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THE SAPPHIRE MIRROR

by

Renée Levasseur

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for a Degree with Honors
(English)

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ABSTRACT

Morgan Molloy is the worst student at Graybridge Academy, a school for the children of the rich and famous. She doesn't do her work, talks in class, and is a professional troublemaker; she's Queen Bee, and knows it. Nothing can ruin this high in life.

Until her friend goes missing.

Morgan's world is turned upside down by the aftermath of her party; things only get stranger when she receives a letter from her father, a man she has never met. After this revelation, Morgan starts to see the world a little differently - that maybe the strange disappearances of the youth in town may not be so mundane in nature.

One by one, her friends are disappearing. And she might be next.

A YA paranormal novel, *The Sapphire Mirror* is an exploration of friendship and relationship conflicts among teens, as well as the concept of death and different perceptions of it; in particular, the idea of 'teenage invincibility' and how an adolescent might cope with it, both with positive and negative results.

The story is partly inspired by an old wives' tale that all mirrors must be covered in the house of a dying person — if they aren't covered, then the mirror can trap the soul of the departed and keep them from entering the afterlife. Thus, there are also themes of reflection, often found in mirrors or water, that provide outward context and introspection to those who are otherwise incapable of self-awareness.

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ARTIST'S STATEMENT

I've had this story sitting around in my head for so long; I can't quite remember how it got started. I had it through most of high school, since that's what was in my notebooks from the time (my first hard drive self-imploded in April 2012, and took everything with it).

My grandmother sent me a book for my birthday once, *The Prophecy of the Stones*, and what most intrigued me about it was not exactly the plot, but rather that it was written by Flavia Bujor, a 15-year-old French girl. At the time, I had no idea you could get published at such a young age. It was probably also why my grandmother sent it, too. While I don't remember the quality of the writing, I remembered liking the story, and suddenly feeling an urgent desire to have a book published before I turned fifteen.

When that didn't happen, I changed it to having a book published before I started high school.

Then a book published before I started college.

Then a book published before I finally graduated UMO.

It wasn't a particularly reasonable goal, nor a healthy one for my mental faculties. *The Prophecy of the Stones* not only provided some inspiration for *The Sapphire Mirror*, but it also gave me this horrible sense of failure whenever I missed each goal I set for myself. Before, writing was easy, when I could just do whatever. Now, with a goal, now trying to write a story that makes sense, that has plot and character and subplot, all tied together, it was *hard*.

This sense of failure, this feeling of reaching a goal I knew I couldn't make but

somehow had to anyways, was really nonconductive to actually writing. I think I just stopped in sophomore year because I didn't want to think about it, just because it made me so frustrated with myself.

I don't know why I thought I could do it. I obviously didn't, and to be honest, I'm glad I never forced myself to do something I definitely wasn't ready for. While little of my pre-college writing survived due to aforementioned drive crash, and I'd be embarrassed to think anything of that quality would be published for the world to see, if it had ever managed to get that far.

While currently incomplete, I consider this work to be not only representative of what I want to do as a writer, but also one of the largest projects I've ever written. For that fact I'm very proud of, and I'm looking forward to completing it in the future.

One of the key traits of Morgan's character is her lack of perspective, her lack of self-awareness in her behavior and actions. I find this ironic, because I, too, have trouble with that; I've had this story with me for so long, I've attached so much of myself to it, that I couldn't get perspective. Before I stripped the plot down to what it needed to be less than a half a month ago, the plot I had previously had been the same for years, and I practically killed myself trying to make a over-complicated engine run on too little fuel.

I chose YA fiction because it's the kind of audience I like to think about when I write, and I'm always thinking about what kind of message I'm telling with my stories. It irks me sometimes that YA fiction gets such a bad rap — it's not real literature, its shallow, it's low caliber, etc — because of certain books published under that label. Likewise, because YA fiction so broad, it can carry a bunch of conflicting messages for the teens reading them. The amount of bad relationships and questionable characters

being presented as popular is apparently the death knell for all literature everywhere.

But that's what I think is so good about YA lit. There's plenty of variety for kids to choose from, especially with the amount of subgenres (mystery, realistic, fantasy, etc), that really aids an author who wants to write in a particular niche. YA stories are generally there for the young teenaged readers, and in that they usually carry some sort of 'moral lesson', or themes that are important to the target audience, like school, family, and friendship.

Those last two are really what I wanted to focus on in this book. Morgan's family life is peculiar and not particularly happy, but there's still positive aspects in it, even if other characters cannot see it (in some cases, literally). On top of that, her vengeful nature and judgmental attitude create problems among her peers, especially in old relationships. Her struggling conversations with Sergio, ex-boyfriend and ex-friend, were important in that aspect.

I remember being the one kid who was the shoulder to cry on when a friend went through a break-up, and because of hurt feelings and resentment, I don't think many of them every got back together — or forgave each other at all, which I thought was kind of sad. All these ruined relationships because two kids just refused to communicate, or because of a misunderstanding. It's why I wanted Morgan and Sergio to reconcile, because it's something I rarely saw in high school, and as far as I can recall, never read in YA fiction myself. High school is the breeding ground for maturing relationships, both romantic and platonic, but the things kids learn about relationships, particularly when watching and learning their peers and their parents, is not always healthy, and I want to change that. It's something I hope to successfully get across in a complete novel.

My original intention with Morgan was to make her the ‘cool’ character, fun and popular, and then break that down. She’s a little unlikable from the reader’s perspective, but not completely unrelatable. Who doesn’t feel resentment after a break-up? Who doesn’t avoid emotional problems they don’t want to deal with? Coupled with how intensely Morgan feels about everything, how underappreciated and misunderstood she feels, I think she represents a certain aspect of the teenage psyche that I hope will get across well. Coupled with her humbling experiences and burgeoning change of character, there’s some positive growth that I hope also changes the reader’s first impression of Morgan, and how complex people can be, even angry hormonal teenagers.

In my opinion, I don’t think skeptics of YA literature are giving its target audience enough credit. I think teens (and by that extend, pre-teens as well) are fully capable of telling apart a good story from a bad one, what kind of messages are of value to them in their life. A fiction is all about being a teenager, what it means and what happens to you. Kids are growing and learning at the same time, with thoughts and opinions constantly changing as they’re exposed to new ideas, and I want to exemplify that in my book. I want readers to see the same change in themselves that they see in Morgan and the other characters alongside her, because that’s what I think being a teenager is about. It’s fun, it’s scary, and it’s sometimes stupid.

The Sapphire Mirror

Chapter One

I belonged at the center of everyone's attention. I was good at it. In fact, I could win over an auditorium full of rowdy teenagers in less than ten seconds.

That's just one great thing about being me.

There's nothing quite like standing up in front of the crowd, knowing everyone's eyes were on me — *only me* — and that I had their undivided attention. That attention was mine to control. I could say whatever I wished and I knew they would listen. And why wouldn't they? No one ignored me.

I stood behind the curtains of the stage, prepping myself for the occasion. Music, a triumphant pop song, was playing on speakers as students on the other side were ushered in and settled to their seats. They filled the room with a low roar as they talked amongst themselves. Did they know it was me yet? I wanted to give them the best speech they ever heard.

"You look *fine*, Morgan." a girl's voice said over my shoulder as I rechecked my reflection in my mirror for exactly the twentieth time in the past five minutes.

"I know," I smiled, snapping the compact shut and slipping it in my pocket. I looked down and readjusted my blouse. Should I let one button out or two? "I'm just making sure. A lot can happen in five minutes. What do you think?"

I heard the clicking of heels as Juniper Correia came around to examine my appearance. Silk scarf shining under the light, she came to a stop before me, arm bent up

at the elbow as she looked me up and down. Then she cocked an eyebrow at me, as if to say *'Is that the best you can do?'*

“What?” I held up my hands, wondering what she could possibly disapprove of in my outfit. I was closer to the dress regulation than she was — then again, that might be the problem.

“Leave one button open. You don’t want to look like you’re trying too hard.” Juni said, fixing my shirt with ring-adorned hands. She stepped back and analyzed some more. She extended an arm and twirled a finger. I rotated in place. “Hmm. Personally, I would’ve gone with more accessories, but you can’t really pull off big necklaces or bracelets; they make you look like an ugly under-stuffed scarecrow. A haircut wouldn’t have hurt, though.”

I grabbed my straight black hair, as if Juni might come at me with a pair of scissors. “But I like it long!”

“Right, who am I kidding?” Juni rolled her eyes, huffing. The large hoops in her ears swayed side to side as she tilted her head and put her hands on her hips. “But couldn’t you have at least gotten a tan over the summer? You really should’ve come with us.”

Juni spent her summers in Rio de Janeiro with her family. She, of course, now had a beautiful tan that gave her chestnut skin a golden sheen. She’d wanted me to come along for a couple years now, but I was never big on flying.

“Yeah, I don’t think so.” The noise outside was beginning to fade. Students were getting ready for the music to stop and me to show up. I had to wrap this up. “Okay, any last judgments before I wreak my havoc?”

Juni pursed her lips. “Well, I think your speech will distract them from all this...*blah*...” she motioned to my uniform: I had ditched the tie and my shirt was untucked from the skirt. I looked like an underachiever next to Juni, who grinned and said, “Good luck.”

The curtain folded back and a small woman peeked in. She teetered on her tiptoes, looking for me. “Morgan, it’s time!”

“I’ll be right there, Miss Demille,” I told her. The woman nodded and smiled at me, not even mentioning the fact that Juni wasn’t allowed backstage as she ducked back behind the curtains — not unusual, as she was the Assistant Dean who did most of the paperwork and left punishment to the Big Man in charge.

I turned back to Juni. “Thanks, but I don’t need it,”

Juni’s eyebrows shot *way* up, then she smirked. As I ducked through the curtain, she called, “I wouldn’t be too cocky! I heard Hawthorn’s been dying to get you into another detention!”

I threw her a look over my shoulder, but Juni had already disappeared behind the curtain, fast enough to avoid trouble. Boy, she had good timing. But I wasn’t worried. Hawthorn was the only professor here who thought he could handle me, and he couldn’t do anything until I started breaking the rules.

