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Kiersten White: *The Dark Descent of Elizabeth Frankenstein*

Social Creature

A NOVEL

TARA ISABELLA BURTON



DOUBLEDAY

New York London Toronto Sydney Auckland

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblances to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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First Edition

1

THE FIRST PARTY LAVINIA TAKES LOUISE TO, she makes Louise wear one of her dresses.

"I found it on the street," Lavinia says. "It's from the twenties."

Maybe it is.

"Someone just left it there. Can you believe it?"

Louise can't.

"They probably just thought it was trash." She puckers her lips. She puts on lipstick. "And *that* is the problem with people. Nobody understands what things *mean*."

Lavinia fiddles with Louise's collar. Lavinia ties the sash around Louise's waist.

"Anyway, the second I saw it—Christ! I wanted to—oh, I just wanted to *genuflect*, you know? Kiss the ground—do Catholics kiss the ground, or is that just sailors? Anyway, I wanted to put my mouth right there on the sidewalk on somebody's chewed gum and say, like, *thank you, God, for making the world make sense today*."

Lavinia puts powder on Louise's cheeks. Lavinia adds rouge. Lavinia keeps talking.

"Like—it's all so fucking *perfect*, right? Like—somebody's grandmother or whoever, dies in some random brownstone in the East Village nobody's even visited in twenty years and they dump all her shit out into the street and then at sunset—here I am walking across East Ninth Street and I find it. This old woman and I

who have never met have these two beautiful, poetic, nights ninety years apart, wearing the exact same dress—oh, Louise, can't you just *smell* it?"

Lavinia shoves the lace in Louise's face.

"You could fall in love," says Lavinia, "wearing a dress like that."

Louise inhales.

"So you know what I did?"

Lavinia gives Louise a beauty mark with her eyebrow pencil.

"I stripped down to my underwear—no, that's a lie; I took my bra off, too. I took off everything and I put on the dress and I left my other one in the street and I walked all night, wearing it, all the way back to the Upper East Side."

Lavinia does Louise's buttons.

Now Lavinia is laughing. "Stick with me long enough," she says, "and I promise—things will just *happen* to you. Like they happen to me."

Lavinia does Louise's hair. At first she tries to do it, like she's done her own: savagely and exuberantly tendriled. But Louise's hair is too flat, and too straight, and so instead Lavinia braids it into a tight, neat bun.

Lavinia puts her hands on Louise's cheeks. She kisses her on the forehead. She roars.

"God," says Lavinia. "You look so beautiful. I can't stand it. I want to kill you. Let's take a picture."

She takes out her phone. She makes it a mirror.

"Let's stand against the peacock feathers," Lavinia says. Louise does.

"Pose."

Louise doesn't know how.

"Oh, please." Lavinia waves the phone. "Everybody knows how to pose. Just, you know: Arch your back a little. Tilt your head. Pretend you're a silent-film star. There. There—no, no, chin down. There."

Lavinia moves Louise's chin. She takes their photo.

“The last one’s good,” Lavinia says. “We look good. I’m posting it.” She turns the phone to Louise. “Which filter do you like?”

Louise doesn’t recognize herself.

Her hair is sleek. Her lips are dark. Her cheekbones are high. She’s wearing a flapper dress and she has cat’s eyes and fake lashes and she looks like she’s not even from this century. She looks like she’s not even real.

“Let’s go with Mayfair. It makes your cheekbones look shiny. Christ—look at you! Look. At. You. You’re beautiful.”

Lavinia has captioned the photo: *alike in indignity.*

Louise thinks this is very witty.

Louise thinks: *I am not myself.*

Thank God, Louise thinks. *Thank God.*

They cab it to Chelsea. Lavinia pays.

It’s New Year’s Eve. Louise has known Lavinia for ten days. They have been the best ten days of her life.

Days don’t go like this for Louise.

Louise’s days go like this:

She wakes up. She wishes she hasn’t.

Chances are: Louise hasn’t slept much. She works as a barista at this coffee shop that turns into a wine bar at night, and also writes for this e-commerce site called GlaZam that sells knockoff handbags, and is also an SAT tutor. She sets an alarm for at least three hours before she has to be anywhere, because she lives deep in Sunset Park, a twenty-minute walk from the R, in the same illegal and roach-infested sublet she’s been in for almost eight years, and half the time the train breaks down. When they call her, once every couple of months, Louise’s parents invariably ask her why she’s so stubborn about moving back to New Hampshire, say, where *that nice Virgil Bryce* is a manager at the local bookstore now, and he won’t stop asking for her new number. Louise invariably hangs up.

She weighs herself. Louise weighs one hundred fourteen and a half pounds on a period day. She puts on her makeup very carefully. She draws on her brows. She checks her roots. She checks her bank balance (sixty-four dollars, thirty-three cents). She covers up the flaws in her skin.

She looks in the mirror.

Today, she says—out loud (a therapist she had once told her that it's always better to say these things out loud)—*is the first day of the rest of your life*.

She makes herself smile. Her therapist told her to do that, too.

Louise walks the twenty minutes to the subway. She ignores the catcaller who asks her, every morning, how her pussy smells, even though he's probably the only person in the world she interacts with regularly. She spends the ride into Manhattan staring at her reflection in the darkened subway windows. Back when Louise was sure she was going to be a go-down-in-history Great Writer she used to take a notebook and use the commute to write stories, but now she is too tired and also she probably will never be a writer; so she reads trashy *Misandry!* articles on her phone and sometimes watches people (Louise enjoys watching people; she finds it calming; when you spend a lot of time focusing on the things wrong with other people you worry less about everything wrong with you).

Louise goes to work as a barista, or at GlaZam, or to give an SAT lesson.

She likes lessons best. When she speaks with her very carefully cultivated mid-Atlantic accent and puts her very carefully dyed blonde hair into a bun and alludes to the fact that she went to school in Devonshire, New Hampshire, she gets \$80 an hour, plus the satisfaction of having fooled somebody. Now if Louise had actually gone to Devonshire Academy, the boarding prep school, and not just the public Devonshire High, she'd get \$250, but the kind of parents who can pay \$250 are more assiduous in checking these things.

Not that most people ever check these things. When Louise was sixteen, she took to leaving her house early and eating breakfast and dinner at the Academy's dining hall. She made it a whole three months, watching people, before anybody noticed, and even then it was just her mother who found out, and grounded her, and by the time she was allowed out of the house again she'd started AIM-chatting Virgil Bryce, who didn't like it when she went anywhere without him.

Louise finishes work.

She looks in her phone-mirror, a few times, to make sure she's still there. She checks Tinder, even though she hardly responds to anybody she matches with. There was one guy who seemed really feminist online but turned out to practice relationship anarchy; and another who was really into kink in ways that she was never entirely sure were not abusive; and one guy who was really great, actually, but he ghosted her after two months. Sometimes Louise considers going out with somebody new, but this seems like just another thing to potentially fuck up.

Sometimes, if Louise has been paid cash that week, she goes to a really nice bar: on Clinton or Rivington, or on the Upper East Side.

She orders the nicest drink she can afford (Louise can't really afford to be drinking at all, but even Louise deserves nice things, sometimes). She sips her drink very, very slowly. If she doesn't eat dinner (Louise never eats dinner) the alcohol will hit her harder, which is a relief, because when Louise gets drunk she forgets the invariable fact that she is going to fuck everything up one day, if she hasn't already, whether it's because she loses all her jobs at once and gets evicted or because she gains twenty pounds because she is too tired to exercise and then not even the catcaller will want to fuck her or because she'll get throat cancer from all the times she has made herself throw up all her food or because she will get another kind of even rarer and more obscure cancer from all the times she obses-

sively dyes her hair in a bathroom without ventilation or she will fuck up by unblocking Virgil Bryce on social media or else because she will get into another relationship in which a man who seems nice on Tinder wants to save her, or else to choke her, and she will do whatever he says because the other way to fuck it all up is to die alone.

Louise waits until she sobers up (another very certain way to fuck up is to be a drunk woman alone in New York at night), and then she takes the subway home, and although Louise no longer writes in her notebook, if she is still tipsy enough to feel that the apocalypse is no longer imminent she tells herself that tomorrow, when she is that little bit less tired, she will write a story.

They say if you haven't made it in New York by thirty, you never will.

Louise is twenty-nine.

Lavinia is twenty-three.

This is how they meet:

Lavinia's sister, Cordelia, is sixteen. She's at boarding school in New Hampshire—not Devonshire Academy but one of its rivals. She's home for Christmas break. Their parents live in Paris. Lavinia found one of Louise's SAT TUTOR? AVAILABLE NOW! flyers at The Corner Bookstore on Ninety-third and Madison, which has a free Christmas champagne reception Louise has been crashing for three years, even though she lives so far away, just to drink for free and watch rich, happy families be happy and rich.

"I'm afraid I don't know a damn thing," Lavinia says over the phone. "But Cordy's brilliant. And I know I'll corrupt her—unless somebody else is there to stop me. You know what I mean. A good influence. And anyway she's here for a whole week before she goes to Paris for Christmas and we've watched every single Ingmar Bergman DVD in the house and now I'm all out of ideas to keep her off the streets. I can pay. How much does a person pay for these things? You tell me."

"One fifty an hour," says Louise.

"Done."

"I'll start tonight," Louise says.

Lavinia lives in a floor-through brownstone apartment on Seventy-eighth Street between Park and Lex. When Louise arrives on the stoop, there is opera blaring from an open window, and Lavinia is singing along, off-key, and this is how Louise figures out that Lavinia lives on the second floor without even having to check the buzzer.

Lavinia has flowers in all of her window boxes. All of them are dead.

Lavinia answers the door in a sleeveless black dress made entirely of feathers. Her hair comes down to her waist. It is wild, and coarse, and she has not brushed it in days, but it is the hue of blonde Louise has spent many hours experimenting with drugstore dyes to achieve, only it is natural. She is not tall but she is thin (Louise tries to calculate exactly how thin, but the feathers get in the way), and she fixes her eyes on Louise with such intensity that Louise instinctively takes a step back: half-knocking into a vase filled with dead lilies.

Lavinia doesn't notice.

"Thank God you're here," she says.

Cordelia is sitting at the dining-room table. She is wearing her hair in one long thick braid, coiled and pinned. She doesn't look up from her book.

There are antique hand fans all over the walls. There is a gold-embroidered caftan hanging on a wall, and a powdered wig on the head of a mannequin whose features are drawn in lipstick, and there are several illustrated tarot cards—the High Priestess, the Tower, the Fool—in rusty art nouveau frames on all the surfaces in the room. The walls are all a regal, blinding blue, except for the moldings, which Lavinia has made gold.

Lavinia kisses Louise on both cheeks.

"Make sure she goes to bed by ten," she says, and leaves.

“She does that.”

Cordelia finally looks up.

“She isn’t really that oblivious,” she says. “That’s just her sense of humor. She thinks it’s funny to tease me. And you.”

Louise doesn’t say anything.

“I’m sorry,” says Cordelia. “I started studying already.” Her smile twists at the edges.

She makes Louise a pot of tea.

“You can have chocolate-vanilla or you can have hazelnut-cinnamon-pear-cardamom,” she says. “Vinny doesn’t have any normal tea.”

She serves it in an intricately patterned teapot (“It’s from Uzbekistan,” Cordelia says. Louise doesn’t know if this is a joke). She sets it down on a tray.

Cordelia forgets a teaspoon, although there is one in the sugar pot, but after the second cup Louise realizes if she stirs the tea it will wet the spoon and then ruin the sugar. If she keeps the spoon dry the sugar will settle in the cup.

Louise sips her tea without any sugar in it. She briefly considers asking for another spoon, but the thought of doing this makes her nervous, and so Louise doesn’t say anything at all.

They do SAT words: *What is the difference between* lackluster, laconic, *and* lachrymose? They do math: all the 3-4-5 triangles, surface areas of different shapes. Cordelia gets all the questions right.

“I’m going to Yale,” Cordelia says, like that’s a thing people just decide. “Then I’m going to a pontifical university in Rome for my master’s. I’m going to be a nun.”

Then: “I’m sorry.”

“For what.”

“I’m trolling you. I shouldn’t. I mean—I do want to be a nun. But even so.”

“That’s okay,” says Louise.

She drinks another cup of sugarless hazelnut-cinnamon-pear-cardamom tea.

"I feel guilty," says Cordelia. "Keeping you here. I don't really need a tutor. Don't feel bad—I mean, you're doing a very good job. Sorry. It's just—I know all this already." She shrugs. "Maybe Vinny really does want you to be my babysitter. Only—she won't be back by ten."

"That's okay," Louise says. "I trust you to make your own bedtime."

"That's not an issue." Cordelia smiles her strange half-smile again. "Vinny's the one with the cash."

Cordelia and Louise sit in silence on the sofa until six in the morning. Cordelia puts on a dressing gown covered in cat hair (there is no cat to be seen) and reads a paperback copy of John Henry Newman's *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*. Louise reads clickbait articles from *Misandry!* on her phone.

She is very tired, but she also needs four hundred fifty dollars more than she needs sleep.

Lavinia comes home at dawn, covered in feathers.

"I'm so terribly, *terribly* sorry," she exclaims. She trips over the threshold. "Of course, I'll pay you for the hours. Every hour. Every one."

She catches her skirt in the door. It rips.

"Christ."

Feathers slice the air as they fall.

"*All my pretty chickens*," Lavinia cries. She gets on her hands and knees. "*All? What, all my pretty chickens and their dam.*"

"I'll get some water," Cordelia says.

"It's a bad omen." Lavinia has fallen over, now, laughing, with a black feather in her hand. "It means death!"

Louise grabs the trailing feathers from underneath the door.

"No, don't! Let them be!"

Lavinia grabs Louise's wrists; she pulls her in.

"It died a noble death." She hiccups. "This dress—it has been *felled in battle*." Her hair fans out on the floor all the way to the steamer trunk she has made into a coffee table. "And what a battle! Oh—what's your name again?"

"Louise."

"Louise!" Lavinia yanks her wrist again, but joyfully. "Like Lou Salomé. [Louise doesn't know who that is.] Louise! I've had the most wonderful, wonderful night in the world. One of *those* nights. You know?"

Louise smiles politely.

"Don't you?"

Louise hesitates.

"I *believe* in things again, Louise!" Lavinia closes her eyes. "God. And glory. And love and fairy dust—God, I *love* this city."

Cordelia leaves a glass of water on the steamer trunk.

But Lavinia is scrambling to the sofa. She's beatific and dark with glitter, and light with different glitter, and Louise doesn't know what to do or say to make Lavinia like her but she is good at watching people and she knows what they need and so, like she always does, she finds an opening.

"I can fix that, you know."

Lavinia sits up. "Fix what?"

"It's just the hem. I can sew it back on. If you have a needle and thread."

"A needle and thread?" Lavinia looks at Cordelia.

"My room," says Cordelia.

"You can fix it?"

"I mean—unless you don't want me to."

"Don't want you to?" Lavinia gathers up her skirts. "*Lazarus, back from the dead*." She piles them in her lap. "*I have come to tell thee!*" She flings back her arms. "Oh, I'm so—so!—sorry."

"Don't be," Louise says.

"I know—I know—you must think I'm ridiculous."

"I don't think you're ridiculous."

"Are you sure?"

Louise doesn't know what Lavinia wants her to say.

"I mean—"

Lavinia doesn't even wait.

"You're not judging me?"

"I'm not judging you."

"You're *sure*?"

Louise speaks very slowly. "Yes," she says. "I'm sure."

"It was just—it was only just a few of us. Me and Father Romylos and Gavin—Gavin's a narcissistic sociopath. He told me so, once. One of the nicest people in the world, but technically, a narcissistic sociopath. Anyway, we decided to see if you can break into the Botanic Garden. Apparently you can! Look!"

She shows Louise a photograph. Lavinia and an Orthodox priest and a bald man in a turtleneck are collapsing in a hedgerow.

"Father Romylos is the one in the cassock," she says.

"Are there even any flowers this time of year?" Cordelia has returned with a sewing kit. She hands it to Louise.

"It's my favorite thing in the world, breaking into places! It makes you feel so alive—to be somewhere you're not supposed to be. We got caught, once, had to pay an awful fine at the Central Park Zoo, but other than that! Oh—don't look at me like that."

"Like what?"

Louise is sewing the hem. She hasn't even looked up.

"Like you think I'm horrible!"

"I don't," says Louise.

What she is thinking is this:

Lavinia isn't afraid of anything.

"I'm not drunk, you know," says Lavinia. She sways her hair—her long, coarse, wonderful hair—across Louise's shoulder. "I swear. Do you know what Baudelaire said?"

Louise puts another stitch in the hem.

"Baudelaire said that you should get drunk. On wine. On poetry. On virtue—as you choose. But get drunk."

"Vinny's drunk on virtue," says Cordelia.

Lavinia snorts. "It's only prosecco," she says. "Even Cordy drinks prosecco. Mother makes us."

"I abhor alcohol." Cordelia winks at Louise as she picks stray feathers out of the couch cushions. "It's a vice."

"God, don't you just *hate* her?" Lavinia puts her feet on the steamer trunk. "I bet you don't even believe in God, do you, Cordy? She's kept it up a whole year—can you believe it? Before that she was vegan. And—oh, God, you're *brilliant*!"

She has seen the hem Louise has fixed for her.

"Are you a costumier? I have a friend who's a costumier. She makes eighteenth-century outfits every year for Carnevale in Venice."

"I'm not a costumier."

"But you can sew."

Louise shrugs. "Lots of people can sew."

"Nobody can sew. What else can you do?"

Louise is caught off guard by the question.

"Not a lot."

"Don't lie to me."

"What?"

"You're special. You have the mark of genius on your brow. I could tell—soon as I saw you. And you—you kept vigil with Cordy, didn't you? All night long. *That's* special."

Louise isn't special. She knows this. We know this. She just needs four hundred fifty dollars.

"Are you an actress? You're pretty enough to be an actress."

"I'm not an actress." (Louise is not pretty enough to be an actress.)

"An artist?"

"No."

"Then you're a writer!"

Louise hesitates.

She hesitates because you can't really call yourself a writer when you haven't written anything anyone else likes enough to publish; not when you haven't even written anything you like enough to even

ask somebody to publish; not when there are so many failed writers to laugh at in this city. But she hesitates long enough before saying “no” that Lavinia seizes.

“I knew it!” She claps her hands. “I knew it! Of *course* you’re a writer. You are a woman of *words*.” She scoops up the flash cards: *assuage, assert, assent*. “I shouldn’t have doubted you.”

“I mean—”

“What have you written?”

“Oh, you know—not a lot. Just a couple of stories and things.”

“What are they about?”

Now Louise is fully afraid. “Oh, you know. New York. Girls in New York. The usual stuff. It’s dumb.”

“Don’t be ridiculous!” Lavinia is staring up at her with those bright and blazing eyes. “New York is the greatest city in the world! Of *course* you want to write about it!”

Lavinia’s hand is so tight on her wrists and Lavinia is staring at her so intently and blinking so innocently that Louise can’t bring herself to let her down.

“You’re right,” Louise says. “I am a writer.”

“I’m *never* wrong!” Lavinia crows. “Cordy says I have a sense about people—I always can sense if a person is going to be interesting. It’s like telepathy, but for poetic qualities—it makes things *happen*.” She stretches like a cat along the sofa. “I’m a writer, too, you know. I mean—I’m working on a novel, right now. I’m on a sabbatical, actually.”

“A sabbatical?”

“From school! That’s why I’m here.” She shrugs. “Living in squalor, you see. I’ve taken the year off to finish it. But my problem is I don’t have any discipline. I’m not like Cordy. She’s so smart.” (Cordelia is back at her Newman and doesn’t look up.) “Me, I just go to parties.” She yawns, long and luxuriant. “Poor Louise,” she says, so softly. “I’ve ruined your night.”

The light streams in through the window.

“It’s fine,” Louise says. “You haven’t.”

"Your beautiful Friday night. Your beautiful winter Friday—right in the middle of the holiday season, too. You probably had plans. A Christmas party, right? Or a date."

"I didn't have a date."

"What did you plan, then? Before I smashed it all to pieces?"

Louise shrugs.

"I dunno. I was going to go home. Maybe watch some TV."

Truth is, Louise was planning to sleep. Sleep is the most seductive thing she can think of.

"But it's almost *New Year's Eve*!"

"I don't really go out, much."

"But this is *New York*!" Lavinia's eyes are so wide. "And we're in our *twenties*!"

It is expensive to go out. It takes so long to get home. You have to tip for everything. It's too cold. There are puddles in the subway stations. She can't afford a cab.

"Come with me," Lavinia says. "I'll take you to a party!"

"Now?"

"Of course not *now*, silly—what am I, crazy? There's a New Year's Eve party happening at the MacIntyre—it's going to be *wonderful*. It's going to be their best party yet. And I owe you! All those extra hours you stayed—I owe you interest."

"You owe her one-fifty an hour," says Cordelia, from the armchair. "Seven until"—she checks her wristwatch—"seven."

"*Jesus fuck*," says Lavinia, so violently Louise starts. "I gave all my cash to the busker. He was playing 'New York, New York' outside the Bandshell. *We were very tired—we were very merry.*"

She straightens up.

"Now you *have* to come," she says. "If I don't see you again, I won't be able to pay you for tonight."

She smiles so ecstatically.

"I owe you more than money," she says. "I owe you the most beautiful night of your life."

This is the first party Lavinia takes Louise to, and the best, and the one Louise will never stop trying to get back to. She goes in Lavinia's dress from the 1920s (it is actually a reproduction from the 1980s, store-bought, but Louise doesn't know this), which she found on the street, because that is the kind of thing that happens to people like Lavinia Williams, all the time.

Now, the MacIntyre Hotel is not a hotel. It's kind of a warehouse and kind of a nightclub, and kind of a performance space, in Chelsea; there are a hundred or so rooms over six floors. Half of them are decorated like a haunted hotel from the Great Depression, but also there's a forest and a whole insane asylum on the top floor where Ophelia goes mad (they also perform *Hamlet*, but they do it without any words), and Louise hears that sometimes actors take you into secret bedrooms or chapels and kiss you on the cheek or on the forehead or on the mouth, but tickets are a hundred dollars each (and that's before you add the coat check, or the ten-dollar ticketing charge), and so Louise has never been herself to verify this.

Some nights, *those nights*, *one of those nights*, they do special themed costume parties in the space: all-night open-bar kiss-a-stranger-and-see parties where everybody dresses up and lurches through all the labyrinthine interconnected rooms, where every floor has its own sound system and even the bathtubs in the insane asylum are full of people making love.

Louise has never had one of those nights before.

Don't worry. She will.

Here is what's inside the MacIntyre, in the order Louise makes sense of it: red velvet, candles, ostrich feathers, champagne flutes, people with *Happy 2015* glasses, people taking selfies, a woman in a red backless sequined dress singing Peggy Lee's "Is That All There Is?," people taking selfies. Lavinia. A girl in a tuxedo. Marie Antoinette. Someone in a lion tamer uniform. Lavinia.

People in black tie. People who actually own black tie in black tie. People in corsets. People in lingerie. Lavinia.

A man in a cassock ("Don't tell him I told you, but he's actually defrocked"). A woman six feet tall wearing nothing but pasties and feathers with the most grating and New York accent Louise has ever heard ("Her burlesque name is Athena Maidenhead. I don't know her real name"). A bald man in black skinny jeans and a turtleneck who is the only person there not in costume and who doesn't seem to notice ("That's Gavin. He keeps Excel spreadsheets of all the women he dates"). Lavinia.

Lavinia dancing. Lavinia drinking. Lavinia taking so many photographs, pulling Louise in with her, pulling her so close Louise can smell her perfume. It's made for Lavinia, Louise will learn one day soon, at a Chinese hole-in-the-wall over on East Fourth Street, and it smells like lavender and tobacco and fig and pear and everything beautiful in this world.

Peggy Lee sings the line *is that all there is to a fire?* and Louise downs a flute of champagne like it's a pickleback and then she starts to get nervous because when she drinks she stops concentrating as much on not fucking up, and when Louise stops concentrating is when she fucks up most; but Lavinia puts one hand on Louise's waist and uses the other to tilt a bottle of Bombay Sapphire straight into Louise's overflowing mouth, and even though Louise is not stupid and she is so good at watching people and she is so very careful—all the time she is so careful!—the intense pressure of Lavinia's hand on the small of her back makes her think that if the world is going to end, anyway, it might as well end tonight.

"Friends! Romans! Countrymen! Bring me more gin!"

Lavinia. Lavinia. Lavinia.

When Louise lived in New Hampshire, she often imagined that once in New York, she'd go to parties like this.

When she and Virgil Bryce would stand on the railroad bridge,

and she would beg him to touch her breasts and he would finally, magnanimously agree, and they would talk about running away together (he wanted to live in Colorado and illustrate manga), and he would remind her how cruel the world was, she would try to explain to him that New York wasn't like anywhere else.

It didn't matter if you weren't that special, she'd say, or even if you weren't pretty, not even by the standards of Devonshire, New Hampshire, as long as you wanted it badly enough. The city would scoop you up and carry you skyward to all your vaulted aspirations; every single party on every single night in that whole, glistening, glaring city would make you feel like you were the only person in the world, and also the most special, and also the most loved.

You and I, of course, we know the truth.

We know how easy it is to fake it. All you need is to keep the lighting low; all you need are a couple of showgirls with cheap feathers superglued to the end of their corsets; all you need is to keep people drinking.

But girls like Louise don't know this. Not yet.

This is the happiest Louise has ever been.

Nine o'clock. Lavinia and Louise and Gavin Mullaney and Father Romylos and Athena Maidenhead and so many other people without names are dancing the Charleston on top of a stage, underneath a chandelier the size of a giraffe. "Are we even allowed to be onstage?" Louise asks, but Lavinia can't hear her over the music. Two aerialists are knotting their bodies together, kicking the crystals in the chandelier, and Athena has abandoned her feathers and there is nothing between her skin and everybody else's sweat except for two pasties and a merkin in the shape of the moon.

"New Year's resolution," Lavinia roars. "Be it resolved: we shall drink life to the lees."

Lavinia's dress has fallen off her shoulder, exposing her breast. She doesn't even care.

Then two hands close over Louise's eyes. Someone kisses her on the neck.

"Guess who," she whispers, into Louise's collarbone.

Louise jerks around so quickly.

The girl is so confused. "But . . ."

"Mimi?" Lavinia has stopped dancing. She isn't smiling.

"*But your dress.*" The girl's voice is loud and monotonous and artificial, like she's speaking lines from a high school play. "I thought . . ." She laughs. It is no less artificial, and no less loud. "*You see?*" Her smile hangs desperately off her mouth. "*She took your dress!*"

Nobody says anything.

"*Sorry I'm late,*" she says. "*Therapy took forever. And then I couldn't find my nice underwear.*"

Nobody reacts to this, either.

"*He says I have neurotic despair.*"

The music is so loud. The girl gets closer. She blinks very intently.

"*ISAID: HESAYSIHAVENEUROTICDESPAIR.*"

Nothing. Not even a nod.

"*IT'S NOTEVENINTHEDSMYOUKNOW.*"

Father Romylos lamely nods at her and this is worse, Louise thinks, than if nobody acknowledged her at all.

The worst part is that she's still smiling.

Even when she goes over to Lavinia. Even when Lavinia recoils.

"I've missed you," she says.

The girl gyrates up to Louise.

"I'm me," she says. "Me."

"What?"

"Mimi," she says, like Louise is supposed to know her.

"Oh," says Louise.

Mimi hands her her phone. She knots her arms around Lavinia's neck.

"Take a picture!"

