Grim Beginnings

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Grim Beginnings

by skv

Summary

"I was the girl who only got attention when she was passed out in the back of the classroom."

Tessa Byrne had never been what most would consider a "normal girl". From a young age, she carried the weight of the world on her shoulders, possessing what she saw as a curse but the rest of her family called a gift. Her classmates viewed her as a quiet loner who often fainted in the middle of a class, sometimes with strange (what they believed to be self-inflicted) injuries, earning her the nickname "that fainting girl".

If Tessa was the quiet loner, then Fin Belmont, the charming rebel and son of the richest man in town, was her complete opposite. Knowing each other for years but never saying more than a dozen words between them, one night changes everything and soon, they are thrust into each other's worlds, both unfamiliar and daunting.

With lots of hesitation and snark, they work to solve a mystery that begins to unravel secrets about their town and both of their pasts, learning that some secrets are better left buried.
“Dr. Baxter, I don’t think she’s breathing!”

The twenty AP Biology students gathered in a circle, peering down at the unconscious girl lying on the cold black and white tiled floor. Whispers about what caused her to faint in the middle of their first exam passed through the crowd, ranging from the sensible (“Maybe she has low blood sugar. She could be diabetic. Check her bag for an EpiPen,” suggested Will, the resident nerd of the senior class who had more knowledge in his head than an entire library) to the ridiculous (“She’s just faking to get out of the test. Someone kick her to wake her up,” said Claire Hilton, co-captain of the cheerleading squad and a self-proclaimed Queen Bee, snapping her gum loudly while poking the girl’s stomach with the heel of her expensive boot). Hilton’s rude remark earned her a hard smack on the shoulder from her best friend Elena Hastings, a literal Miss Perfect with long blonde curls and a laugh that sounded like it belonged to a Disney princess.

No matter how much someone wanted to hate Elena, whether it was for being the daughter of the one of the richest man in the town of Belmont Falls or the most popular girl in school, it proved impossible since despite having all the makings of a mean girl, she was the complete opposite. Elena was known for being quite smart herself and volunteering at animal shelters and soup kitchens on the weekends. The fact that she was such good friends with a literal harpy like Hilton was one of the town’s greatest mysteries. She treated everyone the same, even those who were the lowest of the low in the school’s social order like me, the girl who only got attention when she was passed out in the back of a classroom.

“Sir, should I call for an ambulance?” asked Will, concerned.

A handsome man in his late thirties pushed through the crowd of students. Looking more like a model in a magazine than an actual teacher, he was what girls and some boys fantasized about when imagining themselves with a teacher. Kids at this school could deny it a thousand times but it was a well-known fact that many purposely got themselves in trouble for a chance to be alone with Dr. Baxter for detention. I personally never saw the appeal to him, thinking he was more of a pretentious snob. From the first day he arrived in my freshman year, he flaunted his PhD by insisting that every student call him Dr. Baxter but it was soon obvious that Will was better suited to teach the class. His lessons tended to involve watching sci-fi movies and online videos instead of learning actual science. Even their first exam of the year was a multiple choice test that could be passed by an eleven year old with ease. In my head, I often imagined that he received his PhD by paying an obscene amount of money to some 1-800 number.

Though he was inept at his job, it was rumored that the only reason he was not fired was because of his charm and the fact that Hilton’s mother, an older version of her daughter who was rarely seen out of his company, was the principal of the school.

Dr. Baxter lightly smacked my cheek.

“Laura, can you hear me?”

“No Laura but I’m guessing you mean me. Yes, I’m awake and smacking me around isn’t going to help. We’ve been through this how many times, doctor? Can you please just call my mother?”

“It’s Tessa, sir,” corrected Will.
“Thanks, Will. Maybe they’ll get it right by graduation. Probably not. I should start practicing
standing up when they call me some other random name.”

“I’m going to get the nurse. Keep an eye on her until I get back.”

“You know, Dr. Baxter, I took CPR last year. I could try that,” I heard.

I buried my head in my hands. “Oh, please no. Anyone but him. I’ll even take Hilton. For once,
someone see through this pathetic scam.”

Peeking through my fingers, my eyes flickered to a dark-haired boy who stepped out of the tight
circle. His well-coiffed hair was contrasted by his distressed leather jacket and combat boots. Dr.
Baxter gave him a curt nod and left the classroom.

“I’m not sure that she needs CPR. She’s still breathing, Fin,” said Will, the only one with brains.

The boy scoffed. “I think I know better than you, Nerd King. It was part of my lifeguard training.”

“Okay, let’s not pretend that you didn’t only get that job to pick up girls in bikinis, Belmont,” I
countered, knowing that he was not concerned about my health.

Fin Belmont was the golden boy of Belmont High. His family were the descendants of the founders
of the town, having three times the wealth of every other family combined and putting their names on
every important building. He was the star player of the football, soccer, and baseball teams and loved
to show off his athletic skill to any pretty girl within his line of sight. It was typical to find girls
gathered around the fields to watch his practices and cheer for the tiniest thing. All that attention fed
his already enormous ego but instead of dressing in a preppy style like the rest of his family, he
claimed to be the ‘rebel’. He was always the one to do something forbidden, whether it was having
his first beer at the age of ten or driving around in his father’s expensive sports car on the day of
middle school graduation. Since fourth grade, he made it a habit to carry around a lighter, flicking it
on and off during classes. While he was the typical womanizer, never staying attached to one girl for
longer than a month, he did fail in one area and that was his grades. He often skipped classes,
confident that the school would never attempt to fail him unless they wanted to lose his family’s
funding.

I grimaced as Fin placed his lips on mine, though I was thankful that he was not my first kiss.
Passing out in the middle of a lesson was a common occurrence for me, beginning when I was seven
years old. The first time it happened, everyone went into a panic, thinking that I was dead. After the
first fifteen times, the fear wore off and it turned into their source of entertainment. I had gotten used
to the jokes at my expense, the kids pretending to faint as they passed by my locker, and in eighth
grade, Hilton began to post videos of the incidents on her MyLife channel, gaining her millions of
views. As I got older, no longer the fainting seven year old girl, the boys took advantage of my
unconscious state though they were unaware that I felt their wandering hands on my skin.

Fin was not performing anything remotely close to CPR though no one noticed that or his hand
sliding under my hoodie. I tensed up, feeling his cold touch against my ribcage. His fingers crept
closer and closer to the bottom edge of my bra and to make matters worse, I could hear his friends
sniggering quietly. I nearly gagged at the taste of cigarettes and whiskey in my mouth.

“Ugh, Fin, you’ll get her loser germs. Stop,” said Hilton, disgusted.
When he finally stopped, pretending that his expert CPR had failed, I sighed with relief. “Hey, I tried. You’d think a kiss from me would wake up any girl.”

I rolled my eyes at the same time as Elena’s. “Jenna’s unconscious and you’re making stupid jokes?” said Amy, one of Hilton’s less stuck-up minions.

“It’s Tessa!” I shouted in frustration.

“This always happens. What are you getting all worked up about, Banks?”

“Because all it takes is one time for it to be something serious. She might not wake up.”

“Like that would be a tragedy,” muttered Hilton.

Dr. Baxter eventually returned with Nurse Simpson, a kind-faced, middle-aged woman who spent several minutes checking my pulse.

“Wow. Thank goodness for that nursing degree or you’d never figure that out” I said when she assured my peers that I had a steady pulse.

I followed them down the hallway as he carried me to the nurse’s office. He laid my unconscious body down on a cot.

“Her mother’s on her way,” said Nurse Simpson.

“This is the fifth time just this month. Don’t they take her to a doctor? There must be something wrong with her.”

“Genius deduction. You should be a detective,” I replied, sarcastically.

“I’ve spoken to them plenty of times. Her mother says that the doctors haven’t found a cause for it. Did you notice anything strange before she collapsed?”

“No. The students were taking a test and the next thing I knew, she was on the floor. She’s a bit thin. Maybe she hasn’t been eating.”

“Oh, because all thin girls must be starving themselves, doctor?” I said, sitting on the edge of the cot.

Their conversation was interrupted by a dark-haired woman in her late thirties rushing into the room. Her hands were stained with dried paint. Panting heavily, she clutched her side.

“I came as soon as you called, Alice. How is she feeling?”

“I rushed to get Nurse Simpson as soon as it happened. I wouldn’t want your daughter in any danger, Mrs. Byrne,” said Dr. Baxter, making no attempt to keep his eyes on her face.

“Is it possible to vomit in your sleep?” I asked, repulsed.
My mother smiled. “Thank you very much, Dr. Baxter. I know it must not be easy to deal with Tessa’s…incidents.”

“It’s no trouble at all and please, call me Brendon.”

Nurse Simpson received a call about a sophomore girl puking in the second floor chemistry lab after breaking a flask. I had no doubt that she wanted to avoid the awkward tension in the room. Unfortunately for me, I was always forced to watch my own teacher’s pathetics attempts at flirting with my married mother. He conveniently forgot that my father was still around, not the deadbeat that he imagined in his mind.

“I heard your husband left town again. His work must keep him busy.”

“Well, he loves it and far be it from me to keep him away from a dig site.”

“I bet it gets lonely in that house all by yourself.”

“Not at all. Tessa and Ryan make sure I never get a moment’s rest,” she replied, brushing a strand of hair off my face.

“All that time spent taking care of others…makes me wonder who takes care of you. I uh saw your piece at the gallery this weekend. I think it was your best yet.”

“Thank you. My husband thought so too.”

“Do you ever give lessons?”

“Yes, I teach children at the recreation center every Saturday.”

“I was thinking of taking a few lessons. I’m no da Vinci but I’m not completely hopeless. The classes at the gallery are a little too expensive. Maybe I could take lessons with you instead, Kala. That’s a very pretty name. Is it Brazilian?”

I scrunched my nose in disgust. “Mom, can you please give this moron a black eye already?”

My mother turned towards him with a feigned smile. It was evident by the fire burning behind her dark eyes that she was getting irritated by his advances.

Behind her back, she poured a cup of brownish-yellow liquid into my mouth. “Indian actually and I think that you might stick out among the children.”

“A private lesson, then.”

As the herbal extract flowed through my body, my eyes fluttered open. I sat up, feeling lightheaded, and clutched the edge of the cot.

“What happened?”

My mother embraced me, cradling the back of my head. “You fainted again, little bird. Brendon, could I have a moment alone with my daughter?”
“Of course. La—Tessa, class is almost over by now so the exam will be rescheduled for tomorrow. I’m sure Principal Hilton wouldn’t mind if you skipped the rest of the day.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Once he disappeared down the hallway, my mother lifted up my hoodie. She checked for any signs of an injury.

“No stab wounds this time. That’s a good sign.”

“I think it was a drug overdose. Could’ve been worse. Remember in seventh grade when it was a gun shot through my stomach? That took forever to explain to the nurse. Are you sure there’s no way to skip the fainting part?”

“It’s part of what we are, little bird.”

“I don’t mind the rest. It’s just the constantly fainting in front of everyone that’s annoying.”

“Don’t fret. Soon, you won’t ever have to deal with it again. Your grandmother and I went through the same thing. It’s never easy. Those boys didn’t get handsy again, did they?”

“Of course they did. This time, it was Fin Belmont.”

Putting her hand to her heart, she gasped. “A Belmont? How lucky. Did he taste like money?”

I shot her a playful glare. “You’re hilarious. I’m the one who’s scarred for life.”

“Why don’t you get your things and I’ll take you home? I’ll be waiting outside.”

Leaving the nurse’s office, I headed down to my locker. I hoped that everyone else would be sitting in the cafeteria for lunch but with my luck, they all decided to enjoy the sunny weather and eat out in the courtyard. Whispers followed me down the hallway. After all these years, I learned to tune them out but sometimes, one or two whispers caught my attention. In a way, my fainting incidents did make me popular. I was known as ‘that fainting girl’. Kids would stare at me as if I was a deer on its last legs, about to collapse any minute. Opening my locker, I grabbed my books and placed them in my tattered backpack.

“Just ignore these idiots. By the end of lunch, they’ll find something else to talk about,” she heard.

Elena was leaning against the locker beside her. “I don’t care if they talk about me.”

“Oh, look at me. I’m Miss Cool.”

A small smile tugged at my lips. “I’m just used to it by now, I guess. It’s like my mom said before. Soon, the fainting will stop…but I might prefer that to what has to happen next.”

“Maybe you won’t have to do it because he’s not here. I’m sure they can make an exception for someone as adorable as you. Just bat those big doe eyes at them…maybe flash a little cleavage.”

“I’d sooner become Claire Hilton’s best friend,” I remarked, making her laugh.
I jumped at the sound of a loud banging noise. The senior football players were gathered around one of their lockers, laughing obnoxiously. Fin repeatedly threw a basketball against the lockers. My nails dug into my locker when Parker, one of his more vulgar friends, talked about the incident in AP Biology.

“Fin can cross it off his bucket list now. He got to second base with a sickie. You could’ve gotten ten more points if you managed to unhook her bra.”

Elena gripped my shoulder. “Ignore him. He’s an ass.”

“I’m fine.”

For a split second, as Fin caught the basketball, he made eye contact with me. It felt as though my entire body shut down and my feet were glued to the floor. Panicking on the inside, I quickly turned my head and grabbed my biology notebook. I sensed someone standing on the other side of the locker.

“I see you’re awake. Be honest. Did you fake that to get out of the test? I mean, I wouldn’t blame you. Tests are lame.”

“No.”

“Well, you should thank me, Laura. I think my CPR helped you out a little.”

“It’s Tessa,” I muttered.

“What?”

“Just throw his basketball down the hall so he’ll go away,” said Elena, annoyed.

“You can feel that? If you want, I can remember that for next time and move my hand a little...”
lower. You should know what that’s like before you go to college. Not that I’m assuming you’ve never…it’s just that you don’t leave your house.”

“Drop dead.”

I slammed my locker shut and stormed out of the school. My mother was waiting by her minivan, the back doors decorated with childish scribbles. She immediately recognized that I was in a foul mood. Joining me in the backseat, Elena explained what had happened with Fin.

“Everyone probably thinks the same thing…that I’m like one of those dying kids on TV.”

“Tessa, it doesn’t matter what they think. They wish they could be as gifted as you. I’m not surprised that the Belmont boy was that clueless. No one in his family is known for their intelligence. If he says something that vulgar to you again, I want you to tell me. I’ll teach him some manners.”

She parked in the driveway of a two story house, blue with white shutters. Upon entering the house, I was tackled by a tiny blur. A young boy around five had his arms wrapped around my waist. I smiled, ruffling his mop of dark hair.

“Did you miss me, little bear?”

“Mommy said you fainted at school. Did it hurt?”

“No. It was like falling asleep.”

“Is Ellie with you?”

“Right here,” she said, tapping the top of his head.

Ryan chased her around the house, waving his hands wildly in front of him. Stifling a laugh, I followed my mother into the kitchen to help her with making dinner. As I diced the tomatoes, she sifted through the spice cabinet in search of the paprika.

“This is your father’s doing. I put these spices in alphabetical order and then he messes it up when he’s making his midnight snacks. I think he enjoys throwing me into this chaos.”

“It’s probably in the back, next to the cayenne pepper. He likes to hide the spices that he thinks are gross,” I said, secretly tasting a strand of spaghetti.

“Honestly, sometimes I wonder if he’s a child stuck in an adult’s body. Tessa? What’s wrong?”

My mother’s head had popped up from the cabinet at the sound of breaking glass. Shattered glass and diced tomatoes scattered the floor. I did not even notice the pieces of glass stuck in my own hand, too distracted by the girl standing by the refrigerator. The girl was not much older than me, maybe a junior in college. She wore a preppy style similar to Elena’s, with the peter pan collared blouse, white belted cardigan, white and blue plaid skirt, knee high socks, and ballet flats. Her pin straight blonde hair, adorned with a blue headband, was wet and straggly and her eyeliner was smudged, running halfway down her cheeks. She looked around the messy kitchen, puzzled.

“Tessa, is that the girl?” asked my mother, watching the girl shiver and hug her cardigan close to her body.
I nodded. “She wasn’t wet before. They must’ve put her in the shower to try to wake her up. Casey?”

The girl snapped her head towards me. “H—how do you know my name? How did I get here? I was…the last thing I remember was going to the bathroom.”

“To get your caffeine pills so you could keep studying for your organic chemistry test. You thought it wouldn’t hurt if you took a few more…but a few became half the bottle. It wasn’t your fault. You were just worried that if you didn’t keep studying, you’d get a B on the test and for you, a B is like failing.”

“That doesn’t explain how I ended up here. This isn’t a hospital. If I passed out…”

“You did. Your roommates found you and called an ambulance. They tried to wake you up in the shower but you weren’t even breathing. The doctor called the time as soon as you arrived at the hospital. There was nothing he could do.”

Her eyes widened. “A—Am I…t—then how are you…but you can see me. I can’t be…I’m still here.”

I shook my head, holding back tears. If fainting on a regular basis was the worst part, then the impending conversation with people like Casey was a close second. After ten years of giving the same speech, it never got any easier, especially when the other person was not expecting it or too young to understand its meaning. I looked at my mother, hoping that she would take the burden from me at least once but she simply gave me a reassuring nod, one that said This is your duty.

“I’m the only one that can see you. Well, my mom can too but I’m the one that has to talk to you.”

“About what?”

“What you can do next. The choice is always up to you. I can’t force you to do anything that you don’t want, Casey. You can choose to pass on and let fate decide where you go. You seem like a nice person so I’m sure you’d end up somewhere nice. Your second choice is to…stay behind. Most kids your age choose that because they’re not ready to leave. If you decide to stay, it comes with a price. You can still see the people you care about and interact with things in this world but you’ll be invisible and once you make that choice, you can’t ever pass on. You’d be stuck in between the two worlds.”

“I—I have to choose now?”

“No. I can give you a couple minutes but the longer you wait, then it’ll be harder to leave here, no matter what you decide.”

Casey paced around the kitchen, whispering to herself. With each passing minute, she was slowly descending into madness, afraid that either choice could be a mistake. I listened to her worry about how her overdose would reflect on her family’s pristine reputation, showing little concern for herself.

“I think I know what I want. I want to…what did you call it? Pass on?”

“You’re sure?”

“Not 100% but if I choose to stay, I might never see my family again. You’re not alone when you
pass on, right?"

“No. You’d never be alone. I promise that it’s quick.”

I reached out for her hands. The raven-shaped birthmark on my wrist turned solid black and seconds later, a faint golden glow radiated from her body. Her hands slowly dissolved into mine. Seeing the terrified gleam in her eyes, I swore to her that she was safe. Piece by piece, she began to disappear, becoming one with me. For a moment, as her face faded into mine, I thought that I saw a dark shadow clinging to her back. Flashes of Casey’s life, from her birth to the minutes before her overdose, passed through my mind.

“We’ll need to chop up more tomatoes. Though I don’t doubt your brother wouldn’t mind eating the ones on the floor, I don’t want any of you getting sick. I’ll clean up this mess.”

“How do you do it?”

My mother grabbed a rag from the counter. “Do what, sweetheart?”

“You act like that was nothing. I’ve been doing this since I was seven and I still—it doesn’t even faze you. Someone’s dead.”

“People die every day, Tessa. You know that…you feel it. It’s our duty to guide them when their life is at an end. When you’re my age, this will all feel normal to you.”

“I don’t think I’ll ever feel normal.”

“Don’t see it as a burden. It’s a gift.”

Dicing another batch of tomatoes, my mind was cluttered with the memories of Casey’s past and the fleeting image of a shadow on her back. I had helped others pass on thousands of times but no one ever carried a shadow with them. Passing it off as a figment of my imagination, I focused on helping my mother with dinner then working on my pile of homework, including a six page essay for AP U.S. History, ten questions for AP Calculus (though each question had five parts), and reviewing my biology notes.

Elena sat beside me on my bed. “Why are you studying for Baxter’s test? A monkey could ace it.”

“I want to keep myself busy,” I replied, my eyes on the alarm clock, the screen flashing 1:00 AM.

“Don’t want to think about overdose girl?”

“Her name was Casey. She didn’t do it on purpose…or maybe she did. She was under a lot of pressure from her parents. They freaked out if she got less than 100 on anything since she was in kindergarten. I could see why she would do it. She didn’t want the pressure anymore.”

“Have you ever thought of…”

“Maybe once or twice. It’d be nice to just escape and not have to deal with constantly fainting and being mocked by everyone who thinks I’m some loser or a girl on her deathbed.”

She rested her head on my shoulder. “I don’t think you’re a loser. You’re—”
Her words were drowned out by a sharp pain in my head. I winced, clutching my bird patterned blanket. My eyes squeezed together tightly to block out the pain but it only seemed to get worse as my head was flooded with brief images. Elena guided my hands in front of me carefully and I felt a pen and sketchpad between my fingers. My eyes still shut, I moved my right hand at a rapid pace until the pain and images ceased simultaneously. I glanced at the sketchpad, which now bore a drawing of a wooden bridge near the titular Belmont Falls. The Falls were the most famous thing about the town, tourists flocking to the site to see the water that glistened as if mixed with diamonds and crystals. It was particularly beautiful in the winter. For the teenagers in Belmont Falls, it was a popular hangout for parties, hook ups, and the occasional dare to jump off the bridge. In the drawing, a beer bottle and varsity jacket were floating in the lake, surrounded by a pool of blood.

“Whose jacket is that?” asked Elena, peering over her shoulder at the drawing.

“I didn’t get a good look but it happens at night. I saw someone, definitely a guy…he was standing on the bridge.”

“Probably some drunken idiot. You’ll know at school tomorrow.”

“It doesn’t always work that way. Sometimes, I get a feeling but other times, I don’t know find out until it’s already happened.”

“Fin is having a party this weekend there. Maybe it happens then. Should we tell your mom?”

“No. She’ll just tell me to be ready for them. If it does happen at the party, at least I won’t have to worry about fainting in the middle of Biology again.”

I heard a faint knock on my door. “Tessa, I know you’re awake. It’s one in the morning. Time for bed.”

Tossing the sketchpad under my bed, I clicked off the lamp and laid my head down on the pillow. Elena snuggled up beside me. I drifted off to sleep, feeling her arm around my waist.
Over the following three days, my stomach was filled with a mixture of relief and dread. I was relieved that I did not have another fainting incident though six more people passed through me, one of them as young as Ryan. Though Elena was right that people would stop whispering about what happened in Biology, others, like Hilton and her minions, refused to let me forget it, pretending to faint as they passed by me in the hallways and offering me numbers to several hospitals outside the town. Belmont’s jock friends were no better, snickering whenever I was in the same class as them and several times, I witnessed Parker make obscene hand gestures in my direction. I ignored their taunts, too consumed by my recurring nightmares of a death in the lake. Whenever I had these nightmares, I was usually able to pinpoint the target by sensing a certain aura around the person.

The first time it happened, I was seven and at a church fundraiser with my parents and grandmother. One of the elderly women was selling chocolate chip cookies and every time I saw her, I got a bad feeling in the pit of my stomach. Later that night, she had died in a car accident on her way home from the fundraiser. This time, it was different. All I knew was that the victim was wearing a varsity jacket at the time of their death, which meant they were likely a jock. The dread was not just from thinking that soon, one of my own classmates would be dead. Ever since the night that Casey passed through me, I had a nagging thought in the back of my mind. I wondered if the nightmares were not merely a warning, but a chance for me to save someone’s life. Over the years, while learning about my abilities, I never once asked my mother if it was possible to prevent a death and she never suggested it herself. She always seemed to believe that death was inevitable, an inescapable fate.

I was gathering my books from my locker, having finished my last class of the day. The only topic of conversation was Belmont’s party. Kids were either excited about attending, whether it was for the first time or not, or disappointed about not getting an invite. He allowed any senior to attend the party but the underclassmen were not that lucky.

“Tessa.”

Will walked over to her, his backpack slung over his shoulder. He handed her a copy of The Mysterious Island.

“Your report on Jules Verne was really good. Forget about those brain-dead trolls in our class. Half of them are only in AP English because their parents give the school a lot of money. I doubt they can even read a book if it doesn’t have pictures. I uh thought you might want to read this one…i—if you haven’t already. I’ve read it over a hundred times.”

“Thanks, Will. It’ll be an improvement over the Dr. Seuss books I have stuck in my head from reading them to my brother every night.”

“And I uh got you this too,” he said, handing her an EpiPen box.

“An EpiPen…”

“It’s probably stupid of me to assume but my sister has diabetes and I know that she’s fainted a few times from low blood sugar. I figured that maybe you lost yours. Not that I’m saying you have it too but with the similar symptoms and—”

“No, you’re right. My mother took me to the doctor after what happened in Bio and a doctor finally figured out that it was wrong. I should’ve known that you’d figure it out first. You’re probably the smartest person in this entire town,” I lied, using that as an excuse.
He blushed. “Not very hard considering the competition. You’re smart too. If you didn’t miss school because of fainting so much—pretend I never said that. My foot is lodged in my mouth. I should go before I say something worse. I’ll see you at the party tonight…well, not that you ever go—okay, let’s just erase this conversation from our memories.”

“You’re going to Belmont’s party?” I asked, surprised.

Like me, he never attended those parties. He preferred staying at home or hanging around with a few close friends. Will was the closest thing I had to a friend in the school. I was second best in our year and we had several things in common, like our shared love of books and old science fiction movies. Shyly, he admitted that his stepfather was forcing him to attend the party with Katie, his stepsister two years younger than him. His stepfather claimed it was only to protect her from the older boys but Will knew that he had another reason: wanting Will to step out of his shell.

“He thinks that if I go, Parker and the other jocks won’t push me around. I don’t mind going for Katie. Who knows what those neanderthals would do to her?”

“That’s a hurtful accusation, little Willy.”

The football team and the cheerleaders were walking in from a side door. Belmont put his arm around his neck in a friendly chokehold. Catching my eye, Hilton pretended to faint against one of the freshman cheerleaders, causing the group to burst into a fit of giggles.

“So you want to go to my party, huh? Well, I have this little requirement. Guys can’t go alone.”

“I’m not going alone,” said Will, struggling against his grip.

“Stepsisters don’t count…neither do robots.”

“That’s a silly rule. You expect every guy there to have a date with him?”

“You’re right. I just made it up for you. Looks like your pretty little sister is going to be all alone but don’t worry. I’m sure Parker will keep her company.”

“I’m going with him.”

I never realized those words actually left my mouth until Belmont looked at me. “What?”

“I—I’m going too…with him. I’m his date.”

Hilton let out a shrill laugh. “I told you, Amy. King Dork and Make A Wish are dating. Wait till everyone hears about this.”

The cheerleaders ran down the hallway, yelling loud enough for people in China to hear them. My cheeks felt warm as kids whispered about the supposed new couple of Belmont High. Belmont was staring at me in disbelief. Letting Will out of the chokehold, he leaned close to my ear.

“I know you just said that to help out your geeky friend. Some advice for my party? Dress like a girl, not some depressed little mess. No hoodies…or I kick you both out,” he whispered.

Belmont left with his friends, walking with them to the boys’ locker room. Will apologized over a dozen times for dragging her into the party.

“I don’t mind. I don’t want anything bad happening to Katie.”

“A—and it’s not an actual date. I’ll pick you up around nine?”
“Sure.”

On my way home, Elena joined me, asking about my presentation in AP English Literature. “It wasn’t that bad. Will was the only one that stayed awake, besides Mrs. Kent, but—”

“What cares about a boring presentation on some author?”

“Apparently, you would’ve fallen asleep too.”

“Why does everyone think you and Will Nelson are dating? Did I miss something?”

“We’re not—Will’s stepdad forced him into going to the party to watch over Katie but Belmont wouldn’t let him go unless he had a date so… I lied that I was his date. It’s not a real date. I’m just helping Will. Belmont said I couldn’t go unless I dressed like, in his words, an actual girl.”

“Prick,” she said, looping her arm through mine.

Elena offered to help me pick out an outfit for my first party. It technically was not my first party ever but she disregarded any parties that happened in elementary school. The main problem was that I was unable to wear a hoodie. My usual attire consisted of jeans, oversized sweaters, and hoodies. It was not that I never wanted to wear anything else, like a dress or flats. Though I was not like Hilton and her cheerleader robots, I did not feel like any less of a girl. Everyone just assumed that I either had a tomboy style or my clothes were meant to reflect my depression. I needed to enlist the help of my mother, who was as thrilled as Elena that I was attending a high school party.

Hesitantly, I slipped off my hoodie. My body was reflected in the full-length mirror, showing the dark marks that covered both arms and my entire back. The marks were various runic and Celtic symbols. In the center of my back was a large, interlaced Celtic knot. If an ordinary person on the street had seen the marks, they would believe that they were very intricate tattoos but I had these marks from the day of my seventh birthday. The Celtic knot had been on my back since birth, passed off as an odd birthmark by the doctor. Elena never understood why I needed to hide the marks, thinking that they would gain me popularity at Belmont High. The only reason my mother ever gave me was that if the wrong people recognized the marks, it could put our family in danger. It took nearly an hour for her to cover up each mark with a combination of concealer, foundation, and powder. It was the first time in years that my skin looked normal.

Another hour was spent just choosing my outfit for the party. Elena wanted me to make a good impression, to shove Belmont’s rude comment right back at him. She eventually settled on an outfit that still resembled my style: a pair of black skinny jeans, a dark racerback tank with a floral lace pattern in the back, and ankle boots. I could hardly recognize myself in the mirror, accustomed to the baggy hoodies that hid my curves. Despite Elena’s pleas to leave my hair down, I tied it up in a ponytail.

“Let Belmont say you don’t look like a girl now.”

“I look okay?”

“Amazing. I heard someone knock. I think Will’s here.”

“Wait.”

Opening my closet door, I grabbed a dark red leather jacket. I put it on over my tank top.

“Does this work?”
“Forget what I said before. If Belmont doesn’t have a heart attack when he sees you, he’s blind.”

“I’m not going for Belmont. I don’t care what he or any of his friends think.”

Running down the stairs, I saw my mother speaking with Will. He had never been over to my house but he met my family at a school event in middle school. My mother smiled at me.

“Sweetheart, you look wonderful. Don’t get into too much trouble. I’ve heard stories that Falls are haunted.”

“Hilarious, Mom.”

Katie was waiting in the backseat of his car. Seeing me out of a hoodie, her jaw fell slightly. She never said more than a quick hello to me in the past but on the drive to the party, she was far more talkative. Will insisted that I was only attending the party with him to appease Belmont’s silly rule, not as a real date. Fixing her makeup while holding a compact mirror, Katie gushed over attending a senior party, the only one of her sophomore friends to get an invitation. Will was not as thrilled, insisting that his stepsister needed to be cautious around the upperclassmen, mainly Parker.

“Tessa, tell him that he’s overreacting,” she said, swiping on lipgloss.

“A little but you should be careful. They might be a little more…experienced.”

“Who says I’m not experienced?”

The color drained from Will’s face. “W—what?” he squeaked.

“It was a joke. Lighten up, Will. You’re as uptight as my dad. Sometimes, I think you two are the ones who are related. I’m just hoping that I can get a chance to talk to Claire Hilton. If I impress her, she might give me a spot on the squad.”

Will parked his car with the others, near the entrance to the Falls. They joined the back of a line for the party. As we waited to just get past the archway, I noticed kids turning their heads towards me. It was hard to eavesdrop on their conversations, due to the loud music, but I overheard a few juniors whisper about a new girl. Belmont was standing by the archway, his arm around Hilton. With his other hand, he took a swig from a beer bottle. Hilton’s red dress was barely long enough to cover her backside. She was drawing on each person’s hand with a black marker. Katie explained that it was a way to separate the cool kids and losers at the parties. If a person was deemed a loser, Hilton marked them with an X. She let out a tiny squeal when Hilton complimented her on her skirt and heels and drew a star on her hand, the designated cool kid symbol.

Belmont lowered his beer bottle. “You actually look almost decent, geek. What happened? Did you and make a wish break up already?” he asked, already slurring his words.

“I’m standing right here,” I said, resisting every urge to break his nose.

Hilton’s smirk was wiped from her face. His eyes traveled up and down my body.

“You said I had to wear something less…what did you call it? Depressed little mess?”

“Different clothes don’t make you any less of a loser. You still get an X,” sneered Hilton.

“Shut up, Claire.”

Belmont snatched the marker from her and sloppily drew a star on my hand. A lump rose in my
throat when he winked at me. He drew an X on Will’s hand and offered to give her a tour of the Falls.

“I’m Will’s date…not yours. Yours is currently burning a hole through your skull.”

“Ooh, the mouse has got a sharp tongue.”

Will pulled me away from the archway and over to a picnic table. Though I only offered to attend the party for him, I was beginning to regret my decision. Belmont was not the only boy staring at me like a piece of meat. Will left to get us beers and I wished that I had joined him, not wanting to deal with cheesy pick up lines.

“Told you that you’d give Belmont a heart attack. He was practically drooling,” said Elena, placing her cup of beer on the table.

“He’s a pig…but I’ll admit that the look on Hilton’s face was worth it. I know I came here for Will but I kind of hope that Katie wants to leave early.”

“Liar. You didn’t just come here to help out a friend. This is about your nightmares.”

“Pfft, what do you mean? I told you that it’s not definitely happening tonight.”

“But you think it might and that’s why you’re here. I’m not totally sure why you’d want to be around when you know that you’ll probably pass out again in front of everyone.”

“I just…you’ll think I’m crazy. What if—”

“Hey Byrne!”

Parker walked over to the table, holding a red cup that smelled heavily like rubbing alcohol. I scooted back when he played with a strand of my hair.

“Where the hell have you been all my life?”

“Sitting in the back of the classroom. You’re usually asleep during class or you ditch it so it’s not like you’d know that.”

He laughed. “That’s funny. Can I get you another beer or do you want something a little stronger?”

“Go hump a tree, Parker,” said Elena, rolling her eyes.

“No thanks. Will’s getting me a drink. He should be back soon.”

“Just ditch him. Come on, I can show you this awesome spot by the caves. It’s dark…and private.”

A glass smashed into his face. He groaned, holding his cheek, and stood up angrily, searching for the culprit. Muttering about a dead junior, he left the table, disappearing into the woods.

“Elena, seriously? You can’t do things like that.”

“Tessa?”

Will was standing behind me, holding two red cups. He handed one of the cups to me.

“What were you talking to?”
“Myself. I got a text and—it doesn’t matter. Did you spill beer on your shirt?”

“No. I was on line and Belmont accidentally knocked into me. It’s fine. He’s already pretty drunk so he didn’t know what he was doing.”

“If you say so. Shouldn’t we be keeping an eye on Katie?”

“She’s okay. She’s hanging out with the other sophomores. I think she’s realizing that these parties aren’t so great after some guys almost spilled beer on her shoes. My stepdad will be happy. I wanted to…thank you for coming with me. You didn’t have to come at all.”

“I don’t mind. You’re my friend.”

We gagged at the same time as we sipped the beer. “I never drank beer before,” I admitted.

“Me either. I just wanted to try it to look cool. I think we’re both good with water.”

“Definitely.”

If Will had not been at the party, I would have left hours ago out of boredom. Everyone was either getting wasted on beers, smoking pot, or gossiping in their little cliques. Will and I were having fun on our own, talking about plenty of random things from books to how Dr. Baxter flirted with all the attractive mothers at school events. I laughed at his impression of Mr. Wells, the trigonometry teacher who always spoke in a monotone voice.

“I don’t how I survived that class. I always wanted to fall asleep,” I said, taking a sip from a water bottle.

“He could literally bore someone to death.”

“The only reason you could stay awake is because he always called on you for answers. You knew every one of them.”

“So did you. I could hear you whispering the answer to yourself. You just never like to raise your hand.”

“I don’t like to draw attention to myself. I already get enough of it as ‘that fainting girl’”

“Is that why you wear those sweatshirts all the time? Because if it is, it doesn’t work.”

“What do you mean?”

“You could be wearing a sack over your head and I’d still notice you.”

“Heh, well, I—”

I felt a sharp pain in my head, similar to the night of my first nightmare about the lake. Seeing the concern on Will’s face, I passed it off as nausea from the beer. I sneaked off to the bridge, thinking that the pain was another warning of the impending death. Katie was standing on the railing of the wooden bridge, a varsity jacket draped over her shoulders. She stumbled slightly and giggled, taking another sip from her beer bottle.

“Parker! I’m waiting! You better hurry before my stepbrother finds us. He won’t like it if he sees us making out. You know what? I don’t care. Let him watch! It’s funny when he freaks out,” she said, the bottle falling from her grasp and plopping into the cold water.
“Katie.”

“Tessa, hi! I’m meeting Parker here!”

“Shh.”

“I’m meeting Parker here,” she whispered, her breath smelling heavily of beer and vodka.

“You need to get down from the railing. You could fall.”

“I won’t fall. I can’t fall. It’s not like I’ll fall into the lake.”

“Just take my hand. If you fall off the bridge, you can’t hook up with Parker, right?”

“That’s so true. You’re the partest smerson in the world. Ha, smerson. Did you hear that? I’m hilarious.”

Standing on my tiptoes, I grabbed her hand. A sudden wind blew through the trees, causing Katie to lose her balance. The only thing keeping her from plunging into the lake was my tight grip on her hand.

“Katie, hold on!”

I managed to pull her halfway over the railing when she screamed in pain. An invisible force was tugging her in the other direction. I planted my feet firmly on the bridge but the force was too strong, drawing me closer and closer to the railing. Katie pleaded for help, tears in her eyes. Just as the adrenaline kicked in and I made a little progress in pulling her towards me, whatever was on the other side countered with enough force to throw me partially over the railing, my feet almost dangling in midair. My heart raced as I spotted the creature that had a hold on Katie. I thought it had been a bear or even a wolf but instead, there was a shadow-like figure. It resembled a person though its features were distorted, with pupil-less milky white eyes, gnarled fingers, and no mouth. Slinking up Katie’s body like a snake, it dug one of its fingers into the back of her neck. Her eyes turned the same milky white color. She spoke in a strange language, her voice disembodied and guttural.

“Let her go!”

As I swiped at the shadow, in an attempt to detach it from Katie, my hand smacked the top of its head. My raven-shaped birthmark turned solid black and the shadow retracted its hold on Katie’s neck, almost like it was burned by her skin. Its body radiated a faint golden glow and my eyes widened with fear as it advanced towards me. I prepared for the worst, that the shadow planned to take me in Katie’s place, but just as its eyes stared into my own, it vanished into thin air. Katie’s eyes returned to their normal color.

“Tessa, pull me up!”

A second hand grabbed her wrist. Elena helped me pull Katie over the railing and the three of us were sitting on the bridge, breathing heavily.

“Katie? Tessa?”

Will hurried onto the bridge. He practically squeezed the life out of his stepsister, hearing from some sophomores that she was drunkenly walking on the railing. I was taken aback when his arms wrapped around me, thanking me over and over for saving his sister. Katie, who was unaware of how close she was to actual death or the creature behind it, muttered about him being a drama queen.
“Call me dramatic all you want. We’re leaving now.”

“But the party’s just getting started,” whined Katie.

“I don’t care. You’ve had enough fun for one night.”

“You’re so lame!” she shouted, stamping on his foot.

“I’ll uh meet you by your car, Will. I left my purse at the table.”

I could hear the two of them arguing until was deep in the woods. Elena had followed me, knowing that something was bothering me and it was not Katie’s near-death experience.

“You were right that I wasn’t completely honest about why I wanted to come to the party. It was for Will but I wanted to be here in case the death happened tonight. I wanted to stop it.”

“Stop it? Can you do that?” asked Elena.

“No one’s ever said you couldn’t and I did, right? I mean, Katie was holding the beer and had the varsity jacket. It was Parker’s. I saved her from falling.”

“I sense a but coming…”

“Something else was there, Elena. This…I don’t even know what to call it. It was some kind of shadow monster. Katie couldn’t see it. It was possessing her and tried to make her fall into the lake. It spoke through her. I didn’t recognize the language. When I touched it, it let go of her and I thought it would attack me but then it vanished into nothing.”

“You’ve never seen it before?”

“I think I did once…the night Casey passed through me.”

“You should tell your mom. She’s the expert on this stuff, right?”

“Well, she’s the only other one like me so who else can I ask?”

“Just shut up!” I heard.

Belmont was pacing back and forth nearby, yelling into his phone. He could hardly stand on his own without leaning against an oak tree for support. At the time we arrived at the party, he was already a bit tipsy but now, he was completely wasted, speaking incoherently and taking his aggression out on a shrub by ripping its branches. Elena and I hid behind a pair of trees, listening to a conversation between him and an older man.

“I don’t care. Do you hear me? I don’t care what you think. I’m—by this time next year, I’m gone. I don’t give a damn about—no, you listen to me. I’m not drunk. I’m talking good. Oh, I know that tone. You can add it to my long list of disappointments. Screw you!”

He slammed his phone against the tree and downed the rest of his half-empty beer bottle in one sip. The beer bottle ended up like his phone, shattering into pieces as it struck another tree. Elena pinched my arm, urging me to return to Will’s car.

“I know that look. Don’t you dare. This is the worst moment to—”

“Are you okay?”
“And you do it away. Can you ever listen to me?”

I carefully stepped over the pieces of broken glass. Belmont pushed his hair out of his eyes.

“I didn’t mean to eavesdrop. It was kind of hard not to hear you yelling.”

“Just another fun conversation with my dad, Mr. Perfect. What are you doing out here all alone, Jamie?”

“It’s Tessa and I was heading back to get my bag. Katie got a little too drunk. She almost fell off the bridge.”

“Nerd King’s sister? That would’ve been hilarious.”

“There is something fundamentally wrong with you.”

He pouted. “You don’t think I’m funny?”

“I think you’re an ass and just talking to you is a mistake. I should go.”

I felt a soft tug on my wrist and was pushed up against a tree. Towering over me, he kept my arms pinned to my side. His breath reeked of an assortment of liquor. One of his hands rested on my thigh and his piercing dusty green eyes locked with mine.

“I knew you had a sexy body under those baggy shirts. I could feel it in Bio that day you passed out.”

“You mean when you were giving me fake CPR so you could cop a feel?”

“You make it sound so awful. Any girl would love my hands on them. My tongue is even better. Your boyfriend doesn’t have to know.”

“Will isn’t my boyfriend.”

“Right. He’s your charity case.”

“He’s my friend. You wouldn’t know what that is since all you have is a bunch of lackeys who only hang around you because of your money. I can’t think of any other reason that they’d want to be around you.”

“Look who’s got a lot to say these days. You’ve barely said a word unless it’s for a presentation or to geek out with your nerd buddy. If you dressed like this all the time, you wouldn’t have to settle for a bottom feeder like that.”

“I’d rather hang out with him than an arrogant ass with an ego the size of this planet. Let go of me.”

“I get why you came over here. You wanted to comfort me because I’m upset. You’re sweet. I can think of one way. We’ll both enjoy it.”

As his hand slid higher, moving between my legs, I heard him let out a painful groan and he fell face-first onto the ground. Elena was holding a thick branch.

“Bitch!” he hissed, wiping blood from his cheek.

I hurried me out of the woods and over to Will’s car. Katie refused to say a word the entire ride back to my house. Furious that she was forced to leave the party, she settled on giving Will the silent
treatment. By the time I was home, it was already midnight and my mother was already asleep. I
decided to tell her about what happened at the party in the morning, no matter how much I wanted to
forget most of the night.

I was startled by a loud thud. My vision blurry, I moved my hand around until it rested on my lamp
and flicked on the light. Belmont was standing in the middle of my bedroom, bouncing up and down
and holding his foot. He muttered a slew of curses at my dresser. It took a few seconds, thanks to
only an hour of sleep at most, to realize that he had sneaked into my room. Out of instinct, I grabbed
the closest thing to me and raised my alarm clock, planning to throw it at his head.

“What are you doing in my room?” I hissed, not wanting to wake my mother or brother.

“I don’t—damn, your hair looks horrible. No wonder girls take forever to get ready.”

I brushed my long dark hair to one side. “Shut up. You have three seconds to get out of here before
this clock breaks your nose.”

“I don’t even know how I got in here, Jenna.”

“Tessa!”

“What?”

“For the five hundredth time, my name is Tessa. You know what? I don’t care. Call me whatever
you want…just get out. What, I rejected you so you had to be a creep and sneak into my room? Just
go jack off to some porn in your room.”

“Rejected? That’s what you call bashing my head in?”

“That wasn’t m—you deserved it.”

“And before you go all psycho on me, I didn’t sneak in here. I don’t remember how I got here. One
minute, I was at my party and the next, I stub my toe on your dresser. I don’t control what I do when
I’m drunk. It was an accident…a weird accident. I don’t even know where you live.”

“You expect me to believe—”

As he stepped into the light, I dropped the clock. He had a deep gash on the side of his head, caked
with blood. Both his hair and clothes were soaking wet. His lips were no longer their soft pink color
but a pale shade of blue.

“Where’s your jacket?”

“My what?”

“Your varsity jacket. You were wearing it tonight.”

“I don’t—I told you that I was drunk. I don’t know I got here.”

“You were drinking beer. It wasn’t Katie…” I whispered, overcome with the sense of dread that had
plagued me for days.

“What are you mumbling about?”

“It doesn’t make any sense. That thing…it wanted her. It had to be because…I should’ve stayed
there. It wasn’t done.”
“I’m talking to you!”

I glanced up at him, unable to say a single word. How could I even begin to tell him how he ended up at my house? This was different from the other encounters where I hardly knew the person, except for passing by them in the street. I had known him since my first day of second grade, remembering how he laughed after Claire pushed me off the swings during recess and how he bragged to their classmates about holding his father’s cigarettes. What was I supposed to say to the boy who had the best chance of leaving this town, whether it was by a sports scholarship or driving off in one of his family’s expensive cars with a stack of credit cards to just travel the open road?

“Why are you looking at me like that?”

Instead of words, water dribbled out of my mouth. First, it was little droplets but within minutes, it was like one never-ending flood. I rolled off my bed, struggling to breathe as the air in my lungs was replaced with water. It was just like what happened with Casey, when I fainted in the middle of the Biology exam. I was having the same experience as him though I would not end up with the same fate. As my room faded to black, the last thing I saw was him shaking me roughly and one final thought crossed my mind.

Fin Belmont, the charming rebel with the crooked smile, was dead.
“Tara, wake up.”

“At least he’s getting closer. Maybe by graduation, he’ll get it right.”

I watched Belmont smack my unconscious self repeatedly across the face. He had slapped me at least twenty times in the past five minutes, as if a single hard slap would jolt me awake, and for a moment, I thought he was showing compassion for someone other than himself. That tiny bit of hope was dashed when he muttered about being blamed for my supposed death and not wanting to call his father for help with bailing him out of jail.

I rolled his eyes as he contemplated dragging me into the nearest bathroom, laying me in the bathtub with the water running, and framing my death as a tragic suicide after years of depression. I wished that I was able to touch him, to allow me the glorious opportunity of strangling him with my bare hands. It would be a story that I would be proud to tell my grandchildren one day: how I got to kill the infamous Fin Belmont a second time.

“What the hell is wrong with you? Where is this water even coming from? You better wake up right now. I can’t have this happening to me again. If my dad finds out, he’ll take away my car and my credit cards.”

I clutched my chest. “Oh no, not the car and credit cards. How will you ever survive?”

“Don’t you people have a bracelet or something to call your special hospital?” he asked, lifting up the sleeve of my oversized football jersey to search for a medical bracelet.

Belmont reached for my phone beside my pillow. “Hey! Don’t touch my phone!”

“I could text a friend, pretend to be her, ask them to come over, and then they’ll get blamed for this. Wait, does she have any besides that nerd? It doesn’t matter. Where is he? There you are, Nelson. Who the hell texts about books? Can you two get any lamer?”

“I am going to love letting you pass on and rot in the worst part of Hell.”

Reading through their texts, Belmont imitated Will in a mocking, nerdy tone. “I thought your presentation was—what is this? Belmont and his gang of morons probably couldn’t understand that book unless it had a bunch of pictures. It’s not their fault, Will. They have the combined IQ of a dead goldfish. Look who thinks they’re so funny behind a text.”

“I happen to be hilarious. You just never notice because you’re either ditching class or too busy with your tongue down some girl’s throat,” I replied, trying to wipe the muddy, metallic taste from my tongue.

The door creaked open and Ryan sleepily stumbled into the room, rubbing his eyes. He was clutching a teddy bear with its left ear partially torn off, a present that I had given to him when he was born at the hospital. I remembered how I had spent over an hour at the toy store with my father, searching for the perfect gift, and insisted that I pay for it with my own money, a combination of my allowance and money given to me by a group of elderly women at the church. As a prank, Hilton told the women that I was dying from a dreadful disease and heading to the hospital later that day for surgery, not to visit my newly born brother. The women, feeling sympathetic, gave me about a hundred dollars between them for buying a present after I pulled through the surgery and the speechless expression on Hilton’s face as her plan backfired was worth it enough to play along with
her prank. With the money, I decided to buy him a teddy bear that recited a recorded message when a person squeezed its hand and ever since, he had slept with it every night, my recorded lullaby putting him to sleep.

“Tessa, Teddy and I had another nightmare. Can we—Tessa?”

“Shit. Kid, you’re just sleepwalking. Go back to bed,” said Belmont, hiding her phone behind his back.

Ryan’s eyes grew wide with fear and he rushed to my side, checking my wrist for a pulse. I bent down beside him, wishing that I could hug him to prove that there was no reason to worry despite my lack of a pulse and the water dribbling down my chin. It was only last year that he began to learn about the special gift in our family that was passed down from generation to generation and being only five years old, he struggled to understand that when I experienced another person’s death, I was only unconscious for a few minutes to an hour, not actually dead.

Shouting for my mother, he opened the bottom drawer of my dresser to search for my bag of gotu kola, an herb that was used to wake me up from my unconscious state. My mother tended to blend it together with water to dull its bitter taste and kept bottles in multiple spots, such as the kitchen, her car, and her purse, in case I experienced a death in a public place. Belmont grabbed his wrist roughly, hissing for him to be quiet. I immediately stood up, angered that he put his hands on my little brother. Ryan, knowing that it was a ghost but unable to see them yet, glanced around the room.

“W—who’s there?”

“I’m standing right next to you. Are you blind? What, does your whole family have problems? Be quiet.”

“Let go of my brother!” I shouted, clenching my fists.

My lamp flew across the room at lightning speed, smacking Belmont in the face. He fell to the floor, clutching his cheek, the broken lamp rolling under the bed. Ryan and I shared the same stunned expression though in his childish imagination, some sort of ghost fight was occurring in front of him. When my mother opened the door, she witnessed four very different sights: Ryan kneeling beside me and waving his hands as if he was trying to catch smoke, my unconscious self on the floor, me staring at the broken lamp, and Belmont muttering a slew of curses while wiping blood from his cut cheek.

“It happened again, mommy. Teddy thinks it’s a ghost fight.”

“Don’t be afraid, sweetie. I’m right here. Let me help your sister.”

My mother twisted open a bottle, the same one she used in the nurse’s office, and poured a few drops down my throat. As the herb took effect, my eyes fluttered open and I sat up, breathing heavily. I wiped the water away from my chin. She rubbed my back comfortingly, ignoring Belmont’s whining about needing stitches. Ryan’s tiny arms wrapped around my neck.

“Teddy and I were really scared.”

“You know I’d never leave you behind. You should get to bed. It’s late, little bear.”

He squeezed me as hard as he could and returned to his room, talking to his teddy bear. “So your little brother’s not blind. He’s just messed up in the head.”
My mother gripped my shoulder, stopping me from throwing the broken lamp at Belmont. “I will not have you insulting any of my children in my own home.”

“Oh, now you notice me? Before you think of calling the cops, I didn’t hurt your daughter. She fainted on her own. Maybe you should keep her in the hospital or something. You can take me to get stitches.”

“That’s quite a nasty cut on your head, dear. Are you a friend of Tessa’s?”

“I’m Fin Belmont. Do I look like someone who would hang out with your daughter? Take me to the hospital already.”

“There’s no need for that, Fin.”

“Maybe you didn’t hear me. My last name is Belmont…as in the family who owns this entire town. If you don’t take me to the hospital, my dad will sue you until you’re broke. Judging by this place, it wouldn’t take much for that to happen.”

“Tessa will explain everything.”

“Mom, wait—”

“After he’s decided and I’ve put Ryan to bed, we’ll talk,” she whispered in my ear.

I found myself dreading this conversation even more than usual. Belmont, clueless as to why my mother left the room without offering to drive him to the hospital, looked to me for an explanation. I simply stared at him, knowing that their conversation would only end in disaster. He began to insult my mother, calling her stupid for not caring that my family was about to be bankrupt and kicked out of the town. Fed up with just listening to his voice, I grabbed a squirt bottle on my nightstand, used to train our cat, and sprayed him in the face with water.

“What the hell are you doing?”

“You’re done talking. Now it’s my turn. You got hurt at the party.”

“Probably from you hitting me with a tree branch.”

“No, something else. You don’t remember but in time, it’ll probably start coming back to you. The reason my brother acted like that before is because he couldn’t see you. He’s not blind. It’s…I’ll just say that it’s complicated but only my mother and I can see you right now.”

“You’re not making any sense.”

“You died at the party. I don’t know how but that’s why you ended up in my room without any memory of coming here. What happens next is all up to you. I can’t force you to choose one way or the other. You can choose to pass on and wherever you end up, you end up…or you can stay behind. The second option is if you’re not ready to leave behind people you care about or to accept what’s happened. If you choose to stay, you can still see everybody and interact with things in this world but to everyone but me, my mother, and other people like you, you’ll be invisible. The choice is final. There’s no taking it back days or even years later. I can give you a few minutes to think about it.”

Belmont sniggered. “I get it. You and your nerdy boyfriend are playing a prank. You’re trying to get back at me for being mean to him. Nice try.”
“It’s not a joke. You’re dead. I know how hard it can be to accept but—”

“Shut up.”

“This is never easy. I’ve dealt with it for years and you’re not the first to—”

“I said shut up! I am not dead!”

“With people like you, it’s just better to pass on to get some peace. Just take my hands.”

He angrily smacked my hands away and stormed out of the room. I chased after him, finding him in the kitchen where he grabbed my mother’s car keys from a basket on the counter.

“You can’t drive a car. If someone sees it moving without a person behind the wheel, it’ll lead to a lot of questions that even my mother can’t answer. Give me the keys.”

“Then you can drive, Byrne.”

“Drive where?”

“To the Falls. I’m sure everyone is still at the party. You’re taking me back there and depending on my mood, I’ll consider not destroying your reputation to the point that you’ll want to transfer to a school in another country.”

“Fine. Let me at least tell my mother that I’m going out again. Wait for me in the car.”

As he left the house, slamming the front door behind him, I dialed a number on my phone. “Belmont Police Department. This is Abigail speaking.”

“Hi. I was at a party by the Falls tonight and I just went back there to find my wallet. I uh was walking on the bridge and I thought I saw something in the water. I—it might’ve been a person.”

“By the bridge, you said?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll send someone to check it out. Could I have your name, please? The police may need to question you further about what you witnessed.”

“I’d like to remain anonymous.”

“I understand. Thank you for the tip, miss.”

I scribbled a quick note for my mother, telling her the truth about being forced to take Belmont to the Falls. Any other teenager likely would have lied about meeting with friends but my mother was never that easily fooled and considering my only real friends were Will and Elena, a cover story like that would never be convincing. Slipping on a pair of jeans and sneakers, I left the house. Belmont was impatiently tapping his fingers on the arm rest and as he spotted me by the door, he honked the horn three times. I swallowed hard, holding onto the tiniest bit of sanity left in me, and walked over to the car. The drive back to the Falls was filled with silence and awkward tension. Giving him the dying speech again would only set off another argument so I settled for turning on the radio to make the ride a little more bearable.

“At least your taste in music isn’t awful.”

“Can we please talk about this? I don’t have much experience with this but I think it’s a bad idea if
“Enough with the act, Byrne. Nice try but to be honest, the prank was a little pathetic. I’ll give you credit for you and Nelson sneaking me out of the party without anyone noticing that I was gone.”

“So you find it more believable that Will and I staged an elaborate prank to explain how you somehow ended up in my house, which you’ve never been to, in the middle of the night?”

“Yep. You wanted to get back at me for teasing your little boyfriend.”

“Will isn’t my boyfriend. He’s my friend. Guys and girls can be just friends without it turning into a relationship.”

“You’re really that naïve? He may be a geek but he’s like any other guy. He’s being nice to get laid.”

“Maybe with your friends, that’s common but thankfully, not every guy is like you.”

“Dress like an actual girl for once and you get a backbone?”

“Just because I don’t dress like Claire and her robots, it doesn’t mean I’m not a girl. Clothes don’t define a person.”

“You sound like a fortune cookie.”

Upon arriving at the Falls, we discovered that the entrance gate was locked, a No Trespassing sign hung in the middle. The only cars that remained were three police cars but when I pointed that out to Belmont, he brushed it off, claiming that his friends hid their cars in a different spot to avoid the cops. He was very adamant that his friends were still partying at the Falls, even at two in the morning, and suggested that we climb over the gate.

“The sign says no trespassing. I know you have a limited vocabulary but you should at least know what that word means.”

“The sign says no trespassing,” he said in a mocking tone.

“I don’t talk like that.”

“Stop being a baby. We do this all the time when the cops try to break up a party.”

“It’s like ten feet high.”

“I want you to be there when I embarrass you so you’re climbing that fence. Let’s go.”

The first few steps were easy as I followed him up the chain link fence. Towards the top, I made the mistake of glancing down and it felt like I had climbed thousands of feet into the air. My heart was practically beating out of my chest and I gripped the fence, keeping my eyes shut. I began to count backwards from a hundred, taking deep, shaky breaths. Hearing Belmont shout for me to move faster, I continued to the climb the fence, my fingers digging so deeply into the metal that they were turning red, and once I swung my legs over to the other side, I quickened my pace to get down to the ground. While I cupped my trembling hands over my mouth, breathing in through my nose and out through my mouth, Belmont searched, through squinted eyes, for his friends in the darkness but it was impossible to see past the trees. Several bright lights were shining in the distance.

“That must be them. Bet they’re playing manhunt. What’s up with you?”

“N—nothing.”
“You’re that winded from climbing a fence? Someone needs to work out more during gym. Don’t give them any more reasons to make fun of you, Byrne. I mean, I don’t think your social status could plummet any lower after I get through with you but you might prove me wrong if they see you like this.”

“I’m fine. I just don’t like climbing fences at two in the morning.”

We walked in the direction of the bright lights and I slowly realized that we were headed towards the bridge. Belmont merely laughed at any of my attempts to convince him to return to my mother’s car, thinking that I wanted to avoid being humiliated by his friends. He stopped at the entrance to the path that led directly to the bridge, which was now blocked off by yellow tape with the words Crime Scene - Do Not Cross written in large black letters. The tape extended on both sides to two wooden signs that indicated different trails.

“You can’t do that,” I said as Belmont tore down the tape across the path.

“It’s a gag. Parker always steals this kind of stuff from his dad’s office.”

“Why would he put up crime scene tape?”

“Because it’s funny. You wouldn’t know what that is even if it bit you in the ass.”

Any sane person would put two and two together when they saw the police cars and crime scene tape. I found his level of denial simultaneously impressive and depressing. He seemed more determined to prove that his friends had never left the party at the Falls to himself than to me, though he masked it by teasing how Hilton would not let me forget my failure of a prank for weeks. We stopped at a hill overlooking the bridge where instead of his friends, we spotted half a dozen cops and several German Shepherds. One of the cops, a young man in his early twenties with swept-back golden blonde hair, was drenched from head to toe and holding a Belmont High varsity jacket. It was impossible to hear their conversation from the top of the hill but judging by their grim expressions, they did not drive out to the Falls for a late night swim. I looked at Belmont like he was insane when he sniggered quietly.

“Parker probably got a little too drunk again. He never can handle his liquor too well.”

“We need to leave.”

“Relax. This isn’t the first time he’s gotten this drunk. He fell into the lake, one of those loser sophomores panicked and called the cops, and they’re just waiting for his drunk ass to wake up. That’s weird that he’s got my jacket.”

“Can you please just listen to me? We shouldn’t be here. If the cops see us——”

His smile faltered as one of the cops stepped aside, revealing the body sprawled on the ground. Belmont was staring at his own body, a deep gash on the side of his head, his lips pale blue, and his lifeless jade green eyes gazing up at the pitch black sky. His face bore a blank expression but the longer he stared at his dead body, the stoic façade faded away, a fearful gleam in his eyes. Out of instinct, I hugged him to give him some sort of comfort. He tensed up, his arms hanging stiffly at his side, and shoved me, nearly making me fall over the hill.

“What was that?”

“It’s called a hug. I—I know this can’t be easy. You’re upset and——”

“I’m not upset and I don’t do hugs. Is this another part of your prank? You and Nelson made some
lifelike doll of me and hired
some guys to play cops? You two really went all out.”

“There never was a prank. I think you know the truth but you don’t want to believe it so you’ll say
anything to avoid it.”

“I can’t be down there. I’m right here, next to you. This is…no, I’m not…”

“Let’s go back to my house. We can talk about it there.”

During the drive back to my house, Belmont was completely silent, flicking his lighter on and off
and tugging on a frayed string on his seat belt. I was surprised to see several plates of cookies, both
sugar and chocolate chip, on the kitchen counter, along with three glasses of milk. My mother, taking
another tray of cookies out of the oven, greeted Belmont with a warm smile. Seventeen years of
experience taught me that whenever she was anxious, she baked to calm her nerves.

“Tessa, you’re back.”

“And you’re baking.”

“Well, I was already up and I had a sudden urge to bake some cookies. Would you like one, Fin? I
wasn’t sure if you liked chocolate chip or sugar.”

“How can you see me?”

She placed the tray on the counter. “If you’re not sure, you can try both. There is plenty to—”

“I just saw my dead body being pulled out of a lake! How can you see me?!”

“I know this must be very difficult for you. It’s tragic to have one’s life cut so short but we can’t fight
these things. We can try to escape our fate but in the end, it catches up with us, one way or the other.
It’s rather complicated to explain why Tessa and I can see you. Call it our gift. It’s our job to guide
souls to the other side.”

“More like mine,” I muttered, biting into a sugar cookie.

“I’m sure Tessa has already explained your choices. Most people don’t wish to see their bodies that
were left behind but perhaps it helps the truth sink in better. Both choices have their appeal. It is very
common for someone your age to choose to stay behind because they’re not ready to leave their
loved ones. You know what is best for yourself. Have you decided yet?”

“I’m not choosing anything.”

“It doesn’t work like that, idiot.”

“You’re telling me no one has ever decided that they don’t want to be a ghost or move on to
whatever is on that other side?”

“No, they haven’t. You have to choose one or the other, right, Mom?”

My mother bit her lip, busying herself with placing the tray in the dishwasher. She confessed that it
was possible to choose neither option but it was a choice that people rarely made after death. If
Belmont made that decision, he would remain a ghost but as time passed, his ghostly existence
would become permanent and he could never choose to move on the other side. She warned him
against choosing this third option that she never mentioned to me, knowing that even those much
older and wiser than him regretted it when they realized that they wanted to be with their loved ones years later.

“I made my decision. I’m picking neither.”

“Well, as I said, it is your choice. I do hope you don’t regret it,” she said, scratching the back of her ear. She left the kitchen to check on Ryan. Belmont grabbed a plate of chocolate chip cookies and began stuffing his face.

“Is your mom always that paranoid?”

“She just doesn’t want you to regret your decision,” I replied, bothered by the nagging feeling that my mother was hiding something from me.

“So do you do those séance things for money?”

I glared at him. “We’re not mediums. We’re...my grandmother called us reapers. Like my mom said, we guide souls over to the other side. Let me explain how this ghost thing works. My mother and I are the only ones who can see you. Well, other ghosts can too but I doubt you’ll see many. They like to keep to themselves. You can interact with things in the physical world but you need to be careful. You can’t make it obvious.”

“You were drowning because of me? That water came out of nowhere.”

“Yea, if someone I’ve seen or know personally dies, I feel that same experience. I don’t faint in the middle of class because I’ve got some medical problem. It’s from that death experience. It only lasts an hour, at most. It’s sort of like an out of body thing but I’m not in the same place as ghosts. I don’t really understand much of it myself. I’m going to bed.”

“Well, what do I do?”

“Anything you want. Have fun being a ghost.”

When I woke up the next morning, I was praying that last night was all a bad dream. I was pouring cereal and milk in a bowl when I heard the television switch on in the living room. Carrying one of the bowls, I found Belmont in the living room, watching a news report. His lips were no longer pale blue and the blood had been cleaned from the side of his head, the wound covered with multiple bandages. The screen showed the bridge at the Falls and Angela Starr, a field reporter and notorious gossip commonly referred to as a soulless woman by my own mother, was giving information on the police finding Belmont’s body in the lake. He grabbed the bowl from me, not taking his eyes off the screen.

“Aw, you’re sweet, Byrne. Thanks for making me this.”

“I didn’t.”

“Then make yourself another one. Why are you up so early? School doesn’t start for another two hours.”

“I like to run ten miles before school. Doesn’t everybody?” I asked, my voice dripping with sarcasm.

“They’ve been talking about me all morning. I visited my house last night. I saw the cops visit my parents. My whole family hasn’t stopped crying since they heard the news. The cops think it was an accident...that I got drunk and fell off the bridge.”
“Accidents happen.”

“Only it wasn’t an accident. I’ve been drunk plenty of times on that bridge and I’ve never fallen.”

“First time for everything. Is there a reason you’re in my house?”

“Don’t you have better cereal? This healthy crap is gross. You never asked me why I never made a choice last night.”

“I figured it’s because you’re a stubborn jackass. Was I wrong?”

“Like I said, my death wasn’t an accident. You’re going to help me find out the truth.”

“That’s a job for the cops, not me.”

Belmont insisted that most of the cops in town were lazy, incompetent oafs who would rather do nothing than any actual work. Parker’s father, the chief of police, was known for taking bribes to keep certain incidents quiet and used his position of power to keep his son and his friends, including Belmont, out of any trouble. I had no doubts that the police department was awful, remembering how they ruled my own grandmother’s death an accident and refused to look into the case for more than a week. He suggested that his alleged murderer likely paid off Parker’s father mere hours after they discovered his body at the lake.

“That’s ridiculous.”

“Prove me wrong. Let’s go back to that bridge.”

“When cops are all over that place? I’d rather not get arrested for trespassing on a crime scene.”

“It’s five thirty in the morning. They’re all at Dottie’s Diner.”

“I don’t care if they all decided to go to Disney World for an entire year. I am not going near that bridge. Why is it so hard to accept that you, drunk and possibly high at the same time, fell and probably hit your head?”

“Because I didn’t. We’re going there right now or I’ll pull all kinds of ghost pranks at school then pin it on you so you get expelled. It’s up to you.”

Elena walked into the living room, biting into an apple. “You were right that it’s a waste of time to visit my grandmother. Those retirement homes are really boring. She just sits in front of the TV all day and—why is Belmont on your couch? You were drinking water all night so you didn’t get drunk. Did he follow you home after I hit him? Tessa, don’t tell me you felt bad and let him stay the night.”

“Elena,” I whispered.

“You can’t be this nice. Who knows what could’ve happened while he was drunk? Wait, did he try something? I know his tricks.”

Belmont stood up from the couch, his mouth hanging open. He stared at Elena as if she was a three-headed dragon.

“E—Ellie?”

Elena stopped biting into the apple halfway and looked between him and me, confused. “He said my
name. Can he—why can he see me?"

I pointed at the news report on the television. “The vision wasn’t about Katie. It was about…him. We had a long night.”

“He’s like me?”

“Sort of. He refused to make a decision so for now, he’s a ghost.”

“You stayed behind too? Byrne can see you?” he asked, unsure if he was seeing a hallucination.

“Tessa, we should get going,” she said, avoiding any eye contact with him.

“We need to stop at the Falls first. He wants to prove that his death wasn’t an accident. It won’t take long. Just indulge his little fantasies for an hour and then we can go,” I assured her, knowing that she would rather be drowned in acid than spend another minute with him.

The drive to the Falls was ten times more awkward, if possible, than last night. Belmont was struggling to comprehend how he was seeing Elena, despite my explanation that both of them were ghosts. A small part of me knew that it was difficult for him since Elena had been dead for nearly two years and now suddenly, he was able to see her again as though she never died in the car accident. I remembered that he and Elena were very close friends, rarely spending time apart, and how Elena always cheered him on at his games. It was a stark contrast to now, where Elena refused to say a single word to him and acted like he was invisible.

The police cars were gone from the entrance to the Falls and most of the crime scene tape was already torn down, a sign that Belmont was telling the truth about the police department’s incompetence. All of the tension in the car followed us as we walked towards the bridge and I was trapped in the middle of the awkwardness. I expected the bridge to at least be sealed off from visitors but it looked exactly the same as last night.

“This is a waste of time. There’s nothing here. Can we go now?” asked Elena, impatiently.

“She’s right. It’s—”

Out of the corner of the eye, I noticed a series of scratches on the railing. When I pointed at the markings, Elena argued that the scratches could have been from Katie’s nails to stop herself from falling during the party. I would have readily agreed with her if I had not noticed a second set of markings further down the railing, chipped red nail polish around the edges.

“He’s right. I wasn’t an accident.”

“Tessa, those scratches mean nothing. It could’ve been a squirrel.”

“They look exactly like Katie’s. He was trying to hold onto the railing and—”

“Enough. He’s an idiot who fell over, tried to pull himself back up, and couldn’t hold on any longer. That’s all. Just because he’s being a giant baby, it doesn’t mean you have to listen to his delusions. What are you doing?”

I walked over to a nearby shed where the beautification committee, a group of people dedicated to maintaining the land all year round, stored gardening tools and other equipment. Grabbing rope and a tiny plastic jar, I returned to the bridge and tied one end around the railing and the other end around my waist.
“Tessa, you can’t just—you’re not a cop. This isn’t a TV show where you suddenly become an amazing detective. Don’t climb over that railing.”

“What if the police missed something? There might be a clue…something that can explain how he fell.”

“He was drunk. That’s all the explanation we need.”

“Are you listening to her at all?” asked Belmont.

Elena scoffed. “Oh please, don’t act like you actually give a damn what she thinks. The only reason you’re siding with her is because she’s playing into your delusions.”

“Now you’re talking to me?”

“I can barely say one word to you without puking but I’ll risk that to stop Tessa from dying too.”

“What’s your problem, Ellie?”