Kids cheered and called my name as I walked out, despite the professors’ attempts to keep them quiet and respectful. I grinned and waved at my audience as I approached the microphone. With the lights directed at the stage, it was difficult to recognize faces in the huge crowd curved around me, but if I squinted I could pick out a few jumping

around. Some of the professors tried to calm them down again, but I knew it would only be in vain. Could I help it if I had awesome fans?

I took the microphone off of the stand and walked around it, pulling the cord so I wouldn't trip.

Show time.

"Welcome, everyone, to another year at Graybridge Academy!" I called into the microphone, my voice booming on speakers overhead. Hearing my amplified voice made me squirm with glee. "To new faces and old friends alike, say hello to good food, a Track and Football team that have both reached championship status last year, and heavy backpacks full of tough homework."

This was actually part of the real speech Dean Lovejoy gave me. I didn't use it now because it was the only part I liked (it wasn't — none of it was), but because I didn't want any of the professors to catch on to what I was about to do.

I waited for the chuckles to die down, and then continued, "You all know who I am. And for those of you who've been living under a rock these past few years, I'm Morgan Molloy, and this year I get to represent the school. I don't know if any of you guys know this, but I truly think this place is something really special. I mean, we've done a lot of things we can be proud of, both for ourselves and our peers. This school has a great reputation for honing our individual talents. Tell me, who else do you know but Belle Lentini could steal the answers to Professor Ludden's impossible chemistry test and get away with it?"

Belle's shoulders perked up when she heard her name, and even in the darkness I could see her face going red. The kids around her turned and pointed, snickering as they

recalled the awful test. Across the auditorium, the professors' exchanged glances with each other. Ludden, with his starched lab coat on, looked especially embarrassed.

"Did I forget to mention our great transfer program?" I pointed at a boy down a couple rows from Belle. "Last year, Teran King from Algeria joined the freshman class and then, inexplicably, the PA system got hacked into, and played nothing but Dubstep for three days straight. Coincidence? I think not."

Kids were laughing out loud now, at the faculty's expense. They were fully aware of this and I could tell dissent was starting to brew. Some of the students were getting a little rambunctious, ignoring the warnings from the faculty, moving from their seats instead of sitting still. I noticed dark figures approaching the stage, so I jumped to the last part of my speech.

"You're all members of a great school, everyone. This is a place where we can let our true skills shine. " I said through the cheers. I grinned ear-to-ear as I heard a few kids call out my name. "I mean, I myself am a great example: Sophomore Class President and school Representative. The rumors you've heard about me are true. Remember the time when we blew out all the power in Addison Hollows? In fact —!"

At that point, Professor Hawthorn had charged up the steps, interrupting me to hiss a reprimand: "*Stop talking right now before you earn a month's detention, young lady!*"

The microphone was wrenched from my hands. I looked around to see Miss Demille handing said microphone to Lovejoy, who had walked in with her from behind the curtains.

For a brief second, I was surprised. I didn't know Miss Demille had so much strength behind those dainty little fingers of hers. And used Hawthorn's distraction to her advantage. Huh. She was more devious than I thought.

As the Dean began with the *real* speech, I was ushered off the stage (and by that I mean forced against my will). I couldn't even hear the Dean's voice over the shouting and clapping coming from the audience. I was pretty sure they were giving me a standing ovation as I ducked behind the curtain.

The backstage was entirely empty. I was all alone when I tried to defend myself from Professor Hawthorn, who was ready to rip me a new one.

"That was completely inappropriate," Professor Hawthorn began in the same way he always did. This had to be the millionth time I'd heard him say that, in the exact same gruff tone and the exact same way he crossed his arms. I was fascinated by his tapping fingers. On one of them gleamed a college ring dating back almost twenty years. "What were you thinking?"

I had a bit of experience ducking punishment for the stuff that I do. Some of the professors can be easily distracted, appeased, or if you're really lucky, even black-mailed. But not with Professor Hawthorn, no way. He called the cops if you tried that kind of stuff on him.

It was always worth it. He had quite some priceless expressions if I tried hard enough. But this one was boring, one I always got. Just a regular old scowl. The one back in the auditorium had been pretty funny, where he could only close his eyes and shake his head in his hands, but I couldn't appreciate it when it was so far away.

I groaned inwardly as Professor Hawthorn produced the usual lecture. “You were not elected to humiliate the Academy, Morgan, you know that. What happened to the paper the Dean gave you? Why couldn’t you have just read that?”

I rolled my eyes. Overnight I had realized how dull the original speech was, and threw it out. I knew I could do a better job than *that*. “Because just looking at it made me want to tear my eyes out, Professor. Honestly, do you really think they wanted to hear what he wrote? It was awful! And they clearly enjoyed what I had to say. I don’t see what the big deal is here.”

Graybridge Academy (allegedly) had a time-honored tradition of taking famous peoples’ kids and teen geniuses from across the world and churning them out to become important members to society — something the Dean really wanted me to stress. He pretended as though it were some sort of upper class boarding school that had really tough admissions to pass. Like everyone here was a snobby rich kid who played polo and got high marks on their AP tests, with prospects of becoming the next state senator or CEO a Fortune 500 company.

In reality, the only requirement to getting in was having parents who could afford it. We were a bunch of kids with more money than we knew what to do with — so we spent it on cars and clothes and wasted time in class. I, for one, had no greater goal than getting through high school and living on the party scene for the rest of my gloriously long life. Why the hell would I want to do anything else? I laughed every time I read something different in the brochures they give to parents of prospective kids.

Professor Hawthorn closed his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose behind his glasses. “Morgan, the point of the welcoming speech is to introduce the school as a place of dignity and respect, not a melting pot for criminals and trouble-makers.”

“I just wanted to let them know what they’re getting themselves into.”

“You allowed them to think that the Academy accepts this kind of behavior you present,” he snapped.

“Doesn’t it already?” I’ve been through this before. Talking about the subject of my speech was simply the front to my punishment. So I just got straight to the point.

“The Dean’s going to suspend me, isn’t he?”

Professor Hawthorn paused, apparently reluctant to admit that I wasn’t getting face time with the Big Man. I was almost disappointed when he sighed. “No. Suspension is only a reward for you. Instead, you’ll be prohibited from both the Homecoming game and dance. And you’ll be spending detention with me, where we can discuss your behavior and write an apology to the Dean for not using the speech he gave you. One that was perfectly acceptable, by the way.”

“You clearly didn’t read it, then.”

Graybridge Academy wasn’t all that it was cracked up to be. Sure, the Dean wanted me to talk about its ancient legacy, the famous people that were taught within these walls. To be honest, I didn’t care. I took it as it was: a school filled with marble floors, haunted classrooms, and cramped seating arrangements. It was filled with spoiled brats with no ambition. The only ones getting into college would be the smart kids who did their homework. What more was there to it?

He gave me one last stern look. On the other side of the curtains, the Dean dismissed everyone to their classes. “Today, after school, Morgan.”

Then he dismissed *me*, which I thought was kind of rude. On the other hand, it wasn’t like I had anywhere else to go, so I decided not to push my luck by making a big deal out of it.

I left the stage and headed to my first class, although I kind of felt like skipping. Math was such a bore. But I hadn’t made any plans to do so with Juni. I had decided to only skip with friends after discovering during last year’s Finals how lonely it could be on my own. Turned out, playing hooky wasn’t that great when you don’t have anyone to share the fun with.

I got a slip from Professor Finch for being late to Algebra and took it in stride. I sat in the standard seat in the back of the class. Juni didn’t take this class, but I knew plenty of other people who I could talk to. Aaron Pelkey, for example, discussed with me the importance of having natural light in classrooms. Odd conversation to have, but Professor Finch had a strange phobia for the outside world, and always kept the blinds on the windows down. He was an old, trembling man who peered through glasses that always seemed fogged up, and wore three layers of socks even on a hot day. His habits made the classroom dark and cold, not the least bit welcoming or comfortable in a school with a faulty indoor heating system.

I got picked on several times in class for an answer I didn’t know. Teachers of all kinds liked to do that, thinking they can catch a kid off guard by putting them on the spot. Professor Finch still hadn’t learned that I took whatever chance I got to give him a stupid answer and make the class laugh. All of my other professors this year had already figured

out that I would make their class hell if they tried to pick on me, and reacted accordingly by leaving me alone to do my own thing.

The only ones who *didn't* let me off the hook were Professor Hawthorn and Professor Crusoe. She in particular had a tendency to preach the Academy had a strict 'no tolerance' policy to make us look like a privileged prep school.

She wasn't necessarily wrong. Every kid who lived in Addison Hollows went to the Academy, but that's because Addison Hollows was where all the big wigs live. Kids from Eastside, on the other hand, either get here on scholarship or through very persistent parents. Of course, if a senator knew their overindulged spawn were going to be in the same class as the son of a drugstore owner or daughter of a car mechanic, they'd freak out and the school board would lose funding.

That was why we wore uniforms. So when the VIP's (Very Important Parents) show up, they couldn't tell where anyone was from. At least, that was how I saw it.

Professor Finch tried to stress that math will be important later in life, but I was pretty sure he only meant college, so I just disregarded his advice and continued to doodle in my notebook. He assigned homework I'd probably only give a half-hearted attempt at, and sent us on our way a minute before the bell rang.

The halls of the Academy were a jungle to get through. An obstacle course for the mind and body, it took a kid of a particular agility and ability to memorize flow patterns; getting through the students and lockers and various moving furniture, band instruments, and science projects unscathed. More than once a newcomer would get themselves and their collection of books and papers knocked to the floor. One might be lucky to not get

all their possessions trampled on and make it to class on time, but it was a rare event.

Melanie Yu went through five pairs of glasses in Seventh Grade alone.

By the Tenth Grade, when the students had finally become an integral part of the school, everything got a little easier. I knew how to spot the little Seventh Graders with their terrified expressions and dodge them before they got mauled by a large handbag or trumpet case. I had to avoid the Seniors who did whatever they wanted and caused blockages by standing in circles in the middle of the hall, talking and ignoring all of the lowerclassmen trying to get around them.