Lavinia isn't smiling.

Mimi snatches the phone back. She scrolls through the photos.

"We look great," she says. "I'm gonna post them all."

Now it's ten. Now the moon is full.

"Promise me something," Lavinia says. They're smoking on the rooftop; they're in a hedgerow or a maze or something full of rose-bushes that are still in bloom despite the frost; Louise has no idea how they got here. "I want to usher 2015 in right. I want things to be as they should be. I want it to be a better year than the last one." She breathes out smoke. "It's got to be." (Nobody else is here, not Mimi nor Gavin nor Father Romylos nor Athena Maidenhead, but Louise doesn't remember saying goodbye to them, either.)

"Of course," Louise says.

"I want to recite poetry with you tonight."

At first Louise thinks Lavinia is joking. But Lavinia is tight-lipped and unsmiling and more serious than Louise has yet seen her.

"Don't let me forget, okay?"

"Okay," Louise says.

"Promise?"

"Yes," Louise says. "I promise."

Louise can't remember any poems.

Lavinia takes a pen out of her purse. She writes it on her arms. MORE POETRY!!! The letters are misshapen. She writes it on Louise's, too.

"There," Lavinia says. "Now we'll remember."

Together they gaze out over the city. There are so many stars, although Louise knows some of them must only be city lights.

"Hey, Louise?" Lavinia's smoke spirals from her lips.

"Yes?"

"What's your New Year's resolution?"

Louise has so many: *eat less lose weight make more money get a better job write a story write that story finally write that fucking story and send it somewhere if you only had the nerve stop reading Misandry! at four in*

the morning when you can't sleep read an actual fucking book sometime maybe maybe write a fucking story.

"I don't know." (*Be less boring, that's another one.*)

"Come on—you can tell me!"

She says it like she means it. She says it like Louise is safe.

Louise wants to believe her.

"It's stupid," Louise says.

"I bet it isn't! I'll bet you a hundred dollars it isn't." Technically Lavinia owes Louise between four hundred fifty and eighteen hundred dollars, depending on whether or not Louise counts the hours spent with Cordelia waiting for Lavinia to come home, but Louise is no longer counting.

"I want to send one of my stories out. Maybe. If it's good enough."

Louise is so afraid that, having said it, she will have to do it.

"To a magazine?"

"Yes."

"You've never done it before?"

"No. I mean—I have. But not in years."

"I bet they're brilliant," says Lavinia. "I bet they're *genius*. I bet everybody's going to love you."

"Come on, that's not—"

"Don't contradict me. I have a feeling. I *know*." Lavinia throws back that never-ending hair.

"What's yours?"

Lavinia shakes the last ember out of her cigarette. "Same one I make every year. Same one I'll make every year until I die." She takes a deep and delicious breath. "I want to *live*," she says. "I mean really, *really*, live. Do you know what Oscar Wilde says?"

Louise doesn't but she knows it was probably witty.

"He says—I *put my talent into my work, but my genius into my life*. That's what I want to do, too. Or maybe you think that's *trite*?" She spits the last word.

"No—no!"

"Probably it is. Fuck it. I don't care. That's what I want."

Now it's eleven. Now they're on the dance floor, again; now everybody on the dance floor is kissing everybody else; everybody except Lavinia, who is standing in a spotlight in the center, inviolate, dancing alone.

"Whatawildoutrageousnight."

Mimi's lipstick is smeared. So is her eyeliner.

"Come on!" She's tugging at Lavinia's sleeves. She's still speaking in that clipped and amateurish way. "We'll have some champagne!" Mimi cries. "We'll take a selfie!"

Then Louise gets it: what's so uncanny about that strange, pantomime way Mimi is talking.

She's trying to talk like Lavinia.

Lavinia isn't smiling. "We've already taken a selfie."

Mimi is smiling so desperately. "Then we'll take another!"

She pulls herself against Lavinia and holds out the camera. She leaves a sloppy lipstick kiss on her cheek.

"Jesus, Mimi!"

"Shit—my eyes were closed in that one! *Let's take another okay?*"

She can't keep her hand steady. The photos all come out blurry.

"Okay, we're done here."

"Just one more! One more!"

Mimi keeps pawing at Lavinia, pushing her breasts against her, leaning in to kiss her.

"Just one more, come on!"

She reaches out for Lavinia's sleeve. She tears it.

Louise cannot believe how loud a sound the rip makes.

"For fuck's *sake*, Mimi, don't you know when to fucking leave?"

Lavinia's eyes are terrible.

Mimi's eyes fill with tears. She's still smiling.

"Come on," Mimi keeps whimpering, like a dog. "It's one of those nights. Isn't it? Isn't it?"

"You're drunk, Mimi. Go home."

Mimi does.

An hour later Mimi posts every photo she's taken that night. She tags Lavinia in all of them.

Me and bae, she writes, with a dancing fox emoji and a wiggling Hula-Hoop girl emoji and a cat that rolls over and over doing somersaults, like anybody even says *bae* anymore.

Now the music is so loud you can't hear anybody else unless you're close enough to kiss them; now we are dancing; now we're all standing four abreast on one of the raised columns, seven feet above the crowds, and here Lavinia stands, chin up, shoulders back, like a god.

Now they've lowered the big clock; now everybody's screaming *yes, yes*; now Lavinia's standing and scanning the crowd with those eyes so bright they burn.

"What is it?"

Lavinia doesn't answer her.

"Are you looking for Mimi?"

Lavinia keeps looking, looking, and Louise tries to follow her gaze but she doesn't see anything, just a couple of boys in black tie doing shots she doesn't recognize, and then it is like an electric shock, the way Lavinia digs her nails into Louise's wrist, and Louise asks *what is it* but by now she's so drunk that by the time Lavinia turns back to her Louise forgets what she was asking about in the first place.

Lavinia grabs Louise's shoulders.

"We should jump," Lavinia says.

"What?"

"You. Me. We should do it."

"You want to *crowd-surf*?"

Nobody crowd-surfs. Not in real life.

But this isn't real life.

"What's the worst that can happen?"

It's one minute to midnight.

"Trust me," says Lavinia. "Please."

Ten—nine—

Now Louise remembers everything she is afraid of.

She remembers that she doesn't have health insurance and if she breaks a bone she will not be able to afford to fix it and that she has work tomorrow and she can't afford to take off even if she could (*eight*) and she doesn't even know Lavinia that well and shouldn't even trust her because new people generally let you down if they don't do worse and (*seven*) even though Lavinia is looking at her so raptly Lavinia is a stranger and the most surefire way of fucking it up is to open up to another person and (*six*) she cannot afford to be stupid—stupidity, like happiness, is a luxury, but her heart is beating so fast, like it is a hummingbird that will beat out all its breaths (*five*) and die before midnight but for the first time in as long as she can remember Louise is happy, and she will spend all her heartbeats if she has to, if it means feeling like this (*four*) because in the end she only really wants one thing in the world and that is to be loved and (*three, two, one*).

The crowd catches them.

So many people—they bear up her waist and thighs and back and Louise isn't afraid; she knows, *she knows* they will not let her fall; she knows she can trust them, because they are all in this together and they are all so riotously, gloriously drunk and they all want her to stay up as much as she does, because it is a beautiful thing to be up so high, and they all want to be *a part of it*.

Lavinia reaches across the crowd; she is smiling; she is so far away and then she is closer, just a little bit closer, and then she is close enough to grab Louise's hand, and she squeezes it tightly.

Now it's almost dawn.

Everybody has spilled out into the street. They've taken off their heels. Girls walk barefoot on the ice. Taxis are charging a hundred dollars a person just to go to the Upper East Side.

Louise is a little bit sober by now; she can feel the blisters in her shoes, but she is too happy to care. She wraps herself in her coat, which is not elegant enough to justify how flimsy it is, and huddles against the wind, and Lavinia orders an Uber without thinking about it, even though the surge pricing must be insane at this hour.

“Where are we going?”

Lavinia puts a finger to her lips.

“I have a surprise for you.”

The cab takes them through the West Village, the Lower East Side, across the Brooklyn Bridge.

“Was it what you wanted?” Lavinia is huddled in an enormous fur coat. She is blinking very intently.

“What?”

“The party. Was it what you wanted?”

“Yes,” Louise says. “It was wonderful!”

“Good. I’m glad. I wanted to make you happy.”

The cab rolls on past the water.

“Just think,” Lavinia says. “You could be home in bed right now.”

Louise should be home in bed right now.

“But instead . . .” Lavinia opens the window. The wind whips their faces. “You’re going to watch the sun rise. Isn’t that wonderful?”

The cab comes to a stop underneath the Ferris wheel: by the bright-painted gates, the freak-show signs, the Cyclone.

The park is closed for the season. But the streetlights illuminate the carousel, the haunted houses, the boardwalk beyond it: beyond that, the waves.

“I wanted to be near water,” Lavinia says.

The boardwalk is frozen slick, and so Lavinia uses Louise to steady herself; both of them slip and both of them fall and they skin their knees a little bit, doing it, but there they are.

“At last,” Lavinia says.

It is too cold to sit, but they squat, anyway, and huddle together under Lavinia’s enormous fur.

Lavinia hands Louise a flask.

"Drink this," she says. "It'll warm you up."

There's whiskey in it—*good* whiskey, that's much too nice to be tipped out of a flask just to keep you warm when you can't feel your hands, but that's Lavinia for you.

"On the *Titanic*, they drank whiskey," Lavinia says. "They were going down with the ship and they saw the end before them and they said *fuck it, we might as well* so they got completely plastered on the finest whiskey, and then once the ship sank it saved them. They were so warm on the inside they didn't feel the cold. They swam all the way to the lifeboats. I think about—all the time—when—oh, your *dress!*"

Lavinia's dress—the one she has been so kind and good and generous enough to entrust to Louise, the one she found on the street in the East Village and which represents beauty and truth and everything good in the world and maybe, even, the existence of God, is in shreds. There are wine stains. There are cigarette holes.

And Louise thinks, *you fucked it up*.

She wasn't careful. She was selfish and thoughtless and she drank too much and she let her guard down—even animals know never to let their guard down—and now Lavinia will turn on her the way she turned on poor, pathetic Mimi, who ripped Lavinia's sleeve. It will be so much worse than before, now that the night has been so good, now that she knows what she's been missing.

Louise tries not to cry, but she is drunk and weak and so of course she can't, and so she starts to sputter tears, and then Lavinia looks at her with astonishment.

"What is it?"

"I'm sorry. God, I'm so sorry—your dress."

"What about it?"

"I ruined it!"

"So?"

Lavinia tosses that long hair of hers. It whips in the wind.

"You had a good night, didn't you?"

"Yes, of course, I—"

"So what's the problem? We can always get another dress."

She says it like it's so easy.

"I told you," Lavinia says. "Things happen around me. The gods will bring us another one."

Louise's tears freeze-dry on her face.

"It's a sacrifice," Lavinia says. "We'll sacrifice to the old gods—we'll put the dress in the water and let the water take it and, oh!"

"What?"

Lavinia shoves her forearm in Louise's face.

MORE POETRY!!! is mostly smudged by now, and really more like MRE PERY! 1, but Louise can make it out.

"You almost let me forget! How could you?"

"I—"

"That clinches it."

Lavinia leaps to her feet. She lets the fur fall. She lets her beautiful white dress that makes her look like an angel fall, too. Against the snow she is cold, bitten, naked. Her breasts are blue. Her nipples are purple.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck!"

She's hysterical, laughing.

"Fuckfuckfuckit'ssocold!"

Louise gapes.

"Come on! Your turn!"

"You want me to—"

Louise is already shaking from the cold, now, under the furs.

"Come on! You have to do it!"

Lavinia's eyes are so wild, so wide. Louise is so cold.

"You *promised!*"

Lavinia extends her trembling, blue-veined hand.

"You *promised!*"

Louise did. So she does.

At first she thinks the cold will kill her. It is in the back of her eyes and at the back of her throat and up her nose and all the way down her esophagus, and not even the whiskey can help. If she were on the *Titanic* she would drown. Lavinia takes the dress from the crumpled heap of frost and sand and boardwalk splinterwood at her feet and gathers it up to her breasts and says "Come."

'Tis not too late to seek a newer world.

The thing about Tennyson's "Ulysses" is that everybody knows it. You're not special for knowing it. If you know one poem by Tennyson it's probably that, and if you know one poem, period, there's still a greater-than-fifty-percent chance that it's this one. Lavinia is not special for knowing it (some of it), and Louise is not special either, for having memorized it (all of it) back in Devonshire, nor for whispering it to herself on the railroad bridge, nor for trying so desperately to make Virgil Bryce see that *sail beyond the sunset* were the four most beautiful words in the English language, and if she could not sail then she would, at least, swim. There is no such thing as fate, probably, and it is probably just coincidence. It's probably trite: like Klimt posters, like Mucha, like "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," like Paris (Louise has never been to Paris).

But Louise has that poem written on her heart, and she is so relieved that Lavinia does, too.

*Push off, and sitting well in order smite
The sounding furrows; for my purpose holds
To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths
Of all the western stars, until I die.*

Lavinia hurls the dress in the water. It recedes; it comes back: borne up—like a drowned woman—on the waves.

Lavinia and Louise look at each other.

And they're so goddamn cold Louise thinks they will turn into

statues, they will turn to ice like Lot's wife (or was that salt? she cannot think) and they will stay there forever, the two of them, hand to hand and breast to breast and foreheads touching and snow on their collarbones, and Louise thinks *thank God, thank God*, because, if they could petrify themselves for all time so that all time was nights like these and never any morning afters, then Louise would gladly give up every other dream she ever had.

They take a selfie of their naked bodies, from the lips down. They use their arms to cover their nipples, because otherwise Instagram will censor it, and so they have two remnants of MORE POETRY!!! across the center of the photo.

"We'll get that tattooed on our arms," Lavinia says.

They are huddled, now, under the fur. Lavinia has put her dress back on. Louise has nothing but a shift, and a useless coat.

"I want to remember this forever," Lavinia says. She can't stop laughing. "Until the day I die."

When somebody says *I will remember this until the day I die*, they usually mean *I had a pretty good time*, or else, just *I want to fuck you*. That poly male feminist Louise dated that time used to say that he'd never forget her; so did the guy who was really into kink (*I'll never forget what you let me do to you, you are so not like other women that way*); so did Virgil Bryce. Even the guy who ghosted her once said, the night he took her for a walk in Prospect Park in summertime, *I'm probably going to leave New York, eventually, but when I do I want to remember nights like this* (that was the night she fucked him).

But Lavinia isn't like other people.

And when, six months from now, Lavinia dies, she will be thinking exactly of this night, and of the stars, and of the sea.

Louise will know this. She will be there.

They walk toward the elevated train.

Lavinia hails a cab.

"Take it," she says. She is smiling. Louise marvels at Lavinia's lipstick, still so dark even after all that champagne. "My coat is warmer than yours."

Louise can't afford a cab.

"It's fine," Louise says. "I'll take the subway."

Lavinia laughs, like this is a joke. "God, you're beautiful," she says. She kisses Louise on both cheeks. "I miss you already."

She throws herself into the cab.

Two minutes later, Louise gets a notification on her phone. Lavinia has posted the photograph of the two of them on Facebook.

She walks ten minutes to the Coney Island Q, because none of the other trains are running, for reasons that passeth all understanding. She doesn't step on the cracks in the sidewalk.

She sits on the subway, shaking in her slip underneath her flimsy coat, with holes in the pockets, that she bought at H&M like four years ago when GlaZam gave her a hundred dollars for a Christmas bonus, tries to avoid eye contact with the man who wanders up and down the subway car in a hospital gown with a medical bracelet on his arm, but everybody else is doing this, too, and you have to watch out for yourself, especially when you're five-foot-five and weigh one hundred fourteen and a half pounds on a period day. She is drunk enough to be sick, and tries not to throw up when two young men get on at Kings Highway with Burger King bags and proceed to noisily chomp on their fries all the way to Atlantic Avenue.

Here Louise has to switch to the R, even though it means doubling back, and some girls who maybe were part of a bachelorette party are screaming and waving their sparklers, and on the R-train platform there's a man standing on a plastic crate prophesying the end of the world.

I hate, I despise your festivals, he is shouting, although nobody is looking at him. He is looking straight at Louise. (*Though ye offer me burnt offerings and your meat offerings, I will not accept them: neither will I regard the peace offerings of your fat beasts.*) At least, Louise thinks

he is looking straight at her. (*Take thou away from me the noise of thy songs; for I will not hear the melody of thy viols.*)

Louise gets off the R at Fifty-third Street.

Her heels bleed. There is sand between her toes and it blisters. She keeps her keys between her fingers.

On the corner before her house she sees the man who catcalls her, every day, to and from the subway. He is smoking weed. He is looking at her.

"Hey," he says.

She keeps her head down. She does not look at him.

"Hey, little girl," he says.

Louise does not answer this, either.

"You know it's cold outside?"

She thinks *just keep walking; just keep walking.*

"You know I'd warm you up!"

He is smiling—like this is friendly, like she should be flattered, like this is the nicest thing anybody has ever done for her.

"I'd warm you up, little girl."

He is following her—sauntering, not running, like this is a pleasant stroll, like this is not something that makes her want to scream.

"Don't you want me to warm you up?"

Louise tries so hard not to hear him.

She is so fast, with the key in the door, even though her hands shake. She's had practice.

"Don't flatter yourself," he calls after her, when she has at last made it inside. "I wouldn't fuck a dog like you with a ten-foot dick."

By the time Louise gets to bed it's nine.

She sets her alarm for twelve.

When Louise wakes up she can barely move but she moves anyway, because her shift at the coffee shop starts at two, and the knee-fondling cokehead who runs it will dock her pay if she is even a half-minute late to work.

The Wedding Date

Three small, light grey hearts are scattered around the title. One is in the upper right, one is to the left of the word 'Date', and one is in the lower right.

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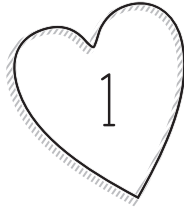
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Alexa Monroe walked into the Fairmont hotel in San Francisco that Thursday night wearing her favorite red heels, feeling jittery from coffee, and carrying a bottle of Veuve Clicquot champagne in her purse. She took out her phone to text her sister, Olivia, upstairs in one of the guest rooms.

Getting on the elevator!!!

It was always good to give Olivia a little more advance warning than most people. It didn't matter that Olivia had just made partner at her New York law firm; some things didn't change.

Oh no, was just about to get in the shower.

Alexa got Olivia's text just as she stepped into the elevator. She laughed out loud as she pushed the number of her sister's floor, the laughter calming her nerves. Alexa couldn't wait to celebrate with her older sister, despite . . . no, maybe because their relationship was still tricky after all these years.

The elevator glided in the air, in that smooth, noiseless way

elevators in expensive hotels do, while Alexa checked her purse for the third time to make sure she'd tossed the fancy crackers and Brie in there. They would need a pre-dinner snack to soak up all of that champagne, after all. She wished she'd found the time to make brownies the night before. Olivia loved her brownies.

She spied the cheese and crackers in the corner of her purse, tucked away from the heavy champagne bottle. Just then, the elevator stopped with a jerk. A second later, the lights went out.

"What's going on?" she said out loud to herself.

A few seconds later, a dim light came on, but the elevator stayed motionless. She looked up and around, and jumped to see a man with a suitcase in the opposite corner of the elevator.

"Were you here this whole time?" she asked.

"What am I, a genie?" He grinned back at her.

"I guess you don't really look like a genie." He was a tall white guy, with tanned skin, rumpled dark brown hair, and about a day's worth of scruff where a beard would be. She had a sudden urge to rub her hand on his cheek to see how prickly it was. How exactly had she missed seeing *this* man get on the elevator with her?

"Thank you, I think. But isn't that what a genie would say?" he asked. "You're not claustrophobic, are you?"

"Um, I don't think so. Why, were you going to bust us out of here with your genie powers if I said I was?"

He laughed.

"I guess you'll never know if I'm a genie now," he said.

"Well, there was that time I got an MRI," she said. "Being inside that tiny machine wasn't much fun. Maybe I am claustrophobic."

"Sorry, you already lost your chance to see my powers." He moved to the front of the elevator and picked up the emergency phone.

“Let’s see if they can give us an ETA on getting out of here.”

She tried not to stare at him in the dim lighting, but she couldn’t miss the opportunity to check out his butt in his perfectly fitted jeans. It was as good as the rest of him. She tried to wipe the grin off her face in case he turned around.

Stuff like this never happened to her. Not the stuck-in-the-elevator thing—her life was full of minor crises like that. No, it was being stuck in an elevator with a hot guy that was the unusual part. She was always the one sitting on an airplane next to a chatty toddler, or a knitting grandma, or a bored college student; never a hot guy to be found.

After about a minute of him saying, “Okay . . . okay,” in progressively tenser tones, he hung up the phone.

“Well . . .” He paused and smiled at her. “Wait, I don’t even know your name, my new elevator friend.”

“Alexa, and you, Genie?”

“Drew. Nice to meet you, Alexa.”

“Drew, it’s a pleasure, but . . .”

“Right, these circumstances are not ideal. So, the bad news is that there’s a power outage in the whole hotel.”

Her phone lit up just then with a text from Olivia.

My power went out. Where are you??

“Ahhh, yes, I was just alerted to that.” Alexa held her phone up before she texted Olivia back.

Whole hotel, I’m stuck in the elevator.

“At least that means they were telling the truth,” Drew said. “The good news, or so they tell me, is that they have generators, so the elevators should start moving shortly.”

She slid down to the floor, placing her purse gently beside her. It would be a tragedy to break that champagne bottle.

“We might as well wait in comfort,” she said. Her favorite red heels were relatively comfortable for the first five hours, but she’d been wearing them for nine plus.

He shrugged off his leather jacket, gifting her a glimpse of his stomach muscles as his gray T-shirt shifted. Mmmm. Hot, funny guy who occasionally flashed his abs. Was it her birthday?

“So, are you a guest here, Drew? Where are you coming from?” she asked him so she wouldn’t stare.

“Just flew in from L.A. And you?” He sat down next to her.

“Oh, I live here. Well, over in Berkeley, anyway. I’m just in the hotel visiting someone.”

He glanced at her phone, her shoes, and back up at her.

“A pretty special someone, with those shoes on, and all of that smiling you were doing when you didn’t even notice someone else got on the elevator with you.”

“A very special someone,” she said, and his grin got wider. “Wait, no, not *that* kind of special someone! My older sister! She’s in town from New York for work.”

Yep, this was how she usually acted around hot guys. Scared to make eye contact, stared at his abs, said something awkward.

“Ahhhh.” He laughed. “Okay, yes, I did think it was *that* kind of special someone. Do you two have a hot night in the city planned?”

She crossed her legs and adjusted her black wrap dress so she didn’t accidentally flash her underwear at this dude on top of everything else.

“Sort of. We’re celebrating. She just made partner at her law firm!” Alexa smiled down at her purse full of treats before looking back up at him. Not even cheese could compete with this dude.

He narrowed his eyes at her. Light brown eyes, with a really dark rim around them. His eyes were so pretty that she looked

away again. Thank God her brown skin meant her cheeks couldn't get too pink, otherwise he'd be able to see them glow in the dark.

"Okay, I'm happy for your sister, but what is in that bag? You keep looking at it like it holds the Holy Grail."

She laughed.

"Just champagne and a few snacks. The plan is to drink the champagne here and then go out to dinner . . . Well, that was the plan, but we'll see how long we're stuck in this elevator."

Drew scooted closer to her and looked in her purse. Alexa pushed it toward him, so he could see better in the dim light. She never let people poke around in her purse, but hey, this was a cute guy and a weird situation.

"Okay good, we have sustenance if we're stuck here for hours. Champagne is so convenient because no corkscrew is needed, and then we've got . . . Oh, look at that, cheese and crackers, the perfect stuck-in-an-elevator snack."

She leaned back against the wood-paneled wall.

"Have you been stuck in an elevator before with a variety of snacks and been able to determine which ones are best for this situation?" she asked.

"No, but come on, cheese and crackers are obviously the best possible option here. First of all, you had the foresight to bring a soft cheese, so we won't need a knife to cut it; we can just use the crackers to pull off bits and spread it with our fingers. And second, have you ever not enjoyed cheese and crackers? Ever not thought, 'Oh boy, these cheese and crackers are exactly what I need right now'?"

She considered for a moment.

"Stop, no, stop even thinking about it," he said. "You know the answer is no. Cheese and crackers are objectively the perfect snack."

She laughed and pried his fingers away from the box of crackers.

“Okay, fine, you’re right. But you didn’t manage to talk me into sharing Olivia’s you-made-partner cheese and crackers with you, you know.”

He stretched his legs out along the floor and took another glance into her purse.

“I was afraid of that. Well, I can only hope we’ll be here so long that you’ll take pity on me.”

She slipped her shoes halfway off, just enough to relieve the pressure on her toes.

“No offense, Drew, but my goal is not to be stuck in this elevator with you all night.” Although those abs . . . No, remember Olivia? Her sister? Right, Olivia, okay, yes, Olivia. Time to ask him another question so she’d stop staring. “Don’t *you* have plans tonight? What are you doing here in San Francisco for the weekend anyway?”

He made a face.

“Wedding.”

She made a face back at him.

“Don’t say it like it’s a prison sentence.”

He slumped against the wall.

“If prison sentences lasted for a weekend, this one would qualify. Okay, fine, a prison in a cushy hotel, but still.”

She looked around at the dim, still elevator.

“Not so cushy right now. What’s so terrible about this wedding?”

He threw his hands in the air.

“Let me count the ways.” He held up one finger. “One: it’s my ex-girlfriend’s wedding.”

Alexa winced. She’d been there. Exes’ weddings were always a trial, even in the best circumstances.

Second finger. “Two: she’s marrying one of my best friends from med school.”

Alexa covered her eyes. Okay, he maybe had a point.

“Were they . . .”

“No, she wasn’t cheating on me with him, but . . . let’s just say I wasn’t particularly pleased about how it all happened, shall we?”

“Ouch. Well, I understand why you—”

He held up a third finger. “THREE.”

She sat up straight.

“There’s another one? A third finger?”

“Oh yes.” He waved his middle finger in the air. “As a matter of fact, this is the worst of the fingers. Three: I am a groomsman.”

She swung around and faced him, mouth wide open.

“Are you kidding me? A groomsman? What? Why? How?”

“Yes, you are asking the important questions. The ones that Josh, Molly, and I all should have asked before this nightmare of a wedding weekend started. What and why indeed. *What* could have possibly inspired him to ask me to be a groomsman? *Why* would he do that? *Why* would she allow it? *WHY* would I say yes? *How* did this happen? All of those questions should have been asked, and yet, here we all are.”

“Oh my God, Drew. That’s almost enough for me to give you some cheese.”

He patted her shoulder. Cheese? Hell, if he’d let his hand linger there for a few more seconds, she would have given him a lot more than cheese.

“Alexa, I’m touched. I truly am. And then”—he waved another finger in the air—“there’s four.”

“Oh good Lord, what could four possibly be? Are your divorced parents coming to the wedding with their spouses, too, or something?”

He laughed.

“No, but good guess. What a nightmare that would be. No, four is that I am not only a groomsman in the wedding of my ex-girlfriend and former best friend, but I am a dateless groomsman in the wedding of my ex-girlfriend and former best friend. My date bailed on me at the last minute, so I’m going to look pathetic, and I’ll probably get drunk and hit on a bridesmaid—the whole thing is going to be a nightmare.”

She brushed that off with a wave of her hand.

