blank. Then he blinks, and erupts into wild laughter.

"Five points for me," he gasps.

Baz rolls over, a weak grin on her face. Her eyes water. Her front and pants are covered in mud, and her cheeks are red from exertion, but her face is dry. Henry's laughter echoes off the rocks around us, filling the whole night with sadistic mirth. He hadn't been drowning her. Everything's a game, and I'm falling behind.

I slump back. Henry rolls off me. I stand and brace myself against the boulder beside the bank. Divots and dents have marred the ground before me. There's so many more of them than there were when Sam died. Then, there were Sam's footprints, clumsily scattered across the mud leading up to two deep-carved ruts where his knees hit. Now, the mud is covered in the marks of dying. Thin lines where fingers dug deep; rugged, wide slashes from Baz's hip bones and feet, nearly obliterated by the pressure of the boy on top of her.

I thought I knew how he died. I was wrong. This is the scene of a murder—frenzy and fear written into nature. What I found was something else. Something quieter.

What am I not seeing?

Henry reaches down and pulls Baz up from the ground, thrusting a drink back into her hands. Graves scrubs at the mud on her jawline with the sleeve of his sweater. She tilts her face toward him like they're dancing, inches

away from laying her head down to rest on his chest. It should be a pretty picture: the fairy lights, the moonlit woods, the blushing girl, the almost-embrace. But Sam died in these moonlit woods.

Unless he didn't. Unless they killed him somewhere else and brought his body here. The bruises could be from moving him, not holding him down. It would explain everything—except the water in his lungs.

“Final round,” Henry sings. He tosses me the keys to his car. “Jamie’s up.”

Graves’s hand stills. “The game is done, Henry.”

“*Memento mori*,” Baz murmurs into his chest.

“No. *Dedescio mori*,” Henry says, and he won’t stop *laughing*. “*Memento Sam*.”

CHAPTER 12

The thing about games is someone has to lose.

Mud from my clothes smears onto the luxe leather of the driver's seat. Baz leans against the back of my seat, humming tunelessly. Henry sits beside me. His eyes are on the road, but it's me he's waiting for. Will I play along? his arched brow asks. Or will I disappoint him?

Graves guides his bike back onto the road by the light of the convertible's headlights. The headlights don't let anything hide. A hole in his earlobe, at the top of the cartilage. The veins on the back of his hands. Short, sharp eyelashes framing even more dangerous eyes. The only one of us not covered in dirt.

My cousin's death wasn't a game.

"What does *dedesco mori* mean?" I ask, even though the question I want answered is *Why Sam?* They didn't need the keys. They didn't hate him. Why is he gone and they're still here?

"Someone didn't learn Latin in ... Where did you say you went to school?" Henry looks feverish, with dry, parted lips and a strange sheen to his eyes. He must be drunker than I thought.

"I didn't say."

"Kentucky," Baz says from the back seat. Glass squeaks beneath her fingertip. She scrubs away a drawing too quickly for me to see it in the rearview. "Her papers said Kentucky."

My papers said—"I didn't show you my papers."

"You don't sound like bourbon," Henry says. "More like hollers and moonshine."

I didn't even think about accents when I wrote that address. Henry's is old money, sharpened by time and cold northern weather. Mine is all Aberdeen. Sam's was, too, a voice like syrup on waffles, settling down into all the spaces that are supposed to be between words.

“Not every accent is a regional monolith,” Baz drones, as if she wasn’t caked in mud, as if they didn’t just playact murder. Bruises on the back of his arms, water in his lungs, nearly blind with alcohol but no drugs. It can’t be an accident that they know those things. But the ground didn’t look at all the way it did when I found it, and it had only just begun to rain. Not enough to wash away the signs of a struggle. “And she’s not from a big city. The address was...” She drifts off, and I need to be paying attention because they’re talking about me, and my lies, but I’m still six feet deep in the stream. Baz sighs. “Hmm. I didn’t recognize the name of the town. I can’t remember it now.”

“My family’s from around here,” I say, choking back memories to throw truth over the fire. “My father’s business is in Kentucky. We have a house in the mountains there. I asked you a question. What does *dedesco mori* mean?”

What I want to ask: *Why did he have to be held down if he wasn’t struggling?*

Henry sighs. “If this life is real, what is the most terrifying thing about it?”

My hands flex on the steering wheel. He is still toying with me, even though it’s *my* turn. “Dying.”

Graves kicks at the clutch on his bike.

“That is *memento mori*,” Henry says.

“Remember death,” I say, needing him to say more. Did he have this same conversation with Sam? Is this what he told him; how he justified it? “I know that’s what that means. But that’s not the one I asked about.”

“Not just remember death. *Memento mori* means fear it. Stake it to our hearts to keep us bound and believing that life is as good as it gets.” He studies me, looking for a weakness in my eyes. Unlike Graves, there’s nothing about his frame that makes me think I wouldn’t be able to break away from his grasp. But rattlesnakes are slender, too, and I fight the part of me thinking one wrong move and it’ll be my body lying poisoned and still beside the stream. “We spend our entire lives fearing death, when death is only the beginning. One tear in an eternal soul. Why focus on that, when all it does is make life feel unbearably short?”

Graves revs his motorcycle, watching us. He can’t see into the car through the whitewash of the headlights. It doesn’t matter. Henry’s words and Baz’s kindness and Graves’s eyes are hemming me in—and God help me, *God help*

me—I want to not be afraid of dying. I want what happened to have been the beginning of Sam’s story, not the end.

But he’s wrong. Life is unbearable and short—and he and Graves made Sam’s even shorter.

“Unlearn death,” Henry says. His eyes blink too slowly. “And you’ll finally be alive.”

“*Dedesco mori*,” Baz sings from the back seat.

“That’s just words,” I say, desperate to stay in control. Everything is heightened, a step more real and yet a touch less lucid than it should be, like wading through a nightmare.

Henry settles back into his seat. He shakes his head gently, like he’s trying to stir something awake inside him. “For now.”

For now. I tighten my grip on the steering wheel. This is insanity. “What are you, Jesus? How drunk are you?”

“I thought you told me you weren’t afraid,” he says.

“Death isn’t something you can just decide not to believe in.” The key is in the ignition. My foot on the accelerator. Graves on a bike, Henry unbuckled beside me, Baz, the quietest, one step away from all of this, the only one tucked into a safety belt. It would be easy to make something ... happen. To prove Henry’s wrong and death isn’t a spiderweb of pretty words but a starving, bottomless throat. It wouldn’t matter if anyone ever believed me about what actually happened to Sam if all of us were gone.

“Which would you rather be, Jamie?” he says. “Alive and afraid, or alive and free?”

I don’t answer him.

It’s my turn to play, Henry.

I put the car in reverse. The wheels spin; we lurch up onto the road. Graves swerves around us. I spin the wheel, hit the gas, and he’s back in my headlights. The car fills with music, low, thrumming strings that buzz in my ears. Henry must have turned it on. We slam out of the night and into Amberdeen, the light flashing yellow, my foot on the brake and Graves skidding across the blacktop as we turn and then we’re on my road. Home—there, then gone, a blink less real than the feel of this pedal pressing hard toward the floorboard. Graves glances over his shoulder at me, his mouth set in an unforgiving line.

The mountain takes over the road, curling it around its fingertips. Henry

pounds his hand against the side of the car as I swerve back and forth across the single-lane road. I want him to stop me. I want him to hold me back, to tell me I'm going too fast; it was just words, calm down, eyes on the road, you're going to kill us. He sways into my side. I shove him back. The car catches up to Graves and I jerk the wheel toward him.

The bike darts sideways, a serpent scar marking its path. Graves's mouth moves, but I can't hear him, all I can hear is the engine's roar and the violins' whine and then there's Henry, his hand moving to mine. He'll stop me; he'll steady the wheel. He'll prove himself wrong, that death is something to fear and run from.

His fingers lay out light as feathers one by one until he's covered each of mine. Graves drives side by side with me. My fingers spasm beneath Henry's, but still, he doesn't take the wheel. Like all he wants is to feel the way I move as I run his friend off the road.

So, this is what holding a life in your hand feels like.

"You're wrong," I say. "If I hit him, it ends."

"Alive and afraid; alive and free. It's a choice, Jamie." His hand is cold. "Don't think about ends. Think about *now*."

His hand slips from mine to reach across my chest and roll down the window. The roar of our engines swarms into the car.

"What the hell, Vane?" Graves shouts. The wind fights him the only way it can, whipping his cardigan against his chest. I take my eyes off the road long enough to meld with his. I see the moment he understands—that hard stare softening around the fear, the glance at my back seat where Baz sits.

I might win this game, after all.

"Na na na na na-na-na!" Baz slurs her way through the chicken dance. With each syllable, I press down harder on the gas. The engine opens up, echoing off the hills around us. The roar is me, coming from my bones, spreading out to devour the night itself.

Ahead, the road takes a hairpin curve so sharp I can see the other stretch of asphalt through the trees. If I don't turn with it, Graves has nowhere to go but into the woods. Neither do we. I'll turn.

I'll ... turn.

"Na na na na na na—Na—Na—Na—Na—" Baz shouts.

Henry looks at me, eyes wide and alive. If I don't look away, I'm going to be eaten whole.

“You’re wrong,” I say to him, tearing my gaze back to the road.

“*Prove it,*” Henry says, a dare, a callback to Graves taunting me that I’m no one, nothing, no one. His fingers wind over mine once more.

“Na—Na—Na—Na!” Baz screams.

The headlights are bright white on the brown tree trunks. My eyes are open; my chest so full of the possibility that he’s right—that there’s nothing in the world more real than us—that there’s no space for breath. Us, our tightly gripping hands, our wind-bitten skin, our wide eyes and endless hunger, these are the things that immortality is made of. This is the way up out of the grave Sam dug for us both.

Baz tries to lean forward but can’t reach the steering wheel. My arm is up, blocking her even as she tugs at my wrist. Henry sits beside us with his eyes closed and his free hand tucked calmly behind his head. He knows I’ll turn. That’s the only reason he isn’t worried.

But what if I didn’t?

Time crashes over itself, slowing the pulse in my ear to a distant drum. Every moment folds into one: the warm pressure of Baz’s hand on my shoulder, unbuckled, pushing herself further forward. The leather seat, and my knee locked straight. My hair, the ends stinging where they beat against the corners of my eyes. Henry’s hand and mine, skin against skin, so easily broken.

I could die. Or maybe he’s right, and I won’t die, just sunder. Me, before—and me, after—a body left behind and a girl finally freed.

I don’t need evidence.

I know it was these people who killed Sam. When you live like you can’t die, there’s nothing you won’t do.

“Jamie!” The wind snatches Graves’s shout. But it’s enough—it wakes me, tearing me back out of Henry’s world and into the dark rushing truth that I’m about to kill us all. I try to turn. My hand tangles with Henry’s. Baz lunges for the steering wheel and twists it. The car skids sideways. Graves is ripped from beside us, disappearing with a tear of tires and then metal. The car slides off the road backward. The bumper screams across a low, rounded rock. Two tires skid, slip, tipping us down the slope. There’s a sudden, swift rush of darkness and a *crunch* that throws me back.

No one moves. Rhododendron branches reach greedily through the smashed rear windowpane. My cheek blazes with heat; something seeps

warm and wet into my ear. A branch the size of my wrist spears across the passenger seat, its path leaving wide, raw marks across Henry's collarbone. Baz kicks at the back seat, sprawled across the center, her forehead bleeding lightly where it slammed into the radio.

Thump

Thump

Thump

I start to breathe.

"Holy fuck," Baz says, still kicking. "Holy fuck."

I need out. "Wrong," I say. "You're wrong." My fingers fumble for a door latch but can't find any. I push myself up and over the door, sliding down to the leaf-covered ground. Air drags through my teeth, fast and difficult. Branches cover the sky. Baz steps out behind me, cracking and stumbling through close-grown shrubs. She bends in half, emptying her stomach.

"Jamie wins." Henry's laugh starts off as a tremble, then builds. It matches the way my body shakes, taming it, owning it. There's nothing to fear, it says to me, to all of us. Nothing to fear but still being alive. All of us are—even Graves, staggering up from the motorcycle and the trail of paint it scraped across the asphalt, his hand pressed to raw flesh on the side of his arm—all alive, breathing, hands wrapping around one another, steadying grips, spitting blood from cut cheeks and blinking far too hard because the night is dark but the world, the world is bright.

Alive. More alive than I've ever been.

Graves helps Baz steady herself against a tree, then drags Henry from the car. They fall. He holds him against his chest, knuckles bloody.

"Jamie," Henry forces out between stuttered breaths, "what do you feel? Tell me—"

I need him to look at me—*Graves, steady me*—our eyes meet when I don't answer Henry's question, his cruel and bright and mine far, far too wide. Yes, this is who I am, the girl Graves is looking at like he wants to eviscerate the earth and bury me beneath it.

"Nothing," I lie. "Yet."

"Amazing." Henry pushes himself off Graves and walks toward me, supporting each step with one hand on his battered car. When he cups my chin, Graves's blood on his palm makes the hold slick. My heart races. I wonder if he can feel it beneath my skin. The moment stretches, but my pulse

doesn't calm. I have the sudden, sharp realization that it won't as long as this boy has me in his grasp. Then his hand falls, and I can breathe.

"So much life in you," he says. "I want it all."

PART TWO

I have high hopes, and would rejoice, if I could find at least one thing that is certain, and unquestionable.

—René Descartes, “Second Meditation”

Mirrors are eyes stapled open. Ever-seeing, never blinking, there is no rest for their sight. Hours, days, years pass staring at the same stretch of wall, the same shifting shadows as dawn rises and noon bursts and night falls. They see the little ragged seams of reality, where *now* meets *before* uneasily. They see the way most mortal eyes slip right past the seams, sifting the blur into shadow—*déjà vu*—daydream.

Adrian’s eyes catch hungrily on one such seam. The darkness inside him clamors to come out and be devoured. He drags the mirror down, resting it against the side of the barren fireplace. His knees hit the floor with a *crack*. He rolls up his sleeves. Even the road’s raw burn can’t hide the scars crisscrossing his forearm. So many sacrifices made to this altar, but it’s been such a long, long time since he wanted this the way he wants it now.

The mirror can feel his eagerness. Already, the shadows rise, quick as blood to a wound. *Now* severs in one frozen slice and Adrian is bare. There, in the hollow curve of his jaw: the blunt-force trauma of her curiosity. There, in the swollen mound of his lip: the echo of metal on wood on skin on bone. And everywhere, mottled on his skin, ghosting across his pupils, the look in her fury-racked eyes.

Shivers force him to brace the knife against his knee to keep it steady. The

shadows go deeper into the woods. Baz thrashing on the ground. Henry's endless grin. Her watching, hearing, seeing all of it. This is what he wanted. Being seen is almost as good as being forgiven.

It has to be, he thinks as the claws dredge up the memory of her touch, her breath, her voice and his rage, his guilt, his choice. Because forgiveness has long since rotted away.

CHAPTER 13

“Grilled tofu?”

The question shoves me out of my daze. I’d been staring down at my plate of salad, prickly with alfalfa and shredded carrots. So different from the peanut butter and powdered sugar sandwich, bag of salt-and-vinegar chips, and an apple that has been my lunch every day since I was in kindergarten. Dad’s probably still making it for himself, like nothing’s changed. Not worried, not sleepless, and not looking for me.

I couldn’t stop imagining it, all night and into the cold dawn. I almost killed us all, and if I had, my dad would’ve woken up and been all alone. I wonder if he would have noticed. Or cared.

Sometimes, Jamie Vane feels so much more real than I do.

“Or steak?” The woman’s smile is impatient. She wears a gray beret-like cap over her hair and a matching gray apron. Her pair of gleaming silver tongs hover halfway between the two protein options.

Lunches here are nothing like those at East County, where we’re all herded in for twenty minutes of plastic-wrapped freedom. Huntsworth has cafeteria *hours*, where students can come and go as class and hunger dictates, ordering food from a line with at least three options whenever they want. And if they don’t fit neatly into the schedule, there’s a fridge full of parfaits and granola bars and exquisitely packaged prickly salads and cold paninis, enough to feed an entire football team. Nothing here is like home.

I don’t miss it. I wish Dad could hear me and know that. I don’t miss home, at all. It’s only Sam I miss.

“I’m not hungry.” I leave the tray and turn toward the dining hall.

Tongs clack once behind me in irritation. I didn’t lie. I’m not hungry. I just want something to hold when I go to the table at the back. The dining hall is almost empty, except for a tight, pulsing knot of excitement near the frost-covered windows where a group of students surrounds Henry, Baz, and

Graves. Last night, I tried to get back before them, hoping against hope that I could at least tell my story to the staff before they told theirs and got me thrown out or thrown in jail.

But Henry wouldn't let me. He called me back; kept me at his side; made me help Baz walk straight as we hiked slowly, weaving side to side, up the hill, sharing the only bottle that survived the crash. Baz held it to the bruise on her head just as often as she drank from it. All of us stumbled, all of us except Graves, switching arms and wincing as the new partner brushed against a spot no one knew was sore until they touched it.

I tried to kill them, and it only made them pull me closer.

RELEASE OF THE HOUNDS bulletins—the event's name, date, and intricate scrollwork the only useful information they provide—cover the glass door of the self-service fridge. I pick a yogurt and open the top with my teeth, licking the lid before throwing the foil in the trash. I'm still not hungry, but I shove the spoon in my mouth anyway and pray the act of eating yogurt is distracting enough no one will notice my hands trembling.

This is the first time I've seen them since we split into our dorms last night. I skipped theology class this morning, waiting until everyone else left to search Baz's room—at least, as much as I could in the whirlwind of clothes and papers. The only interesting things were a long black sheet draped over the mirror on the back of her door, and a small fridge beneath her bed full of insulin bottles and needles. Proof she's diabetic, but nothing that ties her to Sam.

Still empty-handed, and I'm running out of time.

I walk closer.

"The bike's still in the ditch." Graves's voice sounds strange, stretched into the shape of his fake smile. He's the only one with an empty plate in front of him, nothing but crumbs left from something eaten far faster than the others. I stand behind the full bench across from him, pretending to be more interested in stirring the fruit on the bottom into my yogurt than listening.

"You aren't going to repair it?"

"It's his third bike this year, why repair when you can buy new—"

"Left it like a dead body, hah!"

"Show me again." This from a girl perched on the table beside Graves, one leg crossed over the other, the tip of her shoe playing with the edge of his untucked shirt. He doesn't act like he's heard her, continuing to talk about the

newest model of bike. But his hand tugs up on his shirt, raising it away from her foot, midway up his chest. White bandages cover his side. Road rash creeps out from under their edges. She brushes her fingers over the center.

“Want to go on a ride, Victoria?” he asks her, a wicked gleam in his eyes. I search for the fissure behind that gleam. This is the boy who I saw at the party and at the stream, shouting for us to *act alive*, made of late-night clichés and promises with broken-glass edges—but he’s not the one who met my eyes as the road ran out.

I’m convinced this boy is an act. I just can’t decide who the show is for. Victoria, lip bitten and blue eyes fascinated, is the obvious target. But Henry is beside him, too, watching both of them closely. Baz, also, sitting on Henry’s other side, her uniform spotless and a vibrant bruise peeking out from beneath her bangs.

“Ten more feet and it would be Graves in the ditch.” Henry’s fingers trip across the air like he’s conducting music. “So close.”

“Macabre.” Victoria’s hand trails lower, across the tan skin near Graves’s hips. His muscles tighten. I swallow and look up, away from the stretch—and into his eyes. They shift to Victoria’s face so fast that I think I imagined it. He catches her hand, threading his fingers through hers. His shirt falls down again. She giggles, a sound that would make me annoyed, but I’m too grateful that I’m not feeling anything else anymore.

Not that I was. This drumming in my chest is only because of last night. I’m suddenly not sure they weren’t all messing with me. The only one who’s even looked at me so far is Graves, if that was even a look. Maybe I misunderstood everything, and this is a different kind of slow, public vengeance for the wreck. I tug my mother’s ring out from around my neck and slide it on, then off my finger.

Baz pokes at a massive pile of chicken tenders between her and Henry, trying to shove them toward him like she could entice him to eat and be normal just by sheer size of temptation. “Can we talk about something else? Like the Release. It’s only two weeks away. Does anyone have a date?”

“I might.” Victoria won’t stop playing with Graves’s hand.

“I can’t believe you totaled the bike *and* your car,” a boy sitting across from them says.

Henry takes a tender from the bottom of the pile, making the mountain collapse. He leans back, jerks a little, and the senior across from him yelps.

Henry kicks him again, more obviously this time. The boy slides out of the way. Henry's foot takes the space. "I didn't total it," he says, pointing the tender at me. "She did."

He picks at the bread on the end of the tender, waiting for me to speak. Suddenly, everyone at the table is looking at me instead of them. Henry's smile is slow to rise, taking just long enough to make sure I know he did this on purpose. He told me he wasn't angry, he told me he liked me—and still, I'm not confident that both weren't lies told to make me dance for him just a little longer before he turns out all the lights.

I put Mom's ring back where it belongs, then shove his foot off the bench and steal the spot in one move. "Porsches are ugly."

The table explodes in laughter. Just like that, I know neither was a lie. He isn't angry, he doesn't resent me, because he's laughing, too, and all it would take to end this and send me in pieces toward the door is one word. Instead, his eyes are bright and open as he wraps his arm around Graves's shoulders. "I told you she was wonderful."

Graves, on the other hand, looks like he's being held hostage. "You've always liked the suicidal type."

"Mine? Is she mine to like, after all?" Henry asks. "That's not what you told me last night."

"I don't care what you do," Graves says.

Henry lets go of him. "You wound me, Malvolio."

They're mocking me. I wish I was eating something spicy, or hot, anything to have something to blame this godforsaken blush on. Graves shrugs, like he doesn't know what Henry is talking about. Baz reaches for my hand, giving it a squeeze that seems to ask if I'm okay. I pull my hand away but give her a smile. It's not as hard as maybe it should be.

Only Victoria hasn't surrendered, something festering in her stare. "You were the one driving?" she asks. "You almost killed them."

The table quiets. Someone coughs. Henry finally takes a bite. "Come, Vickie. We all know Delgado loves mourning students." There's scattered laughter, but it's smaller now, less sure. "Jamie nearly did you a favor. You'd get a day off class, maybe even a week if I died, too, and they had to figure out how to pay their spring salaries. Delgado wouldn't even have to make up the car accident part; for once, the article would actually be true."

Baz says *Henry*; a quick, low warning. She flicks me a smile, but it's clear

she wants him to stop talking.

I don't, though. If I had known all it took to get the facts I need was to try to kill Henry, I would've defenestrated him the day we met. "What does that mean?" I scrape at the bottom of my yogurt cup with my spoon, pretending to be nonchalant. "Making up a car accident. Who else died?"

"Second-years," Henry says. "Fell off Killary's roof at the start of term. So many drug-related deaths lately."

My eyes snap wide. The locked roof, the keys, the drugs. I sit upright; I can't help myself. "They died from an overdose?"

"It's really an epidemic." He sighs, deep and melancholic. Asshole.

"Why was it written up as a car accident, then?"

Victoria cuts in. "Huntsworth is good at covering its majestic ass. The board will do anything or pay anyone to keep our reputation aloft."

"But they died. What about their parents?"

Beside us, Graves mutters, "See what they want to see."

Henry's smile turns mocking. "Would you rather be told the son you'd paid hundreds of thousands to educate had been stoned out of his mind and stumbled off the edge of a roof that was supposed to be locked—or that he'd died tragically, alongside his best friend, in a car accident delivering donations?"

Oh. I do remember hearing that story all over town earlier this fall. Two boys on their way to a homeless shelter with a trunk full of designer clothes lost control of their car and careered off a bridge. The bodies were never recovered; only the car. Easy enough to fake. As easy as a night guard's body dumped in the woods.

Drugs involved. A secondary cause of death. Two locations; one that doesn't quite match the facts. A story created around it that everyone here seems intimately familiar with. The same; it's the same as Sam. "I'd want the truth."

"Of course you would," Victoria says with a snort. "Because you're poor." I bristle. She taps perfectly manicured fingers on her cheek and drops her eyes to my uniform collar. I cover the frayed corner where a few tiny threads hang down before I think. "Cute how you thought you could hide it."

"Secondhand is better for the environment," Baz says before I can reply. Her voice is bright. She raises one eyebrow at me, the expression playful. Everything inside me is tangled. Thankfulness wraps itself around

embarrassment before burrowing deep beneath the sour weight of guilt. This hand of kindness isn't one I could ever stretch out for her. Not in truth. Someday, she'll find that out.

But this isn't about me. It's never, ever been about me, and it doesn't matter what any of them think about Jamie. I don't need their respect. I need a confession. The keys, the drugs, the phone, even the murder site have all failed me. A confession is the only evidence I'm going to be able to get that will mean anything to anyone with the power to punish them.

"Did they trip and fall off the building, the same way your security guard tripped and fell into a stream? Or are there bruises on the back of their arms, too?" The words are out before I realize how they sound, and my eyes are on Graves's before I realize what that shows.

One breath. Two. Then the blankness cracks into a smile, like he's suddenly realized my stare has made everyone wait for *him* to speak. "Killary is six stories tall. I'd imagine most of them was bruised."

I stand, the bench knocking against the back of my knees. Around me, the others are laughing again, but my stomach is in knots. He's a monster, a perfect monster. They're all leaning in, empty-headed fawns who can't see how far the dark goes inside him. I can't let him get away with hiding it.

Henry says, "Jamie, I think our spinster Hobbit is looking for you."

I turn toward where he points with the chicken tender. A few feet away, Ms. Hobbins stops and smooths the hem of her already immaculate red turtleneck. She frowns, clearly irritated at Henry's nickname for her, but focuses all her ire on slapping me with her tone instead. "Miss Vane, please come with me to Headmistress Delgado's office."

The check bounced. Or it just took them this long to find out about the crash. Either way, my time's up, but I'm not done.

Hobbins turns, trusting me to follow her. I clench my hands into fists, glancing at the side door like I could run and hide. Behind me, someone whistles a dirge. I don't look, because if it's Graves, I won't be able to stop myself from screaming.

I can't leave now.

Running from this summons would only make it worse. I'll try to talk my way out of it with Delgado. I'll find a way to stay. I have to.

For Sam.

"Don't let her lead you to the roof," Henry calls out merrily behind me.

CHAPTER 14

Headmistress Delgado's office is empty when we arrive. Hobbins deposits me in a chair right inside the door. As soon as her shadow disappears, I jump up and pace back and forth. But the room is too cozy to work out this nervous energy, like whoever decorated purposefully tried to absorb as much space as possible and leave none for me. Two top-heavy bookshelves crowd the electric fireplace. A low librarian's cabinet sits in front of them, with a globe and a set of elegant wood bins labeled with things like OUTGOING and INCOMING lined up across its surface. On the other side of the room, a dark wooden desk sprawls on top of a lazily plush rug. It's obvious the favored spot isn't the desk itself, but the leather armchair stuffed into the corner behind it. Photographs fill the small table beside it; a book drapes over the arm.

Any second Delgado is going to walk through that door and I'm going to be sent home. Sheriff Barron will roll up the school's drive in his police car, his deep-set eyes cocky below the rim of his cap. *Funny place for a girl like you to hide*, he'll say as he waits for me to climb into the cruiser's back seat.

The door behind me opens with a quiet *shush* across the carpet. Delgado steps toward me. Her look wraps all my nerves around a rock and sends them plummeting to the bottom of my stomach.

Time's up, and Jamie Vane doesn't have a single lie to stand on. This woman isn't only going to send me home, she's going to send me to jail. Of course, the one time the legal system works quickly, it's going to be against me.

She gestures openhandedly at the leather chair behind the desk. I don't move. She walks past me and sits in the desk chair, gathering the book off the arm of the one she indicated for me, carefully sliding a satin bookmark in before setting it to the side. "Please. Sit."

The space behind the desk is too small. Or maybe the space this woman

demands is too large. Awkwardly, I make my way between the chairs and sit anyway, understanding she's trying to make me comfortable by bringing me to her side of the office. She smiles, leaning to rest her chin on her hand. Every motion feels carefully calculated to set me at ease.

It does the opposite. She's so composed, a woman completely in control of her body and future. She's never once worried about her own sanity; only other people's when they decide to not do as she asked.

"How are you finding our school, Miss Vane?"

Full of monsters and devils. "Invigorating."

"Coming in as a senior is no small task," she says. I try to read between the lines and hear the trap, but I can't find it yet. My feet tap on the floor as I nod; I shift and pin one under my hip. She continues. "I understand you've missed a few classes. Would you like a shadow to help you with the layout of our days?"

The last thing I want is a shadow, human or otherwise. "I got turned around. It won't happen again."

She waves her hand like she's batting away a lazy fly. I think she's going to follow up, to dig deeper. She pivots instead. "You were with Mr. Wu's party at the accident last night."

There it is. The noose. From here, she'll tie a knot with Henry being on probation—or that he would be if not for his family's long history with the school. Tighter, to my ethics not matching Huntsworth's. The final cinch: She's not certain I belong here, not certain whether the acceptance was wise or even valid. Where is your transcript? Where are your references? Where is our money? Who are you, Miss Vane?

I pick up one of the frames beside me to buy time to think. It's an old print photo of a young woman who's clearly Delgado holding a toddler. The child has bright blond fuzz for hair. They're curled into the headmistress's shoulder. It does nothing to help me come up with a diversion.

"It's hard to not be at a party when it's happening in your dorm." Misinterpreting her question is the best I can do right now. If she's not going to accuse me of causing the crash outright, I'm not going to do it for her.

She leans back in her chair, giving me space. "I was a student once, too. Four years at Huntsworth, getting the same challenging education you've signed up for."

That phrase makes me lift my chin. It implies she's not kicking me out.

Yet.

“I didn’t get where I am by squandering my opportunities. My connections from this school created a lasting professional network, one that remains useful to this day. But I didn’t bring you here to talk about the past.” She points at the photo. “My daughter has struggled to leverage her time here with the same resourcefulness. I’m hoping—and I speak as just a mother, not as your headmistress—with your scholastic merit and close proximity in quarters, you could change that for her.”

Her daughter is a student here. I look more closely at the toddler, at the shape of the eyes and the tilt of the chin as she keeps talking.

“Basile needs a true friend, someone to inspire her to leave certain ... acquaintances to their own devices.”

Basile. The girl in Delgado’s arms in this photo is Baz. I would never have known if she hadn’t told me, and not just because Baz’s last name is Hallward. The first time I met Headmistress Delgado, she treated Baz like any of the rest of us. Worse, even. At least I got a greeting.

It makes sense, now, why of all the students in school that uncertain girl is the one Henry and Graves latched on to. As the headmistress’s daughter, she’s another layer of security against being expelled. But Delgado sees through their lies, at least enough to want to draw her daughter away.

I set the photo down. Slide out my foot to cross both legs at the ankles beside the chair, every inch the perfect Huntsworth lady. “I didn’t know Baz was your daughter. Basile, I mean.”

“It changes nothing, of course. No student is exempt from our standards.”

No student. Not even a pair of legacy boys. She might actually listen to me about Henry and Graves. And if the headmistress of Huntsworth was the one to bring Sheriff Barron the evidence ...

Huntsworth is good at covering its majestic ass. A woman who puts the school’s reputation first and foremost might be very willing to hear evidence that the boys she wants out of her daughter’s life are at the core of this school’s rot. If I give her concrete proof, she’ll get everything she wants at once. A reason to expel Henry and Graves. Baz, separate and safe. And public scapegoats for the less-than-savory events on campus.

My chest feels painfully tight. It turns out hope aches. “May I go?” I stand, then add a lie. “I had made plans with Basile to study together after we ate.”

“Please.” She stands to match me. I turn to leave, nearly to the door before she speaks again. “Oh, one more thing. That check your mother sent for tuition?”

So close. I grip the doorframe tightly and stitch a Huntsworth girl’s tailored smile onto my face. “Yes?”

“Regrettably, there seems to have been an error with it. We’ve tried to contact her but received no response.”

“I’ll let her know, Headmistress.” It sounds so easy, so free.

“Please do. We’ll need the balance by the end of the term, or I’m afraid...” She trails off, her hand lying flat and graceful on the desk between us.

The end of term. Two weeks.

“I understand.”

CHAPTER 15

The heavy door falls shut and the little library tucks itself around me, bookshelves and lampstands rising up like a gentle cage. Once again, I've come here looking for rest from the constant pretense. This has become my place to be just Marin. Not Jamie. I slump down into a chair at the table and grind my fists into my eyes. So much is going better than it has since I pulled up to these gates—I have their trust, or whatever approximates it for boys like Henry and Graves; I have another lead, about two students who fell from Killary's roof; I have the headmistress's ear, and her daughter.

But I only have two weeks, and Sam seems farther away than ever.

It shouldn't be possible for a life to disappear like this, slipping quietly between the cracks, leaving behind nothing but a set of keys that no one needed. Life should end with a red-smeared scream.

The table in front of me is covered in books. I flip through them listlessly, hampered by how little I've slept. On the bottom of the pile, I find *The History of Philosophy*, the book I wrote in only a few days ago. It feels like so much longer. It's open still, splayed wide beneath the others—but to a different page. This time, a yellow sticky note is stuck to it about halfway down, underlining a quote from Seneca with a handwritten note beside it.

Ad astra per aspera.

there is no easy way. not in life, and not in death

I flip back, looking for my note. *Death is the easiest thing in the world*, I'd written, and just above it, the note I'd answered—in the same handwriting as the new one. This is an answer to mine. They wrote back.

Wrote back *to me*. They're real; they're here. I turn to the new quote, my fingers curling away from it. It's right, but also wrong. *Ad astra per aspera*,

translated by the text as “There is no easy path from Earth to the stars.” They write like it’s the path itself that’s hard, but it’s not. Life begins without our choice and ends the same way, a straight line of birth, breath, death. It’s us, our ideas and hopes and dreams and needs, that make the way difficult.

I turn the pages, looking for a quote to argue with them. I find it in the section on Immanuel Kant. I underline the quote carefully. Write my note in the margin.

Out of the crooked timber of humanity, no straight thing was ever made.

—Immanuel Kant

It’s only hard because we’re broken.

I’ve never admitted before that I’m afraid there’s something cracked in me. A need for more seeps out through every single fissure in my skin. I slip the sticky note onto the new page, close the book, and slide it to the side, thankful for the anonymity that makes it so easy to confess these things to the other vandal. To myself.

The only other person I’ve talked to like this was Sam, and with him it didn’t make me feel this raw. I miss him. I miss the way he made life small. Pancakes, lacrosse, wrenching on cars. Enough to fill the days but not the mind, so that when I sat on the broken concrete beside him, handing him wrenches and talking about dreams, they felt big. Here, it’s the opposite. Everyone knows too much, and I’m just another girl trying too hard.

Suddenly, I want to see his smile so badly that I don’t care if it’s real or not. This room feels like the one he would’ve led me to. He’d probably try to drag some people in here with me, friends he wanted me to make, but eventually they’d filter out and it would be just us.

But the room is empty.

Just like it’s always been.

★ ★ ★

It isn’t Sam who finds me.

A gentle nudge to my knee wakes me. A moment later, a loud *thump* followed by another jolts me fully upright. Henry crouches beside the fireplace, throwing small logs onto a pile of smoldering kindling. His hair is

tied back at the nape of his neck again, revealing the tattoo.

“Didn’t want to wake you,” Baz says, “but I was scared he’d startle you with all that noise and that’d be worse. How are you?”

She sits cross-legged on the floor beside my chair. Her backpack lies next to her. The key chain is gone. Her tears were real.

I falter. “Fine.” That’s not good enough; I can see it on her face. Someone who’s *fine* doesn’t purposefully crash other people’s cars. “I drank too much last night. I probably shouldn’t have been driving.” Henry chuckles—he knows that’s a lie, but I’m hoping Baz doesn’t. I want her to feel safe around me. It’ll be easier to get her to answer my questions; that’s the only reason.

I’m lying to myself.

“We’re all okay,” she says with a smile. Her quick forgiveness scalds.

I look away. My neck aches. *The History of Philosophy* does not a pillow make. I groan and stretch backward over the chair. It’s dark outside. I’ve been out for hours. “Where’s Graves?”

The flames lick at the wood. Henry uses an iron poker to shift them around. “Lives with him and still hungers for his presence. Adorable.”

I bristle. I’m not looking for Graves; I’m looking for why he isn’t beside Henry. “I’m relieved, not wanting.”

“Midterms are coming up. Adrian doesn’t study. Henry, can’t we go to another room?” Baz glances up at the mirror above his head, then away, chewing on the side of her lip.

“Don’t look at it,” he says, “and it won’t look at you.”

Her face puckers, but she doesn’t push. Just turns to sit with her back toward the fire and her legs spread in a V. She pulls a bag of sriracha-roasted chickpeas out of her backpack and offers me some; I shake my head and think of the mirror in her bedroom, covered with a sheet. Sometimes it feels like I’m hoarding facts about them the way a squirrel hoards nuts. Henry’s scar. Graves’s playacting. Baz’s fear of mirrors.

Henry pushes himself up from the floor, the move stiff enough to make me wonder how badly he was hurt in the accident. He takes the chair across from me. Only the small desk lamp and the flames produce any light, but despite the soft glow, he still looks fragile. Lips too red; skin too pale. From his sweater, he pulls out a composition notebook. One that I recognize. The last time I saw it, it was lying on the desk in my room. It’s just poorly taken class notes from the last few days, more for appearances than actual studying.

But still. “That’s mine.”

“*Jamie* studies,” Henry says. “Which, of course, we knew. Lockstep, point for point, with our boy’s scores and that doesn’t happen unless you’re a genius or a con. Is that where you’re always creeping off to? Study sessions—but we found you sleeping, not cramming. Are you boring like Graves, and don’t need to read a page twice to understand it?” My journal hangs playfully from his fingers, taunting me. *What were you doing in my room* is on the tip of my tongue, but his dark eyes are too eager, his smile too broad. That question is what he wants.

Baz pours the last of her snack into her mouth, and then fills my silence. “Where were you at school before?”

Tension snaps into place beneath my skin. Each lie I tell is a little chain—one is easily broken, but the more I add, the tighter they bind me. And it’s already hard to breathe. I looked up the name of a wealthy private school an hour away from my uncle’s cabin before I left, but I don’t know *anything* about the people there. I keep my answer vague ... and true. “Somewhere much less interesting than here.”

“Public school,” Henry drawls.

My eyes snap to him, but he isn’t even looking at me. He’s staring at the mirror above the fire.

“No.” I throw every ounce of Jamie Vane’s sneer into that one word.

“You reek of ignorance.”

My fingers curl into my palms. That damn empty hourglass on Henry’s neck taunts me. I knew I couldn’t hide forever—but after I got away with it in front of Delgado, I thought I was safe, at least for a while. What did they see in me? Where did I slip?

Baz hums, a soft, grace-giving sound. “You don’t have to hide being on scholarship from us. Neither of us care.”

She gives me a way out so easily. I cling to it, shooting her a look of thanks. “I want to blend in.”

This time, it’s Henry who catches my lie and laughs under his breath. He leans back in the chair, stretching his legs beneath the table until his foot bumps against mine. Always wanting to touch me, like I need reminding that he isn’t a specter. I tuck my feet up beneath me in the chair. It’s time to turn this conversation away from me, and all the things I am—and am not—and back to them.

I point at the notebook. “Go on, then. Since you came prepared, you can lead this *study session*.” I arc my fingers into quotes around those words, turning them into a challenge. I’m not sure I believe Henry Wu ever touches a book. Not when he’s got enough money to pay off any academic smear on his record.

He arches a clever brow and thumbs through my notebook, flipping past page after page of terrible notes. Then, too quick for me to stop him, he flicks his wrist and tosses the entire thing into the fire.

A shout scrambles up the inside of my throat. I swallow it. This game between us is always about control. Blue and green flames curl up from the edges of my journal. My smirk probably looks nauseous, but at least I’m not running for the burning book. “Surely there’s more useful ways to study than immolating my notes.”

“I am studying.” He brushes at the air, wafting smoke out from the now-blazing fire. “Can’t you taste it all the way down your throat? Has any recitation of facts ever rooted in you as deeply as smoke?”

“Must be nice to be Henry Wu,” I say. “Zero consequences, no matter how stupid his decisions.”

Baz’s nervous laugh becomes a cough as Henry throws a book from the table onto the fire and more smoke billows out. He reaches for *The History of Philosophy*; I grab its edge and hold on tight. Not this one. For all I know, it could be him writing me back on its pages. Still, the conversation isn’t something I want to lose.

“Not stupid. Free,” he says. He lets go of the book to grab my hand instead. My fingers tense. He can tell; I can feel it in the way his loosen, like he’s trying to soothe me.

“Rich,” I correct him.

Henry laughs. His fingers slide between mine and then twist, forcing me to turn my palm over. “Rich. I suppose you mean money, don’t you?” He slides *The History of Philosophy* out from under our joined hands, cocking his head at the sight of the sticky note protruding from its edge. “Surely you know you can string an infinite number of zeroes behind that dollar sign and still be living a life of empty dust. Money doesn’t make you rich.”

I don’t like the way he makes the *you* pointed, even if they both think any slips happen because I’m here on scholarship. I’m letting him lead again, but I can’t help it. I need to know what Sam’s moments here were like. “Then

what does?”

“Life,” Baz says from the floor. I frown. Too easy. Too trite.

Henry lets go of my hand and the book and stands. “Every moment, you face a choice. Live—or be safe. Feel—or go numb. Passion, color, need, desperation, and yes; yes, we can’t escape it, pain—or dust. Dust to dust, ashes to ashes. Life to the full in between.”

Words, but I can tell they’re all true—for him, at least. They sound exactly like what he was spouting streamside. “Is that why you wanted to reenact the security guard’s death? To feel?”

“That wasn’t for me.”

He wants to keep going, but I cut him off. I would rather hack the truth out of him than play any more games. “Why him? Did you even know him? Or was it just because he died recently?”

A log collapses on the fire. Ashes scatter across the hearth. Without getting up, Baz stomps on them with her shoe, making sure they’re out. “His name was Sam Bullvane. He’s from the town just down the hill. He was easy to talk to, easy to be with.” She sounds so sad that for a moment I wonder if the right thing to do is exactly what her mother asked of me. Use my time here to pull her gently away from Henry and Graves; save her the way no one saved Sam. “Everything Henry said made him laugh.”

Sam *would* laugh at Henry. He always laughed at anything he didn’t quite follow, like he couldn’t tell the difference between missing a punch line and missing the entire point. But it wasn’t Sam laughing at the streamside last night. It was *Henry*. “So what, every time a friend dies you reenact their death? You know how messed up that is, right?”

“You say every time like it happens often,” Baz says.

With Sam and the two boys who fell from the roof, that’s more often than most. I’m not going to get anywhere by pushing harder, though. I can tell by the tension in Baz’s shoulders. I pivot, not wanting to hurt her. “I heard he died by overdose. He doesn’t sound like a...”

“User?” Henry fills in for me. “And what is a user like, Jamie?”

There’s so much mirth in his tone. Him, I can hurt. “You, actually.”

He *tsks* at me, but it’s not wrong. I wouldn’t be surprised to learn he hadn’t been sober a single moment since I met him. Irritated that I’m so close and nowhere at all, I stand up out of my chair. Walk toward the window.

A movement below catches my eye. Graves, sprinting across the soccer

field. Wind bends the pine trees at the edge of the field, but still, he only wears shorts and a sleeveless top. He runs with his head down and his chest out, faster than seems possible. His arms fight the air, every beat like he's ripping himself forward, not content with the striking of his legs alone. He makes the edge of the field, and I expect him to stop, rest, and sprint back. But instead, his angle arcs, curving around the back of the field, still running like the devil himself is chasing him. But the devil's inside Adrian Hargraves, and there's no outrunning yourself.