The most dangerous, however, were the sports stars, especially during a winning streak in their respective season. Football players were particularly notorious for practicing off-field — I really had to duck to avoid a football coming straight for my face. Being one of the tallest kids in school had its disadvantages. Sometimes it made you look like a goalpost.

Where Professor Crusoe was wrong, however, was the ‘privileged’ part. It didn’t matter whether you were a Mathlete or a football star or somewhere in between. Everyone here had some amount of street cred, a dirty spot on their record. Graybridge did not have a single perfect student.

I caught up with Juni in English class, but we couldn’t talk because Professor Crusoe was allergic to everything but her own voice. Instead, we passed notes to each other and forgot we actually had work to do. We picked up where we left off during lunch and into Study Hall. Aside from the morning fiasco, today was actually pretty boring.

Unfortunately for me, Juni somehow managed to skim on detention today, leaving me with no friends to talk to in Professor Hawthorn's classroom. It was an oddity; if one of us got detention, it was almost guaranteed that the other will.

Professor Hawthorn's classroom was small, filled with those wooden desks that connected to the chairs. There was an old-fashioned chalkboard that's probably been up since the school first opened a million years ago. Maps of old kingdoms and empires that have long since fallen adorned the walls. The floor was made of old tile no longer its original color, thanks to the sun always shining in.

There were plenty of seats in here, which *should* have had at least one of my friends residing in them, if not Juni. I still had a hard time believing I was the *only* one who got in trouble today.

That said, I was not alone.

Three seats to my left and two behind sat a blond boy I had never seen before. Well, I *have* seen him, like in the halls and stuff, but I had never actually *spoken* to him before. Which is a little unusual, as I consider myself to be a very charming person — but I supposed that there were just certain groups I gravitated towards more than others.

The boy was the quiet sort, so it wasn't really my fault I didn't know him. He was always reading a book in every class I saw him in. Even now, the boy was entirely focused on a book — a biography of Dwight D. Eisenhower, a crimson red cover with a portrait of the president himself at the center.

I considered ignoring him. I could tell he was ignoring me, because he didn't even look up when I first walked into Hawthorn's classroom. And although I was staring all too blatantly at him, the boy refused to acknowledge my presence.

Usually, I wouldn't give people like him the time of day. Why should I? If he didn't think I was important enough to even look at, then clearly he was not worth my valuable attention.

Still, I couldn't stop watching. For the life of me, I couldn't remember his name, which was bizarre for a couple reasons. One, I knew every kid's name in this school. Two, there were only about a couple hundred students total attending, making my first point a little easier to achieve. I figured if I hadn't ever interacted with the boy, I'd at least have heard about him from someone else. Obviously, that never happened.

As Sophomore President, I was familiar with all the clubs and activities the school had to offer. I had never seen this boy in any of them. Did he just not have a life or something?

He wasn't dressed all that well either, which might be a part of it. His uniform was ill-fitted, too large in the shoulders and waist, but the sleeves too short, exposing half of his forearms. It betrayed his lanky build, saying that he was more nerd than jock. Only his hairstyle threw me for a loop. It was sort of old-fashioned, a side part that belonged in the 40's and 50's, not the twenty-first century.

Juni would chastise him for being so out of touch with modern trends. Or maybe commend for his retro-chic style. Still, he would never pass her guidelines for proper fashion: fit and comfort. His hand-me-downs did not qualify for either.

I deliberated for a few more seconds before saying, "Hey."

The boy didn't move. Didn't even blink. I stared at him for a second longer. Maybe he was finishing a sentence? I said again, louder, "Hey."

Still not even a look.

I got annoyed. What kind of jerk had the audacity to disregard a direct greeting from me? In retaliation, I reached into my bag, picked up the first piece of paper my fingers laid upon (my graded math test — C minus) and crumpled it up into a ball. With a light but forceful throw, I grunted, “Hey!”

The ball bounced off the boy’s shoulder, making him jump in surprise. He finally saw me, realized how ticked off I looked, and widened his eyes. “What...?”

“I’m talking to you, jerk, pay attention!” I snapped, satisfied that I managed to catch him off guard. “Do you always act like that to other people?”

“I just...I...” the boy continued to stutter, apparently unable to comprehend the situation. Clearly, no one else had called him out on this behavior before. “You were talking to me?”

“Well, more talking *at* you, since you were so distracted,” I said, motioning towards the book in front of him. “What, are some stupid words more important than human interaction? Are you too good to talk to the rest of us?”

I was being meaner than I had to be, but what could I say? I deserved better than to be overlooked.

The boy managed to scramble some coherency after the insult. “I-I didn’t know that...I mean, I don’t usually talk to people.”

“Yeah, obviously.” I snorted, and the boy frowned. He started to look displeased by my attitude. Well, he shouldn’t have started it. “So, are you going to tell me your name already or what?”

“...What?” the boy’s frown turned to one of confusion.

“Are you deaf? What’s your name?” I demanded, leaning forward in my seat.

The boy hesitated, but this time not out of confusion. His brows drew down, suspicion marking his features. Did he think I was going to play a trick on him? “Why do you care?”

“I know everyone’s name in this school.” I said, pointing down at the desk in front of me. “So I have to know yours. Now, spill.”

“But you didn’t tell me your name.” the boy replied with convincing sincerity, actually making me laugh.

“You’re joking, right?”

“Uh...” the boy glanced around, perhaps wondering what I thought was so funny. He looked back at me, not even cracking a smile. Oh, god, he *wasn’t* joking.

“No.” he said.

I blinked. I didn’t know what to say to that. Who in the Academy had never heard of me? I might understand if he was a new student, but I’d known his face for a few years now. How in the dark do you have to be to not even know who wins all the dodge ball games in Gym?

The boy seemed to realize from the look on my face that I was not okay with his answer. “I, um...I’m sorry?”

I scowled. He didn’t sound apologetic for not knowing me - he sounded apologetic because *I* got upset about it. Which I *was*, but that wasn’t the point. I told him, “You should be. How can you even call yourself a student of Graybridge Academy and not know who I am?”

“I don’t want to respond to that.” The boy said quickly, shaking his head and waving a hand in the air. “Look, really, I’m sorry, okay? I didn’t know people here were

so touchy about that. I'm just trying to read my book!"

"Well, for future reference, I'm Morgan Molloy." I said with acid on my tongue. What was it with him and books? "And now you tell me yours."

"I —"

"Morgan?" Professor Hawthorn suddenly appeared in the doorway. He caught me off guard, pulling my attention away from the boy towards the front of the room. Normally, I would say something sarcastic, but Professor Hawthorn was giving me the most curious expression.

"Yeah?" I said, wishing I had something smart to say. It was probably for the best; I didn't want to get another detention for my lip.

"Who were you talking to?" Professor Hawthorn walked into the room, his steps slow and deliberate as he looked around. He was still giving me a funny look.

I just made a face. It wasn't like there were a lot of options for me to converse with. I just waved to the boy behind me with a pointed tilt of my head, "Uh, hello?"

Professor Hawthorn just stared at me, in a manner similar to what I had been doing earlier. He glanced at the spot I was pointing to, then back to me, not saying a word.

I just rolled my eyes. Did I have to do all the talking here? As I turned in my seat, I started to say, "I was just talking to..."

Only when I looked at the boy for confirmation, he wasn't there.

I nearly jumped out of my seat. I hadn't heard the sound of chair squeaking on tile, a book closing and being put away. What I saw made no sense.

In the space where he had sat, there was nothing but empty air and swirling dust.

The boy was gone.

Even his book had vanished.

I was the only student in that room.

I was talking to...

I realized I had let my sentence drift, but I couldn't finish it. My mouth had gone dry, heart jumping to keep up with the shock. Slowly, I turned back in my seat, placing both hands on my desk. They were cold, and I clenched them into fists to hide the shaking. I couldn't meet Hawthorn's eyes; he was still giving me that look.

Finally, I forced a smile on my face and finished, "...myself."

Chapter Two

Professor Hawthorn's eyebrows shot up, but his lips flattened into a line. He did not look surprised. He probably thought I was trying to freak him out again. "Right. Well, then, I suppose I should give you something to do to pass the time."

Relieved that Hawthorn believed the lie (wouldn't be the first time), I relaxed against the chair, and said, "A bored Morgan is a dangerous Morgan."

"Oh, I know," He frowned, concerned by the tone of my voice. Perhaps he suspected I was planning something truly nasty.

But he didn't have to worry. I was trying so hard to appear calm that I could barely think past the empty seat behind me. How real that boy's voice sounded. How utterly normal he seemed. How did I miss it before? I mean, I knew I'd seen him before, in other places, in other classes. I had never realized...

A normal person who wasn't me would be searching for a reasonable explanation for this. The boy could be a master magician. He pulled a disappearing act on me, like Houdini. Maybe he heard of my reputation. Maybe he wanted payback after the way I treated him.

But a normal person's rationale had its limits. No one could pull that move off in the three point two seconds I wasn't looking. There was just no way. And Hawthorn would have seen. He had a view of the entire room when he first walked in, when I was still talking to the boy. Hawthorn would have noticed the boy, too. Unless they were *both* playing a trick on me. I was mildly impressed with this theory a normal person would have probably come up with. Could Hawthorn be so devious?

That's not what happened, though. A normal person wouldn't know, like I did, how to identify this boy for what he really was.

A ghost.

"Morgan? Morgan?" Professor Hawthorn's voice broke through my thoughts, sharp and startling. I looked up, saw his annoyed expression. "Are you even listening to me? I just said to take out a piece of paper."

"Oh," I did so automatically, too distracted to come up with some smart-aleck reply. This was too weird, and I wanted to say something, but what would that achieve? Best case scenario, Hawthorn would just think I was pulling his leg. Worst case scenario, he'd think I was up to something that would earn me more detention time.

In case you couldn't already tell, ghosts weren't always easy for me to tell apart from your average living, breathing person. For me, they were as real as everyone else; I could see them, speak to them, hear them, smell them, even touch them, until they did something...you know, weird.

Like disappearing into thin air.

This ghost caught me off guard. I never ran into one at the Academy, and even worse someone caught me talking to one. I was an idiot, thinking it wouldn't happen here. How could I let my guard down so easily?

But I had to play it cool. Without missing a beat, I said, "And do what with it? Make an airplane?"