“It’s Elena to you! No, you know what? Don’t even talk to me anymore. Tessa and I are leaving right now. You can—Tessa, wait!”

I swung one leg over the railing and carefully descended down the side of the bridge. Though I was determined to not glance down, my mind was aware of the very far drop if the rope broke and my heart raced, similar to what happened when climbing the gate. I breathed in and out and focused on the bridge, searching for any clues. I immediately discovered a trail of dried blood traveling down the wooden railing and doubted that the police were able to miss such an obvious sight. Something shiny was stuck on the underside of one of the wooden boards. Jiggling it loose, I pulled out a sterling silver ring with a brownish red stone, different Celtic symbols carved into the silver. The ring was covered in a light grey powder that smelled heavily like smoke.

“Tessa!” shouted Elena, snapping me out of my thoughts.

I dropped the ring into the plastic jar. “Tessa?”

“Oh no, not him. Not now,” I whispered.

“Tessa.”

Dr. Baxter, dressed in a muscle tee, sweatpants, and sneakers, was leaning over the railing, peering down at her. As he removed his earbuds, she tried to think of a good explanation for why she was dangling on the other side of the bridge. She pulled herself back up, seeing Elena and Belmont standing behind him with very different expressions on their faces. Elena looked prepared to knock out Dr. Baxter with a rock while Belmont was shaking his head, acting like it was her fault that she was caught by their AP Biology teacher.

“Dr. Baxter, hi. What are you doing out here so early in the morning?”

“I go for a run through here three times a day.”

“No kidding. That is—you must really like running.”

He crossed his arms over his chest. “The better question is why are you out here, hanging from a
“I was uh practicing this exercise that my dad learned about while he’s in China. They hold onto the rope and—you know what? It’s complicated and weird. No reason to go into detail. I’ll see you at school.”

“I’m sure you heard what happened to Fin Belmont last night.”

“Y—yea, it’s um such a tragedy.”

“I think it’s best if you stay away from here. We don’t need two students dying in the same week.”

“So true. I’ll let you get back to your running.”

I practically raced back to my mother’s car and if Dr. Baxter was not one of my teachers, I would be avoiding him for the rest of the day. Belmont mocked my, what he called, pathetic attempts at lying and wondered how long it would take before Dr. Baxter reported my suspicious behavior to the police. His taunts led to a vicious argument between him and Elena, who blamed him for the incident on the bridge.

“Can you two stop bickering? Baxter won’t say anything. By now, he’s forgotten that I was even on that bridge because he’s too busy staring at himself in the mirror,” I said, driving into the local cemetery.

“Did you find anything?” asked Belmont, leaning his shoes on the back of Elena’s seat.

Scrunching her nose in disgust, Elena left the car. “Well, there was a lot of blood. I’m guessing it’s yours…maybe from the cut on your head. The cops didn’t even bother taking any for a sample. It’s dried up by now so I doubt they can do anything with it but I found a ring. It looks like it’s covered in gun powder. Maybe you were shot.”

“Great,” he muttered.

“You’re the one who wanted to prove that it wasn’t an accident and now I believe you. Ready to make that decision now?”

“No. We still haven’t caught the guy.”

“Are you—Elena’s right. I’m not a detective. Look, I’m sorry that the cops aren’t doing their best but it’s not my problem.”

“You said to Elena that you had some kind of vision about what would happen to me. You thought it was Nelson’s stepsister. Didn’t you try to save her? Something tells me that you do care about what happened to me.”

“Not when you’re already dead. Even if I could somehow find out how you died, it won’t bring you back to life.”

“Maybe it would stop them from killing someone else in town and if you caught them, you wouldn’t have to suffer another painful death experience. I drowned. What if the next person gets their throat slit or they’re buried alive? That must be tough.”

“Don’t do that. You’re trying to bait me into—don’t act like you know what I go through every time that happens, Belmont. You know nothing.”
“I wasn’t trying to bait you into anything, Byrne. What are we doing here?”

“Elena and I come here every morning to visit her family. We’ve done it ever since their funeral. They all passed on but she likes to talk to them. She thinks they can hear everything she’s saying.”

“You come here every day?” he asked, dumbfounded.

“It makes her feel better. If you tell her that they can’t hear her, I’ll force you to pass on the other side and find a way to send you straight to Hell. It shouldn’t be too hard, considering your reputation. Unless you have a real reason to stay, take my advice and pass on. There’s no reason to bother yourself with trying to find out how you died. Sometimes, it’s better to not know the truth.”

The police may have wanted to quickly forget about Belmont’s death, not bothering to launch an official investigation, but the rest of the town could not as easily put aside their grief. His locker was adorned with flowers, posters, and candles and before first period, most of the school’s female population was gathered around it, sobbing. There were plans to host a memorial for him later in the week on the football field and all exams were cancelled to allow the students time to mourn him. The school had not been in such a somber mood since the news of Elena’s death spread like wildfire only an hour after the accident.

In every class, the first ten minutes were spent remembering him and my eyes almost rolled out of my head as each teacher called him a special and amazing boy with a bright future. Belmont was soaking up the attention but among the grieving students, I noticed a few who were apathetic or pleased that he was no longer around and even behind the tears of those who were grieving, there were hints of a smile or a relieved sigh, proof that some of them were merely putting on acts. His ego the size of a football stadium made him oblivious to the truth that deep down, they would not miss him.

AP Biology was the toughest class of the day, mostly because of my own anxiety that Dr. Baxter remembered our encounter at the bridge. He seemed to have no memory of their conversation, going back to calling me every other name except my real one, but as he played a video on plant biology, I was unable to shake the uncomfortable feeling in the pit of my stomach. I was never happier to hear the bell ring, signaling the end of class, and placed my notebook into my backpack.

“I’ll meet you in the courtyard, Tessa. I just need to drop off some papers for Mrs. Gable,” said Will, slinging his backpack over his shoulder.

“Go ahead. I’ll save our usual spot and start working on the chemistry assignment.”

I stifled a laugh when he hurried past the students, knocking over a stack of papers on Dr. Baxter’s desk. He repeatedly apologized and Dr. Baxter simply shook his head with an exasperated expression. The other students left the classroom, laughing at Will’s clumsiness or having their own side conversations.

“Tessa,” I heard as I reached the door.

Reluctantly, I looked at Dr. Baxter who was picking up the fallen papers. “Y—yes?”

“Are you feeling alright? You looked a little…distracted during class.”

“I didn’t get much sleep last night. It won’t happen again.”

He chuckled. “You’re not in any trouble. You and Will are the only ones who actually pay attention in this class. I think you’re allowed to be distracted every once in awhile. I hope it doesn’t have to do with what happened this morning.”
I gripped the strap of my backpack. “Nope, not at all. Actually, it completely slipped my mind until you brought it up. I never knew that you went running by the Falls. I mean, a lot of people do but three times a day…that’s intense.”

“I like to keep fit. You know, you don’t strike me as the type of person that’s into exercise. Crunches and a treadmill maybe but dangling from a thin little rope? Not really."

“My dad wanted me to try it out. He’s always pushing me to try new and exciting things but I’m not as much of a thrill seeker as him. I think I’ll stick to the crunches instead to stay in shape.”

“Well, if you ask me, I can tell that your body is just fine, even under those baggy sweaters. It’s a shame you hide it. You should have more confidence in yourself.”

“Heh, well I will definitely work on that. I should get going. I promised to meet Will in the courtyard.”

Before I took one step outside the classroom, he grabbed my wrist. The hallways were mostly empty except for a few students at their lockers.

“You could start by wearing that little red jacket more often,” he whispered in my ear, his other hand hovering dangerously close to my waist.

“I—I really need to leave.”

Wrenching my wrist from his grasp, I hurried down the hallway, not daring to turn around for even a second though I could feel his eyes burning into my back. I sat at a rickety, graffiti covered round table in the back of the courtyard and covered several vulgar drawings and Need some good weed? Meet me under the bleachers with my chemistry textbook. Elena sat down at the table, taking a tupperware container filled with strawberries out of the paper bag.

“Do you always have to eat my lunch?”

“It’s called sharing. Why do you look like you just had a heart attack? Did something happen in Bio?”

“No. You were right. I was nervous about nothing.”

“You haven’t smiled once since the jackass showed up.”

“Is that what we’re calling him now?”

“I have much better nicknames for him but I don’t want to taint your little virgin ears,” she said, seductively licking a strawberry.

I giggled. “Would you stop?”

“Why? It’s making you smile. Besides, you know you like it.”

“I remember how good you are at licking stuff,” said Belmont, leaning against the nearby staircase. Disgusted, Elena threw the strawberry at him. “Why are you here again? Go bother someone else.”

“Sure. Let me get my phone and call up all my ghost buddies. Oh wait, the only one I know is you.”

“Go to Vegas or something. I’m sure there are plenty of douchebag ghosts hanging out there. You’d fit right in with them.”
I buried my face in my hands as her scathing remark sparked another argument. Everyone else in the courtyard was able to have a normal lunch but I was forced to listen to two ghost teenagers arguing like kids on a playground. Will saved me from listening to their argument that soon dissolved into a back and forth of rude insults, mostly from Elena, when he sat down at our table.

“Sorry it took me so long. Mrs. Gable was going on and on about our trip to the Saenger Theatre next month. She’s really excited about it. I wouldn’t blame you if you started without me.”

“No, I didn’t mind waiting. Can I ask you something? It might sound weird. It’s about the party.”

“That’s all everyone’s been talking about today. They’re trying to figure out how no one saw Fin fall off that bridge. I mean, I know he was drunk but he didn’t seem that bad when we were there.”

“Did you see Dr. Baxter at the party?”

He looked at me, strangely. “Baxter? Why would he be at a high school party? I know he thinks he’s like a teenager in an adult’s body but I don’t think he’d actually go there. Why?”

“I thought I saw him when you were getting us beer. It was probably just my mind playing tricks on me. Hilton’s always hinting at him to go to those parties but you’re right.”

Both Will and I were having trouble concentrating on the chemistry assignment, due to the loud laughter from the stoner pit. It was a common hangout for the popular kids, especially Belmont and his friends, during lunch, where they smoked weed and cigarettes and passed around bottles stolen from their parents’ liquor cabinets. As I balanced a chemical equation, something soft struck the back of my head. I glanced from the paper ball on the ground to Belmont, who was covering Elena’s mouth to silence her. She scratched at him with her freshly manicured nails.

“Listen to what they're saying,” he said, nodding towards the stoner pit.

“Why?” I mouthed.

“To piss off Ellie that they cared more about me than her.”

“Will, do you want to move to a different spot? They’re kind of loud.”

“It’s not that bad. I’m—”

A beer can flew over the wall and fell onto the table, spilling all over their textbooks. Irritated by the high-pitched giggles, I grabbed the beer can.

“Tessa, wait.”

I walked into the stoner pit, overcome with the smell of cigarette smoke. Hilton, Parker, and several other jocks and cheerleaders were sitting on the benches and staircase, laughing amongst themselves.

“Oh look, Make A Wish and Nerd King are here. Is this where you have steamy make out sessions?” teased Hilton.

“Anna, you’re a tease. You looked all sexy last night and now you’re back to that?” asked Parker, sipping from a bottle of tequila.

I squeezed the beer can in my hand. “I don’t care if you want to act like a pack of drunken idiots but can you at least watch where you throw—”
“Can you smoke?”

“What?” I asked, confused.

“Would that mess up your meds or something? You can celebrate with us.”

“Uh sorry, what are you celebrating?” asked Will, trying not to breathe in any smoke.

“The end of Fin Belmont and the beginning of my reign as king of this school.”

“That’s not funny, Chace. He just died,” chided Amy.

“Good riddance to the jackass. He thought he was such tough shit but his time was going to come, sooner or later. Don’t act like he was the greatest guy. The only reason half of us hung out with him is because he’s a Belmont. I wish I could’ve been there to record the whole thing. Maybe hear him beg a little...I bet he was crying like the little bitch he’s always been.”

“He fell off the bridge by accident. Why would he be begging?” I asked, sensing something off about him.

Parker jumped down from the top of the staircase and put his arm around my shoulders. It was not just his words that were strange, but his mannerisms. Many of his friends, even Hilton, seemed uneasy by his indifference towards Belmont’s death. Belmont and Elena were standing together by the wall, listening to the entire conversation. For a brief second, he looked visibly hurt by Parker’s words but it was swiftly replaced with a harsh glare and clenched fists.

“Don’t be a downer, Jemma. Fin treated you like crap but now that I’m charge, I’m willing to give you a clean slate. Imagine that sexy body in a cheerleading outfit.”

“Can you not make me gag?” said Hilton, lighting up another cigarette.

“Leave her alone, Parker,” said Will.

Parker smirked. “Ooh, are you going to make me?”

“Some friend you are, already making plans to take over as head of your stupid clique barely a day after your best friend died. Let’s go, Tessa. We can finish the assignment in the library.”

As I walked to the library with Will, I was more concerned with Belmont than my chemistry assignment. I already had plenty of suspicions that his death was not an accident but I had been willing to accept that it was at the hand of some random stranger that he likely provoked while immensely drunk. To an outsider, Belmont Falls would seem like a picturesque town but its residents knew that there were people with plenty of problems like alcoholism and drug addiction. By the time the bell rang, I was certain that there was much more to the story of his death and the murderer was someone close to him, possibly even one of his best friends.
For the first time since my three week long obsession in the fourth grade, I found myself obsessed with a boy. Unlike that unfortunate period of time where every inch of the walls in my bedroom were plastered with posters and hand drawn pictures, likely due to aliens abducting me in my sleep and turning my brain into mush, the boy I was obsessing over was not the handsome, teenage TV star with magical powers, piercing blue eyes, and a wolf sidekick, but Chace Parker.

As riveting as it was to listen to Mrs. Allen talk about the latest addition to her horde of cats, affectionately named Miss Cuddles, with intense fervor, instead of teaching them about art, my mind was elsewhere. I replayed my encounter with Parker during lunch over and over again, recalling every small detail from his lack of grief to his interest in using his best friend’s death to bolster his own social status.

Parker was many things (a womanizer, a lunkhead, an arrogant jerk who cared more about tackling someone into the dirt than passing a test, just to name a few) but I doubted that he was capable of murder. No matter how much I told myself that he was neither cunning nor smart enough to cover up a crime, years of watching crime shows with my father told me to never rule out any suspects. Though it was not my job to help Belmont any further than helping him understand his new life as a ghost, I felt a personal responsibility to avenge his death. If it were not for me thinking that the danger passed after saving Katie at the party, I may have been able to save him from his own watery fate.

Will waved his hand in front of my face, snapping me out of my daze. While lost in my own thoughts, the bell had rung and students were leaving the classroom, not bothering to wait for Mrs. Allen to give them any homework. A poster, covered in big, bright letters and glitter, was plastered on every single locker.

Ripping the poster from his locker, Will mentioned that everyone was whispering about the party advertised by the poster instead of listening to the latest adventures of Miss Cuddles and her scratching post. The party, being thrown by Parker, was planned for this Friday after the memorial, as an alternate outlet to grieve Belmont’s death. Like me, Will thought it was ironic that Parker, who seemed to care the least about the loss of his best friend, was throwing a party in his honor.

“Back to the library to finish up that chemistry assignment?”

“Actually, that might be a bad idea. I overheard some freshman saying that he and his friends were going to play a prank in the library. Something about a stink bomb...”

He rolled his eyes at the idea of such a juvenile prank. “Why does everyone like to mess with the library? Why not be original and do a prank in the teacher’s lounge or something?”

“They lack any imagination. We could sit in the bleachers instead. For once, I want to go home without the back of my book being all sticky from our usual table. Let me just stop by my locker.”

On the way to my locker, I bribed three freshmen who were well known pranksters and would not need much encouragement to cause havoc in the library. After a bit of haggling, where the price for risking the wrath of the stern, elderly librarian went up from five dollars to forty dollars each, the three troublemakers headed off to the library, discussing the best plan to guarantee them a spot in the Belmont High prankster hall of fame. I grabbed my chemistry textbook from my locker and walked down to the bleachers. It was much different from our usual spot, with the loud noise from three separate practices for football, cheerleading, and track. Will tapped his pencil against the inside of his
textbook, attempting to block out the shouts of the overly competitive football coaches.

“This might not have been my best idea,” I said, listening to the head football coach reprimand one of the new freshman players with personal insults about his ‘chicken legs’.

“No. I don’t mind—always good to get fresh air. No one’s tried to throw a football at my head yet so that’s a plus.”

“Glad to see you’re aiming high.”

As I sat beside Will, my eyes briefly met Parker’s and he flashed me of his signature smirks. I quickly looked away, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear. It was nearly impossible to focus on balancing a chemical equation when all around us, the football coaches were nearly screaming their heads off at the tiniest mistakes in a play and Hilton was rivaling them with her own insults thrown at the other cheerleaders. I had almost left the bleacher to comfort Katie who was near tears after Hilton told her to lay off the junk food if she wanted to remain a member of the squad. Hilton’s increasingly vicious insults were not the only distraction. I repeatedly noticed Parker glancing in my direction during his practice and any time that we made eye contact, I immediately glanced down at my notebook to hide the blush forming in my cheeks.

“That’s the last one. I can give you a ride home, if you want. We just have to wait for Katie to finish up with her practice,” said Will, shutting his textbook.

“Sure but I don’t think it’ll be over until Hilton’s insulted each of them at least a dozen times.”

“I miss when Elena was in charge. It’s like trading in a kitten for a dragon.”

Katie was receiving the worst treatment, being the newest member to the squad. Hilton practically yelled herself hoarse as she mocked Katie’s inability to do a complicated flip perfectly on the first try. I stopped Will from interfering with the practice when Hilton compared her to a hippo, knowing that even though he towered over Hilton, her brutal taunts were able to cut down anyone twice her size and his meddling would only make the subsequent practices much worse for Katie. The football players ran past them, smelling heavily of cheap cologne and sweat. I nearly jumped out of my skin as my chemistry textbook was lifted from my lap. Turning around, I found Parker standing in the row behind me, flipping through the textbook.

“Only you could be more interested in chemistry when you have a front row seat to a gun show, Byrne.”

“Gun show?”

He flexed his arm, showing off his biceps. I let out the tiniest giggle though on the inside, I was rolling my eyes.

“I’ve got plenty of room in my car. I’ll take you home.”

“Oh, I um…”

“I’m taking her, Parker. We’re just waiting for Katie to finish with practice,” said Will, moving his arm protectively in front of me.

Parker scoffed. “Why would she want a ride in that dinosaur you call a car? I’m not taking no for an answer.”

“I don’t want any trouble, Will. It’s fine,” I whispered.
“You can wait by my car. I just need to get changed,” Parker told her, throwing a smug smirk at Will before leaving the bleachers.

Sensing that Will would rather let me walk home than accept a ride from Parker, I promised to text him the moment I was in my house. I waited in the parking lot, next to Parker’s expensive sports car. I had seen him drive several girls in this very car plenty of times before, always aware that he was not offering the ride out of the goodness of his heart. Belmont was known for doing the same and among the girls at the school; it was considered an honor to just sit in one of their cars. There were rumors that their ‘charitable’ rides usually included a detour at the Falls and I was smart enough to figure out that these detours involved more than a walk across the bridge. Belmont and Elena were reflected in the side mirror. He checked himself out in the mirror, running his fingers through his hair.

Elena punched my shoulder. “What the hell are you thinking? Go back to the bleachers and wait for Will to drive you home. You do not get in a car with Chace Parker. Don’t tell me that it’s just to keep him from fighting Will. You’ve been acting weird ever since what happened at lunch.”

“It’s just a ride home, Elena.”

“You know it’s not just—would you stop staring at yourself for one second and tell her that this is a terrible idea? She’s going to be alone with Parker and we both know that he’s not offering to drive her because he’s a decent person. Tessa, you’re not dumb enough to fall for—you’re doing this on purpose. The little looks during practice…”

I shrugged, finding myself suddenly interested in staring at a ladybug on the windshield. “What looks? We just happened to look in the same direction at the same time and it was awkward so I would look down at my book. That’s all.”

“When you’re lying, you look everywhere but at the person you’re talking to and right now, you’re staring at that ladybug.”

“Maybe I just find bugs interesting. Did you ever think that in the future, I want to be an entomologist? I don’t have to share all my future career ideas with you.”

“Gross. Who would want to look at bugs all day? You really have issues, Byrne,” said Belmont, disgusted.

Not believing her supposedly secret passion for bugs, Elena mentioned that another way to catch me in a lie was that I rambled on and quickly changed the subject to a random topic. She was not the stereotypical blonde ditz who could be easily fooled with a flimsy story and after all the time we spent together, she knew me better than anyone, sometimes better than I knew myself. I confessed to the crazy theory that had been brewing inside my mind since my encounter with Parker in the stoner pit. Expecting the worst, I was unsurprised by Belmont bursting into a fit of hysterical laughter at the idea that his best friend was the murderer.

“Look, I know it sounds crazy—”

“You’re accusing one of my closest friends of killing me. That’s way past crazy.”

“Tell me you don’t think he’s acting weird. Like you said, he was one of your closest friends but he doesn’t care that you’re dead. He’s more interested in being Mr. Popular. He’s planning to throw a party and it hasn’t even been a week since you died. That doesn’t sound strange to you?”

Unable to come up with an explanation, he resorted to shaking his head. “This is Jackson Howler all over again,” said Elena, crossing her arms.
“This is not—it’s different. Maybe nine year old me thought he was the greatest thing ever and the creators of the show gave him the coolest name but seventeen year old me thinks the name was either too on the nose or just a really lame joke. I’m not saying that Parker is the murderer but he knows something. He knows it wasn’t an accident. I have this bad feeling. If I can just find out what he knows, I can—”

“Can what? Get him arrested? Good luck with that when his dad is in charge of the police department. This isn’t your problem. Let’s say Fin was murdered. Do you know how many people are killed every day? You can’t save all of them. I can see that you’re beating yourself up that you couldn’t stop your vision from happening but don’t risk your own life, especially for this jackass who doesn’t give a damn about you,” she pleaded, pointing towards Belmont who was oddly silent.

Elena begged me to return to the bleachers and wait for Will to give me a ride home. I found myself torn between following her advice and my own stubborn determination. The front doors swung open and Parker left the school, carrying a duffel bag. With each second, he was getting closer to the car and I was stuck between two choices: forget all about my suspicions and go on with my life or attempt to make a difference and find out the truth about Belmont’s death. I could practically see Elena’s heart sink to the pit of her stomach as I sat inside the car. Dragging Belmont along with her, she moved into the backseat, nearly getting smacked in the face by Parker’s bag.

“Admit it. My car’s a lot better than that piece of junk your boyfriend drives.”

“How many times do I have to say that Will’s not my boyfriend?”

“I like hearing you say it. It’s a good reminder that you’re available.”

“It’s just a ride home, Parker.”

“Is it? I’ve never seen you anywhere near those bleachers except when we have gym. Don’t tell me you were sitting there because it’s nice outside.”

I tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. “Y—you’re right. I um thought what you said in the stoner pit. You know, about having a clean slate now that Belmont’s dead. This could be my chance to get a fresh start but that’s easier said than done. I thought if anyone could help me, it’s you.”

Parker smirked. “You made the right choice. If you’re serious, then we have to make a couple stops before I take you home.”

On the way to wherever he planned on taking me, I texted Will that I was safely home and then texted my mother that I was visiting the cemetery with Elena. Parker eventually parked the car at the mall. In his mind, if I wanted a fresh start, that meant more than speaking up in class or hanging out with a different crowd. I followed him to a high-end boutique, one with a price range that was far above my allowance. If I was lucky, I would be able to afford a pair of socks and a headband.

When I voiced my concerns about the expensive prices, seeing that a pair of ripped shorts cost the same as a plane ticket, he simply laughed it off, telling me that money was not a problem. I never felt more uncomfortable than when he called over one of the salesgirl and offered her two hundred dollars to help me pick out clothes. The girl, who looked like she was still in college, agreed with a sweet smile though I detected a hint of disdain in her eyes, suggesting that I was not the boutique’s usual clientele.

The girl, introducing herself as ‘Cindi with an I’, led me around the boutique, asking thousands of questions ranging from my personal style to my favorite designers. Elena walked with me, resisting every urge to smack Cindi for her backhanded insults, while Belmont followed two girls towards the
dressing rooms. After what felt like hours of being interrogated on my fashion sense (or according to Cindi, my lack of one), I ended up with enough clothes to dress the population of a small town.

Parker sat on the couches outside the dressing rooms, wanting to see each outfit to receive his stamp of approval. I was never one to care if someone approved of how I dressed but if my plan was going to work, I needed to at least pretend that his opinion mattered to me. I had already taken care of the problem of him seeing the marks that covered my body, dabbing concealer all over myself in the bathroom before the end of lunch.

Slipping out of my hoodie and jeans, I tried on the first outfit: a skintight dark blue dress that barely covered my backside, similar to the dress Hilton wore to the party at the Falls. I tugged on the bottom of the dress, hoping to get it a few inches closer to my knees, but the material is too tight, as if it was made of glue. I replaced my worn converse sneakers, white roses painted on the sides by me, with a pair of black ankle boots.

If I lived in any other town, people would never consider this dress suitable to wear at school but at Belmont High, it was typical for the students to get away with wearing all kinds of clothes. Principal Hilton claimed that it was part of a so-called ‘progressive feminist movement’ where girls should not be ashamed to dress how they wished to express themselves but in reality, it was just an excuse for the school board. Allowing the members of the school board to believe that she was abolishing the dress code to end old, sexist ideas, she was able to maintain her impeccable reputation as an amazing principal while giving special treatment to her precious daughter and her friends.

Peeking through a crack in the door, I watched Parker texting on his phone while he flirted with Cindi, offering her an invite to his party. Elena and Belmont were sitting on the same couch, bickering over his recklessness and taking advantage of his new status as a ghost by sneaking into a girl’s dressing room. Taking a deep breath, I opened the door and immediately, four pairs of eyes fell on me. Parker sat up straighter, his mouth agape.

“I uh think it’s too small. It’s kind of short.”

“The dress is supposed to look like that, sweetie,” replied Cindi, scrunching her nose at Parker who had still not taken his eyes off of me or my chest, which was pushed up even more by the tight dress.

“I guess I just—maybe one size bigger or…”

“She knows what she’s talking about and trust me, it’s perfect,” said Parker, getting up from the couch.

Standing behind me, he placed his hands on my hips and turned me towards a full-length mirror near the dressing rooms. I knew that the girl staring back at me, in the skintight dress and four inch heels, was me but deep down, it just felt wrong. All Parker saw was another notch in his belt, a new girl to add to his long list of hookups. The lust in his eyes blinded him to the obvious fact that it was merely an act.

“I—I’m not sure about this. I look—”

“Sexy.”

“Heh, good joke.”

“I’m serious. You think I’m the only one who notices how sexy you are under those baggy sweaters? Every guy sees it but they never say anything because you dress like that as some kind of feminist thing and they don’t want to get lectured about how men are evil.”
“That’s not what feminism is ab—I don’t dress like that to make a statement. I’m just comfortable that way.”

He rested his chin on her shoulder. “Think of how much better it would be if you dressed like you should? With Fin gone, I’m not the only one who gets a step up. You’d shoot right up to the top of the social ladder. Stick with me and senior year will be our year. No one will remember Fin. He’ll be nothing…just a few lines at the end of the yearbook.”

I was startled by the sound of glass breaking and whipped my head around, seeing a broken vase shattered to pieces. Cindi hurried over to the counter to call for someone to clean up the mess, her heels clicking on the floor. She was in a panic, worried that her boss would fire her for the property damage, and quietly muttered to herself about mothers bringing their misbehaving children into the boutique. Parker ushered me back into the dressing room to try on more clothes and a second later, Elena joined me, pulling Belmont by his ear.

“Did you throw that vase?”

“No. It was Casper the Friendly Ghost,” he replied, sarcastically.

“You were trying to hit Parker.”

“Are you going to keep saying really obvious things? Yeah, I was trying to hit that moron. Did you hear him? He thinks he can replace me?”

“That doesn’t mean you try to bash his head in with a vase. We talked about how you have to be discrete. What if someone saw that vase moving by itself?” I hissed, struggling to keep my voice quiet.

“That’s your problem, not mine.”

“Look, the only reason I’m here is to find out what your best friend knows about what happened to you that night. Do you think I want to dress like a Hilton wannabe? I can’t get any answers from him if you’re trying to make him the newest member of your ghost clique.”

Around six o’clock, after spending thousands of dollars on clothes, jewelry, and shoes, Parker dropped me off at my house. I decided to stash my shopping bags in my father’s abandoned shed in the backyard. A year after my parents were married, my father had bought the shed from the local hardware store, eager to begin several projects but at forty, he had never once set foot inside, always claiming to be busy with his archaeological work. It was the perfect hiding place for my new clothes but with my luck, my mother would suddenly find an overwhelming desire to convert the shed into an art studio. I had no intention of explaining my admittedly poorly thought out plan, knowing that she would react similar to Elena.

“Tessa?”

At the sound of my mother’s voice, I shut the cardboard box that was concealing my bags. She was standing outside the shed, her jeans stained with dirt and a trowel in her hand.

“Byrne, you can’t let her know what you’re doing. Just act natural,” whispered Belmont, nudging my side.

“M—mom, you’re um…you’re home. Don’t you have to pick up Ryan from soccer practice?”

“The practice was cancelled. He wanted to have a play date with his friend Tommy so I dropped him off and thought I’d get some gardening done.”
“Oh, that’s nice. Tommy’s—he’s such a nice kid. He might be a little too obsessed with dinosaurs but who am I to judge what someone likes, right?”

Listening to my rambling, Belmont looked at me like I had grown a second head and muttered, “What the hell are you doing? You’re terrible at this. Have you never lied to her before? Just say you have homework and run to your room.”

“Fin, you are aware that I can hear you, yes?” asked my mother, her eyes directly on him.

He immediately stopped giving me advice on how to tell a convincing lie at the realization that, like me, my mother was able to see ghosts. Elena was leaning against the walls, amused by the scene unraveling in front of her. When my mother asked what Parker was doing at the cemetery, having seen him drop me off, I knew it was pointless to come up with a cover story. My mother had a special talent of her own, one that she called her ‘sixth sense’. She was able to see through any lie without even seeing the person’s face.

“I went to the mall with him.”

“Oh, wait a minute. First of all, we are not friends. She’s…this is not a friendship. It’s whatever. We are just working together towards a common goal. Second of all, he’s my ex-best friend who she thinks could’ve killed me,” said Belmont.

“Because I kind of do think that he did kill him or maybe knows who did…and I wanted to find out what he knew. He was acting weird at lunch and he said with Belmont gone, it was a fresh start for me and I pretended to want that so he took me to the mall to buy new clothes,” I admitted in one breath, mentally preparing myself for a lecture.

“With the best friend of your new friend?”

“Whoa, wait a minute. First of all, we are not friends. She’s…this is not a friendship. It’s whatever. We are just working together towards a common goal. Second of all, he’s my ex-best friend who she thinks could’ve killed me,” said Belmont.

“What is he talking about, Tessa? Why you were at the mall with that boy?”

“Because I kind of do think that he did kill him or maybe knows who did…and I wanted to find out what he knew. He was acting weird at lunch and he said with Belmont gone, it was a fresh start for me and I pretended to want that so he took me to the mall to buy new clothes,” I admitted in one breath, mentally preparing myself for a lecture.

“You two will stay here while I speak to Tessa alone.”

Elena looked at my mother, confused. “You two? Wait, Kala, I did nothing wrong. He was the one who put this idea in her head. Don’t leave me alone with him. I’ll just follow you anyway. It’s not like you can send me away.”

My mother removed a small leather pouch from her jeans pocket and poured its contents, a dark grey powder, across the doorway. As Elena followed me out of the shed, she was repelled back by some sort of invisible shield, forcing her to remain in the shed with Belmont. When he attempted to leave the shed himself by running towards the door, the same happened to him though the force of the blow sent him flying into the wall. My mother apologized for using the powder, which I had never seen before, explaining that the conversation needed to be in private. I hesitated to leave Elena behind, especially with Belmont, but my curiosity got the better of me and I walked back towards the house.

Sitting in the kitchen, I watched my mother boil water on the stove and waited for her to lecture me about my reckless plan. She was silent as she placed tea bags into two cups, the tension slowly killing me. The agonizing silence was finally broken by the whistling of the kettle.

“Can we get started with the lecture already? I’d rather get yelled at than listen to you say nothing.”

“I’m not going to lecture, Tessa. We’ve needed to have this conversation for a while and I know you have many questions. I’m sure you’re wondering about that powder. It keeps ghosts like Elena and Fin confined to a space. They can’t cross that doorway until the line is broken. I didn’t want to resort
“to such measures but some things need to stay between us and our kind.”

“Our kind? We’re still people, Mom. It’s not like we’re animals.”

“No, but we are different. There’s nothing wrong with that but it’s the truth. We never spoke about what happened the night Fin died…what you did with the lamp. It’s a sign of your abilities growing. You’re almost eighteen and we’ve briefly discussed the importance of that special day. When you are in that state between life and death, you are like a ghost but you can cause much more damage.”

I shifted uncomfortably in my seat at the mention of my eighteenth birthday. In my bedroom, a calendar was hanging by my closet and the date was circled in bright red marker. I had been dreading that day since I first learned about my abilities as a reaper.

“What does that mean?”

“Elena, Fin, and others like them have their limits. Yes, they can interact with the physical world but—let’s save that discussion for another time. Why are you so invested in Fin’s death? All these years of guiding people to the other side…what makes him different?”

“Because I could have stopped it from happening.”

I recounted my dream about Fin’s death at the Falls and how my sudden epiphany of being able to prevent the deaths led to me saving Katie. Though my mother dismissed such an idea, claiming that death was part of life and fate would always find a way, I could not help noticing her nails anxiously tapping on the counter. The tapping quickened its pace when I mentioned the strange creature that had attacked Katie on the bridge and the shadow attached to Casey’s back when she chose to pass on to the other side. I was not as skilled at seeing through lies as my mother but with her odd behavior, a blind person could tell that she was hiding something from me.

“I think there’s more to Fin’s death than falling off the bridge. I went back there with him and Elena and I found—”

“You trespassed on a crime scene? Tessa, have you lost your mind?”

“The cops called it an accident barely a day after it happened and they’re not investigating anymore. I haven’t seen anyone from the party being questioned, not even his friends. Everything’s all tied up too nicely. I found two sets of scratches on the railing. One was Katie’s because I recognized her nail polish but the other was someone else’s. There was dried up blood and a ring wedged under the bridge too. I think the ring was covered in gun powder. I can show it to you. When dad gets back, he can take a look at it too. I mean, maybe all those things have nothing to do with Belmont but it’s a possibility.”

“You are not a cop. If you truly think that Fin was murdered, you need to bring this evidence to the police. Tomorrow morning, we can drop off the ring and any other information you have at the station. We can do it anonymously.”

“Did you not hear me before? The cops don’t care. He’s the son of the family whose ancestors founded this damn town. Wouldn’t everyone be panicking over his death? How can his parents accept that it was an accident when there are no witnesses and the only evidence is that he was drinking at the party?”

“Tessa, listen to me. I understand that you regret not being able to save him but this isn’t your concern. I went through this myself when I was your age. I had my own Fin Belmont.”

My mother opened up about an incident from her past, one that she kept from my own father. When
she was around my age, she had the same optimism as me: that reapers could change fate and prevent deaths. Her optimism led to her wanting to save the life of a boy who was very much like Belmont, the popular, handsome jock. They were never in the same social circles but they spoke often during their shared classes, growing up together in their hometown not far from Belmont Falls. Despite her saving him from a terrible car accident that claimed twenty other lives, all that effort was a waste. The boy had died hours after the accident, struck by a car while out with his friends.

“How is that anything like—”

“Because after he died, I asked a lot of questions too. Things weren’t adding up in my mind. He was hardly a genius but he was never dumb enough to run into the street without looking both ways. The police never arrested anyone for his death even though all of his friends had plenty of information on the car and the driver. I blamed myself for weeks. I couldn’t stop thinking about what I saw the day I saved him. When I stopped him from driving down the road right before the accident, I saw a shadow clinging to his back. His eyes turned milky white and it was as if he was possessed…being forced to drive the car.”

“That happened to Katie too. It was trying to pull her off the bridge. Did you ever tell grandma about it?”

“Yes and I will tell you the same thing that she told me. Stop digging into this incident. Pretend it never happened.”

I shook my head. “That is the worst advice ever. If anything, we should be—”

“You are going to stop trying to find the truth about Fin. I understand that he wants justice but it can’t come at the cost of your life. I will not have you putting your life in danger. I had never seen your grandmother truly frightened until the moment I told her what happened at the scene of the accident. She never went into great detail but she told me that if I kept searching for answers, it would lead me to a very dark place. As your mother, I am telling you to let this go and just live your life as you have…focus on getting through senior year. That is all that matters. Do you understand me?”

I was at a loss for words at her insistence to forget about Belmont’s murder. If she never told me that story from her past, I would have been more willing to convince Belmont that finding his murderer was a lost cause but genuinely hearing the tremble in her voice made me that more determined to discover the truth. I had a gut feeling that the two incidents were somehow related and though my grandmother had remained tightlipped, she knew about these creatures and their presence was not mere coincidence. Keeping my thoughts to myself, I agreed to push aside my suspicions for my mother’s sake.

Elena and Belmont were equally curious about the conversation and, in his words, my mother’s witchy voodoo powder. She was relieved to hear that my mother was siding with her with not wanting me to investigate the possible murder. I left out the more pressing part of the conversation: how my mother once encountered the creature that attacked Katie. All three were convinced that I gave up on my plan, something Belmont openly did not agree with and he spent half the night calling me a slew of insults, such as a goody two-shoes who would never disobey her parents.

His insults continued into breakfast and around my mother, he lowered his voice though it was just loud enough for her to overhear him. He threatened to expose himself as a ghost to get her to reconsider but my mother called his bluff, pointing out that proving his new existence to anyone outside my family or other ghosts was impossible. Ryan, who was unable to see Belmont but knew of him through his youngest brother Bradley, tried to distract him with talk about sports, having Belmont write down his responses in his notebook. More impossible than exposing a ghost was
resisting my brother’s puppy dog eyes. For a short while, my brother seemed to be keeping
Belmont’s mind off of possible murder suspects.

I waved at my mother as she drove away from the empty school parking lot. “Okay, now that I’m
done pretending to care what a five year old thinks about soccer, let’s get back to you, Miss Squeaky
Clean.”

“Are you done?” I asked, putting down my backpack.

“Nope. I can come up with names for you all day, Byrne. It’s pathetic that you’re scared to go
behind your mom’s back. She’s wrong.”

“I agree.”

“What?” he chorused with Elena.

“This time, my mom is wrong. I just told her that I was going to give up so she’s not suspicious.
Operation: Reaper is a go. I thought having a code name would make it sound cooler.”

“It does sound—no, you’re not distracting me. You’re listening to your mom, not this idiot who’s
like a devil on your shoulder. If she thinks this is a bad idea, it’s a bad idea,” said Elena.

“Well, life is full of making bad choices and learning from them. Step one? Walk into school.”

“That’s your first step? It should be more than—”

I interrupted Elena by lifting my sweatshirt over my head, revealing the low-cut, short-sleeved crop
top underneath and my red leather jacket, and slipping off my sweatpants, which were hiding my
black leather mini skirt. As I switched out my sneakers for ankle boots, I glanced up at Belmont and
Elena, who stared back at me with dumbfounded expressions.

“I just condensed it to make it sound simpler. Step one is to actually change into new clothes that I
was hiding from my mom and walk into school.”

“Good first step. Listen to that devil on your shoulder, babe.”

I stopped his hand from touching my lower back. “Do not ever call me babe. I might be dressed
differently but I’m still me.”

“Can’t stop me from looking,” he whispered in his ear.

Throwing him a disgusted glare, I walked into the school. I thought I was prepared for any reactions
from my peers but imagining and living the actual experience were very different. Listening to the
stunned whispers, I could not help the tiniest smile tugging at my lips. For once, no one was talking
about my latest fainting incident or calling me names like Make A Wish behind my back. I reminded
myself that the change in my personal style was for nothing more than getting information out of
Parker, but their reactions were an added bonus.

My new look had drawn attention away from the loud argument between Will and Katie at his
locker. He was pleading with her to quit the cheerleading squad instead of having to endure Hilton’s
torment for the sake of popularity. I knew that introducing Will to my new look would be difficult
and confusing. He was the type of person who disliked any sort of changes, even one as small as
sitting in a different seat during classes. I tapped his shoulder as he listed all the reasons to not be a
cheerleader. He glanced back at me before rolling his eyes.
“What, did you text one of your cheerleader clones to come here and convince me that all that torture Hilton puts you through is going to make you a better member of the squad?”

“I don’t think I’d be much of a cheerleader. I’m not peppy enough.”

Recognizing my voice, he turned around and stared at me like I was a monster out of a sci-fi movie. Katie’s face was similar to the night of the party and she blinked several times as if expecting me to change back to my usual clothes.

“Katie, I’m sure this argument isn’t over anytime soon but can I talk to your brother for a minute?”

“Um…yeah, okay.”

Grabbing Will by his sleeve, I dragged him into the nearest boys’ bathroom. I held my breath until I was used to the pungent smell. Will continued to stare at me, the silence making me slightly uncomfortable.

“Tessa?” he squeaked.

“Of course it’s me. Who else would I be?”

“Some kind of shapeshifting monster. How—why…did Parker do this to you? I knew I shouldn’t have let him drive you home. Did he give you something to drink? Did it smell funny? Maybe it brainwashed you. We’ve seen enough movies to know how to—”

“Will, I’m not brainwashed and before you say it, I know that’s what a person who is possibly brainwashed would say but I swear I’m not. Remember when Parker was talking about a fresh start?”

“Even if he was serious, I think it meant wearing less baggy shirts every once in a while, not dressing like…this.”

“I know it’s weird but you have to trust me. Whatever I wear, however I talk, whatever I do…I don’t mean it. I’m doing this for—reasons that I can’t tell you right now. You just need to trust me. I’m going to be acting a little differently but you’re my friend so I didn’t want you to freak out.”

“Oh, I’m way past freaking out.”

“Just please trust me. Hopefully, this only lasts for about a week and then I don’t have to dress like a Hilton wannabe.”

A tiny voice in the back of my head was screaming for me to tell Will the truth. With our smarts put together, we could solve Fin’s murder twice as quickly but if he could barely handle me wearing a skirt instead of sweatpants, finding out that I was a reaper capable of seeing ghosts would send him to the hospital. I settled for telling him about the act I was putting on for Parker though I refused to give him an actual reason. Leaving a confused Will in the bathroom, I headed towards Parker’s locker, readying myself for the worst: seeing Hilton and her minions for the first time since my makeover.
It was just my luck that half the jocks in the school, from the football players to even members of the swim team, decided to gather around Parker’s locker like some secret society meeting. Amidst their raucous laughter, Parker was standing in the middle, doing some kind of impression. The high-pitched, squeaky tone of his voice made me think that he was impersonating Mrs. Kent, the easily excitable AP English Literature teacher who sounded much younger than her thirty-five years. I was surprised that he could manage such a spot-on impression when he was usually using his desk as a pillow during that class. Applying eyeliner to the bottom of her eyes while staring into the ornate mirror in her locker beside his, Hilton bragged to her fellow cheerleaders about her parents planning a vacation to Paris during winter break.

As she tossed the eyeliner into her makeup bag, she caught sight of me in the mirror, the smug smirk falling from her face faster than the speed of light. She slammed her locker shut, her auburn curls bouncing on her shoulder. Following her gaze, Parker smiled and waved me over, calling me by my actual name instead of Byrne, sickie, or some other random name. His friends had mixed reactions to my new style: most of the boys, like him, were too busy focusing on my chest while the girls either shared Hilton’s angered disgust or looked at me in stunned silence. I noticed that the freshman boys were a lot less blatant with their stares, sneaking tiny glances in hopes of not upsetting me.

Parker squeezed my waist, as though challenging his friends to dare to flirt with me in front of him. It was similar to a dog marking its territory. I detested the idea of being like a human fire hydrant for a pack of slobbering idiots who did most of their thinking with the sticks between their legs.

“Told you that you wouldn’t recognize her. Good choice on the skirt, babe. It was my favorite from yesterday.”

“Taylor, you look so great. I really like your boots…” said Amy, her voice faltering as she noticed the harsh glare on Hilton’s face directed towards me.

Hilton scrunched her nose at me like I was some mangy mutt. “Parker, what the holy hell is this?”

He shrugged. “Tessa took up my offer for a fresh start. What, are you jealous?”

“As if I’d be jealous of Make A Wish. You could put her in all the designer clothes you want but it doesn’t change the fact that she’s a loser.”

“You sound really angry over someone you think is just a loser, Claire. Sure you’re not jealous? You’ll need another date to my party. I have to take the sexiest girl and right now, that’s not you.”

I was taken aback by Hilton’s anger, thinking that might actually turn into a harpy and rip off my head. She was adamantly against the idea of me attending Parker’s post memorial party or even joining their clique, which meant hanging out with them at lunch. When Parker suggested putting my inclusion up to a vote, she immediately denied it, claiming that it was not a democracy and their school had a specific, rigid social order. He used his power as self-proclaimed ‘king of the school’ to disregard any of her objections, insisting that she could either accept me as the newest member of their clique or plummet
from her own high position on the social ladder, being forced to eat lunch with the computer nerds.

Hilton and I had been enemies from the first day we shared a class but the animosity between us did not mean I approved of Parker’s actions. No matter how much I wanted to yell at him for being an arrogant jackass, I kept my mouth shut, needing to be on his good side for my plan. My morning classes were incredibly awkward, with everyone more interested in me than the lessons. Some of the teachers themselves seemed distracted, surprised by my sudden change in style. Not wanting to lose her queen bee status, Hilton settled for icy stares and disgusted scoffs behind my back, especially when someone gave me any sort of compliment.

When the bell rang for lunch, my hopes of joining Will, who was prevented from speaking to me by Parker or one of his jock friends, were dashed by Parker dragging me to the stoner pit. I struggled to feign interest in his constant bragging about his prowess on the field and the many offers from colleges to attend on a football scholarship. My attention drifted to the girls, who were discussing the latest gossip and flipping through fashion magazines.

“Have you ever been to a fashion show, Tessa?” asked Amy, detecting the boredom on my face as Parker droned on and on about a difficult catch from a game last year.

Hilton scoffed. “As if she knows anything about fashion. The only reason she’s dressing like this now is because Chace picked out her clothes.”

“Actually, it was a girl named Cindi with an I. She was really specific about that,” I replied, earning a few giggles from the other girls.

“You are such a little fraud. After Chace’s party, when you’re too scared to let him touch your granny panties, he’ll realize that too and you’ll be back where you belong with the other bottom feeders. You’re never going to be me.”

“I’m not trying to be you. I’m just…people can change. Why are you so threatened by that?”

The page on winter fashion trends was jaggedly torn from the magazine. Her icy blue eyes pierced through me, sending a shiver down my spine.

“No one is a threat to me. I’m at the top and I will stay there for the rest of my life but you? You can try to be like us but at the end of the day, you’re a nobody. You’re as worthless and pathetic as the rest of your family.”

My fists clenched. “Insult my family again and I’ll give you a free nose job, Hilton.”

“Why don’t your parents just save themselves the trouble and send you to the loony bin like that freak you call a—”

Hilton was cut off by my fist colliding with her face. She cried out in pain, falling on her back, as I shook my hand to relieve the stinging pain in my knuckles. Two of her minions came to her aid, helping her up from the stairs and holding a tissue under her nose to stem the bleeding. Parker and the other boys were laughing hysterically, some of them clapping me on the back for my impressive punch.

“MOM!!!!” screeched Hilton, her voice echoing across the courtyard.

A dark skinned hand gripped my shoulder. Without saying a word, Dr. Baxter led both me and a
sobbing Hilton towards the principal’s office and I kept my eyes on the tiled floor, not daring to make eye contact with him. I had only been in the principal’s office a few times over the past four years to drop off papers from teachers and my parents or to receive an academic award. It was the first time that I was in the office for being in trouble. Considering I punched the daughter of the principal, I was facing a lot worse than a verbal warning. Principal Hilton was a spitting image of her daughter, even dressing in a similar manner except that it was toeing the line between risqué and professional. Seeing her daughter in tears and holding a bloody tissue to her nose, she jumped up from her chair and moved around the polished wooden desk to comfort her.

Dr. Baxter pulled out one of the chairs and I quickly sat down, awaiting my inevitable expulsion. Hilton was struggling to speak through her sobs and the throbbing pain in her nose.

“Sweetheart, what happened? Do I need to call the hospital?” asked the principal, frantically grabbing more tissues from her desk.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Hilton point a thin, shaking finger at me. “She boke by nose!”

“Claire, sweetie, just sit and I’ll get Nurse Simpson to take a look.”

After telling the elderly secretary to call the nurse, Principal Hilton returned to her desk. Her eyes rested on me but instead of the cold, harsh gaze that I was currently receiving from her daughter, she looked puzzled. It was as if she had never seen me before in her life.

“I’m so sorry, dear. All these students to watch over and I can’t keep track of every name. Are you a recent transfer?”

“Cecile, this is Tessa Byrne,” replied Dr. Baxter, keeping his hand on the back of my chair.

She let out a derisive giggle. “Of course it’s not. I know Teresa. She’s…oh goodness, it is you. Don’t you look lovely? I didn’t recognize you out of your…usual attire.”

“Mom, by nose!” exclaimed Hilton, angered by her mother finding herself more interested in my appearance than her daughter’s injury.

“Yes, yes. Now, why don’t you tell me what this is about? Claire, sweetheart, don’t speak. You’ll make the injury worse. Brendon, I assume you saw what happened.”

Dr. Baxter explained that he had been reprimanding a trio of freshman pranksters, the same ones who played a prank in the library the previous day, when he heard Hilton scream in pain. He had not seen what caused the fight, only witnessing Hilton with her hands over her nose and me rubbing my bruised knuckles. His assumption was that I was angered over something that Hilton said, a complete understatement.

“I see. Well, you’ve always been a good student, Teresa and—”

“Tessa,” I corrected.

“Right. There’s no need for this to become a giant mess. It was one little incident that got out of hand. All you need to do is apologize to Claire and we can forget it ever happened.”

“No.”
“Excuse me?”

“I’m not going to apologize to your daughter. She deserved it. She was making fun of my family… my—I told her that if she didn’t shut up, I’d break her nose and that’s why I punched her. I’m not sorry for that.”

“We do not tolerate violence at this school, Tessa. I don’t wish to suspend you for injuring a fellow student and I’m sure you don’t want that in your permanent record. Simply apologize.”

“Then tell your daughter to apologize too. She’s not an innocent victim. If she hadn’t opened that giant hole she calls a mouth, we wouldn’t be here right now.”

“Cecile, can I speak with you privately? Girls, wait outside, please,” said Dr. Baxter, intervening to diffuse the tension between myself and Principal Hilton, who pursed her plump lips at my blunt honesty.

He ushered me and Hilton out of the office to have a ‘private discussion’ with her mother. I leaned against the wall, expecting to hear sounds straight out of a sex tape at any minute. Pressing my ear against the door, I attempted to eavesdrop on the conversation, wondering if Dr. Baxter was going to defend me or suggest that I get expelled as a way to get a chance with my mother since he would no longer be my teacher. I dodged Hilton’s hand and her nails brushed against the door. Keeping one hand over her nose, she continued to swipe at me like a cat, angrily muttering under her breath. Her impaired speech made it difficult to understand her but I was able to get the basic gist of what she was saying while struggling to scratch out my eyes.

She lowered her hand when the door swung open. Dr. Baxter stepped out of the office, telling Hilton to wait inside until the nurse arrived to check on her nose.

“You can get back to lunch, Tessa,” he said as Hilton flipped me off and slammed the door.

“What’s my punishment? Detention? Do I have to do Hilton’s homework for a month?”

“I convinced Principal Hilton to let you off with a warning this time. We both know that you’re not a bad kid and you would never have hit Claire unless she provoked you.”

If any other teacher had defended me, I would have given them a simple thank you but Dr. Baxter was a completely different story. He struck me as the type of person who always had an ulterior motive. I trusted him about as much as Hilton, possibly even less since I had suspicions about him from the night of Belmont’s party.

“What do you want? Don’t say you helped me out because you’re a good person. You’ve watched her and her little minions bully me for years and now you step in...so what do you want? I’ll tell you right now that my mother is off limits.”

“This had nothing to do with her. I’m just a teacher looking out for one of his students. I see you took my advice about the jacket. The skirt’s a nice touch,” he said, a trace of a smirk on his lips.

I was unsure what I found more unnerving: that he was openly flirting or that he was practically admitting that he attended Belmont’s party. I had not seen him among the guests that night but there was no other way for him to know about my jacket. It was strange that no one mentioned seeing him at the party when his mere presence would have caused more than half the girls to lose their minds and crowd around him, hoping for a dance. I could
think of fifty reasons why he would attend a high school party, each more troubling than the last, but while I was willing to pursue my suspicions that Parker had a hand in Belmont’s death, I was not as comfortable with pointing the finger at a man who could make teenage girls and grown women wet themselves with just a smile.

By Friday afternoon, I realized that I had overly ambitious expectations for my plan. I had hoped to get at least some information from Parker about the night of the party but all I had was a long list of highlights from his football career that began at the age of five. My only accomplishment over the past two days was getting a new nickname: Knockout, for nearly breaking Hilton’s nose. Though all of his friends became morose at the mention of Belmont, none of them were willing to discuss that night. The only one I had a little success with was Amy, who opened up more outside of Hilton’s presence.

During gym on Friday morning, while Hilton was getting her nose checked (“I’m going to kick your ass, Byrne!” she reminded me whenever we were within a foot of each other), Amy told me that Parker and Belmont had gotten into a fight, after the latter muttered a few drunken insults. She had been waiting for Hilton to return with more beers when she saw Parker shove Belmont to the ground. From the slurred words exchanged between them, all she heard was Parker threaten that Belmont was not going to rule the school forever. Noticing her legs shaking as she worried over Parker knowing that she witnessed the fight, I promised to keep it a secret between us.

I was lying on my bed with Elena, as Belmont drew on my whiteboard with several markers. The memorial had been moved to his home to allow more than just the high school students to mourn his death and he wanted me to be prepared to meet with all sorts of people from the town. I had not yet brought up the fight between him and Parker, thinking it was best for a private conversation. He taped pictures, printed out from my computer, alongside each name written on the whiteboard. Tapping the red marker on the whiteboard, he snapped me out of my daze. The tip of the marker was pointing at a picture of a man in his early fifties with well-coiffed ebony hair, graying on the sides, and piercing dark brown eyes. Dressed in a crisp black suit, he looked like the very definition of an imposing businessman. Charles Belmont was written beside the picture in giant red letters.

He had written the names of his other family members: Katrina Belmont, a woman in her late forties who could be described as nothing less than a classic beauty with her cat-like green eyes, button nose, high cheekbones, and shiny ash blonde locks that fell into loose curls at the middle of her back; Rosalie Belmont, a young woman in her early twenties who looked like her mother in miniature yet had her father’s piercing gaze; Rhys Belmont, the same age as his sister and seeming to be very adventurous, judging by his picture of him rock climbing; and Bradley Belmont, a dark-haired boy the same age as Ryan. I had never met any of the Belmonts in person, only ever seeing their pictures in the newspaper. It was not much of a surprise that our paths never crossed, since our houses were on opposite sides of town and our families led very different lives. My house was part of the artsy neighborhood (or as Hilton once called it, the poor neighborhood that cared more about pretty pictures than money).

“What’s with the question mark under Bradley?” asked Elena, taking a bite of my peanut butter sandwich.

“My mom’s having another baby. Don’t know what is yet, don’t really care either. That’s not important. Byrne has to know what she’s dealing with if she’s going to this memorial. Charles Belmont, my father.”

I feigned a gasp. “No way,” I said, my voice dripping with sarcasm as Elena giggled quietly.

He tapped the whiteboard again. “This is serious, Byrne. Pay attention. He’s the definition of an
asshole. All he cares about is money and his next big business move. Just stay away from him. He probably won’t even be at the memorial. He’ll be too busy at the office.”

Hearing his bitter tone, I could not help feeling the tiniest bit of sympathy. Though we had barely spoken to each other before his death, it was well known that Belmont despised his father. I remembered in second grade when we had to write about our parents’ careers and he received a timeout after calling his father a ‘buttface who only cared about money’. All the expensive cars, credit cards, and five thousand dollar a week allowances were not enough to mend their lack of a relationship. I used to think that he was exaggerating how terrible his father was but with his son’s recent death, I could only recall a single interview on the news where his mother was sobbing uncontrollably, barely able to string together a sentence, while his father maintained the same stoic expression in the picture.

Belmont seemed to have a much better relationship with his mother, who he spoke of with a fondness that was uncharacteristic of him. With the suddenness of his death, he forbade me from speaking with her, not wanting to put any additional stress on her or the baby. The bitterness returned when speaking about his two older siblings, the supposedly perfect twins. I had heard plenty about the twins growing up, my own teachers calling them the pride and joy of Belmont Falls. If anyone could be considered perfect, it was them, having won numerous academic awards in school, being heads of many school clubs and sports teams, attending one of the best universities in the country, and graduating from that university with perfect GPAs just last year.

Despite their nearly identical appearances, there were some differences between them. Rosalie was the straitlaced, rule-abiding of the two, being groomed to take over her father’s company upon his retirement. Rhys, on the other hand, cared more about living life to the fullest, which involved all kinds of dangerous adventures.

“If we’re lucky, he’ll be working out down in the basement. You haven’t lived until you’ve seen him shirtless,” whispered Elena, just loud enough for Belmont to overhear and roll his eyes.

“Talk about my brother when I’m out of the room. This is more important. Avoid my sister too. She’s like your mom. She can sniff out a lie from a mile away.”

I sat up, crossing my legs before his eyes could peek under my short skirt. “Am I allowed to talk to any of your family?”

“Rhys won’t be a problem. He’ll just bore you about his latest trip where he climbed a mountain or something. You can talk to my little brother too. Honestly, I doubt you’ll have to worry about my dad or Rosalie. Bet they’re working on some business proposal right now. The company matters more than me, at least to them. Let’s move onto the other people you should avoid at all costs because you are a terrible liar, starting with Chief Parker and his wife.”

Belmont pointed the marker at two pictures on the other side of the whiteboard. Parker was a perfect mix of his parents, inheriting his father’s chiseled chin and caramel colored skin and his mother’s round, chestnut brown eyes. Despite his father’s genial smile in the picture, Belmont cautioned that it was all a façade and Chief Parker could be a very frightening man. His wife, Alexandra, was very much the same, being overly protective of her son. If she heard someone say one bad word against Parker or her husband, she would retaliate with the viciousness of a lioness protecting her cubs. Her petite stature only made her sudden change from a doting housewife that more chilling. Belmont spent another twenty minutes giving her details on members of the police force, most of them barely able to tell their left from their right, and other prominent members of the community.
“She’s going to your house, not infiltrating the White House.”

“Sorry if I want her to be prepared, Ellie. If we’re going to find out what my ex-best friend knows about my death, we have to make sure she knows who to avoid. His mother is going to be attached to his hip pretty much the entire time and if she can’t talk to him, maybe she can get something out of the cops or—”

He stumbled backwards, bumping into the whiteboard. Getting up from the bed, I grabbed his arm, preventing him from falling to the floor, and felt a tingling sensation traveling up my own arm. Brief images flashed before my eyes, too fast for me to see clearly.

“W—what the hell was that? Do ghosts get dizzy if we don’t eat or something?” he asked, snatching the peanut butter sandwich from Elena.

“You’re starting to remember that night. It starts to happen when you’ve been a ghost for a while. The same thing happened to Elena, about a week after her accident. This is good. It could help us figure out who attacked you on the bridge. I saw what you did when I touched your arm. Did you get a better look?”

Belmont shoved the entire sandwich into his mouth, muttering “Not much” between bites. From my experiences with Elena, I knew that the images were not much more than blurs the first few times. She never had a clear memory of the accident that took her life until almost six months later and the memories surfaced at random moments. He only remembered a blurred tattoo on a wrist and red and green fingers clutching his throat. Elena joked that his murderer enjoyed fingerpainting. Picking up the whiteboard from the floor, she reminded me that, according to my mother, the memory flashes were not always just from the moments before a person’s death, but also from their last day alive.

For once, I decided to take a more optimistic approach, hoping that the tattoo and colorful fingers belonged to his murderer. Later that night, Will picked me up for the memorial, still showing signs of discomfort at my new clothes. He awkwardly complimented me on my long-sleeved, black dress with lace sleeves and matching heels.

“Will, I know you have a hard time with change but I haven’t really changed that much. I mean, even if I wasn’t wearing this, I wouldn’t go to Belmont’s memorial in a hoodie and jeans.”

“I’ll get used to it. I just—well, maybe if you told me why you decided to take Parker’s offer…”

“It’s better if you don’t know.”

“That doesn’t help and I want to believe that you’re not becoming one of his fangirls but you’ve never punched Hilton before.”

“Punching her isn’t related to hanging out with Parker. She had it coming for a long time.”

“I heard some of the guys talking about it in the locker room during gym. She said something about…person who shall remain nameless?”

I nodded, feeling a giant lump in my throat. “It’s a touchy subject. I did tell her to shut up so really, it’s her fault,” I said, fiddling with the strap on my right heel.

Will gripped my hand lightly, giving me a small sense of comfort. Just thinking about the incident in the stoner pit with Hilton dampened my mood but I was snapped out of my melancholy when we
arrived at a golden gate with the letters B and H plastered into the metal. *Belmont Hills* was the gated community that housed the richest families in the town and growing up; the children not privileged enough to live inside such a pristine neighborhood made it a game to sneak past the gates. In my childhood, only half a dozen ever won the game though they were swiftly caught by the security guards before making it past the rose gardens, the most troublesome being sent to juvenile centers the very next day. The guard at the gate, an elderly man who looked like he had one foot already in the grave, was quite stern, asking for a form of ID to match their names to a list given to him by Rosalie.

“Nelson…your father’s a cop, ain’t he?” he asked, speaking with a thick Cajun accent.

“H—he was but uh not anymore. He passed away a few years ago.”

It was my turn to comfort Will, holding his hand as he teared up from just speaking about his father. The guard nodded glumly, apologizing for his poor memory, and praised Will’s father as a good man.

“Never caused any trouble, that man. Always good to everybody, no matter what. The chief lost a great podna that night.” He handed back my license. “Byrne…your mama teaches my grandson how to draw. You as good as her?”

“I’m getting there.”

“Daddy’s still digging, huh? When he gets back, tell him ol’ Carl wants to keep having that talk about those mummies, cher.”

I fumbled with putting my license in my purse. My father was the last person I expected to ever visit *Belmont Hills*. He was never fond of the Belmonts, finding them arrogant for putting their family name on every last building and essentially controlling the town. When I questioned if Carl possibly met my father at a local bar, he shook his head, explaining that my father visited the gated community often, usually after arriving home from a dig site.

“I wonder why your dad comes here. It sounds like he’s good friends with that guard,” said Will, driving down the street.

“I have no idea. He definitely wasn’t meeting the Belmonts. He hates them more than he hates oranges.”

“Well, a lot of families live here. Maybe he was doing business with one of them.”

*Belmont Hills* was exactly as I pictured in my mind: several lavish mansions with the same model of cars, down to the year, parked in the vast driveways. The only house that stood out was the Belmont mansion at the end of the street, perched on top of the highest hill behind another golden gate. After handing their licenses to a guard who was far less friendly, only responding in grunts, they drove up the winding road. Will commented that its Victorian style, different from the modern design of the other mansions, reminded him of a house from a horror movie we once watched in his bedroom. Several cars were parked in the driveway and most of our fellow high school students stood outside, either waiting for their parents or too anxious to enter the enormous mansion. The moment we stepped into the mansion, Elena and Belmont walking behind me, I spotted a poster-sized photo of him perched on an easel.

“Names?”
Rosalie was standing beside the door, holding a tablet. Her expression was that of someone being forced to attend a business meeting, not a girl who just lost her younger brother.

“We already gave our names twice,” I said, bewildered by her almost robotic behavior.

“It’s called being cautious. Names?”

“Tessa Byrne and Will Nelson. We uh went to school with your brother.”

She never lifted her eyes from her tablet as she tapped it twice with her finger. “I only asked for your names, not to start a conversation. Food and drink are in the room to your left and we’ll begin the service within the hour. Bathrooms are on every floor. Don’t touch anything or you’ll be promptly taken from the premises. Move along,” she explained, already asking the names of the middle-aged couple walking through the door.

“Told you,” muttered Belmont.

In each room, video screens along the walls were playing a slideshow of pictures and home movies, from when he was a newborn to this year. Most of the guests were in the ballroom where caterers were offering foods like shrimp puffs and tiny blocks of cheese on toothpicks. I was about to decline a glass of champagne until Parker entered the room with his parents. If I was going to have to endure another hour of his accomplishments in little league, the champagne was necessary to keep myself from falling asleep. Parker looked unusually grumpy, his hands stuffed in his pockets. His mother was whispering in his ear, smiling at passing guests every so often.

“See? I was right, Tessa. They have cucumber sandwiches,” said Will, picking up a small tray.

Amy joined us by the table, giggling at his amusement over the sandwiches. “Have you never seen those before? You’re so weird sometimes, Nelson. Tessa, you look so adorbs.”

“Oh uh thanks. Did you just get here?”

“Yeah, my parents are talking to Claire’s. You missed a little drama. Parker wasn’t going to be allowed into the memorial.”

“That’s weird. Why wouldn’t he be allowed? They were best friends.”

“Well, you can never tell with Rosalie because she always has the same expression on her face but for a second, I swear she looked angry with him. Mrs. Parker almost smacked Rosalie in the face when she told him to leave. There’s always been a little tension between their families. I think they’re just mad that with Fin gone, Parker is now head of our clique. It’s like a shift in power or whatever, you know? Oh, you have to come with me. Mr. Hilton wanted to talk to you.”

“T—to me? Why?” I asked, thinking that it was a trap.

Taking me by the arm, she pulled me through the crowd. I imagined that Hilton’s father was very much like his wife, very shallow and dimwitted, yet fiercely protective of his daughter. The possibility that Hilton convinced him to smack me around as revenge ran through my mind and I looked for all possible exits out of the room. The Hiltons were speaking with another couple, likely Amy’s parents, and Principal Hilton quietly scolded her daughter for already drinking two glasses of champagne in the span of five minutes. Hilton ignored her, too busy glaring daggers in my direction.
Mr. Hilton, a handsome, very tanned man in a dark blue suit, smiled as Amy, fighting against my attempts to return to Will, ambled towards them. It did not go unnoticed by me that he was considerably older than his wife, by at least fifteen years.

“Amy, here you are. Your father was just telling us about you applying early to UPenn. A very good school. Ah, I see you brought Tessa with you. Wonderful,” he said, sounding like a stereotypical rich person from a cartoon.

There was a momentary silence as he extended his hand. Ever since the day that I ‘disfigured’ her daughter’s face, Principal Hilton had been very frigid towards me. She never used to acknowledge me in the halls in the past but now, whenever she passed me, she made a point of saying my name in an icy tone, sounding scarily like her daughter. She scrunched her nose when I shook his hand, slightly letting down my guard.

“Truly wonderful to meet you in person, Tessa. The last time I saw you, it was at the fourth grade art exhibit on parents’ night. You’ve got talent like your mother. Cecile and I love seeing her works at the gallery.”

“Yes, you’re Kala’s daughter, aren’t you? I can see the resemblance. I almost didn’t recognize you. You’re usually dressed…differently,” said Mr. Lopez, taking a glass of champagne from a passing caterer.

His flippant remark caused his wife to nudge his side and reprimand him in Spanish. I tucked a stray strand of hair behind my ear.

“I get that a lot…the thing about my mom.”

“I’m sure you girls have all sorts of things to talk about but I was hoping for a moment alone with you, Tessa. Would that be alright?”

Alarm bells rang inside my head at Mr. Hilton’s question. I was now more sure than ever that his friendliness was all an act to get me alone and have some hired hitman bash in my brains. With all eyes on me, I had no choice but to accept his offer. As I followed him outside, I thought of all the action movies I had watched with my father late at night, while my mother thought I was fast asleep, and how the main character, guy or girl kicking ass in their leather jacket and combat boots, fought their enemies. I doubted that I could learn how to break a man’s arm in a matter of seconds but with him pushing sixty, it would be easy to simply knock him to the ground and run all the way back to my house. A disturbing thought crept into the back of my mind: he could be hiding expert fighting skills and a ripped physique behind that grey hair and dark blue suit. He stopped in the middle of the rose garden and sat on a stone bench, patting the spot beside him. I sat down on the bench, gripping my purse strap firmly.

“Have you thought about it?”

I just realized that he had been speaking to me during our walk towards the garden. “Sorry?”

“What you’ll be doing after high school. Cecile’s been very busy lately, keeping track of where every senior has been applying or even going to college at all.”

“Oh. Yea, I uh—well, I definitely want to go to college. I’ll probably go somewhere local since it’s cheaper. I’m hoping for a
scholarship but I’m pretty sure everyone does, unless they’re really rich.”

“I’ll admit that my daughter doesn’t care much about her future beyond what outfit she wears the next day but you, I can see that you’re a very driven young woman, Tessa. Cecile’s always spoken very highly of you…your grades and your community service at the park and the recreation center with your mother. I suppose you want to be an artist like her. I saw that you applied to the Academy of Fine Arts in New York. It’s a fantastic school.”

“Yea, it’s…my mother always wanted to go there but even if I somehow get in, tuition is a lot of money. I just applied to see if I could get in, really.”

“When you do and I know that you will, I would be happy to give you the money.” He smiled at the incredulous look on my face. “I have a vested interest in the arts and its young talent. My mother was an artist herself. I loved to watch her paint for hours. She had a true gift that I unfortunately never inherited. Don’t think of it as charity, Tessa. I do the same for your mother and her friends each year. Charles has wanted to demolish that gallery for ages but I keep it afloat with my donations. I’m afraid he doesn’t have the same appreciation for the arts. I do have one condition for the loan. When you become a famous artist, I get credit for the discovery.”