"Now there—that boy is an excellent example." Henry is suddenly right behind me. How long have I been standing here, watching Graves run? "Uses everything and everyone in his life to try to burn himself out."

"According to you, that's really living."

"You should try it sometime." Henry leans against the bookcase beside me, and it's then, then—of course it's then—that Graves staggers to a stop at the closest edge of the field and looks up. Drawn to Henry like night to the dawn.

Henry shifts, bracing himself on the window seat like he can't stand without help. He's close enough for his breath to stir the hairs against my neck. Close enough that I don't know if Graves sees any space between us at all.

"I think you'd like it," Henry whispers in my ear.

For once, I think he might be right.

CHAPTER 16

In a totally sane society, madness is the only freedom.

—J. G. Ballard

maybe you aren't broken, just sane

I didn't think I liked mornings. They always felt hectic, each moment crammed against the next. Wake, dress, eat, bus. It turns out I feel differently when school doesn't matter and there's no one waiting, trying to squeeze in a hello in that narrow window between his night shift's end and my school's start. I miss nothing about Amberdeen. I miss everything about Sam.

If he were here, he'd be finishing his rounds. He'd walk up the path from Admin, twirling his hat on his finger, and find me sitting on the front step. I'd tease him about making me wait; he'd point out that the cocoa I was sipping was still steaming hot, then ask if I'd slept or spent the night reading. An endless string of little moments, all adding up into someone to smile for.

Without him, mornings at Huntsworth rise foggy and cold, laced with music from Graves's violin. Sometimes I've slept. Sometimes I haven't; no one cares enough to ask. The days I don't sleep, my pacing always eventually leads to the little library tucked into Killary's eaves.

They keep writing me back. Sometimes, multiple times a day. Our notes cover Ballard, Kant, Laozi, and Wiredu. Their handwriting is rushed, and tense, with pen marks that score the page into miniature mountains and valleys. I take far too much care with my own, thinking more about how it will look to them when they read it than what it risks to bare this much of my heart to a stranger. One evening, I write:

Is freedom anything but the right to live as we wish?

—Epictetus

I have no wishes; only regrets. Tell me your wish instead.

The next morning, I find:

Human life begins on the far side of despair.

—Jean Paul Sartre

if I were free I would look my reflection in the eye and not be
afraid

Every time, their words pierce me deeper than I've ever let anyone get. Even Sam. He gave me comfort; this person takes my comfort and gives me something even more important instead. Honesty. Things I've been afraid to look at closely, they see clearly. It makes me bold. It makes me greedy. I come back to this little room over and over.

A week has passed. Seven days of wondering when I'm going to catch the vandal leaving the little library as I enter. Of hoping that I don't, because knowing brings endings. Of barely making it through classes, of Graves gliding along in Henry's shadow, of Baz trying to smile at me and faltering when she sees the look on my face. I fix it, every time, but I'm never quite fast enough for her actually to be at ease.

I have to find her alone. I'll be honest with her, the way my vandal is honest with me. She'll let me all the way in. Then maybe I'll get the truths I need about Sam.

Maybe ... maybe I'll get more. A friend.

This morning, Latin is at eight o'clock, and for once, Graves isn't playing the violin beforehand. I'm still trying to pass my classes despite the thought *YOU ARE RUNNING OUT OF TIME* gnawing its way through my brain, eating away everything except a desperate desire to ask questions about Sam. They don't matter—even if I were to pass this year, to graduate by some fluke of luck in them never checking their records, the diploma would go to a person who doesn't exist—but I have to keep up appearances, give Delgado no reason to call me back into her office. I put on my uniform, struggling with the tie. The fabric twists around itself awkwardly as I curse at it.

Finished. I rub at the front of my throat, checking the fit in the mirror. The tie's still too tight. I can see why boys hate wearing these. It doesn't matter;

as soon as I have my confession, I'll be able to tear it off and never touch one ever again.

I go to leave. Hearing my name from the doorway of the other bedroom stops me. Graves leans against the doorframe in nothing but a pair of old gray sweatpants. The bandages are off, road's kiss reduced to a broad, dull scab that disappears below the waist of his pants.

With how quiet it was, I thought he was gone. I thought I was safe. "How long have you been there?"

"I live here." His voice is raspy with morning.

We stand there, a room between us, his face set in the indolent mask Victoria likes so well. I fold my arms over my chest and ignore him, staring at my own reflection in the mirror instead. I haven't seen a single crack in his act since that night. I know I didn't imagine it; I know he's hiding in there, and if I just pushed, I might find him again. But pushing him feels too much like pushing myself.

He starts to walk toward me. Each step, I have to fight the urge to take a matching step back. This is the first time we've been alone since the crash, and already, I want to run.

He stops less than a foot away, my face in the mirror almost hidden by his shoulders. My eyes stay latched on themselves for just moment—then drift lower, running from what I see in them, with him this quiet and this close, to where his upper back is dusted with small white scars like snowflakes. They spread across the breadth, clustering in a tight group near the top of his right shoulder. The muscles beneath them shift gently. He's raising his hand. I step back.

"Let me fix it," he says. His hand reaches toward the tie around my neck. I swat it away. He doesn't move. "I won't touch you."

My hand falls. *What?*

Why does that promise make my pulse race?

Graves stands as far from me as possible, his arms outstretched and his head bent. Not once do his eyes meet mine as he loosens, then reties, the movements much simpler than my own. Three crosses and threadings, then a tuck through, and the tie is done. Not once did his hands touch any part of me. Not even the lightest of brushes.

But he doesn't let go, either. He keeps hold of the end of the tie, running his thumb over the point. It feels like if I wait long enough, he'll say

something I don't want to hear.

Anger and nerves pound together behind my temples, mixing with a heady rush of adrenaline. I hate him learning things about me and using them to play me like I'm his violin. It makes me feel tainted, like I've let him in somewhere he doesn't belong. I step back, pulling the tie from his fingers. This time, he doesn't follow.

"I'm not a shoe. I can tie myself," I say.

"I'm just helping. You have Latin today."

"Did I ask you to?" I tug at the knot. I'd rather get another detention from our dress-code obsessed teacher than wear the tie he tied. His movements were much quicker than mine, but seem to hang heavier. I swallow, but it doesn't help. I pull the tie completely off. "I just won't wear one."

He steps aside, not making me push past him. I don't tell him where I'm going an hour earlier than class, and he doesn't ask. Down the hall, the stairs, then out the door and I'm halfway across campus before my breathing slows.

I need to find Baz. I follow a brick path down and away from the central one running from Killary to Admin, one I saw her take a few days ago after English. It leads to a pine grove, where a knee-high white sign points the way to Siwper Chapel. I screw up my face in disappointment. If there's one thing I can trust to be true, it's that at a school like Huntsworth any building dedicated to God is bound to be empty.

Even so, I need to make sure. The path winds around the trunks of pines, leading to a small wood building facing down the mountain, away from campus. The door's unlocked. Inside, wall sconces warm the pine walls and whitewashed pews. At the front, there's a curtained window, a vacant stage, and Baz.

She sits cross-legged on the floor, bent over the low side of the stage. Her jacket lies carefully folded on the pew behind her, a bright green pencil case on top of it. Carefully, I close the door, keeping the doorknob twisted until it's all the way shut to avoid even the slightest *click* of the latch. I wish Graves hadn't thrown me off so hard this morning. I feel half wild, and totally incapable of being honest about anything at all. I scrape one hand through my hair. Force a long, slow breath out through my nose.

Baz isn't Graves. I need to separate the two. In my heart, and in my life, the way her mother wants me to. She's hunched forward, her right hand in a fist and her head lying on top of it. My aunt prays kind of like that, her head

laid flat over crossed arms instead of on a fist. The day after Sam went missing, I didn't see her face at all.

"You don't strike me as religious." My voice is a firecracker in the little space.

She jerks upright, twisting toward me.

Her eyes are light brown. Framed by glasses. And wide as wishing wells. If I move, they'll grow wider still, until there's nothing left of her but fear. She swallows. Blinks. Covers the spread of black cards lying on the stage in front of her. They're different from the ones she had the first day I saw her, dealing them out in front of Killary. Her attitude seems completely different now, too, like that was all a show and this is something much more intimate. "Jamie. I didn't hear you come in."

Henry would relish the way her face looks now. Maybe it's why he keeps her close. He strikes me as someone who would enjoy an easy startle. But he's not the only one who's good at manipulating people to get what they want. And I don't have to do it by making her uncomfortable.

Friends. We can be ... friends.

I raise one hand and take a slow step forward, a hunter approaching an animal that's not quite caught in its snare. Her eyes flick from me to the door. I didn't realize how much of her earlier calm came from Henry and Graves being there. Now, alone with her, every harsh word and cold stare I thought she'd forgiven me for is suddenly back, slashing a wall between us. She doesn't trust me. Maybe doesn't even like me—maybe everything I thought was friendship was only her trying to please the boys. I have to start all over and do it now, before she bolts.

I think of Sam, and how he'd let me know everything between us was okay with nothing more than a smile.

One time, when we were little—too little to have been sledding on that hill behind his house alone—my sled hit a tree, breaking my wrist. His mom would've hollered at me that I should've been safer. My dad would've grimaced and picked me up without a word. But Sam was the only one with me. He sat me upright, took my face in his hands, squished my cheeks until my tears ran into my mouth—and smiled.

It'll be okay, Mar. We'll fix it. He ran to get help, leaving me alone. I was still crying, but I wasn't scared anymore. It was like that smile had filled in all the places the tree had jarred loose.

I let go of everything and everyone else in this school and force myself to see only Baz, the way Sam would've seen her. "Just looking for somewhere quiet," I say. "I can leave, if you want me to." Her lips twitch upward, trying to match mine but never quite making it. I wonder if the only natural expression she knows is the jackrabbit fear I saw when she turned.

"No." Her shoulders loosen. "No, it's all right. I'll go." The cards pull her eyes back. They snap to me after only a heartbeat, like the movement was an accident. She starts to sift the pile, stacking them to put away.

"Let's just both stay and promise not to scream." I sit on the pew, my legs stretched out and crossed on the seat in front of me, settling in. "What are you working on?"

She shifts, shielding the cards from view.

Not yet, then. It hurts, having to prove myself to her all over again. It shouldn't. She means nothing to me. The people here are a means to an end, nothing more. All of them. I sigh. Drum my fingers on the back of the pew. Lose my patience. "If it's something you don't want to share, you don't have to. I'm not Henry."

Her head is turned just enough to look at me without looking at me. The chapel feels even smaller with her paying attention to every single move I make. Being here is exhausting. Every conversation, words and gestures fly like moths around my head. I try to catch them without crushing their wings and hold them to the light, but I'm so tired of grasping at air. I'm only able to rest in the little library, with my vandal.

My eyes drift closed, even though I can't let myself sleep. I'd wake up, and Baz would be gone and after this, I don't know if she'll ever let me close without the boys at her side. Not now that we both know how different it is. I need her to trust me. She's my best hope for information that I can use to crack one of the boys. If she even knows anything.

Graves definitely does. My hand wanders toward my neck, then drops.

Baz will be faster.

Easier.

That's the only reason I'm here, and not still in 6A.

I rub my forehead, trying to wake myself up with the pressure. She still sits with her back to me. I know Sam was really thinking of her every time he told me I'd like the people at Huntsworth. He threw himself so easily into loving this quiet, awkward girl. I try to imagine them together the way I saw

them in one of the photos on his phone. Him giving her a piggyback, her still not earnestly smiling. My cousin, vibrant and simple, like a Crayola scribble next to Baz's watercolor layers.

The sound of her shuffling refocuses me. She's shifted the angle of her shoulders so that I can see what she's doing. I can tell by the way she holds them, one side curled down, her chin cocked, that it was purposeful.

So, quiet is the way to catch this one.

I roll on my side to make sure she knows I'm looking. Her hand stills, then slides off the deck, resting beside it. There's something precious about this silent language. "I thought maybe I'd see if the cards would work better if I ... I tried somewhere people thought led to heaven."

If I was trying to get to heaven, I'd have chosen a spot on the hill behind Killary, dappled in shade and sunshine, not something man-made. "Did it work?"

She plays with the edges of the top card. I let the silence stretch.

"No. But maybe it's because the deck isn't finished yet." She picks up the first card, studying it for a while. Then, seeming to make a decision, she turns to me, holding it up where I can see. It's a half-skeleton, half-flesh figure hanging upside down from a thorny tree. "Adrian is drawing these for me."

Slowly, I reach for the card, not taking it, just running a finger down the hanging man. It looks like it's drawn in chalk, some of the lines blurring out into mist. I can't decide if it's beautiful or grotesque, and I'm not sure I like the way that conflict hits me. Not when he's the one who drew it.

Go slow, Marin. "It's beautiful. What are they for?"

"Finding clarity. They help me untangle myself." She places the card back in the deck, shuffling around it.

"Can you teach me?" It comes out as almost a whisper. I mean it, I realize. "Being tangled is something I'm too familiar with."

"You don't want to learn from me." Her tone matches my own, like she can't help but form herself into my image. I think of her mother again, starting to understand even more why she wants someone other than Henry and Graves for Baz to pattern after. Even someone as broken as me. "I know you're not interested in this kind of stuff."

At first, I don't know what she means. Then ... I remember the stream, and her offer to show me something I desperately didn't want to see. Maybe the biggest brick in the wall I built between us. I slide off the pew, nestling

myself next to her. “Where do I start?”

She sets down the cards. “You really want to learn? This isn’t just some way to make me feel better?”

“I don’t really even know you yet,” I say. “Why would I care if you feel better?”

She nods, accepting so easily that I couldn’t possibly care about her. “The hardest part of tarot is to sort out what you see from what you want to see. Our desires don’t hold the true shape of things. That’s something only the cards themselves can do.”

She stops talking, worrying at her lip and glancing at me, like she’s checking to make sure I’m still listening. Something in the back of her eyes makes me think she’d be more comfortable if I wasn’t.

“Read what I see,” I repeat, “not what I want.”

She nods. “That’s ... really all there is.”

I laugh and pick up a card. “Well, I see a piece of paper. With a dancing demon on it.”

This time, her smile isn’t as forced. I see the echo of Sam’s in it. *You’d like them.*

“Maybe that isn’t all,” Baz says. “But I don’t—I know. Can I read for you?”

I pause. If these cards can do what she thinks they can, I don’t want her to look that closely at me. Already, though, that smile is starting to hemorrhage from her expression, leaving only nervousness. I haven’t caught her yet. Besides, she doesn’t know the real me. What could she possibly learn from a deck of cards?

“No one’s ever done this for me before,” I say. “Do I have to do anything?”

The bleed-out stops. She shakes her head. “Just be open.”

That’s impossible for me, with her, when I have to hide even the most basic facts of my life. But she doesn’t need to know that. I turn to face her, putting my hands in my lap. She turns, too, the deck laid carefully in the space between us. Our eyes meet—and this time, she doesn’t flinch away.

I take advantage of her stare to stare back. Just like the others, she’s easy to look at if you don’t look below the surface. Bow lips, golden-brown hair, sun-kissed skin that can only come from escaping somewhere tropical in April, October, and January while the rest of us go fallow. Even her uniform

is mannequin-perfect. Her mother should be proud of a tie that exquisitely cinched.

A Huntsworth girl, to her core.

Baz swipes card after card off the deck, laying a cross-like pattern with a few sure strokes. “You’re not very good at this teaching thing,” I say.

Her dealing slows. For a second, I think I’ve pushed her too hard. I’m not good at *this*. Making friends. Especially not with Huntsworth girls. Then her lips part, close, part again, trying to prep for speech. “If I just read these cards one by one, like stones making a solid path, it wouldn’t work. We’re much more fluid than that, and so are the cards. I’d end up giving you a reading that wouldn’t make any sense, much less be true.”

“Sometimes the truth doesn’t make sense, either.”

A smile that’s all her own ticks at the edge of her lips. “But it’s always there. Beneath the mess. That’s a thing to learn—to look beneath everything for what’s from you, and what’s not. To find yourself in what you see on the cards, and throw that away. Then all that’s left is the person you’re reading for,” she says. She glances over and over again at my face, working to stay in line with me. “And that’s when you can start to untangle.”

Talking has freed her. Her movements are more sure now. She starts talking about seeing endings and heavy burdens. Those aren’t easy for me to look at head-on, so I keep looking at her instead.

I look past the out-of-season tan to the shapes beneath, doing to her what she’s doing to me. Her hair curls in frizzy spirals, a dark blond halo on top of shaved sides and thick, friendly eyebrows. Fingerprints smudge the front of her glasses, clouding the brightness in her eyes as she talks. Even her cheeks are blended into the angles around them by a dense smattering of freckles. A hazy girl, disconnected from the precise tie and starched collar of his uniform. A dreamer in a paper doll’s dress shirt.

I think about the way she sat on Killary’s porch, surrounded by other girls looking to be entertained by having their futures told in the sunshine, but had no one beside her here, when she was looking for her own. About how she tucked herself so easily into Graves’s chest, less than a week after my cousin came blushed and hopeful to the party he knew she’d be at. About how Graves held Henry close after the car crashed, even though she was the one who saved us.

“Wait,” she says, a little gasp that draws me back to the actual words

she's saying. "No, above that card the two of swords means you're at a crossroads. But the choice isn't one you're going to make. It's one that's made for you."

She's right. I am at a crossroads—and it's her who's going to decide which way I go. I need to know if this was enough. If she trusts me, or if I'm still alone. I need us to go back to one of the first bricks I laid in the wall between us, and let me try to break it down. This time, I promise to listen, Baz.

"You asked me if I wanted to see *him* at the stream." I want to hide the look in my eyes from her; I know it's too harsh, too jagged. But I won't. She needs to know that it's not her who's wearing me raw. I was this way long before she ever met me. "Can you use these cards that way?"

She hesitates.

I leap forward for both of us, hoping that she'll come with me, just like my vandal does. "I know you cared about him. I have someone who I care about, too, that I've lost. Maybe you could teach me."

"Scrying isn't the same as tarot. It's much more dangerous. I shouldn't have offered. You just looked so—"

"Scrying?" I don't want her to tell me how I looked. That version of me can stay buried beneath the water.

"Any reflective surface can become a window to the spirit world. Scrying is looking through that window to the other side purposefully. You let go of the world around you, usually with some form of light to focus on instead. It's a little like meditating, but instead of going inside yourself, you're trying to go through. In that way, I guess it is like tarot."

"But more dangerous." I push her.

"You can get lost. The window shuts with you still on the other side. That's why I suggested it at the stream. It's not as easy to do with something as changeable as water, but it's safer. And much harder to get lost, unless you really, really want to."

Water can be a window. *The stream—*

My thought are ten steps ahead of her words, drowning in the dark. I grasp at something, anything, before I sink too far. "Is that why you're afraid of mirrors?"

She looks down at the cards for far longer than I'd like. Long enough for me to catch my breath and worry I was too blunt, even with the new easiness

between us. I open my mouth to soften it, to explain that I noticed it in the little library and could help next time, but she speaks first.

“If you think mirrors are only showing your face, then there’s nothing to be afraid of.”

If.

“But if you look beyond yourself...” I trail off, thinking not about reading tarot but about hollow eyes watching me in the ripples beside my cousin’s body. My skin goes cold, and suddenly I’m thankful that every window in the chapel is covered with a heavy, velvet curtain. She looks at me without raising her head, and I realize that she’d believe my mom if she told her everything that she’d seen.

That she might believe me, too.

“A mirror isn’t just a window,” she says. “It can be a door, too.”

CHAPTER 17

The window into the cabin where Latin is held is foggy, turning everyone inside into splotches of impressionist art. A fire burns in the fireplace on the cabin's far wall. The teacher is a blur of green plaid and red hair pacing back and forth at the front. At the back, as far as possible from the heat and the attention, sits Graves.

Even through the haze, I can tell it's him. All the other boys make small movements, shifting in their seats, drumming their fingers on the desk, cracking their necks or scribbling notes. Only he sits completely still, his arms crossed over his chest and his attention forward, demanding the teacher be worthy of it.

It's been two more days. Between the little library and Baz, I've been away from my room as much as possible, learning about the way she looks for guidance in cards, palms, and the stars themselves. There are some things she won't teach me, though. The mirrors in her room are all still covered.

I lean forward, using my breath to fog the window completely. Everything blurs into shadows. I wait, trying to still myself. To look through.

Are you there?

Just as the fog starts to lift, something moves. I whirl, just as terrified that it worked as that it didn't—and see Henry. He stands on the main path with Headmistress Delgado. I want to turn and hide, embarrassed by how much I'd thought that maybe, just maybe, there'd be no one behind me, but her words hold me in place. “—only because of your family's longstanding dedication to Huntsworth, Mr. Wu. Any other student, as I'm sure you're aware, and the consequences would be severe.”

“Grief consumed me, Headmistress.” Henry moves the fingers of one hand. A wave. At me.

Delgado laces her hands behind her back. She follows Henry's movement with a glance, dark brown eyes softening ever so slightly when they land on

me. One finger taps against her wristwatch. She turns back to Henry. "Yes, well, we were all shocked. Good help is hard to find. But property destruction serves no one. Find other ways to express your ... emotions than raucous parties."

They're talking about Sam's wake. He's completely getting away with it. Just like he said he would.

"I'll try harder next time," Henry says with a yawn.

The headmistress gives him a well-practiced frown. She looks back at me. My fingernails dig half-moons into my palms. "Miss Vane. Any progress?"

I don't know if she means the check, my mother, or her daughter. The answer to all of them is *no*. "Yes, Headmistress."

"Good." Her glance ties Henry to me. "To class, then."

I nod. Henry winks at her as she leaves, then turns and walks toward me. His gait is slow, easy, and I am anything but. Behind him, Delgado is walking away, down the hill. I can feel every second as it ticks by; another one gone, another moment closer to when this ends and I lose.

"You look well." Henry leans against the wall beside me, hemming me in on the small porch. "Except for your tie. I can see why Hemingson kicked you out."

"I didn't get kicked out." My hand rises to my tie without my permission. I force it back down and hold it in a fist at my side.

"So, there's another reason you aren't in Latin, then." His eyes flick over my shoulder, scanning the classroom inside. I can tell when they land on Graves. His mouth curls into a smirk. "Staring in windows again?"

I blush, and his smirk grows. It takes all my willpower not to vomit obscenities on him. I didn't mean to watch him dress, but there's no way I can tell him the actual reason I was looking in his window that day. "How much money did your daddy have to pay to get you off for hosting a party where every single person is underage?"

"My father is dead," he says, straightening off the wall. He moves like every joint is stiff, taking effort to bend. It makes him feel aged, somehow, a feeling that clashes with the smooth perfection of his face. Except for his eyes. Those are also too old for the rest of him. "And so is my mother. If anyone's paying for my sins, it's me."

I don't say anything. What can I say? My eyes fall.

"So bold, but still so soft." Henry's fingers touch my chin, pressing

gently. I twist away. “What parts of you are true?”

Just like that, I’m in danger.

“Vane. Vane,” he says, my name a hand extended in peace, “I’m not mad. Not about the window, not about the crash, and not about you being pleased my parents are dead. I’m intrigued.”

“I’m not—” I start, but I stop myself. He’s letting me in, telling me truths, despite everything. “I’m sorry about your parents.”

His lip curls toward a smile. “No,” he says, “you’re not.”

My mouth falls open. He steps too close, too soon. Everything he does, everything he says, throws me off balance. He raises his hands; I flinch back, but it’s not my face he touches this time. He tugs at the corners of my collar, dipping under to smooth the satin width of my tie. I can feel his palm brush my skin, sliding without breaking contact all the way back around to where my pulse beats slow and steady near the front. A few tugs and the knot falls to pieces. His eyes shift back and forth between both of mine as he works, like he’s making sure I’m feeling every move. “Do you know how few people actually try to challenge me? Everyone’s always looking for ways to ingratiate themselves. You’re refreshing.”

He runs his fingers down the length of the tie, tugging both ends to even them out. I don’t like him this close to me. It feels vulnerable. “You make it sound like I’m trying to make you interested in me.”

One eyebrow raises. He crosses the two ends, tucking one up and over the other. I bend my neck, pretending to watch when really I’m just desperate to break eye contact. The movement brushes my hair against his cheek and lets his breath tickle my ear. I straighten, but even there, his face is too close.

I’m going to end all of this, I repeat to myself. All of them. Even if Delgado kicks me out, I’ll find a way. The need feels like a fever, burning just behind my eyes.

He’s so close. I don’t know what to do with my hands.

“It’s just a matter of knowing when to tighten, and when to stay loose,” Henry says. I feel the fabric tug back and forth. “You hold too tight, don’t you?”

“You don’t know me,” I say. “Don’t pretend like you do.”

“Ah,” he says. With a single, precise move he tugs the tie until it presses against my throat. He adjusts it to center—then tugs tighter. My pulse beats against the fabric. Suddenly, I’m aware of each breath. “But then, you don’t

know me, either.”

His eyes flick to mine. His finger brushes my throat, dancing over my pulse. This time, it isn’t just the ground that’s unsteady. I glare at him, my jaw tight—but if anything, my anger just seems to make him even more pleased. He’s enjoying himself.

Fine, if this is how he likes to play.

“I know some things,” I say, raising one finger to trace where I know the edge of his scar begins. His hand on the tie jerks—the tiniest movement, nothing I would’ve noticed if his knuckles hadn’t still been pressed against my throat—but I’m not done. “Like how you’d enjoy taking me as your date to the Release.”

Baz explained the Release of the Hounds to me last night. A black-tie midwinter ball, of sorts, but with parents and alumni in attendance. My mind had instantly created an image of a cluster of old men handing their dates off to us for the next dance while they sipped whiskey in the corner. Or, worse, no dancing at all, just awkward small talk about future plans that don’t exist for me. She said it was for networking—then quirked her lip and leaned in close. *It’s the after-parties all of us are actually excited about.*

If he was looking out for his future, Henry should absolutely go alone, or with Baz, not me. But by the look on his face, I know I’m right. Henry Wu hasn’t cared about his future in a very long time.

“You want to go with me?” he asks.

I smirk. “That’s not what I said.”

His eyes widen and this time, finally, the smile that breaks his face is real. I step around him, taking advantage of the shift in gravity. My pulse beats steady against the noose-like tie. For once, it’s me pulling the strings to make the puppet dance, and not him. I can see why he likes it.

I walk across the path, where another old hunting cottage sits. This one is dark and empty, or so I think. A shadow shifts across the mirror-dark windows, moving in ways no human reflection should. My steps slow.

There’s something inside me that was expecting it, like I knew it would never come when I asked. Only when it wants. The shadow grows, finding shape. It’s just Henry, following me, except I know it’s not. It’s the shadow from the library, from the mirror, from the stream, to this window.

The pane fragments what used to be a face—an empty eye, a bloated jaw, loose, drifting hair. It’s more solid now, the edges more precise, the features

more clear, like it's growing in strength. There's enough of it that's almost, *almost* real. Except that I don't believe in ghosts.

"He's beautiful, isn't he?" Henry asks.

I whirl on him, expecting to find him facing away from me, using Graves to get my attention back. Instead, his hand is pressed to the hourglass tattoo on his neck, and he's looking the same way I was. Away from the classroom. Across the path.

"Who is?"

"The other one." He says *other* with a devious lilt. He means it in the full, alien sense of the word. The chill lodged between my shoulder blades bursts, spreading across my skin in a sudden rush of tension. He knows what I saw.

"You can see it." It isn't a question. It's the reason his eyes look so much older than the rest of him.

Henry drags his eyes back to me. "I can see *him*." He taps his tie, and then winks. "And so can you."

CHAPTER 18

The bell rings. For a moment, everything's paused—Henry and I on the steps, my eyes wide and his all lying mirth—until the door behind us opens and we're surrounded. Everyone knows him, touching his shoulder, shifting their packs so they don't jostle him. *Henry, hey, how are you, skipping class?* Some of their eyes meet mine. There's a flash of recognition. Sometimes even a strange smile. They remember me from Monday night. The one Henry chose to go with them.

I thought it was because he found me interesting. The new girl, the girl Graves doesn't like.

Not because we both ...

Henry brushes his fingers against the bare skin of my wrist. I flinch away. He doesn't reach again, content with both of us knowing he's close enough to touch me if he wants. My skin goes suddenly cold. If he can see it, too, then it's not just in my head, it's not Baz's fancy, there really is something—someone—there, watching me, following me.

I blink furiously, turning my head away from him, trying to hide the look in my eyes.

"What did you say to her?"

Graves. He stands beside Henry, the smooth lines of his forehead creased with tension. Henry doesn't answer him, because this game isn't with him. It's with me, and he wants to hear me answer.

But *We can see dead people* doesn't roll off the tongue.

"Jamie?" Graves says.

His eyes are too hard, too clear. I can't stand the way they drill into me, waiting for my answer when it's them that need to surrender the truth. They're the murderers. Why is it me who's being hunted?

I need away. I need space. I stumble backward, almost falling on the step down from the porch. Graves stares at me, watching me leave, but I know

him well enough already to know he's not going to choose me over the boy beside him. I feel grass beneath my shoes—the lawn in front of the classroom; each step away from Henry is a step toward that empty cottage—and turn to run uphill toward Killary.

I tug my tie the rest of the way off, wad it up, and stuff it in my pocket. The wind seeps in chilly tendrils through my clothes, colder than it really is against my heated skin. Over and over in my mind, Henry's eyes meet mine. Henry's lips shape around the word *other*.

My mom shouted in his face.

There was a dead woman in the bathtub, she screamed. Water gone stale, left from my bath with a ring of colored-bubble soap scum around the rim and a drowned woman's face near the drain. It wasn't the first time. She'd woken me in my sleep twice, bundling me in my blanket and running for the door before my dad caught her. I remember how hot her tears were, how strong his grip was as he pulled her off the porch and into the living room, waving at Aunt Stella before he slammed the door behind us.

It wasn't the first time she'd seen a dead person. But it was the first time he hit her for it.

The television didn't stop trying to sell me a talking baby doll. Outside, I could see Pat Morhees standing on his steps, the orange glow of a cigarette between his fingers. The walls didn't cave in; the pastor didn't come running through the door. No one came when she fell. She patted my leg and spit a tooth into her shirt, the whole while staring at the bathroom door. Dad stood over her and called her insane.

He bought her the first gram before the bruises faded. Easier to explain to the neighbors.

I found the tooth in our long shag carpet.

My breaths come slowly, but my throat is still raw. I'm starting to shiver. The lawn in front of Killary is empty; the windows blank. I step inside but don't let myself linger beside the common room's fire. I knock into a boy, spin off, apologize, keep running to the Tower stairs. I can't go home if ghosts are real.

I can't go home.

On the sixth floor, both doors are shut. I walk into my living room and lock the door behind me. Cross the room. Graves's bedroom door swings open, inviting me in like he wants to be found out.

I can't wait for a confession. I need to hold their guilt in the palm of my hand. I need to be able to wave it in Henry's face and say, *See, I understand. I know who you are.* And then I need to leave, before Henry digs out more of my sanity and lays it on the brick between us. Leave Huntsworth, leave Amberdeen, leave Marin James completely behind.

I need to get out of here, before my own mind abandons me.

I'll start by looking for Sam's hat. It was also missing from his things, and maybe if I find it, I'll find more. A note. A scrap of trash. A ... a ... My face crumples and I choke back a sob. I know none of this is going to matter. If it would've mattered, I would've found it days ago. I know the only thing that could do anything anymore is a confession, and I'm so, so far from being handed one. I don't have enough time. I wish Sam could just—"Tell me what they did to you, Sam!"

You could say that he died here. Or you could say that he split.

If the ghost is real, could it actually be ...

No. I shrink back fast from that possibility. If Sam was trapped after death, it wouldn't be here, in a place so unlike him. He'd haunt his car. My dad's garage. The chip aisle at Derry's. Huntsworth is old enough to house a thousand ghosts; and even if they are real there's no reason to think one of them is him. *Other than the fact that he was killed here.*

No. Busy hands make it possible to not think. I search quickly and quietly, turning on all the lights, clearing out any shadows November left in the corners. Graves doesn't make it easy. The room is, on the surface, the same tidy sparseness I've glimpsed from the bathroom these past couple of weeks. Black sheets, no blanket, and his violin laid across the pillow beside its bow. A fancy press coffeemaker, a hot water kettle, and a pile of coffee bags, most of them twisted down onto themselves until they're little more than rolls of heavy plastic with a few grains lost inside.

But beneath the surface are the seven layers of hell. His desk drawers are full of crumpled, half-complete papers from classes, silverware from the cafeteria, misshapen chunks of rosin, and handfuls of receipts. His dresser drawers are packed with expensive-looking clothes in subdued colors, all perfectly folded except for the ones in the top drawer, the only ones I've ever seen him wear, where T-shirts and underwear and pairs of athletic pants tangle chaotically with broken strings and dusty linen cloths. A pair of still-wet running shoes are tied together over the closet rung. The uniforms that

should hang there drape in piles on top of his desk chair.

I pick up a book, oddly shaped like the rest of them, the covers slanting down from the spine toward the page edge. He's torn out almost half the pages. A sketch of a face, not finished enough to tell who it is, covers the text on the first intact page. I close it. This is why I haven't come in here. I don't want to know this much about him. I don't want him to feel this human.

Beneath his bed are only a few socks and two boxes. One has letters from an address in Connecticut composed in a young girl's optimistic, Cheerio-shaped handwriting. I flip through them, but none are opened. The last postdate is two weeks ago. The other is smaller, and almost empty. There's a single page from a novel, its edges ripped into a round like the reader turned and twisted and tore until only a few words were clear. *Ever step you take is forever. You can't make it go away. None of it.*

And below it, a newspaper clipping shouting TWO TEENS DIE DURING CHARITY DRIVE, with a photo of a car being dredged from the bottom of the French Broad earlier this fall. The caption names the victims as Timothy Houck and Oliver Silven, the two Huntsworth students Henry told me fell off Killary's roof.

It isn't the only clipping. There's another one about a house fire in Connecticut lying on the bottom—TRAGIC FIRE LEAVES THREE DEAD. He's cut and kept only the headline, with the black-and-white photo of the charred remains of a house below it. A fire is such an easy way to hide evidence. Easier than driving a car off a bridge, or carrying a body to a mountain stream.

Five lives. Houck, Silven, and three more in Connecticut, the same state a young girl is writing him letters from. So many deaths, all kept close enough to seep into his dreams. An article on the death of Sam Bullvane would fit perfectly on top of this stack. I have a sudden, half-formed thought that if ghosts are real, this room is one that deserves to be haunted.

My hand shakes as I scrub back and forth on the smooth fabric of my uniform skirt, trying to press out the rising horror. The entire time I've been staying here, these slips of paper were less than ten feet away from where I slept. Five lives; five deaths stashed lovingly beneath his bed.

Maybe there's another reason why they call him Graves.

A quick clash of lock and key, and the hall door opens. Then slams. Footsteps walk across the suite's living room. Someone's here. I shove the

clippings back in the box and the box back under the bed and stand, whirling just in time to see him step into the bedroom.

His bedroom.

His eyes immediately fall toward the space beneath the bed. Wariness tightens them, turning the anger that had been there a moment ago into something much more brittle. “What are you doing here?”

I can’t let him know what I saw. It isn’t enough, not nearly enough yet, but now I know exactly what questions to ask Henry. I need time; I need an excuse that will get him to let me leave. His copy of Descartes’s *Meditations* sits on the hanging shelf beside my head. “My book’s missing. I’m taking yours,” I say, but I’m thinking *Timothy Houck. Oliver Silven. The Connecticut three. And Sam Bullvane.*

He steps toward me. I grab the book and wave it at him, hard enough to hide the tremor in my hands. A handful of pages fall out, ones he’d torn but not yet discarded. As they flutter down and land on the floor around my feet, I see each one of them has a sketch, too. All partials, but closer to completed. Graves bends, gathering up the pages. Before he can, I look, expecting monsters.

Instead, I see parts of a face, repeated over and over, one on each of the fanned-out pages. A human face—a full smile, a lip creased by a thumb pressed to its center, the edge of a snarl trapped in teeth.

“That’s Henry,” I say.

Graves pauses, his hands hovering over Henry’s snarl. He hadn’t expected me to know him from these partial sketches. I fumble, caught between wanting to take back how easy it was for me to see Henry and wanting to know more, to be able to know him from a single stroke. I don’t like what it means, recognizing him that easily.

He’s a boy whose lines are made for art. That’s all.

Nothing more.

“What did he say to you?” Graves sweeps the rest into a pile and stands, leaving them on the floor at his feet. He’s so close. I try to step back, but the back of my legs bump up against his bed.

The sketches, this question. “You’re obsessed.”

“He’s my friend.”

Graves is *too* close. There’s barely space for me to put my hand between us. I push on his chest; he doesn’t even shift. But it’s not this easy to

intimidate me. I grit my teeth and force myself to look him in the eye.

That was a mistake.

“What did he say to you?” Quieter now. As if he’s well aware exactly how his closeness is undoing me.

He meets me, stare for stare. There are no little movements— no twitch of the lips, no hands slowly fisting, even his hair is cut so close that there’s nothing for him to run his fingers through in subconscious angst. It’s almost like he’s purposely removed every temptation to surrender his truths until there’s nothing left but words he refuses to say. I’ve never felt more out of control than I do right now, facing this boy. I want to scream, to beat my fists against his chest, to shove him backward and make him say something. Instead, I’m pinned against his bed, my breath coming too fast and my thoughts starting to spin.

“Again, with that question.” I hate how my voice matches his, whisper for whisper. I’ve never tried to fit in before. I’m not a mirror, I’m a blade, and that won’t change just because I’m in his world, not mine. “Why is it so important?”

He steps back. Closes down—and only then, seeing his face shutter, do I realize how much he was actually showing me. That empty face wasn’t empty at all, it was pulled tight enough to shatter. “It isn’t.”

“Liar.” My heart pounds inside its cage. It was only a guess, but I see his eyes tighten again and know I’ve hit my mark. “I think you know exactly what he said to me, and you want to know if I believe it or not.”

He turns away and tosses the sketches of Henry into the trash. The quiet lasts so long I think he’s not going to answer. I clamp the book I’m stealing against my side and turn toward the bathroom door, a shortcut from his room to mine. Then he speaks. “Henry isn’t well. I don’t want him ... scaring you.”

He turns toward me, measuring me from across the room. I wonder what he sees. If he thinks I believe him, or if he knows I’ve almost got enough noose to hang him from. Five names. Five deaths. One boy and his too-bright eyes. “You can’t believe the things he says,” he tells me, careful and slow, like he’s offering me a place to land.

“I understand.” I’ll take it. For now.

After all, the closer he lets me, the easier it’ll be to stab him in the back.

CHAPTER 19

I follow Henry toward the front of Huntsworth's auditorium, a beechwood-and-glass Botox job to the back of Admin. Graves walks behind me, with Baz beside him. He seems steadier today—and thanks to him, I'm anything but.

All night, he played that damned violin in our living room. Bow barely touching the strings, making sure the music was quiet enough to not wake the Tower but loud enough to seep under my closed door and wake me. The same six rises and falls, over and over. I wanted to scream, but I wouldn't give him the satisfaction of knowing he was getting to me. He wants to know how much I know. Anything and everything could be a test.

My vision is muggy, my eyes heavy. I just want Henry to stop walking and find a seat. Finally, he picks one three rows from the front. We sit: Henry, me, Graves, Baz, with Victoria and three carbon copy friends filing in directly behind us.

The auditorium darkens, red curtains with a black hound rampant on their center rolling automatically down to cover the windows. Graves thinks he can warn me off. All it did was encourage me that I'm on the right track. I glance at Henry. A slight tic quirks at the side of his lips. He knows I'm looking.

I study his face as I think, watching it slowly bloom with amusement. Where Graves is stone and lightning, Henry is softer, slipperier, a boy I'm never quite sure if he's there to save me or because he likes watching me struggle. "Yesterday..." I pause, making him wait. "Thank you. I didn't know how much I needed that."

The amusement disappears. He looks at me like he can't believe I'm real. Then, slowly: "It's hard to know what you need when you've never had it before."

I don't want him to like me. I *need* him to be desperate for me. That's all this feeling is.

Graves kicks at the seat in front of him, making the student in it yelp and break the moment. Behind him, Victoria giggles.

Headmistress Delgado walks up the short flight of steps to the stage. She wears a black-and-red sleeveless robe over a charcoal suit, with her hair gelled back in thick, rippling waves. “My dear students,” she says, her voice booming in the enclosed space before she even reaches the microphone. “We are nearing the end of another term. The work has been grueling, as it should be. At Huntsworth, we aim to sharpen you not by coddling you but by filing away all of your weaknesses with the edge of a sword. *Non deficient, non debilitare.*”

The students repeat her words, a haphazard echo made strong by a hundred throats. “*Non deficient, non debilitare.*”

She raises her palm toward us, her face falling into solemnity. “Let us take a moment to remember those we have lost.” Her hand falls to her side even as her gaze sharpens. Two names ring out over the auditorium. “Timothy Houck. Oliver Silven. *Mors vincit omnia.* We will meet you again in time.”

Silence falls across the room. I look down at the floor, trying to hide the venom in my stare. Timothy and Oliver fall from her lips easily enough, but no word about Sam Bullvane. It isn’t the time or the place, I tell myself, and her omitting him here, where it’s only her and her students, doesn’t mean she’ll refuse him justice. Still.

Still. I want to hear his name.

Headmistress Delgado begins to talk again, warning us about the stairs to the roof of Killary being off-limits and any access to them cause for expulsion. Graves leans forward in his chair, resting his chin in his hand. His fingers drift across his mouth. His expression doesn’t shift at all except for a tiny pulse near the bridge between his thumb and forefinger. I wish I could reach over, jerk his hand away, and see what he’s hiding.

“Party at my house after midterms. Come when you’re done, leave sometime before the Release? Jamie can wear something ratty and save the planet.” Victoria only lowers her voice a little. Her thoughts are obviously more important than the assembly.

Her hand falls lightly onto Graves’s shoulder. He slides his across the top of hers and twists his neck to look back at her. “I’ll be there.”

Henry leans toward me and nestles his chin on top of my head. I can’t tell

if he's doing it to be cute, possessive, or just annoying. It hurts, especially when he starts to talk. "All weekend, how shamefully hedonist. Baz will go. Jamie and I will think about it."

Jamie and I.

One invite to a ball and suddenly this is a me + you situation. I stare straight ahead at the stage as Baz leans forward and starts to argue about having her own plans and Henry snipes back, *dig dig dig* into my skull. *Jamie and I* is what I wanted to play with, but this was too easy. I lay out one hand, palm up, bait.

Henry's fingers curl into mine, tender as springtime poetry.

Easy. So, so easy. I can't shake the way he watched me earlier. None of this affection is real. Then ... why is he showing it?

I pull my hand out from under his and pretend to scratch an itch on my knee. Henry sits back in his chair. Graves isn't looking at us so hard that I can feel it. A teacher leans all the way forward at the end of our row, glaring at us. She presses a red pen against pursed lips. *Shh.*

Delgado raises her voice. "I expect greatness out of every one of you. Carry yourselves with honor." She pauses, clearly at the end of her speech. The assembly must be almost done already. "And now for a word from our senior president. Miss Hallward?"

Baz?

A *whoop-whoop!* rings out. Graves yells with one hand cupped to his mouth. "Senior PREZ!"

Baz's chin is down and her cheeks are pink, but there's a reluctant smile on her face as she stands, shifting step-by-step down the row and then scaling the set of stairs to the stage. Delgado moves back. Baz adjusts the microphone sitting on the podium.

