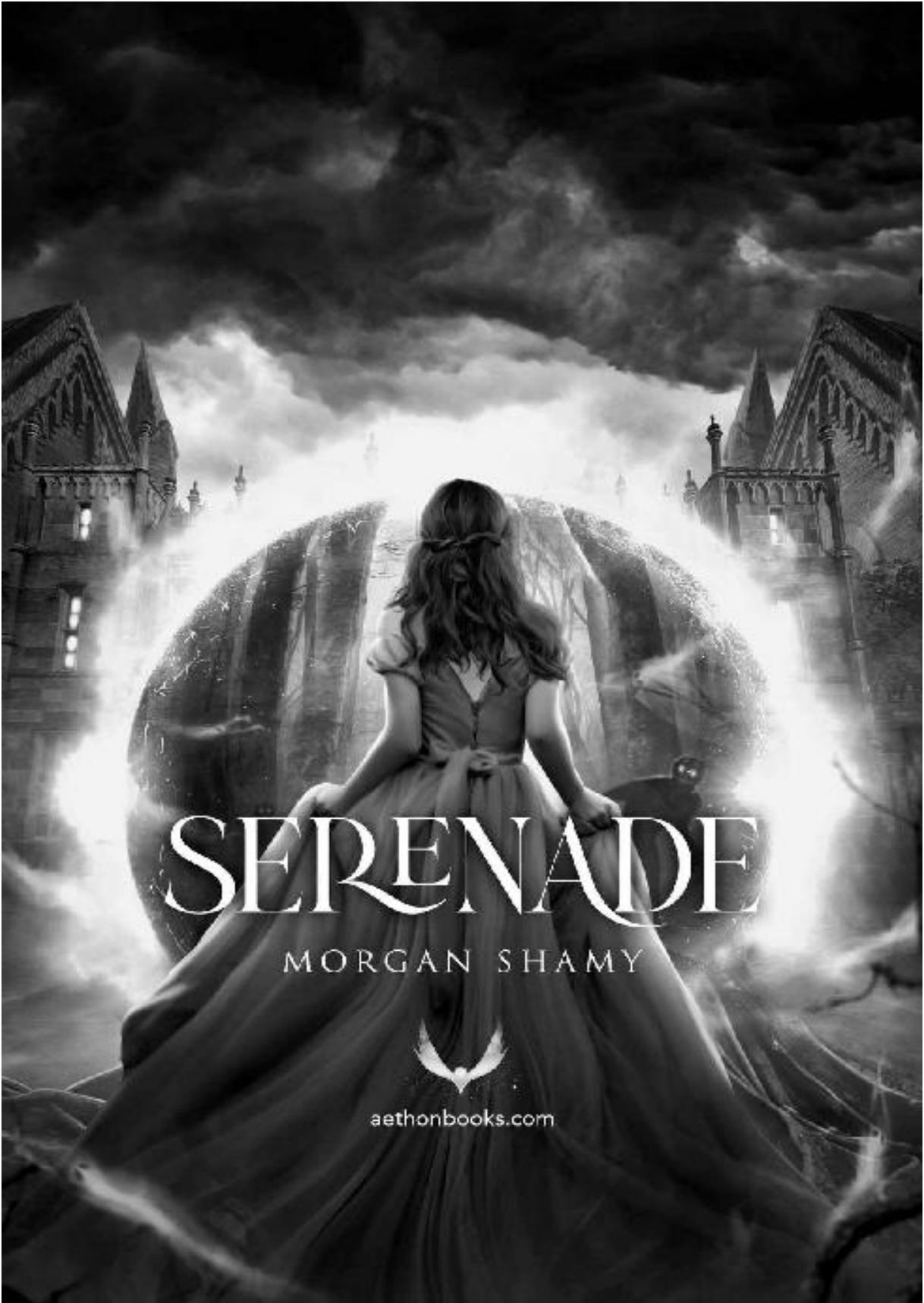


THE DARK NOCTURNE 1

SERENADE



MORGAN SHAMY



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aethonbooks.com

SERENADE
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One

CREAKING HEIGHTS

NOVEMBER HUNTINGTON DUG her fingers into the rock, pulling herself upward. She shifted her weight inward, her climbing shoes jabbing into the large boulder. With her tendons flexing, she traversed to the side, before she pressed her legs down, preparing for the jump. She closed her eyes, the rock cool beneath her hands, the quiet sounds of the forest around her. This was her first time on this problem, and she was determined to flash it.

Breathe in. Weight down. And jump. She floated in the air only for a split second before her fingertips grabbed onto the hold above her. The sharp rock bit her skin, and pain jolted down her fingers, but she held on. With one last reach, she crossed one arm over the other, and leapt up to the top of the boulder, pumping her fists upward.

“Yes!” she yelled.

Nothing answered but her echo as it bounced off the mountain.

She knew it was dangerous to climb alone, but she preferred it that way. People were exhausting. People meant talking—connecting—and she was done with sympathetic faces and reassuring words.

It had been a month since she'd lost the comp in Seattle—the competition that would've sent her to the Olympics. She'd been two hand holds away from claiming her victory, and she'd let it slip through her fingers. Literally. She didn't know what happened. She felt strong—she'd felt secure in the beta she'd received to make her way to the top, but thoughts of her recent breakup with Shawn had invaded her mind.

“You’re just not the one for me,” he had said. “Our time together has been great, but I can’t put up with your ups and downs anymore. You need help, and I can’t help you.”

November shook the memory from her mind, trying to focus on the clouds that passed above her. She needed to focus on the present, not the past.

She knew she had a problem, her mental health wasn’t the best, but she couldn’t help it. Shawn’s *real* problem was her obsession with climbing. If you wanted to be the best, you needed to work and act like the best. Nothing was more important than climbing, and Shawn should’ve known that. If he’d really loved her—he would’ve supported her goal of being the youngest Olympic climber in history. She was seventeen, and now that goal was ruined.

The thought sent a wave of sickness through her as she climbed down the backside of the boulder. She didn’t know why she was still climbing. It wasn’t as if she had a future in it. She could continue to win more National titles, but that bored her. Her dream had been snatched away all because of some boy—because she wasn’t strong enough to keep her head clear.

The light shifted as clouds moved over the sun, and everything darkened a shade. She rubbed her arms, goosebumps spreading across her skin.

She had one more climb she wanted to conquer, but a rush of wind suddenly whooshed into her face, stopping her. Everything stilled, the leaves quieted, and the air seemed to pause. No birds chirped in the trees. No rustling in the bushes. November stood on the rocky ground, her body stiff. She glanced around the shaded wood.

She wasn’t one to get afraid—she couldn’t remember the last time she felt fear—but another set of chills ran down her back. Something was off. She peered around the quiet forest and tiptoed to her backpack sitting by the crash pad. She picked them both up, slinging them around her shoulders. She should get back to the car. She made her way down the trail, awareness prickling along the back of her neck. It was as if someone were watching her.

Her feet crunched on sticks and leaves, and she tried to push out even breaths. She needed to get to the trailhead. The thought pounded faster and faster. *Get to the trailhead.* Her legs picked up the pace, and soon she was sprinting through the forest.

Every inch of her felt alive—aware of every sight and sound around her—her feet racing beneath her, the trees blurring on the sides of her. She focused on her breaths, pushing out the fear, trying to center in on the path in front of her. Everything slammed to a stop when her foot connected with a large tree root. She tumbled to the ground, pain exploding behind her nose when she hit the earth. She lay on the ground, face smashed into the dirt, breathing hard. After a minute, her breaths calmed and she slowly got to her feet, dusting off her palms.

The forest remained silent, and she squinted into the dark woods around her. She was being ridiculous. There was no one after her. No murderer was going to jump out from the forest and attack her. She shook her head, muttering under her breath.

“Idiot,” she said to herself.

She started forward once more, silently cursing, when a soft melody drifted from the woods. The sound jarred her to a stop, and her heart suddenly spiked. She *wasn't* alone. Someone *was* out here. The music drew closer, heightening. It was slow and haunting, tinkling, like a music box. It didn't sound like music from a radio or phone. It moved through the trees, wrapping around the bushes, spreading out toward her. She could feel it all around her, soaking into her.

“Hello?” she asked, backing up a step. She squinted into the trees. “Hello?”

No one answered.

The music continued, and she wrapped her arms around herself, backing up further.

“Hello?”

Deep into the forest, a bright light appeared, small at first until it burst outward. The light seared her eyes, large and white, and she ripped her gaze away. A voice in the back of her mind screamed at her to run. The music continued to play on the air, soaring toward her. It was getting closer, becoming thicker, heavier.

This couldn't be happening. She was having hallucinations. She needed to get out of here. She needed to find stability. Ground herself.

She pushed herself faster, her feet pounding on the forest floor. But the music slithered after her, brushing along her back, carrying with her as she ran.

“Stop!” she yelled. “Stop!” She continued to race, until she dropped to her knees. She covered her hands over her ears, squeezing her eyes shut. “Stop!”

In a blink, the music halted, and the light dissipated, but the music still echoed inside her head, hanging on the air. She stretched her eyes wide, her gaze darting side to side. She stayed frozen, her knees on the dusty ground. Her heart beat loud as the breeze picked up and tickled the hair off her face. Birds chirped, and the forest came alive again. She slowly lowered her hands.

Everything was normal. Everything was fine. She *had* been hallucinating.

She huffed out a frustrated breath and headed back down the trail, shaking out her arms. She was stupid to think someone had been after her, or to think she’d heard music or seen such a bright light, but the sweet melodic sound wouldn’t leave her alone. The melody lingered inside her head, weaving through her memory. Maybe someone *had* been there, and maybe she *had* been its target.

Two

BURNT OFFERINGS

AT THE BASE of the mountain, November jumped into her car and made the trek home, the road disappearing fast beneath her wheels. The greenery outside her window sped by until it opened up into her town—Crescent City—and she took in the old shops that lined the main road. Towering trees enveloped the town, her little city tucked into a pocket of the forest. Salty air from the nearby ocean filled her nose, and she breathed it in, the tension from earlier falling away.

November passed through town, avoiding eye contact with a few passers-by, then turned down the long stretch of road that took her to her home—a small, rustic house with peeling paint and a broken fence. She pulled the car to a stop on the gravel driveway and shut the door, the slam echoing out into the woods.

She crossed the ground to the house, spotting the red pick-up parked in her driveway, then cringed at the boy sitting on her front steps. Tanned skin, muscles that stretched tight over his T-shirt, and a swoosh of blonde hair that shone in the sun. Shawn grinned, his teeth white.

“There you are,” he said. “I’ve been waiting forever.”

November drew to a stop, planting her feet into the ground. “Shawn, what are you doing here?”

He ran his hand through his hair, still grinning. “Wanted to see how my girl was doing. I know it must’ve been devastating to have me break up with you the way I did.”

She tightened her eyes, lowering her lids to slits. “Devastated is definitely the wrong word. More like relieved.”

Shawn chuckled, his laugh deep in the air. “You’re funny.”

She shifted her weight. “I asked you a question. What are you doing here?”

“I missed you.” His grin turned lopsided.

November kept her lips sealed shut, staring him down.

“Did you hear that Stephanie Graham got injured?” he asked. “Can you believe it? It means they’re going to choose a replacement for the Olympic team. And I dunno, I thought about how much I hurt you and wanted to apologize. I think we should be together. So I brought you good news all around.” His grin deepened.

For a moment, her heart softened. He still wanted her. Shawn Davis still cared about her. She knew he’d see what he lost and would come crawling back. But then her fists curled in tight. She was up for that spot on the Olympic team, and that’s why he wanted her back. He wanted the glory of being by her side.

“There’s a comp in LA in a couple weeks to determine who gets Stephanie’s place,” he continued. “I’m not sure why they’re not just giving it to you, but you’re going to kill it. You’re going to get that spot.” Shawn stood from his position on the porch and closed the distance between them, his feet crunching on the gravel driveway.

He stopped in front of her, and all November could see was tanned skin and blonde hair. A sweet smell wafted from off of him, and she inhaled it, sighing. But then the vision of Shawn yelling at her—telling her that she was crazy and messed up—zoomed to the front of her mind. He’d made light of her mental condition—even though she was doing everything she could to be stable. She was taking her meds. She was meditating. She was getting proper nutrition. But he’d slammed her condition in her face.

“No,” November said, backing away. “You’re not going to hurt me anymore. I don’t want anything to do with you.”

Shawn continued to advance on her, his smile widening. “Come on, Nov. We both know I’m the best thing that ever happened to you. Don’t be stubborn.” He reached out and played with the ends of her hair.

“I said no!” She ducked underneath his arm and jogged up the front steps away from him. “Goodbye, Shawn.”

Confusion traveled over his face, before his expression hardened. “You know, I was only being nice—which is who I am. But I meant what I said the other day. You need help. Your depression has spun out of control. I

can't take your highs and lows anymore. One moment you're working hard—through all the hours of the night even—obsessed with being the best, and the next you're so depressed you can't move for days. It's exhausting. I was the only thing that grounded you. And now, without me, you're going to choke on that wall. I look forward to you crashing and burning."

Shawn marched along the gravel and got into his truck, slamming the door. It took off, speeding down the driveway until he disappeared.

November stood for a few heartbeats, staring at where he'd vanished. She'd never had her mental health thrown in her face so blatantly before. It wasn't something she talked about—not since her parents had died. But maybe Shawn was right—maybe she couldn't do this without him. He did help her pull out of the lows, and helped her see when she was too manic to see anything else. Shawn had always brought her back to reality.

The screen door creaked open behind her, and her uncle stood on the porch next to her. "You okay?"

"You were listening?" November asked. "I should've known." She plunked down on the wooden steps, linking her fingers together. "I don't know why I ever liked that jerk."

"I was going to intervene, but it seemed like you had things under control."

"Yeah. I'm not afraid of him."

Her uncle made a sound at the back of his throat. "He's right though, you know."

She spun around and peered up at her uncle. He was handsome like her dad, they looked similar with their salt and pepper hair and strong jaws, but her uncle sported a handlebar mustache, hiding most of his face.

"You do seem a bit unstable lately," he said. "Are you taking your meds? Do we need to go see your doctor again?"

November stared up at her uncle, tears burning behind her eyes. Not him too. She was *fine*. She'd know if she wasn't okay.

"You're starting to get obsessive with your parents," he continued. "Poring over their journals at night. Googling ways with how they were attacked. Asking everyone in town if they knew anything about it. We both know when you get... consumed... that's when you're not okay."

"I'm not sick!" she retorted. "My parents were found with their throats ripped out! Can't I be a little obsessed with that and not be called *crazy*"

because I want to know what happened? Anyone who didn't wouldn't have a heart."

Her uncle sighed and sat down on the porch next to her. "I'm just telling you what I see. You get this look in your eye when you're not okay. You used to sleep at night, now you're not. Your temper is short. It's like walking on eggshells around you. Your parents wouldn't have wanted you to live this way. They'd want you to get help and move on."

November stared at her linked fingers, not wanting to talk about it anymore. Her uncle didn't understand. She knew herself.

"But that's not what I wanted to talk about." He clasped his hands together, leaning forward on his knees. "I have to take off for a while. I'm going to have to send you away—to live with some family."

"What?" November whirled on him. "Family? What family? And why? I'm not leaving!"

Her uncle's mouth flicked upward, before it dropped. "I can't tell you why. I just have some business I need to attend to. It's going to take a couple months—maybe to the end of the school year, and I obviously can't leave you here alone."

"Of course you can! I'm not going to just up and leave. You *know* how important my routine is to me. I'm not..." She rubbed her temples. "I can't believe this. Why?"

"Your father had another brother," he said gruffly. "They were estranged. I was... the middleman. Your father didn't want you to have anything to do with him, so I've adhered to his wishes and kept you away. Our brother—Clifton—recently passed away, and since he's gone, I figured it was time to let you know about your cousins."

"You're seriously going to tell me I have cousins I never knew about."

His mustache turned downward. "Conroy and April Huntington, yes."

November shook her head back and forth. "I'm not leaving."

"Listen. I promised your father that I would watch out for you if anything ever happened to him. This is me watching out for you. You need to leave so you can have a stable environment. The Huntington estate is just outside Crescent City on a long stretch of land. It's right by a mountainside and a lake, you'll love it. Conroy and April are already expecting you."

November opened her mouth, but her throat closed off tight. She couldn't believe this. Her whole life was being turned upside down... *again*. It wasn't bad enough that her parents had died, but now her uncle

was abandoning her, too. She didn't know what to say. She didn't know how to fight this.

"That's not the only thing," he said, voice low.

"What." She placed her palms over her eyes, too tired to be angry anymore. "What else could be worse than this?"

"You'll need to attend a different school. It's a private school for the arts."

She lowered her hands, heat burning behind her eyes. Noise swirled around in her head, she could barely think. She tried to find the space in her head—the space her therapist had taught her to find before she responded.

"Arts?" she said calmly. "What, like music? Painting? I don't do arts! I'm an athlete!" Her voice escalated.

Her uncle scratched underneath his nose. "There's a lot you have to learn about your family. You *will* go to this school and you will stay with your cousins. No questions asked." He stared her down, daring her to say another word.

She opened her mouth to retort, but words failed her. She'd never heard her uncle speak so firmly to her before.

Thoughts of her climbing drifted through her mind. She had the comp in LA in two weeks. Leaving would take her away from that dream. How was she supposed to train and prepare and even *get* to LA for that matter?

"I'm not doing this," November said, though it came out in a whisper.

Her uncle stood from the porch, wiped his hands on his jeans, and opened the screen door. "You will. So pack your bags. We leave tomorrow morning."

Three

GIRL INTERRUPTED

THE HUNTINGTON ESTATE sat just outside of town, tucked in the shadows of a large hillside, surrounded by acres of forest. A lake stretched as still as glass, the green pines and mountainside reflecting on the surface. Fog snaked its way on the frosty ground, and heavy clouds roiled over the sky, everything dim despite it being the late morning.

November headed up the front steps of the large manor, backpack slung over her shoulder, her neck craning up at the towering structure. Intricate carvings ran alongside the massive home, and she peered closer, taking in flowers and vines, snakes and other strange creatures. She wondered what kind of man Clifton Huntington was—to live in such a house—and what his children were like. She stopped on the top step.

“Just go on in,” her uncle called up. “I’ll get the rest of your bags.”

November watched her uncle unload her suitcases from the car, then eyed the heavy iron knocker that hung on the outside of the thick wooden door. She couldn’t just walk in. This place would never feel like home.

Her uncle hefted the bags up the steps and grunted as he reached for the door handle, but the door swung open before he touched it. A flurry of black flashed in front of her face and someone crashed into her, pulling her into a tight hug.

“I’m so glad you’re here!” a hoarse voice said. “I’ve been waiting for you forrrrever!”

The girl pulled back, but kept her hands gripped around November’s shoulders. The girl smiled, her teeth blindingly white.

“Look at you,” she continued, her voice rough, and November realized she had one of those naturally raspy voices. “We look nothing alike. Are you sure we’re family? I would kill to have your red hair.”

The girl was right. They did look nothing alike. The girl had straight black hair that went down to her waist. It hung evenly, cut perfectly at the ends, and shimmered as it moved. She had a thin face with high cheekbones, almost a sallow look, like she hardly ever went outside. November, on the other hand, had auburn hair with a natural wave. It hung just past her shoulders, and one side always seemed to curl in the wrong direction. She had a heart-shaped face, but was still as pale as the girl.

“I’m April,” she said. “April Huntington.”

“It’s good to see you, April,” her uncle said, setting the bags down, “Is Conroy home?”

“I’m right here, Mason.” The door swung open wider. “Hello, November.”

Conroy Huntington had neatly combed brown hair that whooshed upward in a swish, a strong jaw and tanned skin. Clear green eyes stared back at her behind thin-wired glasses, and a T-shirt that stretched across a lean build and jeans. He looked to be in his early twenties.

November’s eyes darted between him and his little sister.

“We’re very happy you’re here, November,” Conroy said. “I hope you will consider this place your home. You are very welcome here.”

“Can I show her the house?” April beamed.

“Go on ahead,” Conroy said. “I have some things I need to discuss with Mason.”

April’s smile widened as she took November by the hand. “Come on!”

November barely gave her uncle a last glance before she was yanked into the front foyer.

April drew her to a stop, and inside, November blinked. The place was ginormous—a vaulted ceiling that cascaded up to a sky window, where she could see the overcast clouds moving overhead. A grand staircase spread out before her, the wood of the banister carved into a long snake, with the snake’s head at the end, its mouth open, fangs etched into the shiny wood.

But that wasn’t what made the room unique.

A series of clocks hung on every inch of wall space—all the way up the vaulted ceiling, a cacophony of ticks ticking in sync. Large clocks, small clocks, square ones and circular ones—clocks with Roman numerals, and

clocks with numbers written in different scrawls. And two large, extravagant grandfather clocks sat on both sides of the room, mirroring each other, adorning each corner.

“My... father had a thing for clocks,” April said, twisting her face.

November stepped forward, her eyes locked on the sight. “Clearly.”

“Our house is a bit eccentric.” April bit her lips, making them extra pink against her pale skin. “I hope that’s okay.”

November’s brows cinched together before she coughed. “Totally fine.”

“Come on, we’ll go in here.” April took November’s hand, and November glanced down at the touch. She gently wiggled her hand out of hers and wiped it on her T-shirt.

April pushed open two double oak doors and they entered a smaller space.

“This is the sitting room,” April said, expectant.

Like the entryway, the room was outlandish. China, from teacups, to plates, to bowls decorated the room. They were painted intricately, with flowers and grapes and different colored swirls. They lined the mantel, and along the walls from top to bottom. Stacks piled in the corners, and some were also placed neatly on the side tables and coffee table. She felt if she were to step in the wrong place, a piece would come crashing down and break.

“It’s Blue Ridge,” April said. “My mother loved Blue Ridge and was quite the collector.”

Again, November swallowed and said, “Clearly.”

“Come on, we’ll cut through the kitchen to my favorite room!”

April reached for her hand again, but November skirted away. She followed after April, traveling through the large kitchen, and she briefly took in a gigantic space—it was three times the size of her kitchen back home.

November slowed her pace as they turned another corner. She stopped at the end of a hall, taking in the space. Along the walls, portraits lined the peeling wallpaper, all men and women who peered outward from their pictures, their blank stares seeming to close the space tighter. Chills erupted along November’s arms as she carefully stepped down the hall. As she walked, dozens of eyes pressed into her back, and it seemed as if their eyes followed her, observing her every movement. A cold draft drifted down the

hall, and she shivered. The wood floors creaked under her feet, revealing how old the building really was.

At the end of the hall, her shoulders relaxed, and she shook off the stares. There was something about that hallway that didn't sit right. April turned right, and November followed, focusing on her slight form. Her simple black dress swooshed in front of her, her tiny feet racing forward, her shiny hair swinging side to side. It was like April hadn't *ever* had friends over before—she was acting like November was the first person to ever step inside their house.

She followed April through another large set of double doors, and inside, she skidded to a halt. Before her, flowing white curtains moved over the tall open windows, a light breeze drifting over her face. A cacophony of chirping filled the air—every pitch a unique sound—from high twitters to light, airy songs. Cages lined the room, along the windows, around the sofas, as well as cages hanging high from the ceiling. The walls were painted to look like they were in a tropical forest, huge murals encasing November, like she really was in an exotic land.

“This is my favorite room,” April said. “Isn't it wonderful?” April danced into the middle of the space, her arms stretched out to the sides of her, her head tilted back. With her black dress and caved-in look, April's appearance didn't fit the chirpiness of her personality. “Whenever life seems impossible, I come here. I come here and everything is okay.” She stopped and her cheeks reddened. “I know, seems ridiculous.”

When November didn't say anything, April said, “Come on, let me show you around.”

April flittered to the cages over by the tall windows. The translucent curtains dusted the floor, another puff of fresh air wafting into November's face.

“These right here are Miligold Macaws, over here are Red Factor Canaries, this here is the African Gray Parrot, right here is Rainbow Lorikeet, and these little guys are Quetzals.” April pointed to each one, stopping at the end of the line. “Beautiful aren't they?” She bent down, peering inside one cage, before she spun upward. “Would you like to hold one?” Her eyebrows lifted and her eyes lit up.

November rubbed her hands on the tops of her jeans. “Maybe... later.” The thought of holding a little creature made her stomach twist. She'd never liked animals. They were jumpy and invaded her space.

“Well, maybe the view then!” April rushed over to another set of glass double doors and pushed them open. “Come, see!”

November glanced back at the exit, sighing, then moved forward. April’s energy was wearing on her, and she wanted nothing more than to be alone. She needed silence—to figure things out—to analyze how miserable her life had become. Not be immersed in this chaotic bubble of happiness.

Another breeze stirred the long white curtains in the room and November stepped out onto a balcony. Out before her, acres of land stretched on for what seemed to be miles of shaded wood. Below them the lake sparkled in the sun, surrounded by a large green manicured lawn. To her left, a towering mountain sat dark and oppressive, dotted in miniature green trees.

“Our fathers used to go fishing down there and hunt in that forest. They were the best of friends growing up. I don’t know what happened.” April’s face turned wistful as she glanced over the landscape.

November gave her a curious look. She didn’t know her father had grown up here. She glanced around the walls. Had he stood right here? This was his home. Why had he left? What was his story? Why had he never told her? Her uncle said that their fathers were estranged. Something big must’ve gone down between them.

April saw the expression on her face. “The Huntingtons have been here for generations. You really don’t know very much about us, do you?”

November wiped a hand over her forehead. “I’d really like it if you’d show me my room now, if you don’t mind.”

The lines in April’s face dropped. “Oh... sure... of course. Follow me.”

They edged out of the chirping room in silence and April quietly shut the doors behind her before they headed back down the hall. April walked with her head down, no longer a bounce in her step. She stayed quiet as they wandered back the way they came, but November was too exhausted to care. She didn’t want or ask for a family.

April cut through a different hallway and led them up through a small staircase that wound upward, still walking in silence. November glided her hand along the banister, the wood rough underneath her fingertips, until they reached the next level. Musty air hit her nose, and chilly air wafted over her skin.

“We have two rooms prepared,” April finally said, her voice gruff. “I wasn’t sure which one you’d like. I originally thought this one, but now I’m

probably being dumb...”

“I’m sure it’s fine,” November said, thinking as long as it wasn’t covered in clocks, china, or birds she was good.

“If you say so.” April wrapped her hand around the knob and pushed the door open.

Four

NIGHT FEVER

INSIDE, November stopped dead.

She couldn't believe what appeared before her.

A massive king-sized bed sat on one side of the room, with a down comforter and too many pillows to count. A high ceiling with silver trimming stretched out above them, with a rustic chandelier. But that wasn't what shocked her. Over the bed, a large tree had grown into the room, branches shooting through the walls that extended into the middle of the space. Bright green leaves sprouted from the tips of the branches, illuminated from the sunlight filtering in through the large windows.

A desk and sofa adorned the other side of the room, looking as ordinary as possible, as if a giant tree weren't hovering overhead.

"It was your father's room," April said. "He used to love climbing that tree. Though it wasn't as big then. We do trim it though."

"What—" November paused. "You can't... you can't have a tree in a house!"

April's forehead creased. "Why not? Conroy always thought it would be cool to build a treehouse at the top of the branches right next to the ceiling, but he never got around to it."

"I can't... I can't sleep in a room with a tree!" November exclaimed.

"Oh." April twisted her lips. "Well, we do have the other room. It's our aqua room filled with tanks of fish from all over the world. It has a wonderful waterbed and oh! There's even a shark in one of the tanks."

November stepped back, trying to take a steady breath. She would rather sleep *in* a tree than sleep in a room full of fish. They had always

creeped her out. Especially sharks.

“I’m good. This room will do fine.” But she couldn’t believe she was saying that.

April grinned. “Excellent. I’ll have Quincy—our steward—bring up your bags and bring you something to eat. Then I’ll see you first thing in the morning. It’ll be your first day of school!” She gave November one last smile before she shut the door behind her.

Silence settled into her chest and she exhaled. Silence. Finally. Though her mind was still spinning. She couldn’t believe she was standing in a room with a full-size tree growing halfway through the walls.

The wood floor creaked under her feet as she crossed over to the open window. She peered to the grounds below. This must’ve been the backside of the house. Statues lined crisp white sidewalks that led into a mass of overgrown foliage. The plants were completely overgrown and in disarray, dried up and tangled, making the path invisible.

A trimmed lawn, with pots of flowers, and perfectly cut rose bushes lined the other side of the house. The surrounding landscape was impeccable. She turned back to the mass of dead garden and wondered why the Huntingtons had let this part of the land die. It was in a pathetic state, and should’ve been easy to tend to.

Suddenly feeling like her eyelids weighed a thousand pounds, November headed over to the bed and collapsed on top. She sunk into the fluffy mattress and stared up at the swirl of branches above her. The leaves rustled in the light breeze wafting in from the open window, and she shut her eyes, listening to the soft sound. Maybe this place wouldn’t be so bad. If she could find a way to start a new routine, stay away from April’s happiness, and find her solitude, she might be alright after all.

Thoughts of the boulder problem she did last week drifted through her mind. Pressing off the ground. Traverse right. Reach. Heel hook. Sloper. Lift. Pull. Until the crux. She had practiced that problem for months until she’d completed it. The thought only made her heart ache as she thought of the comp in LA in two weeks. She *had* to get to that competition. Her climbing career was ruined if she didn’t.

She closed her eyes and let all the thoughts and feelings of the last twenty-four hours flow through her. Her mind slipped through a few layers of oblivion until her eyes shot open.

It was dark. She blinked, not able to see anything. Complete blackness stretched out before her, until the light of the moon slowly adjusted to her eyes. Crickets chirped outside, singing in an endless song, and November jumped out of bed, shivering. She stepped over to the window and closed it shut.

Through the dim light, her bags were placed up against the far wall, and a plate of cheese and crackers sat on the table by her bed. Her uncle had probably left.

She began to pace in her room, trying to sort out her brain. Her life was going nowhere. All her life, she had strived to achieve the impossible, push herself to be the best, but now, she was stuck. Stuck in a room with a tree that only taunted her—telling her to climb, when she couldn't. When she was on the wall, she was happy. She was safe. When she was off of it, she was on unsteady ground.

Life with her uncle had been decent. They had their bad moments, and he was beginning to have more restrictions on her, but he wasn't so bad. He understood her mental condition—how serious it was—but ultimately, he left her health up to her. She couldn't remember what it was like to be loved by a family, and she wasn't about to start loving this one now.

November didn't know if she could live like this—in this house with these people until the end of the school year. She didn't want to go to April's prissy arts school. Maybe she could just make a run for it. She wasn't rich, but her uncle had opened her a bank account and given her an allowance every week for two years, which she hadn't touched. Maybe she could leave and train somewhere else.

But she stopped the thought immediately. That wasn't a stable thought, she told herself. It could be a manic thought. It wasn't normal to think about pulling all your money from a bank account and running off by yourself. She used to have unstable thoughts like that all the time, until she figured things out.

A loud banging sounded on her door and she jerked. A shadow passed underneath the door, lingering. November stood still for a moment, staring at the shadow.

"Hello?" she finally asked. "Who's there? April?"

Silence stretched.

"Conroy?" she called. "Come in."

No one answered, and the shadow didn't move.

November swiped a hand over her face, thinking it was probably one of their proper rules not to enter without her opening the door. She marched across the room and swung the door open.

“Yes?” she asked, slightly irritated, before she blinked. Nothing was there but pitch black. She waved a hand out in front of her, but the doorway was empty.

“Hello?” she called again. She poked her head outside and looked both ways down the hall, but still, nothing but a long stretch of dark.

She started to pull back into her room when she heard it. A voice—smooth and deep, barely a whisper.

“You shouldn’t be here, you know. Your father wouldn’t have wanted it.”

Her heart pounded at the mention of her father, and her mind screamed at who would know him. She gripped the doorframe, her fingers digging into the wood.

“Who are you?” she asked, her jaw tight. “And what do you know about my father?”

“Just call me a family friend.” A smirk carried in his voice.

She squinted down the hall and her eyes cleared a tad. A long dark figure leaned against the wall, arms crossed.

“What are you doing hiding in the dark?”

“I *don’t* want you in my home,” he answered. “So figure out a way to go and go. *Now.*”

November glared through the dark, her teeth clamping together. She had never allowed herself to be bullied, and she wasn’t about to start now.

“I can stay here if I want to,” she said. “And you can’t say otherwise.” She didn’t want to be here either, but she also didn’t want to be told what to do.

A low laugh erupted through the dark. “Oh?” The guy pushed off the wall and straightened. He began to take long steps toward her, smooth, calculated. “You won’t last a week here. Guaranteed.”

November’s grip tightened on the doorframe, anger rising up her throat. She’d met people just like him, climbers even—who were full of themselves—who thought they knew everything. He continued to glide toward her.

“I don’t know who you think you are, showing up at my door in the middle of the night and lecturing me, telling me to get out,” she said, “but I

won't have it." His snark was pushing her over the edge.

He continued to advance, his silhouette lean and black. "Pretty powerful words for a Huntington." The name came out in disgust.

November's stomach tightened the closer he drew near. Awareness prickled on her skin, every inch of her buzzing. He glided to a stop, standing right in front of her, but she still couldn't see his face.

"Tell me, Huntington, what makes you think you're better than the rest of us?"

Her brows creased. "I don't."

"Oh, I can see your ego a mile away. Or maybe I just know too much about you. World class rock climber. Dead parents. Trying to use your sob story to find meaning in your life. Well, Huntington, it's time for you to wake up. Gain some responsibility for your own emotions and go back to your life. Get out. No one wants you here."

November narrowed her eyes, until tears started to gather. She still couldn't see him, only the wild spat of dark hair on top of his head. She'd never had anyone call her egotistical before. Not even Shawn, and he'd been horrible to her.

"Looks like I'm not the only one with an ego," she said, her tears thickening. "And I don't want to be here either, so looks like we both win."

She slammed the door in his face, the sound echoing in her head. She wanted to see his shocked expression as the door shut, but she couldn't stand his presence any longer. She needed to take control of the situation and show him who was boss. She wasn't some girl who cowered away from someone who pushed her around.

She pressed her back against the door, breathing fast, but could still feel him outside. A part of her wanted to run to April and Conroy and demand that they tell her who he was, but she didn't want to give him the pleasure of knowing he affected her. She would ignore him. He didn't have any power over her. But she didn't dare move, not until she heard his footsteps disappear down the hall and walk away.

Five

CLEAN SLATE

ST. Paul's Academy of the Arts rested on top of a large hill, a massive structure that stretched across the landscape, looking almost like a cathedral, with its Victorian spires shooting up into the sky. Grand archways and pillars surrounded the building, with pathways that wove in and out around the structure. November couldn't keep her eyes off of the height, the magnificence, of the building and she wondered how she didn't know this property existed. It looked out of place—like she should be at a tourist spot in Italy, not in a back country of Crescent City.

The car pulled past the iron gates that surrounded the school, and up the long driveway to the front. Quincy put the car in park and exited to open the door for November and April. Quincy wore a black suit and tie, his gray hair swept back behind his ears. He was a thin man, wiry, with wrinkles that folded over his face, but November could tell he was handsome back in his day.

“Thanks, Quincy,” November said, giving him a half smile.

The old man bowed, and shut the door closed behind her. She wouldn't ever get used to such treatment.

“You're going to love this place!” April grinned. “It isn't your average school. I mean... you'll see.” Her face went pale before it brightened. “Even though it has its faults, it's wonderful, too.”

November's brow wrinkled.

“Oh, look!” April exclaimed. “Roderick, our schoolmaster is here!”

Standing in the doorway, just inside the shadows, a tall man waited with his hands linked in front of him. His black hair slicked back in a shine

November had never seen, and his face was even more white and sallow looking than April's. His jawbones ground together as he waited for them to approach, his eyes two black dots deep in their sockets.

"November."

He said her name like someone from a foreign country would. His accent was thick, his "v"s long. He sounded like a version of Dracula.

"Welcome to St. Paul's Academy of the Arts."

November cringed at the name. She shouldn't be here. She didn't have any talent to offer—unless they decided to build a rock gym in the cafeteria.

"Follow me and we'll get you your Issue," Roderick said.

"Issue?" November mouthed to April.

"Your uniform," she whispered back. "You can't go to school like that." She motioned to November's jeans and T-shirt.

November eyed April's black dress and swallowed. "No. No way am I wearing that."

April rolled her eyes, pulling her forward. "You get to choose, silly. There are different Issues you can pick from."

November stepped into the school and her mouth parted. If she thought the Huntington estate was large and luxurious, it *paled* in comparison. She felt like she had entered a palace.

An immaculate chandelier hung above her in the entryway, silver and sparkling, diamonds dripping. The walls and floors were a smooth white marble, her footsteps bouncing off the high vaulted ceiling as she circled around. Two grand staircases mirrored each other on both ends of the gigantic room, descending from three tiers overhead. Gold-plated leaves ran along the white walls, making November feel like she was inside a crystal ball. Everything was so open and bright, she couldn't help but release a breath.

"This is nothing," April whispered. "You should see the ballroom."

"Into my office, ladies," Roderick said, and his shiny black shoes clicked on the floor in front of them. His legs were long and stork-like, the back of his coat cinching his lean frame.

They followed Roderick down a large, open hallway, still marble, with pillars that framed both sides. Little alcoves with curtains were tucked back behind the pillars, and November drew her brows together, curious what was beyond them.

Roderick took a left down another pillared hallway, until they approached a long black curtain. It hung lifeless, still as death, until Roderick whooshed through.

“Come in,” he called out.

“His office is in there?” November asked.

April nodded. “The school doesn’t believe in doors. They say they symbolize restriction. They want our minds to be open and free. No secrets. No barriers.”

November shook her head as she moved through the dark curtain.

Inside, Roderick stood behind a large, ebony desk. He stayed silent as he smoothed down his plated coat, before straightening his cravat. There weren’t any chairs in the room—just a wide-open space, the wood floors a polished oak, the walls covered with intricate tapestries of tigers and snakes and birds.

“Your Issue.” Roderick motioned to a pile of neatly folded clothes on his desk. “They will be your exact size. We do our research thoroughly.” He peered at November, his bones jutting out from his skin. “What is your talent, Miss Huntington?”

November glanced to April, then back to Roderick. “My... what?”

“Your talent. Your cousin here plays the loveliest flute I’ve ever heard. The best in the state. Perhaps the best in the country.” His mouth twitched as his eyes flicked to April’s. They turned cold as they returned to November. “What is it that *you* do?”

November squared her shoulders, rolling her neck. “I rock climb. I’m a climber.”

Roderick laughed, the sound booming, echoing in the room. “No, no, no. That obviously won’t do. There has to be something better. Perhaps you sing? Like our own Miss Turnstile? Or you dance? Our ballerina, Miss Chevsky is the best I’ve ever seen. Or another instrument? Violin? Viola? Trumpet? You’re a Huntington. There has to be *something* you do.”

Heat surged to her cheeks. She hated the name Huntington. Huntingtons abandoned each other. Huntingtons were cursed. They all died.

“No, I’m sorry,” she said. “I don’t do any of those things.”

Roderick pursed his lips. “Your father was the most talented pianist I ever knew,” he said. “He could play Rachmaninov when he was nine. He could compose full symphonies by the time he was eleven. I can’t believe

his daughter is talentless.” He raised his chin, but looked down at her at the same time.

November wrapped her arms over her stomach. She hadn’t known that about her father. There had *never* been music in her home. Why the omission? And why did she suddenly shrink under Roderick’s judgement of her?

“And your mother…” Roderick went on, “the voice of an angel.”

November gripped the sides of her T-shirt, before releasing the fabric. “I don’t care about my parents. And I don’t care about being here. If you want me gone, just tell Conroy to send me to another school.”

Roderick tilted his head to the side. “Oh, you will stay here. Conroy believes in you.” He smiled and waved to her Issue. “Go. Dress. And April will take you to your first class.”

November snatched her clothes and exited, deciding she didn’t like Roderick at all. It was going to be a long day.

Six

DEVIL'S RIGHT LEG

NOVEMBER PULLED at the black turtleneck around her neck. The sleeves reached down past her wrists, and her black pants were so tight, they might as well have been painted on. She winced, silently cursing Roderick under her breath. Thorough research, indeed.

April led her into the classroom, and as November scanned the room, her mind went blank. It wasn't your usual classroom. No hot stuffy air with rows of desks lined before a chalkboard. No boring teacher droning on about mathematics. Sofas were spread out all over the room, with wide open windows and a cool breeze. Gray morning light poured in, highlighting the dozens of cold faces in front of her.

The entire classroom stared back at her, brows furrowed, mouths tight. Their eyes followed her as she headed deeper into the room. Conroy sat at the front of the classroom on a white puffy chair with his hands folded, saying, "and that's how overtones are different than undertones."

April coughed, and Conroy turned. His eyes widened, and he stood abruptly.

"November," he said. "Welcome. I've already told the class you were coming. Class, this is November Huntington."

The room remained silent, expressions still tight. No one said a word. She played with her fingers out in front of her. She had been a new student right after her parents died when she'd moved in with her uncle Mason, but the kids at that school hadn't stared at her the way they were now.

"I hope you will all make November comfortable," Conroy continued. "Make her feel welcome. Now separate and go... practice. I'll check on you

in a little bit.”

The class stood and started to move toward the white curtain, their eyes locked on her as they passed by. A redhead bumped into her shoulder, smirking, a blonde and a brunette following in her wake. November pulled at her collar again.

“See you soon,” April said, squeezing her arm.

“November?” Conroy motioned her over.

She gave one last glance to the departing kids and crossed the room to Conroy. He pulled up a chair for her and she lowered herself down.

“So, you’re a teacher here?” November asked, crossing her legs. “You didn’t tell me before.”

Conroy adjusted his thin-framed glasses. “We haven’t had much time to talk. But yeah, I’ve been teaching here ever since I graduated here myself.”

November rubbed her forehead for a moment, before she eyed him and said, “Conroy, what am I doing here? Like, what’s the real reason?”

Conroy rolled his shoulders, as if his T-shirt were too tight. “That’s what I wanted to talk to you about.” He sat forward. “November, this school will be a good thing for you. You’re going to grow to love this world. Music is a part of you, whether you realize it or not.”

She laughed. “The only music I play is the radio.”

Conroy’s mouth twitched. “Give this place a chance. Participate. Open your mind. You’ll be surprised.”

“Listen, Conroy.” November uncrossed her legs. “I appreciate the info, but you know I’m just going to fake it here until I leave. I have no interest in music or dance or what this place has to offer. I’m only interested in paying my dues so I can finally be free and leave. No offense.”

Humor played on Conroy’s lips. “No offense taken.”

“Then why are you smiling?”

“Because I know you’re going to discover your talent. And then you won’t want to leave. It’ll mean more than life to you. It does to all of us.”

“I’m not just suddenly going to develop some unknown talent I didn’t know I had. From what Roderick told me, these kids are freaking prodigies!”

“You’re a Huntington,” Conroy said. “It’s in your blood. Don’t worry, I was a late bloomer too. It’ll come. And then... we’ll talk. You need to know what you’re up against.”

Loud chatter filled the hall, bouncing off the high vaulted ceiling. Grapes and vines and cupids with little wings were painted on the surface. Circular tables with white tablecloths scattered the room, silverware on top, with crystal glasses. Plates of hot steaming food were brought out by men and women in suits and bow ties. The students found places to sit, laughing, chatting, buttering rolls, with the occasional glance to November.

November sat down with April at the far table in the corner, where bits of sunlight dusted through the window, sunbeams in the air.

“So how are you enjoying your first day?” April asked. Her face was intent, her eyes serious.

“I haven’t done much,” November said. “I spoke to Conroy, and Roderick came and pulled him away, so I pretty much sat by myself until now.”

“Makes sense,” April said. She started to trace her fingers along the tablecloth, before her eyes flew up, gazing past November’s shoulder. “Great. Just what we need.”

The redhead from earlier approached the table, stopping with her arms crossed. Her chin lifted as she looked them over. Her hair was a bright orange, not the deep red that November’s was. A blonde and brunette followed after her, standing on either side of her.

“This is the only place to sit,” the redhead said. She eyed the table, where half of it was covered in sunbeams, the other shaded. “But I *won’t* sit in the sun, so scoot over.”

April fumbled, messing with her napkin, starting to move over, when November set a hand on her arm.

“Why should we do that?” November asked. “We were here first.”

The redhead blinked, eyes widening before her red brows pushed over her forehead. “Because I asked. And people do what I say. Besides,” her lips twitched upward, “I want to speak with you, *November*.” Her name on her lips sounded like poison.

April quickly got up and scooted over, but November stayed put. The redhead smirked and sat down next to her.

“I’m Margaret,” she said. “And this is Amelia and Claire.” The other two girls eyed the seats in the sunshine, and scrunched their noses, but they sat down. Claire flipped a piece of her chestnut hair over her shoulder.

The three girls spread their cloth napkins on their laps simultaneously. Amelia clapped her hands excitedly as her food was placed before her. “Mmm. Roast and potatoes today. My favorite.”

Margaret rolled her eyes.

Amelia snatched up her fork and knife and cut into the juicy meat as her meal was placed in front of her. November stared down at her own plate. A peanut butter and jelly sandwich would’ve done just fine.

“So, tell us about yourself, November,” Margaret said. “Tell us where you’ve been hiding out all these years.”

“What do you mean?” November asked.

“I mean, where did your parents take you? After they left the school? They left this world in a flurry after what happened to your father. The rest of us have all been together since birth practically, but you... you’re a mystery.” She lifted her brows.

“I hear your father hid you away to secretly develop your talents and train you on your own,” Claire said, taking a sip of water.

November swallowed. Again with the lies. Her parents had never revealed anything about this school. Not only did she have a father who had hidden his prodigy talents from her, but he had most definitely *not* tried to pass anything on to her. Resentment swept through her, before she shoved it away. She only cared about climbing, she shouldn’t feel any emotion over this. She didn’t care.

“What is your talent anyway?” Margaret asked, her eyes not leaving hers. Her food remained untouched.

The girls waited, lowering their forks.

November opened her mouth, but nothing came out. She didn’t know what to say. For some reason it mattered that she didn’t look like a fool in front of these girls. Margaret was intense, and she had a feeling that if Margaret found out she didn’t have a talent, she’d never let it down.

“Well, answer,” Margaret demanded. “What’s taking so long?”

“I bet you’re a composer!” Amelia cut in, chewing on the juicy meat. “Like your father.”

“No, definitely not,” November said, squirming. “I...”

“She doesn’t want to talk about it, okay?” April interrupted, voice terse. “Just leave her alone.”

Margaret’s lips curved upward. “The other Huntington comes to the rescue.” Her eyes darted between the two girls. “November’s father is a

saint compared to who *your* father is.”

April’s face reddened, and she glanced down at her plate.

“That’s enough,” November said. “I think I’m done. April, why don’t you show me around?” She stood from the table.

Margaret sat back, crossing her arms again. “You can’t hide your talent forever. I *will* find out one way or another.”

“April?” November asked.

April jumped up from her seat, and they started to head for the door, leaving the girls behind, but before they made it to the doorway, someone entered across the room. The person’s presence was like a darkness that had settled over her, an itch that made her turn around.

A guy entered limping, a cane in hand, long legs, lean frame. He wore black slacks and a long-sleeve shirt that was rolled up to his forearms. Everything about him was black and white—from his dark eyes, lashes, hair—even the hollows in his cheeks—to his pale skin. He looked almost sickly, but in an attractive way.

“Who is that?” November asked, and her jaw slightly dropped.

“That’s V,” April said. “Or Vincent. But people call him V. The guy is a menace. Won’t talk to anyone. Hardly ever looks at anyone, too.”

November tightened her lips, staring. She got that vibe from him. There was an air of authority around him that made her feel beneath him.

“He only came to the school a couple years ago,” April said. “But trust me, he’s annoying.”

“Hmm.” She couldn’t take her eyes off of him. There was something about him that held her captured. She studied him for a bit longer before she shook her head. But it took great effort to look away. “Come on, let’s go.”

They wove in between the tables, making their way to the exit when she peeked up at him again. Vincent’s eyes slid over and up to hers and their eyes caught. November tripped, stumbling over her feet. April rammed into her, then toppled over to the side, hitting a boy sitting down next to them.