“Wow and I thought you were going to bash my head in with a brick for punching your daughter. Forget I said that. You really don’t have to—I mean, I appreciate it. Going there is like a dream…come…true…”

The bright red roses in the hedges behind him darkened in color, turning black as coal. As Mr. Hilton offered me his business card to call him at his office to discuss the potential loan, I was distracted by a soft rustling in the hedges. I jumped up from the bench when a pair of milky white eyes stared back at me.

“Tessa? Is something the matter?”

“I uh—I think I had a bad shrimp puff. I should probably—I’m sorry, Mr. Hilton. I really want to keep talking but—”

“If you’re feeling ill, there’s a bathroom on the first floor, just past the ballroom.”

“T—thank you,” I said, struggling to stay calm when drops of blood fell to the ground like a thick string of drool.

I hurried out of the garden, clutching my stomach as if I had a bad stomachache. Hearing a series of growls, I quickened my pace, ignoring the pain in my ankles from the high heels. The growls seemed to be getting louder but as each time I turned my head, all I saw was the slowly shrinking garden in the distance. The tiniest shriek escaped my lips when something slammed into my back, like being hit by a truck, and the powerful force sent me crashing face first into the ground. A hand, slimy and smelling of rotting flesh, pressed against the back of my head, followed by a heavy weight on my back. Whatever had me pinned let out a disembodied growl and drops of blood dripped onto my shoulder. No matter how much I twisted my body, nothing budged and the hand tightened its grip on my head, its sharp nails digging into my neck. My sobs were muffled by the dirt.

“Tessa!”

The weight was suddenly lifted from my back and a pair of hands lifted me up from the ground. Elena had her arms around me, holding me in a tight embrace. Belmont was standing beside her, a
fallen tree branch in his hands. Across from the three of us stood the same creature that attacked Katie on the night of the party, now sporting a gash across its cheek.

“What is that thing, Byrne? How do we get rid of it?”

My head was buried in Elena’s shoulder. “I—I don’t know.”

“Great. Well, maybe its weakness is tree branches. You want some more, you ugly—”

A black blur jumped down from a nearby tree, striking his head. He fell forward and in his place was another creature, this one more slender. The two creatures stared at one another, growling at different pitches and lengths. Elena wondered if they were speaking their own language and my fright-induced panic made me think that I understood a few words. I imagined that the slender creature said something similar to our orders. Belmont swung the tree branch at the creature’s legs, causing it to stumble, and grabbed both my hand and Elena’s before sprinting towards his house. The creatures were not far behind, moving with the speed of a cheetah. As I hurried through the back door that led into the kitchen, I bumped into someone, my eyes meeting Parker’s. The creatures were repelled from the doorway and hissed at me before vanishing into the ground.

“Tessa, why were you—what happened to your arm? You’re bleeding.”

There was so much I wanted to say but all that came out was silence. Elena refused to let me go, her arms fastened around my waist. Belmont looked like he was about to hug both of us until he stopped himself, instead choosing to give me a curt nod.

“Was it one of their dogs? Bradley must’ve forgotten to keep the door locked again. They think those dogs are so harmless but trust me, you’re not the first to get attacked. Let me help you.”

Trying to lift me was tough when Elena was latched onto me and he joked that I weighed a little more than a feather. I managed a weak smile as he carried me to the bathroom on the first floor, sneaking past the guests in the ballroom. He sat me down on the counter and opened the medicine cabinet.

“You’re in a better mood. I uh heard what happened with Rosalie.”

I winced when he pushed up my sleeve to get a better look at the scrape. “I’m over it. Rosalie’s a… well, if I say what I really think, you might smack me. She’s never liked me. She always accused me of wanting to get out of Fin’s shadow. It’s ironic, right? Her family’s always been on top in this town. You don’t think I’ve heard what kids say about me at school. How I don’t care that he’s gone?”

“To be honest, it doesn’t seem like you do.”

He dabbed a wet towel on the scrape, wiping away the blood. “Of course I care. He was my best friend since diapers. I guess I’m the type that grieves for a little then moves on. Everyone wants me to be holed up in my room, crying my eyes out, but that’s not me. Why should I act like someone else just for them?”

“Can I ask you something about that night? I uh saw you two at the party…you were fighting. I couldn’t hear most of what you were saying because I didn’t want you to see me but you told him that he wouldn’t rule the school forever,” I lied, not wanting Amy to get in trouble.
“We were fighting about Dr. Baxter. The creep snuck into the party and I caught him and Claire making out in the back of his car. She thought it was such a scandalous little secret but Fin knew all about it. He always knew our secrets, no matter how well we hid them.”

I stared at Parker in disbelief as he confessed that Hilton and Dr. Baxter began seeing each other towards the end of junior year. Belmont had not learned the truth until mid-July, having caught them at the Falls one night, but instead of exposing the illicit affair, he kept it to himself for future blackmail. Hilton wanted to wait until she turned eighteen before revealing the relationship to her parents, hoping that the reaction would be less harsh if her parents believed the relationship began between two consenting adults. For once in his life, Belmont was completely silent, avoiding Elena’s disgusted glare.

“It was his party so I told him that he needed to kick Baxter out before some idiot sophomore saw them together and blabbed to someone at school. I didn’t want Claire to get in trouble. He said it was just a fun hookup and Baxter would probably move onto someone else by the end of the night…that you were probably the next girl on his list since he was staring at you all night.”

“H—how long was Baxter at the party?”

“From the beginning, I guess. I think Claire hid him when everyone else showed up…wanted him to wait until we were at least a little drunk so we might not recognize him. After I went looking for the idiot that threw a bottle at me, I saw him leaning against a tree. He was looking right at you but not even just looking. I mean, he was—it was intense. He was talking on his phone to someone. I heard him mention you a few times. Probably one of his buddies…to tell them that he found another underage girl to hook up with that night.”

“Did he stay for the whole party?”

“I don’t remember that whole night but I know he left with Claire after she caught him staring at you when you were leaving with Nelson and his stepsister. Last I saw him, she was offering to wear her ‘sexy outfit’ for him back at her place. Anyway, like I said, we were fighting about Baxter being there. It was just two drunken idiots yelling at each other. When I said that thing about him not ruling the school, I meant that everyone was getting fed up with him using our secrets against us.”

Listening to Parker talk about his version of the fight, it made me question my suspicions. My gut was telling me that even if the fight was over Hilton’s immature decision to have a relationship with her teacher, it did not mean he was innocent. The fight was only one part of that night, taking place long before Belmont was attacked on the bridge. Whether it was Parker’s jealousy, too much alcohol, or a combination of the two, there was still a chance of him being the murderer. He basically admitted his possible motive when he told me about Belmont knowing all of his friend’s secrets, leading me to believe that Parker had secrets of his own that he wanted to stay buried.

Before I could question him further about his memories of the party, Rosalie was calling all of the guests into the drawing room. I followed Parker out of the bathroom, thinking of ways to get him alone at his party. He stopped halfway down the hallway, poking his head into one of the rooms. Rhys and Bradley were sitting on the floor, surrounded by pieces of wood and tools. Unopened cardboard boxes and toys were scattered around the room. Bradley waved at the two of us, introducing the room as the baby’s playroom. Rhys decided to let Bradley help him build a crib instead of spending all day in his room. It was obvious that Rhys was using the playroom as a way to keep his youngest brother’s mind off of the recent death in the family. My smile soon fell when I finally noticed the color of the walls in the playroom: red and green.
“Two colors for one room? Bold choice.”

Rhys lifted a laughing Bradley onto his shoulders. “Bradley thought it would look cool. He said the baby can decide which color they like when they’re born.”

“It must’ve taken the painters a long time. This room is huge.”

“No, it didn’t take us that long. Oh, I know that look. Don’t think us fancy rich people can paint a room? Well, I’ll admit that it took a lot of prodding from me but I thought it would be fun for all of us. Say what you want about my dad and Fin not getting along but they were both stubborn as hell. They took the longest to convince. Fin was supposed to help us out but he decided his little party was more important. Bet he would’ve chosen differently if he knew what was going to happen, huh? Let’s go, champ. We better get down there before Rosie chews off our heads. Rocket ship time.”

Making engine sounds, he sped out of the room. Parker shook his head, teasing that Rhys never aged past five. He continued towards the drawing room while I stayed behind, the red and green walls that taunting me like giant warning signs.

“Don’t say it, Byrne.”

“The red and green fingers…it could’ve been from paint.”

“Elena said that those memories might be from earlier that day.”

“Do you and your family like to strangle each other for fun? Your brother just said that they were painting that same day and you were supposed to help them.”

“I remember seeing them paint before I left for the party. Thinking that my best friend might have killed me is bad enough. Don’t say—I’m done with this.”

Belmont stormed out of the room. I chased after him, expecting to find him outside possibly destroying a couple rose bushes, but he was standing in the doorway to the drawing room, listening to his family members speak about him. Bradley was sitting on Amy’s lap, drying his eyes with the back of his hand. Each of their speeches were different, reflecting their personalities. Rhys spoke about a mountain climbing trip he once took with his brother and how they planned to travel through Europe the summer after graduation. Both Rosalie and Mr. Belmont showed little emotion, speaking about Belmont as if he was a coworker and not family. Mr. Belmont’s speech was terse and I was uncertain if he truly felt nothing for his son or was just bottling up his emotions for fear of looking weak.

His mother, sporting a tiny baby bump under her dress, was hardly holding herself together, dabbing at her eyes with her handkerchief. When she spoke after her husband, the entire room was able to hear the pain and loss in her voice. She constantly stuttered and stopped every few seconds to catch her breath, torn up inside over the loss of one of her children.

“H—he was my special little boy. I loved him more than anything in this world and—I wish I had kept him from leaving that night. If I put my foot down for once, maybe he’d still…st—still be here instead of—I’m very sorry. Ex—excuse me.”

No longer able to contain her sobs, she left the drawing room, Rhys close behind her. Belmont’s eyes were shut tightly, an attempt to hold back his own tears. Remembering how he responded last time, I was reluctant to give him a hug but this time, he did not push me away though his hands still
remained at his sides. I stepped away from him when I caught Bradley looking at me oddly and pretended to fix the sleeves of my dress.

“I can’t imagine how hard this is for you. I’m sorry,” I whispered.

“I never thought I would live forever or something delusional like that but when I died, I didn’t think my mom would still be around. Seeing her like that…I don’t like it. I have to find out what happened that night but not for me…for her. I can’t let her think that I died because of some stupid accident.”

“We’re going to find the truth, I promise.”

“I want to talk to her…to my mom. I know she can’t see or hear me so can you do it?”

“Sure.”

Mrs. Belmont had retreated to her own room. She was standing beside the windowsill, staring at a vase of flowers on the windowsill while clutching her handkerchief. The flowers had six wide, white petals with brown streaks down the middle.

“Those flowers are pretty. Are they lilies?”

She was startled by the sound of my voice. “S—sorry, I just…I wanted to check on you, Mrs. Belmont. I could see how upset you were when you were talking about your son.”

“It’s quite alright, dear. No, they’re not lilies but very close. Asphodel. My mother used to grow this in her garden when I was a little girl and I’ve always liked them. There’s something almost…mesmerizing about them, don’t you agree?”

As I looked at the unique flowers, I began to forget why I was searching for her. “Yeah, they’re really…” Belmont pinched my arm. “They are really nice. My name’s Tessa, by the way. We’ve never met before.”

“Oh, the daughter of Belmont Falls’ prized artist. That’s what Declan calls your mother. I’ve seen her work. She is very talented and I hear you’ve got some of that talent as well. You went to school with my Finley?”

Thankfully, she was unable to hear Elena’s uncontrollable laughter and Belmont shouting, “Shut the hell up! It’s not that funny!”. Suppressing a smile, I nodded.

“Yea, I uh knew him. We weren’t best friends or anything but we’ve been in classes together since second grade. My mother always says that—” I was distracted by Elena chanting “Finley, Finley, Finley” in a taunting manner to a red-faced Belmont.

“That the dead never really leave us. If we listen really hard, we can hear what they’re saying to us.”

“I’d give anything to hear my little boy speak to me again. What do you think he’s saying to me right now?”

I recited exactly what he told me as we walked up the staircase, subtly stepping on Elena’s foot to stop her chanting before she became the first account of death after becoming a ghost, thanks to Belmont bludgeoning her to death with one of his mother’s heels. I told Mrs. Belmont how he did not want her to blame herself for his death and that he was always thinking of her. Just those few
words seemed to cheer her up immensely.

“How do you know that’s what he’s saying? Can you actually hear him?”

“W—well, no. I just um…knowing how much he cared about you, I think that’s what he’d say.”

“I’d like to believe that too.”

My entire body tensed up when I heard a scraping, like nails on a chalkboard, outside her window. One of the creatures was climbing up the side of the house. I was relieved that for some reason, the creatures were unable to enter the house though I could not tell that to the pee about to trickle down my leg. Making direct eye contact, the creature dragged a sharp nail across the window, writing Tessa in the glass. Belmont rushed to shield his mother when the creature slammed its fist, shattering the glass into a million pieces. I bent down beside her, checking if she had been injured.

“M—Mrs. Belmont, are you okay?”

“Yes. That must’ve been a very large bird. I should go find my son. He’ll be able to repair the window. Thank you very much, Tessa. I hope we can talk again.”

“Anytime you want.”

“Excellent. I look forward to our next chat,” she said, leaving the room in search of her son.

“Can ghosts pee themselves? If you’re not sure, I’m pretty sure I’m proof that they can,” gasped Elena, clutching her chest.

“We’re getting out of here now. Screw Parker’s party. It’s not worth getting attacked by those shadow things…or worse.”

Belmont was unconcerned about the shadow creatures, wanting to spend more time with his mother. I dragged him down the stairs by his shirt collar, reminding him that the creatures were somehow able to harm him and if he did not want to end up in a ghost hospital, a term I said with enough confidence to sound convincing, he needed to leave his house. I was halfway out the door when someone shouted my name.

Will grasped my wrist. ‘I’ve been looking everywhere for you. I wasn’t sure if you were with Parker. Everyone’s already heading over there for his party. I know I said I wouldn’t mind going but —’

“No, we don’t have to go. Let’s go home. I want to leave right now. Take all the cucumber sandwiches you can fit in your pocket and let’s leave.”

“O—okay. I don’t need the sandwiches but leaving is good. Yay for leaving.”

A young man with swept-back golden blonde hair was inspecting the inside of Will’s car. I remembered him from the night Belmont and I sneaked out to the Falls: the officer who had pulled his body from the water.

“Can I help you, Officer Garren?”
“Will, good to see you. Didn’t realize this was your car. We got a call at the station that a Lexus at the Belmont memorial was carrying some…illegal substances.”

Will pointed at his old sedan. “Does that look like a Lexus to you?”

“Never been a guy who knows his cars so I figured I’d check every car before one of those stuffed shirts freaks out on me. Standard protocol says I have to do a search of any people on the premises. Is that okay? I’d hate to do it but if Chief Parker catches me slacking, I’ll be demoted to doing paperwork until he retires.”

“Uh sure. I don’t want you to get in trouble.”

“I’ll have to check your friend too.”

Officer Garren performed a quick search, halfheartedly checking Will’s sleeves and pockets for any illegal substances, before doing the same to me. He brushed back my hair, observing the cut on my neck.

“Ooh, nasty cut.”

“I uh tripped.”

“Hate when that happens. Don’t get in that car,” he whispered, checking under my left sleeve.

“Wh—”

“Looks good to me. I knew you two weren’t any trouble but if I went straight to the chief’s son, I might get my badge taken away. You two get home safe.”

Will opened the door on the passenger side but I was too preoccupied with Officer Garren’s words. I brushed it off as my mind playing tricks on me though I could not shake knot twisting in the pit of my stomach as Will drove back to our neighborhood. I nodded my head, only half listening to his story about Amy flirting with him after a few too many glasses of champagne.

“I know it didn’t mean anything but I felt bad when she started flirting with Dr. Baxter. Not that he minded…you know him. He loves the attention. Tessa.”

“Yeah, such a creep.”

“Tessa.”

“I heard you, Will. Can we not talk about him?”

“Tessa. Itty bitty baby Tessa. Stupid, naïve Tessa. Thinks her little friends can help her. Stupid Ellie and Fin…just as stupid as her.”

Elena and Belmont were sitting in the backseat, gaping at the rear-view mirror. “What did you s—”

Will’s eyes were no longer dark brown, but milky white. He stamped on the gas pedal, speeding the car down the street.

“Master, oh master. Damn all men, oh never-ending.”
“Will, you have to listen to me! Stop the car!”

“Stop the car!” he repeated, mockingly.

“Get out of him or I swear I’ll—”

His hand wrapped around my throat. “Itty bitty Tessa can do nothing. Master says be a good girl or a little bird will fall to the ground. No one to save all from evil. Tessa, here I stand. I see Tessa, her eyes…eyes now doomed.”

He threw his head back with a loud gasp and his eyes returned to normal. “Will, look out!”

I gripped the wheel, helplessly steering the wheel in the opposite direction as the car sped towards a street lamp.

Chapter End Notes

Any feedback is appreciated :(
“Why is that thing in her arm?”

A soft, continuous beeping rang in my ears. “It’s helping her while she’s asleep, scamp.”

“I want her to wake up. I don’t like this place.”

“Well when she does wake up, I bet she’ll love seeing all the nice pictures you drew for her at school.”

With some effort, as if I was trying to move a truck instead of the simple movement of opening my eyes, I managed to lift my heavy eyelids. I immediately shut them again, blinded by the bright light shining above me. It took a few seconds for me to adjust to the light and before I could even begin to think of where I was, my first thought was that I felt like I had slept for decades yet I was extremely tired. As I raised my hand to touch my cheek, praying that there were no wrinkles, I noticed the IV inserted in my arm, connected to a plastic bag hanging beside the bed. My eyes darted around the room, taking in every inch of my surroundings as I winced from the soreness in my neck.

The room was all white, from the walls to the window curtains, and smelled heavily of antibacterial cleaner and soap. Directly across from the bed was a chart with hardly legible writing in black marker.

_Belmont Medical Center_

_Friday, November 27th_

_Patient: Tessa Kali Byrne_

_Nurse: Brooke_

A flat screen television, showing the latest episode of one of Ryan’s favorite cartoons, was perched above the chart, next to a clock that was ticking unreasonably loud. To my left was a bedside table with a tray of brown rice, steamed vegetables, chicken noodle soup, and a partially opened carton of chocolate milk with a bendy straw. Over a dozen get well cards, fashion magazines, a stack of old sci-fi movies and comic books, wrapped gift boxes, and a vase of white roses surrounded the tray.

To my right, behind the heart monitor and other machines, Elena, Belmont, and Parker were all asleep in the dark blue hospital chairs against the wall. There were visible tear stains on both of her cheeks.

A tall, broad-shouldered man was bent down in front of a teary-eyed Ryan. His weather beaten, tanned skin and the rough calluses on his hands showed that he spent most of his time outdoors. The freckles sprinkled across his nose and his unkempt jet black hair gave him an almost boyish appearance despite the lines in his face. The sleeves of his button down shirt, hiding his bulging biceps, were rolled up to his elbows and if he was wearing a fedora, he could be cast in the next Indiana Jones movie.

“Dad?”

Though my voice was barely above a whisper, it made every head snap in my direction. Ryan launched himself onto the bed with the speed of a rocket, wrapping his tiny arms around my neck. Elena, Belmont, and Parker simultaneously jumped up from their chairs, sporting the same surprised
expression. Not wanting to scare my brother, I held back a wince when he gave my neck a tight squeeze. My father detected the pain the flashed across my face and gently pulled Ryan back, reminding him that he needed to be careful. Elena did not heed his warning, squeezing me with the grip of a python and muttering incoherently into the crook of my neck.

“You gave us quite the scare, little bird. Are you hungry? Thirsty? Do you need more pillows?”

The tip of my tongue brushed against my dry, chapped lips. “What happened?”

“You and Nelson got in a car accident after you left the memorial. One of the officers passed by the scene and called it into the station. The doctor said you uh had some swelling in your brain so they put you in a medically induced coma. Same for him. They weren’t sure when you’d wake up,” said Parker, looking uncomfortable with the sight of me in a hospital bed.

My father sat on the edge of the bed with Ryan, who was wiping tears from his eyes. “Your mother called me as soon as you were taken to the hospital and I took the first flight back here. This room was the place to be. Your friends dropped off cards and presents. I’m sure they’ll be relieved to hear that you’re awake.”

As my father went on and on about spending night and day in this room for the past two weeks and how my mother and Ryan were nervous wrecks the entire time, I realized that I had no recollection of the car accident. The last thing I remembered was speaking with Mrs. Belmont at the memorial. He explained that temporary amnesia was a typical side effect but slowly, I would regain my memories. I knew that Elena and Belmont were likely in the car with me at the time and they would answer all my questions, once Parker was not around.

After encouraging me to eat, my father left the room to find my mother and the doctor. I moved the tray closer to me and struggled to pick up the carton of chocolate milk, fighting against stiffness in my arm. Ryan helped me by picking up the carton himself, sheepishly admitting that he had a small sip earlier in the morning.

“Are you okay?” I asked Parker, noticing his eyes had not left the heart monitor.

“I uh…I don’t like hospitals that much. When I was five, my parents took me to visit my grandmother who was in one because of her cancer and—well, they’re not a fun place. Seeing you at first with all the cuts was a little freaky.”

“How bad did I look?”

“Just a gash on the side of your head, a few scratches on your cheek from the glass, and bruises on your legs and arms. You had three cracked ribs too but by now, they’re probably almost healed. That’s the most I understood whenever the doctor came in here to talk to your parents.”

“What about Will? Is he okay? I should go see him.”

“You just woke up. It can wait. He’s fine. I mean, he hasn’t woken up yet and his injuries were a little worse since he was driving but the doctor assured his parents that he’d recover. Don’t move from that bed.”

The door swung open but instead of my parents and the doctor, Chief Parker and a familiar blonde-haired officer stepped into the room. I could not shake the feeling that I met the other officer before and that same feeling was telling me that he was somehow related to the accident. When Parker
introduced him as Officer Garren, I briefly recalled seeing him at the memorial and his hands running along my back.

“Dad, what are you doing here?”

“I could ask you the same since you skipped school again after your mother warned you not to miss another football practice or you could lose your scholarship.” His dark eyes rested on me and his stern face broke out into a genial smile that made me somewhat uncomfortable. “So you’re the infamous Tessa. Well, if you’re the reason my boy’s been missing so much school, I can’t blame him, can I?”

“Dad, stop,” muttered Parker, embarrassed.

“Just a joke, kiddo. Relax. We were looking into another case when I overheard someone say that she was awake. Thought I could ask you about the accident, Tessa. We’re still not sure what caused it. All we know is that Will Nelson was driving and somehow he managed to crash into a street lamp.”

“I uh don’t really remember much. Maybe you can ask again in a week or two.”

“Was he drinking before he got in the car?”

I giggled, causing a slight twinge of pain in my side. “Will? He doesn’t drink and he doesn’t do drugs either, before you ask that question…unless you can somehow get high from cucumber sandwiches. Maybe there was something in the road. I’m sorry I can’t be more help, sir.”

My mother was less cordial towards the two officers upon seeing them in my room. She chastised Chief Parker for interrogating a minor without her parents, especially one who had only woken a few minutes ago from a two week long coma.

Angering my mother was like poking a sleeping bear. While most people tried to intimidate by shouting, it was far more unsettling when she threatened someone in her usual, sweet voice. The calm in her voice made it seem like she grew almost twice her size and could shatter the person on the receiving end of her rage into pieces with a slap across the face. All it took was her putting her hands on her hips for Chief Parker to apologize to me before leaving the room with Officer Garren, who had not taken his eyes off of me once.

For another week, I could not shift from one side of the bed to the other without throwing my parents, Parker, and Elena into a panic. My parents had not been this concerned since an incident when I was seven years old, commonly referred to as that incident, and refused to leave my bedside, even offering to feed me when my muscles showed signs of stiffness or I complained about a headache. The doctor was not much better, refusing to tell me about Will’s condition and speaking to me like a small child.

As part of the hospital procedure, I needed to go through therapy, both physical and emotional, to deal with the accident. The only real pain was in my ribs, which was instantly dulled by my pain medication. Past experiences made me anxious around therapists, leading to an hour of silence where I pulled at a string on the seat of the couch while the therapist, an admittedly kind woman, tried to get me to talk about my feelings.

I was changing out of my hospital gown, finally able to return home. Though the doctor gave me permission to go to school, my parents wanted me to have a couple days of rest. My mother had been collecting my assignments over the past three weeks from my teachers, having to dodge advances
from Dr. Baxter, and it was more than enough to keep me occupied at the house. She kept my mind off of the accident and a comatose Will with a flyer from the upcoming exhibition at the gallery. Every year, I submitted a piece for the exhibition and the time off from school would allow me to get my creative juices flowing for my newest work.

For the first time in days, I was alone with Elena and Belmont. I changed behind the curtain to stop him from getting a free peepshow.

“My dad’s filling out the paperwork and my mom just left to take Ryan to school. Now’s the time to talk. What happened?”

Elena and Belmont shared an uneasy glance. “Well, you remember why we left the memorial, right? Definitely a makeup kit,” said Elena, shaking one of my presents.

“Would you stop using your superpower of knowing what’s in a box? This is serious. Yes, I remember leaving the memorial and something with that blonde officer.”

“Garren, yep. He was there because someone tipped him off that one of the cars had drugs or something and he searched you and Will. After that, Will was driving and—one of those shadow monsters possessed him. It was saying really weird things that made no sense and then once it left his body, it was too late for you guys to avoid the street lamp.”

Belmont mentioned that Garren arrived at the scene less than a minute after the accident. Something odd they both noticed was that Garren did not immediately call the accident into the station and he looked more guilty than shocked. It was as though he knew about the accident before it happened and, even stranger, he had peeked inside my mouth and Will’s once he safely pulled us out of the wrecked car.

“Why would he be looking in my mouth?”

“Maybe he’s got a mouth fetish,” replied Belmont, eating a box of chocolates that my mother had bought me the previous day.

“Something’s off about him. He was staring at me when Parker’s dad was trying to ask questions.”

“He probably thought you were lying about not remembering the accident. You missed my funeral, by the way. You know, it looked like Rosalie was crying during my mom’s eulogy but she’s a robot so her oil was probably just leaking. Someone was nice and got me white roses just like those.”

“Tessa was almost killed. You think she cares about your stupid funeral? Can you ever think of anyone but yourself?” asked Elena, disgusted.

“Well, I was thinking we could visit my grave. Maybe seeing my dead body will bring up more memories of that night. It’s worth a shot, Byrne.”

Before I could ask more questions about the accident and Garren’s odd behavior, my father entered the room with an empty cardboard box. He placed the presents and get well cards into the box and commented on how a lot had happened in his absence. I blushed when he mentioned how I had suddenly become popular, judging by the many gifts, and my wardrobe change.

“Just wanted to try something new. Is that bad?”
“Of course not. People change all the time, whether they’re seventeen or seventy. You’re never stuck having to be a certain way. It’s part of life. We learn, we grow, and we change. I only hope that this change in you isn’t being forced by your new ghost friend.”

“My new fr—Mom told you about what happened to Fin Belmont?”

“She didn’t have to tell me a thing. One of my colleagues was friends with the older brother and he heard the news. Your mother told me that he decided to remain a ghost. I suppose he and Elena have been with us all this time. She also told me that you were looking into the cause of his death.”

“N—not anymore.”

“I hope not. That family is nothing but trouble and snooping around by yourself…well, it may end with you being the next funeral. I wouldn’t want that. Are you ready to go?”

“Yes, I just—could we see Will first?” I asked, picking up the vase of white roses.

No one, not even Belmont or Elena, knew who had brought the roses to my room. There was no card to indicate the sender but my mother assumed that it was Parker, as part of some romantic gesture. Ever since I woke from my coma, she had begun teasing me about our new friendship and how he spent every day in the hospital, only sleeping when he could no longer keep his eyes open.

On the way to Will’s room, he handed me his own present: a silver-chained necklace with a raven-shaped pendant. In place of its eyes were two vibrant green gemstones. The stones, according to my father, were malachite, rumored to ward off evil spirits. He had purchased the necklace from a market in Athens shortly before receiving the call about the accident.

In Will’s room, Katie, her father, and Will’s mother were sitting in chairs, each occupying themselves in different ways. Katie refused to look at Will, keeping her eyes, baggy from lack of sleep, on her phone as she played a game. Every so often, she let out a tiny sniffle. His stepfather was busying himself with work, reading over files from his accounting firm, while his mother, clutching a handful of tissues, moved her chair beside the bed, speaking to Will as if he could hear her voice. Seeing my father and me in the doorway, she dabbed at her eyes.

“Oh, I’m sorry, Devlin. You must think I’m—”

“A mother talking to her son? Nothing wrong with that, Esme. Tessa wanted to visit Will. I hope that’s alright.”

“Of course, of course. We were so glad to hear that you were okay, Tessa. You had us just as worried. You know that Will has always been a safe driver, don’t you?”

“Yeah, he’s driven me home lots of t—”

“He would never put anyone’s life in danger, especially not one of his closest friends. The very idea —”

His stepfather rubbed her back comfortingly as she sobbed into his chest, placing his paperwork on the windowsill. Handing Katie his wallet, he suggested that she take her stepmother to the café for some tea. Mrs. Nelson hesitated to leave Will alone but followed a concerned Katie out of the room, continuing to quietly sob into her tissues.
His stepfather wiped his glasses with a handkerchief. “Apologies. Chief Parker paid us a visit about half an hour ago. He wanted to ask questions about the accident. Third time this week. If he shows up again, I don’t think Esme will be able to take it. She’s barely holding herself together as it is… what I wouldn’t give to speak my mind to that man.”

“Third time in a week? What did he say that’s gotten her so upset, Connor?” asked my father.

“He knows that Will isn’t awake yet. The first time, we thought he only stopped by because Tessa had woken up and he wanted to see if Will had done the same. I told him that when Will was awake, I’d contact the station so they could get a better idea of what caused the accident. He stopped by without so much as a warning and both times, he asked if Will had been acting strange lately…any differences in his behavior. Apparently, he thinks Will was taking some sort of drug at the memorial and that’s what caused him to crash.”

“Will would never do such a thing.”

“Agreed but he claims to have a witness. I take care of Officer Barton’s taxes and from what he told me, Chace Parker is a witness to the chief’s suspicions. Chace claims that Will was outside with a few of his friends and they convinced him to get high. A witness statement from the chief’s son is peculiar enough but to say Will was…why would my son ever hang around with those children? They’ve been bullying him for years. I thought it might die down with the Belmont boy’s death but I suppose some people can’t change.”

My hands were shaking in anger as one thought occupied my mind: beat Chace Parker within an inch of his life. Just when I was beginning to believe that he could be a decent person, all that hope was tossed aside like garbage. I knew that he and Will were nowhere near friends but I did not understand why he would tell such an egregious lie to the police. What he would consider a silly prank could end up a mark on Will’s permanent record and with the terrible police work in this town, another possible scenario was being sent to prison, using the technicality that he was only a couple months from turning eighteen. Will was not the only one affected by this lie.

His stepfather admitted that Katie had become withdrawn ever since the accident and after a bit of snooping, he learned that she was being bullied online by other students and her own friends. These bullies, most of them from Parker’s clique, were sending her rude messages about Will and how she should hope that the accident removed him from her life permanently. No matter how much they argued with each other, she and Will were close, bonding over the loss of a parent. I wondered if Katie was using the game on her phone as a distraction from the nasty comments.

“I don’t know Chace that well but he seemed fine when he was with me and Kala.”

“Because of your daughter. I don’t mean any offense by that, Devlin, but who else could it be? Those two have always been awful…Chace and Fin. I’d say that he was causing this trouble as a way to deal with his grief but that would imply the boy actually has emotions. He’s as heartless as his father. I’m glad you stopped by…not just so Tessa could see Will. I was hoping for a little chat.”

While he spoke to my father in a hushed whisper, showing him a piece of paper from one of the folders, I walked over to Will’s bed.

“I promise that you’ll be okay, Will. I won’t let Parker or his stupid father drag your name through the mud. If I’m right about Parker, he’s the one that’ll be going to jail,” I whispered, my fingers brushing against the inside of his palm.
The beeping of the heart monitor quickened and I heard the tiniest breath escape his lips. The second I moved my hand, out of shock, the beeping returned to its steady pace. Elena and Belmont, having witnessed that brief moment, looked at me for an explanation. I simply shrugged, unsure of what had happened when I touched Will’s hand.

“Connor, I’d keep quiet about this. If it were any other family, I’d tell you to bring it to the police but this…they’d ruin you. How did you get your hands on it?”

“It was mixed in with my files. I must’ve taken my boss’s papers by mistake. He’s worked closely with the Belmonts for years. Don’t you find it odd? I called the office and this life insurance policy was drawn up just days before the boy’s death. The date here says it was months before but it looks like it was altered. The lettering doesn’t match in some places. Perhaps I’m being paranoid.”

“Who’s the beneficiary?”

“Doesn’t say. All I could find is that the money was to be transferred to an offshore account. My geography skills aren’t up to par but I believe it’s somewhere in Greece. No record of who set up the insurance.”

“I’ll talk to Charles myself. You don’t need your family getting involved in this mess. Just return the papers to your boss and act like you never read them.”

The drive home was unusually quiet with a side of tension that could be sliced with a knife. Belmont was pinching my arm from the backseat, to keep me from blurting out the millions of questions that were building up inside my head. Which Belmont had taken out life insurance just days before the incident at the Falls? Why was my father referring to Mr. Belmont by his first name when he despised his family? Why were Parker and his father attempting to smear Will’s name by blaming the accident on him? When my father asked what I wanted for lunch, I responded with a sound between a meow and a high-pitched squeak.

“What was that?” he asked, turning into the driveway.

“Why did you call him Charles? You always say how the Belmonts are the worst part of this town and have their heads so far up their asses. Is he the reason that you visit Belmont Hills? I saw your security guard buddy when Will and I were driving there for the memorial and don’t say that you’re not friends because from what it sounded like, you guys talk a lot,” I said in one, long breath.

He tensed up at the mention of his visits to the gated community. “Tessa, I’m not sure what you think but whatever idea you have, I assure you that it’s wrong. Years ago, I made a deal with Charles Belmont and I’ve been visiting about once a month.”

“Why would you make a deal with the Belmonts? You hate them.”

“I’m not particularly fond of most members of that family but when I made that deal, I had to put my loathing aside because it was to protect you.”

After a traumatic incident and a certain someone was sent away (the shakiness in my father’s voice was enough to tell me who he meant), my father visited Belmont Manor to ensure that person could never return to the town. Mr. Belmont was the only one with enough wealth and connections to keep them from leaving on so-called good behavior or escaping in the middle of the night.

My parents were not enough to keep that promise when they received calls from the facility, telling
them that person who shall not be named was improving immensely and showing true remorse. While the doctors were insistent that he was being genuine, my parents were not as easily fooled, knowing that it was all an act. In exchange for the assistance, my father would find rare artifacts while out on a dig site and give them to Mr. Belmont, who only cared about adding priceless objects to his home to brag about during parties.

“I appreciate you keeping him away from me but it doesn’t mean you have to make a deal with the devil…and part of me means that literally.”

“Tessa, I would do anything to protect you, Ryan, or your mother. The last we want is him out and about.”

“You’re willing to make deals with a man who might’ve killed his son?”

Belmont punched my shoulder, which hurt ten times worse because of the bruises. “Why would you—did you hear what Connor said? You’re going to forget it. Think about something else…anything else.”

“Do you think he’s wrong? Do you think it’s possible that he—”

“It doesn’t matter what I think. I grew up in this town with that family. Do I think he’s done despicable things? Yes. I witnessed some of those things when I was a boy and it’s when I learned a sad but important lesson. Sometimes, you can’t beat the bad guy and the little guys just have to live in their world, never stepping on their toes if they want to live till the next day. As wonderful as it would be, life isn’t like the movies. You don’t just wake up one day and take down an evil corporation to bring peace and freedom to your community. Real life is messy and sometimes, it’s unfair. We have rules that we have to abide by and sadly, the people with the power get to make and change those rules. If they want, the rules don’t apply to them. That’s how the world works.”

“You know his death wasn’t an accident.”

“Sweetheart, I’m sure the entire town outside of Belmont Hills and hell, even some of them in there believe that. Do I think that the police hastily declared it an accident because someone paid them off? It’s a definite possibility. I know you already promised your mother but I want you to promise me the same…that you won’t continue to look into his death. Be content with being the small fish in a big pond. Be the cute little clownfish who stays in her anemone for her senior year and don’t go after the big sharks. When you go to college, you’re free to be whatever you want in that pond. A clownfish, a shark, a creepy anglerfish…”

In the past, hearing such an impassioned plea from my father would have been enough to abandon my plan. It almost convinced me this time until I recalled a few things: the creatures attacking me at the memorial, one of those very creatures possessing Will, and how those ‘big sharks’ were trying to hurt my friend. Maybe I would never be able to convince people like Hilton to change their ways but if I was ever going to find out what happened to Belmont and its connection to those creatures, my parents would believe that I was an innocent little clownfish at home while outside, I was a clownfish disguised as a great white shark.

With me being in a coma and my family spending all their time at the hospital, they had gotten partial to takeout and fast food restaurants instead of eating at home, meaning my mother never went grocery shopping. My father offered to drive to the nearest market to get the ingredients for my favorite lunch. My mother was the superior cook but to his credit, he had never burned down the entire kitchen. I waited in the living room, flipping through the channels.
“Tessa, maybe your dad’s right. I agree that this jackass’s death was probably not an accident but it doesn’t mean we have to figure out who did it. Look at what’s happened since you started investigating. Those shadow monsters almost killed you,” said Elena, casually styling my hair into a fishtail braid.

“Exactly. They didn’t start showing up until now. I mean, we saw one attack Katie but they’ve been different. Something’s off about all this. For some reason, those creatures don’t want us to find the truth.”

“Then let’s listen. If it’s between listening to a conceited jerk and creepy shadow monsters that can kill me, I choose monsters every time.”

“This is about more than him, Elena. You said when the creature possessed Will, it was saying something. What was it saying?”

“I don’t know. I was busy trying not to piss myself. It said a bunch of creepy stuff. Something about a master and damning all—it was just gibberish.”

“Was it? Maybe it was a message.”

“Yeah, stop digging or I’m going to kill you. That was the message. Can’t we focus on fun things like the winter ball or—what the hell was that?”

Elena jumped at the sound of breaking glass. Opening the closet door, I quietly picked up a small metal bat and tiptoed towards the kitchen. I leaned against the wall, listening to the sound of soft footsteps on the tile floor, and swung the bat with all the strength I could muster as a hooded figure stepped into the doorway. The figure grabbed the bat with one hand while lowering their hood with the other, revealing a stunned Officer Garren. The bat was an inch away from his face. He carefully lowered the bat to the floor, never taking his eyes off mine.

“Didn’t peg you as the type to carry a bat. Your brother’s?”

“Mine, from little league. I stopped playing after the coach banned me for biting Belmont when he pulled up my shirt.”

“That was you? I had to get ten stitches in my arm,” said Belmont, touching his left arm as if the bite marks were still visible.

“You deserved it for being a little perv. Get over it. It was ten years ago.” I raised the bat again. “You, get the hell out of my house,” I told Garren, prepared to bash in his kneecaps.

“We need to—”

“We don’t need to do anything. You are leaving before I report you for breaking and entering.”

Garren reached into his jeans pocket and dangled a set of keys in my face. He claimed that Chief Parker had copies of keys to every house and building in the town made for every member of the police force. The whole idea sounded illegal on every level and he agreed though he counted it as an excuse against breaking and entering. Elena crept up behind him, holding the cookie jar. My eyes widened as he grabbed her wrist and placed the jar back on the counter.
“H—how did you…Tessa, what do I do? Should I knock him out and we can throw him in some
ditch? Let him think that he imagined all that?”

“I can hear and see you, Elena. It wasn’t my spidey sense going off.”

I swung the bat at his leg, knocking him to the floor. He groaned and rolled onto his side.

“Tessa, there’s no need for the bat. We need to talk before your father gets home. I’d rather have this
conversation in private and no, I’m not a reaper like you. I’m a guardian, a member of the Order of
Charon.”

“I don’t give a damn if you’re my fairy godmother who likes to dress like a boy sometimes, Officer
Pretty Boy. Get the hell out of my house before I permanently turn you into a girl with a few
swings.”

“I’m sorry I couldn’t stop the accident. I’m meant to never even speak with you…to be more of a
behind the scenes kind of guy but that was difficult when I knew those creatures were planning an
attack. I had to be discrete. They were suspicious that I sensed them near the car.”

“So you let me and my friend almost die? What kind of guardian is that?”

“As I said, I needed to be discrete. You were never going to die in that accident. It was only meant to
scare you. That’s why I warned you not to get in the car.”

“And I’m just supposed to trust some stranger?”

“I’d think you would at least consider advice from a cop.”

“A regular cop, sure. One from this town? Not a chance. What do you mean by guardian? Tell me
everything and when you’re done, I’ll consider whether or not you walk out of here with this shoved
firmly up your backside.”

He awkwardly introduced himself as Oliver, aware of the three distrustful teenagers, two of them
ghosts, contemplating the best way to bash his face in with a bat. With a small nod, he indicated for
me to join him on the couch but I stayed near the kitchen doorway with Elena and Belmont. The first
thing he confessed was that he knew about my family’s history as reapers. His role as a guardian was
a task passed down from generation to generation, dating back centuries. The Order of Charon
derived its name from the ferryman to the Greek Underworld, Charon being the first guardian.

Garren had learned about his role as a guardian from his father when he was seven years old, after he
saw his first ghost at the church. The guardians were each assigned their own reaper to protect and
guide, teaching them about their newfound abilities after they passed their eighteenth birthday. His
own father had been the guardian for my mother until he was summoned to be part of the council,
shortly after my parents were married. The council was a small group that kept an eye on both
reapers and guardians, known for being strict.

At first, Garren was not interested in being my guardian, caring more about making the freshman
baseball team than protecting me. His mind was changed after the incident, the same one that led to
my father making deals with Mr. Belmont, and he had been watching over me ever since that day.
Guardians were meant to be silent observers, only stepping in if their assigned reaper was breaking
the rules. He had his own abilities, such as seeing ghosts, opening a passageway to the Other Side,
and extracting and altering memories.

“Extraction is very draining so I can only obtain a few before I get too weak. My father once told me that it was possible with ghosts too but he insisted only the council was allowed to do that. Guardians are trained from the time they turn seven. Not just in our abilities but in combat and knowing all sorts of history. It’s our way of being helpful to a reaper.”

“Where were your ninja skills when I was almost killed by those monsters at the memorial?” I asked, still distrustful of him.

“As much as I’d like to be able to watch you 24/7, I can’t. I never saw a reason to because you weren’t a troublemaker…until recently. Not loving the new look, by the way. It isn’t you.”

“A cop and a fashion critic? Wow, I really hit the Fairy Godmother lottery. You don’t know anything about me.”

“I know more than you think, actually. It’s part of my job as your guardian. It’s also my job to keep you from doing something stupid but I pretty much failed after you trespassed on a crime scene without thinking and decided to get a wardrobe change as part of your plan to befriend the kids who made your life a living hell for the past ten years. I’m curious. I mean, it didn’t take much to figure out your little plan but what exactly were you going to do when you figured out the cause of Fin’s death? What do you gain from it? What does Fin gain from it?”

Belmont scoffed. “What do you mean? Everyone learns the truth. Look, I know that the truth won’t bring me back to life but at least the town won’t see me as the idiot who got drunk and fell off the bridge. Maybe I don’t want to be remembered that way.”

“It’s tragic that your life was cut short, Fin, but dragging Tessa into this mess ends now. She’s provoking forces beyond our understanding and as her guardian, I can’t allow it. The council would disapprove of this and—”

“Fuck you and the council.”

Garren was taken aback by my harsh response. All the frustration I had been bottling up since my mother told me to forget about finding Belmont’s killer was released at that moment. I was tired of people telling me that the plan was too risky or my actions might be frowned upon by someone I had only heard of from my grandmother, no one I ever met face to face. To me, the council was nothing more than a myth on the other side of the world. When I questioned him about the shadow creatures, he remained tightlipped, insisting that his first glimpse of them was at the memorial. I thought it was strange that a guardian, who had a wealth of supernatural knowledge from his training, was being deliberately unhelpful, when it was obvious that he knew something about the creatures.

His eyes followed the bat that trailed up his leg, stopping on his left knee. I tapped his knee lightly three times.

“Tell me what they are or this next tap won’t be so gentle. We could wait until my father gets home and I’ll pretend that you were forcing yourself on me. Did you know he used to wrestle in high school? I bet you’ve never been twisted into a pretzel before.”

“Tessa, your threats will get you nowhere. I told you I had only seen them at the memorial when—”

“Liar. One last chance. You’re wrong that I don’t get something out of finding out who killed him.
Those creatures started showing up the night of his death and that can’t be coincidence. One of them wrote my name on a window. Something isn’t right. Three, two…”

“Fine, okay. Please put the bat down.” I lowered the bat to the floor again. “I have seen those creatures before, mostly in my books. There hasn’t been much written about them, only that they came from the Other Side. One author suggested that they were monsters that sometimes find a way into our world…piggybacking on a person just slipping into death when they choose their fate with a reaper. One of their powers is possession and it’s their way of continuing to live in this world. Usually, they can only maintain the possession for a couple minutes, at most, but there are stories of people being possessed for years…adapting really well.”

Elena shuddered at the idea of being the host for some monstrous parasite. Belmont looked equally disgusted, rubbing his neck as if expecting to find a leech latched onto his skin.

“My father says those stories are just rumors, nothing more. The only other time I saw that kind of creature was the day of that incident. It was on the roof with you and…him, whispering in his ear like a devil on his shoulder.”

“What do they want?” asked Elena, confused.

He responded with a hollow laugh. “Want? They’re monsters, plain and simple. They thrive on chaos.”

I turned my head towards the door, hearing Parker call out my name. As he knocked on the door, I hid Garren in the closet. I cracked open the door and spotted Parker standing on the front porch with a carton of cookie dough ice cream and several DVDs tucked under his arm. The moment I let him step through the doorway, grinning as he bragged about ditching Chemistry to visit me, I jammed the end of the bat into his stomach. He fell to his knees, groaning in pain. I held back a laugh, feeling a sense of joy from getting out my anger towards him.

“Bitch!”

“Oh look at that, it only took a bat to break your act.”

“What act?”

“The one you’ve been using to get in my pants. I’ve known you for years, Parker, and you’re only nice for one reason. You almost had me fooled until I heard what you told your dad about Will.”

“Tessa, wait. I can explain. It’s not what you think,” he said, tucking his head under both arms. “I didn’t—you don’t understand.”

“So you’re not a narcissistic, spoiled prick who wants to get in my pants and is willing to ruin one of my closest friends for your own amusement?”

There was a short silence where he carefully considered his answer. “Okay, I might be most of those things,” I rolled my eyes at his lame attempt at a joke. “But my father forced me to give that statement to the police. I know Nelson would never…he practically pukes when we smoke in the locker room after gym. The night after you woke up, he came into my room while I was going over plays for the game with the guys. He had already written the statement and told me to memorize it. I don’t know why he wrote it. He just said it was to protect me, which made no sense. Maybe you can say no to your parents but if I don’t do what he says…it’s better not to get him mad. I swear that it
wasn’t my idea, the statement or bullying his stepsister. It wasn’t Claire either. The first comment was from Fin’s account, like it was hacked or something.”

I searched for a hint of a lie in his chestnut brown eyes but there was nothing but sincerity and remorse. He was relieved when I accepted his story and behind the closet door, Garren shook his head as I told Parker to sit on the couch. I subtly flipped him off behind the stack of DVDs.

“You’ll actually watch these?” I asked, noticing that none of the movies were his usual action thrillers.

“I can handle movies that don’t have explosions or gore every five minutes. Besides, I got them for you, not me. I thought it’d cheer you up since you were just in a coma for weeks and Nelson’s still not awake. Did you see him?”

“For a little bit, yeah. Just don’t sit too close. My dad will be back soon from the market and if he sees our knees touching, he’ll whack you in the face with a turkey or something. He’s a little protective. If you’re serious about your dad writing the statement, why would it protect you? From what?” I asked as he walked into the kitchen, chuckling at the idea of being hit with frozen poultry.

He returned to the living room with two spoons and opened the ice cream carton. “No clue. He’s been acting weird ever since the night of the party. I mean, he’s always telling me to not get into too much trouble because one day, him being the chief of police might not be enough to keep me from getting arrested. It started after he overheard me telling my mother about this nightmare I’ve been having. I’m at the party and I see Fin on the bridge. He’s holding a bottle of whiskey and talking on the phone and for a second, I’m thinking of how easy it would be to push him off the bridge.”

“Did you want to hurt him that night? Were you still mad from the fight?”

“Yeah but the alcohol made it worse, I think. Fin and I had our problems sometimes but in the end, we always worked through it. The whole thing with Claire and Dr. Baxter made me worry about—other things. Anyway, he’s on the bridge and I head over there to talk to him. Then, he gets shoved forward. It wasn’t like he just stumbled from drinking too much. It looks like something pushes him but he’s the only one on the bridge. Before I wake up, someone chokes me from behind and everything goes black. That’s it. My father—”

Elena shrieked when Belmont socked him in the jaw. Parker slumped against the couch, unconscious. As she smacked his shoulder, chastising him like a parent to their child, I opened the closet door.

“You want to prove that you’re on my side, Officer Pretty Boy? Take out his memory of what happened at the bridge. I have a feeling it’s not just a nightmare,” I told Garren, pointing at the unconscious Parker.

He scratched the back of his ear. “Tessa, it’s not that simple. I told you it takes a lot of energy and it’s difficult to concentrate on a specific memory.”

“Then you can eat that whole carton of ice cream to give you some more energy. That memory could be the key to finding out what happened on the bridge. If Parker was telling the truth, he was unconscious at the time of the murder and he can’t be the killer. My dad just texted me that he’s almost done at the market. You’ve got fifteen minutes.”
He heaved a sigh, sensing my stubbornness would win out over his attempt at reason. Placing his hands on either side of Parker’s head, he closed his eyes and whispered the same phrase in Greek. Belmont and Elena ceased their fighting, him releasing her head from a chokehold, when silver mist seeped out of Parker’s left ear like a wriggling worm. Garren referred to the mist as Parker’s memories and if he concentrated hard enough, he could retrieve the memory from the night of the party. An image of the bridge formed within the mist and as a beer bottle was tipped forward, I realized that the image was from Parker’s perspective. In the memory, Belmont was standing on the bridge with a bottle of whiskey, drunkenly shouting into his phone.

“Stop calling me, Rosie! I don’t give a damn what he says! I’m—he’s a… jerk and you are too. Stop acting like you care. You never care. None of you do. You’re too busy with the company and being perfect. He’s the one that should apologize, not me. He’s just mad because for once, I have the upper hand. I know one of his secrets.”

Parker sniggered. “Is that phone even on, man?”

Belmont did not seem to hear him, too focused on yelling at his sister. “No, I’m not bluffing. If he doesn’t apologize, I’ll… I’ll tell everybody. I’ll ruin our family. Who cares? I’ll be out of this place as soon as graduation is over. Maybe even sooner if I can convince Ceci to just give me my diploma. It wouldn’t take much. She’s so damn thirsty that I could just take off my shirt and she’d give it to me.” He took a deep swig from the bottle. “That’s why she’s all over Baxter, you know. She just wants to get laid but her crypt keeper of a husband is too busy with that art gallery. Bet she’d flip if she knew her daughter was screwing him too. No, I’m not lying. Oh, Dad would kill me if I told anyone what I knew? I’d love to see him try. Let him do it. Like he hasn’t wanted me dead since I was born. Ow!”

He pulled down his sleeve, revealing a fresh cut across his shoulder. “What the fuck? Shut up, Rosie. You’re not my mother. Stop nagging m—”

Parker was not wrong in thinking that Belmont was pushed by some invisible force, except that it was far from invisible. One of those shadow creatures had risen up from the bridge and shoved him violently into the railing. The phone fell from his hand as he hunched over, clutching his stomach. The bridge became clearer as Parker ran towards it to help his friend. I watched as the shadow creature shoved Belmont again and laughed in a taunting manner at him blindly swinging his fists in the air.

Its milky white eyes peered into the bushes near the bridge and the creature spoke in the same language used during the attack at the memorial. The three words I was able to understand were kill, boy, and master. Parker was only a few feet away from the entrance to the bridge when a very muscular arm wrapped around his throat. The memory began to blur, making it harder to get a good look at the attacker.

All I could see was the intricate tattoo on the inside of their wrist, reminding me of the images that flashed before me when I touched Belmont. The tattoo was a wolf’s head with Omnem diem ultimum suus written underneath. The mysterious attacker easily overpowered Parker, who helplessly attempted to fight back—“Let me go!”—and the mist faded from the room, leaving behind nothing but silence. Garren offered to alter Parker’s memories and drive him back to his house. Slinging Parker over his shoulder, he warned me not to sneak out of the house.

“Mystery solved. He was killed by a shadow monster. Now that it’s over, he can leave and find some other ghosts to bother,” said Elena, digging a spoon into the ice cream carton.

I sent a text to my father. “It’s not solved. That creature was sent there. It was speaking to someone. Maybe they were hiding in the bushes. I told my dad that we’re visiting Mr. Hilton at his office to
discuss that loan.”

“But we’re not…are we?”

“Nope. We’re going somewhere to get answers. These creatures are taking orders from someone and I’ve got a hunch. We need to talk to someone with even more knowledge than Garren.”

About twenty minutes into the drive, I passed by a Welcome to New Orleans sign. Elena quickly figured out where we were headed and her anxiety was replaced with excitement. As heavy rain splattered against the windows, we discussed Parker’s memory and possible suspects of who attacked him. The only thing we could agree on was that the attacker was definitely a man, someone strong enough to overpower the 6’2” wide receiver. Belmont, his memory of that night still hazy, was unable to recall his conversation with his sister or what he meant by his father’s secret.

“At least we got a better look at that tattoo.”

“It was written in like Japanese. I bet it said ‘I like to suck—’”

I glanced at him through the rearview mirror. “Latin. It means live each day like it’s your last.”

“Why do you know that? Who learns Latin?”

“It’s part of a reaper’s training to learn several languages. I’m not an expert. I understand them better than I can speak them. Does it sound familiar?”

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “But how hard can it be to find a wrist tattoo? Where are we going? We’ve been driving for hours.”

“It’s only been twenty five minutes. Calm down. We’re here.”

I parked the car outside a two-story, colonial style building. A green sign just outside the door read Elysium Nursing Home, golden flowers curled around the words. I hurried into the building, with the hood of my coat over my head, and walked over to the main desk, where a kind-faced, middle-aged woman in a pale blue nurse’s uniform was typing on a computer. Looking away from the computer, she smiled, a dimple dancing at the corner of her pink lips.

“Tessa, how good to see you again. I didn’t know you were coming up for a visit.”

“It was kind of last minute. I know you’re supposed to call ahead, Anna, but—”

“Tessa, how good to see you again. I didn’t know you were coming up for a visit.”

“It was kind of last minute. I know you’re supposed to call ahead, Anna, but—”

“I’m not trouble. She’ll love the surprise. You always put her in such a good mood. To be honest, it’s perfect timing. She’s been a bit…odd lately,” she said, lowering her voice to a whisper. “I haven’t spoken to your mother about it yet but she tried to escape the nursing home three times just this week and she’s been muttering to herself at all hours of the day. She’s drawing all sorts of pictures as well, which still amazes me considering her…condition. I’ve heard her mention your name so seeing you will do her some good, I hope. Follow me.”

I walked down the hallway, kicking Belmont when he commented on the putrid smell of urine and old lady perfume emanating from the rooms. Anna stopped in front of a room near the end of the hallway and knocked before opening the door. Ancient sounding music, consisting of flutes and stringed instruments like a tanpura, played from a stereo on the coffee table.
Hand-drawn pictures adorned each of the four walls, several towards the bottom looking like they were drawn by a child with crayon. The drawings depicted famous landmarks in India, beautiful, very realistic forests, as if one could touch a tree and feel its leaves, and a city perched on top of the clouds. Just below the city was a painting of a dark, ominous cavern with flames flickering off the walls and a long, winding river that led to a black, three-headed dog with a serpent’s tail and a lion’s claws.

A dark-haired woman had her back turned to the door, her glossy, ebony hair stopping just short of her waist. She wore a dark blue, floor length dress with long sleeves and a pattern of white lotuses and a pair of matching blue flats. Muttering quietly to herself, she passed over one of the drawings with a piece of charcoal but instead of a new drawing, she wrote the same phrase over and over with an intense fervor.

“Indira, you have a visitor. It’s—”

She had moved from the wall to the door at lightning speed, wrapping her frail arms around my neck. Though she was well into her sixties, she did not look a day over forty, a trait she had passed onto the rest of her family. Visible scars that ran from the right side of her forehead to the bottom left side of her chin disfigured her once beautiful face.

“I’ll leave you to it then. Just remember to sign out when you leave, Tessa. If you need anything, I’ll be at the front desk,” said Anna.

The moment she shut the door, my grandmother cupped my face in her hands. “I knew you were coming, my little pakṣī. You came sooner than I thought…and you brought Elena with you. You look even more beautiful than the last I saw you, dear.”

Elena blushed, hiding her face behind her golden blonde hair. “You say that every time. You know ghosts don’t age, right?”

“Doesn’t matter.” She grasped Belmont’s hand, which he was waving in front of her cloudy, chocolate brown eyes out of curiosity—“How did the old bat see me?”—and placed his arm back at his side.

“This old bat doesn’t need eyes to see, Finley Belmont. I can smell that cheap cologne from a mile away…good lord, it’s enough to put down an elephant.”

He stepped away from my grandmother, a bit frightened, while Elena and I looked at each other, equally mortified. “H—how do you know my name?”

“I know your family of old, boy. You smell just as your father did when he was your age and I heard from my daughter that you chose to stay behind. Have you been bothering my sweet granddaughter and her little girlfriend?”

Pushing even more of her hair in front of her face, Elena let out an unnaturally high-pitched giggle. I nudged Belmont’s side, giving him a look that said Be nice or you’ll be sorry. He shook his head, stuttering out a “No. I—I’ve been good”, before sitting in one of the chairs to avoid my grandmother’s scrutinizing gaze. Leaning from side to side, he waved his hands to test the range of her vision but quickly stopped when she grabbed an apple from the fruit basket on the coffee table and chuckled it at his head.
“Sorry about him, Nana. Is everything okay? Anna said that you’ve been trying to leave.”

“To find you and the rest of the family. We’re in danger. I’ve seen it.”

“C—can you uh see the future or something, In—Mrs. Tessa’s grandma?” asked Belmont, struggling to sound polite.

“Yes. It’s a gift that reapers gain when we’re much older. I knew you were coming here, Tessa, because of what happened at his memorial and what the Parker boy showed you in that memory. Sit, sit. We have much to discuss.” Elena and I joined her on the floral printed couch, across from a fidgety Belmont who had not taken his eyes off the floor since he was almost pelted with an apple and held the fruit basket on his lap. “Your mother wouldn’t approve of what I wish to tell you. She wants you to be a naïve little girl forever but she needs to realize that you’re not. You’re a strong young woman. Coddling you is only going to lead to an early grave. These creatures are nothing new.”

“I know. My guardian, who I just met for the first time today, said that they sneak out of the Other Side to possess people and they just do it because they like causing trouble. The ones who attacked us at the memorial and the one in Parker’s memory? Something’s different about them. They talk about this master and it’s like they’re following orders. Someone’s controlling them.”

“I sense you already have a hunch. How could one control such monsters?”

I thought back to my previous encounters with the shadow creatures. “When they spoke, I could understand them. I thought I was just hallucinating because I was the only one who could hear actual words while Elena and Belmont heard a bunch of gibberish. The creatures are taking orders from a reaper. It sounds crazy but—”

The phrase scribbled on the walls caught my eye. In Hindi, my grandmother had written Beware the roses. The kitten is truly a lion, hidden under the waterfall. A knowing smile graced her lips as if she could see the gears spinning in my head.

“You figured out it was a reaper too. There’s another one in Belmont Falls, besides me and my mother.”

“The moment I saw you get attacked in my dreams, I noticed the same as you, Tessa. How they spoke to each other about their master and following orders. As far as I know, only a reaper has such a connection to the Other Side…to the home of these creatures.”

“But you once told me that we can spot other reapers. How could I never see one in my own town?”

“Some have learned to cover their tracks, whether for privacy or to hide their indiscretions. It takes practice. The more pressing matter is who this other reaper is and why they are using these creatures. If I’m right, it is why we are in danger. Not just us but—”

My grandmother’s voice was drowned out by a piercing pain in the side of my head. I shut my eyes but instead of darkness, I was bombarded with rapidly flashing images of a man in his office then rolling down a staircase. In the midst of my vision, I had fallen from the couch and was now lying on my back with Elena propping my head on her lap. I instinctively squeezed her hand when it clasped my own, breathing slowly until the vision ceased. My grandmother was on her knees behind me, rubbing the sides of my head to relieve the pain. Belmont looked between the three of us as if we had just reenacted a scene from The Exorcist.
“What just happened? Were you possessed or something?”

Elena helped me up from the floor, still holding my hand. “She had a vision, idiot. She gets them when someone’s about to die. The same thing happened a few days before you died.”

“Who is it this time? Someone we know? Maybe Nelson didn’t make it.”

“Do you hear yourself when you talk or are you just incapable of caring about someone’s feelings other than your own? Grow up, you jackass. This is exactly why we broke—you’re such a child.”

“Stop fighting, both of you. It wasn’t Will but my vision was a lot clearer than usual. I saw an office and someone typing on a computer. It was today’s date, about a half hour from now. The last thing I saw was them rolling down the stairs. I recognized the watch. It was Connor’s,” I said, fearfully gazing at the clock on the bedside table.

“Connor? Will’s stepdad?”

My grandmother urged me to drive back to Belmont Falls, seeing the apprehension in my eyes at the idea of Will losing his stepfather. I promised to visit her at the nursing home as soon as possible, to discuss our theories on the rogue reaper and their motives with the shadow creatures. During the drive home, my eyes were more focused on the clock than the road, leading to more than a dozen close calls with other cars. Elena flipped off a man who called me a ‘ditzy little bitch’ after I made a quick right turn without using my turn signal. Along the way, I made a call to the police station, claiming that I heard strange noises inside Will’s house.

I parked shoddily in his driveway, the back tires nestled in the grass, and hurried towards the front door. I was about to grab the handle when I heard a series of soft, continuous thuds from inside the house. My hand retracted from the handle, moving to the slowly forming bump on the side of my head. Elena held onto me as I felt each painful blow at the same time as Mr. Mitchell.

Though the pain all over my body dwindled, I was unable to stand on my own. Belmont suggested taking me back to the hospital, lying to the doctors that I slipped on the stairs to explain the bruises and bleeding, but I assured him that my injuries would heal in a matter of minutes. Together, the three of us entered the house, finding Mr. Mitchell at the bottom of the stairs, barely conscious. Fresh blood trickled down the side of his head and a bump was visible under his dark skin.

Belmont checked his pulse. “It’s really weak. He’s not going to make it.”

“We called the cops like ten minutes ago. Why aren’t they—forget it. Let me try something.”

Crouching down beside him, I bit my lip to stifle a groan from the pain and placed my hand over Mr. Mitchell’s wrist. I hoped that what had happened with Will at the hospital was more than mere coincidence. The veins on the back of my hand became more pronounced and I let out a quiet whimper as my wounds that had just healed now reopened and I felt the pain of his injuries all over again. Mr. Mitchell’s eyes fluttered as he took a short inhale of breath.

“T—Tessa?” he gasped.

“It’s okay, Connor. The police are on their way. Don’t sit up,” I said, gently pressing my hand against his chest. “You fell down the stairs. Just lay down until they get here. Do you know what happened? Did someone push you?”
He nodded, blood seeping from his mouth. “G—go to my office. Take the file in the safe behind your mother’s painting. The code is 3763. Give it to your father.”

“Is that why you were attacked? Did you see their face?”

“No. They attacked me from behind. I know it’s what they’re after. Please get to it before—it must be kept hidden.”

Elena and Belmont stayed with him while I headed up to his office. I lifted up the painting, of a sunset over the water, he had bought at the art gallery months ago, revealing a safe embedded in the wall. After typing in the code, I turned the handle and took out the folder. It was the same one he had shown my father at the hospital, containing the life insurance papers. Folding up the papers, I stuffed them in my jacket pocket and placed the folder back in the safe. I stiffened as something brushed against the back of my head.

“Give me those papers or you won’t make it to prom. Don’t make me pull the trigger,” said a gruff voice.

The man’s arm wrapped around my throat violently. “N—no,” I stuttered.

He held the gun under my chin. “Are you deaf, kid? I have a gun. I had orders to leave no witnesses but if you give me the papers, I’ll let you go. This isn’t any of your business. Reach into your pocket and—”

He shouted a stream of curses as my teeth sank into his hand. His grip on my throat loosened and thinking on my feet, I grabbed the closest object and whacked him in the face ten times with a stapler. A tall, lanky man in a baggy black hoodie and jeans staggered backwards, the gun falling from his grasp. He had a scar under his left eye and smelled heavily of whiskey. I thought he seemed familiar and after a few seconds, I realized that he regularly hung around the school, offering to buy alcohol and cigarettes for teenagers at a hefty price. It was rumored that he lived in one of the abandoned trailers in the woods near the Falls.

“Who sent you? Was it one of the Belmonts?”

“Crazy bitch,” he snarled, taking out a switchblade from his jeans pocket.

I grabbed his arm, struggling to keep the knife from cutting into my cheek. The skin on his arm turned an ashy grey and began to take on a sunken appearance, exposing the bones. I moved my hand—“What the hell is happening?” he shouted, panicking over his corpse-like arm—and smacked him once more with the stapler, knocking him to the floor. The door swung open and Chief Parker and two other officers stormed into the room, wielding their guns. I imagined that they expected to find me begging for mercy as the menacing stranger threatened me, not me standing over him, still staring at his once corpse-like arm in horror, with a stapler.

Grabbing the stapler, Chief Parker led me out of the room while the other officers dealt with the stranger. Mr. Mitchell, lying on a stretcher, was being rolled into the back of an ambulance. Garren was speaking with the surrounding neighbors, who were all gathered in a circle in the front yard like a pack of vultures. Writing down what the elderly, partially blind Mrs. Kane told him, Garren glanced over at me with an expression that was reminiscent of both a concerned older brother and a stern parent. Chief Parker ordered me to wait on the front porch until he finished speaking with his fellow officers. One of the officers, a young woman, showed him a white rose that had been tucked
into Mr. Mitchell’s pocket. Elena and Belmont joined me by the porch swing.

“Did you hear that? It’s the same as—”

“Byrne, you need to leave now,” said Belmont, his eyes on the ever-growing crowd gathering around the house, including a news van.

Angela Starr, tactless as ever, attempted to get a statement from the severely injured Mr. Mitchell. The only response was one of the EMTs shutting the ambulance door in her face.

“But he said—”

“Out of the three of us, I’ve dealt with the cops the most. You’re already on his list after that car accident.

I nearly fell off the swing when my grandmother appeared beside him. Luckily, no one could hear Elena or Belmont’s screams.

“N—nana? How did you…what—you just—are you dead?”

“Don’t be silly. It’s an ancient practice I learned from my travels. My body is still at the nursing home but my spirit is outside of the physical world. It allows reapers to communicate with each other in private.”

“Could you at least give us a warning? I think I just died again and crapped my pants,” said Belmont, catching his breath.

“He’s right. You need to leave. After you left the nursing home, I had a vision myself. The intent was never to kill Connor Mitchell. It was to draw you here.”

“Are you saying the other reaper did this?” I lowered my voice. “The white roses at the hospital and his grave…now in Connor’s pocket? It’s all the same person. Nana, they visited me in the hospital. Why wouldn’t they just kill me?”

“I don’t think that’s their intent either, dear. We’ll continue to communicate this way. Your mother wouldn’t want you skipping school to visit me, particularly if she knew the reason for your visits. That dunderhead of a police officer cannot be trusted. I watched him at the station after you made the call. He was purposely biding his time. Before you say it, I don’t believe he’s the reaper but he may know more than we think. Run straight home,” she said, before vanishing from the porch.

With everyone distracted by the latest tragedy in town, I thought it would be easy to sneak off without Chief Parker noticing my absence. I was taken aback by a microphone being shoved under my nose. Angela Starr, with her red-faced cameraman standing behind her, smiled at me like a shark baring its many rows of pointy teeth.

“Hi there. I hear you were the one who found Calvin Michaels after his unfortunate accident.”

“It’s Connor Mitchell and—wait, did you say accident?”

“How would you like to give a statement? Tell us all about your heroism. Your friends will be so impressed with you being on TV.”
“Uh no, I don’t…I really need to go.”

“Another time, then? I’d love a firsthand account of what happened to Corbin,” she said, reaching into her diamond studded leather purse.

The neon pink business card was snatched from her fingers by Chief Parker. “What did I tell you, Angela? Get out of here. If you want a story, go sniffing somewhere else. You’re coming down to the station with me to answer a few questions.”

Placing his hand on the small of my back, he forced me to follow him over to his police car. He opened the back door.

“Why did you sayConnor’s fall was an accident? Where’s the guy who pushed him and almost shot me?”

“Get in the car, Tessa. We’ll talk at the station.”

“No. I—I want my parents here or I’m not going anywhere with you.”

“They’ll be meeting us there.”

“You’re lying. I’ll go down to the station with my parents, not with you.”

Chief Parker’s dark eyes skimmed the gossiping crowd, all too busy with getting any information out of the other officers. My head struck the opposite door as he shoved me into the backseat.

“Let’s get one thing straight, missy. When I tell you to do something, you do it. You’ve got such a bright future ahead of you and it would be a shame if that was all thrown away by an eyewitness saying that they saw you push Connor Mitchell down those stairs. Considering your family tree, it wouldn’t be hard to believe, now would it?”

My nostrils flared. “When you die, you corrupt son of a bitch, I’m going to make sure you rot in the worst circle of Hell.”

With a quiet chuckle, he slammed the door shut and drove down to the police station.
Forty minutes had passed since Chief Parker dragged me into the police station though to the rest of the officers, it looked like I was there of my own free will. He grabbed my phone from my jacket pocket before leaving me alone in the small interrogation room: four blank concrete walls with a metal table, three uncomfortable chairs that were plucked from Hell itself, a two way mirror, and a table lamp that shined brightly on my face.