“Oh please, you’ll be fine. Weddings are great places to meet people. It’s better that you’re without a date. As my friend Colleen always says, ‘Don’t bring a sandwich to a buffet.’”

He let out a bark of laughter.

“I’m definitely going to steal that saying. And while in most situations I would say that your friend Colleen is totally right, this is that five percent of situations where a sandwich would save me from all of the food poisoning in the buffet. I’m going to get so many pitying looks, you have no idea. And the worst part is that I RSVP’d with a plus-one, so there’s going to be an empty seat at the head table. And lots of ‘What happened to your girlfriend, Drew, couldn’t make it?’ And I’m going to have to smile and take it, but there’s like a thirty percent possibility I’m going to have one too many glasses of bourbon and go rogue.”

She touched his hand and tried not to linger there.

“Okay, yes, sometimes a sandwich is a necessary security blanket. I’m sorry that yours bailed on you.”

He looked down into her purse again.

“Alexa, I’m going to need you to stop talking about sandwiches if you don’t want me to steal that cheese.”

She grabbed her purse and moved it to her other side.

“Now temptation is farther away. Isn’t that better?”

He looked at her, at the purse, back at her. She smiled and kept her hand on the strap.

“So, Drew. What happened to your girlfriend?”

He narrowed his eyes at her, and she laughed again.

“Okay, first of all, Emma wasn’t my girlfriend. We were just hanging out, that’s all.”

Alexa frowned at him. This guy had to be in his thirties like her. Hadn’t people stopped “just hanging out” with people by their thirties?

“Don’t look at me like that! I’m not a girlfriend kind of guy! And when I could tell that she might want something more serious, I ended it. I was nice about it! I don’t do girlfriends. I haven’t had a girlfriend since . . .” He sighed. “Molly. Anyway. Except I forgot that I needed a date for this damn wedding.”

Alexa pointed to the fourth finger that he’d raised in the air.

“Wait,” she said. “How, exactly, is that your date ‘bailing’ on you?”

He shook the finger at her.

“Don’t do that! Don’t blame this on me. It’s not my fault. It’s not her fault, either—she was going to come to the wedding with me anyway, but her dad’s having surgery tomorrow, so she couldn’t come.” Those ab muscles moved in a lovely way when he sighed. “And, of course, I’m sorry about her dad. I don’t blame her for that at all. I do, however, think this is just more evidence that I’ve been cursed when it comes to this wedding.”

Alexa laughed and relaxed against the wall. If she happened to move closer to Drew while doing so, that was just an extra benefit. Hey, it’s not like she was in danger of becoming this guy’s not-girlfriend. She could at least get a few accidental touches of his arm in before this elevator started back up again.

“You probably did something to deserve it.”

Drew reached around her and grabbed her purse.

“Oh, really? I pour out my heart to you about this nightmare of a wedding and how now I won’t have a date and all of the terrible things that will happen to me because of that, and when you hear my tale of woe, you tell me that I did something to deserve it? Just for that, I’m taking some cheese.”

He reached into her purse but hesitated for a second and raised his eyebrows at her. She sighed and nodded.

“Okay, fine, you can have a little cheese, but you’d better save some for Olivia. And no tearing it off with your fingers. What kind of a Neanderthal do you think I am? There’s a knife in there.”

He beamed at her. Good Lord, that was a dangerous smile. She looked away and found the butter knife so she wouldn’t throw herself at him.

He’d just bitten into his third cheese-laden cracker when the overhead lights came on and the elevator started with a jerk.

“Wow, are we actually moving?” She sat upright.

“Looks like I won’t have to tackle you for the champagne next.” Drew got to his feet and reached out a hand to help her up. Was it just her imagination that his hand lingered in hers?

Probably. She had a very active imagination. It helped to make up for her current lack of a romantic life.

In no time at all, they reached the sixteenth floor. Alexa was treated to one more glimpse of those abs as he pulled his jacket on.

“Looks like your sister and I are on the same floor,” he said as they got off together.

“Looks like it.” She smiled up at him for a second before she had to look away from those eyes again.

“Which way is she?” They both looked up at the arrow signs by the elevator bank.

“This way,” she said, pointing to the left.

He consulted his room key.

“Ah, I’m that way.” He pointed to the right.

They smiled at each other and didn’t say anything for a moment.

“I can honestly say that I’ve never had a more entertaining time in an elevator. Thanks for that.” He reached out a hand.

“Likewise.” Alexa shook it. “Good luck at the wedding.”

He laughed and grimaced.

“Don’t remind me. Congratulations to your sister.”

She thanked him and walked down the hall toward Olivia’s room. She wished she knew what else she could or should have said to keep talking to him longer. She sighed and kept walking.



“Alexa. Wait.” This was crazy. Drew knew, objectively, that what he was about to do was crazy. But as she turned to walk away, he shouted for her to stop a split second later.

“Yeah?” She turned. “You can’t have the rest of the cheese, not even as a parting gift.”

Okay, here was his opportunity to play it off, pretend that that’s what he was asking for, banter with this cute and funny woman with the great cleavage one last time, then turn around and go to his hotel room and get ready for this brutal weekend . . . Well, when you put it like that, maybe this wasn’t so crazy.

“You . . . you wouldn’t be free this weekend, would you? How long is your sister in town?” No turning back now.

“She leaves tomorrow after her deposition. I’m working on Saturday. I have an event at—”

“Working on Saturday—what about Saturday night? Even . . . Friday night?” Oh please, let her be free, now that he’d gone that far.

“Well, I have to—”

“Be my date this weekend? Please? The wedding isn’t until Saturday night, so that would work, right? If you can’t do Friday night I understand, but if there’s any way you could come to the rehearsal dinner with me, I would . . . I don’t know what I would do. Really appreciate it? Buy you all the cheese you wanted?” How did he go from zero to babbling and pleading with this woman in thirty seconds flat?

“Drew, I . . . Are you sure?”

He smiled. With that question, he knew he’d almost got her.

“Positive. Come to the wedding, be my sandwich, protect me from poisoning and disaster. It’ll be your good deed for the year. And it’s only May—look at you, getting your good deed for the year done before the year is even half over!” He was so close to victory; he could tell by the smile in her eyes as she looked up at him. “Come on, Alexa.” He touched her shoulder. “Save me.”

She took a deep breath, and he held his as she considered.

“When you put it like that, what else can I say? I’ll do it.”

He pulled her into a hug. Her champagne bottle-laden purse clanked against his butt, and they both laughed.

“You won’t regret this.” He pulled back and grabbed his phone out of his pocket. “Wait, give me your number.”

He typed in her number as she recited it.

“There, I texted you, so you have mine. I’ll send you all of the details later.” He turned to leave before she could say anything else.

“Okay, but Drew, are you . . .”

“See you tomorrow, Alexa. Congratulations again to your sister!”

He sped down the hall with his suitcase, not giving her a chance to back out.

WILDCARD

MARIE LU

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In other top headlines, police headquarters around the world are entering a third day of overwhelming crowds outside their doors. Notorious crime boss Jacob “Ace” Kagan walked into a police station in Paris’s 8th arrondissement this morning and surrendered himself to authorities in a startling move that has left many scratching their heads. In the United States, two fugitives on the FBI’s Ten Most Wanted list have been found dead—both incidents have been ruled suicides. This has been your morning roundup . . . [. . .]

—THE TOKYO SUN NEWSCAST,
MORNING ROUNDUP

In my dream, I'm with Hideo.

I know it's a dream because we are in a white bed at the top of a skyscraper I've never seen before, in a room made entirely of glass. If I stare down at the floor, I can see through it to the dozens and dozens of levels beneath us, ceiling-floor, ceiling-floor, until they vanish to a point somewhere far below, stretching deep into the earth.

Maybe there's no solid ground at all.

Even though the soft rays of dawn are streaking in, chasing away the dim blue of night to illuminate our skin with a buttery glow, an impossible blanket of stars can still be seen prominently against the sky, coating it in a film of gold-and-white glitter. Beyond the bedroom sprawls the landscape of a never-ending city, the lights a mirror of the stars above, continuing until it disappears into the cloud cover at the horizon.

It's too much. There is infinity in every direction. I don't know which way to fall.

Then Hideo's lips touch my collarbone, and my disorientation evaporates into warmth. *He's here.* I tilt my head back, my mouth parted, my hair rippling behind me, and turn my eyes toward the glass ceiling and the constellations up above.

I'm sorry, he's whispering, his voice echoing inside my mind.

I shake my head at him and frown. What he's apologizing for, I can't recall, and his eyes are so sad that I don't want to remember. *Something's not right. But what is it?* There's a nagging feeling in me that says I'm not supposed to be here.

Hideo pulls me closer. The feeling intensifies. I peer out at the city through the glass, wondering if maybe this dreamscape doesn't look as it should, or if it's the stars overhead that are giving me pause. *Something's not right . . .*

I stiffen against Hideo. His brow furrows, and he cups my face with a hand. I want to lean back into our kiss, but a stirring at the other end of the room distracts me.

Someone is standing there. It's a figure armored entirely in black, his features hidden behind a dark helmet.

I look at him. And everything made of glass shatters.

SHINJUKU DISTRICT

Tokyo, Japan



Eight Days until the Warcross Closing Ceremony

Someone is watching me.

I can feel it—the eerie sensation of being followed, an invisible gaze locked on my back. It prickles my skin, and as I make my way through Tokyo’s rain-soaked streets to meet up with the Phoenix Riders, I keep looking over my shoulder. People hurry by in a steady stream of colorful umbrellas and business suits, heels and oversize coats. I can’t stop imagining their downcast faces all turned in my direction, no matter which way I go.

Maybe it’s the paranoia that comes with years of being a bounty hunter. *You’re on a crowded street*, I tell myself. *No one’s following you.*

It’s been three days since Hideo’s algorithm was triggered. Technically, the world should now be the safest it’s ever been. Every single person who has used the new Henka Games contact lenses—even just once—should now be completely under Hideo’s control, rendered unable to break the law or harm another person.

Only the few who still use the beta lenses, like me, are unaffected.

So, in theory, I shouldn't be worried about someone following me. The algorithm won't let them do anything to hurt me.

But even as I think this, I slow down to stare at the long line wrapping around a local police station. There must be hundreds of people. They're all turning themselves in to the authorities for anything and everything unlawful they've ever done, from unpaid parking tickets to petty theft—even murder. It's been like this for the past three days.

My attention shifts to a police barricade at the end of the street. They're directing us to detour down a different block. Ambulance lights flash against the walls, illuminating a covered gurney being lifted into the vehicle. I only need to catch a glimpse of officers pointing up at the roof of a nearby building before I figure out what occurred here. Another criminal must have jumped to their death. Suicides like this have been peppering the news.

And I helped make all of this happen.

I swallow my unease and turn away. There's a subtle but significant blankness in everyone's eyes. They don't know an artificial hand is inside their minds, bending their free will.

Hideo's hand.

The reminder is enough to make me pause in the middle of the street and close my eyes. My fists clench and unclench, even as my heart lurches at his name. *I'm such an idiot.*

How can the thought of him fill me with disgust and desire at the same time? How can I stare in horror at this line of people waiting in the rain outside a police station—but still blush at my dream of being in Hideo's bed, running my hands along his back?

We're over. Forget him. I open my eyes again and continue on, trying to contain the anger beating in my chest.

By the time I duck into the heated halls of a Shinjuku shopping center, rain is coming down in wavy sheets, smearing the reflections of neon lights against the slick pavement.

Not that the storm is stopping the preparations for the upcoming Warcross closing ceremony, which will mark the end of this year's games. With my beta lenses on, I can see the roads and sidewalks color-coded in hues of scarlet and gold. Each Tokyo district is highlighted like this right now, the streets shaded the colors of the most popular team in that neighborhood. Overhead, a lavish display of virtual fireworks is going off, piercing the dark sky with bursts of colored light. Shinjuku district's favorite team is the Phoenix Riders, so the fireworks here are currently forming the shape of a rising phoenix, arching its flaming neck in a cry of victory.

Every day over the next week or so, the top ten players of this year's championships will be announced worldwide after a vote by all Warcross fans. Those ten players will compete in a final, all-star tournament during the closing ceremony, and then spend a year as the biggest celebrities in the world before they play again next spring, in the opening ceremony's game. Like the one I once hacked into and disrupted, that upended my entire life and landed me here.

People on the streets are proudly dressed up as their top-ten vote this year. I see a few Asher lookalikes sporting his outfit from our championship game in the White World; someone's decked out as Jena, another as Roshan. Still others are arguing heatedly about the Final. There had obviously been a cheat—power-ups that shouldn't have been in play.

Of course, I had done that.

I adjust my face mask, letting my rainbow hair tumble out from underneath my red raincoat's hood. My rain boots squelch

against the sidewalk. I have a randomized virtual face overlaid over my own, so at least people who are wearing their NeuroLink glasses or contacts will look at me and see a complete stranger. For the rare person who isn't, the face mask should cover enough to make me blend in with everyone else wearing masks on the street.

"*Sugoi!*" someone passing me exclaims, and when I turn, I see a pair of wide-eyed girls grinning at my hair. Their Japanese words translate into English in my view. "Wow! Good Emika Chen costume!"

They make a gesture like they want to take a photo of me, and I play along, putting up my hands in V-for-victory signs. *Are you both under Hideo's control, too?* I wonder.

The girls bob their heads in thanks and move along. I adjust my electric skateboard strapped over my shoulder. It's a good temporary disguise, pretending to be myself, but for someone used to stalking others, I still feel weirdly exposed.

Emi! Almost here?

Hammie's message appears before me as translucent white text, cutting through my tension. I smile instinctively and quicken my steps.

Almost.

**It would've been easier, you know,
if you'd just come with us.**

I cast a glance over my shoulder again. It would've definitely been easier—but the last time I stayed in the same space as my teammates, Zero nearly killed us in an explosion.

I'm not an official Rider anymore.
People would ask questions if they saw
us heading out as a group tonight.

But you'd be safer if you did.

It's safer if I didn't.

I can practically hear her sigh. She sends the address of the bar again.

See you soon.

I pass through the mall and out the other side. Here, the colorful blocks of Shinjuku shift into the seedy streets of Kabukichō, Tokyo's red-light district. I tense my shoulders. It's not an *unsafe* area—certainly not compared to where I came from in New York City—but the walls are covered with glowing screens featuring the services of beautiful girls and handsome, spiky-haired boys, along with shadier banners I don't want to understand.

Virtual models dressed in scanty outfits stand outside bars, beckoning visitors to enter. They ignore me when they realize my profile marks me as a foreigner and turn their attention to the more lucrative Japanese locals navigating the streets.

Still, I pick up my pace. No red-light district in the world is safe.

I duck into a narrow street on the border of Kabukichō. *Piss Alley*, so this cluster of little walkways is called. The Riders picked it for tonight because it's closed to tourists during the Warcross championship season. Scowling bodyguards in suits stand at the entrances and exits of the alleys, shooing away curious passersby.

I take down my disguise for a second so they can see my real identity. One bodyguard bows his head and lets me in.

Both sides of the alleys are lined with tiny sake bars and yaki-tori stands. Through each of their fogged glass doors, I can see the backs of other teams huddled in front of smoking grills, arguing loudly at virtual projections on the walls showing interviews with players. The scent of fresh rain mixes with aromas of garlic, miso, and fried meat.

I pull off my raincoat, shake it out, and fold it inside out into my backpack. Then I head to the last stall. This bar is a little bigger than the others, facing a quiet alley blocked off on either side. Its doorway is lit by a row of cheery red lanterns, and men in suits stand in strategic positions around it. One of them notices me and moves aside, ushering me forward.

I walk under the lanterns and enter through the sliding glass door. A curtain of warm air envelops me.

Checked into Midnight Sense Bar!

+500 Points. Daily Score: +950

Level 36 | ¥120,064

I find myself standing in a cozy room with a handful of filled seats arranged around a bar, where a chef is busy putting out bowls of ramen. He pauses to call out my arrival.

A round of greetings hits me as everyone turns in my direction.

There's Hammie, our Thief, and Roshan, our Shield. Asher, our Captain, is sitting on one of the stools with his stylish wheel-chair folded behind him. Even Tremaine, who technically plays for the Demon Brigade, is here. He keeps his elbows propped up on the bar as he nods at me through the steam rising from his bowl. He's sitting away from Roshan, who's fiddling with a bracelet of

prayer beads on his wrist and making a point of ignoring his former boyfriend.

My team. My friends. The eerie feeling of being watched subsides as I take in their faces.

Hammie waves me over. I slide gratefully into the empty stool beside her. The chef puts down a bowl of ramen before me and steps out to give us privacy. “The whole city’s celebrating,” I mutter. “People have no idea what Hideo’s done.”

She starts pulling her curls tight into a thick pouf high on her head. Then she juts her chin at a virtual screen playing footage from the Final against the wall. “You’re just in time,” she replies. “Hideo’s about to make his announcement.”

We stare at the screen as Hammie pours me a cup of tea. It now shows a room of reporters with their faces turned toward a massive stage, all waiting impatiently for Hideo to arrive. Kenn, the Warcross creative director, and Mari Nakamura, Henka Games’ chief operating officer, are already there, whispering to each other.

The room on the screen suddenly bursts into commotion as Hideo walks onstage. He straightens the lapels of his suit jacket once as he strides over to join his companions, shaking hands as he goes with his usual cool, careful grace.

Even the sight of him onscreen feels as overwhelming as if he’d walked right into this bar. All I see is the same boy I’ve watched my whole life, the face I’d stop to look for at newsstands and take in on TV. I dig my nails into the counter, trying not to show how embarrassingly weak it makes me feel.

Hammie notices. She casts me a sympathetic glance. “No one expects you to be over him already,” she says. “I know he’s trying to take over the world and all, but he still rocks a suit harder than a Balmain catwalk.”

Asher scowls. "I'm right here."

"I didn't say I wanted to *date* him," Hammie replies, reaching over to pat Asher's cheek once.

I look on as Hideo and Kenn talk in low voices and wonder how much Kenn and Mari know about Hideo's plans. Has the entire company been in on this all along? Is it possible to keep such a thing secret? Would *that* many people take part in something so awful?

"As you all know," Hideo begins, "a cheat was activated during the Final of this year's championship that benefited one team—the Phoenix Riders—over the other—Team Andromeda. After reviewing the matter with our creative team"—he pauses to glance at Kenn—"it seems the cheat was activated not by one of the players, but by an outside party. We've decided the best way to resolve this, then, is to hold an official rematch between Team Andromeda and the Phoenix Riders, four days from today. This will be followed by the closing ceremony four days later."

An instant buzz of conversation fills the room at Hideo's words. Asher leans back and frowns at the screen. "Well, it's happening," he says to us all. "An official rematch. We've got three days to get ready."

Hammie slurps up a mouthful of noodles. "An official rematch," she echoes, although there's no enthusiasm in her voice. "Never happened in the history of the championships."

"Gonna be a lot of Phoenix Rider haters out there," Tremaine adds. Already, a few shouts of "Cheaters!" can be clearly heard from the other bars outside.

Asher shrugs. "Nothing we haven't faced before. Isn't that right, Blackbourne?"

Tremaine's expression is blank. The excitement of the new game is lost on all of us as we continue to stare at the screen. A

rematch isn't the big news. If only those reporters knew what Hideo was really doing with the NeuroLink.

I'm tired of the horror in the world, he'd said to me. *So I will force it to end.*

"Well," Roshan begins, rubbing a hand across his face, "if Hideo's bothered by anything that's happened in the last few days, he's not showing it."

Tremaine's concentrating on something invisible in his view and tapping rapidly against the bar. A few weeks ago, I would've bristled at being in the same room as him. He still isn't my favorite person, and I keep waiting for him to sneer and call me Princess Peach again, but for now he's on our side. And we can use all the help we can get.

"Find anything?" I ask him.

"I dug up some solid numbers on how many people have the new lenses." Tremaine sits back and huffs out a sigh. "Ninety-eight percent."

I could cut the silence in here like a cake. Ninety-eight percent of all users are now controlled by Hideo's algorithm. I think of the long lines, the police tape. The sheer scale of it makes me dizzy.

"And the other two percent?" Asher manages to ask.

"Is made up of anybody still using the beta test lenses," Tremaine replies, "and who haven't switched over yet. Those folks are safe for now." He peers around the bar. "Us, of course, and a number of the official players, since we got the beta lenses before the full version went out. A lot of people in the Dark World, I bet. And the tiny number of people worldwide who don't use the NeuroLink at all. That's it. Everybody else is locked in."

No one wants to add anything to that. I don't say it out loud, but I know we can't stay on the beta lenses forever. Word on the street is that those lenses will download a patch that converts

them into algorithm lenses on the day of the Warcross closing ceremony.

That's happening in eight days.

"Seven days of freedom left," Asher finally says, voicing what we're all thinking. "If you want to rob a bank, now's your chance."

I glance at Tremaine. "Any luck digging up more info about the algorithm itself?"

He shakes his head and pulls up a screen for all of us to see. It's a maze of glowing letters. "I can't even find the faintest trace of it. See this?" He stops to point at a block of code. "The main log-on sequence? Something should be here."

"You're saying it's impossible that there's an algorithm here," I reply.

"I'm saying it's impossible, yes. It's like watching a chair float in midair without any wires."

It's the same conclusion I came up with over the past few sleepless nights. I'd spent them digging into every crevice of the NeuroLink. Nothing. However Hideo is implementing his algorithm, I can't find it.

I sigh. "The only way to access it might be through Hideo himself."

On the screen, Hideo is answering questions from the press now. His face is serious, his stance easy, and his hair perfectly tousled. As put together as ever. How does he stay so calm? I lean forward, as if the few moments we'd had together in our brief relationship were enough for me to see what he's thinking.

My dream from last night flashes through my mind again, and I can almost feel his hands running down my bare arms, his expression undone. *I'm sorry*, he'd whispered. Then, the dark silhouette watching me from the corner of the room. The glass all around us shattering.

“And what about you?” Tremaine says, snapping me out of my reverie. “Heard anything new from Zero? Have you contacted Hideo?”

I take a deep breath and shake my head. “I haven’t reached out to anyone. Not yet, anyway.”

“You’re not still seriously thinking about Zero’s offer, are you?” Asher has his head propped against one hand, and he’s looking warily at me. It’s the same expression he used to give me as a Captain, whenever he thought I wasn’t going to listen to his commands. “Don’t do it. It’s obviously a trap.”

“Hideo was a trap, too, Ash,” Hammie says. “And none of us saw that coming.”

“Yeah, well, Hideo never tried to blow up our dorm,” Asher mutters. “Look—even if Zero is serious about wanting Emi to join him in stopping Hideo, there’s got to be some strings attached. He’s not exactly a model citizen. His help might come with more problems than it’s worth.”

Tremaine rests his elbows against the counter. I’m still not used to seeing genuine concern on his face, but it’s comforting. A reminder that I’m not alone. “If you and I work together, Em, we can try to avoid Zero’s help. There have got to be hints about Sasuke Tanaka out there somewhere.”

“Sasuke Tanaka vanished without a trace,” Roshan says. His quiet voice is cool and cutting as he wraps a length of noodle around his chopsticks.

Tremaine glances at him. “There is *always* a trace,” he replies.

Asher speaks up before things turn more awkward between Roshan and Tremaine. “What if you contact Hideo first? Tell him you found out that his brother’s alive. You said he created all of this—Warcross, the algorithm—because of his brother, right? Wouldn’t he do anything for him?”

In my mind, I see Hideo look at me. Everything *I do is because of him*. He'd said that to me only a couple of weeks ago, in the steam of a hot spring, as we watched the stars wink into existence.

Even then, he'd been planning his algorithm. His words take on new meaning now, and I shrink inward, the warmth of that memory hardening into ice.

"If Zero really is his brother," I reply.

"Are you saying he isn't? We all saw it."

"I'm saying I can't be sure." I stir the noodles around my bowl, unable to work up an appetite.

Hammie tilts her head thoughtfully, and I can see the cogs of her chess mind working. "It could be someone who stole Sasuke's identity. It could be someone trying to throw people off his trail by using a dead boy's name."

"Ghosting," I murmur in agreement. I know the term for it because I've done it before.

"Emi can't tell Hideo something this big if it might not even be true. It could make him do something unpredictable. We need proof first."

Roshan suddenly gets up. His chair scoots back with a grating clatter against the floor. I glance abruptly up to see him turning his back to us and heading out of the bar through the sliding door.

"Hey," Hammie calls out. "You okay?"

He pauses to look back at us. "Okay with what? That we're all sitting here, talking about the technicalities of how Emi should throw herself into a situation that might kill her?"

The rest of us halt in our conversation, words hanging unspoken in the air. I've never heard real anger in Roshan's voice before, and the sound seems wrong.

He looks around at his teammates before letting his eyes set-

tle on me. “You don’t owe Hideo anything,” he says softly. “You did what you were hired to do. It’s not your responsibility to dig deeper into this—into Zero’s past or what happened between him and Hideo or even what he plans on doing to Hideo.”

“Emi’s the only one who—” Asher begins.

“Like you’ve always looked out for what she needs,” Roshan snaps back. My eyebrow raises in surprise.

“Roshan,” Asher says, watching him carefully.

But Roshan tightens his lips. “Look—if Zero’s team is still set on stopping Hideo, then let *him* do it. Let the two of them go at each other. Step back and remove yourself from this. You don’t have to do it. And none of us should be convincing you of anything different.”

Before I can respond, Roshan turns away and heads out into the night air. The door slides shut behind him with a sharp bang. Around me, the others let out an inaudible breath.

Hammie shakes her head when I look at her. “It’s because he’s here,” she mutters, nodding to Tremaine. “He throws Roshan off.”

Tremaine clears his throat uncomfortably. “He’s not wrong,” he finally says. “About the danger, I mean.”

I stare at the space where Roshan had been and picture his prayer beads sliding against his wrist. In my view, I can still see the last message from Zero sitting in my archives, the letters small and white and waiting.

My offer to you still stands.

Hammie sits back and crosses her arms. “Why *are* you going on with this?” she asks me.

“Is the fate of the world not enough of a reason?”

“No, there’s more to it than that.”

Irritation rises in my chest. “This is all happening because of me—I was directly involved.”

Hammie doesn’t back down from the edge in my words. “But you know it’s not your fault. Tell me—*why?*”

I hesitate, not wanting to say it. In the corner of my view, I see Hideo’s profile haloed in green. He’s awake and online. It’s enough to make me want to reach out and Link with him.

I hate that he still has this pull on me. After all, everyone has had that one person they can’t help but obsess over. It’s not like I haven’t enjoyed flings that came and went in the span of a few weeks. And yet . . .

He’s more than a fling or a bounty or a mark. He’s forever bound to my history. The Hideo who has stolen the world’s free will is still the same Hideo who grieved his brother so deeply that it left a permanent thread of silver in his dark hair. The same Hideo who loves his mother and father. The same Hideo who once lifted me out of my darkness and dared me to dream of better things.

I refuse to believe that he’s nothing more than a monster. I can’t watch him sink like this. I keep going because I need to find that boy again, the beating heart buried underneath his lie. I have to stop him in order to save him.

He was once the hand that pulled me up. Now I have to be his.



By the time we leave the bar, it’s well past midnight, and the pouring rain has dwindled to a fine mist. Some people still dot the streets. The first two all-star players have just been announced, and virtual figures of them now hover under every streetlight in the city.

**HAMILTON JIMÉNEZ of UNITED STATES
OF AMERICA | PHOENIX RIDERS
SUN YOON of SOUTH KOREA | BLOODHOUNDS**

Hammie barely glances at the images of her best in-game moves now dancing below the light posts. “You should head back with us,” she says, eyeing the neighborhood.