“I’m so sorry!” April said.

The boy turned and his mouth spread into a wide grin. “No problem.” Freckles stood out against his skin. He faced November. “I’m Ty, by the way.”

November mumbled something in response, but she couldn’t keep her eyes off of Vincent. He stared at her openly, his face unreadable, before his lips pursed. Vincent wouldn’t stop looking at her.

November had to rip her gaze away. “April, you coming?” She peeked back to Vincent, but his back had turned, and he was limping away.

“I’ll see you around,” April said to Ty, a small smile on her lips.

“Yeah, see ya.”

November couldn’t get out of the room fast enough. Vincent shook her, and she didn’t know why.

Seven

LOST CHORD

THE REST of the day continued without incident. Conroy held another class where he had blabbed about musical composers—Bach, Beethoven, Stravinsky, Haydn—and November could barely keep her eyes open. She didn't care about any of this stuff. This wasn't school. Learning about musical terms *wasn't* school. She almost began to long for real classes, like Science or History, Mathematics or English. She'd looked for Vincent again, but he never surfaced.

When Conroy had dismissed the students to go practice their own instruments again, April had led November outside and they chatted on the bench near the front doors until Quincy picked them up. She was relieved she didn't have to practice a talent on her own like the other students did—she obviously didn't have a talent—but she didn't know what she was going to do tomorrow. It seemed like the students practiced on their own for at least *half* the day.

November had been thrown into a world that was out of her comfort zone, and she didn't like it. She liked being in control. With climbing, you were the one holding yourself onto the rock—no one else—and she hated that her life wasn't in her hands.

On the drive home, November watched the forest blur together outside her window, meshing together like a child's finger painting. Fog snaked its way on the ground before her, the road twisting back and forth, Quincy taking the turns fast. She thought about climbing once more, itching to get back on the rock.

Again, she didn't know if she could do this—if she could be surrounded by Conroy and April twenty-four-seven. It was one thing to go to school and have to return to them at home, but to have Conroy be her *teacher*? And April her constant companion? She was used to being alone. She preferred being alone. Being alone was better for her mental health.

Maybe if she *could* figure out a talent—even fake a talent—then Conroy and April's presence would dissipate. She could go off and have alone time “practicing” at school. If she could just survive until her uncle returned home—find a way to fake it—maybe she'd survive.

Once home, November gave Quincy her thanks and the two girls walked up the front steps to the manor. Gray clouds moved in fast overhead, the wind picking up, making goosebumps spread along November's arms. On the top step, April spun around, blocking the front door.

“We need to figure this out,” she said. The wind blew her long dark strands over her thin face.

“Huh?”

“Your gift. I know you don't have one. We need to figure this out. Today.”

November wrinkled her nose. “Thanks for your interest, April, but it's not really something you can help me with. Besides, it's been a long day.”

“And it's going to be even longer tomorrow if you show up empty handed. You have no idea how cruel those girls can be. That show today with Margaret was nothing. Those girls are beasts.”

“Beasts?” November tucked her lips in. “Maybe a bit full of themselves, but beasts is an exaggeration. And really, April, I'm tired. I'll deal with it tomorrow—”

“No!” April stamped her foot. “You're dealing with it now and you don't have a choice.”

April snatched November's arm and pushed open the front doors.

Inside, the clocks in the entryway clicked, resonating up to the ceiling. But instead of going through the china room, April pulled November through the end of the entryway, past the two grandfather clocks beside the long stairwell, and pushed open a single door at the far end of the room. Behind the door, a thin, dark hallway stretched before her.

November squinted down the dark hall, where a bit of light glowed at the end. “What's down there?”

“You'll see.”

April led November down the dim hallway, where the velvet carpet beneath them was ripped and bunched up in the corners. The air dropped a few degrees and November tripped over her feet.

“April, where are we going?”

“In here.” April stopped at the end of the hall, where the single lightbulb hung above her face. The yellow light carved her features, deepening her soft bones. “Don’t be afraid.” She pushed open the plain wood door at the end.

Before her, a grand piano sat in the middle of the room, shiny and black, the lights above it reflecting on its surface. A set of drums were planted right behind it, with a harp off to the side. Along the walls, a variety of horned instruments hung, shiny and gold, sparkling in the light. Saxophone. Trumpet. French horn. Even a trombone. Woodwinds were off to the right. A clarinet. Oboe. Bassoon. Several flutes. Off to the left, a full set of string instruments were placed neatly in stands, from violins to violas to cellos to the double bass. She remembered these instruments from learning about them in the fifth grade. She was supposed to choose one for herself to play, but that’s when her uncle Mason had taken her to live with him after her parents had died.

“This is our musical room,” April said. “Every instrument you can think of is in here, and we’re going to try them all.”

November burst out in laughter, setting a hand on her chest. “Are you serious? I’m not going to make a fool of myself.”

“You’ll make an even bigger fool of yourself tomorrow if you don’t try! If you’re not prepared, it could be detrimental.”

“What, like I won’t get a passing grade? I’m okay with that. Better than tooting around on all these different horns feeling like an idiot.”

April shook her head, sighing. “You’re not understanding. And I know it’s not your fault, but...” She took a breath and faced her. “There has to be some desire somewhere in you that longs to be part of the arts—that calls to you. Nov, this world is amazing. When you tap into that space, that musical space, it takes you to a whole new world—another plane, like you’re removed from yourself completely. Don’t you feel anything?”

November made a face. “No.”

“Hmmm.” April’s brows tugged together before her eyes lit up. She rushed over to the piano and dug through the sheet music on top. “Maybe you’re a singer, then? I can play a few tunes. Should we try?”

November clasped her throat, edging backward. “No, no. Definitely not. Not a singer.”

“Are you sure? Your mother, she was a remarkable vocalist—”

“I said definitely not!”

April slammed the music down onto the piano. “You’ve got to give me something! Just *try*.”

Silence echoed in the closed-off room. The two stared at each other until November broke her gaze. She crept back in, walking closer to the woodwinds, running a finger down a bassoon.

“What is it that Vincent does?” November blurted out. “I mean, not that I care, but I’m just... curious.”

A stillness settled over April, and her eyebrows shot up. “Why do you want to know about Vincent?”

November drew another finger across a clarinet. “I don’t know. He creeped me out today. Something was off about him. So I was just curious what his talent was.”

“Vincent is... well, he’s a bother, really,” April said. “But he’s a genius. I haven’t heard anyone play the piano like him—compose songs like him since—” She broke off.

“Since...?”

“Your dad.”

November winced, wishing she hadn’t asked. There was her dad again. Why did every conversation have to lead to her dad? It hurt that he hadn’t been honest with her. Why did her parents have to leave her to this world they had lied about? And why lie? If music had been such a big part of their lives, why did they never tell her about it?

“Why is Vincent... I mean, what’s his story?” November asked instead.

“No one knows. Though it’s probably the same as most of us kids. You’d be surprised how similar most of us are. Parents dead or gone. Left alone.”

“That’s so sad.”

“Oh, don’t give Vincent sympathy. The guy is selfish. Only cares about himself. Does things his own way. Has no regard for authority. He doesn’t listen to Conroy. He does what he wants when he wants, and... well, let’s just say he’s dangerous.”

Dangerous?

November shook her head. “Why is it that he has a cane?” she asked instead.

“We’re *not* here to talk about Vincent,” April snapped. “Now we *have* to try out some instruments and find your true calling.”

November blew out a breath, wondering how her life had come to this. She had gone from the freedom of climbing and doing what she loved to being forced to become something she wasn’t. She wasn’t about to become a band geek. And besides, she wasn’t an idiot. She knew it took years of practice to develop the skills to become proficient at any one of these instruments. But still, she had nothing better to do than wallow in her room.

“Fine,” November said. “What do we try first?”

April clapped her hands together and jumped on the balls of her feet. “Yay! You won’t regret this, I promise!” Chirpy April was back. “Come, let’s try the strings first.”

November headed over to the string instruments on the far side of the room. She stepped up onto a wood platform where the instruments were delicately placed on stands. Light from the chandelier illuminated them on their glossy surfaces, and November waited to see if she felt a connection to any of them—if any of them *called* to her.

“Let’s try the violin first,” April said. She picked up a bow and handed it to her. “This here is how you hold it—with the wrists straight and the fingers curved just so.” April then picked up the violin and set it in her hands.

November had never held a violin before—or any instrument for that matter, but she’d seen them played, of course. She awkwardly placed the instrument under her chin and stretched it out before her. She lifted the bow up to the strings, and pressed down, drawing the bow long and hard along the surface.

An awful screech rung in the air and November jerked back. April winced and quickly took the instrument from her hands.

“Definitely not the violin,” April said.

“But... I only tried it once, how do you know? Shouldn’t I try it again?”

“Oh, trust me, you’d know on your first try whether it was your calling or not.”

November wiped under her nose and handed her the bow. “Okay. What next?”

“Let’s try the other string instruments and then we’ll move on to the brass if we have to.”

November stole herself, agreeing. She might as well try. She attempted each instrument from the viola to the cello, to the ginormous double bass. Each time she placed the bow to the strings, a horrid wrenching sounded from her efforts. After the strings, they tried the brass, but it was all the same. A pathetic splutter that sounded like a dying animal tooted from each horn, ending with April cringing and pulling the instrument from her hands. Even the harp, which anyone could make sound beautiful, sounded like a dissonant cacophony of notes that had no rhyme or reason.

With the woodwinds, November couldn’t figure out the reeds, and she ended up not playing half of them. She finally agreed to singing, which would never be attempted again. It was useless. She didn’t have some hidden talent. She wouldn’t fit in with the kids at school. She was an embarrassment.

When it came time for the piano, April paused. November noticed her change in demeanor, and froze alongside her. They both stared down at the piano, its black surface shiny in the dim light. The piano was her father’s instrument. It was her legacy. If she had a prayer at anything, it would be the piano.

“Come on,” April said. “Just sit on the bench. Don’t be afraid.”

November slowly moved up to the magnificent stringed structure. She stepped onto the small wooden platform that surrounded the instrument, her heels clicking in the silence, until she lowered herself down onto the bench. The black and white keys before her were glossy and bright, and she ran her fingers down the smooth surface.

“How do I... I don’t know what to do,” November said. Her fingertips trembled.

April sat down on the bench next to her and placed her hand on hers. “Just listen to your heart. Place your fingers and just play. It was how it was with me and the flute. Music just... happened.”

November inwardly groaned. She’d done nothing but embarrass herself for the last hour. It would be the same with this. Just because her father was a brilliant pianist didn’t mean *she* would be. But why did it suddenly matter to her? It shouldn’t. She was only trying these dumb instruments so she appeased April and proved to herself she was talentless, but why did she suddenly care?

Maybe a tiny part of her wanted to be connected with her dad. Even though he had died, lied to her about his life, she still wanted to have that link with him. She thought of the last time she saw him. He'd gripped her shoulders and put his face up close to hers.

Just stay here, he had said. Whatever you hear, just stay in the house. If something happens, your uncle... he'll come for you.

Her Mom and Dad had quickly rushed from their home, her mother full of tears, with one last glance to her. The door had slammed shut, and November had stood in silence until her uncle had come for her.

She never saw them again.

"Okay," November said, rolling her shoulders back. "Here we go."

November shifted on the piano bench, gently placing her hands on the keyboard, before she pressed.

A soft clunk escaped from the large instrument. She winced, hands shaking, and tried again. She ran her fingers down a few more notes, playing them at random, waiting for something miraculous to happen—a song to fly from her fingertips—but nothing happened. Each time she pressed a key, nothing but different pitches resonated in the room, clashing with each other.

November pulled her hands back. Sweat beaded on her brow and her body quaked. Her fingertips trembled over the keys, and her pulse beat loud in her ears as the echo of the pitches diminished.

She'd failed.

April's face fell. "Oh, November...I'm so—"

"Don't," November said. "We tried."

She got up and left the room.

Eight

EYES WIDE SHUT

THE NEXT DAY, November sat in Conroy's classroom, parked on a squishy sofa next to April. She picked at a loose thread in her sweater, unable to focus on Conroy's words. She still wore her turtleneck and black pants, refusing to wear the long black Issue like April or the short skirt and collared shirt that Margaret and the other girls wore.

She had her long auburn hair down today, hoping to hide her face from any embarrassment she might encounter. She still didn't have a talent. She would never fit in here. But so far, Conroy had kept them engaged in a conversation about augmented and diminished chords and how you could use them to modulate keys.

Whatever chords were. And modulation and key signatures. She had no idea what he was talking about.

"You okay?" April leaned over and whispered.

November watched Conroy teach, ignoring her. No, she wasn't okay.

Across the room, Margaret had her eyes glued to November, a puzzled look on her face. Claire leaned over and whispered something in her ear, and Margaret's mouth flicked upward. November darted her gaze away, not wanting to know what Margaret was thinking. She was probably plotting her death.

"Can any of you tell me what a Picardy third is?" Conroy asked. November jolted to the conversation. Conroy adjusted his wired glasses and paced across the front of the room. "Anyone?"

The class shifted in their seats, either looking down or out the window.

“Come on, someone has to know. A Picardy third. It’s used in many Baroque pieces.”

Silence stretched.

The curtain parted in the corner, and Vincent walked in. With his cane in hand, he limped across the edge of the room, keeping his head forward, not giving the class or Conroy any notice. His jaw was tight, the hollows in his cheeks more pronounced in the morning light. The students all turned and watched silently.

“What about you, Vincent?” Conroy asked. “Care to explain a Picardy third?”

Vincent kept forward, moving toward the back of the classroom.

Conroy flexed his fingers before digging them into his pockets. “I’m not sure if you heard me, Vincent. Please explain to the class what a Picardy third is. Or is there a more pressing matter that you have?”

Vincent paused, and a cold chill settled over the room. He turned, and his dark eyes locked on Conroy, a muscle twitching in his cheek.

“If these imbeciles don’t know that a Picardy third is when a major third is introduced in the final tonic chord of a piece then you have no prayer with training these students, Conroy. Besides, I’ve never been a fan of Picardy thirds. Picardy thirds imply that things resolve. That there is a major resolution after a song of sadness. You can’t fix everything with one note—with one simple note raising a half-step. We all know minor songs are more beautiful anyways.”

Vincent continued to the back of the classroom where he retrieved a book, then slowly limped back to the entryway. After he disappeared behind the curtain, everyone stayed silent, eyes sliding to each other.

“That’ll be it for today, everyone,” Conroy said. “Separate and go practice.” Conroy motioned to November. “November, a word?”

She groaned. Not again. She was sick of these talks. She didn’t want to be lectured again with how she was going to *find her talent*. Both April and Conroy needed to let it go. She walked slowly, passing Margaret, and Margaret slid a piece of paper into her hand on the way.

“For you to read later,” she said and smirked.

November glanced down at the white crisp note in her palm and shoved it into her pocket.

The room finally emptied, and Conroy took off his glasses and smiled. His green eyes matched his T-shirt. “I heard you practicing yesterday with

April.” His mouth curved downward. “And yes, it was awful.”

November blew out a heavy breath. “I told you, I don’t care about this place. Just send me back to a normal school.”

Conroy pursed his lips, tapping his glasses on his chin. “Why don’t you hang out with me for the rest of the day? I can show you around the rest of the school. Get you more comfortable.”

“Comfort isn’t going to help me. I don’t know *why* you think I’m suddenly going to develop a talent, but it’s ridiculous.”

“Come on, some fresh air will do you some good.”

Conroy motioned her out the exit and she sighed. If life weren’t bad enough, now she had to be chauffeured around and be shown how perfect this school was—just like the perfect kids inside.

Outside, gray clouds stretched across the sky, muting the colors of the landscape. Everything was dim, overcast, the shadows extensions from the trees.

“The gardens are amazing,” Conroy said, jogging down the front steps. “Let me show you.”

November followed after him to the side of the massive building, peering up at the large spires, as they circled around rows of pillars. The sidewalk was well kept, clean, the grass trimmed, and again, she imagined herself taking a tour of a palace in Russia, not of her school.

At the back of the building, a maze of garden stretched out before her, rows of sidewalks cutting in and out of perfectly trimmed flowers of every color. Stone benches were tucked in little nooks along the walkways, and a large cobblestone gazebo in the center. A gigantic fountain sat right before her, water spurting from a statue—a lady dressed in a robe holding a harp, her stone legs extended behind her. The sound of water rushing made November’s shoulders relax a little.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?”

“It is.” She couldn’t keep her eyes off the sight.

“Our kids will come out here to sit and think, practice their skills on their own time, or even just socialize. I know I used to love sitting in that gazebo as a young child.”

November eyed Conroy closely. “What is *your* talent? What is it that you do?”

Conroy’s mouth quirked upward. “I wasn’t lucky enough to have one focus like everyone else. We’ll just leave it at that.”

November creased her brow and looked over the garden again. “I wish your garden at home looked like this. Why is it that yours is all dead and unkept?”

Conroy ran a hand through his hair, and his eyes skittered away. “Let me show you the study hall.” He marched toward the stairs up the backside of the school.

“O-okay.”

November slid her hand on the cool metal railing and watched the gardens disappear as she stepped back inside the mansion. They entered a hall, large and empty, with black and white tiled floors, and black and white tiger skins hanging on the sides of the walls. Along the walls, dozens of white curtains hung every few feet. A unique chandelier hung from the ceiling—a wood chandelier with real candles, and antlers that jutted from the legs of the structure.

In the middle of the room, Roderick stood long and tall, his back to them.

“Roderick,” Conroy said, his voice echoing off the high ceiling.

Roderick slowly spun, his bony fingers linked together, his coat’s collar wrapped high around his neck. Like last time, Roderick’s midnight hair swept back in a black shine, and he was dressed impeccably, like someone from the eighteenth century would be, with the cravat around his throat.

“Just monitoring the students’ progress,” Roderick said, and he motioned to the curtains.

“Each kid has their own room to practice,” Conroy said. “As will you.”

November tilted her head. “Practice? But... I don’t hear anything. It’s completely silent.” If the students were practicing just beyond the curtains, it would be a cacophony of noise right now.

Conroy and Roderick exchanged looks.

“Has she seen the ballroom yet?” Roderick asked. His lips curled upward into a smile. He didn’t wait for an answer before he said, “Never mind. I’ll take November to see the ballroom.”

Roderick’s long legs drew him forward and he walked with his chin high and his chest puffed out. His shiny black shoes clicked on the glossy floor and November glanced back at Conroy.

“Go ahead,” Conroy said. “I should check on the students anyway.”

November kept her body rigid as she tentatively moved toward Roderick. Shivers rippled down her arms. She had visions of him flattening

her up against a wall and sucking her blood.

She followed Roderick down the hall without a word, walking in silence, just the two of them breathing together. She analyzed the detail as she walked, from the antique pieces on the tables and walls, from clocks to pictures to plants. Everything was crisp, pristine, bright. Large open windows and curtains that led to every room.

Roderick turned corner after corner and went down a flight of stairs until they entered a shadowy hallway, cut off from the natural light. Pillars still framed the sides, but shadows stretched in the corners. Roderick stopped, and November nearly rammed into him.

Out before her was a pair of double doors.

The first doors she'd seen in this place.

In the dim light, Roderick's pale skin nearly glowed. His jawbones moved back and forth as he took November in, his black eyes sparkling.

"I have a feeling, you might... feel at home here."

He pushed the doors open.

Nine

HIGH EXPOSURE

THE INSIDE of the ballroom was the most magnificent thing November had ever seen. She blinked several times, touching a hand to her chest.

The floor was made of pure glass, with a golden floor that was layered underneath. The walls were made up of only mirrors, and six white and gold chandeliers hung evenly throughout the space, reflecting back and forth through the mirrors, as if going on for eternity. Diamonds glittered and spun around the room, making her dizzy. A solid gold piano sat in the corner, its smooth surface sparkling in the light. She couldn't believe what she was witnessing. It was unworldly.

Roderick pressed his fingers into her back and pushed her inside. "In you go, sweetheart."

November crept into the space, feeling as if every molecule of her skin were alive. It was like a fire had ignited and was spreading through her veins. She slowly walked around, taking in the diamonds as they twinkled a million times forever through the mirrors, and she resisted the urge to stretch out her arms and spin. She wanted nothing more than to fill every inch of this space, which made no sense at all.

She felt as if she were awake for the first time in her life—every part of her brain firing on all cylinders, all of her senses alive. She kept her eyes stretched open and wide, not wanting to blink, fearful that she'd miss a single moment of standing in this space.

A shadow passed to her left, and she spun around, her skin itching, like a foreign object had wedged its way in her throat. Something, or someone,

had disrupted the feeling that had settled over her.

Vincent moved into the doorway, before stepping into the room.

“Roderick,” Vincent said, and paused. He locked gazes with November and his eyes narrowed. “What is *she* doing in here?”

November tightened her gaze, suddenly protective of the room. For no reason that made sense, she felt like it belonged to her, and Vincent being here threatened her property.

“Me? What are *you* doing here?” November asked.

“I’m here to use the piano,” he said tightly. “Like I always do. It’s my piano. My space. Not yours.”

Roderick observed the exchange with amusement on his lips. He tapped his fingers along his folded arms before he said, “He’s right. You should be getting back, November. Let’s leave Vincent to his practicing.”

November wrapped her arms across her stomach. She didn’t want to leave. She *couldn’t* leave. This was the first place she had ever felt okay. It was like her depression had left. In all her life, she didn’t know what it was like to breath, and she knew it didn’t make any sense, but this place had struck something within her that had awakened her to the point where she would never be the same again. She leveled her gaze with Vincent’s and darkened her expression.

“Fine,” November said.

But she knew she would be back.

That evening, November paced inside her bedroom, trying to get Vincent and the ballroom out of her head. She knew she shouldn’t obsess over him and her experience in there, but she couldn’t help it. Maybe it was her disease. Depression could sneak up on her if she let her guard down. She needed to consistently be mindful of her mental state and how she was feeling. She tried to decipher if Vincent and the ballroom was really something she should obsess over, or if it was a normal human reaction to not stop thinking about it. Mania manifested in many ways, and one way it could creep up on her was delusional thinking and not seeing reality clearly.

Her stomach rumbled as she paced, wishing she hadn’t declined dinner with April and Conroy earlier, but she’d needed to be alone. She needed to

meditate. She needed physical activity.

The thought of climbing sent a pang through her chest, and she knew she had to get out and get some air. She itched to train for the comp next week, but she didn't know how it was possible. Her uncle had always supported her climbing, taken her to her competitions, but she highly doubted Conroy would drop everything and help support her dream. He was too insistent on turning her into some musical prodigy.

November glanced over at her backpack of climbing gear on the floor then slid her gaze over to the window next to her bed. She paused, thinking, taking in the tree that grew through her wall, then back to the window. The need to escape was too strong. There was a mountain right next to the home—there had to be climbing in it. She rushed over to her backpack and strapped it over her shoulders. Heart pounding, she threw open the window and stuck her head outside.

The massive tree grew right up alongside the house, and November eyed the distance from the window to the branches. She'd easily be able to climb down. With a quick breath, she eased herself onto the ledge of the window, reached out, and gripped the bark, her fingers digging into the rough texture. With a push, she leapt from the window onto the tree and began to scale downward, her feet pressing into the rough grooves of the trunk. Conroy and April would never know.

On the ground, she crunched on a pile of crusted leaves, and she peered upward, smiling at her escape. She wiped her mouth, releasing a long sigh.

A small pathway cut through damp grass on her right, and November began to head in that direction. She stayed close to the house, where vines grew up along the walls. This area of the land was shaded, and the cool air spread goosebumps over her arms.

At the end of the path, November peered over past the lake and up into the mountainside. There had to be some boulders up there to climb. She hitched her backpack higher on her shoulders and started off the path and into a grassy field before it disappeared into the forest. The ground became dirt and November climbed over tree roots and small rocks. Birds whistled in the trees, filling the air, as fresh pine tickled her nose. She needed this. Her mental stability was starving for it.

She made her way up the mountainside searching for large boulders, certain there would be a good crag in here somewhere.

As she rounded one more bend, she saw it. A big slab of granite tucked in the forest screaming to be climbed. Several other boulders surrounded it, but it was the large one in the middle that called to her. It was higher than a normal boulder problem, and she didn't have a crash pad to catch her if she fell, but as she approached the rock and analyzed the grooves and juts of the texture, she knew she could do this.

After slipping on her climbing shoes, she shoved her hands into her chalk bag and peered up at the beast again. Bouldering didn't require ropes, which was why she had always preferred it. It was tedious to clip in every few seconds, but bouldering gave her the freedom she liked.

November placed her hands on the cool granite, little bits of rock poking her fingertips. She studied the pattern to the top again, picturing each move, before she gripped the first hand hold. With a toe jab on the right, she pressed herself off the ground and her muscles immediately flexed. Strain tightened in her tendons and she reached her left hand forward. Securing another hold, she found good footing on the right and brought her weight in to the rock. She dug her knee inward, giving her the reach needed to find another good hold above her to the left. Pain bit through her fingertips, and sweat started to trickle from her brow, but she pushed through, leaping and catching another hold to the right.

November paused and glanced at the last move to the top. A small dyno jump to the crux, then she'd flash it. She thought of the hard ground underneath her, knowing if she fell, it wouldn't be good, but she straightened her arms and pressed her legs down, staring at the hold above her.

With her hips in and her grip strong, she pressed deeper before she jumped. She let go of the rock for a split second before her fingers hit the next hold. Her fingertips dug into the granite, power ricocheting through her arms, but she overshot it. Her face hit the rock and her fingers slipped. Her body scraped along the huge boulder and she disconnected, falling backwards.

Pain sliced through her shoulder as she hit hard ground, her teeth jarring together. She lay there for a moment before the real pain set in. Excruciating and deep, her right arm was tucked underneath her at an odd angle. November cried out, unable to hold back the sound.

A rustle came from the bushes, and someone emerged just to her left. The person hovered on the edge of the trees, watching. "Look at you.

You're a mess."

November paused. She knew that voice. It was the guy from the hallway the other night. The "family friend" of the Huntingtons. Embarrassment swept through her and she clenched her eyes shut. This moment couldn't get any worse.

"No no no," she said. "Just leave me alone. I'm fine." Black spots floated in her vision, and she knew she'd hit her head hard, too. She continued to cradle her arm.

Leaves crunched and the guy knelt down in front of her. With the sun behind him, she couldn't see his face, just his shaded figure.

"You dislocated your shoulder."

"Oh, so you're a doctor?" she hissed out. "I said I'm fine. Go take your snark somewhere else."

His silhouette rocked back. "Think you're all that, don't you? You're just like your father." He was silent for a moment before he sighed. "But I'm not going to leave you here like a wounded animal. I need you to sit up." He reached and wrapped one hand behind her back lifting her to sitting position.

"What? No!" November started, and pain shot through her again.

Her vision blurred and her stomach wrenched. The back of her head throbbed. She still couldn't see him.

"I'm going to stretch your arm out a bit, okay?" he said. "Then I've got to position it at the right angle and push it back and in. Hard. It's going to hurt. A lot."

November shook her head. "No. Don't. You're going to make it worse. Just take me to a doctor." Tears gathered in the corners of her eyes, and she wanted to wipe them away, but couldn't.

"You ready?"

She shook her head. "I said no!"

"Alright. Here we go. And—"

He shoved her arm up and in. Pain exploded everywhere and she cried out. She curled over, barely breathing, but after a moment, the pain started to ebb. She let out a relieved laugh.

"How did you know how to do that?" she asked, shaking.

She sat up, finally wiped her eyes, and her vision cleared. She searched for her rescuer's face, but he had already left, his back to her, his long figure disappearing back into the forest.

“I want you out,” he called back to her. “Get out of the house as soon as possible.”

And then he left.

Ten

TUNNEL VISION

“MELODIC. CHROMATIC. HARMONIC.” Conroy wrote the words down onto the chalkboard in front of him. “Who would like to come up to the front of the class and demonstrate these scales?”

Bright light filtered in from the tall open windows, fresh air circulating inside. The class stretched out on their sofas and squishy chairs, each holding their instruments, the room silent.

“Anyone?” Conroy asked again. He smoothed down his tight T-shirt, tucked into his jeans.

“How about November?” Margaret asked, her eyes sliding to hers. A smile played on her lips. “I don’t see her instrument, but I know we’d all love to hear her play—or sing. What *is* it that you do, by the way?”

November kept her eyes locked with hers, staying silent.

“Come on,” Margaret taunted. “You haven’t done a *thing* since you got here. The humble act was fine in the beginning, but now it’s time to show off.” Her smile widened. Amelia and Claire sat next to her, grinning.

“No-vem-ber,” she chanted. “No-vem-ber.”

Amelia and Claire joined. “No-vem-ber.”

The class chanted with them. “No-vem-ber!”

The chanting heightened, and heat rose up November’s neck. The classroom spun around her, and their voices rung in the air, growing, shouting. She shut her eyes, willing it to stop.

“I’ll do it,” April said loudly. November snapped her eyes open.

The room silenced.

“I’ll demonstrate,” April said again. She rose from her chair.

Margaret sat back in her seat, still smirking. Conroy ran a hand over his face. A few snickers broke out and April lifted her chin.

“Fine, come forward,” Conroy said. He looked ashen, like he hadn’t slept a wink last night.

April moved to the front of the classroom, her flute pressed up against her chest. Margaret coughed, and Amelia and Claire burst into giggles. April faced the class, planting her thin legs out to the sides of her. She raised the small instrument to her lips.

“Let’s start with chromatic,” Conroy said. “Go ahead.”

April began, and started playing the notes up the scale, each note rising only a half-step all the way up to the tonic. April played it seamlessly, her fingers quick and smooth, the sound pure and resonant.

Margaret coughed again. More giggles sounded.

“Good,” Conroy said, addressing the class. “I want you all to practice the chromatic scale today in each key. Now, on to the harmonic.” He waved April forward.

Margaret coughed again, this time, pretending to gag, her hands up to her neck. The kids around her chuckled under their breaths, louder this time. November glanced around, confused.

April played up the scale effortlessly, the notes clear, raising up the seventh to finish out the harmonic scale.

“Perfect,” Conroy said to the class. “Like the chromatic, I want you all to practice the harmonic in each key. April, the next.”

This time, most of the kids were quietly laughing, their hands up to their throats, pretending to choke, all except for Ty, who glared at his classmates, his light brown eyebrows pushed together. November sat on the edge of her seat, waiting for Conroy to do something.

“Now on to the melodic,” Conroy said. “Go ahead, April.”

April placed the instrument to her lips again, but her arms began to shake. Her eyes stayed locked on the kids before her, the color draining from her face.

“April, go ahead,” Conroy said again.

April nodded, replanting her feet into the floor, but the minute April blew into the instrument, a horrible toot sounded into the room. Her eyes widened and she quickly pulled the instrument away. The class broke out into even more snickers and April stepped backward. Conroy motioned her forward again, but April shook her head.

The choking sounds in the classroom heightened, followed by loud laughter.

“She always chokes,” Margaret said, chuckling. She wiped the tears from her eyes.

“Not even the Heimlich could help you!” another boy said.

April clutched her flute in her hands, tears building behind her eyes. November stared Conroy down, waiting, hoping he’d stick up for his sister, but he only ran a hand through his hair, ducking his head.

April crumpled, tears escaping, and she bolted from the room, the white curtain swishing behind her.

November jumped to her feet, facing the class. “What is wrong with you people? And what is wrong with *you*?” she yelled to Conroy.

“It’s your fault!” Margaret snickered. “You let her take your place. And why is that by the way? Are you as talentless as April? I’m beginning to wonder.”

November gritted her teeth hard, wanting to retort, but instead, she quickly exited the room, the curtain sliding past her face. Heat pounded behind her eyes, and she wanted to go back in and tell Margaret off, but she had to make sure April was okay.

April sat on a stone bench down the hallway, her head in her hands. She looked so small, her shiny black hair covering her face.

“April.” November quietly walked toward her.

“Leave me alone.” Her soft sobs echoed through the hall.

“Are you okay?”

April smoothed back her hair as she lifted her head. Tears stained her face. “No, I’m not alright. Those people are horrible. They’ve *always* been horrible.”

November carefully sat down next to her. “Why did they do that? What do they have against you?”

April sniffed, wiping her nose. “I don’t know. I’ve been a joke forever. Back when I was ten, I totally choked on a piece of music I played during the winter recital—we used to have recitals before we...” She coughed. “Anyway, I forgot my entire concerto. I stood there on stage like a fool as the pianist played the accompaniment. I was frozen to the floor. They’ve never let it down. That... and my father.”

“Your father?”

She nodded. “He didn’t live up to the Huntington standards,” she said. “He was never revered like your father was, he was always in his shadow. And things were only made worse after... after a terrible mistake he made. And now they’ve taken it out on me.”

“What terrible mistake?”

April shook her head. “You wouldn’t understand. Not now.”

“Try me.”

April continued to shake her head, more tears falling down her face.

November rubbed her neck, a headache creeping up the back of her head. “Listen, April. I don’t know what happened to your father, but it seems like people put too many expectations on him—and you. It doesn’t matter what your father did, and it doesn’t matter that you made a mistake when you were a kid. Your self worth shouldn’t be wrapped up in a hobby or your reputation. Music isn’t who you are—it’s just what you do.” Therapy had taught her that.

“No!” April sprung to her feet. “You don’t understand, there’s so much more to it you don’t understand. *Everything* rides on it. Everything—”

November peered up at her, brow tight. “No, April. Everything doesn’t ride on it. And the sooner you get that in your head, the sooner you won’t care what those people think and the sooner you’ll be happy.”

April glared at her between the curtain of her dark hair, her eyes red. “I’ve got to go practice.” She turned and marched away.

November slowly stood, watching her disappear around the corner. She couldn’t believe what she’d just witnessed. These people here were obsessed with themselves and their music. All of them, including April. They were so uptight, and they seriously had their priorities messed up.

“Nice speech,” a deep voice said.

November jerked, startled, and spun around. Vincent stood down the hall from her, cane in hand, his head cocked to the side. He studied her with his dark eyes, the shadows highlighting the deep grooves in his face. “You really believe all that you just said?”

November tilted her head, mimicking him. “Yeah, I do. These people here need some serious help. Including you.” She clamped her mouth shut. She couldn’t believe she’d just said that.

“Hmmm,” he said, and his mouth curved up in a smile. “Not afraid to speak your mind. It’s almost refreshing.” He paused before he said, “I’m Vincent, by the way.”

“I know. You kicked me out of the ballroom yesterday.”

“I remember.”

“So why are you introducing yourself?”

“I wasn’t sure if you knew the name of the person who kicked you out.”

“Or the name of the person who doesn’t give a crap about anyone?”

Vincent’s eyes tightened. “You don’t know a thing about me.”

Silence settled between them, and Vincent shifted his weight, his knuckles white on his cane.

November eyed him carefully. “So why don’t you take classes with Conroy and the rest of the kids? You’re too good for us measly folk?”

He tilted his head to the other side. “Perhaps. Perhaps it’s a waste of my time. Or perhaps I don’t like people. Or perhaps I haven’t found the right person to study with.” He held still, silent, waiting for her to speak.

Small pringles erupted down her arms.

“Is your shoulder feeling better?” he asked.

November blinked. “How did you... Why do you ask that?”

He motioned to her shoulder. “You’re cradling your arm. It’s obvious.”

“Oh.” She glanced down at her hand supporting her elbow. “It’s okay, thanks.”

“Good.”

She nodded.

He blew out a breath. “The ballroom is mine. You need to find another place to practice with... whatever it is that you do. Have a good day, November.” He lifted his cane and turned, slowly limping back down the hall, before he disappeared around the corner and left.

Eleven

LURKING FEAR

NOVEMBER COULDN'T FOCUS for the rest of the day. Vincent. The ballroom. Their encounter in the hallway. His smirk. His dark presence. And his curiosity about her shoulder.

The ballroom is mine.

She knew she shouldn't let a guy get in her head, but Vincent scared her—intimidated her—and she could never let him know that. He stomped over Conroy and all the kids at this school, and she wasn't about to let him do the same thing to her. She had grown up with guys thinking they were better than her in climbing, but she had always shown them that she was strong. She needed to stick up to Vincent—outsmart him somehow—do anything to get back in that ballroom to figure out *why* she had had such an intense experience in there.

During lunch, April was nowhere to be found. November sat at her table in the corner, bits of sunshine floating through the windows, sparkling on the crystal glasses. Margaret, Amelia, and Claire sat down at the table with her, all of their hair in braids today, intricate swirls around their heads.

“Mind if we sit?” Margaret asked, smirking, as she planted herself down. Like before, the three unfolded their napkins perfectly in sync, like they were tied together with strings.

“I don't know, are you going to start making choking sounds?” November asked.

Margaret snorted, holding in a smile. “You shouldn't hang out with her, you know. You're better than that. Your father got it right from cutting

Clifton out of his life.” She tucked a loose piece of her red hair back into her braid.

“You don’t know a thing about my father.” November apparently didn’t either, but she didn’t want Margaret to know that.

Margaret sat back, eyeing her. “We’re not here to fight.”

“That’s going to be a problem if you keep attacking April.”

Margaret’s expression didn’t change. “Did you get our note?”

“Your what?” November’s lips tightened together. “Oh.” She had forgotten all about the note Margaret had handed her yesterday. Her fingers slipped into her pocket and she pulled it out.

“Don’t bother reading it. I’ll just tell you.” Margaret set her elbows on the table. “We’ve decided to forgive you—for being April’s cousin. Things are going to change here pretty soon, and we want you on our side.”

November twisted her lips. “Change? What do you mean, change?”

“Don’t pretend you don’t know what I’m talking about.” She leaned in closer and lifted her brows.

November internally groaned. “Listen, Margaret, I’m not sure why you get a high off of making yourself better than everyone, but I don’t want to hear it. Either talk or let me eat my lunch in peace.”

Margaret frowned. “You’re serious? You’re going to pretend you have no idea what...” She broke off and whispered, “It’s in your *name*. You can’t pretend that bad things aren’t going to happen.”

This time, November held silent.

“I mean, think of the past,” Margaret continued. “It’s going to tell our future.”

November tried to keep her face blank as irritation itched underneath her skin. These vague statements were beginning to wear on her.

Margaret went on, “The deaths are going to start again.”

November didn’t know what she was talking about, but she decided to play along.

“Oh, you think?” she said. “And... which deaths in particular are you talking about?”

Margaret rolled her eyes. “What other deaths? The ones from a few years ago, of course. Trevor Jackson, Marybeth Humphrey, and Louise Fitzgerald were all found *dead* here at this school. All of them... well, you know, like your parents...”

November stopped, and it was as if a jolt went through her. “My parents? You mean these kids...”

Margaret’s brow creased. “Were all found with their throats ripped out? Yeah. Has no one ever told you? Of course someone has told you...” Her brows pushed further down.

“No, I knew...” She coughed. “I just... forgot.”

Margaret eyed her warily, though she seemed appeased. “Then I’m sure you haven’t forgotten the most famous death of all—January Hill.”

“Right.” November swallowed. “January. Sure.”

Margaret’s eyes darkened. “You have no idea about any of this, do you? Did your parents not tell you a thing? What else do you not know?”

“Just tell me about January.” November’s lips flattened into a thin line.

Margaret set her chin. “She heard the music.”

“And?”

“And it was the late eighteen hundreds, and we all know that hearing the music is the most frightening thing that can ever happen to a person.”

November tucked her mouth inward, before reality rushed in. Margaret was playing her. She must’ve known about her parents’ deaths, and now she was making a fool of her—trying to scare her. “Wow. Terrifying. She heard *the music*. Isn’t this a *music* school?”

Margaret’s forehead cinched. “Seriously? You would make a *joke* of this? January died a torturous death of being trapped in her mind, stuck, feeling as if her mind was being torn apart one molecule at a time until her body gave out. You of all people should be respectful, understanding death. And you of all people should be most afraid...”

November slammed her hands on the table. “Is that a threat?”

Margaret’s eyes widened before they narrowed. “No, but it’s the truth. Which is why you should join us. Without us, you’re going to end up like January. Six feet under and *dead*.”

November stood abruptly, banging her knee on the inside of the table. “You know what, Margaret, you’re a bully. I don’t know why you’ve chosen April and me to be put on your hit list, but it’s way uncool. April may not know how to defend herself, but I do. Leave me alone. I don’t want anything to do with you.”

She shoved her chair into the table and spun around, unable to believe the extent of their cruelty. Making up deaths just to threaten her. Making

fun of April because she'd made a mistake. November stormed out of the dining hall, leaving their shocked faces behind.

A knock sounded on November's bedroom door and she peered down from her position in the tree. She had started to find comfort in climbing the tree in her room, lounging on one long branch at the top. She knew it was silly, but she had to climb somehow—even if it was this tree. She glared at the door and yelled, "Go away!"

The door creaked open and Conroy stuck his head inside. His hair was ruffled like he had been pulling at it all day.

"Can we speak for a moment?"

November sighed, leaning her head back on a branch. Not another talk.

Conroy stepped inside, shutting the door quietly. "I wanted to thank you for what you did for April today. For sticking up for her."

"Somebody had to," November mumbled.

He dropped his head, running a hand over the back of his hair. "I get that you're mad. I would be too if I didn't understand. But April needs to be grounded. She lives in a bubble—in a pretend world. And she needs to wake up and find the reality in her life."

November shifted her position in the tree, eyeing Conroy. "April isn't as innocent as you think. She was *hurt* today. She just chooses to see the good in the world. She chooses to find happiness where you clearly don't care."

Conroy kept his face calm, expressionless. "Perhaps."

"What is it that you really want to talk about?" November asked. It couldn't all be about April.

"There's a lot I need to speak with you about. I'm just not sure where to start."

November waited for him talk, she wasn't going to press him anymore. She was tired, and sick of everyone dancing around her. Margaret's vague statements that day still ate at her, and now Conroy was doing it too.

A soft screech sounded outside the dark window, and Conroy's head snapped up. Wind

whipped outside, and the house shook. The lights flickered and the chandelier on the ceiling swayed. November gripped onto the tree branches,

stopping her from falling.

“What’s happening?” she asked, tightening her grip.

The screeching heightened, the grating sound piercing her ears.

Conroy’s eyes widened, his face going pale. “Unbelievable.”

“What? What is it?”

Conroy faced her head on. He lifted his hands out in front of him.

“Keep calm. It’ll be okay. I’ll get rid of them.”

“What? Rid of who?” A deep rumbling came from the wooden floors.

“Just stay here, okay? Don’t leave this room!”

The house rocked sideways again, creaking, before it rocked to the other side. November held in a scream, as Conroy disappeared out the door.

“What?” November cried. “Conroy!”

“Don’t leave the room!” he called out again.

November started to climb down the tree, the howling outside screaming in her ears, and her feet hit the cool floor. She stood panting, facing the doorway. The house gave another large creak, bending to the side, and she cried out again, slipping sideways, trying to gain her footing. She couldn’t believe what was happening. Houses didn’t do this. Houses didn’t move like it was a living thing.

Another howl sounded, and November wasn’t sure if it came from outside or *inside* the house. The lights flickered again, the floorboards shaking, until the lights shut off completely.

Everything went quiet, and the house stilled. Silence pounded.

She stood with her feet rooted to the floor. Her breaths heaved fast, and she kept her eyes locked on the empty doorway. Something was wrong. And she hated that Conroy had left her. Just like her parents. Just like her uncle. Everyone always left her.

She waited in silence for a time, nothing but the beating of her heart for company. The sides of her vision pulsed, and she finally forced herself to move forward.

“Conroy?” she asked, although she knew he wasn’t there. She made it to the door and gripped the doorframe, peeking her head outside. “Conroy?”

Then she heard it.

Slow and haunting, a melody drifted on the air, coming from somewhere deep within the house. It was dissonant, but lovely, a soft tinkling, carrying through the hallways. She’d heard this melody before. Out in the forest—the day her uncle told her she needed to leave home.

The melody heightened, and a strange sensation overcame her. Her nerves dissipated, and her arms fell to her sides. She edged forward, straining to hear the sound.

In the back of her mind, she knew it wasn't wise to wander the hallways to find the source of the sound, especially after what had just happened, but something about it called to her—spoke to her—just like the ballroom had. An overpowering source in her *needed* to know where it was coming from. She vaguely thought of the tale Margaret had told her earlier that day—about January “hearing the music” and how it led to her death— but she shut the thought down. It was a ridiculous story. This wasn't the same music.

She crept through the dark hallway, running a hand along the wall, guiding her toward the stairs. She kept her eyes wide open in the dark, listening to the haunting melody as it continued to weave its way into her heart. One by one, she descended each step, the music calling to her, almost as if her mind were in a daze, but she didn't care. All that mattered was that she reached the sound.

On the main level, she wandered through the halls as the music grew, following the melody, but she couldn't locate it. It almost seemed... out of reach. Her heart started to race that she wouldn't be able to find it. But she continued onward, moving through room after room until she ended in the entryway. The music seemed to echo in this space, filling it up. The clocks ticked in time with the music, and November spun around, the moonlight falling through the sky window at the top of the ceiling.

Without knowing why or how, her feet began to move underneath her. She stretched her arms out to the sides of her, her fingertips long and delicate. She lifted her chin at a perfect angle as the music carried her away.

Her body waltzed, dancing, as she drew her feet around. Step two three, step two three, around in circles across the floor, spinning perfectly in time with the music. Her footwork was precise—flawless—and she carried herself with a grace that was almost unearthly. Around and around in the moonlight she danced, with the clocks as her rhythm, the music beneath her, filling her, and she felt a joy she had never felt before.

Her feet and legs began to move in different ways—making the steps more complicated. Twisting and turning, playing with the tempo, quick and slow, her arms starting to stretch outward in different directions through the space, until it stopped.

The music came to an abrupt halt.

November paused, and the lights flicked on. Conroy stood in the entryway.

“Well, I’ll be...” he said. “You know your calling. November, you’re a dancer. The most exquisite ballroom dancer I have ever seen.”

Twelve

DANCER.

She couldn't be a dancer.

She was a rock climber. She wasn't graceful, she was powerful. But the music didn't lie. The music had carried her away, transported her to another place—filled her being completely—giving her a sense of belonging. And it manifested in dance.

No wonder the ballroom had called to her.

Uneven footsteps sounded from down the hallway, and Vincent hobbled into the room.

"They were here," he said. "But I took care of it. And—" Vincent skidded to a halt. "Oh."

November glanced between Vincent and Conroy, blinking. Vincent was in the *Huntington home*? Past midnight? She had to be seeing things.

"What is *he* doing here?" she blurted out.

Conroy cleared his throat, and Vincent remained motionless, staring her down.

"Well?" she asked again.

"Vincent... He..." Conroy itched his neck.

"I live here," Vincent finished. "This house belongs to me."

November shook her head. "No, the house belongs to Clifton—my dad's brother. He—"

November stopped, taking in Vincent's lean form and his wild dark hair. The vision of the silhouetted guy in the hallway came to mind.

I don't want you in my home. So figure out a way to go, and go.

The guy in the hallway.

The guy in the forest.

He'd fixed her shoulder.

"You *live* here?" November asked, "But... why?"

Vincent's eyes turned cold. "It doesn't concern you." He turned back to Conroy. "I was able to stop them, but they almost broke through. They're getting stronger."

"They?" November asked. "Who's *they*?"

"If they break through, they're going to tear this house down," Vincent continued, ignoring her. "We need our allies back. We have to find them."

November's mind couldn't keep up. The house. Vincent. The music. Her dancing. It was too much to process.

Conroy motioned Vincent down, then slowly faced November. "I tried to tell you before. There's so much we haven't told you. But I couldn't tell you... not before... not until you found your calling."

"She doesn't know?" Vincent interrupted. "You haven't told her *anything*?"

Conroy's shoulders sagged and he began to pace around the room. "No. Her uncle Mason told me the day she arrived that she knew nothing about the school, our home, and her true purpose here. Her father kept everything from her."

"Unbelievable," Vincent said. "I told you she was a liability. No wonder they attacked us tonight."

"Stop talking about me like I'm not here!" November yelled. She stomped her foot knowing she looked like a little girl. "Who attacked tonight? What do you mean by allies? And why am I a liability?"

Vincent sealed his lips tight.