A camera was perched high in the left corner of the room and the sweltering heat led me to imagine that it was able to follow my every movement. I only knew how long I had been sitting in the room because of the clock high above the door, ticking ominously. Each second seemed to take longer than the previous one and I was slowly losing my mind.

It was forty minutes of tense silence, leaving me to my own thoughts. Elena was sprawled on the floor, with Belmont pinning one arm behind her back. He was the only reason that she had not jumped Chief Parker in the police car, with the intent of scratching out his eyes. Belmont refused to release his grip until she promised to not attack Chief Parker the moment he entered the interrogation room.

Her responses—“Mrmph”—were muffled by the carpet but knowing Elena and her tendency to hold a grudge, she would likely never forgive him.

Just as the second hand on the clock passed over the twelve, Chief Parker and Garren entered the room, looking like complete opposites as the three of us made eye contact. Garren managed a weak smile but his fingers drumming against the back of the clipboard like some kind of Morse code revealed his true feelings. Sitting across from me, Chief Parker lowered the lamp, allowing me to see for the first time since I was taken into the room.

“We have a lot to discuss, Tessa. Officer Garren is here to assist me. He’ll be writing down your responses so we can review it all later,” he explained as Garren walked over to the third chair in the corner, briefly glancing at Elena and Belmont.

“Where are my parents?”

“On their way. It’s just a few questions, nothing more. You made the call to the station about what happened to Connor Mitchell, didn’t you?”

“Yes. I was heading over to Will’s house to check on Katie. She’s been really upset since the accident and some kids have been bullying her. I wanted to make sure she was okay and that’s when I heard weird noises inside the house. It sounded like a fight.”

“And then you found him at the bottom of the stairs. How did that happen?”

“I guess he was pushed by that guy I saw in his office. Where—”

“You’re certain that he was pushed?”

The further we went into this interrogation, the sooner I realized that it was all a sham. Chief Parker
was asking increasingly obscure questions, such as the exact time I called into the police station and if Mr. Mitchell’s injuries matched the injuries of someone who was pushed down a set of stairs. Garren had been shaking his head so much, as a warning to not say something I would later regret, that he now resembled a bobblehead doll.

Having been through plenty of these interrogations, Belmont reminded me to keep my answers short. As the clock struck nine, an hour since I was brought into the station, my parents were nowhere to be found and I was now sure that Chief Parker never contacted either of them. Elena, finally freed from one of Belmont’s wrestling moves, subtly retrieved my phone from Chief Parker’s pocket and sent a message to my mother.

“Where is he? The guy who attacked me. Are you questioning him too?” I asked as Garren wrote down my answer about Mr. Mitchell’s injuries.

Chief Parker shut the folder that contained statements from the surrounding neighbors and immediate observations of the scene inside the house. He brushed off my question, muttering that the stranger, who he referred to as Jackson, was the police’s problem and irrelevant to the conversation.

“He almost shot me. I could’ve been dead if I didn’t fight back. He’s the one who pushed Connor.”

“How are you so sure of that?” He whipped his heard around at the sound of a loud crash. “Garren, what’s wrong with you?”

Garren had one hand in the air, stopping Elena from striking Chief Parker with the unplugged table lamp on the floor. He awkwardly explained that he kicked the plug while stretching his arms, his eyes quickly diverting to his black boots to avoid the police chief’s stern glare. The moment Chief Parker turned back towards me, Garren lowered Elena’s arm and rolled the table lamp under his chair.

“You weren’t there. You don’t know that Jackson had anything to do with the accident.”

“Accid—you’re seriously calling this an accident?” I asked, bewildered. Belmont pinched my leg, hissing “Byrne, shut up,” under his breath. “He was there to get something in Connor’s office. Connor told me that himself when I found him. I know this Jackson guy’s not exactly a model citizen but he wouldn’t just randomly walk into a person’s house and attack them. He’s not even here, is he? If you questioned him before me, his statement would be in that folder too but it’s not. I bet you sneaked him through the back door so the neighbors and Angela Starr didn’t see him. All to help you pass this off as a little accident, right?”

“We haven’t deemed it as anything yet, Tessa. Maybe Jackson did have something to do with Mitchell’s fall down the stairs, maybe not. We won’t know until we get a better look or until we hear from Mitchell himself. It’s possible he was a distraction for an accomplice.”

“Oh like who, me? That’s what you pretty much implied when you chucked me into the back of a police car. Officer Garren, you’re supposed to writing all this down, right? I don’t see you writing,” Garren was frozen with his pen pressed against the paper. He stared at me as if I was breathing fire and for a split second, I thought my rage could make that a possibility. “Instead of threatening to pin this all on me, let’s talk about how you took twenty minutes to get to Connor’s house when it’s only five from the station. I could talk to Angela Starr about it later over some lattes. I bet she’d have a nice spin on it…how the cops in this town don’t give a damn unless you’re throwing money at them. A man was near death and you were all just sitting on your asses like nothing was wrong.”
“Watch that tone of yours. You shouldn’t make nasty accusations like that,” he replied, the vein in his temple throbbing.

“Those aren’t nasty accusations. If you want to get nasty, I can bring up how you called Fin Belmont’s death an accident too and didn’t even bother with checking the crime scene or conducting any interviews. If you did, you would’ve questioned every single person who was at that party or at least waited a week before tearing down the tape. Who paid you to do that? Was it the same person who’s paying you now to let an attempted murderer walk free and who made you force your son to give that silly statement to trash Will?”

The entire room was deadly silent as Chief Parker and I stared each other down, a fire blazing in our eyes. Garren opened his mouth to defuse the tension but even he was unsure of how to handle the situation.

“S—sir, I think—”

“Quiet, Garren. Who knew she had a mouth on her? What’s got you so talkative now, huh? Is it the little makeover my son gave you? Or is it just a trait you got from your mother? It must be something that gets triggered when you turn seventeen because she was like you, a little bitch who never knew when to shut up and do what she’s told.”

My nails were digging so deeply into my hands that they drew blood. At that moment, I wanted to smack the arrogant police chief, not caring if it sent me straight to prison.

“Don’t…ever…talk about my mother like that.”

“I’ll talk about her all I like. Maybe we should take a little trip up to Erinyes and we’ll get you your own little padded room. It’s only a matter of time before—” He clutched his throat, beginning to choke. Garren stood up from his chair, no longer restraining a persistent Elena, as he coughed up blood onto the table.

Belmont pinched my leg again. “Byrne, I think you’re doing this. Stop it.”

Calming myself down, which proved to be difficult when I wanted to set him on fire for insulting my mother, I watched Chief Parker’s choking cease within seconds. He wiped away the blood with his sleeve. Garren, Belmont, and Elena were too busy looking at me in fear but something else caught my attention. Chief Parker was not the least bit concerned by his random choking fit and I caught a brief satisfied smirk flashing across his face. He assured Garren that it was nothing more than a side effect of his new kidney medication.

“Honestly, it’s nothing to trouble yourself over. I’ll be—”

“You know.” My voice was dangerously quiet but just loud enough for both officers to hear. “She was right. You know.”

“Tessa, I think the heat is getting to you a little. Why don’t we go check if your parents have arrived yet and they can take you home? I think you’ve answered enough questions, don’t you agree, sir?”

Ignoring Garren’s feeble attempt at avoiding another argument, I kept my eyes on Chief Parker’s tense face. He was trying his best to remain calm yet he looked like a child who got caught stealing from the cookie jar.
“You know what I am, don’t you? You’re working for them. That’s why you took so long to get to Connor’s house. You knew it was a trap for me.”

“Garren’s right. The heat’s making you a little crazy. You’re not making any sense. Let’s—”

“Stop lying. I’m not your dimwitted son or his friends that think Mountain Dew is an actual mountain. I don’t know when you found out but you knew it when Fin Belmont was killed and when Will and I got in that car accident. I know they live in Belmont Falls. Tell me who it is or I’ll do something worse than making you choke.”

Chief Parker grinned. “You’ve got quite the imagination, kiddo. Must be all that stress from senior year, I bet.”

“I get it. You don’t want to talk because you’re scared. You must think they have a way of watching your every move.” Seeing him squirm, I could not help but laugh. “Sorry, but it’s just so funny. You called my mother a bitch but really, I think it fits you better. You’re the little bitch. Your head must be shoved pretty far up their ass if you’re willing to let an entire town think you’re an incompetent piece of trash.”

What happened in the next five seconds was one giant blur. Chief Parker, possibly exhibiting secret powers of his own, had moved across the room in the blink of an eye and slammed me against the wall with enough force to make the clock shake, his hand wrapped around my throat. Garren pulled at the burly police chief’s sausage fingers. His pleas were falling on deaf ears, Chief Parker only concerned with popping off my head.

As Belmont stopped Elena from smacking him in the back with a chair, the door burst open, followed by two angry voices blending together. A short young man not much older than Garren, with the body of a stick and a long, pointed nose, was desperately trying to keep my parents from entering the room.

“C—Chief Parker, I’m so sorry. I told Mr. and Mrs. Byrne to wait outside but—” He shrank under my mother’s vicious gaze.

“They were…I tried to…”

He was at a loss for words when he saw Chief Parker fighting off Garren with one hand while squeezing my throat with the other. My father wasted no time, punching him across the face. The blow caused Chief Parker to stumble away from the wall and Garren checked for any bruising on my throat.

“Devlin, how did—I see you got my message.”

My mother was the only thing standing between my father and Chief Parker receiving a black eye. She calmly whispered in his ear, her fingers curled around his arm.

“We didn’t get a message from you or anyone at the station. We had to hear it from one of the neighbors, who saw Tessa getting in the back of your car. Do all of your interrogations usually involve strangling an innocent child?” my father asked, pure venom in his voice.

“You should teach your little girl better manners.”
“Ironic, coming from the man whose son only avoided arrest for lacking any around a girl because his father is in charge of the police department.”

I was clueless about what my father meant but Elena and Belmont, both looking surprised, seemed to have some idea. Chief Parker’s lip curled and he smoothed the front of his shirt that had gotten crinkled during the scuffle.

“I’ll um walk them out, Danny. Questioning’s over,” Garren told the short officer, who had not spoken a word since entering the interrogation room.

As Garren steered me towards the door, my mother sauntered over to Chief Parker. He towered over her petite frame, being nearly 6’6” with bulging muscles under his uniform, but her face showed no signs of fear.

“I will only say this once so listen to me very carefully, Caleb Parker. If you ever lay a hand on my daughter again, you won’t have to worry about my husband or Declan, who will surely hear of this matter and won’t be the least bit pleased that you harmed an innocent girl. No, the only person you’ll have to fear is me. I don’t care about your friends in high places or that some people in this town think you’re such an inspiration. I won’t tolerate anyone hurting the people I love.”

He raised an eyebrow at her. “That’s a familiar little speech. It didn’t scare me twenty three years ago. What makes you think it’ll scare me now? You should put a muzzle on that girl of yours before —”

My mother silenced him with a brutal slap across the face. He reached up to his cheek, his fingers brushing over the scratch on his cheek left by her wedding ring.

“Oliver, you were supposed to be protecting her!”

The car ride home had been awkward enough, with my mother squeezing me, Oliver, who both my parents admitted to knowing as my guardian, Elena, and Belmont into the backseat of the car. Most of the time in the car, for me, was spent on Elena’s lap. When we finally arrived at the house, my parents, mostly my mother, unleashed all of their pent up frustrations.

My brother was lucky to be at a friend’s house for a sleepover, not having to listen as my parents traded back and forth in lecturing the four of us. In the span of just ten minutes, they covered a variety of topics, from me checking on Mr. Mitchell before the police and nearly getting killed by a stranger to mouthing off to Chief Parker in the interrogation room.

I stopped Garren from defending himself, knowing it was better to wait until my parents were finished talking. He faced the brunt of my mother’s anger for not knowing that I was with Mr. Mitchell until the police arrived at the house.

“Kala, I’m sorry. I know I should’ve been watching her but I had to drive Chace Parker back to his house after—I was wrong”

“After what? What was Chace doing in the house, Tessa?” said my father, going into overprotective mode at the mention of a boy’s name.

I weighed out my options of what answer would make him least angry. He crossed his arms when I muttered softly, “We were making out.”

“You what?!"
“Yeah, we were…really going at it. I just couldn’t help myself. My tongue was pretty much down his throat and if Oliver didn’t show up, I’m like 75% sure we would’ve had sex on this couch. I’m not the girl you knew before you went off to Greece, Daddy. I think it’s those sex ed classes. They made me very curious and—Mom, are you going to stop me yet? You know I’m lying.”

“Yes, I do.” My father heaved a sigh of relief. “Devlin, honestly, you can’t keep expecting that she won’t so much as kiss a boy before she’s eighty. Now, I want the truth from one of you. What was Chace doing in the house?”

When I admitted why Garren had to drive Parker home, part of me wished that I had continued with my cover story. My parents were equally displeased, having told me to abandon my plan to uncover the truth behind Belmont’s murder. It was even worse, according to my mother, that I was abusing Garren’s own abilities. Memory extraction and manipulation were only meant to be used in desperate circumstances.

“We just had our talk today. Do you not remember what I said?”

“I remember, Dad. This isn’t about me wanting to be a shark now.” My mother looked at him, strangely. He scratched the back of his ear and whispered that this conversation was about me, not his questionable inspirational lectures. “What happened to him is part of something bigger and nana agrees with me.”

“When could you possibly visit your grandmother? What does she have to do with this?”

“I visited her when I told you that I was meeting with Mr. Hilton about the loan and then she kind of appeared to me as a freaky spirit thingy outside Will’s house. She didn’t really explain how but it was weird. The nurse told me that she’s tried to escape a few times because she wanted to give us a message. She said we’re in danger and before you think that’s just her being dramatic…I haven’t been completely honest about what’s going on.”

My lack of a filter around authority figures was the least of my parents’ worries as I recalled everything that occurred since the night of the party, my mother almost having a heart attack when she learned about the attack at the memorial. The only thing that all of them were unaware of was Chief Parker’s odd reaction to his choking fit in the interrogation room. Hearing that there was another possible reaper in *Belmont Falls* shocked my mother, who had only ever seen one other reaper pass through the town when I was a little girl. Garren refused to believe that a reaper was behind Belmont’s death and the other incidents.

“Their guardian would’ve taken them to the council if the situation was that severe.”

“Do you get a new guardian if the one you have dies?”

“Usually, yes but if it happens when the reaper is well into adulthood, then the council sees them as fit to handle themselves. We’d know if a guardian was killed. We…feel it, just as you feel a person’s death.”

“Then whoever this reaper is, maybe they have their guardian kept hostage or manipulated them into working together. It’s not impossible. These creatures don’t always have a reason for possessing people, beyond just wanting to cause a little trouble, but right now, they’re listening to this master who is telling them to hurt innocent people. Maybe one of the creatures possessed whoever killed him that night or the person is working with the reaper.”
“And you think one of the possible suspects is someone in his own family? Devlin, tell her that’s insane,” said my mother, having not removed her arm from my shoulders since I spoke about the memorial.

He ran his hand through his dark hair. “I want to but she makes a convincing argument. Who else would’ve hired Jackson to steal those papers? Someone took out life insurance for Fin and unless someone in this town is a very good actor, it has to be a family member. Maybe it’s not connected at all but it’s certainly worth looking into, don’t you agree?”

At the moment, the living room was split into three separate camps: my mother and Garren denying the possibility of another reaper and wanting me to move on from playing amateur detective, my father being mildly intrigued and at least willing to believe that another Belmont played a role, and Elena, Belmont, and me now more determined than ever to find the truth. My word, this time, was not enough to convince my parents that I was going to continue on with a normal life, not one where I risked getting mauled to death by shadow monsters. I handed over all the evidence I had gathered to my father, including the ring that I discovered on the underside of the bridge.

Another week had passed, though being cooped up in my house all day made it feel like months. The day after my interrogation at the police station, Parker visited me again, apologizing a dozen times for his father’s behavior. My own father watched him like a lion eyeing its prey, ensuring that we were never alone for more than thirty seconds and casually mentioning his days on the high school wrestling team and how he learned how to kill someone with his thumb on one of his expeditions. The only upside to being trapped in my house for days was that it gave me time to work on my piece for the art exhibition.

Early Monday morning, I got dressed very quietly for school and sneaked out of the house. Garren was leaning against his police car, his arms folded over his chest.

“Going somewhere? It’s a little too early to head over to the school.”

“The cemetery. We go there every morning to see my family. Is that illegal?” asked Elena.

“No at all. I’ll drive you then I can drop Tessa off at school. I wouldn’t want her getting in any trouble.”

On the way to the cemetery, I responded to his questions with nothing more than a “yes”, “no”, or “I don’t know”. Noticing the several cups of coffee and the half empty bag of sour cream and onion chips in the passenger seat, I wondered if he had spent the night sitting outside my house. Elena sat in front of her family’s tombstones, telling them how she finally learned how to cook without burning herself (though she conveniently left out burning Belmont’s arm with a splash of water from the pot).

“I remember when the accident happened. It was on the news for almost two weeks…all those interviews with her friends and her other family members that came all the way here to pay their respects. I went to the funeral with her. She wasn’t happy that Angela Starr was harassing her friends for interviews. Isn’t that funny?”

“I don’t see the humor in exploiting a person’s death for some gossip,” said Garren, listening to Elena’s one-sided conversation.

“Not that. I mean, Starr literally stalked her friends for days to get any interesting information,
something to make a good story. Look at how she got to Will’s house so quickly and tried to get a
statement from Connor while he was being rolled into the ambulance. It’s funny that she never did
that after Belmont died.” I slipped a subtle wink to an intrigued Belmont, who was playing with his
lighter. “She wouldn’t care if it was murder or an accident. I never saw her hounding his friends for
some juicy gossip to turn into her latest article.”

“Tessa.”

“Just an observation, that’s all.”

“You swore to me and your parents that this obsession with Fin’s death was at an end. Don’t you
dare think of meeting with Angie to get dirt on—”

His face was soon redder than a tomato as he realized what he called her. He raised his voice in an
attempt to drown out our laughter, insisting that we misheard him. Elena returned to the police car to
the sight of Belmont making kissy faces while I mimicked Garren’s voice.

“Officer Ken has a thing for Angela Starr,” I teased.

“K—oh, like a ken doll? Very mature, Tessa. I’ve seen better behaved monkeys at the zoo,” he said,
fumbling with the back door. “I don’t have feelings for—we went to school together and for a time,
she had a crush on me. I’m sure she still does but it never…we were never together. Get in the car. I
know what you three are planning and it’s not going to work. You are not using me to get any
information Angela has on Fin’s case.”

We looked at each other then back at Garren, amazed. “That’s genius, man. We didn’t even think of
that,” said Belmont, stuffing his lighter back in his jeans pocket.

In the blink of an eye, Garren’s face turned from bright red to chalk white. He shook his head, seeing
the plan form between the three of us like a psychic connection.

“W—what? I—no, you were—I didn’t say…ignore what I just said.”

“We were just going to use you to find out what Chief Parker’s hiding but this is so much better. She
has to know something about that night. We can meet her after school. Call her and tell her you want
to meet for coffee.”

“Absolutely not. Tessa, you promised—”

“I promised not to look into Belmont’s death myself. You’re doing it for me. I bet you’ve got your
friend Angie’s number. You can either call her or I’ll sneak into the police station later and risk Chief
Parker trying to tear off my head. Do you want that on your hands, guardian?”

“Fine. I’ll leave her a message,” he said, bearing a look of defeated resignation. “But I highly doubt
she knows anything. If she had any information on the Belmonts, she would find a way to get it out
there. She can’t stand keeping secrets to herself.”

After a very interesting call, where Angela Starr’s high-pitched squeal could be heard through the
phone, he drove us to the school, occasionally throwing me an exasperated glare in the rearview
mirror. We planned for him to pick us up after my last class, to join him on his ‘date’ at the Blue
Moon café. I was halfway through the front doors when Amy tackled me in a hug. Behind her,
Parker and her friends were waiting, most of them looking relieved to see me back at school. Mr.
Hilton stood out among them, his arm around his daughter’s shoulders. Parker glanced outside anxiously, as if expecting my father to be joining me in classes for the day.

“Tessa, we were like so worried. We tried to visit you at the hospital but Claire’s mom wouldn’t let us all leave at once. Did you like the magazines?”

“Yeah, thanks. I liked that one article about bird prints being the new chic for the winter.”

“So true. It’s why I bought this dress at this cute shop in New Orleans last week,” she said, showing off her dark, short-sleeved, knee-length dress with a white dove print.

Mr. Hilton asked for a moment alone when the bell rang for homeroom. Hilton went to say goodbye to her father before joining her friends but he simply waved her off, his eyes on me. I mentally prepared myself for the verbal lashing I would receive when we were in the same room.

“I’m glad to see you’re all better. Not in any pain from that mess in the police station, are you?” he asked, concerned.

“You know about that?”

“Oh yes, your mother was quite upset. I’ve already spoken to Chief Parker about keeping his temper under control. Stress is no reason to harm a child. If he harms you again, tell me and that man will lose his badge faster than he can say Belmont Falls.”

“That’s uh really nice of you, sir, but I doubt I’ll be seeing much of him. I was only at the station to tell him what happened with Connor Mitchell.”

“Yes, I heard about that. This town’s going topsy turvey lately. What with happened to Fin and now Connor…good thing you were there to call the police.” He fixed the cuffs on his shirt. I briefly caught a glimpse of his left wrist and kicked Belmont’s leg to get his attention away from a freshman girl bending over to pick up her books. “Your mother told me how they’re framing it as an accident. An accident, I tell you. How ridiculous. Tessa?”

My eyes had not left his wrist, where moments ago I had seen the tattoo from Parker’s memory. I moved my hand behind my back, holding Belmont’s shirt in a firm grip while Elena pinned his arms to his side. He fought against the both of us, which made it look as if I was bouncing on my heels, hissing, “Let me at him. I’m going to beat that crypt keeper within an inch of his life,” under his breath.

“Sorry. I just—I saw the tattoo and…no offense but you don’t look like the type. Did you get it when you were younger?”

Mr. Hilton chuckled. “Oh yes, just before college. It was part of my initiation into the Odyssey Society,” he said, touching the wolf’s head on his wrist as though it evoked a fond memory. “It’s an adventurer’s club of sorts. My great great grandfather started it himself. We technically don’t allow boys to become members until they’re eighteen but we don’t mind if they come along with their fathers. I invited your father to join several times but he’s much too busy with his work.”

“It’s men only?”

“Of course not. Don’t think me sexist, dear. We’ve had a few women join in the past. Rhys thought Fin would be a good match for it before his…accident. He’s been far more active in it lately to cope
with the death.”

My thoughts drifted to the red and green fingers in Belmont’s memory and the same colored walls in the unborn baby’s nursery. The only family member I could truly disregard was his youngest brother, Bradley. All of the insane theories in the world could never make me believe that a five year old boy was capable of murder, especially one who once cried after accidentally crushing an ant. Mr. Hilton told me how the club intended to explore a series of caves just outside town during the weekend.

“Do you think I could go? I know I’m not a member but it sounds fun and it would be perfect for some inspiration…for my piece at the exhibition.”

He seemed unsure about letting me join the excursion, noting that Chief Parker was one of the members. “I don’t think your parents would feel comfortable with that,” he said, waving at a passing Nurse Simpson.

“But you’ll be there. I doubt he’d try anything with you around, sir. Please? I’ve never been the type to take risks and who knows how many chances I’ll get for an adventure like this? I promise not to be any trouble.”

After considering it for a few minutes, he grinned. “I suppose it couldn’t hurt. You will need a parent’s permission, of course. I require that of any minors who travel with us and you will need to dress appropriately.” I nodded eagerly, letting him think that I was excited to explore a cave when I was truly interested in investigating Rhys Belmont and Chief Parker. “You know, sometimes, I wish that Claire was more like you, Tessa. I’ve tried to get her to explore hundreds of times on vacations but she’d rather spend all day in the spa. We leave at nine o’clock sharp on Saturday. I’ll send one of my drivers to pick you up and take you to the house half an hour before.”

“Can’t wait. Thank you so much, Mr. Hilton. I should get to homeroom. It was nice talking to you.”

“Always a pleasure, dear.”

The moment I stepped into the AP Biology classroom, I felt Hilton’s icy blue eyes burning into me. I hesitated to sit at the back table where Amy saved me a seat beside her but thought it was a slightly better option than the awkward stares from my classmates. Dr. Baxter was one of several pairs of eyes watching me as I headed to the back of the room.

“What did my dad want with you this time, Byrne? Is he paying for your hospital bills too?” whispered Hilton, not bothering to hide the fury in her voice. “How is he helping his little charity case today?”

“We were just talking about Will’s dad and uh the trip he’s taking with his adventure club. I said it sounded fun and he said I could go.”

The pen she was using to draw in her notebook poked through the page. Parker, overhearing the conversation, leaned towards the table with a smile.

“You’re going too? I didn’t think you’d be into that stuff. Always with the surprises, Byrne. If you get too scared, feel free to hold onto me.”

A paper ball struck the side of my face. “You? Why would he let you go? Your dad’s not even—you’re not…is this all part of your plan, bitch?” said Hilton with a sneer.
“W—what plan?” I asked, my eyes darting to Elena.

She shrugged, looking just as clueless as me and the rest of Hilton’s friends. Dr. Baxter was discussing the art exhibition and Mrs. Allen’s offer for extra credit by creating a piece for the gallery.

“Is that why you let Chace make you all pretty too? To get his attention?” she asked, slamming her notebook shut. “You didn’t need that. He was noticing you back when you were a pathetic little girl in baggy sweaters. You might have everyone else fooled but not me. I’ve known exactly who you are since that first day in second grade. Soon enough, everyone will see that you’re nothing more than a manipulative little schemer who hides behind her doe eyes and ‘please pity me’ face. You’re—”

“Miss Hilton, is the exhibition so boring that you need to have your own side conversation?” interrupted Dr. Baxter.

Twenty pairs of eyes were now looking in my direction as the other students shifted in their seats. I wished that I was able to turn invisible at will or at least teleport myself to another room. Hilton feigned a smile at the dark-skinned man with high cheekbones who looked like he belonged on the cover of *GQ*, not discussing extra credit opportunities with a group of high school students (the man who was also her secret boyfriend, according to Parker).

“I’m sorry, sir. I was just saying that Tessa’s skirt is so pretty. It really shows off her legs, don’t you think?”

“As a teacher, I think it would be inappropriate to comment on such a thing.”

“When is it appropriate? When you’re at a high school party and too busy staring at her to pay attention to your girlfriend?” I shrunk down in my seat, whispers erupting from her remark. “You didn’t have a problem with telling your friend on the phone all about her sexy legs and how you wanted to slip your tongue—”

“Miss Hilton, that’s enough!” The bell rang, signaling the end of homeroom. “I would like a word with you. The rest of you, get to your first class.”

I began to follow Amy to AP English Literature when I felt a sharp tug on the back of my jacket. Belmont dragged me back towards the door. Instead of saying a word, he pointed towards the door then put a finger to his lips. I peeked through the door, seeing Hilton on Dr. Baxter’s desk with her legs crossed. He paced back and forth, muttering to himself.

“Discretion is all I asked for, Claire. I thought you were smart enough to be careful with your words. If those pack of morons understood what you meant—”

She scoffed, taking her nail file out of her purse. “They didn’t. Fin was the only one who knew and he’s dead. Stop freaking out over nothing. It’s not like I was lying. I heard you that night. Surprised I didn’t find you jacking off behind a tree.”

“Is that what this is all about? Your jealousy? I’m not a teenage boy, Claire. I don’t care for your childish rivalries.”

“That bitch started it. If you think I’m so childish, why don’t you dump me and hook up with her? You obviously don’t care about me. You’ll have to get in line. I think my dad wants a shot first since he’s throwing all this money at her and her mom. Looks like you’re not the only one trying for a
mother-daughter combo.”

Dr. Baxter silenced her with a backhanded slap. Belmont stopped me from opening the door, leaving Hilton to clasp her cheek in pain. The fear reflected in her eyes suggested that it was not the first time he had gotten rough with her. He grabbed her by the front of her dress, his nails digging into her breast.

“S—stop it.”

“You’re right, Claire. I don’t give a damn about you. Fin was right when he told you that I was just using you out of boredom. You were all too willing, what with the flirting and wanting to impress your friends with your secret, older boyfriend. To me, you’re second best, just as your father sees you.”

Claire whimpered, struggling to remove his hand. He gripped her dress so tightly that it caused a slight tear.

“Oh, apologies, I tore your nice dress. Now, I’m only going to say this once. You are going to stop antagonizing that girl. She’s been through enough, don’t you think? Put your petty jealousy aside and for once, be mature.”

She spat in his face. “Screw you. Just because I let you have all this,” she said, indicating her curvaceous body. “Doesn’t mean you can tell me who I can and can’t torment. That face of yours isn’t good enough to make me forget how much I hate that stupid—”

He slammed her head into the desk. Thinking on my feet, I pulled the fire alarm near the girls’ bathroom. Within seconds, a blaring sound, loud and irritating enough to make one’s ears bleed, rang through the hallways and students casually walked out of their classrooms, knowing that there was no danger of an actual fire. Mrs. Allen hushed a group of gossiping freshman girls and urged them to stay in a single file line. She scowled when one girl quietly commented that talking did not affect their ability to leave the building.

I slipped into the line of students leaving the computer lab and waited outside, keeping an eye out for Hilton. Five minutes into the fake fire drill, I found her with Amy, rubbing concealer over a cut on her cheek. After Principal Hilton reprimanded the entire student body for one miscreant fooling around with the fire alarm (“Free beer for whoever did it!” shouted Parker to a chorus of laughter), she allowed us back into the building. Dr. Baxter was sitting behind his desk, wiping the blood under his nails.

“Byrne, don’t be stupid,” whispered Belmont, clutching my arm.

“He’s right, Tessa. Look at what he did to Claire. He’s always a creep but he’s even worse in a bad mood. Just go to class,” said Elena.

I wrenched my arm from Belmont’s grasp and walked into the classroom. Dr. Baxter was typing on a laptop, likely searching for some video to show his class instead of teaching an actual lesson. He lifted his head up when I shut the laptop.

“Tessa, shouldn’t you be in class? If this is about what happened in homeroom, I already spoke to Claire. She won’t be doing that again.”

“Why, because you slapped her?”
“I’m sorry?” He acted confused though the tense gleam in his eyes betrayed him. “You’re mistaken. I would never raise my hand at a student.”

“Oh, spare me. I saw you. I can’t stop her from hooking up with vile trash but even if we’re not friends, it doesn’t mean I’ll let you hurt someone like that. If you ever hurt her again, I’ll—”

“You’ll what?” he asked, sounding more like a challenge than a question.

“I don’t have specifics right now but trust me, you’ll regret it.” Belmont scoffed at my failure of a threat. “Go for someone your own age instead of taking advantage of girls half your age.”

My right foot had not even passed through the door when Dr. Baxter pushed it close with one hand and spun me around with the other. His body was pressed against mine, not even an inch of space between us. I grimaced at the feeling of something hard brushing my inner thigh.

“I guess I can’t help it. Some men like blondes, some like brunettes, some like them skinny, some like them a bit thicker, some like them nice and sweet, some like them a little nasty… I prefer teenage girls with sharp tongues. Yours has gotten very sharp lately, hasn’t it?”

“G—get off me.”

“If you saw me slap poor Claire, then I’m sure you heard what I said after that. It is the truth, isn’t it? It would take more than a little smile to make your knees go weak.” As he spoke, I waved my hand in a circular motion, a silent sign for Elena and Belmont to not hit him, at risk of exposing themselves. “But I enjoy that. You’ve made it difficult for me now that you’ve decided to abandon your usual style. I used to imagine what you look like under the sweatshirts and I have to say, my imagination didn’t do you justice.”

He snatched my hand, inches away from his face, and leaned close to my ear. “You’ve kept me up so many nights, Tessa, and I’d love to take what I want, right here and now, but I’ll be a gentleman. Do be careful though. The sharper your tongue gets, the less I may be able to resist and I can only be a gentleman for so long. You won’t have a stapler to help you then,” he whispered, his breath on my neck making me cringe.

My trembling hand managed to grab the door handle and I hurried into the nearest bathroom, wanting to scrub away the feeling of his hands on me. Elena suggested leaving an anonymous tip to Principal Hilton about his affair with her daughter, though the note could leave out Hilton’s name.

“It would take less than five minutes for her mother to figure it out, Elena. I don’t want to drag Hilton into this. He knew I got attacked in Will’s house.”

Belmont was fixing his hair in the mirror. “He could’ve found that out from any cop, Byrne. More than half the town’s in love with him. Guy’s a grade A jackass but you have to admit, he’s good looking. He knows some of the younger cops. I bet one of them mentioned it to him. You need to work on your threats. You couldn’t scare a rabbit.” He caught my reflection. “What? Why are you smiling?”

“Because you were a decent person. I wouldn’t have seen what he did if you didn’t drag me back to the classroom. You knew he hit her before, didn’t you?”
“She mentioned it a couple times. It was nothing,” he muttered.

“It could’ve been a lot worse than a cut on her cheek. You helped her.”

His lips curved into a fraction of a smile. “Ooh, he does one nice thing. Let’s congratulate him for acting like a normal person,” said Elena sarcastically, looking irked by my compliment. “I’m going outside to find some dog poop to put in Baxter’s coffee. You should get to English before they think you fainted or something.”

She disappeared from her spot by the sink, leaving me and Belmont alone in the bathroom. Knowing their tumultuous past, I doubted that I needed to explain her coldness towards him.

“That girl can hold a grudge like nobody else,” he said, flicking open his lighter.

“Can you blame her? You weren’t exactly Prince Charming when you two dated or when you were just friends.”

“Look, I know I was pretty bad back then but I’m not that per—” I crossed my arms. “I’m trying to be better. To be honest, dying helped me see that and you’re kinda part of that too. You’re the only person who’s willing to give me a chance and who wants to help me. My own family won’t even consider that my death wasn’t an accident. I was a jerk to you that night and you’re still willing to help me out. I don’t get it.”

“It’s called being a nice person. Somewhere deep, deep, deep inside you is one too and I think a tiny part of him came out this morning. Give Elena time. I’m not saying she’ll ever be best friends with you again but someday, she might be able to tolerate you.”

Elena eventually returned during the last period of the day, Art. She claimed that she was spying on Dr. Baxter but I knew better, that she wanted time away from Belmont. It was challenging enough for her to be near him, doing her best for the sole purpose of protecting me. In her mind, my small compliment was comparable to me forgetting my own past troubles with him. She was the last person who would believe that Belmont could ever be a decent person.

I sat outside on the front steps, waiting for Garren to arrive at the school. My eyes constantly flickered to my phone to check the time, in hopes that he would not back out of our deal. I had not known Garren long but despite having a giant stick up his backside, he had some sense of honor. Parker encouraged me to watch his football practice, even offering me a ride home.

“My ride’s almost here. Don’t be late to practice.”

“Coach won’t mind if I’m a little late. I’m the star player, after all. I can always skip it and we can go somewhere.”

“I heard you talking to your friends. You’re supposed to hang out with them at the Falls after practice. You don’t have to ditch your plans. It’ll only give Hilton more reason to hate me.”

“She doesn’t hate—okay, she hates you with a fiery passion.” I stifled a laugh. “Claire’s always been the jealous type. Ignore her.”

“It’s what I’ve been doing for the past ten years.”

Katie passed by the front doors in her cheerleading uniform. She called out Amy’s name in
frustration, warning her of Hilton’s threat to remove her from the squad for being late.

“Have you seen her, Tessa? Claire sent me to find her but it’s like she vanished.”

“Not since art class, sorry. Did you try calling her?”

“Y—no, I didn’t think of that. My head’s been all jumbled since…”

Her voice trailed off as fresh tears pooled in her eyes. She sniffled to regain her composure and called Amy’s phone.

“Amy, finally. I’ve been looking everywhere for you. Where—what?” Katie’s confused gaze fell on me. “Yeah, Tessa’s right here. Why? Okay, okay, I’ll let you talk to her. One second.”

She tapped the screen and I heard Amy sing, her melodious voice echoing through the phone. Since we were eight, she had been the lead in numerous plays, whether it was produced by the school or the local theater. She was known for her passion for singing, never missing an opportunity to show off her talent. In one of our conversations during lunch, she had mentioned that while she was away at college, pursuing a business degree to appease her parents, she hoped to be discovered by a talent agent to achieve her true dream of being on Broadway.

Parker joked that it was too early to begin practicing for the spring musical and while I was not opposed to listening to her sing, finding her voice soothing, her choice of song unnerved me. My hands gripped the stone steps.

“Tessa? What is it?” asked Elena, noticing my odd reaction.

“When will we meet again, my sweet? My heart aches for you so. Will it be by the old oak tree? The one where we shared those kisses three?”

I grabbed Katie’s phone. “Amy? Where are you?”

“The roof,” she replied, before continuing to sing.

“Tessa, wait up!” shouted Parker as I dashed up three flights of stairs to the roof.

Amy was standing on the ledge, a gust of wind blowing back her cropped, dark hair. Hearing me call her name, she turned around, looking frightened.

“Amy, why are you on the roof? Get down before you fall.”

“I—I don’t want to be on here. He told me and I tried to stop but he made me stand here. He made me sing that song.”

“He? Who brought you up here?”

“I don’t…it was in my head. He said he was using me to punish you because you didn’t listen. Why can’t I get down?”

“I’ll help you, okay?” I was distracted by a banging noise. Katie and Parker were unable to open the door, which somehow locked behind me. “Just give me your hand and I’ll help you down.”
As I reached for her hand, the fearful expression fell from her face, replaced with a sadistic smile. She cackled loudly and purposely leaned over the edge of the roof.

“Itty bitty Tessa didn’t listen. Didn’t she hear what I said? Now the little bird will fall,” she said in a disembodied voice, her eyes turning milky white.

“Get out of her now.”

“I let your friend live last time. This time, you won’t be that lucky. Her blood is on your hands. This is your punishment. Every time you disobey, another friend dies. I can hurt your invisible friends too. I’ll kill Fin all over again then I’ll kill Elena while you watch helplessly. I’ll make sure her death lasts the longest.”

“S—stop it. You don’t have to hurt her. It’s me you want so kill me. Just leave Amy alone.”

She pouted. “But we don’t want to kill you. Master wants you alive. Master is trying to help you. So much potential and you waste it on these pieces of flesh,” she said, patting her cheek. “With each death, you’ll care less and less until you realize that they mean nothing.”

“I don’t know who’s controlling you but I am nothing like your master. Every person means something, whether they’re like me or not. I won’t let you take another life!”

A warm sensation grazed my wrist. My raven-shaped birthmark turned solid black, reminiscent of the night I saved Katie, and Amy tilted her head back, a cloud of black smoke emerging from her mouth. As Amy remained on the ledge, in an almost catatonic state, the shadow creature appeared in front of her, growling. The creature lunged towards me and out of instinct, I crouched down, with my hands over my head. A flash of golden light washed over me, my wrist feeling like it was on fire. I waited for the creature’s attack but I heard nothing but the wind.

“B—Byrne, what is that?” I heard Belmont say behind me.

Moving my hands, I saw the creature swatting at a golden light in the shape of a raven. The raven passed through the creature, slicing it in half and reducing it to a pile of ash. I stepped back as the raven flew towards me and perched itself on the palm of my hand, turning into a thin black dagger with its blade in the shape of a scythe.

I stuffed the dagger in my jacket pocket and helped a bemused Amy down from the ledge. She had no recollection of how she ended up on the roof and before I could think of a convincing lie, the door broke open, Parker, Garren, and Katie fell to the ground, piled on top of each other. Garren managed to extricate himself first and almost tripped over his own feet in his hurry to check on both me and Amy.

Breathless, he lied that he was driving past the school when he saw Amy standing on the roof. He passed off the suspiciously locked door on a piece of wood jammed into the door frame, which was enough to convince Amy, Parker, and Katie.

“Officer Garren, I swear I don’t know how I got up here. Maybe someone was playing a prank on me. My vitamin water kind of tasted funny.”

“I’m sure that’s it. Do you need to go to the hospital? I was heading that way to take Tessa for a checkup.”
“No. I have to get to cheer practice. Claire is probably so mad,” she said, running down the steps as though she had not been seconds away from plummeting to her death.

I followed Garren to a red sedan, instead of the usual police car. He drove around the corner before parking along the sidewalk, concerned by my silence.

“What happened to Amy? Was it one of those creatures?”

“Yeah, it possessed her but this time, it was different. She heard it in her head and it forced her up to the roof,” said Elena, answering for me. “It made Amy sing a song. I’ve never heard it before.”

“My grandmother used to sing it,” I explained, twirling the pendant of my necklace between my fingers. “She sang it all the time when we visited my grandfather’s grave. The last time I heard it was the day she got attacked. We were all supposed to go to the zoo and when my mother found her, my grandmother was lying on the living room, unconscious. Her stereo was playing that song on a loop, like it was taunting her…telling her that she’d be reunited with my grandfather soon. No one could know the meaning of that song besides my family and whoever attacked her.”

“You think it’s the same person who killed me? The reaper?” asked Belmont.

“Who else could it be? They had to be stalking my grandmother for awhile if they recorded her singing just for that tape. The creature said their master doesn’t want to kill me. What if they want to use me to get at my grandmother? To finish what they started.”

Garren was firmly in denial of the reaper theory. As he began to list off several reasons that it was improbable, starting with his beloved council being aware of all actions committed by reapers and guardians, the blade of the dagger glinted in the sunlight streaming through the window. He reached into my jacket pocket.

“Hey, you can at least ask. What is this, violate personal space day? First Baxter, now you…” He stared at the strange dagger, his eyes growing to the size of a basketball. “I was going to show you that after you talked to your precious Angie. I don’t want you thinking I have some weird knife collection so I’ll just tell you now. That creature was about to attack me and this golden raven appeared out of nowhere.”

“Came out of her birthmark. It was just light and then it looked like a raven,” added Elena, slapping Belmont’s hand as he reached into the bag of chips on her lap.

“Didn’t see that part but I did see the weird raven slice one of those creatures in half and then it turned into the dagger. That’s all I—”

“What did you do?!”

“N—nothing,” I stuttered, taken aback by his shouting. “I told you what happened. Why are you freaking out?”

“Y—you shouldn’t…this can’t be here. The council will—oh gods, my father will never let me hear the end of it. This is all your fault,” he said, pointing at Belmont who stuffed a handful of chips in his mouth and mumbled, “What did I do?” in between bites. “She was fine until you came along and started toying with her head. We wouldn’t be in this mess if you hadn’t—we need to get rid of it.”

I snatched the dagger from him. “Uh no. We need to keep it because it’s the only thing that hurts
those shadow creatures. It saved my life. What’s got your panties in a knot?”

Garren leaned his head against the steering wheel. The way he was acting, it was like the dagger was a weapon used to murder the council leader and possessing it would frame us for the crime. He quietly explained, not raising his voice above a whisper, that the dagger was a treasured artifact, the blade of Charon. It was one of the weapons used by the ferryman of the same name to guard the passage to the Underworld and keep its many monsters from escaping out into the rest of the world. The blade was entrusted to the council for safekeeping centuries ago and was protected by all sorts of enchantments, hidden in a place only known by its members.

Though I tried to tell him that it was not my fault, he was having a full blown panic attack. “I swear I didn’t summon it or perform a creepy ritual to bring it here. Like I said, my birthmark shot out a raven that killed the creature and then turned into…this. I don’t know how. I never even knew about it until now.”

“You’ve certainly gotten better at lying. How do I know you didn’t read about it in one of your books, figured out its location, and sent Elena or Fin to retrieve it?”

“That’s insane. Okay, if I knew it could kill those creatures, I probably would’ve tried to find it” My honesty caused him to become short of breath. “But I swear on my little brother’s life that I was clueless about it until five minutes ago. You know I’m telling the truth. If it’s so protected, why did it show up? This happened before…when I saved Katie. The dagger didn’t appear but my birthmark went all dark and then that first creature vanished.”

“We’ll talk to your mother. Perhaps she knows a way to send it back before the council realizes that it’s missing. If Cedric finds out…but he won’t because we’ll tell your mother after this little plan with Angela fails. Is it hot in here? Am I the only one sweating?”

Belmont, not helping matters, suggested that the blame was solely on Garren for this dagger mishap. If he had shown up at the school on time, he could have protected me from the shadow creature himself but because of his tardiness, I was forced to summon a mystical dagger that was allegedly off limits to reapers. His taunts were slowly leading Garren to his breaking point, his hands gripping the wheel. Instead of voicing his anger, he settled for seizing the bag of chips and crushing the remaining chips into pieces.

He threw the crumpled bag at Belmont’s face then headed inside the Blue Moon café, where Angela Starr, swiping on lip gloss, was sitting at a table by the window. She was dressed in her usual attire that was better suited for Beverly Hills, with her six inch peep toe heels and a sleeveless, floral print dress. The bow-shaped belt around her waist highlighted her unnaturally skinny frame and her neatly trimmed nails were freshly painted with a French manicure, diamond studs separating the white and clear polish. Her cherry red lips, long eyelashes, and the light blush accentuating the cheekbones of her tanned, oval face gave her the appearance of a living doll.

I never understood why she wasted her time as a journalist in Belmont Falls when she clearly had aspirations of stardom. A passing tourist would see her as a sweet young woman with a passion for journalism but those who lived in Belmont Falls knew that her doll-like appearance was merely a façade, hiding her truly ugly personality. Angela Starr was, no doubt, ambitious, doing all kinds of things, mostly illegal, to get her hands on a good story and her willingness to slander anyone made her plenty of enemies.

The adults in town outright despised her and her malicious tactics. She was much more popular with the teenagers, particularly Hilton and her clique, who devoured her articles as ammunition for their
bullying.

I sat at a table directly across from her, pretending to text on my phone. Upon seeing Garren, she let out a girlish giggle and kissed him on both cheeks.

“Ollie, it’s been forever. I’m so touched that you missed me. I got your favorite. Coffee, two sugars.”

As they sat down at the table, her fingers rested on his wrist like a snake coiled around a tree branch.

“Heh, well I saw that you were back in town when we were dealing with the Connor Mitchell accident. How was Los Angeles?”

“So amazing. Don’t get me wrong. I’ll always love this town but being in LA is just…it’s like a whole other world. I even got to talk to some people about expanding my blog into an actual show. How awesome would that be?” she said, taking a sip from her vanilla soy latte.

“It would be very impressive. Imagine using your talents to get the latest gossip on celebrities. None of them would be able to hide their secrets from you.”

Unsurprisingly, Angela boasted about herself and her potential fame. Garren was hardly able to say one word before she redirected the conversation back to her trip to Los Angeles. Whenever she mentioned a man or the occasional woman flirting with her, she seemed to be gauging his reaction, waiting for a hint of jealousy.

She flashed him a seductive smile. “I think I know why you asked me to meet you.”

“It’s about the Fin Belmont case.” Those six words altered her mood considerably. She retracted her hand from his wrist, as if it was made of lava. “Angie, I’m sorry if you thought…”

“Thought what?” she asked, coolly. “This is so typical of you, Ollie. You just want to use me and then you’ll avoid me like a plague until you need me again.”

“It isn’t like that at all,” he assured her, reaching for her hand. “I—I’ve always…no matter how I feel, I can’t go against Chief Parker’s orders. He’s my boss and if he found out that we were seeing each other, he’d fire me on the spot.”

“I get why you’re scared of him after what he did to that poor Byron girl.” Garren’s eyes widened, realizing that she was referring to me. “Yeah, I know about that. After a few beers, Danny will talk about anything. If he wasn’t so close to Charles, you know he’d be the one getting fired. Why are you looking into Fin Belmont’s death? It was ruled an accident.”

“One of his classmates doesn’t think it was and I thought speaking with you would help prove their suspicions wrong. I mean, if you had any information to the contrary, you would’ve posted it on your blog, no matter the consequences.”

Her hazel green eyes sparkled with excitement. “No, they’re right. I’ve been sitting on this for weeks now and I’ve been dying to post it but I’ll admit that I’m a little nervous. It’s about the Belmont family, after all. The last time I posted a remotely scandalous thing about one of them, Charles pretty much threatened to kill me. Remember that article on their spring break trip to Cancun? It was taken down in like thirty seconds. Didn’t stop someone from taking a quick screenshot to keep circulating it but I guess a blurry picture is easier to dismiss than a full article.”
Angela retrieved her laptop from her leather purse. Garren’s eager smile was as fake as the toupee on the middle-aged café owner’s head. When he agreed to meet her, he hoped that it would prove pointless and dissuade me from continuing the investigation into Belmont’s death. She opened up several documents on her laptop, including a copy of the life insurance policy. Most of the documents were statements from the staff at Belmont Manor, willing to divulge a few secrets in exchange for money.

The maids reported overhearing numerous arguments between Belmont and his father in the days leading up to his death. One maid, who had been cleaning the kitchen the night before the incident, witnessed Mr. Belmont threatening to disown his son if he leaked a well-guarded secret.

“She didn’t hear all the details but it was enough to do my own research. Katrina’s about four months along in her pregnancy. Those maids hear everything, Ollie, and I mean everything. The last time they heard Charles and his little wife getting intimate? Eight months ago, give or take a few weeks. That baby isn’t his.”

Hearing Angela theorize about the possible fathers of the unborn baby sparked Fin’s own memories. He whispered to me and Elena that he remembered the fight with his father and how he learned about the secret. Coming home after a grueling football practice, he overheard his parents arguing about his mother keeping the baby. His father wanted her to terminate the pregnancy, disgusted by the idea of his wife’s baby being fathered by another man.

Though his mother strongly denied any affairs, his father threatened to divorce her and leave her penniless, the same as she was when they first met years ago, though his exact words were ‘a penniless, desperate whore’. Belmont used the secret as leverage to protect his mother, knowing that his father would never want the town to learn such a secret. He was willing to believe his mother’s claims that the baby was truly his father’s; the baby the product of a hazy, drunken memory from a night spent in St. Tropez.

“Somehow, Fin found out. We all know how much he hated his father and wanted to leave this town, never look back. This was his ticket out.”

“So your theory is that his father took out this life insurance policy then killed him to keep the secret? I hardly see why he would be that threatened. Even if Fin exposed the truth about the baby, he wasn’t known for being reliable. I doubt anyone would have believed him.”

“Not exactly. I think Robot Rosalie is in on it too. She’s got her lips so firmly attached to his ass that she’d do anything for him. She’s daddy’s little girl. I traced back the document to the insurance agent and talked with him at a bar in New Orleans. Three hours later plus my lucky bra and my favorite little black dress? He told me that Rosalie was the one who met with him about the life insurance.”

Angela showed him security footage of Rosalie meeting the insurance agent in his office. “She claimed that her parents were being cautious since Fin planned to go on a little adventure with Rhys after graduation. I think the money from the policy was going to be used for his mother after the divorce, to keep her quiet about any other secrets in that family.”

I remembered how Mr. Mitchell mentioned the offshore account in Greece to my father. If Angela was right, the plan was for Mrs. Belmont to be sent there after giving birth to live a comfortable life, far away from the rest of her family.

“Why haven’t you told anyone about this? You have video evidence plus testimony from the insurance agent.”
“Except I don’t. The morning after our night together, I woke up alone in the hotel bed. He left a note that he needed to leave town for a few days to visit family but he would be willing to meet with me again. That was three weeks ago, Ollie, and I checked the handwriting on the note to a note in his office. Pieces of it don’t match.” Copies of the two notes appeared side by side on the screen, the differences between them circled in red. “Last night, I finally tracked his credit card to another hotel in New Orleans and found out that he was last seen with his body hanging from a ceiling fan. The cops there said he left behind a suicide note, stress over a recent divorce and the usual cliché crap.”

“Angie, you don’t think—”

“Of course I do and you’re thinking it too. Charles Belmont got to him first to tie up the loose ends. As much as I love a scandal, I love my life a little more.”

She checked a message on her phone. “I need to get to the hospital to talk with Connor Mitchell. Hopefully, I get there before your boss does and I find out that Mitchell slit his own throat. It was nice seeing you. Maybe we can have another coffee date and talk about something a little more cheerful than murder?”

“Anytime you like. Just please don’t keep looking into this case. If you’re right about what happened to that insurance agent—”

“Hey, I always go after the big stories. You don’t have to worry about me. Just because I walk in six inch heels and wear miniskirts, it doesn’t mean I can’t take care of myself.”

Giving him a quick peck on the cheek, she left the café. For someone who had been initially against just leaving her a voicemail, the concern was written all over his face. The meeting with the conceited yet unexpectedly resourceful Angela Starr had not only given us new pieces of information linked to Belmont’s death, but a possible ally in Garren.
“Oliver, take a deep breath. You’re going to make yourself faint.”

After his conversation with Angela Starr at the café, Garren channeled his inner Dale Earnhardt and sped past several red lights in his haste to find my mother. He was now standing in the middle of the art gallery, breathless and desperately trying to speak to my baffled mother in actual words instead of gibberish. The only thing she could understand was that I was the reason for his visit though a chicken could figure out that much themselves, with him constantly pointing at me.

My mother gently took him by his arm and led him away from the lobby, away from her concerned friends who had forgotten all about their previous conversation the moment a winded, twitchy police officer hurried into the building (after ten attempts of pushing a door that needed to be pulled). She helped him onto a bench in one of the rooms displaying Greek art pieces.

“Tessa, what happened? Did you have an encounter with one of those creatures again?”

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “Well, yeah, one of them possessed Amy and almost made her fall from the roof. It’s a long story. He’s freaking out over nothing.”

“It’s not nothing!” He blushed at two elderly women passing through the doorway, affronted by his tone. “Kala, the council is going to have our heads because of their recklessness. I found this in her pocket.”

When Garren showed her the strange dagger, I expected her to be frightened or angered, siding with him that the dagger’s sudden appearance was my fault, but she simply looked amazed. She held the dagger in her own hands, her fingers trailing across the intricate marks carved into the handle. Elena described the incident on the roof: how a flash of light emerged from my birthmark in the shape of a raven and destroyed the creature before taking the form of the dagger. Lost in her own thoughts, my mother nodded, half-listening to Elena’s story, and I heard her whisper that the dagger was even more magnificent in person.

“I’ve only ever seen this in my books. It’s remarkable.” She lifted her eyes from the dagger. “I wouldn’t worry, Tessa. The blade of Charon is meant to be hidden but I’ve read that it can be summoned if a reaper is in danger. It appeared because it sensed you were in danger.”

As I thought, Garren had overreacted to the situation but I would be lying if I was not secretly relieved that he was wrong.

“See, Fairy Godmother? The council won’t care that it disappeared from its hiding spot.”

“Oh no, the council will certainly be concerned.” I sat beside Garren, now sharing his anxiety. “They understand that reapers don’t purposely call the dagger to them, in most cases, but they have to ensure that there was actual danger. As I recall, when your grandmother once summoned it, the council interrogated her for hours. There was a small trial…nothing too serious, dear, but this is very good.”

“I think our definitions of good differ. How is this good?”
“Because you can tell the council what’s been happening,” she explained with an encouraging smile. “Once the council knows the truth, they’ll take the dagger back and make sure those nasty little creatures don’t harm you ever again. You can put all the worry of Fin’s death behind you and let them handle it.”

“Is a trial necessary? Can’t we just send the dagger back with a note that says something like I’m sorry that it popped up in my hand when I was about to get attacked by a monster?”

My own question was answered when a wren, with cinnamon colored feathers and a white stripe above one of its eyes, flew through the open window and landed on my knee. A tiny scroll was tied around its right leg by a red ribbon. Garren muttered that the wren belonged to Cedric, the leader of the council, and ducked his head between his knees, as if the wren was about to shoot lasers out of its eyes. The wren raised its leg towards me. At my mother’s insistence, I untied the scroll and skimmed its contents.

Dear Miss Byrne,

It has to come to the council’s attention that at twenty minutes past three this afternoon, on the rooftop of Belmont Falls High, you summoned the blade of Charon from its secure location. As you should know from your studies, this is a breach of law fifty two, section C, paragraph three, which states that such a summons must be authorized by the council through a deciding vote.

The council understands that young reapers such as yourself have little control over their abilities and accidents may happen, which is why we require your attendance, along with your guardian Oliver Garren, at a trial this Saturday, December 19th, at 8 PM. At the trial, we shall allow you to plead your case and then decide whether or not you will be punished. Witnesses are permitted for your defense. Sage will remain by your side and guide you to the proper location on the day of your trial.

Sincerely,

Cedric Cullen

Grand Master and Protector of the Realms

Elena rested her head on my shoulder, reading over the letter several times. My stomach twisted into a thousand tiny knots at the threat of being punished for something out of my control. Though my mother believed that I should tell the council about the shadow creatures and my suspicions surrounding Belmont’s death, a small doubt nagged at me that the council would not be as lenient as she imagined. Most of my doubt stemmed from Garren’s near heart attack, brought on by the risk of upsetting the council.

The wren tilted its head to the side. “Do you have to read this too?” I asked Garren. He nodded, taking the scroll from me. “Why is a bird taking me to the trial? Why can’t they just tell me the location?”

“The council loves their secrecy and no, Fin, the bird didn’t use magic to fly across the sea in less than a day.” Belmont closed his mouth, looking embarrassed, and angrily punched Elena’s arm as she giggled at him. That single punch was enough to start another longwinded argument. “Cedric has a way with birds. He’s able to speak to them from any location. Tessa, when you meet with the council, I urge you to be respectful and polite. Some members have little patience around children.”
“Well, this Cedric guy sounds like a pr—”

My mother placed her hand over my mouth. “Sweetheart, don’t say such things. The council has eyes and ears everywhere, especially around those who are awaiting a trial. Take it from someone who learned that the hard way. Until it’s over, let’s not say anything that could get you in more trouble.”

“You’ve met the council before?”

“Yes, when I was eighteen. It’s a story for another time,” she said, playing with her wedding ring. “Your grandmother was once put on trial as well, though hers ended on far worse terms. There’s no reason to worry about this trial. You simply state the facts and the council will see that you’ve done nothing wrong. It’s merely a formality. I remember how stuffy some of them can be so I’ll pick out the perfect outfit for you.”

“Great. Mom, could I uh talk to you alone for a minute?” I asked, holding the back of Elena’s dress to stop her from scratching out Belmont’s eyes. “I’m having trouble with figuring out what piece to use for the gallery.”

Leaving Garren to deal with the quarreling teenage ghosts, who soon dragged him into their argument, I followed my mother to her private studio. Her studio was covered from wall to wall with artwork, created by her, my brother, and me. The exhibition, at the moment, was the last thing on my mind and she did not need to use her sixth sense to know that I had no intention of discussing art. As I sat on her desk, I glanced at a painting of a field of flowers near the door. It was one of my first pieces, done when I was four years old.

“Are you nervous about the trial? If you like, we can practice before Saturday. I remember my trial vividly and I doubt much has changed over the years.”

“I—don’t want to go in front of the council.” Warm tears stung my eyes. My mother was stunned by the sudden quiver in my voice and grabbed a sketchpad from her desk. “They’ll punish me, whether they believe me about those creatures or not. What if they’ve been watching me before I summoned that dagger? They’ll think that I’m just like Damon.”

She handed me the sketchpad, my usual method to relax when I was upset. “Why would you think—that’s ridiculous. You’ve done nothing wrong.”

“Yes, I did. I hurt someone. I don’t know how I…it just happened and I didn’t do it on purpose or maybe I did. Chief Parker’s right. I should have my own room at Erinyes.” My mother cupped my cheeks in her hands and brushed away my tears.

“Or—we could share a room. He’d love that. He was right about me from the beginning.”

“Enough. I don’t ever want to hear you say that. Where is this coming from, Tessa?”

Fighting back more tears, I opened up to her about the fight with the stranger in Mr. Mitchell’s office on the day he was pushed down the stairs. I could see her tense up, from her fingers anxiously tapping against the edge of the desk, as I mentioned his skin turning corpse-like and his arm only returning to normal when I released my grip.

“You—think I’m a monster too,” I said, averting her gaze. Ever since I was a little girl, I hated the idea of disappointing my parents. I had only seen her this tense one other time, minutes after that incident and she genuinely thought I was dead. “I am just like him.”
“No, sweetheart, you’re not. I know such a sight must have been quite alarming. I didn’t think we’d get to that topic in your lessons for a couple years. You are not a monster. Say it so I know you understand.” I nodded, muttering, “I am not a monster” under my breath. “Your abilities are growing at a faster rate than usual. I remember the first time it happened to me. I was a senior in college and your father and I were in his bedroom—”

“Mom!” I exclaimed, disgusted.

“Oh, hush. I’m sure you’ve read worse on the internet. Our abilities don’t just mean that we’re a passageway between life and death. We’re also quite dangerous. When we feel heightened emotions like sadness or fear, our untapped abilities come to the surface, without us even realizing it. What happened with that man was you protecting yourself,” she said, squishing a ladybug on her desk with a tissue and holding it in the palm of her hand. “Just as we can give life, like what you did in helping Connor that day…” The ladybug’s legs began to move. “We can also take it.”

To my amazement, the ladybug was dead once more, lying on its back. “It’s why we have the council. They keep reapers in line...making sure none of us abuse our gifts. As you get older, you’ll find yourself with more power than you ever thought possible. It’s up to you to make sure that you use it wisely. I think we’ll need to skip ahead a few chapters for lessons this week.”

“Maybe go over the council rules too. Apparently, by now, I should know rule fifty two, section C, paragraph three by heart.”

Amy’s possession provided the perfect opportunity to visit my grandmother the next day. My mother turned it into a family trip after school, which made Ryan so excited that he squeezed his juice box and squirted apple juice all over Belmont’s face. Upon hearing that I was meeting with the council, my grandmother was overjoyed, earning stern looks from both of my parents. She quietly congratulated me for continuing the tradition and assured me that the members of the council were as harmless as teddy bears (though she did warn me that the ‘old bats’ had giant sticks up their backsides).

When I told her about Amy’s possession and the shadow creature mocking me with the song, I was surprised to see that she was not the least bit unnerved. She laughed it off as the other reaper’s pathetic attempt to scare the family. My father, afraid for her safety, had offered to let her stay at our house until the council dealt with the problem but she refused, insisting that she was capable of handling an ‘arrogant fool with an ego the size of the sun’.

Two straight hours of arguing back and forth between my parents and grandmother was unsuccessful, only leading to my father handing my grandmother twenty dollars for losing a bet they made on his wedding day. I suspected that my parents hoped that my grandmother would side with them and her fear would deter me from pursuing my investigation but it had the opposite effect. If anything, my grandmother’s fearlessness inspired me to be the same: to not let this other reaper or their minions scare me from finding out the truth.

While my parents spoke with the nurses about heightened security measures for the room, lying that a dangerous ex-girlfriend of hers was recently released from prison, I spoke with my grandmother in private (though it was not so private with Elena and Belmont standing on either side of me) about Chief Parker’s odd behavior and my plans to question Rhys during the hiking trip. She promised to keep an eye on me from afar, in case I found myself in danger.

In the week leading up to the hiking trip and my trial, my mother increased my lessons from once a
week on Friday afternoons to twice a day. She wanted me to better understand my abilities as a reaper, so I was not afraid the next time a new ability suddenly emerged, and the lessons, which were infinitely more interesting than in the past, proved that I honestly knew nothing about being a reaper. The council had all kinds of laws, written in a hefty, leather-bound book that had a spine thicker than my waist. I soon realized that the council made it astonishingly easy to break one of their precious rules. It seemed that one little mistake was enough for them to send a reaper or guardian to the Meadows, a deceptive name.

The Meadows was a prison where the guilty were sent directly after a trial, without the chance to visit their loved ones. Once the council decided that the accused was guilty, the person was forced to drink water from the Lethe river, causing them to lose their identities and wander around for an eternity. Those who were guilty of very serious crimes were sent to a similar prison yet, along with losing their memories, they had to endure an eternity of punishment, based on their personal fears. Such harsh punishments made me wonder if the council believed in redemption, that a person was capable of changing for the better after making one mistake.

“Tessa, your ride is here,” my father shouted from downstairs.

I shut the mythology book I had borrowed from the school library, leaving a cat-shaped bookmark on one of the pages. Ever since my visit with my grandmother, I was determined to find out more about the shadow creatures and how to defeat them without a magical dagger that was summoned through my birthmark. The first step was identifying the creatures by an actual name and I managed to narrow it down to a few possibilities.

Sage flew through my bedroom door, my ragdoll cat at its tail feathers. I sprayed her twice with the bottle on my nightstand.

“Purrsephone, no. We do not eat our guests. Are you ever going to stop laughing?” Belmont was snickering into his sleeve. Hearing my cat’s name, chosen when I was eight years old, made him cackle like a hyena. “I was eight and I thought it was cute.”

“Of course you would, Byrne. You’re weird. Not weird weird…a good weird.”

“In your language, is that a compliment? Come on, Sage,” I said, opening my backpack to hide the small bird.

My father was speaking to a middle-aged man, dressed in a black suit with a matching black tie and chauffeur hat, in the living room. Most people would find it strange to hear their father discussing video games but it was just a typical day in my house. He was like a teenager, showing the man that he was nearly finished with his latest game: Underworld Uprising, or Baxter the Bunny’s Forest Adventure if my mother was around while he played with my brother. Ryan was on the couch, surrounded by bowls of chips and pretzels and slicing through hordes of zombies with a chainsaw.

“Hello, Miss Byrne,” said the man, greeting me with a kind smile. “Are you ready to go?”

“Um yeah. Dad, you might want to switch the games. I think she’s almost done exercising upstairs and she won’t want to see Ryan cutting off zombie heads.”

“She’s right, kiddo. Time to put away the chainsaw and help Baxter find his way to Sunshine Hollow.” As he sliced off another zombie’s head, Ryan whined that he was almost finished with the level. My father was torn between letting my brother continue and risking my mother catching him killing zombies instead of helping a anthropomorphic bunny in overalls find his friends. “Sorry, little
bear, but if mommy finds out you were playing this again, daddy will have to sleep on the couch for a week and he won’t get to see mommy’s new pajamas that she bought while he was away.”

I scrunched my nose in disgust, wishing that I was as naïve as my brother. “Nice,” whispered Belmont, with a smirk that suggested he was imagining my own mother in some pose straight out of *Playboy*.

“Well, that’s another thing to talk to my therapist about when I’m in my thirties. Thanks for adding to the list, Dad. I’m not sure if I’ll be home before that meeting tonight but if not, I’ll tell you all about it in the morning,” I said, grabbing my house keys from the glass table near the front door.

“Your mother and I will be up when you get home.” He wrestled the controller away from my brother, who held on as if it was a piece of valuable treasure. “Have fun at Claire’s.”

When the chauffeur (“Call me James,” he insisted as he opened the back door of the Rolls Royce parked outside my house) turned into the Hilton’s driveway, I wondered how he was able to distinguish their home from the others, considering each house in the neighborhood looked eerily similar. The single difference, nearly invisible to the untrained eye, was the *H* adorned on the iron lock of the front gate. All the times I imagined where Hilton lived, when she was not making my life a living hell at school, I expected that it was like Belmont’s, uninviting and ornately decorated to boast their vast wealth. I was surprisingly reminded of my own home, with the many portraits hanging on the walls resembling a miniature art gallery.

“Mr. Hilton had some business to attend to before the trip and the other guests haven’t arrived yet. Would you like a tour while you wait?” he asked, hanging his hat on a rack near the door.

“I’m a little worried about getting lost in this place.” Reaching into the pocket of his suit jacket, he handed her a pamphlet. Inside was a detailed map of each floor of the mansion. “Seriously?”

“It was made after the third staff member disappeared this month. He was the head gardener. One minute, he was washing his hands in the bathroom and the next, he simply vanished. His body was never found, just like the others. I’ve heard the maids say that if you listen closely at night, you can hear the ghosts begging for help.”

“That was almost convincing. If you want to make some quick cash, when they leave for a vacation, you should offer a haunted tour. The people in this town are embarrassingly gullible so you’d make a fortune. I get a cut of the profits for giving you the idea.”

Mr. Hilton had not been joking about his love of art. In between family portraits and random pictures of Claire, from the days of being a chubby toddler to her most recent school picture, there were pieces from the gallery, most of them painted by my mother. James was in the middle of showing me around the enormous kitchen (including the new, fancy refrigerator from Japan that had its own TV) when Principal Hilton passed by the door, looking very impatient as she spoke on the phone.

“No, it was scheduled for today at noon. Of course I made an appointment with—Jasmine!” A frazzled girl in her late twenties hurried towards her, her high heels clicking against the marble floor. Judging by the bags under her eyes, she had not slept in days. “Didn’t you make an appointment at the spa?” she hissed, covering the lower end of the phone with her hand.

“Yes—yes, Mrs. Hilton. I did it right after I set up the…” Her tanned face soon turned chalk white. “I had it written down but when I was checking on the reservations for lunch, Claire asked me to help her with something and I must’ve gotten distracted and forgotten to make the call. I’m so sorry.”
“I don’t pay you to forget things. You may think you’re irreplaceable but I can assure you that you’re not. You can ask the line of other girls who had your job before you were out of diapers. It’s fortunate that an acquaintance of mine owns this spa and can rectify your mistake. This is your last warning. One more mistake and you’ll be back to serving fried garbage at some lowly diner. Is that understood?”

“Is it alright if you continue the tour on your own?” asked James, his eyes following Principal Hilton down the hallway.

“Jasmine doesn’t take it well when something goes wrong and I don’t want her losing her job.”

After assuring him that I could navigate the mansion on my own, with the help of the map, he gently placed his hand on Jasmine’s arm and grabbed the pill bottle that she retrieved from her purse. She was seconds away from a panic attack as he steered away from the kitchen, fretting that today would be her last day as Principal Hilton’s personal assistant (“I know Claire did this on purpose. She’s hated me since day one, James,” she said, sniffling). Belmont grabbed a chocolate chip cookie from the jar on the counter.

“Sucks that I’m dead. If I was still alive, I could help her.”

Elena crossed her arms. “You help someone? Did you just see that pig fly by the window?”

“Hey, I always comforted Jas when she messed up. The first time, it was at a brunch with my family and the Hiltons. Claire blamed her for the fruit bowl having both red and green grapes. I found her crying in the kitchen while I was looking for a beer and offered to help out.” He bit into the cookie. “Go down on her for a few minutes and she stops having her little freak outs.”