“I’ll be fine,” I reassure her. If someone really is following me, best not to make it so that they’re following my teammates, too.

“It’s Kabukichō, Em.”

I give her a wry smile. “So? Hideo’s algorithm is running on most of these people now. What’s there to be afraid of?”

“Very funny,” Hammie responds with an exasperated lift of her eyebrow.

“Look, we shouldn’t all be traveling together. You know that makes us too tempting a target, regardless of the algorithm. I’ll call you when I’m in back in my hotel.”

Hammie hears the note of finality in my voice. Her lips twist in frustration, but then she nods and starts to walk away. “Yeah, you better,” she says over her shoulder, waving her hand at me as she hurries off.

I watch her join the others as they head toward the subway station, where a private car waits for them. I try to picture each of them before they were famous, the first times they arrived in Tokyo, whether or not they felt invisible enough to take the subways. Whether they felt alone.

When my teammates disappear into the haze of rain, I turn away.

I’m used to traveling by myself. Still, my solitude feels sharper now, and the space around me seems emptier without my teammates. I shove my hands back into my pockets and try to ignore

the virtual male model that now saunters up to me with a smile, inviting me in English into one of the host clubs that line the street.

“Nope,” I reply to him. He vanishes immediately, then resets at the entrance of the club and looks for another potential customer.

I tuck the rest of my hair completely under my hood and keep going. Just a week ago, I probably would’ve been walking with Hideo beside me. His arm wrapped around my waist, his coat over my shoulders. He might’ve been laughing at something I said.

But I’m on my own here, listening to the lonely splash of my boots in the dirty street puddles. The echo of water dripping from signs and overhangs keeps distracting me. It sounds like someone else’s footsteps. The feeling of being watched has returned.

A static buzz vibrates in my ears. I pause for a moment at an intersection, tilting my head this way and that until it stops.

I glance again at Hideo’s green-haloed icon in my view. Where is he now, and what is he doing? I imagine contacting him, his virtual form appearing before me, as Asher’s question rings in my ears. What if I *did* tell him about Zero’s connection to his brother? Would it be so bad to see what happens, even without being entirely sure?

I clench my teeth, annoyed with myself for thinking of excuses to hear his voice. If I just give myself enough distance from him and focus on this whole thing like it’s a job, I’ll stop having this nagging feeling of wanting to be near him.

The static buzzes in my ear again. This time I halt, turn quiet, and listen carefully. Nothing. Only a few people are on the street with me now, each a nondescript silhouette. *Maybe someone’s trying to hack me.* I start an inspection of my NeuroLink system to make sure everything’s in order. Green text floats past my view, the scan looking normal.

Until it skips over running a diagnostic on my messages.

I frown, but before I can examine it closer, all the text vanishes from my view. It's replaced by a single white sentence.

I'm still waiting, Emika.

Every hair on the back of my neck rises. It's Zero.

CATWOMAN

SOULSTEALER

— DC ICONS —

SARAH J. MAAS

Random House  New York

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BEFORE



CHAPTER 1

The roaring crowd in the makeshift arena didn't set her blood on fire.

It did not shake her, or rile her, or set her hopping from foot to foot. No, Selina Kyle only rolled her shoulders—once, twice.

And waited.

The wild cheering that barreled down the grimy hallway to the prep room was little more than a distant rumble of thunder. A storm, just like the one that had swept over the East End on her walk from the apartment complex. She'd been soaked before she reached the covert subway entrance that led into the underground gaming warren owned by Carmine Falcone, the latest of Gotham City's endless parade of mob bosses.

But like any other storm, this fight, too, would be weathered.

Rain still drying in her long, dark hair, Selina checked that it was indeed tucked into its tight bun atop her head. She'd made the mistake once of wearing a ponytail—in her second street fight. The

other girl had managed to grab it, and those few seconds when Selina's neck had been exposed had lasted longer than any in her life.

But she'd won—barely. And she'd learned. Had learned at every fight since, whether on the streets above or in the arena carved into the sewers beneath Gotham City.

It didn't matter who her opponent was tonight. The challengers were all usually variations of the same: desperate men who owed more than they could repay to Falcone. Fools willing to risk their lives for a chance to lift their debt by taking on one of his Leopards in the ring.

The prize: never having to look over their shoulder for a waiting shadow. The cost of failing: having their asses handed to them—and the debts remained. Usually with the promise of a one-way ticket to the bottom of the Sprang River. The odds of winning: slim to none.

Regardless of whatever sad sack she'd be battling tonight, Selina prayed Falcone would give her the nod faster than last time. That fight . . . He'd made her keep that particularly brutal match going. The crowd had been too excited, too ready to spend money on the cheap alcohol and everything else for sale in the subterranean warren. She'd taken home more bruises than usual, and the man she'd beaten to unconsciousness . . .

Not her problem, she told herself again and again. Even when she saw her adversaries' bloodied faces in her dreams, both asleep and waking. What Falcone did with them after the fight was not her problem. She left her opponents breathing. At least she had that.

And at least she wasn't dumb enough to push back outright, like some of the other Leopards. The ones who were too proud or too stupid or too young to get how the game was played. No, her

small rebellions against Carmine Falcone were subtler. He wanted men dead—she left them unconscious, but did it so well that not one person in the crowd objected.

A fine line to walk, especially with her sister's life hanging in the balance. Push back too much, and Falcone might ask questions, start wondering who meant the most to her. Where to strike hardest. She'd never allow it to get to that point. Never risk Maggie's safety like that—even if these fights were all for her. Every one of them.

It had been three years since Selina had joined the Leopards, and nearly two and a half since she'd proved herself against the other girl gangs well enough that Mika, her Alpha, had introduced her to Falcone. Selina hadn't dared miss that meeting.

Order in the girl gangs was simple: The Alpha of each gang ruled and protected, laid down punishment and reward. The Alphas' commands were law. And the enforcers of those commands were their Seconds and Thirds. From there, the pecking order turned murkier. Fighting offered a way to rise in the ranks—or you could fall, depending on how badly a match went. Even an Alpha might be challenged if you were dumb or brave enough to do so.

But the thought of ascending the ranks had been far from Selina's mind when Mika had brought Falcone over to watch her take on the Second of the Wolf Pack and leave the girl leaking blood onto the concrete of the alley.

Before that fight, only four leopard spots had been inked onto Selina's pale left arm, each a trophy of a fight won.

Selina adjusted the hem of her white tank. At seventeen, she now had twenty-seven spots inked across both arms.

Undefeated.

That's what the match emcee was declaring down the hall. Selina could just make out the croon of words: *The undefeated champion, the fiercest of Leopards . . .*

Her hand drifted to the one item she was allowed to bring into the arena: the bullwhip.

Some Leopards opted for signature makeup or clothes to make their identities stand out in the ring. Selina had little money to spare for that kind of thing—not when a tube of lip gloss could cost as much as a small meal. But Mika had been unimpressed when Selina had shown up to her first official fight in her old gymnastics leotard and a pair of leggings.

You look like you're going to Jazzercise, her Alpha had said. *Let's give you some claws at least.*

All sorts of small weapons were allowed in the ring, short of knives and guns. But there hadn't been any on hand that night. No, there had only been the bullwhip, discarded in a pile of props from when this place had hosted some sort of alternative circus.

You've got ten minutes to figure out how to use it, Mika had warned Selina before leaving her to it.

She'd barely figured out how to snap the thing before she was shoved into the fighting ring. The whip had been more of a hindrance than a help in that first fight, but the crowd had loved it. And some small part of *her* had loved it, the crack that cleaved through the world.

So she'd learned to wield it. Until it became an extension of her arm, until it gave her an edge that her slight frame didn't offer. The high drama it provided in the ring didn't hurt, either.

A thump on the metal door was her signal to go.

Selina checked the bullwhip at her hip, her black spandex pants, the green sneakers that matched her eyes—though no one had ever

commented on it. She flexed her fingers within their wrappings. All good.

Or as good as could be.

Her muscles were loose, her body limber, courtesy of her old gymnastics warm-up, which she'd repurposed for these fights. Between the physical fighting, the whip, and the sheer acrobatics that she used both for show and to throw her heavier opponents off-balance, making sure her body was *ready* for these fights was half the battle.

The rusty door groaned as Selina opened it. Mika was tending to the new girl in the hall beyond, the flickering fluorescent lights draining the Alpha's golden skin of its usual glow.

Mika threw Selina an assessing look over her narrow shoulder, her black braid shifting with the movement. The white girl sniffing in front of her gingerly wiped away the blood streaming from her swollen nose. One of the kitten's eyes was already puffy and red, the other swimming with unshed tears.

No wonder the crowd was riled. If a Leopard had taken that bad a beating, it must have been one hell of a fight. Brutal enough that Mika put a hand on the girl's pale arm to keep her from swaying.

Down the shadowy hall that led into the arena, one of Falcone's bouncers beckoned. Selina shut the door behind her. She'd left no valuables. She had nothing worth stealing, anyway.

"Be careful," Mika said as Selina passed, the Asian girl's voice low and soft. "He's got a worse batch than usual tonight." The kitten hissed, yanking her head away as Mika dabbed her split lip with a disinfectant wipe. Mika snarled a warning at her, and the kitten wisely fell still, trembling a bit as the Alpha cleaned out the cut. Mika added without glancing back, "He saved the best for you. Sorry."

"He always does," Selina said coolly, even as her stomach roiled. "I can handle it."

She didn't have any other choice. Losing would leave Maggie with no one to look after her. And refusing to fight? Not an option, either.

In the three years that Selina had known Mika, the Alpha had never suggested ending their arrangement with Carmine Falcone. Not when having Falcone back the Leopards made the other East End gangs think twice about pushing in on their territory. Even if it meant doing these fights and offering up Leopards for the crowd's enjoyment.

Falcone turned it into a weekly spectacle—a veritable Roman circus to make the underbelly of Gotham City love *and* fear him. It certainly helped that many of the other notorious lowlifes had been imprisoned thanks to certain do-gooders running around the city in capes.

Mika eased the kitten to the prep room, giving Selina a jerk of the chin—an order to go.

But Selina paused to scan the hall, the exits. Even down here, in the heart of Falcone's territory, it was a death wish to be defenseless in the open. Especially if you were an Alpha with as many enemies as Mika.

Three figures slipped in from a door at the opposite end of the hall, and Selina's shoulders loosened a bit at the sight of the Latina girl who emerged. Ani, Mika's Second, with two other low-ranking Leopards flanking her.

Good. They'd guard the exit while their Alpha tended to their own.

The crowd's cheering rumbled through the concrete floor, rattling the loose ceramic tiles on the walls, echoing along Selina's

bones and breath as she neared the dented metal door to the arena. The bouncer gestured for her to hurry the hell up, but she kept her strides even. Stalking.

The Leopards, these fights . . . they were her job. And it paid well. With her mother gone and her sister sick, no legit job could pay as much or as quickly.

The Leopards had asked no questions three years ago. They hadn't wondered if she'd deliberately picked that fight with the Razor girl in the block courtyard—and another and another, until Mika came sniffing about the hothead in Building C.

Mika only told her that pulling this sort of shit in the East End would get her killed pretty fast, and that the Leopards could use a fighter like her. The Alpha didn't ask who had taught her to fight. Or how to take a punch.

The bouncer opened the door, the unfiltered roar of the crowd bursting down the hall like a pack of rabid wolves.

Selina Kyle blew out a long breath as she lifted her chin and stepped into the sound and the light and the wrath.

Let the bloodying begin.

Her hands were so swollen that she could barely handle her keys.

Their jangling filled her apartment complex's hallway, loud as a goddamn dinner bell.

It took every lingering scrap of concentration to keep her hand steady enough to slide the key into the top lock. Selina refused to look at the three others beneath it—each as imposing as a mountain peak.

Too long. Falcone had dragged out the fight for too long.

Mika hadn't been lying about her opponent. The man had been

a fighter himself. Not well trained, but big. Twice her weight. And desperate to repay his debt. His blows had hurt. To say the least.

But she'd won. Not by brute strength, but because she'd been smarter. When the injuries had started to pile up, when he'd managed to snatch the whip from her hand, when she'd temporarily lost sight in one eye thanks to the blood . . . she'd used simple physics against him. Her science teacher would be proud.

If she showed up to class tomorrow. Or next week.

The top lock snapped open.

Against larger, heavier opponents, pure physical strength wasn't her greatest ally. No, her own arsenal was something different: speed, agility, flexibility, mostly thanks to those countless gymnastics classes. And the bullwhip. All things that she might use to surprise her opponents—to harness the speed of a two-hundred-pound man charging at her and wield it against him. A few maneuvers, and that blind rush at her would turn into a flip onto his back. Or a face-first collision with one of the posts. Or the bullwhip around his leg, yanking his balance out from under him as she drove her elbow into his gut.

Always aim for the soft parts. She'd learned that before she'd ever set foot in the ring.

Her left eye still a bit blurry, Selina surveyed either side of the grayish-blue-painted hallway, skimming over the graffiti, the puddle of something that wasn't water. None of it threatening.

The shadowy parts of the hall . . . Precisely why there were four locks on this door. Why Maggie was to open it under *zero* circumstances. Especially for their mother. And whoever her mother might have with her.

There was still a dent in the metal door from the last time—six months ago.

A large, round dent, right beside the peephole, where the sweaty man who'd stood beside her strung-out mother had planted his fist when Selina refused to answer the door. They'd left only when a neighbor had threatened to call the cops.

There were nice people in this building. Good people. But calling the cops would have made things worse. Cops meant questions. Questions about their *living situation*.

Selina turned back to the door, assured that no one had slipped into those shadows. In the shape she was in . . . She managed to open the second lock. And the third.

Selina was just starting on the final lock when the elevator grumbled down the hall. The dented doors parted to reveal Mrs. Sullivan, grocery bags in one hand, keys threaded like metal claws through the fingers of her other.

Their eyes met as the ancient white woman hobbled down the hall, and Selina gave her a nod, praying the hood of the sweatshirt beneath her jacket concealed her face. The bullwhip, at least, was hidden down her back. Mrs. Sullivan frowned deeply, clicking her tongue, and hurried for her apartment. The woman had five locks.

Selina took her time with the final lock, well aware the woman was monitoring her every movement. She debated telling Mrs. Sullivan that she wasn't lingering because she was thinking of robbing her. Debated it, and decided against it at the sneer the old woman threw her way.

Trash—that was the word that danced in Mrs. Sullivan's eyes before she slammed shut the door to her apartment and all those locks clicked into place.

Selina was too sore to bother being pissed off by it. She'd heard worse.

She freed the last lock and entered the apartment, quickly

shutting and locking the door. Lock after lock after lock, then the chain at the very top.

The apartment was dim, illuminated only by the golden glow of the streetlights in the courtyard outside the two windows of their living room/kitchen. She was pretty sure there were people in Gotham City whose bathrooms were bigger than the entirety of this space, but at least she kept it as clean as she could.

The tang of tomato sauce and the sweetness of bread lingered in the air. A peek in the fridge revealed that Maggie had indeed eaten the food Selina had bought for her after school. A lot of it.

Good.

Shutting the fridge, Selina opened the freezer and fished out a bag of peas stashed beside a stack of frozen dinners. She pushed it against her throbbing cheek as she counted those frozen dinners—just three. Their meals for the rest of the week, once the Italian ran out.

Pressing the frozen peas to her face, savoring the cool bite, Selina stashed the bullwhip under the sink, toed off her sneakers, and padded over the dingy green carpet of the living area to the hallway with the bathroom and single bedroom across from it. The tiny bathroom was dark, empty. But to her left, a warm glow leaked from the door left ajar.

The wad of cash in her back pocket was still not enough. Not between rent and food and Maggie's tests and copays.

Her chest tight, she eased open the door with a shoulder, craning her head inside the bedroom. It was the only place of color in the apartment, painted buttercup yellow and plastered with Broadway posters Selina had been lucky enough to find when yet another East End school had been shut down and cleared out its theater department.

Those posters now watched over the girl in the bed, curled up under some cartoon kids' comforter that was about two sizes too small and ten years too worn. So was everything in the room—including the glowworm night-light Maggie still insisted be left on.

Selina didn't blame her. At thirteen, Maggie had dealt with enough shit to earn the right to do whatever she wanted. The labored, rasping breathing that filled the room was proof enough. Selina silently picked up one of the several inhalers beside Maggie's bed and checked the gauge. More than enough left if another coughing fit hit her tonight. Not that Selina wouldn't rush in here from her spot on the living room couch the moment she heard her sister's hacking coughs.

After plugging in the humidifier, Selina crept back to the living space and slumped into a cracked vinyl chair at the small table in the middle of the kitchen.

Everything ached. Everything throbbed and burned and begged her to lie down.

Selina checked the clock. Two a.m. They had school in . . . five hours. Well, Maggie had school. Selina certainly couldn't go with her face like this.

She fished the cash from her pocket and set it on the plastic table.

Hauling a small box in the center of the table toward her, Selina looted through it with the hand that hurt only a fraction less than the other. She'd have to be smart at the market—the EBT funds only stretched so far. Certainly not far enough to cover herself and a sister with severe cystic fibrosis. Selina had read up on food-as-medicine on a library computer while waiting for Maggie to finish her after-school theater class. Not a cure-all, but eating healthy

could help. *Anything* was worth a try. If it bought them time. If it brought Maggie any relief.

Cystic fibrosis—Selina couldn't remember a time when she hadn't known those words. What they meant: the incurable genetic disease that caused a buildup of mucus in several organs, but especially the lungs. The mucus clogged and blocked airways, where it trapped bacteria that at best led to infections. At worst: lung damage and respiratory failure.

And then there was the mucus that also built up in the pancreas, blocking the enzymes that helped break down food and absorb nutrients.

Selina had Googled it once: *life expectancy for severe cystic fibrosis*.

She'd closed the web browser and vomited into the library's toilet for thirty minutes afterward.

Selina studied the cash on the table and swallowed. The kinds of healthy foods Maggie needed didn't come cheap. The frozen microwave dinners were emergency meals. Garbage food. The fresh Italian meal Maggie had consumed tonight was a rare treat.

And perhaps an apology, for the fight Selina had left her sister in order to take part in.

"Your face."

The rasping words had Selina's head snapping up. "You should be asleep."

Maggie's curly brown hair was half wild, a pillow wrinkle running down her too-thin pale cheek. Only her green eyes—the single trait they shared, despite having two different fathers—were clear. Alert. "Don't forget to ice your hands. You won't be able to use them tomorrow if you don't."

Selina gave her sister a half smile, which only made her face

hurt more, and obeyed, transferring the peas from her throbbing face to the split, swollen skin of her knuckles. At least the swelling had gone down since the fight finished an hour ago.

Maggie slowly crossed the room, and Selina tried not to wince at the labored breathing, the quiet clearing of her sister's throat. The latest lung infection had taken its toll, and the color was gone from her usually pink cheeks. "You should go to the hospital," Maggie breathed. "Or let me clean you up."

Selina ignored both suggestions and asked, "How are you feeling?"

Maggie pulled the pile of cash toward her, eyes widening as she began counting wrinkled twenties. "Fine."

"You do your homework?"

A wry, exasperated look. "Yes. And tomorrow's."

"Good girl."

Maggie studied her, those green eyes too alert, too aware. "We've got the doctor tomorrow after school."

"What about it?"

Maggie finished counting the money and neatly set the stack into the small box with the EBT card. "Mom won't be there."

Neither would Maggie's father—whoever he was. Selina doubted even her mother knew. Selina's own father . . . She only knew what her mother had said during one of her rambling monologues while high: that her mother had met him through a friend at a party. Nothing more. Not even a name.

Selina moved the frozen peas from her right hand to her left. "No, she won't. But I will."

Maggie scratched at an invisible fleck on the table. "Auditions for the spring play are soon."

"You going to try out?"

A little shrug. "I want to ask the doctor if I can."

So responsible, her sister. "What musical is it this year?"

"*Carousel*."

"Have we watched that one?"

A shake of the head, those curls bouncing, and a beaming smile.

Selina smiled back. "But I assume we're going to watch it tomorrow night?" Friday night—movie night. Courtesy of a DVD player she and the Leopards had taken off the back of a truck, and the library's extensive movie section.

Maggie nodded. Broadway musicals: Maggie's not-so-secret dream and lifelong obsession. Selina had no idea where it had come from. They'd certainly never been able to afford theater tickets, but Maggie's school had taken plenty of field trips to Gotham City productions. Perhaps she'd picked it up at one of those outings, that undying love. Undimming, even when the cystic fibrosis battered her lungs so brutally that singing, standing on a stage, and dancing were difficult.

Perhaps a lung transplant might change that, but she was at the bottom of a long, long list. Even as Maggie's health plummeted with each passing month, she didn't move any higher. And the drugs that the doctors had hailed as breakthroughs that would add decades of life for some people with CF . . . Maggie hadn't responded to them.

But Selina wasn't about to tell her sister any of that. She'd never make her feel like there were limits to what she could do.

That Maggie was even willing to audition made Selina's chest unbearably tight.

"You should go to bed," Selina said to her sister, setting down the frozen peas.

"You should, too," Maggie said tartly.

Selina huffed a low laugh that made her aching body protest in agony. "We'll go together." She winced as she stood, and chucked the peas back in the freezer.

She'd just turned around when frail arms wrapped carefully around her waist. As if Maggie knew that bruises now bloomed on her ribs. "I love you, Selina," she said quietly.

Selina kissed the top of Maggie's head through the riot of curls and rubbed her sister's back, even as it made her fingers bark in pain.

Worth it, though—that pain as she held her sister, the fridge a steady hum around them.

Worth it.

"I don't understand how our copay the last time was so much cheaper."

It was an effort to keep her voice steady, to keep her hands from curling into fists on the counter of the hospital's checkout desk.

The aging woman in pink floral scrubs barely glanced up from her computer. "I can only tell you what the computer tells *me*." She pointed with a long purple nail to whatever was on the screen. "And this says you owe five hundred today."

Selina clenched her jaw so hard it ached, glancing over a shoulder to where Maggie waited in one of the plastic chairs against the white wall. Reading a book—but her eyes weren't darting over the page.

Selina kept her voice down, even though she knew Maggie

would just lean forward to eavesdrop. “Last month, it was a hundred.”

That purple nail tapped against the screen. “Dr. Tasker did tests today. Your insurance doesn’t cover them.”

“No one told me that.” Even if they had, Maggie *needed* those tests. Yet the results they’d received . . . Selina shoved the thought from her mind, along with what the doctor had said moments ago.

The woman finally looked up from her computer long enough to take in Selina. The swelling had gone down on her face, the bruises concealed with some expert makeup and artful arranging of her curtain of dark hair. The woman’s blue eyes narrowed. “Are you the parent or guardian?”

Selina just said, “We can’t pay that bill.”

“Then it’s something to take up with your insurance company.”

Yes, but Maggie would need more tests like the one she’d had today. The next one in two weeks. The third a month from now. Selina did the math and swallowed the tightness in her throat. “There’s nothing the hospital can do?”

The woman typed away, keys clacking. “It’s an issue for your insurance company.”

“Our insurance company will say it’s an issue for *you*.”

The clacking on those keys stopped. “Where’s your mother?” The woman glanced around Selina as if she’d find her mother standing a few feet away.

Selina was half tempted to tell the woman to take a stroll through an East End alley, since that was the only place their mother would be, dead or alive. Instead, she plucked up the insurance card that had been left on the counter and said flatly, “She’s at work.”

The woman didn't seem convinced. But she said, "We'll send the bill to your house."

Selina didn't bother replying as she turned and scooped up her sister's heavy backpack. Slinging it over a shoulder, she motioned for Maggie to follow her to the elevator bay.

"We don't have five hundred dollars," Maggie murmured while Selina punched the elevator button harder than was necessary.

No, between the food and rent and today's tests, the money from the fight wouldn't stretch far enough.

"Don't worry about it," Selina said, watching the elevator floors light up one by one.

Maggie wrapped her arms around herself. Not good—the news had not been good.

That crushing tunnel vision again crept up on Selina. Those five hundred dollars and those stupid tests and that bland-faced doctor saying, *There's no cure for CF, but let's try another route or two.*

She'd almost asked, *Before what?*

As Maggie continued to hold herself, her blunted, rounded fingertips—their shape another *screw you* from the disease—dug into her thin arms hard enough to make Selina wince.

Selina pried one of her sister's hands free and interlaced their fingers.

Squeezing tightly, neither sister let go the entire trek home.

The neighbors were really at each other's throats.

Barely five minutes after Selina had turned on the movie, the shouting and screeching had begun filtering in through the wall behind them. Curled up on the sagging, stained couch that also

served as Selina's bed, her sister tucked against one end with her feet in Selina's lap, Selina half listened to the drunken fight unfurling next door and the musical on the ancient TV in front of them.

Carousel. The music was fine, even if everyone was a bit too judgey and smiley and the dude was a total controlling loser-douchebag. Still, Maggie's head swayed and bobbed along.

The aroma of cheap mac and cheese clung to the air. Selina had offered to buy Maggie a real dinner out, but Maggie had wanted to just go home—tired, she'd said. She hadn't lost that grim-faced expression since the hospital. And there was enough of a nip in the air that Selina hadn't tried to convince her.

Not that they had the money. But after the doctor's not-so-sunny prognosis, what difference did thirty bucks make?

Selina eyed her flip phone sitting on the coffee table she'd propped her feet on. Mika and the other Leopards knew not to call on Fridays. Knew tonight was the only night Selina wouldn't show up, no matter the job or the threat.

But if Mika called right then, saying Falcone was hosting another fight and it'd pay big, she'd take it. She'd take three fights in a row.

Yet—no. She had to be smart about it. If she was hurt badly, the hospital social workers would come sniffing. Ask where their mother was, and likely recognize the tattoos inked down Selina's arms. Tattoos she kept covered year-round with long sleeves. Even with Maggie, she made sure to dress in the bathroom and never to roll her sleeves up too high while washing her hands.

But in the ring . . . those tattoos were on full display for her opponents. *Look how many have fallen*, they snarled at all who saw them. *You're next*.

The wall behind them thudded, rattling the two framed pic-

tures. The bigger one: a photo of her and Maggie from two years ago—the frame stolen, the photo a cheap printout off the school library printer. They'd been sitting on a bench in the park on a glorious fall day, the trees bright as jewels around them, and Maggie had asked a passing businesswoman to take the picture on her phone. The quality of the image wasn't great, but the light shining from Maggie's face was still undeniable.

And the second: a photo of Selina five years ago, midair as she executed a perfect backflip on a balance beam. One of many gymnastics competitions she'd participated in. And won. Her instructor at the Y had tried to convince her to keep going after those initial three years, claiming that she was remarkably gifted. But Maggie's illness had been getting worse, their mom had just bailed, and the time and money it would take to train and compete . . . Not an option. So Selina had stopped going to gymnastics class, had stopped picking up the coach's calls. Even if she still used everything she'd learned in her fights.

The crowds loved it, too. Perhaps more than the bullwhip. Their favorite: a back handspring into a backflip—right onto her opponent's shoulders. Where gravity and a squeeze of her legs around the throat did the work in bringing a man to his knees.

A string of curses shot through the apartment, and Maggie leaned forward to grab the remote off the table and punch up the volume. "This is the big number," her sister explained, eyes fixed on the screen. "The most famous song in the musical."

The controlling douchebag had indeed launched into a seemingly endless monologue.

"He's just found out that his wife is pregnant, and he's having a total freak-out."

"I'm watching," Selina said, brows lifting.

Maggie smiled, shaking her head. "You were listening to the neighbors."

Guilty. Selina gave her sister a wince of apology, and focused again on the musical.