"No," Professor Hawthorn's face twitched — the tell-tale sign of restraining an eye roll. "I want you to write an apology to Dean Lovejoy for how you butchered the Homecoming speech."

“You want me to use those exact words?” I asked, pulling out my pencil case as well. I should go with the gel pink, just to show how much I didn’t care. “Too many syllables might be hard for Lovejoy to understand.”

“*Dean* Lovejoy, and no,” Professor Hawthorn said again, settling down into his chair. It, unlike the desk chairs, had wheels and padded armrests. It made me jealous. “You can find your own words to express your feelings. It shouldn’t be a problem, you’re usually very articulate.”

“Hm,” I said, not really in the mood to continue the conversation. I just wanted to get this stupid letter over with and get out of here. I was going to meet Juni and the others at our favorite coffee shop later, and I didn’t want to miss it.

There was a stretch of silence as I began writing. Professor Hawthorn took some paperwork from the tray on his desk and took out a red pen — making sharp slashes all over various pages. Grading tests. As the History professor, Hawthorn was very meticulous and particular about the questions he asked on his exams. That was how he weeded out the attentive and the lazy — whoever knew the finer points of Mongol warfare clearly did their work.

The center of my forehead started to ache; I remember that test from a few days earlier. It had been on the same day as the math test. I hadn’t studied for either of them.

I wasn’t worried about it. At the very least, I’d pass with a D plus, the minimum effort required for succeeding. I had to get lucky with some of the questions right?

I shook my head, clearing the thoughts from my mind. I wasn’t concerned with acing this class — or any class, really. Even graduating wasn’t that big of a goal. I had no plans

for the future, no ideal career. My mother made enough that I could live out the rest of my life without doing an ounce of labor, and I was perfectly fine with that.

Professor Hawthorn cleared his throat. It was loud, conspicuous enough to make me look up. He said with innocuous raised eyebrows, “You know you won’t be able to go to the Homecoming formal, correct?”

“Uh, yeah,” I said, glancing to the side before back at him. “I heard you the first time.”

“Oh,” Professor Hawthorn gaze turned down towards his papers. His brow was drawn together, much like when I said I (allegedly) had been only talking to myself. “You just don’t seem bothered by it very much. I just figured...you’d be looking forward to this.”

“I was. Until you said I couldn’t go.”

“So...” the man squinted at me, apparently searching for some kind of answer in my expression. He knew there was something wrong in the way how calmly I was acting. Key word: acting. “You’re not going to fight it?”

I thought about my answer before saying, “No.”

For some reason, Professor Hawthorn did not look relieved. His brow just furrowed even deeper and without another word, he went back to grading tests.

I watched him for a second before picking up my pink gel pen again. I suppressed a smile as I went back to writing the letter.

* * *

About an hour later I showed up at the *Bean Sidhe*, a coffee shop of a decidedly Irish flair in the middle of Addison Hollows’ shopping district. It had a painted green four-leaf clover on the door, the wood paneling carved with fairy imagery, and folk music playing

on the speakers. This was a popular spot for Graybridge students to hang out — that is, after they changed out of their uniforms and into more expensive, flattering clothes.

I myself had ditched the skirt and tie for some good old fashioned jeans and a leather jacket on the trip there. As expected, Mr. Barrett (the chauffeur to an impeccably clean silver sedan) had been very understanding about my situation. If he was bothered with having to wait longer than usual because of my detention, he was professional enough not to mention it.

(Also, the fact that he gets paid may have something to do with it as well).

I pushed through the glass door of the cafe, a bell twinkling at my entrance. I felt more comfortable here, surrounded by the smell of coffee, fashionable teens, and tall buildings. I didn't see my friends, but they found me before I had a chance to take a good look around.

"There you are!" Juni called, jumping out of her seat to grab me by the arm and haul me over to her table by a window with a clear view of the street. She, too, had changed, now wearing a white cashmere sweater. The scarf and giant heels stayed, however. "Took you long enough. What did Hawthorn make you do?"

"I just had to write a stupid letter," I said, sitting down with a loud *piff* as the seat cushion deflated beneath me. The sky was overcast, a shade of gray that stayed the same color the entire day. "Why, did I miss something important?"

Juni sat opposite me, grasping a ceramic mug with both of her hands and taking a long swig, allowing me to assess the area. We were not alone.

On her side of the table sat twins Alyssa and Aaron Pelkey, one still in her school uniform and the other in a paint splattered shirt (Treasurer and Secretary, respectively).

Alyssa had a mini laptop and Aaron was pulling clay shavings from his hair, a bewildered look on his face as though he couldn't remember how they got there.

Sitting by the window on my side was Melanie Yu (PR Director), her blue-black hair pulled back into a bun pierced by a pencil, sipping juice from a straw as she scribbled something in her notebook.

And, last but not least, Winnie Blake (Historian), crazy hair to match her constantly flicking eyes and whatever green-brown contents she had in her bottle. She had a matching smoothie mustache across her upper lip.

Together, we created the entirety of the Sophomore Student Council. I had just figured it out when Juni rolled her eyes and said, "Duh? You missed the council meeting. We were talking about how to fix the recent scandal that now has you banned from the Homecoming Dance."

"You know what that means, right?" she added when I didn't say anything. Arms crossed, Juni did not look happy. I knew the only way I could make things better is if I came up with a solution, but since I hadn't, I kept my mouth shut.

As if to rub it in, Winnie leaned in, blonde frizzy hair itching my skin as she whispered into my ear: "You're in *trouble!*"

Winnie was the kind of friend you had to remember if you liked her or not. Sometimes she did the funniest things, and you're glad you were there to see it — other times, you wonder how everything she says sounded so stupid or crazy, much like the way she just spoke to me now. She was the only one among them with a grin on her face and that alone freaked me out.

I pushed her away from me. "Thanks for the memo."

To be honest, I was still thinking about Houdini — the name I gave to the ghost boy I met in Hawthorn's detention. I couldn't shake the feeling that there was something strange about him. You know, aside the fact that he was a ghost and all.

"So, what are we going to do now?" Juni demanded, raising her eyebrow. Her coffee lay untouched in front of her. I could tell from the condensation that it was still full, but it had long since gone cold. She vented her barely-contained wrath through her voice. "Professor Hawthorn said you're off from planning *and* attending the Homecoming Dance! So that leaves us without our only chance at making it good. I hope you spent your detention thinking how we can fix this mess, Morgan."

"You're the Vice President!" I exclaimed, a little taken aback by her tone. What did she expect when she learned I was going to put my own spin on the Homecoming speech? It wasn't my fault she wasn't prepared. "You're supposed to be in charge when I'm not around."

"Well, I don't know how we're going to pull this together without you." Juni said, throwing a hand up in the air in frustration. "Like, *maybe* the professors will let you help us, but probably not. They'll think we're just planning a way to sneak you in on Homecoming night."

"Which we were, by the way," Winnie added.

"Well, I seriously doubt that's going to happen." I said with a half-hearted shrug. I was still somewhat drained from the detention experience, and it had more to do with disappearing boys than a stupid apology letter. "We'll keep thinking, but that's a good back-up."

I was starting to wonder if I made a mistake with that speech, how it got me into detention, then led to this argument right now. I didn't like it when my friends were angry at me; it usually meant I had to do something I want to make it up.

Also, because it led me to Houdini. I wondered if I wouldn't have a headache right now if it wasn't for him messing up my day. Had there really been a ghost at the Academy all this time? How could I not know about it? A recent student death would've maybe clued me in, but as far as I know, no Academy student suddenly up and died in the past ten years or so.

"Yeah, there's no way we'll be able to plan something like that, on top of everything else," Alyssa sighed, hanging her head and taking a long drag of her coffee. Her dreadlocks were a little tangled, a sign of constant hand-running. "I've got other stuff to do too; I still have to paint the banners for the football game, on top of decorating the gym and halls, and managing our finances, which were shot to hell since last spring's Prom. There's no way we can get all of this done. I mean, we can always hire out, but it has to go through the Dean, and he has to go through the School Board, and they don't want anything we want."

She seemed legitimately upset. The professors could say whatever they want about Academy kids being irresponsible and lacking discipline, but no one could deny Alyssa's dedication to whatever assignment she was given. That seemed to be why she had better grades than the rest of us.

"And the votes on the theme of the dance came out even," Aaron added, scowling. I remembered the options, taken from student suggestions. They hadn't been very good. "Candy Land and Hunting Camouflage. Why Hunting Camouflage? That's

not even a theme, that's just bad taste. I could combine them, make everyone happy, but it's going to look like absolute sh—"

"Point is, this thing has been bad from the start," Mel summed up. There was a pad of paper before her, with some notes. A glance at them revealed they were a combination of complaints and idle doodles. "You're just the cherry on top."

I took stock of each of their angry and depressed faces before finally saying, "Okay, okay, so without me you're all goners, I get it. But there's no way Hawthorn is letting me in on Homecoming, so I don't know what I can do..."

Melanie gave me a serious look over her frames. I still hadn't given the right answer. "I have to set up a new voting ballot, since you're now no longer Homecoming Queen. There's no time to start a new campaign! It's this weekend. By the time we find out who wins, there wouldn't be enough time to set up the speech and show. How is the paper supposed to advertise a disaster? No one wants to come to *that*."

"I know, I know," I said, holding up a hand before she could dump any more discouragement on my shoulders. "I'm thinking, okay? It's just — I don't know how to fix this without actually *being* there, unless..."

"Unless what?" Juni peered at me, trying to gauge my expression. "Morgan, you're losing me."

Aaron figured it out before she did. "You have an idea, don't you?"

I smirked. Trust the design coordinator to know what inspiration looked like on someone's face. "I'm thinking...what if we have the dance someplace else?"

"Like where?" Juni frowned. "The community center? They'll never let us back in after Aaron threw a stink bomb in there during an art auction."

“Hey, you guys dared me to do it!” Aaron protested, looking a little miffed that he was taking the blame for the Academy to never rent a night there again.

“We didn’t actually think you would!” Alyssa growled, rolling her eyes. Their parents had been at that auction. I remembered it didn’t go very well for either of the twins. “Now Mom and Dad think we need to learn impulse control. We won’t be able to get our driver’s license until we’re eighteen!”