Conroy stopped pacing.

"Conroy?"

Conroy sighed. "This isn't a normal house, November. And the school isn't really a music school—it's only a front for what we really do."

A cool draft wafted into the room and November wrapped her arms around herself. "Then what is it?"

"The school is really a gathering point for the dead."

November burst out laughing, hysteria from the night catching up. She wiped the tears from her eyes. They couldn't be serious.

Vincent darkened his gaze. “Of course you would laugh. Just like your father—incapable of human emotion.”

November zeroed in on him. “What do you have against my father? You didn’t know him!”

Vincent tightened his grip on his cane. “He was a lying, thieving, cold-hearted scoundrel that ruined my life!” he retorted. “And now, because you’re here, you’ve clearly awakened the dead further. It took everything I had to close off the gates. Do you know how *hard* that is?”

Conroy stepped between them, holding up his hands. “Whoa. Whoa, you guys. Calm down. Vincent, she isn’t her father, and November, try and take us seriously, would you?” He exhaled again. “The school is on a piece of land where the veil between us and the spirit world is very thin. The dead are able to pass through the veil, and we’re trying to stop them.”

November’s eyes darted between them. “You’ve got to be kidding.”

“It’s what our students do when they ‘practice.’ They’re using their music to keep the dead at bay.”

November held in another laugh. “You guys... can’t be serious. You’re telling me, that when my classmates disappear behind those curtains to practice their instruments, they’re really... trying to keep the *dead* from entering our world?”

Vincent threw up an arm. “See? I told you she shouldn’t be here. There she is mocking our life’s work again!”

“Well now she knows,” Conroy intervened. “So Vincent, give her a chance. And November, it’d help if you stopped laughing.”

The room went silent, and all three stared at each other. Nothing sounded but the clocks ticking on the walls.

“Okay,” November finally said. “Say I believe you. There are... ghosts... or dead people trying to get into our world. Why? And why are you trying to stop them? And why would my presence make a difference?” She couldn’t believe she’d just asked that.

“The dead are rallying. We’re on the brink of a war, November. Us against them. They want to take over our world—obtain it for their own. The spirits are battling each other, the dark against the light—the dark are actually consuming the light, and there isn’t anywhere for the light ones to go, so they need to release into this world, but we can’t let that happen. Once the gates are opened, everything will implode. There will be no stopping them.”

“Okay... and?”

“And we’re trying to stop them because long ago—”

“No,” Vincent cut in.

“No?”

“She’s heard enough. She doesn’t need to hear anymore. She isn’t a part of this, Conroy. She’ll only make things worse. So you need to make her pack her bags and go.”

“I want to hear the rest,” November said.

She didn’t know *why* she said that. She didn’t believe in the afterlife or ghosts, but she still was intrigued. They clearly believed all this stuff, and she wanted to know the history behind their thoughts. Though she did believe the past was dangerous to her. She believed in the present. The only way she survived her condition was because she didn’t focus on what could be—or what was. She focused only on the here and now, and that’s what kept her healthy.

“All you need to know now is that your presence is stopping us from doing our job,” Vincent spat. “You need to leave.”

“I think the opposite,” Conroy said. “Since she’s arrived, the dead have awakened. The kids have been working harder at school, and after what happened tonight... it’s almost like she’s like a magnet to them. We haven’t had an attack like this since—”

“Let me guess,” November interrupted. “Since my father was here.”

The room went silent, just the ticking on the walls, before Conroy nodded. “There is that. But no, since January Hill was here.”

January Hill.

The most famous death of all.

She’d heard the music.

Just like her.

“We need to use your presence to our advantage,” Conroy said.

Vincent shifted his stance, his knuckles white on his cane, body tight.

Conroy peeked over at him and sighed. “Vincent’s right though. We’ve talked enough for the evening.”

“No,” November said. “Tell me more about my father. Tell me more about January Hill.”

“We’re done,” Vincent said. “I’m going to bed.” He tapped his cane and the sound ricocheted off the walls. He gave November one last glance, his eyes dark, before he turned and limped from the room.

Conroy and November stood in silence, her heart pounding. After a moment, Conroy said, “He really is trying to be patient with you. You just need to be patient with him.”

She doubted that. Vincent didn’t want her here, which only made her want to stay more. She didn’t know if she could believe any of this, but deep in her gut, something about it resonated with her, and she wondered if they really were speaking the truth.

Thirteen

REWRITTEN

NOVEMBER STARED out in front of her, the classroom blurring at the sides. Conroy was droning on about some musical term, but November couldn't hear him. Her thoughts were locked on last night. She couldn't believe what she'd experienced. The feeling of dancing... the way it had captured her whole being... Energy had hummed underneath her fingertips and she had felt lighter than air.

She had felt that kind of power—that kind of magic—when she had entered the ballroom that day. And now it made sense. It was her space. Her place to dance. The thought of her being a dancer was absurd—she still couldn't believe it herself—but Conroy had witnessed the experience, too. April had said that when she first picked up the flute, music flowed. And when November had started those first steps, the movement had come pouring out of her like a smooth liquid, spreading outward, like she couldn't control it.

And then there was everything Conroy and Vincent had revealed to her. The dead. The school being a gathering point for these spirits. She couldn't imagine them even existing, let alone this location enabling them to pass through here. Then there was the kids fighting to keep the spirits locked away—and her father and how he had been just like her. Like she was a magnet to them.

November shook her head. This couldn't be real.

Though a horrid thought lingered in the back of her brain.

November wondered if her experiences—these feelings and intense experiences she had—had been due to medication. She knew hallucinations

were a side effect of her meds, and maybe the house shaking and the music and her dancing experience hadn't really happened at all. What if her mania was back? She always felt happiness beyond belief when she was manic—like she was unstoppable, like she could accomplish anything. Like she was flying high. And that's the way she had felt when she'd danced.

Maybe she wasn't stable.

November set her head in her hands, taking deep breaths. She *had* to be fine. She had to. She'd been taking her medication. She'd kept a healthy diet. She hadn't been sleeping at night, which was a sign, but under the circumstances, who would be sleeping?

But her routine was off. Maybe the change had spun her into an episode.

"And now onto a new topic," Conroy said, his voice bringing November back to the present. "I want to talk about a tale that you all know too well. A tale that your parents told you every night before going to sleep. A tale that *some* of you need to know." He looked at November directly, and a zing shot through her, her thoughts forgotten. "A tale that we can now talk about because circumstances have changed."

November lowered her hands.

"Who can tell me about Sylphs?" he asked.

The kids shifted around her, and a chill settled on the air. She straightened in her seat.

"Come on, who can tell me about Sylphs? Margaret? You like to talk."

Margaret smoothed down her red hair, her fingertips trembling, but kept her face calm and blank. "Sylphs are beautiful, graceful women who lead men, women, and children to their deaths," she said. "They wander the Earth, searching for their prey, finding the innocent. The more innocent you are, the more delicious you are to them."

"Good," Conroy said. He paced in front of the classroom. "What else? Amelia?"

Amelia jerked, her blonde curls bouncing. "Me? Oh." Her eyes slid to the sides of her before she coughed. "Well, they are spirits of the air—existing between both planes, which means they can walk both here and on the other side of the veil."

"That is correct," Conroy said. "They may look like angels, but in reality they are horrific beasts."

"And you can tell one is near when you hear their sweet song," Ty said, his freckles standing out against his skin. "At least that's what my dad told

me.”

Conroy’s jaw tightened before it relaxed. He continued to look at November, as if assessing whether she believed all of this or not. “Yes, it’s been told that if you hear their song, it’s already too late for you. You’re in their power—their grasp forever. They devour you whole and torture you. Your mind feels like it’s being ripped from the inside out, because you’re not really living, and you’re not really dead.”

The entire room sat in silence, eyes wide, bodies frozen. They didn’t dare move—didn’t dare breathe.

“Why are we talking about this?” Claire finally asked. “You know that...” Her eyes darted to November, and the entire class followed suit. November felt heat rush up to the sides of her face, the entire classroom staring her down, waiting.

She shifted under their stares.

“We’re talking about this because I want you to be prepared,” Conroy said. “The Sylph’s song can be more powerful than *your* song so you need to train harder. Be stronger. Be aware. Because they will come for you. And because... because I had an experience last night that confirmed the Sylphs have been awakened. They are aware of what we’re trying to do here, and they aren’t on our side. They want the spirits you fight every day to win.”

“The spirits of light, you mean,” Margaret said. “Those are the ones we’re trying to keep out.”

“Yes and no. We obviously want to keep out the dark, too. But it’s the light who are pushing through. They have nowhere to go. The dark are consuming their light, turning them dark, and their only hope is to escape into our world. It’s chaos over there.”

“So you’re pretty much trapping the light ones in their world so they’re sitting ducks?” November interrupted. “You’re *trapping* them only to be consumed by the dark ones? Not very humane of us to keep them locked in, if you ask me.”

The class froze. Eyes slid to each other.

Conroy’s jaw flexed. “We’re dealing with the dead, November. None of this is humane.”

Everyone stayed silent.

Finally, Conroy cleared his throat. “But don’t let the news of the Sylphs deter you from what you do here. Remember, with spirits of light, music reminds them of what it was like to be human—of what it was like to feel,

and they can't stand being around it. And it's unlikely a Sylph will attack again soon. But if one does, use your training here to the best of your advantage. All we can do is try. We must keep their world separate from ours. If they got through... it would be the end of all of us." Silence settled again until he said, "Now go. Roderick will watch over you today."

The class stood from their spots, a somber feeling hanging around them. They moved toward the exit slowly, like the air was so thick, they walked through slush.

November turned to Conroy, expecting him to motion to her, wanting to talk with her, but instead Claire popped her head in front of her.

"I get to work with you today," Claire said, a piece of her brunette hair slipping over her face. "Conroy told me to show you the ropes. He—" Her eyes darted around her. "He told me... that you don't know anything—not since you came here. But don't worry, I won't tell Margaret."

"Er... thank you...?" November rubbed her arms. "Conroy told you, what exactly?"

She lowered her voice. "He wanted me to help you because... well, you're the only other dancer here. Everyone else here is a musician. The way we interact with the dead is different."

November peeked back at Conroy, but he was busy at his desk. She wanted to ask him *why* he'd decided to throw all this information on her today. He said he didn't want to talk about it before because she hadn't discovered her talent yet, by why wait? Why now?

"Come on," Claire said. "I'll show you. Follow me?"

November expelled a breath, her whole body drooping. She couldn't believe this had become her life. Her life had gone from joining a snobby music school to a crazy person school. She felt like one big joke was being played on her.

She followed Claire out of the classroom and down the main hall where pillars framed both sides of her. Exquisite paintings were placed neatly on the walls, paintings of flowers, countrysides, and waterfalls. They moved past Roderick's office and down another long hallway toward the back of the mansion. They passed a large entryway where the curtains were parted, and November peeked inside. It was the black and white room, with checkered floors and the animal skins on the walls. Roderick paced alone in the center of the room, hands linked behind his back, back straight.

November eyed the curtains that ran along both sides of the room, and knew that was where the kids were “practicing.”

“Tell me more about what those kids do behind those curtains,” November said. “They just play their music?”

Claire slowed to a stop, facing the entryway. “It’s still so weird that you don’t know.” She peeked over to November then back to the room. “Long story short, behind those curtains, each of the kids use their music to keep the dead away. This school is built on a tectonic plate—it’s a plate that pulls energy from our world and creates a thin fabric between here and the spirit world. This location is where the spirits bleed into our world. Behind those curtains, we stand ready when the veil becomes thinner—when spirits of light try to push through. Think of us as... guards. And when a spirit pushes through, we use our music to keep the spirits away. They don’t want to enter where music is playing. Like Conroy said, music reminds them what it’s like to be human, and they can’t stand it. It’s painful for them.”

“Why is it that everyone is so good then?” November asked. “Why do you all need to be prodigies? Couldn’t any kid be playing music and do what you’re doing?”

“It’s more than just playing music, November. We each have individual abilities with our gift of music that keep the dead out. We can’t help being the best. And we need to be the best in order to fight.”

“But you said that you’re different?”

“Come on,” she continued. “Let me show you our space.”

November shivered and followed Claire again through the hallways. After one more corner, Claire led November to a still white curtain at the end of the hall.

“This, is where we work.”

November analyzed the curtain, as if it were floating through the air. A light breeze stirred the ends, dusting the floor.

Claire held the curtain open, and November stepped through, the silky material sliding past her face. Inside, a smooth wood floor shimmered. Mirrors lined one side of the wall, with a ballet barre on the other.

“A ballet studio?” November asked. “I... wasn’t expecting this. I was expecting...”

“A dark room with candles and voodoo stuff?” Claire asked wryly.

“I actually didn’t know what I expected. But not this.”

“We need the open space to do what we do. We don’t guard the veils like the rest of them. In fact, we’re the opposite.”

November furrowed her brow.

“We *open* the veil,” Claire said.

“Open?” November asked. “Why would we want to do *that*?”

“To search, of course.”

November scratched her chin, tilting her head. This was all too much. Too much information had been thrown at her today. “Search? Search for what?”

“Before you know *who* we search for, you need to know *how*.”

Claire moved to the far end of the room, where she ducked behind a tall screen. November waited patiently, wondering what she was doing, until she emerged wearing a black leotard and pink tights. Next to her, on the far wall, was an extravagant chair with velvet cushions and gold trimming. On the chair was a pile of pointe shoes. Claire removed a pair, sat down, and slowly began to lace up her shoes.

“This is obviously a ballet studio—and is my space, but you’ll discover your own space to work.”

November already knew her space.

The thought of the ballroom made her fingertips tingle. Another overwhelming surge to be in there swelled inside of her.

“Unlike music, dancing doesn’t scare off the dead,” Claire said. “Dancing draws them to us, making the veil become thin, allowing us to open it. But it keeps them distracted—they don’t try to leave their world. Dancing enables us to keep the veil open long enough to search.”

November twisted her lips. “Who are we searching for?” she asked again.

Claire went deathly still, and her image in the mirror didn’t move. “You’re going to have to find out.”

Fourteen

THIN AIR

CLAIRE STOOD BEFORE NOVEMBER, her thin body reflecting in the mirror behind her. Silence pounded between them, neither of them saying a word. Claire stared at November for a time, her eyes darkening, before she sucked in a deep breath.

“Okay. Here we go.” Claire shook out her hands, then turned and faced the mirror. Slowly, she lifted her arms high over her head, smooth, methodic. In the dead silence, Claire bent to the floor, her fingertips brushing the wood. She slowly raised, pressing up onto her toes, her pointe shoes making quick steps on the floor. Her arms floated around her, reaching and stretching through the space.

Claire was more graceful than anyone she had ever seen. The way she moved through the space was hypnotic, and she couldn’t tear her gaze away.

Around the room Claire danced, traveling from one side of the room to the other, filling up space. The movements continued to be smooth, her countenance unearthly.

Claire danced for a time, and November lost track of how long she stood there, captured by Claire’s dance. Her delicate features stayed calm as she moved, her eyes drifting closed.

A light rumble started to build beneath the floor, and the vibration traveled up into November’s legs. The rumble continued to build until the walls started to rattle. November broke out of her trance, her eyes wide, her head darting back and forth. She felt as if the room were suddenly closing

in on itself, the air becoming tighter, more restrictive. Claire continued to dance in front of her—seductive, gliding.

A hum buzzed in the air, light at first, before it became louder. Claire continued to dance through the hum, but pressure built in November's head, and she covered her ears. The hum grew louder, the sound reverberating in her head. Energy built and seized around her.

Claire's movements became bigger, more intense, her legs lifting higher, her jumps stronger. Even though there wasn't any music, November felt each beat, each pulse of her steps.

Then, as if a curtain were parting, the air split open, and bright light flooded her eyes. Her hands lifted up, trying to shield the light, and she blinked. It was like the air had been cut in front of her, revealing a new world. November could see white figures moving inside the split portion of the air, and they moved toward Claire with their arms outstretched. Claire continued to dance, traveling toward the invisible, open curtain.

Warmth started to extend through November's being, and she felt herself also drawing closer. Her mind seemed to separate from itself, the warmth in her limbs spreading. Her feet carried her forward, as she edged toward the veil.

She needed to know what was beyond it. She was desperate to find out what the spirits looked like up close. In the back of her brain, she reeled that this couldn't be real, but the evidence was right before her eyes. This school really was a place where the dead existed. Everything that Conroy and Claire and Vincent had said was true.

November let the feeling take over her completely as she joined Claire's side.

"What do we do now?" November asked.

"There is a man. The only *living* man with flesh and blood who can live on the other side. It's him who we want to find. Normally, we stand here and search... but maybe... maybe you should go in. You can search better from inside."

The spirits beyond the veil started to draw closer, their light brighter than the sun. November squinted, barely able to withstand their light.

"Go in," Claire said. "I'll be right behind you." Her voice trailed off, warm, anticipating.

But something felt off. Claire seemed too excited. November forced her feet to dig into the ground.

“You know you want to,” Claire said. “Go on.”

November still couldn't believe she was witnessing this. Spirits—real spirits—existed on another plane, standing right in front of her. Their arms reached toward her as if wanting to meet her. They beckoned her in, their light growing brighter. They seemed so friendly, she wanted to be closer to them, see what they looked like face to face.

Slowly, November peeled her feet from off the floor, and she glided forward. Energy pulsed around her. The closer she drew near, the warmer she became. The light seeped into her, the spirits before her calling to her.

“Yes,” Claire said.

November stopped at the edge of the veil, where the air parted, and she lifted her hand, her fingertips brushing where the opening existed.

“Keep going,” Claire said.

November slowly slid a foot past the opening when someone screamed, “Stop!”

The word jolted November, and the veil suddenly closed. The light dissipated, and November blinked. Claire dropped her arms. Nothing was in front of her but the studio mirror.

“What?” Claire spun around sharply.

“I didn't give you permission to open a veil,” Conroy said. “I told you to prep her, talk more about our history, but not this.” His face was tight, the muscles standing out in his neck.

A slow smirk spread on Claire's face and she laughed, the sound echoing in the room. She peeked over at November. “I almost had you.”

November glanced between them, eyebrows down. “*Had* me?”

“It's extremely dangerous to go into the spirit world unprepared,” Conroy said. “And Claire knows that. I thought I could trust you, Claire.”

Claire continued to smirk, humor in her eyes. She leaned in and whispered to November, “When Margaret and I found out you didn't know anything, it was the best news ever. You don't really think I'd help you, do you? It would've been hilarious to see you trapped on the other side.”

“Claire. Out. Now,” Conroy ordered. His finger flew to the door.

“You should've accepted our invitation to be with us,” Claire said as she walked away. “Good luck figuring this out on your own.” She lifted her chin as she exited out of the entryway.

Conroy sighed, and dug his thumbs into his forehead. “It seems you have more to watch out for than just Sylphs. I'm sorry about Claire. I

trusted her. Don't worry, she'll be punished."

November nodded, though she still felt disconnected from her body.

She didn't know how long she stood there in the ballet studio, but it was long enough that Conroy left, and she was alone until it was time to go home.

November hid in the top of the tree in her bedroom, wishing life were simpler again. Her head throbbed, and her eyes ached. Every time she thought about what she had learned in the last couple of days, her stomach twisted, and a sick feeling came over her.

The thought that she was mentally not okay wouldn't leave her mind. She knew mental illness was a serious disease, and there was a time when she wasn't well. Right after her parents' death, it was like the catalyst to her downfall. She'd stopped eating. She'd felt a darkness settle over her. There was noise in her brain she couldn't get rid of. Her thoughts spun so fast she couldn't grab hold of any of them.

It had slowly gotten worse through the years—to the point that she couldn't deal with it anymore, and almost waited for death—until her uncle finally put his foot down. He made her get a psych evaluation. She got a therapist. She started medication. She learned the grounding tools she needed to survive in this world and be okay. Living with this disease was a constant, every day battle, but she'd been stable for the last year. She knew how to separate her thoughts. She knew how to see the reality instead of delusional thinking. She knew how to find the space she needed in her head to think before she reacted.

But now everything was a mess. She couldn't think clearly, thoughts constantly spun in her head, she felt a fear she hadn't felt in a long time. She was seeing things. Everything pointed to the fact that she wasn't well. But there were so many kids who *actually* believed they were dealing with the dead. What were the odds of so many people believing the same thing?

Maybe she was stable. Maybe all of this really was true, and she needed to just let go and believe the impossible. She couldn't keep living in doubt of her sanity. She needed to either believe this or not believe it. She couldn't live in limbo anymore.

Voices sounded from downstairs, carrying up through the air vent in the corner. Two male voices laughed, and she sat up straighter in the tree. She had a hard time imagining Vincent and Conroy laughing together. She still hadn't processed that Vincent actually lived in this home.

The voices reverberated again, and irritation itched underneath her skin. The thought that people could be laughing right now when she was in turmoil irked her. Conroy knew what she was going through, and she knew it was self-centered, but he should've been sensitive to her situation and not be throwing a party downstairs.

Another burst of laughter resonated, and November couldn't take it anymore. If she was going to suffer, they all needed to suffer. She started to climb down the tree, jumping from one branch to the other, her shoulder aching, until she faced the doorway. Stealing a breath, she exited out her door and followed the source of the sound.

The laughter grew louder and louder as she followed the hallways.

They were in the kitchen.

She stopped outside the door for a moment, listening.

"Remember when you put Lysol in my fish tank?" Conroy laughed. "I'd woken up the next morning will all the fish dead, floating at the top—I was furious at you!"

Another voice laughed. It wasn't Vincent. The voice was a bit rougher around the edges—raspy, like April's.

"Oh, I remember. It was retribution for telling Sophie Anderson that I liked her. And I hated that girl. She followed me around for *months* after that." There was humor in his voice.

The two chuckled again, and November bit her teeth down. She pushed open the door.

Conroy sat at the table, while another guy—around her age—sat on the countertop. Vincent stood in the corner, silent, leaning up against the wall. He had a glower on his face that looked like it had been painted on.

November stood speechless. The image of this new guy started her.

Like Vincent, the guy was dark, in that he had black hair—though it hung sleek over his forehead—where Vincent's was wild to the sides. His bones stood strong against his pale face, deep hollows that indented his cheeks, mimicking Vincent's, but not quite as sallow. The guy wore ripped jeans and a black t-shirt.

“November. Hello,” Conroy said. “Let me introduce you to Cambridge, or Cam for short. He’s...”

“He’s my brother,” Vincent said from the corner. “And he’s overstayed his welcome here. That seems to be happening a lot lately.”

November glanced between Vincent and Cam. It was clear they were brothers—the resemblance had been instant.

Cam jumped off the counter and planted himself in front of November, his thumbs in his pockets.

“The famous November,” he said. “I’ve heard all about you.” His mouth lifted up into a lopsided smile.

November looked to Vincent again, who was still glaring, then back to Cam, who was looking at her with a kind, but amused face.

“How... do you know Conroy?” November asked. “Or what I mean is... why are you here? I mean, I’m still trying to piece together why all of you are in this home.” Heat rushed to her face. She stammered her words which didn’t make sense. She never stammered.

“I’m just checking up on my little brother and my best friend,” Cam said. “I’m only a year older than Vincent, and Conroy’s the old man in our relationship at twenty-one, but we all know I’m more mature than both of them.” He grinned and swept a chunk of inky hair off his forehead.

Vincent continued to glower.

“But the famous November Huntington,” Cam said, returning to her. “Man, am I happy to meet you. Your father was quite influential in my life. He talked a lot about you.”

Her father had never mentioned him.

“And your uncle,” Cam continued. “How is Mason doing?”

“I don’t know,” she said blankly. “I haven’t seen him since he abandoned me here.”

Cam’s eyes grew tight as he took her in. “That’s too bad.” He shifted his weight. “Well, the good thing is that you’re here. And I’m here for you if you ever need anything.”

“You’re *not* here,” Vincent interrupted. “You’re going.”

Cam’s smile deepened. “Always the cynic, V. Can’t even let me have a pleasant moment before you attack me. I sure wished you had grown out of this brooding persona you have, but you haven’t changed a bit.”

For some reason, November laughed. It came out in a burst.

Vincent’s eyes flew to hers.

“Sorry,” she said, still chuckling. “Sorry.” She slowly stopped laughing. “It’s funny because it’s true.”

Vincent continued to glower, and Cam lifted his brows. His mouth quirked before he said, “I’m here because I’m going to attend St. Paul’s. I’ve been away long enough, and decided it’s time for me to come home and finish school. It’s embarrassing that I’m eighteen and haven’t finished school yet, but I think it’s time to amend that.”

Vincent sprung off the wall, his right hand gripping his cane. “You wouldn’t dare.”

Cam bent his head to the side. “And you’re going to stop me, little brother? I’ve seen the errors of my ways and want to return home to make up for the time lost.” He smiled at November and said, “Prodigal son and all that.”

Vincent kept his mouth shut, his jaw tight.

Conroy closed the distance between Vincent and Cam. He slapped a hand on Cam’s shoulder.

“We do need you. And we’d be lucky to have you.”

Cam smiled back.

Vincent glared between them. “You will regret this.” His eyes connected with November’s one more time before he limped from the room.

Fifteen

THE NEXT DAY, Quincy dropped November and April off to the front steps of the school, and early morning sunshine filtered in through the gray clouds overhead. The warmth hit her skin through the chilly air, and November tucked her turtleneck closer to her chin.

“I heard about you finding your gift,” April said between steps. “Conroy told me. I’m glad.”

November nodded, continuing to climb.

“And I... I heard about Claire,” she said. “He told me about that, too.” Her thin lips flicked into a frown.

November held silent. That was definitely something she didn’t want to talk about.

April cleared her throat. “So you met Cam.”

“Yeah,” November finally spoke. “He actually seems pretty cool.”

April pushed her long black hair off her face. “Oh, that’s Cam alright. He’s completely opposite of his brother. He was always the one everybody loved.”

“Where’d he go?” November asked. “I mean, he said that he hadn’t graduated, and now he’s back.”

April stopped just outside the front doors, and a light breeze made her visibly shiver. “I’m... I’m not sure if I should tell you. It’s his story to tell, really. But let’s just say he experienced a huge loss, and he couldn’t handle the pain of being here any longer. I’m surprised he’s back, to be honest.”

November scrunched her brows together. “Well now I really want to know.”

“Maybe later.” She pushed open the heavy iron doors and they headed into the school.

Inside the classroom, Conroy waited at the front while kids took their seats on the scattered couches. Vincent stood at the back of the room, and November blinked. What was he doing here? Cam sat on a couch by the far window, leaning back, one knee crossed over the other. He grinned at November as she walked in. She took a seat in front of him, and she felt his presence behind her like a warm fire. Awareness emanated between them, she felt his stare on her back.

“Today we’re going to do something a bit different,” Conroy said, addressing the class. “Instead of talking about music theory—which we all know helps our music become stronger, we’re going to do an experiment of sorts. I’ve decided we’ve become used to solitude here. We’ve been working individually to attain our goals, when we really should be working together.”

The class broke out in whispers, glancing at each other.

“We’re going to split up into pairs,” Conroy continued. He moved over to his desk and picked up a stack of black and red handkerchiefs. “If I give you a black blindfold, you’re going to be the caller, if I give you a red one, you’re going to be the one doing the obstacle. Let me just show you outside. It’ll make more sense. Follow me.”

Conroy walked to the curtain, but everyone stayed in their seats. This clearly hadn’t ever happened before. Conroy lifted the blindfolds in the air and said, “Well, come on!”

The class jumped up, foreheads wrinkled, and followed Conroy out of the room. November walked next to April, a prickle rippling down her back—it was like a pressure, boring little holes into her back. She knew someone was staring at her—though she wasn’t sure if it was Vincent or Cam.

They exited out the back doors of the school, walking past the rushing fountain and maze of bright flowers. The clouds were moving fast over the sky, but sunshine poured down, warm on November’s skin. They walked crisply and quietly along a long white sidewalk to the side of the school. A large green field stretched out before them, a series of rattraps laid along the grass. November did a double take.

“What are *those* doing here?” November whispered to April.

April's delicate features pinched. "I have no idea. Conroy's off his rocker."

"A blindfold is being passed out to each of you," Conroy said, moving through the group of kids. He handed November a red one. "Each of you need to pair up with someone of the opposite color. You have one minute to assemble into your pairs. Now go."

Everyone moved at once, scrambling through the group, finding a partner. November turned to April, but she had disappeared. Her eyes frantically flicked around, until they landed on Ty. He had approached April, and they were clearly making plans to be partners. Kids continued to scramble around her, bodies rushing, and November stood alone in the center of the field. She searched for Cam—maybe he would be her partner, but he had planted himself up by Conroy, clearly not participating.

Kids continued to swirl around, November's head spinning. The world felt like it was shifting beneath her feet. She was alone. Again. People were pairing up left and right. She felt exposed, like a roast on a platter.

The group slowed to a stop, the whispers quieting, everyone was clearly taken. November stood awkwardly in the middle of the group. Sweat spread on her brow, and the ends of her fingertips tingled.

"Guess you're stuck with me," Vincent said in a dry tone.

His dark presence approached, and she whirled around.

Vincent stood with his head tilted, a black handkerchief in his hands. November glanced down at her red one. She silently cursed.

"Why are you suddenly participating?" she asked. "You never participate."

Vincent's lips pressed together.

"Everyone, it's obvious by now you've seen the line of traps in front of you," Conroy called out, his voice reverberating over the grassy area. "I want you to line up along the field, and stand parallel with your partner. Black blindfolds will stay back and be the caller, directing the red blindfolds through the maze of traps. The objective is to get through unscathed. Red blindfolds, if you don't listen precisely what your partner is saying to you, you'll suffer the consequences. Oh, and red blindfolds, remove your shoes."

Murmuring erupted, kids objecting, and Margaret yelled out, "That's cruel! You wouldn't possibly make us do this!"

“It’s called teamwork,” Conroy said, undeterred. “And this is nothing compared to what will happen to you if you encounter a Sylph or other unkind spirits who have motivation to hurt you. So line up and get ready.”

More murmurs rose. November agreed with Margaret. This *was* cruel. She didn’t know a single school that would do something like this. To force kids into unity by putting them in real danger? Conroy had lost his mind.

“If you don’t participate, then you’re off duty until next week.” Conroy crossed his arms. “No training. No using your gifts. Nothing.”

Another ripple went through the crowd, kids groaning, and they began to take off their shoes. They lined up in one long line in front of the field before them, and November followed suit. She bent down and removed her sneakers. She was with the rest of the kids. She had just barely discovered her talent. She couldn’t stop learning now.

She followed along to the edge where the rattraps began. Grass tickled her toes and Vincent limped beside her. A breeze swept in, chilling her arms.

“Do you think you’re capable enough to follow my commands?” Vincent asked. November paused, and he stopped behind her, his breath falling onto the back of her neck.

“I don’t know,” she replied. “Are you capable of thinking about someone else’s wellbeing other than your own?”

Vincent grunted.

“Thought so.” November wrapped her arms around her, staring out in front of her. It wasn’t fair she got Vincent as a partner. Everyone else had someone decent—she’d even choose Margaret over this.

“As long as you listen,” he said, “you’ll be safe. I promise.”

November kept her fists clenched. She didn’t believe him. He’d had it out for her from day one. He’d been trying to get rid of her for days. Why would she trust him now?

On Conroy’s command, November tied the red handkerchief over her eyes. Through the handkerchief, nothing but complete darkness greeted her, but she could feel the light shift as the clouds passed over the sun. Warmth trickled down from the sun in the crisp air, and November blew out a breath.

There was no way Vincent was going to protect her. He’d made it clear he wanted her gone. He now had his chance with injuring her. Her hands shook as she imagined herself stepping onto a trap, or the pain as it sliced

into her foot. She imagined the humiliation. He wouldn't dare, would he? Not in front of Conroy—not in front of the whole class. But she *knew* he would.

"Everyone, ready?" Conroy called out.

November's pulse hammered in her ears.

"On the count of three. One... two... three... and begin!"

Voices exploded from all directions, the callers directing the red blindfolds where to go. November stood unmoving, waiting for Vincent's command. She licked her lips.

"Two steps to your left and one step forward." Vincent's voice rang low and clear through the chaos around her.

She couldn't move. She could barely breathe. For a moment, she wanted to trust him. With her blindfold on, and the calming brush of his voice, she almost felt safe, but she knew better. Vincent had no good intentions, and she wasn't going to let him hurt her.

Instead, November took two steps to her right and one forward. Vincent hissed, and she froze.

"Don't move," he said tightly. "Take another step to your left. *Please.*"

The intensity in his voice couldn't be forged. Blood pounded in November's ears as she held rooted. Vincent had no reason to help her, but the fear in his voice scared her. She shook out her hands, trying to decide what to do. Tentatively, she obeyed, letting her left foot slide over a few inches. Her toes met nothing but cool grass.

Vincent exhaled a loud breath. "Good. Now take another step to your left and then one forward."

November hesitated again, her breath high in her chest, but again, she obeyed. Her feet met nothing but grass.

"Please don't do that again," Vincent said. "I may not want you here, but it doesn't mean I want you mangled."

She shook her head. "You haven't given me any reason to trust you."

"Haven't I? I did fix your shoulder, did I not?"

November swallowed. "Fine. A one-time blip in nature. It still doesn't mean I trust you."

"Trust goes both ways. So I guess we're in the same boat." The thought hung in the air before he said, "One long step forward, then three to your left."

November tentatively obeyed again, her feet continuing to meet the grass. Kids yelled beside her, all making their way across the field.

“So what happened with your leg?” November asked, trying to distract herself. The last thing she needed was to remember she was walking through a minefield of traps.

“I don’t play twenty questions,” Vincent said. “Two steps to your right.”

November continued on. “Injury as a child? Car accident? Rattrap?” The attempt at humor fell flat. “Or are you just pretending? I wouldn’t put it past you to fake your limp for attention.”

“A little to your left,” Vincent said, voice terse.

“Or we can talk about Cam,” November said, the end of the blindfold tickling her nose. “You clearly don’t like him.”

“Don’t talk about my brother,” Vincent ordered. “You know nothing about us, so leave it be.”

November clamped her teeth together. “You know, where I come from, people are *nice*,” she said. “People are encouraging, not selfish.” She thought about her rock climbing friends, even though she had always shoved them off, wanting to be alone, but they’d still been accepting. “So I hope you’re happy being—”

“November, stop!” Vincent yelled.

A large thud hit November from behind and she went tumbling. The air knocked from her lungs, and her blindfold went flying. But it wasn’t Vincent that hit her. Cam lay on top of her, his face contorted in pain.

“That scoundrel almost led you to your death,” Cam hissed. He swallowed, his throat tight.

November peered at the stream of blood in front of her. A trap had bitten into Cam’s forearm, the wound open and raw.

“Oh my gosh! Cam, are you okay?” November quickly scanned over the rest of his body, but he appeared untouched from other injuries.

“He wasn’t paying attention,” Cam ground out. “Your foot... you were about to step on a trap.”

Vincent hovered over them, breathing hard. “Lies.”

November lay there, her mind racing.

Cam had saved her. He’d knocked her out of the way.

“I... I don’t know what to say,” she said lamely.

“Say you’ll stay away from that bastard,” Cam bit out.

With his body pressed on top of hers, November was hyper aware of the rise and fall of his chest, and the way his smooth dark hair fell across his forehead, stark against his blue eyes. He grinned down at her.

“I was already doing that on my own.”

The corners of Cam’s mouth twitched. “Well, then the world might be alright after all.”

November waited until Cam was helped to stand, and she slowly got to her feet. She didn’t dare look, but she knew Vincent was glaring at her, his dark eyes cold and unrelenting, but she wouldn’t give him the satisfaction of looking back.

Sixteen

HEART OF DARKNESS

THAT EVENING at the Huntington manor, Quincy set a plate full of rice and chicken in front of November as April bowed her head and prayed. November kept her eyes open during the prayer, staring at her food, and the three of them sat around the dinner table as they quietly began to eat their meal. Vincent and Cam were nowhere to be found.

Conroy picked at his food, his face glazed over, his mind clearly elsewhere. April was shoving food into her mouth so fast you wouldn't think such a small girl could eat so much. November sat awkwardly between them, wondering if this was what it was like every night at dinner.

"You wouldn't believe what happened today, Nov," April said. "Right before the obstacle course, Amy told Ty that she was in love with him and wanted to take him to the Inaugural ball, but he totally shot her down! It was awful. It was right in front of everybody and everything. So embarrassing."

November set her fork down slowly. "Ball?"

"And then Ty came straight to me as a partner. I'm sure that made it so much worse."

November tightened her brow. "What's this about a ball?"

A clock chimed on the wall, and Quincy walked in with a pitcher of water. He began filling the glasses.

April chewed and swallowed. "The Inaugural ball is a dance we have at the school. Boys and girls ask each other and it's quite formal—we all dance in the ballroom—we use dance cards and everything. It's all very traditional. Though... I've never been asked." Her eyes flicked downward.

“I always go alone and hardly ever dance.” She took a sip of her drink, spilling on the front of her dress. “Shoot.” She grabbed her cloth napkin and began dabbing at the spill.

“The... ballroom?” November asked, swallowing. “It takes place in there?”

“Yes, of course.” April looked at her blankly. “But that’s not the point of the story. Did you not hear about Ty?”

November pushed her plate away. The thought of being in the ballroom again made her stomach flutter. “When?” November asked. “When is the Inaugural Ball?”

April continued chomping. “Next Friday.”

November sat back, thinking. She had never wanted to go to a school dance before, but the thought of being in that ballroom again made her insides sing. What would it be like to be dressed in a gown and waltzing around that room? To be asked to dance at all? In the past, she’d had a few climber guys hit on her, but she’d never allowed her heart to be opened before—not even with Shawn. Sure, she’d been together with him, but in the back of her mind, she knew with her condition, it was best to keep people away. And she’d certainly never danced.

November watched April eat, a bit of color in her cousin’s cheeks. “So... are you happy that Ty blew off Amy? Maybe... you like him?”

April’s face reddened further. “No. I mean, it was nice to finally be chosen for something, but no. He was just being nice.”

“Mmh hmm,” November said.

“We should go together,” April blurted out.

“Huh?”

“We should go to the Inaugural ball together. You and me.”

November swallowed, choking on her water. “What?”

“No, I’m serious,” April said. “We can pick out dresses from our storage room. My mother collected vintage gowns! We have loads to choose from!”

“Of course she did,” November mumbled.

The thought of being in the ballroom did entice her, even if she went with her cousin. She imagined standing in the ballroom again.

“Sounds great,” November said. “We’ll have fun.”

April squealed, clapping her hands together. “What about you, big brother? Will you ask Annabelle? I’m sure she’ll be in town.”

Conroy continued to stir his food, silent, and April made a face.

“Who’s Annabelle?” November whispered.

“This girl who went to school with Conroy,” April said, voice low. “She comes in as a guest teacher every once in a while. She’s madly in love with him, but Conroy’s always shoved her off. I have no idea why. She’s perfect. Hair. Body. Clothes. He’s crazy not to fall for her.”

November returned to her food, silently watching Conroy. She took in his lean muscles and strong jawline. She wasn’t surprised Annabelle was in love with him.

“So what’s their story?” November asked.

“I can hear you,” Conroy said, finally looking up from his plate. “And there’s no story. So no more talking.” He stood and left the room, shutting the door forcefully behind him.

November couldn’t sleep. She stared at the branches that stretched out over her head, bits of moonlight streaming in through the window. Her mind was fixed on the obstacle course from earlier that day, and the way Cam had rushed to her rescue. She couldn’t believe Vincent had led her purposely into a trap. She wanted to give him the benefit of the doubt, and she had started to trust him, but Vincent clearly was just biding his time until he attacked. He showed no sign of human emotion, and he was impossible to talk to.

Cam on the other hand, was light and funny. He’d smiled at her even though he was in pain. The difference between the two brothers was astounding. Something about Cam spoke her—like they already had a connection before they met. He was so easy to be around, and so genuine.

Her stomach rumbled from not eating dinner earlier, and she rolled over onto her side. She didn’t want to move—she wanted to stay in bed and ignore her hunger, but then she remembered that nutrition helped her stay stable. It also helped her be physically strong. She thought of the climbing comp that took place in a week, but then knew staying strong for climbing wasn’t important anymore.

Every day that passed, she felt her old life slipping away. She almost couldn’t remember what it was like to be on the rock—to feel strong,

secure, in control. Now, she was immersed in a world that was too confusing to comprehend. The more she learned about the world she was in right now, the more confusing it got. She'd never see her climbing goals come true. Not when the competition was in LA. Not with no one to support her, and there was no way to get there.

She couldn't ignore her hunger anymore. November hefted herself out of bed and silently opened her door. The hallways stretched long and black in front of her, and she carefully tiptoed outside. She moved through the dark, making her way to the kitchen. The floorboards squeaked under her feet, and she tried to keep quiet. The last thing she wanted was for Vincent to wake up and find her.

November started to head down the hallway filled with portraits. She remembered how she had first felt when she'd walked down this hallway. It was as if their eyes were watching her, following her every move. Even now, as she took in the painted faces on the wall beside her, there seemed to be a strange feeling in the air. She analyzed each person in the dim light. Old and young, the faces before her seemed to be in discomfort, the lines of their faces tight, worry in their eyes.

She shivered and hurried quickly down the hall. Paintings couldn't be worried—what an absurd thought. But her eyes slid to the wall again. As she took in the portraits further, the air seemed to close around her. Her throat constricted as she locked gazes on each painting. The faces seemed to be stretching through the canvas, crying out, pleading in pain. November stumbled back, holding her throat, trying to breathe.

She was seeing things. She forced herself quicker down the hall, before she tripped, catching herself against the wall, staring out in front of her.

On the wall before her were her parents. Their portraits sat side by side, both wrapped in intricate frames. November's heart beat triple time as she took in her father's face. His face used to be warm and genuine, with kind eyes that always glimmered back at her. Now, he glared through the painting, intensity in his gaze, his lips firm together.

Her eyes darted to her mother. Instead of seeing her mother's soft blonde hair and rosy complexion, her mother's hair was tangled and gray, with ashen skin. Her parents seemed to be crying out at her, telling her something with their eyes, tortured forever in that painting.

November edged away from them, her pulse pounding, her eyes frozen wide. This wasn't real, she told herself. Her parents weren't really

screaming at her through those portraits. Her parents were fine—dead and fine—resting in peace. But their faces were so lifelike—she could almost see them breathing.

She shut her eyes tight, trying to force herself to think of good thoughts.

She remembered the long walks she used to take with her parents. They'd stroll the streets by her childhood home, talking to neighbors, running through the sprinklers. Her mother would cook while her father read. They took her on hikes, which had then morphed into climbing rocks. They were always outdoors, laughing, smiling. The faces staring back at her weren't theirs.

November forced her eyes open, willing herself to see the truth. But all she could think about was how they'd given no indication to being a part of the world she was now immersed in. They'd never played music, or ever believed in the supernatural. They were just kind parents who did normal things and raised a good daughter. What else had they kept from her?

The lights above her flickered, and a waft of cool air traveled over her skin. A deep rumble sounded from beneath the floorboards and adrenaline shot through her. She stood frozen for two seconds before she took off down the hall. She couldn't reach the end fast enough. She'd almost reached the corner when she tripped again, tumbling forward.

She slammed into something hard, and strong arms gripped her shoulders.

"Whoa. Are you okay?" Cam held her upright.

November sniffed, stepping back. "No. No, I'm not." She tried to shuffle around him, but he still had a firm grip on her.

"Nov, what happened?"

"Those paintings... my parents..." Tears leaked from her eyes.

Understanding flashed across his face. "Nov, you're okay. You're out of the hallway now. Conroy should've told you not to wander this hallway at night. It isn't safe."

She wiped her eyes. "What do you mean?"

Cam shook his head. "Everyone knows this hallway isn't safe at night. Come on." He led her around the corner, keeping a tight grip on her.

"Come into my room here." He turned another corner and opened a door. Shaking, November entered, grateful to be out of the hallway.

Inside, in the dim light, shiny metal seemed to sparkle everywhere. Full sized armor stood in the corners, with shiny swords and weapons lining the

walls. The chandelier light was soft, reflecting on the silver and steel that was apparent throughout the room.

“It’s like an armory,” November said, eyes wide.

“Yeah, it’s where I stayed here as a boy. It was my favorite room.” He rubbed his jaw, moving the bones back and forth.

November stopped, peering at him closely. “You lived here?”

A fire crackled on the far side of the room, the flames casting shadows on the wall. Cam crossed the room, moving over to it, and warmed his hands. “I did.”

“So you grew up with Conroy and April? Are you... related to them?” She hoped he wasn’t, for some reason the thought of him being related to her upset her.

“Clifton Huntington and my mother were best friends, or so I was told. They were both vocalists, like your mother. They used to go around singing at parties and such—when they weren’t... you know.”

“Fighting with the dead.”

Cam nodded.

“And your father?”

“Vincent and I never met him. Not that I can remember. I was so young. And he took off after my mother died.”

“Hmm.”

She knew what that felt like—to have your parents be gone—but both he and Vincent didn’t get the benefit of growing up with their parents, of making memories with them. At least she had that.

“So Clifton took you in then.”

“Yes.” The fire light played off the grooves of his face.

“But Vincent said this home belonged to him,” November said. “How is that possible?”

Cam’s face hardened for a moment, before it softened. “It does. When Clifton died, he left the home to Vincent in his will. I suppose we’re all lucky that Vincent lets us stay here.”

“But that doesn’t make sense!” November burst out. “Conroy and April should get the home. Why on earth would Clifton give it to Vincent?”

Cam stayed silent, staring at the fire. More shadows shifted over his features.

“Tell me more about the hallway,” November said, knowing she shouldn’t press more about his family. It clearly was a sore subject.

Cam's shoulders drooped and he headed over to the sofa that was tucked in the corner by the fire. "Come, sit," he said. "I'm not sure why Conroy or my brother haven't been more forward with you. Do you know nothing about this house?"

"No one ever talks to me. I hardly know anything about this house or this world. Cam, it's like everyone is tiptoeing around me *all* the time. Conroy let me go to this school without any knowledge of who I was or what this world entailed. It made me look like a fool! And now you're telling me there's more?"

Cam patted the seat next to him. His mouth flicked up before it turned downward. She had never seen him so serious.

"Nov, I am not my brother. And I am not Conroy. They probably believed they were protecting to you, but in reality, they were only harming you." His head quirked to the side as his blue eyes took her in. "I will always tell you the truth. What do you want to know?"

November slowly walked forward, the tightness in her chest easing. Cam's words made the knots in her chest loosen one by one. Finally, someone who had trust in her, who was looking out for her wellbeing. She lowered herself next to him on the couch.

"I want to know everything," she said quietly. "I want to know the history. If the kids at the school are really consorting with the dead. If I'm not imagining it all."

Cam's mouth tucked inward in a smile. "You're not crazy."

He took her hand and November glanced down at the touch. It sent shivers up her arm.

"I'm going to do my best to summarize," he said, "But it might be hard to believe. We had our history taught to us for years, so it'll probably be hard for you to take in all at once."

November straightened her shoulders, keeping her eyes locked with his. "I'm ready."

Cam cleared his throat, his hand still wrapped in hers.

"Well, it starts with the Earth. About two hundred million years ago, the continental drift broke up Pangea—yes, I'm giving you a boring history lesson." His lips twitched.

November motioned for him to go on.

"Pangea was when all the continents were joined, remember? Anyway, the tectonic plates caused this shift, and ultimately, there became seven

major tectonic plates. People think this history of the Earth is happenstance, but we know the truth.”

He paused, his eyes intense, before he continued, “During this time, there was a Great War between the spirits—between all the dead on the other side. But there was a man—a man who was believed to put an end to this war. His name was Cedric. It is said that he had the ability to live forever—a man with real flesh and blood that could live in the spirit world without harm from other spirits. That he would live for an eternity, walking between both worlds, not being tainted by death.

“But there was a group of people—a group of supernatural beings who were jealous of his eternal life. They sought to take his life, thinking if they did so, they could replace him, that they would steal his immortality if they destroyed him.”

“These supernatural beings,” he continued, “were the seven leaders who emerged in the rebellion—Gabriel, Selaphiel, Michael, Uriel, Raphael, Griffin, and Barachief. They each had a great following, dividing up the spirits in the spirit world. They used their own armies to fight with each other, each in a race to find Cedric for their own.