No one told me she was our senior president. Not even Baz. It doesn't make sense that she's the one up there. She's made for the background, always looking at another in the frame. It should be one of the other two, with their iron spines and demanding gazes.

"Thank you, Headmistress," she says. Her smile fractures at the edges when she glances back at her mother. She shuffles her feet and looks down at our row. "Just a few quickies."

Someone catcalls from halfway back. Baz clears her throat, straightens her tie, drums her fingers on the side of the podium. There's nothing quick

about this. By the time she finds her voice, I'm almost humming with secondhand embarrassment and a desperate desire for her to know she's doing a good job. I love that she's our senior president. I hate how hard it is for her.

"The Release of the Hounds is next Sunday. Freshmen, if you don't have your service assignments, see Keppart. Seniors"—she pauses, wetting her lips, clearly reading off something typeset—"remember the event is black tie. No one will be admitted without proper evening wear. Our alumni and their associates will see us at our best."

Behind her, her mother nods, hands clasped behind her back. Onstage, Baz stands a little straighter, speaking earnestly to the juniors about their winter event, a weekend at a ski resort in North Carolina with Ivy League recruiters.

Henry pulls a small notebook from his back pocket and lays it open in his lap. In slanted, dizzy cursive he writes a few words left-handed, then closes it and sets it on my lap. I flip to the page.

You'll look stunning in a dress.

I stare at the words. From the outside, it might look like I'm caught, daydreaming of being the princess at the ball. But in truth, I've caught a glimpse of Graves's hand out of the corner of my eye. It had been lying still on his knee. I watch as it slowly fists. The same small action he made at the streamside, when Henry was tormenting Baz.

But Baz is far from us onstage. It's not her who he's upset about. It's me, and the *not-well* boy I'm flirting with.

I pass the notebook back to Henry with a smile and lay my head on his shoulder. He leans his against mine, closing me in. It doesn't matter if this is real for either one of us—this is exactly where Graves doesn't want me, and that means it's exactly where I belong.

"We are almost home, Hounds," Baz says. The chapel quiets. I force myself to look up and see her face. She isn't even pretending to smile now. Her hands grip the podium, one thumb beating erratically on the top. Her eyes meet mine.

It's okay, I mouth. It's all going to be okay.

Baz doesn't smile. Just nods. "One term remains, and then we are gone."

Do not go gently, Hounds.”

Someone drums their feet on the ground. The action catches, wildfire spreading through the crowd until the chapel is reverberating with the sound.

I’m right. It’s all going to be okay. But she’s right, too.

It won’t be gentle.

CHAPTER 20

One late summer night tucked in between her lost tooth and her lost mind, my mom cradled my head in her lap and stroked my hair while she sang a lullaby to the dead boy waiting in my window. Tonight is nearly midwinter. There's still a boy in the window I'm looking at, but he's not dead yet.

We're scattered like thrown dice around Killary's little library. Baz by the fire, Henry and I at the table, Graves in the window seat. A chilly December draft stirs the pages Graves tears one after the other from his copy of *Meditations*. Midterms are the Friday before the Release of the Hounds—for our capstone, it's an oral exam, where Leckey will grill us one by one at the front of the room, like we're on trial. The four of us, the six *Meditations*, and Graves is slowly shredding all of them.

He looks up from his book. Our eyes meet. It always feels like this—tug-of-war, where slipping means death. This time I look away first, because Henry might think I was trying to memorize the lines of his face.

Focus on studying, Marin. Delgado has to stay happy with my grades, the only thing that forces me to even show up for any of the other classes. But I couldn't keep myself from this capstone course, even if she wasn't watching me. The other classes are just East County accelerated, but this ... this is different. This is being trusted to sink our teeth into the nature of reality itself and see what we can swallow.

I hum beneath my breath, ignoring how long it takes his position to shift and prove he's not still looking at me. *The History of Philosophy* sits cast away at the edge of the table. My yellow sticky note is moved to near the top corner. There's a new note from *them*, waiting for me. I hadn't even noticed until now. Being here with these three makes the room feel too full for anything else.

A feeling too nervous, and too warm, to be just anticipation curls in my stomach. I wish I was alone, able to linger over each word of theirs the way I

usually do. Trace the hasty lines of their penmanship and wonder if they're this passionate in person, or if it's something they only save for me.

I could wait. Come back later. But everyone else seems busy, not paying any attention to me. Henry's neck is bent gracefully over the back of his chair. He spins a pen trapped between his fingers. Graves rips at another page. Blankets and a pillow that someone left in the window seat lay on the floor in front of him, slowly being covered by shreds of paper. Baz sits cross-legged in the oversize chair. She banters back and forth with Henry in a losing battle, trying to get him to study.

Baz: "Describe Descartes's process of doubt."

Henry: "It was long, and hard, and completely blew his mind."

A sigh, blown through tense cheeks, then Baz: "I need more detail."

Henry: "I can give it to you, but for that kind of talk you have to pay upfront."

Baz throws the book at Henry. He catches it, flips it in his palm, and tosses it back, all without looking up. Baz grunts as she catches it against her chest. "I'm not helping you if you aren't serious."

Henry smirks, because he doesn't want her help, he wants her attention. As soon as he actually starts to study, Baz will drift off, her mind slinking back to her own memorization work. Henry is greedy, so Baz is always behind in her schoolwork—and Henry is purposefully failing.

I slide my pencil between *The History of Philosophy's* pages, prying it open just enough to read the new message. A quote from Rousseau is newly underlined on the page marked by our sticky note.

The man who has lived the most is not he who has
counted the most years but he who has most felt life.

Usually, they write in the margins. This time, their handwriting runs above and below Rousseau, crammed into the slender spaces between the lines as if this was something even they didn't want to fully admit.

everything changed when you came. I can't go back. I don't know
how to be that person anymore

I slip the pencil out.

The room narrows to just the book in front of me.

This isn't secrets left on abandoned pages, picked up by happenstance, the mind on the other side nothing more than dreams and a familiar scrawl of ink. They know who I am.

They know who I am.

They know *exactly* who I am.

Something shifts in my peripheral vision and I look down, startled to find the view of my copy of Descartes interrupted by Henry's hand. He taps gently on the words, his finger running directly under a quote spanning several lines. I've highlighted it so many times that the inked words have begun to wear away. *When I turn my mind's eye upon myself, I understand that I am a thing which is incomplete and dependent on another and which aspires without limit to ever greater and better things ...*

I push his hand away and close the book, somewhere in the back of my mind annoyed at myself for having shown so much interest in something that proves so much weakness. I dig in my bag for the explanatory text to spread out to distract him from what he found, all the while fighting the desire to throw open *History* instead and reread every single note I'd ever written and every one I'd written back, made new in the light of being known.

He nudges me in the side, then slides a book into my lap. Blue ink runs a single, delicate line beneath only one line on the open page. The same one as mine.

My breath hitches. He pulls the book back, leaving me staring at my own lap. Somehow, I feel even more exposed than before. I want to ask him if those lines clung to him the way they did to me, if there was an instant kinship with someone four hundred years dead, someone brilliant, someone who changed the world of thinkers to come after them and yet when he looked in on himself all he could see were the missing pieces.

No one looks at a puzzle with missing pieces and says *What a beautiful picture*. They stare at the holes, the "should've beens" and "could've beens" and "if onlys" that someone lost and swept under the rug, and say *What a shame*.

For once, Henry isn't smiling. His dark eyes meet mine, searching one and then the other the same exact way I know I'm doing to him. Both of us, looking for something we refuse to say.

His cursive on that note flowed more freely than my vandal's print, unhindered and loose where the words written in the margins are rushed, pressed in, struggling to breathe. The same way the boy in front of me laughs at the things everyone else fears—while he stares down terrors no one else can even see. Except me.

I know you, his eyes whisper.

It's him. My vandal. It has to be him.

Glass rattling in a loose pane tears my attention away from his face. Graves stands on the window seat, his hands still braced on top of the pane. He sits back down, picking up his book again without even glancing over at us.

It was enough. When I look back, Henry is looking down at his book again.

He has to know the other writer is me—the way he underlined that, the way he looked at me. He was sitting right beside me when I opened up *History*. He knows. As soon as I gave him an opening, he closed the distance between us to match the way there's never, ever been anything hidden in those margins.

"I'm bored," he says, closing his book.

How long has he known?

"The two enemies of human happiness are pain and boredom," Graves says, the words mumbled, half thought.

"That makes you a natural disaster," Baz says, grinning over the top of the chair.

Graves says, "An act of god."

Henry leans back in his chair, stretching his hands up and back. His shirt slides up, revealing a strip of tawny skin just above his waistband. "Enough. Whether we pass or fail, what does it matter?"

A deep, aching need to have it all out in the open flares inside me. I can't lose this. If the me I've written on those pages disappears, no one ever knowing her again, I will break. But I still don't know if he was part of Sam's death. Everything I've found points to Graves, but nothing I've found proves *anything*.

Except this. Maybe this means I can trust Henry. Maybe he's not involved—someone who is as honest as my vandal couldn't possibly be—

No. No more weakness. None of this is mine. Not even our notes. I was

never, ever here to become one of them. “You’re just going to tell college admissions that you’ve made your own truth when it comes to your grades.” I challenge him under my breath. Nothing will change.

Everything has changed.

He cocks his head at me. “Jamie, you are a wonder. I forget that not everyone has legacy.”

Bitterness sears across the bridge we’d built between us. Of course, they didn’t even have to apply for college. Life is a waltz with the tune perfectly measured to their strides no matter how slowly they spin. I flex my hand, trying not to snap the pencil I’m holding in half, trying not to think about the fact that my life plans for next year involved being a waitress in Nashville with a boy who’s dead. “Or not everyone chooses to rely on Daddy’s money.”

Graves says, “Easy to do when Daddy doesn’t have any.” He tucks his destroyed book onto one of the shelves and jumps down off the window seat. “Let’s go. I need to drink enough to forget.”

The pencil snaps. I set its two halves down and make a show of running my finger down my book’s index even though I’ve read nothing on it.

Graves can’t be allowed to forget *anything* he’s done.

He jerks his chin at Baz. She stands eagerly, tossing her books onto the table in front of me.

“Coming?” Henry asks me. “I have a feeling you, bored, would absolutely be a natural disaster. We should avoid that ... at all costs.” He winks and wraps his arm around Graves’s neck, pulling him from Baz to himself so easily. Baz stands alone in the doorway. Rejection flashes across her face—there, then gone as she catches me watching. She smiles for me, and it’s real.

I take a deep breath and close my book. “Wouldn’t miss it.”

She takes my hand. The boys leave, but Baz holds me back, letting the space between us and them grow. Henry looks over Graves’s shoulder at me. One quick glance, that’s all—but every move he makes, every word he writes, has purpose. Graves alone isn’t enough for him. Maybe he was once, but he isn’t anymore.

Everything has changed, that look says.

Baz pulls my attention back. “I was wrong when I read for you. If I had the full deck, it would’ve been different. Not a two of swords. This is what should’ve come up.” She pulls the pen from behind her ear and sketches a

small, lopsided heart on the curve of my wrist. “It’s been better with you here.”

“I’m sure it was fine before,” I lie to her.

It tickles as she colors the heart in with jagged, overeager strokes. I can tell by the way she won’t meet my eyes, focusing on her art only to still create a hectic mess, that she’s nervous. “Do you like Henry?”

Is she nervous about asking me—or my answer? I open my mouth to reassure her, but she talks over me.

“I don’t need to know if you don’t want to tell me. But I thought—earlier, when he was studying with you—it seemed like you might. And I know Henry likes you.”

I don’t know what to say. If she was just asking about the boy who writes me marginalia, the answer would be easier. But asking if I like Henry is the same as asking if I like a pair of new jeans. I don’t know. I haven’t worn them in yet. Do I like him? Or just the idea of him?

Her voice gets smaller. “Please be careful.”

“Baz?” I pull on my hand. She doesn’t let go.

“I don’t want you to walk into something with him without knowing the truth. He gets so lost sometimes. We all do. But the ways Henry tries to find himself are dangerous. And if you’re ever not comfortable, I want you to know that I’m here.”

My heart is racing. “What do you mean, dangerous?”

The heart is completely colored in. She keeps tracing. Around and around and around. “Do you remember what I told you about mirrors?”

“Yes.” That anything can be a window, but a mirror can be a door. “But I don’t understand—”

“He’s hurting, Jamie, and he’s looking for something, anything to help him, but ... I’m afraid of who he’s asking.”

Down the hall, Graves laughs. My voice is barely a whisper. “Who?”

She lets my hand slip away. “You can help him. You’re different.”

That’s how Henry would answer me, not Baz. “Who is he asking?” She looks past me, back into the library. I catch her hand, but her stare doesn’t shift. “Baz?” I turn around. There’s no one there. “*Basile*, who?”

“But not that different.” Her eyes are shining. “It’s like we’re all drowning, and you’re burning.”

She’s scaring me. I force myself to laugh. “Graves seems like he can

breathe underwater just fine.”

Finally, she looks at me. I’m so worried that it’s because I said Graves’s name, not because she trusts me. “He’s screaming. It looks a lot like breathing, but someday he’ll remember he needs to inhale, too.”

Maybe none of us will. Maybe all of us will end this screaming.

CHAPTER 21

Where all is but dream, reasoning and arguments are of no use, truth and knowledge nothing.

—John Locke

I am always afraid that none of this is real

The Tower is quiet except for the sound of my shower. The other three are still in Baz and Henry's common room, arranged picturesquely with cards and drinks and existential crises. I couldn't take one more minute of trying to find words and failing, choked by the twin pressures of Baz's warnings and Henry's words scrawled between the lines of *The History of Philosophy*. I left a few hours ago to stand beside the stream with my arms tucked inside my sleeves. No one rose from the dead to give me guidance. My tangles are mine, and mine alone.

Now steam fills the bathroom, fogging all the mirrors. I let my towel fall and then step into the bathtub. The hot water against my freezing skin makes me gasp. I turn toward the flow, raise my chin, let it wash over me with a long, shuddering breath. The shower is the only sound and sense in the room. In this cocoon, if I close my eyes, I'm gone.

Nashville had been the plan, because Sam refused to go farther than what he could handle for a weekend drive home. Each apartment in our price range had peeling paint and wobbly-looking banisters on the stairs leading up to them. We could fit two beds, one pushed to the wall opposite the TV and the other sticking out to block half of the bathroom door. The best one had a kitchenette with a small window covered in frosted glass and a little ledge where I'd pile books beneath the mint plant hanging from the empty curtain rod.

I clutch the ring hanging from my neck. Even without him, I can still probably afford the first month's rent once I pawn this. The diamonds aren't

big, but it's pure silver. And I don't have to go to Nashville. I could go somewhere cheaper if I needed to. I could leave tonight. I don't have to do any of this. I want to. For ... Sam.

Nothing has changed.

I close my eyes more tightly and turn off the water. Too many shower thoughts.

"Enough, Henry."

My eyes shoot open. I stand still as stone.

Sam is gone and Graves is back. Henry, too. The bathroom door slams open—I locked the hall door, but not this one. I shrink back inside the curtain, about to shout at whichever of them just came in. I stop myself. He's rummaging in the towels, not saying anything to me even though water still drips from the showerhead and the mirrors are covered in steam. Maybe he doesn't realize I'm still here. Maybe I can use that. After all, if he finds me, it would be so, so easy to claim I was afraid of being seen and didn't know what to say.

Until then, I can listen.

Water drips quietly from my fingertips. Whichever of them is in here with me turns on the sink, running water over something that mutes the sound.

"Adrian Hargraves, finally found someone who looks at you like you're ugly." It's Henry. His words are a tumble of shallow breaths and slurred consonants. He sounds like he's in pain, not just drunk. That must be why he hasn't noticed me. The water turns off. "Does it feel good? Does it give you tingles all up and down your chest?"

He leaves, the door hanging open after him. I steal a glance through the crack between the shower curtain and the wall. Graves slumps against the closet door, his hands braced on his knees. His back arches, heaving with each labored breath. His shirt is soaked with sweat. His shoes are smeared with grass and mud. Henry throws the sopping wet towel at his face. He snatches it and looks up; I step back behind the curtain.

The floorboards creak, loose and groaning right in front of the closet.

"I said, *enough*."

My body hums with the need to get out, get back to my room, and get the clothes I left lying on my bed. But even more, I want to listen. The shifting of the shower curtain sounds loud as a freight train to me as I push my hand through and slowly pull my towel toward myself.

“It’s not because she likes you.” Henry’s words are heated, meant to scald. “She doesn’t like you, Graves. She’s afraid of you.”

Graves’s answer is more exhale than laugh. “Jamie isn’t afraid of anything.”

Jamie. Me. They’re talking about me.

“But you are.” Whispered words. Chosen words, each placed careful as scalpel cuts. “Aren’t you, Graves?”

The moment catches. None of us move; I don’t think any of us can move. The silence grows too quickly, feeding off Henry’s careful question, filling every inch of space. My towel dangles from my fingertips; water snakes chill down my legs.

“You know me,” Graves says, and nothing more.

“Do I?” Henry asks, pressing the wound open, probing now.

The floorboards creak again as one of them moves closer to the other. I wrap the towel around my body and step out of the tub, the movements rushed but quiet. A few more steps, and I’m at the door to his room. This won’t last long—the words and the silences are too bright with pain. One of them is about to explode, and I want to see it.

“How far will you go,” Henry whispers. “As far as I ask? As far as ... Sam?”

I don’t even dare to breathe. Finally, finally.

They stand in the center of the room. Graves is shirtless, his hands fists at his sides. Henry’s draped over his shoulder, toying with him. “Such a kind boy,” he says. His lips barely part as he speaks. The flush on his cheeks is gone, leaving a hollow honeysuckle tinge. “That didn’t go very well for him, did it?”

I want to scream. I need more. They’re dancing around what happened, all the spaces in this conversation filled with things they know and I don’t. I’m trapped in this tiny bathroom, silent and shivering, when all I want to do is rush out there and force the truth out of them. I press my hand against the doorframe, as close as possible to where they stand. *Please. Please tell me what happened.*

Graves’s neck twists like he wants away but can’t bear to actually push Henry back. Henry leans into the space he made, haunting him. “Well, if you don’t want to, all that’s left is Baz.”

Everything breaks at once. Graves’s head whips up. His arm jams into

Henry's stomach, breaking him in two. He shoves. Henry's shoulders slam against the closet door, Graves one breath behind him, fist raised. I see it: Henry's face, bruised and broken. Blood dripping from his nose. The smile, just as wide, just as fake, but with teeth rimmed in red.

The fist slams into the wood beside Henry's head. The door splinters. Henry's laugh is strange, the low sound of coals simmering in the heart of a fire.

"You're beautiful," Henry says. He holds Graves's face in his hands. The lines of Graves's neck are so tense it looks like, if Henry twists even a little, it'll snap. "Never leave."

Graves pulls back his fist. The closet door creaks, protesting. He sways, and I know why. I've stood this close to Henry, too. I know what his earth feels like right now.

I raise my eyes and ask for the earth to open wide and swallow both of them whole.

"I need you," Henry says, and it sounds like *Forgive me*.

"I'm not going anywhere," Graves says. Rough. Forced. Real.

Henry's hand finds Graves's shoulder, his fingers arced tight and digging into Graves's skin.

"I'm not," Graves says, angry again. But this is a different anger. It's a welling up to burst the dam, flood the world just to bury you beneath it and make you listen kind of anger. It's him pushing Henry back, not to hurt, not to stop, but to make enough space for Henry to look him in the eye.

It's Henry who breaks it off. He holds Graves by the wrist, tracing the bones beneath the skin. His eyes are wide and glassy. "I always know when you're lying to me."

Graves shakes off his grip. He walks back, out of my view. I should leave. Now. Go back to my room and pretend I was in there this entire time. But I need to hear what Graves is going to say. I need to see what he does next. My heart is made of paper, and this day is slowly shredding it.

"Then why would I lie," he finally says, and his voice is far, far too close.

The door opens.

He's standing in front of me wearing nothing but a pair of red boxers and a towel slung over his shoulder. His hand flexes at his side. Open, then closed, then open again, drawing my eyes down his unmarred, broad chest. I cross my arms over my heart, vividly aware that there's nothing beneath my

towel. I don't meet his eyes. I don't want to see what's in them. If I do, and they match this heat that's filling mine—

“Jamie,” he says, his voice thick.

The paper in my chest burns.

In the room behind him, Henry slumps backward against the closet. “I can't ... feel—”

Graves whips around. Runs. He catches Henry before he falls to the ground, picking him up easily, cradling the taller boy against his chest. Henry's eyes roll back in his head. His cheeks have lost all their color, leaving nothing behind but pallor and shadows. If I didn't just hear his voice, I'd think he was gone.

“What's wrong with him?” I ask, though I don't follow him into the room.

Graves's eyes meet mine. He looks scared. “He's fine.” He scrapes the bedroom door open with a foot and gently works his way through, shifting his grip to hold Henry's head near. The door closes behind them with a *click*.

CHAPTER 22

I tug a sweatshirt over my head and pull on running shorts. In the hall, a door slams. Footsteps hurry past. I listen carefully, making sure, but everything stays quiet.

Henry knows *everything*. I need to get to him while he's weak, disoriented, and alone. Not able to play the usual mind games with me. I'll make him tell me what he meant about Graves going as far as Sam, and exactly what they're both hiding. I'll make him be as honest in person as he is in the margins.

I dig my phone out of my drawer and step into the empty hallway. Henry and Baz's suite stands open, the living area empty. Light shines from beneath Baz's bedroom door; Henry's, on the opposite side, is dark.

Silently, I walk toward Henry's bedroom, my eyes on the strip of light beneath Baz's door, watching for shadows. Nothing moves. I slip into his room.

Inside is dark, a blanket thrown over the window to shut out the moon's pale eye. I close the door behind me and turn on my phone flashlight, half hiding the light between my fingers to keep it from showing in the living room. I can't let anyone interrupt us.

My phone lights the room in slits of white and black. Henry lies flat and still on top of the bed. It feels wrong to speak, but more wrong to stay silent. All I need is a recorded statement—not enough to stand up in court, just enough to get Headmistress Delgado in here, finally asking the right questions. "It's me."

He doesn't move.

I cross to the bed. The shadows move with me, skittering along the walls. He's lying on his back, one arm thrown across his chest, the other at his side, eyes open. Awake, then, and just playing games with me. "Graves sent me."

The light shines on his face. He doesn't flinch or blink, just remains lying

there, staring at the ceiling while his pupils shrink, running from the light. His body is here, but it's empty.

I curse. Sit beside him on the bed. Set my phone near his shoulder so the light shines up, casting the room in shades of gray. I shake his shoulder; his head slips lower on the pillow without even a blink. My fingers search for a pulse.

Not once do I let myself say his name.

This isn't Sam. Just a boy who likes to write in books.

His pulse is there, but faint. I throw his hand back to the bed, where it hangs limp off the side. Graves didn't do this to him—otherwise why would he have run to help him? *If he didn't, then where is he now?* my thoughts whisper, cold and quiet.

But the way Henry looks isn't natural. They said drugs killed Sam. I never wanted to believe he took them willingly—though the chances are good that drugs are what's killing Henry now, too. I stand and walk quickly to the desk and open the top drawer, shoving the things in it side to side before closing it and opening the one below, and the one below that, to find his stash. Nothing but books, pens, a flask, and two packs of cigarettes, even though I've never seen him smoke.

Open closet, jackets hanging in rank and file, marching toward empty bottles arranged like the books on the desk. His dresser has only a photograph of a slender boy with ink-black hair standing in front of a man and a woman with smooth cheeks and straight lips, an older woman in an Adirondack chair at their side.

Beneath him, the bed is perfectly made, so perfect it looks like it has never been slept in. His drawers are clean, the floor of his closet, the top shelf above his jackets, the pockets of the jacket on the back of the door. No drugs, no signs of use, nothing but a life so sterile it doesn't feel lived. Uniform, books, and coping mechanisms, things that could belong to any high school senior in any private school across the country. It isn't just Henry's body that's empty. It's his life.

The light nearly blinds me when I stand over him again, my eyes staring into his and nothing looking back. His chest is still. His lips aren't blue. Yet. I stand there, watching the rise and fall of his chest grow slower and slower. It starts to stagger, little gasping hitches.

I could make sure his heart keeps beating. Yell for help. But if I do, his

world will wind back up into the blazing light of privilege and this ugly moment in the darkness will be nothing but an accident. Near death laughed off as easily as a stubbed toe.

He's the one at their center. All their secrets hide inside this boy's mind. If I don't, if I watch him die, I might never know the truth about what happened to Sam.

But if I do, am I doing it for the truth about Sam ... or for myself?

None of this is mine.

What do I do?

Sam, what do I do?

I sit and cross my hands over his heart. They won't move. All it takes is one two three and on, pressing down like I want to break his ribs four five six keep it steady, stayin' alive, ah ah ah ah stayin' alive that's what I'm supposed to do, but this dying boy is Sam's. If I don't, if he dies, maybe it won't matter which of them did it.

Life for life.

All I have to do is press down. It doesn't matter if I can't or won't—I'm not. I'm watching his lips, waiting for them to turn blue, my hands frozen over his heart. My eyes are just as wide as his but only his are empty and no one knows I'm here. How long does it take someone to die?

I lean forward, lean in, push down, think about what it would feel like for bone to hit the heart, not to save him but to feel when it stops—and Henry blinks.

My hands fly back to my side. A gasp racks his chest. His back arches, rising up off the bed, his eyes wide and full of sudden, desperate fear. I try to step back, but his hand lashes out, catching on my necklace. The chain snaps. The ring falls onto his chest. I lunge for it—*my way out*—and just as my fingers close around it, he latches on to my wrist.

"It's okay—" I start to soothe him, but just as quickly his face changes. Clenched teeth part around a languid breath. Our eyes meet, and the look in his throws heat into my cheeks. His eyes darken; his chin lifts, baring his throat. He runs his hand along his throat, fingers loose and gentle until they reach his jaw. Then they arc, digging into his mouth while his face caves in around something that looks a lot like shame.

What is going on? Fear, lust, shame, smashing one after the other across his face. Is he mocking me? Was he awake this whole time, watching me

wrestle with myself?

Tighter, his grip on my wrist is getting tighter. “Let go,” I say. I slip the ring into my free palm and stuff it in my pocket.

He rolls on his side. His shoulders heave, his hand trembling so much I feel my own shaking. Nothing about this is natural. I reach across him, snatching my phone and shining the light directly in his eyes. “Let. Go.”

His other hand drops from his face. Red half-moons score the side of his jaw. His face is stone—jaw, lips, eyes, brows all frozen in a solid sheet of rage. I’ve never seen someone burn like this before. It drives a spike of fear right into the base of my throat.

He knows. Somehow, he knows that I would’ve sat beside him, my hands on his heart, his life tucked beneath them, and I would’ve watched it slip away. I would’ve pressed down just far enough to feel when the beating stopped. And I would’ve waited for the door to open, for Graves to walk in, so that I could see what grief looks like on him.

I’m a monster, just like him.

If he’s going to kill me, I’m getting it on video. I tap the screen of my phone, then start to record. But just as quickly as it came, the rage disappears. He collapses back on the bed, dragging my hand with him, spreading my fingers one by one across his chest. I can still see his face, see his eyes searching the darkness around us, bright with delight like he’s feeling everything, absolutely everything at once. Pink flushes his cheeks—not the moth-eaten pink of a fever anymore, but a summertime flush. Each breath fills his chest to bursting. There isn’t enough air, enough space, enough *life* for him. He takes one full lip between his teeth and bites down, drawing blood, licking it away. Henry isn’t empty anymore. He’s full and boiling over. He starts to hum beneath his breath.

Now. The camera’s already running. I may be a monster, but I’m a monster for Sam. And that makes all the difference in the world. “Henry, I need you to tell me the truth about something. None of your games.”

His grip finally loosens. I snatch my wrist back, rubbing away the pain. His lips spread in a smile that wants to split his face in half. “I can’t do that,” he says. “Everything’s a game.”

Even delirious, he’s impossible. “Truth or dare?”

Henry lays his hand on top of mine. Slowly, he draws one leg up. A shiver courses through his body. This time, when I look at his face, I see lines

I know intimately: indrawn brows, curled upper lip, eyes bolted tightly against the sting of tears. First, there was fear, lust, shame, rage, delight, and finally now a deep, aching, impossible loss.

He forces his answer out with a ragged exhale. “Dare.”

I turn my hand over beneath his. His palm is burning hot. I lace my fingers with his, curling them tight so that neither of us will feel them tremble. “The ghost we can both see”—*Tell me the truth, Henry, tell me the truth*—“I dare you to tell me what really happened to him.”

I’m not playing by the rules, but he never does, either. It’s the right question. I can see it when his eyes meet mine, and they’re clear. This is the truth he’s been waiting to tell me.

Each word, heartless and clear as diamonds, placed carefully by a master jeweler.

“Adrian Hargraves killed him.”

PART THREE

Although I may desire objects that are wrong, and even that never existed, it is still true that I desire them.

—René Descartes, “Third Meditation”

Mirrors are light and shadow tangled together, haunting sight. Hang them on the wall where they're easy to turn from; they will wait, patiently, for a forgetful moment. Run from them, avoiding rooms where they hang, and they will find life in glass. In windows. In car doors and curved spoons and the long, sleek blade of a knife. In the frozen ice where a stream is caught, eddying among the boulders.

Adrian cannot run from them, no matter how hard he tries.

His grip slips as he raises the mirror toward its spot on the hearth; it starts to fall. He curses. Wraps his arms around it and clutches it to his chest. He stumbles back beneath its weight. A candle snaps in two under his heel.

For a moment, he doesn't move. Just stands in the darkness listening to his heart thunder. Then, slowly, each bending joint and shifting muscle warily watched, he lays it against the table. He checks the fragments with his fingertip to make sure each is still holding. They shred the tip; he doesn't notice. There are no new cracks. No loose shards.

“I'm sorry,” he whispers, talking to the one inside. He means today. He means a week ago. He means every moment he has ever lived. There are so, so many things he never should have done.

The mirror doesn't answer.

Reverently, Adrian lifts it from the table. He stares into the glass, watching himself carefully as he walks to the hearth and lifts it up into place. A small patch of blood dulls the gilt where his finger rested. He doesn't notice as he steps back. All he sees is empty glass.

For now.

CHAPTER 23

I am going to *love* breaking Graves.

I'm standing in my hoodie on the curb of the parking lot behind the administration building by the sign that says RESERVED FOR HEADMISTRESS. My mother's ring is clutched inside one palm, my phone in the other, my future held in both. The sun is dying to rise. I'm almost done. It's almost over.

She'll believe me. She wanted Baz away from them. I did her one better, giving her a way to not just free her daughter but lock up one of the boys and expel the other for hiding evidence and aiding a murderer. Graves will never forgive me, and that's a good thing. Henry, though ...

I can't go back. I don't know how to be that person anymore

He wants everything to change. He said so himself.

He told me the truth in real life just like he always has on our pages. Maybe when it's all settled, when he's found a new path and Baz has graduated and Graves is far in the past for all of us, I'll find a way to tell him who I really am. Maybe he and Baz will want to come visit me in Nashville. Maybe I'm delusional and haven't slept, high on the sound of listening to those four words play on my phone all night long. *Adrian Hargraves killed him*. I was not wrong.

A white Cadillac drives slowly up the curving lane to the parking lot. Its lights are still on, their brightness proving just how much the dark still lingers. She parks in front of me. I don't step out of the glare.

I watch as she leans into her back seat and pulls out an oversize leather purse and a silver water bottle. I wonder where she lives, close enough to drive but still far enough that Baz prefers to board instead of stay at home. Her door shuts softly. She walks right past me with nothing but a nod.

I stare at her car for moment, recalibrating. Then spin and chase her down. "Headmistress, I need to talk to you."

She does not stop. “Good morning, Miss Vane. The office opens in an hour. You can make an appointment with Hobbins. I believe she still holds office hours just before lunch.” Her heels are loud and everything else is quiet. She adjusts her scarf tighter. My feet buzz with pins and needles. The phone is in my hand.

“It can’t wait until lunch.”

Annoyance flickers at the bow of her garnet-colored lips. This isn’t the way it’s supposed to go. I can’t give up. I’m interrupting her routine, throwing her off just as much as she’s throwing me. She will listen to me.

“I appreciate that you are not used to our structures here, but—”

“Your daughter is in danger.”

She stops.

I knew she would listen. “Please, Headmistress. I’ve done as you asked, and I’ve found something you need to hear.”

Her foot taps. Once. Twice. She looks me over, seeing everything I didn’t bother to hide. I haven’t slept. I haven’t showered. I’m still wearing the sweatshirt and pants from last night. She will believe that what I’ve found is important, and she’s going to take me seriously.

“Inside,” she says.



I follow her into the administration building. She locks the doors behind us. We walk down the hall and to the elevator. The doors shut. We stand side by side. The join at the center divides our reflections. She’s taller and more polished than me, especially this morning, but our shoulders hold the same strict strength.

“Speak,” Delgado says.

I startle. I thought we would go to her office and sit the way we had last time. “Now?”

“You said it referenced my daughter.” There are no cameras in this elevator. No maybe-empty offices where other employees with building keys may or may not be listening in. Hope spikes harder than ever now—Delgado is prepared for something she wouldn’t want overheard or recorded. I was right to come to her first.

“I did as you asked. Your daughter is wonderful—”

“The point, Miss Vane. I do not need flattering about genetic happenstance.”

“—but,” I say slowly, my own little dig back at her for interrupting me, letting her sit in the caveat, “you were right that her friends are not. I didn’t mean to get close to them, but it was hard not to—if I was also going to get close to Basile.”

The point, her arched brow says.

I open my phone.

Each tap I make toward opening the video feels like it takes forever, with her watching me. I scroll past Henry’s strange attacks to where his face stands out lurid against the nighttime background. Loss drags his features low.

Everything changes, right here, right now, all because of me.

Her raised eyebrow drops. I can’t read what she’s thinking, but she doesn’t look entirely pleased to see this boy’s face on my screen. I don’t blame her. Henry rarely brings easy things. I take a deep breath, hoping she won’t write me off the way she has him once she hears the question I asked to get the truth.

“Henry told me he could see ghosts.” Her look flattens. I was right to worry. I rush on. “I knew it wasn’t true, of course, but I thought maybe he was trying to hint at something else. There’s been so many deaths this year. I ... things he’s said, and others, made me wonder...”

“A tragedy is not something for idle speculation, Miss Vane.” Her tone is clipped. “The Silvens and Houcks deserve your respect for their mourning, not your gossip.”

“And the Bullvanes.”

My knowing his last name sets her back a bit. Good—I need more room to get this conversation where it needs to go.

“You’re very interested in our former staff,” she says.

I can’t tell her why. There’s still no world in which Jamie Vane exists long enough to graduate from Huntsworth. She has to disappear, and Marin James can’t bear the burden of her tuition payment when she does. Something tells me that even if this woman forgives me everything else, she won’t forgive my tuition.

“I told you, I was going along with hints Henry was leaving me. He took me, Basile, and Graves—Hargraves—to the place where that security guard

died. He and Hargraves knew things no one should know if they hadn't seen them. And the way he talked about that boy, he seemed like he really believed that he was haunted by him. I think he wanted to mess with me, that was all, so I went along with it. I figured the closer I was to him, the more Baz—Basile—would believe me when I told her she needed to cut him out. But last night he"—I pause, floundering as I pick through the truth to make it palatable—"wasn't feeling well. I said what I needed to, to get him to tell me what really happened to Sam Bullvane."

She has to believe me.

I push play. I hear my own voice speaking first. *The ghost we can both see ... I dare you to tell me what really happened to him.*

The phone is a safer place to look than her. I know what she's seeing, but I want to watch it again, to try to see it through her eyes. He speaks simply. He doesn't look drunk, doesn't slur, doesn't smile or act in any way like he's telling a joke. Then he speaks.

Adrian Hargraves killed him.

She has to believe me.

The video ends. I lock the screen. She doesn't say anything. I fill the silence. "I can send you the video if you give me your email. I know it won't hold up in court, but I'm not—that's not—I'm just worried about Basile. And myself. If Henry's right, and Hargraves did do something, then he's a danger to her. To the entire student body."

I finally look up. She's staring at me, a look of horror on her face that quickly snaps into impatience when our eyes meet. She believes me. She doesn't want to, but she can't help it. I knew this would work. "I knew you would listen."

She presses the button for the third floor.

"There's a town just a few minutes away. There's a sheriff there." One who wouldn't listen to me, but he will listen to you, Headmistress. I can't stop turning the phone over and over in my hands. It's finally happening. She'll force Barron to see what he was too lazy to see earlier, and it will all fall into place. Henry wants the truth out. Baz will, too. "If you took the video to him, he could investigate. It wouldn't even have to be public—"

"If my daughter is in danger from anyone, it may well be you."

The doors open. Our reflections part, then disappear.

"He confessed—"

“He is clearly in an altered state of mind and you are playing a *children’s game* about ghosts.” She pulls down on her suit jacket. “I asked you to befriend her, in the hopes she would finally have someone rational to ground her. Instead, I find that I have let yet another raving lunatic into her circle.”

She steps out of the elevator.

“I regret giving your mother two weeks to sort out your overdue payments. However, my word, once set, is something of great importance. She may have her two weeks—though I am beginning to doubt she will pay at all, given the progeny she sent me to fix—but you will lose yours.”

I am not mad.

“I am assigning you detention, from the end of your last class until curfew on a daily basis. Dinner will be brought to you in Schneider Cabin, where you will serve your detention and then report to your dorm at curfew. I trust you to spend the evening hours in ways productive to your own mental health.”

“And what am I supposed to tell Baz?” I demand, pushing the lever to hold the door open. “That her mother would rather protect Huntsworth’s majestic ass than remove a murderer from her midst?”

“You will tell Basile *nothing* except the truth: that you and Mr. Wu have overactive imaginations and should not be trusted.”

The elevator bell starts going off.

“Good day, Miss Vane.”

The door closes.

The reflection shows me the way she saw me. The fire’s gone from my eyes. My hair is matted with sleeplessness, cheeks chapped with cold, phone hanging loose from two limp fingers. I scrub my fingers through my listless curls restlessly, trying to work out the shattered feeling building in my chest.

I know the truth. But that doesn’t matter if no one else believes me. Not my dad, not Faye, not Barron or anyone in Amberdeen, and not Headmistress Delgado. Only Henry ... and Graves.

A ragged sob escapes me. I bite down on it. I’ve been playing this game by normal, fair, just, sane rules and all it’s done is grind me into the dirt. I need to play the way Henry does and let Jamie, the Huntsworth girl, fully take over.

Slap.

My face cracks to the side. My hand and cheek sting. I hit myself again,

and then again, until the pain is the only thing I feel. I'll be damned if I'm going to cry inside this building. I wipe a bead of blood from the split in my lip. This time, when I meet my eyes, something kindles inside them.

No more hiding. No more running from the truth.

"I'm not mad," I say to the girl in the reflection.

I'm free.

CHAPTER 24

When I get back, the fire in the common room is almost out. The curtains are all still pulled. A lone boy lies collapsed on one of the sofas, his uniform jacket covering his face. The only light is the weak firelight. It fades to nothing as the door to the Tower's stairs closes behind me. There are no windows in this hall, no break from the dark. A floorboard above my head creaks, then another. My head jerks up. Someone other than me is already awake.

I climb the stairs, barely making any noise. I want it to be Graves who's awake. I want the first face I see to be his.

The door to our dorm opens with a creak. The living room is dark, our fireplace cold. His cardigan still hangs from the back of the chair. His bedroom is locked. I sit and pull the sweater into my lap, crumpling it between my hands. One arm is torn. Mud stains the side. A button is missing. *Snap*. I pull off another. It rolls beneath the chair. I want him to wake up, thinking he got away with it. *Snap*. I picture him stretching his arms. Getting dressed. Planning what he's going to do that day. *Snap*. Walking out that door and seeing me.

Snap. The last button falls to the ground. I wrap the cardigan around my shoulders. It smells like gasoline. "I know what you did," I whisper.

The sun comes up, streaming through my window. It makes its way, inch by inch, across the battered red rug covering the wood floor. My mind replays, move by move, the scene at the stream, but it's Sam on the ground and Graves kneeling on his back. Noises across the hall announce when Baz and Henry wake, but the room behind me stays silent. Their common room door opens and closes. Baz makes a comment about pancakes and Henry answers *coffee*. The hall empties. My stomach growls. He still sleeps.

I haven't slept. I don't need it; I'm not even tired. But I am done waiting on Graves. I stand and push open the door to his room. Morning light streams

in through the window. It's not a body on the bed. It's a pile of sweatshirts. A tangled blanket.

Frustration slams my jaw tight, my hands slam his door shut, then I'm down the hall, down the stairs where that boy is gone from the couch—it wasn't him, I know his frame, his bulk, that body was too slender at the hips—and the dining hall doors are wide open, the space blazing with light and chatter. Henry and Baz stand in line, her plate full of steaming pancakes, him with a piece of toast and a cup of black coffee—I run down the main hall, through the East Wing, to the library. He isn't there. He can't just disappear. Not like this. Not before I've had my turn. I'm checking the study rooms down a back hall, empty empty empty empty, about to leave when I see a flash of white in the woods through the window beside me. It darts through the trees, running like a winter demon.

I know who runs like that.

The next moment, I'm through the dining hall and out the back door, a shout that might have been from Baz and might have been my imagination chasing me. I scan the woods for that slash of white. But Killary's shadow and the steep mountain slope join hands to block out the sun. The white multiplies, becoming any number of brilliant sunspots cast between the branches.

Wind and winter and a sudden fear that I'm not going to find him make my steps falter. Henry might have told him. Or he heard us. He saw me waiting for Delgado. He knows. He knows. He ran, and I'll never get what I need from him. I cross my arms over my chest and walk the rest of the way across the soccer field. Not once do my eyes leave the forest. The closer I get to the woods, the deeper and colder the shadows grow. I don't see the white slash anymore.

"Graves!" I shout. The wind throws my hair in my face. My teeth chatter. It was him I saw out the window. It had to be him.

I stumble to a stop at the edge of the field. The stream runs just a few feet in front of me. I can't hear it over the wind. Branches clack and moan. The sun shifts behind a cloud. I see the white. I see *him*, hurling himself through the trees, his arms pounding and his teeth bared, running down the hill trail. Toward me.

I trace the path ahead of him, tracking it to where it comes out of the woods. A few flat stones make an almost bridge from the trail's end across

the water. I stop on this side of the stream. A moment later Graves comes out of the woods. He sees me. His run slows to a walk. He stops across the stream from me.

I know what you did.

His breath steams white in the cold, puff after puff coming from his heaving chest. Small cuts from low-hanging branches and thick brambles score the underside of his left arm. He shifts, bouncing foot to foot, so unbearably *alive* while I stand frozen and still across from him, only his sweater moving, billowing around me in the wind.

Three hundred yards down the water's course and we'd find the spot he held Sam's face beneath this shallow stream. If ghosts were real, my cousin would pull a Duncan and rise from the water to point his finger in Graves's guilty face, but the stream is just a fast-moving body of water, my mind is just my own, and the boy in front of me is just a murderer.

He doesn't say a word, but eventually, his movement slows. He could step to the side and jump across, ignoring my presence the way everyone else ignores my truths. He doesn't. It's almost like he knows exactly why I'm here and isn't afraid at all.

"I talked to Henry last night."

You killed him.

His hands flex at his sides. I know he wants to know what Henry said to me. He always does. But he doesn't ask. He just nods, and then leaps over the stream, landing with a huff of breath at my side. I grab him before he can walk away from me. His arm is hot and slick and solid.