Aaron and Alyssa threw dirty looks at each other before turning away, arms crossed and pouting. Oh good, sibling warfare, just what I needed in the middle of a crisis.

The fact that they were twins wouldn’t be obvious right off the bat. They both had the same dark skin, but Alyssa wore a string of small pearls with the hopes of a scholarship to Vassar, while Aaron had a spiky eyebrow piercing and an internship at an art studio. Aaron also thought that alcohol brought out his inner muse and create his most stirring work while completely smashed.

Most of that “work” meant throwing stink bombs into windows because his sister told him not to.

“Guys, please, don’t do this right now,” I was getting a headache just watching them. The twins had a habit of making other people pick sides if their arguments got heated enough and that was the last thing I needed right now. “I’m not putting the blame on anyone. The community center is out, end of story. I wasn’t even thinking of that anyways.”

“Well, then, what do we do?” Alyssa demanded. “Even if we do find another place, the Academy is still going to do the Homecoming dance. How are we supposed to compete with that?”

I had an idea. I was afraid to say it, because a part of me didn’t want it to happen.

But I looked at everyone’s faces, all of them desperate for a solution. Who was I to ruin the fun for them?

So I forced a smile and said, “Why don’t we have the party at my place?”

“Your place?” Winnie made a face, and then pointed at the wooden boards beneath her feet, as if the concept somehow flew over her head. “As in, *the haunted one?*”

There was a drawn out pause as that information took a second to sink in. Winnie’s little input did not help, either.

I winced. I should have known that would be a bad idea. Coventry Hall was no place for a gathering, not in its current state. Not when I knew what was there, and the rumors that surrounded the property since before I was born.

Like Winnie said, most people thought it was haunted. Ghosts. Poltergeists. Things that went bump in the night. The strange deaths that occurred there, how far away it was from the city proper. I had lived there my entire life and it wasn’t as bad as some thought, but I still wasn’t been brave enough to let anyone other than Juni come over. I had been able to build my reputation despite the fact that I lived in Coventry Hall, but I always wondered if people still thought about that in the back of their minds: that they were talking to the weird girl who lived by herself in a haunted manor.

Usually, I didn’t think about it. When I didn’t think about it, it didn’t affect me.

Except now.

After Houdini, ghosts were all I could think about. I was scared of people finding out what I could do; I had bad enough experiences with my own family, so why should it be any different with people in my school? Or hell, even the whole town?

Just rumors were enough to make people uncomfortable. No one at the table wanted to look me in the eye. They were too afraid to speak their minds, but I could see that they were reluctant to agree.

I didn't blame them, but it still hurt.

On the other hand, I didn't want to back down. I didn't want anyone to think I was afraid of letting people into my house, like some kind of leper. I couldn't play to the rumors, or people would think it's true. And it wasn't like *they* could interact with ghosts, that was just on me. As long as I didn't start acting weird around them, or Houdini popped up again (extremely unlikely), then everything would be fine.

And I was already a pro at hiding this ability. And it was just for one night. How hard could it be?

I took a deep breath, deciding to break the silence first. "I know I've never had a party there before, but I think it's a good idea. It could be a...a theme party. For Halloween. People can wear costumes and stuff. So people won't think it's so creepy."

"We never said your place was creepy," Aaron said, his eyes wide.

I gave him a sarcastic look. "Please. It would have been less obvious if you did."

But it was Juni who turned it around. I watched as a grin broke out on her face. She threw her arms up in the air, bangles clinking together as she said, "That's a great

idea! We can have our own dance on our own terms! But how are we going to get that by Hawthorn? He'll never let you hold a school dance off property."

"Who says we have to advertise it as a school dance?" Melanie asked, a wicked grin on her face. If she had doubts before, they were gone now. "It's a house party. We spread it by word of mouth, like usual. I'll still cover the Homecoming, but everyone's going to want to go to your party anyways. Especially if there's alcohol."

"There won't be alcohol," Alyssa said almost immediately.

"Competition!" Winnie said, pumping her fist. She had the toughest attitude on the Academy's soccer team, so it didn't really surprise me to think that she'd love the chance to beat the school at their own game. "I like it!"

The new idea brought both Alyssa and Aaron out of their mutual silent treatment. Aaron seemed especially pleased, now that I had removed the blame and attention away from him.

Chatter filled the table as everyone threw in their two cents, wanting to come up as many great ideas as possible. Suddenly, the Homecoming wasn't so important anymore. Yeah, Alyssa would still pitch in, as well as the others, but they didn't *have* to. Suddenly, going to the Dean for the hired help option didn't sound so impossible anymore. The twin's parents were very influential in that area and had plenty of spare cash to throw around, enough to please the School Board if complaints should arise. This was going to work out. We were going to *make* it work.

And yet, I found myself studying the table in silence, tracing my fingers over the Celtic knot pattern carved into the wood. I knew I should have been glad that everyone

was finally warming up to my idea, but I still had my worries. I had the distinct feeling that no matter what I did, something was going to go wrong. It would be just my luck.

And again, Houdini. Was it just me, or had he been avoiding the topic of his name? I mean, I wasn't calling him Houdini for nothing. Ghosts usually don't withhold a lot of information; the very least, their names.

Calling a ghost by their name gets their attention, it grounds them, reminds them who they are, even after years of being dead. A ghost saying their own name doesn't mean much, but anyone else, particularly someone who knows or is related to the ghost, can really have an effect. At least in my experience. What ghost wouldn't want that?

Juni was the only one who noticed me lost in my reverie. Leaning over the table, she said in a low voice, "Hey, is everything all right? I thought you'd be happy about all this."

"Oh, I am," I said, looking up at her and trying to smile. I didn't know if I was convincing her or not. "It's just...it's the first time I ever had a party at Coventry Hall. The idea of a bunch of random kids being there just feels...wrong."

"They won't be random," Juni gave me a funny look, half reassuring. "They're your friends. Okay, yeah, there'll be a lot of people, but it's going to be fun."

"Yeah, I guess," I said, going back to studying the design on the table. "But it's also...you know."

My birthday. I knew Juni understood, and her response confirmed it.

"Look on the bright side. At least this time your family won't be here," Juni offered as comfort. She gave me a smile and punched me playfully on the arm. "You've

got us now. Admit it, we're the perfect replacement. Now you won't have to remember all your birthdays as being bad."

I snorted. "Just one out of sixteen — that'll make a difference."

Juni shook her head, displeased with my cynicism. "You'll see, Morgan. I promise, you won't regret it."

Chapter Three

Coventry Hall never changed, not in all the years I'd been living there.

With its steepled roofs, pointed arch windows, and parapets lining the gutters, my home didn't exactly scream 'friendly'. It was more like 'Abandon all hope, ye who enter here'. Visitors often did a double-take the first time they see it. I guessed it wouldn't have been so bad if the walls of the manor weren't painted in this dour gray color that made the place look abandoned. I'd wanted it to get painted a nice color, like blue or umber, something non-threatening, but after the entire estate was deemed a landmark by Addison Hollow's Historical Society; any thought of artistic or architectural change to it was vetoed. Unless that wood had termites or mold in it, those walls were going to stay gray.

It was first built by my great-great-great-great-great-grandfather (I know, I counted), the venerable and slightly insane Oscar Frederick Molloy, who came from a humble family of immigrant potato farmers.

Good ol' Oscar had built this home, seeking sanctuary from an alleged banshee, which had haunted him since his last battle. Every time I walked up to the front doors, I passed wind chimes and mirrors; a cross made of rowan branches tied with red thread; and even a mezuzah, despite the fact that Oscar had been strictly Catholic. He built the house with every superstition in mind — The Civil War could do that to a person.

As I walked into the foyer, I was being watched by the portrait of Lady Coventry. A giant painting, she had the entire wall to herself, with curtains to shield her from sunlight. It didn't take a genius to figure out who the house was named after.

As her title warranted, Lady Coventry was decked in luscious folds of blue satin and velvet, with corn silk blond hair and eyes so gray and intense that I couldn't look into her face for too long. Her face was unsmiling and pale, cold beauty marred by the rip in the canvas. The mend was unnoticeable at a distance, but up-close I could see the ridge, in a jagged line starting at the woman's hairline and ending at her left shoulder. It looked as though someone had taken a knife to Lady Coventry's face.

She had been the first to die here.

Her eyes were starting to freak me out again, so I pulled the curtains over the portrait.

I took a deep breath and spun around, heading for the kitchen. While the coffee and pastry were good, I had a craving for over-salted potato chips, and they were a perfect distraction to the current problems on my mind right now.

I was in a hallway, going to the TV room when I heard two voices arguing in the room to my right. Suspicious, I ducked in to see what was going on.

Fronie and Bernard were in the parlor — Fronie on her brother's shoulders as they tried to reach the top cabinet over the desk. I stared at them for a moment, Bernie swaying perilously on his feet as he held onto Fronie. "Um, what are you two doing?"

"Morgan!" They cried at the same time. Bernie spun around, Fronie spinning along with him as they faced me, both with enormous grins on their faces. "You're home!"

Fronie immediately forgot what she was trying to get and jumped off her older brother's shoulders, running over to me in her sparkling white shoes, her favorite. She slammed face-first into my knees, wrapping her arms around my legs. "I missed you!"

“I’ve only been gone for, like, seven hours,” I said, laughing a little. I bent down to give her a hug. Fronie was only six years old and still trying to get over her toddler-like clinginess. “What were you just trying to do?”

“Oh, nothing!” Fronie peered up at me through her blond curls, the picture of innocence.

I raised an eyebrow. “Maybe you want to try that one again.”

Fronie gave me a gap-toothed smile while Bernie just groaned in the background, throwing his head back. “Come on, you said we’d have it before she got here!”

“Have what?” I glanced at Bernard, who jerked when my attention turned to him. He flushed and pulled off his hat, distracting himself with the fabric. My gaze flew up to the top shelf, looking at the items. Most were books, but I saw some crystal sculptures, too. I felt a smirk pull on my lips. “Wait...were you trying to get that swan, Fronie? You know you’re not old enough to play with that.”