Musing and brooding and gloating about the son he'd have, utter macho nonsense. "They're really putting this on at your school?"

Maggie hushed her with a waved hand. The song shifted, the jerk now mulling over what it'd be like with a daughter, more macho nonsense and misogynistic crap.

Selina slid her attention over to Maggie as the music shifted, rising. Her sister's beautiful green eyes were wide and bright. "This is the part," she whispered.

The music exploded, and her sister's lips moved, mouthing every word.

Mouthing, because those failing lungs couldn't hold enough air to make the sounds, and the latest infection in them had ripped away any chance of holding a note in key.

Maggie silently sang on, not missing a word.

Selina looked to the screen. To the crashing ocean and the man belting out every note, every dream to shelter and clothe and keep food on the table for his child. To attain money in any way he could, whether by theft or by making it honestly. His only alternative: die trying.

And for a moment, it seemed that even the neighbors quieted to hear it. The entire complex. All of the East End.

When Selina glanced back to her sister, Maggie was staring at her, mouth closed. Eyes bright with tears.

And it was the understanding on her sister's face, the way Maggie's damp eyes flicked to the bruises on Selina's own . . .

Selina made herself stay seated for another minute. Two. Five. Ten.

Maggie went back to watching the movie. The neighbors went back to screaming and cursing.

Then Selina casually rose, gently setting Maggie's blanket-wrapped feet on the couch before padding for the bathroom. She wondered if her sister saw her scoop up her phone.

Selina shut the bathroom door and ran the sink faucet on full blast.

She managed to close the lid on the toilet, at least, before she slumped onto it and covered her face with both hands, breathing hard between her fingers. The room pushed in, and she couldn't get air down fast enough, deep enough—

Her hand slid to her chest, as if she'd somehow will her lungs to open up—her lungs, and Maggie's lungs, wrecked and failing. *There are countless other desperate patients waiting for lung transplants*, the doctor had said this afternoon. *I would not count on it as an option.*

Unless you were rich enough to buy your way up that list. Or to buy yourself a pair on the black market.

Selina took gulping mouthfuls of air, hands shaking so badly she lowered them to her knees, gripping tight. They were fighting for twenty years at best. At worst . . .

The rate at which the disease has progressed and Maggie's resistance to the drugs are cause for concern, the doctor had gone on, speaking more to his flock of interns than to them.

Maggie hadn't asked him if she could be in the musical. Her sister had known. She'd known that this thing that made her come alive with joy, that gave her whatever slim shred of hope. It didn't matter how many fights Selina fought for her. How many stores

she looted with the Leopards. The blood and the bruises and the cracked ribs could not buy her sister a new set of lungs or a cure for this disease or a chance to stand on that school stage and belt her heart out.

Sobs threatened, shuddering beneath each breath.

Selina covered her face again, as if she could hide it—the tears that rose up within her like a tidal wave, that she pushed back and back and back.

Hands trembling, she grabbed the phone off the narrow sink counter, fingers shaking so wildly she could barely text Mika: *I need another fight. ASAP.*

Mika replied a few minutes later, *If you need cash, I've got you covered.*

Tempting, but too many complications. She wouldn't be able to repay Mika. And though she trusted her Alpha, this was the East End. Everyone needed cash, and Mika might be ruthless in getting it returned to her.

Fights are fine. Then, after a heartbeat, But thank you.

Mika's response came instantly: *Anything I should be concerned about?*

Not because she cared, but because if it was something that threatened the Leopards, she needed to know.

Just personal shit.

Whether the Leopards knew her sister was sick, she wasn't sure. She had never told them, and Mika wasn't the type to ask.

Mika replied, *You healed enough from last night to do it?*

No. Yes.

Selina blew out a breath, tears sinking back into her. Shutting off the faucet, she listened. The musical continued on—along with the neighbors' fighting.

She could steal the money, of course. Had done it in the past with the Leopards. Even enjoyed the puzzle that some burglaries offered: how to break inside a place, how to ease past the guards or security systems, how to avoid leaving a trace. But to go it alone . . . She hadn't done that yet. Wouldn't risk jail, not with fighting as a relatively safer option.

Mika only said, *I'll ask Falcone.*

Selina flipped her phone shut and flushed the toilet. Mercifully, her hands had stopped shaking by the time she emerged into the living room, where her sister was still bundled on the couch.

Maggie picked up the remote and paused the movie. Looking Selina over with eyes that missed nothing, not even the cell phone clenched in Selina's hand, Maggie asked quietly, "Can't you just ask for the money?"

Selina didn't care to guess how Maggie had figured it out as she slid her phone into her back pocket. "No."

She and the Leopards were often sent by Falcone to those in his debt. Either to remind them of the money owed or to exact punishment when the final warning had been ignored. It was ugly and dirty, and over her dead body would she be in his debt.

"But—"

"No."

Maggie opened her mouth again, green fire lighting her eyes, but a knock sounded on the door.

They froze. Not good. At this hour.

Another pounding knock. "*Police!*"

CHAPTER 2

Shit.

Selina had cataloged every possible exit from this apartment. She looked toward the window at the other end of the room. Could her sister make it down the fire escape fast enough to slip away?

She'd carry Maggie if she had to. Selina winced as she shot to her feet, lingering pain lashing through her body.

Maggie threw the blanket off her legs as the door rattled again. "What do we do?" she breathed.

If this was about the Leopards—

"We're looking for Maria Kyle," the officer said.

Selina blew out a breath that Maggie echoed. Thank God. They'd dealt with this in the past. Several times.

Hide, Maggie mouthed. The cops would surely start asking questions if they saw her bruises. Selina shook her head. But Maggie stood and pointed to the bedroom in a silent order.

Another pound on the door.

Selina limped over and confirmed it *was* two thickly built GCPD officers standing there, one dark-haired and the other balding and mustached, before heading for the bedroom closet.

A reliable hiding place in the past, a pocket of it tucked back far enough that she could remain hidden. Or put Maggie in there. Selina was just climbing in around the tightly packed clothes when Maggie opened the front door, locks clicking free.

Ears straining, Selina heard her sister say quietly, the portrait of sleepy confusion, “My mom didn’t come home tonight.”

One of the cops asked, “Can we come in?”

“I’m not allowed to let in strangers,” her sister said. “Even cops.”

A pause. Then a woman’s voice asked, “What about social workers, Maggie?”

Selina’s heart stopped dead.

There hadn’t been a woman outside when she looked, no mention of social services—

Maggie stammered, “Why? M-my mother isn’t here.”

“We know,” the woman said calmly but not gently. “She’s down at the precinct.”

Hangers rattling, Selina shoved out of the closet, pain barking down her body as she stepped over neatly folded piles of clothes, the room now a minefield keeping her from getting to the hall.

She stumbled into the living room, where Maggie stood before the open door, the two towering cops, and a small, fair woman in an ill-fitting suit. They all looked at her, the cops’ eyes narrowing as they beheld the bruises, the woman’s face tightening in disapproval.

“Good. I’m glad you’re here, too” was all the social worker said.

Maggie backed up to Selina’s side. The officers and the social worker pushed into the apartment, shutting the door behind them.

Selina knew the neighbors were likely listening through the walls as the social worker went on. "We picked up your mom earlier tonight. She's not in good shape." A glance around the apartment. "But I'm sure you know that."

"We do," Selina said evenly.

"You're not in good shape, either," the woman added.

"I'm fine. Just fell down the stairs yesterday."

"Must have been some fall," one of the cops said, crossing his thick arms. A gun, a billy club, and a Taser hung from his heavy belt.

Selina said, "We can't make her bail."

The social worker had the nerve to laugh quietly. "We're not here for that." A glance between her and Maggie. "We're here to bring you two in."

"Maggie's innocent," Selina said, pushing her sister behind her.

"And what about you?" the second cop said, brows rising on his meaty face.

Selina ignored him, meeting the social worker's stare. There was a grand stashed in the box taped under the kitchen sink. If they wanted to be paid off—

"Neither of you is in trouble, Selina Kyle," the social worker said, the embodiment of a bureaucratic, rule-abiding worker bee. "But as you're both underage and living here alone"—a glance around the apartment said the woman was well aware they'd been on their own for years—"we need to find a better living arrangement for you both. There are two very nice spots in homes waiting for you right now."

Foster homes. *Separate ones.*

The room, the sounds, her body . . . they all started to feel a bit distant.

"This is our home," Maggie said softly. "We're fine here."

"State doesn't think so," one of the cops said, his sandy mustache yellow against his pasty skin. "Two little girls living alone in *this* building?" The man walked over to the kitchen and began opening cabinets.

Selina's heart pounded with every groan and thud of the wood. And her hands began to shake as he stooped, opening the sink cabinets, and peered in. A rip of tape, and he chuckled as he stood, cashbox in his hands.

Flipping open the lid, he smiled at the money inside. Lifted the wad of bills and fanned them. His partner let out a low whistle of approval. "Been working on the side?" he asked Selina.

The way his eyes raked over her, she knew what kind of work he thought she did. "No" was all she said.

He'd known exactly where that box might be hidden. Perhaps he'd anticipated drugs instead. She should have been better at hiding it, figured out a smarter place for that money—

The social worker said, "You have a record."

"It was from three years ago." Selina's voice came out surprisingly even.

"You have two strikes," the social worker continued. "No judge will let you stay here." She gestured to their bedroom. "Go pack your bags. Bring enough stuff for a week or two."

Maggie shook her head. "I'm not going."

Selina watched as the mustached cop smiled at her and slid that grand into his pocket. Her stomach dropped to her feet, her pulse pounding through every battered inch of her.

Two corrupt cops were in her apartment. And an unsympathetic social worker. Not good. Not safe.

"Maggie," she murmured to her sister, "go pack your bags."

Her sister refused to move.

Selina turned to the woman, who had now crossed her slender arms. "My sister has a serious medical condition. A group home in some filthy house is not what she needs."

"Every foster home in our system is constantly inspected for cleanliness and safety. Any home she goes to will meet her needs."

Bullshit. She'd heard from girls in the Leopards that those homes were roach palaces at best.

"And as for Maggie's special needs," the woman said, patience running thin as her words turned clipped, "living with a sister who has a criminal record does not seem so safe, either."

Maggie snapped, "You don't know *anything*."

Selina shot her sister a warning look. "Go pack your bags."

Maggie shook her head, brown curls bouncing. "I'm not going."

"It's nearly one in the morning," the social worker coaxed. "Let's get you settled somewhere safe."

"I'm safe *here*," Maggie said, voice hitching.

At the sound of it, the way Maggie's voice broke with fear, Selina's blood started roaring.

Stay calm. Stay focused. Selina tried again. "If it's so late, then why don't we sleep here? You can pick us up in the morning."

"And come back to find you've skipped town?" asked the dark-haired cop who hadn't pocketed her money. "Not a chance. Get your stuff. Now."

No options. No choices. No way to figure this out.

Selina put a hand on Maggie's too-skinny arm. Medications. Maggie would need to bring all her medications with her—

The touch seemed to snap some leash in her sister.

Maggie bolted.

Not for the bedroom but for the apartment door.

For a moment, the world slowed and bent.

All Selina saw was her sister, so frail and small, sprinting past those cops, hair flying behind her. All she saw was the closest cop, the mustached one with their money in his pocket, lunging for Maggie, his enormous hand reaching for her delicate arm.

And as that hand closed around Maggie's arm, as her rasping inhale of breath, of *pain* at the tightness of that grip, filled the apartment, the world . . .

Selina exploded.

The dark-haired cop went down first. Uppercut to get his head up, then elbow to the nose to put him on the ground. He was unconscious before he hit the carpet.

The social worker screeched, but Selina was already on the mustached cop, now whirling toward her, that meaty hand still on Maggie's arm.

Selina barreled into him. He dropped Maggie immediately, both of his hands grappling to shove Selina off as they slammed into the wall, cracking plaster.

"*You little—*" His spat words were cut short as Selina ducked out of his grasp, dodged the fumble he made to grab her again, and her fist connected with his face.

Her body sang in agony, wounds ripping open, bruises bleating.

"*Run,*" she managed to say to Maggie.

But her sister remained frozen. Gaping, terror draining the color from her face.

Slim white hands wrapped around Maggie's arm again. The social worker. "She's not going anywhere."

And those hands, those hands and that cold, hateful face—

Selina shoved the woman. Hard.

Hard enough that the social worker went careening into the table, chairs scattering.

Maggie screamed, and Selina whirled, fists up, knees bending.

Too slow. The mustached cop had risen to his feet. She didn't have time to try to dodge before volts of pain tore through her. Before his leering, bloody face smiled as he dug a Taser right into her neck.

Agony barreled in—then the world tilted.

Then nothing.

The humming of the fluorescent lights was what awoke her.

Her tongue was a dry, thick weight in her mouth, her head a pounding mess, her body . . .

Sitting in a chair. Handcuffed to the metal table before her.

Precinct room.

Selina groaned quietly, surveying the space. Tiny. No one-way mirror. No speakers or cameras or anything.

She tugged on the cuffs linked to the table to see if they were secured.

They were.

Maggie—

The metal door hissed open, and Selina braced herself.

It wasn't the blond social worker in her cheap suit. Or the cop who looked at her a little too long.

A tall, slim woman with night-black hair and skin like golden honey entered instead.

Selina had seen enough of the various businessmen who Falcone liked to associate himself with to know that the white pantsuit was high quality. And from her work with Mika, she knew that the simple, elegant gold jewelry at her neck and ears was real and expensive. The manicured nails, the silky sheet of hair cut into

stylish layers, the full mouth painted red, were all markers that screamed *money*.

This was no social worker.

Those crimson nails tapped against a thick file in her hands as she approached the table and the empty chair before it. *Selina's* file.

Not good.

"Where's Maggie?" The words were a low rasp. Water—she needed some water. And aspirin.

"My name is Talia."

"Where. Is. Maggie."

Keeping her head upright took every bit of effort thanks to the Taser bruise that still radiated pain down her neck and spine.

"*Your* name is Selina Kyle, and you are seventeen years old. Three weeks away from being eighteen." A click of the tongue as she slid into the metal chair across the table, opened up that fat file, and began flipping through the pages. The table was too long for Selina to see what the woman examined. "For someone so young, you've certainly accomplished an impressive amount." *Flick, flap, hiss*. "Illegal betting, assault, robbery."

Shame and pride warred through her. Shame for the fact that if Maggie ever heard this, the unvarnished truth of her crimes . . . Selina knew she couldn't endure the look she'd see on her sister's face. Pride for the fact that she *had* done this, had survived in the best way she could, had given her sister what she could as well.

But Selina managed to keep her voice cool, bored, as she replied, "I was never convicted of the last two."

"No, but the charges are on here," Talia countered, tapping a red nail on the paper. "What you *will* be convicted of in a matter of days is aggravated battery of two police officers and a state worker."

Selina just stared at the woman from beneath lowered brows.

No way out of this room—this precinct. And even if she did make it, then she'd have to find Maggie. Which would be the first stop the cops would make, too.

Talia smiled slightly, revealing too-white teeth. "Did the police give you those bruises?"

Selina didn't reply.

Talia flicked through those papers again, scanning for something. "Or are those bruises and split knuckles from the fighting you do for Carmine Falcone?"

Silence. Leopards didn't talk. Selina hadn't the first two times she'd been here. She wasn't about to now.

"Do you know what it means to be three weeks away from eighteen in Gotham City?" Talia leaned forward, resting her arms on the metal table. There was a slight accent to her words, some rolling purr.

"I can buy lotto tickets?"

Again, that hint of a smile. "It means you will be lucky if the judge tries you as a juvenile. It's your third strike. You're looking at bars no matter what. The question is whether it's kiddie prison or the big girls club."

"Where. Is. Maggie."

The question was a roar in her blood—a screaming, thrashing demand.

Talia leaned back in her chair and slid a paper-clipped file toward Selina. "Your sister is at a group home. In the Bowery of the East End."

Oh God. If their apartment complex was garbage, then the Bowery was the entire dump. The gangs in that area . . . Even Falcone didn't mess with them.

Selina set her bound hands on the file Talia had pushed over,

the photo of a grimy, cramped bedroom atop it. Maggie's *new* bedroom. She turned the paper over, fingers curling.

"Lord knows who is running that home," Talia mused, flipping through the rest of Selina's file.

"Are you trying to piss me off so they can add assaulting a grade A asshole to my rap sheet?"

The question was out, low and growling, before Selina could reconsider.

Talia laughed, a light and silvery sound. "Do you think you could do it? Handcuffed?"

A faint click sounded in answer.

Rotating her free wrist, Selina dropped the straightened paper clip onto the metal table. A sleight of hand—turning over that photo of Maggie's foster home to distract the eye while she palmed the paper clip. And then used it and some careful angling to spring a handcuff free. She'd bought a pair a few years ago to use for practice, to learn how the locking mechanism worked. For precisely this sort of moment.

Talia smiled again, full and wide, and let out a satisfied hum. "Clever girl." She jerked her chin toward Selina's free hand. "I'd suggest putting it back on. You know how uptight the police can be about such things."

She did. And she knew that even if she unlocked the other cuff and pummeled this woman's face in, she still wouldn't make it out of this holding room or the precinct.

Selina clicked the handcuff back around her wrist. Leaving it loose enough that she could free herself again, should the need arise.

Talia watched every movement, head angled to the side, dark hair shifting. "I'm here to offer you a bargain, Selina Kyle."

Selina waited.

Talia closed her file. "I run a vocational school for young women like you. Physically skilled, yes." A nod toward the cuffs, the bruises on her face. "But *smart* most of all." She placed a hand on the file. "I've got chart after chart of your grades. Your exam scores. Do your little kitty-cat friends know you're top of your class and that you aced all statewide exams?"

"I don't know what you're talking about." She'd made sure the Leopards never heard about it as well. Being good in the ring with the bullwhip and gymnastics was about as much talent as she'd let show. Selina leaned forward a bit. "Acing tests doesn't win fights."

Another laugh, this one low and sultry. "You know, if your frequent absences didn't bar you from graduating this year, you might have been able to have your pick of scholarships."

College wasn't a possibility. Not with Maggie to look after.

"This school of mine, though," Talia said, tracing a nail over the surface of the file. Like a long red talon. "It would be a new start. And a better fit than juvie. Or prison."

With every passing minute she spent in here, Maggie was in that disgusting home, breathing in filth and dirt.

"The catch, before you ask, is that my school is located in the Dolomites of Italy. And your sister cannot come."

Selina blinked, processing what the woman had said. A school in Italy. No Maggie.

"If you come with me," Talia went on, "I can make this record"—a tap of the hand on the file—"vanish. Forever."

Selina studied the file and then Talia's beautiful face. These offers didn't come without major strings.

"I don't give a shit about the record," Selina said. "I want Maggie out of that house."

Talia blinked, the only sign of surprise.

"I want my sister put in a single-family foster home. With good people who are willing to adopt her. Somewhere in a cushy suburb. No gangs, no violence, no drugs."

Silence.

Selina added softly, "And I want you to make sure my mother is never able to get her hands on Maggie again."

The lights above hummed. Talia's hand scraped over the rough surface of the file folder as she slid her hands into her lap. "You're in no position to make demands."

Selina leaned back in her chair, refusing to break the woman's dark gaze. "If you want me so badly for your human-trafficking club, you'll do it."

Talia burst out laughing. There was no joy in the sound.

Selina rolled her shoulders and waited.

Talia chuckled once more before tossing her sheet of hair over a shoulder. "I'll make it happen."

Selina didn't let her shock show.

"There is one more condition," Talia said, rising from the table.

Of course there was. Selina monitored her every breath.

"We leave tonight," Talia said. "And you will not get to say good-bye."

For a moment, Selina didn't hear the words, or the hum of the lights, or the click of Talia's beige heels as she strutted for the door. She heard that damned *Carousel* song.

And Selina was still hearing it as she said, voice thick, "Take off the cuffs."

* * *

The tarmac of the private airport was empty.

Empty save for the sleek white jet idling just off the runway, its steps already lowered to reveal a near-glowing wooden interior.

The perfect match to the Aston Martin that Selina had just vacated. Talia was already striding toward the plane.

Rubbing her wrists, Selina stalked after the woman, glancing toward the glittering city skyline to their left. The eastern horizon was just beginning to lighten. Dawn.

Her body ached. Everything ached. Not just bone and flesh.

Selina shoved down the thought as she took in Gotham City. The light and the shadow.

A cool wind whipped at her face, dragging strands of her hair free as she caught up to Talia's side just before the woman began to ascend the steps into the private plane. A flight attendant waited at the top of the stairs, a tray with two glasses of champagne fizzing in her hands.

"Is this your plane?" Selina asked as Talia braced a hand on the stair rail and set a well-heeled foot on the first step.

"It is."

This school, then . . . Selina again glanced toward the city's horizon. To where she prayed Maggie was being shuttled through the streets to the trees and open air and quiet of the suburbs.

She swallowed, trailing Talia up the narrow steps of the plane. The private plane.

"Are you a Wayne or something?" The Waynes did plenty of charity work, and a fancy Italian school for wayward young women didn't seem beyond them.

Talia let out a low laugh and didn't bother to turn as she reached the top stair, swiped a flute of champagne from the flight attendant, and said, "No. My family name is al Ghül."

READ ON FOR AN
EXCLUSIVE FIRST LOOK AT

Spinning Silver

by Naomi Novik

COMING JULY 2018

This book contains an excerpt from the forthcoming book
Spinning Silver by Naomi Novik.

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Chapter 1

The real story isn't half as pretty as the one you've heard. The real story is, the miller's daughter with her long golden hair wants to catch a lord, a prince, a rich man's son, so she goes to the moneylender and borrows for a ring and a necklace and decks herself out for the festival. And she's beautiful enough, so the lord, the prince, the rich man's son notices her, and dances with her, and tumbles her in a quiet hayloft when the dancing is over, and afterwards he goes home and marries the rich woman his family has picked out for him. Then the miller's despoiled daughter tells everyone that the moneylender's in league with the devil, and the village runs him out or maybe even stones him, so at least she gets to keep the jewels for a dowry, and the blacksmith marries her before that firstborn child comes along a little early.

Because that's what the story's really about: getting out of paying your debts. That's not how they tell it, but I knew. My father was a moneylender, you see.

He wasn't very good at it. If someone didn't pay him back on time, he never so much as mentioned it to them. Only if our cupboards were really bare, or our shoes were falling off our feet, and my mother spoke quietly with him after I was in bed, then he'd go, unhappy, and knock on a few doors, and make it sound like an apology when he asked for some of what they owed. And if there was money in the house and someone asked to borrow, he hated to say no, even if we didn't really have enough ourselves. So all his money, most of which had been my mother's money, her dowry, stayed in other people's houses. And everyone else liked it that way, even though they knew they ought to be ashamed of themselves, so they told the story often, even or especially when I could hear it.

My mother's father was a moneylender, too, but he was a very good one. He lived in Vysnia, forty miles away by the pitted old trading road that dragged from village to village like a string full of small dirty knots. Mama often took me on visits, when she could afford a few pennies to pay someone to let us ride along at the back of a peddler's cart or a sledge, five or six changes along the way. Sometimes we caught glimpses of the other road through the trees, the one that belonged to the Saryk, gleaming like the top of the river in winter

when the snow had blown clear. "Don't look, Miryem," my mother would tell me, but I always kept watching it out of the corner of my eyes, hoping to keep it near, because it meant a quicker journey: whoever was driving the cart would slap the horses and hurry them up until it vanished again.

One time, we heard the hooves behind us as they came off their road, a sound like ice cracking, and the driver beat the horses quick to get the cart behind a tree, and we all huddled there in the well of the wagon among the sacks, my mother's arm wrapped around my head holding it down so I couldn't be tempted to take a look. They rode past us and did not stop. It was a poor peddler's cart, covered in dull tin pots, and Saryk knights only ever came riding for gold. The hooves went jangling past, and a knife-wind blew over us, so when I sat up the end of my thin braid was frosted white, and all of my mother's sleeve where it wrapped around me, and our backs. But the frost faded, and as soon as it was gone, the peddler said to my mother, "Well, that's enough of a rest, isn't it," as if he didn't remember why we had stopped.

"Yes," my mother said, nodding, as if she didn't remember either, and he got back up onto the driver's seat and clucked to the horses and set us going again. I was young enough to remember it afterwards a little, and not old enough to care about the Saryk as much as about the ordinary cold biting through my clothes, and

my pinched stomach. I didn't want to say anything that might make the cart stop again, impatient to get to the city and my grandfather's house.

My grandmother would always have a new dress for me, plain and dull brown but warm and well made, and each winter a pair of new leather shoes that didn't pinch my feet and weren't patched and cracked around the edges. She would feed me to bursting three times every day, and the last night before we left she would always make cheesecake, her cheesecake, which was baked golden on the outside and thick and white and crumbly inside and tasted just a little bit of apples, and she would make decorations with sweet golden raisins on the top. After I had slowly and lingeringly eaten every last bite of a slice wider than the palm of my hand, they would put me to bed upstairs, in the big cozy bedroom where my mother and her sisters had slept as girls, in the same narrow wooden bed carved with doves. My mother would sit next to her mother by the fireplace, and put her head on her shoulder. They wouldn't speak, but when I was a little older and didn't fall asleep right away, I would see in the firelight glow that both of them had a little wet track of tears down their faces.

We could have stayed. There was room in my grandfather's house, and welcome for us. But we always went home, because we loved my father. He was terrible with money, but he was endlessly warm and gentle, and

he tried to make up for his failings: he spent nearly all of every day out in the cold woods hunting for food and firewood, and when he was indoors there was nothing he wouldn't do to help my mother. No talk of woman's work in my house, and when we did go hungry, he went hungriest, and snuck food from his plate to ours. When he sat by the fire in the evenings, his hands were always working, whittling some new little toy for me or something for my mother, a decoration on a chair or a wooden spoon.

But winter was always long and bitter, and every year I was old enough to remember was worse than the one before. Our town was unwallled and half nameless; some people said it was called Pakel, for being near the road, and those who didn't like that, because it reminded them of being near the Staryk road, would shout them down and say it was called Pavys, for being near the river, but no one bothered to put it on a map, so no decision was ever made. When we spoke, we all only called it *town*. It was welcome to travelers, a third of the way between Vysnia and Minask, and a small river crossed the road running from east to west. Many farmers brought their goods by boat, so our market day was busy. But that was the limit of our importance. No lord concerned himself very much with us, and the tsar in Koron not at all. I could not have told you who the tax collector worked for until one visit to my grandfather's house I learned accidentally that the Duke of

Vysnia was angry because the receipts from our town had been creeping steadily down year-to-year. The cold kept stealing out of the woods earlier and earlier, eating at our crops.

And the year I turned sixteen, the Staryk came, too, during what should have been the last week of autumn, before the late barley was all the way in. They had always come raiding for gold, once in a while; people told stories of half-remembered glimpses, and the dead they left behind. But over the last seven years, as the winters worsened, they had grown more rapacious. There were still a few leaves clinging to the trees when they rode off their road and onto ours, and they went only ten miles past our village to the rich monastery down the road, and there they killed a dozen of the monks and stole the golden candlesticks, and the golden cup, and all the icons painted in gilt, and carried away that golden treasure to whatever kingdom lay at the end of their own road.

The ground froze solid that night with their passing, and every day after that a sharp steady wind blew out of the forest carrying whirls of stinging snow. Our own little house stood apart and at the very end of town, without other walls nearby to share in breaking the wind, and we grew ever more thin and hungry and shivering. My father kept making his excuses, avoiding the work he couldn't bear to do. But even when my mother finally pressed him and he tried, he only came

back with a scant handful of coins, and said in apology for them, "It's a bad winter. A hard winter for everyone," when I didn't believe they'd even bothered to make him that much of an excuse. I walked through town the next day to take our loaf to the baker, and I heard women who owed us money talking of the feasts they planned to cook, the treats they would buy in the market. It was coming on midwinter. They all wanted to have something good on the table; something special for the festival, their festival.