"The ghost he's seeing. Sam Bullvane."

He tenses. I wait for him to pull away, my nails digging blood out of his skin.

He doesn't. He turns and looks at me. There's nothing behind his eyes at all. No regret. No fear. No anger, nothing, not even the flush of a runner's high I'd seen only seconds ago. He already knows what I'm about to say and feels *nothing*. I hate him more in this moment than I've ever hated him before. I drop his arm. I don't want to touch him.

"His death wasn't an accident, was it?" Even if everyone else thinks Henry Wu is lying to me, Graves and I both know he isn't and I will haunt him with that until he breaks beneath his guilt and gives me justice, one way or the other. But I need to hear it from him. I *want* to hear him damn himself.

The wind steals each cloud of breath, until it looks like neither of us are breathing at all. I can't stop shaking.

His eyes drop to my lips, like they're waiting for me to ask the question again. I fist my hands inside his sweater's sleeves. Then he leans in, and for just a moment I think I'm wrong and he's waiting for something very, very different. I raise my hand to push him away but though his shirt is freezing and wet, the skin beneath is hot, and I jerk my hand back. The distance between us disappears.

His mouth goes to my ear, not my lips. Close enough that even the greedy winter wind can't steal this whispered word.

"No."

CHAPTER 25

Partway through my first assigned detention, Henry walks in wearing a half-buttoned dress shirt and a pair of slacks. He stumbles slightly, off-center with alcohol, beaming like an angel who just found out the fastest way to hell is very, very fun.

Adrian Hargraves killed him. I'm never going to forget the way those words sounded in his mouth.

"You look lonely." He points at me. The shadows beneath his eyes have disappeared, like in the hours since I've seen him he's gained a week of sleep. Delgado must have sentenced him, too, for his role in what she is desperate to think is all an elaborate prank. But if that's the case, then he knows I went to her. He knows I told her about the confession.

I don't think he would have told me if he didn't want me to do something. Henry is always, always pushing us to act, not just think. Still, anxiety laces itself to my spine. I shuffle the English papers scattered across my desk and glance at the professor at the front of the class, a white-haired man with small rectangular glasses and no apparent desire for me to know his name.

"Mr. Wu, you're staying for...?" the teacher says, peering over the tops of his lenses.

"Miss Vane."

The teacher taps his fingers on the desk. Henry bows at the waist, winking at me when his head dips low. "I heard she was having trouble in Temple's class. I'm surrendering my time to come and accompany her through The Waste Land."

If that's true, then it wasn't Delgado who sent him here, just his own curiosity. If he remembers last night at all—no, Delgado is wrong, he was sober, not drunk, and will remember all of it—then he must be here to talk to me about it. I relax a little into my seat, even though I'm more alert than ever. "I do need help," I say, trying to not sound too eager.

The teacher doesn't look pleased by my getting company in detention, no matter how we frame it, but he also looks unwilling to say no to Henry's continued bow. "As you like."

"Actually, it was *The Tempest*," I say under my breath.

Henry is close enough to hear me. His smile changes shape. There's a language to the way his lips move, and I'm starting to learn it. This sweep is satisfaction. Henry, at least, is easy to read. He perches on top of my desk.

"How drunk are you?" I ask him.

His hand tips side to side in answer. He smirks and taps on my paper, clearly waiting for me to start writing again. But it's hard to think about Shakespeare when he's sitting this close to me. If he's here—whether or not Delgado gave him detention—it's because he wants to be. Maybe I'm the reason. Maybe I'm not. "Why are you really here?"

"Jamie, it's too early to debate the meaning of life. I haven't drunk nearly enough."

I roll my eyes. "Be serious; he obviously isn't going to make you stay; why are you here?"

His only reply is to start filling in the next answer for me, writing perfectly upside down. *Caliban has the truest grasp of man, for only someone looking in from the outside can see man in all their beauty and all their horror without self-interest getting in the way.* I cover the paper, annoyed that his inebriated answer is better than what I'd scraped together while trying not to fall asleep. He keeps writing, unbothered that his media has shifted from paper to skin, filling my hand with words.

I watch, transfixed. Black ink, just like in our book, but there he writes in all lowercase print. Once again, he's picked as different a script as possible, this wandering, loose-edged cursive, spiraling up my arm and then back down again, taunting me.

He's still trying to pretend all of this is play, even after what he told me last night. It's like he can't bear to look head-on at truth, preferring to peer at it through this fragile apathy that he's just barely hiding behind. Is that what makes it so hard to be honest with him outside of the book?

It makes me want to keep our marginalia a secret, even from us. Keep it safe for him. A place he can be real. Our own special language.

He flips my hand over and starts to write down the inside of my arm. "Do you think I'm a liar, Jamie?"

If he'd asked me that before I knew he was the one writing to me, I wouldn't have known what to answer. No one says the type of things Henry does without lying at least some of the time. But I know he's always been honest with me on our pages. And I know he was honest last night. "No."

His long, graceful fingers cradle my hand as he works. A slow, warm current snakes up my arm from where we touch. I don't feel safe—Henry's too fey to be safe—but I do feel ... wanted. His head slips gently to the side, following the curve of his script as it loops around my wrist bone. "So, you do believe there is life, of a sort, at least, after this, and that dead boys aren't necessarily gone boys."

No.

Yes.

I don't want to choose. "Does it matter what I believe?" He doesn't answer, an answer in itself. I want to push him, to get as much information out of him as possible, because every fact he gives me is something I can use against Graves. But I have to go carefully. I have to win him. I want him to look at me and think of secrets and safety, and pick me over Graves. "What do you see when you look in a mirror?"

"Treacherous ground, Jamie." My fingers twitch, unable to hide how much I'd hoped alluding to the marginalia would open him up. He smooths out my hand, shifting to drawing cartoon bones covering each of my fingerprints. "It's so tempting to just show you."

My hand goes very, very still in his. There is a limit to the secrets I want to know, after all. "Telling me is fine."

He sighs and stops doodling. Behind him, the teacher decides to do his job exactly when I need him to not. "Mr. Wu, you are not helping; you are distracting. Find a seat of your own or leave, please."

Henry blows on my hand, drying off the ink. He holds it up slightly. Clearly, he wants me to read the scrawl. I won't, not until he answers me. I'm getting better at Henry's games and how to play them. I ball my hand into a fist and put it in my lap.

He smirks at me, then answers the teacher. "Professor VonVeigh, who pays your salary?"

The teacher startles at Henry's question. "That's not an appropriate discussion—"

"'Administration' is the answer you give if you want to evade that

question, sir. Then I nod, accepting the tacit fact, and say *Who pays administration?*” The teacher refuses to speak. Henry clucks his tongue. The power imbalance is fascinating, the way every pound of it is shifting to the side of the boy perched on my desk. “The correct answer now is: Why, tuition payments, Mr. Wu. And generous donors.”

He stops, smiling at me. I start to speak, to ask him to stop it and just sit down. He presses a finger to his lips, asking me to wait. The hair on the skin of my arms is prickling with the tension, but he’s reveling in it. It’s clear in every carefully casual line of his body that these little games are what he lives for—and this game, the only prize he wins is time with me.

“Huntsworth is very grateful for your contributions, Mr. Wu. I believe that’s made exceptionally clear at the start-of-term banquet each year. Now, if you don’t mind, please allow Miss...”

“Conceited,” Henry says. “No, that’s not correct. Vain.” I smack his arm. He rubs the spot with exaggerated hurt.

“Vane, yes, to complete her missing work.”

“Do you want me to go?” he says to me, loud enough for both the teacher and me to know he won’t do anything an authority figure wants him to do just because they want it. He has to want it, too.

And right now, what he wants is me.

Graves would hate this.

Suddenly, I see my path forward. It’s my head nestled on Henry’s shoulder and Graves slowly turning to stone beside us. It’s Baz smiling bright and true at me and Graves fading into the background. They’re the only two people on earth he seems to give a damn about. Win them, and I’d win his world. He’d be alone with his guilt. I’m already partway there. Both of them are at least a little bit mine.

Henry definitely is—or he wouldn’t be here. He would’ve said no to my invitation to the Release, and kicked me out of his room when I asked him for the truth. But none of those moments were easy. Henry doesn’t like easy, or he’d have told me he was my marginalia author instead of writing on my arm. It’ll be a careful dance, pushing him away just enough to stay *interesting* without losing the slender grip I have on his heart.

The longer I wait to answer him, the more he seems to want me to. Do I want him to go?

“Yes.” To make sure it’s not easy.

He gives mock insult. Stands.

“But don’t go far.” To stay interesting.

His tongue moves beneath his lip, sliding across his teeth. He waves one finger at me, back and forth in warning. He steps back, leaving—then circles around and sits in the desk next to me, leaning forward to lay his head on his arms. His eyes close. He hums a few bars of music I recognize from Graves’s violin playing. His breaths even out. For the teacher up front, he probably looks asleep. But he’s smiling, ever so faintly, his fingers tapping out a rhythm only I can see. I turn back to my homework, with Henry exactly where I wanted him. By my side, not Graves’s.

“Read your hand,” he whispers.

My pen stops. I flex my fingers. His words stretch and pull across my skin. I scan them, my heart pounding, finding the place where he stops wondering whether Caliban is the most human of all of us and starts answering my question.

I see a boy with dark hair and dark eyes who knows absolutely everything about you and finds you fascinating. I see you scowling at him. You want to hit him but are afraid he’ll like it too much. You’re probably right, because I see him smiling. His script here almost loses its way, dodging between two fingers to scroll onto the front, squeezing itself into the space between his notes on Caliban’s rage and Prospero’s lies. *And I see demons.*

CHAPTER 26

For once on this mountain, the sun is shining. The possessive fog shriveled beneath its touch, leaving the mountains and hills lying undressed and indolent. Ms. Krillen, our art teacher, could not resist scattering our class around the picnic tables outside. Out here, the sun's rays glint off every window, brightening them past the point of reflections. I am sitting between Henry and Baz, wound tight enough into both of them that Graves could not move me if he tried.

We've been instructed to capture the light using a medium of our choice. Baz, as always, has taken the directive seriously and sits with her legs crossed, her knee touching mine, struggling with pastels. I half-heartedly mimic her, making meaningless swirls of color on the sheet of paper in front of me just to have something to do with my hands.

Henry lies prone on the bench, his head in my lap. The table's shadow blocks the sun from his face, but it doesn't block his weight, or the warmth of his cheek when he shifts and lays it against my thigh. Every day, he's redefined *not too far* to be just a little closer than the day before. Someday, maybe, we'll be close enough that he'll be honest about our words. Until then, he's definitely starting to get close enough to wear on Graves.

He sits by himself on the other side of the table. One leg cocked up, an arm resting on it while he sketches Baz's final tarot card with chalk—and his jaw set tight enough to crack.

"When he finishes, will you read and know for sure who your true love is?" Henry asks Baz. She ignores him, her blush from his incessant teasing this afternoon already ripe enough to burst if she speaks. "Swords to pierce the heart, a two of icy eyes. Is there one for scowls?"

"Henry." Just his name, that's all Graves says, but it's enough to undo Baz. She nearly bends in half over her sheet of paper, the yellow pastel she's been scribbling with for the past ten minutes worn to a nub.

I can feel Henry start to laugh, the little movements drawing a spark of goose bumps up my thigh. I nudge him to save both Baz and myself. “What are you working on for your project?”

“You.” He stretches. His hand shields his face from the sun when he looks at me. “My masterpiece.”

There’s nothing serious in his look, turning the compliment into mockery. The comfort we’d just had between us falters. I miss it, instantly, and wish I could go to the little library and write to him. If we could just act and speak in real life the way we do in the book, everything would be easier. He weaves too many webs here; in the book the webs are cut, and the boy at the center is bare.

I know it’s not us; it’s the others he’s playacting for. I need to get him alone again if I want anything honest. “I am a thing which is incomplete,” I say bitterly, wanting him to remember the moment we shared in the library and stop toying with me.

“Dependent on another,” Henry parrots back perfectly, but it doesn’t hit. I’m embracing my weakness and he’s doing the same—embracing *mine*.

Across the table, the chalk snaps in Graves’s hand.

Henry tucks a strand of hair behind my ear. The touch lingers. He smooths his thumb across my earlobe, then lower, pressing softly into the dip at the back of my jaw. There’s a promise in every shift, and suddenly I’m not sure I’m ready to be alone with him. He’s always undone me so easily. If I give him the chance to undo more than just my mind, I might not recover.

“Boy, girl, boy, girl. Isn’t this nice?” Henry says. It’s the exact thing I needed—a burst of humor. His touch is still on my skin, but it’s no longer so needy. He understood what just happened inside me. He won’t take more than I can give.

“It is,” I say, thankful he can read me as easily as I can read him.

Graves finishes his sketch with a quick slash. He blows the dust off and passes it to Baz. Unlike every other one he’s handed her this week, she doesn’t take it right away. It lies on the table between them. The illustration is a body on the ground, done all in white slashes of bone. Swords impale the entire length of his spine. The ragged edge on the chalk piece he used makes the last sword look broken. A storm swirls above him, lines of dust and chaos covering the sky except for a thin line across the center that Graves has made look more like a crack than a horizon.

“What’s this card mean?” I haven’t seen it before.

Baz digs in her backpack and pulls out the spray she uses to seal each card. She lays it on the grass and sprays while she answers me. “The ten of swords is destruction. He’s pinned by hopelessness, trapped in his own anguish above and below and inside, waiting for the dawn.”

“I see why you left it for last,” Henry says. “A little too close to home, Graves?”

“She asked me to leave it,” Graves says.

Baz waves the card in the air until it dries, then shuffles it into her deck. There’s a reason she asked for that to be the last card. That’s exactly the type of situation Baz would never want anyone to face. I bet if she could’ve been at ease without the Ten of Swords in her deck, she would’ve asked for him to leave it out entirely.

“It’s complete now,” she says. She sets the deck’s edges, then turns the cards and shuffles once more.

“The first time is important. Sets the tone.” Henry smirks and leans back in the sun. “Who will you read for?”

Baz doesn’t stop shuffling, but she glances at Graves, who scowls and looks away. Already, the moment is shifting, her letting go and turning toward me even though she wants so badly to read for him. I could let her choose me. It would be another small victory of him, alone, and me, with her.

But the card he just finished is too perfect. Destruction and hopelessness, him pinned to the ground while I walk off into the dawn. It’s exactly the image I want written on the inside of his skull. Baz sets the cards down. I pick them up.

“Let me read for you,” I say to Graves.

It takes Baz a moment to realize what I asked, and that I didn’t say it to her. “He never lets anyone read for him. But you can practice on me again, if you’d like.”

“Baz, I know what fate has in store for you.” I coat the words with a smile, feeling just like Henry, poking and prodding to get what I want. “But him? He’s a closed book. Don’t you want to know what’s waiting for you, Graves?”

Henry writes something on the back of my neck with his finger, sending shivers down my spine. I wonder, fleetingly, if he likes me when I’m like this.

Then Graves's leg drops and he turns toward me. He props both elbows up on the table, weaving his fingers to rest his chin on top of them. One sharp brow raises, already demanding to know why, if he so clearly just said yes, the table is still empty.

"You will?" Baz sounds stunned. She starts to take the cards from me to read for him herself, but I don't let her. I see the hurt crest and then settle behind her eyes. She wants this moment of intimacy with him—she's waited as he built her an entire deck, probably wishing on every single card for the chance to lay them out for him and see if they speak a future that says yes. But it's me he gave that chance to, not her.

I shift to face him. Hand him the deck of cards, going step-by-step the way Baz showed me in the chapel. He shuffles them and hands them back. Our hands touch. He doesn't let go, sliding his fingers around and over mine to cut the deck while I'm still holding it. His fingertips keep brushing my skin, the small calluses on them rough enough that each slip strips away another layer of my mask and paints hot, untamed anger in its place. There's no wonder Henry has to write in a book to be honest—it's the boy across the table from us. It's impossible to be vulnerable when he's there, waiting for the smallest crack to slide inside.

I tear my hand out from beneath his and tap twice on top of the deck of cards. Baz says, "Think of your questions," but I begin without waiting for his answer. He lost the chance to define his own future the moment he let Sam's mouth drop below the water. I flip the deck so I can see his drawings and start sifting through it, finding sword after sword after sword. Each one I lay on the table until they make an arc around his hands. All upside down, the worst possible interpretation. All aiming back at me.

Baz is talking to me, to him, telling me that I can't force the reading, I have to let the cards speak, as she gathers the cards I left lying and makes a perfect pile once more, leaving only the swords on the table like she can't bear to take them back now that she's seen how they slice. Henry doesn't stop laughing until his lips press the underside of my wrist, and even then, I still feel them fluttering with delight. Ms. Krillen stands beside our table, paint on the fingertips she's using to point at the spread of cards, calling the rest of the class to come and see with pride in her voice for the creative art her pupil created. She means him, not me, even though I've made my own creation, too.

The lines of his jaw. The pulse ticking away in the hollow of his throat. The eyes that linger on the cards he knows too intimately to study this hard; they're not a fascination, they're an excuse. He can't look me in the eye because he knows all I need is one more reason to start shouting out his guilt.

I love the way he looks right now.

It would be even better in the middle of the dance floor at the Release. He could wear a tux. I'll wear a dress. Henry's confession will play instead of music. Graves and I will dance until they drag him away. The doors will close while he's still begging for mercy—him, on the outside but Henry and Baz by my side. She'll need comfort; he'll need distraction. I'll be there for both of them as the lights dim and the gossip begins. The glimmering lights, the press of bodies, the shine of glasses, and the swirl of dresses and sheer number of *witnesses* will force Delgado to act.

Graves reaches across the table and takes the top card from the deck Baz remade. It's the hanged skeleton boy I saw in the chapel. He lays it down on top of my spread of swords, then meets my eyes. "You missed one."

I smile at him. Rest my head on my fist. Let myself dream.

CHAPTER 27

Everywhere one seeks to produce meaning, to make the world signify, to render it visible. We are not, however, in danger of lacking meaning; quite the contrary, we are gorged with meaning and it is killing us.

—Jean Baudrillard

I have to win against him. I hope you forgive me.

Nights, we drink; days, we study. The two slide closer and closer together until I'm struggling to keep my lips moving, silently reciting *All things I see are illusions; I believe that nothing has ever existed of everything my lying memory tells me* when Henry hands me a glass, and I look up, and the windows are dark when the last time I raised my head they were bright.

My life is a string of must-dos: class to detention to curfew, trapped in my room where Baz and Henry trap themselves with me, the books around us piling up and blocking out the rest of the world. I don't think this is what Delgado wanted, but it is exactly what I do. My bedroom is cluttered with proof of our existence here, empty coffee cups and plates from the dining hall, scattered blankets and splayed books and us, me on the floor, Baz beside me, Henry above us both on my bed. Graves alone is gone, leaving each night just as dark falls and not reappearing until morning.

"Time for a break," Henry says. Days pass, and while we haven't moved any closer, he also hasn't stepped away from me. He comes over to lie down on the bed behind me, his shoulder firm and warm against my back. My breath stutters. A thousand handwritten confessions exist behind every gentle touch and I'm feeling all of them, every time.

Day after tomorrow, midterms. Two days after, Release of the Hounds. Then my two weeks are up, and all of this ends.

The drink's shivering in its glass, betraying how weak my grip is. I'm too blurred already. I pass the glass to Baz and smile just to watch its mimic

bloom across her face. I've watched as time and again she shape-shifts, changing herself to meet our needs, smiling or frowning not because she's showing her emotions but because she's trying to keep pace with ours.

She leans on my shoulder.

"Tired?" I ask. Or is it just that she knows I am?

She hums in agreement.

"Go to bed," Henry says. "Or get a snack." The dining hall is open with small bites and cold sandwiches until midnight. Often, we skip the evening meal entirely, preferring the wide space and quiet of a late-night snack to a hot meal teeming with eyes and ears.

"It's not even ten," Baz says. "And it's too late for food."

She stands and wanders toward the door, wanting the solace of studying in the quiet of her room. I stay—not because of my curfew, but to wait and see if Graves comes back, even though the past two nights he hasn't returned until dawn.

The door closes behind her and Henry makes space for me, rearranging the shape of us until we're together on my bed, his head in my lap. I try to root myself here, to take advantage of this time to work on him, but I'm lost, yearning for the way Graves's face shifts, slowly shutting down, each time a barb hits. I don't want to miss a single opportunity to haunt him. Since art class, he's given me so few. A whispered *non sum oblitus* in Latin. Ferdinand's *Hell is empty and the devils are here* volunteered for sentence dissection in English. Henry stirs, reaching toward the desk to pull off his copy of *Shakespeare's Tragedies*. Sometimes, when I'm lost like this, he reads so we don't have to try to talk. A gentle mercy to be allowed to just be.

His cadence rises and falls as he reads, as gentle as his touch. The sounds move from notes to words to images with meaning that slowly replace the vision of Graves, coming undone, in my mind. I comb my fingers through Henry's hair, carefully drawing it back from his face until it is lying silken across my lap. Every now and again, his eyes dance from the text to mine. He still loves watching me listen to him. It's little moments like these—the strands of his hair slipping between my fingers, his voice a lullaby—that I feel less sane than ever.

Because this feels like peace. And a little bit like home. And none of it's actually mine. It's all ... Jamie's.

"As whence the sun 'gins his reflection shipwracking storms and direful

thunders break, so from that spring whence comfort seemed to come discomfort swells.” Henry pauses. Turns the page. “*Mark, King of Scotland, mark.*”

His voice stops. The book falls to his chest.

“Where have you gone?” He reaches up. Soft, so soft, his fingers trace the length of my jaw.

I haven’t gone anywhere. It’s Jamie who is moving forward, leaving Marin as trapped and empty as the hourglass he inked onto his skin. I trace the outline of his tattoo. Henry smiles at me, making me bold. “If Graves killed him,” I ask, because *Marin* needs to know, “why are you still friends?”

Why do you love him that much, and how can I make you love me more?

“He saved him, too,” he says.

No. That’s wrong. “He’s dead, not saved.”

“Two sides of the same coin, sometimes.” He covers my fingers with his hand, so when he sits up, our hands stay joined but fall, slipping down, nestling over his heart. “Everything ended a long time ago.”

I feel like a doll, my limbs heavy, my will made of strings that he’s pulling, pushing, tucking around his fingers as he folds my hand inside his and kisses my knuckles. What are we, if none of this is real?

He kisses my temple, breathes me in. Tucks me into his shape on the too-small bed, one arm warm around my stomach, breathing slow against my back. I wait for sleep, but sleep won’t come, the actual weight of Henry around me still too unfamiliar. I yearn to slip out from beneath his arm and run to the little library, where his words and mine lie tangled with much greater ease.

Every chance I get, I leave a message. After classes and before curfew, throwing myself through Killary’s halls like the doorways are caves and the bookshelves are trees and the eyes watching me race past are nothing but shadows.

The truth is not always beautiful, nor beautiful words the truth.

—Lao Tzu

I’m afraid you’ll find the truth of me ugly.
Even if you’ve never flinched from me here.

The further one goes, the less one knows.

—Lao Tzu

There are two of me, and we are losing our way.

He has yet to write me back. I'm writing to myself, but I can't stop. She's worth the words. She needs the words. They're true, when so much else isn't.

The room falls quiet. The clouds shift and silver moonlight glints off the mirror in my room. When Baz is here, she keeps the door open, hiding the mirror behind it. I can't help thinking about her fears and Henry's secrets. But when I stare into this one, I don't see doors ... or demons.

There's only this: a girl with a boy's arm draped across her, his face hidden and her eyes clear and peaceful. It's so easy to see the path in front of that girl. A life she could enjoy, with people who could fill it well, and all it would take is forgetting one short cluster of days. As simple as tearing out a page and letting it fall to the floor before I enjoy the rest of the book.

Sam's page.

The mirror isn't empty. It's full of lies. I slip out from beneath Henry's arm. He shifts on his pillow. I leave, but I don't go far. Only across the hall.

Baz's room looks the same as it did when I searched it, thinking she might be a murderer. Like duct tape should be running down its center. One side is clinically clean, walls bare and the desk clear of everything, even dust. Even the books are lined up in alphabetical order. Still wearing her uniform, she sketches near the center of the room, where the order disintegrates into piles of easy mess. I stare at her, trying to fit the state of her room into the tightly controlled way she presents herself and failing. A pencil shivers in her grip, shading in one eye socket of a skull. The skull sits on the bookcase in front of her, on top of a leaning pile of books, beside a collection of small plastic bottles. Something with an acrid smell has eaten away the bone around the nostrils.

Did I come here because I'm running out of time to dig deeper into her, cinch her closer to my side? Or because I knew that here, in this bright, cluttered room, all the mirrors would be covered?

"Hey," she says to me, not taking her eyes off her sketch.

Words won't come. The quiet convulsion of her pencil stops. She looks up at me.

“What are you working on?” My voice cracks, just a little, when I ask it.

She looks away, and I can breathe. Her pencil starts to move again. “Bio project. The effects of acids and bases on bare bone. The acid is obvious. The base, less so. I wonder if applied to marrow...” She stops speaking for a moment, pencil still scratching across the page. “I could take a photo, but this helps me memorize the plates for the midterm as well.” When I still don’t speak, she stops sketching. Her cheeks are pink, but they always are, a rough wind chap that makes her look like a cherub. Her eyes ask me why I’m there.

“I don’t need anything,” I say, wanting to put her at ease, hating that I’m trying. I want something real. But it’s easier to keep it all lies, and not grieve anyone ever again in my life. “Just...”

“I’m glad you’re here,” she says quickly. “You can stay, if you want. If it’s okay with the headmistress.”

“I don’t care what your mother wants, Baz.” I just don’t want either of us to feel alone.

With a laugh, she kicks aside a pile of uniforms on the floor and tugs at the top drawer of her dresser with difficulty, her smooth brow suddenly deeply creasing. It flies open, the jumbled-up clothes stuffed inside expanding over the edge with a sigh. She grabs a pair of flannel pajamas and shucks her pants, pulling the baggy pajama bottoms up quickly. Half changed, she pauses and looks at me. Something in her expression firms with her decision.

She pulls her shirt up on one side. A black device no bigger than a flip phone sits clipped to her waistband, with a slender tube snaking up to bury itself beneath a sticker near her hip. I’ve heard of insulin pumps before but have never seen one. Her shirt moves no higher, the hem hovering just above where the tube disappears inside her, and I realize she’s waiting for me to say something.

Baz doesn’t know that I searched her room weeks ago and found the diabetes care kit beneath her bed. She’s letting me in to this part of her for the first time, and as the shirt starts to slip back down I realize that I’m failing.

“It’s just a—” she starts.

“For diabetes. I’ve seen one,” I lie. “Is it uncomfortable?”

“Only if the tube catches.” Her eyes search mine, but there’s nothing there for her to see. This is just part of her, and it changes nothing. Her brow furrows, a little expression I’ve seen before when she’s thinking. Then she

nods, and I shrug, and I realize as she pulls off her shirt and shoves the pajama top over her head that I might be willing to tear Sam's page to pieces for a friendship as easy as this.

Her head pops out like a turtle's from the button-up top and she beams at me. No, not at me. At Jamie.

It doesn't matter what I'd be willing to shred; this friendship isn't mine.

Baz digs in her desk and comes out with an aggressively small vial yelling NO SUGAR EXTRA-STRENGTH ENERGY. "Caffeine?" she asks.

"It's eleven o'clock at night."

She runs her hand through her hair, dislodging the loose hairband completely. "I have to study for math still. Here." She scrapes fallen clothes off the top of the bed against the other wall. "You can sleep if you want to."

I don't think I could sleep, but I do want to stay. We study together, Baz at her desk while I'm on her bed, my head propped up on my elbow and the calculus book in front of me. I can't stop seeing the spread of cards I would forge for her if I could. All stars and skies, the journey ahead dawning bright before the determined hiker. Every time she moves, every time she breathes, I imagine what this friendship could look like two years, three years, ten years down the road after Graves is long gone and everything's easy between us.

And then I crush it.

She isn't mine to have. Henry isn't mine to have. This place, this life isn't *mine* to have. What's mine is the confession, and the hunt. I need to sink my fingers deep into that fact's throat. Graves is a murderer, and his friends are nothing more to me than tools.

Baz is the best of them. But I'm willing to bet that even she's capable of desiring someone's death. From her bookshelf, the skull watches me. No one stays pure in a world like this. Not when they're in love with a devil.

"Let's play a game," I say, scrubbing at my eyes with my hands to hide how wide and horrible they're stretched.

She looks up from her book.

"Screw, marry, kill. Who—and I want details." *Tell me who you've dreamed of strangling, Baz. Tell me what their skin feels like beneath your fingers.*

Help me remember who you all are.

She looks back down, flushes pink to her ears. "I don't—"

"Leckey. You. Graves," I say, answering my own question, though only

one is honest. There's this strange distance inside me right now. Who I really am has pulled back from my skin, from these lips. I'm watching as the monster speaks, trying to get her victim to dance at her command. "After class. In the fall, when the leaves are dying. Anytime, anywhere, probably with a rope."

She bleats a laugh. "You've thought about this."

I shrug and grimace, pretending to be caught. "I get bored. Your turn."

She twirls her pencil between her fingers. Glances at me, then back down at her book so I don't see the moment she makes the mistake of trusting me. "I don't ... know for the first one. I don't think about—that isn't—I think I'd like to be married first."

I arch a brow. Lead her on. "So, the first two are the same person."

She bites her lip.

"You don't have an answer to the third, either," I say. "Unless it's also him."

That makes her finally look me in the eye, and grin. If I were still human, that look would warm me. I fall back on the bed and cover my face with my arm, hiding as much of myself as I can. *Him*, I said, and she doesn't correct me. Why, why is it always him for everything, for both of us?

"I answered," I say. "You at least owe me the how, even if you won't say who."

Her answer is as quiet as a prayer, meant for her and God. "In our home, with candles. And we'd marry on the longest night of the year, so winter would never be without warmth."

She pauses.

"How," I prompt her.

She swallows, but she gives me what I want. "It doesn't matter if a body makes insulin on its own or not; add too much of it, and it makes you dizzy, confused. Your heart, your body feels like it's turning on itself ... then just ... you just fall asleep. Except you don't wake up." Quieter, this; meant only for me. "One prick, that's all it would take. Every day, this body reminds me that the medicine that keeps it working is also poison. I sleep above enough needles to kill this entire floor. Sometimes I think that I..." She trails off.

I open my eyes as soon as she stops talking. She's staring down at her hands, fingers curling in to hide where her heart just went.

“You’ve thought about this,” I say.

She doesn’t answer, her hands closed to fists and her eyes faraway.

“For what it’s worth,” I say, “I like your plan better.”

Her shoulders shudder. “Yeah.” She shoves aside the textbook in front of her and opens another. She picks up a highlighter and runs it across the center of the page, just to have something to do, some reason to move. “Yeah,” she says again.

I pull a book toward me, too. Biology: a class I’m not even enrolled in. I flip through it, looking at the pictures, thinking about her idea. It wouldn’t hurt her, only put her to sleep.

It would only hurt Graves.

I yawn and sink onto the pillow, pretending to read the biology text. A different future than the one the girl in the mirror wants unfolds before me. A needle would be so easy to hide during the Release of the Hounds. I can see it now. The ball. The dress. Baz, on the floor. Him, over her. Saying her name over and over and over while I watch. No risk of them not choosing me over him. Just eye for an eye, friend for a friend.

Later, much later, I jerk awake. The room is dark, the night sky out the window almost moonless. I can sense Baz standing above me and stir, trying to get myself to sit up.

“Sorry,” she whispers. “I didn’t mean to wake you up.” She kicks clothes around, scraping them into a pile close to the edge of the bed.

I fell asleep, and woke to the monster inside me gone. My skin is mine again. Everything tenses. I shouldn’t be here with her. “I’m sorry. I’ll go.”

“If you want to,” she says, but she says it slowly and carefully, asking me not to leave her alone in the darkness.

I deserve hell for what I fell asleep dreaming of. My skin crawls. I came here to prove to myself that she was just as bad as Graves, but instead I proved I might be worse. She doesn’t know. I have to stay; I have to keep her thinking I’m here as a friend and not a demon. I shift as far as I can toward the wall. “There’s room,” I say.

She stands so still, hesitating.

“Are you worried about the midterm?” Baz asks, her voice hushed.

“No,” I say, because it doesn’t matter if Jamie Vane passes or fails.

“Lucky.” She goes to lie down on the bed gingerly, like she’s afraid I’m breakable. Her hair is soft on the pillow, bleached-blond curls mingling with

my black. We stay there, me on my side and she on her back, the small distance between us proof of how careful we are not to touch. *Almost*, I think, *this is almost what it's like to have a friend*.

I lay a hand on her wrist, the briefest touch. Her breath hitches, and I realize this is the first time I've touched her on purpose. It feels odd to know that—but that's how time with them is. It's like I'm wading through a dream after years spent awake, and dreams are what I'm made of.

"Baz," I whisper, though it still sounds too loud in this spell-cast room. "Do you think Descartes is right? That this is all an illusion?"

A breath pushes her chest up; then slowly, slowly, collapsing, down. I watch, waiting, aware of how close I came to believing I could stop that breath forever. Maybe I'm not made of dreams. Maybe I'm made of nightmares.

"Lie or not," she says, her eyes drifting closed, "it still hurts, doesn't it?"

CHAPTER 28

Let us read, and let us dance—two amusements that will never do any harm to the world.

—Voltaire

dance with me

Leckey sits like a possessive tabby cat beneath a series of page numbers written on the board, with the words *read & discuss* above them. This is our last class together before midterms. My last class with him ever. He doesn't know that yet.

A soft hiss fills the room when the mist irrigation system turns on. It sprays the rows of plants surrounding us with sparkling dew. A metal bucket sits at the end of the row nearest to Leckey, catching drips from a hose connection. The water hasn't been emptied for days, and the bucket is almost full to the top. Something is lying in the bottom of it. I can't see what it is from this angle.

Beside Leckey sits Graves. He wears an oversize cardigan, the sleeves draping low across the backs of his hands. Eyes half closed, his head sways almost imperceptibly back and forth. One sideways shift each time he breathes in. If I had to guess, he's listening to violin music only he can hear. I've searched his room again, twice now since he's been gone so much. The box beneath his bed is gone. So is the violin. Nothing else has changed.

Beside Graves sits Baz.

I flinch away from last night's thoughts. I'm going to use her, nothing more. Make her need this friendship enough that she wants me by her side no matter what Graves says. That's all.

That's ... all.

Leckey clears his throat. He makes a point of catching my eye, then runs his gaze across my clothes. This is the only class I forced myself to go to

today, the only one I share with the three of them, and I didn't even bother to try putting on my tie. The tiny, complicated knot wasn't worth working at. I washed my hands until they were stinging and raw, then washed them more. Still, they feel odd, like my thoughts laid down a coat of taint.

I shrug. He waits a beat longer, like he's trying to fulfill a duty he doesn't actually believe in, then takes a sip of tea and reaches up beside his head to tap his finger on the board.

Read, and discuss.

Baz, her eyes flicking from the text to Graves, begins to read. "One. Whatever I have accepted until now as most true has come to me through my senses. But occasionally I have found that they have deceived me, and it is unwise to trust completely those who have deceived us even once."

I would have never doubted my own senses before I came here. Now there's nothing I won't doubt.

Henry, who's refused to sit down since we arrived, wanders back into my line of sight, his long fingers waltzing from bloom to bloom. A petal falls beneath his touch; he pauses, examining where it lies before picking it up. He catches me watching him—and winks.

He wrote back. All of my many lines of angst and yearning answered with just three words. I thought I wanted a dissertation, enough words to match mine one for one, to prove their worth by striving to outdo them, but it turns out all I really needed was to be seen, and wanted.

dance with me

I bite my lip. He walks to stand behind my chair. The petal falls into my lap.

Baz stops reading. Leckey raises his head to look for why. "Have a seat, Mr. Wu."

"Have a seat," Henry says. "Have a care. Have a nice day, but the only thing worth having is life." He walks around to the back of Graves's chair and slowly leans over him, too, until his chest presses Graves's head toward the arm of the chair. From there, he can see straight to me. "You don't look well, Graves. Be careful. Lose your good looks. Lose everything." His smile makes it so difficult to not smile back, especially when it's Graves he's taunting.

"If you won't be seated, at least be quiet." Leckey crosses his arms over

his chest, the first time I've seen him show disapproval. Perhaps he is tired of seniors showing up half dead and wasted.

Henry smirks and stays standing, leaning back against a row of bright orange-and-yellow flowers labeled *Lantana camara*. The thing in the bottom of the bucket stirs, sloshing a little bit of water over the side. Baz begins to read again, but I'm not listening. I lean forward, wanting to see what animal is trapped and drowning.

A human finger hooks over the rim.

I sit back so suddenly that my chair scrapes over the brick floor. Leckey looks at me expectantly. The rest are quiet; Baz has finished reading and they're all waiting for someone to begin the *and discuss* part of the prompt. I glance back at the bucket. Three fingers hook over the side, each covered in tiny scrapes gone black and bloated with rot.

Leckey sighs and sets down his tea. "I think, therefore I am. Should we rephrase to *No thoughts, brain empty* for you all tonight?"

Baz says, "It's the simplest premise. The self, reduced to its most pure form. No body, no senses, no external world. All that can be doubted, is, even the truth of what is being thought, but the fact that something is being thought by someone has to be true if it's happening."

Henry waves his hand toward her. "Thinky thoughts."

There are four fingers now, only the thumb missing. I can't look away. First it will be the hand, then the arm, then the face with its halo of bloody hair and the hollow, gaping eyes. Sam, watching me.

I didn't mean it, I try to tell him. *I'm here for you, not them. You don't have to—*

Leckey speaks again. "What if it isn't you doing the thinking? What if something else is thinking for you?"

Henry's shoulder brushes mine—how did he get this close?—and, suddenly, like his touch undoes everything I need from Sam, the bucket is empty. *Come back. Come back. I don't want your page to be the missing one. I didn't mean it.*

Henry whispers, "Welcome to the desert of the real. Take the red pill."

It wasn't real. I haven't slept. Mirrors are windows, and they go both ways.

Come back.

Leckey calls him out. "Mr. Wu, if what you have to say is important

enough to say at all, say it for all. *The Matrix* is exactly the right metaphor here. We wouldn't have spent class time watching it in September if it wasn't applicable. Descartes is asking us to doubt even the most basic level of our existence. I am asking you to take it a step further and doubt your ability to consider anything. To take the red pill, and wake up to the truth of your existence, that even your thoughts are not being thought by the pure You. But"—he leans forward, throwing all his weight into that one word—"when Neo ... wakes ... how does he know that Zion is real? How does he know that world he's been aching to find, where he finally has a purpose, isn't just another layer of lies fabricated by the AI?"

The dream world, on the other side of reality.

Huntsworth, Amberdeen.

Sam is rotting in both. I'm a lie in both.

Leckey shifts back. "Because Zion is more terrible, and therefore must be true?" Pause. "Indulge me. How do we know that robots controlling our minds is, in fact, terrible?"

"Cinematic lighting," Henry says. "And the savior looked wasted when he woke up."

Graves tilts his head. "In the dream world, Neo was invincible. Zion brought him pain."

"Is that all it takes to prove truth? Pain?" Leckey asks.

Pain is the only thing that's held me grounded. Everything else has failed, but this blazing pain in the center of my chest when I look at Graves, the ache of loss, reminds me what's real. What's worth fighting for.

Sam isn't here, all because of him. And that *hurts*.

"Pain is proof of evil," I say. "Not truth."

Leckey looks at me. "Pain proves evil without proving truth. Hmm. I would posit that evil is itself a form of truth—there is no evil without its counterpart. Without good, evil is just reality."

I nod slowly, not sure I'm following him. But these weeks at Huntsworth—weeks at Henry's half-mad side—have taught me to sift through what feels too tangled to swallow and find a crumb to chew on. "There's good, and there's evil, and pain helps us know which is which."

This is what I want, I realize. If I can't get truth, let me give him pain.

"Well, then," Leckey says, "if evil is true, and pain proves evil—who tells you what pain is?"

“I don’t need anyone to tell me. I know. I feel it.” No, wait. There’s an error there. Our feelings can’t be trusted; we learned that in the first class I went to. I can’t stop here, or he’ll destroy me. “It’s deeper than a physical sensation. It’s rooted in the eternal part of me. I feel pain sometimes when my body is whole, and there’s no reason outside of my mind to feel it.”

“Aw, someone get her a blankie,” Henry says.

Leckey smiles. “Why did you choose to attend class today, Miss Vane?”

What does that have to do with pain? I shift uncomfortably in my chair. “It’s ... required.”

“In other words, someone told you to. Why did you decide they were worth obeying?”

“They aren’t worth it. Not on their own. But I don’t want—I don’t want the consequences they promised.”

“Consequence-based worth, then. Their worth is based on your own preferences for controlling inputs of what you label pain and pleasure. But is missing class something you are personally against, regardless of consequences?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

I feel like I’m being peeled, layer by layer. He’s looking for something. I don’t think I want him to find it, at least not in front of the boys. “Because ... I like to learn. It’s an inherent part of me.”

“No.” Leckey’s voice hits me like a slap.

“What do you mean, no?” I demand.

“If your consent to the rules is rooted in nothing more than what you like, what feels good on that day, then they aren’t rules at all. There’s nothing binding. It might be the correct decision to wear your uniform one day”—he looks at Henry—“and not the next. Turning and turning in the widening gyre; the falcon cannot hear the falconer. If right and wrong isn’t rooted in something beyond your own preferences, then right and wrong—good and evil—do not exist. There is no eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth if no one can agree on what an eye is, what a tooth is.”

Eye for an eye is justice. It’s necessary. “That isn’t true. There are things that are right and things that are wrong.”

“If there were, then we’d all agree on gun control. On abortion. On the basic provision of life’s necessities.” He takes a sip of tea, letting the new

silence punctuate his message. “We are the people we are because of what we want; we want the things we want because *someone else told us to*, not because of anything intrinsic in the things themselves. Likes and comments, sound bites on a TV screen, clickbait on our phones hesitated on just long enough for an algorithm to notice and send us more, shaping us into its own image. We are Zion, but the wires we have hooked to our brains are plugged in with our own hands. There is no right, there is no wrong, there are just preferences, on and on into the heart of the machine. Are you even real, then? Or nothing more than an endless simulation? *Child, Pretending*,” Leckey says, framing me—a girl who doesn’t exist in the first place—with his fingers spread into two adjoining L shapes.

Every moment here is like a first moment in the sun. There’s a reason they tell you not to look at it. “If we are all just making choices off of what some machine has told us we should think, then what’s the point?”

Leckey says nothing. He just spreads his hands, inviting us into the emptiness like it’s a banquet.

And then he claps. “Ah, next term is going to be fascinating. We leap from doubt and certainty straight into Baudrillard’s ruin of it all. Postmodernism.” He tosses a clothbound book into each of our laps. “Begin this reading. After midterms, of course.”

Nothing is real. Nothing is true. It’s so easy to fall into the slipstream when I can still feel Sam’s skin slick on my palms even though my hand is clean. There’s no natural reason for what I saw in the bucket. It would be easier to believe it’s all a messed-up simulation than true. But some things are solid ground. The bucket is empty. The bucket was full. I know who killed him; I know how and when and half of where. I know who is dying to tell me why.

Henry stands when Leckey leaves. I catch his eye, then shift mine to the bucket. His gaze follows mine, landing on the bucket. *Ah*, he says with a lift of his brows.

“Three days,” Baz says as she gathers up her books. “I can’t believe that’s all we have left until the Release.”