Fronie looked down in shame, pouting her lips. “I just wanted to touch it, that’s all. I wouldn’t drop it or nothin’. I’d be extra special careful, Morgan, I promise!”

While normally I wouldn’t care for Fronie and her brother playing with delicate objects that belonged to my family, things in this room were an exception. They didn’t belong to my mother or my aunts. These crystal animals were once my great-grandfather’s — the swan, along with the dove, the unicorn, a lioness, deer, and elephant — were gifts to his wife, one for every decade of their marriage.

I loved my great-grandfather. He was the one of the few people who had ever really listened to me, taken me seriously. He may have not left me anything in his will,

but I still felt protective of his things. Especially after his death, when Aunt Charmaine, one of my mother's sisters, tried to sell them off at an auction.

"Sorry," I said, wincing. "You're still not old enough, Fronie. These things were really important to great-grand-daddy Teddy. The last thing he'd want is for these things to break, you understand? Besides," I reached over to pick up the doll left on the bottom shelf of the cabinet. Her dress was stained and face paint faded, the signs of constant love and cherishment from her owner. "Don't you think Libby is getting a little lonely by herself?"

"Oh," Fronie grabbed her doll, cradling her in her arms and cooing. She twirled her fingers in Libby's curled hair, auburn and frizzy. "I almost forgot! Poor Libby, she doesn't have anyone else to play with."

"Eugh," Bernard made a face, starting to look more than a little disgusted by his sister's love for inanimate objects with faces. "Girls are weird. And now I don't have anything to do."

I paused, deciding not to tell him to go outside, because one: I knew he'd hate that and two: unless someone was out there with him, he'll get bored and trash the rose bushes that Mr. Bailey, the gardener, had spent so much time on. "Well, why don't you two play a game or something? You could try *Monopoly* again."

I only suggested that one because it was a extensive game and I hoped that maybe it would keep them distracted long enough for me to think of something else.

But Bernie had learned from the last time we played (which ended in he and Fronie fighting, the board overturning and losing the dog piece), and said, "No way! There's too many rules. I want to play your Xbox."

“Your hands can’t even fit over the controller,” at eight, Bernie was just big enough to show interest in shooting games and other gory, violent stuff; which was all well and good, but he also tended to throw the controller when he got frustrated. And I wasn’t going to explain another broken TV to Ms. Pearl the housekeeper, so I compromised, “How about I let you guys watch TV, any show you want.”

“*Anything* we want?” Bernie asked, jaw dropping at the prospect.

“Anything,” I said, before adding, “But don’t turn the volume on too loud, okay? You don’t want to make Aunt Temperance angry. She hates modern technology as it is.”

“Yay!” The two were now practically bouncing on their heels, ready to run out of the room and exercise their freedom with the TV remote.

But before they could go, I remembered my earlier discussion in the cafe and said, “Hey, wait, you two, I still have some news. I think you’re going to like it.”

Fronie’s eyes sparkled with expectation, and she started to jump on her toes. “Oooh, what, what, what? Is it good? Are you going to let us eat all the ice cream we want?”

“Stay up all night?” Bernie asked with a hopeful smile.

“*Nooo*,” I said, knowing they did that anyways, with my permission or not. “We’re going to have a party here this weekend,”

To the right, the door closed seemingly of its own accord. I sighed and hung my head before calling out: “I know you’re there, Aunt Temperance.”

The curtains rustled from a breeze that came from nowhere. By the grandfather clock appeared an austere woman with an equally severe expression, graying hair and

dark green dress, looking the most disapproving. The woman fixed me with dark blue eyes not unlike my mother's, lips pursed and ready to scold.

It was she who said, "I do sincerely hope you don't plan on inviting any *boys*, Morgan. It's not proper for a girl your age to be consorting with the other gender. What would your mother think?"

"Aunt Temperance, you know very well I don't give a flying crap what my mother thinks," I said with a smooth smile, used to her disapproval. I liked to think it was the fact that the woman had the corset tied too tight, preventing blood to reach her head, which is why she stuck to the values of her time — even though I knew it wasn't true. Ghosts just didn't acclimate very well to current trends. They'd always belong to the time they came from.

"Of course you wouldn't," Temperance turned up her nose. Her hat, laden with fake roses and feathers, threatened to fall off her head. "And your language is as reprehensible as ever. Well, seeing as I can't stop you, I'll just have to ensure that none of your so-called male 'friends' make any untoward actions on any of the young women attending this ill-conceived idea of yours."

I just groaned. See, my problem with the party wasn't with my friends. My problem was with my family. More specifically, my *ghost* family.

"You better not start hitting people with your umbrella again," I said, standing up straight now. Aunt Temperance usually got what she wanted by using force, which rarely worked out in my favor. "Just because they can't see you doesn't make it okay. This party is happening, whether you like it or not."

Everyone here had been dead for at least thirty years, if not more. Fronie and Bernard were killed by the Spanish Flu in 1918 and 1919, and now lived in this house as eternal children, unable to grow up, mentally or physically. I guess it wasn't so bad, since neither were self-aware enough to become cynical with their lot in un-life. Uncle Teddy somehow managed it, which I consider quite a feat since he fought in World War Two. Some of my fondest memories of childhood were him telling me old war stories, him in his leather office chair, me on the floor playing with my toys.

Speaking of which. I looked around, expecting more voices on the matter. I usually needed help when fighting against Temperance. "Has Uncle Teddy come back yet?"

"No, not yet," Aunt Temperance said, curt as ever. But there was a flicker of doubt across her face, and I knew that this was definitely unusual. "I'm sure he will return soon enough. He always does."

"It's been two weeks," I said, as if she needed a reminder. "Has anyone ever been gone that long?"

Aunt Temperance just shook her head, her face carefully composed so I couldn't tell what she was really thinking. But she wouldn't look me in the eyes when she said, "Not since you were born."

I bit my lip, frowned down at the floor. Like with their difficulty to embrace changes, ghosts sometimes... *slipped* back in time. Not like actual time travel, as far as I can figure from what the others tell me about it. They just disappear from this time period, the present moment, to relive their strongest memories — sometimes happy ones, other times not so much.

Fronie and Bernie, being the youngest, didn't have many memories to begin with, and so they tended to remain anchored in my life. When they did slip back, it was usually a birthday or holiday, like Christmas. Bernie had it worse sometimes; since Fronie died before, he sometimes had to relive her death.

It got hard, sometimes, to explain death to an eight-year-old who would probably never truly understand.

Least to say, it was usually not fun. Especially if you were a soldier, like Uncle Teddy.

Aunt Temperance never told me about any of the times *she* relived her memories, so I couldn't even imagine how bad they'd be. But as her comment indicated, my presence somehow lessened the amount of time slippage they experienced. Not just frequency, but duration, too. Before I happened, one of them might come back and a whole decade would have passed without them realizing it. I guess having a not-dead person to talk to helps them keep track and stay grounded.

"I thought it might get better," I said, after a moment of thought. "After Easter Sunday, I didn't think he'd be gone for longer than a week."

"Things will go back to normal," Aunt Temperance said, her tone turning sharp when she finally regarded me again. Her shoulders stiffened as if I had somehow offended her with my own doubt. "They always do. Just you wait."

I sighed, shrugged my shoulders. It wasn't like I could do anything about it anyways, and as much as I hated to admit it, Aunt Temperance was usually right. "*Anyways*, I just wanted to let you guys know that for the next week, a lot of my friends are going to be here to help with the planning. Real, *living* friends who *can't* see you, all right?"

“So,” Bernard said with raised eyebrows. “Is it like a family reunion?”

That made me wince just thinking about it. There weren’t a lot of things I hated more than dealing with ghost problems, but family reunions were definitely one of them.

The Molloy family had a reunion every couple years, with the entire extended family congregated to Coventry Hall to celebrate...something. Togetherness? I never felt connected with any of my family who wasn’t already dead (which sounded a lot more pathetic than it actually was), not made better by the air of perfection my mother and her sisters maintained the whole time; whoever had the best children, the best job, the best garden. Essentially, a competition between the most prominent members of my family to see who was better than the rest.

It was sad and stupid, and I usually spent reunions in my room, talking to people no one else could see.

“Kind of,” I said with a smile. “But a lot more fun. It’s with people I like, who aren’t related to me, who know how to have a good time. We’re going to have lots of decorations, food, and dancing, and it’s going to be packed all night long. ”

“Can we help?” Fronie asked from the couch, rocking Libby in her arms as though she were a baby. “I know the best place to hang decorations!”

“Well, that’s good! I’ll let you help if you two promise to behave, okay?”

Aunt Temperance just sniffed. “I certainly hope this doesn’t turn out like the Fourth of July of 1967. What a disaster *that* was. I’m just glad *you* weren’t there, Morgan. I doubt the family reputation would’ve survived had your shenanigans been involved.”

“What? Why?” I asked, curiosity piqued, before quickly backpedaling when Aunt Temperance took a deep breath and opened her mouth. “Wait, no, never mind! You’re just going to turn it into another lecture.”

“Hmph.” Aunt Temperance scowled, raising her chin in defiance before turning to walk through the wall. “Well, clearly I’m not needed here anymore.”

While she didn’t appreciate the new ages, Aunt Temperance had an encyclopedic knowledge of every event that happened in this household during her lifetime and afterwards. This included the time Teddy (her grandson) snuck out of the house to go meet a girl that ended with his new car in the river. She also knew the number of every single cookie Fronie and Bernard stole from the kitchen. Each. This was why I kept most of my troublemaking *outside* of the house. Not that Temperance could tell anybody if she *did* know, but the woman could make my life painful if she wanted to.

I don’t know why she did it; maybe someone forget her birthday one time and now here she was, recalling every misdeed out of pure spite. At least the two of us had *that* in common.

My stomach growled, and I looked at the bag of chips in distaste before leaving the room. All this worry of ghosts and parties had me aching for better comfort food. Returning to the kitchen, I found Gemma was smoking a cigarette that had long gone out.

She turned to me with a cherry-red smile, speaking in heavy upper-crust brogue, “Why, *hel-lo*, Morgan! You here to chat with little ol’ me?”