So they had sent my father away empty-handed, and their lights shone out on the snow and the smell of roasting meat slipped out of the cracks while I walked slowly back to the baker, to give him a worn penny in return for a coarse half-burned loaf that hadn't been the loaf I'd made at all. He'd given a good loaf to one of his other customers, and kept a ruined one for us. At home my mother was making thin cabbage soup and scrounging together used cooking oil to light the lamp for the third night of our own celebration, coughing as she worked: another deep chill had rolled in from the woods, and it crept through every crack and eave of our run-down little house. We only had the flames lit for a few minutes before a gust of it came in and blew them out, and my father said, "Well, perhaps that means it's time for bed," instead of relighting them, because we were almost out of oil.

By the eighth day, my mother was too tired from

coughing to get out of bed at all. “She’ll be all right soon,” my father said, avoiding my eyes. “This cold will break soon. It’s been so long already.” He was whittling candles out of wood, little narrow sticks to burn, because we’d used the last drops of oil the night before. There wasn’t going to be any miracle of light in our house.

He went out to scrounge under the snow for some more firewood. Our box was getting low, too. “Miryem,” my mother said, hoarsely, after he left. I took her a cup of weak tea with a scraping of honey, all I had to comfort her. She sipped a little and lay back on the pillows and said, “When the winter breaks, I want you to go to my father’s house. He’ll take you to my father’s house.”

The last time we had visited my grandfather, one night my mother’s sisters had come to dinner with their husbands and their children. They all wore dresses made of thick wool, and they left fur cloaks in the entryway, and had gold rings on their hands, and gold bracelets. They laughed and sang and the whole room was warm, though it had been deep in winter, and we ate fresh bread and roast chicken and hot golden soup full of flavor and salt, steam rising into my face. When my mother spoke, I inhaled all the warmth of that memory with her words, and longed for it with my cold hands curled into painful knots. I thought of going there to stay, a beggar girl, leaving my father alone and my mother’s gold forever in our neighbors’ houses.

I pressed my lips together hard, and then I kissed her forehead and told her to rest, and after she fell fitfully asleep, I went to the box next to the fireplace where my father kept his big ledger-book. I took it out and I took his worn pen out of its holder, and I mixed ink out of the ashes in the fireplace and I made a list. A money-lender's daughter, even a bad moneylender, learns her numbers. I wrote and figured and wrote and figured, interest and time broken up by all the little haphazard scattered payments. My father had every one carefully written down, as scrupulous with all of them as no one else ever was with him. And when I had my list finished, I took all the knitting out of my bag, put my shawl on, and went out into the cold morning.

I went to every house that owed us, and I banged on their doors. It was early, very early, still dark, because my mother's coughing had woken us in the night. Everyone was still at home. So the men opened the doors and stared at me in surprise, and I looked them in their faces and said, cold and hard, "I've come to settle your account."

They tried to put me off, of course; some of them laughed at me. Oleg the carter with his big hands closed them into fists and put them on his hips and stared at me while his small squirrelish wife kept her head down over the fire, darting eyes towards me. Kajus, who had borrowed two gold pieces the year before I was born, and did a good custom in the krupnik he brewed in the

big copper kettles he'd bought with the money, smiled at me and asked me to come inside and warm myself up, have a hot drink. I refused. I didn't want to be warmed. I stood on their doorsteps, and I brought out my list, and I told them how much they had borrowed, and what little they had paid, and how much interest they owed besides.

They spluttered and argued and some of them shouted. No one had ever shouted at me in my life: my mother with her quiet voice, my gentle father. But I found something bitter inside myself, something of that winter blown into my heart: the sound of my mother coughing, and the memory of the story the way they'd told it in the village square so many times, about a girl who made herself a queen with someone else's gold, and never paid her debts. I stayed in their doorways, and I didn't move. My numbers were true, and they and I knew it, and when they'd shouted themselves out, I said, "Do you have the money?"

They thought it was an opening. They said no, of course not; they didn't have such a sum.

"Then you'll pay me a little now, and again every week, until your debt is cleared," I said, "and pay interest on what you haven't paid, if you don't want me to send to my grandfather to bring the law into it."

None of them traveled very much. They knew my mother's father was rich, and lived in a great house in Vysnia, and had loaned money to knights and even,

rumor had it, to a lord. So they gave me a little, grudgingly; only a few pennies in some houses, but every one of them gave me something. I let them give me goods, too: twelve yards of warm woolen cloth in deep red, a jar of oil, two dozen good tall candles of white beeswax, a new kitchen knife from the blacksmith. I gave them all a fair value—the price they would have charged someone else, not me, buying in the market—and I wrote down the numbers in front of them, and told them I would see them next week.

On my way home, I stopped in at Lyudmila's house. She didn't borrow money; she could have lent it herself, but she couldn't have charged interest, and anyway no one in our town would have been foolish enough to borrow from anyone but my father, who would let them pay as they liked or didn't. She opened the door with her practiced smile on: she took in travelers overnight. It came off when she saw me. "Well?" she said sharply. She thought I had come to beg.

"My mother is sick, Panova," I said, politely, so she'd keep thinking it just a little longer, and then be relieved when I went on to say, "I've come to buy some food. How much for soup?"

I asked her the price of eggs after, and bread, as though I were trying to fit them to a narrow purse, and because she didn't know otherwise, she just brusquely told me the prices instead of inflating them twice over. Then she was annoyed when I finally counted out six

pennies for a pot of hot soup with half a chicken in it, and three fresh eggs, and a soft loaf, and a bowl of honeycomb covered with a napkin. But she gave them to me grudgingly, and I carried them down the long lane to our house.

My father had come back home before me; he was feeding the fire, and he looked up worried when I shouldered my way in. He stared at my arms full of food and red wool. I put my load all down and I put the rest of the pennies and the one silver kopek into the jar next to our hearth, where there were only a couple of pennies left otherwise, and I gave him the list with the payments written on it, and then I turned to making my mother comfortable.

After that, I was the moneylender in our town. And I was a good moneylender, and a lot of people owed us money, so very soon the straw of our floor was smooth boards of golden wood, and the cracks in our fireplace were chinked with good clay and our roof was thatched fresh, and my mother had a fur cloak to sleep under or to wear, to keep her chest warm. She didn't like it at all, and neither did my father, who went outside and wept quietly to himself the day I brought the cloak home. Odeta, the baker's wife, had offered it to me as payment

in full of her family's debt. It was beautiful, dark and light browns; she'd brought it with her when she married, made of ermines her father had hunted in the boyar's woods.

That part of the old story turned out to be true: you have to be cruel to be a good moneylender. But I was ready to be as merciless with our neighbors as they'd been with my father. I didn't take firstborn children exactly, but one week late in the spring, when the roads were finally clear again, I walked out to one of the peasant farmers in the far fields, and he had nothing to pay me with, not even a spare loaf of bread. Gorek had borrowed six silver kopeks, a sum he'd never repay if he made a crop every year of the rest of his life; I didn't believe he'd ever had more than five pennies in his hand at once. He tried to curse me out of the house at first casually, as many of them did, but when I held my ground and told him the law would come for him, real desperation came into his voice. "I have four mouths to feed!" he said. "You can't suck blood from a stone."

I should have felt sorry for him, I suppose. My father would have, and my mother, but wrapped in my coldness, I only felt the danger of the moment. If I forgave him, took his excuses, next week everyone would have an excuse; I saw everything unraveling again from there.

Then his tall daughter came staggering in, a kerchief over her long yellow braids and a heavy yoke

across her shoulders, carrying two buckets of water, twice as much as I could manage when I went for water to the well myself. I said, "Then your daughter will come work in my house to pay off the debt, for half a penny every day," and I walked home pleased as a cat, and even danced a few steps to myself in the road, alone under the trees.

Her name was Wanda. She came silently to the house at dawn the next morning, worked like an ox until dinner, and left silently after; she kept her head down the entire time. She was very strong, and she took almost all the burden of the housework even in just that half day. She carried water and chopped wood, and tended the small flock of hens we now had scratching in our yard, and scrubbed the floors and our hearth and all our pots, and I was well satisfied with my solution.

After she left, for the first time in my life my mother spoke to my father in anger, in blame, as she hadn't even when she was most cold and sick. "And you don't care for what it does to her?" I heard her crying out to him, her voice still hoarse, as I knocked the mud from my boot heels at the gate; without the morning work to do, I had borrowed a donkey and gone all the way to the farthest villages to collect money from people who'd probably thought they'd never see anyone ever come for it again. The winter rye was in, and I had two full sacks of grain, another two of wool, and a big bag of my mother's favorite hazelnuts that had been kept fresh

all winter out in the cold, along with an old but good nutcracker made of iron, so we wouldn't have to shell them with the hammer anymore.

"What shall I say to her?" he cried back. "What shall I say? No, you shall starve; no, you shall go cold and you will wear rags?"

"If you had the coldness to do it yourself, you could be cold enough to let her do it," my mother said. "Our daughter, Josef!"

That night, my father tried to say something to me quietly, stumbling over the words: I'd done enough, it wasn't my work, tomorrow I'd stay home. I didn't look up from shelling the hazelnuts, and I didn't answer him, holding the cold knotted under my ribs. I thought of my mother's hoarse voice, and not the words she'd said. After a little while he trailed off. The coldness in me met him and drove him back, just as it had when he'd met it in the village, asking for what he was owed.

Chapter 2

Da would often say he was going to the money-lender. He would get money for a new plow, or to buy some pigs, or a milch cow. I did not really know what money was. Our cottage was far from town and we paid tax in sacks of grain. Da made it sound like magic, but Mama made it sound dangerous. “Don’t go, Gorek,” she would say. “There’s always trouble where there’s money owed, sooner or later.” Then Da would shout at her to mind her own business and slap her, but he wouldn’t go.

He went when I was eleven. Another baby had come and gone in the night and Mama was sick. We hadn’t needed another baby. We already had Sergey and Stepon and the four dead ones in the ground by the white tree. Da always buried the babies there even though the ground was hard to dig, because he didn’t want to spare planting ground. He could not plant any-

thing too close to the white tree anyway. It would eat up anything around it. The rye seedlings would sprout and then one cold morning they would all be withered and the white tree would have some more white leaves on it. And he could not cut it down. It was all white, so it belonged to the Staryk. If he cut it down, they would come and kill him. So all we could plant there was the dead babies.

After Da came back in angry and sweating from burying the new dead baby, he said loudly, "Your mother needs medicine. I am going to the money-lender." We looked at each other, me and Sergey and Stepon. They were only little, too scared to say anything, and Mama was too sick to say anything. I didn't say anything either. Mama was still lying in the bed and there was blood and she was hot and red. She did not say anything when I talked to her. She only coughed. I wanted Da to bring back magic and make her get out of bed and be well again.

So he went. He drank up two kopeks in town and lost two gambling before he came home with the doctor. The doctor took the last two kopeks and gave me some powder to mix with hot water and give to Mama. It didn't stop the fever. Three days later I was trying to give her some water to drink. She was coughing again. "Mama, I have some water," I said. She did not open her eyes. She put her big hand on my head, strange and loose and heavy, and then she died. I sat with her the

rest of the day until Da came home from the fields. He looked down at her silently, and then he told me, "Change the straw." He took her body over his shoulder like potatoes and carried her out to the white tree and buried her next to the dead babies.

The moneylender came a few months after that and asked for the money back. I let him in when he came. I knew he was a servant of the devil but I wasn't afraid of him. He was very narrow, hands and body and face. Mama had an icon nailed to the wall that was carved out of a skinny branch. He looked like that. His voice was quiet. I gave him a cup of tea and a piece of bread because I remembered Mama always gave people something to eat if they came to the house.

When Da came home he shouted the moneylender out of the house. Then he beat me five big wallops with his belt for letting him in at all, much less giving him food. "What business has he got coming here? You can't get blood from a stone," he said, putting his belt back on. I kept my face in my mother's apron until I stopped crying.

He said the same thing when the tax collector came to our house, but he only said it under his breath. The tax collector always came the day we brought in the last of the grain harvest, winter and spring. I didn't know how he always knew, but he knew. After he left, the tax was paid. Whatever he did not take, that was for us to live on. There was never very much. In winter, Mama

used to say to Da, “We will eat that in November, and that in December,” and point to this and that until everything was divided up until spring. But Mama was not there anymore. So Da took one of the kid goats away to town. That night he came back very late and drunk. We were sleeping in the house next to the oven and he tripped over Stepon when he came in. Stepon cried and then Da got angry and took off his belt and hit us all until we ran out of the house. That mama goat stopped giving milk, and we ran out of food at the end of winter. We had to dig under the snow for old acorns until spring.

But the next winter when the tax collector came, Da took a sack of grain to town anyway. We all went to sleep in the shed with the goats. Sergey and Stepon were all right, but Da beat me the next day anyway when he was sober, because his dinner was not ready when he came home. So the next year I waited in the house until I saw Da coming down the road. Da had a lantern with him that was swaying in big circles because he was so drunk. I put the hot food in a bowl on the table and ran out. It was already dark but I did not take a candle because I did not want Da to see me leaving.

I meant to go to the shed, but I kept looking behind me to see if Da was coming after me. His lantern was swinging inside the house making eyes of the windows looking for me. But then it stopped moving, so he had put it onto the table. Then I thought I was safe. I started

to look where I was walking, but I could not see in the dark, because I had been looking at the bright windows, and I was not on the path to the shed. I was in the deep snow. There was no sound of the goats or even the pigs. It was a dark night.

I thought I had to come to the fence or the road sooner or later. I kept walking with my hands held out to catch the fence but I didn't come to it. It was dark and first I was afraid, and then I was only cold, and then I was also getting sleepy. My toes were numb. Snow was getting into the cracks between the woven bark of my shoes.

Then ahead of me there was a light. I went towards it. I was near the white tree. Its branches were narrow and all the white leaves were still on it even though it was winter. The wind blew them and they made a noise like someone whispering too quiet to hear. On the other side of the tree there was a broad road, very smooth like ice and shining. I knew it was the Staryk road. But it was so beautiful, and I still felt very strange and cold and sleepy. I did not remember to be afraid. I went to walk onto it.

The graves were in a row under the tree. There was one flat stone at the top of each one. Mama had gotten them out of the river for the others. I had gotten one for her, and the last baby. Theirs were smaller than the others because I could not carry as big a stone as Mama yet. When I stepped over the row of stones to go to the

road, a branch of the tree hit me on my shoulders. I fell down hard. All my breath was knocked out. The wind blew the white leaves and I heard them say, *Run home, Wanda!* Then I was not sleepy anymore, and I was so afraid I got up and I ran all the way back to the house. I could see it a long way off because the lantern was still in the windows. Da was already snoring on his bed.

A year later old Jakob our neighbor came to the house and asked Da for me. He wanted Da to give him a goat, too, so Da threw him out of the house, saying, "A virgin, healthy, a strong back, and he wants a goat from me!"

I worked very hard after that. I took as much of Da's work as I could. I didn't want to make a row of dead babies and die. But I got tall and my hair was yellow and long and my breasts grew. Two more men asked for me over the next two years. The last one I didn't know at all. He came from the other side of town, six miles away. He even offered a bride price of one pig. But my hard work had made Da greedy by then, and he said three pigs. The man spat on the floor and walked out of the house.

But the harvests were going very bad. The snow melted later every year in spring and came sooner in the fall. After the tax collector took his share, there was

not much left for drinking. I had learned to hide food in places so we did not run out so badly in winter as the first year, but Sergey and Stepon and me were all getting bigger. The year I was sixteen, after the spring harvest, Da came back from town only half drunk and sour. He didn't beat me, but he looked at me like I was one of the pigs, weighing me in his head. "You'll come to market with me next week," he told me.

The next day I went out to the white tree. I had stayed away from it ever since that night I saw the Staryk road, but that day I waited until the sun was up high. Then I said I was going for water, but I went to the tree instead. I knelt down under the branches and said, "Help me, Mama."

Two days later, the moneylender's daughter came to the house. She was like her father, a skinny branch with dark brown hair and thin cheeks. She was not as high as Da's shoulder, but she stood in front of the door and threw a long shadow into the house and said she would have the law on him if he did not pay her back the money. He shouted at her, but she was not afraid. When he was done telling her there wasn't blood to be had from a stone, and showing her the empty cupboard, she said, "Your daughter will come and work for me, then, in payment of your debt."

When she was gone, I went back to the white tree and said, "Thank you, Mama," and between the roots I buried an apple, a whole apple, though I was so hungry

I could have eaten it with all the seeds. Above my head, the tree put out a very small white flower.

I went to the moneylender's house the next morning. I was afraid to go to town, alone, but it was better than going to the market with Da. I didn't really have to go into town anyway: their house was the first out of the forest. It was big, with two rooms and a floor of smooth fresh-smelling wood boards. The moneylender's wife was in bed in the back room. She was sick and coughing. It made my shoulders tight and hard to hear it.

The moneylender's daughter was named Miryem. That morning she put on a pot of soup, steam filling the cottage with a smell that made my empty stomach tighten like a knot. Then she took the dough rising in the corner with her and went out. She came back in the late afternoon with a hard face and dusty shoes and a loaf of dark brown bread fresh from the baker's ovens, a pail of milk and a dish of butter, and a sack over her shoulders full of apples. She put out plates on the table, and laid one for me, which I didn't expect. The moneylender said a magic spell over the bread when we sat down, but I ate it anyway. It tasted good.

I tried to do as much as I could, so they would want me to come back. Before I left the house, the moneylender's wife said to me in her cough-hoarsened voice, "Will you tell me your name?" After a moment I told her. She said, "Thank you, Wanda. You have been a great help." After I left the house, I heard her saying I

had done so much work, surely the debt would be paid soon. I stopped to listen outside the window.

Miryem said, “He borrowed six kopeks! At half a penny a day she’ll be four years paying it off. Don’t try to tell me that’s not a fair wage when she gets her dinner with us.”

Four years! My heart was glad as birds.

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A MAP OF DAYS

== THE FOURTH NOVEL OF ==

MISS PEREGRINE'S

— PECULIAR CHILDREN —

BY RANSOM RIGGS

DUTTON BOOKS

*N*ever have I doubted my soundness of mind as often as I did on that first night, when the bird-woman and her wards came to save me from the madhouse. That's where I was going, pinned between beefy uncles in the backseat of my parents' car, when a wall of peculiar children seemed to leap directly from my imagination into the driveway before us, aglow in our high beams like a formation of angels.

We skidded to a stop, a wave of gravel dust erasing everything beyond our windshield. Had I conjured their echo, some flickering hologram projected from deep within my brain? Anything seemed more believable than my friends being here now. Peculiars had a way of making anything seem possible, but a visit from them was one of the few impossibilities I could still count on.

It had been my choice to leave Devil's Acre. To go home again, where my friends couldn't follow. I had hoped that in returning I might sew together the disparate threads of my life: the normal and the peculiar, the ordinary and the extraordinary.

Another impossibility. My grandfather had tried to sew his lives together, too, and failed, estranged in the end from both his peculiar family and his normal one. In refusing to choose one kind of life over the other, he had doomed himself to lose both—just as I was about to.

I looked up to see a silhouette coming toward us through the clearing dust.

"Who the hell are you?" my dad said.

"Alma LeFay Peregrine," she replied, "Ymbryne Council leader pro tem and headmistress to these peculiar children. We've met before, though I don't expect you'd remember. Children, say hello."



CHAPTER ONE



It's strange, what the mind can digest and what it resists. I had just survived the most surreal summer imaginable—skipping back to bygone centuries, taming invisible monsters, falling in love with my grandfather's time-arrested ex-girlfriend—but only now, in the unexceptional present, in suburban Florida, in the house I'd grown up in, was I finding it hard to believe my eyes.

Here was Enoch, splayed upon our beige sectional, sipping Coke from my dad's Tampa Bay Buccaneers tumbler; here was Olive, unstrapping her lead shoes to float ceilingward and ride circles on our fan; here were Horace and Hugh in our kitchen, Horace studying the photos on the fridge door while Hugh rustled for a snack; here was Claire, both mouths slack as she gazed at the great black monolith of our wall-mounted television; here was Millard, my mother's decor magazines rising from the coffee table and splitting in midair as he skimmed them, the shape of his bare feet imprinted into our carpet. It was a mingling of worlds I'd imagined a thousand times but never dreamed possible. But here it was: my Before and After, colliding with the force of planets.

Millard had already tried to explain to me already how it was possible that they could be here, apparently safe and unafraid. The loop collapse that had nearly killed us in Devil's Acre had reset their internal clocks. He didn't quite understand why, only that they were no longer in danger of sudden catastrophic aging if they stayed too long in the present. They would get older one day at a time, just like I did, their debt of years seemingly forgiven—as if they hadn't spent most of the twentieth century reliving the same sunny day. It was a miracle, undoubtedly—a breakthrough unprecedented in peculiar

history—and yet how it had come to be was not half as amazing to me as the fact that they were here at all: that beside me stood Emma, lovely, strong Emma, her hand entwined with mine, her green eyes shining as they scanned the room in wonder. Emma, whom I'd so often dreamed about in the long, lonely weeks since my return home. She wore a sensible gray dress that fell below the knees, hard flat shoes she could run in if she had to, her sandy hair pulled back into a ponytail. Decades of being depended on had made her practical to the core, but neither the responsibility nor the weight of years she carried had managed to snuff the girlish spark that lit her so brightly from the inside. She was both hard and soft, sour and sweet, old and young. That she could contain so much was what I loved most about her. Her soul was bottomless.

“Jacob?”

She was talking to me. I tried to reply, but my head was mired in dreamy quicksand.

She waved at me, then snapped her fingers, her thumb sparking like struck flint. I startled and came back to myself.

“Hey,” I said. “Sorry.”

“Where'd you go?”

“I'm just—” I waved as if raking cobwebs from the air. “It's good to see you, that's all.” Completing a sentence felt like trying to gather a dozen balloons in my arms.

Her smile couldn't mask a look of mild concern. “I know it must be awfully strange for you, all of us dropping in like his. I hope we didn't shock you too badly.”

“No, no. Well, maybe a little.” I nodded at the room and everyone in it. Happy chaos accompanied our friends wherever they went. “You sure I'm not dreaming?”

“Are you sure *I'm* not?” She took my other hand and squeezed it, and her warmth and solidness seemed to lend the world some weight. “I can't tell you how many times, over the years, I've pictured myself visiting this little town.”

For a moment I was confused, but then . . . of course. My grandfather. Abe had lived here since the fifties; I'd seen his Florida address on letters Emma had kept. Her gaze drifted, as if she were lost in a memory, and I felt an unwelcome twinge of jealousy—then was embarrassed for it. She was entitled to her past, and had every right to feel as unmoored by the collision of our worlds as I did.

Miss Peregrine blew in like a tornado. She had taken off her traveling coat to reveal a striking green tweed jacket and riding pants, as if she'd just arrived on horseback, and she tossed out orders as she crossed the room. "Olive, come down from there! Enoch, remove your feet from the sofa!" She hooked a finger at me and nodded toward the kitchen. "Mr. Portman, there are matters which require your attention."

Emma took my arm and accompanied me, for which I was grateful; the room had not quite stopped spinning.

"Off to snog each other already?" said Enoch. "We only just arrived!"

Emma's free hand darted out to singe the top of his hair. Enoch recoiled and slapped at his smoking head, and the laugh that burst out of me seemed to clear some of the cobwebs from my head.

Yes, my friends were real and they were here. Not only that, Miss Peregrine had said they were going to stay awhile. Learn about the modern world a bit. Have a holiday, a well-earned respite from the squalor of Devil's Acre—which, with their proud old house on Cairnholm gone, had become their temporary home. Of course they were welcome, and I was inexpressibly grateful to have them here. But how would this work, exactly? What about my parents and uncles, who at this very moment Bronwyn was guarding in the garage? It was too much to grapple with all at once, so for the moment I shoved it aside.

Miss Peregrine was talking to Horace by the open fridge. They looked jarringly out of place amid the stainless steel and hard edges of my parents' modern kitchen, like actors who had wandered

onto the wrong movie set. Horace was waving a package of plastic-wrapped string cheese.

“But there’s only strange food here, and I haven’t eaten for centuries!”

“Don’t exaggerate, Hugh.”

“I’m not. It’s 1886 in Devil’s Acre, and that’s where we had breakfast.”

Horace burst from our walk-in pantry. “I have completed my inventory and am frankly shocked. One sack of baking soda, one tin of sardines in salt, and one box of weevil-infested biscuit mix. Is the government rationing his food? Is there a war on?”

“We eat a lot of takeout,” I said, walking up beside him. “My parents don’t really cook.”

“Then why do they have this whomping great kitchen?” said Horace. “I may be an accomplished *chef de cuisine*, but I can’t make something from nothing.”

The truth was that my father had seen the kitchen in a design magazine and decided he had to have it. He tried to justify the cost by promising he would learn to cook and then throw legendary dinner parties for the family—but, like a lot of his plans, it fizzled after a few cooking lessons. So now they had this hugely expensive kitchen that was used mostly to cook frozen dinners and heat up day-old takeout. But rather than say any of that, I shrugged.

“Surely you won’t perish of hunger in the next five minutes,” Miss Peregrine said, and shooed both Horace and Hugh from the kitchen. “Now, then. You were looking a bit wobbly earlier, Mr. Portman. Are you feeling all right?”

“Better every minute,” I said, a bit embarrassed.

“You may be suffering from a touch of loop lag,” said Miss Peregrine. “Somewhat delayed in your case. It’s absolutely normal among time travelers, especially those who are new to it.” She was speaking to me over her shoulder as she moved through the kitchen, peeking inside each cabinet. “The symptoms are usually

inconsequential, though not always. How long have you been feeling dizzy?”

“Only since you all got here. But really, I’m fine—”

“What about leaking ulcers, bunion clusters, or migraine headaches?”

“Nope.”

“Sudden mental derangement?”

“Uh . . . not that I can remember?”

“Untreated loop lag is no laughing matter, Mister Portman. People have died. Hey—biscuits!” She grabbed a box of cookies from a cabinet, shook one into her hand, and popped it into her mouth. “Snails in your feces?” she asked, chewing.

I choked back a snicker. “No.”

“Spontaneous pregnancy?”

Emma recoiled. “You’re not serious!”

“It’s only happened once, that we know of,” said Miss Peregrine. She set the cookies down and fixed me with a stare. “The subject was male.”

“I’m not pregnant!” I said a little too loudly.

“And thank goodness for that!” someone shouted from the living room.

Miss Peregrine patted my shoulder. “It sounds as if you’re in the clear. Though I should have warned you.”

“It’s probably better you didn’t,” I said. It would have made me paranoid, not to mention that if I’d spent the last month sneaking pregnancy tests and checking my feces for snails, my parents would have long before banished me to an asylum.

“Fair enough,” said Miss Peregrine. “Now, before we can all relax and enjoy one another’s company, some business.” She began pacing a tight circle between the double ovens and the prep sink. “Item one: Safety and security. I’ve scouted the perimeter of the house. All seems quiet, but appearances can be deceiving. Is there anything I should know about your neighbors?”

“Like what?”

“Criminal histories? Violent tendencies? Firearm collections?”

We only had two neighbors: ancient Mrs. Melloroos, a wheelchair-bound octogenarian who only left her house with the help of a live-in nurse, and a German couple who spent most of the year elsewhere, leaving their Cape Cod-style McMansion empty except during the winter.