Disgusted, I snatched the cookie from him and chucked it in the trash can. The fleeting hope that he had any compassion was gone in an instant and it made me question if him saving Hilton from being Dr. Baxter’s punching bag was truly selfless or some manipulative act.

“What, now you’re mad at me?” he asked, two steps behind me on the staircase. “It helped her not be upset anymore. Why is it a problem how I did it?”

“Because it wasn’t about helping her. You did it because she’s a hot girl and you can’t control the tiny carrot in your pants. I bet you wouldn’t have helped if she wasn’t pretty enough for you.”

“Ti—who the hell said it was tiny?” He pointed at Elena, offended by my accusation. “Did she say that? She didn’t have anything else to compare it to so what does she know?”

“The fact that you’re more offended by that than how you took advantage of some poor girl proves what I’ve known about you since the day I saw your smug face that first day in second grade. You’re a pig, Belmont.”

“At least I’m not some prude princess. Maybe you’re just jealous that the closest you’ve gotten to anything like that is when someone has to give you CPR because you fainted in the middle of class.” I stopped at the top of the staircase, my nails digging into the railing. “It’s a real waste, if you ask me. You could’ve at least been ugly so you have an excuse for why you’re seventeen and haven’t gotten past first base. Wait, have you even done th—”

SMACK!
Belmont clutched his cheek, blood trickling through his fingers from the cut inflicted by my ring. A white hot rage was burning inside me and all I wanted was to tear off his lips with my bare hands. Elena was ironically quiet, looking more concerned with me than with teasing her former boyfriend.

“You know, I never had to help you. There’s no written law that says reapers have to help ghosts find out how they died, if it was an accident or not. I did it because for some stupid reason and against my better judgment, I felt sorry for you. Dressing in clothes that I would never wear, getting close to your jerk friends, and almost getting myself killed by some stranger? It’s all because you want to prove that you want to find your killer. You want to know why no one’s looking into it? Because you were…no, you still are a terrible person. Why should I keep helping someone who doesn’t give a damn about anyone but himself and doesn’t appreciate everything that I’ve done? Those creatures didn’t show up until I started digging into what happened to you and now, I have to go on trial and if the council doesn’t believe me, I’ll be punished but you don’t care.”

“Byrne, I—”

“I want you to go.”

“If you want me to go wait in your room until your little PMS fit is over, fine. I’ll—what the hell?”
His right arm began to vanish into thin air, starting with his fingers. “What’s happening?”

“I said I want you to go. See, I can make you cross over for good whenever I want. It’s something I learned a long time ago but I never thought of actually using it until now. Once you’re gone, you’re gone, Belmont. There’s no coming back and I don’t need to keep looking for your killer.”

“T—Tessa, stop it,” stuttered Elena, watching the rest of his arm vanish before her eyes. With his arm gone, it spread to his neck. “Don’t do this.”

“Why not? It’s not like you want him here. You’ve hated him hanging around since you found out he was a ghost too. Why shouldn’t I just get rid of him?”

“Because this isn’t you!” Elena moved in front of the slowly vanishing Belmont (“Byrne, this isn’t funny. Make it stop,” he pleaded with a shaky breath, panicking over his lack of a right leg) and reached for my trembling hand. “I know you, Tessa. You don’t want to do this. If you do, you’ll prove him right. You’re not helping Fin because you feel sorry for him. It’s because you’re a good person. You’re the best person I know…it’s the one thing I’ve been sure of since the accident. Please don’t let that change.”

Belmont’s body returned to normal. As he checked that all of his limbs were intact, Elena sighed in relief and threw her arms around my neck.

“Don’t let him get to you. You know he’s a jackass,” she whispered. I was calmed by the scent of her vanilla lotion, a smell that lingered even after she became a ghost. “Once this whole killer mess is over, he’ll cross over and we won’t have to see him ever again.”

With a comforting smile, she took the map and offered her own personal tour, knowing the house like the back of her hand. I extended my arm, blocking Belmont from joining her in the east wing.

“Let me make something clear, you pompous prick. We barely spoke before the night you died so don’t presume you know a damn thing about me. You don’t know me or what I’ve been through…”
Belmont swallowed hard, for once not having any witty remarks. “You’re right. I’m sor—I’m s—I shouldn’t have said any of that. You’re wrong about one thing. I do appreciate what you’ve done and at the trial, I’ll tell that to the lame council.”

The east wing, nicknamed *The Princess Wing* on the map, was entirely devoted to Hilton. Elena and Belmont did not bat an eye at the fact that she had four rooms serving as her closet, each dedicated to a specific season, but I could not, for the life of me, understand how one person owned that many clothes. One of the doors differed from the rest, painted pale blue with an etching of a raven. According to Belmont, it was the sole room that Hilton was not allowed to remodel when her father allowed her to have an entire wing to herself. Dubbed the *Inspiration Room* by her father, it was where Hilton was sent to do her homework and study for tests. Despite being friends since birth, neither of them had ever been allowed inside, with Hilton’s excuse being that it was the ugliest room in the house.

When I opened the door, I realized why she kept her friends out of the room: from wall to wall, it was filled with my own artwork. I recognized several pieces, some of them made when I was as young as seven.

“Didn’t you make this for back to school night in second grade?” asked Elena, picking up a clay cat sculpture on one of the tables. On the bottom of one of the front paws were my initials. “Why would it be in here?”

As I walked around the room, reminiscing about making the different works, I spotted a notebook on the white desk in the corner. The first half of the notebook was filled with crudely drawn pictures of me being murdered in creative ways, such as an alligator tearing off my head and an elephant crushing the rest of my body. The rest of the pages contained drawings of different outfits (some of them very similar to clothes Hilton had worn before) and at the very end was a brochure to a fashion school in New York, with hearts drawn around the name.

“Make sure that Stella and Chanel get their baths before we leave for lunch. Remember that Stella likes—what are you doing in here?”

Hilton was standing in the doorway, dressed in a lacy red chemise and a matching silk robe that stopped far above her knees, with Jasmine, her eyeliner smudged on the edges, at her heels and struggling to keep two Maltese in her arms. The dogs were dressed in matching cashmere sweaters and for a moment, I wondered if it would be sad to admit that their clothes likely cost more than mine. I quickly placed the notebook back on the desk.

“Isn’t it bad enough that I have to see you at school, Byrne? Now I have to deal with you when I wake up in the morning?”

“You just woke—you know it’s noon, right?” Elena pinched my arm. “I’m uh here for the trip with your dad and his club. James picked me up early so he said I could look around the house until everyone gets here.”

“Of course you’re on first name basis with the help. With those clothes, you fit right in,” she said, her icy blue eyes passing over my hoodie and dark, ripped skinny jeans in disdain. “Do you like my father’s little shrine to you? When I got to decorate the wing, I wanted to demolish every inch of this room and turn it into my own personal spa but no, he wouldn’t allow that.”

“Yeah, that sucks. I should probably go downstairs in case—“ Hilton placed her arm across the
“Did you know he makes me sit in here to do my homework, day after day? He says that being around success and talent will rub off on me. Do you think he’s right?” (“A—are you asking me or is this rhetorical?” I asked, feeling like Hilton was a lion about to kill its prey, which was me) “He’s not. All it does is fuel my hatred. I’m shocked he hasn’t offed your parents so he can adopt you and have the daughter he always wanted. You could probably shit in your hand and wipe it on a piece of paper and he’d think you’re the next Picasso.”

“It’s actually uh Picasso but that’s not important. Look, I didn’t ask him to make this room. He just really likes art and you’re kind of an artist too…with your fashion stuff. Those designs in your notebook are amazing. I recognized one of them from an outfit you wore last year. I didn’t know you actually designed your own stuff.”

Her right eye twitched. “Listen to me, you dirty little curry muncher.” Elena forced both my arms to stay at my sides, before I could break Hilton’s nose a second time. To both Hilton and Jasmine, it looked like I was shaking in anger. “Don’t ever go through my things again. I could make your life so much worse. I doubt Chace would think you’re so great if he knew the things I did about your messed up family. I hope crazy isn’t contagious.”

The only reason that Hilton was not screaming for her mother, with her hands over her bleeding nose, was Elena, who continued to hold onto my arms and pushed me towards the door. She loosened her grip once we were back downstairs, far away from that harpy. The other members of the Odyssey Society were in the living room and, unsurprisingly, they were mostly men, except for two women around my mother’s age who were laughing at Mr. Hilton’s jokes.

“Tessa, here you are. Come, come, no need to be all by yourself,” he called, waving me over to him. He introduced me to the two women, Isabelle Leone and Danica Kim, who had moved to Belmont Falls just last year and were recent additions to the club. Isabelle was a member of the police department (“But if you ask Caleb, I’m nothing more than a secretary with a gun. Honestly, he needs to get his head out of his ass,” she said, already making her one of my favorite people in this town) while Danica, the more outgoing of the two, owned a chain of high-end boutiques with a part-time hobby as a nature photographer. I soon learned that despite not being as adventurous as her other half, she had no problem with putting sexist morons in their place, shutting up Chief Parker when he loudly proclaimed that the trip was unsafe for ‘little girls’ (“Then there was no reason for you to come, Caleb. Did you bring your blanket with you in case you get scared?”). Parker and some of his friends were outside, tossing around a football. As he caught the ball, he winked at me and flexed his biceps.

“I see Chace has his eyes on you,” said Danica with a sly smile. “You better be careful. He’s as charming as his father.”

“A toad has more charm than Caleb,” remarked Isabelle.

“Oh, there’s the queen bit—bee herself. Don’t make eye contact, Izzy. If she doesn’t see us—and she did. Cecile, how wonderful to see you again.”

As Principal Hilton and a half dozen other women, reminiscent of ducklings following their mother, walked into the room, dressed like she was off to a fashion show in Paris, Isabelle quietly explained that the two women had a strained relationship with the so-called stepford wives of Belmont Falls. Principal Hilton was far more accepting of Danica, with her modelesque appearance and budding
fashion empire (though she sometimes slipped in a condescending remark or two). Isabelle was not as well-liked by the middle-age clique, who she loved to call ‘the botox brigade’, due to her job, never bothering to hide their contempt when they blatantly told Danica that she deserved better.

“You’d think Dani would be the target of their jokes considering they all have the same hair,” she whispered, referring to Danica’s ebony pixie cut with dark red highlights. “But she’d never dare insult Dani or else she wouldn’t get the inside scoop on the latest fashion crazes.”

Danica’s voice went up three octaves as she spoke to Principal Hilton. “I see you took my advice on the hair. It looks fabulous.”

“You do have a sixth sense about these things. I do wish you would join us at the spa instead, darling. Claire’s decided to spend some time with her father and go with him on this silly trip.”

An alarm went off in my head at the news of Hilton joining the cave expedition. My doubts that she had ever spent time outdoors willingly were confirmed by the surprise on Belmont and Elena’s faces. He suggested that I was the reason for her sudden change of heart, possibly planning to shove me off a cliff or feed me to a bear.

Her smile briefly faltered when she noticed Isabelle. “Hello Isabelle. I would invite you as well but we both know you’re not a spa person. You’re too busy directing traffic or whatever it is that they have you do at the station.”

“Actually, I love a good spa day but Dani likes getting her hands dirty. She even insists on competitions after we’re done, to see who has the most scrapes. She’s won the past three times.”

“Past four,” corrected Danica. “You should’ve seen us after the last trip. I needed to take three showers just to get out all the dirt.”

“How…interesting,” said Principal Hilton, looking seconds away from puking up the single carrot she ate for breakfast.

She shifted the conversation from scraped knees to Danica’s trip to New York for a Victoria’s Secret fashion show. The women squealed like schoolgirls when she mentioned meeting Antonio Vitale, an apparently famous Italian designer (Elena was hyperventilating at the mere thought of seeing him in person) and convincing him to host one of his exclusive fashion shows in Belmont Falls.

“Really, we should be thanking Izzy. She made her grandmother’s famous tiramisu for a party I went to and he could not stop talking about it,” she said with so much love in her voice that it made the petite brunette turn ten different shades of red. “I swear he’s just coming here so he can taste more of her cooking, not to show off his newest designs.”

“Hmm, well, it’s just remarkable how well someone like you has done for themselves.”

“Someone like me?” (“Here we go,” mumbled Isabelle, bracing herself for the worst) “What does that mean?”

“I’m sure your parents expected your career to be more…medically-oriented. Don’t misunderstand me, Dani. There’s nothing wrong with going against expectations.”

“Oh, I understand you perfectly, Cecile. I have a few thoughts on the subject myself. Would you like to hear—”
Isabelle gasped. “Dani, is that—yes, I think it is him. What a small world. I’m so sorry, Cecile. We just spotted an old friend of ours. Who could imagine that he was part of the club too? He must be one of Declan’s newest recruits. A joy talking to you as always.”

Taking Danica by the arm, she led her out of the living room to prevent her from making a scene in front of the other guests. Belmont joked that they reminded him of me and Elena, as Danica repeatedly pointed at Principal Hilton and made a few rude gestures.

Before I became my snooty principal’s next target, I sneaked out the back door and was greeted by a football zooming towards me. I was about to duck to the ground until Belmont raised my arms, allowing me to catch the football before it collided with my face.

“Nice catch, Byrne! Maybe you can replace Danvers on the team. He hasn’t made a decent catch all season,” joked Parker. I was still hunched down towards the ground, my eyes closed. “You okay?”

“I just had a flashback to when we used to play dodgeball but yeah, I’m good. At least I didn’t get a bruise this time. My hands just sting a little.”

With a quiet chuckle, he grabbed the football and tossed it back to Danvers, who missed it by a few inches. I was taken aback as he began to lightly massage my hands.

“Does that feel better?”

Elena mocked him, thoroughly unimpressed. “W—what?” I stuttered, going brain dead for a second. (“Your hands,” he said, flashing me his signature smile that made plenty girls at school weak in the knees) “Oh, I uh guess so.”

My answer earned me a sharp pain in my foot, courtesy of Elena stomping her heel. She insisted that this was one of his many ploys to charm a girl into the backseat of his car.

“Tessa, you’re not actually falling for this, are you? Anyone can rub their fingers back and forth over someone’s hands. It’s not—”

Her rant was cut off by a screechy “Chace!”, followed by Hilton roughly bumping into my shoulder. She wrapped her arms around his neck, like a python constricting its prey, then planted a kiss on his cheek, leaving behind a glittery pink mark.

“Do you like my new dress? It’s a Vitale original,” she boasted, spinning around to show every angle of her short-sleeved pink dress with a low back. “My mother bought it for me right after his latest show in Paris. They practically snatched it off the model when she got off the runway.”

“That’s…cool?” he asked, his eyes darting to me for an idea of how to respond but I was just as clueless. “Um, you know that we’re going hiking on this trip, right? It’s a lot of walking and maybe you should at least change your shoes. Knee high boots and hiking don’t usually mix.”

“I’ll be totes fine. If we get attacked by something, you’ll be there to protect me. Besides, as if I’d ever dress like Byrne. I like to look good, not poor,” she said, side-eyeing my clothes.

“I think I look good,” I shot back, with a small shrug. “Will got this for me last year for science pun birthdays.”
“Science pun birthdays?” asked Parker, sounding genuinely curious. It was the first time he was ever interested in a conversation involving Will. “What’s that?”

“Just this fun thing we do. Every year, our birthday presents have a theme. He loves Star Wars so I got him this shirt that said ‘May the force be with you’ but instead of the word force, it has the equation and he got me this hoodie.”

The hoodie had a picture of a cartoon cat in a box with The Cat in the Box by Dr. Schrodinger written along the side. As I explained how it referenced a famous physics experiment, Belmont and Parker looked at me like I was speaking a different language while Hilton looked as if she would rather be sticking her hand down a garbage disposal than listening to me.

“You’re talking physics with three idiots who thought Dr. Pepper was a real doctor? Good luck,” said Elena.

I decided to spare their few remaining brain cells from overexerting themselves. “It’s easier to understand if you know about physics but I like cats too so that’s why he got it. The picture kind of looks like my cat Purrsephone so—” My cheeks reddened when Parker sniggered. “I know it’s weird. That’s what you come up with when you’re eight and interested in Greek mythology.”

“No, I get it. I like that stuff too. My dog Polly is actually Apollo. We just call him Polly because my mom said it was cuter…and after all these years, she’s convinced herself that he’s a she.”

Claire’s upper lip curled. “What the hell are you—oh, finally, someone here who is actually interesting. Rhys won’t make me want to throw myself off the roof.”

“I heard he’s bringing his latest fling. Be nice to this one, Claire. You had the last girl crying in the bathroom for two hours. Aren’t you over Rhys by now?”

“So what’s the plan? You can’t just ask my brother what he was doing the night I…you know,” whispered Belmont.

I rolled my eyes as some of the boys wolf whistled, presumably at Rhys’s new girlfriend. Danvers was particularly crude, joking that he would steal her away if Rhys was not careful.

“I’ll be subtle. You said he was a biology major. I can tell him that I’m interested in the same and wanted some advice. The best strategy is to play it cool. Hilton will be too busy trying to hump Parker behind a tree so there won’t be any distrac—”

The hair on the back of my neck stood on the end at the sound of a familiar giggle. Elena and Belmont both clutched their stomachs, seemingly ill. I headed back into the mansion (‘Tessa?’ asked Parker, confused) and towards the nearest bathroom. My hands gripped the edges of the porcelain sink and it suddenly felt as if something was squeezing my heart. Hearing the door knob turn, the only sound besides my own heavy breathing, I reached for the closest object: a bar of soap. I only lowered the soap when Garren walked through the door.

“What are you doing here?”

“Young mother told me that you were spending time at Claire’s and since I know you two get along about as well as a cobra and a mongoose, it didn’t take long for me to figure out the truth. I told Chief Parker that I was interested in joining the club. I was talking to him and Dr. Baxter when I saw you run in here faster than a speeding train. Did something happen?” Ignoring his question, I moved
past him and shut the door, turning the lock. “Tessa, you can talk to me, even if it’s not about reaper business. Is Claire—why do you two look so ill?” he asked, seeing Elena on the toilet and Belmont on the floor, still clutching their stomachs.

Quietly counting back from one hundred, I handed him my phone. “Ninety seven. I—I need you to call my mother.”

The door knob jiggled and seconds later, it swung open, revealing a girl with a bobby pin in her hand, leaning against the frame. She was only a couple years older than myself, with sultry chocolate brown eyes that were simultaneously mesmerizing and intimidating and dark red lips. Her dark tresses fell just past her shoulders, her bangs swept to one side to hide the burn mark on the left side of her temple. The only way to truly describe her was every parent’s worst nightmare.

“Aw, don’t do that. She’s such a buzzkill,” she whined, a hint of a Mexican accent in her voice.

I mentally cursed at myself when I felt my knees slightly buckle. Garren stood in front of me protectively, keeping me pressed against the wall.

“I see you’ve got your guardian now. Sucks that you got someone as pathetic as him.” She smirked at the nauseous Elena and Belmont. “I see I still have that nasty effect on little ghosts. Sorry. It goes away when I leave…or you get used to it after like ten minutes.”

“Don’t speak to any of them, Vivienne. I don’t know how you escaped but—”

“Oh no, Oliver, you’ve got it all wrong. I was released on good behavior. The doctors at Erinyes said that I’m all better. I’m surprised your daddy didn’t tell you that I’ve been out for months. We both know how much he hates me. The feeling’s mutual, by the way. I’d gladly get sent back there if I got the chance to snap his neck.”

“Months?” I asked, speaking for the first time since she entered the room. I disregarded Garren’s warning to not speak to her.

“When did you get out?”

Vivienne’s face softened when she caught the sliver of my face not hidden by Garren. She admitted that she had been released during the first week in October and planned to visit me until she spotted members of the council spying on her. The council was watching her every move as a precaution, still unsure that she was fully rehabilitated, making it difficult to do much besides hole herself up in hotel rooms. Despite being secluded from the rest of the world, she managed to catch up on what she missed and when she heard about my accident, she headed to Belmont Falls and even visited me at the hospital. Garren denied her claims, sure that the council would never let her within ten feet of another reaper.

“If you had a real guardian instead of this coward, you never would’ve gotten hurt. I’ve been watching you for a while…you and your little ghost friends. I kept my distance because I didn’t want the council up my ass.”

“Then why show up now? Why are you dating Rhys Belmont?”

Her eyes sparkled with mischief. “Is my muñequita jealous?” (“Hardly,” I replied with a scoff, avoiding Elena’s gaze) “It’s not dating. Well, he thinks it is but he’s just a way to pass the time until I get what I really want. He gets the job done…mostly.”
“How do you know Tessa?” asked Garren, sensing that her visit was more than her wanting to connect with a fellow reaper.

“Oh, we go way back. I’m her first. First friend, first—”

“Um wrong, dollar store J.Lo,” interrupted Elena, angrily. Vivienne raised her brow in amusement. “That would be me. We’ve been friends since second grade and she’s never even mentioned you so don’t go bragging about something that isn’t true.”

“Let me rephrase then. First friend that would actually acknowledge her in public.”

Vivienne’s comeback was like a knife in the gut to Elena, who lowered her eyes to the floor. I always considered her my first real friend, having met her at the park a week before starting second grade, and even then, I knew that our friendship would not be easy. I remembered how she believed that her friends would never approve of me, whether it was because of my lack of wealth or my clothes, and at the time, she cared about maintaining her popularity.

It meant a lot of sneaking around after school and passing secret notes to each other during class. Though I never cared about hiding our friendship, I knew that, deep down, it bothered Elena that she felt ashamed for letting her other friends bully her into hiding a part of herself.

Vivienne was someone who thrived off of that shame. “You must be Elena,” she said, gazing down at the petite blonde. “Hmm, you’re not that pretty in person. You think you know Tessa better than anyone, don’t you? Well, you’re wrong, cheerleader Barbie.”

“Get out now, Vivienne. I want you out of this town or I’ll go to the council to make sure you never leave Erinyes again,” threatened Garren.

“You have no power over me so enough with the empty threats. I’ll stay as long as I like.” I heard Rhys calling her name down the hall. “That’s my boyfriend. We must be leaving soon. I’m so excited for this trip.”

She whispered in Elena’s ear before leaving the bathroom and in the reflection of the mirror, her lips twisted into a familiar smirk that I had seen dozens of times. Once she disappeared from the hallway, acting all lovey-dovey with a naïve Rhys, I bent down to Elena, who had her knees pulled up to her chest.

“What did she say to you?”

“Just because you’re a ghost, don’t think I can’t make you suffer. You were friends with her?”

“It’s…complicated. Finding out what Rhys knows is more important. Maybe we can use Hilton as a distraction to keep him and Vivienne apart.”

“The only place you are going is home, Tessa,” said Garren, shaken from our encounter with Vivienne. “Until I speak with the council and have actual confirmation that they agreed to her release, you are staying as far away as possible. My father would have told me if they were even thinking of releasing that monster. I can call him and straighten out this whole me—”

Garren was silenced by a swift blow to the head. I placed the toothbrush holder back on the sink and reached into his jacket pocket, taking out his cellphone.
“Byrne, did you just—are you nuts?” asked Belmont, his eyes tore away from the unconscious guardian and towards a stunned Elena. “Why did you do that?”

“This is our only chance at getting close to your brother. Vivienne is doing this on purpose. It’s no coincidence that she showed up now, pretending to date the one reason we’re going on this stupid trip. Just because she couldn’t visit me before, it doesn’t mean she wasn’t spying on me…on all of us somehow.”

“You think she’s the reaper we’re looking for?”

I shook my head, seeing Mr. Hilton and the rest of his club climbing into large, black cargo vans. “No, she’s been in Erinyes too long. When you’re released, your abilities come back slowly. She had no reason to attack you anyway. You’re not her usual target.”

Catching up to the group, I waited behind Danica and Isabelle, who were arguing over whether to replace Principal Hilton’s shampoo with hair remover (“Dani, I’m a cop. I can’t break into someone’s house,” hissed Isabelle) as revenge. Parker glanced back, in the midst of wrenching his arm away from Hilton, and gave me a helpless look that said I can’t get away from her. Hilton yanked him into one of the vans, along with their fathers, Dr. Baxter, Rhys, and Vivienne.

“Whatever that means. What’s the story with you two?” he asked, catching Vivienne wink at me before pecking Rhys on the cheek. “You’ve mentioned that place before. What is it? I thought bad reapers get sent to a meadow prison.”

“Erinyes isn’t a prison. Well, the people there think it is but it’s somewhere that young reapers get sent for rehabilitation. It’s easier to believe that kids are more capable of change than adults. If they prove that they’ve changed for the better, they can be released but most of the time, they’re hopeless cases. My mother says it’s more common for the reapers to die there, either by the council’s orders or their own hand.”

“So it’s like an insane asylum. How did she end up there? If the council puts you on trial just for having a little knife, she probably did something lame like calling them a bunch of names.”

“Not exactly,” I said, shifting uncomfortably as I thought back to how a nine year old Vivienne was sent to Erinyes, supposedly for the rest of her life.

Explaining Vivienne’s history was not an easy task when we were stuck in the back of a van, surrounded by a dozen middle-aged men, several of them eyeing me like a juicy steak. I pretended to be texting on my phone, as a way to avoid their lecherous stares and to talk to the invisible ghosts on either side of me without being seen as crazy.

Vivienne was hardly the first young reaper to be sent to Erinyes, the institution more well-known for its pre-pubescent patients than the grown adults, and she was not even the youngest, that honor belonging to a seven year old boy with a mountain of rage issues, but her story was a cautionary tale to all reapers just beginning to learn about their gifts. She was considered a prodigy, having developed her abilities quicker than most, which was attributed to her parents both being high-ranking members of the council. To the public, she was nothing more than an innocent girl with vast potential: popular, sweet, friendly, the star of her soccer team, and a girl scout. All of that was revealed as nothing more than a perfectly crafted façade on the morning of her ninth birthday.

With her parents constantly gone for council business, her father had hired a fellow reaper in their
hometown of Santa Fe to continue Vivienne’s training. The reaper, a girl in her early twenties named Carmen who worked part-time at a clothing store, never reported any suspicious behavior to the council. That morning, she had gone about her usual routine, stopping by the local bakery to pick up a birthday cake, and when she arrived at the Reyes house, she found Vivienne cooking breakfast (scrambled eggs, pancakes, and sausage) in the kitchen. Carmen was pleasantly surprised when the young girl told her that her parents decided to skip council meetings for the day to be there for her birthday but when she went to greet them in the dining room, there were no party decorations.

Vivienne’s parents were sitting at the table, broad smiles on their faces, and at first glance, it all seemed normal except for one minor detail: they were tied to the chairs with rope and a pair of forks kept their hands pinned to the table. Underneath their clothes, a fancy suit and tie for him and a long-sleeved floral printed dress for her, their flesh had been terribly burnt, the skin on her mother’s cheek hanging on by a mere thread. Gashes ran along her father’s face from one side to the other, as if he had been scratched by a beast, and the blood under her mother’s fingernails indicated that the scratches and bruises all over her body were of her own doing.

The vacant expression in their eyes made them look more like zombies than humans and the only sign of life were their eyes (well, only her father’s left since the other was shoddily ripped out and lying on the plate before him) slowly moving back and forth. Carmen would have saved them, or at least alerted the council, if it were not for a boy, one of Vivienne’s teenage neighbors, plunging a knife into her back. According to Carmen’s report, when questioned by the council, she told them that the boy’s eyes were just as vacant and he forcibly tied her down to the chair beside Mrs. Reyes. Carmen recalled how Vivienne walked into the room with four plates on a tray, blissfully humming the lullaby her mother sang to her every night.

Four days had passed before a member of the council was sent to check on her parents and Carmen. The three were still sitting at that same table, Vivienne taunting Carmen with a ‘sausage that her mother always raved about to her friends’. The council discovered that Vivienne had been playing with her parents and Carmen like puppets, which explained why her mother, now missing half an ear, was repeatedly stabbing herself in the leg with a steak knife, the blood dripping down to the massive puddle on the floor. Carmen was not much better off, the left side of her face partially burnt (the muscles of her jaw visibly moving as she chewed a piece of burnt meat that was definitely not from a cow) and several bones sticking out of her left arm. Vivienne herself was enjoying her food, acting like it was any other normal day.

The council member managed to knock her out when she was busy yelling at Carmen for not chewing with her mouth closed, breaking her control over the three captives, but the damage was too severe: her parents succumbed to their wounds while Carmen was left in a catatonic state (only able to communicate through her memories). The day of Vivienne’s trial, the room was very tense as the people about to decide her fate remembered her as a sweet, talented girl. Each shocking truth revealed, from how Vivienne lured her parents by pretending to be ill then paralyzing them with a potion to the intimate details of the torture, just chipped away at the face she presented to the world until all that was left was the soulless monster.

Vivienne showed no remorse for her actions, only wishing that she had more time to ‘play’ with her parents.

Elena and Belmont were rightfully disturbed by the gruesome tale. The vans stopped at the entrance to the woods for the expedition.

“After the trial, it took them three days to decide what to do with her,” I said, stepping out of the van. “Most of the council was ready to throw her in Erinyes and throw away the key but some still saw her as that innocent girl. My mother always said they were never sure if that had been an act or
something made Vivienne snap that day. The council covered up what happened to her parents by wiping the memory of every person in that town. None of them could remember Vivienne, her family, or Carmen. Only Carmen’s parents had their memories because they’re reapers. I hear she hasn’t moved once since she was rescued, either because of the trauma or because she blames herself. Maybe it’s both.”

Elena avoided bumping into one of the men. “Blames herself for what? She’s not the one that went psycho. Why would she think it’s her fault?” she asked, thinking it was obvious who was to blame for that horrible day.

“The potion that Vivienne made was from a book in Carmen’s family library. It was banned in the 18th century because reapers were misusing it to toy with regular people and even other reapers. She blamed herself for teaching Vivienne how to control people too. All reapers have that ability but it’s not taught until we’re past eighteen, sometimes never if your teacher doesn’t think you’re mature enough to handle it. Even then, Vivienne knew how to get her way. She manipulated Carmen into teaching her by complaining that the lessons weren’t challenging enough and saying that Carmen was the sister she always wanted. Carmen lost her two younger sisters the month before she started helping Vivienne. It wasn’t a reaper, just a bad car accident. You can imagine how hearing Vivienne say that made her feel.”

“Maybe Oliver was right that she escaped. Someone like that…wouldn’t the council keep her on a tight leash?”

“I don’t know what to think. I wouldn’t put it past her to trick the hospital into letting her out but after all these years, they must know all her tricks. Vivienne is the council’s problem, not ours. We need to get Rhys alone.”

“I don’t get why you didn’t mention it before.” I glanced over at Belmont. “If you could just mind control my brother into telling us about the night of the party—”

“No. This is exactly why some reapers never get to learn. It’s not something to take lightly. I’ve done it before on little animals…sometimes on Purrsephone when she freaks out at the vet but that’s all. It’s violating a person and it’s disgusting. Honestly, I wish I couldn’t do it.”

“Byrne, it’s one time. I’ll seduce your crazy ex-friend away from him and you get him to talk.”

“Three things wrong with your plan. One, you’re not her type.” Elena rolled her eyes when he bragged that he was every girl’s type, his head swelling from his ever-growing ego. “Two, she’ll see what you’re doing from a mile away because unlike you, Belmont, she’s not an idiot. Three, I just told you that I will never use that power on an actual person. We’ll get him alone somehow. It’s not like they’ll be attached at the hip 24/7.”

I could not have been more wrong. As we hiked along the winding trail, to the tune of Hilton’s constant whining, I wondered if it was possible that Rhys and Vivienne’s lips were surgically sewn together. Barely a second passed between them breaking apart after a passionate kiss and her lips moving somewhere else on his body. For the first time, Hilton and I were in agreement, her face looking just as disgusted as mine. When she was not whining about the long walk or sickened by Rhys’s attempts to swallow Vivienne’s face, she was flashing a seductive smile at Dr. Baxter, their spat at school apparently in the past. Belmont quietly encouraged me to use my abilities to force Vivienne away from her brother, promising no judgment if I made her walk into a tree or straight off a cliff.
“What color is your dress?” Parker walked beside me, tossing the football between his hands. His friends were hanging back, watching us like we were part of a reality show. “For the winter ball. I want to make sure the corsage matches.”

The mention of a corsage distracted me from Vivienne sliding her hands under Rhys’s shirt. “The—oh, I don’t do dances. I haven’t gone to one since like fifth grade. They’re just not my thing. Will and I would usually hang out, bingeing old sci-fi shows or sneaking into the chemistry lab. Last year, we were trying to make a new element. It didn’t end so well...we’re sort of the ones that made that big hole in the ceiling.”

Parker grinned, remembering how Mr. Simpson, the high-strung Chemistry teacher, almost had a heart attack at the sight of the gaping hole the morning after the dance. “I thought this year might be different. Nelson’s still in the hospital and it’s our senior year.” He shrugged when I brought up that Belmont, the former ‘king of the school’, always brought Claire as his date to the dances and, before her accident, that honor was reserved for Elena. “Am I Fin? Technically, I’m supposed to take the hottest girl and that’s you. If you need money for a dress, I’ve got you covered.”

“I don’t need you to—”

I was about to turn him down until I noticed Vivienne finally stopped dry humping Rhys’s leg. Her dark eyes were burning a hole through Parker’s skull. It was like a light bulb switched on in my head, the pieces of a plan coming together, and I looped my arm through his, batting my eyelashes. “You don’t have to do that. I have plenty of dresses but I’m not sure which one is best. Maybe after the trip, you can come back to the house and I can try them on for you.” (“Babe, tone it down a little. You’re starting to draw blood,” uttered Rhys between kisses) “To be honest, I’m kind of worried that they’re too revealing. Don’t worry about my parents. They’re going out to dinner and my brother has a sleepover tonight. It’ll be just the two of us...unless you don’t want that.”

He was surprised yet excited by her flirtatious tone. “Is that a trick question? I’d love to help you out. Being friends with Claire all these years pretty much makes me an expert when it comes to fashion.”

“Can’t wait.” Mr. Hilton shouted that we were less than a mile away from the caves. “Wow, Rhys and his girlfriend really like each other. You know what would be funny? If you made it look like he peed himself.”

“Watch this.”

The football struck the canteen in Rhys’s pocket, knocking it to the ground and spraying both him and Vivienne with water. Her first instinct was to chuck the canteen at Parker, who was failing to hold back his laughter along with his friends, but she managed to stop herself, choosing instead to cry into Rhys’s shoulder. He cupped her cheek and whispered softly to her, pressing his lips against her forehead.

His loving smile was replaced with a snarl when he overheard the boys’ raucous laughter. “Dick move, Chace!”

“Sorry, man. I thought you two needed to cool off a little,” he said between laughs.

“I’ll try talking to Rhys. You two keep an eye on Vivienne,” I whispered to Elena. “Knowing her, she might rip Parker’s heart out.”
Pretending to need to re-fill my own water bottle, I walked in the same direction as Rhys, making sure that I was not too close. He muttered under his breath though the bits I heard involved shoving the football down Parker’s throat. I was startled by a loud snap and soon, leaves were raining down all around me.

A shirtless Dr. Baxter was leaning against a tree, a dent in its trunk, shaking off bits of bark from one hand while holding a phone to his ear with the other. A pink dress and a pair of heels were in a pile by his feet. He lowered his voice to barely above a whisper.

“It would be easier if you were here to calm him down. He’s growing impatient. He’s been talking about silencing her for good. No, I know that’s not what you want. I’ll try talking to him again though it’s like reasoning with a brick wall. You weren’t wrong to trust me. Everything will go on as planned but there may be a problem if she—”

Hilton, a men’s button-down covering her bra and panties, joined him, playfully planting kisses on his neck. He ended the call and slid the phone into his back pocket.

“Finally. That call took forever. You better not be cheating on me, Brendon,” she said, tracing small circles on his bare, sculpted chest.

“Who?”

She giggled. “You, silly. Are we playing a game?”

“No. I um was distracted by that call. Some mother complaining that her son doesn’t have the grades to get into my class next year.” He pulled her closer by tugging on the waistband of her panties. “Now you have my full attention.”

“Good. We only have a few minutes before my dad notices that I’m missing.”

I continued down the path to the nearby river, blocking out Hilton’s increasingly loud moans. Rhys was filling his canteen with water.

“Hey…Tessa, right?” he said, unsure, as I opened my empty water bottle. “You were at Fin’s memorial.”

“Surprised you remember me. Your brother never really did and we were classmates for years. Sorry about what Chace did before. We were goofing off and I dared him to try to hit one of the trees. Guess his aim isn’t that great.”

“I’ve seen him in plenty of games. His aim is fine but he’s a teenager. I was one not that long ago. No harm done...and I’m sure Viv is already over it.”

“You two are cute together. How long have you been dating?”

“About three weeks now. She just moved to town and we met at the café. She forgot her wallet so I offered to pay, we started talking, and now we’re dating. My parents weren’t happy about it since she’s not from what my dad calls ‘our circle’ but it doesn’t matter to me. It’s the first time my mom is siding with him about that stuff. Vivienne’s a little different from the girls I usually date. Once you get to know her, she’s a sweetheart. Between you and me, her accent kind of sealed the deal… there’s something about hearing her speak in Spanish. She calls me her little bicho.”
It was obvious that Rhys remembered very little from his Spanish classes over the years. I feigned a smile, knowing that Vivienne’s pet name for him was more insulting than cute.

“Seriously, you two are like relationship goals. I want something like that when I’m older.”

“Chace isn’t the one?”

“Ch—no, no, we’re not—we’re just friends…sort of. It’s not really defined. Before this year, we barely spoke to each other. We don’t exactly run in the same circles at school. I’m sorry about what happened to your brother but between you and me, he was…”

“A prick?” Rhys, like his brother, was very blunt. “You don’t have to sugarcoat it because he was my brother. I know Fin was hard to deal with…try living with him. Not that he deserved to be killed —”

“I thought the police said it was an accident.”

He stuffed his hands in his pockets. “My brother was an idiot most of his life and no matter how much I tried, he never really had a plan for after high school. He’s thrown parties at the Falls…taken countless girls to that bridge for reasons I’m sure a smart girl like you can guess. He’s done plenty of dumb things but the cops are saying that he somehow tripped on a bridge and fell to his death. It’s not like he couldn’t swim and even if he was hurt, no one heard him scream for help?” His voice choked up as he spoke, tears welling up in his eyes. “If my dad wasn’t such close friends with Chief Parker, I would go down to that station and raise hell until he told me who made him say it was an accident. My brother deserves better than to be mourned as a stupid teenage jock who got too drunk one night.”

“If you really think it wasn’t an accident, then the killer is still out there, possibly someone in this town. Do you remember anything from that nigh—”

Rhys’s eyes rolled to the back of his head and he fell to the ground, Vivienne standing behind him. I checked my surroundings for any sign of Elena or Belmont, a feeling of dread creeping up inside me that she was the reason for their disappearance.

“What did you do to Elena?!?”

Vivienne smirked. “Ooh, does someone only care about what happens to a certain blonde? I’ll keep that in mind for the future. They’ll live…as much as a ghost can. I just taught them an important lesson that ghosts aren’t invincible. I used to think that Rhys exaggerated when he said his brother could be an annoying little shit but he was right. It’s cute how they thought they could hurt me. You should be more worried about yourself. I’m doing you a favor.”

“Pfft, yeah, I remember your favors. No thanks. Why don’t you do Rhys one and leave him alone? For some reason, he actually likes you…or, he likes the act you put on for him. You must love having him as your little toy. He’s so clueless that he doesn’t even know you consider him nothing more than a bug. Go away.”

“Let me spare you the endless hours of boring stories about his adventures. I already checked his memories the first day we met. He was nowhere near the Falls when Fin was murdered. That whole night, he was busy painting a nursery with the little brother and he only spoke to Fin once. He was telling him about some college program before the sister stormed in, snatched the phone, and started bitching at Fin about a big secret. Cross him off your crazy suspect list.”
“The only one here who’s crazy is you…hell, maybe I am too for all that time I spent believing you. You’d think I would’ve learned my lesson the first ten times but I was a thirteen and gullible, something you loved to take advantage of over and over again.” She crossed her arms, looking more amused than hurt by my rant. “Is that how you got released? They looked back at past memories and thought ‘Hey, if this thirteen year old thinks she’s changed, then she definitely has?’”

“Wow, your parents really did a number on you, Tessie.” (“Don’t call me that!”) “Did your mother have someone from the council mess with your memories? Because from what I remember, it wasn’t all bad. The three of us had so much fun together. You enjoyed it.”

“Because you made me! I was nothing more than your puppet. You used me just like you use everyone else. Carmen, your parents…”

As Vivienne stepped over Rhys’s unconscious body, I resisted every urge to run away, even if it meant witnessing Dr. Baxter humping Hilton against a tree. The alarm bells were ringing in my head, screaming for me to keep running until I was back with the group but I firmly stood my ground, to show that I was no longer that gullible thirteen year old girl. With each step closer, my resolve was weakening.

“Tell me something. If it was all so horrible, why did you keep my jacket? I saw you wearing it when Rhys was going through pictures from the party. It still looks good on you.” Her eyes traveled up and down my slim, hourglass figure. “Even better now that you’re all grown up.”

“Why are you here?” I asked, exasperated.

“For you. I thought that was obvious.”

Her smirk faltered slightly at the tiny giggle that slipped from my lips. “If you had said that four years ago, it probably would’ve meant the world to me. Back then, you used to seem so cool. There I was, the awkward, artsy girl who everyone thought had some terminal disease because she fainted randomly in the middle of class, and here you were, the sexy rebel in the leather jacket who didn’t give a fuck about rules or what people said about her. I should’ve realized then what you were doing the minute you started talking about me but I was all caught up in your act…because it fulfilled this secret desire that younger me had to be like Belmont and his friends, so I could actually talk to Elena at school without having to orchestrate all these convoluted ways to just ask how she did on a math test. I’m not thirteen anymore so I won’t fall for your tricks. Do you know how long it took for me to put myself back together after what you did to me?”

Vivienne was oddly silent. Recalling a time in my past that I had spent years trying to forget created a giant lump in the back of my throat, making it difficult to do something as simple as breathing. Every word out of my mouth was a word I had written in my diary countless times, everything I wanted to tell Vivienne once I was no longer under her thrall.

“You were still my dirty little secret so I could never tell Will or Elena why I was so broken and miserable. Hilton and her minions were loving it. You gave them plenty of ammunition to make me feel like shit every day and right when I’m starting to move past it, to figure out who I am when you’re not in my head, you’re back again…like a fucking bulldozer ready to tear it down.”

“Tessa—”

I shoved her roughly, causing her to stumble on her heels and against a nearby tree. Before she could
say a single word, I pushed her again, this time keeping her pinned with my hand curled tightly around the collar of her leather jacket.

“No, I’m talking. If I were like *him*, you would’ve been dead the second I heard you laugh. I could’ve let Oliver call the council but you don’t want that. If they learned you were in Belmont Falls, anywhere near me or my family, they’d send your ass straight back to *Erinyes*. I would love to watch that happen but unlike you, I’m capable of compassion. I can just as easily change my mind.”

“I’m warning you—”

She groaned as my elbow dug into her throat. “Let’s change it up. I’ll be the one warning you. You are going to stay the hell away from me, my family, my friends, and everyone else in this town. If I find out that you’re helping the other reaper and someone else gets hurt, I don’t care if it’s that piece of garbage Chief Parker, I’ll send you back to that padded room.”

“Other reaper? What are you talking about?”

“Play dumb all you want. I’m sure you two are part of some secret society of psychotic reapers that get a sick thrill out of destroying people’s lives. They probably helped you get out of *Erinyes* and sent you here. You can tell him, her, whatever the hell they are…that they can send all the monsters they want. They don’t scare me.”

I cried out as her fingers pinched the underside of my arm and in a split second, we switched positions. My face was now pressed against the tree, with both my arms pinned behind my back.

“Look at my little doll, dishing out threats. You almost had me shaking. I’m not here as your enemy, Tessa. I’ve never been your enemy. Everything you’re saying is what your parents beat into your head.”

“You don’t listen to a word other people say, do you?” I said, struggling against her grip.

“It’ll take time for you to see that but I’m a patient girl. You only have to remember one thing. It’s what I’ve held onto for the past four years.” Her hot breath tickled my ear. “The last night we were together, under the stars and drinking that cheap whiskey I stole from Dr. Sergei’s office. That’s proof that it wasn’t all bad. I know you remember that night…when you—argh!”

The weight of her body was lifted off mine and I turned around to see Elena on her back, yanking her long, wavy hair. Belmont lowered the log in his hands, cheering Elena on for the first time instead of arguing with her. Vivienne threw the persistent blonde off of her, panting heavily. She wiped a spot of blood from her lip. “Oh, that’s it, you little ghost bitch. You’re going to find out why they put me away for all those years. I’ll start by making you cut off your precious hair.”

The weight of her body was lifted off mine and I turned around to see Elena on her back, yanking her long, wavy hair. Belmont lowered the log in his hands, cheering Elena on for the first time instead of arguing with her. Vivienne threw the persistent blonde off of her, panting heavily. She wiped a spot of blood from her lip. “Oh, that’s it, you little ghost bitch. You’re going to find out why they put me away for all those years. I’ll start by making you cut off your precious hair.”

The only thing preventing Vivienne from finding a creative way to murder a ghost was me, standing in front of a breathless Elena. “It wasn’t an empty threat, Viv. You come anywhere near her again and I’ll make sure the council gives you the punishment you deserved.”

Her lips curved up into a manic smile. “Viv, huh? See, it’s only a matter of time before the truth comes back to you. Don’t feel too bad when that happens, Gisele Buttchin.”

I glared at Belmont, who snickered quietly to himself. He shrugged, muttering, “What? That was pretty good”
“Is that all you’ve got? I’ve heard better insults from a preschooler.” In the midst of holding Elena back, her legs kicking the air, I heard a soft pounding in the distance. “Come on, give it another go, crazy pants.”

“Elena, don’t. She won’t bother us again.” The pounding grew louder then went completely silent. “Let’s just wake up Rhys and get out of here. I’m not about to be attacked by a bear.”

A few light slaps on the cheek were not enough to wake Rhys. If I was not able to feel his pulse, I would have thought that Vivienne killed him.

“Just smack him with the water bottle. He likes it rough,” she suggested with a playful smile.

Twisting open my water bottle, I tilted it over his face when I spotted a set of paw prints that stopped right next to his body. The tracks looked brand-new (I blamed a trick of the light when the closest prints deepened, revealing the worms hiding beneath the dirt), as if an animal had passed by the river in the last five minutes. I was distracted by something wet dripping onto my fingers but instead of water, it was a long, string of drool.

Being winter, no one would find it strange to see their breath. The only problem was that my own putrid breath was not hitting my face. I staggered backwards, the bottle smacking Rhys’s chest (proving that he was a heavy sleeper when he did not even flinch), as a giant dog, nearly eight feet tall, with mangled black fur and glowing red eyes appeared across from me. With a sharp tug on my sleeve, Vivienne made a dash for the forest.

“Keep moving!” she shouted, a fearful quiver in her tone. I had never seen her this frightened, except for when the doctors forced her to sit in the ‘black room’ at Erinyes. “Would you stop caring about ghosts? It can’t hurt them!”

My heart skipped a beat each time I heard its paws pounding into the dirt. Vivienne helped me climb up a tree, refusing to let me stop until we were on one of the highest branches. I breathed a shaky sigh of relief as Elena and Belmont appeared on the branches below us.

“Since when do wolves get that big?” asked Belmont, checking for any sign of the monstrous dog.

“Shh. It’s not a wolf. It’s a hellhound and they can hear ghosts,” I whispered, feeling like my heart was moving at a thousand beats per minute. Vivienne rocked back and forth on the branch, her eyes shut and her hands over her ears. “A—are you okay?”

“Who cares? She probably brought it here to scare us, Byrne. Well, I’m pretty sure I shit myself when that thing was running after me so mission accomplished.” He clapped mockingly in Vivienne’s face. “No wonder they put you in a loony bin.”

“It wasn’t her. A hellhound bite kills a reaper in minutes. They’re not supposed to be above the surface.”

“T—the council sent it. He was right. They didn’t actually want to release me. This is how they handle problems now. They pretend that they believe you’re better and then have you killed. I should’ve known it was a trick.”

“Oh, spare me. You’re not much of an actress so the council must be full of morons,” said Elena, not sounding the least bit sympathetic. “None of us will fall for—Tessa, come on. She’s faking it.”
I had let Vivienne rest her head in my lap, a method that usually relaxed her. Having visited Erinyes several times, I was the only one who understood Vivienne’s fear. The hospital had a reputation for its extremely harsh treatments, whether the patient was six or sixty. If a patient broke the rules or was considered too disruptive, they were sent to The Black Room. The experience in that room was different for each person but from what Vivienne had told me, the room was able to change based on a person’s fears.

If facing their fears was not enough to break them, which was difficult when dealing with people guilty of heinous crimes, the doctors would put them in near-death situations to teach them a lesson about their own mortality. One of those situations involved releasing a pack of hellhounds in the confined space and the doctors only gave the antidote when the patient agreed to follow the rules.

“You don’t get it. It’s…a reaper thing.”

“Putting her head in your lap?”

“Elena, you died in a car crash. It was quick. Being bitten by a hellhound is like being stabbed by a thousand knives over and over and just when you think the pain is gone, it gets ten times worse. The doctors at Erinyes use them to get patients to comply. It’s not fun to feel like you’re dying while the people who could help just stand around and do nothing.”

I seized the branch as the tree shook violently. The hellhound, somehow looking bigger than before, was on its hind legs and pushing against the tree with its paws. With each push, the tree was tilting more and more to the right and I scrambled to find some way out of this mess that did not end with my death. The trunk snapped in half, falling rapidly towards the ground. I braced myself for the impact, hugging the trunk with all the strength I could muster. The tree crashed with a resounding thud and I rolled onto my back, lightheaded and seeing little dots dancing in front of my eyes.

“I’ve got you, Te—”

The hellhound knocked Elena aside, like she weighed less than a feather, with a swipe of its paw. Before I could do much as stand on one leg, its paws pressed down on my chest, making it painful to just breathe. Drool trickled onto my face like rain drops as its hovered over me. I winced from the pain of its claws digging into my chest. As it opened its massive jaw, wide enough to swallow me whole, I closed my eyes, accepting that there was no escape. The heavy weight was suddenly lifted off my chest and instead of the sound of a jaw snapping shut, I heard a series of growls.

Too afraid to move, I turned my head to the side. There were now two hellhounds but the newest arrival, slightly smaller with lighter fur and a x-shaped scar on its back, was fighting the other. The smaller hellhound knocked its opponent down the hill and I scooted back as it ambled towards me. With just its nose, it was strong enough to nudge me across the ground until I was hidden behind a large boulder. I peeked over the top of the boulder to watch the fight between the two hellhounds, thinking that I was beginning to lose my mind.

“Where’s Vivienne?” I asked as Elena and Belmont joined me at my hiding spot.

“I offered to take her while Ellie got you. We were almost by the river when she punched me and ran off,” said Belmont. “Why are we not doing the same? Especially now that there are two…”

“The smaller one saved me. I don’t know why.”

“So it could eat you all by itself?”
“No, it pushed me over here…like it was protecting me.”

The smaller hellhound howled in pain as the larger one dug its bloodstained teeth into its shoulder. No matter how much I wanted to help, I doubted that I could do much damage. The fight continued on, each getting in blows and suffering some, until the larger hellhound suffered a bite to the neck. Its menacing red eyes darted towards me before disappearing down the hill.

“Is it over?” asked Elena, peeping through her fingers. “Did the nice one win?”

“I think so. Wait here.”

I chased after the smaller hellhound, limping on its front leg. The tracks led me back to the hiking trail towards the caves. As I followed the tracks, my feet dwarfed by their size, I noticed that they slowly began to be shaped less like a dog’s. I stared down at the final two tracks, just outside the caves where I could hear Mr. Hilton’s voice. The prints were not much bigger than the ones made by my sneakers and definitely human.

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”
The Underworld

I think I had the ghost version of a heart attack so I’m going to lie down. Tell me what happens when you get back from the trial.

Those were Elena’s last words to Belmont before vanishing from the woods. Translation? ‘I just found out about this friend that you never mentioned before and you two are obviously really close and I’m the worst friend ever’. If he had any brains, he would know that Elena left the woods out of shame, not fear. Sitting on the ground outside the cave entrance, my head between my knees, I felt exactly the same, regretting that I never told her about Vivienne.

“If you squint really hard and tilt your head to the right, he kind of looks like a dog.” With his head cocked to the side, Belmont’s eyes fell on Mr. Jameson, the owner of a major oil company who looked like he already had one foot in the grave. “How can we tell? Maybe if I kick him in the leg a bunch of times, he’ll get angry and turn into a monster dog again.”

“You’re not kicking an old man. Besides, I doubt it’s him. He’s been telling the same story for the past hour and I think Mr. Hilton would mention it if he disappeared.”

“Am I the only one confused on how those…dogs could be actual people?” he asked, careful not to brush up against anyone else in fear that it would trigger a sudden change. “You said that they’re not allowed above the surface unless they’re being used to keep insane reapers like Vivienne under control. Are you definitely sure that the tracks turned human? For all you know, it turned invisible then went back to wherever the hell it’s from and the tracks belonged to an actual person, not a dog in a disguise.”

A small part of me wanted to agree with Belmont, thinking all the insanity that I had been through lately made me paranoid. No matter how much I wanted to believe his theory that the hellhound just happened to be following the same path, its tracks covering a person’s footprints, I knew that a hellhound, possibly two, was hiding among the group. It seemed almost impossible that these creatures lived in Belmont Falls but, being a reaper with the power to see ghosts, I had no right to judge what was considered too crazy for this world.

“If Elena wasn’t such a baby, she could help us find it. Bet she’s crying into a pillow. It’s not like ghosts can die twice…can we?”

“She’s not crying into a pillow. She locked herself in my bedroom and is writing in her notebook.”

“Wh—is she forgetting that you almost died? N—not that it’s a big deal or anything,” he said, rubbing the back of his neck. “What, is she writing an angry letter to send to the hellhound?”

“No, this is what she does when she’s upset. She’d be doing it in her own room if someone wasn’t living in it. She takes her mind off of what’s bothering her by writing in her special notebook. Poems, short stories…she says when she comes up with an amazing idea, I have to make sure it gets published so she can achieve her dream of being a famous writer. Getting published in the town newspaper every few months wasn’t good enough for her.”

As I half-listened to Mr. Hilton discuss some kind of search party, I caught Belmont shifting uncomfortably out of the corner of my eye. “I’ve known her since all we could do was crawl but I never knew she actually liked writing. I saw her write in that glittery notebook for years and I just thought it was her diary or something. No wonder she hates me. Was I that bad of a boyfriend?”
“Well, you’re not exactly in her top five and since she’s only had one other relationship with some British guy at summer camp when she was twelve…” I twirled my necklace between my fingers, remembering the jealousy burning inside me when she showed me pictures of her ‘teenage Mr. Darcy’. “If it’s any consolation, I’m not her favorite person right now either. It would be easy to blame Vivienne for that but it’s my fault. She just needs time to herself. We’ll talk to her after the trial.”

“Tessa, are you okay?” Rhys sprinted towards me, holding an ice pack to the back of his head. “I was worried that you were still out there,” he said, relieved to find me in one piece.

His head injury was effortlessly explained away by Vivienne, who concocted an elaborate story of a wild animal attacking him by the river. When he awoke, she was kneeling by his side and he could barely process anything she told him, more concerned with my disappearance.

“Declan was just about to send a bunch of us out to find you.” His eyes, widening in alarm, passed over my cuts and bruises from the hellhound attack. “It’s my fault. I’ve been out here a hundred times. I should’ve been more careful…heard it creeping up behind me. Isabelle brought a first aid kit. She can patch you up.”

“Rhys—”

I was interrupted by Rhys checking my injuries. He quietly muttered to himself over the possibilities of my attacker, from wolves to bears.

“It wasn’t an animal,” I said, wincing as his fingers brushed against a cut on my elbow.

“Then you definitely have to talk to Isabelle. I know some drifters wander around here. Did you get a good look at their face?”

“No, it wasn’t—Vivienne hit you.”

Belmont shook his head so fast that I thought it was about to fall off his shoulders. Hearing my startling confession, Rhys merely stifled a laugh.

“You’re a little disoriented from what happened. Maybe the person looked like her. At least we know it was a woman. That gives the police more to work with…I mean, it won’t be at the top of their list of priorities but I’m sure Isabelle and Oliver will keep an eye out.”

“Byrne, abort. This is a bad idea. You don’t need to tell my brother anything,” hissed Belmont. It was the first time I ever heard something close to concern in his voice. “Tell him it was a joke.”

“Rhys, I lied to you before. I know Vivienne…the real her. She’s just using you and when she’s done, you’ll be the latest on a long list of victims, including me. Don’t let your brother’s death be the reason that you make stupid decisions. You’re Rhys Belmont. The school has a goddamn award named after you and your sister and the teachers judge their students based on how much they’re like you. I’m pretty sure I’ve even heard Mr. Simpson call me and my friend Will your mini clones after the science fair last year. If you think with your brain instead of your dick, you’d see that she’s nothing but a liar.”

When I unloaded everything I had bottled up since discovering his relationship with Vivienne, I expected him to be surprised and have a million questions but instead, he just flashed me that charming Belmont smile.

“I get it, Tessa. I went through the same thing with Claire and plenty of other girls. You’re jealous of Vivienne because you like me.”
“After everything I just said, the only logical explanation is that I have a crush on you?” I asked, thinking that I somehow ended up in the twilight zone.

“You don’t have to be embarrassed. Like I said, you’re not the first. You said it yourself. I am kind of a legend at Belmont High.”

I smacked his hand away before he could examine a scrape on my knee. “Did your dad pay off your teachers to get your perfect GPA? To get you into college? Because there’s no way one of the only people to impress Mr. Simpson is this stupid. Seriously, is being a pigheaded jackass a family trait?”

“Tessa—”

When I had been chasing after the hellhound, the adrenaline kick made me forget all the pain but the second I simply stood on one leg, in an attempt to storm off in anger, I felt like it was about to snap in half. Rhys held onto me, helping me limp back towards the cave despite my protests.

“I don’t need your help,” I muttered, fighting back the immense pain shooting up my leg.

“Actually, you do but like my brother always said, you’re being stubborn. Once you’ve had time to rest, you’ll see that you just imagined Vivienne hitting me. I know for a fact that she’d never do that.”

Barely a minute had passed since entering the cave when I heard several people say my name in a panic. Rhys carefully placed me down on the ground then handed me his ice pack.

I glanced up at him, ignoring the sharp pebbles digging into my backside. “When I go to your funeral after she screws you over, I’ll give my condolences to your parents and once everyone is gone, I’ll walk over to your grave and all I’ll say is ‘I told you so’.”

At that moment, it was unclear what was colder: the ice pack on my thigh or my chilling, unapologetic tone as I spoke to him. The brief flicker of fear in his eyes was enough proof for me that, even in the tiniest way, my words made him doubt his relationship. I would have continued to chip away at his wall of confidence if we were alone, instead of now being surrounded by Parker, Mr. Hilton, and several other members of the group. Rhys had to speak on my behalf since Isabelle was too busy cleaning my cuts and checking that my leg was not severely injured.

“Mr. Hilton, I’m fine,” I insisted, not wanting him to blame himself. “I was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. I’ve been through worse with my little brother when I try to get him to eat his vegetables.”

“That may be but you are my responsibility. I can have James drive you back early, if you wish.”

“No, I just need to rest for a few minutes and then I’ll be good to go.”

Parker offered to keep me company while the others explored the cave. I struggled not to check my phone every few minutes for a text from Elena or send one myself, knowing that she needed her privacy.

“Were you really attacked by some woman?” he asked, sounding skeptical.

“It was all a big blur. All I remember is talking to Rhys by the river and then getting dragged by my hair.”

This was the only case where a lie sounded more realistic than the truth. Despite being a fan of Greek mythology, I highly doubted that Parker would not think I was insane if I told him about the
existence of hellhounds.

“You didn’t have to stay with me.”

With a small shrug, he rubbed his shoulder. “Gotta make sure my date’s good for the dance. If you don’t think those cuts will heal before then, I’ve gotten pretty good at covering stuff like that up.”

“The king of the school can’t be seen with a girl unless she looks perfect, right?” I asked, holding back a groan as I shifted around to relieve the soreness in my backside.

“I didn’t mean—personally, I think they make you look badass but you know how people like Claire can be sometimes.”

“More like all the time and I’m nowhere near a badass.”

“Says the girl who beat up a crazy guy with just a stapler. My dad told me what happened at Nelson’s house. I shouldn’t be surprised since I watched you break Claire’s nose but you are a force to be reckoned with, Byrne.”

Either the temperature had risen a thousand degrees or my cheeks had gone red. Judging by his smile, it was the latter.

“Hell, you spooked Jackson enough that they had to put him on psychiatric hold for a few days. He kept babbling that you were a monster.”

“Have they looked more into that? Connor’s out of the hospital but no one’s mentioned if the police found out who pushed him.”

“My dad hasn’t mentioned it except to say that it was an accident,” he said, shaking his head. “Izzy brought it up when my mom and I visited the station before we went out to dinner. He kind of exploded when she showed him your witness statement and how it matched another neighbor’s report of someone sneaking into the house through the back door. She spotted it in the pile for the paper shredder. He threatened to have her demoted if she didn’t stop with the conspiracy theories.”

“So what, he thinks that Jackson just happened to be in the house at the same time?”

Parker began wringing his hands and his eyes darted around the cave, as if expecting to find someone hiding behind one of the boulders. “Izzy thought it sounded like a bunch of crap too. Even if you don’t believe it, just pretend that my dad is telling the truth. Bad things happen when you cross him. You don’t know what he’s capable of, Tessa.”

The others soon returned to the cave entrance. The next part of the expedition involved descending down a nearby chasm in pairs and searching for any interesting artifacts. Parker leapt up at the snap of his father’s fingers and rushed to his side. There was a quiet tension between them and I assumed that I was the source when Chief Parker nodded his head in my direction before continuing what looked like a stern lecture.

As I fastened the dark blue climbing helmet on my head, I quietly spoke to Belmont about the obvious cover-up of Mr. Mitchell’s attack.

“We could look for Jackson again. The guys and I always went to his place for booze before a party,” he suggested. “Just threaten to do what you did to his arm before and he’ll tell us who hired him to get those papers. He’s our best shot at finding out who killed me. There’s no guarantee it’s the same person but it’s at least a lead. Whoever hired him could be connected to the killer.”
“Then we’ll talk to him, but not directly. Chief Parker definitely has eyes on him to keep him quiet and if I go there, one of his spies will blab and he’ll just change his story to accuse me of pushing Connor because I’m mentally unstable or something. When has Angela Starr ever listened to the police? They’ve threatened her a thousand times but she always gets the story out somehow. Maybe she’s talked to Jackson and she has a clue, even if she doesn’t know it.”

“Garren won’t meet with her again. He’d rather face a pack of wolves and I don’t blame him.”

“Me either but she’s all about gossip so we can use that to get her attention. We’ll figure out the details after the trial, if I’m not found guilty.”

“Nervous?” Dr. Baxter, no longer half naked and taking his anger out on trees, was standing in front of me. “There’s no reason to be scared, Tessa. As your partner, I’ll make sure you’re safe.”

“Chace is my partner so why don’t you go bother someone else?” I asked, wiping dirt from the back of my jeans as I lifted myself up from the ground.

“Declan agreed with me that it would be best to have someone more experienced as your partner. What if Chace hurt himself while making sure you were safe? There’s a big game soon. We don’t want the school’s star player to sit it out.”

Parker, leaning against the wall, was surrounded by his friends, ignoring their concerns about Friday’s game. Looking over Danvers’ shoulder (“I heard the whole team is on ‘roids, man”, he said, earning several nervous murmurs of agreement from his fellow teammates), he spotted Dr. Baxter with me, his expression a mirror of how I felt on the inside.

“I’m merely your guide. If you’re not comfortable with something, just say so and we won’t do it.” I stepped back as he extended his hand. “Ready?”

“The only reason I’m letting you near me is because I’m not the type to make a scene but let’s make one thing clear, asshole. You’re not allowed to touch me.”

He chuckled. “There’s no reason for—”

“Ever. Otherwise, I’ll tell Declan how you’ve been screwing his daughter.”

“Blackmail is a two way street. I’m sure Chief Parker would be very interested in learning about your little trip to the bridge at the Falls, just a day after Fin’s accident. Do you think he’ll believe that pathetic excuse of yours? I’m curious what you were really doing that day.”

Our tense conversation was interrupted by Vivienne looping her arm through mine. Acting as if she had not been seconds from death just an hour before, she declared that Rhys was woozy after being hit in the back of the head by an unknown assailant and with the group having an odd number, she was joining them as a trio. Rhys, holding a new bag of ice to his head, was sitting near Parker and his friends and gave a half-hearted wave to Vivienne, who blew him a kiss.

“Threesomes, my fave,” she joked, playfully nudging my shoulder.

Seeing that I was not in the mood for her jokes, she turned her attention to Dr. Baxter, who was ironically not eyeing her like a piece of meat. His eyes traveled up and down her body but more out of suspicion than lust.

“I don’t think we met yet. I’m Vivienne.”

“Brendon.”
“Oh, you teach at the high school, right? Rhys was telling me. I loved bio when I was in school. I was practically top of the class when it came to anatomy. I bet you’re a really hands-on teacher.”

“If you’ll excuse me.”

“Do you get that weird vibe from him too?” she asked as he walked over to the chasm and tied a rope around a large boulder close to the edge.

I wrenched my arm from her grasp. “Yeah. It’s because he’s a pervert who has most of the women in this town making heart eyes at him and the teenage girls wishing that he was the one screwing them instead of some horny boy who pats himself on the back for lasting more than a minute.” Belmont looked offended but chose to remain silent when we made eye contact. “Just my luck that I’m in partnered with a conceited perv and a psychotic bitch.”

Fighting back the urge to wince, I limped over to my backpack to retrieve the harness. Sage flew out the moment I unzipped the front pocket, circling around my head before landing on my shoulder.

“Why is Cedric’s little spy with you?” Vivienne asked, her lip curled in disgust as I grabbed a bag of seeds from the side pocket.

“She’s taking me to my trial. I accidentally summoned some dagger when I was trying not to get killed by a monster…the one your friend sent.”

“The only reapers I know in this town are you and your mother. That’s the truth. Why would a reaper come after you?”

“Why did you kill your parents? The world’s full of weird, unanswered questions,” replied Belmont.

He jumped when Vivienne waved her hands in a strange manner, as if casting a spell. Seeing the fear in his eyes only made her giggle. Putting on a serious face, she insisted that she never met another reaper in the town and if any were in hiding, either of us would have sensed them by now.

“I’ve been on trial before so take my advice. Just apologize for taking the dagger and tell them it won’t happen again. You’re like the least threatening person they’ve had in that courtroom. Every baby reaper breaks the rules once. It’s not a big deal.”

“No. I’m going to ask for their help. When they hear what’s been happening, they’ll—”

“You being so optimistic and naïve is adorable. The council acts like they care about everyone but they’re only interested in protecting themselves and their precious rules. These are the same people who chuck kids in a hellhole for making one mistake and then abandon them, not batting an eye when they take their own lives out of desperation for any kind of freedom. If you tell them that you think a reaper is attacking people and their own kind? They’ll send you to Erinyes too. It’s what they do with all the so-called problematic reapers.”

“You’re wrong. You just don’t want me to tell them because you’d rather that I rely on you for help. That’s why you sent those hellhounds, isn’t it? Did you meet them at some sleazy bar when you got released? Buy them a few drinks and convince them to go after me so you could act like a hero? Did they already live in Belmont Falls or did you bring them with you?”

She stared at me like I was speaking another language. “Okay, this is why you need me. Did you join that weird organization that thinks animals deserve the same rights as people? I met someone from there and seriously, they’re the ones who need straitjackets.”

Though Belmont dismissed her cluelessness as an act, I knew her better than most and there was
nothing but confusion in her dark eyes, a sign that she was unaware of a hellhound’s double identity. If she knew that the hellhounds were walking amongst us on the trip, she would be teasing me about that very fact with veiled remarks (“If he gets anymore excited, he’ll start wagging his tail”) that, to the oblivious, would just sound like jokes.

The one upside to being partners with Vivienne was that she stopped Dr. Baxter from making a single lewd comment towards me. It did not take long for her to see that his interest in me went far beyond teacher and student and if he so much glanced at me, she was prepared to cut his rope. Her protectiveness also allowed me and Belmont to discuss the hellhound situation in private.

Trying to determine the hellhound’s true identity was difficult, between my injuries, being forced to be within an inch of some of my least favorite people, and Belmont’s eagerness to accuse any person of being a dog for the tiniest thing. I held my tongue when he pointed out that Mr. Hilton was repeatedly scratching the back of his neck.

As I concentrated on not falling to my death, he made a list of reasons why a certain person was or was not the hellhound. His main suspect was Mr. Hilton as the smaller hellhound, considering that was the one protecting me during the attack and he had a ‘soft spot’ for me.

“Scratching your neck doesn’t make you a dog. It could just be a mosquito bite,” I whispered, lowering my voice around a suspicious Vivienne. “Besides, someone would notice if he went missing.”

“I saw Danvers catch a frisbee with his mouth once.”

“That’s just proof he’s an idiot.”

Upon returning to the Hilton’s home, Parker finally managed to escape his father, who had kept him on a tight leash. He offered to drive me home, reminding me of the ploy I used to distract Vivienne in the woods. Before I could come up with a convincing excuse, Garren walked towards us, his nostrils subtly flaring at the mere sight of me.

“Had a run-in with a thief. They had a pretty good right hook,” he explained when Parker pointed out the nasty bruise on the side of his head. “I’m actually taking Tessa home.”

“Why? Is something wrong?”

“No, I had a few questions to ask her father so I told him I’d drop her off. I’m sure you two can hang out some other time. We should get going.”

“I’ll uh see you later,” I said, giving him a quick wave before following Garren.

An air of awkward silence pervaded the car as Garren drove out of the gated community, with both me and Belmont in the backseat. It was the one instance where I would rather be lectured than thrown judgmental looks through the mirror. Perched on the dashboard, Sage let out a series of chirps to direct him to the location of the trial. Belmont refrained from making any jokes about his ability to ‘speak bird’ though keeping quiet was making him bounce up and down in his seat like an impatient child.