I hadn’t been planning on it, but I just shrugged and smiled. “Sure. I was getting something to eat, anyways.”

“Oh, please, spare me your pity,” Gemma sighed with dramatic flair, slumping over the counter in the middle of the kitchen and pressing the back of her hand to her head. She looked out of place here, in her fancy black cocktail dress and kitten heels. “If you want me gone, just say you want me gone!”

“What? I don’t want you gone,” I chuckled, throwing Gemma a baffled look as I reached up to replace the chips back to their designated cabinet. “You know you’re my favorite.”

“Oh, darling, you know just what to say,” Gemma flapped her hand to her face, mocking flattery and then laughing at the inside joke. I always told her she was my favorite whenever she acted mildly upset. “So what was all that commotion I was hearing in the other room? Are you starting up more trouble? *Without* me?”

“Oh, it was nothing,” I said, going through other cabinets to see what else appealed to my hunger. As was the curse of many American teenagers, I could not find a single thing to eat in any of these cabinets filled with food. “Just throwing a party, that’s all.”

“A *party*?” Gemma drawled out, eyebrows rising as she turned to me. “You should have come to me first thing, Morgan, honey. *I* know how to throw a party.”

She *would* know. Gemma’s last act in the land of the living was throwing a massive gala here, right before choking on the olive in her martini and promptly joining the Dead Molloy Society.

“I had to run it by Temperance first,” I said in apology. Really, Gemma was the only person I trusted in a situation like this. Biologically, Gemma was a distant aunt of mine — but she felt more like the older sister I never had; she always knew what to do. “I

can't have her running around giving people unexplained bruises and concussions. It's bad enough people think this place is haunted."

"But it *is*, darling," Gemma said with a frown.

"Yeah, but I don't want it to become a stereotype," I said, pulling out some ice cream before Gemma gave me a disapproving look, and I sheepishly put it back in the freezer. Beleaguered, I added, "I mean, it's not like you guys are demons from hell that need to be exorcised or anything. You don't hurt others, you don't want to take control of their bodies and eat their souls. You're just regular people... who are dead."

"And happen to be related to you, too, don't forget that," Gemma winked, bumping her hip with mine as she passed by. "That's the best part about living here, Morgan. Everyone here loves you, just the way you are. I'm sure Temperance will listen to you, she just likes *thinking* she won the argument."

I smiled at that, then felt a twinge in my chest. If only my mother had the same mentality as Gemma.

She was about to walk out of the room before I suddenly called out, "Gemma, wait! I have to ask you something."

"About what, darling?" Gemma paused, hand on the doorframe and giving me a curious smile.

"It's about a boy." I said. "At school."

"A *boy*?" she gasped, and I only realized too late I said the wrong thing. She shot back to me, arms flying around my shoulders in a gleeful hug. "Oh, Morgan, I knew you'd get over that breakup! Like I said before, all it'd take was some time to clear your head —"

“What? No,” I said, shaking my head and quickly pushing Gemma away before she ran off with this idea. Already flustered with her implication, I stuttered to correct myself: “No, no, no, not *that* kind of boy. I’m not over, I mean, I’m not looking...just — never mind, okay? Look, the boy at school, he’s...he’s...”

Gemma frowned at me when I couldn’t finish my sentence, her eyes searching my face. “Morgan, what’s wrong? What happened? Did that boy hurt your feelings?”

I snorted despite myself. I didn’t consider myself very sensitive, at least not to be devastated about someone insulting me. I shook my head and said, “No, nothing like that. It’s just, the boy I met — I think he’s dead.”

Gemma blinked, long eyelashes fluttering. She said, “How did you find out?”

“Hawthorn couldn’t see him,” I replied, thinking back on the moment and getting chills. It was still startling to think about — I hadn’t been surprised by a ghost in a while. I was kind of frustrated with myself for not picking up on it sooner. How long had he been alone, unnoticed, when I was less than a hundred feet away? “The boy...disappeared. There was no way he could’ve left the room without someone else noticing otherwise. Like-like Houdini, only dead.”

“Houdini *is* dead, honey.”

“You know what,” I said, scowling. Gemma had a tendency to tear apart my comparisons. “I’d appreciate some actual feedback on my situation, please.”

“Sorry,” Gemma strained a smile, rubbing my arm with her thumb. “I didn’t mean to come off as rude. But this isn’t the first time you’ve met a ghost outside this house. Weren’t you talking about the Santa Claus at the mall yesterday?”

“Yeah, but I knew him for a while,” I replied. “This is different.”

The Santa Claus at the mall had been one of those nice old men who dressed up to make Christmas special for the kids — had a heart attack and died, but his soul remained to continue the work he loved. Now he spent his afterlife popping up only during the holiday season, bringing joy to the children by bringing toys to life and inspiring their wonder. A literal Christmas spirit.

But I digress. I added, “I’ve been at the Academy for *years* and only now I talk to him? Only now I realize he’s dead? I don’t remember him at all, I have no idea how or when he died. It’s like I’m off my game. And there was something just off about him, Gemma. Like, he couldn’t believe someone was talking to him. That he was noticed.”

“Well, you’re probably the first person he’s met that can talk to dead people,” Gemma pointed out. “Heaven knows, I’ve been here for ages and you’re the first living person I’ve spoken to since I died.”

“Maybe,” I said, but even though her answer made sense, I had the unsettling feeling that there might be more to this than I realized. If the boy knew he was dead, knew people couldn’t see him, why would he disappear when Hawthorn showed up? Why didn’t he tell me his name? “I don’t know what it was, but there was something about him that was different than other ghosts I’ve met. Usually I can tell right away.”

“Well, just go back and ask him, sweetie,” Gemma said with a simple smile and a shrug, like it was as easy as that. Maybe it was, and I was just over-thinking it. “Use your natural charm, I’m sure he’ll warm up to you soon enough.”

“Yeah,” I said, deciding not to tell her how I threw a paper ball at the boy’s head. “I’m not sure that’s going to work out.”

“You never know,” Gemma said, mistaking my tone for uncertainty rather than sarcasm. “I’m sure everything will go fine.”

* * *

For the rest of the week I didn’t spot Houdini again. I decided to keep calling him that until I got an actual name.

Oh, believe me, I looked. While I was the only person I knew who could see ghosts, that didn’t mean my...*gift*, if you could call it that was all-powerful. The dead could still hide from me, if they wanted to. This seemed to be Houdini’s plan of action.

I was now starting to regret antagonizing him. But come on; was it really my fault that he wouldn’t pay attention to the *only* living person who could see him?

For my part, I tried my best to identify him, despite the obvious setbacks. I had asked Melanie for student files from Miss Demille’s office, but the boy wasn’t in any of the folders, meaning that scaling two floors of ivy colored stone in the middle of the night was all for nothing. The library had yearbooks for each class of students since its inception — with the reluctant help of Juni, Mel, and Aaron, I tackled them all; I didn’t tell them the real reason why I was looking for Houdini’s likeness; just that it was a project Professor Hawthorn was making me do, something random on the history of the school.

They bought it. Why wouldn’t they? I was the best liar I knew, and this was totally something Hawthorn would come up with for detention assignments.

They didn’t know I could see ghosts. Not even Juni. Even if I told them, I doubted they would believe me. There was an urban legend across Addison Hollows, the

embarrassment the (living) Molloy family tried so hard to pretend never happened. I was little then, barely out of my booster seat when I started talking about my great-grandfather. When my mother found out, she thought I was lying just to amuse myself. My aunts laughed and my brother made fun of me.

When I hadn't stopped, I had been sent to a child therapist, and every word that came out of my mouth since was diagnosed to an overactive imagination and a desire for attention. No one took me seriously after that.

So yeah, maybe I was still a little sore on the subject. Unless I could prove my abilities — which I still didn't know how to do — I wasn't going to bother.

It didn't matter, anyways. The yearbook exercise turned out to be fruitless. Houdini, despite wearing a bad uniform, was not in any class, had no picture or name to pin. If he was a student, even a dead one, shouldn't there be *some* record of him somewhere?

I didn't know where else to look. After going through so many pictures and reading so many names, I was starting to lose my memory of Houdini's face, so eventually I just had to stop before I forgot entirely. The guy just had a kind of face that slipped under my radar — I might have passed him the halls a million times and not even noticed

I was so close to convincing myself that I just imagined him. Or maybe I got lucky and he somehow figured out the reason he was a ghost, fixed the problem, and moved on to the afterlife within the last week or so. I didn't know what happened to ghosts after they completed whatever business had them stuck here; was there a Heaven? A Hell? No ghost had ever come back to tell me.

I was about to give up. Then Friday happened.

It had been in the library. I had given up on the yearbooks and was just trying to hide from Professor Hawthorn. I had been trying to look at the answers for a future test he left on his desk, moving the cup of tea that had been resting on top of them. I hadn't meant to spill his all over his stuff; it just slipped from my hands! Any second now he was going to discover the mess I left behind, and I didn't want to be anywhere near when it happened.

So there I was, hunkered down on the second floor of the library and peaking through the banister, overlooking the shelves below, when I saw him.

There he was. The boy, Houdini, ducking in and out of aisles, seeming to have a destination in mind. He knew what he was looking for. No one else was around, so I didn't have to worry about putting up a façade.

He came up to the back wall of the library. I could barely see the top of his head over the bookshelves. Carefully, I got up from my spot and crept closer, keeping quiet in case anyone noticed me. Houdini was scanning the shelves, apparently trying to find some dusty old reference book no one's used in years.

I didn't take my eyes off of him. I slid down a ladder that led to the floor, keeping it quick so I didn't lose him. The boy was out of my line of sight but I knew he was there, I could see his shadow on the floor. Yeah, I could see their shadows, too. I guess light particles weren't that picky when it comes to the supernatural. It's not like I ever paid attention on Physics class.

For a moment, I stayed there, crouched, considering my next move. Part of me just wanted to go up and say hi, the other wanted me to get back at him for the little scare he gave me earlier. I chose the last one, because I thought he deserved it.

I managed to get within ten feet of the guy without him noticing me. I figured I'd just sneak up and scare the bejeezus out of him. "So, what're you looking for?"