“Mrs. Melloroos can be kind of nosy,” I said. “But as long as no one’s being flagrantly peculiar in her front yard, I don’t think she’ll give us any trouble.”

“Noted,” said Miss Peregrine. “Item two: Have you felt the presence of any hollowgast since you returned home?”

I felt my blood pressure spike at her mention of the word, which had crossed neither my mind nor my lips in several weeks. “No,” I said quickly. “Why? Have there been more attacks?”

“No more attacks. No sign of them whatsoever. But that’s what worries me. Now, about your family—”

“Didn’t we kill or capture them all in Devil’s Acre?” I said, not ready to change the subject away from hollowgast so quickly.

“Not quite *all*. A small cadre escaped with some wights after our victory, and we believe they absconded to America. And while I doubt they’ll come anywhere near *you*—I daresay they’ve learned their lesson—I can only assume they’re planning something. An abundance of caution couldn’t hurt.”

“They’re *terrified* of you, Jacob,” Emma said proudly.

“They are?” I said.

“After the thrashing you gave them, they’d be stupid not to be,” said Millard, his voice ringing out from the edge of the kitchen.

“Polite persons do not spy on private conversations,” Miss Peregrine huffed.

“I wasn’t spying, I was *hungry*. Also, I’ve been sent to ask you not to hog Jacob. We came an awfully long way to see him, you know.”

"They missed Jacob a lot," Emma said to Miss Peregrine. "Nearly as much as I did."

"Perhaps it's time you addressed everyone," Miss Peregrine said to me. "Made a welcome speech. Laid out some ground rules."

"Ground rules?" I said. "Like what?"

"They're my wards, Mr. Portman, but this is your town and your time. I'll need your help keeping everyone out of trouble."

"Just be sure to feed them," said Emma. "Otherwise they might riot."

I turned to Miss Peregrine. "What were you saying about my family?"

They couldn't stay prisoners in the garage forever, and I was getting anxious about how we were going to deal with them.

"You needn't worry," Miss Peregrine said. "Bronwyn has the situation well in hand."

The words had hardly left her lips when a percussive, wall-rattling crash sounded from the direction of the garage. The vibrations sent glasses toppling from a nearby shelf to the floor, where they shattered.

"That sounds like a distinctly *out* of hand situation," said Millard.

We were already running.



"Stay where you are!" Miss Peregrine shouted toward the living room.

I dashed out of the kitchen and down the back hall, Emma just behind, adrenaline sharpening me. I wasn't sure what to expect when we burst into the garage—smoke? Blood? It had sounded like an explosion—but I definitely had not anticipated finding my parents and uncles passed out in our car, peaceful as babes. The car's rear end was wedged into a major dent in the rolled-down garage door,

and the concrete around it sparkled with bits of broken taillight. The engine was on and idling.

Bronwyn stood at the front end of the car with the bumper dangling from her hands. “Oh, I’m so sorry, I don’t know what happened,” she said, and dropped the bumper with an echoing clang.

Realizing I had to kill the engine before we all suffocated, I peeled away from the others and ran to the passenger door. The handle was locked. Of course it was: My family had been trying to keep Bronwyn out. I’m sure they’d been terrified.

“I can open it,” Bronwyn said. “Stand back!”

She planted her feet and grabbed the door handle with both hands.

“What are you—” I started to say, and then with a mighty heave she pulled the door open, and straight off its hinges. Weight and momentum being what they were, the door kept going, flying out of her hands and across the room before burying itself in the back wall. The noise was like a physical force pushing me backward.

“Oh, fiddlywinks,” Bronwyn said into the ringing silence that followed.

The garage was beginning to resemble some of the bombed houses I’d seen in wartime London.

“Bronwyn!” Emma shouted, uncovering her head. “You might have decapitated someone!”

I ducked into the hole where the passenger door had been, reached across my sleeping mother, and snatched the keys from the ignition. She was slumped against my father, who was snoring with his head against the window, his breath steaming a blank word bubble onto the glass. In the back, my uncles slept in one another’s arms. Despite all the noise, none of them had stirred. I knew of only one substance that could put people into such a deep sleep: a powdered piece of Mother Dust. When I stood up out of the car again, I saw Bronwyn holding a little pouch of the stuff as she attempted to explain what had happened.

"The man in the back," she was saying, pointing at my uncle Bobby, "I seen him using his, his little—" she pulled Bobby's phone from her pocket.

"Cell phone," I said.

"Right—that," she continued. "So I took it away, which made all of them as mad as a bag of ferrets, and then I did like Miss P showed me—"

"You used the powder?" said Miss Peregrine.

"I blew it right at 'em, but they didn't fall asleep straight off. Jacob's dad started up the car, but instead of going forward he—he—" Bronwyn gestured to the dented garage door, words failing her.

Miss Peregrine patted her on the arm. "Yes, dear, I can see. You handled things just right."

"Yeah," said Enoch. "Right through the *wall*."

We turned to see the other kids peeping at us from a tight cluster in the hallway.

"I told you to stay where you were," said Miss Peregrine.

"After *that* noise?" said Enoch.

"I'm sorry, Jacob," Bronwyn said. "They got so upset, and I didn't know what to do. I didn't hurt 'em, did I?"

"I don't think so." I had experienced the velvety sleep induced by Mother Dust's powder, and it wasn't a bad place to spend a few hours. "Can I see my uncle's phone?"

Bronwyn pulled it from her pocket and handed it to me. The screen was spider-cracked but readable. When it lit up, I saw a string of texts from my aunt:

What's happening?

When will u be home?

Everything ok??

In reply, Uncle Bobby had started to type CALL THE COPS and then had probably realized that he could just as easily call them himself. But Bronwyn had taken his phone before he'd been able to. If she'd been a few seconds slower, we might've had a visit from the

SWAT team. My chest tightened as I realized how fast our situation could have become dangerous and complicated. *Hell*, I thought, looking from the ruined car to the ruined wall to the ruined garage door. *It already has.*

“Don’t worry, Jacob. I’ve handled much stickier situations.” Miss Peregrine was walking around the car, examining the damage. “Your family will sleep soundly until morning, and I daresay we should try to do the same.”

“And then what?” I said, anxious and starting to sweat. The un-air-conditioned garage was sweltering.

“When they wake, I’ll wipe their recent memories and send your uncles home.”

“But what will they—”

“I’ll explain that we’re distant relatives from your father’s side of the family, here from Europe to pay our respects at Abe’s grave. And as for your appointment at the asylum, you’re feeling much better now and no longer require psychiatric care.”

“And what about—”

“Oh, they’ll believe it; normals are highly suggestible following a memory-wipe. I could probably convince them we’re visitors from a moon colony.”

“Miss Peregrine, please stop doing that.”

She smiled. “My apologies. A century of headmistressing trains you to anticipate questions for the sake of expediency. Now come along, children, we need to discuss protocol for the next several days. There’s much to learn about the present, and no time like the present to start learning.”

She began herding everyone out of the garage while they peppered her with questions and complaints:

“How long can we stay?” said Olive.

“May we go exploring in the morning?” said Claire.

“I would like to eat something before I perish from the earth,” said Millard.

Soon, I was alone in the garage, lingering there partly because I felt bad about leaving my family there overnight, but also because I was anxious about their impending memory-wipe. Miss Peregrine seemed confident, but this would be a bigger wipe than the one she had performed on them in London, which had only been about ten minutes of their memories. What if she didn't erase enough, or erased too much? What if my dad forgot all he knew about birds, or my mom forgot all the French she learned in college?

I watched them sleep for a minute, this new weight settling upon me. I felt suddenly, uncomfortably adult, while my family—vulnerable, peaceful, drooling a bit—looked almost like babies.

Maybe there was another way.

Emma leaned in through the open door. "Everything okay? I think the boys are going to riot if dinner doesn't appear soon."

"I wasn't sure I should leave them," I said, nodding vaguely toward my family.

"They aren't going anywhere, and they shouldn't need watching. With the dose they got, they'll sleep like rocks into the middle of tomorrow."

"I know. I just . . . I feel a little bad."

"You shouldn't." She came and stood next to me. "It's not your fault. At all."

"I know. It just seems a little tragic."

"What does?"

"That Abe Portman's son will never know how special a man his father was."

Emma took my arm and draped it over her shoulders. "I think it's a hundred times more tragic that he'll never know how special a man his son is."

I was just leaning down to kiss her when my uncle's phone buzzed in my pocket. It made us both startle, and I pulled it out to find a new text from my aunt.

Is crazy J in the loony bin yet?

“What is it?” Emma asked.

“Nothing important.” I returned the phone to my pocket and turned toward the door. Suddenly, leaving my family in the garage overnight didn’t seem so bad. “Come on, let’s figure out dinner.”

“Are you sure?” Emma said.

“Very.”

I flipped off the lights as we left.



I suggested we order pizza from a place that delivered late. Only a few of the kids even knew what pizza was, and delivery was a totally foreign concept.

“They prepare it remotely and bring it to your *home*?” said Horace, as if the concept were vaguely scandalous.

“Pizza—is that Floridian cuisine?” asked Bronwyn.

“Not really,” I said. “But trust me, you’ll like it.”

I called in a massive order and we settled onto couches and chairs in the living room to wait for it to arrive. Miss Peregrine whispered in my ear, “*You should say something to everyone. Give a little welcome speech.*” And without waiting for a reply, she cleared her throat and announced to the room that I had something to say. So I stood up and began, somewhat awkwardly, to improvise.

“I’m so glad you’re all here. I’m not sure if you know where my family was taking me tonight, but it wasn’t a good place. I mean—” I hesitated. “I mean, it might be good for *some* people, you know, with actual mental problems, but . . . long story short, you guys saved my ass.”

Miss Peregrine frowned.

“It was you that saved all *our* . . . bums,” said Bronwyn. “We were only returning the favor.”

“Well, thanks. When you first got here, I thought you were

a dream. Because I've been dreaming about having you all here ever since I met you. So it was pretty hard to believe it was really happening. Anyway, the point is, you *are* here, and I hope I can make you feel as welcome as you made me feel when I came to stay with you." I nodded and looked to the floor, suddenly self-conscious. "So, basically, thrilled you're here, love you guys, speech over."

"We love you, too!" Claire said, and then she leaped out of her seat and ran to hug me. Then Olive and Bronwyn joined her, and soon almost everyone was bear-hugging the breath out of me.

"We're so happy to be here," said Claire.

"And not in Devil's Acre," added Horace.

"We'll have ever so much fun!" sang Olive.

"Sorry we broke part of your house," said Bronwyn.

"What do you mean, *we*?" said Enoch.

"Bronwyn," I gasped. "Can't breathe—squeezing too hard—"

The pack expanded enough for me to inhale. Hugh inserted himself into the gap and poked me in the chest.

"You know it's not *all* of us who are here, right?" A solitary bee zipped around him in agitated circles. The group expanded more as people sensed something was wrong. "When you said you were glad we were *all* here. Well, we're not."

It took me a moment to realize what he meant, and then I felt ashamed. "I'm sorry, Hugh. I didn't mean to leave out Fiona."

He looked down at his fuzzy striped socks. "Sometimes I feel like everyone but me has forgotten her." His bottom lip trembled, and then he clenched his fists to make it stop. "She's not dead, you know."

"I hope you're right."

He met my eyes, defiant. "She's *not*."

"Okay. She's not."

"I really miss her, Jacob."

"We all do," I said. "I didn't mean to leave her out, and I haven't forgotten her."

“Apology accepted,” Hugh said, and then he wiped his face and walked out of the room.

After a moment, Millard said, “Well, that was progress.”

“He’ll barely even talk to any of us,” said Emma. “He’s angry, and he won’t face the truth.”

“You don’t think it’s possible Fiona could be alive somewhere?” I asked.

“I’d rate it unlikely,” said Millard.

Miss Peregrine winced and put a finger to her lips—she’d been gliding toward us across the room—and with a hand on our backs she pushed us into a private huddle. “We put out word to every loop and peculiar community we’re in contact with,” she said quietly. “We’ve distributed communiqués, bulletins, photographs, detailed descriptions—I even sent Miss Wren’s pigeon scouts to search the forests for Fiona. Thus far, nothing.”

Millard sighed. “If she was alive, poor thing, wouldn’t she have reached out to us by now? We aren’t difficult to find.”

“I guess so,” I said. “But has anyone tried looking for her . . . um . . .”

“Her body?” Millard said.

“Millard, please,” said the headmistress.

“Was that indelicate? Should I have chosen a less exact term?”

“Just be *quiet*,” Miss Peregrine hissed.

Millard didn’t lack feeling; he just wasn’t good at minding the feelings of others.

“The fall that likely killed Fiona,” Millard said, “occurred in Miss Wren’s menagerie loop, which has since collapsed. If her body was there, it is no longer recoverable.”

“I’ve been weighing whether to hold a memorial service,” Miss Peregrine said. “But I can’t even raise the topic without sending Hugh into a spiral of depression. I fear if we push him too hard—”

“He won’t even adopt new bees,” said Millard. “He says he

wouldn't love them the same if they'd never met Fiona, so he only keeps the one, who's of a rather advanced age at this point."

"Sounds like this change of scenery might do him good," I said.

Just then the doorbell rang. And not a moment too soon, as the mood in the room was getting heavier by the second.

Claire and Bronwyn tried to follow me down the hall, but Miss Peregrine snapped at them. "I don't think so! You're not ready to talk to normals yet."

I didn't think there was much risk in them meeting the pizza delivery guy—until I opened the door to see a kid I knew from school, balancing a stack of pizza boxes in his hands.

"Ninety-four sixty," he mumbled, then jerked his head in recognition. "Oh, snap. Portman?"

"Justin. Hey."

His name was Justin Pamperton, though everyone called him Pampers. He was one of the pothead skaters who haunted the outer parking lots.

"You look good. Are you, like, better now?"

"What do you mean," I said, not actually wanting to know what he meant, counting out his money as quickly as I could. (I had earlier raided my parents' sock drawer, where they always kept a couple hundred bucks stashed.)

"Word is you went, like, *off the deep end*. No offense."

"Uh, nope," I said. "I'm fine."

"Righteous," he said, nodding like a bobblehead figurine. "'Cause what *I* heard was—"

He stopped mid-sentence. Someone inside was laughing.

"Dude, are you having a party right now?"

I took the pizzas from him, shoved the bills into his hand. "Something like that. Keep the change."

"With *girls*?" He tried to peek into the house, but I shifted to block his view. "I'm off in an hour. I can get some beers . . ."

I had never wanted anyone off my porch so badly.

“Sorry, it’s kind of a private thing.”

He looked impressed. “You handle that, dogg.” He raised a hand to high-five me, realized I couldn’t because of the pizzas, then made a fist and shook it. “See you in a week, Portman.”

“In a week?”

“*School*, bro! What planet have you been living on?” He jogged off toward his idling hatchback, shaking his head and laughing to himself.



Conversation ground to a halt as the pizza was distributed, and for a full three minutes there was only the sound of lips smacking and the occasional satisfied grunt. In the lull I kept replaying Justin’s words. School started in a week, and somehow I had forgotten all about it. Before my parents decided I was certifiable and tried to have me committed, I’d made up my mind to go back to school. My plan had been to stick it out at home long enough to graduate, then escape to London so I could be with Emma and my friends. But now the friends I had thought so distant, and the world I had thought so inaccessible, had landed on my doorstep, and in the space of one night everything had changed. My friends were now free to roam anywhere (and anytime) they liked. Could I really imagine sitting through interminable classes and lunch periods and mandatory assemblies every day while all that was waiting for me?

Maybe not, but it was too much to figure out right at that moment, pizza in my lap, still dizzy with the idea that any of this was possible. School didn’t start for a week. There was time. Right now all I needed to do was eat and enjoy the company of my friends.

“This is the best food in the world!” Claire announced through a mouthful of gooey cheese. “I’ll be having this every night.”

“Not if you want to live out the week,” said Horace, plucking

the olives off his slice with fastidious precision. “There’s more sodium in this than in the whole Dead Sea.”

“Worried you’ll get fat?” Enoch laughed. “Fat Horace. That I’d like to see.”

“That I’ll *bloat*,” said Horace. “My clothes are tailored just so, unlike the flour sacks you wear.”

Enoch glanced down at his clothes—a collarless gray shirt under a black vest, fraying black pants, and patent leather shoes that had long ago lost their shine. “I got these in *Pah-ree*,” he said in an exaggerated French accent, “from a fashionable fellow who was no longer in need of them.”

“From a *dead* fellow,” said Claire, her lips curling in disgust.

“Funeral parlors are the best secondhand boutiques in the world,” said Enoch, taking a massive chomp of pizza. “You’ve just got to get the clothes before their occupant begins to leak.”

“Well, there goes my appetite,” said Horace, tossing his plate down on the coffee table.

“Pick that up and finish it,” Miss Peregrine scolded him. “We don’t waste food.”

Horace sighed and picked up his plate again. “Sometimes I envy Nullings. He could gain a hundred pounds and no one would notice.”

“I’m quite svelte, for your information,” said Millard, and made a sound that could only have been his hand smacking his bare stomach. “Come have a feel if you don’t believe me.”

“I’ll pass, thanks.”

“For bird’s sake, *clothe* yourself, Millard,” said Miss Peregrine. “What have I said about unnecessary nudity?”

“What does it matter if no one can see me?” Millard replied.

“It’s in bad taste.”

“But it’s so hot here!”

“*Now*, Mr. Nullings.”

Millard stood up from the couch and grumbled something

about *prudes* as he breezed past, then came back a minute later with a bath towel tied loosely around his waist. But Miss Peregrine disapproved of this, too, and sent him away again. When he returned the second time he was overdressed in clothes he'd ransacked from my closet: hiking boots, wool pants, a coat, a scarf, a hat, and gloves.

"Millard, you'll perish of heatstroke!" said Bronwyn.

"At least no one will have to imagine me in a state of nature!" he said, which had the desired effect of annoying Miss Peregrine. She announced that it was time for another security check and abruptly walked out of the room.

The laughs many of us had been holding in burst forth.

"Did you see her face?" said Enoch. "She was ready to kill you, Nullings!"

The dynamic between the kids and Miss Peregrine had shifted a bit. They seemed more like teenagers now—real ones, beginning to chafe against the limits of her authority.

"You're all being rude!" said Claire. "Stop it right now!"

Well, not *all* of them.

"Don't you find it wearying, being lectured about every little thing?" said Millard.

"*Little thing!*" Enoch said, then burst out laughing all over again. "Millard has a—*oww!*"

Claire had bit him on the shoulder with her backmouth, and while Enoch was rubbing the spot, she said, "No I *don't* find it wearying. And it *is* strange for you to be nude in mixed company for no good reason."

"Ahh, balderclap," said Millard. "Does it bother anyone else?"

All the girls raised their hands.

Millard sighed. "Well, then. I shall endeavor to be fully dressed at all times, lest anyone be made uncomfortable by basic facts of biology."



We talked and talked. There was so much to catch up on. We had slipped back into easy familiarity so quickly that it felt like we'd only been apart a few days, but it had been almost six weeks. A lot had happened in that time—to them, anyway—though I'd gotten only occasional updates in the letters Emma sent. They took turns describing adventures they'd had exploring peculiar places via the Panloopticon—though only loops which had been prescouted and deemed safe by the ymbrynes, since it was not well known what lay waiting behind all of the Panloopticon's doors.

They had visited a loop in ancient Mongolia and watched a peculiar shepherd speak the language of sheep, tending his flock without a stick or a dog, just the sound of his own voice. Olive's favorite had been a trip to a loop in the Atlas Mountains of North Africa, where in a certain little town every peculiar could float just like she did. They had strung nets everywhere above the town so the people could go about their days without weighing themselves down, and they bounced from place to place like acrobats in zero gravity. There was a loop in Amazonia, too, which had become a popular place to visit: a fantastic city in the jungle made from trees, the roots and branches all knotted together to form roads and bridges and houses. The peculiars there could manipulate plants much the way Fiona did—which Hugh had found so distressing and overwhelming that he had scurried out of the loop and back to Devil's Acre almost immediately.

"It was hot and the insects were terrible," said Millard, "but the locals were exceedingly nice, and they showed us how they make fantastic medicines from plants."

"And they go fishing with a special poison that stuns the fish, but doesn't kill them," said Emma, "so they can just scoop the ones they want out of the water. Absolutely brilliant."

"We did some other trips, too," Bronwyn said. "Em, show Jacob your snaps!"

Emma hopped up from the couch beside me and ran to retrieve

them from her luggage. She returned a minute later with a photos in her hand, and we gathered around a floor lamp's glow to look at them.

"I only recently started taking pictures, and I still don't really know what I'm doing. . . ."

"Don't be so modest," I said. "You sent some of your photos along with your letters, and they were great."

"Eek, I forgot about that."

Emma was anything but boastful, but neither was she afraid to trumpet her achievements when it came to things she did well. So the fact that she was shy about her photos meant she had high standards and aspired to live up to them. Lucky for both of us—since I have a hard time faking enthusiasm—she was a natural talent. But while the composition and framing and exposure and all that were nice (not that I'm an expert), it was the subject matter that really made them interesting—and terrible.

The first photo showed a dozen or so Victorians posing, casual as picnic-goers, on the crazily slanted roofs of houses that looked like they'd been smashed by an angry giant.

"An earthquake in Chile," Emma explained. "Printed on non-archival paper that aged badly after we left Devil's Acre, unfortunately."

She flipped to the next picture: a train that had jumped its tracks and tipped over sideways. There were children—peculiar ones, presumably—sitting and standing all around it, smiling like they were having a grand old time.

"A train disaster," said Millard. "It was carrying some sort of volatile chemical, and a few minutes after this picture was taken, we retreated to a safe distance and watched it catch fire and explode in the most impressive way."

"What was the point of these trips?" I asked. "Seems a lot less fun than visiting some cool loop in the Amazon."

"We were helping Sharon," said Millard. "You remember him—tall, cloaked boatman from Devil's Acre? Rats for friends?"





“How could I forget?”

“He’s developing a new and improved version of his Fire ‘n’ Flames Disaster Tour using the Panloopticon’s loops, and he asked us to test out an early version. Besides the Chilean earthquake and the train wreck, there was a town in Portugal where it rained blood.”

“Seriously?” I said.

“I didn’t go along for that one,” Emma said.

“Good thing, too,” said Horace. “Our clothes were irreparably stained.”

“Well, it sounds like you’ve all had a much more exciting time than I have,” I said. “I think I’ve left my house about six times since I last saw you.”

“I hope that’s about to change,” said Bronwyn. “I’ve always wanted to see America—and the present day, especially. Is New York City very far?”

“I’m afraid it is,” I said.

“Oh,” she said, sinking down into the couch cushions.

“I’d like to visit Muncie, Indiana,” said Olive. “The guidebook says you haven’t lived until you’ve seen Muncie.”

“What guidebook?”

“*Peculiar Planet: North America*,” Olive said, and held up a book with a tattered green cover. “It’s a travel guide for peculiars. It named Muncie the Most Normal Town in America six years running. Absolutely average in every way.”

“That book is horribly out of date,” said Millard. “In all likelihood useless.”

Olive ignored him. “Apparently, nothing unusual or out of the ordinary has ever happened there. Ever!”

“Not all of us find normal people as interesting as you do,” Horace said. “And anyway, I’m sure it’s crawling with peculiar tourists.”

Olive, who wasn’t wearing her leaded shoes, floated over the coffee table, to the couch, and dropped the book in my lap. It was open to a page describing the only peculiar-friendly accommodations

near Muncie—a place called *Clownmouth House* in a loop on the outskirts of town. True to its name, it appeared to be a room inside a giant plaster clown's head.

I shuddered a little and let the book fall closed.

"We don't have to go all the way to Indiana to find unextraordinary places," I said. "We've got plenty right here in Englewood, trust me."

"The rest of you can do what you like," said Enoch. "My only plan for the next few weeks is to sleep until noon and bury my toes in warm sand."

"That *does* sound nice," said Emma. "Is there a beach near here?"

"Across the street," I said.

Emma's eyes lit up.

"I *hate* beaches," Olive said. "I can never take my stupid metal boots off, which ruins all the fun."

"We could tie you to a rock near the water's edge," said Claire.

"Sounds magical," Olive grumbled, then snatched *Peculiar Planet* out of my lap and floated into a corner. "I'll just take a train to Muncie and fiddlywinks to the rest of you."

"You'll do no such thing." Miss Peregrine came into the room. I wondered whether she'd been eavesdropping on us from the hall, rather than doing an extra security round. "You children have earned a bit of a rest, certainly, but our responsibilities are such that we cannot simply while away the next several weeks in idleness."

"What!" said Enoch. "I distinctly remember you saying we were here on holiday."

"A *working* holiday. We can't afford to waste the educational opportunities presented us by being here."

At the word *educational*, groans went up around the room.

"Don't we do enough lessons as it is?" Olive whined. "My brain may split open."

Miss Peregrine shot Olive a look of warning and stepped



smartly into the center of the room. “I don’t want to hear another word of complaint,” she said. “With the extraordinary new freedom of movement you’ve been given, you’ll be invaluable to the reconstruction effort. With the right preparation, you could be ambassadors to other peculiar peoples one day. Explorers of new loops and territories. Planners and cartographers and leaders and builders—as crucial to the work of remaking our world as you were to the wights’ defeat. Don’t you want that?”

“Of course,” said Emma. “But what does that have to do with taking a holiday?”

“Before you become any of those things, you must first learn to navigate this world. The present day. *America*. You must familiarize yourselves with its idioms and its customs and ultimately be able to pass as normal. If you cannot, you’ll be a danger to yourselves and all of us.”

“So you want us to . . . what?” said Horace. “Take normalling lessons?”

“Yes. I want you to learn what you can while you’re here, not just bake your brains in the sun. And I happen to know a very capable teacher.” Miss Peregrine turned to me and smiled. “Mr. Portman, would you accept the job?”

“Me?” I said. “I’m not exactly an expert on what’s normal. There’s a reason I feel so at home with you guys.”

“Miss P’s right,” said Emma. “You’re perfect for it. You’ve lived here all your life. You grew up thinking you were normal, but you’re one of us.”

“Well, I *had* planned on spending the next few weeks in a padded room,” I said, “but now that that’s not happening, I guess I could teach you guys a thing or two.”

“Normalling lessons!” said Olive. “Oh, how fun!”

“There’s so much to cover,” I said. “Where do we start?”

“In the morning,” Miss Peregrine said. “It’s getting late, and we should all find beds.”

She was right—it was nearly midnight, and my friends had begun their day in Devil’s Acre twenty-three hours (and one hundred thirty-odd years) ago. We were all exhausted. I found places for everyone to sleep—in our guest bedrooms, stretched out on couches, in a tangle of blankets in a broom closet for Enoch, who preferred his sleeping arrangements dark and nest-like. I offered my parents’ bed to Miss Peregrine, since they wouldn’t be using it, but she demurred. “I appreciate the offer, but let Bronwyn and Miss Bloom share it. I’ll be keeping watch tonight.” She flashed me a knowing look that said *and not just over the house*, and it took a lot of effort not to roll my eyes. *You don’t have to worry*, I almost said, *we’re taking things slow*. But what business was that of hers? I was so irritated that the minute she left to tuck Olive and Claire into bed I found Emma and said, “Want to see my room?”

“Absolutely,” she replied, and we snuck into the hall and up the stairs.



I could hear Miss Peregrine’s voice drifting up from one of the guest bedrooms, where she was singing a soft and sad lullaby. Like all peculiar lullabies it was mournful and long—this one a saga about a girl whose only friends were ghosts—which meant we had several minutes, at least, before Miss P came looking for Emma.