“Cedric tried to stop it, he knew if they continued to fight, it would destroy the earth. You see, back before the continental drift happened, men lived happily amongst each other. There was no sickness or strife. The Earth was calm, without earthquakes, fires, hurricanes, and floods. But the war became so sore, these spirits and their leaders broke into the world, and it resulted in the Earth breaking apart into these seven sections.

“Earthquakes and fires and hurricanes and floods took over the Earth, and mankind began to lose its peace. There were wars and heartache, starvation and sickness amongst the living. But these seven leaders didn’t care. They continued the war, desperate to find Cedric, desperate to destroy him and take his power, but he had disappeared. It is said that Cedric left the world of the living, too ashamed of what he had allowed to happen to mankind, that he left the world and crossed over into the spirit world, never to be found again. He left the world in its current state, riddled and barren. He left the world to these seven, who will forever be searching for him, fighting for his power, where they can live and rule for eternity.”

Cam stopped, his face expectant, waiting for November to say something. November waited a moment in silence, taking all of this in.

“So...” she began, “Claire told me that we dancers are searching for someone. Because we dancers are the only ones who *can* search. Do you mean to say we’re searching for... Cedric?”

Cam smiled, his eyes shimmering at her. “You’re a smart one, you know that?”

Heat rushed to her cheeks. “And why are *we* searching for him? We’re not trying to gain eternal life and take his place. Not like the seven.”

“Cedric can put a stop to all of this. He can stop the war and bring peace about in our world again. Our classmates are continually guarding the veils to stop spirits coming in so our world isn’t destroyed. They’re keeping this world as safe as it can be. If those spirits were to break lose, it would be absolute chaos. We are the Band-Aid that is stopping the bleeding, but Cedric is the only one who can truly heal it all.

“The world is continuing to crumble into ruin. The more the seven fight on the other side, the worse our world becomes. It’s only a matter of time before we aren’t able to guard the veils anymore. And when that happens, death will come.”

“Death? How?”

“You don’t know what the dark spirits will do. You’ve never seen one in action. Unlike Sylphs, where they kill you inside your mind, the dark spirits *physically* suck the light out of you. They drink every last bit of light from you until they rip out your throats and you’re dead.”

November paused, every inch of her frozen. “Dark spirits are the ones that killed my parents?”

Cam nodded. “Your parents were fighting Sylphs when it happened. They didn’t have a chance. When they were fighting the Sylphs, they were bombarded by the dark spirits. They were going to die one way or the other. Better that they died physically by the dark ones then mentally by the Sylphs’ sweet song.”

Tears burned in the back of November’s throat. “And you’re saying Cedric is the only one who can put a stop to this? But... he’s run off? It’s like he doesn’t *care* that any of us are suffering.” She tried to swallow, but it hurt.

Cam’s eyes went distant. “Some would think that, yes. But I like to think Cedric had another reason for stepping away.” He stopped, and nothing but the sound of the fire crackled in the room. Cam removed his hand from hers and rubbed his eyes.

“So what about this house?” November asked, changing the subject. She couldn’t think about her parents any longer. “What happened back there in the hallway? How does it relate to all of this?”

Cam lifted his head, staring out in front of him, across the room. “This house was created for one purpose only,” he whispered. “Maxwell Huntington—Clifton’s father—built this home to house spirits.” His eyes slid over to hers, pain blazing in them. “He wanted to create friendships with spirits in case the war worsened, and he wanted allies on his side.

“He believed that if he made friends with the dead, it would not only help him on the other side, but it would also protect his children. He wanted as many on his side as possible should the day come that the spirits overtake the earth, he wouldn’t be left unprotected. So he created friendships with the dead. He created rooms that would make the dead want to linger here—make them want to stay. It’s why this house is so eclectic. You see, the dead have lost their grip on what it’s like to be alive, but they tend to... obsess over things that they loved in this life, to remind them of who they were.

“Lief Richardson was an old clock maker in his life, so Clifton filled the entryway with clocks to entice him to stay. Sophia Turner was an antique enthusiast, who was obsessed with collecting Blue Ridge. Sebastian Clark was a bird watcher, Natalia Diaz worked as a marine biologist, and August Butler was a little boy who loved to climb trees.”

November shivered. “And... this room?”

“An Earl of Sussex. He was a fine warrior in his time.”

November gripped the sofa, her fingers digging into the fabric. “You’re telling me... that *ghosts* live in this house? Like this home is... a hotel for ghosts.”

Cam nodded, a piece of his dark hair flopping over his forehead. “Indeed.”

“But they’re good ghosts?”

He nodded again. “They’re not dark spirits, no. Though they haven’t been seen since Clifton died. At least not that I’ve heard.”

“And what about that hallway?”

“The hallway is... well, photographs and paintings are another place where spirits cling to. It’s like they’re finding a piece of themselves they don’t want to let go. When you’re dead, you’re desperate for any remembrance of your life. Except if it’s too stimulating. Like music—music

is too much for their souls to handle. It's in soft objects and spaces that the dead like to linger."

"You're not saying that my parents... in that portrait..." She swallowed.

"There's no way to tell. It could have been them. I don't see who else would cling on to their photographs. The dead also waken at night, which means it's best to stay away from places like that hallway. Too many spirits can tarry there."

"I can't believe this," November said.

"It's a lot to take in, I know."

"And why couldn't I be trusted with this information? Does everyone think I'm really that weak?"

Cam shifted on the couch so he faced her. "Nov, I don't know how to say this, but they probably didn't know *how* to tell you. You see," a lump bobbed in his throat, "your father was the only one to go in. They were probably afraid you would try too. Once you found out..."

"What about my father?"

"There hasn't ever been a person to step beyond the veil and survive. Cedric was thought to be the only one. Dancers have the ability to search from this side by opening the veil, but it's too dangerous to go in. Once you step inside, it's as if you don't have your own thoughts anymore. You become... consumed with the beauty and pain-free atmosphere that it's nearly impossible to leave. But your father did it. He stepped in and made it back out. It's why he's a legend."

November held paralyzed. Her father had done the impossible. He had ventured into the spirit world and made it back out alive. "What else?" She needed to know the rest.

"He got far into their world. Searched high and low, looking for Cedric. Oh, the stories he told. He revealed that the spirit world had no order, that there were sections of chaos, pure blackness of lost spirits, that there were cities of gray, with no color, that there were streams of spirits that flowed through the barren land like water. And there were places of great beauty—sights we can't even imagine in our fragile minds. He had plans to return again, to continue searching for Cedric, but his first visit made him a target. Because he went inside, the Sylphs caught his scent. He became their obsession, and sought to take his life. And...well...you know the rest."

November's heart was pounding its way up into her throat. "The Sylphs came after him. The night my parents left me... the Sylphs were coming for

him. My parents left to protect me.”

Cam nodded. “But during the fight, the dark ones got to them. And ripped out their throats.”

November clenched her eyes shut. “There were others,” November whispered. “Who were found with their throats ripped out. Students.”

Cam lowered his eyes, and his dark lashes swept over his chiseled cheeks. “Yes, they wanted to be a hero like your father. They thought they could do what he had done. But from that time forth, any student who tried to pass through, didn’t make it inside.”

His face paled, and it seemed as if he were living in another time, his eyes distant.

“Are you okay?” November asked.

“Fine,” Cam said, swallowing. He stood up from the couch. “You can stay in here. I need... a walk.”

“O-Okay...” Her brows pushed together.

Cam quietly shut the door, but she hardly paid any mind. Thoughts of the Sylphs and dark ones who had led her parents to their deaths swirled inside her head, and a deep anger built inside of her. The anger burned her heart, spreading through her veins. She wanted to find these dark spirits—and find these Sylphs—and destroy them all for what they had done.

Seventeen

TRIBAL WAR

CLAIRE SAT ACROSS THE ROOM, laughing with Margaret and Amelia. Their heads were dipped close together, their hair in high ponytails, their collars perfectly pressed. Claire's eyes slid back over to November, before she giggled again.

November looked away, her stomach turning. Claire had tried to get her to pass through the veil. If she had stepped through, she could've lost her mind. She would've been consumed with the beauty and pain-free atmosphere of their world that it would've been impossible to leave—not to mention the Sylphs would've caught her scent. Just like with her dad. She couldn't believe those girls would resort to something like this.

Conroy's voice resonated in the back of November's head as he taunted, but she couldn't focus on his words. She continued to stare at Claire and Margaret, who kept snickering. One wouldn't think they were capable of murder, but that's exactly what they had tried to do. That must've been why they wanted her to join them. To get her close and *trick* her into passing through to the other side. But she didn't know why. What did they have against her that they'd want to kill her? Wasn't her father a legend? Why was she a target?

"Hey, you okay?" Cam whispered from behind.

November turned her head, his sleek dark hair in her peripheral. She opened her mouth to say 'no,' but instead said, "Fine. I'm great."

Cam sat back, and Conroy continued on. He was talking about resolving cadences.

"Are you sure?" Cam leaned forward again.

“Yes,” November said out of the corner of her mouth.

Cam sat back again before he popped his head right next to her shoulder once more. “Because I’m pretty sure you’re not okay. How could you be?”

“I’m fine!” November spun around.

Cam lifted his brows as the class turned to her.

“I’m so glad to hear that, November,” Conroy said. He narrowed his eyes at Cam. “I know you two are dancers, but that doesn’t mean you don’t have to listen, learn, and pay attention. Music theory can help your dancing. When you know the music’s basics, it helps you feel the music more, it helps you open your mind.”

November gaped, staring at Cam. “You’re a *dancer*?”

Cam’s mouth quirked up. “The best.”

Conroy crossed his arms. “Then show me you’re the best by telling me how to tell a diminished chord from an augmented chord.”

In that moment, the curtain swished to the side, and Vincent walked in. He took in the scene before him, his cheeks extra hollow. His bones seemed to stand out against his skin, his hair spitting out in all directions.

“Perfect timing, Vincent,” Conroy said. “Your brother is about to attempt a question that will clearly prove if he’s listening or not. If he doesn’t answer the questions, I’m sure you’ll oblige.”

Vincent darkened his gaze, locking his eyes on Cam, then over to November.

Cam stood up from his seat, smoothing out his black shirt. His lean muscles flexed under his skin, and he smiled down at November before he faced Conroy.

“I like to use a mathematical way to distinguish the two,” he said. His eyes darted over to his brother and his lips curved into a smile. “Three plus three equals diminished. Meaning, you go up three half steps from the base of the chord, then three half steps more to find the diminished chord. Or, you use four plus four. For an augmented chord, you go up four half steps from the root, and another four. It’s as easy as that.”

The class murmured with each other, and Cam continued to smirk at his brother.

Vincent tightened his gaze, before it landed on November again. “Yeah, or you could play the chords by ear,” Vincent said. “Play them instantaneously instead of sitting down and having to do *math* to figure it out.”

The class stopped, and Vincent tapped his cane. “Roderick wants to see you, Conroy.” And then he left, the curtain closing behind him.

Conroy visibly sighed. “Margaret, will you lead the class on inversions and how they work? I’ll be back.”

Margaret lifted her chin, clearly pleased with being singled out, and jumped up from her seat. She headed to the front of the classroom, planting herself in Conroy’s chair.

“I wonder what Roderick wants to see him for.” Cam stuck his head next to hers again. His breath tickled the ends of her hair.

“Who knows.”

“Do you want to go find out?” Cam asked.

She spun around again. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, go on an adventure. It’s stuffy in here. Let’s go see what ol’ Roderick wants with Conroy, and what’s so important to pull him out of the classroom.”

“You’re serious.”

“Deadly.” His eyes twinkled with mirth. “I’ll leave first. Then you follow me after a minute. I’ll meet you outside.”

Before November had a chance to object, Cam stood from his seat and made his way over to the exit. November rubbed her palms on her thighs, bouncing her legs. She didn’t know *how* she’d found herself in this position, but she liked it. Cam made her feel like the real version of herself, uncaring about these people and adhering to rules. And the thought of staying in a classroom with Margaret in charge was enough to kill her.

November held in a smile as Cam disappeared behind the curtain. She waited a few seconds before she stood.

“What are you doing?” Margaret said firmly. “You don’t get to stand in my class.”

November about rolled her eyes. “Bathroom,” she said and headed for the curtain.

Margaret started to protest again, but November disappeared out into the hall before she heard another word.

Cam leaned up against the wall in front of her, his arms crossed and a grin on his face. “She really is a piece of work, isn’t she?”

November nodded, thinking how similar Cam’s mannerisms were to Vincent’s. She’d seen Vincent pose the exact same way.

“You have no idea,” she said. “Where to next?”

“Roderick’s office of course.”

Cam took her hand and November didn’t reel away. She’d never been a fan of being touched, but maybe she was adjusting to it, or maybe it was just Cam. When Cam held her hand, it made her warm from the inside out. Nothing she had ever felt with Shawn.

“Come on.”

Cam pulled her down the hall, and their feet raced quickly and quietly. He grinned back at her as they ran, and November couldn’t help but grin back. She held down a giggle in the back of her throat as they turned corner after corner, weaving through large marble pillars, under the high vaulted ceilings. They stopped when voices carried down the hallway. Roderick’s black curtain was straight ahead, and Cam continued to edge them forward.

“Just a little bit closer,” he said.

The two inched up to the curtain and crouched down on their feet, listening. Cam had let go of her hand, but with the way he stared at her, she felt as if he were eating her up.

“I told you, the dark ones are multiplying faster than normal, and it’s only a matter of time before the light burst out.” Roderick’s voice rung clearly.

“But why the sudden increase?” Conroy asked. “And are you so sure? How can you be so certain?”

Roderick’s voice turned seductive. “You of all people should know why.”

Conroy coughed. “Is it because of her? Because she’s here?”

“They want to keep their message clear. Call off the guards or we’ll come after you. They know she’s her father’s daughter. They want us to lower the veils or they’ll give her to the Sylphs.”

“No. The dark ones don’t consort with the Sylphs. They only care about sucking light out of anything that gets in their way.”

“Yes, but she’s different,” Roderick reminded him.

Conroy heaved out a breath. “She’s one of the twelve.”

Silence settled between them. *One of the twelve?* Every part of her buzzed with energy. What were they talking about?

“Yes, she’s one of the twelve. So the dark spirits have every reason to want to get rid of her, whether she’s her father’s daughter or not.”

“Then this *really* does mean the end is coming near,” Conroy said. “There’s nothing we can do to stop them from breaking through. We have to

prepare for war.” Conroy sighed. “I’m not one to believe in prophecies, but the signs have been there. Cedric spoke of it before he disappeared. The two sacrificial souls. The sirens calling. The twelve gathering together. And if the twelve don’t unite, the spirits will break loose. Our world will be overtaken by them. These signs all point to our destruction.”

Roderick grunted.

“I don’t know what to do.”

“We keep teaching the students,” Roderick said. “Preparing them even though they don’t know what’s ahead for them.”

“And you’ll... help with that?”

“I’d do anything for you, you know that.” Silence settled between them. “Just because I’m dark doesn’t mean I have any sway with the dark ones, I’ll keep an eye out.”

Cam touched November’s shoulder, and she jerked, broken from the conversation.

“We should go,” he whispered.

November nodded, quietly standing, but her knees shook. Whatever was coming, it involved *her*, and she intended to find out why.

Eighteen

ROCK WARS

“I CAN’T BELIEVE he’s a dancer.”

April looked up from her food, chewing. She’d been immersed in her plate, while November’s remained untouched.

“Who?” April took a sip of water.

For lunch, chicken pot pie was being devoured across the dining room. She tapped her fork, gazing out over the sea of students.

“Cam, of course,” November said. “Why did no one tell me he was a *dancer*?”

“Oh, Cam’s amazing.” April took another sip, and the sound of silverware clanked around the room. “I once saw him in the studio at our house and I couldn’t tear my eyes away. He’s hypnotizing.”

November set down her fork. “There’s a *dance* studio at your house?”

“Of course.”

November scrubbed her palms on her thighs. Of course there was.

“He had a dance partner once,” April said, “but...”

“But what?”

“She was one of the students who died.” April cringed, going back to her food.

November stared at April, trying to focus on her narrow face. Her dark lashes were stark against her pale skin.

“Who?”

“Marybeth Humphrey,” April said, chewing. “She was a ballroom dancer, like you. The two were inseparable. When they danced...” April sighed. “It was magic.”

November shifted in her seat, her back itching. “Okay. So they were amazing together, got it. What happened?”

April stopped eating and faced November head on. Her face seemed extra pale. “It happened outside the ballroom.”

Chills crept up November’s back. “And?”

“And Cam was the last to see her alive before she died. It was the Inaugural ball. They left the party, and before we knew it, screams sounded and we all exited to find Cam standing over her body, with Marybeth dead at his feet. There wasn’t a mark on her—just a cold, dead body. No sign of a dark spirit attack or anything. Everyone thinks he did it.”

November’s hands shook and she sat on them, trying to calm them.

“But how?”

“We don’t know. Some people are suspicious of a Sylph attack, but that’s rare. All we know is Marybeth didn’t want to go to the ball with him. She came with someone else, and Cam was furious.”

“How could she not want to go to the ball with Cam? He’s—”

Perfect.

November shook her head. Something about this didn’t add up.

“Then Cam took off,” April continued. “We haven’t seen him until now. So you can see why it’s kind of a big deal that he returned.”

November sat in silence, the clink of silverware continuing around her, and April’s words washing over her.

“That’s quite the story,” Vincent said from behind. He approached and stopped right behind November, planting his cane out in front of him. The kids in the dining room continued to chatter around them.

“What do you want?” November said, without turning around. “Here to flaunt how amazing you are again? You’re not God’s gift to music, you know that, right?”

Vincent moved forward, then lowered himself down next to November. He set his cane on his lap. “April, if we could have a moment?”

April stared at Vincent wide-eyed. “What? Oh,” she stammered, “Right. I’ll see you in a bit, November.” She fumbled upright and escaped out of her chair, leaving them alone.

Vincent’s long, deft fingers tapped on the table between them. He sat patiently, not saying a word, the sunlight from the window highlighting his sunken features.

“What?” November asked. “You clearly have something to say.”

“We got off on the wrong foot,” he said quietly.

“You think?”

He tucked his mouth in sideways. “I shouldn’t have tried to push you from my home.”

“*Your* home.” She gave a humorless laugh.

He cocked his head to the side. “What now?”

“The home shouldn’t be yours. It should belong to Conroy and April.”

He tilted his head to the other side. “Perhaps.”

November sighed. “What do you want Vincent?”

Kids were beginning to stare. Whispers heightened over the dining room.

“I want you to stay away from my brother,” he said. “He isn’t good. Nothing good comes from him.”

“Like something *good* could come from you?” She gave him a pointed look. “Excuse me if I don’t trust your judge of character.”

He continued to tap his fingers on the table. “I didn’t mean to mislead you in the obstacle course. That wasn’t on purpose.”

“Good thing Cam was there to save me. But *nothing* good comes from him, right?”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Then *what* do you mean, Vincent? Because you have been nothing but a grump toward me since I met you. You clearly don’t like me, so why would I take advice from you?”

His fingers stopped tapping. “I never said I didn’t like you.” He stared at her, his dark eyes unmoving.

“Then what. Are you saying you want to be friends? Is that it?” she asked. “Choose you over your brother? Like we’re in some sort of cheesy love triangle? I don’t do drama.”

“And I don’t have patience for wasted time. Time with Cam would be a waste.” He gripped his cane and slowly got to his feet. “It’s your choice, but if I know you, you’re about to make the wrong one.”

November opened her mouth, but nothing came out.

Vincent tapped his knuckle on the table before he limped away.

The entire lunchroom had stopped eating and were watching the encounter. Mouths were flopped open and heads swiveled around like owls, watching Vincent as he departed. All except for Cam, who had been silently

watching in the corner. His eyes wouldn't leave November's, and she ducked her head back toward her food, still untouched.

November needed to gain control of her thoughts.

If she didn't, she was going to fall into an episode, probably without knowing she was in an episode. If she wasn't in one already. Nothing was more important than keeping her stability. It was so nice to have finally found middle ground. The thought of spinning high—as amazing as it was when she was manic—made her stomach hurt. And the thought of slipping into a deep depression, made it hurt more.

November pushed out several breaths, sitting on the top step outside the school, waiting for Quincy. She couldn't be in the school any longer. Not after her encounter with Vincent. He couldn't tell her what to do. It seemed to be a habit of his. And Vincent was the enemy—not Cam.

Though the thought of Cam being partners with Marybeth Humphrey all those years ago sent a wave of sickness through her. She was jealous, she admitted. She hated the idea of someone being in Cam's arms, though it shouldn't have bothered her. It's not as if Cam *liked* her, or that she should like him. They barely knew each other.

November tried to focus on other things. She needed to focus on the conversation she had overhead between Conroy and Roderick.

Conroy had talked about signs before everything came to an end. What did that mean? He had talked about the two sacrificial deaths. He talked about sirens. Then something about the twelve. And what would happen if the twelve didn't unite.

None of it made sense. She *had* just heard the history of the seven supernatural beings and Cedric, and there was so much more she wanted to understand. She wanted to know more about the dark spirits and how they sucked out all the light from not only the good spirits, but from what Conroy said, people, too. She wanted to know how horrible it really would be if the spirits broke loose and the kids weren't able to keep them out.

Then there was Margaret and her cronies. She hadn't done anything to offend them that she knew of—they obviously had pretended to be nice to

her to get close to her, but when that had failed, they'd lashed out. Why did they hate her and April so much?

November placed her head in her hands, the wind whistling through the trees. The tops of them swayed, which only reminded her of climbing. She needed to be in the mountains. She needed to be out in the air. She needed her old life, where all she had to worry about was Shawn and his drama. That was nothing compared to what she was facing now.

Quincy pulled up to a stop in front of the school, and she silently thanked the old man for arriving early. She could hide out in the car until April was finished, hopefully not seeing anyone for the rest of the day. She stood from the top step and made her way down the front steps of the massive building. Birds flew overhead, and the gray clouds billowed over the sky.

"What are you doing out here, miss?" Quincy asked, walking around the car.

November didn't know how much the old man knew about this place, but she wasn't about to reveal to him her feelings about everything. He might kill over.

"Just tired," she said.

Quincy didn't move to open her door. "You know, I understand how hard this world is. Believing all of this."

November snapped her head up. "So you do know."

"What takes place within those walls? Yes." He straightened his tie, his hands splotchy and bony. "I've been serving this family for over forty years. I was around when the Huntington manor was filled with... their inhabitants. Hard to miss a house full of ghosts."

November thought of the eclectic rooms, and the long-lost ghosts who used to live there. "Where do you think they all went?"

Quincy's mouth pulled down, his wrinkles creasing. "They started to disperse when your father left the home. Some of them lingered with Clifton though."

"So you knew my father?"

"Yes. And your mother, too," Quincy said. "I thought it was noble of them to walk away from this world—to raise you out of it. That was just the kind of people they were, thinking of others before themselves."

November furrowed her brow. "It would've been better for them to have been honest with me."

“Aw, but then you would have been robbed of your childhood.”

“A childhood built off of lies. Sometimes I get so mad that I... that I *hate* them. I know I shouldn’t feel abandoned by them, it wasn’t their fault that they died, but they did choose to leave me that night.”

Quincy pondered that for a moment. “We all make mistakes, and I, for one, can tell you that your father was the best human being I ever knew. He was the best of his brothers, even your uncle Mason, who walked away from this world completely.”

Her uncle. She had forgotten about her uncle. He *knew* about this world and hadn’t said anything to her either. November pinched the bridge of her nose, exhaling. They were all liars.

“I’m done with being the victim,” November said. “I’m done with having my life be tragic because of others’ actions. I want to choose for myself what I want.”

“Then, what is it that you want?”

November paused. It was a good question. What was it that she wanted?

Mason had walked away from this world completely. Her father had been in it, but hid it from her. And Clifton was in the world, and hadn’t kept a thing from his kids. Three brothers. Three different paths.

Did she want to run? Or did she want to be a part of this world?

Running meant climbing. Running meant stepping away from this chaos and not having to deal with Vincent, April, or Cam. But did she really want that? Staying meant figuring more about her parents’ history and how she could find resolution in it. Staying meant dancing. Staying meant seeing the dead. Maybe she’d see her parents again.

November squared her shoulders and faced the old man head on. “Will you keep the car running? There’s one thing I need to do first.”

Quincy bowed, a small smile on his lips. “Of course, miss.”

Nineteen

NOVEMBER HAD RACED through the entire school looking for Cam, but he was nowhere to be found. She knew what she needed to say to him, and she needed to say it fast before she lost her nerve. Now all she could think about was getting to him, but he wasn't at the school.

After she'd failed, Quincy drove her home, with April bouncing in the seat next to her. For not being well liked at school, she sure handled it well. She was prattling on with a story about Ty, and how Amy had asked Ty to the Inaugural ball *again*, but he'd shut her down a second time. November half listened. Maybe Cam was already home. Maybe he'd left early. She *needed* to speak with him.

When they pulled up at the house, Quincy got out of the car, circled the vehicle and opened November's door. She started to climb out when he said, "He's usually not in the house this time of day. He usually walks the landscape."

November stared blankly at him.

"Cambridge," he said. "I'm assuming that's who you're looking for."

"How did you—?"

Quincy smiled. "You've been sitting on the edge of the seat since you got in the car. That would only have to do with a boy."

November grinned back. "Thank you, Quincy."

She took off around the side of the house, leaving April by the car, blinking. She ran along the stone steps that lined the lush grass like a miniature walkway, keeping her head forward, her eyes scanning the

landscape. She stepped underneath a few archways that extended from the house. The lake shimmered on her right, and she continued forward, passing the large field that stretched out into the forest.

Cam was nowhere to be seen.

Around the backside of the house, November paused where the healthy land suddenly cut off into the tangled gardens. She'd seen these gardens from her bedroom window. Dried roots and overgrown foliage lined the small walkway. Thorny bushes and dried flowers grew in huge disarray, growing upward on the side of the house. The garden stretched out so far, she couldn't see where it ended.

A crackle came from inside the dried bushes, and November stopped, peering into the dark gardens.

"Cam?" she asked. "Cam, are you in there?"

Another rustle came from deep within the bushes, and she squinted inside. A silhouetted shadow passed down the walkway within the bushes, and she moved a tangle of branches to the side as she stepped onto the path.

"Cam?"

She treaded carefully down the stone steps which led the path, her feet kicking up dirt and small rocks. The branches scraped her skin, but she continued to push them aside, heading deeper into the gardens.

"Cam, if that's you, stop making me follow you."

Still, nothing sounded but the crackle of bushes ahead of her.

The sun disappeared behind the clouds, and everything dimmed a shade. She glanced behind her, itching to turn back. She wasn't going to be the girl who followed a strange sound into the dark woods only to be eaten by a monster later. But there probably wasn't anyone in the gardens, and now she was intrigued. She wanted to know where this pathway led, and what was deeper inside. There had to be a reason these gardens were dead—especially when the rest of the yard was so well-manicured.

Curiosity overtook her, and she continued forward. The dried bushes and trees bent over her head, sealing her inside. Nothing could be heard but the sound of her soft footsteps, and her breath in her ears. The foliage seemed to close in around her further, until she felt like she was walking straight through dead plants, with no pathway whatsoever.

She pushed through one last branch, when the gardens opened up. A small alcove appeared before her, surrounded by foliage. Four archways encased the area, tangled ivy growing up alongside the stone. A rusted

bench was placed off to the side, with iron railings that swirled around the edges. She quietly walked along the crusted leaves on the ground.

Wind pushed back and forth in the small encasing, tickling November's hair, and she sat, absorbing the small space. It looked like a secret hideout, and she wondered how long it'd been since anyone had come here. She analyzed every detail of the alcove, and noticed that each archway had a symbol engraved at the top. She stood from the bench and approached one archway, craning her head back.

It was an engraving of a key—like an old-fashioned key. The object was carved into the stone, with swirls coming out the sides of it. Her feet crunched as she moved up to the next archway. This symbol was a rose, its petals delicately carved into the structure. She crossed over the ground to the next one. It was a clock, clear with its hands frozen on the time. And the last symbol was a snake, twisting in and out, around the stone.

November stepped back, shivering. The sight of the carved snake sent chills down her back and along her arms. What was she doing out here? She shouldn't have come. This place felt off—like she shouldn't be here. The air seemed to pause, shift somehow, like she was being watched.

Another rustle sounded from the bushes, and alarm bells went off in her head. She needed to get out.

November took off, racing through the bushes on her left, hoping she was going in the right direction. She pushed fast through the branches and dead leaves, the sticks scraping her skin. Her feet pounded on the dirt floor, leaves flying. She clearly wasn't on the path. But she pushed forward, her heart hammering, adrenaline coursing through her.

It seemed like an eternity that she raced through the maze of bushes, like she was circling around and around, cursed to never find her way out. She had no idea if someone had been there, or if she had made up the sound completely, but regardless, every inch of her cried to get out.

She sprinted harder, faster, until fresh air met her face. She tumbled out of the gardens onto a clean lawn, where the lake glimmered in the descending light. Her heart slowed, and she fumbled back away from the gardens, continuing to edge back, until she rammed into something hard.

"You seem to be making a habit of bumping into me," Cam said from behind.

November spun around. "Cam, hey. I was just—" She glanced behind her back toward the gardens, a sick feeling still in her stomach. "—looking

for you.”

Cam’s mouth curved upward. “That’s a coincidence, because I was just thinking about *you*.”

November was still breathing fast, and she tried to control her breaths, slowing them down. “Quincy told me you’d be out here, I wasn’t sure.”

Cam nodded, gazing out over the lake. “I do like to walk along the water. It’s peaceful.”

“You weren’t... I mean, were you in the gardens just now?”

Cam scrunched his brows together. “No. Were *you*?”

“I...” November swallowed. “No.”

Cam still looked at her curiously. “I should hope not. That place... well, let’s just say it’s best if you stay out of it.”

November wanted to ask why, but she thought it was better if she dropped it. She didn’t need another reason to be afraid of this place.

“I wanted to ask you a favor,” she said.

In the descending sun, the light highlighted Cam’s face, playing off of his sharp grooves. He did look a lot like Vincent, with their high cheekbones and jawline, though Cam had a sparkle in his eyes that Vincent didn’t. Vincent carried a sadness, where Cam carried mischief.

“A favor?” Cam asked. “Now I’m intrigued.”

“I want you to teach me,” November said before she lost her nerve. “I’ve decided I want to be here, I want to be a part of this world, and I want you to teach me. You’re a dancer. So am I. We should work together.”

Cam went still. His face faltered, paling, before he put himself together. “And why do you think I could help you?”

“There’s no one else, Cam. The only other dancer is Claire and she tried to kill me! I don’t have anyone else.”

“Don’t you know the rumors? There are those who say I murdered the last girl who danced with me.” He stared at her dead on, silent.

“We both know that’s ridiculous,” November said. “You wouldn’t do that. And we need to do this. I want to learn how to open the veil through my dancing. I want to...” She stopped. “We just need to do this, okay?”

He tucked his lips inward. “Well, if you think it’s best, then I’m down. I might as well do some good here.”

“Really?” November threw her arms around him in a hug. He held frozen, not hugging her back, until he slowly relaxed and drew his arms around her.

“Let’s get inside,” Cam said, glancing around. “We don’t want to be outside when it’s dark.”

Twenty

“THIS ROOM WILL HAVE TO DO,” Cam said, looking around. He placed his hands on his hips, his feet planted to the side.

It was a small studio space, with a wood floor and a large mirror that covered one wall. The mirror was tinted yellow with age, and the floorboards creaked when November walked forward.

“Claire’s space was a lot better than this,” she said.

“Our studio at home is better, so we can practice there, too. But this will have to do while we’re at school.”

November nodded, silently taking in the area. She couldn’t sleep last night, she was too excited to see what Cam would teach her today. She remembered Claire and how lovely she was when she danced; she recalled the way the veil had opened up to her, and revealed the spirits inside. What would it be like for her?

“Nov?”

“Hmm?” November snapped her head over.

“I asked you to remove your shoes.”

“Oh. Right.”

November bent down and unlaced the black boots she wore, then pulled her hair up into a high ponytail. She rubbed her hands together, watching Cam slip off his shoes, and push his ebony hair off his forehead.

“Ninety percent of music is based on dance,” Cam said, his voice ringing through the small space. “Most people don’t think music and dance are that connected, or you might wonder why dance also has such an impact

with what we do, but it's not *us* that is dependent on music. It's actually the other way around.

"Think of the types of music there are," he went on. "A minuet. A waltz. A tarantella. The list goes on. Without dance, so much music wouldn't exist."

"Okay," November said. "So how do we open the veil?"

Cam held up his hand. "You're being way too anxious. Before we even *begin* to think about using your gift to open a veil, you have to learn the dance first. It's like asking a baby to open a jar of peanut butter. It's just not going to happen."

November opened her mouth, defensive, but clamped her thoughts down. She didn't like being compared to a baby. She was one of the best climbers in the world, and should've gotten more credit. Yes, this was dance, but still.

"Let's start with the most basic of all dances," Cam said. "The Cha Cha."

"The Cha Cha? Are you serious? I'm not going to open a veil to the spirit world with the *Cha Cha*. I just want to do what Claire did." *Be beautiful.*

"Do you think Claire got as good as she is by just doing a couple of stretches? No, it takes time, Nov. We need to start from square one."

November groaned, but Cam came up to her and took both of her hands from behind. His long body stood behind her, and he slid his foot forward.

"Step forward, step back, and three cha cha chas," he said. "Like so. Ready to try?"

She couldn't believe she was doing this.

"Alright, here we go," he said. "One, two, cha cha cha. Three, four, cha cha cha. And again. You see?"

Cam moved his hips back and forth, his legs long as he did the steps, and November did her best to follow. She stepped forward, she stepped back, and her hips swayed side to side. The steps soon were easy, and came natural like she had been doing them her whole life. There wasn't any music, but she could hear the rhythm and beat like it was in her soul.

A light tingle began to make its way down her back. It was a warmth, that snaked its way around to her center, and she wanted to feel it grow. She let the feeling build—allowed the feeling to take hold. It surrounded her,

consumed her, the warmth continuing to build in her chest until her face relaxed into a smile. She could stay wrapped in this feeling forever.

“That’s enough!” Cam said. He pushed her back, breathing hard.

November stopped.

“Don’t do that,” he said. “Steps first. Only the steps. Nothing else—I could feel you... expanding yourself outward... so do *nothing* else. Not yet.”

She blinked at him. She wanted that feeling back. Whatever it was—however she was doing it—she wanted it back.

“Next is the Salsa,” Cam said, gathering himself. He squared his shoulders and faced the mirror again.

Cam proceeded to show her the steps, and November was easily able to see them in her head, taking root in her brain. Cam glanced over at her, a small smile on his face before he turned forward again.

“Ready to try?” he asked.

November nodded, and Cam moved up to the sides of her. He gently raised her arms, then kept his hands on her waist. The touch felt like fire on her skin, and she breathed in his scent. Chills spread down her back.

“Ready?” he whispered again, staring intently at her through the mirror in front of them. “And... go!”

November let the new rhythm and beat sink into her steps, carrying her forward. The footwork made perfect sense, the sway of her hips, the carry of her arms, and detail of the fingers all came naturally. Cam’s smile grew, and soon they were dancing full out around the classroom.

“Amazing!” Cam said. “You’re a natural, of course!”

After that, Cam taught her the Rumba and the Foxtrot. Each dance was like breathing, the steps flowing as if she’d learned them since birth. They laughed as they filled the space, November’s heart feeling lighter than air.

“Next up, the Argentine Tango,” Cam said. He stomped his foot into the floor and mocked the dance with a Spanish flair.

November giggled. She never thought she could have so much fun—especially dancing. This world was completely foreign to her, yet it seemed so familiar, too.

Cam taught her the intricate steps, and excitement bubbled at the thought of dancing this. The dance seemed... intimate... romantic. Once again, Cam moved up close to her and took her in his arms. November

stared at their reflection in the mirror—Cam’s head above hers, his sharp bones cut at perfect angles. His damp hair swooping across his forehead.

He reached up and tucked a piece of her auburn hair behind her ear. “You ready for this one?”

November could barely breathe. She nodded.

The movement began.

As soon as they started the first steps, something changed in the air. No longer was the dance light-hearted and fun, but it was heavy—grounded. The air felt thicker around them, as if sealing them in a tight bubble. She couldn’t help but have a stirring build deep within her. As November wrapped her feet around his, making quick movements, Cam stared back at her, a smile tugging his lips. They moved together like oil, smooth, easy. The warmth inside her began again, and she couldn’t take her eyes off of Cam.

Around the room they danced, their steps becoming faster. November’s head began to spin until she couldn’t see anything other than Cam’s eyes pouring into her. The feeling between them grew, like they couldn’t control their movements—it was the movement that controlled *them*. Cam seemed to be lost in the movement too, his eyes falling closed, his face relaxed. November pushed the dance harder, focused on making the feeling grow, feeling as if something big was going to happen, until Cam’s eyes shot open.

He shoved November back. “Stop!”

November shuffled back, her breaths fast. “What?”

“You’re doing it again. You’re pushing boundaries. You’re trying to find an opening. You need to stop.” He stepped away from her, running a hand through his hair. “I’ve never... never been with someone who’s danced so closely to the veil. It’s...” His breaths came in and out. “It’s overwhelming.”

November twisted her fingers in front of her. “Is that a bad thing?”

Cam swallowed, his jaw flexing. “Maybe. Maybe not. Too soon to tell.”

November furrowed her brow. They stood in silence for a moment before she said, “I want to waltz. Teach me to waltz.” The thought of dancing that classic, but intimate dance with him made her skin buzz with electricity.

“No,” he said quickly. “Definitely not. No.” He wiped a hand over his mouth. “We’re done for the day. See you at home.” He picked up his shoes,

slid them on, and headed for the door.

“We’ll practice tonight?” she asked, but he was already out the door.

Twenty-One

THE GIFT

CAM'S sudden departure ate at November for the rest of the day. She felt as if she'd done something wrong. It seemed like Cam got flustered any time she felt the warmth start to build within her veins. Was that how opening the veil started? It was like some sort of power—and it felt good. She wanted to feel it again.

Thoughts of her mother and father also stayed with her throughout the day. As she sat in Conroy's class, she couldn't get the picture of her parents' portraits out of her head. The way her father had stared back at her in pain, and the way her mother looked so sallow and beaten down. She couldn't help but feel they were in trouble, that they weren't resting in peace on the other side.

Cam had told her about the seven beings who were recruiting armies to find Cedric. What if her parents were part of an army? What if they had no choice to join? What if they were doomed to an eternity of torment? If there was a chance she could open a veil and find them, she would. So she needed to practice, with or without Cam's help.

Margaret and Claire had continued to stare at her during class, whispering, lifting their noses. Though most of their laughing had been aimed at April with them snickering to each other. April had sat with her long dark hair covering her face, trying to focus on Conroy's words.

By the end of the day, November's heart and body ached to climb. Each day that she spent here, the closer the comp in LA became. It was strange to long for something so desperately, but also be consumed with something else. Climbing didn't make her feel the way dancing did. Climbing was a

rush, a huge part of her heart, an extreme physical outlet. But dancing felt like an addiction, if this was what an addiction felt like. She'd only tried it a few times, but already she longed for her next fix.

As November exited the car, she gave Quincy a warm smile and headed up the front steps to the manor, April next to her. November couldn't see the back gardens from here, but being outside reminded her of her experience deep within the alcove. The symbols on the archways flashed to her mind, and again, November wondered what they meant. She shook the thoughts away and stepped inside.

"I heard about Cam," April said, pausing. "You guys really working together?"

"Yeah," November said, drawing to a stop. "It was... interesting. We'll see how much he can teach me."

"Hmm." A small line creased between April's brows and she pushed open the front door. Inside the entryway, the clocks all ticked in unison, welcoming them home.

"I don't like that you're working with him," April whispered. "I think you should stop."

"What? *Why?*" Not her too.

"Nov, you weren't around the last time he was here. He got obsessed with Marybeth. You'd never see them apart—he was almost too protective of her. She was a stunning dancer—probably just as stunning as you from what I've heard, but then... you know... things happened. I don't want you to be his next victim."

A zing went down November's back, ending in her toes. "There's no way he'd hurt me. Cam is one of the sweetest people I know. Vincent is the one who I should avoid."

April shook her head. "At least you know what you're getting with Vincent. With Cam, he always has other motivations. Please tell me you'll stay away from him. You can learn another way. You don't need him."

November started to retort, but April stopped her. "Don't say anything now. I know you don't agree with me. Just think about it, okay?"

The clocks chimed, and April squeezed November's hand before she stepped out of the room.

November rubbed her head, still standing in the entryway. Just when she had found something good—a reason to keep pushing and move on with the crappy circumstances she had been dealt—April had to go and ruin it for

her. April didn't know anything about Cam. She was listening to rumors. And it wasn't fair to him—or her.

Frustration bubbled in the back of November's throat, and she clenched her jaw tight. "Gah! I hate my life!" she yelled to the ceiling. Her voice reverberated off the walls.

"Don't we all," Vincent said, stepping into the room.

He leaned in the entryway, his cane planted out to the side. He looked extra tired that day, with bruises that circled his eyes. He moved his jaw back and forth, as if searching for something to say.

"What do you want?" November bit out. She wasn't in a good mood, and she wasn't about to pretend with Vincent.

"I wanted to show you something, but maybe that's not such a good idea. Not if you're going to bite my head off."

November started to respond, but she couldn't think of anything to say.

"Is that a yes?" Vincent asked. "Or do you want to stand there and yell at the ceiling more?"

November exhaled sharply. "Fine. What do you want to show me?"

"You'll have to follow me."

Vincent turned and exited out of the entryway, into the hallway. November stood there for a moment, shook her head, and then followed after him.

He moved down the hallway smooth and sleek, despite his limp. The lamps above him hung, the dim light highlighting his lean frame. He wasn't as tall as Cam—he was more her height—but he looked long with his thin build.

He turned down another hall, not looking back to see if she was following him. His white knuckles were bony on his cane. Was he in pain? She'd never thought to think that before.

Vincent stopped at the end of the hallway, bent down, dug his fingers into a wood crease in the floor, and pulled up a trap door. He held it open and motioned her inside. "Your mystery awaits."

November's eyes widened. "Down there?"

"If you want to see what I have to show you, yes. What, are you afraid?" A smile quirked his lips. It was the closest thing to a smile she'd ever seen from him.

"Of course not." November set her chin and crouched down next to Vincent. With his face up close to hers, she analyzed the deep grooves of

his face, from his jawline to his hollow cheeks.

“Well?” Vincent motioned her down again.

“Right.” November cleared her throat.

Grabbing a hold of the thin, metal railing, November circled down a set of narrow stairs, leading deep within the house. She hoped she wasn’t making a mistake coming down here with him, but in this moment, he seemed harmless. Vincent hobbled down after her, his cane awkward as he lowered himself down. The stairs seemed to spiral forever, but soon, November stepped onto a cement floor.

“Just ahead,” Vincent said, stepping adjacent to her.

They wandered in the dark for a moment, cool air chilling her skin. It smelled damp and musty, like she was in a cave. Goosebumps brushed her arms as they walked, and soon, everything came to light.

Out before her, a polished wooden floor stretched over the ground, illuminated by a dozen tiny chandeliers that hung from the ceiling. A grand piano sat on the middle of the floor, its surface smooth and black. Even though the light was dim, everything shimmered and shined.

“What is this place?” November asked, rubbing her arms.

“It’s my space,” Vincent replied. “It’s where I spend all my free time.”

She’d never thought of Vincent as a real person before—in that he did stuff in his free time. For some reason, she pictured him constantly brooding, hiding in the shadows.

“And what is it that you do?” she asked.

“I play. Read books. Sit in silence.”

The last part resonated with her. Her quiet time was everything to her.

“Come, over here.” Vincent moved across the wood floor, his cane clicking softly. She hovered on her feet, hesitating, before she followed after him.

Vincent lowered himself down on the piano bench and patted the seat next to him.

“Come, sit.”

November stared at the small seat. She couldn’t sit there. She couldn’t be that close to him.

“It’s okay... I’ll stand.”

Something shone in Vincent’s eyes—almost like a pain behind them.

“Suit yourself.”

“What are you going to do?” November asked.

Vincent shrugged. “Your gift is already here. I’m surprised you haven’t noticed it by now.” His voice echoed in the large room. November glanced around, biting her lips, searching. She couldn’t see anything other than the floor, chandeliers, piano, a few chairs in the corner, and the stone walls.

Stone walls.

“Is that... *granite*?” November burst out. She circled around, taking in the juts and bumpy surfaces on the rock that surrounded them.

“I suppose it is.” There was satisfaction in his voice.

“Oh my goodness!” November rushed over to one wall and set her hands on the stone. She traced her fingers along the rough texture, excitement coursing through her. “I think... I think I could actually climb this.” She glanced up to the ceiling, which was higher than she first realized.

“I’m glad you like it,” Vincent said. “They... aren’t being used.” There was humor in his voice.

“Are you kidding? This is amazing! But...” She paused, and spun around. “This is your space... I can’t... Do you mind if I...?”

“It’s big enough for the both of us. You can come down here to climb as much as you want, if you don’t mind my playing.” He motioned to the piano.

“No, no. Of course not.” She hadn’t felt such light since she came here. It felt like home. It felt like a piece of herself had been stitched together. Even though dancing had become an obsessive part of her, this was real. This was solid ground. “I won’t forget this. Thank you.”

Vincent nodded once. “I’m glad you like it.”

Twenty-Two

“TODAY WE ARE GOING to introduce you to a project we’ll be working on,” Conroy said.

The class all stood in a massive library, with books that reached high to the ceiling, complete with a sliding ladder, and polished circular tables that spread throughout the room. November had never seen such a library. It felt like each book was ancient, leather-bound and dusty. The only library she’d been to was the small public library on the outskirts of Crescent City, and that was nowhere near this extravagant.

“I know each of you are working hard in your respective areas, and you’re doing a fine job. You are guarding the veils wonderfully, but we’ve recently received some information that leads us to believe there is someone who has had communication with Cedric.” He adjusted his wire glasses and stared the class down. “Someone in the past fifty years.”

The class all glanced at each other, murmuring, disbelief on their faces.

“I don’t want to scare you,” Conroy continued. “But things are escalating. I’m sure you can all feel the pressure increase—guarding the veils is becoming more difficult. The dark ones are multiplying, consuming the light ones, and the light are trying to escape more than ever. If that happens, all spirits will be let loose, and we’ll be like a feast on a platter for the dark spirits who come through.”

Conroy stayed frozen, looking over the class. “The only way we can stop this is if we find Cedric. If one of you has had communication with him, then I urge you to come speak with me. If it’s *not* one of you, then my information says it could be someone in our history here at the school, and

we're going to pore over every book, every bit of information we have until we can find who this person is. They're the only chance we have at finding him in time."

Conroy kept his eyes fierce, and the class stood still. "So, we're going to take shifts guarding the veils. If you are not on guard duty, then I want you searching every book, every journal entry, every piece of documentation we have in this library to find who this person was, and what kind of connection they had with Cedric. And if you are the one who finds this person, you will have the privilege of..." He cleared his throat. "...going inside. With me."

The room quieted. Eyes slid to each other.

"Going inside?" Margaret burst out. "You mean... like... *inside*? But that's too dangerous!"

"Not with me. I'll take you in myself. Time is running out and we need to find Cedric now."

Claire made a face. "How do you even know someone has had contact with him? That's pretty far-fetched."

"That's not your concern," Conroy said. "Your purpose here is to focus and fight. Let *me* know how I handle information. Any questions?"

Hands shot up. Conroy scanned the room.

"I have one."

The curtain on the far side of the room parted, and the class swiveled over to the entryway. A tall blonde entered into the library, wearing a business suit that didn't do much to hide her supermodel body. Long legs, curves in all the right places, makeup done perfectly. Her blonde hair had just the right amount of volume, dusting her shoulders.

"Conroy," she said. "It's so good to see you. And... your class." Her eyes roamed over the kids.

Conroy rubbed the back of his neck. "Annabelle."