“I can’t wait,” Henry says, slow and sweet. With a *clang*, he kicks the bucket over, spreading black water across the floor. The hand is gone. But it was there, and both Henry and I know it. He stands behind the mess, his foot outstretched. His eyes drift to mine like lazy lightning. “Though I’m more

excited for the after-party.”

“Victoria’s is before the Release this year,” Baz says.

“So it is.”

She cocks her head at him, waiting for him to say more. He doesn’t. Graves gets to his feet, hunching over the chair for a moment before standing. His blue eyes tighten when he sees how close Henry and I stand.

Baz goes to his side. Her hand hovers in the air, then touches his shoulder. “Hell, Adrian. How drunk are you?” That hand switches to his chin. He doesn’t shake it off, only smiles, for all the world looking like she’s just taught him how to breathe. Baz, blushing, steps back from Graves.

“Darling, is this where you’ve been sneaking off to every night? Leaving me behind while you blitz your mind,” Henry says.

Graves raises his middle finger at him. It’s all an act. Layers put on—that smile for Baz is just a softer version of the one he sliced Victoria with—each one carefully chosen for his audience. Some for her, some for Henry, some for the other seniors who orbit them, some for teachers. I think I’m the only one he peels them off for. Maybe it’s because only I know what’s under that act.

Henry’s fingers brush the back of my neck, not tangling in the curls or even touching the skull beneath them. I lean into it, the slightest of shifts, my eyes on Graves. I want him to think I want this. I want him to say something, anything, and maybe because he can read that on my face he closes down, turning into nothing more than a hungover boy walking toward the door with Baz.

He can be that. And I’ll be just the Huntsworth girl his best friend told every single one of his secrets. A girl who is going to have the time of her life sharing them with the world.

If we believe things because someone else told us to, then it’s my turn to do the telling.

CHAPTER 29

In searching for the self, one cannot simultaneously be the hunter and the hunted.

—Gilbert Ryle

I'm afraid to die after living a life that was never mine.

one dance. for me

Midterms don't even matter for me, and still the test being over feels like it's lightened everything. Finishing is its own kind of drunkenness. Baz feels it, too. Our paths sway, drawing closer to each other then pulling apart. We wind to the edge of the teachers' parking lot, where we stop, silent, waiting for the boys who finished ahead of us, all our words wrung out by Leckey's barrage. I've got detention today—every day—but with only two days left until my time here ends, it didn't seem important to follow the headmistress's rules anymore.

Free. Or some version of it.

I turn my face toward the sky and close my eyes. A few snowflakes leave icy bee stings on my cheeks, but most hang tense in the night sky, holding its breath as it watches me. Hypocrite, liar, I reach for Baz's hand. She squeezes mine, then lets go. Winter fills the space between us.

Henry pulls up in a new black convertible. He leans across the passenger seat, throwing the door open as the car decapitates itself, folding its roof backward into the trunk. Baz climbs over the door behind him. Graves jogs down from Killary, tugging a sweatshirt over his head as he runs. He jumps smoothly over the other rear door, his legs spread to fit in the tight seat behind the passenger seat. So, tonight he's actually joining us.

"Took you long enough," Henry says.

"Left something in the library," Graves says. He adjusts one sleeve where it caught on a thick bandage covering his lower arm.

“Did you hurt yourself?” Baz asks.

“Yes.” One word and a blinding smile, the most insincere one I’ve seen on him yet. It works on her, at least. She immediately looks away, out the window, waving for me to join them.

“What was that Jamie said in class,” Henry murmurs. “Pain is proof of evil?”

“He’d need a big-ass knife to prove everything he has inside him.” I wink at Graves as I walk by. He scrubs his hand once, fast, across his shorn hair and then leans back as far as possible from the seat in front of him.

I climb into it. Henry reaches over and fixes the end of my collar, brushing my throat with his knuckle. There’s no place to set my feet. The floor is covered in books. I pick one up, bound in black with its cover removed. Post-its stick out all the way down its length, like the owner needs the deniability of removal. I flick one with my finger, wondering what I would find underlined if I opened to that page. Henry takes it from me, throwing it into the back seat. Graves grunts.

I try to shift the books gently so my feet don’t rest on top of any of them. It’s hard in this outfit. I’m wearing one of Graves’s shirts, the sleeves rolled up and my hair swept away from my face with Baz’s soft-hold spray. Henry had smirked when I walked out in the same uniform skirt and the black shirt I arrived at Huntsworth in, then shoved me into Graves’s closet, matching an overlarge charcoal dress shirt with a short leather skirt he’d probably stolen from Victoria. With the shirt’s tails tied to show my waist and my heels lengthening my legs beneath this skirt, I finally actually look like Jamie Vane.

Tonight, tomorrow: this party. Sunday night, Release of the Hounds. Two more nights, one more day. Then I can burn this shirt with the rest of Graves’s life.

“Did you steal this car from a librarian?” I say to clear my mind. I don’t want any of them reading my thoughts on my face.

Henry guns the engine, wheels skidding in the teachers’ parking lot. “No, she gave it to me as payment.”

I should know the curve of his smile better than to push him on that, but the tires are skidding sideways on the gravel drive and the gates he’s barreling toward are closed and there’s no such thing as common sense when I’m in a car heading down the mountain with these three. “What could you

have possibly done that would be worth this much?”

His grin splits wider. I regret asking and push myself up out of the seat, sitting up on the side of the car. His lips move, but I can't hear him through the rush of air. Sam would wrap his hand around my leg and tug me back in.

Henry presses the pedal to the floor.

The car bucks beneath me. I grab on to the front windshield. I could stand if I wanted to—jump if I wanted to. My limits are my own to set and my own to be smashed senseless by. We aren't even off campus yet; already, Henry is driving so fast I can barely breathe through the wind. Graves beats on the back of my seat, his fists working out the rhythm of a song I struggle to hear even though the volume is all the way up. The gates are still opening as we pass through. I could touch them if I stretched out my fingers.

Just ahead, the road curves too sharply for my trust in Henry's driving. I slide back down into the seat. Icy wind nips at our clothing, batting our hair back and forth and setting teeth chattering. Henry finds a song with a bass track that makes the car shiver around us. Everything is too loud for talking. It's freeing, to be this quiet and yet still this close to them. I hadn't realized how on edge I always am, looking for the right thing to say and the right way to say it to keep them close. This moment, with the music pulsing up through the back of my seat and not one of us talking because not one of us needs to, feels like black ink on old pages.

I reach for Henry's hand. He takes my fingers in his and draws them to his lips. The kiss is featherlight and quick, creating different shivers than the wind. His thumb smooths them away with slow strokes on the side of my ring finger. This, I understand, is why he asked me to dance. Some things are easier when the words aren't in the way.

The road splits ahead. Henry lets go of my hand and slows just enough to not skid off the road. Instead of east, toward Del Rio, where the party waits on the banks of the river, he turns south.

Toward Aberdeen.

“Where are you going?” I yell at him.

“Bruuuuu Thruuuuuu!” he howls. Graves adds his own, tossing his head back.

The Brew Thru. My hair snaps around my face. He's driving us straight into the center of Aberdeen for drive-thru liquor, and I'm sitting in the front seat with the windows down. There's no helmet and no broad shoulders to

hide behind. It doesn't matter what time of night it is, if even one person sees me in this car, everything is over.

I can't be caught. Not this close to the end.

"Let's go to Del Rio instead!" I shout. "They'll have a store there!" Anywhere else. I scramble to think of a reason.

Henry cups his hand around the back of my head, pulling me across the center console until he can yell straight into my ear. "Town's shit, but they don't ask questions!"

Heat rushes across my face. I force a laugh and peel his fingers off my neck. Already, I can see the lights of Main Street piercing the tree trunks. I have to figure out a way to hide. I can't let anyone there see me and let these three know who I am. All of this would come to a sudden, crashing halt. I can't let that happen. Henry swerves hard around the pothole in front of the WELCOME TO AMBERDEEN sign. I lean my elbow on the window, covering my face as much as possible with my hand.

Sam's house, my house, Faye's house—we roll past them with no shouts, no slammed screen doors. My chest tightens. It's quick. This street is meaningless to them; Henry doesn't slow, and none of their eyes wander. None of them notice that my house is dark or that Sam's blazes with light, except for one bedroom on the second floor.

I curl my back, trying to sink farther into the seat, away from the accusing stare of the darkened room. No matter what I'm wearing, no matter how much I let myself fall into their rhythm—Marin James is not one of them. She belongs here, in the dead-end town, with the dead boy.

I feel like I'm going to be sick.

Henry taps me on the shoulder. I risk a glance at him. His brow is furrowed, only a little, but enough to prove he's noticed my behavior. I grimace and point to the side of my head. *Headache*. He nods slowly. I'm not sure he believes me. There are so many things I've said to him in our notes that I've never said to another person, but *I'm not Jamie Vane, I'm a girl from Amberdeen* wasn't one of them. Now I almost wish I had. My vandal might help me.

Our front wheels bump over the steep curb into the Brew Thru; he drives around back, pulling up to the truck delivery bay. He leans once on the horn. A few moments later, the door beside the bay opens. Faye's brother, Dickie, stands framed in the light, a green apron tied around his waist.

“Dessert time,” Henry says, getting out of the car.

I duck below the dash, reaching back to tug out two of the books that slid beneath my seat.

“You’ve got to be quiet,” Dickie calls. I haven’t heard the voice of someone who knows *me* in weeks, and it washes over me like a panic attack. “I’ve got customers up front.”

“They hear something, you tell them it’s ghosts,” Henry says. I lift my head above the dash just high enough to see him slide cash into Dickie’s collar. He twists to fit in the door. Dickie’s holding it open less than halfway, like he can’t make himself commit to the motion.

“Ghosts,” Dickie repeats. I hear the tremble in his voice. His hand drifts toward the money in his shirt. He’s known me since I was born; I noticed he existed somewhere around kindergarten. All it would take is one look. I lean back down and cradle my head in my hand, rubbing my temples like they ache.

“Fine,” Dickie says. “But make it quick.”

Graves stands, leaning over the seat toward me. “Come pick something out. The stockroom’s ours; he locks the door to the front.” *If you’re worried*, his look says. It isn’t a kind one. He’s pushing me. He definitely doesn’t believe that I have a headache.

“It’s fine, Jamie.” The sound of my name in Baz’s bright, easy voice makes me flinch. I glance up at the door before remembering the name *Jamie* means nothing to Dickie. He’s already closed it, a piece of cardboard slid between the door handle and the frame to keep the lock from engaging. “Henry says this guy will do anything for cash.”

My gut twists. I have to be careful. Jamie Vane doesn’t know Dickie, so I don’t have any reason to defend him. “Just grab me some coconut rum. Or something strong,” I say, wincing to play up my “headache” for them.

Baz cringes sympathetically, then dances her hands in front of her body, pretending to be at a luau. She walks away from the car slowly as she does, completely at ease despite this errand of ours being against the law. Aberdeen has always accepted people like her for what they are. It’s me the town couldn’t figure out—too much Aberdeen to look up to, but too different to stand alongside. I wonder if they even miss me. Or if Marin James is just another one who ran.

A shadow moves in between me and the bright light of the delivery bay. I

look up, startled. It isn't Dickie.

"Get in the back." Graves sits in the driver's seat, turning to brace one arm across the dashboard, his shoulders wide enough to block my view of the doors behind him. When I don't move, he speaks again. "You look like shit. And you're acting like shit. Get in the back, so if you puke it doesn't land on me."

The back seat is tight, closed in by the two front seats and a wide arc of metal jutting upward from the window to hold the convertible top when it's closed. I'd barely have to hide at all, if I sat back there. I snap at him to hide my relief. "If I puke, you're the perfect place for it to land."

"If you're that sick, maybe I should ask the stock boy to come help you."

I grit my teeth and lean far enough to the side to see around his shoulders at the doors. They're both closed, Dickie nowhere to be seen. I push up and over the center console. The move forces me to brush against Graves, who doesn't shift back to make space. Each inch feels like a mile as I fit one leg through, and then twist to fit the other, my back brushing his chest, his fingers catching briefly in my hair. I could swear they twine, tugging gently on my hair, trying to linger, but he keeps his face turned away, looking out the driver's window. It's only me struggling to swallow around my tainted heart. Only me that feels each time we touch like an earthquake.

I hate him. And he doesn't give a damn.

The leather seat where he sat is still warm. I tuck my freezing hands beneath my legs and lean my head against the back of the seat, trying to ignore both him and the way I can just make out the side parking lot from this angle. No one else is going to drive around back and park, I remind myself. Everyone—everyone *legal*—drives through.

His fingers drum on the console, then he moves closer all at once. He twists, putting one hand on the passenger seat and one hand through the gap, reaching to grip the back seat. He fills the air above me. I lean against the window, looking for an escape, but there aren't any doors back here, nowhere to run except into him. Then he steps through the gap and perches stoically on the edge of the center console. He props one foot against the back seat. The Brew Thru and its parking lot disappears from my sight. All I see is him.

"You look ridiculous," I say, because it's true with so much of him in so small a space, and because I need to say something to choke off the wicked cocktail of thankfulness that no one could possibly see me now and anger that

Graves is the reason.

He doesn't say anything in reply. The car falls silent. An owl calls from the woods behind the parking lot, but its song does nothing to ease how uncomfortable this quiet feels. I want to reach up and push him farther away. But that would let him know that his closeness bothers me, and that's a weapon I don't want to give him. I fold my hands across my chest—and then realize I've mimicked the way he's sitting and uncross them.

I can't take it anymore. I need to fight with him, to lance the tension in the air with words. I say the first thing that comes to mind that I know he'll hate. I don't know if it's true. But I also don't know if it's a lie. "I think I'm in love with Henry."

His face stays stony.

"He's honest." This, I do know: Every word he's written me is true. I can feel it in their lines, in the heaviness of the pen marks that make them, in the way that, unlike when he talks, their cadence is sometimes halting and unsure. In our book, he doesn't always know how to say what he means, but he always tries. Even when it's hard.

Graves raises his eyebrows and settles against the side of the passenger seat. I clench my hands into fists and look away from him, out across the dark parking lot. The seconds tick by, and he says nothing, moves not an inch, like my idiotically petty words are nothing but pebbles against his fortress walls. But I can see it in his eyes. There's something roiling there. Something I want to drag out into the light and laugh at. "Did you stay out here just to drive me insane?"

He picks at the bandage on his wrist, pulling out a loose string. He snaps it off. It falls from his fingers, floating down to rest on my knee. I brush it off. His eyes track the path of my hand, and I hate how I know that; I hate how not a single inch of him escapes my notice. I hate how it makes me wonder if he does the same, if I'm rooted inside him this deeply. I need to be, if destroying him is going to work.

That's all this feeling is.

His hand stays on his wrist, his eyes on the fallen string. "In a completely sane society, madness is the only freedom."

Everything inside me goes suddenly, devastatingly still. I swallow, just to force some movement inside my chest. His quote is by Ballard, one the vandal underlined the second time he wrote back to me. It means nothing.

We've been studying philosophy all semester. They did an overview first. Leckey probably had them memorize all sorts of quotes from the greats. It's just coincidence.

"Freedom is the right to live as we wish." I test him with the next marginalia, wishing my voice wasn't this hollow, suddenly hating how I've committed every single line to memory. "So ... tell me your wish," I say, reciting part of the words I wrote in the margin of *The History of Philosophy*.

His eyes meet mine.

I've never felt more naked before a stare. He was already halfway through me by the time I looked up, slicing deep and fast with a surgeon's brutal precision. He wants things, that stare says, things he has no right to ask of me. "To look my reflection in the eye..." *And not be afraid.*

No.

The vandal is him, not Henry. The one writing the notes to me is *Adrian*, not Henry.

I'm suddenly terribly, achingly afraid.

The Brew Thru door creaks open, then slams shut. Henry, Henry, blessing and curse all in one, a boy who is a stranger to me and should not be is across the parking lot and waving a glass bottle at us; when he's close, he tosses it through the window. Graves catches it and drops it to the floor of the passenger side. Baz joins us, her arms heavy with clanking brown paper bags. So much noise. I cling to it, letting it white out the rumble growing inside my mind.

"You're feeling better," Henry says, not getting in the car. I shrug, unable to speak. He tilts his head in question, looking from me to the empty passenger seat. Baz takes it in my place, riffling through the bags. She's talking, listing off the things they bought, wondering which one we want to start with. Graves slides off the console into the seat beside me like nothing has changed, like nothing is different. Everything has changed. And nothing has. I press myself against the door. The first weekend we met, he touched me and I bled. I'm not letting him do it against just because—

I'm afraid you'll find the truth of me ugly.

Even if you've never flinched from me here.

There's no *space* in this back seat. Baz offers one of the bottles to us. Graves takes it. My coconut rum sits unopened in his hands. He rolls it between his palms, then holds it out to me without a word or a look. I press

my forehead to the window. He lays the bottle at my feet.

“That’s good,” Henry says. “Because we’ve had a change of plans.”

Graves groans. His leg brushes mine. I am burning alive. “For once, man, something simple,” he says.

“As simple as it gets.” Finally, Henry sits in the driver’s seat and wraps his hand around Baz’s chin, tugging her back and forth. “We’ve been invited to a bonfire.”

Damn you, Dickie. “We aren’t going.”

“I promised him,” Baz says. “He seemed nice.”

“Un-promise.” I can’t do this tonight. I need a place where no one knows me, where I can disappear. “We’re going to Victoria’s midterms party.”

Henry reaches between Baz’s legs to grab a bottle and twist off the top. “Jamie, I thought I knew you better. You wouldn’t choose plasticine perfection in a house where you aren’t allowed to smash anything over burning bed frames and mattresses while we dance like pagans around a god we all know is just an excuse to—”

“Drive,” Graves interrupts him.

“Impatient,” Henry says.

“Bored,” Graves says.

“Natural disaster,” Baz sings.

Henry tips his bottle at Baz and slams on the gas, ripping the car into reverse. The tires scream; the car fishtails backward, spewing gravel. Graves braces himself against the seat behind me. His fingers brush the exposed skin of my neck when Henry swerves around the front of the building, blowing past a blue pickup truck parking near the front door. My shoulder rubs against his side, fitting into the nook below his outstretched arm. So easy to tuck into him, like the space there was carved out just for me.

He draws his arm back, bracing himself against the front seat instead.

Baz is right. Tonight is a natural disaster, and I might not survive.

CHAPTER 30

Without music, life would be a mistake.

—Friedrich Nietzsche

don't stop. tell me something true

I have denied everything it is possible to deny. I have always been wrong. But this time, I have to be right. Graves isn't the boy who knows exactly how fragile I am. Who chased me down into my darkest moments and met me there. Who I thought—

Who I thought I was falling—

Henry twists in his seat, saying something to me. I bury my head in my hands. All I can do is shake my head. It's not true. Cold air washes over me. Baz clasps my shoulder. I brush her off. Her hand withdraws. The door closes gently.

But not all of them left. I can feel his eyes on me, reminding me of every time he's had me inside out, splayed across the table in front of him. He says nothing. He doesn't have to. The back seat silence says it for him.

I snap the silence's back. "Get out."

"Still feeling sick," he says, mocking me.

"You're still here, so, yes."

He waits long enough to make sure I know he doesn't have to leave if he doesn't want to, then shoves himself out through the driver's side door, slamming it so hard the car rocks. I lean my head against the cool leather of the seat and try to breathe.

If I had known it was him—if only I had known it was him.

I try to focus on something else. Anything other than the way his head turns, jaw tight, looking back at the car as he walks toward Henry. But nothing ever really changes in Amberdeen. It's still them around the fire and me on the edge, haunted. Three East County football seniors stand between

the convertible and the fire. One braces his leg on the front bumper and shoves down, shaking the car.

The same empty posturing, the same cocky grins. Nothing to distract me from Graves breaking into their group, his arms outstretched, theirs folded in. Or the way I can see his brutal handwriting in his body language—the way he demands everything else buckle before him; the white pages permanently scarred, their crossed arms slowly loosened, my cousin's body crumpled, even my mind, my—*no*. My mind only, and only my mind has been bent by him. A truck guns, the roar of the exhaust overwhelming the music. I know that hiss at the end of the exhaust. Dickie's shift is over. I sink low in the seat, bracing my feet against the far door and listening as the truck shuts off and the tailgate slams down. Faye crows, bright and winsome as cherry pie. Sounds of home. The music spikes in answer.

I was a fool to think I'd ever get away from this place. A fool to think the person I was writing to understood me. A fool to write back, to go looking as often as I did—I press my fists into my eyes, trying to hold back a groan at how often my feet made their way to that table in the little library to see if the sticky note had moved. Wondering when he saw me; how long he's known. I want to run back, right now, rip every single page out of the binding and burn it.

Every secret. Each moment of wonder. His. I was tracing *his* handwriting. I was yearning for *his* words. I fell in lo—

No. Loneliness. That's all that feeling was.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see my reflection shift. I reach up and snap the rearview mirror down to where it can't see me. I understand why Baz hates mirrors. I don't ever want to look in one the rest of my life. *She* might be the one looking back at me—Marin, the girl who thought she'd finally been found—and I'm afraid. I choke off a laugh at the echo of his words. Someday, I'll look at my reflection and I will be very, very afraid. How deep inside me have I let him burrow?

I stare at the car ceiling. Every few moments the fire's light burns brighter in my little cave. Soon, all I can hear is music with human shouts spliced in between beats. It blares from multiple car stereos, clashing, rocking against the beat beside it, just like the dancers. It's a party with all the pretense of order hastily skinned, leaving behind nothing but white-boned mayhem.

No one will notice a shadow in a car's back seat now. As long as I don't

step out and make a scene, I don't have anything to worry about. Marin James has been gone long enough that no one, not even family, is still thinking about her. Maybe Faye—but I heard the way she sounded when she pulled up. Faye isn't looking for me tonight. She's looking for distraction.

I sit up and look for the boys, finding only Baz. She sits on Dickie's tailgate, handing out drinks. Faye stands in front of her lecturing Dickie, her hair mussed and a full-moon smile on her face. Dickie points at her hair; she smacks his leg and jabs her finger at Baz. Baz's and Dickie's eyes both go wide, looking anywhere but each other. Baz shakes her head and says something that makes Faye start to glow with mischief. I know that look on her face. She's matchmaking.

Faye pulls three drinks from the cooler and slams the top shut. I watch her toss a final word like a grenade, Baz's cheeks flaming on impact. Her hand wraps around Baz's. She tugs her off the back of the truck and shoves a bottle into her hand.

With Baz like a pull-string toy behind her, Faye walks across the front of the fire, her steps becoming more and more sure as she raises the remaining two drinks high above her shoulders. *One for you, one for me*, her taunt to try to get me to go to the Huntsworth party, feels like a lifetime ago. If I'd taken her up on it—if we'd gone to the party, looking for some fun with two boys she saw on Sam's socials, everything would've been different.

The car door opens. Winter air slides in with Henry, pulling my attention from Baz and whatever hapless townie Faye decided is her fated mate. He rests his hand on my leg, finishes his drink, sets it in the cupholder. I have to remind myself that I still know him, even without the words being ours.

It makes sense that the broken boy on those pages isn't him. Henry's always been so sure of himself, knowing exactly what he wanted and how he was going to get it. Now he has me, and I have him, not Graves. Exactly what I wanted.

"Victoria called," he says. "She isn't pleased."

The after-midterms party. "I'm not pleased, either." I take a slow breath and slide my hand over his. His fingers are freezing. Someone throws a wheelbarrow full of dry leaves on the bonfire. They catch light before even touching the flames, fairy embers dancing with the stars.

Henry shifts to put his arm around me, hugging me into his side. "I told her this detour was your idea."

“I bet she got even angrier, then.” I can’t pull my eyes away from the fire to look at him even though I should. Bind us tighter, and tighter, that’s my goal. Tight enough to suffocate Graves before he does the same to me.

“I like when people feel things,” he says. His thumb traces hourglasses above my collarbone.

I turn my head away from the fire, away from him, and toward the woods. There, I see where Faye dropped off Baz, leaving her standing with her back to me and her drink hanging forgotten from one hand in favor of the boy with his hands wrapped around her waist. Faye’s mission was successful, then. I almost look away, the ghost of a smile on my lips because at least someone is having a good night—but then Baz leans forward to speak in his ear ... and I see his face.

The light turns Graves into smoke and shadows, so that when she reaches up and traces his jawline I can’t tell if she’s touching bruises or just darkness. He wraps his hand around where hers holds her bottle and raises it to her lips. She drinks; he pulls it back and draws his to his own lips.

“You like to watch people, don’t you?” Henry whispers in my ear. “First me, now them.” My skin tightens against his breath.

Baz’s hand trails down Graves’s chest as he finishes the bottle and tosses it into the woods. I push back, but Henry is right there, leaving me no room. I know what my face looks like, that there’s nothing even close to desire on it; it doesn’t matter, Henry’s looking at me hungrily, his eyes dancing in the firelight, like everything I’m feeling is everything he’s wanted. His neck bends. His lips press against my skin, finding a spot just below my ear where they sear and then spread. His teeth nip at me, tasting me. “Are you feeling something now?”

I close my eyes, dizzy.

“Let’s go,” he says, pulling away from me. The door opens. Goose bumps raise on my legs and arms. “Come outside with me.”

My hands fist around the hem of this borrowed skirt. In the dark behind my eyes, everything is larger. The fire, the trees, Henry close beside me and Graves, with Baz, with Graves—“No.”

Henry pries my fingers open and presses something into my palm. I open my eyes. It’s a single pill, a tiny white circle. He shows me his tongue, where a matching pill rests. He closes his mouth. Swallows. “If you won’t leave the shadows, at least make the shadows dance.”

Opioid use is such an epidemic ... Marey girl.

“Is this...,” I start to say, but I can’t finish. I don’t know the words anymore, only the feelings. I close my hand around the pill, my eyes never once leaving the flames inside Henry’s. I want them to spread, to devour him from the inside out. I want them to catch and light me up, too. I haven’t thought about Sam once since Graves tore into me. Only them. Only me. Only Jamie.

I finally have evidence that no one could deny and it’s a slap in the face how easy it was to get. Was I ever really even looking for it? Or was I just looking for excuses to stay one more day? My fingers search for the ring around my neck, but it isn’t there. It’s back at Huntsworth, hidden in my drawer. Left behind. Just like Sam.

“Is it *what...*?” he whispers. He brushes the hair back from my face, tucking it ever so slowly behind my ear. “If it makes you feel good, does it matter?”

All at once, I’m out. The door thrown open, my arm cranked back, the pill tucked inside it, ready to be launched into the fire. I stop just as quickly. I can’t burn this. I might need this. *Screw, marry, KILL*, what’s left of me screams, *this is better than insulin. This is what he did to Sam!* But it’s not the Release yet. I still have time to make a choice. I still have time to fix all the things I’ve done wrong. My arm drops. I have to keep this because it’s evidence, not a weapon.

Behind me, the car door slams. I turn away from Henry—and toward Graves, his eyes raised to the noise.

Raised to meet mine.

Baz leans in to blow a piece of ash off his shoulder. Shadows shift across his jaw and his hand runs down her back and his dark eyes are branding irons on my own. He cups her chin, pushing her off but not releasing her. I feel every second, every shiver, as his grip tightens, holding her still. He waits—for her to open her eyes and see him looking at someone else, for me to have every chance to leave and prove I can’t, I’m just as trapped as she is, for the fire to snap and flare and him to bend, ever so slightly, and close her wondering lips with his.

Slowly, dreamlike, her arms wind around his neck. His jaw shifts, her shoulders twitching in surprise as his lips force hers open. Her head tilts, every movement softened by firelit longing. Her shirt creases under his touch

as he presses her tighter and tighter against him when her knees buckle.

All of this, seared into the edges of my sight. The center is only him, his eyes, haunted with something darker than I've ever seen. He's breaking her against him, and he's doing it because of me.

dance with me

I want to run. But when I tear my eyes from his, that's enough of a surrender that pride nails my feet to the floor. I grab at the collar of my shirt before I remember that I'm not wearing a tie, and this tightness in my throat has nothing to do with a uniform. An irritated gasp escapes me.

Baz, I'm so sorry.

"Jamie," Henry says, close enough to touch.

I don't want him to see the way my face looks right now. I push past him, out into the night. A heavy grip on my arm jerks me to a stop just inside the halo of the fire's light.

"Let me help you," Henry says. It's his hand keeping me pinned to this party.

"Let go." I can't face him. I don't know what's wrong with me.

His grip softens with his voice. "Do you trust me?"

Anger stiffens the line of my shoulders. I don't trust him, and he isn't safe. He's too real for that. I turn to face him and start to answer. He stops me with a hand, then pulls me closer.

"I'm sorry for what I gave you in the car. I just wanted you to relax," he says. Behind him, a stick cracks. I flinch and pull back. Again, he stops me. The fingers on my arm release, raise, curl carefully around the curve of my throat. "But I'm not sorry about this."

All at once, he's closer. His lips brush mine, then tilt, the angle of his jaw deepening as he pulls me against him. My eyes flash open as unfamiliar heat sears my lips. I push on his shoulders. This isn't right. This isn't us. He holds me tighter, his hand shifting to the back of my neck. My hands fist in his shirt. I need air. Space. I want to stand beside him and see his eyes tight with amused approval, not this suffocating embrace. He pulls back, but not enough. I gasp and breathe in nothing but him.

"Now you're even with him," he whispers against my lips. His eyes drift lazily up toward mine, completely in control.

Mine dart over his shoulder, where I see Graves, silhouetted by the fire. Alone.

Watching.

Need settles like arsenic in my stomach. I want to pay him back for everything he's done to me, every slice, every stab, every look that's dug itself beneath my skin and torn open parts of me I hadn't known existed. For how much each bared wound has been filled with everything I've ever dreamed of—and him, the poison laced throughout it.

I trace the outline of Henry's hourglass, not needing sight to know its lines. Time is so, so short and I refuse to waste one more second of it thinking about Graves. I raise my lips, still warm from his, tugging the band out of his hair as I do. It falls silken around our faces. This time, when he kisses me, I'm ready. This time, I kiss him back.

The sudden heat is still there, the shock of someone else breathing the air from my lungs. He presses me against him; we tangle together, almost dancing, his tongue slipping between my teeth and his hands slipping beneath my borrowed shirt, cold fingers leading me back step-by-step as they encircle my waist. I can't tell if the quick, unsteady rise and fall of his chest beneath my palms is him laughing or shuddering. My hips hit the side of the car. His knee presses between my legs. I open for him, a poisoned lily blooming for the touch of night.

I wanted to come here. For Sam. For me. Graves won't take that from me. It's going to be me, taking everything from him. And enjoying myself as I do.

All of us.

All of us deserve to burn.

CHAPTER 31

To love someone ... is to circle around the other like a dead star and absorb him into a black light.

—Jean Baudrillard

none of this was a lie. only everything else

We drive back in silence. I sit in the passenger seat, Baz in the back with her legs sticking out across the middle console, humming to Schubert's violins with her fingers placed gently on her lips. Henry sits beside me, one hand out the open window, his fingers spread and trickling up and down, making ripples out of wind. Graves isn't here. He wasn't there when I stepped away from Henry, and we never found him after.

Taxis exist, Henry had said when Baz asked if we were leaving him. She went to look for him anyway, two drinks in her hands because he was waiting for her. But he wasn't.

We grow closer to Huntsworth and Baz's humming quiets to a soft snore. Henry's cheeks are white from the wind, his expression calm. It's only me whose skin has grown eyes, all of them looking straight at me, wondering when I'm going to ask him what, if anything, the kiss meant to him.

It would be one thing if he just kissed me. If he took the way I've been letting our hands touch, the way his lips grazed my cheek as we lay in bed, the way he looked at me with his head tucked in my lap, and deepened them. A kiss is just what people drawing closer and closer together do as they go from you and me to us. I can't shake the feeling that none of those is his reason. That he didn't kiss me because of *us*. After all, I didn't, either.

I open my palm. Four white pills are nestled inside. I'd asked Henry for more and he'd given abundantly. He thinks they're for me. He's wrong. Nothing artificial could ever match the pure, wicked vertigo in my heart right now. I still don't know why Graves killed Sam, but I have a hell of a how.

Tomorrow night's show just got much harder for Delgado to shut down.

"Why did you ask me if I trusted you?" I ask, once the distance left to the school is short enough I know I can walk.

His fingers stop their dance, but he doesn't say anything. Bend after bend on these back roads, and a silence that stretches on, long enough that it's obvious he didn't want me to say anything. I was supposed to just accept it and let the mystery be part of the two of us. But I need an answer. I need to know where we stand, so I can know how he'll react when I move against Graves.

The headlights shine on Huntsworth's gates. The car slows, and finally he turns to look at me. Instead of the disapproval I'd been expecting, there's this slight dismay, like he's caught off guard by me not understanding. He reaches across the distance between us and touches the skin beside my eye. Then the line of my jaw. There's nothing sensual about it. He's but an illustrator, tracing shapes, measuring distances for his latest still life.

"Eye for an eye," he says. "Tooth for a tooth." His finger rests lightly on the bow of my lips. Kiss for a kiss. The car sways. His finger drops. "Justice. Nothing more, Jamie."

Because you're beautiful.

Because you wanted me, too.

Fire and moonlight and rum, Jamie.

All answers, all ones I maybe should have wanted. But the only balance this kiss would right is one that has nothing to do with us and everything to do with Graves. He kissed me because I was watching Graves. Or ... because Graves was watching me.

He pulls inside and parks; we walk side by side, Baz hanging around his neck humming a single stanza over and over. Henry pulls one of her hands off and laces it with mine, her palm cold and dry against the heat of my skin. At Killary's porch, we pause.

"Graves kissing"—Baz—"her and you kissing me is symmetry, not justice. And not something I needed to trust you for."

"He kissed me." Baz pushes herself up and beams at me. I try to smile back, but she didn't see me the way he did, his lips on hers and his eyes on mine, and her smile falters the same way mine does. "Adrian kissed me," she says again. *Was it a dream?* those suddenly unsure eyes ask me.

"I'm happy for you." It's all I can manage.

It's good enough; she shines, and tucks herself under my arm. "I never thought—" she starts, and her words don't stop, months of yearning trickling out, but Henry's whisper in my other ear is all I hear.

"Are you asking me if I wanted to kiss you, or if I wanted to be seen kissing you? Because we both know only one of those requires trust." He brushes the tender space beneath my ear with his lips. "We could try again. But would you like it as much if he's not watching?"

I was right. This was never about me, for him. It's always, always about *him*.

For all of us.

"Oh," Baz says as she sways. Her hand goes to her stomach. She dry heaves, and then she moans, her hand fisting accidentally in my hair, tugging painfully. My neck arcs back under the pressure. Henry strokes the side of my throat, then steps away, carrying Baz up the steps and into the hall. "She needs food, and rest."

I didn't even get drunk, but I've never felt less sober. I follow them up the Tower in a daze. He sloughs Baz off onto a chair in their living room, disappearing into her room with a quiet request for me to get a snack for her from the desk by the door. I open the top drawer. It's filled with single-serve cups of peanut butter, granola bars—and a ring of keys, identical to Sam's.

Henry's keys to the castle. So easy to find, like they were waiting for me to just open my eyes and look. My hand hovers over them, then darts to the side and closes around a peanut butter. This isn't as simple as a locked door anymore.

I hand Baz the snack and collapse into the chair beside her. She licks peanut butter off the lid, giggling, her body operating on autopilot. Soon, based on the speed her tongue is moving, she'll fall asleep again. I know who she'll be dreaming of.

Add too much of it, and they'll go to sleep. But they never wake up. She'd dream of tonight forever. I pinch at the skin between my thumbs to chase away the dark thought.

Baz takes off her glasses and tries to set them on the side table. She misses; they drop quietly to the floor. She rubs at the bridge of her nose and sinks farther into the couch. A small splotch of peanut butter is smeared just beside her smile. One hand stretches out, reaching for me. I ignore her.

Her fingers waggle, determined to draw me in. Reluctantly but inevitably,

I stand. She grabs clumsily at my hand and presses it to her forehead. “I didn’t think it was possible to be this happy.” I sit in front of her, my knees tucked up as tight as I can get them, letting her play with my hand. Seeing his mouth crush against hers. “It’s been years, Jamie, and I never—I mean, I imagined it, often, but I never *believed*—and then he did, and it felt so right.”

Her happiness is quicksand. I go still, refusing to be pulled under. “Do you really like him?”

“Wouldn’t anyone?”

Me. I wouldn’t. I can’t. It’s impossible. It’s *damnable*.

“Do you think he...” The joy is gone now. It fled so easily. I look up at her, worried that somehow she let my fears become hers, but she’s looking at the door, not me. “He didn’t come back. Do you think it’s because of me? Maybe it was a mistake.”

“Anyone choosing you would never be a mistake.” I mean it. I would choose this girl for a friend no matter what the other options were. It’s the people she chooses who are the mistakes, not her. “He’s probably just waiting until he’s not hungover to come back and ask you to the Release.”

“You think he’ll ask me?”

“No. I don’t.” I feel her nod. Her gossamer hope is so fragile. “I think he’ll just show up at your door in a suit and make his resting asshole face when you aren’t ready yet.”

She laughs. I let it wrap around me, enjoying creating something beautiful for once. We sit like this, her hand in mine, until her pump chimes. She groans, bending to look at the screen. Henry comes back in and tosses a can of soda at her. She fumbles the catch. Caramel fizz splatters the front of her shirt when she opens it. She gasps but doesn’t pause in her chugging. Halfway through the can, she stops.

“You really don’t think he regrets it?” she whispers to me.

I help her stand. She needs to go to bed, and I need to stop wishing things were different. “I don’t think Graves regrets anything he’s done.”

I close the door on her smile. Bitterness forms a hard crust around my heart. There’s no future where that girl is my friend. I realize that. Even if I succeed in convincing her that the boy she loves is a murderer, she’ll never be the same. It doesn’t stop me from wanting it. I want so, so many things I can never have.

“I need a shower,” Henry says. I catch him watching me in the wall

mirror. A smirk pulls his lips tight—he used me, and I know it; I used him, and he knows it—but if the way his darkening gaze is drifting toward my lips is true at all, he wouldn't mind using me over and over and over again. He pulls his shirt off over his head. A scar, equal in depth but much smaller than the one on his front, puckers the skin beside his spine. Around it, all the way to his shoulders, the skin is stretched tight by clusters of silvery-pink. Something horrific did that to him. I wonder if he enjoyed it.

I walk over to him. Run my fingers over the edge of the scar. Watch as goose bumps erupt on the patches of whole skin around it. He reaches back and clasps my wrist, pulling it around to feel the scar at his front. “No one's watching.”

I meet his eyes in the mirror. “Except you.”

He laughs, soft and low and rich with approval. He doesn't know me, not the way Graves does. He knows Jamie, and exactly how far she's willing to go. And he likes that about her. There's another retort on my tongue, something teasing and intimate. Then Henry exhales, long and slow, and something moves in the dark crack between his lips.

I watch his reflection, transfixed, as the pale slice grows fingers. A wrist. A long, too-thin arm. Its movements are jerky and broken, too fast for its wasted muscles. It's the same one I saw in the bucket. In the library. In the stream, where he died. He knows everything I've done and failed to do since I got here. Baz lied. Every slice of darkness is a door, and he's coming for me.

Henry says my name. In the mirror, his mouth doesn't move. Only the hand inside does, tearing the edge of his lips as the one inside scavenges the gap. Then the mirror is gone.

Henry faces me. Seals my gasping lips with his own. Grave dirt and rot, that's what this mouth should taste like, but all I taste is whiskey and warmth. I stumble back, scraping my hand across my mouth. He catches me. “What are you so afraid of, Jamie?”

I remember the first time I answered this question of his. Back then, I was lying. Now I know he doesn't care if I'm afraid or not. Only if I'm honest. “Everything.”

“Good.” His hands barely touch me, refusing to hold me in place. Giving me my freedom. “Then you're finally ready.”

CHAPTER 32

*Who's asleep beneath the waves
Soul softly swaying in the deep
Rest, sweet child, and close your eyes
And rise with tomorrow's tide*

My mom's voice always trembled when she sang that lullaby to the boy in my window. As a little girl, I thought it was because that was the window I'd fallen out of. I almost died, my dad told me, a matter-of-fact statement that I accepted with all the morbid worldliness of small children. I thought it made my mom sad to remember how he was almost me, every time she saw that dead boy in the pane of glass. Now I know she trembled because she was the only one who knew she wasn't mad.

Henry sits on his bed shirtless still, his hair pulled back into a ponytail. A half-full glass rests in his palm. He swirls the glass, the movement drawing my eyes downward to his pale chest. I snap my focus back on his face, willing my cheeks to stay clear of any evidence of blush.

"Drink?" he asks.

I nod. He sets a glass on the table and pours from a bottle sitting openly on his windowsill, halfway up the glass like he knows how little I want to learn what he wants to tell me. He hands me the cup and sits on the bed with one leg propped up beside him, his glass hanging carelessly from the tips of his fingers. I lick my lips. He shifts, making space for me on the bed. I sit beside him.

"Tell me what you see, Jamie."

"What we see." He can see him, too. I'm clinging to that. I'm not alone in my madness, which means maybe it was never madness. Not for me, and not for Mom. I spin the glass between my palms, looking down at the swirling surface of the drink. Henry's leg brushes mine.

"What we see," he corrects himself. "Tell me about our demons."

I see a boy made of shadows, with flowing hair turned black by death and gray lips and rot-dark skin, a boy who left only his eyes at the streamside. But I can't say that because I'm not the cousin who found his body, just a girl from Kentucky. In this room, with this boy, I've only ever been Jamie.

My hands tremble. I take a sip. I don't know how to do this. Not with this much buzzing in my brain.

He twists toward me, his leg pressing harder into mine. We're close enough that the moves I don't see, I feel. "It's okay," he says. "I want to hear your words. I promise I'll believe you."

I glance at him, but this time he isn't smiling. Somehow, that makes it feel all the more real. It hits me that maybe what's happening between us is as important to him as it is to me. Baz believes, at least in part, or she wouldn't be afraid of mirrors. But believing isn't the same thing as seeing. I wonder if he's been alone as long as I have.

The words he wrote on my hand are where I'll start. "He's not a demon. He's a boy with no eyes, only darkness. He's alone, but not lost. Just waiting."

"What do you think he's waiting for?" He touches his glass to mine, the movement slow enough that the glass barely chimes. He studies where the two cups meet. Then he twists his hand, just enough that our knuckles brush. Something dangerous runs up my arm, curling in the hollow at the base of my throat. I swallow, trying to force it lower, but it stays there, making it difficult to breathe.

He's waiting for me to get him justice, I think. And with the way Henry's looking at me, I almost feel like I could tell him. It would only bind us closer. He can see the boy in the mirror; he understands me. I've seen him with Graves, too, taking all that rage and soaking it up without backing away in the slightest. Henry's comfort with extremes frightens me, and I think ... I like that.

The unbalance is addictive.

"He's waiting for someone to care," I say.

"He's proof Descartes is right." His voice struggles to stay even. "There's something immortal in all of us. Unlearn the rest. Unlearn the fear."

"*Dedescio mori.*" I put my glass to my lips and drain the entire thing. "This is all just words, Henry. I want more. I want to know." It's true, I realize. I came into this room because he wanted me here, and I have no

choice but to do whatever it takes to keep him close. But each word I've said has only led me deeper into the dark, not sidestepping it the way I could. I want his answers as much as he wants to give them to me. I guess I do ... trust him.

"I am the wisest man alive, for I know one thing: that I know nothing," he says, quoting Socrates at me. "You can't hold the spirit world in your hands, Jamie. It isn't something to be examined under a microscope and pinned to the page of a journal. To know it, you need to dwell in the nothing." He empties his glass, too, then stands and takes our cups to a low bookshelf. He lights a candle and turns off the lamp, leaving the tiny dancing flame as the only light in the room. This time, when he sits beside me, he crosses his legs. I match him.