“Oliver,” I started, breaking the silence.

“Don’t. After the trial, we’ll discuss why you knocked me out. It’s between us so I won’t mention it to my father or Cedric. I’d ask to reschedule to give you time to recuperate from whatever attacked you—and it wasn’t a hellhound before you two babble about that again—but the council doesn’t like to be kept waiting, no matter what.”
“It was a hellhound and I already told you that whoever it was, yeah I said whoever…they were on the trip with me. I’m not going to waste my breath convincing you. You know I wouldn’t have hit you if it wasn’t import—”

“Apparently, I know nothing. I thought I knew you but maybe I was wrong. Maybe you’re just like Vivienne, putting on an act. Why else would she be this intent on getting close to you at risk of being reprimanded by the council? Moving to Belmont Falls, dating Rhys Belmont…”

“I—it’s complicated. I wanted to tell you in the bathroom but I was scared and I can’t just explain it over a ten minute car ride. When this is over, I promise to tell you everything.”

Relieved that the tension was somewhat broken, Belmont took the opportunity to ask several questions about the trial, including its location (“It’s in the Underworld, but it’s not like a Disney movie,” I explained, dismissing his image of a man with flaming blue hair and demonic minions as mere fantasy) and how the council decided on my guilt or innocence.

Garren had never witnessed a trial himself, due to his father forbidding him from visiting him at work, but, as a boy, he had read several transcripts from past trials, sneaking into his father’s office late at night. The severity of the trial depended on the accused’s crimes and if they possessed any priors, whether it was supernaturally related or a DUI.

Years of watching sci-fi and fantasy movies gave Belmont his own idea of their journey to the Underworld.

“It’s like a portal, right?” he asked, his eyes lighting up with excitement. “I watched this movie with Rhys once where the main character had to slice his hand with this fancy knife in the middle of the woods and make a weird pattern with his blood. When he spoke another language, the ground started shaking and a swirling vortex opened up right below him. It was awesome.”

“Sounds overly complicated,” I said, a sense of dread creeping up the back of my throat as Garren stopped the car.

“Are we here already? Do I get to do something or do ghosts have another way of getting there?” He frowned when he glanced out the window, the local bank on the other side of the glass. “This is the bank.”

“Perceptive as always, Belmont. With those brains, why did you need your dad to pay off the school so you could pass every year? You should’ve easily been top of the class.”

Walking up the steps to the bank, I regretted bringing him along for the trip, even if he was key to proving my innocence. Garren shared the same thought, pinching the bridge of his nose as Belmont questioned why we were waiting on a long line, almost to the door, instead of heading to the trial.

“It starts in like half an hour. Is this really the time to take out money?”

“Fin, for once in your life, be quiet. We won’t be late.” Reaching into his coat pocket, he handed me a pack of tissues. “You need to look somewhat presentable. We’ll tell the council that you were mugged. That will get you some sympathy.”

In the midst of muttering about incompetent workers, the elderly woman in front of us, dressed in an oversized fur coat that was possibly made from a giant polar bear and sporting gaudy rings on both wrinkly hands, narrowed her shrewd eyes at me. I stopped wiping the caked blood under my nose and placed my hood over my head to avoid the stares of other curious bystanders.

“Next, please,” said a soft-spoken voice.
The three of us, with Belmont still questioning this odd visit, walked over to the next available bank teller, a young blonde in a white blouse with a peter pan collar and a black pencil skirt. I recognized her as Naomi Cohen, a girl who graduated when I was a freshman and was known for her sunny disposition.

“Officer Garren, hi.” She tucked a loose strand of strawberry blonde hair behind her ear, her pale cheeks flushed. “You’re looking—oh no, what happened?” she asked, spotting his bruise.

“Nothing serious, Naomi. It’s all part of being a cop.”

“You are really good at that. I remember when you stopped that robber here a few months ago. You were so brave. How can I help you today?”

“I’d like to withdraw one penny from my account.”

Belmont looked at him strangely. “What? Who the hell only takes out one—what’s happening?” Her aquamarine eyes were glazed, the usual twinkle gone. “Did one of those creatures follow us? Is she getting possessed?”

Naomi retrieved a set of keys from the drawer behind the window and unfastened the rusty key from the chain. “Here you go. Please return the key when you’re finished.”

Her expression returned to normal as another woman, looking like she just left an intense session at the gym, took our place. Pretending to search through my bag, I grabbed Belmont by his sleeve and dragged him down the hallway. He turned his head back towards the bank teller window where Naomi was aiding the woman, having no recollection of her encounter with Garren.

“There are portals to the Underworld but we don’t open them by sacrificing small animals or dripping blood on a stone in the middle of the woods. Every town has seven portals to represent the seven deadly sins. Pride, sl—”

“I know what those are, Byrne. Sunday school practically beat it into my head. That doesn’t explain what happened back there. Her eyes went all weird,” he said, mimicking Naomi’s vacant expression. “It’s like she wasn’t herself.”

“That’s how we keep the portals hidden. The portals are in places that represent the sins. They must consider what I did theft and that’s part of greed so we had to travel through that portal, which is why we’re here. The council makes sure that an ordinary person can’t find it accidentally so the key is only given when someone say a specific phrase, something that you’d never say in a normal conversation. When someone takes a job at a place with a portal, a member of the council activates them.”

“Activates?”

“The council member implants the phrase in their head, along with what they are to do when they hear it, but then the employee forgets the entire conversation…until they hear that phrase again. Think of it like pavlov conditioning,” explained Garren.

Belmont responded with a blank stare. “Basically, it’s like brainwashing,” I said, choosing a simpler approach. “The council deactivates them when they’re no longer employed at the site of the portal. Not everyone agrees with it. When they were my age, my grandparents were part of a protest to change how the portals were hidden.”

Garren warned me not to mention my grandparents in front of the council, given their poor reputation among most of its members. He stopped in front of a bare wall at the end of the hallway, where Sage
began flying in a specific pattern, a thread of silver light emerging from its tail feathers. The pattern was in the shape of a Celtic knot, emanating a faint glow, and as it faded, a steel elevator door appeared.

“Relax, we’re the only ones that can see it,” I assured a stunned Belmont. “Sorry it’s not the swirling vortex of doom you were expecting.”

The inside of the elevator was covered from wall to wall in art from different cultures, each depicting their own versions of the underworld. I remembered one of my grandmother’s stories about the largest mural reflecting the heritage of the head of the council and in this case, it was a mural of Mag Mell, an idyllic afterlife in Irish mythology.

The further the elevator descended, the more reality set in: in a few minutes, my fate was in the hands of powerful strangers. As I played with my necklace, I wished that Elena was beside me, instead of writing in her notebook and playing songs from her angst playlist.

“Whoa.”

Belmont’s voice snapped me out of my own thoughts. The steel elevator doors had opened and he stared in awe at his first glimpse of the underworld. Instead of the fire and brimstone commonly associated with the place, it was a bustling marketplace with people of all ethnicities selling a wide range of goods, from jewelry to potion ingredients. Garren kept a hand on Belmont’s shoulder, steering him away from the eccentric peddlers. I waved at an elderly Mexican woman selling necklaces that warded off dangerous spirits.

“Do you know her?” Belmont asked as the woman waved back with a kind smile.

“Yeah, she’s friends with my grandmother. She visits her all the time and we’ve had her over for dinner. They’ve known each other for like fifty years.”

“How does she visit? Aren’t all these people dead?”

“Not all of them. Some just do business down here. Most of it is innocent stuff like jewelry, food, clothes…but the others are a little more underhanded. Think of it like the underworld version of a black market,” I explained, pointing at a sleazy man, his grey greasy hair slicked back, selling hellhound venom (“Just a drop and your enemies will be left paralyzed for up to an hour,” he boasted, holding a vial of blood red liquid between his stubby fingers) for the ‘small price’ of five hundred dollars. “That’s why my mother never lets me go down here. My grandmother did once when I was ten to visit Rosa and it started a huge fight. She told my mother that it was an educational lesson about brujas.”

“Bruwhat?”

“Witch healers. There’s not just hellhounds and reapers, Belmont. There’s a whole world you can’t see unless you know it’s there. That’s why they work down here. They don’t want things like these to fall into the hands of some average human.”

As Garren led us through the massive crowd, it was my job to keep Belmont away from any unsavory people, who were far more common in the underworld than someone like Rosa. I distracted him with stories about the underworld, including how its appearance was updated to match the times aboveground and the same occurred with each culture’s ideas of paradise and eternal torture.

“Fin, we are here for a trial, not to shop,” said an exasperated Garren when Belmont asked for a
minute to explore the shops.

“We won’t be late. Come on, when are we ever getting a chance to go here again, man? Let us have fun before the council probably decides to lock Byrne away forever.” He shrugged at my harsh glare. “What? We’re all thinking it’ll happen, right? What’s wrong with a little fun?”

“Nothing,” said a soft melodic voice.

It belonged to a girl our age stepping out an alleyway, immediately catching Belmont’s attention with the pink highlights in her dark wavy hair and her dress that was better suited for a nightclub than a marketplace, the cut stopping just above her bellybutton. His eyes lingered on her long legs, his gaze only broken by my fingers pinching his arm.

“I couldn’t help but overhear what you were saying.”

She grazed her fingers along his bicep, once again grabbing his attention. The way Belmont was openly drooling, I thought he might drown the entire underworld within a few minutes.

“Bet you could,” I replied, not bothering to lower my voice.

Her dark eyes snapped away from his, her fingers still drawing tiny circles on his arm. “Tessa, I heard you’d be coming down here. It’s not every day a goody-goody reaper gets in trouble. What’d you do, get a C on a test?” she teased. “Your ghost friend is right. You should have some fun. I’m Amara, by the way. What’s your name, handsome?”

“Fin,” he said, excited by the mere fact that he was able to feel her touch. “I’m all about fun.”

“How would you like to hear your futures? Follow me.”

“Fin, wait—and he’s gone,” said Garren, watching Belmont eagerly follow the seductive Amara into the dark alley. “I knew I shouldn’t have gone this way. He uses girls like her to get his customers.”

“In a way, it is a good business strategy.”

Together, we hurried after Belmont before he lost an eye or worse. Garren had just passed through the narrow space when a hooded figure bumped into me, nearly knocking me to the ground. The stranger did not even have the decency to apologize, continuing on his way, and I was about to yell at them until I caught a familiar scent, unsure of where I encountered it before. Clutching their shoulder, the stranger disappeared into an apothecary.

“Tessa!”

Shaking off the uneasy feeling in the pit of my stomach, I caught up with Garren, who was at the end of the alley, banging on a black door. “Password?” asked Amara, sweetly.

“Enough of this, Amara. Let us in.”

“I need the password.”

“The password is let us in or I’ll post a video of you and a certain someone on a beach, late at night after a lot of tequila. I never deleted it,” I warned. “One person sees it and your social life will plummet.”

The door swung open, revealing an amused Amara. “Look at that, Viv’s little pet has teeth. Come on in, the fun’s about to begin.”
Belmont was sitting at a wooden round table, symbols carved all around the edges and a crystal ball in the center. The man across from him, his face shielded by the hood of his coat, was moving his large hands around the crystal ball.

"Tessa, Oliver, come to join the show?" he asked, speaking with a thick Greek accent. "I was just about to tell young Fin his future."

"He’s dead. What could you possibly tell him?" I countered.

"He wishes to know if his killer is caught. I see that it plagues his mind greatly. Let me ease that pain."

"Fin, don’t do this. It’s not as simple as reading your fortune. That’s why Carnus uses girls like Amara to bring people to him…to distract them so they’ll do whatever he wants. For once, don’t think with the worm between your legs. I can’t believe I’m saying this but you’re smarter than that. He won’t tell you the whole truth anyway. That’s how he works."

Amara sat beside Belmont, using her sexuality to drown out my pleas. He was too busy eyeing her cleavage to listen to reason.

"It’s fun, trust me. Don’t you want to have fun, Fin?" she asked, ruffling his hair.

"Sure. How do I uh get my fortune? Do I have to give you a drop of blood or something?"

"Not exactly."

Belmont fell back in his chair, his head slamming into the hard ground, as Carnus lowered his hood. He looked like a normal man, who was once handsome, with his disheveled dark hair and bronze skin except for the stitches (shaped in an X) in place of his eyes. Reaching under his seat, he placed a jar, filled to the brim with eyes, moving in all different directions, on the table.

"I require your eyes as payment for this service."

"Where the hell are yours?" he squeaked.

"Taken from me long ago, I’m afraid, but once I put your eyes where mine once were, I can see into your future. There’s no need to be scared. Amara can tell you. I’ve done this many times. The procedure to remove them is painless." She held up a sharp, menacing knife. "You’ll get one back of your choice. I keep the other as a token. Do we have a deal?"

He scrambled to his feet and stood behind me, as if afraid that Amara would attack him with the knife at any moment. "No way. You’re not taking my eyes."

"Fin, I promise it doesn’t hurt," said Amara, pouting. "Don’t you want to know who’s to blame for ending your pathetic life? You’re a ghost. You don’t need more than one eye but if you really do, there’s a stand nearby that sells replacements. Even with one eye, you’d still be super cute."

"Hey, he’s not pathetic! He was the best quarterback in the state and surprisingly really good at math. If anyone here is pathetic, it’s you, the girl who seduces anyone who walks by your creepy alley just to get some money."

Amara tossed her chair back as she stood up and held the knife dangerously close to my face. The fire burning in her eyes reminded me why I never picked fights with her in the past.

"You better watch how you talk to me. If what I’ve heard is true, that whole council is going to find"
you guilty, no matter how much you beg and plead and bat your little innocent eyes at them,” she hissed. “Then you’ll want friends like me because you’ll have no one else. I’ll be a good friend to have when you need something. Viv knew that and so did Damon.”

“What did you say?” I asked, thinking that I heard her wrong.

“Yeah, we’ve been seeing each other a lot lately. He always knows how to sweet talk me into doing anything. You can ask him yourself when Cedric chucks you into a room next to him.”

Leading me out of the room, Garrett dismissed Amara’s claims as nothing more than a cruel joke, a way to get under my skin. He ignored Belmont’s many questions about the ‘creepy guy with no eyes’, Amara, and Damon (“Who is he? Another reaper?”), insisting that we needed to get to the council on time. I had little doubt that Amara purposely dropped that little truth bomb to make me forget everything I prepared for the trial and it worked since the only thing on my mind was Damon, the thought sending shivers down my spine.

I had not even realized that we were standing outside the council’s headquarters, the building resembling a courthouse, until I heard Garren speaking with one of the burly, stone-faced guards. As the guard gave him directions, I noticed the same hooded figure from before, sitting on a bench with a paper bag. Their hood made it impossible to see their face but somehow, I knew they were staring straight at me.

Garren nudged me inside the building and it was even more imposing in person, compared to the pictures in my mother’s books. The stone grey walls seemed to stretch for miles, as if reaching the heavens themselves, and portraits of past and present council members adorned one side. It was oddly calming to see my grandfather’s face among them, reminding me how he was lauded as a fair and kind member, giving even the worst cases a chance to redeem themselves, until a new Grand Master replaced the previous one and dismissed him in favor of someone far more strict.

Near the doors was a twenty foot tall statue of the grim reaper, with men, women, and children bowing down at its feet. In the books, it always looked like they were smiling but up close, I noticed that their expressions were more similar to groveling or begging for mercy. My mother always told me that the statue was meant to show a reaper’s importance, how they had control over life and death.

Swarms of people passed by us, all dressed the same (the men in crisp black business suits with a white button down shirt and black loafers and the women in a similar button down with a black blazer, matching pencil skirt that stopped just at the knee, and matching heels) and walking in two lines, one for each gender. No one said a word to each other, staring straight ahead with not a single emotion on their faces. The only distinguishing feature was a gold, silver, or bronze badge, judging on their position.

“Whoa,” said Belmont, seeing a woman, a silver badge like one worn by the police pinned to her blazer, disappear into the wall instead of taking the stairs. “Is she a—”

“Ghost? Yeah. All kinds of people work for the council. Most ghosts are part of their special forces to bring in dangerous criminals. Ghosts can’t be seen by regular people so it’s easier for them to sneak around.”

Having never been inside the council’s headquarters, I was looking around with just as much wonder as Belmont. The ghosts vanished within the walls while the others stepped into elevators that went in all directions or sat in rowboats on an indoor river that traveled all the way down the hall, manned by hooded figures with corpse-like hands. The same murals in the elevators were on the floors, constantly changing every few seconds. Television screens were mounted on the walls, depicting the
same blonde-haired, blue-eyed woman giving news updates around the world. Unlike the usual news, these reports were far more cheerful, with not one instance of death or violence.

“That’s a lot weirder now if we’re right,” said Belmont, looking at a woman with a hellhound, no bigger than a puppy, in her purse. “Think she’s got some kind of weird fetish? What are you two doing?”

Stopping in front of a pair of giant doors at the end of the hall, images of reapers, guardians, hellhounds, ghosts, and other supernatural beings carved into the wood and the handles in the shape of the grim reaper’s scythe, Garren and I placed a hand on our chests. Others that were heading in the same direction did the same, their heads held high.

“Put your hand on your chest,” I whispered. Some people began to notice Belmont was the only one among them with his hands at his sides and one man, possibly a professional wrestler before becoming a ghost, in particular was ready to twist him into a pretzel. “Do it now and just mouth the words.”

Belmont listened to me, looking completely lost.

“Gods are fair. Gods are just. Gods protect us. That we trust,” the small group of us chorused as the doors swung open, bathing the hall in a silvery light.

He hesitated to move his hand until he saw me lower mine. “What was that?” he asked as people passed through the doors, the beefy man knocking into his shoulder. “You sounded like robots.”

“Our motto. We have to say it in our prayers and before we enter the council’s chambers,” I said, joining the rest of the group.

One at a time, they approached a short, balding man in round glasses behind a desk before being sent to another room within the chamber. Only those who worked in the building were allowed to skip the line, heading straight to their offices.

“You have to? You don’t think that’s creepy, Byrne?”

“The council members are the only ones who have seen the gods up close. They’re sort of like secondary gods, in a way. It’s how we show our respect for what they do. We learn it as soon as we’re able to talk.”

“Still sounds creepy to me. Wait, what do you mean they’ve seen the gods up close? You’re not—” He stifled a laugh. “You really think those exist? Like the council members are just having tea with Zeus?”

“Not just him. Gods from any culture…”

“You know they probably just say that so everyone listens to them, right? I mean, do they have pictures with these so-called gods? Even if they did, ten bucks says they’re photoshopped.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about, Belmont,” I said, clenching my fists. “Shut up or I’ll call Amara to come get you and scoop out your eyes.”

After sending away a woman who twitched repeatedly as she walked, muttering what sounded like a fake language under her breath, the bespectacled man said, “Next, please.”

Garren stepped forward. “Oliver Garren, guardian to Tessa Byrne. I’m here to escort her to her trial tonight, along with a witness Finley Belmont.” (“It’s Fin, man. What the hell?” he muttered, getting
“Do you need to see a form of ID?”

The man’s eyes, magnified by the glasses, skimmed the parchment in his hand, the end of his pen scratching his chin. He tapped the parchment twice and turned it around before placing it back on the table.

“I need you two to confirm your identities. Just touch your thumb under your name, please. Miss Byrne, you first.”

I pressed my thumb against the parchment and winced as I felt a sharp prick. Lifting my thumb, I saw a small drop of blood that soon seeped into the paper. Belmont did the same, holding back a groan.

“Everything seems to be in order. Your trial will be in the main chamber behind me, Miss Byrne. Please wait—”

“The main—I’m sorry,” interrupted Garren. “You must have her confused with someone else. My father works with the council and I know the main chamber is for…a certain kind of person. Her trial is over a small matter, nothing that serious really.”

“That’s what the parchment says, Mister Garren. As I was saying, please wait to the side and someone will escort you into the main chamber when the council is ready to proceed. Good luck to you.”

Garren nervously wrung his hands as the three of us stepped aside. Belmont and I leaned against the wall, watching him pace back and forth and whispering to himself.

“What kind of person is the main chamber for?” I asked, seeing him grow more panicked by the minute. “Why are you freaking out?”

“I’m not—the main chamber is for people like Vivienne. Those who have committed the worst crimes and the trial is in front of the entire council. I don’t understand why they’d put you through that. I know taking the blade is a serious offense but you’ve never been in trouble before. Surely they can understand that it was an accident, not done out of malicious intent.”

“Amara’s right. They already think I’m guilty,” I said, my heart sinking at the realization that I was possibly seconds from a lifetime sentence in Erinyes.

He gripped my shoulders. “No, don’t let her get in your head. You did nothing wrong, Tessa. Just stick to what we talked about and they won’t convict you of any crime. Cedric is a fair man. He won’t judge you for one mistake. With Fin’s testimony, that will make it all the more clear that you’re innocent in all this. Don’t let this shake your confidence.”

“Already made a mistake with her, boy?”

A middle-aged man in a crisp dark blue suit, his golden blonde hair slicked back with gel and not a hair out of place, walked towards us, leaning against a sterling silver skull headed cane. Judging by the color quickly draining from Garren’s face and his striking resemblance to the man, I knew that he was his father. He was exactly as Garren described: strait-laced and daunting, standing at seven feet tall.

“Father, it’s good to see you. Certainly not under these circumstances but um…oh, Mother wanted to know if you’ll be joining us for Christmas dinner. She’s invited the—”

“Your reaper is on trial and you wish to talk about a dinner?” he sneered. He sounded more like a
stern boss than a father. “Keep your priorities straight, boy.”

“Um hi, Mr. Garren, sir,” I said, hoping to defuse the tension. “I’m Te—”

He glanced down at my extended hand. “I see your parents haven’t taught your manners. Children don’t speak unless they’re spoken to, Miss Byrne.”

I lowered my hand, unsure if I should even respond, and Garren threw me the tiniest apologetic look before returning to a stoic face in front of his father. Belmont decided to stay quiet to avoid his own tongue-lashing.

“She’s about to stand trial and you bring her to the council like this?” Mr. Garren asked, indicating my scrapes and bruises. “Have you no sense?”

“She was mugged on her way to meeting me. I managed to clean her up a bit. Believe me, she looked much worse before. The council should be judging her on her testimony, not how she looks. They can’t fault her for something out of her control. Father, if I may ask, why is her trial in the main chamber?”

“Are you questioning my decisions and by extension, the council’s? We do as we see fit. No matter if she stands trial in the main chamber or a bathroom stall, we will judge her based on what we hear. I’ll escort you in when the council is ready. You best not disappoint me, boy.”

His cane tapped against the tile floor as he walked over to the balding man. Garren released a deep breath once his back was turned and the two men began a deep conversation. Somehow, I was feeling worse than before.

“Your dad’s a dick,” said Belmont, breaking the silence. “He knows your name, right? He doesn’t just think it’s boy?”

Garren heaved a heavy sigh. “My father doesn’t exactly wear his emotions on his sleeve. He has certain standards for the family. He wants me to be the best, always has. I’m sorry for what he said to you, Tessa. He’s old-fashioned. Now you can see why I want you to stick to what we talked about. Don’t bring up strange monsters or hellhounds. Many people on the council are like my father and the moment you bring something like that up, they’ll write you off as insane.”

“But we have proof. They can take my memories and see—Oliver, the council might be the only ones who can do something about those creatures. Some of them are centuries old. They probably know what they are and how to get rid of them.”

“Now is not the time. Let us just get through tonight,” he pleaded. “I don’t want to have to go home and give your parents bad news.”

The mood dropped considerably when his father returned, looking between the three of us with shrewd eyes. “The trial will begin momentarily. I suggest you be prepared, Miss Byrne. We will not tolerate any nonsense or pathetic excuses.”

A hearty yet oddly familiar laugh echoed through the halls. “Lionel, there’s no need to scare the poor girl. Keep talking like that and she’ll have a heart attack before this trial even begins.”
“Grand Master Cullen, you’re here…in this—building,” said Garren, his voice several octaves higher. “Of course you’re here. You’re always—not that you’re always…you certainly have a life outside of presiding over trials but the trials are a top priority over whatever it is you do when you’re not here.”

Somehow, he was more tense than before and barely able to form a complete sentence without stuttering. His father’s lips were pressed so tightly together that they appeared to vanish from his face and I half expected him to end the awkwardness with a smack upside the head. I would have offered my own slap or two (maybe a swift kick to the back of the leg) if I was not busy staring at the man across from him, who carried himself much differently from the older, stoic Garren. Whenever I read about the Grand Master, the man or woman who presided over the council, I always imagined someone elderly and wise, someone who looked as if they knew all of the world’s secrets and wanted to share that wisdom.

Instead of an old man with snow white hair, he looked about the same age as my parents, give or take a few years, his tousled dark hair a sharp contrast to his eyes that were as blue as forget me nots. He was dressed a bit more casually than Mr. Garren, the sleeves of his white button down shirt rolled up to his elbows and over that, a dark grey vest, a white rose tucked into the lapel, with a matching tie and slacks.

The way my heart fluttered when he smiled at a bumbling Garren felt just as familiar as his laugh and I could not shake the feeling that I had met him before. That feeling naged at me as I doubted that I could ever forget someone that looked like him. I soon realized that I had only experienced something like this once in my life.

Grabbing my phone from my back pocket, I opened up a folder marked ‘JH’ and dozens of photos of the same dark-haired boy in his early twenties filled the screen. I enlarged the first photo, a screenshot of a poster from some teen magazine back in fourth grade.

My eyes flickered from the photo (the boy dressed in a white v-neck and leather jacket, his smirk causing the simultaneous deaths of thousands of girls and grown women) to the man that Garren was making a fool of himself in front of and I noted every similarity, from their dimples to the shape of their nose. The only real difference was that the boy in the photo was clean-shaven while the man had some scruff.

“Oliver, I’m hardly your elder.” My knees weakened at the sound of his Irish accent. “You can call me Cedric.”

“Right, you’ve said that before. It slipped my mind. I’m sorry. The past few days have been…eventful.”

“I can see that. Rough day at work?” he asked, indicating his bruise.

“You could say that. I wish we were meeting under better circumstances. I want you to know that —”

“Save it for the trial,” interrupted Mr. Garren, sensing that his son wanted to garner sympathy points.

“Just relax, Oliver,” said Cullen.

Like a soldier taking orders, Garren lowered his shoulders and released a shaky breath. Belmont
barked quietly behind his back, enjoying his awkward behavior.

“All you have to do is tell your side of the story. The council always regards each case fairly, no matter who is standing in front of us. The circumstances aren’t all bad. Now I’ll get to meet Indira’s granddaughter and if she’s half as brilliant and lovely as Indira says, you honestly have nothing to worry about tonight.”

“Yes, you should meet—this is uh Fin. He’s a friend of Tessa’s and one of the witnesses to the incident. He’ll tell you anything you want to know about that day.”

Cullen grasped his hand in a firm handshake. “Good to meet you, Fin. I’m glad to see you’re adjusting well to your new existence. Death is never easy, especially for someone so young.”

“Hey.” Mr. Garren scoffed at his laidback response. “Yeah, it’s been a little tough but honestly, Byr—Tessa’s helped a lot. I’d probably be doing way worse without her.”

His sincere compliment went in one ear and out the other. I was too distracted by Cullen and the feeling that I was back in fourth grade, sitting inches away from a television screen and waiting with bated breath for the clock to strike nine. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a flicker of surprise pass over Garren’s face at the unexpected praise.

“She really has, Gr—Cedric, and of course, here she—where did she—Tessa?” I was now standing behind Cullen, comparing his neck to the boy’s in a different photo. “What are you doing?”

“You have the same scar on the back of your neck. You’re him,” I said, holding back an excited squeal.

“Heh, I’m very sorry, Cedric. I don’t know what’s gotten into her. She’s usually—”

“You’re Jackson Howler…or Aiden Cavanaugh…or whatever but you’re him.” Garren shook his head. “Yes, he is. Did you even watch the show? Obviously you did because *The Howler Chronicles* was amazing.”

*The Howler Chronicles*, or *My fourth grade obsession that took over my entire life* (my father’s words), was the biggest teen television show when I was younger, the one thing every girl had in common no matter if she was eight or eighteen. It followed the adventures of Jackson Howler, a teenage werewolf who was protecting his town from other supernatural forces, and every Friday night at eight, kids across the country would be glued to their television screens as he fought all kinds of monsters.

He had help from his friends, some of them supernatural themselves, and a wolf that he helped raise since he was a boy and shared a psychic connection with, named Shadow. Jackson, or the actor who played him, became a teen heartthrob and like every other girl, my room was covered with his posters.

I remembered how heartbroken every girl in my class was when the season finale was announced as the end of the series a few weeks after it aired, the show ending on a suspenseful cliffhanger. When I rewatched episodes with Elena, I knew that it was a lot cheesier than it seemed as a little girl but in a way, I still loved the show because it helped me embrace my own supernatural abilities.

Belmont, clearly remembering the show from how much every girl gushed over it and its main star, rolled his eyes. “Amazing? Are you kidding? It lasted one season because its ratings sucked. Now it makes sense why he was a bad actor.”

“He doesn’t mean that,” I told an intrigued Cullen, not wanting him to think that I agreed with
Belmont. “You were like the best thing on that show. He never watched it so how could he know if you were good or not? Don’t listen to him. You totally deserved a second season. I used my dad’s credit card to donate three hundred dollars to that petition.”

“Oliver, do you have any control over these children?” asked Mr. Garren, disgusted by our ‘immaturity’. “Grand Master, I apologize for this nonsense. The children should be much better behaved, not acting like—”

He stiffened at Cullen’s laughter. “Children? Lighten up, will you? Besides, it’s always a joy to meet a fan.” My heart nearly leapt out of my chest when he flashed me a smile. “I agree with you, Tessa. It was a good show.”

“C—can you say my name again? I want to record it for my friend Elena.”

“Byrne, stop being weird,” said Belmont before turning to Cullen. “Why were you on it? You’re not really an actor, right?”

“It was for a mission. Despite our abilities, we are able to lead perfectly normal lives, Fin. There were suspicions that a reaper, one of the older actresses on the show, was involved in something very dangerous. My father was the Grand Master at the time and he ordered me to conduct my own investigation. We had never met so she only knew that I was a fellow reaper, not the Grand Master’s son.” My breath caught in my throat as he looked over at me. “Your trial will begin in a few minutes, Tessa. Why don’t I help you get cleaned up? The washroom isn’t far. I assume you have a change of clothes as well? My colleagues can be a bit uptight when it comes to proper attire.”

Unable to speak, I merely nodded. I had been so busy staring that I did not realize we were in the bathroom until I heard the sound of running water. Cullen held a hand towel under the faucet then used it to wipe away the dried blood under my nose.

“Are you nervous?”

“Because I’m this close to the guy I had a crush on when I was nine? N—oh, you mean the trial,” I said, causing him to chuckle again. “I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t. I mean, one wrong word and it’s a guilty sentence. No pressure.”

“All we need to hear is the truth. The other council members and I know that you’re a good girl, Tessa. You’ve never stepped out of line before. This is all just a formality.”

He wiped away a spot of dirt from my left cheek. “I’ve known your family for a long time. Even if they were guilty of any wrongdoing, there was always a justifiable reason for it. As happy as I am to finally meet you, I do wish it wasn’t in such a tense situation. Danger seems to be following you lately. The car crash, this trial…”

My eyes drifted to the white rose in his lapel. I recalled the vases in my hospital room, Belmont’s claims that similar flowers were placed at his grave, and the same being found in Mr. Mitchell’s pocket before he was taken away in an ambulance.

“Did you visit me in the hospital?”

He held the towel under the faucet once more, to wash away the mixture of dirt and blood. “Afraid I was attending to business in Italy at the time. Why do you ask?”

“I just remember someone leaving me roses like that in my room. Not that I’d expect you to visit me. You don’t know me—I mean, you do but you know every reaper. It’s not like you visit every single one who gets hurt. Maybe you do. I don’t know you that well. I was just—please stop me before I
“It’s a symbol for the council. All the members have one. We are always aware when a reaper has been harmed. Perhaps one of the members sent it as a reminder that you were in our thoughts and prayers. We’d never wish to see a young reaper, certainly not one with such promise, cut down when their life has barely started.”

I managed a weak grin to hide that I did not share his optimistic view. If anything, it made the mission to find Belmont’s killer even more unsettling. Accusing a fellow student was far different from accusing a member of the esteemed council, someone who was highly regarded among the supernatural community.

Cullen left the bathroom to give me privacy as I changed out of my clothes. I had just zipped up the back of my pencil skirt when I saw a young girl, no older than six years old, in the mirror. There were shards of glass in her curly golden blonde hair and her porcelain skin was marred by a deep gash that ran along the left side of her face. The girl opened her mouth to speak but there was nothing but silence.

I closed my eyes, thinking that I was hallucinating from the stress of the trial. My heart nearly leapt out of my chest at the feeling of thin fingers brushing against my arm. Turning around, I saw the same girl, who barely came up to my waist.

“A—Abby?”

“How can I see you? You’re not—you can’t be here. This is a trick.” She grasped my wrist. “A really good trick. You’re not real. It’s all in my head.”

“How can I see you? You’re not—you can’t be here. This is a trick.”

“A—Abby?”

“How can I see you? You’re not—you can’t be here. This is a trick.” She grasped my wrist. “A really good trick. You’re not real. It’s all in my head.”

One of the creatures appeared at her side, blood dripping from its mouth and its fingers entwined in her curls. Without hesitation, I threw a bottle of scented hand soap but it went right through its body, striking the wall. I noticed that I could no longer hear the girl, her words cutting in and out like bad cell reception.

“Help—tell—council—trouble—you—El—Fi”

In the blink of an eye, both she and the creature vanished from the bathroom. “Abby? Where’d you go? What were you saying?”

Belmont poked his head through the door. “Byrne, the trial is about to st—” He watched as I waved my arms wildly in all directions. “What are you doing?”

I pulled him inside the bathroom and locked the door. “I saw Abby,” I whispered.

“How can I see you? You’re not—you can’t be here. This is a trick.”

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“Ab—” His eyes widened slightly. “Elena’s little sister? How—but she told me that the rest of her family passed on after the accident. She was the only one that stayed as a ghost. I thought we couldn’t see people who passed on.”

“She was standing right behind me. I thought I was just going crazy because I was all nervous about the trial but she grabbed my wrist. She said that she needed help and then one of those creatures appeared too. It didn’t attack me but I couldn’t touch it like I could with Abby. It was just standing there and then I couldn’t hear her anymore. She was saying something about trouble and the
council...you can say it. I’m losing my mind.”

“Hey, look at me,” he said, reaching for my hand. “If you say you saw her, I believe you. You’re a little weird sometimes but you’re not crazy, Byrne. Let’s get through this trial and then we’ll figure out what’s going on. Maybe the council will know what it means. One thing at a time, okay? Don’t be scared. I’ve got your back.”

Together, we returned to Garren, who was being quietly reprimanded by his father. Even from a distance, I could hear bits of their conversation. His father warned him that if the trial ended with a guilty verdict, Garren would be disowned by his family and sent away to live with his ‘pathetic great-uncle Bartholomew’. Mr. Garren, a white rose now nestled in the pocket of his suit jacket, regarded me with the same disdainful look, my more respectable outfit not changing his poor opinion of me.

“I am about to escort you into the main chamber, Miss Byrne. I will remind you that you are not to speak unless spoken to and the council will not tolerate any immaturity from you or your ghostly companion. Follow me.”

As he tapped his cane on the floor three times, the double doors swung open with an ominous creak. The main chamber was, for lack of a better word, enormous. Each footstep echoed off the stone walls and it was dim, except for the ceiling that reflected the cosmos. I spotted the Canis Minor constellation twinkling amongst the darkness.

The moment the doors shut, the once dim room was illuminated by floating candles, revealing that we were surrounded on all sides by men and women, some only a few years older than me and others looking like they had been around for centuries. I had expected them all to be dressed similarly to Mr. Garren but their attire reflected their individual cultures.

If a Hollywood executive was in the same room, he would be having a near heart attack at the sight of so much diversity. The only similarity between the council members was the white roses, either tucked into their clothing or placed in their hair. White seemed to be a theme with the council, considering it was the color of the walls, the marble floor, the candles, and their high-backed chairs (though there was a pop of color with the golden accents). Cullen was seated in the middle, his chair perched higher than the rest and resembling a throne, with Mr. Garren on his right and a middle-aged woman in a pale blue sari that matched her eyes on his left.

The woman flashed me the tiniest smile as a sign of comfort but all I could see was the roses. It felt like they were mocking me from every angle, taunting that Belmont’s possible killer was in the room and about to decide my fate despite being the one who put me in this mess.

“You are Tessa Kali Byrne, age seventeen, of Belmont Falls, Louisiana?” asked Cullen, placing a black folder on his lap.

In the chair below him, a young boy around eighteen, who looked like he modeled himself after Mr. Garren, was diligently typing on a thin silver laptop. He stopped to glance up at me, waiting for my response.

“Yes.”

The boy continued to type and as Cullen repeated the same with Garren and Belmont, my eyes darted around the spacious room. Many of the council members looked at me with pity or curiosity but others were more like Mr. Garren, thinking that I was no better than gum stuck on the bottom of their shoes. I heard a pair of elderly women whispering in the corner about me being no better than my reckless grandmother.
“Well, that’s all settled. Shall we begin?” He opened the folder. “At ten past three, the blade of Charon was reported missing from its secure location and found in your possession. Oliver had written to the council shortly after you received our message informing you of this trial and explained that you had no idea how it ended up with you. Is that the truth?”

Belmont suddenly squeezed my arm so tightly that I could feel his fingers pressing into bone. Following his gaze, I tensed up at the sight of a hoofed, lion-like creature with a single, sharp horn on its head. The creature paced around the chamber (“I think I just shit myself. Don’t write that,” he hissed at the young scribe, who lifted his fingers from the keyboard at Belmont’s harsh glare) before settling itself at the front of the chamber. Cullen explained that it was a xiezhi, an animal capable of distinguishing truths and lies.

“That’s it like gore someone with that horn if they’re lying?”

He grinned at my surprising knowledge. “This one is well-trained, Tessa. Li can assure you herself that it will not attack unless told,” he said, nodding towards a dark-haired Chinese girl in her late twenties who looked like she would fit in better at a rock concert than with the council. She lazily waved her hand. “It will only growl when it senses a lie. You’re in no danger.”

“That’s how you decide if we’re telling the truth? A freaky lion unicorn?” asked Belmont, his outburst earning him a pinch on the back of his arm from Garren.

“As I said, you’re in no danger. All we need to hear is the truth from both of you. As Tessa is the one standing trial, we will hear from her first and then from you, Fin. Tessa?”

I remembered everything that I had practiced with Garren and my mother the night before the trial. When I spoke with the council, I was supposed to apologize and insist that it was an accident. The white roses continued to taunt me and at the moment, all I wanted to do was scream.

“Oliver’s wrong. It wasn’t an accident, not really.”

“You admit that you stole the blade? How did you—”

Mr. Garren went silent as Cullen raised his hand ever so slightly. “Let her speak, Lionel. That is why she’s here. Go on, Tessa.”

“My mom said that it can be summoned if a reaper is in danger and—” (“Tessa, please. This isn’t the right time,” Garren quietly pleaded as Belmont gave me an encouraging nod) “I was in danger. Well, my friend…sort of friend Amy was…she was about to jump off the school roof that day but she was being forced to do it.”

“ Forced? Was she being threatened by another classmate?”

“No, she was… I guess you’d call it possessed. It was using Amy to scare me…to punish me because I didn’t listen and when it got out of her, it tried to attack me but then, my birthmark kind of glowed and something came out of it to kill the creature and then it turned into the dagger.” Complete silence followed my confession. Dozens of pairs of eyes were staring at me but no one said a word.

“Creature? What do you mean by that?” asked the woman on his left, leaning forward in her chair. “Why do you think your friend was possessed?”

“Because it’s not the first time. That’s why I got in the car accident. The same thing was inside my friend Will and made him crash the car. I’ve seen them a few times now and they only started showing up when I started looking into Fin’s death.”
“His death was an accident. According to his file, he fell off a bridge after having too much to drink. Why were you looking into it?”

“Because that’s a lie. Fin was killed and…I think a reaper did it.”

This time, my words were met with outrage and disbelief. Several council members, including Mr. Garren, were insisting that I was spouting lies to cover up my own crime and that it at least guaranteed me a cell at Erinyes. The others stared at me as if I was speaking a foreign language.

“SILENCE!”

Cullen’s voice rang throughout the chamber and all the shouting ceased, though the anger and disgust was written on their faces. He sat back in his chair, never taking his pale blue eyes off me.

“Tessa,” he said, his voice very quiet. “Are you aware that is a serious accusation? To accuse a reaper of—we help to guide life, not extinguish it. Death at our own hands is a sin that can never be wiped clean.”

“That’s why Oliver didn’t want me to say anything but if I don’t tell you now, you might not be able to stop them. There’s another reaper that’s been in Belmont Falls, besides me and my mother. I don’t know why they would kill Fin. Maybe he was just a random target or there’s a deeper meaning but I know it was a reaper.”

“And what makes you so sure?” asked the woman, one of the only council members to not want my head on a spike. “Why would you think a reaper murdered an innocent boy?”

“Because we’re the only ones who can control the creatures that helped them. I think they found a way to bring sluagh from the other side. I know—” I raised my voice as some council members scoffed in disbelief. “I know that they were banished to remain there but they look exactly like what Fin and I have seen. I can’t tell you how they crossed over but they started appearing the night that Fin died...maybe before that. One of them tried to take my friend Will’s little sister Katie but I stopped it. They attacked me at his memorial and they possessed Will to make him crash the car. It’s the same creature that tried to get Amy off the roof and it’s why the dagger appeared to me. It was protecting me from a sluagh. If I was lying, wouldn’t the xiezhe be growling? I wouldn’t be risking eternal punishment for—”

My impassioned plea was interrupted by the sound of clapping. I gazed up at Mr. Garren, who was holding back a laugh.

“Very amusing, Tessa. Almost reminiscent of your mother when she had her trial. You think childish ghost stories are going to distract us from the truth? Vidya may be fooled by that innocent face but I see through this little act.”

“It’s not—”

“Quiet, you insolent girl. Just because you believe something doesn’t make it true. Yes, the xiezhe can see between truth and lie but if you believe hard enough, it can be fooled. You’re hardly brainless. What a clever way to distract us from your own indiscretion.”

“That’s not what I’m doing. Why else would I have the dagger? It appeared because it knew I was getting attacked. The sluagh aren’t the only proof. Reapers can control those too. That’s why they’re used at Erinyes...because they’ll obey us and do anything we ask. They’re allowed to cross over from the other side.”

“Yes and are closely monitored to ensure they return.”
“Unless they know how to blend in with the rest of us. There were two hellhounds, one attacked me and one saved me. I followed the one that helped and its prints turned human. They can shift their appearance. How do you know some of them haven’t done that secretly and they’ve just been living up here?”

“Because that ability was denied to them centuries ago, Tessa,” said Cullen, speaking for the first time since I confessed to everything that had happened in Belmont Falls. “Yes, they were able to shift at will but when they became too dangerous, the council decided to keep them permanently on the other side.”

“Maybe you didn’t get all of them. Like you told me before, if my family did something wrong, they always had a good reason for it. Well, I had a good reason for taking that dagger. I don’t care if you think I’m insane. If you want to throw me in Erinyes, fine. I just need one of you to believe me. I’m not just doing this for Fin. Whoever that reaper is, they’re the ones who hurt my grandmother and she didn’t deserve what happened to her either. You say you care about justice? Then get off your asses and prove it because while you’re sitting in your fancy chairs all day, acting like nothing is wrong with the world, something is happening and if more people end up hurt or worse, that’s on your conscience.”

A silence fell among the chamber again, the council members looking from one another to me. Waiting for any of them, but hopefully not Mr. Garren, to speak, a sense of relief washed over me as Belmont gave me a small thumbs up. Cullen repeatedly nodded as Vidya and Mr. Garren whispered in both his ears, like an angel and devil on his shoulders. In the midst of their hushed discussion, the young scribe handed Cullen a piece of paper that had appeared out of thin air.

“Tessa, you claim that this other reaper is in Belmont Falls. Why did you not accuse Vivienne Reyes of being this alleged murderer? I have eyewitnesses that report her being in town though she was strictly forbidden from being within a hundred miles of any reaper. These same eyewitnesses claim that she violated those terms of her release and was seen speaking with you. Is that true?”

“Yes,” I replied, already dreading the direction of this conversation. “But she has no part in it. I know she doesn’t. Don’t ask me how. I just know.”

“You just know,” repeated Mr. Garren, enunciating each word. “How convenient that you fail to mention that you already know of another reaper in your town. One who has violent inclinations… perhaps this little story of yours isn’t as true as you’d like us to believe or if it is true, is your past blinding you to the obvious answer? The council is well aware of your intimate past with Miss Reyes.”

Belmont burst into a fit of laughter, resulting in affronted glares from the elder council members. I was determined to stare at my heels, refusing to make any eye contact.

“Intimate? Wait, you think—Byrne and—come on, now you’re just messing with us, right? I’ve known Byrne since second grade and I’m pretty sure she’s never so much as kissed anyone. Not that she couldn’t get any action—” Garren pinched the bridge of his nose. “She could be one of the hottest girls at school if she didn’t dress so…well, she used to dress a lot worse, trust me. I mean, I get why because she’s kind of a prude. The closest she’s gotten to a real kiss is when the guys and I would give her ‘CPR’ when she passed out in class.”

“Did the girls think he was charming when he was alive?” Li asked me, scrunching her nose. “They must have low standards in your hometown.”

“Fin,” I hissed, not wanting his outburst to ruin the trial.
“What?” he said, shrugging. “I’m defending you, Byrne. They actually think you used to hook up with that psycho.”

I tore my eyes away from the marble floor. “I don’t see how my past with Vivienne is relevant.”

(“Wait, you and—what?” whispered Belmont in disbelief, earning another hard pinch from Garren)

“That was years ago. I’m not that naïve anymore. I told her to stay away from me the moment we saw each other again and I doubt she’s completely rehabilitated but she’s not the reaper. The timeline doesn’t fit and I don’t appreciate my past being used to slander my credibility.”

“Considering the hold that girl had on you for a time, you can understand our concern. Perhaps old feelings resurfaced and you’re covering her tracks because you don’t wish to see her locked up again,” suggested Mr. Garren.

“Or perhaps you want to keep your head in the sand instead of dealing with the actual problem, which is the murderous reaper who already killed once and is somehow letting dangerous creatures out from the other side. If I can’t convince you, then fine. At least I tried. My trial is about whether I purposely took the dagger or not so decide on that instead of debating whether my past love life is affecting my decisions now.”

Vidya and Li, who was holding back a laugh, looked impressed by my verbal bitch slap. Mr. Garren’s tanned face reddened in rage, his bulging out eyes making him look like an angry owl, but it was soon replaced with confusion as the double doors burst open. The same hooded figure that I had seen outside the building, carrying a duffel bag, entered the room, his footsteps the only noise among the tense silence.

“What is the meaning of this?” asked Cullen as he stood up from his chair, baffled by the intrusion. “As you can see, we are in the middle of a trial. Interrupting council business is—”

Without saying a word, the figure hunched forward and I could hear the bones breaking in their back with a sickening crunch. The figure groaned as they fell to their knees, tufts of light brown fur peeking out from the tears in their sweatshirt. Once their clothes had torn completely, the bones in their furry body were visible, moving back and forth like a giant worm crawling beneath their skin, and in a split second, a hellhound was standing in full view of the council, who were now out of their chairs and staring at the oversized beast in horror.

Garren stopped me from stepping closer to the hellhound, the one who had saved me earlier that day (bearing more than just the X-shaped scar after the intense fight), and forced both me and Belmont to stand behind him. Before the council could react, Mr. Garren beginning to shout for the guards, the hellhound returned to their original form, a completely naked Parker. If it were any other situation, I would have checked if Elena was lying about the size of his ‘twig’ (“More like a huge log,” she whispered in the midst of telling me about their summer trip to Cancun in our first seventh grade art class) but my mind was just blank.

Belmont and Garren’s faces were frozen in shock, both clueless about his supernatural nature, but I was...unsure. It was the only word that described my emotions in that moment. I was simultaneously speechless and wanting to say a million things but it just looked like I was as stunned as the rest of the room. Parker unzipped the duffel bag and put on a new set of clothes, a Belmont High Varsity t-shirt and jeans.

“I know I shouldn’t have interrupted but you’re ganging up on the wrong person. Tessa’s telling the truth. I think what I just did is enough proof.”

“Grandmaster, these children are making a mockery of—”
“Not now, Lionel.” Cullen eyed Parker suspiciously. “Your name?”

“Chace Parker, sir. She’s right that there’s another reaper...one who is causing trouble. I’ve heard things among others like me. Whoever the reaper is, they’ve been recruiting us and other supernaturals.”

“You know Miss Byrne?” asked Vidya, intrigued unlike the rest of her frightened peers.

“We’ve gone to the same school since second grade. I don’t know who the reaper is but I know someone working with them. My dad is a hellhound like me. He attacked Tessa today and he would’ve killed her if I didn’t stop him.”

“Surely you know that being above the surface is forbidden for your kind and yet you revealed yourself. You understand the risk of such an act?”

“I don’t care what happens to me. I just don’t want you to punish Tessa. She’s innocent in all this.”

I was still attempting to sort out my conflicting thoughts and feelings when the young scribe ushered us into a side hallway. Garren muttered to himself, thinking he was an idiot for never realizing that Chief Parker, who he spent most of his days with, was a supernatural being, let alone a hellhound.

“That explains why you knew how to shut up my dogs. You speak the same language,” said Belmont. Parker finally tore his dark eyes away from me, his fists clenched. “Explains why you always beat my time on the treadmill too. They should’ve given you a best in show ribbon instead of that medal.”

“This isn’t the time for your lame jokes.”

“That didn’t get your tail wagging? I’ve got all night. Can you only see me when we’re down here?”

“No, I’ve seen you around her. I thought you were just being your usual asshole self and deciding to spend your ghostly existence tormenting her for your own sick fun. I saw Elena get a good smack in too. Bet she was waiting a long time for that.”

“Get out.”

My voice, barely above a whisper, distracted them from the looming argument between the former best friends. “You heard her, Fido. Walk away. Go find a hydrant to pee on or chase a squirrel.”

“I mean you! Both of you!” I shouted, my voice ringing through the long hallway. I pointed at him and Garren then the nearest door. “GET OUT!”

Garren, sensing that he could not convince me otherwise, pushed Belmont towards the door. Once it shut behind them, despite Belmont’s protests, I turned my back on Parker, my head buried in my hands. I was still struggling to understand what I had just seen minutes ago, trying to make myself believe that it was all a weird dream.

“Tessa, I know—I didn’t want you to find out this way but I heard what Oliver’s dad was saying and I wanted to help.”

The word ‘help’ snapped me out of my own thoughts. “Help? You just wanted to help? Is that all you wanted to do? Really? Help me out some more, pal. How long have you known the truth about me?”

“I figured it out in eighth grade. I wasn’t able to turn until my fourteenth birthday and my dad told
me everything. A few days later, you passed out again in class and your wrists were cut pretty badly. Everyone thought you were trying to commit suicide but I felt like something was off. That night, my parents were talking about a suicide at the high school that same day and he left the file on his desk. The girl’s wrists in the pictures looked just like yours and I put two and two together. I guess I knew before that then…that there was something different about you but I didn’t know what until I found out about myself.”

“Four years. For four years, you knew what was going on and you let those sleazeballs you call friends put their hands on me for fun. You let Claire and her band of brainless monkeys torment me day after day. You joined in with them. Sickie, Make a Wish…didn’t see you trying to help me then.”

“According to my dad, hellhounds don’t have the best relationship with reapers,” he said, rubbing the back of his neck. “He and your mom have a bad history and when he heard you were in my class, he told me to stay away from you. After I found out what you were, I wanted to talk to you about it. I thought you could understand what it’s like to be different. It’s how I got this.” He brushed his hand over the faded scar on his ribcage. “He heard me in my room, practicing how I was going to bring it up. My mom freaked out when she saw me and I had to lie that I had a rough football practice.”

“So you must’ve known that I wasn’t attacked by one of Belmont’s dogs at his memorial.”

“I wasn’t sure but I guessed it was something supernatural. Look, I—” I inched back as he took a step forward, closing the wide gap between us. “I get that this is tough and I’m sorry that I let people like Claire and Fin treat you like crap. You’re right that I should’ve had your back but—can you blame me? It’s high school. If I started hanging out with you—I didn’t mean it like that. It came out wrong.”

“No, I think it’s exactly what you meant. Your precious popularity and stupid friends were more important to you than being a decent person. Your dad was right to stop you from talking to me. Even if I knew that you were a hellhound, I wouldn’t be friends with you. Both of us being supernatural doesn’t make us automatic BFFs, Parker. We’ve never been friends and we never will be because I deserve better than a shallow asshole like you. If the council finds me innocent, you’re staying the hell away from me. We’re done talking.”

I headed towards the door, sure that Garren and Belmont had heard every word, ignoring Parker’s pleas to explain himself. My body went numb when he grabbed my wrist a little too tightly. He immediately released his grip and I glanced down at the tiny bruises forming on my skin.

“I’m sorry. I—sometimes, I forget my own strength. Tessa, please. What if my little show for the council isn’t enough? Maybe some of them will believe you but they won’t do anything. I can help you. If we work together, we could find out who the reaper is and stop them before they hurt anyone else.”

“I don’t need your help,” I replied, bluntly. It was taking all my strength to not let out a shaky breath as the sight of the bruises brought up painful memories. “I have the help I need. Let the council think I’m crazy. I’ll prove them wrong.”

He scoffed. “What help? Two ghosts who spend more time arguing with each other than anything else and a neurotic guardian who panics if his papers aren’t in a neat pile on his desk? You think Fin actually gives a damn about you? He’s using you like he uses everyone else.”

The door to the main chamber swung open and Vidya stepped into the hallway. “You’re free to go, Tessa. A majority of the council has decided that you had no ill intentions of taking the dagger and
the charges have been dropped. Chace, I’m afraid we have a few more questions. If you’ll come with me, please.”

“Just think about what I said,” he whispered.

I felt something soft press into the palm of my hand as he followed Vidya through the door. Opening my fist, I found a piece of paper with Look into Blaine Gilbert, heard my dad talking about him late one night on the phone scribbled by Parker.

“Good news?” asked Garren, opening the other door.

“All cleared,” I said, smiling as I hid the paper in the pocket of my skirt. “We can go h—” I was taken aback by his arms wrapping around me in a warm hug. “You okay?”

“Are you?”

That question held a lot more meaning with all that happened. I leaned my head against his shoulder.

“I will be.”

“We should get you home. I’m sure your parents and Elena are waiting to hear how the trial went. We have a lot to tell them.”

Belmont was uncharacteristically quiet as we headed back through the elevator and out of the bank, which involved sneaking past an elderly security guard who was half asleep. I half expected him to make more dog jokes about Parker but he did not mention him once, not even to complain about his best friend’s biggest secret. Part of me wondered if he was holding back out of respect, that just hearing Parker’s name would upset me.

Garren had just begun to drive when my phone buzzed, revealing a voicemail from the hospital. I dreaded the possibility that it was the therapist wanting another session.

Tessa, this is Brooke, the nurse you spoke with at the hospital. You wanted me to call you if there was any improvement in Will’s condition and I’m happy to tell you that we’ve started to see some progress. He’s not out of his coma yet but the doctors think he’ll be awake any day now. We’re encouraging any of Will’s close friends and family to stop by for a visit. Dr. Samuels thinks that might be the final push that he needs. Feel free to visit before or after school.

“Oliver, turn left here,” I said, listening to the voicemail again.

“Your house is the opposite way.”

“We need to stop at the hospital first. One of the nurses said that Will could wake up soon and I know it’s really late and I could just go tomorrow morning but—”

“Sure. We can’t stay long. I don’t want your parents to worry.”

I texted Elena the good news, hoping that she was in a better mood than a few hours ago. Just as we pulled into the hospital parking lot, I spotted Brooke, the young nurse whose peppy personality rivaled Elena’s at her cheerleading prime, walking out the front door, digging through her purse for her keys. I hurried out of Garren’s car with the speed of a cheetah, ignoring the pain in my ankles from the high heels.

Brooke smiled at me as she finished tying a red knit scarf around her neck. “Tessa, hi. I was just—what happened?” she asked, frowning at my many scrapes and bruises.
“I went on this hiking trip and I uh slipped. I’m fine. The cell reception was terrible out there so I just got your message now. I wanted to see Will. Technically, it’s after school.”

“Oh, visiting hours ended twenty minutes ago. You can come back in the morning, if you want.”

“Please, can I just see him? I’ve had a really rough day and seeing Will would make it better. Please, please, please?” I begged, bouncing on my heels.

Biting her glossy red lip, she glanced back at the door. “Okay, just this once. You get five minutes, that’s it. Come with me.”

Brooke led me through a side entrance to the hospital. After explaining the situation to the two nurses behind the front desk, both giving me sympathetic looks, she allowed me to continue onto Will’s room. I had just turned the corner to his corridor when Elena appeared by my side.

“Hey. I didn’t think—” I was cut off by her arms wrapping around my neck. “As much as I like your hugs, I’m kind of on a time limit.”

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have run off before. I’m the worst friend ever. I should’ve been there for the trial. You needed me and I was too busy letting that stupid girl get in my head.”

“You don’t have to—it’s kind of my fault too, El. I should’ve told you about Vivienne before. I guess I just…it’s complicated.”

“I get why you didn’t. You probably wouldn’t have been friends with her if I wasn’t such a wuss back then. I don’t have the best track record when it comes to friends either.” Belmont popped up beside her. “Exhibit A.”

“Can we cut this sappy moment short? What did Chace give you before we left the trial, Byrne?”

Elena looked at him, strangely. “Why would Chace be at the trial? What happened when I was gone?”

“Long story,” I said, not wanting to so much as think about Parker. “Like I said, time limit. Let’s go check on Will and then on the way back, I’ll tell you all about the craziness at the trial. It was a trainwreck for the most part but I did meet the real Jackson Howler.”

Belmont scrunched his nose as Elena gushed over the picture I had secretly taken of Cullen before the trial. He covered his ears to block out our massive fangirling, muttering “Girls are weird” to himself.

“Now I really wish I was there. I bet he did send you those roses. It’s a total Aiden Cavanaugh move.”

“That’s not a real person but maybe you’re right,” said Belmont, grabbing a bowl of blue jell-o from a tray outside one of the rooms. “When you’re not pretending that you have a shot with a guy twice your age, who isn’t a real actor by the way, did either of you consider that he’s the reaper trying to kill us?”

“Pfft, that’s ridiculous.” I snatched the bowl out of his hand in the middle of him taking a bite, placing it back on the tray. “Cullen’s the head of the council.”

“So what? That proves nothing, Byrne…or do you just know?” My nostrils flared at his imitation of Mr. Garren. “Aw, did I hit a nerve?”

“Cullen isn’t the one after us but I don’t think the roses are a coincidence. I don’t know the council
well enough to point fingers…except maybe at Oliver’s dad.”

My mood dropped considerably as we entered Will’s room. He was still hooked up to all kinds of monitors, the only signs of life being his own breathing and the beeping of the heart monitor. Sitting on the edge of the bed, I had the selfish desire to use my abilities force him awake but my mother warned me that it could have disastrous consequences. Waking him before he was ready risked the possibility of Will not returning to his full self.

I gripped his hand through the bed sheet. “You’re going to be okay, Will. The doctors say you’ll be up soon and I really need that to be true. There’s so much going on…most of it I can’t tell you, no matter how much I want to, but I promise I’m done hanging around Parker. You don’t have to worry about him corrupting me.”

Beneath the sheet, his index finger was tapping against the mattress. Some pauses between each tap were longer than others. “His finger’s moving. They called you for that?” asked Belmont, thinking it was a little too early to celebrate.

“Will, you’re a genius,” I heard Elena whisper in excitement.

She erased the writing on the chart and grabbed the black marker on the side. For once, Belmont and I were equally confused as she drew a table with five rows and five columns, writing a letter of the alphabet in each box.

“He’s not just moving his finger. It’s a tap code.”

“A what?” we chorused.

“You learn it in the military. It’s used if you’re taken prisoner…for communication. My dad taught it to me when I was younger. Will’s dad must’ve taught him too. It’s a pattern. He taps a certain number of times then pauses before he does it again and you use the chart to figure out the letter. Remember that video Baxter showed the first lesson of the year? It was about medical miracles and one of them was a guy in a coma who could still hear everything around him. What if Will can hear you, Tessa? Maybe he’s trying to send you a message.”

She waited until Will began repeating the tapping for the tenth time and wrote down the corresponding letters to the pattern. “Well, GI Barbie? What does it say?” asked Belmont, curious if there was an actual message or just random gibberish.

Elena hesitated before stepping away from the chart, revealing the hidden message. It was a five letter word…a short message yet a giant warning sign in neon lights at the same time. To any other person, it was meaningless but to me, it was like having all the air sucked out of the room.

“Damon.”
Damon

Tessa struggled to climb up the ladder, her feet barely able to reach the next rung. It was made all the more difficult by the rain pounding down on her head. She froze in fear at the sight of lightning flashing in the distance. The weather was having a sort of identity crisis, being bright and sunny one minute and dark and stormy the next. It was even stranger that the rain clouds seemed to only hover over the stretch of houses down the block.

She was snapped out of her thoughts by a derisive laugh. “If you're too scared, go back inside.”

With a shaky breath, she glanced up at the dark-haired boy on the roof. He looked like he jumped out of a Brooks Brothers ad, with his pale blue button down shirt, khakis, and plaid sweater vest.

“I—I’m not scared.”

“Then come on, pipsqueak. You can’t see the surprise from down there. It’s just a little rain. Don’t you trust me?” he asked, holding out his hand.

“Tessa?”

Five pairs of eyes, all filled with concern, were on me at the dinner table. “Sorry, I uh spaced out,” I told my father, gripping a fork.

“Oliver was just telling us about Chace. I’m sure that was a surprise. Is that why you haven’t touched your food? We made your favorite.”

I realized that I hadn’t taken a single bite. Everything after the hospital visit was a giant blur. I could barely remember leaving Will’s room.

“I'm just not hungry. Can I go upstairs?”

“Of course, sweetheart,” said my mother, sensing that there was more going on than a lack of appetite. “You’ve had a very long day. If you need anything, just ask… and I don’t want you to worry. I spoke with Rosa while you were at the hospital and she brought over some herbs to keep out any unwanted visitors. I placed them outside the school and art gallery. That horrible girl won’t set a foot in this house or she’ll be wishing that she never met me.”

Managing a weak smile, I thanked her before heading up to my room. I had just sat on the edge of my bed when Elena and Belmont appeared by the door. Both of them knew what had caused my odd behavior at dinner. Will’s message was clearly still on their minds as well but for different reasons.

“Okay, I’ll say it. If Nelson’s message is real and not just his fingers moving around in his sleep, what does he mean?” he asked, crossing his arms. “Is this Damon guy the bad reaper?”

“No, it’s not possible,” I insisted. Even as the words left my lips, I felt uneasy, as if I was trying to convince myself more than anyone else. “He’s in Erinyes. It’s like a fortress. You’d have an easier time breaking out of Alcatraz.”

“Well, he said Damon’s name for a reason,” said Elena, joining me on the bed. “What are you
thinking? Whatever you decide, we’re with you. Right?”

Belmont nodded half-heartedly. When I wasn’t in my own little world of past memories, I was mulling over a terrible, insane idea.

“We need to talk to Vivienne.”

“What?”

Reacting as well as I expected, I waited a few minutes, sure that my mother and Oliver heard them. Skipping my favorite meal plus two ghosts shouting were like flashing warning signs.

“I have a hunch and if I’m right, Amara is involved somehow,” I said, lowering my voice. “We can’t visit her by ourselves. Going to the Underworld is dangerous enough but we don’t exactly have the best relationship. I could ask her a million questions and she’d never give me a real answer. Vivienne can help with that. They used to be friends.”

“Where did they meet, the psycho convention? Last time we saw her, she nearly stabbed you, Byrne. Alternative, because anything is better than your idea. We tell your parents about what happened at the hospital.”

“We are not mentioning Damon to them. If we tell them about the message, I’ll never leave this house and then good luck finding out who murdered you. As much as I hate to say it, Vivienne is our only option right now.”

Elena, tense from just the mention of her name, scoffed. “And what, she’ll help out of the goodness of her heart?”

“No. She’ll obviously want something but we’ll deal with that later. Talking to Amara is more important. She might be the key to solving this whole thing.”

Neither she nor Belmont were in agreement with the plan. Knowing that Vivienne would not be deterred by some herbs, I slipped a message under the front door later that night, asking her to meet me at the Blue Moon café. In between Elena and Belmont telling me all the ways the plan could go horribly wrong, my parents checking on me every five minutes to make sure the trial hadn’t turned me into the poster child for crippling depression, and Parker begging me for a second chance through a barrage of texts, I prepared for the secret meeting.

“If you order one more of these, I’ll need to cut you off,” joked Craig, a junior who was known for his Stephen King-esque short stories and as the wrestling king of Belmont High. He placed my third gingerbread latte and a soy latte on the table. “Should I confiscate your keys?”

“Heh, I’m just waiting for someone. They’re running late,” I said, the clock high on the wall moving to half past noon.

“You better not be getting stood up. I uh heard you and Parker were on the outs.”

I gripped the paper cup, partially because the mention of Parker made my blood boil but also because I already knew his intentions. Elena scrunched her nose when he leaned against the table, purposely showing off his massive biceps.

“If you’re looking for a date for the winter ball, I’m—”
He winced when Vivienne gripped his shoulder, her nails digging into the fabric of his short-sleeved shirt. “It’s not your day, champ. Trust me, it will never be your day. Go back to slinging coffees and writing your lame Star Wars fanfiction.” She turned towards Elena as he walked back towards the counter, rubbing his shoulder in pain. “You’re in my seat, Trashy Swift.”

“I don’t think I’ll move. I’d rather watch everyone in here think you’re a crazy person for talking to an empty chair.”

“Lena,” I whispered.

Elena pursed her lips before moving to the empty chair across from me. With a smug smirk, Vivienne took her place and picked up the second cup.

“Oh, you remembered my fave. How sweet. Do mommy, daddy, and big brother Ollie know that we’re here?” She faked a gasp. “Is this a secret? Someone’s being naughty.”

“I’m not here for games, Vivienne. I asked you to meet me at noon.”

“Wanted to make sure it wasn’t a trap. For all I know, Oliver sent that note to ship me back to Erinyes. I heard I was a hot topic at your trial. I bet all the sordid details made Lionel blush.”

I avoided any eye contact with Elena, the only one unaware of our romantic past. “I need you to take me to the Underworld. I need to talk to Amara. I know you’ll want something in return so just—”

“Not at all, sweetie.” She placed her freshly manicured hand over mine. “For you, anything.”

I was not foolish enough to think that she was suddenly compassionate and selfless. The way she eyed Elena, especially when she squeezed my hand, I knew that she had ulterior motives, at least one being to bring the petite blonde to her breaking point.

As I stood up to leave, I bumped into someone, causing them to spill their drink. “Mrs. Belmont, I’m so sorry.” I frantically grabbed a bunch of napkins to clean up the spill. “I should’ve been watching where I was going. If you need new shoes, I’ll pay for them. Well, not all at once…we can do a monthly payment plan or something. Your shoes probably cost a lot.”

“Tessa, Tessa, it’s all right,” she said, her melodious laugh carrying throughout the café. “The shoes were a gift. Antonio Vitale sends me a new pair every month. It’s a small stain, at best. There’s no need to make a fuss. I haven’t seen you since the memorial service. I paid you a visit in the hospital. I was beginning to think you’d never wake up.” She placed her hand on my arm in a comforting manner. “Rhys told me about that nasty business in the woods. I can’t imagine how you must be feeling.”

“Oh, it was…nothing. I’m fine, really. I’m glad to see that you’re doing better too.”

“Such a sweetheart. I should get going. I don’t want to be late for my appointment,” she said, holding her slightly larger belly. “It was wonderful to see you again, Tessa. I suppose I’ll see you again at the winter ball. Charles and I are making an important announcement there.” Her kind smile was swiftly wiped from her face. “Vivienne.”

The icy tone in her voice and the way she purposely knocked into Vivienne’s shoulder as she passed took me by surprise. “Rhys wasn’t kidding that she doesn’t like you.”
Vivienne was silent, staring glassy-eyed at the wall of photos of Belmont Falls. With a snap of my fingers, she seemed to be shaken from a daydream.

“Are you okay?”

“Just imagining her on fire…falling down the stairs…poured into a vat of acid…”

Belmont started towards her, nostrils flaring. It took the combined strength of me and Elena to hold him back. “If you lay one hand on my mother, you’ll—” He hunched over, his hands on his knees. “You’ll—oh man, do ghosts vomit?”

The same soon began to happen to Elena until I flicked my wrist. Vivienne stepped back, as if she had been punched in the gut. She glanced over at me, the tiniest smirk gracing her dark red lips.

“I see someone’s been practicing. You’ll have to do better than that if you can’t keep your pets in line.”

“Remind me again why we’re even talking to her,” said Elena, glaring at Vivienne’s back. “There’s no one nicer that could take us to Amara?”

“It’s an hour or two, at most. Just be ni—you know what? Let me do all the talking.”

Wanting to draw as little attention as possible, we traveled to the Underworld through a statue of Belmont’s founding ancestor near the entrance to the Falls. Vivienne led us through the crowded market, Elena struggling to not get distracted by the fancy jewelry and other trinkets, to the seedy part of the realm. Instead of talismans and cute necklaces, the people behind the stands were peddling objects with malicious intent. One man offered Belmont a gaudy ring that was capable of restoring his body at the cost of someone else’s life.

“I think the world would be better without Rosalie around,” he explained as I dragged him away from the shabby stand by his shirt collar. “In a way, it’s a win-win for both of us, Byrne.”

“There’s always a catch with those things. We’re not here to add another murder to the list.”

Vivienne stopped in front of Bacchanal, a well-known dive bar. Its regular customers included criminals and ex-residents of Erinyes, making it the perfect place for Amara to gather clients. Elena nearly vomited just from the smell emanating out of an open window. I grabbed her hand, giving it a light squeeze as a small comfort, and led her inside the bar.