"That's Annabelle?" November whispered to April.

April nodded. "Yup. He's crazy not to like her, right?"

"I can't see how."

Annabelle glided across the room in her high heels, and planted a kiss on Conroy's cheek. He ducked his head and slightly moved away from her.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

"Roderick called me. He told me you needed help. I assumed with teaching the kids." She motioned over the room.

Conroy's jaw tightened. "I don't. I'm just fine."

Annabelle lifted her perfectly shaped brows. "You always say that. And then you run yourself ragged. I'm here to help so let me help. I've already given my notice to St. Andrews."

"What's that?" November whispered.

"Another school," April whispered back. "There are seven of our music schools located on top of the seven tectonic plates—the seven locations where the veil is the thinnest. Ours is the biggest though."

November blinked. She didn't know there were others. And they were the biggest? They only had this class of kids. She couldn't imagine anything smaller. She looked over the group. Most of the kids were her age, some slightly older like Cam, and some early teens.

"Fine," Conroy said. "Stay. I am swamped. It would be nice to have you help oversee this project for me. And you could help organize the Inaugural ball."

April squeezed November's arm. "Yay. It's happening. Circumstance will *finally* bring them together."

November wasn't so sure. Conroy's body language didn't say that he was interested in her. He stood with his back slightly away from her, and he barely made eye contact. There was more of a story here.

"Perfect," Annabelle said. She addressed the class. "Hey everyone, if you follow me, I'll show you where the records are kept."

The class followed Annabelle to the far side of the room. November kept her eyes on Conroy, who stood in the middle of the library, his countenance white.

November waited inside the dusty studio at the school, staring at the door, willing Cam to walk in. They were supposed to practice that day, yet he was nowhere to be found. She stared at the entryway for a long time, until she shuffled her feet over the floor, marking a few of the steps that she had learned yesterday. The Cha Cha. The Rumba. The Salsa. She easily recalled all of the steps, but she didn't feel the overwhelming warmth that overcame her when she danced with Cam. She glanced to the doorway again. Nothing was around her but a few wooden chairs that reflected in the old mirror.

The longer she waited, the more convinced she was that he wouldn't show. A heaviness settled in her chest, that sunk into her stomach. Stupidity began to sweep through her. She was waiting like a fool—waiting like a lovesick girl being dumped by her boyfriend. She had gotten her hopes up—thinking her and Cam had a connection through dance, that he was just as excited to dance with her as she had him—but that clearly wasn't the case.

The vision of Cam acting strange at the end of their lesson yesterday came to mind. He'd left so abruptly, not answering her when she asked if they could rehearse later that night—maybe it was because he didn't want to rehearse with her at all. Maybe the experience yesterday with teaching her had been so revolting, he couldn't stand spending another day with her.

Her stomach sunk deeper.

This was why she didn't allow herself to be connected with anyone. This was why she preferred being alone. Connecting meant hurting. Connecting meant opening yourself up to heartache. She'd learned that with her parents and Shawn.

She could do this on her own, she told herself. She didn't need Cam.

She wasn't going to wait here like a fool. If she wanted to dance, she was going to dance. She didn't need a boy to do so.

She faced the mirror head on, remembering how she had danced that first night back at the Huntington manor. She had danced alone then, and the power had been overwhelming. She knew she could find that feeling again—that she could tap into that warmth that overcame her. It had to be the way to opening up the veil.

November closed her eyes, soaking in the silence. She waited for a time, letting all the toxic thoughts leave her body. She knew how to create that peaceful space in her head from therapy and meditation. She'd had to learn it for her condition; if she hadn't, the disease would control her.

She waited until all her anger and stupidity had washed through her, then she slowly opened her eyes. It was just her and the rusty mirror. She slowly brought her arms upward, letting her wrists guide the way, her fingers separated and delicate. They moved through the space almost hypnotizing, filling the air around her.

She didn't want to dance a specific genre of dance—she wanted to move for herself.

November continued the movement with her arms, then let it flow into her body. She bent to the ground, brushing her fingertips reaching

downward, then unfolded upward. Her feet started to move, traveling through the space. There was an invisible beat in the silence, that resonated between her breaths.

Round and round she danced, the familiar warmth starting to build. She wanted to stop and enjoy the feeling, but she knew she had to keep going. She let it consume her, filling her whole being, as the steps pounded faster and faster. Her heart rate increased, but her movements stayed fluid and controlled.

She danced until she could only see her heartbeat throbbing in her eyes. Then she felt it. The air seemed to part around her. November paused, her vision slowly clearing, until bright light seared her eyes. It was happening. She couldn't believe it was happening.

Like a zipper being unzipped, the air peeled open in front of her, and bright figures stood in the distance before her. They seemed to sense her presence, and started to move toward her. November reached out her hand, pushing the air to the side, and the veil opened further. More figures were revealed.

She waited, watching them approach, the warmth still searing through her. She could stand here all day watching the people draw closer. Thoughts of her parents came to mind, and she squinted through the light, hoping to see them. Then thoughts of Cedric surged. Maybe she could be the one to find him. She continued to peer into the light, searching.

In the midst of the white, a black dot traveled toward her, like a drop of dark ink ruining a white canvas. It zoomed toward her at an impossible speed, the black growing bigger, wider. In the back of her mind, she knew this wasn't good, that it felt off to have a dark presence interrupt the white, but she couldn't find the mental strength to back away. She wanted to keep the veil open, but she also didn't know how to close it.

A loud screeching sounded on the air, growing louder the closer the black figure came. November covered her ears, backing away, but the sound continued to heighten. Soon the black figure became a face, its jaws unhinged, mouth open, speeding toward her. Black wisps swirled off of it, and the white figures departed, making way.

November couldn't move—she couldn't breathe. She felt useless against this presence that was about to envelop her. She'd made a mistake opening the veil, and now she was going to pay the price. If only she had waited, had listened to Cam, until she'd learned how to close the veil.

The screeching sound continued, and the dark figure stretched out its hands—which were more like claws, with gnarled fingers and long nails. It continued to zoom closer, its contorted face screaming toward her. She tried to edge back, tried to run, but her feet were glued to the ground. Just as it reached the veil, November shut her eyes, waiting for the inevitable, when a blast of light rocketed through the room. Her eyes flew open and the veil closed shut. November stood panting in the silence, frozen to the floor.

“What the hell are you doing?” Cam stepped into the room, his arms outstretched before him. His eyes were wide with fear, before he clamped down hard on his jaw, glaring. “You could’ve killed yourself!”

“What...” November still couldn’t move. “What was that?”

Cam moved deeper into the room and scanned the area, making sure it was safe. “A dark one, of course. He was two shakes away from ripping your throat out.”

November was still panting, her heart hammering. “How’d you close the veil?”

Cam turned on her, his eyes dark. “I wouldn’t have had to if you hadn’t have opened it.” He kept his gaze locked with hers, silence pounding, until he relaxed. “Closing the veil is as natural as breathing. You’ll learn how to do it soon enough. That is, if I ever let you out of my sight again.”

November held silent as Cam paced in front of her. With his head tipped downward, a chunk of midnight hair fell across his forehead.

“Dark spirits consume light spirits in the blink of an eye, but for one to latch onto you... onto the living... it’s one of the most horrifying things I’ve ever seen.” She held silent as Cam’s face tightened. Pain radiated off of him, his head tipped down to the floor. His eyes seemed to glaze over in memory, until his head turned to her. “I wouldn’t want to see that happen to you.”

“You’ve... seen a dark one kill someone before,” November said tentatively. “You mean Marybeth?”

Cam nodded. “The night of the Inaugural ball... She opened the veil. A dark one came out and feasted upon her. It sucked the life right out of her. I was able to fight it off—to stop it from ripping out her throat, but I was too late. I’ll never forget the look on Marybeth’s dying face. It haunts me to this day.”

“Cam... I’m...” She didn’t know what to say.

“It’s my fault,” he said. “Her death is on my hands.”

“No, it wasn’t. But you ran anyway.”

He exhaled, straightening his shoulders. “I couldn’t stand being here any longer for a myriad of reasons. But yes, Marybeth was part of it.”

Silence settled again.

“So will you keep teaching me?” November asked. “So that doesn’t happen again?”

The memory fell from Cam’s eyes as he focused on her. “I do want to keep dancing with you.”

November’s stomach tightened at the thought. “I want to keep dancing with you, too.”

A small smile flickered on Cam’s lips. “Good. Let’s start with the Tango, then.”

Twenty-Three

NOVEMBER AND CAM danced all afternoon. Like their first session, the steps had come natural and easy, like November had been a dancer her whole life. She enjoyed her time with Cam. After the veil incident, he had become light-hearted and fun, returning to his normal self. He smiled at her as they danced, lifting November's step.

But as they'd danced, slow, creeping thoughts had entered her mind. She couldn't get the vision of the rock walls in Vincent's lair out of her head. Her fingers itched to climb, and a part of her heart hurt from being off the wall for so long. The comp in LA was still only a few days away, and even though November was starting to get comfortable with the idea of not climbing, a small part of her still longed to make it to that competition. She wanted to know if she was good enough—good enough to make the Olympic team. Even though she knew her life here was important, she still missed her old one.

She set her backpack down on the floor of her bedroom, closing the door behind her. Her shoulders relaxed as she leaned against the door, grateful for the silence. Even though this new world excited her—intrigued her—it was exhausting running at such a high capacity all the time. She needed her quiet, her time to regroup and reprogram her brain, otherwise she wasn't okay.

The leaves rustled in her room, and November glanced up.

A small boy sat at the top of the tree, crouched on a long branch, staring down at her. She blinked, rubbing her eyes.

"What?" November said. "What are you doing in here? *Who* are you?"

The boy tilted his head to the side, keeping his wide brown eyes locked on her. His clothes were rough and torn, with pants that were ripped at the calves. His button up shirt was loose and hung off his bony frame. He continued to stare at her.

“Hello?” she asked. “Did you hear me?”

“Where is David?” the boy asked. “He said he’d come back for me, but he hasn’t. I’ve been waiting. But now... now you’re here.” His face scrunched to the side.

A cold feeling slithered down her back. “David?”

The boy tilted his head to the other side. “David Huntington, yes. Do you know him?”

November pressed her palms against the wooden door behind her, curling her fingertips in. “I know him pretty well, yeah.”

She hadn’t heard her father’s name said out loud since his funeral.

The boy made a sudden movement—hopping down to the branch below him. “I bet you don’t know him as well as me.” He narrowed his eyes. “He’s my best friend.”

November tried to breathe normally. “How did you know him exactly?”

The boy stilled again. “This was his room. I visit here sometimes. We’d have the greatest adventures climbing in this tree. I love to climb trees.”

“I can... see that.”

Something felt off about the boy. A strange feeling surrounded him, a vibe in the air that didn’t settle well. It didn’t make sense that her father would have a child as a friend, nor could it be possible since her father died seven years ago. The kid could only be ten. And her father hadn’t lived in this house for years.

The light from the window shifted and bits of sunlight filtered in, shining through the boy’s torso. November clamped her hands over her mouth, holding in a gasp. With the sunlight on him, he was nearly transparent. She swallowed, her heart suddenly present.

“What’s your name?” she asked, trying to stay calm.

The boy scooted over to the far side of the branch, still crouched. He stared at her, as if assessing her. “August,” he finally said.

“Great. Hi, August. I’m November.”

“You remind me of David,” August said. He jumped down another branch, and a few leaves floated down onto the bed.

“Really?” November peeled herself from off the door and started to inch forward. “How long has it been since you’ve seen David?”

“Yesterday. A week. A year, I’m not sure.”

November’s pulse took off. She tried to stay calm. “Where?”

“I don’t like this game,” August said. “I want to play something fun. With David.”

“Do you think he’ll come back?” November asked quickly. “To this... room?”

“I told you I don’t like this game!” he yelled.

“Okay, okay.” November held up her hands. “Then what do you want to play?”

August snapped his head up, as if he’d heard something. Fear flashed in his eyes. “I have to go.”

He disappeared in a flash, the leaves rustling behind him. He was gone. Just like that.

November stared at where he’d been, her heartbeat thrumming through her whole body. August had seen her father *recently*. He’d been dead for seven years. August knew her father. And August was a ghost. She’d just talked to a real, live... ghost.

Pounding sounded from behind and November flinched.

“Can I come in?” April’s voice echoed from outside the door.

The door swung open.

“Hey,” April said, breathless. “I was here to ask you...” She paused, eyebrows pinched. “Are you okay?”

November hiccupped, then wiped a hand over her forehead. “I’m great. What’s up?” She wasn’t okay—she had just talked to a ghost who knew her father—and she didn’t know what to do about it.

April furrowed her brow. “You sure?”

“April, I’m fine. What’s up?” But her voice shook.

“I was wondering if you wanted to join forces with me—you know, with the project at school. Everyone probably already has a head start, researching the library and stuff. But I figured... well, we could use our library here. See if we can find any info on this person who was contacted by Cedric. I really want to be the student who gets to go in. I’m sure you do too.”

April waited, and silence beat between them. She *did* want to go in. She wanted to step through the veil and search—she wanted to find her parents.

She still had a horrid suspicion that they weren't okay, and if someone like Margaret won the contest and got to go inside the veil with Conroy, it was enough to push her over the edge.

November nodded. "Let's go."

"Great." April smiled. "Follow me."

April led November down the hall, the dim walls seeming to close in. November hugged her arms around her waist as they traveled down a flight of stairs. They passed April's favorite room, with birds echoing out into the hall, then passed several other rooms, and she tried to see what was inside. Jewelry? Paintings? More antiques? Watches?

When April started down the hallway of portraits, November paused at the end, hesitating. She peered down the long hall, chills pricking the back of her neck. April noticed her hesitancy, and her forehead wrinkled.

"You coming?" she asked.

November rubbed her hands on her thighs. "Yeah. Yeah, I'm coming."

As November drew her feet forward, she forced herself to keep her head straight—to not look at the faces on the portraits as she passed by. The air seemed tight in her lungs, and it was a struggle to move. Halfway through the hall, she couldn't help herself—she peeked over to the side and took in her parents' portraits.

Her father's warm face stared back at her, his expression relaxed, his eyes bright. Her mother's face was smooth and lovely, her hair lush and blonde.

November paused again, her mouth agape. "How..."

"What's wrong?" April stopped.

"My parents... their pictures..." November edged forward, reaching out a hand and tracing the frame with her fingers.

"What about them?" April asked, her brows digging deeper.

"They weren't like this the last time I saw them."

April moved up next to her and linked her elbow through November's arm. "We don't want to hang around in here, Nov. Pictures are a place where spirits linger."

She dragged November from the hall and turned left. November resisted the urge to look back. They traveled past a few more doors, and November shook out her arms, exhaling. April took one more corner then paused in front of a large set of double doors. She grinned and pushed them open. April flipped on the light, and November gawked.

Books filled the room to capacity—some organized neatly on bookshelves, others stacked in random piles. Circular tables scattered the room, some with open books, some with more stacks. Like the school’s library, a tall sliding ladder was available, and a swirling set of stairs adorned the far edge of the room, which led to another level of books, packed tightly on their shelves.

She had never seen so many books in her life. Not even in the school library.

“Where did these all come from? I mean... how can one possibly own all of these books?”

“My father...” April started.

“Liked to collect books. Figured.”

April smirked. “He kept this room because of my mother. She died too, you know—when I was five. A dark spirit got her.” Something traveled over her eyes before she focused. “He always hoped she would come visit because of this space. She loved reading, it was everything to her.”

November nodded, taking in the sight. She stepped deeper into the room. “Where do we start?”

“I figured we’d start with the journals. We have a collection of them—loads of our ancestors kept them. The school’s library won’t have this kind of personal information. I figured if anything were to have gone down—if someone really had contact with Cedric—it would’ve been recorded in private.”

“I don’t get why this is all such a big deal. So what if Cedric contacted someone? You think he spilled all of his secrets, how to *save the universe*, to one particular person? Seems a bit far-fetched. Besides, who would’ve given Conroy this information?”

“Knock. Knock.”

November’s uncle poked his head into the room. She took in his handsome face, with the handlebar mustache that covered his features that looked so much like her father. His salt and pepper hair was thick on his head, and his eyes twinkled with acknowledgment.

“Uncle Mason!” November exclaimed. He opened up his arms, and November ran into them, giving him a big hug. “What are you...?”

“I came to see how you were doing.”

November hugged him again, then pulled back. All the events of the past week hit her, and she stepped away.

“How could you not have told me? All this time? About my parents... about this world... about my abilities... I obsessed over my parents’ deaths, and you knew all this time how they died.” She wanted to be angry, but she was too excited to see him.

Mason rubbed his jaw, moving his mouth back and forth. “Your father didn’t want you part of this world, Nov. I was only adhering to his wishes. But when I was called away, I called an audible. I decided you needed to know.”

“Called away? What do you mean called away? Where have you been?”

“I left this world a long time ago,” he said. “But Conroy needed my skills. I’m a specialist in spirits and how they interact with mankind. I follow cases that might bring potential information to our cause. Tracking people down who claim to have been visited by spirits and such. It’s difficult to differentiate the stories out there from people who might have had a real experience with spirits or with people who are just faking it. But Conroy was in dire need, and so I came out of retirement for him.”

November rubbed the sides of her head. “This is all so hard to comprehend.”

“So what are *you*?” Mason asked. “What instrument do you play?”

November eyed him warily. “I’m a dancer.”

Her uncle went still. “Of course. That’s rare. And have you...?”

“I’ve opened up the veil once, yes.”

April’s head darted over, eyes wide. “You have?”

“Already?” Mason laughed. “Your parents would be so proud.”

November narrowed her eyes. “Apparently they wouldn’t.”

Mason rolled his shoulders. “Well, I’m proud. It takes years to master such a skill, and already...” He broke off, and his eyes lit up. “This is perfect.”

He rushed over to a table and pushed a few books aside. He took out a piece of paper from his pocket, and flattened it on the hard surface. “Come look.”

November crept forward and peered over her uncle’s shoulder. On the paper, burnt marks scorched along the edges, along with a hole that had been burnt in the middle. A list of names ran down the paper, all written in a different scrawl.

“What’s that?” April asked. She was still giving November curious looks every few moments.

“It’s a list of some sorts. Every name on here is of a person who is dead, but at one time or another, they signed their name onto this piece of paper.”

“Why?”

“That’s what I’m trying to figure out.” He ran a finger down the list. “But now knowing that November can open the veil, maybe we can find out.”

“Why do you think these names are significant?” April asked.

November stayed silent, staring at the page. She touched the paper and said, “Because... look.”

April bent closer to the paper, and Mason nodded.

January Hill

May MacTavish

July Frederick

March Adams

June Johnson

September Reinhert

February Pederson

December Jacobs

“These are all... months!” April exclaimed.

Mason raised a brow. “Significant, yes?”

“Like you and me,” November whispered to April.

April went pale. “What does it mean?”

“I have my theories.” Mason ran a hand over his mustache.

“Which are?” April asked.

“The signs,” November interrupted.

“What?” April asked.

“Two souls being sacrificed. The sirens coming. And the twelve reuniting...”

Mason smiled with pride in his eyes. “Your parents *would* be proud.” He proceeded to talk. “There are twelve months of the year. And it is said that the twelve will gather together before the end comes. The names aren’t a coincidence.”

Silence stretched.

“And... you think November and I... we’re part of this *twelve*?” April asked. “But, our parents could’ve named us anything. Why would we all *happen* to end up with these names? That doesn’t make sense.”

“It makes sense if someone on the other side *told* them to name you as such.”

April sucked in a quick breath. “Like... Cedric?”

Mason nodded. “Which is why it’s essential we find these twelve. Cedric knew something. He knew the twelve were essential and he used these names so you could find each other. He wouldn’t go through this much trouble if we didn’t stand a chance against what’s coming. I don’t know why he’s in hiding, but for now, our goal is to find these twelve and unite them. I’m sure things will be made clear once you’re connected.”

“But most of them are dead,” November said. “How are we supposed to unite with the *dead*?”

Mason raised a brow. “That’s where you come in. You have the other side at your fingertips.”

“It’s missing four names,” April mumbled, staring at the page. “There isn’t an October or an August. And if November and I are really two of them...”

“We’re only missing one of them.” November’s heart picked up.

April and Mason waited.

“There’s a boy... who visited my bedroom,” November said. “He knew my dad. His name is August. I think he’d be the August we’re looking for.”

April groaned, shutting her eyes. “This is too much. How could November and I be one of the twelve? What does gathering even mean?”

“That’s what we need to figure out.”

“So what about the school project?” November asked. “Why are we having the kids search for one person who supposedly had a connection with Cedric?”

“Well, obviously he contacted several people in order to instruct their children to name you as such. But... we think Cedric had a lover,” Mason said.

“A lov—” November coughed. “Seriously?”

“Someone he loved on this Earth. Someone either living or dead. I’ve found some documentation that alludes to Cedric reproducing—I don’t know what this means. A child of Cedric could be detrimental to our protection of this world, depending on his or her motivations. You see, Cedric is an immortal, almighty being. We don’t know what this child would be capable of. We need to find this child and see what we’re dealing with. If they were with us, we’d have more power. But if they were against us...”

“We need to find Cedric’s child,” November said.

Mason nodded. “And I don’t know how old this boy or girl could be. From what I read, they could’ve been born any time within the last fifty years.”

“So we search,” November said.

Mason rolled the paper up. “We search.”

Twenty-Four

ANGEL'S DELIGHT

NOVEMBER AND APRIL spent all day poring over journals in the library. They did little talking, each absorbed in the thought that they were both one of the twelve. Had Cedric visited *her* parents, telling them to name her November? She had always thought she had a peculiar name, and now she knew why. Whether her parents just *thought* she was one of the twelve, or because she really was part of a group of people that could stop the war that could kill all of mankind.

But why hadn't her parents wanted her to be a part of this world? If they knew she was special, then why did they try to hide it?

They also searched for any sign of the woman Cedric had had an affair with. It wasn't every day that one rifled through documents, searching for any sign of a mother or child who had connections to a missing immortal. After hours of research, November finally crashed.

The next day, she went to school in a daze. Conroy didn't hold class. Students were either protecting the veil, or searching the library obsessively. They each wanted to be the one chosen to go inside the veil.

Cam showed up to their lesson, and they practiced together, Cam with his usual warm smile and bits of mischief in his eyes. November had learned two more dances, but none of them stirred the warmth within, enticing her to open the veil.

At the end of the day, she walked the halls with April, making her way to Quincy, when Vincent stepped in front of her, blocking her way.

"Can I speak with you for a moment?" He stood in front of her, his bones sharp against his pale skin.

November blinked, not sure how she felt about talking with him. He wasn't exactly her favorite person.

"S-Sure...?"

"I'll wait over here," April said, eyebrows raised.

Vincent limped to the wall and leaned against it, his cane planted out in front of him. She edged up next to him, and he hovered over her, too close.

"I..." Vincent's dark eyes slid to the sides of him before he focused back in on her. "I..." He started again and cleared his throat.

"You what?" November asked.

"I was wondering... if you'd like to climb today? You haven't yet."

"Oh." November scrubbed her palms on her thighs. "Right. It's been pretty busy."

"I know. The assignment from Conroy."

"Yes."

Vincent sighed and leaned his head back against the marble wall. "You shouldn't give up what you love for a stupid assignment. Your mental health is more important than this world."

November jerked back. She opened her mouth, but she couldn't find words. Did he know about her depression? Or was he just generally speaking? An itch bristled on her back and she squirmed.

"So what's your answer?" Vincent asked. "Are you coming?"

"I'm... not sure."

He lifted his dark brows. "Afraid?"

She narrowed her eyes to slits. "No, don't flatter yourself. See you tonight."

Vincent's mouth flicked upward. "Okay, then. See you tonight."

He turned, limping, until he disappeared around the corner.

April rushed forward, gripping November's arm.

"What was that about?" Her eyes stretched wide.

November stared where Vincent had vanished. "I have no idea."

November stood at one end of the long hall, staring at the trapdoor that led down to Vincent's space. A window at the end cast moonlight onto the

floorboards, patterns on the floor. She couldn't find herself to move. Her feet felt as if they were part of the floor, glued to the ground.

A huge part of her longed to go down into his lair—she *wanted* to climb again—she *needed* that healthy outlet. She wanted to feel weightless on the wall. But she was unsure about sharing space with Vincent. He scared her—almost intimidated her—and she didn't know what it would be like to be alone with him.

Again, she thought of how Vincent was so opposite of his brother. Not in looks—physically it was apparent they were siblings, though Vincent had more of a tortured look—but in personality was how they differed. Cam was vibrant, happy, warm, and comforting to be around. Vincent, on the other hand, was cold, dark, and unsettling.

She tried to weigh the pros and cons of spending time with Vincent. Pro, she might find him interesting. Maybe there was more to him than what was on the surface—a deeper person underneath the cold exterior. Con, he'd only add more darkness to her life. She didn't need to be around someone who made her uncomfortable, someone who added stress.

But she *should* give him a chance, and she *wanted* to climb. She eyed the trapdoor at the end of the hallway again and shook out her hands. Making a decision, she stepped forward.

“What are you doing down here?” Cam stuck his head over her shoulder. “What are you looking at?”

November jumped and spun around. “Cam, you scared me!” She shoved his chest.

He stumbled back, laughing, and pushed a thick lock of dark hair off his forehead. “Funny thing finding you in the hallway staring at the floor. Are you okay?”

November sighed. “No, I'm not. I don't know what I'm thinking.” She glanced back at the trapdoor. “What are you doing?”

Cam's eyes twinkled with mischief. “I was going to head to the alligator room and feed them some dinner.”

“That room *exists*?” November clasped her hands over her mouth.

He chuckled. “I'm kidding.”

“Cam!” She punched his arm.

He winced, rubbing where the punch had been. “Dang. You *are* tough.”

November smirked.

“Actually, I was just going for a walk. Care to join me?”

November peeked over at the trapdoor again, her fingertips buzzing. She turned back to Cam and her shoulders relaxed. “Yeah. Sure.”

He held out his elbow. “Milady.”

November linked her arm through his. It was better that she spent some time with Cam. Vincent wouldn’t mind if she didn’t show. And like Vincent had said, she needed to do what was best for her mental health. And Cam gave her a warmth no one else could.

They walked in silence for a few steps before Cam said, “Hey, do you wanna do something fun?”

“Is this another joke? Because I definitely don’t want to feed any alligators.”

He laughed out loud. “Follow me.”

Cam took her hand and picked up the pace through the hallways. She glanced down at his touch, her nerve endings tingling. A small smile formed on her lips as they continued to race.

When they came to the end of a hall, Cam approached the window on the far end. His fingers dug underneath the lip that opened it, and he shoved the window open. Cool air drifted inside, tickling over her arms.

Cam held out his hand. “Come on.”

“What are we doing?”

Cam grinned. “Just come on.”

He stepped through the window, leading November with him. Outside, the roof extended out like a platform, and Cam plunked himself down, his legs swinging off the edge. He patted the spot next to him.

“Sit.”

November tentatively walked forward, staring up at the stars that dotted the sky. It looked like a painting—a large black canvas with drops of bright paint sprinkled throughout. She lowered herself next to Cam.

“Nice, isn’t it?” Cam asked. “I like to come out here and reflect sometimes. Stare up into the heavens wondering what it’s like up there.”

November kept her head tipped back, taking in the majestic sight. “Don’t you mean down here? It seems as if the heavens are all around us. Life after death is almost like... well, like they’re just room over. Like their world exists on top of ours.”

“I suppose you’re right,” Cam said. “But I like to think there’s something up there, too. Do you ever wonder where we came from? We had

to be created somehow. Or what kind of almighty beings exist? We can't be alone. We already know there's life after death."

They sat in silence for a few heartbeats.

November couldn't get her mind off of Vincent and how she'd stood him up. She cringed at the thought of seeing his face tomorrow. He was going to be mad—but he already hated her, didn't he?

"What did I do to make Vincent hate me?" she asked out loud.

"Vincent?" Cam leaned back on his elbows. "Nah. He doesn't hate you."

"He does," November pressed. "When I first came here, he was so adamant about me leaving. Trust me, he hates me."

Cam swallowed, his throat bobbing in the moonlight. "Oh, well, that."

"What?"

"It isn't *you* he hates exactly. Well, you see, your father and Vincent were close. Very close."

"They were?"

"You obviously didn't know this, but your father used to come here weekly to mentor Vincent. They were both pianists, and brilliant ones. Your father was everything to Vincent—like a father to him. He helped Vincent not only develop his skills, but he taught him about life, too."

"So my father and Vincent were close. That doesn't explain the hatred."

"Your father took you away," Cam said. "He told Vincent that he didn't want you to be part of this world, so he packed up and left. Because of you, he abandoned Vincent. Vincent was left alone. He lost his mentor—his only friend."

Silence pounded, and November crossed her arms over herself. "Oh."

Her father had been his best friend, and she was the reason he left. But it wasn't her fault. She didn't know. She didn't know about Vincent or this world or their friendship.

"How did he get his limp?" November asked.

Cam swallowed again, and the line of his jaw drew tight. "That's a story for another time." He stared at the stars, tense, until he relaxed. "Let's just enjoy the moment, shall we?" An easy smile spread on his lips. He set a hand on her back and scooted her closer.

November leaned into the touch, his arm around her, and she relished in the warmth of his body. She tilted her head onto his shoulder, silence dancing between them.

“I love it when we dance, you know.” Cam’s voice echoed out into the night. “You make me feel things I haven’t felt for a long time. It’s really nice.”

She wanted to ask about Marybeth and what it had been like when they danced before she died, but didn’t. She didn’t want anything to break up this moment. Cam. The stars. The easy feeling between them.

“We dancers are supposed to be together, you know,” he continued. “No one else understands the burden of what we do. It takes serious self-control to open a veil and not step inside. The pull is so strong. None of those other kids could do what we do. It’s one thing to guard a veil, and another to be tempted by the sweetness that draws us in.

“It’s like being home,” he went on. “I believe there’s a part of our souls that want to be home. I believe we lived in the spirit world before we were born, and a subconscious part of us wants to go back.”

November let Cam’s words roll off of her out into the night. She wasn’t sure how she felt about Cam’s theories, but there might be some truth to it.

“But I don’t know *why* we’d want to go back when there is so much to be felt and experienced here,” he said.

Cam turned, and ran a hand through November’s hair. He played with the strands, his blue eyes taking her in. The moonlight highlighted his angular features, playing off of his strong bones. He leaned forward until he cupped the back of her head.

“I’m going to kiss you now,” he said.

A rush went through November, sparks sizzling underneath her skin. She felt paralyzed, like she couldn’t do anything to stop it—but she didn’t want to at the same time.

“Okay.”

Cam lowered his head to hers and pressed his lips onto her cheek. He kissed her again, drawing his lips closer to her mouth. Again, he kissed her, gentle kisses, until he found her lips with his own.

The moment their lips touched, warmth exploded through her. November fell into the kiss, kissing him back with full fervor. She’d had boyfriends before, but she’d never experienced a kiss like this. Cam’s mouth drew her in, took complete control of her. She couldn’t get enough. Her hands found his face, and she traced the finely cut grooves.

“See?” Cam mumbled through the kisses. “We dancers are meant to be together. There’s a pull between us that can’t be stopped.”

“That’s what you told Marybeth,” Vincent said from behind them. He stood on the other side of the open window.

November jerked, spinning out of Cam’s embrace.

“Vincent.” November didn’t know why she felt guilt. It’s not as if they had a connection, or like they were together, or she should even care what Vincent thought.

Vincent stared at her, his face so similar to Cam’s in that moment, but Vincent’s cheeks were more hollow, the circles under his eyes more pronounced. He was leaner, slighter than Cam.

“I hope it’s worth it,” Vincent said. His eyes slithered over to Cam, narrowed, before they returned to November. “You have no idea what you’re getting into.” And he turned and limped back down the hall.

November sat frozen in the night air. Her throat throbbed and her muscles itched.

Cam gently drew his arm around her. “It’ll be worth it.”

Twenty-Five

“GOOD. AGAIN.”

Cam stood on the far side of the studio, his hand outstretched. His hair hung in wet strands over his face, and his chest heaved up and down.

“I’m not sure I can do it again,” November said, wiping the sweat off her forehead. “My legs are killing me, and...” She glanced out into the middle of the dimly lit space, where the veil had last opened. “It’s just so hard.”

“I know it’s hard to keep the veil from opening, but it’s the control you need. When you can stop it from opening, then you have the control to close it when needed. You can’t be trusted until you have this skill. Do you know what happens when a veil is left open? All sorts of spirits can come through. We have to have full control over what we do.”

November blinked, focusing in on Cam again. “Spirits like the dark one that almost attacked me the other day?”

“Yes, and no.”

“Then what?”

Cam lowered his hand and moved to the middle of the floor. He sat down, curled one knee up against his chest, and patted the spot next to him.

“Sit.”

November moved through the dim space and lowered herself next to him. Some of the ache in her legs eased.

He linked his elbow over his knee. “Dark spirits, like I told you, try to consume the light ones. And like you know, the dark ones can consume

us...” Pain shone behind his eyes before he blinked. “But in addition to keeping these spirits at bay, we need to know how to keep the Sylphs out.”

November went cold. “The Sylphs?”

“They’re more dangerous than anything else—the consequences of their presence even more dangerous than having your throat ripped out. Sylphs can make anyone do anything. Once you hear their music, they’re in control. They could make you walk off a cliff. Murder another human being. Even pretend to have you be completely normal. The Sylphs feed off of the innocent—woman, man or child—and the more they feed on your spirit, the more they multiply in numbers.”

“Then how do we destroy them?”

“We don’t. No one has succeeded yet. Not even your father.”

The mention of her father made her stomach squeeze. “Then what do we do?”

“Another reason to find Cedric. He’s the only one who can put a stop to these Sylphs.”

Cam stood up from the floor, wiping the back of his pants. He faced November, mouth turned downward. “One other thing.”

November moaned. “There can’t possibly be anything else.”

Cam ran a hand over his face. “Sylphs have a... memory. When they feel threatened, they latch onto whoever is in their presence. It’s why they came for your father after he succeeded in visiting the other side. He invaded their space, and ultimately paid the price.”

“They caught his scent.” November remembered.

He nodded. “But their need for revenge extends beyond his death. They want the whole bloodline. Now that they know you exist, they sense his blood in you, and they’re coming for you next.”

November didn’t remember taking off. She had burst out of the studio doors and torn down the hallway so fast, her mind couldn’t catch up. The hallways had whizzed by, nothing but the sound of her breath whooshing in her ears. She exploded out the back doors of the school, fresh air attacking her face. She stood outside, eyes wide, barely registering the stretch of gardens and the large fountain in front of her. The Sylphs. She’d known

they had been after her father, but she didn't know she was a target too. That's why they attacked her that night in the manor. That's why they came to her that day in the forest. She didn't know how to process this.

Margaret, Amelia, and Claire walked by, deep in conversation. They noticed November, who was frozen on the steps, and they stopped in front of her. Margaret planted her hands on her hips.

"You should've seen your cousin choke it today," Margaret said. "Conroy had us playing arpeggios, and April's playing was worse than nails on a chalkboard." They burst out laughing.

"How's your training going?" Claire smirked. "Open any veils yet? We wouldn't want you to *accidentally* wander in." More laughter.

Amelia stayed silent, but quietly giggled along with them. Tears leaked from their eyes, as their laughing intensified.

November balled her fists, her fingernails digging into her palms. "Shut up!" she yelled. "Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!" She marched forward down the steps, glaring at the three girls.

Margaret stumbled back, clearly not expecting November to march toward her, and her eyes stretched open. Amelia and Claire stood frozen, mouths open.

"I'm sick of you! Leave April alone! She's amazing! And you—" She spun on Claire. "You think it's funny to try and get me killed? The same way my parents were killed? Who are you? A psychopath?"

The girls blinked. November stood her ground, breathing hard.

"Seriously," November said. "Get out of here!"

Their faces went arctic and they took off, heading back into the school. November stared out in front of her, her vision blurring. She waited a few moments, until the light breeze softened her shoulders. Footsteps sounded from behind, and November turned.

April stood next to the fountain, the water rushing behind her. Her wide eyes stared at her through her curtain of dark hair. "You really mean it?" she asked. "You think I'm amazing?"

"Of course I mean it," November said. "I just wish I could say the same for myself." She plunked down onto the school's steps behind her and wrapped her elbows over her knees.

"What do you mean?" April asked. "You *are* amazing. You're incredible. I'd do anything to be like you. You're so confident and strong

and not afraid of anybody, where I just put up with people's crap. I'm afraid to speak up for myself."

"You're pure hearted, April," November said. "I'm a mess. I can't get over the feeling of abandonment—the knowledge that my parents lied to me. They didn't love me enough to tell the truth. I'm mentally unstable. I thought I was okay, but I'm not. I'm not okay with this world—and part of me doesn't believe it still. Part of me thinks it's one big delusion. I can't trust my mind! I can't trust anybody!"

November covered her face with her hands. Irritation swept through her, and she tried to find the mental space to get rid of it. Breathe. She just needed to breathe.

She wasn't crazy. She wasn't having delusions. This world was a lot to handle, and she was handling it *well*, she told herself. She'd get over the knowledge of her parents' deaths, and she needed to believe that no one was out to get her. There weren't Sylphs around the corner ready to kill her.

Focus on the present.

"Will you be okay?" April asked.

"Yes. No. I don't know. Yes." November rubbed her eyes. Bits of sunlight streamed down through the clouds, before everything darkened. November lifted her head, and April looked up at the sky. The clouds shifted over the sun, and the breeze changed directions. Goosebumps spread over November's arms, and she stood up from the steps.

April straightened, looking around her. "Something's not right."

November held rooted. "I know. I can feel it."

"Let's go inside." April's voice shook.

The two headed up the steps when a small rumble rolled through the earth. The two girls paused, glancing at each other. Another rumble shook the earth, this time larger. November toppled over to the side, and gripped April's arm. The ground continued to quake, and the building in front of them rattled.

"It's an earthquake!" April exclaimed.

"No, it's more than that." November remembered the night the Huntington manor was attacked.

"Then what is it?"

Chunks of stone fell off of the school, bits of the pillars crumbling. The ground continued to shake, and April and November clutched onto each other. Screaming sounded from inside the school, and November tensed.

“We need to go see if we can help!” November said.

“No! No way! I’m not going in there!” April shook her head.

November gave her an exasperated look and took off. She ran up the back steps and pulled open the heavy doors. November could barely stay upright as she ran through the hallway. Paintings crashed to the floor, glass shattering. The shaking ground jarred her teeth, and she turned a corner, toppling over.

“November, wait!” April cried behind her. She ducked as a chunk of ceiling fell.

November pressed on, following the source of the screaming. It was coming from the main hall.

As soon as November turned the last corner, the building stopped moving. Everything went silent. Paintings hung crooked on the walls, and vases had dumped over and broken. November walked down the long hallway, her feet crunching on the glass, the silence deafening.

She finally reached the black and white room, and noticed a group of people circled, frozen to the floor.

“What’s going on?” November asked. Her voice echoed out into the large hall.

No one moved. No one breathed. Not even Margaret, who stood at the edge of the circle.

“Guys, are you okay?” November asked again.

She quietly moved up to the group, and peered down at what they were looking at.

Out before them, Claire’s body lay flat on the ground, her legs at an odd angle. Her throat lay open and exposed, blood everywhere, pooling onto the black and white checkered floor. November tried to look away, but she couldn’t. The blood continued to flow around her blank face, eyes open and wide.

“Everyone clear out!” Conroy yelled. “Give me space!” He brushed past November, and rushed up to the group, his face white with shock. “Everyone, get out.”

But no one moved.

Margaret started screaming.

Ty moved up next to her, trying to comfort her, but she shoved him off, screaming louder.

“I said, *get out!*” Conroy roared.

The screaming continued, the sound grating along November's bones, Margaret's voice reverberating off the walls. Annabelle, who must've heard the screaming, hurried into the room and wrapped her arm around Margaret. She led her away from the group, and Margaret's screams continued down the hall until she disappeared around the corner. The group slowly dispersed, everyone clearly shaken.

November stayed fixed, unwilling to leave. Conroy stared down at Claire's body, tension strumming down him like a taut string. November's throat thickened, and she tried to swallow.

"The dark ones," November said. "How did they get through?"

"I'm not sure, but it was more than a normal attack—like the Sylphs were involved. The earth doesn't usually respond that way when the dark ones visit. They're sneakier with their approach, where the Sylphs can't help but make a big entrance. We might need Vincent on this."

"Vincent. Why?"

"No one is better at sealing off the veil than him. He was the one who saved you from the Sylphs that night after all."

November's heart thudded in her ears. "Sylphs? He was?"

Conroy nodded. "This is only the beginning, November. Claire's death is the start of it all."

Twenty-Six

BLACK VELVET

NOVEMBER LIFTED up the trap door, the heavy wood squeaking. She peered into the black pit below, a shiver running down her back. She didn't know if she was making the right decision, but she had to do this.

Darkness stretched out before her, but she descended down the steps, her hand gripping the iron railing. Her footsteps echoed out into the cave below her, the light from above spilling downward.

She immediately heard it—a tinkling melody drifting on the air. Haunting, yet delicate and sweet, the melody surrounded her, pulling her forward. The music guided her until the room opened up. Vincent sat at the piano in the middle of the cave, the black ebony surface glimmering in the dim light. November stepped up onto the wooden floor, still captured by the hypnotizing notes.

She longed to dance—the song filled her being—willing her to stretch her feet and move to the steady tempo. Her arms ached to lift and fill the space, swirl around until she couldn't breathe.

Vincent kept his head lowered, his long, deft fingers gliding over the keys. She started to hear patterns in the music—elements to the structure of the song that Conroy had talked about in class. Each chord progression moving to the next, the heavy chords satisfying. Vincent's dark lashes and hair were stark against his white skin, his eyes intent before him.

Then, without warning, he moved the chords to the sixth—a deceptive cadence, before he lifted his head. The music sat unresolved in the air, begging to go back to the tonic and resolve.

“What are you doing here?” he asked.

November continued to walk forward, her hands wringing out in front of her.

“I wanted to see you,” she said. “And thank you.”

He narrowed his eyes. “Thank me for what? Isn’t it Cam who you should be thanking?”

November stayed silent. She didn’t know how to respond to him. He almost sounded hurt, but that wouldn’t make sense. He’d loathed her since she came here.

“Actually, I wanted to thank you for what you did the second night I was here. The night of the Sylph attack. Conroy told me you called them off. You saved me.”

He tilted his head to the side. “So you are human after all. I was beginning to think you were a robot.”

November flinched. “Excuse me?”

“Oh, I’ve watched you—don’t think I haven’t. You don’t let anything get to you. Regardless of life happening around you, it’s almost as if... as if you have the control to let emotion *not* be a part of you. You’re a robot.” He bent his head to the other side.

“I am not!”

He pursed his lips. “You’re entitled to believe what you believe.” He was silent a moment longer before he said, “Well, thank you for thanking me. You can go now.”

November hovered on the balls of her feet. She didn’t want to go. His robot comment had struck her. She allowed herself to feel emotion, didn’t she? And how would he have noticed?

“You’re still here.” He lifted his brows.

She peeked around the room. “Is it okay if I take you up on your invitation to climb?” Her voice lingered in the air, hanging on like a soft note.

Vincent sighed. “Huntington, what are you getting at? Go spend your time with Cam. There’s nothing down here but darkness.”

She shifted on her feet. “I don’t believe that.”

His gaze met hers.

“I’d rather not... go... if you don’t mind?” she asked. “I could really climb for a moment.”

Something shone in Vincent's eyes. Hurt? Resolution? Excitement? He gave a single nod. "As long as you don't mind my playing."

"Not at all."

Vincent turned back to the piano and ran his fingers down the keys. He pressed onto them light, but firm, his fingers perfectly rounded. But she suddenly wanted to know more about him. Where he was from. What made him tick. Did he have passions? Desires?

"You're staring," he said.

"If you could live anywhere in the world, where would it be?" November blurted out. It was a stupid question, but it was the first question that popped into her head.

He stopped playing, turned, and lifted one brow. But he didn't say a word.

Heat burned her cheeks. She shouldn't have said anything. He wasn't the kind of person who was capable of small talk.

She turned and started toward the wall. Silence echoed between them before he said, "I spent some time in London several years ago. I've always wanted to go back. If I could live anywhere, it'd be there. It's also where my favorite composer, Vaughn Williams, is from."

November nodded, swallowing. She didn't dare ask any more questions. Even though she wanted to. There was so much more she wanted to know. There was a kindness in him she didn't know about. She wanted to know that side of him. Had she misjudged him all along?

She turned her attention back to the rocky walls, to the juts and grooves, and

quickly headed over to the south end. Vincent resumed his playing without saying another word, the music continuing once more.

She placed her hands on the cool granite, and closed her eyes, almost feeling a heartbeat within the wall. Even though her mind was still on Vincent, she dug her fingertips into the rock, little granules catching in her fingernails. She opened her eyes and ran her hands along the rough surface, mapping out a route. She noticed a jug at the top of the wall and knew that would be her ending point.

Finding a jab for her footing on the bottom, and a crimper for her hands to start on, she pressed up off the floor, her body instantly tensing. Vincent's music drifted around her, filling her ears, and she reached up and caught another hold above her. The music seemed to carry her forward, like a

dance on the wall, and she traversed to the side, keeping her body close in to the rock.

She tucked a leg underneath her and grasped another hold above her. Jab after jab, and crimper after crimper, she made her way up. She found a good heel hook on the right and a big slab of rock to the left. One more move to the top.

November couldn't hear the music anymore—it was just her heartbeat and her breathing. She bent down, pressing her weight into the wall, straightening her arms, preparing for the jump. Thoughts of Shawn drifted to mind, his words about her being crazy, and all the events of the last week piled on top of each other in her brain.

She blinked, trying to focus on the hold above her, but her arms began to shake, and her thighs trembled. Focus. But the noise wouldn't stop. Did she really shut out emotion? Was she experiencing delusions with her new relationship with Cam? Maybe she wasn't really feeling the things she felt when she danced. Maybe she wasn't right in the head...

Her fingers slipped, and the rock scraped her palms. In the back of her mind, she knew she needed to find good footing, but it was too late. She fell downward, prepared for a hard hit, when strong arms wrapped securely around her. Vincent was there, his arms outstretched, her body cradled in his. He peered down at her with his dark eyes, his face expressionless.

November stayed in his arms, unmoving, her heart still thumping in her chest.

"Vincent..." November didn't know what to say.

"You're welcome." He quickly set her down on her feet and retrieved his cane from the floor.

She glanced at the piano. "You stopped playing."

"I wanted to watch you."

She held her breath. "Oh."

Something settled between them—an invisible electricity that sizzled between their bodies. After he had set her down, she felt empty being out of his embrace. She realized she *liked* his presence. It made her feel... protected. He continued to stare at her, the light tracing his bones.

"I think I'm done playing," he said, voice low.

"Okay."

She couldn't move as he turned and headed across the wood floor, cane in hand, limping away. November stood silent for a long time, until she

could force her legs forward toward the exit. Something had happened between them—he made her *feel*—really feel, different from the hypnotic feelings she felt while she danced. This was... real. And she didn't push it away, she welcomed it.

Twenty-Seven

CUTS LIKE A KNIFE

CAM CAME up from behind and planted a kiss on November's cheek. "How are you feeling today?"

November smiled, breathing in his fresh scent. A combination of lavender and sandalwood wafted in her nose.

"Hey, Cam," she replied, though the greeting stuck in her throat.

Cam slid around her and took her hands, facing her, his back reflecting in the studio mirror. "I haven't been able to stop thinking about you since that night on the roof." Half of his mouth pulled up.

"Me too." But November knew it was a lie. She hadn't been able to stop thinking about Vincent and the way he'd caught her when she fell.

Cam ducked his head and looked at her straight in the eyes. "Are you sure? You seem... off."

November removed her hands from his. "I don't know, Cam. I don't know about any of this. I think... I don't know. I think I might be done. I think my parents had the right idea with not having me be a part of this world. I think I want to just climb—go back to my old life. There's a competition in a couple days, and I think—"

Cam's face darkened. "You can't be serious. Nov, you have a gift. You've been able to open a veil faster than anyone I've ever heard! And when we dance... you *know* it's right. Can't you feel the feeling that exists between us when we dance? No amount of rock climbing could replace that."