"Do you know that there's a trapdoor in the ceiling of that small library where we study? Right over the window seat. A little pull-down ladder, ten steps and you're on the roof, the closest you can get to the sky." Killary's locked roof door—it was that close to me, this entire time. He gestures at the candle. "People focus on the stars, drawn to the light, but scrying is letting go of the light and seeing the billions of miles of emptiness between. It's opening yourself up to the void, and letting it fill you."

He sets the candle on the floor, then leans back and pulls a small tabletop mirror out from beside the bed. He lays it across our laps, our knees touching beneath it. I don't know where to place my hands—they hover over the glass until he cups them in his, palms up.

Joined, our hands almost completely cover the dim reflection of our faces. Above them, the ceiling is a black hole. I can't look straight at it. "Baz said to be careful with mirrors. That some could become a door."

"She's not wrong. But this mirror is whole. No matter how hard you look, no matter how deep you go, it will only ever be a window. It takes something more than just wishes to crack a door between us and death."

The way he hangs on the word *crack* makes me pause. Baz won't linger in front of any mirror, but there was one mirror in particular that I also wouldn't like to stare at, and it's cracked side to side. "What about the mirror in the library?"

Henry's hands tighten around mine. I've pleased him. "That mirror devours. This one merely tastes." I'm not sure I want to be tasted, much less devoured, but already, Henry's thumb is tracing patterns on the back of my

hand and I know I don't have a choice. I have to know.

My mom was sane, just broken. Cracked. And so am I.

"The boy you've seen—you have no reason to fear him." It isn't a question. A small noise of agreement escapes me anyway. I could never fear that boy. He pulls our hands apart, framing our reflections with our arms. In the glass, my eyes meet his. "Are you ready?"

No.

"Yes."

We sit in silence, no words, no incantations, just the feeling of my hands in his and the dark hills and valleys of our faces in the mirror. The candle isn't bright enough to give us eyes of color. I can't stop thinking about Sam's eyes—how they were. How they are.

Then cold seeps through the air around me. I know this feeling. I know this cold. It's the sodden grip of earth around an empty grave. It's the chill wrongness to his skin, the blue tinge of loose lips that won't ever smile around my name again. It's an ache that tightens beneath my skin, the hairs raising along the backs of my arms. The mirror stays empty, but I can already feel him coming.

Sam, I think, I know you're here ... Don't hide.

A smear of dull gray in the back of the mirror—just a mark on the ceiling, hidden in the background, until it begins to grow, stretching and splitting into that hand. This time, it moves slowly like it knows that, finally, I won't run as it drags itself closer and the cold sinks into my bones and my hands are trembling inside Henry's. Closer, close enough that I can see those absent eyes lock with mine. Sunken, stretched holes in places made for eyes, a mouth that is just that—a mouth. No teeth, no tongue, no throat, only an endless black mouth leaking the chill breeze I feel wrapping around my neck.

Sam is dead. Sam is here.

I feel him. Cold breath on my neck. A shiver of electric ice leaving a trail as his fingers crawl their way up my frozen reflection's neck. In the back of my mind, I feel Henry's arms wrap around me, but Sam's are moving faster, scrabbling now, skipping my parted lips. His fingers brush across my eye. Ice becomes fire. I'm afraid. I don't want this, not like this. My mouth stretches in a scream. He slides inside me as easily as a branding iron.

"Don't blink," Henry says.

CHAPTER 33

Cold falls like a guillotine. It severs me from me, filling the cut with ... not me.

No! I shout, but the one inside me doesn't listen. It reaches deeper, prying open parts of me I'd long since locked away.

Hate, it sighs, and it's Graves the first day we met, violin in hand, lips curled in a snarl as I push the words *sounds like someone was dying* in like daggers. I gasp at the purity of it. The memory is real. His head cocked, my hand stabbing at his chest, our words barbed and mocking. All of it, laser focused on feeling. No thoughts, no distractions. Only a red, rippling heat that Sam names for me.

Fear. This memory, I'm alone, sitting in the backseat of Henry's car. A bonfire burns. Beside me, Graves leans close. His hand reaches for mine, then falters, caving in as I snarl.

Jealousy. A cold winter night, standing on the outside watching four people debate reality in a conservatory filled with flowers.

Pride. East County boys mocking my mother as I walk down the center of the hall, head up and *Medea* clutched to my chest.

The memories fall past me chaotically, pulled from past and present without order. The ghost hooks the memory of the night my mother left. In my mind, she's looking over her shoulder, but she isn't smiling. She's watching me with steady eyes. Waiting for me to do something that will force her to stay.

Selfishness, the ghost whispers.

No.

You're wrong, I say.

The ghost pauses, its mouth hanging open like a ragged stab wound. It has never been wrong. I feel it prodding at my mind, more curious than anything.

Love, I say to it. I was wrong, too. She didn't want me to force her to stay.

She needed me to go with her.

It considers the memory, its claw piercing the skin just beneath my mother's eye.

Same thing, it whispers. *Same thing, same thing.*

I try to push at it, though my hands are not my own. It doesn't react but doesn't shrug me off, either. I don't want him to name the loss I'd felt every single time I relived that memory, until I couldn't tell if it was her leaving or my father staying that hurt me more.

Then the ghost pauses again. *Grief...*, it says. My mother, again, clutching her bleeding mouth—and then the memory ripping, another stronger one forcing its way through. A glimpse of skin, seen over the edge of a boulder. The whispering water of a stream on a forest hillside. I recoil.

No, I think, and something snaps.

CHAPTER 34

Jamie.

I hear it distantly, warmth seeping through layers of mist.

... *Jamie.*

★ ★ ★

... *Jamie.*

★ ★ ★

“Jamie.” Henry, saying my name over and over, gently, carefully, like he’s trying to wake me from a dream. His hands skim the sides of my face; his fingertips trace the soft skin behind my ear. Our foreheads touch, so close I can see nothing but him. This, this was the heat I felt. This is what called me back.

I inhale—*breathe, I wasn’t breathing*—and he inhales with me, like he was lost with me, like both of us are just now remembering how to surface.

My hands rise to his face, slide up his jaw, bury in his hair. I can’t let him move back, not when I’m this cold. His hair tickles my temple; I lean into him more, letting him slip closer, his skin smooth against my cheek. He’s warm, and alive, and I need him closer still because I’m breathing, but something’s wrong. Something’s missing.

Every memory Sam touched is there, just ... empty. I can feel the fear, the pride, the jealousy, the grief, but it’s like they aren’t mine. They’re disguises I can touch but never put on. I’m holding Henry too tight. My fingernails will break his skin. I need him to hold me like this.

I’m not all back.

Part of me is still in that mirror.

His lips brush my cheekbone, so shockingly soft and hot that I gasp. “He”—*Sam*—“the boy in the mirror—he took from me.” It’s not the right

words, but it's close. I'm less than I was. I can't tell if it's terrifying or beautiful. Everything hurts so much less, but the loss feels wrong. Henry has to understand. My fingers rake down the side of his neck, but all of his touches stay gentle, loose, as far away as my memories.

I feel his answer on my skin. "Jamie," he says again. It's not my name. I need my name, my real name, but his lips are ghosting higher now, toying with the corner of my lips. "He didn't take anything. You *gave*."

CHAPTER 35

I am accustomed to sleep and in my dreams to imagine the same things that lunatics imagine when awake.

—René Descartes

in my dreams, we dance

I thought I understood what it meant to be swept away when the tug of grief tried to bury me, tearing away every single handhold I had. I had no idea.

It's real. It's all real.

I lie back on my bed, grab my pillow and clutch it against my chest, kneading at the cotton stuffing with my fingers. The door to the bathroom stands open. The faucet isn't turned off all the way, and it drips unevenly, *pat, pat, pit pit pit*, refusing to let sleep in. I can't close it; if I get up even once more, my feet are going to carry me past that door and to the top drawer of my dresser.

Four little white pills are tucked in beside her wedding ring. Four is more than enough for me to follow after her. I understand why you kept taking them, Mom, even when he stopped buying them for you. It's so, so much easier to be broken than sane.

Tighter against my chest I press the pillow. I changed out of the clothes Henry picked and into a pair of gym shorts and a black T-shirt. I know who I am—I don't know if she's Jamie or if she's Marin, but I'm *this* girl, the one who doesn't cherish her body, only her mind. The reckless one, the wondering one, always reaching, making others uncomfortable because she sees too much and speaks too freely. The one who hurts too much, feels too much, needs too much, and will take and take and take until there's nothing left to take and, somehow, I'll be the girl who's still empty inside.

How much did Sam take from me?

And if that was only *tasting*, what would it feel like to be devoured?

There is no moon tonight, leaving my room brutally dark. In the mirror, I can't see my face. Only the wet glint of my eyes and the pale length of my leg. A girl on a bed in a haunted house full of strangers, and I've never looked more alone.

A quiet *click* draws my attention toward the door to the living room. I shift, craning my neck to stare as the knob begins to twist, slowly, strangely, the metal turning under an invisible hand. It hits the pressure of the lock and pauses, not believing, then turns back. No one tries a door like that unless they're not welcome.

The knob twists again. I clasp my hands together around the pillow so hard I can feel my bones shift. It hits the lock, then keeps pushing. The metal groans. Something heavy falls against the door and there's a quiet *shhh* as it slips down the wood, but the knob stays crooked, shaking now, and I press my face into the pillow, stifling my breath and not my eyes. It's coming in. That's not a window, it's a door, and it's going to open. Something snaps. I'm afraid, but am I afraid of what is about to come through that door—or of how unwilling I am to do anything about it? I can't stand up. I refuse.

Cr-r-rreaak.

The door

—*move, Marin—*

opens.

It's just a boy—

It's a boy, not a ghost; it's a boy, not a monster, I tell myself. But I know boys, and now I know monsters, and there isn't that much difference between them.

The door swings wide and, light or no, I know those shoulders, that curve of skull. My cousin's killer braces himself against the frame, always so still that even little movements—his throat pulsing as he swallows—look like shockwaves. He wipes his mouth and pushes himself upright. Something yellow and metal glints in his hand. He tucks it into his pocket and picks up a bottle from beside his foot. Any moment, he'll realize this isn't his room. I don't wonder that he's confused. It's the first time he's come back to the suite in days, and he looks drunk enough to not remember that I exist.

I lay motionless, trapped between wanting him to notice me and leave or notice me and come closer. I shut my eyes, which just makes everything worse. I didn't know how talented my memory was until it started painting

him and her and the bonfire across the insides of my eyelids, blurring their kiss with this moment. His jaw, flexing as their lips met, and the sound of my floorboards creaking when he steps in instead of out. Her hand, caressing as she sank into him, and the slow exhale when he stops beside my bed.

A curl lies across my forehead, and then it shifts, pushed backward by a touch so light I can't even feel his hand on my skin. "Crooked timbers," he whispers, "all of us."

"Not me," I say, because if he wants to touch me he needs to know that I am awake enough to bite.

He doesn't move. I open my eyes and find myself staring at a nearly empty bottle of peach brandy. Something dark is smeared across the label.

"No," he says, swaying slightly. "Not you. You're a wish."

My heart catches in my throat. His hand is back, heavier this time, dragging down the underside of my jaw. It aches, rough and demanding where Henry's was detached and cool. I don't know how I could have ever confused the two of them. How I could have ever convinced myself that the one who tempted me to tear myself apart was Henry, and not him?

I'm such a fool.

His soft laugh chainsaws through the silence. He walks away, leaving me shaking on the bed. Something wet and sticky runs down the side of my cheek where he touched me. I scrub at it. It stains my hand.

"I hate you," I tell him, but the nothing just stretches, becoming a very physical something that fills the entire room with its presence. Then it breaks, sundered by the sound of glass shattering.

I'm on my feet before I have time to think. Graves stands in front of the bathroom mirror, staring at himself. Spiderweb cracks fracture his reflection. Pieces of the brandy bottle he'd thrown at the mirror fill the sink and lie scattered all around his hands. Blood pricks from several tiny cuts on his fingers. None of the wounds are large enough to explain the red I see trailing down the white porcelain. He makes a sound part wheeze, part gasp, like he's in pain.

There's something deeply wrong with him. He's too rigid. Too still, even for him. I walk closer, but he doesn't even look at me. One hand lies curled on the side of the sink, a strip of cloth bandage loosely held between his fingers. The slow stream of red is coming from its underside. His other hand hangs loose in the dark. Something clatters to the floor.

A yellow box cutter with a dark-stained blade. Horror and quick, throbbing suspicion fill my lungs. “What did you do?”

But no—I stop the violent place my thoughts immediately race to when confronted with this boy and a blade. The blood in the sink isn’t coming from someone else. It’s coming from him. He used the blade on himself.

Slowly, I reach for where his hand lies in the sink. His skin is cold to the touch. I turn my wrist, turning his with it. Slashes—some dark and brown with age, others new-born and angry—score the length of his forearm. The blood seeps from a cut across his tendons. Beneath it, they stand in taut twin ridges, like even now, when I can’t hear him breathing and can’t see him move, his body is fighting my touch.

I wipe off the blood with my thumb. More chases after it. There are so many wounds, and I knew about none of them. He hasn’t bothered to hide his crimes from me. Yet this, he did. Why? Why let me piece together murder but hide pain?

I drop the box cutter in the sink, where it breaks another shard off the bottle. He gasps again, deep enough that I wonder if these ragged breaths are the only ones he’s taking. His eyes are wide, his jaw tight, every muscle hardened like he’s fighting against pure terror. My heart pounds as I remember his wish. I’ve always thought it meant he hated himself for the things he’s done—and I was right, he does hate himself—but what if I was wrong about why? The way he’s staring at the mirror. The broken glass, the broken skin, the breaking boy. What if he isn’t running from his own darkness ... but the darkness watching?

Henry and Baz both believe. It wouldn’t be so strange if Graves did, too.

But that means Sam—and him—

The thought of Sam devouring the memories of his murderer turns my stomach. Feasting on his own death over and over and over, every time Graves looks in a mirror. I have to stop him.

I turn on the light.

Graves doesn’t even blink. I step into the mirror’s frame beside him, looking for Sam, ready to stop this. But there’s nothing there except him and me. The stain on my cheek is a deep, earthy brown, the same color as the blood on the glass. Dark bruises hollow the space under his eyes, dragging the skull out from beneath his skin. His lips are chapped, his breathing shallow, like bands of iron wrap around his chest, holding it too tight to rest.

And yet, even now—more haunted than alive—I can't deny he's beautiful. In another life, in another world, he'd be someone I couldn't stop looking at.

Maybe, I think, that's just because he looks so damn scared.

I pull his hand up and wrap the bandage he'd brought around the cut, tying it viciously, like if I can just seal off this wound I can seal him off from Sam. I cup his palm around my jaw, not looking away from our reflection. He needs to feel my words in real life the way I've felt his on every page. "You're not ever going to be free enough to look yourself in the eye." I am being wound just as tight as he is, and it hurts. He won't look at me. Won't even blink. And still, I can't see Sam. Every other time that he's been there, I've seen him. My words tumble across my lips, too quick to be properly formed by logic. "Leave him alone."

Nothing happens.

I don't know how any of this works. For a minute, I thought somehow he was ... *feeding* something to the mirror with his blood. That he was taking the step deeper Henry teased me with, from merely being tasted to being devoured. But I bandaged the wound, stopped the blood, and nothing's changed. The cuts have to be connected to scrying—that last one was made here, in front of this mirror—and I know the look on his face. I know that blankness. I felt it, after Sam tasted me. *Sam*. "Leave him alone!" I turn and slap him in the face. My handprint rises pink on wax. "I won't let him take you. That's my job—you're *mine*." I step between him and the mirror.

He reacts immediately. One breath dredged up from far, far outside this world. His hands flip and clamp slick and painful onto mine. Then he slips lower, laying his head on my shoulder, breath after breath heaving his chest.

"I hate you," I whisper.

Every breath washes warm across my collarbone.

He whispers back, "Thank you," then falls to the floor. I kneel by his head, turning his face toward mine. His eyes are open but unfocused. He moans, his lids drooping closed. His chest and throat spasm. I tilt him to the side just in time.

"If I had known it was you, I would never have written a word," I whisper acidly to him, my hand trapped under his jaw. I should let him lie on the floor in a mess of his own making, pack my bag, and leave.

I reach for a towel, and then for the shower knobs, flicking them with my fingertips. I have no idea what the temperature will be when I get him in

there, but I don't care. It'll clean him off, and maybe sober him up. Maybe the cut on his wrist was just a liquor-laced accident. But I can't shake this certainty that it's all woven into what he did to Sam.

I need to know. I need him sober enough to tell me. Now, while he's vulnerable.

"Get in the shower and rinse the crap off your shirt." I heft him up, sliding my arm under his shoulder. New lipstick marks his skin, a purple smattering around his ear and on the side of his jaw that I've never seen on Baz. My heart twists painfully, hoping against hope that she's still asleep and didn't see him come in. He sits up clumsily, his head hanging low, brushing against my shoulder but never quite resting on it. Somehow, though, we're standing, his weight leaning hard against me. I've never seen him drunk before. I don't like that I can't predict what he'll do.

I tug back the curtain and shift sideways, trying to figure out how to force him in without getting wet myself. "Pick up your leg."

He obeys, lifting the one closest to me, and I push his calf with my foot, forcing it up and over the edge of the tub. His foot slips on the smooth ceramic surface. He sags back but doesn't let go of my shoulder. He drags me over the tub with him, forcing me straight into the spray of water. I curse and throw my free hand out, trying to block the water from my face. He leans against me, and we both fall, landing in a heap. My shoulder cracks into the side of the tub. I hiss, clenching my teeth.

Graves groans, one hand moving slowly toward his head. My leg is trapped beneath him. I pull it out. He sways into me, his back trapping me against the edge of the tub. The water cascading over us is chill, still not warm from its long, hard climb up the ancient plumbing. It makes me aware of every inch of exposed skin on my body, tingling beneath its stinging drops—and even more terrifyingly aware of the places it can't reach because he's covering them. My shoulder, my chest, my stomach; there, his body presses hot against mine, his hips barely fitting between my legs in the tub. His cropped hair rubs softly against the underside of my chin.

It isn't shadows dancing on his face now, it's water. Every plane, every valley traced by thousands of crystal fingers the same way Baz did, the way I never have. Water beads on his upturned cheeks, gathering at the corners of his eyes. I realize my fingers are reaching to wipe it away just before they touch him. I curl them in.

Please. Not him.

I need more space. He's been taking it from me ever since I found out he was the one writing me back. The slot beneath his outstretched arm—the coal fire in his stare—his fingers in my hair and his words, those *words*, that I can't get out of my head. I push on him. His head slips lower on my shoulder, eyes heavy lidded with liquor. I gasp out a breath. Even that pushes us closer, closing the tiny gaps between his back and my chest.

He won't remember any of this in the morning. It'll be just me trapped in this memory—the way his jeans cling, wet and heavy, to my bare legs. The easy slide of his arm down my calf. The heady dance of heat and chill; my skin freezing, my blood molten, his breath warm, his hands cold. I open my mouth to beg him to move. My jaw brushes his temple. He turns into my movement, temple becoming cheek becoming far too close to lips. My mouth closes. His parts.

The only space left between us is this breath between our lips. Slowly, against my will, mine part to match his. There's no hand cupping my chin. His eyes are closed, not hooked into mine. Still, I'm caught just as thoroughly as Baz was. It will be a memory of mine, and only mine. I don't ever have to look in a mirror again. He won't remember this, and Sam will never have to know. This is my small white pill. This is my self-immolation: closing the gap, and finally, finally finding out what it feels like to burn.

One more short, shattered inhale. My chin tilts. A droplet falls from my lip to his. His tongue flicks out to lick it away.

I shift back, away, immediately; he startles, his head jerking away from mine. He grips the side of the tub and pulls himself forward, farther into the stream of water. His clothes are soaked, clinging to the lines of the muscles at his shoulders and back. Tension makes a rigid valley down their center. I scrub the water, the warmth, the mistake I almost made off my lips with the back of my hand.

"I haven't told him," he says.

I want to ask what he means, but to open my mouth means to move my jaw and live all over again how very, very close I came to closing the only distance we have left.

Only I will remember. *Please.*

He scrapes his hand across his head, sending rivulets down the back of his neck. Some are mottled and pink; I follow the blushing droplets up his arm to

where the flow turns red. This arm, too, is welted with cuts—some deep, most shallow, the skin around many puckered and hot. Two close to a smaller bandage on his wrist have reopened and are freely bleeding. His words come out as a sore croak.

“I won’t tell. I promise. You’re safe.”

I’m safe.

My heart hammers in my chest. “What do you know?”

I reach for him. His shoulder dips beneath my touch, like he can’t bear the weight of it. My hand starts to slip, but he catches it, forcing his fingers through mine, twisting his grip until our palms press, our fingers a knotted mess caught between them. It changes nothing—I was trapped long before he took my hand—and everything.

He rakes our hands across his forehead, crushing my fingers inside his. His lips move like he’s praying; I feel them brush against the back of my wrist, a sting of warmth that sets the rest of me shivering. Water runs off his chin, joining the hundreds of beads tracing their way down my arm. It’s like every droplet falling on my skin is sent by him, a thousand slowly warming trails of touch, all winding him too close, and not close enough. His fingers arch; mine follow, without thought, without permission, because the way a magnet knows its match is the way my body knows his.

“Marin...,” he whispers.

Both of us hear it at the same time, the echo finding its way from lips to heart. He hardens, line by line of his body pulling away from me. I tear my hand from his, but he’s already let go, pushing himself up and stepping out, one hand braced on the shower curtain rod and the other on the wall. I tug the curtain aside and see him gripping the side of the sink, his knuckles white. His shoulders heave, but nothing comes out. I slide the curtain shut again, closing my eyes and letting the water run over my face. His clothes hit the floor with a steady cadence of wet smacks.

My name. He said *my* name. Every inch of my skin pulls tight with a desperate need to run. “You know who I am. Why didn’t you say anything?”

He pauses at the door. For a moment, I think he’s going to strip the curtain back and pull me out. Instead, I hear the hollow, forceless thud of his fist hitting the wall.

“Some people deserve to be caught,” he says.

I listen to him walk out of the bathroom and wait for the sigh of springs as

he collapses into his bed. It never comes. The water's finally warm, but I can't stop shivering. I wrap my arms around my legs and rock.

Some people deserve to be caught. But it wasn't Jamie he was talking to.
It was me.

PART FOUR

And although the ability to deceive seems to be an indication of cleverness or power, the will to deceive undoubtedly attests to maliciousness or weakness.

—René Descartes, “Fourth Meditation”

Mirrors are breakable. Too much pressure and they’ll shatter—glass, wood, man, soul—once something whole, now just shards on the floor.

Adrian unwinds the bandage slowly. The final layer catches on this morning’s scabs, bursting bright and new. The mirror should be glutted by now. He should be empty by now. But mirrors are made in man’s image and he will never, never have enough of *her*. He sways. Steadies himself with his hand. Flexes his fist, watching the droplets well. He said too much and too little tonight. He isn’t brave enough to say more. He’s too selfish to say less.

He grits his teeth and picks up the knife. He’s learned the way his muscles tense when the mirror’s bite deepens past what his mind can bear, blacking out the world around him. He’s learned the angle he needs to hold the blade, so when his grip shifts the steel shifts with it, digging in to the warmth. Dragging him out of the cold.

Maybe tonight it won’t. Maybe tonight he’ll be lost forever in the tightness of her fingers threaded through his, the heat of her skin against his lips, each feverish rise against his back, each shift and press of her legs screaming at him that he is broken and he will make her bleed but *God* he is bleeding already, all over both of them.

This is all he can do. Empty himself over and over again. Keep the mirror sated. Keep her safe from its hungry teeth. But it isn't only the mirror she needs to be kept safe from. It isn't only the mirror that wants her. He opens his eyes. His reflection stares back, whispered truth in his eyes.

Hate me, they plead. Please.

CHAPTER 36

Dawn is breaking. There's still blood smeared on my hands when I raise one to turn off the bathroom light. Pieces of Graves are flaking off my knuckles. I walk out of the bathroom and into my bedroom. The ring is still hidden in my top dresser drawer. I should shower; I could change. I won't sleep, even though I haven't had a full night's rest in days. I have to talk to Henry. Before he does.

My feet carry me through our dark common room to the hall. Behind me, his bedroom door opens. I thought he was asleep. He isn't. I run for Henry and Baz's common room. Grab at the door handle. But his bandaged arm strikes the wood above my shoulder. The door slams shut.

I jerk at the knob. All it does is send me back against his chest. He's hemming me in, not letting me go forward or back. "Move," I say.

"No."

"Yes." I twist to glare up at him.

A smirk catches at the corner of his lips, unexpected and raw. *Make me*, it whispers.

I don't like the way that expression snags in my chest. I strike out at him with my elbow. He sways back with the hit, and for the briefest moment, I think I've won. But then the sway turns into a tug and he pushes me against the wall, proving beyond a doubt which one of us is in control.

"Let me go." My voice is too quiet, too full of breath. I can barely hear my thoughts over the pounding of my heart. He pins my hand beside my head. His fingers flex on my wrist, one slipping up to lay across my palm. I flatten mine against the wall like I can run from its touch. Has the hall always been this small?

He grimaces in pain. Then tightens down with a slight shake of his head. "He's using you."

He followed me to stop me from going to Henry. Not to beat me to

spilling my secrets. My lips split in a sudden, stunning smile. “And you’re not? You spent weeks writing to me, making me think you *care*—”

“I care.” His eyes tighten around the mistake he just made.

One dry laugh escapes me before I can stop it. It sours my mood immediately. I hate letting him know when he gets to me. “Oh, I’m sorry. That’s why you murdered my cousin.”

“I’m trying to help you.”

“You’ve never helped anyone in your life. You’ve never even been *real*. I’ve seen you smile and study and, sure, the outside is perfect. But inside, there’s nothing there but fear.” I frame my free hand the same way Leckey did, holding it a breath away from his face. “Boy, pretending.”

His jaw tightens, letting me believe he hates giving anything away to me just as much as I do to him. “I’m not pretending.”

I can’t stop the laughter this time. It feels good to let the words pour out. Standing this close, I can’t miss a single shift in his expression as one after the other they hit. “Everything about you is pretend. You make sure your uniform’s always a little wrinkled, and the top button’s loose beneath your tie. You hunch forward instead of slouching back, so you can cover your mouth with your hand anytime it might betray the Brood. You even shaved your head so no one looks at you and thinks you’re trying too hard.”

“I shaved it because I don’t give a damn about my hair,” he says, when he shaved it because he knows how hard it is to look him straight in the eye. His eyes are too bright, too demanding, with a slight tilt that promises something feral hiding inside. They don’t back down, drilling into my own.

I remember you, those eyes say as they flick to my lips.

Fear screws tight around my breastbone, making it difficult to breathe. There’s nothing to remember except how much I hate him. “Tell me the truth. Once, Adrian.” His lip curls like he also knows that’s the first time I’ve let myself say his name out loud. *Adrian*. Why can I still taste the echo? His eyes darken, his jaw angles to match mine, and I know that if I look away, if I even flinch, he’s going to devour me.

I lift my chin and dare him to try. “What did you see in the mirror?”

His hand tightens around my wrist. If it were anyone else, anywhere else, we would look like lovers. I fight the urge to turn my face away as his neck bends and the space between his lips and mine grows smaller still. Any shift, any movement, and they’ll brush. I swallow. He is everywhere, all around

me, and then he speaks, low and hard, his words digging into the quiet hall like shovels into fresh dirt. “You should know. You brought me back, didn’t you?”

“That’s not an answer. Tell me the truth.” My mouth barely moves. “You know exactly who’s in there.”

Who. I lay Sam between us, just like that.

It’s true. I see it in the way his face hardens, blocking off every emotion but one: malice. “Listen to me,” he says, “you think you understand what’s going on, but you don’t. This isn’t a game. It isn’t knocking on the table and parlor tricks. There’s the darkness, and the devil, and you. And when it’s over, only one is left.”

He’s trying to scare me, and I hate how much it’s working. I can see Sam’s face now, waiting for me in the dark. Watching me, just like Graves is. His eyes scour my face, resting on my lips only to snap back up.

“I know this isn’t a game.” People don’t die in games. “What don’t I understand?”

“Henry.”

This again. I don’t bother hiding my laughter this time. “So desperate to keep me from him.”

“You asked for a truth,” he says.

The darkness, the devil, and you. One is left when we’re finished. I wonder which it was for this boy in front of me.

The door beside us opens. Henry steps out, Baz behind him.

“Careful,” he says, pointing at my hand to pull Graves’s attention to it. “You’ll leave a bruise.” Graves’s fingers open. He steps back. His sleeves fall down with the movement, covering the bandages at his wrists. But not before we all see the bright red stains seeping through both of them.

Baz covers her mouth and pushes past me to his side. She fusses over the bandages, asking him quiet little questions about what he did and when. The answers to them sizzle on my tongue. Drinking. Scrying. Immolating. I stay silent with Henry, wary of saying anything that will set Graves off and give him a reason to expose me.

“I have some alcohol wipes in my room. These need to be cleaned.” Baz leads him past Henry and me into their living room.

Following her, Graves whispers, “I won’t tell.”

I don’t believe him. He’s just trying to push me off, to find the right time

to tell my secrets before I can blow this all up with his. Henry takes my hand. The world steadies, even though my heart is still racing.

Baz and Graves sit side by side on the couch. She folds his sleeves back. Her fingers hover over the reddened bandages. Graves's stare is pulled from my hand holding Henry's when she finally starts to work and the bandage rips off a layer of scabbing. He goes perfectly still. She flinches for him.

It's that small, tender movement that decides me. I can't let her fall into him any further. "Don't you know what he did?"

Baz's hands stop for a second when I speak. The bandage falls. She picks it back up.

"I cut myself," Graves says.

I walk over to them. Henry comes with me. "You carried his key chain," I say to Baz. "You acted like you cared that he was dead. But you show so much tenderness to the boy who killed him."

"What are you talking about?"

It's not my job to answer her. "Tell her, Adrian."

He doesn't. Baz stands, between him and me. She's staring at me with confusion and hurt on her face. She's looking in the wrong direction. I waited too long; I trusted too much in how I felt about her and didn't realize he could steal her with just one kiss. I can't stop now. "Tell her that you killed Sam Bullvane!"

"Jamie!" Baz shouts. "You seriously don't think—"

"Sam never would've taken those drugs, and he never could've drowned in water that shallow without them. You know. You *saw it* and asked that same question! Someone held him down. But who knew about the bruises?"

Her stare is hollow with hurt. "That was just a game."

"He told me himself." She has to believe me. She's my friend. "Why do you think Henry wanted to play it? Because he knows, too!"

Graves takes her hand. She whips around to face him. I step forward. I don't want him to be the only one who can see how her face looks right now. Henry lets go of my hand. I reach for him. He doesn't reach back.

"It's not true, right?" Baz asks Graves.

"No," he says.

"He's lying. Can't you see?" I want to shake her. Her shoulders curve down to shield the boy below her from my words. I'm losing, but it's not until Henry starts to laugh that I realize just how badly.

Clap.

Clap.

Clap.

“Beautiful show, Jamie.” Henry pulls me under his shoulder, a place I’m too tall to fit comfortably. Three red scratches score his skin, cutting straight across the empty hourglass tattoo. Marks from my fingernails. I push him away. He lets me, walking over to sit on the back of the couch behind Graves. “Two points.”

Baz doesn’t believe me; of course she’d side with him. Henry does, but he’s still choosing Graves. I told them everything and neither one of them cares. No one is ever going to care.

Graves won’t meet my eyes.

I turn. Riffle through the top drawer of his desk. Take the set of keys he never needed to steal from Sam.

★ ★ ★

I walk into the hall and across, down, across, up—I’ve tread this path so many times I don’t need to wipe away my tears to see it—to the little library. I’ve avoided this room, so afraid I’d see the sticky note had moved and want to read words that would damn me. I should’ve let Henry burn that book when he tried.

Now it’s the only place left. I don’t even look at the book when I enter. Instead, I pause before the cracked mirror. Henry promised me that, in it, Sam wouldn’t just taste, he would devour. It tempts me. But this isn’t Sam’s to fix. I stand up on the window seat and reach toward the lock set into the ceiling. The key slots in. The lock turns. I open the trapdoor, pull down the folding ladder, and climb.

★ ★ ★

Wind sneaks beneath my shirt, playing with the bare skin beneath. I stare down into Henry’s window, where the three of them sit on his bed. Baz and Graves, Henry and the empty space beside him. It’s so laughably obvious that none of them would ever choose me.

None of them even knew me.

The morning sun is blinding. The opposite of the dark, moonless night

when Sam, another stranger to them, another body brought in and run ragged for their entertainment, took the photo with them here. My toes curl over the edge of the wall. All I have to do is lean forward.

Death is the only water to wash away this dirt, Medea said. She's right. There aren't any other options.

I've done everything I can. It was never going to be enough. But you knew that, didn't you, Sam? When I first talked about leaving home, you already knew I wouldn't be enough. You would need to come, even if you didn't want to.

I'm sorry. I can come to *you* now.

Henry looks up. Our eyes meet. Pity, fear, loathing—any of those would have been enough to push me over and let me fly. But his eyes are wide with fascination, like me on the edge is the most beautiful thing he's ever seen. He presses his fingers to his lips.

I sway, remembering his words in the car. Kiss for a kiss. Eye for an eye. And ... life for a life. There's still a way through to justice. Medea is right, but it isn't my death that will wash this stain away.

It's Adrian's soft place that needs to die. His home. His safety.

His Sam.

CHAPTER 37

If a man destroys his body, and so his life, he does it by the use of his will, which is itself destroyed in the process.

—Immanuel Kant

please. I can't do this without you

I wait until night falls again to come down off the roof. My limbs are frozen. Each step sends fire searing up through my feet. I move slowly. I have all the time in the world. Hate, fear, jealousy, pride, selfishness, grief. There's only one emotion left in me, strong enough to stay mostly whole after life's sharp teeth tore into it.

Grief. For my Sam.

I know which life I have to take.

Baz's door opens silently. Her room is neater this time, like she's made an effort just in case I come back. And I did. I'm here, standing beside her bed, watching her sleep. She looks fragile with her face smooth, finally resting from trying to mimic everyone else's. Our little mirror. Breakable as glass.

I kneel on the floor beside her head and slide my hand beneath her bed. It's so easy to open the fridge without even drawing it out. She told me herself that it won't hurt. Just a slip from one kind of sleep to another.

The syringe rests on my palm. I curl my fingers around it. Such a small thing, to have so much purpose. I press it through the chilled rubber seal on the insulin container and draw out as much as possible. Her chest rises and falls. Maybe she won't even wake. Maybe she'll dream of bee stings and then slowly creeping darkness. Maybe I'll still be here, kneeling beside her, when her face falls slack. I wasn't there for Sam. I'd like to be here for her.

Life for a life. Grief for grief.

Sam.

Baz.

Forgive me.

“Jamie? You came back.” Baz’s arm wraps around my neck, pulling me down, burying me in a hug that screams forgiveness. “I was worried about you. The things you said.” My hands clamp on the edge of her bed, the needle tucked inside the right, full and wet. She ruffles my hair; my cheek presses against her. Gently, so gently, her thumb draws away a tear. I feel it, hot and wet, a line of betrayal written from the side of my eye to the side of my face. “Are you crying? Don’t worry; I know you didn’t mean any of that. Tell me what’s really going on.”

“That’s not my name.” The words are muffled by how close she is, how damnably close.

“What?” Her hand stills, fingers tangled in my curls. The sleep that’s clouded every syllable clears. “What are you talking about?”

All I have to do is twist my wrist. Press down with my thumb. That’s all I have to do, raise the needle, stab it through her skin, push the plunger down.

But my hand won’t move.

She’s so warm; she’s so real and I’m about to end all that. I can’t stop thinking about the way she looked at me across the room and the way she holds me now. What if I’m wrong? What if Adrian didn’t kill Sam? What if Sam just wanted to fit in, and these boys are all that Sam ever wanted, if this was the one place where he looked in the mirror and he saw himself, his real self, the person he always wanted to be, so when they reached out he reached back and he took everything they offered, not because they made him but because it’s what he wanted.

What if it’s not Sam I’m questioning, but me?

What if it’s not Adrian I’m about to break, but myself?

“I can’t do this,” I gasp.

Baz nuzzles her forehead against mine. “I believe in you. Here. Come, sleep off whatever it is. We can talk in the morning.” She shifts herself, making space for me beside her on the bed.

I jerk back, terrified of the way her arms curve toward me, *me*, this devil on her floor. The needle falls between us. Glass on carpet, almost silent and yet the loudest noise in the world. I can feel the way her eyes watch the slow stop to its roll. Feel when they shift to me, when their question lodges deep inside my heart. But the only thing I see is the bare steel of the needle, glinting in the moonlight.

“Sam. The security guard. Adrian—and Henry—” I throw in because I know she didn’t believe me about Adrian, but Henry, Henry maybe even if it’s a lie, anything to escape the look on her face. “I meant it when I said they killed him. I know it’s true, because he was my cousin.”

“Jamie?” she asks, the name barbed and painful as a needle’s point. “No. Who are you?”

Broken. I am so, so broken.

Behind my back, the door creaks open. Baz’s eyes dart over my shoulder. Relief floods her face. Horror dredges every drop of blood from mine.

“Baz, I need to talk to you.” It’s Adrian. Still awake.

I turn. His eyes drop to mine. There’s something fragile in his face, like finding me, here, in the dark watching over Baz is a whispered wish. He wants me here. But only because he doesn’t know what I was planning to do. Baz will tell him how close I came to ending her. She *has* to tell him.

Adrian steps forward.

Finally, I run.

CHAPTER 38

Killary's back door slams behind me and winter lunges for my throat. I can't keep my eyes clear, can't keep my steps straight as I follow the path beside the stream, heading toward the wall, the way they looked at me keeping my feet moving one after the other after the other. She's telling him right now; everything I meant to do to her. He's picking up the needle. He's asking her why. She doesn't know; I'm someone's cousin, she'll say. *Her name is Marin*, he'll tell her. *Marin James tried to kill you*.

And him, she'll believe.

I'm no better than he is. Worse, even. I'm a murderer who couldn't go through with it, even when that last breath of the innocent was for something good and true. I can feel his eyes like ice between my shoulder blades. I don't understand how he could take that breath for nothing. How can he go on, day after day, knowing what he ended? Can he feel Sam's look, too, beneath his skin? Or has Sam eaten that away from him along with everything else?

The streamside gate is locked; I kick at it. Waiting isn't a choice, not when I'm this close to everywhere you are, Sam, with Baz standing behind me, watching from the Tower with her eyes still open. I can't go back and watch her see me so, so differently than this morning. Maybe it's easier for Adrian, knowing they can't see him anymore, their eyes dead and buried. Maybe that's why he's still sane.

Or maybe Adrian's still sane because he didn't do it, because Henry lied to me, and Sam died in a terrible accident and everyone, everyone else is right except me. Maybe I'm ruining my life the way my mom ruined hers, walking away from every hand that's held out to me except the ones belonging to the dead.

The way he looked at me in her room. The softness, when I was the most terrible I've ever been. I'm so far from deserving it, I'm so far from deserving any of this. Forgive me.

I scale the wall. It isn't hard; it's never hard. These walls aren't meant to actually keep people out, just to make them think they should be. That's all it's ever been, smoke and mirrors. I fell so hard for it, that this world was what I'd dreamed of. Somewhere I could finally be the person I needed to be. Instead, I became a Huntsworth girl.

Liars, every one of us.

My foot catches on a root. I trip but don't fall. A branch scratches my cheek, my ankle twists on a spray-slick rock. Not once do I stop. I have to make it to the glade. I could go to the little library, to the mirror, but that room is still Huntsworth, still inside those gates and here—here it's just Sam and me. The same boulders block my way. My fingernails dig into their rough surface, lichen turning them into black crescents as I climb. I slide down the other side. The rough rock skins my elbow. The glade is quiet, the ground smooth, and the water is empty. It's just me, always me, waiting for a miracle that life's never been willing to give.

Teeth chattering, I stumble toward the water. Dead leaves and ice clog its mouth, turning the laughter into a dull, throaty whisper. I tug off my shoes and step in, standing where he lay.

The cold clamps shackles around my ankles, hushing the throbbing of one, sending spikes of fresh pain up the side of the other.

I stare, and stare, and stare. He doesn't come, even though it's a reflection and it should work. He's shown up before without me even asking, much less trying to scry. Sam, where are you? I need you. "*I'm here.*" The words tear out of me. "Why will you only find me when I'm with *them*?"

"Marin!"

No. No, not here.

A branch snaps. He shouts my name again. I stare at the stream, willing it to sweep me away, drag me down with it because I cannot run from him again. I will not.

He drops down into the clearing. Frozen ground crunches beneath his footsteps. A broad hand closes over my shoulder; he drags me back, out of the water. I shake him off and try to push past him, but each step brings pain.

"If you say one word—"

"*Baz,*" he snarls.

One word. The only word. He knows everything, and I can't speak.

He steps closer, crowding me back against a moss-slick boulder. "Why?"

Why her?" His face twists, each word forced through gritted teeth. Oh, how he hates having to be this close to me. "I saw the needle. I know why you had it. She's *innocent*."

The word lands like a knife. It slices deep, carving out all my grief and confusion.

Rage for Sam takes their place.

A short, hot laugh bursts from me. "According to you, that means she's exactly who deserves to die." I duck beneath his arm and grab my shoes, my fingers trembling enough it's hard to get them on. My back is turned to him. I straighten.

"This isn't about me. You're the one who took things here."

I whirl. My hands slam against his chest, shoving him backward, pinning him against the rock. He doesn't stop me, just stares with eyes made of stone. Those eyes will crush me if I let them.

"Don't you dare put this on me," I say.

"She's *innocent*."

Guilt sears me.

"You aren't allowed to talk to me about innocence!" I yell. I push at him again, and again, like if I just hit him hard enough I can split him open. I want it out, now, every godforsaken secret buried in his chest; I want it bare before me, before this moon, before the world. Forget an audience, all I've ever needed was for him to be truthful to *me*.

"Why? Why him? It wasn't his keys. It wasn't his job. It wasn't even jealousy over Baz; she was always yours and never, ever his. If it was some sick murder game, you could have taken any boy at that school, why did you pick *him*?" My hands fist in his shirt, twisting. He's so close. I want him closer. I want him splayed open. But he just stands there, his hands tight fists at his sides, his face so carefully blank I want to scream. It terrifies me, how much I need that wall to break because of me.

"Say something!" I shout.

His jaw works. His lips part, and there's something there, in the way that small movement locks my eyes on his mouth that makes him suddenly feel too close. I step back.

His hands clamp around my waist, keeping me from moving away any farther.

"Don't," he says.

I can't look at his eyes. I don't want to see my own reflected in them. I grab his wrist; his bandage shifts beneath my touch and suddenly there's cold air and the bright heat of his thumb, sliding up and under the hem of my shirt. I gasp.

"Don't touch me." I push at him, trying to force that heat down, off my skin, but it only sears hotter as he flattens his palm and his fingers brush the bottom of my rib cage. Each move is as demanding as it is silent, buried by the promise of every look since the day we met. It's not want. It's not need. It's like calling to like. Dark to dark. Lost ... to lost. I know what he's feeling. I feel it, too. Which means I know exactly how to destroy him.

Give him absolutely everything he wants.

His head tilts toward me. I feel his breath on the side of my neck, then caressing my ear, warm against the edge of my jaw, close enough that if I move, if I even flinch, his lips will brush my skin and we both will burst into flames. My fingers seize where they clutch at him. He stands up, off the boulder, closing any distance left between us. Every breath I take, I feel him against me.