It was packed from wall to wall, some patrons just barely older than me and others pushing their sixties. Vivienne disappeared into the crowd, greeting old friends along the way. I ignored the lecherous stares and obscene hand gestures as I searched for any sign of Amara. It should have been easy to spot her, with the way she dressed, but in the bar, every girl made it their mission to show as much skin as possible.

Belmont spotted her at a corner table, flirting with a lanky guy in his late twenties. Dressed in a black leather dress that barely contained her ample chest, it was no surprise that his eyes had never once looked at her face.

“Virgin alert. It’s like he’s never talked to a girl before,” joked Vivienne. “So what’s your pl—Tessa?”
I headed towards the table, determined, and as I got closer, I was able to hear their conversation.

“You must be so worried about that trial. My friend could help you out, you know. He’s a seer. He could tell you what to expect…what the council will ask you…”

“So I could make sure that I’m found innocent?” he asked, sounding hopeful. “Wait, what’s the catch?”

“No catch,” she assured him, tracing tiny circles on the inside of his palm. “He just requires a small payment and I’m sure you won’t have a problem with that.”

“Yeah, no problem at all.” I sat in the empty chair beside her. “Do you like pirates?”

“Sorry, what?” he asked, looking from me to a displeased Amara.

“Well, you need to give him one of your eyes so unless you want to cough up the money for a new one, instead of some bargain eye that’s probably been used a thousand times, you’ll need to wear an eyepatch. Ooh, maybe you could get a parrot too. That sounds fun, huh?”

His face chalk white, he stood up from the table, leaving money for his drinks. “I um—I should go. My trial starts in twenty minutes and it would make a good impression to be there early.”

“Yikes. I bet you’ve never seen a guy run away from you that fast,” I said, watching him dash out of the bar.

For a moment, her eyes flickered between their usual chestnut brown and pitch black. “You really have a death wish, don’t you? I’ll happily grant it,” she spat, pure venom in her voice.

“Now, now, let’s play nice, children.”

Vivienne, Elena, and Belmont joined the table. Belmont kept his distance, their previous encounter likely still fresh in his mind. Amara was never one to openly show her emotions but I knew that seeing Vivienne was awkward. The last time they had been face to face, it nearly caused the destruction of Erinyes itself. Admittedly, it was even worse for me but I pushed down my own feelings, knowing that stopping the rogue reaper was more important.

“Viv, long time, no see.” Instead of the expected temper tantrum, Amara was oddly calm. “Been busy pining after brats? Ironic how times have changed since the old days. Do you want a drink? Do you still like it sweet?”

“She’s not here to catch up. This won’t take long...depending on your cooperation. When’s the last time you talked to Damon?”

She merely smiled at me. “Haven’t in nearly a year. I guess they have him on lockdown. Such a shame, really.” Belmont rolled his eyes, muttering that the visit was a waste of time. “Well, if that’s why you’re here, I’ll be going. I’m a busy—BITCH!”

All heads in the dingy bar turned in our direction. Her hand was pinned to the table by a knife, my hand wrapped around the handle. Vivienne and Belmont both stared at me in stunned silence while Elena peered around the bar, worrying that one of them would come to Amara’s rescue, yet they all quickly returned to their previous conversations and half empty stained glasses.
“You’re not getting away that easy.”

“Oh, if you think that reaper is scary, I’m about to put you through Hell. You won’t be safe anywhere. Even Viv can’t protect you in your dreams, you brat,” snarled Amara.

“That’s how he was getting to Will, right? You were slipping him in there. You’re the reason Will isn’t waking up either. Why?”

“I haven’t—” She groaned as I pressed down on the handle. “Fine, fine! Yes, we had a deal. He would give me clients for Carnus from Erinyes in exchange for my help. He wanted to keep your dorky friend asleep. I don’t know why.”

“What were you doing in his head?”

“I don’t know that either. I just put Damon in his dreams and waited for his signal to take him out. Why would I care what he’s doing to some pathetic human? From what I’ve heard, he’s more popular than ever. Maybe you should just let him stay that way.”

“You need physical contact for your abilities to work. How are you getting in there to see him? You could walk in there naked and flirt all you want but they wouldn’t let you within ten feet of his room. They won’t even let me see him so how do you do it?”

“Looks like I have something you want now,” she said, amused. “What do I get in return?”

“You get to walk out of this shithole with all your limbs intact,” I hissed.

“You know, I have been feeling tired lately,” she said, pouting as she twirled the empty beer bottle with her free hand. “Slipping in and out of dreams is hard work for a yakshini and a coffee in the morning just isn’t giving me the boost I need, Tessa. I think I’m too tired to remember how I sneak inside that scary supernatural prison. If only I had more energy…ghosts usually do the trick.”

Her eyes glinting with mischief, she pointed a finger between Elena and Belmont like a twisted game of *eenie, meenie, miney, moe*.

When I was younger, one of the lessons was on the different supernatural beings in our world, besides reapers, and my mother had played a video depicting their abilities. Yakshini drew their strength by draining energy from others through physical contact, usually with a kiss. If the yakshini maintained the contact for too long, the person was reduced to nothing more than a corpse. With ghosts, they were simply wiped from existence, lacking the energy to remain in the physical world.

“The very best one and you are—”

“I’ll do it,” offered Elena. “If you promise to tell us what you know, I’ll give you some of my energy or whatever.”

“Elena, don’t.” I trusted Amara about as much as a rabid dog. “It’s too dangerous.”

“I want to help. How does it work? We just hold hands or something?”

“We could but if you want it done faster, it has to be a bit more intimate.”
Amara tapped her full, glossy lips, enjoying the pure fear written across my face. I silently begged Vivienne for any kind of help but she simply shrugged, not giving a damn if Elena vanished in the blink of an eye.

“Just a quick peck.”

“And then you’ll tell us how you met with Damon?”

“Pinky promise. Don’t worry. You won’t feel a thing.”

“El, don’t do this. It’s a trick,” said Belmont, showing genuine concern. “We don’t need her help.”

“Yes, we do. If Damon’s working with the reaper, he might know who killed you and why. It’s just a kiss.”

As a reluctant Elena leaned across the table, every inch closer making my heart beat faster, I spun Amara towards me and planted my lips firmly on hers. At first, it was like any normal kiss and with the distance practically nonexistent between us, I could smell the flowery scent in her dark hair, the one that always drew the boys and girls under her spell. I was about to pull away, starting to feel lightheaded, but she had other plans, her red nails, now more like talons, digging into my arm. With each passing second, I was growing weaker and just moving my mouth seemed like an impossible task.

I heard the faint sound of breaking glass and a hand forcefully pushed against my chest. In a split second, my lips were torn from hers, my back pressed against the rickety chair. My tongue brushed against my lips, tasting the strawberry gloss that lingered from the kiss. Barely able to lift my head, I could only see the rats scurrying across the dirty wooden floor.

“Tessa, Tessa, are you okay?” Elena’s hands gently cupped my face. “What the hell were you thinking? She almost killed you!”

Slowly getting my strength back, I looked up to see the tears streaming down her face. Her sky blue eyes were red and puffy.

“I didn’t...I didn’t want her to hurt you.”

“I’m already dead. What could be worse than that?”

“She could make you disappear and then I’d never see you again. If that happened…” We were the only ones at the table. “Where is she?”

“Vivienne pulled you guys apart when Amara started going all face hugger on you,” she said, sniffling. “She dragged her into the back of the bar and Fin followed them. He was going to stay too but I didn’t trust the two of them alone.”

She helped me up from the chair, wrapping her arm around my waist. Still a bit shaky from the kiss, I leaned on her as we headed towards the back door.

“Don’t ever do that again,” she whispered. “We didn’t make that friends forever pact in the sandbox for nothing.”

The door led to a side alley where Amara was being restrained by Vivienne’s elbow against her
throat. In her other hand, Vivienne held a broken beer bottle to her cheek.

“Hey, shouldn’t you be resting?” said Belmont, moving away from the wall he had been leaning against and walking towards me. “I think almost turning into a pile of bones is a reasonable excuse to pause the detective work.”

“I’m good. It’s already wearing off,” I assured him though neither he nor Elena looked convinced.

“You know, I finally get the appeal.” Amara licked her lips. “If I knew you were that good, I would’ve let you join in on our fun all those years ago… put that tongue to better use.”

She cried out as Vivienne nearly crushed her throat. “Don’t talk to her. Don’t even look at her or I’ll be giving Carnus your eyes. We had a deal so it’s time to hold up your end. How are you visiting Damon? He’s been in solitary for the past year.”

My mind was reeling at the idea of him being trapped alone in a room. Had solitary confinement made him stir crazy and he was lashing out by attacking my friends? Amara, with some urging from the bottle dangerously close to her left eye, admitted that she blackmailed one of the younger guards into letting her into the prison late at night. She was able to sneak in and out undetected, the guard delivering messages from Damon under the guise of getting a drink at Bacchanal.

“You’re taking us there tonight,” I said, able to stand on my own. “Midnight is probably best.”

Amara pushed the bottle away from her face. “Uh wrong, bookworm. Our deal was that I’d tell you how I got in and that’s all. I’m not part of your Nancy Drew act. If you’re ever interested in another round of tonsil hockey, you know where to find me.”

“Did you know it’s illegal for a yakshini to use their abilities on a reaper?” She froze, one foot barely through the doorway. “It was a law passed by the council in 1786 to protect our kind from what they considered lesser beings. If Cullen was to find out, you don’t even get a trial. He’ll sentence you straight to death.”

“You think you can scare me with some fake law?”

“We could ask Oliver, if you want. I’m sure he’d love to hear about how you nearly sucked the life out of me. That was the next part of my plan anyway. If there’s one thing you’re scared of, it’s the council. Carnus is the only reason they haven’t caught you yet.”

Amara turned on her five inch heel, her icy stare burning into me. “Keep it up and you won’t make it out of this alley.”

Reaching into the pocket of my coat, I pulled out my phone. “Nice way to end the recording, Amara.” Her glare faltered as I pressed the stop button. “I doubt you’re fast enough to stop a ghost so unless you want Elena to deliver this to the council, you’re going to help us out one more time. Otherwise, you’ll have to explain how you’ve been blackmailing a prestigious guard and aiding an Erinyes prisoner with harming an innocent.”

“Midnight, your place,” she said, through gritted teeth.

*It’s done. He won’t have a clue. Just remember to hold up your end.*

-L
“Tessa, as crazy as this sounds, maybe Fin’s right.”

I finished sending a quick reply on my phone before looking over at Elena, who was laying down on my bed with my stuffed cat Cleo. We had spent the past hour preparing for our late night visit to Erinyes and the likelihood of Amara’s betrayal. The alarm clock on my nightstand flashed 11:55.

“Maybe we should tell your parents. If they know that Amara is helping Damon, then they can’t keep going into Will’s head and he wakes up.”

“Damon knows something. Going after Will doesn’t make sense. He could’ve had Amara do that at any time but why now? It can’t be coincidence. Besides, he can’t hurt us, El.”

“Have you considered that this could be a trap? What if Amara lets us in and then all of a sudden, we’re ambushed by guards? You just barely survived a trial. You really want to go through another one?”

“I’m going, with or without you. Honestly, I’d rather you two don’t go at all. You can’t even be around Damon too long without getting sick. At Erinyes, they inject the reaper patients with this potion that repels ghosts. It’s so they can’t use them as an escape plan. Ghosts are easily manipulated, especially if they’re alone.”

“That’s why we get sick around her?” asked Belmont, watching his old football highlights on my laptop. “But she’s out now. Why is it still happening?”

“Must take awhile for it to leave her system. I think it’s best if you guys stay here.” Vivienne was waiting outside in the front yard. “I’ll text you when I’m on my way back.”

Elena sat up, still holding onto Cleo, as I slung my backpack over my shoulder. “Be careful. If something goes wrong—”

“It won’t. I promise I won’t be gone long.”

I quietly opened the window and climbed down using a rope ladder that had been part of my old treehouse. Vivienne waved at a distrustful Elena and Belmont then led me over to a silver porsche. Doubting that she had learned to drive in the span of a few months, I looked at her for an explanation.

“Apparently, Carnus likes to ride around in style.” Amara was sitting in the front seat, drumming her fingers against the steering wheel to the beat of a pop song. “You sure you’re up for this? You haven’t seen him in years.”

“Telling me not to break the rules? Doesn’t sound like the Vivienne I remember.”

“Like I said, it’s been years. A million things could go wrong. Amara and I might’ve been friends before but she switches allegiances without a second thought. I can’t keep her under control for long.”

“I can handle myself. I’m not a little girl.”

She stopped me from walking towards the car, her fingers curled around my arm. “I’m telling you now. I don’t care about what happened to that idiot jock. I’ll give you the time you need with Damon but if he tries anything, I’ll throw you over my shoulder if that’s what it takes to leave. I’m not
watching you almost die a second time, Tessa. A ghost isn’t worth your life."

“You’re wrong.”

The ride to Erinyes was quiet and tense. Amara and Vivienne seemed to be on the outs due to my near death experience earlier in the day and Amara would drive over me several times if it were not for the blackmail hanging over her head. Vivienne and I could hardly be considered friends (reluctant allies, at best), but she clearly wanted to use this late night adventure as a second chance.

“What are you stopping?” I asked, the car parked in front of the empty playground of an elementary school. “It’s another ten miles. I know where it is, Amara.”

“And you know about the secret entrances, princess?” she said, mockingly. Beneath my jacket, I unzipped the front pocket of my backpack. “They use them in case of emergencies. That wasn’t in one of your precious books?”

“Then why aren’t we getting out of the car?”

“I’m waiting for my guard friend. You need a guard to open the entrance.”

Five minutes passed and the playground remained empty. Amara continued to listen to music, purposely turning up the volume to annoy me. I leaned forward, my hand balled into a fist.

“No one’s here.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.” She pouted at me through the mirror. “The world doesn’t revolve around you, sweetie. People don’t just drop everything for you and your pet ghosts. Some of us—urgh!”

Amara clamped her hands over her ears. I lowered the wooden whistle from my lips and as she lowered her hands, I noticed the tips of her ears had a slight red tinge.

“My dad found this on an expedition in Greece a few years ago. He thought it was just a hunting whistle but it actually was used to drive away succubi from villages. The longer I play it, the more it’ll hurt so I suggest you stop playing games.”

“Tessa?”

A redheaded teenage girl, only a year older than me, was peering through the window. Dressed in ripped jeans, combat boots, and an old Led Zeppelin t-shirt, she would fit in perfectly at a rock concert. I stepped out of the car, unsure if I was hallucinating after a long day.

“Alexis?”

The lithe girl hurried around to the other side of the car, wrapping her arms around me. I slowly relaxed into the hug, still in shock.

“When Amara told me, I thought she might be lying. It’s so good to see you.”

“You too. I heard you had gotten out a couple years ago. I wanted to visit but your parents wouldn’t tell me where you went. Your dad just mentioned some retreat in the mountains. Wait, you’re the guard that’s been helping Amara?”
“Not by choice,” she mumbled, pushing her round glasses up her freckled nose.

“Then why? What does she have on you? I want to help so she doesn’t keep bullying you. You don’t deserve that.”

She grinned. “I see you haven’t changed, always wanting to help people. It’s my fight, not yours, Tess. Besides, I hear you have a lot on your plate with your ghost scooby gang. I can take you to Damon. Security’s been tighter lately, with Vivienne out and all, but I can guarantee you a few minutes.”

“Yeah, I’d appreciate that, Lex,” I said, knowing that there was more to her silence than a fear of Amara.

Alexis led the four of us over to an old oak tree, several runic symbols carved into its gnarled trunk. The runes glowed bright silver each time she tapped on the trunk. After the seventh tap, the ground beneath them lifted, revealing a stone staircase. Within minutes, they were no longer on the outskirts of a playground, but the basement of Erinyes. The steel doors on either side of the long hallway looked identical, aside from the plaque with the patient’s initials.

“Not all of them are used. Solitary is really only for the special cases. I never thought he would be down here but he’s gotten worse lately. Some of the doctors think he just snapped.”

“Have you tried talking to him?”

“A few times. They don’t let me see him often because they know we were friends but sometimes, they let me bring him meals. He would never even look at me.”

“Who would want to?”

My eyes narrowed at Vivienne, who snickered at Amara’s rude remark. “Ignore them, Lex. You’re better than them any day of the week. You never deserved to be in here,” I whispered.

Alexis kept her eyes on the pristine tile floor as we continued down the hallway. “We’re here.” She turned towards a door with the initials D.B. “The guards do their nightly checks every twenty minutes so whatever you want to ask him, be quick and don’t make a lot of noise. I’ll flash a light under the door when you’re out of time.”

Vivienne was about to follow me until I moved my arm across the door. “I’m doing this alone. Stay here to make sure the face hugger over here doesn’t screw us over.” I handed her the whistle. “Use it if she tries any of her tricks.”

“Tessa, are you nuts? If he’s in solitary, then he’s at his worst. Even I’ve never been thrown in one of these cells. I’m not letting you go in there alone.

“She won’t be.”

Elena and Belmont appeared beside me. He winked at a confused Alexis, whose face was soon as red as her hair.

“We’re in this together, Tessa. Operation: Reaper started with the three of us and if he knows something about the night Fin died, then Fin deserves to be here too,” said Elena.
“Is this an interrogation or a party?” asked Amara, her hands on her hips. “Who invited you two idiots? You’ll start puking as soon as you’re within an inch of him.”

“Thanks for the concern but we’ll be fine.”

“Yeah, they’ll just be wondering why his floor is covered in transparent vomit,” said Vivienne, sarcastically.

“We don’t have time for this. Let’s go,” I hissed, checking the time on my phone.

Alexis retrieved a set of keys from her jeans pocket and used a worn silver key to open the door. Elena gripped my hand as we stepped through the threshold, the door immediately shutting behind us.

Instead of a dank, dark padded cell with no windows, we were standing in a room that looked like it was plucked right out of Belmont Manor. Classical music played from an old radio and the moonlight bounced off the crystal chandelier on the ceiling. A bookcase covered two sides of the room, some of the books looking centuries old with their tattered, dusty covers, and a fire crackled in the fireplace near Belmont.

As my eyes darted around the ornately decorated room, I noticed a teenage boy sitting in a red armchair, a book in one hand and a fork in the other. A five course meal straight out of a gourmet restaurant was laid out on the dark wooden table in front of him. He looked exactly as I remembered, with his perfectly coiffed dark hair tied back into a bun, dark loafers, khakis, and partially unbuttoned shirt.

“Sneaking out behind mommy and daddy’s back. I think your new ghost friend is being a bad influence.”

His grin would charm any girl in seconds but for me, knowing better, it was just unsettling. He closed the book before placing it down on the table. Behind me, I heard Elena make a slight retching sound.

“The Once and Future King. You’re never one for subtlety, reading the last book I showed you. Amara told you I was coming?”

“She didn’t have to,” he said, taking a bite of his pasta. “They already knew you were on your way and told me about your plan. You’re not as discrete as you think, dove.”

My eyes narrowed at his childish nickname. “Good, we’re not playing games. You admit that you’re helping this psychopath. Tell me who it is, Damon.”

“Is that the only reason you’re here?” There was a hint of melancholy in his voice. “To interrogate me?”

“Why else would I be here?”

“Oh, I don’t know. To see how your big brother is doing in the scary prison he’s been in the past ten years.”

“Your wh—” Belmont rested his head against the wall. “I’m gonna—no, I’m good. I’m not really but—oh man, this is worse than I thought. When did you get an older brother?”
“We’re twins. He’s older by a minute,” I said, hating when Damon acted like he was years ahead of me. “Shut up and sit down with your head between your knees.”

Damon lowered his fork, taking his eyes off of a nauseous Belmont. “Of course he didn’t know about me. I’m the family shame, right? I bet you don’t even put up pictures of me around the house.”

“That’s what happens when you try to kill your sister. If you think you’re getting sympathy from someone like him, you’re barking up the wrong tree.”

From the moment I planned to visit, I knew the game he would play with me. He wanted to tug at my empathetic side, to make me forget why I was even in his room. It was a tactic he had used countless times over the years, ever since the day he was brought to Erinyes. I remembered how I begged my parents to give him a second chance, even blaming myself for the incident on the roof. One minute, we had been climbing up the ladder for a ‘special surprise’ and the next, I was dangling off the edge of the roof, seconds from plummeting to my death, before our babysitter discovered we were no longer playing in the backyard.

The way he always manipulated me was the exact reason my parents kept us apart. It wasn’t that I was weak, just that, as twins, we had this unspoken bond.

“Oh, here we go again,” he said, as if I was boring him with details of a shopping spree. “I wasn’t trying to kill you. I was trying to save you.”

“You’re insane,” said Elena, barely able to stand without holding onto the bookcase.

His dark eyes passed over her with amusement. “You must be Elena. I see why my sister likes you so much. You’re one of those odd ghosts. Your whole family decides to move on but you stay behind. Have you ever been to therapy in the Underworld? I bet the therapists there would find you fascinating. They’d really dig deep into your issues.”

“Do you remember Luke? You used to call him Loser Luke,” I said, changing the subject. He chuckled as he picked up his glass of bourbon. “Every time mom and dad would let me visit, he’d give me some of the candy he hid in his desk and you hated that because he’d never give you any. He knew you loved caramel but he loved screwing with you so he’d give me all the caramel instead, even if I didn’t want it. He never liked you.”

“Jealousy. He knew he’d always be a lowly guard and I was meant for better things.”

“And he thinks you’re a conceited prick. We had a lovely chat this afternoon when I told him to put some nightshade in your nightly bottle of bourbon,” I said, just as he took a sip from the glass. “He told me you’d never even taste it and I guess he was right. Since you love reading as much as I do, I bet you know that it works as a kind of truth serum. Did you honestly think I would come here without a plan? I figured Amara was going to warn you but hey, I did even better. Now I know you’re working with that snake.”

I jumped as he smashed the bottle of bourbon against the wall. Elena pleaded with me to leave, worried about Damon’s terrible temper.

“Get out!”

“I’m not afraid of you. We’re not kids anymore, Damon. I’m not leaving until I get the truth. Who’s
“I don’t know.”

“You’re lying.”

Damon responded with a crazed laugh, the same I heard the day he nearly pushed me off the roof. “You poisoned me to get me to tell the truth. How can I be lying? It’s just not the answer you wanted to hear.” He gripped the table, breathing heavily. “I don’t have the answers you’re looking for, Tessa. You’re wasting your time.”

“You said they warned you that I was coming which means you’ve been communicating. Why are you helping them? Why are you using Amara to hurt Will? Is this some sick game of yours? What, they promised you payback for all the years you spent here and hurting one of my best friends was part of the deal?”

His eyes were shut and under his breath, he muttered to himself. I knew the effects of the herb were temporary.

“Get out before you learn why they put me in here. I’ll do the same to you as I did to that guard.”

“I actually thought you were getting better. That’s why Dad had to work for Charles Belmont, because the doctors were going to release you but they thought it was all an act so he had to beg the worst man in town for help. I wanted to believe that you changed. I knew the day was getting closer and that they were just planning on chucking you in the Meadows or worse but I didn’t want you to spend that last day alone.” My eyes brimmed with tears as he continued to grip the table so tightly that his knuckles turned white. “I wanted you home and I knew you wanted that too. No matter how much you tried to scare me or the other kids in this place, I knew you wanted to just go back, to be the older brother that Ryan doesn’t even know exists, the one he deserves, but instead, you’re here.”

“T—Tessa…”

“It’s like mom always said. We’re twins. The bond between us, only we can understand and no one knows you like I do so what changed? What did they offer you that you’re willing to be the monster everyone thinks you are? Why are you helping them?!”

“To save you!”

His voice echoed around the small room, nearly shaking the bookcase. We stared at each other in awkward silence and my eyes searched his for the smallest hint of a lie. All the bravado I mustered to just be in the same room faded the moment he moved from the armchair. It felt like I had gone back in time, back to that frightened seven year old who could barely look at her twin brother without hiding behind her father’s back.

“I heard you and Amara got a little close today too. That must’ve been awkward. Kissing the girl who your ex cheated on you with in front of that very same ex.” Even though she was behind me curled up in a ball, Elena seemed to forget about the crippling pain in her stomach for just a few passing seconds. “It’s like something out of a soap opera. I bet Viv was ready to tear off her head. When they warned me about your secret visit, they sent a gift too.”

Damon kicked a small metal ball out from under the table and as it rolled closer, a sense of dread crawled up my spine. “Vi—”
I was silenced by a hand over my mouth, the smell of my father’s cologne filling my nostrils. A pale green smoke emitted from the ball, enveloping both Elena and Belmont. No matter how much I struggled, Damon kept a firm grip on my waist, pulling me into the corner by the fireplace.

As the smoke cleared, I screamed into his hand at the sight of them unconscious or possibly worse. “Shh, they’re fine. They’re not dead, just knocked out. It was supposed to force them to pass on but I modified it a little. I’m gonna let go of you but you can’t scream. If Vivienne hears you, they’ll know.” He slowly lowered his hand. “You need to trust—”

Damon staggered backwards, his hands over his nose. Ignoring the stinging pain in my knuckles, I hurried over to Elena, placing two fingers on her neck. I released a shaky breath when I felt the tiniest pulse.

“I’m guessing you packed ten years of pent up anger into that. Dad teach you that one?” he asked, rubbing his red nose. He ducked as I chucked the metal ball at his head. “Hey, I said no noise. Tessa, I’m not the enemy here.”

“No, you’re just trying to save me,” I said, sarcasm dripping from my every word. “How stupid do you think I am?”

“You’ve never been stupid, just naive. It’s not your fault. Mom and Dad just wanted to protect their precious little girl.” He moved in front of the door. “You’re not leaving until you hear me out. They’re using Vivienne as a puppet. She doesn’t know that, obviously, but it’s how they’ve been one step ahead of you.”

“If you’re working with them, why should I believe a word you say? Maybe the gas was never meant to kill them. Maybe you’re just saying that to trick me. It wouldn’t be the first time. Don’t come near me.”

Staying near the wall, he bent down to eye level. “I’m not going to hurt you. I never wanted to hurt you. I never claimed to be perfect and maybe my methods were terrible but I was seven. Can you blame me? I’m not lying. Everything I’ve done is to protect you. That fall wasn’t meant to kill you. I spent days practicing with dolls and admittedly, that wasn’t the best comparison but I thought it would paralyze you at best…put you in a coma at worst.”

“Oh, is that all?” I asked, resting Elena’s head in my lap while sitting protectively in front of Belmont. My eyes briefly scanned the underside of the door, hoping to see a flash of light. “So generous, D. In your delusional mind, how would that save me?”

“Because the council is a bunch of elitist snobs. Nana once told me that they only wanted reapers in peak condition, to prove that we were the alpha race. It was an old mindset that a lot of its members still have to this day. They wouldn’t let you practice as a reaper if you were that badly injured.” He lowered his eyes to the concrete floor. “And then there wouldn’t be a ritual. We’d both make it past eighteen. It was a way to beat their stupid rule.”

I remembered the day we learned about being reapers. We were no older than four and our father decided to take the us on a camping trip with relatives from his side of the family. When we woke up one morning, Damon was in a panic, thinking that Henry, one of our older cousins who enjoyed pranks, had drawn all over our skin with marker. It took nearly half an hour for our mother to calm us down, slip sweatshirts over our heads to hide the markings, and tell us the truth about our ancestry. For her, it was the best and worst day of her life.
Twin reapers were rare, usually only one child gaining the abilities, and with their connection, it allowed them to be stronger than a typical reaper. The council believed that to be dangerous and on their eighteenth birthday, the twins were forced to take part in a special ritual. It seemed simple enough at the time (we join hands and one twin comes out as the victor) until we began to understand that the ‘loser’ was sent into the afterlife, their abilities being taken back by the council. My mother, like many others, had spent countless years fighting against the law but council was resolute, insisting that the ritual was a precautionary measure.

“They’ve been talking to me longer than you know, Tessa, like a bird chirping in my ear. I would hear them everywhere. When we were playing outside and in my sleep…they said they wanted to help.” He ran his fingers through his dark hair. “Back then, I never understood why you couldn’t hear them too. You just thought it was some imaginary friend of mine but they were getting angry…they wanted you to listen. I started to realize that they didn’t want to help because they felt sorry for us. They wanted twins for whatever they were planning and if you were hurt, it would stop them and help you.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked, thinking he was sounding crazier by the minute.

“If we went through the ritual, you—I always knew you would win.” Before I could even begin to correct him, he shook his head. “You thought I was better at lessons but I wasn’t and Mom knew it too. You never understood just how strong you actually are, Tessa. I didn’t want that burden for you. If you were the reason I died, you’d never forgive yourself because that’s the kind of person you are and I didn’t want that for you. That’s why I asked Amara to keep Will asleep. She used her powers to put him in this supernatural coma and as long as she maintains it, the reaper can’t hurt him.”

“Let’s say I believe you. If the reaper’s been talking to you all this time, then what do they want? What does it have to do with Fin?”

“We don’t have tea time together, Tessa. All I know is that they want reapers to be in charge, not just in the Underworld. They’ve been gathering followers with the hellhounds and other creatures. I don’t know why they haven’t just done it yet. Maybe they’re waiting for something.”

My whole body went tense as he walked towards me. I heard a soft groan from Belmont and Elena’s eyes began to flutter.

“I thought if I was in here, they couldn’t get to me but they’re strong…stronger than any reaper I’ve ever met. Please, I just need you to trust me,” he implored, his voice quivering with each word. “I want to help you. That’s all I’ve ever tried to do. If we work together—”

The door burst open and he was lifted off his feet and thrown roughly against the wall. His room began to change, now resembling a more typical cell with the bare walls and a single cot. The world seemed to be moving ten times faster as Luke, a burly man in his early thirties, picked up a dizzy Damon by his collar. In the hallway, Alexis, Amara, and Vivienne were stuck to the floor, a brown, sticky substance around their legs.

“Luke, w—”

My face paled at the sight of my father entering the room. He practically squeezed the life out of me, his hand resting on the back of my head, and all I could do was stare at my helpless brother, who struggled against the binds that slithered out from under the cot.
“Tessa, thank goodness you’re safe. If I didn’t get here in time…”

I felt numb as he squeezed me even tighter. Elena and Belmont managed to stand, a little wobbly themselves, baffled by what was happening in and outside the room.

“I assume Fin and Elena are with you. It’s time to go home.” He turned my head away from the cot, despite Damon’s pleas. “Luke will handle it. There’s no reason to worry.”

Vivienne was the first to free herself from the strange goo. She looked relieved at the sight of me, her expression hardening at my father’s glare.

“I assume this is your doing?” he spat, not bothering to hide his disgust. “I can’t say I’m surprised. Kala thought the herbs would be enough to keep you away but you always have to slither back in, don’t you?”

“Dad, she didn’t—”

“Yeah, it was my idea,” I looked at Vivienne, surprised. “They’re brother and sister and they missed each other. Sue me for treating them like actual people, not beta fish.”

“If you come near my daughter or her friends again, the council will be the least of your worries, Vivienne.”

“You think I’m scared of an old man like you?” she asked, not the least bit intimidated by his muscular frame. “I didn’t get sent here for messing up my mommy’s hair, Devlin. I’m not scared of you or Kala.”

“And that will be your downfall. The council is keeping a very close eye on you so I suggest you behave yourself or you’ll be back in one of these cells.”

On the drive back to Belmont Falls, I sat in the front seat in silence, playing with a loose string on the seat belt. I could not even dare to look at my father, knowing he was either terrified or disappointed, maybe both. We waited at a red light for what seemed like an eternity.

“Vivienne didn’t bring me there. She just said that because she knows it’s easier to blame her than to hear that it was my fault.”

“I know.” My father gripped the steering wheel. “I was on my way home from a conference and looking for my house key when your grandmother appeared in front of me. I nearly wet myself and when I was done thinking I had gone insane, she told me you spoke to Luke. He would help you speak to Damon in exchange for half your college fund. That’s quite a lot of money but he’s been desperate to get away from that job for ages. She thought it was better to warn me instead of your mother because we both know you’d never leave the house again. Even when we died, she’d just appoint Oliver or Ryan to watch over you in her place.”

“Dad—”

“Why would you go there? You know how dangerous it is. Do you not remember the last time you paid him a visit?”

“Maybe it’s not that black and white.”
“Tessa, please. I know you want him to get better. Don’t you think your mother and I want that as well? We’d love nothing more than to have him home and to be a family again but it’s not in the cards. Why would you visit him?”

“Because I thought he had the answers I wanted.”

He kept his eyes on the road as I explained Amara and Damon’s roles in Will’s prolonged stay at the hospital. The moment I mentioned Damon’s claims of hearing the reaper at a young age, I knew my father was seconds from going into lecture mode. It was proof that I had gone behind my parents’ backs and continued my investigation into Fin’s death.

“You swore to your mother and me that you would stop this, Tessa,” he said, his voice barely above a whisper.

“I can’t. If Damon’s telling the truth, then that reaper is going after me for a reason. If the council won’t listen to me, then—”

“Then nothing,” he stated, pulling into the driveway. “You’ve told the council everything and now it’s time for them to handle it. Oliver said that they weren’t overwhelmingly on your side but if Cullen believed you, that’s enough. He happened to stop by while you were out this morning and asked for all that evidence you collected, which I take as a good sign. I showed him the ring you found by the bridge and he agreed with me that it’s not…enhanced in any way.”

“What about those runes?”

“I translated them. We will rise from the ashes. I suppose it’s a family motto. Cullen said it could have merely fallen off the bridge at any time.”

Knowing it was a losing battle, I followed him into the house. I wanted to be grateful that Cullen was taking my concerns seriously but Damon was the only thing on my mind. Did this reaper mess with him from the beginning, using him as some sort of puppet? Was he putting on an act to lull me into a false sense of security and then betray me like he did in the past?

“Byrne.”

“We’ll talk about it in the morning,” I told Belmont, tossing my backpack to the floor. “I’m too tired to argue with you right now. I just want to sleep.”

“Uh, that might not be that easy.”

On my bed was a neatly wrapped box, tied with a bright red ribbon. Elena volunteered to open it, a ghost less likely to be harmed if it contained some sort of weapon. She carefully unwrapped the box and pulled out a floor-length white dress. It was strapless with a sweetheart neckline and the crystals embedded in the fabric sparkled in the light like tiny stars.

“It’s so pretty,” squealed Elena. “You could be like a Disney princess. When did you order it?”

“I didn’t. Do you think Parker bought it so I’d forgive him?” I asked, picking up the box.

“Look at it sparkle. I know the perfect hairstyle to go with this. You’ll look amazing,” she said, twirling with the dress in front of my mirror.
Digging through the copious amounts of red tissue paper, I found a card. I half-expected to see Parker’s name, along with some long-winded apology, but the reality was much worse.

_I hope you enjoyed that time with your brother tonight. Consider it my Christmas gift to you, along with this. I thought it was perfect for the winter ball, for someone so sweet and innocent. Unless you want my partnership with Damon to come to a violent end, you’ll be there. It’s going to be a night you won’t soon forget._

“They’re just messing with you,” said Belmont, reading the message over my shoulder. “They won’t be there, Byrne. We’d recognize anyone out of place.”

“Unless they’re doing what they did to Vivienne. When you guys were unconscious, Damon said the reaper was using her to spy on us and that’s how he knew we were coming. What if they do the same thing to someone like Amy or a teacher? We can send the message to Cullen and if he does believe us, he’ll send some guards, ones who can spot a disguise. My parents don’t want us involved in this so it respects their wishes and maybe we’ll finally find out who this psycho is and why they killed you.”

My phone vibrated in my pocket, two messages, from Katie and an unknown number flashing across the screen.

_Hope this means you can trust me_

“Will’s awake.”
“Wow, you really went all out.” Will gazed down at the assortment of chips and candies sprawled across the bed. “How did you get all these at 6 AM?”

“You remember JJ?” I asked, opening the bag of gummy worms.

“The creepy cashier at the 7/11 that used to stare at you all the time? Tessa, please tell me you didn’t go back there. We made a pinky promise in 8th grade.”

“You’re worth breaking a pinky promise, Will.” Blushing, he bit into a red and green worm. “He was a lot creepier than I remember but I just pretended my dad was in the car so he wouldn’t try anything.”

The truth was that Elena and Belmont used their ghostly existence to frighten the lewd cashier. He attempted to ask me out on a date, claiming it was close enough to be legal, when Elena purposely messed with the slushie machine. I left him at the register, panicking over Belmont flickering the lights to the tune of the rock song on the radio.

Will awoke less than four hours ago and if it weren’t for school, I would spend all day with him. I had very little trust in Damon’s words, knowing that Will could be back in a coma with a snap of Amara’s fingers. No matter how much he insisted that he was feeling better, even looking like he had not spent the past couple months in the hospital, I was treating him like a delicate flower.

“You have to get to school. Don’t ruin your perfect attendance for me, Tessa. I may be worth getting hit on by pervy old guys but not that,” he joked. My eyes peeked at his steady heart monitor. “I promise I’m fine. If something goes wrong, my mom or Katie will call.”

“Well, I’m still doing all your homework until you’re better. Did the doctor say when you’ll be good enough to leave?”

“Not yet. He’s checking on me later but he said my vitals are already pretty good. I might be back by the end of the week, which is a little weird but not as weird as those dreams about your brother. Not that I know what your brother looks like now or I had a crush on him when I was seven.”

Feigning a laugh, I jumped down from the bed and wrapped my arms around his neck, careful not to squeeze too tightly.

“Hello Miss Byrne,” I heard, seconds after closing the door.

Standing behind me was a tall middle-aged man with dark hair that was somehow disheveled and neatly styled at the same time. His dark suit and polished shoes gave him the appearance of a businessman, possibly a lawyer. My first thought was that Chief Parker hired him to interrogate Will for some bogus confession about the accident, until I spotted the white rose tucked into his suit pocket.

Elena and Belmont were on either side of him, the petite blonde staring adoringly at his handsome face. The man held out his tanned hand.

“A pleasure to make your acquaintance. I am Liam Evans,” he said, speaking in a throaty voice, with a posh accent. “I am one of Grandmaster Cullen’s trusted advisers.”

“Wow, that’s a big job. Why are you here?”
“He’s asked me to keep an eye on you until this business with the rogue reaper has been dealt with accordingly. He wanted me to assure you that all of our resources are on the case. Sending him that note you received was the right thing to do.”

“Not that I don’t appreciate him looking out for me but um won’t it look weird if you’re following me around?”

“The only ones who can see me are those with supernatural abilities,” he explained, leading her out of the hospital. “I can imagine this is difficult for you, Miss Byrne, but if all goes to plan, it will all be over tonight.”

I hesitated, taking one last look at the hospital, before getting into her car, Evans holding open the door. “Hot, British, and a gentleman? He’s like an older Edwin,” whispered Elena, waving at him from the backseat.

“He’s old enough to be your dad and you still look fifteen,” I said, not wanting to relive her teenage Mr. Darcy memories. “Dial it back.”

“You could cut glass with those cheekbones. Who cares?”

The whole ride to school, my eyes were on my phone, fearing that I would get a message that Will was once again comatose or worse. Encouraging messages from Katie were not enough to assuage my fears.

“So Mr. Evans,” said Elena, breaking the silence. (“Liam, please. No need for formality,” he insisted.) “Tell us all about you. Where are you from? What’s it like working for the council?”

“I was born in Kent. I’ve known the Grandmaster for a very long time. Our families are old friends and in a way, we’ve always been like brothers. My duties are to assist him in any way I can, mostly for intellectual purposes. I would protect him with my own life, if need be. That’s why I admire your friend.”

I glanced up from my phone for the first time in minutes. “Me?”

“Yes. You’re compassionate and loyal, traits I hold dear myself. I watched you in the hospital before, with your friend William. He’s different than your ghostly companions, far more fragile, but you would protect them all the same, no matter the cost. Ah, here we are.”

“Thanks for the ride, M—Liam.”

“We’ll meet back here at 4:15, yes? You’re staying behind for dance committee?”

“Yeah, I—wow, you really do your homework. Thanks again.”

Elena waved at him again as he drove out of the parking lot. Before I could dissuade her from her latest crush, a thin hand, each nail painted scarlet red, latched onto my arm and I found Amy by my side. She rambled on about sending me a million texts over the weekend, the entire town knowing about the incident in the woods.

“If I was attacked by some psycho in the woods, my dad would keep me locked in my room forever. Chace was telling us all about it last night at his place. You’re still going to winter ball, right?”

“Of course. You spent months planning it, Amy. I wouldn’t miss it,” I replied, having no choice.

She heaved a sighed of relief. “Good, because Claire’s bringing her secret older boyfriend and they’ll
probably be making out all night, which is gross. I need someone who won’t ditch me.”

“I’m your girl. Why are we going this way?” I asked, passing the staircase. “We have history first.”

“Oh right, you probably didn’t see the email from Claire’s mom. After what happened to you, Chief Parker had the idea to teach us all about self defense so that’s first. We get to miss two periods and learn to kick butt like Black Widow.”

In a normal high school, a lesson in self defense sounded uneventful. The instructor would teach them a few basic moves and pretend that they were now capable of taking down attackers twice their size. It was a different story when one of the instructors was Chief Parker himself. Seeing Garren did not lift my spirits since he looked like he would lose to a feisty chihuahua. Coach Anderson assigned each student to one of five groups.

“Wow, I guess I never realized what an asshole Chief Parker is since he was always on my side,” said Belmont, shaking his head. “I mean, he definitely put you two together just to—Byrne, where are you going?”

I stormed over to Chief Parker, ignoring all the Glad you’re back and We were really worried from my fellow classmates. If the incident happened a few months ago, I would’ve been ridiculed for days. The feigned concern was only because of my newfound friendship with the ‘popular’ clique, Amy my only true friend among them.

“Change my group,” I stated, interrupting his conversation about football with Coach Anderson.

“Tessa, the groups were randomly assigned. What’s wrong with your group?”

“I don’t know, sir. Why do you knock over the stapler every morning in the principal’s office ‘by accident’ just to watch Ms. Jones pick it up?”

“Byrne,” he hissed, his face as red as his hair.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I thought we were asking each other rhetorical questions. No? Okay, well I want to change groups because I don’t want to be within ten feet of his dirty mutt of a son.”

Coach Anderson was too busy struggling to come up with a response to notice that Chief Parker’s eyes were now scarlet red. Elena squeaked in fright and even Belmont reluctantly raised his fists, his eyes darting for every exit at the same time. I stood my ground, refusing to even blink, as a challenge for him to show everyone his true self.

“Heh, teenagers, sir. You know how they can be at times. One minute, you’re best friends and the next, you wish they were never born. Hormones, am I right?” said Garren, chuckling nervously.

Evans was in the corner, by the bleachers, reaching inside his suit. He lowered his hand at a slight twitch of Garren’s right eye, who passed it off as a nervous tic.

“Though perhaps it is best if Tessa doesn’t participate. It could trigger memories of what happened and we wouldn’t want that.”

Chief Parker’s eyes returned to their usual dark brown color. “Every student is required to participate, Garren. It’ll be good for her. She should know how to fight back when—if she ever finds herself in that situation again. Sadly, it is all too common for girls her age.”

“Oh course, sir. Self defense is important. I’ll get her back to her group and we can begin.”
He placed his hand on my shoulder, gripping it hard enough that he was pressing against bone. I was about to yell at him when I realized that Chief Parker was watching our every move.

“Pretend to trip and I’ll say you need the nurse. You can’t be around Chace or his father right now,” he said, barely moving his lips.

“I’m not scared of them,” I replied, mimicking him.

“Tessa, your father told me about your little visit with Damon. This is why twin reapers are dangerous. You’re meant to be kept apart. If you’re in close quarters for too long, especially if you make physical contact, you begin to absorb each other’s power and personality. It’s Damon’s anger that is fueling you and being around Chace will only make it worse.”

I wrenched my shoulder from his grasp. “I am not running like some scared little girl, Oliver. If he wants a fight, he’ll get one.”

“Tessa, maybe Oliver’s right,” suggested Elena, looking at me like I was a whole new person. “You wouldn’t be dumb enough to pick a fight with Chief Parker. Nurse Simpson is easy to trick. Just tell her you’re not feeling well and we can go back to the hospital.”

“No. I’m done being a coward and letting people walk all over me because I’m nice. You know what nice gets you? Nothing. I’m not taking shit from anyone, not Hilton, not Baxter, and definitely not from a freakin’ dog.”

Tuning out their concerns, I headed over to my group. Danvers was imitating some lewd sex act to Hilton’s disgust and Parker’s amusement.

“If your so-called new girlfriend likes that, she’s blind or desperate. Speaking of pathetic Lily Grove girls, Byrne is here. Can this day get any worse?” she asked, scrunching her nose.

“I bet your parents say that every morning when they see you.”

A trio of nearby girls gasped while Danvers sniggered under his breath. Hilton turned on her heel, shooting me one of her trademark icy glares.

“I must’ve gone temporarily deaf for a minute. What did you just say? I’d think very carefully.”

“I bet your parents say that every morning when they see you,” I repeated slowly, doing the proper hand gestures in sign language. “Is the space between your ears just not connecting the dots?”

“You little—” Parker moved between us. “He can’t be your guard dog 24/7, Byrne. Watch your back.”

“Sure. Let’s see what all the fuss is about,” I said, with a shrug. “Your boyfriend likes to do that too. Hey, you know what? I bet when you two are getting all hot and heavy, he’s thinking of me. Second place to me when it comes to daddy and the boyfriend. Tragic.”

Hilton’s cheeks puffed out like a bullfrog’s. Her string of curses was drowned out by Coach Anderson’s shrill whistle. He ordered each group to split into pairs. If Parker was not standing like a statue, Hilton would have chosen me as a partner to ‘accidentally’ kick in the face.

“What the hell is going on?” Parker asked, as Hilton dragged Danvers away with a tug of his ear. “This isn’t you.”

“No, this is me. This is me when I don’t care about people’s feelings or being nice. Unfiltered and
not giving a damn. Do you have a problem with that, Scooby-Doo?”

Chief Parker began to demonstrate the first move with an officer: flipping an attacker over their back. Garren and the other officers walked around the room, placing students in the correct position.

“Oliver, he doesn’t need help. He has tons of practice with this,” I said, as Garren started to adjust Parker’s hand on my waist. “I bet he does it to all the girls he brings to the Falls, after they realize he’s a sleazebag but he can’t have them run off.”

His grip loosened on my throat. Judging by Belmont’s expression, I had hit a nerve.

“Aww, is the puppy sad? You should be happy. If this were the back row of a movie theater, you’d have me right where you want me. It used to be Vivienne’s favorite too. Are you jealous that she beat you to it, to that first taste?”

“Byrne, that’s enough. Come on,” said Belmont.

“You’re right.”

I elbowed Parker in the ribs and flipped him onto the rubber mat. He rolled over to his side, groaning in pain. His friends looked between their brawny captain and me, a girl who weighed about a hundred pounds soaking wet, at a loss for words. Lying that I looked a bit flushed, Garren pulled me out into the hallway. Evans, as if he could teleport from room to room, was somehow already there, his expression both sympathetic and, in my addled mind, amused.

“Until this wears off, you need to go somewhere quiet.”

“Because I hurt Chace Parker’s feelings?” I asked, pouting. “Who knew he even had any?”

“It raises questions when a tiny girl can toss a star running back with the ease of a feather. Caleb has done a fantastic job at hiding his true self but the second he has you alone, he’ll attempt to finish what he started in those woods.”

“Tessa, I know you,” Elena said, grabbing my hands. “It’s Damon messing with your head. I mean, Fin was horrible to you all these years but you’re still helping him...because you’re good. You have the biggest heart of anyone I know. You believe in the good of people and that’s what makes them better around you. That’s why you’re my best friend.” She frowned at my fit of giggles. “What’s so funny?”

“Best friend,” I said, mockingly. “We’re not friends. I’m your charity case. You thought you were better than your real friends because you didn’t make my every day a living hell but you didn’t stop them either. You were just a bitch in sheep’s clothing. That’s why you didn’t pass on, right? Because you knew when it was your time to be judged, you wouldn’t go to the nice place like your parents and Abby and then they’d know the truth about you too. The only reason you hang out with me is because I’m the only one who can see you.”

The sight of a single tear trickling down her cheek sent a shock to my system, like waking up from a nightmare. Everything that happened in the past five minutes played over and over in my head. She was right. No matter how much I hated Parker or Hilton, I would never be as cruel.

“I didn’t mean—I’m sorry. I shouldn’t—I just want to be alone right now.”

“Tessa, wait!” cried Elena, as I disappeared through the doors.

Keeping my eyes on the ground, I sped past the football field and continued walking down the
street. I stopped when my feet began to hurt and was surprised to find myself at the sandbox in the local playground. My fingers traced over the E + T that Elena had carved into one of the wooden edges with her dad’s pocket knife, the day before second grade.

I remembered the first time we met: me, the awkward new girl in town, dressed in a hoodie and jeans to hide the markings on my body that increased by the day, and her, the bubbly blonde in a pink floral dress and matching bow in her hair. My mother encouraged me to play with the other kids, to get my mind off of Damon, but I was never one to make the first move. I just avoided getting hit in the face by a purple bucket when I spotted two boys, no older than nine, destroying a blonde girl’s sand castle.

“You’re such a butthead, Nate!” the girl shouted, stamping her foot. “Knights are supposed to protect the castle!”

“Aw, is the little princess gonna cry? It didn’t look much like a castle to me,” teased the taller of the two, digging his sneaker into the sand. “Tell you what, you let me give you three indian burns and I’ll help you build it again.

“No way. That hurts!”

“Leave her alone.”

The boys turned their heads and sniggered, seeing that I was about the size of a twig and only reached their waist. Behind their backs, the girl shook her head.

“Look at that, Billy. Fresh meat,” he said to the other boy, who cracked his knuckles. “What did you just say to me, pipsqueak?”

“I said leave her alone.”

“Or wh—oof!”

He was silenced by the bucket smacking his stomach and swiftly fell to his knees. His friend lunged at me but I easily tripped him, causing him to stumble into the swing set.

“Go away or I’ll make you both eat your underwear.”

The girl was stifling her giggles into her hand. “Y—you better stop laughing, Ellie. I’m telling Aunt Aubrey!” said Nate, still clutching his stomach.

Still clutching his stomach, he forced his friend to follow him up the small hill. I handed the girl the bucket.

“Sorry.”

“Why are you sorry? That was funny. My mom knows he’s a bully. She won’t yell at you.”

“That’s good. I should go.”

“Wait!” The girl moved in front of me. “I’ve never seen you around here before. Do you want to play with me? Nate and Billy were supposed to be my knights but they were really bad at it. You can be the knight instead.”

She tapped both of my shoulders with her purple shovel. “I name thee...what’s your name?”

“Tessa,” I replied, shyly tugging on the bottom of my hoodie.
“Ooh, that’s pretty,” she said, her big, blue eyes shimmering in the light. “I name thee Lady Tessa, knight to the beautiful Princess Elena. You will be sworn to protect the princess from any danger, from now until your last day.”

Snap.

I whipped my head around at the sound of a twig breaking. My heart sank when I came face to face with Evans.

“Expecting someone else? I told Oliver it was best if I was the one to talk to you. I find it’s much easier to clear your head with a stranger.”

“How did you know I was here?”

“As you said, I do my homework. You don’t have to worry about the council finding out about your visit to Erinyes. I have a soft spot when it comes to family. It must be even harder for you, being a twin. It’s a bond unlike any other, a connection that only a fellow twin understands. The ritual happens to be one tradition that I never agreed with, too archaic and brutal.”

“I never should’ve gone there. It just caused more problems. The reaper threatened him, the guards are probably treating him worse than before, and being near him turned me into a temporary bitch. How can I face Elena after what I said?”

“She knows you didn’t mean it, even if that’s not strictly true.” I looked at him, curiously. “You and your brother are quite opposite. He doesn’t care about the opinions of others. He will gladly say what’s on his mind. You, on the other hand, are very careful with your words. A girl like Claire Hilton makes your life unbearable yet you would never be as needlessly cruel. You may come to blows from time to time but you hold back, bottling up your feelings. It’s why you’ve reacted so strongly to your brother’s presence. It must be—”

“Horrible? That’s an understatement.”

“I was going to say liberating. No matter how horrible you feel, you did speak the truth to her. You simply kept it buried deep down all this time. You may not have meant to speak so harshly but it is your truth, how you’ve felt each time she ignored you when her other friends were around. There’s nothing wrong with that, Tessa. It’s why I’ve asked her and Fin to stay away for the night.”

“What? Why would you do that?”

“If the reaper does show up tonight, you may be called upon to aid in the defense and as admirable as your loyalty is, emotional attachments can be a weakness in battle. You cannot concern yourself with their safety. Rest assured, they are under council protection. The Grandmaster agreed with my decision.”

As much as I wanted to trust Cullen, Elena and Belmont’s disappearance only made me more anxious. I had planned for them to be at a dance, to act as lookouts for any strange behavior. Instead, I would be fretting over them, instead of the reaper’s possible attack.

After a few hours of last minute decorating, Evans drove me home and I began to get ready for the dance. It was difficult without Elena’s expertise in makeup and hair but I tried my best. I left a post-it note on my mirror, in case the council sent them back, and walked downstairs, holding a white embroidered masquerade mask. My mother took so many pictures of me that I was going blind in one eye.
“I don’t want you to worry, Kala,” said Evans. “She’s in good hands. Hopefully, we’ll be able to put this nasty business behind us for good.”

“If you need any help, don’t hesitate to call, Liam.”

Hearing a soft knock, Ryan opened the door and greeted Amy. She looked even more beautiful than usual, her dark red dress complimenting her curves.

“Aw, you must be Ryan. I’m Amy. Is your sister ready?”

He untied the blue and gold yarn bracelet around his wrist, one Rosa had given to my mother for his protection. It was enchanted to repel any dangerous beasts, particularly sluagh, from going near him.

“It’ll protect you from the monsters at the dance,” he said, placing it on her own wrist. My father chuckled, passing it off as an overactive imagination. “Just in case Tessa isn’t there to beat them up first.”

“I bet she could. You should’ve seen her take down Chace in gym today. I think she might be a secret ninja”

Not wanting to relive gym class, I grabbed my clutch before heading towards the door. “Heh, we should probably get going, right?”

“We don’t want her out too late, Amy. With what happened this past weekend, we’re a little more protective than usual,” said my father.

“Girl Scout honor, Mr. Byrne.” She squeezed my arm as we walked down the driveway. “Okay, who was Mr. Tall, dark, and handsome? Tessa, don’t hold out on the details. We’re friends and friends don’t keep hotties like that a secret. Spill.”

“The guy is um—he’s my uncle, on my dad’s side. He’s staying with us for a little bit, not really sure how long.”

I dreaded hearing another girl gush over the handsome guard, when the shocking realization struck me like a speeding train. Amy was talking about Evans, a man who should have been invisible to her. No matter how many conspiracy theories I thought up in my head, it all circled back to one explanation: Amy somehow being supernatural.

A bump in the road shook me out of my stupor. For the first time, I noticed that I was inside the limo with Amy, her date Erik (or ‘Eight pack Erik’, a senior on the swim team), Danvers and his date (a pretty blonde named Ashlyn with an infectious laugh), and Hilton and Parker, who were too busy sucking each other’s faces to acknowledge me. Parker eyed me between kisses, as if gauging my reaction, but I was too busy staring at Amy, who was deep in conversation with Ashlyn about some musical.

Danvers placed a shot glass in my head. “What’s your poison, Byrne?”

“What?”

“Your drink. You’ve got to catch up before we get to the school. We’ve already had three shots a piece.”

“I don’t drink much.”

“No problem. I’ve got a sixth sense with these things. I bet you’re a whiskey girl,”
If the reaper does show up tonight, you may be called upon to aid in the defense. Evans’s words at the playground were a chilling reminder that I was not a normal teenage girl, going to some dance. Instead of drinking punch and dancing with friends, I had to fight monsters killing my fellow classmates, kids I grew up with over the past ten years. What if Cullen’s men weren’t enough to stop the reaper? What if at the end of the night, the school was a pile of rubble?

I downed the shot in my hand then took the bottle and chugged it, ignoring the burning sensation in my throat. Immediately regretting my poor choice in coping mechanism, I lowered the bottle, to see all of them wide-eyed and mouths hanging open.

“Tessa, are you—”

“Byrne, holy shit,” Danvers said, high-fiving me. “Who knew the little mouse was a beast? That was awesome!”

The limo stopped and as I stepped out, feeling a little tipsy, Parker pulled me aside. His lips were moving at a frantic pace but his voice sounded a thousand miles away. Hilton paid him no mind, too concerned with finding her real date.

“Tessa,” he repeated, giving my arm a quick shake. “If something’s going on, you need to tell me.”

Parker took several step backs as Cullen and Evans descended down the steps of the school, dressed in crisp black suits and holding matching masquerade masks. He lowered his eyes to the sidewalk, when Evans reminded him of his deal with the council. After I left and he continued to be interrogated, the council considered sending him and his father down to the Underworld, for disobeying the law all these years. To change their minds, he swore to stay away from any reapers, particularly me.

“I showed you leniency, Chace, and here you are, not just near Tessa but blatantly putting your hands on her.”

“I would never hurt Tessa.”

“Your past says otherwise,” Cullen countered, a fire in his eyes.

Parker meekly began to defend himself before Cullen raised his hand, an ornate silver ring gleaming in the light of the street lamp.

“You’re not just here because I broke some pinky promise. Is it the reaper? Please, I want to help. I’m not on my father’s side.”

“If you wish to help, dog, you’ll go inside and act as if everything is normal,” said Evans, hands behind his back. Parker’s eyes flickered red. “With a temper like yours, you’re no help to us”

“At the trial, you told me that you wanted to be better than the past Grandmasters…that you wanted to bring about change,” he told Cullen, who looked torn between empathy and indifference. “How are you any better if you paint me with the same brush as my dad?”

Cullen was resolute in his decision to keep Chace in the dark. Though he admired his willingness to help (“Though it may be borne out of selfish desires,” he said, his pale blue eyes passing over me), his concern was that Chief Parker had some involvement in tonight’s planned attack and pitting father against son only complicated matters. His men were here to prevent a war, not start one.

Knowing it was a losing battle, he marched up the steps to the school and settled back into his old days, stealing a six pack from a passing sophomore and knocking him him into the wall. It felt like the calm before a raging storm.
“I know you’re worried for him but he’s right,” said Cullen. “He isn’t his father…not yet. He’s a lost pup. As much as I’d appreciate the help, we don’t need any unexpected variables in the mix.”

“I get that but um—when you said you were sending people, I didn’t think you meant—it’s just—heh, you’re here, dressed all fancy.”

“This reaper endangers us all, Tessa. What kind of example would I be showing if I allowed my people to rush into danger while I sat comfortably in my home? I have guards stationed within the dance itself and Li and a few others are guarding the perimeter. Ah, here she is now.”

Instead of the Asian rocker who had been less than impressed with Belmont, a black fox emerged from the bushes, followed by a raccoon and a tabby cat. I did a double take as three women stood in their places, thinking that the alcohol was finally affecting me.

Aside from their shared affinity for black clothing, the two women on either side of Li could not be more different. The one on her right (the raccoon) was not much older than myself, probably just out of college. Her sleek black hair was tied in a high ponytail that exposed the crow tattoo behind her right ear, one of many tattoos on her body, and she was dressed in a similar style to Li. The other woman was certainly pushing her fifties yet looked like she could knock someone out with a single punch.

“Outside’s all clear, Ced. Never seen a shapeshifter before, huh?” Li asked, seeing my bewildered expression. “I’m half kitsune on my mom’s side and Evani and Tala are skin-walkers. It’s a secret among the guard and Cullen’s trusted advisers so that reaper will be in for a surprise.”

“You look like your grandmother when she was your age,” said Tala, with a kind smile. “I haven’t been to see her in awhile. I’m sure she misses these outings.”

“My grandmother was part of the guard?”

“Of course. She was one of the fiercest among us. It was a shame what happened to her, a coward’s move.”

Cullen discussed the basics of the plan. He and Evans would pose as chaperones at the dance while Evani and Tala used their abilities to blend in with the high school crowd. Li and the other members of the guard would remain outside, reporting any strange sightings. If the reaper attacked, the guard had strict orders to evacuate the school.

As if he could see my insides twisted into knots, he led me away from the others. “I can see you’re nervous. What’s on your mind?”

“Murphy’s law.”

“Come again?” he asked, perplexed.

“Anything that can go wrong will go wrong. You think this plan is foolproof and I don’t want to doubt you…trust me, I don’t want to have to fight monsters while Hilton is getting crowned Ice Princess or something but my grandmother always says that you have to expect a plan to fail. Do you have backup plans, like Plan B to Z?”

“There is no need for that.” If I was not terrified, I would find his optimism encouraging. “Instead of focusing on what could go wrong, let’s take a positive approach. My guards have never let me down before. We’ve dealt with far worse than a rogue reaper, Tessa. Tonight, all this pain and misery they’ve inflicted will be a thing of the past and you can move forward, look towards your future.”
“Well, if you’re right, that’s exactly what I want to talk to you about. I know it’s a long shot but—”

“Enough with the talking, Ced. Her friends are starting to wonder where she is and I’d rather not deal with a puppy on steroids,” interrupted Li.

In a split second, she returned to her fox form and Evani and Tala had disguised themselves as two junior girls. Taking a deep breath, I tied the lace mask around my face and followed Cullen into the school. Evani looped her arm through mine, which looked odd considering she was pretending to be one of Hilton’s minions.

“Is a dance. Try to have fun. With any luck, no fighting,” she whispered.

“My luck’s been terrible lately.”

“Well, I hear you’re pretty good with a stapler or a toothbrush holder. You clocked Ollie pretty good.”

“Ol—you know Oliver?”

“We dated a couple years ago,” she said, giggling quietly. Evani was the farthest I could imagine from Oliver’s possible girlfriends. “Mostly to get that reporter off his back but we’re good friends. Kids of council members pretty much grow up together. His father never liked me but he’d never say that out loud, especially in front of grams.”

Amy, as the hard-working head of the dance committee, had outdone herself. The gym, no longer smelling like sweat and a heavy dose of cologne, resembled a winter wonderland. Fake snow sprinkled down from the starry ceiling and a professional photographer took pictures of couples and friends between several trees covered in twinkling lights.

While I was admiring the decorations, Cullen and the others had seamlessly blended into the crowd. Cullen, adopting a flawless Southern accent, was speaking to Mr. Simpson, under the guise of a freshman boy’s father. The far stranger sight happened to be by the drinks table: Garren, with his arm around Angela Starr. Either I was going insane or he was laughing at one of her stories. Their dynamic had done a complete 180 since their last encounter in the Blue Moon café.

I was about to point out the odd couple to Elena when I realized that she was not with me. It felt like losing my right hand. I had gotten used to her being at my side over the past two years and instead, she was stashed away in some secret location by a man I only met this morning.

“Tessa, over here!” Ashlyn waved at me from one of the tables. “Amy’s talking to the DJ.”

“See that? Still standing like a champ,” Danvers said, raising his glass of punch in the air. The faint smell of vodka hit my nose. “Up for another round, Byrne?”

“Robbie, I think she’s had enough. We don’t need her going to the hospital. I hope Claire’s okay though. Maybe her boyfriend couldn’t make it tonight.”

Ashlyn was not what I expected from a girl willing to date someone like Danvers. We connected over both being born in Lily Grove, where my mother was apparently a mini celebrity at the high school, and our shared love of art. Painting proved to be the only way to stand out, being the youngest of five siblings.

“You should hear Mrs. Potter talk about your mom. She’s like the gold standard of art.”

“Imagine being her daughter. All of her friends thought I’d be painting masterpieces by the time I
was in preschool.”

“Chace said your work is amazing.”

I bristled at the mention of Parker. Ever since his conversation with Cullen, he had kept his distance, out of fear, anger, or both.

Ashlyn frowned. “Oh, I’m really sorry, Tessa. I know you two aren’t on the best of terms right now.”

“It’s okay,” I assured her. “Speaking of Parker, have you seen him? It’s been like an hour.”

“Not since we left the limo. He stole a six pack from some kid and stormed off.”

“I’m gonna check on him. Just tell Amy so she doesn’t think I bailed.”

I was barely out the doors when someone seized my arm and pulled me into a nearby janitor’s closet. Damon placed one hand over my mouth, muffling the curses that poured out, while the other switched on the shabby, swinging lamp. He was dressed in a black suit, a black and red mask covering half of his face.

“I can see you’re freaked out but I need you to stay calm, Tessa.” I whacked him across the face with a dirty rag. “That’s not calm!”

“How the hell—you can’t—you’re not—no, you’re not here. The whiskey is getting to me,” I whispered, praying that he was a hallucination.

He snickered. “Better not let Viv hear about that. She’ll consider it cheating.” Lowering his head, he dodged another swing of the rag. “Stop hitting me with that. I don’t think it’s been cleaned since the fifties.”

“How the hell are you here? Are you a ghost like nana?”

“I’m good but not that good. Turns out being so close had a few side effects. Just like you got my penchant for not taking people’s bullshit, I got some things from you too. Your empathy, which made me listen to one of the guards talk about his critically ill daughter for an hour, and your resourcefulness.”

Erinyes had been heavily fortified with magic, affecting normal objects like the surveillance cameras that shut off for thirty seconds every twenty minutes. Damon made this discovery when his bout of empathy led the guard to offer a slice of cake, dessert being highly coveted among the residents of the institution. He told Damon that he had the glitches timed down to the minute and cake led to knocking the guard out, hiding him under the covers, and putting on his uniform.

In a matter of minutes, he managed to do what he could not in years, sneaking down to the basement where all sorts of potions ingredients were stored. He mixed together two potions he once read in one of his books and used it to swap his appearance with the guard’s and the other to knock the guard out for at least a week.

“Then I just walked out of there and after a few minutes, the potion wore off and I was back to my handsome self. It’s a good thing you never got sent there. You would’ve gotten out a lot faster than me. It’s both impressive and scary.”

“Okay, genius. What happens when the guards realize you’re not in your room?”
“You think they care that I’m not eating? They’d gladly let me starve. I didn’t come all this way for you to lecture me. There’s something you need to see.”

Just as he opened the door, we were greeted by the sight of Garren in a passionate lip lock against the wall with Angela Starr, her hand sliding down the front of his slacks. He quickly detached himself when he spotted me, failing to fix his messy hair. Damon hid himself back in the closet.

“T—Tessa, h—hello. I—we—this isn’t what it looks like.”

“I like the look. Prom meets Braveheart,” I teased, red lipstick all over his tanned face.

“Heh, Angela, could you give us a minute?”

Angela nipped his ear. “I’ll be at our old spot.”

She winked at me before disappearing down the hallway. Garren’s embarrassment was just an act, his face no longer red and his eyes narrowed.

“Before you start, I was only doing that to protect you.”

“Does she have the hots for me? I’m flattered but she's not my type.” He crossed his arms. “I’m curious. How does making out like two horny teenagers help me?”

“After our conversation at the café, I knew you wouldn’t stop digging into Finn’s death so I’ve been spending time with her. I saw your email to her about Jackson. You’re lucky she never read it. Did you know she attempted to speak with Charles Belmont directly about Finn? She could’ve gone to jail or ended up in the morgue alongside him.”

“Did she get to talk to him?” I asked, curious if the rabid reporter had any new information. “Did he tell her anything?”

“Nothing. She somehow weaseled her way into his office but he just sat there. Security got her out and Rosalie’s put in a restraining order. I’m the only reason Angela hasn’t gone back or published anything about Finn. I keep her…distracted.”

“I can see that.”

His cheeks reddened again. “Why are you not at the dance?”

“I needed a break from watching Danvers and the other meatheads play dare or double dare,” I lied with ease. “Shouldn’t you be getting back to dry humping your fake girlfriend?”

His right eye twitching, a sign that he was about to yell, he instead chose to straighten his tie and walk away, counting backwards from twenty under his breath. I lightly tapped on the closet door. Damon led me in the other direction, keeping an eye out for Cullen’s guard. He turned the corner to the biology classroom, nearly bumping into Mr. Belmont who was staring at his phone.

“Sorry, Mr. Belmont. My date never looks where he’s going.” My apology was met with silence. “Mr. Belmont?”

His eyes did not leave the dimly lit screen. Seconds later, Mrs. Belmont left the classroom, dressed in a knee-length, sleeveless white dress and nude heels. With her movie star looks and impossibly white smile, she looked like an angel.

“Tessa, hello.” She pulled me into a hug, catching me off guard. “Don’t you look lovely? I suppose great minds think alike.”
“Guess so. My date sort of crashed into your husband. Is he um okay?”

“Oh, when it comes to business, he goes off into his own little world and in his old age, his hearing’s a bit off. You remember Tessa, don’t you, dear? Say hello.”

There was no smile or warmth in his dark eyes as he looked at me and Damon. “Hello, Tessa.”

“I was hoping to speak with Brendon,” explained Mrs. Belmont. “He said he found some of Finn’s old things in the classroom and I ended up reminiscing about my days here.”

“When did you go to Belmont High? Fin t—I heard him say once that you and Mr. Belmont met in Patras when he was there for a business deal.”

“Oh, that boy,” she said, with a laugh. Her voice had gone up a few octaves. “I swear he never paid attention to a thing I told him. He must’ve gotten confused. Our first anniversary was in Patras. Such a lovely city.”

“Right, that sounds like him,” I agreed, sensing something off about her mannerisms.

“We should get going. Cecile is having us make our speech shortly before they crown Ice Prince and Princess. It would mean very much to me if you were there.”

Mrs. Belmont hugged me once more then walked off with her silent husband. I could not shake the strange feeling in my gut.

“Is it just me or was that weird?” Damon glanced down both ends of the hallway before opening the door. “He’s no spring chicken but he definitely would’ve felt you bumping into him.”

“First of all, never use that phrase again. You sound like an old lady. Second, Dad always said Charles Belmont was a man of few words. He must’ve meant it literally. We’ve got more important matters than the richest family in town.”

“I could’ve sworn he said they met in Greece but why else would she be in—”

My heart stopped as I followed him into the classroom. Belmont and Elena, their clothes in tatters, were sitting at one of the desks, covered in cuts, bruises, and a foul-smelling purple paste. Vivienne applied more of the paste above Belmont’s left eye.

“W—what happened?” I asked, trying not to panic as my fingers brushed over a cut on Elena’s cheek. She winced at the slightest touch. “How are you even hurt?”