November opened her mouth, but Cam continued on before she could speak.

“Besides, you’re going to be excited about what I was going to tell you. Because I was going to let you open and close the veil all by yourself today.”

November’s face lit up. “Really?”

“Yes, really,” Cam said. “I think you’re ready.”

Cam waited anxiously, clearly willing her to answer. But November couldn’t decide if this is what she wanted. After climbing down in Vincent’s lair, her heart longed to do nothing but climb. It was her. It was everything that she was made of—where dancing was nothing but an addiction. It seemed like darkness. That wasn’t her. But she wanted to be with Cam, too. She couldn’t deny that.

“Okay,” November said. “Yeah. I don’t know what I was thinking. Of course I want to open the veil today. I want to search.” *Search for her parents.* That was what was important. Not what she desired. She owed this to them.

Cam reached out his hand and pulled her in close to him. He wrapped one hand around her back, his palm flat.

“I think we should dance the Waltz,” he whispered. “I think we’re ready for that, too.”

Her knees weakened and she gripped onto his arms for support.

Without removing his gaze from hers, he lifted one set of arms out to the side, holding it carefully, the air underneath their arms holding them up. He kept his other arm pressing into her back, and November set her hand on his shoulder.

“Just close your eyes,” Cam whispered. “This dance needs to be felt.”

They began the Waltz, and their footsteps glided around the room. Legs stretching long, backs perfectly straight. November felt the pulse in her chest—down, up, up. Down up. up. She kept her eyes closed, trying to focus on the movement, trying to focus on the feeling of the dance.

But Vincent wouldn’t leave her thoughts.

His presence hovered in her head, his face floating in her mind. No matter how hard she tried to get his face from her mind, he stayed there, dark eyes pouring into hers. She analyzed the hard lines of his face, his dark ruffled hair.

The steps continued. Down, up, up. Down, up, up. The air around her breezed past her face, but still, all she could see was Vincent.

Cam's arm around her tightened, along with his hand in hers. There became an aggression to Cam's dancing—a fervor she didn't expect. She opened her eyes and Cam was glaring at her through half-lowered lids. His teeth were grit, face tight. Instead of the Waltz being lovely and intimate, it became furious, and she couldn't handle the intensity.

“Why isn't it working?” he ground out. “Work.” Around the room they continued to waltz, and Cam's face tightened further. “What's wrong with you?”

November's mind screeched to a halt, and she yanked out of his embrace. “What's wrong with *me*? What's wrong with *you*?”

Cam stood before her, hands clenched into fists, his chest pumping hard. “I thought you were good. I thought you could open the veil on command, but it's not working.”

“Are you serious? Where is this coming from?”

“You're such a disappointment!”

“Cam, I can't help it. I don't know *when* the ability flows through me or not. Besides, I had other things on my mind. I—”

“What were you thinking about?” Cam snapped. “*What* was in your mind?”

November didn't know this Cam. She'd never seen him so intense and angry before. He was the fun-loving brother, not the scary one.

“N-Nothing,” November said.

Cam's jaw tightened, and he shoved her away. “We're not through here. We *will* dance again, and it *will* work.” He brushed by her, stomping from the room.

November's heart pounded in the silence. She didn't know what to think. Vincent had warned her. April had warned her. Had they been right all this time? She was used to Shawn's aggression, his blame for the end of their relationship, but she didn't expect Cam to turn on her so quickly. Were they in a relationship? They'd only shared one kiss. But the friendship between them had seemed real.

November covered her face with her hands, willing steady thoughts to come, but still, all she could see was Vincent's dark form, lingering in her mind. She needed to get him out, or she'd never find her parents, and her relationship with Cam would be ruined.

“Nov, you seem off.” April leaned in across the table in the library, her elbows on the book before her.

“You’re not the first person to tell me that today,” she mumbled.

“What’s going on?”

“Not sure I want to talk about it.”

“Well, you need to sort it out, whatever it is,” April said. “Claire is *dead*, which means there’s no one else who can open veils besides you and Cam. And you know how I feel about Cam... he can’t help us search.”

“Search for *what*, April?” November slammed her hands on the table. “A woman that may or may not have been intimate with Cedric? Search for a love child that may or may not be immortal like his dad? And then what? Try and get information out of them that may or may not lead to Cedric? Who apparently is our only hope at stopping an impending war?”

April blinked at her, eyes wide. “So... you’re saying you don’t want to search?”

“No, I’m saying, what’s the point?”

“I don’t need another point other than that I trust Conroy,” April said softly. “He’s the smartest, most strategic, best musician, and knowledgeable person I know. If he tells me I need to find this person—this woman who had contact with Cedric—then I’m going to do it.”

November slowly relaxed. The tension in her neck eased. “What do you mean he’s the best musician? When I asked about what he did, he wouldn’t tell me. I figured it was because... I don’t know, those who don’t do, teach.”

April kept her gaze locked on hers. “Conroy is what you call a Renaissance man. He can do anything. He was gifted with the ability to play any instrument, or compose any symphony. He can pick up any instrument and play it flawlessly. Which can come in handy when you’re guarding the veils. Different instruments protect against different kind of spirits. Like, the violin or viola do better at keeping dark spirits out. The flute, like me, keeps out light spirits. The only thing he doesn’t do is dance.”

“But yet there’s no way to keep the Sylphs out.”

April shook her head. “No. They come and go as they please.” She looked down at her book, and her eyes widened. “Oh my gosh!”

“What?” November asked. “What is it?”

April read furiously, her finger tracing down the text. She flipped a page and kept reading. Finally, she lifted her head.

“Look at this.” She scooted the book over to November. It was clearly a journal, with its pages full of a neat scrawl before her.

He came the night before October was born.

Clear as day, a bright light seared my eyes, and a voice spoke from beyond.

October was to be her name.

She was special, he had said. One piece of twelve that would unite the spirits back together, and create an afterlife worth living in. He said darkness raged, but the hour was at nigh for the twelve to reunite.

If only my husband believed. He took October away.

I asked Cedric if we could find him if we needed him. He said we could find him only if we had a key to get past the Sylphs. He resided beyond the wasteland to where the dark spirits lived, where time doesn't exist. Past the decaying cities, kingdoms that once stood tall and glorious, but are now crumbling like petals off a rose. Past rivers of fog, which used to be rivers of gold. That's where we'd find him.

November stopped reading. All of those words didn't make sense. Rivers of fog? Crumbling petals? She scanned the page again.

“October,” November mumbled. She glanced at the date. It was written only fifteen years ago. “She's real. She's still alive. She's here, living.”

April placed her hands on her cheeks. “We have to find her.”

November nodded. “Her father obviously didn't want her part of this world. Just like *my* father. I wonder why.”

April's eyes continued to scan the page, and her face whitened further. “I think I have an idea. Look.” She pointed to the bottom of the page.

It is only the death of the twelve that will make things right. They must give their lives to restore peace.

Everything screamed to a halt, and November blinked.

“No,” she said. “No. This can't be right.”

“It all makes sense,” April said. “Your parents *knew*. It's why they tried to hide you away. They were trying to save your life. They knew the twelve would have to... to *die* and they wanted you to live.” She broke off, and her lashes lowered. “Question is, why was *my* father okay with me giving up my life?” Tears threatened behind her eyes.

“We don't know that,” November said. “This could all be rubbish.”

“I guess.” April looked down at her fingers.

“Well, you want to know what I think? I think if we find October, then we can do what we want as a twelve. If we twelve are so powerful together—if we can restore something as big as peace, then we don’t need Cedric. I say we find October and come up with a plan of our own. Cedric and his prophecy is going down. We get to choose our own fate.”

April looked up at November, hope in her eyes. “And how are we going to do that?”

November smiled to herself. “I know right where to start.”

Twenty-Eight

A KNOCK SOUNDED on the Huntington manor door, and November swung the door open.

Margaret stood on the front porch, Amelia by her side. Margaret had a purse slung around her shoulder, and Amelia carried her trumpet.

“I can’t believe I’m here,” Margaret said, her red hair bright in the sun. She peered into the entryway full of clocks, lips pursed. “Just as I suspected. The Huntingtons would have a freaky house.”

Amelia nudged Margaret in the shoulder. “Don’t be rude. We’re doing this for Claire, remember?”

Margaret rolled her eyes. “Claire wouldn’t want me to be doing this.”

“Hey guys! I’m here!” Ty raced up the front steps and joined the girls in the entryway. He had his violin case in hand. “Sorry I’m late.” Ty’s freckles stuck out against his skin, his cheeks flushed. He waved at April, ducking his head, and April gave him a small smile.

“Come on in,” November said, clamping down her irritation. If she could’ve avoided Margaret and these kids for this operation, she would have.

Margaret, Amelia, and Ty stepped into the entryway, their eyes wide as they took in the dozens of clocks ticking on the walls.

“Whoa! Dude! This place is amazing!” Ty exclaimed. His voice bounced off the ceiling.

Margaret took out some hand sanitizer from her purse and rubbed it over her palms. “How long is this going to take?”

“Let’s just follow me, okay?” November said. “I’ll explain everything.”

The five exited out of the entryway into the dark hallways of the Huntington manor. Margaret's nose was scrunched, as if the place stunk. Amelia held her trumpet up close to her chest, her eyes still wide. Ty was practically skipping by April's side, taking in every detail.

"I feel like I'm in a haunted house!" he said.

April stayed silent, but she watched him with her lips curved up.

Their feet creaked on the stained red carpet beneath them, the walls narrow as they wove through the house. It was a chance inviting Margaret and Amelia and Ty over, but it was one she had to take. She needed the manpower to complete what they were about to complete, and she didn't know anyone else who would help.

As November approached the last turn, her pace slowed. The thought of what was around the corner sent chills up her arms. She rubbed them, forcing herself to move forward, until she turned down the *hallway*.

Along the walls, faces from the dozens of portraits stared back at her, all seemingly pleasant and warm, except for the look in their eyes. Pain seemed to shine behind their depths, as if they were screaming—screaming to be released from the prison from which they were held. Like they were doomed to an eternity of death, their only connection to this world being their portrait on the wall.

"What's this?" Margaret asked, slowing her pace with November. "Like Ty said, I feel like I'm in a cheesy haunted house."

"This is where you're going to avenge Claire's death," November said. "I wouldn't take it lightly."

Margaret snorted, pushing back her hair. "Avenging Claire's death in a hallway full of pictures. Seriously?"

"Let's just hear her out, okay?" April burst out. "You're not Miss Know-it-all, so don't act like it."

"Ohhh. Burn." Ty held up his hand, waiting for April to high-five it. She stared at his palm, until she finally smacked it, smiling.

"Pictures hold a piece of someone's soul," November said. "It's how spirits hold onto this world." She clasped her hands together and faced the kids. "The other night, I saw my parents through these pictures—they were tortured, almost screaming to communicate with me something, so it got me thinking. If there really is a piece of them in there—a piece of *any* of these people in here—then we'd be able to communicate with them, even briefly."

She continued, "Music hurts souls because it reminds them too much of who they used to be. But I want to use music to awaken them. Since they can't run away, unlike the spirits you guard back at the school, here, I want to make the spirits that linger here uncomfortable enough to wake up."

Margaret stared at November, her eyebrows raised. "You're serious. You want us to use our music to wake up the dead."

"But they can't run because they're not really spirits," April said. "It's only fragments of their souls. It's brilliant."

Margaret rubbed her temples.

"It's not a bad idea," Amelia said. "There once was a photo in my practice room that would change expressions every time I practiced the trumpet. I finally had to remove the photo and have it relocated because it freaked me out."

"And since there are so many photos here," November said, "I need your help. I didn't think April's music alone would be enough to torture them and awaken them. And since *I* can't help... I need you guys."

"I honestly don't know how you think making these fragmented spirits mad will make them talk to you," Margaret said. "And why you'd even think they'd want to talk."

"Because we need an army on our side," November said. "Everyone else seems to have one, and we need to have one, too."

November knew it was because they needed to find the twelve, but she didn't want to tell Margaret that. Margaret didn't need to know that she was going to unite the twelve together as a resistance against Cedric.

"You guys ready?" November asked.

"Sure thing!" Ty took out his violin and placed it under his chin. He grinned over at April, and she placed her flute up to her lips. Amelia lifted up her trumpet, and Margaret rolled her eyes.

"I can't believe we're doing this," Margaret mumbled. "We've created the worst quartet in the history of quartets, and we're playing to a bunch of photos on the wall."

"Sounds fun to me," Ty said.

"Let's play the minuet we learned last year in our study with Bach," April said. "Margaret, you can sing solfège to the melody. If you recall, Conroy taught us this for unity purposes. How to use our music together if ever needed to stave off a big group of spirits."

Amelia nodded. "I remember."

Margaret cleared her throat. “Might as well get this over with.”

November stood behind the group, Amelia, April, and Ty with their instruments raised, and Margaret with her feet planted into the floor. She was doing lip rolls, warming up her voice in preparation.

Ty drew his bow downward along the strings, and April immediately started to play the quick melody, with Amelia taking the bass line. Margaret let her voice ring out into the air, and the music immediately filled the space to capacity. It bounced off the narrow walls, surrounding November, the rhythm beating deep in her heart.

The music continued to soar, intricate and mathematical, the different variations of notes blending together in perfect harmony. The piece separated until a counter melody emerged, and April took the high line. The music moved, ringing through November’s ears, making the little hairs on her arm stand.

The music went on for a time, and November stared at the portraits, waiting for something to happen. The longer the music continued, the more she was afraid her plan wouldn’t work. The melody ended a phrase, and November tightened her fists, sweat beginning to bead on her forehead. The kids repeated the melody, starting at the beginning again.

November sighed and looked away, her throat thickening, until the paintings on the wall began to rattle. Lightly at first, until the shaking intensified with each note. She held her breath, her eyes widening.

“Keep going!” November called out to them.

Amelia looked back at November with a worried gaze, but she continued to play her trumpet. Ty grinned over at April as he played his violin, and April blinked, color on her cheeks. Margaret continued to sing like she was at Carnegie Hall, her voice pure and clean, her vibrato spinning.

The shaking continued. Wisps of white started to smoke from the portraits, and the paintings’ faces started to push outward. The canvas bubbled, pushing in and out, translucent hands starting to claw outward from the wall. November stared at her parents’ portraits. Would she see them finally? Would they be the ones to emerge? But the music continued, until a painting at the end of the hall—a young man with a curly brown mop of hair—pushed himself outward, peeling himself away from his portrait. He stood before them, dressed in a crisp white suit. His translucent being

was still at the end of the hall, his build slender, his thick brows slanted over his eyes.

“Stop.” His voice rung clear.

The kids ceased playing, the music lingering on the air until it dissipated.

“Hi,” November said, her voice shaking. “Sorry to... disturb you.”

The young man held unmoving, his jaw strong in the dim light.

“We have some questions if you don’t mind,” November said. His eyes flew to hers with a look so intense, she staggered back. “Um... what is your name?”

“I know who you are,” the young man said. “And you...” He peered at April. “And... you...” He nodded toward Margaret.

His smooth voice echoed out into the hallway, and the kids all stood silent, unable to believe what they were witnessing.

“You’re running out of time,” the young man continued. “What are you doing waking me from my resting place?” His face tightened together.

“We... We need your help,” November said. “A war is coming, and we don’t want to be unprotected. We’ve heard of the twelve—” November peeked at Margaret, not wanting to say too much, “—that these twelve can restore peace, but Cedric says that it’ll be at the expense of their lives. We —”

“Cedric?” he interrupted. “Why do you mention that name?” His mouth lifted almost in a smile. “If you think you can go against his wishes, then you are wrong.”

“Why? What do you know about Cedric?”

“I know that he always gets what he wants. That his plan is the only plan.” He leveled his gaze with November. “As I said, I know who you are. And you.” He looked to April. “And you.” His head turned to Margaret. “The twelve are all around you. You can’t stop what has already been put into motion. The end is coming, and you won’t survive. Now let me rest in peace.”

His translucent being drifted back over to the wall and he closed his eyes as he melted back into the wall.

“No!” November said. “Wait!”

But the young man merged with the photo on the wall, disappearing completely.

Silence throbbed through the hallway until Margaret whirled on November. “What... the... heck... was that all about? Don’t tell me that... you... and you...” She spun on April. “The twelve?”

November sighed. The last thing she wanted was for Margaret to have this knowledge. She’d spill everything to everyone.

“Awesome!” Ty held up a high-five to April again. “So cool!”

This time, April didn’t respond.

“I...” Margaret began. Her eyelashes lowered. “I want to help you.”

November folded her arms. “Really.”

Margaret gave a solemn nod. “I know about the twelve. I know about their destiny. And I want to help change it.” She raised her head, and her face was deadly serious, her eyes filled with fear.

“Why is that?” November asked, lowering her arms.

“Because... I’m October,” Margaret said. “October Margaret Swenson. My father told me to use my middle name in fear for my life. He didn’t want anyone to find out who I am. But I know all about the twelve and what our fate is. I suspected... who you were because of your names... but yeah, I want to help.”

“If you suspected us, then why be so terrible to us?” April bit out.

“I didn’t want you to be real. You were a walking reminder of what my fate was going to be. I was going to *die* because of you. So yeah, I might have let my anger out on you. But now... now we might have a chance if we work together.”

“But we have to find the rest of the twelve,” April said.

“Or do we?” November’s mind spun. Her thoughts crashed together at once, racing back and forth. “The young man said the twelve were all around us.” She slowly walked in a circle, her feet on the battered carpet.

“You don’t think they’re in here? Like this hallway?” Margaret asked.

“No, but I do think they’re in this house. Clifton housed spirits for a reason.” She turned to April. “Think about it. Your father didn’t willingly seal you to your fate, uncaring that you’d die. He made this house what it was. He was housing spirits *for* you. He was trying to protect you and the twelve with an army around you.”

“What do you mean?”

“The rest of the twelve. They’re in here. We just have to find them.”

Twenty-Nine

MIDNIGHT LIGHTNING

NOVEMBER SAT on the back steps of the Huntington manor, the last bits of light descending over the horizon. She stared out at the lake, still as glass, then over to the tangled gardens.

Her experience within those gardens flashed to mind, hovering inside her head. The key. The rose. The clock. The snake. Her head hurt as she tried to figure out those symbols once more. There had to be a purpose for their existence. Why were they hidden deep within a dead garden? It couldn't just be a random architectural design.

Uneven footsteps clicked from behind her, and November turned.

Vincent hovered off to the side of the house, the light from the windows cutting strong along his profile. A breeze whooshed in, ruffling his hair.

"What are you doing out here?" he asked. He twirled his cane around, spinning it on the ground.

November turned back to the landscape, gazing outward. "I don't know. Just trying to figure myself out, I suppose."

"Hhmm." Vincent limped forward, his cane clicking on the stone pathway. "I'm pretty sure you have yourself figured out more than the rest of us have ourselves figured out."

November laughed. "Definitely not."

His cane stopped, and she turned again. "Why do you think that?"

He cocked his head to the side and stared at her with his dark eyes. "Because I've watched you. You have this... awareness most people don't have. It's fascinating."

November sighed, turning back. “Maybe you’re right. I do have to consciously check in with myself. Assess myself to make sure I’m okay. I actually wish sometimes I could just live normally. With a normal head that could just experience life instead of having to constantly worry whether I’m sane or not.”

“Care if I sit?”

November eyed the spot next to her. She shivered and said, “Sure.”

Vincent lowered himself down, setting his cane by his feet. His shoulder brushed hers, and she was suddenly aware with how close they were to each other.

“I understand the darkness,” Vincent said. “I battle it myself.”

His words hung out into the evening air, and November swallowed.

“Once you get trapped in it, it’s nearly impossible to climb out.”

She stayed silent.

“Everything tumbles downward, until you can’t see any light,” he went on. “No matter what people say or do, it can’t stop the cloud that you’re in.” He turned to her, and November could feel his gaze on the side of her face. “It’s why you’re amazing to me.”

Her eyes slid over and caught his.

“You’ve discovered how to fight the darkness. You live your life in a way that keeps yourself from spiraling downward. I want to know how to do that.”

November had never had herself validated like this before—especially regarding her illness. Shawn had thrown it in her face, Cam had been ignorant of it, but Vincent... he saw it. And he admired her for it.

“Thank you,” November said. It was all she knew what to say.

They sat in silence for a few moments.

“How did you get your limp?” November asked, changing the subject. “I mean... I’ve tried to ask others before, but...”

Vincent long fingers curled in tight, making fists. “It’s not something I talk about.”

“I don’t talk about my mental illness either, I get it.”

Something in Vincent softened. His shoulders visibly relaxed, and he slowly uncurled his fingers. “I suppose I owe you the truth. You’re not going to like it though.”

November sat frozen, electricity in the air between them. She felt as if they were trapped in their own little bubble, her skin alive like a live wire.

“Tell me.”

“It happened a few years ago,” Vincent said softly. “Cam was just beginning to learn how to open and close the veil. He was quite good at it. He liked to show off—you know Cam.” Vincent cleared his throat. “I would play the piano while he practiced. No one was as talented as we were at such a young age. And Cam knew it.”

“Then what happened?”

Vincent’s jaw tightened. “He got curious. You see, he was always obsessed with finding out who his father was. It consumed him, really. He was convinced his father was on the other side, so Cam would constantly practice opening the veil in order to find him. I’m sure you understand that.” He gave her a knowing look. “But one day, when he opened the veil, we were attacked.”

“Attacked? By what?” The vision of the dark spirit that had zoomed toward her surged to mind. Its contorted face and unhinged jaw etched into her memory. She shivered. “What happened?”

“An army was waiting on the other side. There weren’t any light spirits in sight—they were all dark, and they attacked full force.” His eyes glazed over in memory. “They grabbed him. Their gnarled hands and bony bodies—it was a swirl of dark—it all happened so fast.”

“What did you do?”

“I leapt forward. I couldn’t let them take him. All I could think was to throw myself in his place.”

November held her breath, waiting.

“It worked. The dark spirits attacked me, and Cam slipped away. But Cam couldn’t close the veil. He panicked, and the dark spirits started to devour me. I’ll never forget the pain. The sight must’ve been too much, because Cam ran from the room, leaving me alone to those beasts. He abandoned me.”

November’s chest froze—like her lungs were ice. She couldn’t believe it. Vincent had saved Cam, yet Cam couldn’t try and save him?

“Then... what happened?” she asked, voice tight. “How are you here?”

“A dark spirit from the pack broke loose. Somehow, this single spirit took pity on me. Somehow, there was a little humanity left in him. He broke free from the masses and he started pulling me back, fighting against his brothers. He attempted to pull me out, and he even started to close off the veil himself. But...” He winced in memory. “My leg got caught. I

remember the spirits on the other side not letting go of my foot—and this kind dark spirit continued to yank me back. He tried to close the veil—it opened and closed on my leg too many times to count. It was so painful. I’ll never forget the pain.” He rubbed his knuckles on the tops of his thighs.

“But the dark spirit pulled you loose.”

“Eventually, yes. The veil was closed, and I was left alone with this spirit.”

“And...?”

“The spirit was Roderick. He saved me.”

November sucked in a heavy breath. “Roderick? He was... He’s a *spirit*? But he’s alive!”

Vincent nodded. “Somehow, the saving act morphed him into who he is today. Almost like... the kind act of humanity gave him back a piece of himself. He’s still dark—I see darkness in him—but on some days the light outweighs the darkness.”

November shook her head, unable to believe it. “And Cam?”

“I’ve been broken about it ever since.”

Silence pounded.

“He abandoned me. He didn’t fight for me. He was too afraid, and he left me to the wolves. I thought he was better than that. After everything I’ve... I thought he was better.”

November couldn’t believe what she was hearing. Cam was a coward. Vincent had saved him, and Cam had been too cowardly to help save him back.

“So that’s that,” Vincent said. “I’ve had a limp ever since—my leg will never be the same.”

A fire stirred deep within her. She sat on the edge of her seat, heat in her veins. She couldn’t control the anger and disappointment that she felt for Cam.

Then she noticed Vincent was trembling. His arms and legs shook as she stared out into the night. November reached out and set a hand on his arm. Vincent started, darting his head down at the touch. Her hand lingered there for a moment.

“I need to get back,” he said tightly. “Thanks for listening, Huntington. You’re a good friend.” And he stood, easing his weight onto his cane, and limped away.

Thirty

THE BLACK ROSE

“OOOO! THIS ONE IS GORGEOUS!”

April pulled a large gown out from the dusty trunk and laid it out on the table in the attic. The gown was a light lavender, with lace and beads stitched into the delicate dress. Its sleeves were long and flowing, with a thin fabric that was see-through. Its neckline wrapped up high around the neck, but also with a fabric that was see-through to the bust. Several layers of netting made the gown lush and thick, ruffling at the ends.

“You *have* to wear this, Nov!”

November stared down at the gown. She’d never cared about dresses. She was a tomboy—a rock climber. She didn’t care about this pretty stuff. But staring down at that lavender gown, suddenly the most important thing to her in the world was wearing it, dancing around in the ballroom. She tried picturing herself dancing with Cam, but the thought wouldn’t stick. She could only envision herself dancing with Vincent, his dark eyes taking her in as they swirled around the ballroom...

“Nov!”

“Huh?”

“I’ve been calling your name forever.”

“Oh.” Her eyes focused on the dress again. “Yes,” she said. “Yes. I’ll wear it.”

April smiled with satisfaction in her eyes. “Perfect.”

November watched as April went to the trunk again, digging through the other dresses. “Which one will you wear?”

April's presence softened, and she glanced back, warmth in her eyes. "This one." She pulled out a pink chiffon dress, with ruffles in all the right places. For being a pink dress, it really was lovely. Though the thought of April wearing a pink dress was... surprising. She'd never seen April wear anything other than black.

"It was my mother's," April said softly. "Oh... which reminds me..." She lowered the dress, worry in her eyes. "I meant to tell you... Ty asked me to the dance. I know we planned on going together, but—"

November blinked, before her mouth spread into a wide smile. "April, that's great!"

April's face lit up, tears shimmering in her eyes. "Really? I was so afraid you'd be mad."

"No!" November rushed over and gave her a hug. "Of course he asked you. That's amazing."

April tightened the hug and pulled back, beaming. When had they become friends? She couldn't think of any specific moment, only that it had happened. She cared about her.

April's gaze flicked past November's shoulder, and her face went white. Her eyes stretched wide, and her mouth flopped open. "Nov..." She lifted a finger and pointed. "Behind you."

November went still. A prickle went up her back, and she felt a presence loom behind her. She slowly turned, a knot in her throat.

Out before her, a woman dressed in a gown stood before them. She hovered off the floor, the edge of her dress barely brushing the surface. Her skin was a translucent white, the door behind her visible through her elegant frame. A plunging neckline traced her form, revealing delicate shoulders and thin arms. She crossed her hands in front of her, wearing white gloves that went to her wrists.

The woman looked at November and April, silent, not saying a word.

"Who are you?" November finally asked.

The woman straightened her shoulders, lifting her chin. "I'm January Hill. I've been sent here to speak for everyone."

November went cold. January. The most famous death of all. She heard the music. She was one of the twelve. And she was hovering right in front of her.

November blinked, swallowing. "January? You know we're looking for you?"

“We hear all. We see all,” she said. “And we won’t join you.”

“You...” November shook her head. “What do you mean?”

“We live a peaceful life.” Her voice rung out, soft, tinkling. “And we’ve overheard you wanting the twelve to reunite for your purposes. But Clifton has provided us a home here. On the other side of the veil, the dark ones consume the light ones every day, and we won’t rest easy over there. We’re safe here, and we won’t do anything to jeopardize our peaceful life.”

“But... you’re dead. We’re supposed to unite as a twelve. It says that if we unite together, then we can restore peace. You can finally have the afterlife you’re meant to—you won’t have to be trapped in the confines of this house. You’ll have more freedom.”

“Aligning ourselves with you isn’t worth it. I speak for the others when I say that we’re fearful of Cedric. He may be in hiding, but his power is everywhere. Just because we’re dead, doesn’t mean our afterlife can’t be worse. If we were to go against him, there would be consequences.”

“But...”

“No,” she said sternly. “You’re on your own. If you and your friend here want to rally an army against Cedric, then that is your prerogative, but we won’t help you.”

November shook her head again. Her only plan was to find these twelve and unite against Cedric’s prophecy. Cedric had said that the twelve would die in order to restore peace, and she wasn’t going to let that happen. Nine of the twelve were already dead. If they didn’t unite—living and dead—it meant April, Margaret, and her lives were in trouble.

“Death is coming for you,” January warned. “Just like it did for the rest of us. There’s nothing you can do.”

Before November could say another word, January vanished like smoke, leaving her and April alone in the room.

“What now?” April asked, her voice echoing in the small attic.

“I have no idea,” November said. The excitement of the dance and the ballgowns was gone. January had thrown a wrench in her plans, and now, she was afraid they wouldn’t live to see the ball.

November sat in Conroy's class, Conroy standing off to the side, his mouth in a frown. Annabelle addressed the class, relaying information about the Inaugural ball and what it entailed. Her bright blonde hair was pulled up in a high ponytail today, her lips a ruby red. Her pantsuit fit tightly to her frame, and again, November wondered *how* Conroy didn't have a thing for her.

"And that's how the dance cards will work," Annabelle said. "Each of you will have one, and gentlemen—or ladies—make sure you write your name on the card next to the proposed dance if you want to reserve that dance for a specific someone. I expect you to use them. It's tradition."

November imagined her own dance card and wondered if it would be empty. Or would Cam's name be on there? Vincent? What would it be like to dance with Vincent? *If* he could even dance with his leg. Then she thought of Cam and their last encounter. He'd been so angry that she hadn't opened the veil. Which didn't make sense, because he could open it himself if he wanted. Her thoughts drifted to Marybeth, and her murder, which led to Roderick and how he was really a dark spirit. How was it possible for him to have such a human form? Maybe it really was his act of humanity that made him who he was.

Her mind raced as she thought about the symbols in the garden, until her thoughts morphed to the child of Cedric, and who his child was. She wondered what woman had had an affair with him, and if finding this child would solve anything. She thought of Cedric's prophecy she had overheard Roderick speak of—of the two sacrificial souls. The sirens. The twelve. Their impending doom—how the spirits would break loose if the twelve didn't unite. The ballroom.

The ballroom.

"Oh my gosh!" November burst out.

Annabelle paused, and her large eyes opened wider. "Care to share something, November?"

The class turned to November expectant, Ty grinning, and Margaret with a curious look on her face.

"E-Excuse me," November said, standing. "I... I need to go." She quickly exited the classroom in a rush.

"Er... me too," April said, standing. She followed after November, and Margaret also stood, coughing, then followed April out. November paced in the hallway, her breaths pumping fast. Her mind was on fire.

“What is it?” April hissed. “Nov, you’re scaring me.”

November continued to pace, her footsteps echoing on the marble floor.

“Nov, seriously, what is going on?”

But November could barely process April’s words.

“November!” Margaret yelled.

November paused, finally meeting their eyes. She nodded, pushing out a breath and said, “I know how we can unite the twelve.”

“What? How?” April asked.

“The Inaugural ball. We get *all* the spirits to go to the Inaugural ball.”

April’s brows drew together tight.

“Think about it,” November said. “January was wearing a ballgown. I have a feeling she’d do anything to attend a ball again. And if we can convince her to bring the others…”

“They’d go without even knowing we were uniting.”

“We’ll all be in the same place at once.”

“It’s genius.”

“One problem,” Margaret interrupted. She held up her finger. “They hate music. A bunch of spirits aren’t going to go to a ball where there’s live music.”

November paused, thinking. “Then we’ll have to figure out a way to get them there. I’ll hire a stringless quartet if I have to.”

Arguing sounded from inside the classroom, and something crashed onto the floor.

“What’s that?” April asked, alert.

“I don’t know,” November said.

Margaret rushed over to the curtain and poked her head inside. “You guys won’t believe this.”

November and April rushed over and peered into the classroom.

“You cruel, unbelievable, heart-breaking fool!” Annabelle screamed. “I only came to this school to help with the ball because I was assuming you’d go with me! When are you going to stop fighting and give us a chance? It’s been like this since we were kids!”

Conroy stood facing her, his hair disheveled. “We’ll never work, Annabelle. I don’t have feelings for you, so just drop it. I tried to tell you not to stay, but you did anyway. That isn’t my fault.”

“It *is* your fault! It’s obvious we’re meant to be together. Since our first Inaugural ball when we were kids, everyone always expected us to be

together. I've been waiting so long, giving you space, because I was being a good person, but no longer. It's now or never, Conroy. I need to know once and for all if we even have a chance."

Conroy tugged a hand through his hair, exhaling loudly through his nose. "We never had a chance, Annabelle. I'm in love with someone else."

Annabelle froze. Tears stained her cheeks, but she couldn't move to wipe her cheeks. "What? When? Who?"

"That doesn't matter. What matters is that you know it's not you, but it's ___"

"But it's *you*? Is that what you're going to say? Conroy, I'd know if you were in love with someone, and that's impossible. You live your life closed off, spending time with no one but Roderick and the students here at this school. So go ahead and lie. But you keep telling those lies to yourself while I'm gone."

Annabelle flipped her blonde hair, grabbed her bag on the side table, and stormed toward the three girls. They backed up as Annabelle pushed past them.

"Don't give your heart to anyone ever," Annabelle said to them and left.

Thirty-One

LUCID DREAMING

THE TRAP DOOR creaked open as November peered down inside. A stretch of dark lay before her, like an endless pit. Why was her heart pumping so loudly? It was just Vincent. It was just climbing. She needed that physical release—she needed to sweat it out on the wall, but something about being close to Vincent again made her pulse race.

He made her feel something other than normal human attraction. He made her feel like herself—but exposed. He made her not afraid to be herself and not put up an act. He made her uncomfortable—uncomfortable enough to push herself, even when she didn't want to be pushed. She was *just* going to spend some time on the wall, she told herself. She wasn't going down there to spend time with Vincent.

She descended the steps, her eyes slowly adjusting to the dark. Voices echoed down the cave, and November paused, cocking her head. The voices rumbled off the jagged walls, and November crept closer.

“When are you going to tell her?” Vincent demanded. There was heat in his voice, like the conversation had been escalating for a while.

“Tell her what? That I was using her?” Cam answered. “Anyone with a pair of eyes could see that.”

“She couldn't.”

“It doesn't matter,” Cam continued. “I needed in, so she was helping me in. And she's going to continue to help me.”

“Why don't you just open the veil by yourself?” Vincent demanded. “Why do you always drag innocent girls into this? You get them killed.”

“They're a means to an end. They're not what's important.”

“Then what is?” Vincent’s voice rung off the walls. “What’s so important? What’s so important that you need to go in anyway? Is it Cedric? You want the glory of finding him first? Or is it something else? Are you still obsessed with finding out who your father is?”

Silence pounded.

“They found another one, you know that?” Cam said.

Vincent stayed silent.

“Conroy told me last night. One of the gardeners. He was found dead outside next to the gazebo. His throat had been ripped out.”

Silence echoed again, and November clamped a hand over her mouth.

“Does Conroy plan on doing anything?” Vincent finally asked.

“The school stays open,” Cam said. “And no, it wasn’t my fault, so don’t blame it on me like you do everything else.” Footsteps echoed toward November and she scrambled backward into the dark.

“Sure, just walk away,” Vincent called out. “Like you always do!”

November edged back toward the stairs and ducked into the shadows. Cam stormed past her and plunked upward, his heavy feet slamming onto the metal steps. He let out an exasperated grunt and shoved the trapdoor open, before he disappeared. November stayed tucked in the shadows for a long while, afraid to move, not daring to leave until Vincent’s piano playing began and she could slip away.



November knew she was dreaming. She could feel her jaw gritting tight and the soft pillow beneath her. Sweat stuck to her skin, and she tried to pry open her lids.

In her dream, August floated before her, screaming at her to move, but she couldn’t hear him. They were outside, the wind whipping the trees, but no matter how hard he yelled, she still couldn’t understand his words. She felt as if she were floating along with him, caught in a swirling windstorm, being tossed around, doomed to never understand what August was trying to tell her.

The wind stopped, and everything paused. The trees stilled and August motioned his hand out in front of him. The air split, the veil opening, and the bright light from the other side seared November’s eyes. Bright beings

walked toward her, their light blurring together like one large glowing orb, until a single figure pulled itself out from the group.

Her mother emerged, and even though November knew she was dreaming, her heart leapt.

“Mom!” she tried to yell, but her voice wouldn’t work.

Her mother continued forward, her eyes on November, a pleasant expression on her face.

“Mom!” November tried again.

Her mother stopped at the veil, and November took in every detail of her face. The soft line of her jaw. Her warm eyes. Her lips that always seemed to pull up in a genuine smile. She silently begged for her to step through.

Her mother reached a hand toward her. “November.”

Her heart cracked, and she rushed up to where the air split. Figures continued to move on the other side of the veil, but November could only focus on her mom. It’d been so long since she’d seen her face.

“Mom, what are you doing here? Are you okay?”

Her mother only smiled a sad smile. “I’ve missed you, but look at you. You’re so beautiful.”

“Mom. No. That’s you.”

Tears gathered in November’s eyes, and she never wanted this moment to end. It felt so real—like her mother really was right there in front of her.

They continued to share space, the swirl of light behind her mom, until a dark figure cut through the cloud of light. Like it’d happened in real life, the figure sped forward, and the light figures around it separated, dispersing to the sides. The closer the figure approached, the more its features came into focus. Strong bones. Angular nose. Dark brow.

November stumbled back as her father’s presence came into focus. He had gnarled, bony hands that reached forward, and dark wisps that fell off his form as he rushed toward them. His usual handsome face was twisted, his expression contorted, his jaw long and disconnected. His eyes caught hers, and his mouth pulled up in a wicked grin.

She continued to edge back, but his presence zoomed forward at an impossible speed. When he reached the veil, November tensed, expecting him to burst through, but he didn’t. Instead, he gripped her mother by the throat, yanking her back, and bit right into the side of her neck.

“Dad!” November screamed. “No!”

Her mother's head fell back, and it appeared as if her father were sucking the light right out of her. Her glowing color began to diminish the longer her father kept her captive. His breaths pulled in heavy and deep, as his mouth continued to keep a firm grip on her neck.

November whirled on August. "Do something! You can reach them! Why are you just standing there?" But August remained still, watching the scene before him with dead eyes.

Her father continued to suck the life out of her mom, until her mom's countenance started to turn dark. Her hair drooped, and bags formed under her eyes. Her father grinned another wicked grin.

"No!" November yelled. "Stop it!"

She pushed off the ground and bolted forward, determined to stop it, no matter how dangerous it was to step past the veil. She felt as if she were running in slow motion, but she pushed onward. Just as her fingers reached the veil, her father's head snapped up, and he jumped toward her. She screamed.

November sat upright in bed, panting, her heart thrumming in her chest. She stared out before her in the dark, blinking. She felt along the sides of her, feeling the squishy bed beneath her fingers.

It was just a dream.

She had known it was a dream.

But it had seemed so real.

She tried to hold on to every detail. Seeing her parents had felt so real, and she wanted to keep the memory of them from fading. She replayed the dream in her head.

August screaming. The trees whipping furiously. The veil parting and her mom appearing. Her father's contorted face...

November clenched her eyes shut. It was only a dream, she told herself again. But something niggled at the back of her brain, something that made her feel as if there were deeper meaning to the dream. She thought over the dream again.

August screaming. The trees whipping furiously.

The trees.

She knew those trees. Tangled and dead, they had surrounded her from all sides. Those were the trees in the alcove. She had been standing in the dead gardens.

November peered open, rubbing the sides of her head. Moonlight streamed in from the window, casting shapes on the floor. She needed to visit that alcove. Something was in there—something that had to do with her parents. She knew it.

She stared out the window for a long time, waiting for the memory of her father's twisted face to subside. It never did.

Thirty-Two

LOOSE ENDS

NOVEMBER WATCHED as Conroy paced in front of the class, his hair wild, like he hadn't combed it for days. She sat with her back rigid, feeling Vincent and Cam's presence behind her. Vincent stood in the back corner, leaning against the wall, his eyes making the middle of her back itch. She hadn't spoken with him since that night—the night he opened up to her about his leg. She'd felt a connection with him, and she wanted to know if he was okay, if he regretted being honest with her, or if he felt that connection to her too.

Cam, on the other hand, sat directly behind her, his breath on the back of her neck. After hearing about what he had done to Vincent—how he'd run and didn't try to save Vincent from the attack—her stomach twisted in his presence. She didn't want anything to do with him. She'd misjudged the two brothers completely, and she wanted to remedy that.

"I need to speak with you," Cam said, leaning forward.

November scooted her chair away, trying to focus on Conroy and his words. He was talking about transposing and developing your ear, in order to improve your defense tactics.

"Please," Cam said, scooting his chair forward along with her. "The other day, when I got mad...I—" He broke off and exhaled. "I've been an idiot, okay? I haven't been able to stop thinking about us when we dance. We really do have something special between us. I miss our time together. Can we just get together and talk about it?"

"No," November said, scooting her chair away again. "Cam, I don't want anything to do with you."

He moved his chair once more. "Please?"

November turned around and glared. "You said enough to Vincent the other night," she hissed. "Yes, I heard you. I heard about how you were using me, just like you used Marybeth. I don't know why you need me to open the veil for you, but it isn't going to happen."

Cam sat back, frowning. He clearly didn't expect that.

"Now to more important matters," Conroy said, cutting into November's thoughts. "You've all been failing. Miserably."

His voice rung loud and clear, and the class shifted under his stare. Conroy continued talking.

"I knew I shouldn't have put Annabelle in charge of your research. But now that that's remedied," heat dotted his cheeks and he coughed, "I want whatever information you've gathered. What have you discovered with the location of this person who had contact with Cedric?"

The room sat silent, and eyes slid to the floor.

"Anyone?" Conroy asked. "Anyone at all?"

Again, the class remained silent.

"Don't tell me you've been researching this whole time, and you haven't found a single clue in *all* the history books or journals and anything?" Conroy tightened his fists, then slowly released them. "You do realize that you might all *die* because of this, don't you? Without this information, we're blind. We have nothing to go on. We're sitting ducks on this side of the veil, waiting until the spirits become too much and they break through. Finding this person is our only key to discovering where Cedric is."

When no one answered, Conroy threw up his hands, pacing away.

"I know who he spoke to," Cam said, lounging back in his chair. Conroy turned, and the class froze.

"And I'll be happy to relay the information to you," Cam continued. "But I'm not going to unless November promises to dance with me at the ball. On Friday."

Eyes widened and whispers erupted. Vincent pushed himself from off the wall. Conroy faced Cam head on, and November held silent, afraid to move.

"November?" Conroy asked, lifting his brows.

The room waited, and November still couldn't move. She felt every pair of eyes on her, staring holes right into her.

“I—” she began. She glanced at Cam who had his mouth lifted up into a cocky smile. “No, I—”

“Come on, Nov,” Cam said. “It’s for the greater good.”

November opened her mouth again, but her words piled on top of each other in her throat.

“Done,” Conroy said. “November, you will dance with him. Cam, if we could speak in private please? You will give me the information you have. Class, go separate and take your stations.”

Cam rose from his chair and smirked as he made his way to Conroy. He didn’t take his eyes off of her until she blinked and looked away.

“I can’t believe you have to dance with him,” April whispered, pulling November up against the far wall in the hallway. November had just finished catching her up—everything about Cam from the beginning. About Cam’s rude behavior, her not being able to open the veil, to what she heard down in Vincent’s lair. Everything but the kiss, that she kept to herself.

“And I can’t believe you were spending time with Vincent!” April exclaimed.

“What are you going to do?” she continued. “Clearly Cam doesn’t have good intentions. You could be in danger. And why doesn’t he just open the veil himself?”

“Something I’ve asked myself multiple times,” November mumbled.

“So what *are* you going to do?” Margaret asked as she joined them. Her red hair was piled on top of her head today, a black headband around her head.

“I don’t know,” November said. “I obviously can’t stay home from the dance. Maybe I can just hide from him.”

“Conroy would kill you,” April said.

“I don’t care. It’s not as if Conroy is giving us much information anyway,” November said. “He’s like a man sleepwalking these days. He goes through the motions of his day, saying and doing all the right things, but it’s like his heart isn’t into it. Maybe he really is in love with Annabelle and regrets his decision to dump her.”

“Oh, I doubt that,” Margaret said. “I know when someone is being sincere or not in their affections, and Conroy definitely doesn’t have a thing for her. Besides, he said he was in love with someone else.”

“Then what is it then?” April asked. “Something is clearly bothering Conroy.”

Footsteps clicked, and the three went silent as Vincent limped past. His eyes caught November’s, and a chill rushed down her back.

“Let’s talk about *him*,” April whispered. “Is something going on between you two?”

“No,” November said quickly. “Of course not.”

April made a doubtful face. “Sure. Not that I mind, other than he’s a mopey, brooding, weirdo.”

“He is not!” November burst out, then shut her mouth.

The two girls raised their brows.

“He’s not a weirdo. Just... misunderstood.”

The girls blinked back at her.

“I need to go figure out this veil thing,” November mumbled. “I need to go practice shutting the veil in case Cam really does force me to open it for him.”

November walked away, wondering if he was going to do just that. She didn’t see a way out of not dancing with Cam, and she was afraid for what would happen if she did.

Thirty-Three

THE BEAUTY

NOVEMBER COULDN'T GET Vincent out of her mind.

His presence had been a disruption to her—a sliver in her finger—until it hadn't. She didn't know when the change happened, but she felt sympathetic toward him, she wanted to be friends with him. She wanted to know more about him.

When she thought he was the one uncaring and cold to the world, he'd only been acting out of hurt. He didn't want her here because she reminded him too much of her father. He'd been mad at Cam because of his cruelty. And he had saved her twice when she'd fallen from the rock. He wasn't cold-hearted and mean spirited, he was broken, like she had been, and she wanted to fix it.

She felt as if he cared about her—from the looks exchanged between them, to the feeling that settled when they were together. Something was there, and she was sick of pretending it wasn't. She was going to tell him what she thought of him—that she cared about him. Had anyone ever told him that before?

November peeled open the trapdoor and descended into the dark, her feet stepping onto the metal stairs. Music immediately drifted up from the pits below, a soft, tinkling melody that swirled around inside the air. Vincent was clearly at the piano. But there was another song that clashed with it. It was heavy, haunting, and dissonant as the two songs played together.

The top of her skin itched, and November wrapped her arms close to her. Something wasn't right—there shouldn't be these two songs playing

together. She had heard the haunting melody before, and thoughts of that night here in the Huntington manor rushed to mind. She had followed the music, and Vincent had... stopped it.

She edged through the dark cave until she turned the corner. She stopped dead.

Vincent sat at the piano, his face relaxed into ecstasy, his eyes closed as he played his intricate melody, but around Vincent, the most exquisite women surrounded him. They floated in the air, white and transparent, with dark eyes and red lips. They glided around Vincent, their hair long and luscious, their skin flawless. They caressed his cheeks, their graceful fingers running through his hair. They wore robes that barely covered their skin, and for a moment, November was entranced, until she shook her head.

“Vincent, *what* is going on?”

The woman all snapped their heads toward her at the same time. Their expressions became dark, their lips curling upward. Claws seemed to stretch from their fingertips, their skin peeling away from their skin.

November shuffled back, her mind frozen, unable to believe what she was witnessing. The woman started to prowl toward her.

“Vincent...”

His eyes shot open and fear flashed across his face. “November? What? No!” he yelled.

In a rush, the women came surging forward, and November continued to scramble back. Their music heightened, resonating loud in her ears, and she could barely see it was so loud.

Vincent didn’t move from the piano. He stared at November, eyes wide with fear, face extra pale. He was frozen for a few moments until he dipped his head back to the piano. He pressed his fingers into the keys with fervor, his jaw tight.

The women continued to descend on November, their ruby lips open, revealing sharp teeth, their eyes turning red, until Vincent’s song rang clear. It burst through the room, and the beast women immediately paused, listening.

“That’s it,” Vincent said, playing harder. “I’m in control.”