It should've been him. The one on the bed, the heart waiting for the needle. It should've been him, and both of us know it. I let go of his wrist and shirt to wrap my hands around his throat. Feel him swallow. Tighten my grip. "If it was you, I wouldn't have hesitated," I say.

He drags in a breath, his lips parting.

"Hate me," he whispers into the space between our lips, and it frees me.

I close them with my own.

Once, I climbed a pine almost to its top. It was on the side of the mountain, high enough that the ground dropped away steeply at its roots. The trunk bent in the breeze, swaying back and forth in a gentle, easy motion. I could see the town, crowded tight around the intersection. I could see my house, a plume of smoke from our chimney just barely visible against the gray slate sky. I traced the smoke with my finger.

The wind shifted, and I fell.

My chest hit the branch below me; I threw my arms out. The branch caught under my shoulders. I swung, my feet dangling forty feet in the air and my stomach and chest worn raw by the bark's careless bite.

Kissing Adrian is letting go. It's a free fall, as he groans, bending to my lead. His lips scrape heat across mine. I gasp for breath. His mouth parts

along with mine, stealing my air, consuming me whole. I feel his tongue flash across my bottom lip—and bite down. He jerks and pulls back, but this time it's me who's refusing to allow any distance between us. I chase him, rising against his chest to force his lips open again, my tongue tangling with his. He tastes like copper and salt.

I have never hated myself more than I do right now.

I have never felt more alive than I do right now.

His hands explore my hips, my waist, the soft skin of my stomach, keeping me from falling, pressing me against him until there's no space left to breathe. My hands tighten around his neck, my thumb caressing his windpipe, feeling the vibrations each time he gasps. His blood pounds beneath my palm, my grip not tight enough to stop it. I want him closer. I want him to let go. I want to hit the ground and never wake up again.

"You terrify me," he says, gasping into the curve of my throat. His kiss is fire. I'm not the one who's supposed to burn. I push him back, my thumbs digging into the underside of his jaw, until I can see his face. His tongue moves across his bottom lip. His eyes jump from mine to my lips. He leans forward, wanting me, and I'm damned, I'm gone, because I want him, too.

My lips sting. His hand digs into my side like he's worried I'm pulling away again. I won't, though. This is where I need to be. "You killed him"—his pulse trembles as he listens, making me think I'm not the only one worn raw—"and you did it on purpose."

Adrian's hand twitches, leaving my waist to rest on the hand that's wrapped white-knuckled around the tan skin of his neck. His lips are blue-tinted with a smear of blood near their corner. His eyes flutter. I squeeze tighter, hating that he doesn't even make an effort to stop me.

"I would do it again." Raspy. Barely there. Choosing to confess instead of breathe.

Hate me, his failing eyes say. *Only me*.

"Why?" I ask, not knowing if it's a demand or a plea. I'm giving him exactly what he wants. He's taking even revenge from me. I let go. He drags in a shuddering breath. We stand inches apart, not touching, but not stepping back, either. My handprints are already forming around his neck.

There's something in his eyes that I don't like. That same deadly softness I saw when he stood in the door to Baz's room.

Hope.

“I can’t tell you,” he whispers hoarsely. “I have to show you.”

He steps around me, his fingers snagging mine and twisting through them, just enough pressure that I turn and follow. He doesn’t let go, holding tighter instead. I let him, even though it feels like everything I am is bleeding out through where our palms touch, leaving nothing left except this feeling filling up my chest. It terrifies me, more than anything else I’ve seen or felt since I met this boy.

Because maybe, just maybe he’s going to give me the answers I need. I cling to his hand as he leads me back up the hill, hoping that he’s going to save me.

If only free falls didn’t always end in death.

CHAPTER 39

Adrian's walls stay down the entire walk to the little library. My stinging lips, his confession, and our kiss are smoldering fires impossible to lay any fortifications on. Twice, his steps slow, forcing me to catch up and fill the space at his side. Each time, he kisses me—once, on the wooden patio just outside the dining hall's back door, cautious and light before we step back inside; once in the dark tightness of Killary's servant's stairs, hungrier, heated, my breath stolen as he runs lips and teeth down my throat. It feels different, being this close to him inside. Everything is smaller. Someone will hear us. Someone will know.

I can't even say I'm sorry, Sam, because not all of me is.

The door to the little library closes behind us, and all I can think is: *I hope there will be a third.*

His hand drops from mine. He hasn't said a word since the forest, leaving me to wonder in silence what he's planning to show me. He kneels in front of me, striking a match to light tinder beneath the wood in the library fireplace. Flames flare, dousing him in a sudden warm glow. I turn away from him before my eyes can trace the outlines of his form.

A blanket lies on the window seat, wadded up with a sweatshirt. The cracked mirror has been taken down from over the fireplace and sits propped up beside them. Dirty coffee mugs and a few plates perch on the bookshelves on either side of the seat; books and scraps of paper scatter the floor. This is where he's been hiding the past week, coming here to sleep instead of our suite. The blankets and the pillow I saw were his. Trying to get as far as possible from me.

I sit woodenly in a chair and scrape my hands down my face. Now all I want is him closer, and closer, and closer. I hear him moving around and open my eyes, not wanting to be surprised by whatever he's preparing. But he's just stacking more wood on the blooming flames, his back still turned

toward me.

The History of Philosophy lies open on the table between us. The faded yellow of my sticky note still sticks out from the side, but now it's surrounded by too many others to count. I turn from one, to the other, the warmth inside me growing with every line.

Without music, life would be a mistake.

don't stop. tell me something true

To love someone ... is to circle around the other like a dead star and absorb him into a black light.

none of this was a lie only everything else

I am accustomed to sleep and in my dreams to imagine the same things that lunatics imagine when awake.

in my dreams, we dance

If a man destroys his body, and so his life, he does it by the use of his will, which is itself destroyed in the process.

please. I can't do this without you

He's still been writing to me, even after I knew it was him. He wants me to feel things about him. He wants me to understand him. And I do. I do. The pages tear from the binding so easily, a rending sound that fills the little room. I keep turning the pages, looking for the ones I wrote, ripping each out as soon as I find it. There's so many of them. Sam, I've failed you in every single way. I can't have this. Him.

Adrian touches my shoulder. I flinch. He leans over me, stilling my hand halfway through tearing out a new page. I curl my fingers; he turns the pages, slowly, steadily, looking for one in particular. When he finds it, not marked by a sticky note, he smooths the page, his fingers lingering over the marginalia.

My eyes are certainly wide awake.

you should have left

This page, he takes for himself. It crumples inside his fist. “The first time you walked through that door, I knew exactly who you were. I wanted you gone. Things were in balance, even if they weren’t under control. But you wouldn’t leave. You stayed beside me, reminding me every single day of what I’ve done.”

He’s always known. I’m such a fool.

“I was lost before you. No light, no dark. Only ... emptiness.” He pauses. I hear the page slowly crumpling in his hand but can’t look down. He shudders, like he can’t finish his sentence without losing his mind. Then, harder, more determined: “I need you to hate me. I need you to remind me that I’m human.”

But he isn’t human. He’s a monster. And so am I.

“You killed Sam. Tell me why.”

Finally, his eyes leave mine. I follow the line of his gaze. He moved things while I was reading. The mirror, the blanket, and the yellow box cutter I found on the bathroom floor are all arranged right next to the fireplace. He wants to scry for Sam together, the way I did with Henry. But this mirror’s cracked, and so am I.

Let me show you, his eyes say.

“No. Not with you.” I drop his hand. I can’t face Sam ever again. I can’t let him feast on what I’ve become. Even if it meant he took it from me.

He reaches one hand toward me. The bandage on his wrist brushes my skin. “You have to understand.”

In the fire’s weak light, I see the collar of bruises around his neck. My eyes meet his, watching me take in my marks. Heat stirs in their depths. They drop to my lips.

“Not here,” I say again, too fragile.

He takes a step toward me.

Sam, help.

He bends; I rise to meet him. I know his taste now. I know how his lips feel like guilt, his tongue like jealousy, his teeth like hate. How he pulls me apart and puts me back together, everything lost and unlovely seen, tried,

swallowed whole. He drags me out of the chair and crushes me against him. We stagger back. I rake my fingers down his chest, my lips parting, ready for his. He grabs my wrist and pulls away from me.

His eyes are hard. The walls are back. He steps toward the mirror without letting go of my arm.

“No. Not with you.” Not ever again; Sam is never, ever allowed to see what I have inside me now that Adrian’s there.

I claw at his fingers, tearing skin. He doesn’t even flinch, just sits and tugs me crashing into his lap. One arm pins me against his chest. The other finally releases my wrist to wrap around my head, gripping my jaw and holding me in place.

I close my eyes. “I’ve seen him. Henry showed me. He did this with me. I don’t need to do it again. I already know he’s trapped in there. That when you open yourself, Sam comes and takes.” I hate how shaky my voice is, not because I’m afraid but because there’s so little of me that isn’t being touched by him. I hate how my eyes are closed not because I’m afraid of Sam, but because I’m afraid of what I’ll feel if I see myself held in his arms. “He took my emotions from me. I know this truth already, Adrian. I know why you’ve been using this mirror.”

He holds me like a life raft. “You’re wrong. You don’t understand.”

“I do.” I think of kissing him. Of kissing Henry. Of kneeling beside Baz’s bed, of lying down with my head next to hers on the pillow. Of finding my cousin dead and knowing it was finally, finally a reason I could run. “There’s things I want to never have to feel again, too.”

“I wouldn’t be alive if it wasn’t for him.” He shifts; his hand flexes where it rests against my stomach. My pulse throbs beneath it, my body waking beneath his touch. “And he wouldn’t be the way he is if it wasn’t for me.”

I don’t understand. Sam wouldn’t be dead if it wasn’t for Adrian, but the rest—

“It was Christmas, and they had a huge tree in the atrium. We were sleeping in his room; I woke up in the middle of the night and went downstairs to look at the lights. Somehow, the tree caught fire. A wire. A candle, I don’t know. I tried to stop it. It spread so fast. The tree fell toward me. I remember fire, everywhere. Henry could have woken his family. Gotten them out. Instead, he came down. He got *me*. Only me.” The words pour out of him in a heated whisper. “The balcony collapsed. He was pinned by a

beam.”

The fire, with three dead. The scar in the center of Henry’s chest. He’s talking about Henry, not Sam.

“I couldn’t get it off him. Pieces of the balcony were raining down on us.”

The scars on Adrian’s back and hands.

“He lost himself to save me. My life is his, to do whatever he wants with it.”

“What does this have to do with anything?” I say, watching as his arms cinch tighter. I gasp a breath; his hand slides higher. “You said you owe him something. Did you kill Sam ... for Henry?”

“I owe Henry *everything*,” he says, and even I can hear the desperation in his words.

“And so you—what, you murdered for him?” I’m almost dizzy, my heart’s racing so fast. I’m talking to him. I’m talking to me. “*To live is not to breathe but to act*. If he saved you, why does that mean you have to kill?”

His jaw brushes against my cheek. How many times have we pulled the room small like this? Tightening it around us, our words a black hole devouring everything except the space between us. If I opened my eyes, the rest of the world would still be there. But here in the darkness, it’s only him, me, and the desperate pounding of our hearts. He runs too deep inside me; I don’t think even Sam could rip him out.

“You deserve to burn,” I whisper hoarsely, leaning back against him. Burn, we both need to burn.

“I didn’t kill Sam because I wanted to,” he says, too quickly to be anything but the truth. “I didn’t have a choice.”

“There’s always a choice.” Baz still breathes.

The tensing of his arms is the only answer I get. The room falls quiet except for the hisses and pops of the fire. Adrian’s breathing slows against my back, finally staring at his reflection without fear. It does nothing to calm me. The calmer he gets, the more I feel like screaming. I could do it. I could open my mouth and scream. Someone would hear. Someone would come.

His hand spreads wider on my jaw—a caress, if it wasn’t crushing. My right eye is covered by the tips of his fingers. “He’s coming.”

Sam will see us, like this. But if I don’t open my eyes, will he see it all from Adrian’s soul anyway? I think of the cuts scoring Adrian’s arms, of how many times he’s laid himself bare before Sam already. What must it be like to

be forced to feed off the memories of the one who killed you?

I can't make him do that again.

My left eye opens.

Firelight plays over our skin, highlighting every crook of arm and press of finger. His legs bracket mine, my hands and arms cling to his. His face is half hidden behind my hair, one dark eye staring past me into the mirror. My chest heaves; I swallow down the heat trying to rise inside my stomach. Adrian's breaths are shallow and rushed, ticking off the seconds against my back.

"Look." I swear he says it aloud, but in the mirror his reflection's lips don't move. I follow his frozen gaze to pale, slender fingers reaching out of the darkness. Adrian's arms tighten around me. I want them tighter still, clamping the life out of me. I deserve this. All of it.

Sam's hand curls around my reflection's neck. His empty eye sockets fix on me, the darkness gleaming with all the hunger of a black hole. His jaw unhinges, widening, distorting his features.

I deserve this, but—

I know my legs are kicking. I feel my shoulders pressing back into Adrian, my back arching, hips raising, trying to break free from his chains. Heat, wrong, warped heat creeps up my heel when it strikes the fire's grate, spilling coals. My vision blurs, dizzy by my skull striking the side of his. I know these things are true, are real, are what my body is doing while his unbreakable one pins me in place, but in the mirror Marin is still, and Adrian is still, and Sam's darkness is tearing through the inside corner of her eye.

There's too much inside I don't want Sam to see. There's too much he can't ever know. I was wrong, I was wrong—I deserve this, but that doesn't mean I can endure it.

"You have to see," Adrian says from far away. "You have to understand."

"Sam!" I scream. "Stop!"

Arms hold me tight, using me as shield and sacrifice. The mirror drowns in darkness.

"Not Sam," Adrian says as the cold bites down.

Henry.

CHAPTER 40

Henry rips through me.

But how can Henry be here, dead, when he's still alive?

Think about Sam, someone says from outside me. *See the truth.*

Lust, the boy in the mirror says, his teeth sunk deep into Adrian, pressed against the rock. I shrink back, not wanting to see my face. It isn't thoughts that guided him to this memory, or anything he's taken from me. It's grasping hands and shuddered breaths glowing white-hot in their forge of anger and need.

This time, though, the boy does more than taste. The memory rends, something swirling and purple as a bruise drawn out from its core. The ghost swells, struggling to swallow it all. With each bite, he grows more solid.

Henry?

The boy stops feasting. His neck twists farther than bones would allow, fixing that broken gaze on me. Dark hollows fill the spaces where his eyes once were. Their edges move, hundreds of slender black streaks spreading slowly outward. No, not streaks. Worms. The dying sunlight glints off their segmented backs as each one writhes, desperate to burrow its way deeper inside. But there's too many, and some lose their grip, rot's tears sliding down toward the corner of his lips.

He smiles. My mind shudders. I was so desperate for Sam to be here, guiding me, that I never looked past the shadow. This presence is too sure, too knowing, settling into the darkest parts of my soul with all the ease of an oil slick.

The memory starts to fade, the clearing fraying before the tangled sheets in Henry's bedroom. I shrink back from it.

Sam. I'm here for Sam.

I force myself to remember life, real life, just hours ago. Standing beside the stream, alone. No Adrian. No Henry. No Baz. No Sam. Only shame, the

poisonous tip to grief's arrows, sinking deep in my center. I wanted the stream to wash it away. It only made it worse.

This whole time, no matter how much I denied it, there was a part of me that thought the face haunting me was Sam's. From the stream to the mirror, I thought he was still with me, watching, and waiting for me to fix him. That isn't true anymore. He's not here, alive or dead. There's nothing I can do to fix this. I can't bring him back, even if I burn them down.

Sam, I think. You're ... gone.

Just like I want him to, the boy senses the wave about to crash over me. *Despair*, he says hungrily. *Hopelessness*. Hollow eyes sweep toward my center. His jaw distends, then snaps back into place. He is a boy, he is my nightmare, and it's me he wants to consume now, not just a memory.

Show me Sam, and this feeling will grow. I reach for him, begging and offering at once. He drifts closer. My mind ripples in his wake, shivering beneath his growing weight. *Show me how he died.*

The worm-like edges of his eyes writhe like living strips of void. He reaches up and snags one by the tail. Slowly, he pulls on the end, drawing it out from somewhere spooled deep inside him. It pulls taut, then snaps.

The boy turns toward my memory, where Adrian's lips press to my neck, and my back arches. The void strip convulses in his grip. Adrian gasps—and the boy threads the strip through the glimpse of dark at the back of his throat. He pulls it through, a stitch of hollow, and the memory of Adrian unravels. A stitch, through a shadow pooled in the curve of my neck and I join him. He weaves the thread into the water, into the sky, each stitch surgically quick, snagging on the back of my mind.

He tears at the weakened fabric of my memory. I scream. The moonlight disappears. Voices—figures—they keep coming until my mind is too full, not made to hold someone else's thoughts.

Love, the boy says. *This is love.*

In a memory that's not my own, Sam sits on the ground in front of the mirror, his eyes wide and staring at his reflection, his pupils pinpricks. Beside him, Henry stands with Adrian. Neither of them move to help. The ghost boy steps out from his own shadow, empty eyes fixed on me. He *is* Henry's shadow, stretched and slender. How much of him is in each? How much of this monster is the boy I know—and how much of the boy I've kissed is monster?

“You could save him,” the brighter, less-real Henry says. “But you won’t.”

Adrian pushes Henry away and takes a step forward to kneel beside Sam, his face hidden in the library’s deep shadows. Shade Henry drifts over to stand above him. *Shame*, he sighs. *Fear. Not enough, not enough.*

“You could draw his blood. You could break the mirror. You choose not to do either ... for me,” Henry says. “I want you to always remember that.”

Sam’s chest heaves. A wet gurgle comes from his mouth, like he’s trying to plead for help. Adrian’s hand latches around his arm.

“Take him to the stream.” Henry hasn’t moved, but his voice has grown colder.

Adrian’s hand snaps back from Sam. “No.”

“He’s finished,” Henry says, and ice skitters across my mind. “Nothing’s left; not that there was much to begin with. Wrap it up. Give them a story, the way you did with Houck and that other boy.”

“Henry—”

“It isn’t enough! I need more.” His voice is a whip, and Adrian flinches under it. “He didn’t fill me, either. Just get *rid of him*.”

Adrian doesn’t answer, doesn’t protest. I know what he does. I still want to scream.

Henry steps forward, his pale hands cupping Adrian’s cheeks like flower petals. “Shhh. Shhh. He isn’t lost, just changed. You’ve seen it yourself. There’s something immortal in all of us.” Henry lets go, and Adrian drops to his knees, a puppet with his strings cut. He turns to Sam. He’s still sitting upright, just like Adrian did that night, trapped by something inside himself—but his chest doesn’t move. His eyes are rolled back in his head, only the whites showing. I want Adrian to apologize, to beg for mercy.

Instead, he stands and wrenches Sam up with a grunt—bruises across the backs of both arms—and carries him, held tight to his chest, toward the door.

The memory glitches. Back at the glade, the night of the new moon. There’s almost no light as Adrian lays him down gently, like he’s putting him in bed, tilting him onto a pillow made of icy water. The stream flows around Sam’s head, around Adrian’s feet, around Adrian’s leg as he kneels and uses the lightest touch on the side of my cousin’s head to shift his mouth and nose beneath the flow. Sam doesn’t even struggle.

It is a lifetime before he stands, leaving Sam lying still at his feet. Henry

touches the back of his neck.

Adrian turns to stone.

Hate, shade Henry says, his empty voice pulled tight enough to snap. *So much ... hate. All for me.*

CHAPTER 41

I wake to pain and pressure. Blood trickles down the inside of my arm. I'm still in Adrian's lap. The fire is down to glowing embers beside me. My skin is warm, too warm, but below it is freezing ... and broken. What was once Marin is scattered, then glued back together around a few dark pieces of fear. I can feel it, in the way the tightness in my throat hasn't shifted, or lessened, ever since Henry's ghost latched his teeth onto my core.

I force my eyes to focus. In the cracked mirror, I see Adrian wrapped around me, his legs cocked beside mine, one arm too tight across my stomach and the other raised, holding the stained blade of the box cutter high. Everything else is ... wrong. His head is twisted back, someone else's hand around his neck, a handgun prying his lips wide.

"You two have been busy." Henry's slow drawl drips into my ear like poison. Every word he said in my mind is instantly real. The same voice, the same boy, ordering Adrian to kill my cousin and *enjoying it*.

The twisted void at the center has always been him. And Adrian, the willing hands trying to fill him up. It was never about Sam at all. He was just another sacrifice. Timothy Houck. Oliver Silven. Sam Bullvane. All attempts to make Henry what he once was.

If he's telling the truth about needing to be filled, and taking soul after soul into the mirror to try to satisfy his hunger—and why wouldn't he tell the truth, when it was only him, Adrian, and Sam in the room; the darkness, the devil, and you—then why hasn't he taken Adrian?

Why, every time Adrian kneels before this bloodstained altar, does Henry let him be the only one who gets back up?

"Had to go and interrupt me when I was having a perfectly pleasant time with Baz. Did you think I wouldn't know? When it's me in there, just as much as I am here. Splay. Splice. *Split*." Whispers on spider feet, weaving their web around us. I can't tell which of us he means them for, and I can't

see him in the mirror. In my mind's eye, that voice comes from a face with no eyes, only voids. Fear tightens my muscles. I fight it, craning my neck, pressing back against Adrian, needing to see, needing to prove this is real. My mind is my own, even if it's still full of nightmares.

"You know what, Graves? I think I was right. Now that I've truly tasted her, I think *she* would finally fill me up. So much hate. So much love. All for me."

Adrian's throat flexes, trying to swallow. Blood from where metal scraped his gums raw trickles between his teeth. His arm tightens, then releases from around my stomach. I spring off him, scurrying on hands and knees toward the fireplace. I grab the poker and raise it before I turn back toward Henry and the handgun stuffed down Adrian's throat.

"Let him go," I say.

Adrian moans. Henry's head twitches like he's watching the sound unravel, trying to pull it apart. Already, his features are shifting, waterfaling out of the hard grip of hate and into sorrow. He's doing this because of what he ate inside *me*.

First, hate—Adrian's, or mine, I don't know; both, all for him. Now, sorrow over Sam. The feelings shade Henry consumed from me; they're passing into him.

"Stop it," I say, angry, not scared. "Don't do it."

"Don't do what? This?" Henry shifts the angle of the gun, mouth gaping as he swipes away a teardrop with his shoulder. Adrian's throat heaves. He drops the box cutter and clamps both hands around Henry's arm, every tendon in his neck and arms tense and tight.

Henry's face seizes, screwing tight—then bursts with a sob. He's almost unbearable to look at, his wide lips and white teeth as wrong as the sun at midnight. There's too much of him, and too little of me. "I can't. Can't stop. You taste too good. Doesn't she, Graves?"

Each fresh burst of anguish racking Henry makes Adrian shiver. A tear rolls down the side of his face, matching Henry's.

Henry's thumb caresses the undone safety lock on the gun.

"Let him go," I whisper.

Henry blinks, like he's not sure who I'm talking about. He looks up at me. "Oh." His finger drifts toward the trigger. "This. Don't worry. He likes it. Don't you?" Adrian's hand moves slowly down Henry's arm, then back up

again, petting him. “See? He wants this. He knows it will make it so, so much better when he feeds me later. He’s whole. He’s saved. It’s me left in pain. It’s me who lost everything. But then, he told you everything, didn’t he ... Jamie?”

There’s a pause before that name, one I don’t like.

“Two young boys and a Christmas tree. One fell down, and the other wouldn’t let him die. I know my truths. I also know yours, Jamie. Or ... Marin?” He cocks his head and smiles at me through tears, and I know without a doubt that everything, *everything* passes from the shade of him to him. “Which do you prefer? I want to make sure you feel safe around me.”

I try to speak, but my throat barely lets air in, much less words out. He has me cornered, and he’s loving every second of it.

“Jamie Vane, such a nice tribute to Marin James and Sam Bullvane. I think I’ll use that one.” He shifts his attention down and smooths the lines marring Adrian’s forehead with a clucking noise. “You knew, didn’t you?”

Adrian’s neck twists, the back-and-forth movement almost too small to see. A *no, no, no* as his eyes drill into Henry’s. He makes a sound like a groan, ground down by the barrel of the gun.

“And you didn’t tell”—Henry’s voice quiets, his tone snapping in a vicious whisper—“me!” His elbow straightens, pushing the gun in farther. Adrian’s body crackles with tension, his hips arching off the floor. His eyes close. His hand raises, shaking as he searches blindly, his fingertips finding and then spreading across Henry’s cheek. Henry turns into it. Adrian’s palm muffles Henry’s next words, but the room is so quiet I hear them anyway.

“Come here, Jamie.”

Adrian’s fingers stop moving. Henry rubs his cheek across them, using his own movement to replace the sudden stillness. He pulls the gun from Adrian’s mouth and points it at me.

Bright, coppery fear runs rampant, shredding me from the inside faster than any ghost.

I’m going to die. And no one will ever know the truth.

Suddenly, Adrian lunges forward, swiping Henry’s arm down toward the floor. The gun explodes; a bullet rips into the wood floor. I stand, poker raised, curses painting the room black. Adrian curls onto his side, dry heaving onto the worn carpet, one arm locked on Henry’s wrist. The gun sways at the end of his arm, hypnotizing as a metal cobra.

Henry looks at me, but he doesn't repeat himself. He doesn't have to. Not with me. I take a step toward them, scraping one hand back through my curls, my eyes focused not on Adrian, not on the gun, but on him. I know where the real danger lies.

"Kneel," he says.

My feet stop. I wet my lips nervously. "Why?"

Henry straightens, rising above Adrian's shoulders, a long, slow exhale stretching his spine. His eyes are still red with tears, but it isn't my sorrow that fills them now. He's all his own. Close to whole, but only close. He pushes the gun into the hollow beneath Adrian's jaw.

"*Do it,*" Adrian says. The words push down on the gun. I want to hear his voice again. I want him to tell me that it's okay.

Henry shushes him, forcing his head up and back. He wants this moment—and me—all for himself. "Because Graves needs to be taught a lesson, and I thought you might enjoy it."

I can't help the way my eyes widen. Henry notices it, the way he notices everything. He's always watching, always remembering, tracking things about us that I've let slip through my fingers. If I refuse, it'll do nothing but prove he's found a weakness. It wouldn't even matter why—if my skin crawls because I hate it, I hate him, I hate the feeling of his lips on mine, or if it's because I only hate myself. Henry will dig into it and find the festering center.

I kneel. I lay the poker down beside my leg. The gun falls from Adrian's chin. His hand grips Henry's leg in relief.

"Kiss him," Henry says.

The flicker of Adrian's eyebrows is the only proof either of us heard him. Inches apart, trapped in the moment before, when the gun fell away and neither of us moved to run. It's Henry at the heart of this tension, holding our strings taut with his fingers. He pulls Adrian's head back even farther, far enough he can easily lean down and drag his teeth along the edge of his ear. "Don't be gentle."

Adrian's eyes drop to mine, roiling with something I know Henry's shade would delight in. My breath comes faster, and faster, the longer he looks at me. Henry sets down the gun on the floor beside Adrian's knee. He doesn't need it anymore.

He has me.

“You said I just needed to watch,” I murmur. I’m hiding, and not just from Henry.

Henry tucks his lips between his teeth, like he’s trying to stifle more laughter. “Think carefully. Is that what I said?” He reaches one finger up around Adrian’s chin and hooks it inside his lip. Hard, at first, then releasing, gentle, becoming a caress that soothes.

“You said...” I watch Adrian’s breathing start to steady, only then realizing how closely it mirrors my own. Am I cueing from him—or him, from me? Heat colors my cheeks. “... that I would...”

Henry’s nails dig into the side of Adrian’s neck.

“... enjoy,” I finish, my voice half formed.

“And are you?”

I shake my head, wordless. A low moan of sirens echoes in the night. Red-and-white flashes on the trees outside the window. The police, called for the gunshot. So quick to come when it’s Huntsworth in need.

“I don’t blame you. I know some things are better tasted than seen.” Henry reaches forward, cups the underside of my jaw. His finger is wet and warm where it lays against my skin. His voice lowers, promising secrets, as he draws me closer to Adrian. I don’t resist. There’s only white noise in my mind, and the feeling of Henry’s fingers trembling where they touch my cheek. “I swear ... he’ll hate every second of it.”

Adrian holds himself taut, pulled back and away even though Henry’s hand is on me, not him. His eyes are shut, his jaw clenched. A body screaming torture.

“If you promise,” I say, not recognizing my own voice.

Henry’s hand leaves me without support. I have to finish this, that move says. His words, his will, but my actions, my lips, my body, moving for him. Adrian’s lip curls, but I steal anything he’s about to say when I tilt my head and close my lips around the corner of his jaw. Part bite, part kiss, then gone as I pull back, lick my lips, let them fall open. Not the kiss Henry wanted, but I’ve never liked giving Huntsworth boys what they want.

Before I can say anything, Adrian moves. One hand, torn from Henry’s leg to wrap around my neck and draw me close. I gasp—and he stops, our mouths a breath apart. I watch him struggle—his brows drawing together, his lips peeling back over his teeth, his jaw tightening, screwing down, until tension locks his entire torso. He doesn’t want to kiss me.

How much of what Henry saw inside me did Adrian see, too?

“He’s right, isn’t he?” I whisper. The sirens are louder now, just outside the building. They cut off all at once, plunging us into silence.

“He’s always right,” Adrian says. “But never for the reason you think.” He pulls at the back of my neck. I resist, holding myself away. If he doesn’t want this, then neither do I. I feel the rush of his exhale. It traces across my skin, heating me.

I know what I saw in my mind. Sam’s killer is still alive, and I’ve been given the choice to let him die or kiss him—and keep him alive. Either way, Henry wins, because either way he owns me. I’m his because he killed Adrian for me; or I’m his because I’m just like Adrian.

But if I keep him alive—for *now*—then *Adrian* is mine.

He would never have killed Sam if it wasn’t for Henry. It’s Henry who deserves to die, Henry who should be dead and is alive, more damnably alive than any of us. And there’s only one person who Henry has refused to drain to stay that way. His best friend, the boy who he saved when his entire world burned down.

His weakness.

Slowly, dreamlike, I reach for Adrian. Our lips meet, then meld. I shift to the side; he stays hungrily upright. We hardly move, a kiss turned into still life—until a stifled groan rumbles through Adrian’s chest. The sound of surrender.

Mine. All mine.

My lips part, my hands scrape across his neck, then lower, tugging at his shirt, trying to bury myself in him. His hands shake as they carve needy trails through my hair, pulling at the roots; his eyes are closed, not roving, looking inward instead of looking for prey. We part; he gasps; we join again.

Henry’s hand brushes the side of my cheek, a cold, light touch. My lips stop responding to Adrian’s hunger. I train my face to look quiet, controlled, even as Adrian angles toward me, searching for more.

A metallic *click* rolls across the suddenly still room. Henry glances down and sees the barrel of his gun staring back at him. So busy watching our mouths. Not paying any attention to my searching fingers.

“Tell me why Sam had to die,” I say.

Henry’s mouth falls open in such a perfect mimicry of the shade in my mind that my eyes prick with hot, involuntary tears. “Jamie,” he says. “Jamie,

Jamie, you exquisite thing. I already told you. I've been telling you since the first time you asked, back in the glade."

"*Tell me plainly.*" I raise the gun toward his face. I have to know if the plan burrowing into the darkest parts of my will is going to work.

His languid sigh mocks my weapon. "If I must." He points at his tattoo. "My time ran out that day. I died. Suffocated and crushed beneath a burning plank. Graves couldn't move it fast enough. Couldn't save me. But what he could do was *beg.*"

He wipes his finger across Adrian's lips, and I know without doubt that I will never think of kissing him without thinking of Henry, too. Something stirs deep inside me. Grief, raging at losing a love I never had in the first place. I wasted so much time thinking it was Henry who knew me when it was always, always him. But anything that could have been between us has to die. Only Henry is left.

"Someone heard you, didn't they?" Henry says to him. "My soul left, but it didn't go far. Trapped in the mirror that hung from a collapsing wall above us, faithfully watching over a boy desperate to save his best friend. When the firefighters freed my body, my soul tried to rush back in. But heat and glass play about as well as you and I do, Jamie. The glass cracked. And I ... split."

In the glade. He did tell me this. *If you pull the soul from the body, and the body dies but the soul does not, has there been a death?* "You were talking about yourself that night."

Henry's nod is a slow dance with depravity. "How do you keep a trapped soul alive? What was it Rousseau said? The quote you liked so much, you underlined in your pretty little conversations. Ah. I have it. *The man who has lived the most is not he who has counted the most years but he who has most felt life.*"

He's read our words—or pulled them from our hearts. That's what they were for, maybe, even, the reason Adrian started them. What Sam was for, what Timothy and Oliver were for. Feeding Henry. Trying to fill him back up with lives lived to the fullest, but you can't fill a void.

"Why wasn't Sam's death in the box beneath your bed?" I ask Adrian. "Every other one, but not him."

Henry answers for him. "It was. Until you came. But finding that would've ended our game a little too fast, and I made sure to burn it for him." He glances up at the window. Blue-and-red strobes flash against the pane,

blending with the earlier white. “Shame. Out of time, just when you were starting to ask the interesting questions. The police are here now, too. Don’t you think Graves should go see why?”

Adrian tenses. Henry shifts his leg to give him space. That small action is all he needs to unfurl from the floor. They have such a quiet language of control and submission branded into each of them. Adrian leaves without looking back at me once. I won’t let that sting. Not when I’m staying here, with Henry, instead of following after him.

But then Henry stands, too. He brushes off his pants, straightens the collar of his shirt. Turns for the door, like the gun in my hand is nothing more than a child’s toy when there, right by my ankle, is the bullet hole it dug. I toss the gun onto the chair beside me, disgusted with myself for trusting in it.

“You’re leaving?” I ask.

“I want to see Graves’s face when he finds out why they’re here.”

For me, I think. It has to be. Baz told her mom about what I did, and Sheriff Barron is here to give the townie justice. He won’t take me home; he’ll take me to jail. I have to get my mom’s ring and run before he comes for me. But I’ll come back. I’ll finish things. “He’s not going to be that surprised.”

Henry turns and places a kiss on the top of my head. I feel like a doll. “You’re such a fun toy,” he says. “Here, I’ll give you a treat.”

He takes my hand and leads me out into the hallway, walking me halfway down until it turns. There, the dark hall blazes with siren lights, all coming in through a window looking out on the front courtyard. Henry stops by it, drawing me to stand in front of him. Three stories beneath us, an ambulance, a police car, and a fire chief’s truck are parked haphazardly. Paramedics in light green scrubs walk a stretcher down the front steps, passing by Headmistress Delgado in a tracksuit and house slippers. She grips the edge of the stretcher, forcing them to stop.

A side door bursts open. Adrian rushes across the courtyard, staggering when he gets close. He shouts.

“Who are they taking?” I ask, afraid. Delgado hasn’t moved. A paramedic has both hands on her shoulders, trying to guide her away.

It can’t be what I’m thinking. I left her alive.

“You left such a tempting display, Jamie. It was impossible not to finish what you started.” He rests his chin on my shoulder, nuzzling at my neck. “I

held her while she seized, like I knew you would want to. I wore gloves. So all the fingerprints on that syringe are yours, aren't they? Don't fear, Jamie, I'd never ruin your fun."

Baz.

That's ... Baz.

The ambulance pulls away. My knees buckle. Henry holds me up. I push him away, choosing gravity's embrace to his empty touch.

"Remember," he says. "Hate is not that far from love."

He leaves. I dig my fingers into the windowsill. Paint flakes away beneath them. I scrape more, and more, until my nails are shredded and the skin beneath them starts to tear. All of this is because of me. I can't look away, not until the door below me swings open and Henry strolls out. He raises one hand, waving at me as he crosses to where Adrian stands barefoot in the glow of the fire chief's retreating lights. Adrian turns and swings his fist at Henry. Henry's back bends, dodging easily with his hands still lightly tucked into his pockets. He touches the side of Adrian's neck, and the other boy collapses against him, clinging to his shoulders.

He left me to go feel Adrian's anguish. Left me steps away from his loaded gun. From Adrian's box cutter, lying bare-bladed on the floor. I could run. I could defend myself. I could kill myself. I could kill them all. He doesn't care. He isn't afraid of this plaything at all.

He should be. After all, I know the one thing he *is* afraid of.

Dying.

CHAPTER 42

Every day at Huntsworth I've felt out of control. Something bigger than me has been propelling me forward, even if it sent me straight off the cliff. Love, I'd thought—for Sam, for myself, for this place, even, maybe for one of the boys here. Shade Henry was probably closer to the truth. Selfishness. Same thing, same thing.

Downstairs, girls cry prettily, checking through their fingers to see when it's okay to stop. There were already decorations hung, the leather chairs taken away and chest-high tables put up in their place, ready for the crowd. This school isn't made for mourning. It'll sweep tragedy beneath the table, stuffed in a shadowy corner for the mere mortals to deal with while they feast on canapes and cold shrimp.

Henry and Adrian are at the hospital. I suppose that means Baz is, too, or at least her body. If someone dies before they make it to the emergency room doors, do they still pull up and unroll the stretcher? Or do they just keep the doors shut and quietly roll past, parking in the shadows of the morgue?

Baz.

She might be gone. Adrian already is—or as good as, with how deep Henry's rooted in his heart. There isn't anyone who's going to finish this except me. I go to the little library first, then the dining room, sneaking in a side door to leave what I need to. My plan is forming, running across the backs of Henry's confessions, things he said trying to break me, trying to trap me, but all he's doing is giving me weapons.

When I get back to my suite, a dark shape hangs on the back of my bedroom door. Someone's dry cleaning, wrapped in smooth packing paper the color of wine. I reach as high as I can and gently tug; the whole thing falls gently into my arms. I slip my hand between the sheaths of paper to separate a silver sticker holding them shut. The paper slides open to reveal a floor-length black dress with a card tacked to the hanger. *H*, it says, and nothing

more.

You'll look stunning in a dress. Henry chose this for me to wear. He still wants to go with me to the Release.

I run my fingers along the neckline, trapped for a moment by the feeling of fabric made to be caressed. The dress slides off the hanger easily. Satin slick as his smile, loose drapes teasing low across the chest and a slit straight up the side. A pocket, so cleverly made as to be invisible in the folds of the dress, sits just below the hip. The only accent is a rose gold zipper at the back, a simplicity that screams money.

Everything. He's thought of everything. And now, if I don't do what he wants, he's got more than enough evidence to hang me for Baz's death. We both know the law won't bend itself backward for a girl from Amberdeen.

He wants to fit himself around both of my lives like a second skin until he's finally full. Each kiss, each question, each midnight gleam of steel—he's found them all and taken them for himself. He doesn't care if I hate him or love him as long as he's the sun at the center, burning me alive or bringing forth thanksgiving for the blessing of light.

The dress slithers down my bare skin. It's made of fabric so black it shimmers in the room's dim light. I run my hands over my hips, the satin cool beneath my palms. Even suns can't resist the pull of a black hole.

The door opens. Adrian walks in, his footsteps too slow, his eyes haunted by midnight yet still just as terrifyingly handsome as the first time I saw him. He's an aesthetic, a collection of pretty moods and impressive angles, but when you sift through them there's no core holding it together. Henry's taken it all. There's nothing left of him but an empty frame and the word *sinner*.

"I've been waiting for you," I say.

His lips press into a thin, white line, like he's trying to keep the air in his lungs from escaping. My zipper is undone; the strap of my dress slips down. I slide it back up, watching him watch the slow, purposeful movement.

"Tell me how she is." I grab him by the arm.

He looks straight at me, his eyes haunted. That's all the answer I need. Now, he knows what it feels like to lose someone. The grief their death leaves behind.

Baz is gone.

"You have to fix this," he says. He tears his eyes from mine. I feel them leave like ripping a bandage off a burn.

Life for a life. Sam for a Sam. But Baz was Adrian's weakness, and it wasn't ever him I needed to punish. She was my mistake.

She was my friend.

Laughter bubbles up, so much that it makes it hard to breathe. I'm laughing; I'm choking on tears. I grab at Adrian with both hands, forcing him to hold me up.

"You have to fix what I did!" he shouts.

"What"—I can't; it's too much—"you did? No, this was"—*me*—"Henry."

"No!" He pulls at one of my hands, forcing me fully upright. I'm still shaking. It's laughter, I tell myself. Only laughter. "If I had just let him fucking die, she'd be here. They would all be here." He staggers back, dropping my hand. So soft. So easy to break. All he had to do was lose her and gain me. It's hilarious that I used to think this boy was made of stone.

"This isn't mine to fix. You're the one who needs to stop Henry." Calm, Marin. Soothe him. He's so fragile, and if you don't hold him together just right, he'll fall to pieces before you can use him. It was always the right choice to save this one. I need him. He's mine.

He drags his fingers along his skull, digging in so deep at the back that they leave red ruts in their wake. Then he snaps. He grabs a handful of books from the shelf, all ones I know he's sketched in—*Henry Henry Henry Henry*—and roars as he throws them out the window. He can't fix this.

"You can," I say. This time, when he shakes his head, the action is smaller. More focused. He's letting me hold his jagged edges for him. "You just have to do what you're best at."

He turns to me. *What?* those eyes say.

I place my words carefully, lining them up with each little fracture. "Listen to Henry. What did he tell you to do last?"

He searches my face, his own open and pleading with me to say more. I wish I could capture this expression. There's so much innocence in it, so much beauty—and all from a perfect monster.

"In the library, Adrian. When I was with you." Each word brings us closer together. His eyes cloud, and for a moment, we're both there again. The whispering lights in the window. Her body carried across the lot. Henry.

"Go to Baz," Adrian says, echoing the meaning of Henry's words. "But she's..."

I nod, and watch as the freedom of what's next sinks slowly into him.

"Get ready for the Release, Graves."

My hand slides off him. He walks into the bathroom. I hear the shower turn on. I go to the dresser and pull open the top drawer. Just like Henry promised, the syringe with my and only my fingerprints on it rests right next to four little white pills. I slide both into the pocket of this dress, then reach farther in.

The back of the drawer is empty. I slide my hand across the length of it. There's nothing there.

That isn't possible. I bend to look closely, pushing the garments to the side then pulling them out and shaking them one by one but there's nothing except clothes. I know I put it here. I check the other drawers; maybe I misremembered which one I put it in. All are filled with only a Huntsworth girl's clothes. The ring is gone.

I clutch at my neck, as if the past weeks haven't happened and it never broke and it was right where it should be before Henry tore it off of me. Wait.

"Henry." I turn to run across the hall to their rooms. Two steps, that's all I get before I stop myself. He took it. He must've felt its importance when he was inside my mind. That tiny silver circle, a girl's fragile hope for something after this, would've been irresistible to him. But he would never have left it somewhere I could find it. Searching is only a waste of time, and I have almost none left.

There's no running from any of this now. No ring. No way out.

So, this is how you want it all to end, Henry Wu.

One last time, I run my trembling hand across the base of each drawer. Then I close them and walk into the bathroom. Almost no mist hangs in the air, despite the shower pounding down. An indistinct shadow moves against the shower curtain. Adrian doesn't say anything, and neither do I. I turn his kettle on, scoop three of the pills out of my pocket and crush them in the bottom of an empty glass, then add the boiling water and stir until they're gone. I stick the needle into the liquid and draw it up, filling the chamber with poison.