“It’s kind of a mess,” I warned her. That was an understatement, though the prospect of a few minutes alone with her made me not really care.

“I’ve been sleeping in a dormitory with two dozen girls,” she said. “I am unshockable.”

We darted up the stairs to my bedroom. I flipped on the lights and Emma’s mouth fell open.

“What *is* all this stuff?”

“Ah,” I said. “Right.” I wondered if I’d made a mistake.

Explaining my room was going to eat up time we otherwise might have spent kissing.

I didn't have *stuff*. I had *collections*. And I had a lot of them, spread across bookshelves that lined my room. I wouldn't have called myself a pack rat—and I wasn't a hoarder—but collecting things was one of the ways I had dealt with loneliness as a kid. When your best friend is your seventy-five-year-old grandpa, you spend a lot of time doing what grandpas do, and for us that meant hitting garage sales every Saturday morning. (Grandpa Portman might have been a peculiar war hero and a badass hollowgast hunter, but few things thrilled him more than a bargain.)

At each garage sale I was allowed to pick out one thing that cost less than fifty cents. Multiply that by several per weekend and that's how I amassed, over the course a decade, a huge number of old records, dime-store detective novels with silly covers, baseball cards (though I cared nothing for baseball as a sport), *MAD* magazines, and other inexpensive things that were nevertheless arranged like treasures along the shelves around my room. My parents often begged me to cull the herd and throw most of it away. I had made a few halfhearted attempts, but I never got far—the rest of the house was so big and modern and *blank* that I had developed a sort of horror of empty space—so when it came to the only room in the house that I had some control over, I preferred it full. Which is why, in addition to all the overflowing bookshelves, I had plastered one wall floor-to-ceiling with maps, and another with old record album covers.

"Oh, wow. You really like music!" She broke away from me and went to the wall—the one with album covers growing over it like scales. I was starting to resent my distracting decor.

"Doesn't everyone?" I said.

"Not everyone papers their walls with it."

"I'm mostly into the older stuff," I said.

"Oh, me too," she said. "I don't like these new groups, with

their loud guitars and long hair. . . .” She picked up a copy of *Meet the Beatles* and wrinkled her nose.

“That record came out, what . . . fifty years ago?”

“Like I said. But you never mentioned liking music so much.” She was walking along my wall, trailing her hand over the records, looking at everything. “There are lots of things like that I don’t know about you, and I want to.”

“I feel the same,” I said. “Like, we know each other so well in some ways, but in others it feels like we just met.”

“In our defense, we were both quite busy, what with trying not to die and rescuing all those ymbrynes and such. But now we have time.”

We have time. Whenever I heard those words, an electric feeling of possibility began to uncoil in my chest.

“Play me one,” said Emma, nodding at my album wall. “Whichever is your favorite.”

“I don’t know if I have a favorite,” I said. “There are so many.”

“I want to dance with you. Pick a good one for dancing.”

She smiled and went back to looking at things. I thought for a moment, then found *Harvest Moon* by Neil Young. I slid the album from its sleeve, placed it on the turntable, and dropped the needle carefully into the silence between the third and fourth song. There was a warm crackle and then the title track began to play, wistful and sweet. I was hoping she’d come to join me in the middle of the room, where I’d cleared a little space for us to dance, but she had come upon my wall of maps. There were layers upon layers of them—maps of the world, city maps, subway maps, tri-fold maps torn from old *National Geographic* magazines.

“These are *amazing*, Jacob.”

“I used to spend a lot of time imagining I was somewhere else,” I said.

“Me too,” she said.

She came to my bed, shoved lengthwise against the wall and

surrounded by maps, and rather than going around it she jumped up onto the comforter and kept inching along.

"Sometimes I remember you're only sixteen," she said. "Actually sixteen. And it kind of breaks my head open."

She turned to look down at me in wonder.

"What made you say that?"

"I don't know. It's just strange. You don't seem only sixteen."

"And you don't seem ninety-eight."

"I'm only *eighty*-eight."

"Oh, well, you definitely seem eighty-eight."

She laughed and shook her head, then looked back at the wall.

"Come back here," I said. "Dance with me."

She hadn't seemed to hear. She had come to the oldest part of my map wall—the ones I had made with my grandfather when I was eight or nine, drawn on everything from graph paper to construction paper. We'd spent a lot of long summer days making them, inventing legends and symbols and drawing strange creatures in the margins, sometimes drawing them from scratch on a blank page, sometimes overwriting real maps with our own invented places. When I realized what she was staring at, and that her hand had come to rest on a bit of Abe's handwriting, my heart sank a bit.

"Is this . . .?"

"We used to do all kinds of projects together. He was basically my best friend."

Emma nodded. "Mine too." She let her finger trace words he had written—*Okeechobee River*—then turned away from it and got down from the bed. "But that was a long time ago."

She came over to me, took my hands, and rested her head against my shoulder. We began to sway with the music.

"I'm sorry," she said. "That caught me by surprise."

"It's okay. You guys were together for so long. And now you're here. . . ."

I felt her shake her head. *Let's not ruin it.* Her hands slipped out

of mine and slid around my waist. My cheek dropped and pressed softly against hers.

“Do you ever still imagine you’re somewhere else?” she asked me.

“Not anymore,” I said. “For the first time in a long time, I’m happy where I am.”

“Me too,” she said, and she lifted her head from my shoulder, and I kissed her.

We danced and kissed until the song ended and a soft hiss filled the room, and we kept dancing a while longer because we weren’t ready for the moment to end. I tried to forget the strange turn things had taken, and how I’d felt when she’d mentioned my grandfather. She was going through something and that was okay. Even if I couldn’t understand it.

For now, I told myself, all that mattered was that we were together and we were safe. For now, that was enough. It was more than we’d ever had. There was no clock counting down to the moment when she would wither and turn to dust. There were no bombers turning the world to fire around us. There were no hollowgast lurking outside the door. I didn’t know what our future held, but in that moment it was enough just to believe we had one.

I heard Miss Peregrine talking downstairs. That was our cue.

“*Until tomorrow,*” she whispered in my ear. “*Good night, Jacob.*”

We kissed one more time, and it was like an electrical pulse that left every part of me tingling. Then she slipped out the door, and for the first time since my friends had arrived, I was alone.



I could hardly sleep that night. It wasn’t so much the buzz of Hugh’s bee as he dozed in a pile of blankets on my floor as it was the buzzing in my own head, filled now with uncertainty and exciting new prospects. When I left Devil’s Acre to come back home, it was

because I had decided that finishing high school and keeping my parents in my life were important enough goals that they were worth enduring Englewood for a couple more years. The time between now and graduation had promised to be a special kind of torment, though, especially with Emma and my friends stuck in loops on the other side of the Atlantic.

But so much had changed in one night. Now, maybe, I didn't have to wait. Maybe now I wouldn't have to choose one or the other: peculiar or normal, this life or that. I wanted, and needed, both—though not in equal measure. I had no interest in a normal career. In settling down with someone who didn't understand who I was, or having kids from whom I had to keep half my life a secret, like my grandfather had.

That said, I didn't want to go through life a high school dropout, either—you can't exactly put *hollowgast tamer* on a resume—and though my mom and dad were never going to win Parents of the Year, I didn't want to cut them out of my life, either. I also didn't want to become so alienated from the normal world that I forgot how to navigate it. The peculiar world was wonderful and I would never be whole without it, but it could also be extraordinarily stressful and overwhelming. For the sake of my long-term sanity, I knew I needed to maintain a bit of my normal life as an escape valve. I needed that balance. And now, maybe, the next year or two didn't have to be a prison sentence as I waited for it all.

Now maybe I could be with my friends and be with Emma *and* have my home and my family. Maybe Emma could even go to school with me. Maybe all my friends could! We could take classes together, eat lunch together, go to stupid school dances. Of course! What more perfect place to learn about the lives and habits of normal teenagers than high school? After a semester of that, they'd be able to impersonate normals with no problem (even I had learned to do it, eventually), and they'd be able to blend in when we ventured out into the larger world of peculiar America. And we would travel back

to Devil's Acre whenever time permitted—over long weekends and holidays and summers—and help the cause, help rebuild the loops, and hopefully make peculiardom impervious to future threats.

Unfortunately, the key to it all was my parents. They could make this impossible or they could make it easy. If only there was a way for my friends to be around them without my mom and dad losing it, so that we wouldn't have to tiptoe around them, always afraid that some accidental display of peculiarness would send them screaming into the streets and bring hell down upon our heads.

There had to be something I could tell them that they would believe. Some way to explain my friends. Their presence, their strangeness—maybe even their abilities. I wracked my brain for the perfect story . . . they were exchange students I had met while in London. They had saved my life, taken me in, and I wanted to repay them. (That this wasn't far from the truth appealed to me.) They also happened to be expert magicians who were always practicing their act. Masters of illusion. Their tricks so refined you can never tell how they achieve them.

Maybe. Maybe there was a way. And then things could be so *good*.

My brain was a hope-making machine.



The adventure is
just beginning!

Turn the page for a peek
at what lurks ahead.



The last door past the bathrooms was made of heavy insulated metal and had a sign that read NO ADMITTANCE. I put the key in and opened it and a blast of frozen air came out. Inside, there were icicles pointing down at us from the ceiling and shelves of frozen food lining the walls.

"There's no one in here," I said, hugging myself against the chill. "I think Norma's gone senile."

"Look at the floor," said Emma. There were arrows made with electrical tape leading across the floor to the back of the room, where a curtain of thick plastic flaps hung from ceiling to floor. Stencil-painted across them were the words MEATING ROOM.

"Is that a misspelling?" Emma said. "Or a strange joke?"

"Let's find out."

I shouldered through the plastic curtains, which were caked with half-frozen meat-slime, and led us into a smaller, much colder room that flickered under the light of a faulty fluorescent tube. There were cuts of meat everywhere, spilling from torn-open boxes, scattered across the floor, dusted with frost.

"What the hell happened in here?" I said.

I nudged a rack of lamb with my foot that had been bitten clean in half—while still frozen—and got a sudden, sinking feeling.

"Looks like someone had quite the *meating* in here," said Emma. "Get it? M-E-A-T . . ."

"I think we should get out of here," I said. I think this might be a—"

The word *trap* was leaving my lips when three things happened in quick succession:

—I put my foot down on a big X made of tape on the floor

—the flickering bulb above our heads shattered and the room went black

—I felt a rollercoaster-y lurch in my stomach and a sudden pressure change in my head.

Then the light came back on above us, only now it was a yellow incandescent bulb in a wire cage. The boxes of meat were gone, replaced by bags of frozen vegetables. And I felt a sharp, unmistakable pain in my gut.

I touched Emma's hand and raised a finger to my lips. I mouthed the word to her silently—*Hollow*.

Emma looked, for an instant, terrified—and then she swallowed hard and reined it in. She put her lips to my ear.

"Can you control it?" she whispered.

It had been months since I'd spoken hollowgast, or even confronted a hollow in person. I was way out of practice, and even at the top of my game, my control over a hollow had never come instantly.

"I need time to feel it out," I whispered. *"A minute or two."*

Emma nodded. "Then we'll wait."

It was in the cold storage locker with us. My inner compass needle was warming up, even as my body was freezing, and it told me the beast was just outside the plastic curtains. We could hear it chewing on something, grunting and slavering as it ate. We crouched by a wooden crate full of radishes, trying to make ourselves invisible as the seconds ticked by.

It tossed aside whatever it had been eating and let out a loud belch.

Emma shot me a questioning look—*anything?*—and I shook my head. Nothing yet. I needed to hear it speak.

It took a step toward us, its shadow falling crooked across the plastic curtains. I listened in vain for anything I could use to get a toehold in its brain—any little utterance would help—but the hollowgast was quiet, but for its ragged breathing. It was sniffing the air, gathering our scent.

I tapped Emma and raised my thumb. We rose slowly to standing. We were going to have fight.

Emma put out her hands, palms-up, and I grit my teeth, which

were chattering either from cold or from fear. More likely the latter. I was surprised at how scared I was.

The hollow's shadow warped. One of its muscular tongues poked through the curtain flaps and curled experimentally in the air, like a periscope that was spying on us.

Emma took a half step forward and quietly lit her hand-flames. She kept them small, but I could tell from the way she tensed her forearms that she was building up to a burst. Now the hollow's second tongue pierced the curtains. Emma's flames climbed a little higher, then a little higher still. A drop of freezing water hit the back of my neck. The icicles on the ceiling were starting to melt.

It happened suddenly, as violence often does. The hollowgast screamed and punched its last tongue through the curtains, and then all three of them came at us. Emma shouted and released the blast of fire she'd been holding in reserve, and just as the tongues reached us, they got burned and reeled suddenly back again—but not before one of them wrapped itself around my foot, and dragged me along with it.

I slid across the floor on my back, through the curtains, and out into the larger cold storage room. The hollow had flung itself backward against the door to escape the fire, and it was pulling me toward its open mouth. I stuck out my hand as I slid, raking it along the shelves until I managed to hook my fingers into something. But it didn't stop me—it was just a wooden crate, and it yanked away from the shelf with me as I slid.

I heard Emma shouting my name. Acting purely on reflex, I grabbed the crate with my other hand and held it out in front of me—and when I reached the hollow, it jammed right between its jaws.

It let my ankle go for a moment, giving me enough time to scramble away from it. I'd heard it utter a few sounds now and I tried them in my own throat, summoning the strange guttural language of hollows from wherever it had been slumbering inside me.

Emma ran to where I was kneeling. "You okay?"

"I'm okay," I said. "But we have to get out of this room. Never fight hollows in a confined space."

"It's blocking the exit."

The hollow gave up trying to dislodge the crate using its tongues and clamped its jaws shut instead, splintering the wood like it was a mouthful of potato chips.

"Then I'll convince it to move," I said.

Move, I said, testing out a word of hollowspeak.

It took a step toward us, but it was still blocking our escape. I tried a slight modification. *Move aside*.

It took another step toward us and readied its tongues to strike. They waved in the air before it like rattlesnakes.

"It's not working," Emma said. Her flames were starting to melt everything around us, and drips of water from the ceiling were forming a puddle on the floor.

"Make it even hotter," I said. "I have an idea."

Emma took a deep breath, tensed, and her flames burned a little higher.

I whispered, "*When I say the word, you run that way and I'll run this way.*"

The hollow let out a sharp cry and ran at us. I shouted, "NOW!" and Emma jumped right and I leaped left. The hollow's tongues shot past over our heads, and I kept running to the corner. The hollow tried to spin and follow me, but it slipped in the water and fell, and then it cried out and sent its tongues after me, but one of them caught in the rungs of a metal shelf against the wall. Trying to yank free, the hollow brought the heavy shelf, and all its crates of frozen food, down on top of it.

I shouted, "GO!" met Emma at the door and pulled it open, and in a moment we were out in the hall and pulling the door closed behind us.

"Lock it!"

THE
DARK
DESCENT
OF
ELIZABETH
FRANKENSTEIN

KIERSTEN WHITE

Delacorte Press

NOTE: ALL CHAPTER TITLES ARE TAKEN
FROM JOHN MILTON'S *PARADISE LOST*

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Random House Children's Books supports the First Amendment and celebrates the right to read.

PART ONE



HOW CAN
I LIVE
WITHOUT
THEE?

ONE

TO BE WEAK IS MISERABLE

LIGHTNING CLAWED ACROSS THE sky, tracing veins through the clouds and marking the pulse of the universe itself.

I sighed happily as rain slashed the carriage windows and thunder rumbled so loudly we could not even hear the wheels bump when the dirt lane met the cobblestones at the edge of Ingolstadt.

Justine trembled beside me like a newborn rabbit, burying her face in my shoulder. Another bolt lit our carriage with bright white clarity before rendering us temporarily deaf with a clap of thunder so loud the windows threatened to loosen.

“How can you laugh?” Justine asked. I had not realized I was laughing until that moment.

I stroked her dark hair where strands dangled free from her hat. Justine hated loud noises of any type: Slamming doors. Storms. Shouting. Especially shouting. But I had made certain she had endured none of that in the past two years. It was so odd that our separate origins—similar in cruelty, though differing in duration—had had such opposite outcomes. Justine was the most open and loving and genuinely good person I had ever known.

And I was—

Well. Not like her.

“Did I ever tell you Victor and I used to climb out onto the roof of the house to watch lightning storms?”

She shook her head, not lifting it.

“The way the lightning would play off the mountains, throwing them into sharp relief, as though we were watching the creation of the world itself. Or over the lake, so it looked like it was in both the sky and the water. We would be soaked by the end; it is a wonder neither of us caught our death.” I laughed again, remembering. My skin—fair like my hair—would turn the most violent shades of red from the cold. Victor, with his dark curls plastered to his sallow forehead, accentuating the shadows he always bore beneath his eyes, would look like death. What a pair we were!

“One night,” I continued, sensing Justine was calming, “lightning struck a tree on the grounds not ten body lengths from where we sat.”

“That must have been terrifying!”

“It was glorious.” I smiled, placing my hand flat against the cold glass, feeling the temperature beneath my lacy white gloves. “To me, it was the great and terrible power of nature. It was like seeing God.”

Justine clucked disapprovingly, peeling herself from my side to give me a stern look. “Do not blaspheme.”

I stuck my tongue out at her until she relented into a smile.

“What did Victor think of it?”

“Oh, he was horribly depressed for months afterward. I believe his exact phrasing was that he *‘languished in valleys of incomprehensible despair.’*”

Justine’s smile grew, though with a puzzled edge. Her face was clearer than any of Victor’s texts. His books always required further knowledge and intense study, while Justine was an illuminated manuscript—beautiful and treasured and instantly understandable.

I reluctantly pulled the curtains closed on the carriage window, sealing us away from the storm for her comfort. She had not left the house at the lake since our last disastrous trip into Geneva had ended with her insane, bereft mother attacking us. This journey into Bavaria was taxing for her. “While I saw the destruction of the tree as nature’s beauty, Victor saw power—power to light up the night and banish darkness, power to end a centuries-old life in a single strike—that he cannot control or access. And nothing bothers Victor more than something he cannot control.”

“I wish I had known him better before he left for university.”

I patted her hand—her brown leather gloves a gift Henry had given me—before squeezing her fingers. Those gloves were far softer and warmer than my own. But Victor preferred me in white. And I loved giving nice things to Justine. She had joined the household two years earlier, when she was seventeen and I was fifteen, and had been there only a couple of months before Victor left us. She did not really know him.

No one did, except me. I liked it that way, but I wanted them to love each other as I loved them both.

“Soon you will know Victor. We shall all of us—Victor and you and me—” I paused, my tongue traitorously trying to add Henry. That was not going to happen. “We will be reunited most joyfully, and then my heart will be complete.” My tone was cheery to mask the fear that underlay this entire endeavor.

I could not let Justine be worried. Her willingness to come as my chaperone was the only reason I had managed this trip. Judge Frankenstein had initially rejected my pleadings to check on Victor. I think he was relieved to have Victor gone, did not care when we had no word. Judge Frankenstein always said Victor would come home when he was ready, and I should not worry about it.

I did. Very much. Particularly after I found a list of expenses with

my name at the top. He was auditing me—and soon, I had no doubt, he would determine that I was not worth holding on to. I had done too well, fixing Victor. He was out in the world, and I was obsolete to his father.

I would not let myself be cast out. Not after my years of hard work. Not after all I had done.

Fortunately, Judge Frankenstein had been called away on a mysterious journey of his own. I did not ask permission again so much as . . . leave. Justine did not know that. Her presence gave me the freedom I needed here to move about without inviting suspicion or censure. William and Ernest, Victor's younger brothers and her charges, would be fine in the care of the maid until we could return.

Another burst of thunder, this one rumbling through our chests so we felt it in our very hearts.

"Tell me the story of the first time you met Victor," she squeaked, clutching my hand so hard that the bones ached.

The woman who was not my mother pinched me and tugged my hair with brutally efficient meanness.

I wore a dress that was far too big. The sleeves hung down to my wrists, which was not the style for children. But the dress covered the bruises that covered my skin. The week previous I had been caught stealing an extra portion of food. Though I had often been bloodied by her angry fists, this time my caregiver had beaten me until everything went black. I spent the next three nights hiding in the woods at the lake, eating berries. I thought she would kill me when she found me; she had often threatened to do just that. Instead, she had discovered another use for me.

"Do not ruin this," she hissed. "Better for you to have died at your birth along with your mother than to be left here with me. Selfish in life, selfish in death. That's what you come from."

I lifted my chin high, let her finish brushing my hair so that it shone as bright as gold.

"Make them love you," she demanded as a gentle knock sounded at the door to the hovel I shared with my caregiver and her own four children. "If they do not take you, I will drown you in the rain barrel like the cat's last litter of runty kittens."

A woman stood outside, surrounded by a blinding halo of sunlight.

"Here she is," my caretaker said. "Elizabeth. The little angel herself. Born to nobility. Fate stole her mother, pride imprisoned her father, and Austria took her fortune. But nothing could touch her beauty and goodness."

I could not turn around lest I stomp on her foot or punch her for her false love.

"Would you like to meet my son?" the new woman asked. Her voice trembled as though she was the one who was scared.

I nodded solemnly. She took my hand and led me away. I did not look back.

"My son, Victor, is only a year or two older than you are. He is a special child. Bright and inquisitive. But he does not make friends easily. Other children are . . ." She paused, as though searching a candy dish for just the right piece to pop into her mouth. "They are intimidated by him. He is solitary and lonely. But I think a friend like you would be just the gentling influence he needs. Could you do that, Elizabeth? Could you be Victor's special friend?"

Our walk had brought us to their holiday villa. I stopped dead. I was amazed by the sight. Her momentum tugged me forward and I stumbled, stunned.

I had had a life, before. Before the hovel with mean and biting children. Before the woman who cared for me with fists and bruises. Before a life haunted by hunger and fear and cold, crammed into the dirty darkness with strange bodies.

*I pushed one toe gingerly over the threshold of the villa the Frankens-
steins had taken for their time at Lake Como. I followed her through those*

beautiful rooms of green and gold, windows and light, pain left behind as I stepped through this dreamworld.

I had lived here before. And I lived here every night when I closed my eyes.

Though I had lost my home and my father more than two years before, and no child could remember with perfect clarity, I knew it. This had been my life. These rooms, blessed with beauty and space—so much space!—had graced my infancy. It was not this villa, specifically, so much as the general sense of it. There is a safety in cleanliness, a comfort in beauty.

Madame Frankenstein had brought me out of the darkness and back into the light.

I rubbed at my tender and bruised arms, as thin as sticks. Determination filled my child's body. I would be whatever her son needed if doing so gave me back this life. The day was bright, the lady's hand was softer than anything I had felt in years, and the rooms ahead of us seemed filled with hope for a new future.

Madame Frankenstein led me through the hallways and out to the garden.

Victor stood alone. His hands were clasped behind his back, and though he was not much more than two years older than me, he seemed almost like an adult. I felt the same shy wariness I would feel approaching a strange man.

"Victor," his mother said, and again I sensed fear and nervousness in her voice. "Victor, I have brought a friend."

He turned. How clean he was! It filled me with shame to be wearing a much-patched, too-big dress. Though my hair was washed—my caregiver said it was the best thing I had to recommend me—I knew my feet inside my slippers were dirty. I felt, as he looked at me, that he must surely know, too.

He tried on a smile like I tried on castoff clothing, shifting it around until it mostly fit his face. "Hello," he said.

"Hello," I said.

We both stood, motionless, as his mother watched.

I had to make him like me. But what did I have to offer a boy who had everything? "Do you want to find a bird's nest with me?" I asked, the words tumbling out in a rush. I was better at finding them than any of the other children. Victor did not look like a boy who had ever climbed a tree to spy on nests. It was the only thing I could think of. "It is spring, so their chicks are all nearly ready to hatch."

Victor frowned, his dark eyebrows drawing close together. And then he nodded, holding out his hand. I stepped forward and took it. His mother sighed with relief.

"Have fun! Do stay close to the villa, though," she entreated us.

I led Victor out of the garden and into the spring-green forest that surrounded the estate. The lake was not far. I could smell it, cold and dark, on the breeze. I took a wandering path, keeping my eyes trained on the branches above us. It felt vital to find the promised nest. As though it were a test, and if I passed, then I could stay in Victor's world.

And if I failed . . .

But there, like hope bundled into twigs and mud: a nest! I pointed to it, beaming.

Victor frowned. "It is high."

"I can get it!"

He considered me. "You are a girl. You should not climb trees."

I had been climbing trees since I could walk, but his pronouncement filled me with the same shame my dirty feet did. I was doing everything wrong.

"Maybe," I said, twisting my dress in my hands, "maybe I can climb this one, and it will be the last tree I climb? For you?"

He considered my proposal, and then he smiled. "Yes, all right."

"I will count the eggs and tell you how many there are!" I was already scrambling up the trunk, wishing my feet were bare but too aware of myself to take off my shoes.

"No, bring the nest down."

I paused, halfway to my goal. "But if we move the nest, the mother may not be able to find it."

"You said you would show me a nest. Did you lie?" He looked so angry at the idea that I had deceived him. Especially that first day, I would have done anything to make him smile.

"No!" I said, my breath catching in my chest. I reached the branch and scooted along it. Inside the nest were four tiny, perfect eggs of pale blue.

As carefully as I could, I worked the nest free from the branch. I would show Victor and then put it right back. It was difficult, climbing down while keeping the nest protected and intact, but I managed. I presented it to Victor triumphantly, beaming at him.

He peered inside. "When will they hatch?"

"Soon."

He held out his hands and took the nest. Then he found a large, flat rock and set the nest on top of it.

"Robins, I think." I stroked the smooth blue of the shells. I imagined they were pieces of the sky, and that if I could reach high enough, the sky would be smooth and warm like these eggs.

"Maybe," I said, giggling, "the sky laid these eggs. And when they hatch, a miniature sun will burst free and fly up into the air."

Victor looked at me. "That is absurd. You are very odd."

I closed my mouth, trying to smile at him to let him know his words had not hurt my feelings. He smiled back, tentative, and said, "There are four eggs and only one sun. Maybe the others will be clouds." I felt a warm rush of affection for him. He picked up the first egg, holding it to the light of the sun. "Look. You can see the bird."

He was right. The shell was translucent, and the silhouette of a curled-up chick was visible. I let out a laugh of delight. "It is like seeing the future," I said.

"Almost."

If either of us could have seen the future, we would have known that the next day his mother would pay my cruel caregiver and take me away forever, presenting me to Victor as his special gift.

Justine sighed happily. "I love that story."

She loved it because I told it just for her. It was not entirely the truth. But so little of what I told anyone ever was. I had ceased feeling guilty long ago. Words and stories were tools to elicit the desired reactions in others, and I was an expert craftswoman.

That particular story was almost correct. I embellished some, particularly about remembering the villa, because that was critical to lie about. And I always left off the ending. She would not understand, and I did not like to think about it.

"I can feel its heart," Victor whispered in my memory.

I peeked out the edge of the curtain as the city of Ingolstadt swallowed us, its dark stone homes closing around us like teeth. It had taken my Victor and devoured him. I had sent Henry to lure him home, and now I had lost them both.

I was here to get Victor back. I would not leave until I had.

I had not lied to Justine about my motivation. Henry's betrayal stung like a wound, fresh and raw. But I could survive that. What I could not survive was losing my Victor. I *needed* Victor. And that little girl who had done what was necessary to secure his heart would still do whatever it took to keep it.

I bared my teeth back at the city, daring it to try to stop me.