The women snarled, keeping their eyes on November, but they backed away. November’s legs trembled, her whole body shaking. She set a hand on her heart, her pulse racing.

The women slowly morphed back into their beautiful selves, but instead of surrounding Vincent again, they started to pool together in one space. They layered on top of one another, merging into one being until they disappeared completely.

Vincent removed his hands from the piano, and silence echoed in the room.

November couldn't believe what she'd just witnessed. She kept her eyes locked on Vincent until he finally looked up.

"You weren't supposed to see that." His voice was soft, deep, and resonated through the dim space. "I know how it must've looked..."

"Like you were *enjoying* yourself? Vincent, *what* was that about? Those were... Sylphs! You were consorting with Sylphs!" She backed up, her feet edging off the wood floor, the light from the chandelier above her making her head spin.

Vincent stood abruptly, his chair scooting on the floor. "I was *practicing*," he said. "One of the most difficult things anyone can do is call off the Sylphs' call. And I wanted to take it a step farther. Do what your father couldn't do. I can control them. I can make them go back inside the veil because I... practice."

"And enjoy yourself while you're doing it," she said. "I saw your face when they were with you. It was like..." November broke off.

"It was nothing," Vincent said, eyes dark. "Don't judge me."

"I... I think I need to leave." She backed away further.

Vincent pushed away from the piano bench, and it screeched on the floor. "Please don't. I'm glad you came."

November shook her head. She'd come down here to tell him that she cared for him, and he'd been enjoying these women. It was written all over him.

"November, please."

"I need to leave," she said, and rushed from the room.



November shook out her hands, pacing in the entryway, hoping the cacophony of clocks ticking would drown out the noise in her head.

Adrenaline pulsed through her, and she shook out her hands again, trying to get rid of it.

She wished she'd never met Cam or Vincent. Cam was a master manipulator who only sought his own gain, and Vincent was a guy who was addicted to spending time with the enemy. These two brothers were messed up, and November didn't know why she had let herself get so wrapped up in their lives.

All she could think about was how she was alone—yet again. She had allowed two boys affect her, take energy from her, and she had even envisioned dancing with both of them at the ball, but now she'd be alone. She knew it was silly, but she *wanted* to dance around in that ballroom, like a normal girl, having a normal night—and not being forced to dance like she was with Cam. She wanted to wear that lavender dress and feel giddy like April did. To be on a real date.

But instead, she *had* to have feelings for one brother, who didn't have any interest in her, and another brother whose sole purpose was to use her for who knows what. She was alone, like she always was. Her depression started to take root, swelling in her chest. For a while, she had forgotten about it, it had been subdued, but now it was growing and pressing her down.

The clocks chimed, and April walked in. Instead of wearing her usual black dress, she had on long-sleeved purple T-shirt and pleated black slacks.

“Oh, November, hi,” she said. “I was just coming to meet Ty. He wanted to pick me up and take me out for ice cream.” Her face lit up until she looked at November closer. “You okay?”

November held in a laugh. *Was she okay?* She was pacing in a room full of clocks, pondering how she had no one, while April was getting ready for a date. She used to be the best climber in the state. She used to have a boyfriend and an uncle and somewhat normal life. Now she was lost in a whirlpool that spun so fast she'd never be able to swim out.

“Sure,” November said sharply. “I'm fine.”

April's eyes widened. “Did I do something?”

“Yes!” November retorted. “You're acting like everything is fine. Like you're skipping in a field of daisies when we're about to face our impending death! You're one of the *twelve*, April. Cedric prophesied our death. And that doesn't bother you? And besides, you're too obsessed with your life and how wonderful it is instead of seeing that I'm... I'm...”

April's face screwed tight. "You're what? A self-centered jerk?"
November blinked like she'd been slapped.

"Yes, that's what I said," April went on. "Can't you see that for the first time in my life someone likes me? For the first time, I feel like someone sees me for me, and you can't be happy for me? You've always been the strong one, the one that people respect and look up to, while I've been nothing but a loser—someone people make fun of. But you've got to be focused on yourself. Who cares about the twelve? Whatever happens is going to happen, but I'm at least going to live a life until it does. Gosh, you're so selfish!"

April marched past her and exited out the front door. The slam echoed in November's ears, ringing in her head. She groaned to herself and marched toward the china room. She needed to be alone without all this noise.

November threw open the doors to the parlor and fumbled back.

Conroy was in the room with Roderick. They were wrapped in each other's arms, with their lips locked together. Roderick's long, thin fingers were pressed into Conroy's back, and Conroy had his hands on Roderick's ghostly-white face.

"Conroy?" November burst out before she could control herself. She had clearly interrupted a private moment, and she wished she could kick herself.

Conroy jerked away from Roderick and wiped his mouth. "N-November," he said. "What... what do you need?"

Sweat shone on his forehead, and he wiped his mouth again. Roderick straightened his suit coat, undeterred, and smoothed back his slick hair.

"You definitely aren't in love with Annabelle," November said before she could stop herself. "I get it now."

Heat rushed up the sides of Conroy's face, and his eyes slithered away. "Please don't tell April. I've been trying to get the nerve to tell her, but I haven't known how."

November swallowed, not knowing what to say. It wasn't her news to share, but this was huge. April should know. She'd been worried about Conroy, and this would help allay her fears. Of course she'd be happy for him.

"Please, November?" Conroy tugged at his collar.

"Yeah," she said. "Yeah, of course."

Her eyes slid to Roderick, and she took in his straight back and eerie demeanor. She recalled the story about how Roderick had saved Vincent from the dark spirits—how Roderick was a dark spirit that had broken loose from his group and he was able to pull Vincent from the veil.

“How long have you guys...?”

“Been together?” Roderick said. “It’s new... but we’ve had our eyes on each other for a while.”

Conroy rubbed the back of his neck, his eyes skating to the floor.

“I think it’s awesome,” November said. “I’m happy for you.”

Conroy lifted his gaze, emotion behind his eyes. “Thank you.”

November nodded, but a sick feeling twisted in her stomach. Even Conroy had someone to connect with—to love. This was only another reminder of how alone she truly was.

Thirty-Four

DOOM

WIND WHIPPED over November's face as she stepped outside the back of the school. She hadn't been able to sleep the night before, either because she couldn't get the feeling of being alone and abandoned out of her, or because she was spinning into another episode. She could never sleep when she went manic, but she also felt like she was depressed. A manic-depressive episode wouldn't be good. She couldn't handle her mental health going down the drain on top of everything else. Of course she'd thought she hadn't been okay for a while.

She wandered down the steps and through the maze of gardens toward the gazebo, clouds hanging over the late afternoon sky. Stone benches were scattered along the way, the bushes trimmed, and the flowers extra colorful in the muted light. Gray clouds hung over the sky, blocking the sun, and the wind continued to whirl around her.

November shivered, and stepped inside the gazebo. This would be a good place to think—a place to get her mind sorted out. She didn't want to be depressed, but she also didn't want to face her feelings. There was nothing for her here, not anymore. Only death.

When November stepped underneath the stone roof of the gazebo, she stopped. Vincent was leaning up against a pillar, tucked in the shadows, gazing out to the colorful gardens.

"Oh," November said, her throat suddenly thick. "Vincent, hi."

He slowly turned, his jaw tight, and his mouth turned down. "Here to judge me again? Because if you are, I don't want to hear it."

Anger started to rise up November's throat, but she swallowed it down. She was too tired for anger—too beaten down.

“No, I'm not here to judge you. I'm only here to think about my pathetic life.” She suddenly realized she wasn't mad at him anymore. Whether or not he was addicted to spending time with the Sylphs didn't matter. That was his choice, and it wasn't her problem.

Vincent turned, his fingers white on his cane. “You think your life is pathetic? Why?”

November walked over to the stone bench off to the side and sat. “I'm alone,” she said. “And I deserve to be alone. I'm not April where I can look at the world through rose-colored glasses, and I'm not brave like Conroy. I'm not you, training to become better, and I'm even not Cam—even though he's selfish, he still has motivation in life.”

“Huntington.” Vincent swallowed, and the chords stuck out tight in his neck. He limped over until he hovered above her.

“I seem to remember a girl who once gave April a pep talk about not thinking what other people think. Did you ever stop to think that *you* changed April's life? You lifted her up when she was down, and look at the happiness she's found. If that doesn't say everything about you, nothing does.”

November shook her head. “No, I didn't do that. Ty did. And I've done no good here. There's so much...” She broke off. “There's so much I need to learn and figure out and discover, but I'm not getting anywhere. I don't know what to do.”

He slowly lowered himself down next to her on the stone bench. He reached over, hesitated, then set his hand on top of hers. The touch sent shivers up her body, and she itched to link her fingers through his. Instead, she let his hand simply lie on top of hers.

“I know you hate me,” Vincent whispered. “And I wish I could amend that.”

“I don't hate you. I'm confused by you.” She met his gaze. This close to him, she wanted to trace the deep grooves of his face. “I never know what I'm going to get from you. But I know I'm... I'm drawn to you.”

“Is that what you told Cam?” There was no disdain to his voice, only mere curiosity.

November sighed, removing her hand out from under his. “No. I think my connection to Cam was merely in the dance. The dance made me feel

things that weren't me. I felt like myself when I rock climbed down under the manor with you."

He kept his gaze fixed with hers. "Are you saying you enjoyed time with me?" His voice was even, but she swore she heard hope in his tone.

"Yeah," she said. "I did.

I'm not sure what it is exactly that I feel for you, but it's something. At first it was intimidation, then it was intrigue, then..." She swallowed. "When I saw you with those Sylphs, I got jealous."

His mouth twitched. "I was jealous when I saw you with Cam. You have no idea." He clamped his teeth together tight. "I don't think I've ever been more hurt."

Her heart soared, and her breath escaped her lungs. *He cared for her?* He cared about her? Enough to be jealous?

"Vincent... I..."

"It's okay," he said. "You don't need to say anything else. I just want you to know how I feel. I care about you, Huntington. And I'd do anything for you."

She analyzed every line of his face, from the deep divots in his cheeks to his dark eyes. He was telling the truth.

"I'd do the same," she said. "I'd do the same."



November went through the rest of the day in a haze. A small seed of hope had been planted in her gut, and it started to grow, its tendrils weaving around her heart, stitching it back together. Maybe she did have purpose. Vincent's confession had given her a new fire, a new determination to fight for her fate and not let Cedric's prophecy about the twelve dying get to her. She was sick of working off of so little information, and she was sick of things happening to her instead of her making things happen herself. She wasn't going to be depressed. She needed to take control of her mind, use her tools, and find stability again.

She was to meet April out front, where Quincy would be waiting to pick them up. They were going to try on their dresses again and see if there were any adjustments to be made. The ball was tomorrow, and she wanted to make sure she looked good. Though a secret part of her couldn't forget the

comp that was in LA tomorrow either. Even though she had a new bounce in her step and a newfound determination, she couldn't help the small longing that ate in the back of her brain. She still wanted to climb. She just couldn't right now. But the thought of Vincent lightened her heart, and she couldn't wait until the next time she saw him—hopefully at the ball.

She walked down the hall, and kids brushed past her, familiar faces, but she hadn't taken the time to get to know their names. She suddenly had a desire to know each of them, to know their stories, and why they chose to fight—to keep the veils closed day after day. She felt so selfish of not thinking of them before. She'd been so consumed with learning her ability and dealing with Cam and Vincent that she hadn't stepped outside herself before now.

She continued down the hall, past the bright green plants and stone statues, excitement buzzing through her skin. She needed to go find April, tell her how happy she was that she was with Ty, and apologize for not voicing it before. Again, she'd been so selfish thinking of herself, and not April. Of course she was delighted that April was happy.

She turned another corner, heading for the large front doors when a gut-wrenching scream sounded. November stopped, the sound piercing to her bones. Her heart started pumping, and she glanced around her, searching. It was probably another attack. The scream sounded again, and November realized it was coming from outside the front doors.

Her heart beat faster as she raced across the foyer, her footsteps pounding on the marble floor, bouncing off the tall ceiling. She gripped her hand over the silver doorknob and pushed the door open. April stood on the top step, holding her throat. Blood—too much blood—ran down the front of April's dress, her face painted in shock. Her eyes locked with November, and she mouthed her name as she collapsed onto the step.

November stared, frozen, her mouth open, before realization hit.

“Help!” November yelled. She dropped to her knees next to April, her hands hovering over her body. April's eyes were open, stretched wide, gazing over past November's shoulder, as she gasped for air.

A dark presence loomed up behind November, and she stiffened. The presence hovered behind her, blocking out the sun. April's attacker was still here. Her skin crawled, but she forced herself to slowly turn around. Her father's distorted face appeared in front of her, his mouth open in a grin, revealing decaying, sharp teeth. He glared at her with a look so wicked, her

lungs froze, and she couldn't move. Black wisps drifted off his ghostly body, and he reached a gnarled hand toward her. She still couldn't move.

His long fingernails traced down the edge of her throat, stopping at the base.

"You're lucky you are who you are," his raspy voice said. "Or you'd already be dead. But don't worry, another one is coming for you."

"Dad—" November choked out. "What... *What* happened to you?"

Her father laughed, his eyes twinkling. "When the dark gets you, there's no turning back," he said. "You have no idea what is happening on the other side. And I'm glad I'm on the winning team."

"But... Mom... Where's Mom?"

"Still fighting, still waiting for Cedric to organize, believing he's the only one who can stop the dark from eating the light, but we'll break through soon enough, and survive off of real flesh and blood." He licked his lips. "Cedric is gone, and there is no hope for you."

She glanced down at April again, who was still gasping for breath, the color draining from her face. "April! Hold on!" Her hands still hovered over her, trembling.

November shook her head. "This isn't happening. This isn't real. You were the one everyone revered," she said to her father. "You were Vincent's mentor. My *dad*. I don't understand why you're okay with this. You should be fighting too."

April let out another choking sound, her lips opening and closing.

"Another member of the twelve dead," he said, laughing down at April. "Like I said, if you weren't my daughter, then you'd be dead, too."

April's body convulsed, her chest heaving up and down, until her head rolled to the side.

Her dad laughed again and vanished, leaving a trail of black smoke behind him. November spun back to April, hiccupping. Her eyes scanned over her body frantically, her jaw chattering. What could she do? She *had* to do something. But

April was lifeless, frozen, her eyes wide open. Blood continued to stream, running from her throat down the front steps, staining the white marble. November scrambled to her feet, her hands clutched over her mouth.

"No," she whispered. "No."

She backed away, unable to tear her eyes away, until she took off, racing down the front steps of the school.

Thirty-Five

BREAK THE CHAINS

NOVEMBER BOLTED DOWN the front steps, just as Conroy exited the building. His cry echoed out across the front of the school, but she couldn't look back. She couldn't see the look of devastation on his face. She couldn't experience the heartache he was feeling.

Quincy pulled the car out front, and November jumped in before the old man had a chance to say a word.

"Go! Now!" November ordered. She couldn't be there any longer. She had to get away from April's lifeless body.

Quincy looked at her through the rear-view mirror, his bushy eyebrows pushed together.

"Out! Out of here! Please!" Sobs began to wrack November's chest, and she couldn't contain the tears that poured down her face.

April was gone. She should've been there. If she had been just a touch faster, her father wouldn't have killed her. She was sure of it. But April was gone. Which meant only Margaret and she were left alive. Ten of the twelve were dead.

The thought made November's stomach heave. The twelve really *did* all have to die. Wasn't that what Cedric prophesied? She couldn't do this. She couldn't die. She couldn't be here any longer.

"I want out of this town," November said to Quincy, wiping the tears that wouldn't stop. "I need to climb. I need out. Take me to LA. I need my old life."

Quincy gave a single nod, his lips pressed together. "On our way."

Quincy drove along the stretch of highway, November's knees tucked up to her chest. She had unrolled the window, and stuck her hand outside, the wind breezing around her fingertips. Long stretches of green land whizzed by as the road disappeared beneath their wheels.

Her stomach wouldn't untangle itself. It stayed in tight knots the entire car ride, making her sick. She couldn't get April's lifeless face out of her mind. She had just laid there, eyes open, dead. It couldn't be true. But Conroy's cry continued to echo in her head.

She needed on the rock. She needed to sweat and make her body hurt so badly all she could feel was her weight against gravity. She didn't want to feel the hurt anymore. She didn't want to end up lifeless like April.

What would Vincent think when he discovered she was gone? Would he be sad? What would he do? Would he come after her?

Did it matter?

It didn't. She was done. She was done with that life. She didn't want a part of it anymore. It only brought death and darkness and sadness. It wasn't meant for her. She needed out. She needed air. She needed peace.

The road continued to speed by as Quincy kept the car at a steady pace. It felt strange that she had been a part of that world for so long. With each mile that they drove, her head began to clear, and the darkness began to wash off her shoulders. She was making the right decision with running. She needed this.

Quincy pulled up to the gym where the competition was going to take place the next day. She hopped out of the car, the bright sun beating down. Heat seeped into her skin, warming her from the inside out.

"I'll be right back, Quincy," November said and jogged across the parking lot. She approached the tall gym, pushing past the glass doors. This was where she belonged.

Inside, the air dropped a few degrees as the air conditioning roared, and November blinked at the change of light. Large synthetic rock walls towered above her, with brightly colored holds dotting the surface. The stereo was blasting, with shouts echoing as setters mapped out routes for the competition the next day. Chalk puffed up in the air as a few climbers bouldered off to the side.

“Hey,” November said, stepping up to the desk. “I’m here to register for the comp tomorrow.”

The kid at the desk had dreads that framed his face, a beanie on his head. He peered down at his phone, scrolling, his feet kicked up on the desk. “Sorry, this isn’t just a walk-in competition. You need to quali—” The kid broke off as his gaze flicked up from his phone. His eyes widened, and he lowered his feet. “November. Hey. I didn’t know you’d be competing.”

“Hey, Travis!” someone called from the back room. “You need to get the bibs ready, and then we need to make sure the top ropes are set up.”

That voice.

November’s feet rooted to the floor, and the hair on top of her head crawled.

Shawn’s blonde head stepped out of the back room, his nose stuck in a pile of paperwork in his hands. He kept his eyes lowered, sorting through the paperwork before slapping it down on the desk. His gaze lifted.

His skin whitened two shades. He stared at November openly, until his lips relaxed into a smile. “I knew you’d be back,” he said. “I was waiting for you to come find me.”

November opened her mouth, but nothing came out. She wasn’t prepared for this. She didn’t expect to ever see Shawn again. All the emotions she’d felt the last time she was with him surged forward, and all she could hear was his voice telling her how horrible she was. How messed up she was. That she was mentally ill.

“I’m not here to see you,” she finally whispered.

He leaned his ear to her side. “What was that? I don’t speak crazy.” He laughed, nudging Travis in the side, but Travis ducked his head and went back to his phone.

“What do you want, Shawn?” she asked. “And what are you doing here, anyway? You don’t work here.”

“They needed volunteers for the comp, so I volunteered. What are *you* doing here? Come back for redemption? Do you actually think you can make the Olympic team?” He grinned wider. “I doubt you’ve even been training. I haven’t seen you around.”

“Oh, I’ve been training,” she said. “And I’m going to get that spot on the team.”

Shawn shook his head, laughing harder. “Sure. Your delusions are coming through, Nov. You’re not mentally strong enough or stable enough

to handle this right now. You're going to choke on the wall like you did at the comp earlier this month. You should probably back out now, so you don't make a fool of yourself."

November slapped her hand on the counter. "Travis, put me down for tomorrow. And you," she said to Shawn, "I'll see you from the top of the wall."

Later that night, November sat next to the pool outside the hotel. Lights reflected on the water's surface, slightly warped with the gentle lapping. Moonlight shone down from above, the sky clear, stars hazy from the city lights. The pool area was empty, except for a couple of people soaking in the hot tub just down the way. Quincy had used his card to pay for their rooms, after telling her he would stay with her until she decided what she wanted to do.

The night air brushed soft on November's skin, cooling her from the hot sun earlier. She relaxed as the breeze lifted the hair off her neck, nothing heard but the muted conversation down the way. This was good. This was right. Just her, the pool, and the competition tomorrow. She didn't need to worry about Shawn, about Vincent, Cam, and how things were going on back at the school.

She only needed to focus on the present.

She gripped the sides of the lawn chair, her fingers digging into the plastic. She was present. She was here. She was okay. Her fingers slowly uncurled.

Quincy walked up and lowered himself down into the chair next to her. His gray suit inched up his calves, showing his white socks.

"Lovely, isn't it?" he asked. "I'm not much for the LA weather, but it's not too bad here at night."

November breathed in heavily through her nose and exhaled slowly. She was present. She was here. She was okay, she repeated again.

"I'm not much of a swimmer," he said. "But the water sure is pretty to look at."

She exhaled again. She was present. She was here. She was okay.

"And that moon," Quincy said. "Lovely on such a clear—"

“I’m not doing the wrong thing, am I?” November burst out.

“Hmm?” Quincy lifted a gray brow.

“Being here. Am I doing the wrong thing?”

Quincy’s lips lifted to one side. “I’m not sure. The only thing I know is a great many people live by the philosophy of doing whatever makes you happy—that that’s the way one should live their life—but I’m not sure it’s the best philosophy to live by.”

“What do you mean?”

Silence lingered between them for a moment. He leaned back in his chair and

linked his fingers together.

“What is happiness, really?” he said. “Take for instance, a mother and her newborn baby. Sleeping all night would make her happy, but what if the baby was up all night crying? Could she really be happy while her baby is suffering? I suppose she could ignore the child and let it cry, and choose to go to sleep anyway, and see if the baby calms on its own, but doesn’t she have some responsibility for the child? We each have life circumstances that fall into our lap, and we have a choice with how to act, but what brings true happiness? Is it the sleep? Or is it the child? Or is it the act of pushing through the hardship, sleep deprivation and all, that gives us true joy?”

November made a face. “So you think I’m running. That I’m not facing my problems.”

“Oh, don’t think I’m judging you,” he said. “I’m not. In fact, I think you’re doing the right thing.”

She flinched. “What?”

“November, there are some people in this life who have been dealt horrific cards. And you are one of them. I know what you suffer with daily. And you choosing to walk away is probably the best thing you can do right now. The world isn’t on your shoulders. You need to make sure you have shoulders at all. And that is by stepping back and making sure you’re alright.”

“But...” November started. “Why do I feel such guilt then?” She placed her hands in her lap. “I’m sitting here trying to convince myself that I’m okay, when I don’t think I am. The thought of leaving everyone behind... when they’re facing everything they’re facing back there...” She broke off. “I just feel terrible.”

“Then I guess you need to decide why you’re really here then,” he said softly. “Are you here because you really do need to step back and regroup so you can be mentally stable? Take an extra hour of sleep so you can be a better mother for your child? Or are you here because you’re scared, and you don’t want to face what you need to face?”

November didn’t answer. She didn’t know the answer. Quincy’s analogy played over again in her mind. Maybe the child would learn how not to cry on its own—that it was good for the mother and child to be separated for a time, so they could both grow stronger.

She let Quincy’s words travel off into the night. The light continued to reflect on the surface of the pool, just the two of them sitting in silence, until he quietly stood and left her alone once more.

Thirty-Six

TIDAL WAVE

THE CROWD STOOD hip to hip as November waited in isolation. She rubbed her palms together, trying to get rid of the sweat. She had her number pinned to her T-shirt, and she paced back and forth, listening as the crowd would either applaud or gasp at the climbers in front of her.

She wasn't allowed to see the route before she climbed it—she could only gauge how a climber was doing depending on the crowd's reaction. About a dozen people had gone ahead of her, and her turn was coming up.

Her conversation with Quincy last night rung over and over again in her mind. She tried to analyze why she was really here. Did she really want to be a climber? Was it still important to her? Did she run because of April? Or did she want to be back in Crescent City, helping the school with their impending doom? She wasn't sure. Being here felt familiar. This felt right, but she couldn't get Vincent's face out of her head.

It was only a matter of time before the spirits broke through the veil. And where would she be? Out here climbing? What if she could have stopped it? Would she be able to forgive herself? She stared at the gym's doors and a vision of the dark spirits bursting through came to mind. She envisioned every member of the crowd here being attacked, getting their throats ripped out. And what about her parents? Had she stopped caring what had happened to them? Did she want to help them? Help her father become light again? If it was possible.

November rubbed the sides of her head as she continued to pace. The more she thought about it, the more she wondered why she was here.

A member of the staff called her name, and she zoomed back to the present. The staff member held up a clipboard, motioning her forward. She blew out a shaky breath. This was it. She exited out of the isolation tent and headed out into the gym where the crowd lined up along the mat. A wall towered above her, with a variety of colored holds splattered up to the top of the ceiling. She eyed the yellow route marked with yellow tape, and peered over the holds, mapping out a way to the top of the wall.

This felt right. This felt comfortable. This was what she was meant to do. With the go ahead, she secured the rope into her harness and moved up to the wall, digging her hands into her chalk bag. She clapped her hands together, white dust puffing outward, before wiping her fingers on her pants. She peered up at the wall again, zoning in on the pattern before her, the world quieting around her. Placing her hands on the wall, she grabbed onto the first hold and bent her knees, pressing into the ground. With a large push, she threw her weight up and in, lifting herself off the floor. Her movements were smooth and quick, her feet tucking up and underneath her as she scaled upward.

Immediately, she felt a release, her face relaxing into a smile as she climbed upward. Her fingers gripped into the synthetic rock, one leg stretching out to catch a small jab while she chalked up and continued on. She clipped in, did another couple of moves, then clipped in again. Her muscles reached and pulled, her weight perfectly balanced. It was a dance with the wall, and she was the leader.

The route was difficult, but November was flawless, jumping and gliding upward, until Vincent's face came to mind. His presence hovered inside her head, staring her down, invading all clear thought. Her foot slipped and she caught herself. The crowd gasped, all watching, cameras out, filming. November held onto the rock, frozen, her fingers gripping tight. She couldn't see the holds above her. All she could see was that tortured face, with his hollow cheeks and sad eyes.

She'd left him.

He'd just confessed his feelings for her, and she'd left him. She couldn't have done something more cruel. Her arms shook, and her legs trembled. Sweat began to gather on her fingertips. Every part of her body suddenly wanted to be near him. She needed to apologize. She needed to tell him she cared about him too. Did she? She did. He made her *feel* in a way no one else did.

She blinked, trying to clear her vision, but still it wouldn't clear. Along with Vincent, she saw Cam, Margaret and Ty. Conroy and Roderick and August. And... her mom's soft face.

She couldn't be here.

She didn't want to be here.

Quincy was right. She had run because she was scared, not because she needed the escape to feel mentally sane. She was fine. She was strong with a clear head. She needed to be back at the school to help—to help stop the spirit world from imploding. She glanced at the clock down below next to the doors. She had three hours. Three hours before the ball.

But she had one thing to finish first.

November scanned the crowd, and stopped on Shawn's waiting form. He stood with his arms crossed, a smirk on his face. She secured her hold, and glanced up at the two holds waiting before her. Regaining her footing, she pressed deeper into the wall, reached up, and secured herself on the next hold. She peeked down at Shawn again, his mouth slackening. The crowd waited, anticipation thick in the air.

Just a jump to the top.

She knew climbing wasn't right for her at this time in her life, that she had more important things to do, but she couldn't leave without seeing the look on Shawn's face when she flashed this route.

Tendons straining, and sweat beading, November dug deep into the wall, bending her knees, before she pressed up and jumped. Her fingers gripped onto the final hold above her and she securely planted her feet beneath her. The crowd cheered and a laugh escaped out of November's chest. A relieved smile spread over her face, as she looked down at the crowd below. Shawn had turned and was leaving the room.

The rope lowered her to the ground, and she unclipped herself from the harness. People and conversations buzzed all around her, but she pushed through the crowd, racing over to the back of the gym where Quincy stood.

"We need to go back," she said, breathless.

Quincy gave a nod, a small smile on his wrinkled face. "I thought you might say that."

Quincy couldn't drive fast enough.

They raced along the California highway, the land open and bright, until the sun started to descend over the horizon. The trees began to thicken, lining the sides of the road, and soon Quincy was driving in the dark, headlights bright out in front of him.

November sat with her back tall, tapping her fingers on her legs. The realization pounded over and over again in her heart. She had changed. No longer was she the girl whose only dream was to make it to the Olympics. No longer was she a sad, lonely girl looking for answers about her parents. No longer was she only focused on herself and her life.

Her friends were in trouble—this world was in trouble—and her stepping outside herself and helping was more important than any Olympic dream. She had answers with her parents—and even though she didn't like it, she knew her dad was dark and needed to be stopped. And she had a team of people behind her to help.

She didn't need to die tonight. The twelve could gather without any more deaths. Her original plan would still work. The twelve needed to join together in the ballroom. If they couldn't find Cedric, then they needed to restore peace themselves.

Her nails dug into her palms. "Quincy, can you drive any faster?"

The old man's mouth flicked upward. "Yes, ma'am."

They sat in silence for the rest of the ride, November lost in her thoughts. Soon, the Huntington manor came into view, looming dark against the night sky. It seemed to double in size the closer they approached. In the driveway, November hopped out of the car and raced up the front steps.

The cacophony of ticks greeted her as she walked in, and she started to sprint through the entryway, when she slammed to a halt.

Out before her, a man stood still as a ghost, wearing a cap on his head, and pants that went up to his calves. A white puffy shirt framed his lean body, beneath a button-up vest.

"Oh," November said, pausing. "Hi."

The man stayed frozen in front of her, his eyes unblinking.

She stayed unmoving, not knowing whether she should leave him or not. She hesitated on the balls of her feet, itching to move, but she also didn't want to seem rude.

"Are you waiting for someone?" she asked.

The man remained motionless, his arms to his sides.

“Conroy?”

Again, no response.

November screwed up her face tight, thinking. Then her eyes widened. His feet hovered an inch off the floor, and the light shifted through his transparent form.

“You’re Lief Richardson,” she exclaimed. “The old clock maker. Clifton made this entryway for you—so you would stay.”

He stayed silent.

“What are you doing here?”

Still, he didn’t say a word.

November ran a hand over her face, bouncing on her heels. She didn’t have time to have a stare down with this ghost man.

“Is... there something you need to say?” she asked. “If there’s something you need to tell me, then tell me, because I’m in a rush.”

In a flash, his face was before hers, eyes wild, bulging. November flinched back, her heart taking off. He zoomed closer to her and she stumbled backwards, until she rammed into the wall behind her. A clock chimed.

“It’s time,” he said. “It’s time.”

November ducked out of his way and took off through the china room. But before she could exit, a woman wearing a large skirt that puffed to the sides and a white apron wrapped around her round frame stepped in front of her. Ringlets cascaded down her back, and she wrapped her hands out in front of her, like she was pleasantly awaiting a visitor.

“It’s time,” she said. “You can’t run.”

Sophia Turner. She collected Blue Ridge dishes.

“Excuse me.” November dashed around her, sprinting down the halls. What was happening? Why were all the ghosts surfacing? And *what time* was it?

She passed by the bird room and could see a man in khaki pants and a T-shirt attending to the birds. Sebastian Clark. He turned, and started to speak, when she passed by the room filled with fish tanks. A woman in jeans and a khaki jacket peered inside one of the tanks. Natalia Diaz. Her head shot over.

“It’s time,” Natalia said.

November sprinted faster, running through the halls, then leapt up two stairs at a time to the second floor. She continued to rush to the old attic. When she approached the wooden door, she paused outside of it, breathing hard. January had better be in there.

The door creaked open and a single lightbulb dangled from the ceiling above her. She pulled the string that turned on the light, and a soft glow illuminated the room. She entered the space, her feet squeaking on the floorboards.

“January?” November asked. “Are you here?”

Her heart still wouldn’t slow.

It’s time.

What were all the ghosts talking about?

She scanned the space for January again. Maybe she had already gone to the ball. She’d made sure they were all invited.

The light flicked and flickered, and November headed over to the chest in the corner. Her dress lay on top, the lavender fabric smooth and lovely in the dim light. Laces and beads adorned the gown, along the edges of the fabric. The thick layer of netting beneath the purple silk was fluffed, and a pair of earrings and a necklace sat off to the side on a wooden table.

April must have laid it out for her before she died.

November clenched her eyes tight, fighting back the tears. Her throat thickened, and she clamped her emotion down. She couldn’t cry. Not now. She had a ball to go to. She’d mourn April later.

“Thanks, April,” she whispered, and picked up the gown.

Thirty-Seven

THE MUSIC ECHOED out into the hallway at the school, and November's heels clicked softly as she passed the pillars and portraits around her. Her dress ruffled along the marble floor, and the closer she approached the ballroom, the more her skin tingled in anticipation. Her insides tightened, and she placed her hands over her stomach.

Vincent had to be inside. Cam had to be in there also. He was expecting her to dance with him. She didn't know what she was going to do about it, but she had a plan. It was going to be fine.

November turned down one more hall, and as she faced the closed double doors at the end, music resonated louder, floating out toward her. The melody was light and joyous, a quick tempo, and she suddenly had an urge to be in there, swirling around, waltzing throughout the room, dresses and bow ties surrounding her.

She flexed her fingers, lowering her arms to her sides. She could do this. No matter what was on the other side of the door, she could do this. She took a step forward.

"November!" Margaret rushed up to the side of her in an orange flurry, her small white gloves around her wrists gripping November's hands. "You're here! I was so worried. April's gone, and I thought you were dead. So I'm not the only one still alive. I—"

She pulled back, her red hair piled up on top of her head. Pearls decorated her ears, matching the necklace at her throat.

"Where have you been?" she asked.

November blew out a breath, steadying herself. “Too hard to explain.” The doors opened and November raised up onto her toes, trying to peek inside. “Is Vincent here?”

Margaret scrunched her face. “I haven’t seen any of the brothers. But everyone else is here. So what’s the plan?”

“It’s risky,” November whispered. “But you’ll just have to trust me. I’m opening the veil tonight, and it might cause havoc, but it’s a risk we have to take.”

Margaret wrapped her fingers around her neck. “O-Okay.”

The doors opened once more, and Ty emerged from the ballroom. His eyes were glued to the floor, his mouth turned downward. His face was a sickly color, his hair mussed as he walked toward them.

“He looks horrible,” Margaret whispered. “Look at him.”

“I don’t blame him,” November said. “I think he really liked her.”

Ty moved past them without a word, until Margaret said, “Hey, Ty. I…” She looked down at the dance card around her wrist. “I still have a couple dances left untaken. Do you want me to steal a dance from you?”

Ty paused, still looking at the floor. He swallowed. “Thanks, but no.” Tear stains streaked down his freckled skin. He continued forward once more, and the girls didn’t move until he disappeared around the corner.

“Well, I tried,” Margaret said.

November nodded. Thoughts of April were still too fresh. But if everything went well tonight, she’d be seeing her soon.

“Come on!” Margaret said. “You have to see inside!”

Margaret dragged her forward, and November’s feet slid on the marble floor, until the ballroom doors flew wide open. The sight unfolded before her.

Dresses of every color swirled, spinning and swishing, reflecting in the mirrors that lined the walls. It looked as if the dancers were repeating on forever, the mirrors bouncing off of each other for eternity. Smiles were spread on every face, jewels glittering around slender necks. Fancy footwork crossed over the glass floor, with the golden floor layered beneath it, the chandeliers above them dazzling.

It seemed as if the room was filled to capacity, although it was only the few students in their class present, along with several adults, including her uncle Mason. Her body relaxed at the sight of him. He would be able to

help. The mirrors reflected on and on, duplicating everyone, a string quartet playing in the corner.

She entered slowly, absorbing the sight. It was everything she dreamed and more. She let the music seep into her, let it carry her forward, deeper into the room. The sight of all the colors swirling together made her eyes stay wide open, and she couldn't look away.

"Lovely, isn't it?" Margaret asked.

A young man with straight brown hair that frizzed outward approached Margaret and said, "Can I have this dance?"

Margaret beamed. "Of course!" She turned to November and said, "No matter what happens tonight, I'm going to enjoy it." Worry flashed across her face, before she turned back to the young man and disappeared into the mix.

November set a hand on her head, dizzy.

No matter what happens tonight.

She edged along the room, passing through people, chatting, smiling, glasses of punch in their hands. Bouquets sat on pedestals that lined up along the mirrors, with white roses in each vase, trimmed with silver. The six chandeliers overhead continued to sparkle, reflecting on the dazzling jewelry throughout the room.

The sights and sensations started to make November come alive—a buzzing awakening beneath her skin. She'd always had an intense experience in the ballroom, but this was unlike anything she'd ever felt. It was as if every dancer, every note being played from the small orchestra in the corner, was a part of her—like they'd latched onto her heart and the beauty was spreading through her veins.

She found a back corner in the room, pushing out her breaths, trying to compose herself. She needed to keep a clear head, not be immersed in the beauty. She waited alone along the back wall. Everyone was wrapped up in their perfect world, being swallowed in the beauty around them, soaking it in like sunshine. Even Roderick and Conroy, who stood off to the side, with her uncle Mason.

She pressed her back up against the wall, flattening her palms against the mirror behind her. She tried to focus in on the present.

"Enjoying the ball?"

Vincent lingered off to the side of her, tucked in the corner. He was dressed in a dark suit and tie, tailored perfectly to his lean frame. His dark

hair was partly combed to the side, but scruffy around his ears. The lights from the chandelier lined the grooves of his face, casting shadows under his eyes and cheekbones.

“I didn’t see you,” November said, feeling her chest tighten.

“Dancing... really isn’t my thing,” he answered, lifting his cane.

“Yeah, I suppose not. But you dressed up.”

“I did.” He tilted his head, taking her in. “So did you.”

The way he looked at her made her cheeks warm. She placed her hands on her face.

“Do you want to...” she started. “I mean, you probably don’t dance, but do you want to?”

The music continued to swirl behind them, but all November could hear was the beat of her own heart.

One half of his mouth lifted. “We can try.”

Vincent slowly set his cane on the floor and limped a couple steps toward her. The mirrors captured his reflection, and she tried not to stare at the way his dark form went on forever. It was the first time she’d seen him stand alone without his cane.

He moved in close to her, and the nerves along her skin tingled. She was hyper aware of his whole presence, at the way he stared her down, watched her like he was hungry. He slowly reached down and took her hand, observing it, looking over her skin, before he drew her closer. He pressed a palm into her back, then took her right hand and lifted it out to the side.

They started to move in a slow, hypnotic dance, his eyes not leaving hers. The dance wasn’t bright and fast like the other dancers around them, but smooth and simple, just their bodies moving back and forth.

“I’m not my brother,” Vincent said. “I can’t do what he does.”

November didn’t blink, she kept her gaze connected with his. “Cam is Cam. Sure, he’s a great dancer, but he isn’t... you either.”

Vincent pulled in a deep breath before exhaling. “Perhaps. Though we’ll never see eye to eye.”

“Maybe you two will come to terms one day,” November said.

“Maybe.”

The music slowed and the dancers around them dispersed. Students switched partners and began a slow dance while November and Vincent stayed locked together.

“I’m glad you came back,” Vincent said. He still wouldn’t look away. “I wasn’t sure what I’d do if I never saw you again.”

She swallowed, “I couldn’t handle... everything. But now I can. I’m sorry.”

“You *can* handle it,” Vincent said. “As you know, your strength is one of the reasons why I’m fascinated with you.”

Her body tightened, before she softened her shoulders.

“It’s hard,” she said. “Always having to stay mindful. I have to think through every act, every decision, and check on myself, analyzing if I’m making a stable choice or not. It’s so easy to slip one way or the other—into mania where my thoughts are one long string that I can’t focus on anything, or into a deep depression, where I don’t want to focus on anything. I think it’s only when I can question myself that I know I’m okay.”

Vincent nodded, the line of his jaw tight. “When I... When I lost use of my leg, I went into a darkness so deep I never thought I’d come out of it. You’ve helped me do that.”

She opened her mouth to respond, but she didn’t know what to say. She wanted to tell him that she cared about him, that he’d made a difference in her life, to apologize that she’d judged him, but her words stuffed in her throat. She didn’t know how to voice it.

She blinked, looking away. His presence pounded through her being, and she realized she cared about him more than she’d originally thought. He got underneath her skin, but not in an irritant way, in an uncomfortable way that made her want to be better. He put her on edge, that made her *care* what he thought of her. What did he really think of her? Did he care about her as much as she cared about him?

She could feel his gaze pressing in on her, but she didn’t dare look back at him. If she did, she might not be able to ever look away. She wanted to stay trapped in this dance forever.

Someone stepped up in November’s peripheral, and extended their hand out in front of her. “It’s my turn.” The dance stopped, and November stared at Cam’s hand. “I’m here to claim my dance.”

Cam stood tall in a black suit and tie, making his frame look extra long.

Vincent’s face hardened. “No. We’re not finished.”

“Oh, I think you are,” Cam challenged him. The two stared each other down, the music continuing to soar around them.

Cam's outstretched hand stayed in front of her face. She knew she needed to dance with him, whether she wanted to or not.

"It's okay, Vincent," she said. "I'll be back."

Vincent ground his teeth together, but he gave a single nod. Cam drew her away, toward the middle of the ballroom.

"You're not meant to hover in the corner," Cam said. "You're meant to be center stage, shining so everyone can see your gift."

Energy scratched on the surface of her skin. She *did* long to dance—really dance—the way she was made to dance. Just not with Cam.

Cam pulled her in quick, his hand pressing her in close, their other arms stretched out to the side. In a blink, they were immersed in the circle of dancers, their feet moving quick and smooth. Cam circled her around at a fast pace, their footwork fast and intricate. He grinned back at her, knowing that this was what she'd been waiting for all along. He knew dancing was like a drug to her, because he felt it, too.

Colorful ballgowns swished, and young men in dark suits danced, the mirrors making the room look three times its size. The chandelier continued to make November's head dizzy, and her breaths became short as they swirled around.

The music ended, and November faltered, at a sudden loss. Cam tightened his grip around her, and she peered up at him, hoping for the music to start again—*needing* the music to start again.

A soft beat began to filter through the air, pushing up and down. It skimmed along her shoulders and echoed in her heart, beating down up up, down up up.

The Waltz.

November edged closer to Cam.

"Please say we can dance this," she breathed.

Cam's hair hung in damp strands over his face, and his eyes twinkled down at hers. "Nothing could stop me."

The haunting waltz took over, and in an instant, they were swallowed back in the dance again. She knew this was where her plan needed to come into motion, that she needed to be brave enough to open the veil.

November kept her eyes connected with Cam, willing her natural feelings to flow through. She *wanted* the warmth to start seeping into her veins. She relaxed back into the dance, allowing it to happen. Warmth filled her being as the music carried them round and round. The heat spread

throughout her body, relaxing her further. Her back stayed straight, her arms stretched out to the sides of her. Their feet glided across the floor, as the music deepened, resonating further into November's bones.

From the corner of her eye, the mirrors seemed to shift, warp somehow. November felt a change in the air, a cool draft tickle over her skin. Pressure built in her head, and the ground seemed to tilt underneath her feet. A loud hum buzzed on the air, and the dancers around her stopped. The hum heightened, and kids covered their ears. The ground began to shake, rattling the glass floor, and the chandeliers above them swayed.

"What's going on?" Margaret yelled, then zoomed in on November. Her eyes widened, and Margaret shook her head.

The walls continued to tremble, until bright light flashed into the room. Everyone gasped, shielding their eyes, as translucent figures peeled themselves from the walls, emerging into the ballroom. The white figures were all dressed to dance in their gowns and their bow ties, the men bowing to the women. The hum diminished and silence echoed. The ghosts were all faint—each a pale white that barely seemed to exist. But November could see them. She could see every detail from their done-up hair to the ruffles in their skirts. The veil opened further, creating a gap in the wall. Bright light seared inside, shining through the translucent beings.

The ghost men bowed to the ghost women, undeterred by the stares. The women curtsied back, and in a whoosh, they all began to dance. The room spun with the echo of the waltz, the instruments silent, but the memory of the beat still pulsed in the air. The ghosts swirled round and round, their translucent beings twirling. Then, as if the rest of the kids were caught in a dream, they also began the waltz. Living and dead, the room danced to the heavy beat that pounded in their hearts. It was as if they could hear the haunting melody in their heads, thrumming through the room. The invisible music filled November's soul on a deep level, the dark song soaring through her body. Without a word from Cam, they started the dance once more.

He stared at her curiously, their eyes locked, bright colored dresses and translucent beings swirling around them.

"What are you doing?" he hissed. "I know this is your doing."

They continued to spin, ghostly figures in her peripheral. "And why would I tell you that?"

Cam tightened his lips, clearly thinking. “Did Vincent make you do this? Some preemptive plan to stop me from my agenda?”

“And what is your agenda, Cam?” They continued to spin. “It still doesn’t make sense. Is it what Vincent thinks—that you’re trying to find your father?”

Cam swallowed, glancing away.

“Why does it matter who your father is?” she went on. “And why do you need me?”

The waltz continued on, white figures weaving in and out of the other dancing bodies. “I vowed to never open the veil again,” Cam said softly. “After... After I hurt Vincent. That night, when I opened the veil and I ran, instead of saving him. It was my fault his leg was hurt the way it was. So I promised myself to *never* open a veil again of my own volition. That’s why I need you.”

November stopped, searching Cam’s face. The translucent beings still swirled around her. “You’re serious?”

Cam unlinked his hand from hers and wiped his forehead. “So what if I want to find my father? So what if I refuse to be the one to open the veil myself? Those don’t seem like horrible crimes, yet everyone thinks me a murderer. It’s why I needed Marybeth...” He paused, swallowing. “Though... her death wasn’t an accident. Neither were the dark spirits that attacked Vincent that dreadful day. I’m still to blame.”

“What do you mean?” Her feet rooted to the glass floor. “How can you claim to *not* be a murderer and say it wasn’t an accident at the same time?”

“I was searching for my father,” he said quietly. “Well, for Cedric. He seems to be the answer to everything, and I knew he could help me find my father. Do you know how hard it is to live your whole life not knowing where you came from? I promised myself to never open a veil again, yes, just to help make me feel as if I’m not a total monster. I do have some morals after all. But with Vincent, and Marybeth... I could’ve closed the veil, but I didn’t. I *wanted* the dark ones to come. I knew that if there was a threat, the dark ones would draw Cedric out. And he’s the only one who can tell me who my father is.”

“So you *willingly* kept the veil open with Marybeth and Vincent to draw Cedric out? And you planned to do the same with me?”

“Plan,” he corrected her, his eyes darkening. “The veil isn’t closing tonight until the dark ones release into our world. And now, you’ve already

done my job for me. The veil is open, and I'm not letting it close until I get what I want, so thank you." His lips pulled up in a tight grin.

Cam gripped her again, yanking her up against him, and they took off back into the dance. November's head spun, suddenly feverish, knowing she had fallen into his trap. The open veil against the wall continued pulse, more light figures emerging.

She couldn't stop dancing. Cam held her tight, and her heart thumped in time with the silent music. The ghostly figures around her started to clarify, and she could see August dancing with a little girl in the corner. January came into focus, elegant as always, in her extravagant gown and silk gloves. Other figures also came into focus, ghostly figures dancing with ghostly figures. *Any minute now*, she thought. Maybe her plan would work before Cam's. The twelve had gathered. Something *had* to happen.

Except it wouldn't.

There was only eleven of them here.

April was gone.

Where was April? She should've been here. Her eyes flew around the room as she tried to spot her small friend. She searched for any sign of long midnight hair, but she wasn't there.

The twelve hadn't gathered.

As they did another round across the glass floor, November spotted Vincent standing in the corner, his knuckles white on his cane. He stared at her with a look so dark, it was like a shot of adrenaline straight into her heart. The veil seemed to open wider.

"Cam, no!" She shoved against him. "We need to stop!"

Cam tightened his grip on her. "No, not yet. Not until the dark ones come. Not until Cedric comes."

They continued to spin around, until all the colors blurred in her vision. "Please, Cam, stop! It's not too late to fix everything. All the deaths, the constant battle these kids fight every day. We could let them have normal lives!"

"Not. Happening." Cam kept a firm grip on her, forcing her to dance. "We keep this veil open until Cedric comes. Sometimes we need to have destruction to have light."

November fought against Cam, struggling to get out of his grip, but he kept her secure, forcing her to do the steps. She tried to focus in on herself,

tried to find the space where she could close the veil, but the chaotic dance was too much for her. She couldn't focus.