Belmont explained that after my gym freak out, Liam decided to send them to a safe house in the Underworld for the night. It was a quaint tea shop owned by an ex-council member and they had been there just over two hours when three of the guests, a seemingly normal family, revealed themselves to be hellhounds and chased the two ghosts. Not knowing the Underworld well, they found themselves trapped in an alley.

After his grand escape from Erinyes, Damon met up with Vivienne at Bacchanal and the two of them overheard the commotion. He managed to drive away the hellhounds by mimicking Cullen’s voice.

“Never even got a thank you either,” said Vivienne, dabbing paste over his nose. “No thanks for saving our asses, Viv and Damon.”

“I was a little busy feeling like my insides were about to burst,” retorted Belmont. “They were just
sitting there, celebrating little Timmy’s science fair award. Who knew little Timmy had it in him to almost chew off my leg too? Don’t they have a ghost hospital?”

“This paste is good enough. Give it a few minutes and it’ll be like you were never a dog’s chew toy. You’re lucky the apothecary owner lets me take stuff for free. What, do you wish mommy could see you so she could kiss your wittle boo boos?”

“I don’t understand,” I interrupted, before a fight erupted between them. “They had to have been working for the reaper. That doesn’t—how could they know that you were even there?”

“That leads to problem number two.”

Vivienne headed over to the back door as the paste began to work, healing the numerous cuts on Elena’s face. She gave me a look that said *This isn’t your fault*, taking my hand in hers despite the pain. A quiet sniffle caught my attention, my eyes leaving her face to see a shy, trembling Abby hiding behind Vivienne’s left leg.

“I went back to the shop to look for any clues, see if maybe it was just a random attack or spurred on by some herb in the tea,” said Damon. He nodded towards the frightened Abby. “She was peering through the window. My theory is that the reaper or someone working for them knew about the family connection and figured out that Elena wasn’t just some ghost.”

Unlike the last time, when her body was scarred by reminders of the car accident, she looked like any normal six year old girl. She kept her face pressed against Vivienne’s leg as I bent down to her.

“Abby, how are you here? I helped you pass on, remember?”

“This is the juicy part.” Vivienne tapped the top of her head. “Go on, Shirley Temple.”

“T—the doggy man and his friend helped me.”

“Doggy?” I asked, certain it was Chief Parker.

“He said I didn’t have to be dead anymore…that nice people could go back and his friend would help me. I wanted mommy and daddy to come too but he said only me first. He brought me to this garden where there were lots of people.”

“Did you see the doggy man’s friend?” She shook her head.

“It was just him and people with their faces covered by hoods. They kind of looked like wizards. The lady next to me said that we were being given a second chance. She wanted payback on her mean boyfriend. I wasn’t supposed to be at the shop. I knew I’d get in trouble again, like when I visited you, but I wanted to see Ellie.”

“Where were you supposed to be, Abby?” She simply shrugged. “How did the doggy man’s friend bring you back?”

“I don’t remember.”

Hearing footsteps outside, I ushered all of them into the closet. My ability to trust was at an all time low. Even Cullen joined my list of suspects, considering he authorized Evans to place Elena and Belmont in the safe house. All I cared about was keeping the small group I did trust safe.

Dr. Baxter stepped into the classroom, his tie hanging loosely over his bare, sculpted chest. He smirked, not caring that he was shirtless in front of a student.
“Well, seems Christmas came early. Santa gave me just what I wanted.”

Being around Damon again had amplified the anger inside me. Fighting the effects, I claimed that I was searching for Chace.

“In my classroom? Is that the best you can come up with, Tessa?”

“It’s the truth,” I said, convincingly. “What’s your lame excuse for being shirtless?”

“Hayley Scott spilled her punch. I keep some extra shirts in the closet and I thought I’d change.”

“I’ll pretend to believe that. I should get back to the dance.”

The hairs on the back of my neck stood on end as he seized my arm. His dark eyes passed over my body, sparkling with hunger and lust.

“L—let go.” The closet door creaked open, revealing the top of Damon’s head. “I said let go of me right now.”

“Don’t you want your present?”

“I don’t want anything from you,” I snapped.

“That’s not in the Christmas spirit.”

“Tessa? Hey, here you are. You like disappeared and I was wor—”

Ashlyn appeared in the doorway. Her smile faltered when she noticed a half naked Baxter with his hands on me. It was odd enough that he released my arm but I was more intrigued by the look on his face, as if he had been doused in ice water.

“What the hell is going on? Are you okay?”

“Ashlyn.”

“I’m not talking to you, creep,” she told him, her lip curled in disgust.

She pulled me towards her and away from the tense teacher. I never imagined he would get caught harassing me or another student but considering his usual behavior, I expected him to turn up the charm and come up with some flimsy excuse. It was completely out of character for him to just stand there and take a verbal lashing from someone else, particularly a teenage girl.

“I was talking to my friend. Stay the hell away from her or you’ll be trading in the ties and button down shirts for a prison uniform.”

I took one last look at Baxter before following her to the gym. She muttered to herself about disgusting perverts and entitled pricks.

“Tessa,” she said, concerned. “Are you sure you’re okay? Do you want to tell Claire’s mom about what happened?”

“We’re not uh on the best terms right now and even if we were, she’d probably take his side. I’m fine, really. I’m used to it after four years. I mean, he just started the creepy comments this year but—I’m rambling, aren’t I? I should be thanking you.”

“For being a decent person? Ugh, I can’t imagine what Claire sees in him.” I looked at her, surprised.
“I know he’s the super secret older boyfriend. She tried to be all cryptic but I’m not an idiot. Judging by that face, neither are you.”

“Chace told me awhile ago. Have you two met before?”

“No. Robbie was probably talking about me to his friends so I bet that perv has some alarm that goes off in his head every time someone mentions an underage girl.”

As Principal Hilton walked onto the stage, silencing the DJ with a curt nod, Elena, Belmont, and Abby popped up on either side of me. I waited until Ashlyn and Amy were distracted by their dates before looking at Elena.

“What took you so long?”

Damon apparently was not fond of Baxter or his unwanted advances. They had been waiting for Baxter to leave the classroom but instead, he went over to his desk where he had a photo album with pictures of me and even a cardigan I had lost in the park last year. My brother, protective as ever, flew into a rage and was only refrained from attacking Baxter thanks to Vivienne, Elena, and Belmont pinning him to the floor.

“Did Baxter do anything e—what’s happening?” Damon, joined by a now disguised Vivienne (her red lace mask matching her short, revealing dress), placed his suit jacket around my shoulders.

“Seriously?”

“You looked cold.”

“Now isn’t the time for the big brother routine. We’re here to find the reaper, not for you to beat up Billy for asking me to get milkshakes after the dance.”

“Who the hell is Billy?” Vivienne rolled her eyes at my sarcasm flying over his head. “What, is he the janitor?”

“There is no—you two shouldn’t even be in here. If Cullen recognizes you, you’re dead, maybe literally.”

Cullen and his guard had blended in so well that I could not even spot them in the large crowd. I tensed up at the other students passing glances at me, unsure if it was mere coincidence or they were skin-walkers in disguise.

“Viv?”

Rhys and Bradley, both dressed in suits like their father, walked towards us. The youngest Belmont was entertaining himself with a handful of blue frosted cupcakes.

“What are you doing here?” Rhys asked, pecking her on the cheek. “Not that I mind. I mean, you look—wow.”

“I know you thought it was best if I didn’t join you for the speech but I wanted to be here for support,” she said, tracing small circles on his chest. “Besides, I missed my little bicho.”

Damon failed to stifle his laughter, catching Rhys’s attention. Always the expert liar, Vivienne introduced him as my date.

“I’m glad to see you’re doing better, Tessa. That day was…intense, to say the least.” Principal Hilton quieted the crowd. “We should get going. I’ll find you after the speech, babe.”
“Bye,” said Bradley, with a blue-lipped smile.

He held out one of the cupcakes between me and Damon. As Damon grabbed the cupcake, he looked upset but said nothing, joining Rhys and the rest of his family on the side of the stage where Amy was speaking with Mrs. Belmont, a microphone in her hand.

I glanced back at the spot where the cupcake had been moments ago. Besides the thin, empty space between me and my brother stuffing his face, there was just Abby, who was attempting to catch the fake snow with Elena’s help.

“What are you even still doing with my brother?” asked Belmont, clenching his fists. “You’re obviously not into him.”

“Every girl has their needs, little boy. Your brother gets the job done…sometimes.”

“So you’re just using him for sex?”

“Oh, you are the last person to judge me for such a thing. At least I don’t take advantage of unconscious girls to get some action.”

Their argument was drowned out by Amy singing a song in Belmont’s memory. “What’s her deal?”

My brother’s voice broke me out of my own swirling thoughts. He picked bits of cupcake out of the wrapper, his eyes on the talented Amy.

“She’s an amazing singer…and she could see Evans but she can’t see ghosts.”

“Sure about that?”

“She was friends with both of them,” I said, indicating Elena, enjoying her time with her little sister, and Belmont, threatening Vivienne for toying with his own sibling. “Pretty sure she’d freak out if she saw them in the middle of class.”

“With that voice, definitely not human,” he agreed, listening to her hold a high note for what felt like an hour.

The crowd erupted into claps and cheers when she finished her song and she waved before handing the microphone to Mrs. Belmont. She began a long speech about her ‘darling Fin’ and how much he adored the school, its students, and its teachers.

“Fin’s death was more than just a tragic passing. It was a reminder, a reminder that death can happen at any moment and while we may grieve, it is what we do after that matters. We can either shut ourselves away from the world or try to make it better. Perhaps his death wasn’t an accident.”

“What?” said Belmont, among the quiet, surprised murmurs in the crowd. “I—is she serious?”

“Katrina,” his father whispered, gripping her arm.

Mrs. Belmont sniffled. “I don’t mean any foul play of course. What a horrible thing to think, that one of our own would take the life of such a promising young boy. Could it have been prevented? Of course. I shouldn’t have let him go out that night but I didn’t want him to deny him time with his friends and maybe that was my mistake. Maybe I was too trusting and this was my lesson, to see that things need to change. The world may not be perfect but with this, I hope we get one step closer. We—forgive me…I promised myself I’d get through this.”
Mr. Belmont took the microphone from his shaken wife. “It’s alright, dear.” He cleared his throat as she stood beside Rhys, holding back tears. “As my lovely wife was saying, we have decided to use Fin’s death as an opportunity, to prevent such a tragedy from happening again. That is why my company has devised the Finley Belmont foundation. It will work towards—”

Abby hunched forward, coughing violently. She soon fell to her knees, holding onto a frightened Elena for support, a mixture of blood and sweat dripping from her pink lips.

“Abby, what’s wrong? Whatever you two are doing, stop it,” Elena pleaded, her teary eyes on Vivienne and Damon.

“We’re not doing anything,” assured Damon, just as confused by the sudden illness. “Tessa, I swear we’re not doing this. We don’t have any reason to hurt her. She was around us for hours and nothing happened. This isn’t the potion from Erinyes. Something else is doing it. Tessa, you have to believe me.”

“Daddy, stop!” Mr. Belmont was about to reprimanded his youngest son for interrupting his speech. “She looks really sick. I think she needs the hospital.”

Before a single head turned, I dropped to my knees and imitated Abby. The impression was a little too good, considering my brother, Vivienne, Belmont, and Elena lost their minds. Unable to stop the performance, even for a second, I purposely hid Abby beneath me, continuing to mimic her symptoms. Parker pushed through the crowd, joining Elena and the others on the floor. He was too concerned with me to acknowledge Abby, who looked worse by the minute.

“Get the hell out of here before I neuter you myself,” threatened Damon. “Aren’t you supposed to stay away from my sister?”

“Sis—I don’t care. Tessa, what happened?”

“He—can—see—Abby,” I whispered, between retching sounds.

Their eyes flickered to Bradley jumping down from the stage. He was clearly running towards us, specifically a ghostly pale Abby.

“No, he’s looking at you,” said Belmont, shaking his head. “She’s still a ghost. She’s not—solid. People can’t see people who can walk through walls.”

Parker lifted me up up from the floor, his arm around my waist. “Heh, she wasn’t feeling well at all today but she still decided to come. What a trooper, huh? I’ll just take her out so she can lie down. Keep it up, Mr. B. Awesome speech. Really tugs at the heart.”

“Come on, Abby. We’ll get you help,” said Elena.

She retracted her hand as Abby snapped at her, growling like a rabid dog. With another cough, a river of dark blood poured out of her mouth and from the never-ending flow, gnarled fingers slipped through her lips.

“What the fu—”

Vivienne was cut off by a loud pop, the gym plunged into complete darkness. Some of the lights returned, thanks to the electric sparks bouncing from Li’s fingers, revealing the Belmonts were not alone on the stage. A dozen sluagh slithered behind them and as one let out a guttural roar in Rosalie’s ear, she cried out in fright. The gym dissolved into utter chaos, everyone somehow able to see the creatures, and admist the screams, I heard Cullen shout for his guards.
Tala, shifting from an oddly calm Mr. Simpson, fought off two sluagh at once, a tomahawk in each hand. While others, including Li and Evani, joined the fight against the growing number of creatures, a few hellhounds added into the mix, some attempted to usher the terrified students and teachers out of the gym. The only problem was that all the school doors had been magically sealed.

“Tessa!”

Cullen and Evans rushed over, relieved to see me unharmed. They stiffened at the sight of Damon and Vivienne, neither able to hide amongst the crowd.

“How are you out?” Evans asked, his eyes narrowed at an anxious Damon.

“Do I know you? You look like this pompous jerk who used to—”

“Enough!” Cullen’s raised voice silenced my brother. “Any other time, we would be having a very different conversation. You want to prove that you deserved to be released? Then do as you are meant to as a reaper and help me protect these people. Show the council that you’re more than your mistakes. The same for you, Vivienne. Once this is over, we’ll be having a long chat.”

“What do you want us to do?” I asked, my earlier fears a thing of the past.

“Help get those doors open. This spell is far too intricate to be done from afar. Perhaps Elena and Fin could slip through the walls and find whoever is casting it and once it’s down, you’ll guide these people to safety. We’ll handle the sluagh.”

With a flick of his wrist, a silver spiked whip materialized in his hand. He swung the whip over his head and it wrapped around the neck of a sluagh cornering two freshman boys. With a single snap, the sluagh disintegrated into a pile of ash. I watched in awe as the two men, Evans armed with a longsword, sliced through the dangerous creatures like cutting a piece of cake.

“Tessa, Abby’s gone!”

A pile of dried blood remained where the vomiting Abby had once been. I cupped Elena’s face as she began to hyperventilate, thinking the sluagh had taken her.

“It’s okay,” I said, brushing her tears away. “Don’t worry. We’ll find her.”

“I think we have more important matters than a missing ghost,” said Damon, dismissively.

“Can you not be an asshole right now?”

“Oh, I’m sorry. We’re in the middle of chaos here and you want to care about some ghost. Priorities, little sister.”

“Fine. You three go look for whoever’s casting the spell and stop them in a non-violent way and we’ll look for Abby. She has to be somewhere in the school.”

“Three?” asked Parker, looking warily at the two reapers. “Tessa, I’m sure they can handle—”

“You have better senses than any of us. I’m sure you’ll sniff out the bad guy in two seconds and then once the spell is lifted, you can help us find Abby. We don’t have time to argue. The sluagh keep coming and Cullen can only hold them off for so long.”

“Let’s go, Lassie,” said Damon, shoving him towards the gym doors.

We searched through every classroom for any sign of the little blonde girl but she seemed to vanish
into thin air. Elena and I were the only ones concerned with her disappearance, Belmont wanting to instead find his family. He refused to believe that Bradley was able to see Abby and no matter how much I tried to convince myself otherwise, it was the truth.

Elena suggested searching the cafeteria, due to Abby’s love of chocolate milk. She tore apart the kitchens, throwing pots, pans, and cardboard boxes in every direction.

“How could he see her, Byrne? It’s not possible,” he said, dodging a flying box of macaroni.

“Honestly, I don’t know.” I kept my real thoughts to myself. “But he did. I only pretended to be sick so people didn’t see him talking to nothing. Can we focus on Abby, please? She didn’t just run off. She was coughing up all that blood and something—”

My voice caught in my throat as a large shadow fell over the counter. Chief Parker was leaning against the doorway, two burly men (the local butcher and a fellow officer) behind him. It was unsettling to see him outside his uniform and in a regular suit. I was suddenly alone, trapped with three hellhounds.

“Don’t you watch movies, Tessa? It’s never good to split up.”

“I—I’m not afraid of you,” I said, grabbing a knife from the counter.

“Y—you’re n—not?” he mocked. The men sniggered as he stepped into the room. “Well, you shouldn’t be. I have strict orders not to harm a hair on your head. Can’t say the same for your friends though. They learned that earlier today.”

“If you touch either of them, I’ll end you. Where’s your boss, huh? Too scared to show their face?”

“I’ve never been one to get scared.”

Hilton appeared in front of me, her ice blue eyes glinting with malice. Before I could comprehend what happened, she snatched the knife and pressed it against my throat.

“I thought this form was fitting. Don’t you agree, Tessa?”

“Do you really think you’re so tough, scaring a bunch of high school kids?”

“Oh, we’re not here to scare them. We’re here to prove a point, that fighting is useless. This fight has been over from the beginning, before it even began. Tonight was a taste. Soon, the rift between the worlds will be severed and my lovely followers will roam free.”

“Cullen will stop you.”

“That fool? He can try but it’ll be for nothing. Yes, we want the world to burn but that’s what’s necessary for change, to make it better. You’re part of that solution.”

“Funny,” I said, my hand feeling warm. “I didn’t sign up for that. What’s so special about me and my brother?”

“Not a thing,” she replied, with a high-pitched giggle. “You’re not special at all. You never have been, not as a reaper, certainly not as a person. You’re a grain of sand, a mere speck, just like everyone else. The only reason you have any value is because of your family. You see, they destroyed me and now I get to return the favor, piece by piece. I ripped apart your grandparents, turned your grandmother into a helpless old woman…but that was only the start. With you, I get to have it all. I watch everything they fought for crumble: the council, their sweet little family…and in
the end, I’ll be on top while you all burn for ete—”

She staggered backwards but instead of my fist, a thin, curved saber struck her pale cheek. The skin around the tip of the blade crumbled, a glimpse of a scarred face beneath Hilton’s rosy complexion. Tearing the sword from her cheek, she cried out in pain, her fingers blistering as if the blade was scorching hot. It reappeared in my hand, a series of inscriptions on the handle.

“Don’t!” she screeched, stopping the men from advancing on me.

She snapped her fingers and a swirling black hole formed in the freezer. At first, it was nothing but darkness and then I could see the gym, my brother and my friends protecting kids from the sluagh. Parker whacked one of them in the face with a chair, Ashlyn and Amy hiding under a table.

“Kill them all.” She flashed me a sadistic smile. “Maybe watching your life get torn away will convince you. Start with Damon, Caleb.”

“NO!”

I tackled the fake Hilton through the black hole, smacking into the gym floor. Several of my own classmates were cowering in the corner, their injuries being tended to by Cullen’s guard. Vivienne was among the wounded, a bloody hand clutching her side. Only one thing on my mind, I swung the sword in hopes of slicing her in half. She easily dodged each swing, cackling at my desperation.

“Make them stop,” I said, nearly striking her shoulder. “Make them leave. You made your point. Leave!”

“Why would I? Isn’t this fun? Look at them, shaking and scared. How pathetic these humans are, aren’t they? Why protect them?”

“Because it’s what we do.”

“Your grandmother isn’t the only one who’s blind. Don’t you get tired of it, Tessa?” She dodged another swing. “Being the good little girl, caring about their feelings. It’s alright to admit it. I got tired of it long ago.”

“They haven’t done anything to you.”

“They exist, that’s enough.” The sluagh and hellhounds now turned their attention on me, to protect their ‘leader’. “These humans are insignificant little things. We’d be better off without their constant whining. One snap of my fingers and my followers will tear them apart. Would you like to see?”

“STOP!”

The sword vibrated in my hand, a golden glow surrounding the blade. Beneath me, the floor shook, like a miniature earthquake, and a beam of golden light shot out of the sword, destroying one of the sluagh. The reaper frowned at the sight of the charred remains.

“You should’ve submitted when you had the chance. This isn’t over. Now the fun will begin.”

Another black hole formed in the gym floor, sweeping up her and her followers. Damon stopped me from jumping into the hole myself, my legs dangling in the air. In a split second, it disappeared, leaving nothing but a floor littered with confetti and fake snow. The sword did the same, no longer in my hands.

“Not how I saw this night going at all.” He easily fought against my struggling. “We’re not here for a
suicide mission.”

Everyone was staring at their two dead classmates. The Belmonts, hiding by the bleachers, forgot about the horrors of the past few minutes, only caring about their fallen member. Rosalie, showing emotion for the first time, wrapped her arms around his neck. Her words were muffled as she buried her face into his shoulder but they vaguely sounded like “I’m sorry, Fin”.

Belmont was startled by his sister’s open affection. At the same time, he appreciated just being able to see his family again, especially his mother, bombarding him with kisses.

“F—Fin? E—Ellie?” asked Amy, reaching out to touch Elena’s arm. “W—what’s going on? How are you—you died and—why did Tessa—those creepy monsters—you both died.”

“What the hell are you?” Danvers said to Parker, who had clearly turned into a hellhound during the fight.

Their questions were left unanswered, thanks to some movement from the pile of ashes. Abby emerged, her dress torn and blood around her lips and fingers. Elena crushed her small frame and kissed the top of her head.

“Abby, you’re okay. Where did you go? I was so scared. I thought I’d never see you again.”

The guard, all holding their weapons, faced the pair, some, like Evani, anxious. Sharing a solemn glance with Evans, Cullen nodded and advanced towards the sisters, retrieving a jagged dagger from his pocket. Putting two and two together, I slipped out of Damon’s grasp and moved in front of them, just as Cullen raised the dagger. Elena scooped Abby up into her arms, shielding her from view.

“Tessa, it’s what needs to be done,” he insisted, refusing to look me in the eye. “You were right about the sluagh. This is how they have been getting across from the Underworld. It’s a vessel without realizing it. It has no control.”

“Her name is Abby.”

“Tessa.”

“I want you to say it. Her name is Abby. She is not an it. She’s a person, a little girl.”

“It isn’t that simple and you know it.”

“Actually, it is and if you want to get to her, you’ll have to kill me first.” His grip tightened on the dagger. “You said you wanted to be better than the ones before you, Cedric. Your father probably would’ve slit her throat without a second thought, probably mine too, right? Then be better. Don’t just look at her as some hopeless cause. Find a way to fix it.”

“Cedric, there’s only one way,” said Evans. “Put it out of its misery. Better to be gone from existence than to serve that abomination.”

Cullen looked from his own men, insistent on eliminating the threat, to Elena, silently begging him. He hesitated before lowering the dagger.

“Evans, take care of this whole mess. Li, you’ll take Abby to the main chambers. The rest of you, continue your searching. No stone left unturned.”

His eyes finally met mine, his expression indescribable. Was it relief? Pity? Fear?
“Come with me.”

A hole formed in the gym doors and with a deep breath, I followed him through the swirling white light.
The bright light faded, revealing a lavish office, its white decor reflecting the council’s obsession with innocence and purity. Unsure if Cullen was trustworthy, considering he had been seconds from murdering my best friend’s little sister, my eyes darted around the room in search of any objects to use as potential weapons, including a collection of vintage guitars, a bookcase filled to the brim with ancient tomes, dozens of strange instruments, and a silver globe depicting much more than seven continents.

Thousands of portraits decorated a wall, including one of Cullen himself.

“Past Grand Masters,” he said, retrieving two glasses and a bottle of scotch from a cabinet before slumping into his cushy chair. “They’re taken the moment you’re given the title. Mine happened to be mere hours after my father’s death. You wouldn’t know it by that smile.”

He poured scotch into both glasses and pushed one towards me. My hardened gaze and crossed arms were enough of a hint that I was in no mood for a drink.

“More for me, then.”

“Is this really the time to be drinking?” I asked, watching the scotch reach the rim of his glass.

“I don’t usually partake but in cases like these, I make an exception.” He took a long, deep swig. “When I first started as Grand Master, I told myself that I would do better than my predecessors, never make their same mistakes...and yet I did when it comes to you. I haven’t been completely honest.”

“About what?”

“When I visited your home, I thought I wouldn’t find much. Perhaps conspiracy theories scribbled on a piece of paper or blurry photos of what you assumed to be a dangerous monster. Things that could be easily discredited because I was hoping you were wrong. I wanted to believe that under my reign, there was peace but that blissful ignorance is what’s caused all this. I knew it was a possibility and I turned a blind eye to not just you, but to Damon as well, to maintain the illusion.”

Once again avoiding my gaze, he revealed that he had paid Damon a visit, shortly after becoming the Grand Master. He expected to find another Vivienne, a remorseless soul, completely devoid of emotion, but instead, he met a teary-eyed, ten year old boy, begging for his family and covering his ears to quiet the voices in his head, something the doctors considered a sign of madness.

“I’ve always known your brother was innocent, Tessa...that someone else was pulling the strings. That day we met, I could’ve released him but my own cowardice made me keep him institutionalized all these years.”

Hearing his confession, my heart was torn. Half of me was crestfallen at the idea of my once hero being no better than the scum who tortured my brother on a daily basis, partially thanks to him. He knew that Damon did not belong in Erinyes yet kept him trapped like a rat in a cage, away from his family. The other half of me wanted to clobber him with one of his fancy guitars.

Cullen stared at me as if he could feel my anger. He remained silent, waiting for me to say or do something.

“I thought it was best for him to remain there.”
His words shook me out of my stupor. Years of pent-up anger bubbled to the surface.

“Best?” I asked, incredulously. “How was it best for him to be locked in a cell for years? To be kept away from his family? Do you know how much it killed my parents to put him in there? Her crying every night, holding his teddy bear, and my dad barely keeping it together but having to because someone needed to be brave, to make sure the rest of us didn’t fall apart? How much they tried to prove that he wasn’t a monster, how much they hated keeping me away from him because they were afraid he would go for a round two?”

“Tessa—”

“My parents had to erase every trace of him!” I shouted, my eyes blazing. “He had to be cut out of pictures! His stuff was put in boxes that we keep in a storage unit miles away from the house! And you know why? Because it’s easier to do that than tell Ryan the truth! How do you explain any of it to a little kid? But you don’t care about that, right? You don’t care that my family’s had a hole in it all these years…or how much I try not to slip in front of him.”

I swallowed hard, my hands trembling. It only angered me more that Cullen continued to sit silently behind his desk, not even attempting to defend himself.

“All that matters is your stupid reputation! Well guess what?! Your so-called reign of peace is a lie! It’s built on the lives of people whose lives have been destroyed because of you!”

“I never claimed to be perfect,” he said, his poor attempt at an apology. “I make mistakes, just like anyone else, but my mistakes tend to have greater consequences. When I met your brother, I recognized the signs immediately. I had seen them countless times before in the records room. It’s where the council stores all of our history. There are bookshelves that seem to extend to the heavens with trial transcripts and orbs containing memories from witnesses, the accused, council members…”

“Great. Do you have one of those orbs? You can add a memory of me calling you an arrogant prick.”

“I would spend hours in that room as a boy. It allowed me to hear about all sorts of history, the good and the bad. There’s a reason this reaper seems so much more dangerous, able to slip out of our grasp so easily, have such a sway over the hellhounds and sluagh, do things that other reapers think are impossible…they’re one of the original reapers.”

My mother told me this story many nights as a child. Hades, the god of the underworld, tasked his daughters to train as the first reapers, to help guide recently departed souls to their rightful place. They were meant to make the transition from life to death easier, whether that was to an afterlife or remaining as a ghost.

As violence and death grew in the world, Hades knew it was too much for just his daughters to handle and that was how the reapers were created, by the powerful god bestowing their same abilities to a chosen few.

Cullen beckoned me over to the bookcase. As he pulled out a thin red book on the shelf, the bookcase moved aside, uncovering a passageway. Elaborate paintings adorned the walls, depicting what looked like reaper history. I hesitated to follow him, until my curiosity got the better of me.

He indicated a painting to the right of a man, woman, and two teenage girls, all who looked ethereally beautiful. The younger girl stood out among the others, with her waist-length ebony hair and impossibly blue eyes, not resembling either parent except for her mother’s shared button nose.
Her sister could not be more different, her golden blonde hair cascading down her shoulders in ringlets and rosy cheeks giving her the appearance of an angel. The more I gazed at the painting, I could not shake the feeling that she looked strangely familiar.

“This is Melinoe’s doing.” Cullen pointed to the younger girl. “What happened with Damon isn’t a rare occurrence. It’s her trademark, inducing madness and chaos. I listened to testimony from her victims over and over, how her voice in their head drove them insane, to do terrible things. She enjoyed terrorizing children the most, corrupting their innocence.”

“But why would she want to hurt any of us? We’re just like her.”

“That’s exactly why, Tessa. You see, Melinoe was born out of tragedy, a bit of drama between gods. Her father is—”

“Zeus. I pay attention in class. What does that have to do with us?”

“Isn’t it clear by the painting? There’s barely any trace of her parents in her. She resembles Zeus more than either of them, making it all the more obvious that she is not Hades’s daughter. He raised her as his own, of course, loved her just the same but to her, it wasn’t. When she learned the truth about her parentage, she grew resentful and that only grew when he decided to bestow his gifts onto others, those outside his bloodline. Melinoe despised humanity and didn’t think we were worthy of such power. She already had to compete with one beloved sister and to compete with all these others, it didn’t sit well with her.”

Cullen continued down the passageway, giving me a short history lesson. He explained that over time, as the legacy of the reaper extended to other cultures, Melinoe began to act out, like a typical rebellious teenager, though most would settle for wearing all black or sneaking out in the middle of the night. It started small, such as interfering with a soul’s transition to becoming a ghost, leaving them split in half and in agonizing pain, and putting the blame on the reaper.

When that became unsatisfying, she turned the rebellion dial up to eleven and started murdering her fellow reapers. She managed to evade detection for centuries, always making the death look like a tragic accident, until one day, the truth was discovered by a young reaper, a girl who stopped Melinoe in the midst of killing a council member.

Hades, horrified by the news, hoped that she could change her ways but she refused, unless he took back his gifts from all reapers. She accused of him caring more about the ‘pathetic mortals’ than her, seeing them as his own children.

The explosive argument between them led to her banishment from the Underworld and, stripped of her abilities and no longer revered as a goddess, she was left to walk the Earth, as a mortal.

“So we’re dealing with a psycho ex-goddess. What does that have to do with Damon?”

“The reaper who exposed her was your grandmother. Your great-grandfather was the one being attacked. He was on his way to a council meeting, one that would decide the next Grand Master. He was the popular choice but not the one Melinoe wanted. You see, while she was hiding her activities, she was amassing her own following, reapers who wanted more power, ones who would do her bidding. Your great-grandfather could not be manipulated and if he was chosen, it would impede her work.”

“She never said—”

“Sometimes, we wish to bury the past. I imagine it’s difficult for her. There were several trials,
meetings about what to do about the situation, and seeing as she was a key witness, she was there for
all of it. It was a lot for a sixteen year old girl to handle. She received high praise from the council
and Hades as well but it also put an enormous target on her back.”

“D—did she—“

Cullen nodded gravely. “Vengeance for your grandmother ruining her plans. Only the highest
ranking members of the council knew the truth. My father kept it quiet, at her request. The same with
your grandfather’s death, which was deemed natural causes. Your mother was much like you at your
age. If she knew the truth, she would’ve gone after Melinoe herself.”

“That’s what she meant back at the school. That’s why she went after me and Damon…because of
what our grandmother did.”

“That’s not the only reason.”

He pressed his finger against the wall, moving it in a rectangular shape. A thin golden line followed
his finger across the smooth stone and as he reached the starting point, a door appeared. The same
phrase was written all over the polished wood, in different languages. I did not have time to try
deciphering a single word before Cullen opened the door.

“Ladies first.”

I stepped into what could only be described as a bizarre museum exhibit. Instead of paintings and
sculptures, the room was filled with all sorts of objects, mainly weapons. In front of each object was
a placard, describing its origins. Cullen stood by the door as I explored the massive room, feeling like
a kid in a candy store.

“Ouch!”

I retracted my hand from a sword claiming to be Excalibur. The second I touched the blade, it burned
my skin. It happened with each item I attempted to touch and after the tenth time, I decided it was
best to observe.

“Do you see the pattern yet?”

He picked up a spiked whip, turning it in his hands. I recognized it as the same one he used to
destroy sluagh in the gym.

“Only the Grand Master can use them.”

“Not quite. Does this one look familiar?”

I followed him over to a collection of swords. In the center was the saber that had appeared in my
hands. He placed his index finger on the hilt but then winced, shaking out his hand.

“The same thing happened to her. It was lodged in her cheek and when she touched it, she got
burned…but I didn’t. It was we—what the hell are you doing?”

Cullen grabbed the saber from its stand, holding his breath, and tossed it towards me. Out of instinct,
more like panic, I caught it, expecting to burst into flames or worse, but nothing happened.

He held up the whip with his uninjured hand. “This belonged to Ogmios, a Celtic deity. He once did
as we do, ferrying souls to the afterlife. All these objects are artifacts of the gods, Tessa. Only their
descendants, those they deem worthy, can wield their weapons. That sword in your hand belonged
to your ancestor. A fitting middle name your parents gave you.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Because her plans didn’t become clear until tonight. She wants us eradicated, yes, but she also wants to punish someone else, the man whose approval she sought ever since she was a little girl. She wants to sever the divide between worlds, to gain dominion over those she sees as inferior and prove her father wrong. She wants to prove that these mortals he cares for, gifted with such power, do not deserve it. What better way than to show how weak they are, when they are subjugated to her rule.”

“What does that have to do with me?”

“The gods created the barrier between the worlds. It’s strong magic, stronger than any one god to break it down. Why do you think we don’t allow twin reapers? That we force parents to go through the loss of one of their own? Because together, their power is too great to control. The power of twin reapers with the blood of the gods running through their veins? That is why Melinoe is interested in you and Damon and that is why I kept you apart.”

My heart beating as fast as a hummingbird’s, I glanced at the clock hanging on the wall.

9:40 PM.

Each tick sounded louder than the last. Everything I thought I knew was turned upside down. Last summer, I had been worried about senior year and colleges and now, my life was in danger from a goddess with a personal vendetta against my family.

“S—so if she gets us, she could make us tear down the barrier.”

My fingers curled around the hilt of the saber, my knuckles turning white. At that moment, the answer to the problem seemed clear as day.

“Yes,” said Cullen, solemnly. “But that is not going to happen. We are going to find a way to stop her. We will work tirelessly, night and day, until—Tessa, stop!”

The whip wrapped around the hilt, the blade inches from my own heart. With one tug, the saber was sent flying across the room. He looked at me as if a facehugger burst from my chest.

“Have you lost your mind?!?”

“How else are we supposed to stop her, Cedric?! She’s a god! You say she lost her abilities but somehow, she still has them but you don’t know how, right? What’s your plan? How much time are you going to waste looking for the solution when there is one right in front of you? If taking me out prevents her from unleashing hell on Earth, I’m willing to make that sacrifice to stop anyone else from dying!”

“Tessa—”

“Look at what happened tonight!” I said, tears in my eyes. “You don’t even know what she looks like right now so what’s your next move? You can stop her plans here and now. Please just do it.”

“Completely out of the question,” he insisted, shaking his head. “You’ve barely begun your life. I will never consider that an option, for you or your brother.”

With a snap of his fingers, the whip and saber returned to their stands. He avoided my gaze once more.
“I’ll take you home. We have much to discuss with your parents.”

I was barely through the door when I was pulled into a bone-crushing embrace. My mother kissed every inch of my face, speaking a mile a minute, before burying my head into her shoulder.

“Oh sweetheart, we were so worried.” She spotted Cullen on the porch. “Liam’s already here. Come in, come in. Would you like some tea?”

“That would be lovely, Kala. Thank you.”

Walking into the living room, I stumbled onto the strangest sight. Damon was sitting on the couch, staring at the dark blue carpet as my father bandaged his wrist. He tensed up at the slightest touch until my father’s hushed whispers (“It’s okay. You’re safe.”) relaxed him.

My grandmother was sitting on the other side of him, rubbing a spot of dirt from his cheek while Purrsephone rested in her lap. Elena, Belmont, Vivienne, and Parker awkwardly stood by the window, under the harsh gaze of Evans.

“Always one step ahead,” said Cullen, with a grin. “Thank you for bringing them, Liam. Any news from Li?”

His eyes flickered over to a hopeful Elena. “She just sent a message through the fire. They’re working on removing the creature from the girl. It’s not an easy process.”

“But one that Abby will undoubtedly survive and then perhaps we can find a way to rescue the other lost souls and put an end to this madness.”

The tiniest scoff escaped my lips. My father frowned slightly, sensing that something was wrong. He shifted on the couch, making room for me, but I stayed by the doorway, my head down.

“The kids told us the gist of what happened,” my mother said, her eyes passing over me as she handed Cullen a cup of tea. “But I assume there’s more to it than Claire Hilton suddenly losing her mind and attempting to kill her classmates.”

“Much more.” He settled himself in the armchair next to my grandmother. “I’m afraid what we feared is true, Indira.”

The next half hour played out exactly as I imagined though my grandmother’s version of events contained many more violent details. My mother was seconds from a heart attack, her hand clasped over her mouth as my grandmother revealed the truth behind her blindness. Damon had his eyes shut tightly the entire time, not wanting to relive Melinoe’s taunting voice in his head and also likely resisting the urge to punch Cullen for leaving him in Erinyes.

My father went into overprotective mode, planning to seal the house like a fortress and never let anyone leave the house again. The others were simply dumbfounded by the idea of a goddess being the culprit, not some ordinary reaper. Parker, the first to break the uncomfortable silence, questioned how Melinoe regained her abilities.

“She’s siphoning it,” said Vivienne, as if the answer was obvious. “I read about it in one of books Carmen gave me. It’s an easy potion. The reaper drinks it and then with just a touch, she can take their power.”

“We would notice if reapers suddenly lost their abilities,” argued Evans.

“Would you? Do you go door to door, asking every reaper in the world how they’re doing?” The
sarcasm dripped from her every word. “I didn’t realize you were so hands-on.”

“It is a possibility.”

He looked at Cullen, stunned. The last thing he expected was the Grand Master agreeing with a former prisoner.

“For all we know, she’s amassed a following of reapers and they’re more than willing to give up their gifts for her cause. Who knows what she could promise them?”

“Do you have a plan?” my father, who had not lifted his hand from Damon’s the entire time, asked. “A way to imprison her or something more permanent?”

“It’ll take time, I’m afraid, Devlin. Convincing the council that Melinoe’s returned will be hard enough. No one wants to deal with that chaos again. I’m hoping Hades will provide us with some assistance but contact with the gods is limited.”

“So instead of going with a solution that’ll take two seconds…” I raised my voice when he began to interrupt. “We’re gonna wait for a god who you maybe can’t even talk to?”

“Tessa, please.”

“Hey, Byrne’s really smart,” said Belmont. “If she has a better idea, why don’t you hear her out?”

“She can’t break down the barrier without me and Damon so if we remove one of us from that equation, the problem is solved. I already told you that I’ll volunteer.”

My suggestion was immediately met with outrage. Their voices overlapped, all calling my plan foolish in their own way. My grandmother sat in silence, scratching Purrsephone behind the ear. Part of me wondered if she agreed with the plan, knowing it was the best option.

“You are not dying, Tessa. End of discussion.”

“Mom—”

My mother suddenly looked like an angry tiger as she rounded on an uneasy Cullen. Only she could get away with calling such an important person ‘thick in the head’ and ‘a brainless buffoon’. My father attempted to calm her down but decided otherwise at the sight of her cheeks swelling, a sign that she was far from done. He soon joined in himself, questioning why Cullen would place such a burden on my shoulders.

“Dad, it wasn’t his idea. It was mine,” I argued, wanting this long, grueling night to end. “Am I the only one thinking rationally here?”

“We have very different ideas of what rational means,” said Vivienne, siding with my parents for the first time. “Rational isn’t sacrificing yourself. This problem isn’t yours to fix, Tessa. It’s time for his grand highness and his incompetent monkeys to get off their asses and do something.”

“This is exactly why I just wanted Cullen to get it over with back in his office. The only way to stop her is—”

“You were just gonna leave?”

It took all my courage to look Elena in the eyes. Admittedly, I had been focused on stopping Melinoe, no matter the cost or how it would affect those closest to me. That thought hit me like a truck after hearing those few words from her.
“No goodbye or anything? What was the plan, for him to walk through the door with your dead body while we all waited for you, no idea of where you went or if you were even coming back? How could you even—”

Her voice hitched in her throat. She vanished through the wall and I hurried out the front door, despite my mother and Cullen’s protests. Knowing her like the back of my hand, I climbed up the tree outside my bedroom window, finding her on one of the branches with her head between her knees.

“That was fast,” she mumbled.

“You always come up here when you’re upset. After your grandmother died, when you saw Belmont kissing Kelsey Cooper at your thirteenth birthday party, first day you became a ghost...El, you know I would come back, right?”

“What if you couldn’t?” The question caught me by surprise. “What if you have to move on or worse so she can’t get her hands on you? She was able to get Abby. What would stop her from doing the same with you unless you were destroyed completely?”

“I didn’t—okay, so I didn’t think this through but how else are we supposed to stop her? We can’t let her win. She already killed Belmont and half our school could’ve been next. I’m not thrilled about dying but you know this plan will work. The sooner we all agree—”

“No.” Elena’s response was blunt. “I won’t agree to any plan that involves you dying.”

“El—”

“You know, everyone thinks I didn’t pass on with my family because I was afraid or some selfish brat who didn’t want to believe I was dead. I was afraid but it was because of you.”

She lifted her head, tears trickling down her tanned face.

“I didn’t want to go because it would mean leaving you. I don’t want to be in a world where you’re not with me. That’s why I didn’t care when I chose to stay behind. I mean, I miss my family more than anything but the thought of never seeing you would feel like dying all over again.”

I wondered if this was all a very vivid dream. Maybe I was lying unconscious in a hospital bed, the past hour nothing more than my imagination. I had imagined this moment a million times since the seventh grade but instead of Elena, the peppy, popular cheerleader adored by everyone, the words came from me.

“It’s why I disappeared after Chief Parker attacked us in the woods and you were comforting Vivienne. I knew there was something between you two and it seemed like those feelings were coming back. I’m nothing like her. She’s this tough girl who understands you in a way I can’t and it’s just like she said. She was there for you when I was too scared to ruin my stupid reputation. Just like I’ve always been too scared to—”

Elena was silenced by my lips gently pressing against hers and suddenly, it felt like thousands of fireworks burst inside my chest. Had Cullen not stopped me from driving the saber into my heart and this was my paradise? I knew it was real when my fingers grazed over the sliver of bare skin between her cashmere sweater and plaid skirt, her quiet giggle causing me to smile.

Two days had passed since that night and the kiss remained a secret. My house had turned into a miniature prison, our every action monitored by Cullen’s guards. I could barely get up in the middle of the night for a glass of water without having a knife to my throat, only lowered once I confirmed
my identity.

Cullen had the best protective enchantments placed on the house, in case Melinoe attempted another attack. It was strong enough to keep Elena and Belmont from vanishing without permission from a guard, making it difficult for them to hear about strange occurrences among the other ghosts.

Evans became a permanent fixture, keeping a close eye on me and Damon. With Cullen busy tracking Melinoe, I told him about Bradley’s odd behavior at the dance but he dismissed it as a crack between the worlds. He reminded me that the sluagh, hellhounds, and ghosts became visible to all the ‘mere mortals’, not just the youngest Belmont.

“Hey!”

A nerf dart struck my shoulder as I hung ornaments on the tree. I blocked another dart from hitting me in the face and chucked it back at Damon, who was laughing alongside my brother.

The morning after the school attack was an awkward mess. My parents, fearing Ryan’s reaction to Damon, made all of his favorites for breakfast and my mother even offered to let him play one of his zombie games. After giving him a very watered down version of Damon’s absence for the past ten years, they prepared for a lot of questions or a tantrum but in less than five minutes, it felt as if Damon had always been part of the family.

“You know, if these decorations aren’t finished, Santa won’t come tonight with presents.”

Tossing his nerf gun onto the couch, he rifled through the box of ornaments. Damon rolled his eyes.

“Really? We were just getting into—” A dart struck his cheek. “Wh—nana, that’s not fair. You know I can’t fight back or mom will wring my neck.”

With a mischievous smile, she lowered the gun. “I’m aware, my wild bhediya.”

Giggling, I lifted Ryan up to reach the higher branches. The guards immediately raised their weapons at the sound of a knock on the door.

“Relax,” I said, grabbing a dagger from Li. “I’m sure it’s just Mrs. McGill. She brings cookies to everyone in the neighborhood on Christmas Eve.”

“We need to verify that.”

“Li, if it was some assassin, I don’t think they’d knock on the door first.”

“Fair point,” she conceded, slipping the dagger into her leg holster.

The other guards lowered their weapons at her signal, a slight nod of her head. Undoing the extra locks, courtesy of my father’s paranoia, I opened the door but instead of a friendly neighbor, the porch was empty. I passed it off as a prank, a case of ding dong ditch by a kid with fast legs, until something shiny caught my eye. There was a thin, neatly wrapped box on the welcome mat, a note attached to the red ribbon.

I knew you wouldn’t accept this in person. I wouldn’t blame you, given our past, but I am hoping you can fix that. You’re the only one I trust, the only one who can end this. Keep it hidden. Consider it my apology.

“Tessa? Who’s there?”
“No one,” I told Li, hiding the box inside my hoodie. “Probably just some joke.”

Around noon, I headed to the hospital to visit Will, Evans only allowing it after being faced with my puppy dog pout and the threat of sneaking out behind their backs. His sole condition was that he accompanied me. I was not going to let some psychopath ruin an annual tradition.

Every Christmas Eve, Will and I would spend the day at each other’s houses, watching sci-fi holiday movies and television specials. Now more than ever, I needed those several hours of relaxation, to spend a day with one of my best friends without a care in the world. It was a small way of feeling normal.

Upon entering his room, I was greeted by his family: his mother opening his carton of milk and blowing on his soup, Katie teasing him about his cute nurse between texts to her friends, and his stepfather watching the news, a cast on his right arm. I tensed up when Mr. Mitchell hailed me as ‘the town hero’, taking a few seconds to realize he was referring to the break-in, not the school.

“Oh, Mrs. Nelson, you didn’t have to get me anything,” I said, struggling to hold the stack of presents. “Definitely not this much.”

“Nonsense, we always give you a present. Besides, if it weren’t for you, Will and Connor may not have made it to Christmas. We’re lucky to have you in our lives, Tessa.”

Seeing my discomfort, Katie pushed her towards the door. “Mom, you’re only allowed to be embarrassing once a day and it’s only 12:30. Reel it in.”

“We’ll be back around five for dinner, sweetheart,” she reminded Will. “If you need anything, just call.”

As an apologetic Katie shut the door, I joined him on the bed, picking up his laptop from the side table. Up close, something seemed off about him. He looked even more anxious than usual. “I’m glad your mom said yes. I was worried she’d have you on lockdown but then again, she knows not to mess with tradition. So uh I thought we’d do Doctor Who this year. Are we going from worst to best or best to worst? If it’s best first, then it’s definitely—”

A high-pitched noise distracted me. At first, I thought it was one of the monitors but when I turned my head, I realized it was coming out of Will’s mouth. His lips pressed tightly together, he repeatedly tapped his foot under the blanket.

“Will? What’s wrong? Is it your medicine? Do you want me to get the nurse or—”

“Can we please talk about the dance?”

Nearly dropping the laptop, I tried to maintain a blank expression. “W—what about it? Some idiots, probably Parker and his goons, let off some stink bombs so they made us leave early. Amy was upset. She should be since she spent months planning it and it looked great.”

“You don’t have to lie,” he said, eagerly. “I know. I know, Tessa.”

Amy had paid him a visit hours before the dance. Feeling sympathetic that he was stuck in the hospital, she bribed the tech club with invitations to Ashlyn’s Christmas party in exchange for a livestream of the auditorium. He watched the dance through his laptop, seeing everything from the sluagh attacking the students to my fight with Melinoe.

Evans wiped everyone’s memories of the incident, replacing them with false ones to explain the dance ending early. My entire body felt numb as he moved his hands around the supposedly empty
spaces on the bed.

“Are Elena and Fin here too? The temperature must drop around them so a cool spot would indicate their presence. Am I right?”

I found myself at a crossroads. For years, I wanted to be honest with Will, to discuss my reaper struggles without looking like I was speaking to myself. How would Cullen react to an outsider knowing the truth? A best friend was not on the same level as a relative. Would it only put Will in more danger or keep him safe?

My mouth decided long before my own mind, telling him everything. An enormous weight lifted off my shoulders. I was fearful of his reaction, Will never one to like the slightest change. He once panicked over the switch from Taco Tuesday to Tots Tuesday in middle school. Freaking out in excitement rather than fear, he bombarded me with all kinds of questions.

“How do you heal from the injuries so fast? Is it magic or—”

“Will, we have plenty of time. I’m really glad you know now. I’ve wanted to tell you but I wasn’t sure how or when. You said you saw everything?”

“Well, just in the auditorium. You looked badass with that sword. Do all reapers have swords? Is it bonded to you somehow?”

“Sort of, I guess. It belonged to my ancestor. Apparently, I’m descended from Kali.” His eyes widened in amazement. “But that’s not important. How did the livestream work?”

“Through the security cameras,” he explained, clicking on a link.

The screen showed a bird’s-eye view of the auditorium from several angles. A dangerous idea popped into my head.

“I’m sure it’s not the first time CJ and the others have done it. I heard rumors last year that they would work with Fin and his friends to get answers for tests. Principal Hilton knew someone was hacking so she made the teachers write down the answers. It’s still happening so I bet in exchange for some money, they’re using the cameras in the classrooms to find the answer sheets.”

“That’s brilliant.”

“I—in a way, yeah. Sort of scary too. I mean, who knows what else they’ve been hacking?” I jumped down from the bed. “Where are you going?”

“Ashlyn’s party. I have to find CJ. If you’re right about the cameras, it could show us who changed into Hilton that night.”

“You want to talk to CJ alone?” he asked, his tone suggesting it was a bad plan. “Let me come—”

Just lifting his leg made him groan in pain. I promised to text him updates from the party. Giving him a quick hug and kiss on the cheek, I found Evans in the lobby to return home, lying that Will was too ill to watch movies.

Belmont did not bother acting innocent about the test scam. He was almost proud of his deal with the ‘tech geeks’, offering them half of any profits.

“You told Will the truth?” Elena asked, surprised. “Is he allowed to know?”
“There’s no rule against it,” said Damon, crossing his arms. “The council likes to be cautious. If everyone knew about us, some would try to take advantage. Why do we care how Richie Rich over here used to cheat on tests? You think they saw what Cullen’s guards couldn’t?”

I lowered my voice as a pair of guards passed by, helping my mother set the table. It was a much larger feast than previous years, having to prepare food for twenty three people instead of five.

“I doubt they monitor the school 24/7 but what if we’re able to track Melinoe from that night? Maybe we could see out what she really looks like.”

“And how are we getting to this party? We’re under high security than Alcatraz and before you say not we, you are not going out there alone. That bitch could be anywhere and we’re stronger together than apart.”

Throughout the delicious dinner, I tried to think of the perfect excuse. The guards watched all of us like hawks and getting answers at a high school party would be impossible if I was surrounded by men and women trained in thirty different styles of combat.

Passing notes under the table, Damon suggested using Elena and Belmont as bait, having them disappear and send the guards chasing them around the town. It had its advantages yet I did not want to risk the guards imprisoning either of them or worse. In the midst of dessert, my grandmother asked for help cutting the chocolate mousse cake.

“Thank you, sweetheart,” she said, squeezing my hand. “These old hands aren’t what they used to be.”

Something scratched the inside of my palm. My grandmother picked up her fork with a grin, slipping me the subtlest wink. I peeked at the crumpled up paper in my hand, the one Damon and I had been scribbling messages on for the past half hour.

*Use the party as a solution to assuage their outrage*

It was another instance that made me wonder if she could read minds. I was unsure what she meant by outrage but then I remembered the night of the dance.

“Liam, could I go out again? My friend Ashlyn is having a little party. I wouldn’t stay long. Maybe an hour at most?”

“I don’t think that’s wise, Tessa,” he advised, somehow both firm and sympathetic. “We allowed you to leave to visit Mr. Nelson but a party is much different from a hospital. There’s too much risk. Melinoe could hide in plain sight amongst your peers.”

I sighed in defeat, pushing the mixture of vanilla ice cream and brownie around my plate. “I know it’s risky but I won’t have a lot of chances to see her since she lives in Lily Grove. I just wanted to thank her. She practically saved me from Dr. Baxter at the dance.”

Several utensils clattered around me, like an uncoordinated marching band. My parents were frozen in shock, my father’s glass cracking beneath his fingers. Damon, quickly catching on, hid his smirk behind his glass of water.

“Tessa, what are you um—what does that mean?” my mother asked, her voice overly sweet to masquerade her own anger.

“Well, I walked around, looking for Chace, and I thought I heard him in the AP bio room. He wasn’t there but when I turned around, I saw Dr. Baxter. He was acting weird so I wanted to leave but he...”
kept following me. If Ashlyn didn’t show up, I don’t know what would’ve happened.”

“Did he put his hands on you? If he so much as looked at you inappropriately, I will march down to the school and—”

“N—no. I just wanted to thank her for helping me. She told me about the party at the dance and if I’m a ghost all winter break, it looks a lot more suspicious.”

After an endless argument between my parents and Evans, he agreed to let me attend the party, except for half an hour and with Li and Evani as protection. Damon, along with Elena and Belmont, managed to gain that tiny slice of freedom as well, stoking my father’s paranoia with a partially true rumor that Dr. Baxter sneaked into high school parties.

Finding CJ was not as easy as snapping my fingers. I had to navigate through the mostly drunken crowd, giving quick waves and dodging the advances of my peers. Elena dumped a cup of beer on a Lily Grove boy who attempted to get me under the mistletoe.

“We’re trying for discrete here,” I said, ducking as Hilton turned her head to greet one of her cheerleader robots.

“Well, it’s not like I can tell him you’re taken,” she whispered, her breath tickling my ear.

Biting my lip to hold back a smile, I led her into the backyard. Amy, sitting in a hot tub with a group of kids, was boasting about getting the lead in the spring musical, rehearsals starting the first week back at school. My curiosity about her possible supernatural nature was interrupted by Belmont tugging on my sleeve, pointing out a girl alone in the gazebo.

Remembering to pick Will’s brain later, I headed over to the gazebo, knowing my plan had a high probability of failure. The girl looked like she had just stepped out of a board meeting, with her navy blazer, matching pencil skirt, and short heels.

“CJ’s an ice queen. Just butter her up by saying she’ll be the next Steve Jobs or something,” suggested Belmont.

“Finally. I’ve been waiting for—ugh.” Her dark eyes, hidden behind a pair of round frames, narrowed. “Well if it isn’t Belmont High’s own cinderella story.”

“CJ—”

“You know, they all think you’re such an inspiration. Rising from the designated bottom feeder to Chace Parker’s special girl. What’s it like, being another name on his list? I’m not surprised, honestly. He’s not exactly an ideal choice for riveting conversation but then again, you never were one with good taste.”

Damon chuckled, joining her in the gazebo. CJ scrunched her nose as he laid his arm on the back of the bench, his fingers delicately brushing against her shoulder.

“I see there’s some tension between you two. Hey, I’m her cousin Damon. CJ…that’s adorable.” I pinched the bridge of my nose. “Trying to hide some embarrassing name your parents gave you? What does it stand for?”

She flicked away his hand. “One, you’re barking up a very wrong tree. Two, my name is CJ. Three, get the hell away from me. I’m here on business and my clients value their privacy.”

“Selling more answer sheets?” I asked, trying a different approach. “Imagine if Principal Hilton
knew it was you. Bye bye, Harvard. Hello, community college.”

Her grip tightened on her phone. “It almost sounds like you’re blackmailing me.”

“Well, you’re well-versed in that.” She quietly scoffed. “Unless you want me to give her concrete proof of your hacking, you’ll do me a little favor. Try to point your finger at Belmont and his lackeys but in the end, you know you’ll be the scapegoat, the brilliant class president who proves minorities just aren’t good enough.”

“What do you want?”

“Will told me what you did for him. The livestream of the dance? Really impressive. Could you show me other footage from that night? Before you ask why, it’s none of your business. In exchange, I keep quiet about your scam.”

CJ, backed into a corner, grudgingly agreed to the deal. Needing her laptop to search through the files, we decided to meet before homeroom.

“Tessa!” Ashlyn waved at her from the hot tub. “Over here!”

“Don’t want to keep your subjects waiting,” said CJ, bitterly.

“What was that all about?” asked Elena, glancing back at the uptight hacker. “I know CJ’s not the friendliest person but it’s like she hates you. I’ve never even seen you guys talk before.”

Trying my best not to scratch my ear, I told her that it was over a silly incident in ninth grade. She did not get a chance to question it further as Ashlyn greeted me with a hug.

“I’m so glad you could make it.”

“I uh can’t stay long. My dad has this tradition with me and my brother and if I miss it, he’ll say Christmas is ruined. I just wanted to thank you for the other night. You know, with Baxter and everything…”

“Us girls have to stick together, right?” Ashlyn grabbed my hand. “Come on, I want to show you something.”

After introducing himself as my cousin, kissing her hand, Damon followed us into the house. He stole a half empty cup of beer from a nearby table. While she headed up to her bedroom, I waited on a couch in the living room. Elena and Belmont vanished from the couch to do their own security sweep of the house, to ensure none of Melinoe’s spies were among the partiers.

“You know, I thought I was the suave one but look at you, breaking hearts left and right.”

My head snapped up at his words. Damon leaned over the couch with a cheeky grin.

“W—what are you talking about?”

“Vivienne, Chace, CJ, Elena…”

Blushing, I snatched the cup from him, taking a small sip.

“I’m not blind, Tessa. I saw how you two were the other night. It was obvious before that but after you went chasing after her, you kept giving each other these little looks. Don’t want her getting jealous of you and Miss Class President?”
“Elena and I aren’t—we kissed but that’s it. A relationship is the last thing on my mind right now. Plus it would put her in more danger. Who knows if we’ll survive this, Damon? I can’t give her that false hope. She deserves better.”

Lowering my voice, I admitted that CJ used to be one of my few friends. She had sent me a valentine in ninth grade, revealing her true feelings and even setting up a date at the Blue Moon café. Thinking I was not ready to be out in the open, she promised to keep it a secret, having not come out herself at the time either.

Dealing with the fall out from my tumultuous relationship with Vivienne, I could not gather the courage to meet her, letting her sit alone for hours. Out of anger, she threatened to tell the entire school about Vivienne, having learned of her by hacking my emails and only stopping thanks to Will’s interference. He never told me about his secret leverage. Ever since that horrible night, CJ refused to even speak to me, always avoiding me in the halls.

“She obviously still likes you. Better not let her think she has another shot. It’s not like you can tell her you’re sort of dating a ghost.”

Ashlyn bounding down the staircase saved me from more relationship talk. To my confusion, she held up a yearbook from Lily Grove High.

“We’re doing a project in history about our ancestors. I was digging through some stuff in the attic and I found this.” Opening it to a page, she placed it on my lap. “Check it out.”

My eyes immediately fell on a picture towards the bottom, of a girl with a striking resemblance to me. It was my mother at seventeen years old, her dark hair falling down her back in soft waves and the same bright smile that always comforted me on a bad day.

“Isn’t that cool? Look, she was in the same year as my brother.”

Ashlyn flipped a couple pages back, pointing to another photo. He was incredibly handsome, with his well-coiffed ash blonde hair and eyes like a clear ocean. In a way, with his good looks and varsity jacket, he reminded me of Belmont. I frowned as I read the name under the photo: Blaine Gilbert.

It was the name Parker had given me after the trial, the one his father was speaking about one night. If that was not strange enough, his senior quote was enough to catch my attention.

“We will rise from the ashes.”

“Dramatic, right?” she said, shaking her head in embarrassment. “It’s the Gilbert family motto. My dad’s always saying it, even for something as little as one of my brothers losing a baseball game. Pretty sure my grandmother has it stitched on a pillow.”

Ashlyn showed off the sterling silver ring on her left hand. It looked eerily similar to the one I found at the Falls, except the stone was a diamond. Calling it a Gilbert tradition, she and her brothers had received the ring, with their specific birthstone, on their sixteenth birthday.

“Pretty intense motto. Are you secretly phoenixes?” joked Damon, my eyes still transfixed on the photo.

“Yeah, totally, and my cousin is a werewolf,” she replied, giggling. “Your cousin’s so funny, T—”

“Does Blaine live nearby?”
She frowned slightly at my question. “Oh, he’s—sorry, I forgot you didn’t live here long. He died a few weeks after his senior year. It was a freak accident. Your mother actually saved him that same day from some huge car wreck.”

A chill ran down my spine. When my mother told me about ‘her own Fin Belmont’, she was referring to Blaine Gilbert. Chief Parker was talking about a dead teenager, one who had died over twenty years ago. I thought back to his encounter with my mom at the police station, the tension between them, and her story of the shadow clinging to Blaine’s back before his accident. It was too much to be mere coincidence.

“He was visiting a friend in Belmont Falls and this car came out of nowhere, ran right over him, and drove off. His friends kept telling the cops everything they knew about the car like the color and part of the license plate but they never arrested anyone. He was the oldest and my brother Adrian was barely a year old so it took a huge toll on my parents.”

“I didn’t mean to—I shouldn’t have asked, Ashlyn.”

“It’s not your fault. I thought maybe your mom told you. When I told mine about meeting you, she said Blaine was practically in love with her. Couldn’t be more different. The jock and the artsy girl…but around town, my mom always noticed him looking at her like she was made of stars. Guess he never worked up the nerve to ask her out.”

“She did mention the accident once. I just didn’t know he was your brother. You must miss him.”

“Well, I never met him. I try to think of what he’d be like when I look at his pictures but sometimes, I feel like he’s watching over me. I hope he’s in a good place.” She sniffled. “Sorry, instant party killer.”

“No, it’s fine.” I handed her the yearbook. “I bet he’d be really proud of how you turned out.”

All the way home, the wheels in my head were spinning, churning out numerous conspiracy theories. I had all this information in my head that was somehow connected yet I could not fit the pieces together. Kissing my parents and a sleepy Ryan, refusing to go to bed until he heard Santa’s reindeer, goodnight, I headed up to my room to fill Damon in on what he missed while in Erinyes.

“The Gilbert ring has to be Blaine’s,” he said, leaning back in my desk chair. “Maybe he was fighting with Tom Brady that night and it fell off.”

Belmont glared at my brother. “One problem with your theory. Wouldn’t your mother notice him walking around all this time as a ghost, especially since he liked her?”

“But he’s not a ghost.” Damon came to the same conclusion as me. “He’s one of the sluagh. Perfect for Melinoe’s agenda, a teenager cut down in his prime. Who would be more desperate to get a second chance? He’s just been jumping from host to host.”

I sat down on the edge of my bed. “And what if after all these years, he’s strong enough to inhabit a living person? What if he’s the one we saw in Parker’s memories? The one who was choking him before he could save you?”

“You think he stayed inside the same body?” said Elena, hopefully. “That could narrow it down. We saw the tattoo on his wrist. He’s part of Mr. Hilton’s club. Maybe we could get a list from his office and use that to find Blaine.”

“Hey, what’s this, Byrne?”

Belmont was gazing curiously at the box I found this morning. Never bothering to open it, assuming...
“Those are memories,” said Damon, intrigued. “Why would she give you that? How did she even get it out? Only guardians can do it.”

Elena reached inside the box. “There’s a note,” she said, holding up a neatly wrapped piece of paper. “Dear Tessa, I’m writing this in my few moments of clarity. It’s taken years but I’ve gotten strong enough to fight back. He doesn’t know that I’m able to hear and see all of his horrible actions, ones I’d never do if I was in control of myself.”

“Tessa, I don’t think Viv sent this. Keep going.”

“What he’s done is unspeakable and I wish to right those wrongs. He’s been keeping a close eye on you as you search for answers. He’s working for a woman, her face always different but I know it’s her each time. If you’re as clever as I’ve seen from these past four years, you know what’s inside that vial. She’s had him remove his memories each day, to protect herself no doubt, with the help of another man named Lionel. I’ve never seen his face but I hear his cane tapping on the floor when he leaves the room.”

A sudden realization struck me. “Oliver’s dad. Remember when Oliver wouldn’t believe us about the reaper? He said their guardian would’ve reported them and when I mentioned the guardian might be dead, he said they feel it. But they wouldn’t if the guardian is still alive. His dad kept trying to dismiss my theory about the sluagh.”

“He’s not very wise, labeling these memories like twisted trophies. I’ve given you one that should help you understand. It’s the best I could do in such a short time. When I see you as myself again, I hope it is under better circumstances.” She folded the note again. “What do you think is in the memory?”

Damon left the room, returning minutes later with an empty bowl. Taking the vial, he removed the cork and poured its contents, the silver liquid pouring out slowly. As he used his finger to stir, the liquid turned into a mist that rose into the air. An image soon formed, showing Parker being choked by an unseen assailant.

“Can’t have you saving the day. Your daddy wouldn’t like that. Time for a nap, puppy.”

The voice was slightly distorted, sounding like it was simultaneously spoken by Blaine and his host. With a forceful twist, he snapped Parker’s neck, leaving him unconscious on the ground. Seeing through Blaine’s eyes, I watched Belmont blindly swinging his fists at the sluagh on the bridge.

“He’s showing us how you died,” I whispered to Belmont, amazed.

Feeling how anxious he was, I gripped his trembling hand. In the memory, he continued to fight, actually landing a punch against the sluagh, which responded with a guttural roar that shook the surrounding trees.

“Enough!”

The sluagh backed away, blood dripping from its lips. Belmont, stumbling and very drunk, became clearer as Blaine walked towards him.

“What—what are you still doing here? I think I’m losing my mind,” he said, clutching his face that was now scarred by a familiar gash. “Can you help me back to my car? I’m good to drive. Why are you just standing there?”
“Finish it. You know how the plan is supposed to go.”

“The plan? What—”

Belmont squeezed my hand so tightly that it felt numb. Elena stared at the mist in disbelief, the color draining from her face.

In the memory, Rosalie had stepped out from a tree, a gun in her hand and her usual cold demeanor replaced with one of fear. She could barely hold the gun straight as Belmont moved against the railing, eyes wide.

“R—Rosalie, what the hell? This isn’t funny. Put the gun down. Is this about the baby? It was a bluff. Who would believe me, right? Put the gun down.”

“Do it, Rosalie,” said Blaine.

“Shut up! Rosie, Rosie, don’t!” he said, panicking as she pointed the gun at his head. “What, are you two having an affair or something? Hey, no judgement. I won’t tell dad. I didn’t mean what I said before. You know he gets me mad.”

“What are you waiting for? Do it!”

“P—please don’t make me,” she begged, turning her tearful eyes away from her brother. “There has to be another way. I can’t hurt him. Use anyone else. There’s plenty of drifters in these woods. Jackson’s trailer is less than a mile away. He’s a worthless drunk. I can easily lure him here. He’ll do anything for me. No one would care if he died.”

“IT HAS TO BE FIN! She hasn’t been setting this in motion for years for your cowardice to ruin it!” he spat. “She knew you were too weak, that you were all talk. You’re nothing. She knows it, I know it, and deep down, you know it too. I’ll do it myself.”

Blaine growled, pinning Belmont to the railing. He struggled against his forceful grip, pleading with Rosalie. In his desperation, he clawed at Blaine’s hand around his throat, causing his ring to slip from his finger.

Belmont was knocked to the ground by a single punch, the sluagh holding him down. As Rosalie openly sobbed, continuing to beg for her brother’s life, Blaine cupped her cheek with his gloved hand.

“Prove her wrong. Show her how strong you are, that she didn’t misplace her trust. It’s not easy to come by but she saw something in you, something special.”

“I—I can’t. Not Fin.”

“He’s the child born on the seventh day of the seventh month at exactly the seventh hour and when the moon is full and he dies by the hands of his own blood, it’ll unleash an immense power, one she can take for herself.”

“Rosie, just shoot him and we can leave!” shouted Belmont, managing to throw off the sluagh and lift himself up, panting. “We’ll call the cops on the way and tell him he’s insane! Don’t listen to him!”

All trace of her icy exterior were gone. She looked like a scared little girl, not the tough businesswoman I had met at the funeral.
“She’ll share that power to reward our loyalty. You know your father will never see you as an equal. He’d sooner give the business to Fin because in his mind, you’re not good enough. You’ve never been good enough for him. That can all change with her help.”

“S—she could do that?”

“You could, Rose. That power’s already inside you. It’s buried deep inside but she can set it free. Your father and everyone else will finally see you as the brilliant woman you are.”

“Ros—”

Two loud gunshots rang through the air. Belmont staggered backwards, falling over the bridge. He somehow managed to hold onto the wooden railing despite the immense pain.

“R—Rosie, please. You don’t have to do this.”

Her ruby red lips pressed against the top of his head, tears streaming down her face. “Yes, I do. I’m sorry it has to be this way but for once, I’m getting what I want.”

She pried his fingers from the railing and the moment his body crashed into the lake below, she collapsed onto the bridge, muttering, “I’m sorry” like a broken record. Blaine glanced over the railing, watching another sluagh collect a mixture of Belmont’s blood and the water in a vial. It jumped from several feet below and landed on top of the railing. The water emitted a faint purplish glow.

“Bring it to her.”

Both sluagh bowed their heads and vanished into thin air. “W—was that it?” stuttered Rosalie. “Do we drink it or something?”

He helped her up, hiding the gun in his jacket pocket. “Not yet. The ritual has to be done when the blood moon is at its highest point. It’s when her power is strongest and we’ll need the twins. Tessa’s the trickier of the two but with the right motivation, she’ll do what we want.”

“What about Fin? They’ll know he was shot…that I—”

“No need to worry. Caleb will handle that part. Let’s get you cleaned up.”

The bridge faded away and Damon cleared the mist with a flick of his wrist, returning it to its liquid form in the bowl. In any scenario I imagined for Belmont’s death, I never expected his own sister delivering the deathly blow. All four of us stood in complete silence, unsure of what to say.

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