I drag my fingers through my hair, raking it back from my forehead to check my reflection in the bathroom mirror. I have to hold her together, too. There's no color in her cheeks, only the steep slope giving them any shading at all. Her eyes are feverishly bright. She can't keep everything she doesn't

have out of them anymore. She was supposed to be able to leave. A small, sunny apartment in Nashville with pillowcase curtains and library books was waiting for her. This wasn't her life; it was Jamie's.

Henry thought of everything. He took my cousin. He took my friend. He took my memories. Now he's taken my future.

But I didn't come here for any of those things. I came here for me, and he doesn't have her, yet. I don't look away from the girl in the mirror. I let my mind my open. See deep, deep inside, where even his shade hasn't touched.

I am anger. I am grief. I am a bottomless cup of hate, and I will pour myself out into Henry until he drowns in me.

The water cuts off. The curtain tears open. Adrian's eyes meet mine in the mirror. Water beads in the hollow of his collarbone, anything lower blocked by my shoulders and the mirror's frame. His shoulder muscles shift as he grabs a towel with one hand, wrapping it around his waist. "You didn't leave."

I don't turn around. He doesn't need to know that Henry's stolen that option. "I thought you wanted to dance with me."

"I want—" Two words, dragged from his chest to sear into mine. Two words is all I get. I hear him step out and then leave. I catch a glimpse of the towel wrapped around his waist, the scars running up and down his back. Dresser drawers drag open and never shut. Clothing rustles soft over skin.

I raise my hands to lift the short edges of my hair off my neck. The dress hangs open all the way down, the zipper nestling in the curve of my lower back.

"Do me a favor," I call to him.

A floor or two below us, I hear a door slam shut. Voices echo up the stairwell, muted but festive. All across Killary, life is taking over. All except here, in this tiny dorm. There is no life in this suite. Only brokenness, and wishes.

The floorboards creak with each step he takes toward me. Still, I'm not ready for the feeling of his hand on my skin. Knuckles brush the base of my spine, then track upward, indelible proof that I am alive, I am feeling, and what I am feeling is him. What does it matter, what's real and what's a lie, when it feels like this? Close enough to touch, close enough to caress, close enough to break me in two.

The zipper slides up tooth by tooth, then stalls. "Henry chose this dress

for you.”

“Henry bought it,” I say. “I chose to wear it. Just like you’re going to choose to help me pay him back for Baz.”

“For all of them,” he says. His fingers stretch, forgetting the zipper to press hot between my shoulder blades. “For Sam.” They trace the lines of each blade, brushing down the side to wrapping low around my waist, each move a declaration. *You win*, they tell me. Heat coils in my stomach. I waver, suddenly frightened. I don’t know if I can do this.

He holds me tight against him, keeping me steady. “This isn’t how it was meant to go,” he murmurs into the curve of my neck. “You were supposed to hate me. You were supposed to leave.”

“I got it half right.” I cup his head and draw him down until his lips meet my throat. He presses a kiss to my pulse.

He moves the zipper up tooth by tooth, like he can’t bear to see the skin disappear. I turn to face him. He’s dressed for the Release, black-and-white and far too perfect. I unbutton the very top button, loosen his tie, let the world see the bruises. His eyes plunge to my lips, his hands catch me at the waist. The wild rush of it all pounds in my blood like alcohol. He’s even more beautiful this close, this desperate. For just a moment, I understand Henry.

I raise my hand and place it on the corner of his jaw. My fingers curl, inviting him forward. His lips part, he closes the distance—I place a single white pill on the center of his waiting tongue.

“Swallow,” I whisper, and he does. I don’t need to explain. He knows this is how everyone thinks Sam died. “There’s something else I need from you. Do you have your phone?”

He nods. I take the phone he holds out and find the camera, turning it to record. I lift it until his face is fully on-screen. His brow furrows, then clears. I can see it in his eyes. Henry led him into the darkness. He wants me to drag him back out.

Too bad I don’t know the way.

“Tell me exactly how you and Henry Wu killed Sam Bullvane,” I say. He starts to speak. I hold myself still, listening as he confesses. Word follows word, detail after detail, all marching in such tight order I’d think he prepared—but I know he hasn’t. This is what he relives, every single time he lets Henry inside. He finishes speaking.

I stop the recording and open his email before I load the video into a

message. It'll stay in drafts, for now. I can't let the police come this time until *I* am ready for them. I slide the phone back into his pocket and thread my arm in his. "Now, let's dance."

CHAPTER 43

The dress is black, and long, brushing the floor around my heels as I walk. It hugs every single line of my body. I'm not Jamie Vane, but neither am I Marin James. I am Descartes's wax, melting and cooling, losing my shape and finding a new one but all the while the same spark of self burns bright at my core. A chill breeze sifts through the air above me. I lift my cheek toward it, enjoying the way it plays over my skin.

Gone are the heavy wooden tables; dismembered and dragged away, replaced by slender, chest-high islands spiraling beneath the candlelit chandelier. A string quartet plays in one corner, their chosen tone lighter and airier and altogether less interesting than anything Adrian ever played. Men and women in expensive suits and shimmering dresses part as we enter Killary's common room, measuring me with expressions I need no mirror to understand. On Adrian Hargraves's arm, I finally belong.

Henry stands near a window at the back, talking to a small group of men. His eyes pass disinterestedly over their heads even as he speaks, looking for someone. I can see it now, how the way he treats people would make them want more. For him to deign them *worthy* of more. He controls everything so perfectly, including other people, in a way that Adrian's stripped-bone existence can only mimic.

Henry's eyes lock on me. Neither one of us smiles.

While he watches, I wrap my arms lightly around Adrian's shoulders. All around us, I can hear whispers. Beyond them, so faint it might only be my memory, I hear a single violin. Mournful, ragged, but so very, very alive.

Adrian's hands are firm and broad where they wrap around the small of my back. He presses me tightly to him. He smells like mint and licorice, and I can't help but smile. So not all boys smell like cedar and pine. The music is louder now, the other strings finding their place alongside the first. I sway, then step forward, pushing him back. He lets me lead. Our story would be so

different if he had ever once stepped up.

“You can send it now,” I say.

His cheek nestles against my hair as he breaks our dance to open his phone. A few taps, then it disappears back into his pocket. He wraps his arms around my waist. We swirl, just fast enough for the candles and faces around us to blur. He’s easier. Lighter. I can’t tell if it’s the drug already in his bloodstream, or knowing he’s about to be free. He starts to hum, following the melody of the song perfectly, a deep vibration I can feel and hear as I lay my head on his chest.

“Nice music,” I whisper. *Not music*, I expect him to say, *just notes*, taking us back to the beginning, when everything about hating him was simpler.

Instead, he says, “I only ever played for you.” His voice is soft with a smile, a note I’ve never heard in it before. More than anything, I want to look up and see the way it changes his face, but his hand cups the back of my head and his lips press against my temple. He won’t let me see. He knows I might change my mind. “Even before I knew you, the music was always yours. You don’t know how much I needed—” His voice breaks. “I could never find you ugly. You’re the most beautiful thing I’ve ever dreamed.”

Our words. My fears. No longer just in that book. He’s here, and real, and not flinching from me at all.

“Shhh,” I whisper. It’s hard to talk. I drop one hand, letting it trail down the lapel of his suit. “Just dance with me.” We’re close enough together that no one but him could see my fingers slip into the pocket of my dress. I palm the syringe with the needle sticking between my fingers. It’s full. I don’t know if it will be enough.

“Please,” he says, murmuring *Marin* against my skin. *I can’t do this without you.*

I press my cheek to his. The needle slides through the fine fabric of his dress shirt without any resistance. His hands spasm around my waist. His breath rushes across my neck in a slow, warm hiss. All I need to do is depress the plunger and push the drug into his veins.

My thumb won’t move.

His hand drops from my waist and slips between us to cover mine. “No,” I say, suddenly desperate. Henry needs to lose him. He needs to lose everyone he’s loved.

“It’s okay,” Adrian whispers. His hand tightens around mine, his thumb

pushing down until the plunger moves, and the drug floods his bloodstream. A single, hot sob breaks between my lips. He pulls his hand away. My fingers are loose; the syringe drops between us. He crushes it beneath the sole of his shoe. A step forward, his foot between mine, pushing me back. "I'm sorry."

I am never going to be the same again.

The music swells. Adrian leads me into a wide, sweeping turn. His hand grips mine and pulls it to his side, covering the spot where I pierced him. "I don't know if it will hurt," I say.

His jaw flexes. He doesn't say anything. I want to scream. I want to beat my hands against his chest and force him to rage at me. Anything, anything—because still, *still*, I can't help but be selfish. I want our time together to have meant enough to him that he fights this, but instead, he pulls me close, and we dance.

Don't cry, Mare.

"May I cut in?" Henry puts his hand on Adrian's shoulder.

Adrian's hand tightens on mine. He steps back, releasing my hand only when our arms pull straight. Henry waits. Adrian looks over at him. I brace myself.

He nods without a word, and steps back.

No. This isn't right. He has to die here, with me. Nausea sweeps over me. "Adrian," I call. His hand slips into his pocket, then out, sliding something onto his little finger. He won't look at me. A few steps away, and the crowd swallows him.

"You have something you're not telling me," Henry says.

My laugh is slow, and mixed with bile. I have to clench my teeth to keep it from spilling over into insanity. "There's so much I haven't told you."

"You look well," Henry says as he draws me against him, though I am very, very far from well.

I can't see him in the crowd. "The dress fits perfectly."

"And everything else." Henry's eyebrow arches in approval. If we were anyone else, I would love him for saying that, and only that. But we are us, here, and so I spin, letting the long black folds of the dress swirl around my ankles, searching the faces that whirl past me. "But does it fit Jamie..." Henry says, "... or Sam Bullvane's cousin?"

The breeze stirs at the sound of my cousin's name, like a cold breath coming up from hell to claim me. "Neither," I say. Maybe it was never Sam

in his mirror. But maybe, just maybe, Sam's here, now. After all, if there's one thing I believe in now, it's ghosts.

Henry's lips slip into a smile. *"What is there then that can be taken as true? Perhaps only this one thing, that nothing at all is certain."*

"Doubt is the origin of wisdom," I parrot back. He wants to think I'm finally his, heart and mind, and I will let him. Sam Bullvane and Marin James are both dead. And Adrian—

In the mirrorlike surface of the windows, I see the Release reflected in all its beauty. I can't stop searching for him. He has to be in this room still. He wouldn't have left. Not with both Henry and me here. Lights and ever-shifting bodies glimmer in the darkness around me, everywhere except for one spot to my right. There, the movement stalls, the flow of the party snagging on someone immovable.

I turn toward that spot and find Adrian staring at me. Something inside me breaks at the way his lips twist. My arms loosen from around Henry. I drift toward him.

Henry's hand wraps around the back of my arm. "Stay."

For the first time, I have the feeling he's being totally honest. But I don't know if it's because of me or Adrian. I smile at him, as slow and sweet as licking honey off your thumb. I'm about to change absolutely everything for us, and I've never felt more in control. Watch me shine, Henry.

"No, you come with me." I turn, not wanting to lose Adrian in the crowd again just as someone gasps in surprise on the other side of the room. He's there, holding himself upright using a man in a tux like a cane. Beside him, a woman pats frantically at the front of her dress, where red wine blossoms like a gunshot wound.

"What did you do to him?" Henry says to me.

"This is your fault, not mine." All of this is because of him, and I will strip it from him strand by strand until he has nothing left but himself. He can't take what was mine and expect to not have to pay for it. Adrian pushes himself off the man, takes a step forward. His body goes loose, then simply sags to the floor, like a flower with its stem cut.

"Adrian!" Henry yells. Shock tightens his voice.

The crowd swells back and away from Adrian.

"A boy's passed out," I hear a woman sneer.

"Dead drunk," says another. "Shame."

A familiar face steps out from the crowd. Leckey snaps his fingers at two freshmen in white server's jackets with the hound red and rampant near the cuffs. "Get him out," he says curtly.

Henry's nearly to him. I'm a step behind. He shoves the freshmen away and kneels at Adrian's side. "What did she do to you?"

"Not her—" Adrian says. He sounds like he's choking on each word. His eyes rove, searching for me in the wall of people around us, but his pupils are such tight pinpricks that I'm not sure he can see anything anymore, even if I could let myself step close enough to be seen. "—me."

Henry's back curves into the shape of denial.

"Get him *out of here*," Leckey repeats. Hands reach for Adrian's shoulders.

"Don't touch him," Henry growls. He digs in his pocket, pulls out a phone, dials, and presses it to his cheek. Adrian's body starts to seize. Henry cradles his head in his hand, turning his neck to the side, each gentle motion proof that I was right.

"Yes, there's been an emergency—" he starts. It's hard to hear his voice over the rising tide of questions surrounding us. Everything's happening the way I wanted. The two boys. My audience. Their end. A few minutes more, and this farce will be over.

Blue creeps in around the edges of Adrian's lips.

"Hang up."

Henry glares at me, still talking to the first responder.

"They're already on their way. They'll be here in minutes. He made sure of that." I gesture at Adrian. Henry doesn't believe me. I raise my hands and, slowly, carefully, my eyes on Henry, watching for any signs that he's going to snap, kneel beside Adrian. I pull his phone from the pocket of his suit jacket. He's left it unlocked, like he knew he wouldn't be here to open it when I needed it. My face softens.

"Get away from him," Henry says.

I press play on a video at the top of his Sent folder. The first few words of Adrian's recorded voice are lost in the noise of the crowd. Soon enough, they quiet. "—of confession, given freely and without coercion. On Monday, November 3, I, Adrian Hargraves, and Henry Wu willfully and knowingly murdered Sam Bullvane. We did it for fun. We did it because we could, and we deserve to pay to the full extent of the law. On Friday, September 12, I

and Henry Wu willfully and knowingly murdered Timothy Houck and—”

Noise explodes around us.

Henry reaches for the phone, shrugging off the hands now trying to grab his shoulders. I let him have it. I want him to see where I got the video, to see the emails Adrian sent it to. Sheriff Barron and a detective in Nashville, one well-known for pursuing cases that would get a lot of controversial publicity.

“He did it for you,” I say. “They’re coming for *you*.”

Henry’s hand tightens around the phone, his eyes hard and tight as he stares at the face paused on the screen. Then his gaze drifts to the face on the floor, and something inside it cracks. He punches the floor beside Adrian’s head. The phone skitters out of his grip like a live cockroach.

Leckey grips his arm, yelling in his face. Henry’s hair is loose, covering his expression as the older man drags him to his feet. Two other sets of hands take hold of his arms. They start to pull him toward the door. Someone else has me by the arm, guiding me in the opposite direction. It worked.

They believed me.

I look back over my shoulder. I want to see Adrian. He needs to know we won. All I see are bodies. “Adrian!”

Henry’s gone, too. The front doors are open. Someone’s shouting near them.

All I see are bodies.

Suddenly, the chandelier drops. A wheel of fire and brass plummet toward our heads—then its chain catches on a safety block. It veers wildly across the room. A woman screams. Brass and wax crash into the brick fireplace. Candles spray. There are shouts as hot wax sears bare necks, stomps as dress shoes try to stamp out fluttering flames, and through it all, there is Henry, bending, picking up a candle, and holding it to the edge of an ancient book.

The book catches aflame. It spreads so easily, leaping from book to book to tablecloth and then curtains. Smoke starts to creep up over Henry’s shoulders.

Hate is a bottomless cup, his look says. I will pour and pour.

“Fire!” a man shouts.

This is something he knows. Adrian, him, and the red warmth of flames as his family died. Phones light up around the room even as women hold up their hems and men hold tight to their glasses and, together, run toward the

door.

A decrepit sprinkler system dots the plasterwork ceiling. Smoke trails slowly up toward it. The next time I see him, Henry has Adrian by the arm, struggling to stand beneath his weight. Adrian's head rolls to the side, his eyes wide and white. His body shakes more intensely now. He slips from Henry's grip. My heart stutters.

The sprinklers seize, then explode. Water pours from the ceiling. In an instant, I'm soaked. I lean my head back. The stale, warm water streams down my cheeks, washing away the tears, every trickle a taunting memory of a touch I will never feel again. The hall empties around me in a flurry of hunched backs and muffled shouts of *The door, Cynthia!*, and *Fire! There's a fire!*

I slip off my shoes. The water is soft. Almost a caress. This wasn't part of my plan, but I like the flavor it lends. Fire and water. Henry and me. Adrian and Sam.

Almost finished, Sam. I open my eyes when I feel the water start to lick at the top of my foot and find Henry on his knees, Adrian draped in false embrace around his shoulders.

Bodies. Nothing more.

I turn from them and walk to the back wall, so close to where I saw Henry standing when we first entered. Behind the curtain to his right was where I'd left it, almost like he knew and was drawn to it the way his soul is drawn to pain. I push back the curtain. The mirror gleams in the firelight, water droplets and shadow already warping my reflection. Carefully, without looking too deeply, I prop it against a table, close enough for me to easily reach from Henry's side, but far enough away that he won't be able to stop me in time.

Tonight, I'm ending everything. But not before I get the truth. "Why?" I shout across the empty room. "Why, of all people, did you choose Sam? I would understand"—my voice breaks, because it's true; I would understand, and I hate that about myself—"if you chose him because you wanted what he felt. You could've eaten joy. Hope. Love. But that's not what you want."

The rush of water and hiss of the flames fight to tamp down my voice. He doesn't look away from Adrian, but I know he hears me. Henry always has.

"Do you know what it feels like to be alone?"

I am so damn tired of him answering my questions with another question.

I scoff, but he plows on, for once, not waiting for me to prove I'm with him.

"Eleven years ago, Adrian got up out of the bed beside mine and took so long to come back that I started to think, like I always thought, that he wasn't coming back. That I was going to be alone, forever, the only person in that massive house, ignored by everyone except for him. That he only came over because he pitied me. That he wouldn't leave, if he thought I needed him."

Adrian's body seizes. Henry holds him, protecting his neck from the most violent shakes. "It's such an easy thing to bring a few gas cans inside and hide them behind all the presents. To forget to do the one job they remember to give you each season: water the Christmas tree. To flick lit matches over the balcony until finally, one lands bright and orange on dry branches. *Fwoom*," he says, bursting the fingers of one hand outward. "It wasn't supposed to hurt him. Only me. If I was hurt, he wouldn't leave me." A small laugh shakes his shoulders. "I was right about that."

A wire. A candle. Adrian never knew what started the fire. He thought it was his fault. He blamed himself for what happened to Henry; he damned himself for what happened to Henry—and Henry—"You lied to him."

He tucks Adrian into his chest, humming below his breath.

"You killed your family," I say. "And you let him think it was his fault."

He stills, but there's nothing quiet about it. I've never seen someone laid so bare. "No," he says. "You killed the only one who was ever *family* to me." He stands, laying Adrian softly at his feet. My body takes a step back before my mind can stop it. Henry has sharpened. His angles crackle with tension, shoulders held at odds with his chin, his hands fisted in his pockets.

Adrian's neck arches, alone on the floor.

The breeze sinks into me, spreading beneath my skin like a current. The fire is already dying beneath the sprinkler's battering. "Choose, Henry. If you run now, you can probably get him to the hospital before he dies. Maybe they'll be able to save him."

Sirens echo in the distance. The sprinklers turn off. There is me, and there is him in this room, with black water settling around our feet. "But if you leave, you leave me here with that." I point back at the mirror. Henry sees it for the first time. His eyes widen, then snap to me. "How easily do you think a mirror breaks?"

Colder than ever before, the breeze spreads crystals of ice across the surface of the water. It hardens partially, stilling in the spaces between so

much that I can see the reflection of my face in it. Twisted, but there. Each memory Henry ate from me was like that. Even love, it twisted into something unholy before it took it.

“You think you’ve won, don’t you?” His hand slices through the air to point down at Adrian, finally at rest in the water. “This is what you wanted, isn’t it? Me, alone. Just like *you*.”

The air crackles with electricity. Around the room, the ice splinters. The floor is a minefield of razor-sharp shards. My eyes dart back and forth, snapping from one part of the room to the other. The pressure zones in the air shift so often that it tugs at the hair around my face, whipping the black strands across my eyes.

“You’re a fool,” he says. “This won’t bring you peace. I’ve seen your mind. I’ve seen what’s festering inside there. You’re so desperate for the things you feel to mean something, anything, to anyone. That’s all Sam was to you. You didn’t love *him*. You loved how he made you feel. But even if I’d left him for you, he would never have been enough. He could never have given you peace.” At the sound of his voice, the ice around my feet cracks. My teeth chatter as cold sweeps over me. Henry raises his voice, yelling over the growing wind. “And you know that. You know it isn’t them you need. Sam’s at peace. Adrian is now, too. It’s you who isn’t! You need me!”

His words always find their way to my heart like silver bullets. I am so, so far from peace. But this was never about me. I step back toward the mirror, my fist raised. My feet crackle with fiery numbness. “You made your choice. Now come save your precious soul.” I turn and bring my fist down toward the glass to shatter it.

Henry moves, faster than I thought possible. He catches my wrist. Knocks my legs out from beneath me. My knee hits first, cracking against the hardwood with a *snap* I feel in the back of my head. Then my hands hit, barely stopping my head from going underwater. He lunges on top of me, throwing me sideways under his weight. Water splashes around my shoulders, washing over my neck. His knee hits me in the stomach. I’m pinned beneath him.

“Jamie,” he says. Each movement is disjointed, like someone cut all his strings. Even his words are muddled. My name comes out thick, and low. “Jamie, sweet Jamie. You make everything so exciting.”

His eyes and mouth are wide enough to swallow me whole. He leans over

me, not blinking, barely breathing, and wraps one shaking hand around my neck. I strike it away. His elbow sags backward, collapsing him down onto my chest. I beat at him, trying to get him off me. His hand snakes up, wrapping itself around the side of my face, one finger digging into my mouth, the other working at my eye socket. I scream and kick up at him, ripping at his face with my hands.

Then, suddenly, his grip tightens. He slams my head to the side, cracking my skull against the floor. Pressure bears down on top of me. There's no laughter, no swaying, just steady, immovable force. The water covers my nose. It fills my mouth when I open it to scream. So shallow, but deep enough.

I try to force his hand off my head. Kick out at his legs. Over and over again, my heel hits his leg. He's talking to me. I can't hear the words over the hammering of my heart, just the sound, soft and sweet.

Adrian's lying in the water next to me. Water keeps splashing over my eyes, my struggles to free myself creating waves. In between, I can see him. His hand lies on his chest. He looks almost like he's sleeping. Finally, at rest.

I'm going to drown with my eyes open.

At least ... at least there's him.

I stop fighting. Adrian's hand slips off his chest and sinks beneath the water. I let go of Henry and reach toward it. Our fingertips brush, tangle. I arch mine; his slip free and fall to the floor. Something glints—a ring, wrapped around Adrian's little finger. Three twined strands, with diamonds too small to be worth pawning.

He took my mother's ring, not Henry.

Black creeps into the edges of my vision. I'm not breathing. Neither is he. *I won't leave you*, I promise him. He didn't have to steal the ring. There's no future in which I would've ever left. Henry drags my face back out into the air. I cough and vomit water.

"Love. There it is. Finally." He flips me on my stomach. One of his knees pins my calves to the floor. The other pushes up on my stomach. I lie folded over his leg, his hand gripping my chin, forcing me to look exactly where he wants. "You never would have loved me, but you figured out I loved him, didn't you? Because you did, too. It's easy to see an emotion when you know what to look for."

The water stills.

I see myself. I see Henry. I see his shadow.
And then I see nothing. Nothing at all.

CHAPTER 44

I am nothing.

A hand tucks against the side of my face. It caresses my cheek, warm and soft. I'm floating, floating in an endless mirror with a dead boy beside me. I open my mouth, and nothing comes out.

Henry stands above me. The water sloshes against my cheeks as he disappears, then comes back. Triumph makes his smile glow, but I don't know if it's his, or the memory of mine, devoured and alive inside him. It contorts into pain, and then rage, then softens into shapes I've never seen on it before. Love. He's right. I do recognize it now.

Then I don't see him anymore, only me. The mirror's cracked from side to side, blocking out everything else except the empty look on my face that matches Sam's and Adrian's. I'm trapped, the natural join between my body and my soul consumed by a will that was not mine.

But no clawed spirit will come from that split, no matter how long I stare. He isn't there anymore. He didn't want just desperation. He wanted life. That's all he needed to fill his void. And I was a bottomless cup that he could pour, and pour, and pour.

Now I'm empty, and alone. This is where I deserve to be. Adrian is gone; Henry has lost him and so have I. An eye for an eye; a heart for a heart. I don't know if I won, or if all of us lost. At least I know I can go. This future, he can't take from me.

Henry leans close, the mirror coming with him. He kisses the side of my mouth. His lips linger, trembling. My body is cold, but it's a distant realization. I'm watching as he kisses me again, his shoulder straining to hold the heavy mirror above our bodies. His hair shimmers in the candlelight. It falls across my face as he kisses my forehead, the bridge of my nose, my still, blue lips.

Please, he says, a lifetime away from where I am now. *Bring her back.*

No.

He begs again, and someone answers. I feel the ropes tightening, weaving body and soul, pulling me back to where I've never, ever belonged. I fight it, but there's no yield in truth. The distance between me and me tightens, bringing back the sound of water lapping against the inside of my ears, the warmth of his hand, the acrid smell of smoke.

Then something snags. I'm caught. Water slaps against the side of my face. The hand on my cheek disappears. There's a rush of movement, a sudden lightness to the rest of my body. Still, I can't sit myself up. Or maybe I don't want to—I want to stay here, inside the mirror, with the dead girl. Strong, large hands pull me forward. My mouth breaks the line of water and air. It hangs open, but nothing goes in.

Something's laid beneath my head. A jacket, keeping my face above water. One two three four, the strong hands push down-down-down-down on my chest.

All at once, there's life. Water rushes out of my mouth. I can breathe—no, that's not life, only air. The hands pull me up, hold me steady. They belong to a firefighter crouching beside me, his helmet rolling by his knee. "Miss? Miss, are you with me?"

"No..." My head is empty, far too empty. I can hear her, already whispering in the back of my mind. I need back under the water, where it was silent. That's where she belongs. "What have you done to me? What have you done!"

"Scott!" the firefighter shouts. "I need a care team. Near drowning and shock. Stay with me, miss."

I'm not with you. Only she is.

I'm in the mirror.

CHAPTER 45

Silent sirens turn Killary's whitewashed walls into a Jackson Pollock painting. Men and women in evening dress perform a new, sordid dance—milling by their cars, shivering under emergency blankets, demanding care for minor burns and smoke inhalation while their necks bend and twist to keep the white-draped body in the back of the ambulance in sight.

A new movement begins as Killary's front doors swing open. The dance grows staccato with gossip. A cop-blue county uniform marches down the front steps. His mouth moves, reciting words about rights and understanding to a person at his side. The person does not nod. Only digs their fingers more and more tightly into their face until it seems impossible that their mask will hold.

I am not that person.

I stand just to the side of the stairs, in the shadows, a blanket wrapped around my shoulders, its tail wrapped around my wrist, stifling the trails of blood. I found a broken champagne flute and dug it in, trying to dig myself out, over and over, as soon as the paramedics decided I wasn't in danger and left for more urgent—or vocal—cases. It did nothing. She's still there, and I'm still here.

My throat tightens. I watch as Henry Wu is forced against the side of a police car. He lays his head down on the car's roof before the officer even leans in. Ragged scratches score his cheeks. The silver cuffs lock.

He smiles, ear to ear, when our eyes touch. His mouth moves. I shouldn't be able to hear him. Not from here. And maybe I can't; maybe I can only sense the way his words should feel. The curl of his lip speaks hate. Greed shouts in that flash of teeth. Promised pain—for him or for me, I don't know and I don't care as long as it keeps feeling the way this does—lies molten in his stare.

What are you so afraid of? he demands.

The cop jerks him off the car, his palm on the back of his head, shoving him down and under and into the car, but his eyes don't leave mine until the door slams shut between us. I step forward. He can't leave me. Not like this. Not when he's so full and I'm so empty. The door closes. I can *feel* him laughing—not joy, something darker, more vicious—at me through the dark tinted window. He knows what's happening to me, he knows how to fight it, and he's letting them take him away.

I can't let him leave.

“Henry—” my voice croaks. A paramedic hears me and turns, her eyes widening at the sight of my outstretched arm. The blanket had slipped. Red sheets across my arm. My vision flickers; my knees buckle. I can't tell if I'm weak because I'm losing blood or because I'm losing *him*. I have to stop the car. I grab the blanket back, trying to hide the cuts, but she's already at my side, guiding me toward the ambulance with a firm hand at my back.

Over and over, I tell her I'm fine. Each time, she agrees without letting go. I'm told to sit in the open door. The bed is taken, she apologizes, her voice pinched. I don't turn around and look. I can't. I'm terrified that I won't feel anything.

Butterfly stitches pinch each cut closed. Snowflakes blow into the paramedic's hair. A faint twinge of panic whirls around her, mixed with guilt and lingering nausea. She doesn't enjoy this. She does it for other reasons, ones I can't feel yet. A fireman walks past, helmet in hand, pride blossoming beneath his chin. None of them are strong enough to do more than tease me.

I need Henry.

Blue-white-red lights shift. The police car is pulling away. I stand, bracing myself on the ambulance's frame as the paramedic shouts.

He's looking for me, too. Our eyes meet through the back window. I taste nothing, nothing at all, until his gaze drops lower, behind me, to the taken bed. Grief slams into me, a tidal force that makes my knees buckle. Hands grip my waist and pull me down. The car's driving away, taking the grief with it, leaving me with nothing but a bitter, smoky aftertaste that tempts my tongue with the memory of pain. My fingers claw into the paramedic's shoulders.

Inside, someone picks up the mirror.

I *split*.

Curiosity and scorn and a pair of avaricious eyes tucked low beneath the

sheriff's wide-brimmed hat—then I am tearing through the darkness, choking on it as I rush for him. Close enough to see the dying embers in his eyes catch. Close enough to rend, close enough to feast—

Brilliant light flashes back and forth across my vision. I blink against it, reeling back. My head rocks against the floor of the ambulance. The paramedic crouches above me, cupping my head and strafing a penlight in front of my eyes. A hand hangs out from beneath the sheet, a ring on its little finger. The fingernails are tinged with blue.

The body is empty. No fear, no hate, no ...

“Are you with me?”

I'm crying. I don't know why. I don't feel sad. I don't feel anything.

“Too soon,” I croak, desperate. Barron sat the mirror down too soon. I'm losing my mind to the girl he left behind.

“Miss Vane, can you hear me?”

Vane. They still think I'm Jamie Vane.

Sheriff Barron is inside.

I haven't seen him—*he* hasn't seen me. I sit up, the movement awkward and difficult, like moving a puppet with too many strings. The front door stands open, a RELEASE program wind-caught on the top step. I have to get out of here before he comes out and everyone finds out that I'm me. Before all of this follows me home.

“Please remain seated,” the paramedic says, and it tastes like confidence.

Dad can't find out. “Can I have some water?”

She eyes me.

I pull my lips back and up, crafting a smile. “It's been a long night.” Press my hand to my forehead and laugh lightly. This is how it worked before, setting someone at ease, wasn't it? She's studying me. I've done something wrong.

Then she nods and turns. Disappears around the side of the ambulance. I slide off the edge, shed the blanket, and run.

My limbs won't work right at first. It takes me a few steps to find the cadence again. I reach the gate, breath bright white clouds in front of my face, and the road ahead is empty. Henry's gone. I duck into the woods and walk blindly, listening for the quiet whispers of the stream. There's nowhere to go but home now, until I find out where he is.

I should want to kill him. And maybe, later, I will. But as the branches

slash my face and the boulders rise in front of me, all I can think about is the way his eyes bored into mine. They held so much life. So much hate.

All for me.

PART FIVE

What can be more internal than pain?

—René Descartes, “The Final Meditation”

Mirrors are hollow worlds.

When you step away—when the lights go out, when the faces fade and all that remains are corners and lines and shadows—I am empty. Waiting. Lost. There is nothing here to tether me, or to remind me what I am. An eye that can’t stop seeing, a tangled mess of light, a shard of glass, a liar and a girl. I was a girl.

I have never known need like this. Every part of me is gnawing on itself, trying to find something to sink its teeth into, but I am only vapor. I should be dead, and I am not; I should not be alive, and I am, but only sometimes.

Every mirror she passes, I can taste life. It riots around her; an Amberdeen full of petty little hates and greedy whispers and secret loneliness, but all a taste does is remind that I am *hungry*. My teeth are too sharp, they are not made for only tasting.

Let me out.

Let me in.

I am losing myself to this hunger, and I am terrified of what that means. Please. I promise it won’t hurt. Don’t turn off the light just yet. Stay a little longer; look a little deeper. Linger with me. Let me see all of you. I won’t lie. I won’t run. I will only look, taste, take.

You can be all for me.

All ... for me.

EPILOGUE

SIX MONTHS LATER

The summer sun beats down on the back of my neck, streaming through the open garage door. A full glass of tea sits beside me on the oil-stained concrete, all of its chill bled out into a warm puddle of condensation.

Six months ago, I snuck into my room while my dad was asleep in front of a Volunteers football game. I walked down the stairs for breakfast the next day, holding a plastic bag with the ruined black dress in it. He looked up. Raised one eyebrow. Added a second piece of toast to the toaster.

He didn't ask where I went. I told him I had been living with a boy I'd met at a junkyard party, but that it was over. That I was mourning Sam. That I needed space. He knew it wasn't true, but it was a good enough story to tell the neighbors and win their sympathy for being such a good dad, taking me back. He didn't care about anything else. I know this, because otherwise *she* would stir, and demand I let her feel something.

But I'm not Henry or Adrian. I won't feed her by force, even when she screams for it. And so, we're both slowly, slowly fading.

The trial ended three weeks ago, at the Tennessee State Courthouse three and a half hours away from Huntsworth. Headmistress Delgado petitioned to have the case moved to the state court, "to be among his peers," and won. Henry's wealth created a scandal that got the trial a daily spot on CBS.

He told them everything they would believe. The weight of guilt. The need to feel alive. His plan, born of boredom and a desire to control. He told the jury about giving the security guard, a boy named Sam Bullvane, a dose he knew was far, far too much, and then hauling him three hundred yards down the stream into the woods and where they dumped him at the side of the stream to watch him die. Everything matched Adrian's confession.

The other key eyewitness, a Miss Jamie Vane, couldn't be found to testify, but Ms. Hobbins, a member of the Huntsworth school administration,

provided evidence that she willingly withdrew from enrollment, an act dated just prior to the final incident—and that she owes them a sum of twenty-three thousand dollars for the portion of the fall term that she attended.

Twenty-three thousand dollars. The price of a conviction.

Henry hasn't told them who I am. It's more fun for him to know I'm out here, needing to talk to him, unable to risk visiting the jail lest he tell someone the truth about me. All it would take is my name whispered into his lawyer's ear, and I'd be right alongside him. Maybe not for murder—Adrian and Baz are officially accidental overdoses, one illegal, one medical—but for forgery and defrauding the school of twenty-three thousand dollars I'll never, ever be able to pay back.

I won, I think. But it doesn't feel like victory. It doesn't feel like anything.

I reach for the tea, then pull my hand back after my fingers brush the glass. It's still too cold to pick up. I should go inside, where everyone else who works here is breaking for lunch, but I can hear the air conditioner running, keeping my dad's small office comfortable in Amberdeen's sticky summer heat. I don't like the cold. I'm always, always cold.

Two weeks ago, they had his sentencing. This was supposed to be justice. I'd finally get peace, because everything was set right.

The camera panned in close on his face as the jury read the sentence. His eyes were staring, a small smile tenting up the corners of his lips. First-degree murder. Fifty years, with parole in ten if he behaves. Through the screen, I couldn't taste any of what he was feeling and it drove me nearly insane. That was the first night I finally took up Faye on her endless invitations to join her at the junkyard, just to feel alive. But sitting on the sidelines, tasting emotions that proved the looks on her face to be nothing but lies made everything worse.

She's never forgiven me for not telling her where I went. Lost both of us, she keeps saying. She tastes like guilt. I don't answer her texts.

I am so, so empty. I turn over the letter I hold in my hands, fighting the urge to rip it in two. Morgan County Detention Center scrawls across the front in my own, half-legible handwriting.

"Miss Marey, how you go?" The mailman stands on the sidewalk in front of me, sweat running past the corners of his bright smile. He pulls a pile of junk mail out of his pouch and starts up the short sidewalk toward where I lie on one of my dad's roller dollies. He looks genuinely happy, but it's not real

happiness, just ignorance. The girl inside the mirror knows the difference, even if I don't.

"Hot one, isn't it?" he asks me. His eyes are no longer sure. I know why. I know what I look like. I'd raise a hand to scrape the cold sweat off my face, but it takes everything I have to focus on breathing as I force the letter back in the front pocket of my coveralls. I pick up the wrench that I'd let fall. The metal wheels of my dolly screech and I roll myself back underneath the car.

I can't remember his name, but I can almost taste his pride as he taps his foot twice, his sagging cheeks drawn low by a thought that looks an awful lot like *I'm glad my daughter didn't turn out like her*.

The space beneath the car is dark. I hear him open the door to the office. They greet one another loudly, then the door shuts and I'm alone again. The hum of the AC whispers in my ears. Thousands of pounds of metal hang in the air above me. I can't feel—and then, all at once, I can.

The car above me disappears. I'm no longer her; I'm me, and I've been waiting so, so long that there's nothing left of me but hunger. I drag my way toward the light, prying open the one narrow sliver of dark that cracks across, the taste of *him* nearly driving me mad as I work. It takes forever; it takes one shallow breath for the girl lying prone beneath the car.

Then I'm through me and into Henry.

He is nothing but tangled, bitter need and I am feasting. *Pain*, as he learned what it felt like when the friends his money bought got tired of his tongue and turned on him. *Fear*, when the lights switch off every night and he's alone in the dark. *Desperation*, when he met with a man in a suit and the man shook his head and spread his hands.

Love, as he tore a page out of a book and hid it beneath his pillow, taking it out only at night to sketch the shape of a face. Too crudely drawn to know who; the memory stretches, night blending into night, the face erased and replaced over and over until the paper was worn as thin as me. *No*, I say while I tear into his heart as the last stroke falls and it's my own face I see. *Hate*.

Bright, pulsing, coppery warmth forces its way between my bite and his mind. I'm falling back out—but not before I see Henry's smiling face in the mirror, a guard's arm already wrapped around his neck as he wrestles the sharp tool out of his hand. Blood spatters Henry's arm. "Only the best for you," he says.

Then he's gone, and I'm me, only me, finally me caving in around my stomach as the trolley clatters out from beneath me and his pain pours into my mind. It's everywhere, filling me as I lie on my side, eyes blasted wide with fear, watching the reflection of leaves and sunlight in a puddle from last night's thunderstorm. Wave after wave blankets me.

"No more," I gag out. I try to force myself to my knees before what I know is coming hits me.

My fingernails scrape against the concrete. A shuddering breath slips between my lips. My head clears. My pulse steadies. I know this feeling so, so well. A deep ache for another person, like a cancer rooted in my chest that I can't carve out without taking my heart with it. This is me. This is him. Not so different, after all.

Hate and love hold me as I crawl out from beneath the car. *Same thing, same thing*, the girl in the mirror whispers. I stumble toward the office, my gait drunken. I'm close to full, for the first time in months, and it's all because of him. I can't stop smiling. I can't believe I had forgotten how to.

I'm not alone.

I'm never going to be alone again—and I'm never going to be at peace again. Terror, and hope, and need, and *Henry*, all riot beneath my skin. So, this is what it feels like to be alive.

"*Dedesco mori.*" It comes out in a whisper. If I raise my voice at all it will be in a scream.

I push open the office door. Conversation stops, the sudden pause a demand that I take what I'm there for and leave. A chair creaks as one of the men eases back in it. My dad leans over and spits into the trash can by his side, his eyes narrowing as he stares at my face. Impatience and guilt sour his taste—sweetened, when I smile, by a sharp spike of fear. He flinches. Humming, I walk over to the mailman—Mr. Upton, I remember—and pull the envelope from my pocket. My hands are steady as I hold it out to him. "I've got a letter."

It's only a few lines, but it's enough. He'll know what I need.

Dear Henry,

I'm bored.

Yours.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I have been—and still am, in so many ways—someone too monstrous to be loved. I’ve been angry and bitter. I’ve hurt and been hurt, I’ve lied and been lied to. I’ve run so far and so fast that I didn’t just lose my way, I lost myself. I’ve been Marin, with all her desperation to be understood, to be seen, to be *right*. I’ve been Henry, trying to shape the world in my image just so I could feel something. And I’ve been Adrian, defining myself by someone else until I nearly drown in their shadow.

This book is a cry of pain for all those moments—and a shout of joy, because I wrote these characters hoping desperately that people would love them despite their mess. Because that’s true for all of us. We can be imperfect, broken, unlovely—and loved.

So, first and foremost, I owe my thanks for this book to the one that loved me this way first and best, who’s never going to run out of grace for any of us, who was and is to come: Jesus.

Then, to you. Thank you for picking up this book. For giving Marin and Adrian and Henry and Baz a chance to tell their story. Please find me and say hello. I’d love to hear your stories, too.

Thank you, also, for being a part of the much, much bigger tale unfolding. With the income from this and every book I write, my family and I give to the International Justice Mission and local charities in Frederick, Maryland, where we live. Fifty million people are trapped in slavery today, and thanks to readers like you, we are part of setting them free. It’s been fourteen years since I first started praying and dreaming about being able to radically give like this, and I still can’t believe it’s real.

I wish I could throw a massive party for all the people who have been part of making that dream come true. I’ve been ridiculously and wildly blessed in friendships on the road to publishing *Boys with Sharp Teeth*—so many, with so much goodness, that I legitimately threatened to write the rest of these

acknowledgments in ALL CAPS. Which, if you know me, is probably actually the proper voice.

Out of respect for your eyeballs, and because I am not Jesse Dittley, I will abstain.

Mostly.

First, to my agent, Claire Friedman: You are Gandalf on the dawn of the fifth day, and I could sing a song about your amazingness that is as long as any Tom Bombadil ever composed. Thank you for believing in me, for seeing the potential in this book, for your skill and passion and grit. Thank you for bearing with me as I went Chihuahua on the bone I knew was buried somewhere in the backyard ... over and over and over again. And then once more, for good measure. You are my chill, and I've never had that. Turns out it's really lovely. DON'T EVER LEAVE. /caps lock off

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To Jamie Howard and Emily Estabrook, my nuggets: You're terds. Leave me and die. Jamie, tell Steve he better give you this book fast. Emily, my guest room is empty and I don't understand why. We have writing to do. Where you at. PS: Nugs not drugs, especially as the midpoint twist. PSPS: I love you with my whole heart. PSPSPS: I'm going to win bingo.

To D. L. Taylor and Elise Hill, my sisters in Christ: You are an answer to prayer. I wouldn't be here without our daily chats. I wouldn't want to be. Thank you for loving me so well and loving Jesus better, for teaching me truths about hope and forgiveness and perseverance and living on the edge of what feels possible, one step off the cliff and eyes on heaven. I love doing life with you two, especially when life is in the swamp, dancing and yelling at a new season of *The Bachelor*.

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To all the lost and weary, still yearning to be known: I see you.

And if I don't yet ... I want to.

Here's to our as-yet-untold stories that are going to change the world.

Xoxo,

J

About the Author



Jenni Howell tried out archaeology, linguistics, mongoose herding (known to some as “teaching”), finance, and espionage, but always got bored. Now she writes books, where her entire world changes every six months—and she will never be bored again. *Boys with Sharp Teeth* is her debut novel. Visit her online at **jennihowell.com**, or sign up for email updates [here](#).

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