The ghosts swirled around them faster, until all November could see was a blur of white and bright colors. Living and dead.

“Cam!”

Pressure built again, and the air seemed to be closing in on her. She heard shouting, and felt feet pounding into the floor. She tried to focus on what was happening, but all she could see was the world spinning around her.

More screams sounded. Shouts erupted. Darkness surged into her peripheral.

The music ceased in her head and Cam finally released her grip. Sights and sounds blasted into November full force. She blinked back, stumbling. Bodies were rushing in every direction as dark spirits flew into the room. They whirled around the space, gripping onto students, biting into their necks. Long claws. Unhinged jaws. Black eyes. The white ghosts separated, letting the dark ones have way.

It was too late. She couldn't close the veil now. They were already here.

The ballroom doors flew open, and kids went running, but the dark ones were faster. Shoulders brushed past her, and her feet itched to run. She had led the students into slaughter.

“Finally,” Cam said. His face fell into a smile, and he reached out his arms to the side, laughing. “There's no way Cedric will ignore this. I will finally be able to confront him about who my father is.”

November stood paralyzed. Screams echoed throughout the room, and dark souls were feeding off of the kids. No one was escaping. Conroy and Roderick rushed around with her uncle Mason, trying to get kids to safety. Her eyes shot to the corner where Vincent had been. He wasn't there. Her heart raced at the thought of him dying because of her.

“We can't let the dark ones leave the school!” Conroy yelled. “Seal off the exits!”

The white ghosts were starting to hover back to the veil. November's heart beat against her rib cage. The twelve who were here were going to abandon them. They were going to leave November and Margaret to their deaths. She really was going to die. If only the twelve could do something. But what could they do? She had failed. She had tried to gather everyone together, but kids were dying, and there wasn't any hope.

She continued to watch the mayhem, Cam still grinning, his head dropped back to the ceiling. A few more dark spirits attacked another kid, and Roderick sprinted forward, punching the dark spirit back. The kid took off, running down the hall. Roderick stood panting, long and slim in his suit coat. His jaw bones ground back and forth, his eyes two little pinpoints. He had once been a dark one, yet he was alive and well now. He had sacrificed himself for the living, and had been restored life.

She glanced at the white ghosts again, and her brows shot up.

Maybe they could come back, too.

Without another thought, November bolted across the ballroom, past the screaming kids and dark spirits. They zoomed in and out of her vision in black wisps. She reached the veil, chest heaving up and down, and yelled, "Stop!"

The white souls paused, their expressions blank, curious.

"Please don't leave," she said. "We need you."

"How?" January said, her voice light through the madness.

"You need to save them," she said. "Save the kids. Fight against the dark spirits. And..." *You might be brought back to life.*

January lifted a slim brow. "And why should we do that?"

"Just trust me. Don't abandon these kids to their deaths to be tortured in the afterlife like you. Fight against the dark ones and we can overpower them. *Please.*"

The ghosts hovered silently, the men with their backs stiff, and the women with their skirts brushing over the floor.

"Please," November tried again.

August stepped up next to January, his chest puffed up. "I'm not afraid. David Huntington taught me to not be afraid."

November's heart ached at the mention of her dad, but she didn't have time to think of that now. He could be in here, feasting on some poor child.

January turned to her fellow spirits. She whispered to them, and November strained to hear. They spoke for a moment, and November stood on the balls of her feet, every inch of her itching.

January finally turned to her, her slender fingers clasped together. "Fine. We agree. We'll help you."

The souls took off, soaring through the ballroom, descending upon the dark ones. November's heart lifted and anticipation thrummed beneath her skin. Cam noticed, and his dark brows drew together, his face contorting.

“No!” he yelled. His head snapped over to November, and his eyelids narrowed to slits. “You. Come with me.” He marched over, and November backed away, but Cam gripped her around the wrist. He yanked her into the chaos, storming through the rushing bodies and darting spirits.

The ghosts were dodging around the dark ones, putting themselves between them and the kids. No matter how hard the dark ones tried to get pass by, they faltered, unable to get through. Some of the dark ones attacked the twelve that were here, but the light were able to push them back, retreating them toward the veil.

She peeked over to January, who was protecting Margaret. Margaret, with her hands over her head, crouched onto the floor, January blocking her from the dark spirit before her. Bits of color appeared on January’s dress. A light green with black lace. Color began to dot her cheeks, her lips turning red.

It was working.

The twelve were becoming more human from their selfless act. Just like Roderick. She knew it would work.

Cam continued to wrench her through the crowd, out of the ballroom and into the hallway. A dark spirit whizzed by, and August rushed down after it, zooming down the hall and around the corner.

November continued to struggle. “Cam, let me go! What are you doing?” She tried to pry his fingers off of her.

“We’re going to the only other place where I might find Cedric.” He continued to march forward.

“And where is that?”

He grinned back at her, his white teeth flashing. “The only other place he might linger. Back to the Huntington manor. Inside a hidden alcove. Where the love of his life died. Isabelle Beaument.”

Thirty-Eight

THE DREAM NOVEMBER had the other night replayed in her head. August yelling at her. Her mother at the veil. Her father coming up from behind and sucking the life out of her. The trees around them. They were headed to the alcove, and she couldn't stop the feeling that her stomach was being eaten from the inside out. What was happening back at the school? Were the kids okay? Or were the dark ones escaping?

Cam had driven them back to the manor so fast, she could barely see the trees as they passed by. When they arrived, Cam jumped out of the car and was in November's face before she could blink.

"Don't try and run," he said. "I need you."

Moonlight lit their path as they headed across the Huntington estate, the moon reflecting on the ripples across the lake. A heavy wind blew across November's face, her hair whipping in her eyes. Cam's steps were large and fast, clearly determined to get to the alcove as quickly as possible. His grip on her arm ached, and white air puffed out from her breath.

"Almost there," Cam said, stopping where the tangled garden met the clean lawn. November peered into the dark foliage. Inside was where Isabelle died? No wonder the place had felt off to her.

A shadow emerged to the left, and Vincent appeared in the night. He limped up to them, his cheeks hollow in the moonlight.

"I'm not letting you take her in there alone," Vincent said.

Cam jerked, his grip tightening on her. But his mouth turned lopsided.

"Then come," Cam said. "See if I care."

Vincent tapped his cane. "You first."

“And I don’t have a choice?” November asked. “I don’t want to go in there!” She remembered the cold, dark feeling of being in the alcove.

Cam shoved her forward, and the three walked in silence, just the crunch of their feet and breaths between them. The air bit November’s skin, cool and crisp, and she shivered. Cam pushed away dead branches, dragging November along, while Vincent limped behind them in silence.

She had so many questions. Who Isabelle Beaumont was, and why Cedric had loved her. Why had she died in this alcove? And why would coming here now lead Cam to his father? What was Vincent doing here? How had he known to come? How were the kids back at the school?

They turned corner after corner, cutting through thick foliage, Cam leading the way, and moonlight casting shadows along the path before them. Vincent’s presence tickled along her back, like one long shiver. She wanted to turn back and talk to him, ask him why he was here, but bushes swallowed up the path, and Cam was moving so fast.

Silence beat between them until November couldn’t handle it any longer.

“So who wants to tell me exactly what we’re doing here? And why is Isabelle so important?”

“She was your father’s most prized student,” Cam said. “When she was eighteen, Clifton had an affair with her. It was a huge scandal back in the day. Conroy was only a toddler at the time, and Clifton’s wife was pregnant with April. It’s what broke up the relationship between Clifton and your father. Your father could never forgive him for his affair. It wasn’t until later I discovered Isabelle was the one who Cedric loved. I found it in Clifton’s journal. That’s the information I gave to Conroy that day.”

November heard Vincent grunt behind them, but she pushed on. She thought of her father. She thought of Clifton. She thought of Cedric. They had all cared for her.

“What made Isabelle so special that Cedric fell for her?” she asked.

“Who knows,” Cam said. “What makes anyone special?”

“Maybe she was intelligent, kind, beautiful, and selfless,” Vincent said, voice gruff. “There could be a number of reasons.”

“Like November?” Cam said with a smile in his voice. “I know you think the same of her.”

Silence stretched. Their footsteps crunched again.

“And why do you think coming to the alcove will help you find your father?” November asked Cam.

“Because I read it in a journal,” he said. “Not Clifton’s—but October’s mother. You left it open in the library. You probably don’t even remember.”

November scrunched her brows together. The journal entry in the library—where she had first read about Margaret—or October. Realization dawned.

“Margaret’s mother,” she said. “She spoke about how her husband hid October away, trying to protect her. But what does that have to do with anything?”

“Did you not read the words?”

Her mind spun, until she paused on the rocky trail. The words on the bottom of the page echoed in her head.

I asked Cedric if we could find him if we needed him. He said we could find him only if we had a key to get past the Sylphs. He resided beyond the wasteland to where the dark spirits lived, where time doesn't exist. Past the decaying cities, kingdoms that once stood tall and glorious, but are now crumbling like petals off a rose. Past rivers of fog, which used to be rivers of gold. That's where we'd find him.

Her mind continued to race.

Those words.

“The key... time... a rose... rivers... like a snake...” November’s head shot up to Cam. “The alcove. The carvings on the archways. They lead to Cedric.”

Cam clicked his tongue. “Smart one. Now let’s go.”

“Wait, Cam! Stop!” She rushed after him, pushing aside branches. Energy buzzed through her, like she was awake for the first time that day. Cam was right—the riddle did lead to Cedric. Maybe Cedric could help her find her parents, too. Maybe he could save them. But he was in hiding for a reason. Something must have happened to him. He hadn’t disappeared for nothing. Vincent continued to limp behind.

“Do you think he’ll really be there?” November asked.

“He better be.”

The wind picked up, and November shivered again. They walked in silence for a few more moments, until the gardens opened up. November tentatively ducked inside the alcove, her eyes immediately shooting to the

four archways. They stood tall and oppressive, lit by the moonlight, dark clouds shifting over the night sky.

“Here it is!” Cam jogged into the alcove, looking around. “So now what?”

“Maybe you should just ask Cedric to show,” Vincent said as he limped inside. Dead foliage hung around the sides of his face. “That’s how far-fetched this plan is.”

“I highly doubt he’s just going to appear to me by asking him to show, brother,” Cam said wryly. “What was the first clue? You need the key to get past the Sylphs.” He walked up to the archway that had the key engraved in it at the top. He peered at the carving for a moment before he walked to the next archway holding the clock. “It says to follow the path where time doesn’t exist.” He moved over to the next archway and said, “The rose. The decaying cities like petals off of a rose. Then...” He squinted over at the last archway. “Past the rivers of fog. How are we supposed to travel to all of these places?”

November glanced around the alcove, another gust of wind making her shiver. “Maybe you don’t need to travel to these places. I know my dad did inside the veil, but maybe we don’t. Maybe it’s just us standing here, in the center, where all these places unite. Where Isabelle died. Maybe if we open the veil together...”

“But if we open the veil again, we might encounter Sylphs or more dark spirits. We’ll never survive,” Cam said. “The only person who’s ever had power over the Sylphs is Cedric himself.”

“No,” November said. “That’s not true. Vincent...” She paused, turning on him. “Vincent has power over the Sylphs.”

Vincent walked deeper into the alcove, stopping a few feet from them. His head was cocked to the side, his cane planted out in front of him. He stared them down until he tilted his head to the other side.

“You don’t need to open the veil to find... Cedric.” His fingers trembled as he said, “You’re looking right at him.”

November stopped dead, and Cam went still.

“What.” She swallowed. “What are you talking about?”

Vincent’s mouth tucked in at the corners. “No more games. It’s time for me to tell you the truth. You want Cedric? I’m right here. So tell me what it is you want.”

Thirty-Nine

ENDGAME

NOVEMBER STARED AT VINCENT, Cam frozen by her side. Leaves rustled across the ground before her, and nothing sounded but the wind in the trees.

“You?” Cam asked, breaking the silence. “No. Definitely not. No. You’re not Cedric.” He still didn’t move. “I grew up with you. You’re my brother. You can’t possibly...”

“Vincent, is this the *truth*?” November asked. “Why this charade? Why abandon us to all of this? Cedric ran. He’s the one who could fix all this mess, but... is it really you?” Her throat swelled in tight, and she could hardly breathe.

“I failed this world,” Vincent said quietly. “I fought so hard for so long, but it became lonely being the only one to walk through both worlds, alive for eternity. I was alone. So I left. I wanted to find a new life amongst the living. I had already corrupted the world by not being able to control the seven, so there was nothing else I could do. I wanted to experience life again as a child and grow up. I had the ability to do that. There’s so much you don’t know about me. Where I came from, why I’m here. What I’m capable of. I wanted to live a normal life. But I couldn’t escape my doomed fate.”

He shifted his weight, wincing. “Then I met Isabelle. I fell in love. We had a child.”

November stumbled back a step. The thought of Vincent having a child was too much. He was *seventeen*... going on a few thousand.

“Isabelle was your mother.” Vincent looked to Cam. “We had you together.”

November’s world screeched to a halt. This wasn’t happening.

Cam ground his teeth together, his eyes tightening. “Liar,” he said. “You’re lying. You can’t be Cedric *and* my father. You’re my *brother*.”

“It’s the only reason I’m still here in this place right now,” Vincent said. “If I didn’t want to watch over you, then I wouldn’t be. I’d be long gone. After we had you, I knew the only way to be with you—to watch over you—to truly know you, would be as your brother. It was the perfect disguise. The seven were after me—still are—and I knew they would be looking for someone older. Not a child.”

“But... you *hate* each other. You always have,” November said. “Since the accident. You’re acting like you... care about him.”

“Cam did hurt me, yes,” Vincent said. Pain washed over his face before he composed himself. “Even though I have eternal life, doesn’t mean I still can’t be physically hurt... or killed. It’s why the seven want my blood. It’s true that if they killed me, they could take my place and take my eternal life. But do I hate Cambridge?” He took a shaky breath. “No. Never. I love him more than anything.” Pain flashed over his face again. “He only reminded of Isabelle, which hurt my heart more than I expected.”

November glanced around the small alcove, at the trees swaying, and the archways standing tall in the night.

“So... this is where Isabelle died?”

Vincent lowered his head. “Yes. It was on a night just like this. This was our place—our secret place where we would run to escape from the world. She didn’t know I was an immortal being then. I was just a seventeen-year-old kid who visited her. She came to the Huntington manor every Tuesday to study with your father. We would meet here in this alcove after her lessons. But then...” He exhaled. “Things escalated. We had a child together. But I... I wasn’t aware that Clifton was in love with her. He followed us into the alcove one night. There was a fight—and he said that Isabelle was his, that the child was his. I of course wouldn’t have it. The battle between us was fierce. Clifton was strong, but ultimately, Isabelle threw herself between us to make us stop, and she tripped, hitting her head on a rock. It was over so quickly.

“Cam was only a newborn when she died,” he continued. “I watched over him until I knew I had to disguise myself. It wasn’t safe for me to live

out in the open anymore, let alone allow the seven and the world know that I had a child. I wanted to be close to Cambridge, and I knew I couldn't leave him, so that's when I pretended to be his brother."

Silence settled, and November could barely breathe. The whole tale was so hard to believe. Vincent loving Isabelle. Them having a child. Vincent using whatever unearthly powers he had to make himself young again to grow up with Cam. It was straight out of a fantasy novel.

"I can't believe all of this."

He nodded, his eyes still to the ground. "It was hard... I hadn't realized Isabelle had a relationship with Clifton. The scandal ruined his reputation. Isabelle had the child," his eyes flicked to Cam, "without Clifton knowing who his real father was—mine or his. But I of course knew." Vincent lifted his gaze.

"It hasn't left me, all these years," Vincent continued. "The pain of losing her. The worry of watching Cam grow up without parents. Clifton took Cam in, believing Cam was his child, but as he grew, Clifton discovered the truth. Cam looked just like me. Clifton knew I had power. He knew I had the ability to keep myself young. He was afraid of me. He gave me the house as a peace token." He shifted his weight, wincing. "How could I explain to Cam that I was his father—a seventeen-year-old kid who had pretended to be his brother? It was better that he would be raised under Clifton's care."

Cam remained silent, just staring Vincent down.

"All of this ate at me for years, I almost considered running again, but like I said, I couldn't leave you, Cambridge." The wind whipped between them, and Vincent's face remained stone. "Then, I definitely couldn't leave because of you." He met November's gaze straight on.

November stiffened, her fingers stretching. "Me?"

Vincent slowly limped forward. His eyes flicked to Cam's again until he stopped in front of her.

"I've never met anyone so in tune with herself and not the world. Not even Isabelle. Isabelle had an innocence that was appealing, but..." He shook his head. "She still deceived me with Clifton. Huntington, I've never met anyone like you."

November's lungs felt like two ice blocks in her chest. She didn't know what to say. She felt the same about him, but could she say so? After

everything she'd learned about him and Isabelle and Cam? It was too much. He'd lied to her.

"I know I can't expect anything from you anymore—or from you, Cambridge," he said. "But please, please forgive me." He turned back to November. "You've captured me. Getting to know you is the most beautiful thing I've witnessed. And I've witnessed a lot."

"But..." November cleared her throat. "No. You can't mean that."

He set his jaw with a firm look. "I do."

"Enough," Cam interrupted, face red. "I hate this lovey talk. Are you forgetting about the fact that you've left all of us behind? The whole world is in devastation because you ran away. Starvation and earthquakes and the misery of the world. If you had fought and beat the seven from tearing the world apart trying to find you, we might have peace." Sweat gathered on his brow.

"And what about the kids at the school?" Cam continued. "They battle every day to keep the veils closed. They put their lives in danger *every single day*. Because of *you*. You had the power to give them normal lives, but running was more important to you. Playing family was more important. Forget about the twisted fact that you're my..." He swallowed. "...that you were part of my creation. Which I still don't know how to deal with."

Vincent lifted a palm up to the sky, keeping his hand lifted in front of him. "There was nothing more that I could do. I can't physically force the seven to stop searching for me. It's their vigilant search for me that is destroying the Earth and the afterlife. It's their war, not mine. I can't fix what they've done. I'm a bystander just like you. A broken bystander who is trying to balance his feelings for you all."

"Then what of your prophecies?" November asked. "You said there was hope. If the twelve united together we'd be stronger than the seven. You spoke of the sirens, and the two who would be sacrificed."

"The prophecies are true," he answered. "Being who I am... who my father is... what I am... I have the ability to see the future, but only in glimpses. The twelve are stronger than the seven. The seven are from all corners of the Earth, grasping onto any kind of humanity they can grasp onto. They're not human. They're seven supernatural beings that will never be balanced with the universe. They are dangerous, and should be avoided at all costs."

“That doesn’t help.”

“You tried your best,” he said. “The twelve haven’t gathered. If you had succeeded, it would’ve restored peace to the afterlife. It would’ve stopped the armies from coming through. The dark ones would go back to their cities. The light would go back to the rivers of gold. They would no longer be trying to burst through our veils.”

“It can’t be too late.”

“The two who died were your parents, November,” he continued on, ignoring her last comment. “Your parents were the two sacrifices. They gave their life for you. And the nine back at the school failed. It was smart of you to think they could regain life, but they couldn’t.” Pain etched in his eyes. “And my prophecy reveals that the sirens—Sylphs—will gather in these final days when we will have a chance to defeat them. And yes, I’m the only one who can control the Sylphs—to a degree—but I’ve never been able to defeat them, destroy them, which you witnessed.” He ducked his head.

“But how is it all connected? Why do the Sylphs even matter?”

“The Sylphs guard the seven. They feel...loyal to their purpose. If the Sylphs are destroyed, then the seven are exposed. Once the seven are exposed, the twelve have a chance to destroy them.”

November shook her head. “It’s still impossible for me to believe that you would know all of this.”

“I know this because there is a power greater than me. I come from a place greater than me. My father...” He broke off. “We are eternal.”

November dug her nails deep into her scalp. “Then who are you really?”

“Nothing that matters now.”

November slowly lowered her hands. Frustration bubbled inside her chest. Too much information was being thrown at her. Isabelle. Clifton. Cam. Vincent and his secrets. Who was he really? If he wasn’t going to talk now, then she needed to focus on what she could control.

“Then I want you to call the sirens,” she said. “I want this done. If you really do have an ability to see the future, then we’re going to fulfill this stupid prophecy. We either face the Sylph’s head on and try to complete the twelve, or we don’t and keep living like this. And I, for one, can’t live like this.”

Vincent tightened his lips, staring at her as if reading her face. “No. I won’t put you or anyone else in any more danger.”

November shook her head. “Vincent, it can’t get any worse than this! The Sylphs are the reason my parents died. I can’t live the rest of my life without trying to make this right. And all those kids back at the school... If the Sylphs are the key to stopping the seven, then the seven won’t have control over the dark ones, and peace can finally be restored. You can’t keep running. You’ve been running for the past seventeen years. It’s time for you to face this.”

Vincent didn’t move. A multitude of thoughts crossed over his face, before his shoulders sagged, his fingers loosening on his cane. “Then I’ll call the sirens and I’ll take my chances. But I’m the only one who will face them. You need to leave.”

“No,” November said. “You call the sirens, and *I’ll* face them. They’re why my parents are dead. I need to be the one to destroy them.”

Forty

DEATH PROOF

NOVEMBER'S BODY RACKETED, shivering, and she wrapped her arms around herself. The trees in the alcove continued to lash around them, the wind howling. The thought of facing the Sylphs shook her to her core, and her jaw chattered. But she didn't want any more death to occur. Something had to be done. She couldn't let her fellow classmates continue living the way they were—living day to day guarding the veils. They had no life. They had no freedom. And the dark ones had already broken through—they would only travel on, continuing their destruction. If she could do anything to stop it, she would.

But from what she'd learned of the Sylphs, they drew you in with their persuasion, the beautiful creatures that they were, until your mind was trapped in endless torment, feeling as if it were being ripped apart from the inside out. And Vincent—*Cedric*—had just said he'd never been able to completely overcome them before. So how could she?

Cam paced in front of her, pulling at his hair. The moonlight lit his path, his face set in determination.

"I can't believe I'm saying this," Cam said, "But I agree with you, Nov. I want this done and over with too." He stopped and faced Vincent. "That way I can be done with *you*." He glared. He moved over to November and took her hand. "I want to help you. I want to face the Sylphs with you."

"As do I," a deep voice said.

They all paused, and November turned to see her uncle emerge from the bushes. Mason crossed his arms and planted his feet, his handlebar mustache turned down. Margaret followed behind, her eyes wide as she

took in the alcove. Conroy and Roderick also followed, their hands linked together.

“Uncle Mason!” November ran up to him. She threw her arms around him, then pulled back, giving the other three a smile. “What are you doing here? How are things back at the school?”

“Contained,” Conroy said. “But the dark ones will attack again. The veils are thin, and the students are doing everything they can to keep them closed, but they’re weak from the attack. We don’t have much time.”

“We came to help,” Roderick said. “Conroy pieced it together with the information Cam gave him. And Mason knew this was where you had to be. He knew this was the place Isabelle died.”

“I did,” Mason said. “Clifton came here a lot back then. He peeked at Vincent.

“So what do we do?” November asked. She turned to Vincent, who stood off to the side, his cane placed out in front of him. “We need to face the Sylphs and I don’t know how to stop them.”

“I’ve already told you. I’m the only one who has a chance,” Vincent said.

“You said yourself you can’t defeat them. You’ve only been able to put them back in their place.”

“Sylphs?” Margaret burst out. “Are you out of your mind?”

“No, it makes sense,” Conroy said. “The prophecy.” His eyes narrowed as he glanced around the space.

“So, it all ends here then,” her uncle said, nodding.

Vincent sighed, as if resigned. He rubbed the back of his neck. “Sylphs can only be defeated if you block them from your mind. Once you hear their music, or once it enters your soul, it’s almost certain death. But if you’re able to withstand their power, you just might have a chance. They thrive off of torturing your mind, and if they can’t have control over your thoughts, they’ll cease to exist.”

“I can’t let you all die because of me,” November said. “I’m the one they want. I’m the one that they’re after, because of my father. So let me face them alone. I can defeat them. I know it. You should all leave.”

“We’re a team,” Cam said. “It only takes *one* of us to defeat them, then the seven will back down. Our chances are greater if we all try.”

The group nodded in agreement.

Vincent cleared his throat, and everyone faced him. “I’ll allow you to try—for you, November. But if things start going south and you can’t defeat them, I’m stepping in and putting them back in their place. Are you ready?”

November’s hands shook and she squeezed them together tight, trying to calm them. Was she ready? She had ended her junior year almost a member of the Olympic team. Shawn had broken up with her, and she couldn’t believe she had ever felt devastated by that. Her life had been turned completely upside down with her uncle sending her off, to a place where she didn’t imagine finding a friend like April. She could never predict that she would be a dancer, that she’d have the abilities she did. And she’d never guess that she’d care about all the students here—even Margaret, who stood like she was going to pass out.

Yes, she was ready. She had already left climbing to choose to help. It felt good to finally be a part of a team. She hadn’t quite figured out her feelings toward Vincent yet, but she knew she cared about him. And she cared about Cam, too. She cared about everyone. Which was a miracle, knowing that she’d always preferred to be alone. She’d give her life for anyone here.

“Yes,” November said, setting her chin. “We’re ready. Open the veil.” She reached over and took Margaret’s hand. Cam remained by her side. The three men also stood alongside them, making a long line.

Vincent observed the group for a moment, his brows pushed down, the light from the moon making him look almost skeletal. He slowly lifted his arms, his fingers long, then flicked his wrists outward.

The air immediately ripped open and bright light seared into November’s eyes, but there weren’t any spirits on the other side. Instead, a large kingdom stretched out before them, broken and crumbling, a large mountainside behind it. Beautiful women were scattered on the gray-colored lawns, sitting in a field of dead flowers, everything dim, muted. November immediately recognized them as Sylphs.

“That’s them,” she whispered to Margaret.

Margaret stiffened, her hand tightening in hers. “I really don’t want to do this. I really *really* don’t want to do this.”

The women noticed the disturbance, and their heads turned simultaneously. They slowly unfolded from their positions on the lawn, the white robes that covered their skin brushing against the gray grassy floor. Their lashes were long and perfect, their complexion all different shades,

flawless and smooth. Their lips were full and luscious, their expressions curious.

They slowly stalked toward the veil, their hair flowing down to their waists, until they reached the veil. Their eyes roamed over the alcove, before their lips curved up into wicked smiles.

A soft tinkling began to reach through the air, light and airy, barely a whisper. The sound made November's shoulders relax, and comfort surrounded her. The melody deepened, lower registers sounding, making the music fuller and more vibrant. It twisted and weaved in the air toward the group, heightening as it approached.

November felt Margaret's hand relax until it let go of hers. She enjoyed the peace that had settled over her mind, and knew Margaret must've been feeling the same thing. She didn't know what the men were doing or how they were reacting to this, but November suddenly realized she was falling under their spell.

"No," she bit out. "Guys, don't listen to it." She clasped her hands over her ears and squinted over at the group. Each of them had their eyes falling closed, their bodies slightly swaying to the song.

She also felt her own body moving to the music, and a deep stirring began to swell within her. She wanted to dance—no, she *needed* to dance. It was as if the music were flowing through her veins. The women continued to approach, stepping out of the veil, their fluid movements gliding toward them. November subconsciously knew what would happen if they reached them. She remembered the beasts they had turned into in Vincent's lair.

Her eyes flew over to the side, and Vincent stood watching the proceedings, sorrow etched onto his face. He had his hands linked behind him, his head slightly bowed. Maybe she needed to rethink not using him. Maybe he could defeat them, even though he'd never been able to before.

The women continued to advance, and the relaxing feelings melted her deeper. All the tension from her limbs drained away, and she felt herself being drawn forward.

Margaret had already started to creep forward, ecstasy on her face.

"Margaret, no," November mumbled. "Stop." But she wasn't even sure if *she* could stop.

"I need to get closer," Margaret said. "Just a few more steps."

November could barely process her thoughts. She knew deep down that she needed to stop Margaret, but she also didn't know how. She was doing

everything to stop herself from gliding toward them.

Her heart began to race as Margaret drew closer. Slow steps, inching forward. Margaret reached out her hand, almost touching one of them. The Sylph in front of her smiled, delight in her eyes, sparkling with a knowing look, but clearly Margaret was lost.

The minute Margaret's hand touched the Sylph, Margaret cried out in pain. She dropped to the ground, claspng her head, rolling from side to side. She screamed, pulling at her hair, and somewhere in November's fuzzy subconscious, she knew Margaret's mind was being tortured.

Conroy and Cam had started to edge forward, and November knew she needed to do something. They were all going to die. They could only last so long in a tortured state, before their bodies gave out. She shouldn't have thought she could beat them—that any of them could've beaten them.

Roderick stood back, glaring out in front of him. He was holding it together, where the rest of them weren't. His eyes slid to hers, and he softly spoke. "They aren't affecting me. I can't hear the music. So I can't resist them to defeat them." He looked back to Conroy, and pain emanated from his eyes.

Margaret kept screaming, holding her head, her eyes clenched, continuing to writhe on the ground. The trees whipped around them, bending side to side, the moonlight lighting the whole scene. Conroy and Cam continued to inch forward.

The music resonated so loudly in November's ears, it felt as if it were humming through her mind. Margaret's screams continued until they stopped. She went limp, her eyes wide open. Her chest didn't rise and fall, her body perfectly still.

"Margaret, no!" November yelled. She couldn't hear her own voice over the music, but she knew she had yelled it. Margaret wasn't any help now. November was the only one left of the twelve.

A fire began to build within her chest. She had to beat this. She *had* to. She had mastered the strength of mind with her disease, she had the ability to control her thoughts more than most people because of what she had to deal with every day. Her depression had made her stronger. If she could deal with that, she could beat the Sylphs, too.

Conroy and Cam were drawing closer. Roderick eyed November again and said, "I can't lose Conroy. I'm going to pull him away before they get to him."

November only had so much time. The boys clearly weren't any good. She glanced to Vincent again. He was still motionless.

"Stop!" November yelled. "You can't control me! And I won't let you! And I won't let you hurt anyone else!"

The Sylphs all snapped their attention to her. Their eyes started to darken, and their mouths began to curl open. Sharp teeth were revealed, and their skin became saggy, their hair brittle.

They all stared at each other for a few heartbeats, November barely able to breathe. They would leave the boys alone. They would come after her now. She took a step back before they surged forward.

Claws stretched out before her, and November froze. In an instant, the music was gone. But a fraction of a second later, the pain began. She vaguely felt herself hit the ground, the pain in her head much worse than the pain in her shoulder where she landed. Black spots danced in the corners of her vision, and everything blurred.

She heard Vincent shout, but it was soft, far away, as the pain attacked her head full force. It was unrelenting, it felt like her brain was being peeled off the sides of her skull.

"Make... it... stop," she tried to say, but she wasn't sure if the words came out.

Vincent continued to yell, and she felt the Sylphs hovering above her, surrounding her, their claws scraping her skin. She was fading just like Margaret. She realized she was... dying. Her brain continued to tear itself apart, shattering into pieces, bit by bit. It felt like an eternity that she was trapped in this torment.

Slowly, the pain started to lessen, and cold began to seep into her veins. She started to feel removed from her body, like all the pain and hardship was glued to the ground while she started to soar upward. Light filled her mind as the pain completely faded, and November found herself hovering in air above the alcove, above her own body.

"No!" Vincent yelled. She watched as he collapsed to the ground next to her, his head in his hands.

Her brows slanted inward. Her body was motionless on the cold ground. No breaths. No sense of her being alive at all. She felt along her own body, her arms, her legs, her stomach. She was all there, but the body before her was dead.

“We’re gone,” Margaret said as her translucent body glided up next to her. “I watched you die myself. It was horrible.”

November shook her head as her throat seized tight. “No, no, no. I can’t die. This isn’t supposed to be how it ends! I was supposed to beat the Sylphs. I was supposed to save everyone.”

Conroy, Cam, and her uncle were still enraptured by the Sylphs, even though the Sylphs were now in full beastly form. Rodrick rushed forward and put himself in between Conroy and the Sylphs. Her uncle swayed on his feet, staying back, and Cam continued onward, exposed.

“No!” November yelled again.

“They can’t hear you,” Margaret said. “I’ve tried.”

“I can’t not do anything!” November pushed herself forward, and her body sailed through the air. It was a feeling she had never felt before. It was like she was floating, soaring above the ground, able to move much quicker than normal.

She stopped in front of Cam, blocking him from the Sylph before him. The beast woman only smiled, clearly seeing November.

“Just because you’re dead,” her raspy voice said, “doesn’t mean I still can’t harm you. We eat light spirits all the time. And you would be delicious.”

November stood her ground, keeping herself in front of Cam.

Cam started to groan, blinking, looking as if he were waking up from a daze. Her uncle continued to hover behind. Cam rubbed a hand over his face. He couldn’t see November, he was looking right through her, but his eyes widened as he took in the Sylph before him.

The Sylph let out a nasty growl. The music heightened, trying to persuade Cam again.

“Stop.” Cam threw out his hands, backing away. “I won’t let you affect me anymore. I don’t want anything to do with you.”

The Sylph opened her mouth, snarling. Her bloodshot eyes narrowed. “You can’t stop us. No one can. You’re next, just like your friends.”

Cam’s brows drew together, and he peeked down at his feet. His complexion went white as his eyes cleared. He took November and Margaret in, dead on the ground. “No.” His gaze flicked around the small alcove, stopping on Vincent, curled over. He was still ~~crumpled~~ over November’s body.

“No!” Cam said. He clenched his fists and marched forward. “No! You are going to pay!”

The Sylph, clearly surprised by Cam’s actions, faltered. He continued to march forward, and the Sylph kept slithering back.

“Leave!” Cam yelled. “All of you! Out! Now!”

The Sylphs continued back, while Cam surged forward.

Like a whirlwind, the Sylphs began to swirl together, unwillingly, from the expressions on their faces. They quickly were sucked backwards, as if being forced into the veil. But instead of going inside, their faces started to crumble. Piece by piece, chunks started to melt off their faces, falling to the ground. Their eyes stretched wide with terror, their mouths open as their skin sunk in on itself, slowly shrinking as they continued to crumble.

Vincent’s head lifted, and his eyes connected with Cam. “You’re doing it,” he said.

Cam tore his gaze away and focused back in on the Sylphs. “Leave. You have no power over us here.”

The music began to diminish, slowly fading away as the Sylphs continued to break apart. Bits of them fell to the ground, turning into sand, blowing away in the wind, until the Sylphs dissipated completely.

Everyone held silent. November watched Cam stand there, still holding his ground, face fierce. Conroy shook his head, confused, as Roderick still held him firmly. Her uncle blinked, waking up from his daze. November’s heart ached as Cam looked down at her once more.

“No.” Cam moved over to November gently and knelt next to her side. “No.”

November continued to watch herself from above, her translucent body shaking. She was gone. She was dead. And so was Margaret. The twelve were all dead.

The twelve were dead.

November’s hands flew to her chest, as her head darted to Margaret.

“United in death,” she said. “We’re united in death.”

The bushes of the alcove rustled, and November turned. Two beings tumbled inside the small space. August had flown into the garden with a dark spirit in his clutches. The spirit wriggled and writhed, trying to get out of August’s hold, but August was too strong. November nearly dropped to the ground when she realized it was her father.

“I got David,” August said up to November. “Now that we’re together, we can fix him.” He was speaking to her. He could see her.

Of course he could. He was dead. The sight of her dad, fighting against August, writhing and growling made her insides crawl. That wasn’t her father. He was a lost soul.

“We?” November asked.

“The others,” August said.

The bushes rustled again, and January stepped into the alcove, followed by several other ghosts—including April.

“April!” November cried.

Her face was extra pale behind her dark curtain of hair. Her eyes, cheeks, and lips shaded.

“We did it,” she whispered. “You did it.”

More bodies emerged, and November frantically counted the number of them in the alcove, scanning each of their faces. She went deathly still when she stopped on the number twelve. They were all here.

The twelve all hovered at the edge of the garden, their bodies translucent, smiles on their faces. January linked her fingers in front of her, her ghostly dress gliding along as she approached.

“April’s right,” January said. “We’re together.”

November kept her eyes glued to April. “This wasn’t how it was supposed to be. I don’t want to be dead. I have too much to live for. I want to be alive. With you.”

“But we twelve are finally where we need to be,” April whispered.

Margaret gripped November’s arm. “She’s right. We’re all here.”

November shook her head, still not able to accept it. Everything she had ever known and dreamed of was gone. Climbing. Her parents. Happiness.

“Come on,” Margaret said, and drew November forward. November unwillingly followed, stopping in front of January.

“So what now?” November asked. Even though she was dead, her throat still felt tight.

“Now, we wait. They’re coming. I can feel them.”

November’s forehead drew tight. “They?”

“The seven. They still want Cedric.”

November peeked back to Vincent, who was still hovered over her dead body. “We can’t let them get him. They’ll kill him. They’ll take away his immortality. And uncle Mason said the seven were a disturbance to the

universe. Those supernatural beings could do more harm to the world. They've already created armies, who knows what they could do with them."

Though did she really care?

Vincent had lied to her. He'd lied to Cam. And could they do anything about the seven?

Then she heard it. A deep rumbling in the earth. It was slight at first, distant, but it grew as she hovered softly over the ground. The rumbling reverberated the earth like heavy footsteps, as if an army were marching toward her. Vincent stayed fixed on November, while Cam lifted his head, glancing around. The others followed suit, straightening.

One by one, the tangled foliage around them departed, and seven men and women emerged from the darkness, circling them, all standing around them at the edge of the alcove.

They were all so different. One of them wore large hoop earrings and flowing gypsy-like pants. Another was tall and thin—his features sunken in, like he'd been dead for centuries. Another looked almost like a beast, with wild hair and facial hair that went down his neck. Another small, pixy-like girl with pointed features and a frail body. The diversity between them went on and on. They couldn't be more different.

"It's the seven," January whispered. "All representing the supernatural beings that exist in this world. Witches. Blood Walkers. Fairies. And Shifters, to name a few."

November's brows shot upward. She'd heard about them, yes, but seeing them now was an entirely different experience. This world extended further than she imagined. It was one thing to believe in the afterlife and spirits that resided on the other side, but to see different supernatural beings that also existed? There was so much she didn't know.

The seven weren't translucent, like they were dead. They were flesh and blood, even though she knew they'd lived as long as Vincent. They'd been after him for centuries.

Their eyes immediately darted to Vincent, who was still shaking over November, with his head dropped. He was paying no mind to the seven, as if he couldn't see them.

The gypsy-like woman leveled her gaze right with November. "You led us right to him. After all these years, we've finally found him."

"No," November said, shaking her head. "I won't let you hurt him. You've caused enough destruction." She waved to the earth. "Let Vincent

be. He's suffered enough."

She raised her brow, and her gold hoop earrings jingled. "You really think we'd let him walk after all this time? We seven have been searching for him for far too long."

"And you're going to stop searching now and let him be." She narrowed her eyes.

"And why is that?" the tall man asked, his features caved in like a skeleton's, deep pockets for eyes and cheeks.

"Because we're the twelve," January interjected, her voice light like a bell. "I'm the leader of this group, and we will fight you. You already know the prophecy says the twelve will win over the seven."

"As if that were possible," the beast man growled. His red wild hair matched his grizzled beard.

He started forward, his large hands in fists, when the pixy girl stopped him. "No, we don't act until we know what we're up against." Her sprite light features pinched together. "Tell us more."

"You're going to leave," November said. "You're going to let your spirit armies go free and peace will be restored in the spirit world. No more fighting. No more searching. No more rallying troops. The kingdoms will be restored, and the rivers will flow again, and the afterlife will be a peaceful place for the dead to reside. If not, then we'll rally an army of our own, and not stop until every single one of you crumble to dust just like the Sylphs did before you."

"Sylphs?" one of them asked. "You defeated Sylphs?"

The beast man laughed. "As if that means they'd truly have a chance against us."

"You already have an afterlife," November said. "So take the one you have and leave."

"Wait." The woman with the hoops lifted her slender fingers to her temples and closed her eyes. Her eyes moved back and forth behind her lids, her body strumming with energy. "She's right."

"What?" the beast man growled.

"I see our future if we fight this night." She slowly opened her eyes. "The twelve defeat us. We lose our existence. We lose our armies. The prophecy comes to pass."

“But we’ve finally found Cedric,” another one of them said. He held a strange string-like instrument in his hands.

“And we’ll find him again,” the gypsy woman said. “Cedric has a weakness now. Her.” Her eyes connected with November.

November’s mouth dropped open.

“We’ll call off our armies,” the gypsy said. “We’ll take our dark ones and restore them to their place of rest. We’ll make sure they don’t bother the light ones again.”

“No!” the beast man burst out.

November narrowed her eyes. “Make the dark ones turn light again.” She thought of her dad. “Release them from your clutches.”

The woman shook her head, and her earrings dangled again. “We don’t have control over that. It’s a spirit’s choice which side they choose. Dark or light.”

November glanced to her dad, still caught in August’s clutches.

“Come,” the gypsy said. “We will fight another day. And perhaps next time, we will get Cedric.”

The seven started to depart.

“Wait,” November said, and they paused. “Help my dad. Whichever army he belongs to, release him. Help him choose to see the light.”

The group held silent, exchanging looks. Finally, the beast man stepped forward. “He’s one of mine. And you’ll *never* get him back.” He bared his teeth, before letting out another laugh. He snapped his fingers, and her dad stiffened, before shoving August back. August tumbled away, and her father took long strides toward the beast man.

“No!” November yelled. She rushed forward and tugged on her father’s arm. He whirled around and pushed away, snarling.

“Dad, please!”

“Don’t call me that!” he roared. “You’ll regret destroying the Sylphs. You’ll regret putting the seven in their place. This isn’t over. It’s not over until I devour your mother and have her join my side.” His lips peeled backward, showing his razor teeth.

“Dad, no.”

The beast man smiled again, and her father joined his side. The seven all exchanged looks with each other, before the gypsy woman motioned them to follow her. In one fluid motion, the seven departed together, gliding

away, including her dad, until they disappeared back into the bushes, disappearing from sight.

November stilled, and the alcove silenced. She blinked back tears, unable to move. “Dad...” The name stuck in her throat.

Silence echoed. Everyone remained frozen. Even Vincent, who still hovered over November’s dead body, unaware of the conversation that had just taken place. *Had they not been able to hear or see a thing?* He slowly lifted his head, looking Cam in the eye.

“Something just happened,” he said. His gaze lifted and flicked around the alcove. His mouth pressed together as he slowly rose to his feet, gripping his cane. “I don’t know how I missed it, but I did.”

Cam also stood, his shoulders back. “What?”

“I haven’t been looking with my other eyes. Something is happening on the other plane.”

Vincent’s gaze swept around the alcove, his dark brows pushed together, before they lifted. He faced November head on, and his body softened.

“There you are,” he said.

The world around them seemed to pause as Vincent soaked November in. She wasn’t sure what emotion flashed across his face—whether it was relief, fear, or sadness. Regardless, it ended in gratitude.

“For a moment, I almost forgot I could walk between both worlds,” he said. His eyes slid over to the twelve, who still hovered inside of the alcove.

“What is it?” Cam asked. “What do you see?”

Vincent’s mouth flicked upward, and he set a hand on Cam’s shoulder. “The twelve have done it. The seven are no longer a threat.”

Cam’s head shot to him. “You’re free?”

Vincent nodded. “For now.” His eyes returned to November. “I’m going to fix this. My father can fix this. He can fix you.”

She didn’t know what to say. Fix this? As in bring her back? Who was he?

Her mind raced as she thought about living again. Did she want to? Of course she did. But being dead, she began to realize there wasn’t any noise in her head. She wasn’t battling for a sane mind. Her whole mind felt at peace—no depression to be fought. Here, she wouldn’t have to suffer. Her disease was a lifetime of work, and it’d never leave her. Here, she could

find her mother. She could save her from her dad. But there, in the world of the living, she got to experience heartache. There, she couldn't be with April. If she returned, could she abandon her? She looked to her friend, who still hovered next to the twelve. April peered back at her with sad eyes between her dark curtain of hair. Could April be brought back?

But alive, November would get to experience hardship that would make her grow. Was it better to take the easy route? Or better to embrace the woes of life and choose to experience it to the fullest?

Vincent's gaze stayed locked with hers. "Is that what you'd like, Huntington?"

"What about April?" November blurted out. "And Margaret? Can you bring them back, too?"

Vincent's lids lowered. "No one can be brought back from a dark spirit attack. A Sylph attack is different, it's a mental death over a physical one, but a dark one? No." He shook his head. "April's fate is sealed, but I'd be happy to bring Margaret along."

Her mind continued to race. Could she do that to April? Just abandon her? Living was more difficult, living meant pain, but she only got one life to live. April would forgive her, wouldn't she? Could she pass this up?

She tore her gaze from April's sad expression, trying to block it out. She prayed she would forgive her. She faced Vincent again.

"I... I choose to live. I want to live."

Vincent gave one sharp nod.

"What is happening?" Cam asked. He clutched Vincent's arm. "Tell me what is happening."

"She's choosing to come back to you."

Cam's brows dug together. "If she's choosing life, then I'm pretty sure she's choosing to be with you."

A lump bobbed in Vincent's throat. He turned to November, expectant.

Tingles rushed down her back. She felt captured under his stare, the weight of his eyes pressing her down.

Did she want to be with him?

He had confessed his feelings for her. He'd said she was different than Isabelle. He'd seen her for who she really was—for her strengths and for her weaknesses. And with the way he was looking at her now...

He wanted to be with her.

But was it what she wanted?

Yes. Her breath caught. Of course she wanted to be with him. He understood her darkness. He understood what she suffered with every day. He made her feel alive. Every part of her wanted to be around him. There was still so much she didn't know about him. Where he came from. Who he was. Why she felt such a connection to him.

But he'd lied to her.

She looked to Cam, his dark features mirroring his father's.

Father.

No.

She couldn't think about Vincent being Cam's father. It was too much. She shook her head. She couldn't be with him. It was too weird. The truth too tainted by lies. She could never get over that.

"No," November said.

Vincent whitened a shade, but wouldn't rip his gaze away.

"I don't want to be with you. I want to have life, but it isn't going to be with you."

"What's happening? Tell me what's happening," Cam said. He stood stiff, staring right through where November lingered. The twelve still hovered silently behind her.

"Is it because of him?" Vincent asked. His eyes flicked to Cam, and he swallowed.

November shook her head fiercely. "No, of course not. I... I don't want to be with anyone. I just want to *live*. I want out of this world completely. I never want to see you or anyone else in this dark world again." Her throat swelled as she said the words. She regretted them the moment she said them, she shouldn't have been so harsh, but it was the truth. Now that the afterlife would have peace, she wanted to live a normal life. She didn't want to be part of this darkness any longer. Conroy and the others could handle things on their own.

Vincent kept his face expressionless, but his mouth tightened at the corners. "If that is what you want."

"It is." But her heart was beating so fast it was making her head spin. Is it what she wanted? Was it too late to change her mind?

He gave one last nod. “Then you’ll be free. Let’s take you to my father, and then you’ll be free.”

She clenched her eyes shut. She had made her decision.

She had lived through darkness. But it was the darkness that made her see the light. If she had another chance to live, then she would take it. Guilt still ate at her for leaving April, and she didn’t want to abandon the kids at the school, but they would be fine. April would be fine. Conroy and Roderick and Cam would be fine. Vincent, on the other hand, she had broken his heart, and she knew it.

But Vincent wasn’t what she needed right now. His presence consumed her, every part of her wanted to be with him, but being around him was like a heavy blanket of sadness on her life. She couldn’t be around that. No matter how he made her feel, he had still lied. No matter how much she cared for him, she needed to be free. She needed light, and that involved leaving him.

Vincent slowly stepped forward, reaching his hand out to her.

“Let’s take you to my father,” he said, and his fingers slid through her own. His touch was warm against her translucent body, and prickles rushed up her arm. Margaret joined his side, eyes wide, and the three stood in a line. Before November could blink, bright light seared her vision, and her mind went blank.

Everything went white.

THE STORY CONTINUES IN [ETUDE](#).

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