"Gah!" I watched with a smug smile as Houdini whipped around, an expression of shock on his face. Nice to finally get a one-up on him. Then he huffed, hands clenching into fists and scowling. "Are you following me?"

"Trying to." I said, leaning against the bookshelf, deciding not to get any closer to him. I already knew he didn't like me, I didn't want him to get the idea he could hurt me, too, if he felt like it. "You still haven't answered my question."

He threw me a strange look. "*What* question?"

"Your name, idiot," I sighed, rolling my eyes. Did I seriously have to remind this guy? "And why you just up and vanished in the middle of class. I thought we were having a nice conversation."

"Yeah, well, that professor came in," Houdini shrugged, looking away from me, suddenly fascinated with some almanacs of New York. He traced his finger along one spine. "And you were being annoying. And I'm not telling you my name."

"What? Why, because I'm annoying? That's stupid."

I got a nice glare for that one. "You've been after me all week, just to ask me my name?"

"Well, yeah. It's not everyday I meet a ghost at school." I said like it was obvious. Apparently, I overestimated him.

His face went pale. "...a *what?*"

"A ghost." I squinted at him. Houdini acted like I just told him I ran over his dog. "Duh."

But Houdini just shook his head frantically, turning his back to me completely. The sunlight that his hair made a golden halo around his head. Strangely fitting. "I-I'm not a ghost. You're just...confused."

"Pretty sure I'm not." I said, tilting my head, rather intrigued by this novel situation. I never had to convince someone they were dead before. Houdini remained turned away, his shoulders hunched. Pushing off the bookshelf, I drew nearer to him, placing a hand on his shoulder so he'd look at me again. "What, like you didn't know? You're telling me you didn't notice the way no one ever looks at you, or talks to you, or calls your name — which I still don't know by the way — and, by the way, most normal people can't disappear into thin air like you can."

"I did that?" Houdini blinked at me. Oh, right, how could I explain to him that when a ghost disappears from *my* sight, it meant he was trapped in his own memories? That seemed pretty heavy for a guy who was apparently new to this idea. "I don't remember that. I just had another class to go to."

"Another class? It was the end of the day, I was in detention," I told him, again not surprised. Like I said, he transitioned into another memory without realizing it. It'd be difficult to tell, if most of his memories take place in the same location he haunted in. "It's fine, it happens to most ghosts, don't worry about it."

“But I’m not dead!” Houdini jerked out from under my hand, a line forming between his brow. Worry, maybe even panic, filled his expression. He stumbled away from me. “I can’t be dead. It’s not possible.”

“Well, I don’t know what to tell you, pal.” I replied, my hand dropping back to my side. “But, yeah, you’re pretty dead.”

“You’re lying.” Houdini’s eyes met mine, his voice hard.

Now *that* was an interesting accusation. I just made a face, threw up a hand. “What? That doesn’t even make any sense! What would I have to gain from lying to you about something as serious as this?”

“I don’t know, to mess with me? You seem like the kind of person who’d do that,” Houdini pointed out, not necessarily incorrect. “It’s not like you care about my feelings, do you?”

Admittedly, no, but I wasn’t going to say that. How could I convince him? Laughing in his face wasn’t going to make this situation any better. So I kept my voice even, my gaze level. “I’m just telling you the truth, that’s all. I thought you already knew.”

“And how do you figure that?”

“Well, like I said before, ghosts usually notice the things that make them a ghost. And, you know, the whole *dying* thing tends to be memorable,” I fixed him with a skeptical look. There had to be a reason why I couldn’t find him in any of the yearbooks. “You *do* remember how you died, right?”

The wide-eyed, helpless look he gave me said otherwise. I pressed the heel of my palm to my temple, saying, “Oh, boy, that’s not good. Well, I suppose I can work with that —”

I took a step towards him, but Houdini jumped away, suddenly furious. “No, stay away! Don’t touch me!”

“What? I’m just trying to help!”

“I don’t want your help!” He snapped. “Because I’m not dead!”

Oh, great, I made him mad. I raised my hands in what I hoped was a placating gesture. “Look, I’m not trying to scare you —”

BANG!

Something had just collided with a shelf behind me. The sound cut me off, ending my sentence in a gasp. My heart leaping into my throat, I spun around to see who it was. To confirm that theory, someone hissed, “Ow!”

Frustrated that I had been distracted by some clumsy idiot, I turned back to Houdini, only to find myself staring at an empty wall.

My heart practically dropped into my stomach. *No, no, no.* I dashed towards the shelf, bracing myself against the wood. I looked both ways on either side — but Houdini was nowhere to be seen. I checked all the nearest aisles he could’ve gone in the split-second I had my eyes off of him, but nope. He was gone.

Unbelievable! Houdini pulled another disappearing act on me!

Frustrated, I wanted to knock over a shelf and just watch them topple like dominos. Still, I had a little ounce of hope left; maybe he hadn’t gotten too far. So I called out, “Hello?”

No reply. At least, not from Houdini. Instead, I got a different voice, one that was too deep, too mellow to be from a skinny blond boy.

“Oh, sorry, did I scare you?” The newcomer, the one who had bumped into the shelf, was coming around the corner. I froze at his voice. He appeared around the shelf with hands held up, palms out in a friendly gesture, “I didn’t mean —” He stopped himself when he recognized me, hands dropping to his sides. “Oh. You.”

I didn’t say anything. I felt my hands clench at my sides and I moved around him. His dark curly hair fell into his warm, brown, thick-lashed eyes. Sometimes I forgot how handsome he was. I made myself look away and I tasted the bile on my tongue. Of course, it would be *him* to screw up my one chance to actually get through to Houdini. But I wasn’t going to give him the time of day. I had better things to deal with.

“What, you’re not even going to talk to me now?” *He* demanded as I stalked away without so much as an acknowledgement. I heard him scoff and mutter to himself as I left the aisle. “Typical.”

I thought I was over it. After, what, four months to recuperate from the utter humiliation of being dumped? No one *dumped* me. Even thinking his name made my gut still boiled with bile and loathing.

Sergio Medina. That was the name whispered behind my back when I passed down the halls. Sergio Medina dumped Morgan Molloy, and lived to tell the tale.

Apparently, he wasn’t so over it, either. I had just crossed into another book section when I heard him heave a sigh and say, “Morgan, wait.”

I really didn’t want to, but I did anyways because apparently even vile hatred couldn’t trump my own curiosity. I came to a stop, fists clenched, and didn’t turn around

until I heard him approach from behind. After a moment, I spoke through gritted teeth.
“What.”

That was me being as calm as possible.

“You know what. You haven’t spoken a word to me since last May —”

“And apparently that wasn’t enough of a hint?” I cut him off, giving Sergio my best glare. “I don’t have anything to say to you. Just leave me alone.”

See? Calm.

Sergio closed his eyes for a long moment, inhaling through his nose, apparently trying to stay calm as well. I liked to think I was good at getting a rise out of people. Made me better than them.

That’s when I caught the scent of his cologne; Armani, the same scent I got him for Valentine’s Day. It was probably a bit much for our first Valentine’s together, but according to *Cosmo* that’s how you keep a boyfriend. I couldn’t believe he still used it. Aren’t you supposed throw away every memory of your ex after a breakup?

Then Sergio opened his eyes again and said, “If this is about that Facebook post Jordan wrote, I swear, I had nothing to do with it.”

Jordan Kasprzak was a girl in our grade, with a massive crush on Sergio that not only did everyone know about, apparently also wasn’t reciprocated. The girl had been jealous of me since the day Sergio and I became best friends (September 15th, Seventh Grade), and probably thought we were in a relationship long before it actually happened.

When we broke up, Jordan must’ve smelled the blood in the water, and went after it like a shark; less than two days after Sergio dumped me, she wrote a public post online about broken hearts, unhealthy relationships, and teasing, ungrateful girlfriends.

She never mentioned me by name. No smart person would. But everyone knew who she was talking about, anyways. I had a good feeling they might be dating now, although I wasn't sure; I'd blocked both of them online, and I wasn't going to lower my pride by asking anyone, either. The only way I — and for that matter, the rest of the school — could get past this is if I acted like I didn't care.

And luckily for me, I had no classes with Jordan this year. Like Sergio, she was not getting an invite to my party. Just desserts.

“Right, sure,” I said, with a roll of my eyes, although I was pretty sure Sergio was telling the truth. To admit that, though would put us on the same side for once, and that was the last thing I wanted. “Well, you can tell your one true love that she doesn't have to worry about Morgan Molloy getting in the way anymore. I'm clearly not interested.”

“That's not what I wanted to talk —”

“Whatever,” I said and turned on my heel with a flick of my head, having the desired effect of my hair hitting his face. I had no intention to let Sergio further this conversation.

Still, my eyes were starting to burn. I couldn't get out of that library fast enough.

Chapter Four

I've never put so much effort into a party before, not like this. It was all anyone wanted to talk about in school all week. My party, not the Homecoming dance.

I think the professors caught on, because they brought up the Homecoming in classes, hoping to convince students to pay the fifteen dollar ticket (ten for couples) to go. It was just to get enough funding to pay off whoever they got to organize it this year, probably Student Government members from the other grades — Juni and I decided only Sophomores and up would be allowed at our party. The younger kids, seventh and eighth graders, weren't really ready for the kind of thing I had in mind, and they seemed happy enough to get the organization of Homecoming passed down to them.

I kept my hands off the whole event, exactly as Graybridge Academy asked, and instead spent my free time organizing and preparing Coventry Hall for the party. To go with the month of October and general American fare, it was now completely decked out in creepy Halloween fun, with pumpkin lanterns, plenty of skeletons, and curtains of fake cobwebs (as well as some real ones). The upper floor of the Hall remained untouched, mostly because I liked my privacy and there was no way I was letting any drunk baby-making or other bad life decisions happen in my house.

Everyone in the Sophomore council had something to do. Aaron handled set design, while Alyssa was in charge of lights and music, of which there were plenty. Mel advertised online and sent out the invitations. Winnie somehow managed to find a guy to do a creepy hayride with his tractor through the looping forest trail behind my house. Juni

was in charge of the food and drinks, and I was busy trying to keep everything from falling apart. So far, I had faced no ghostly problems, from my family or otherwise.

By the time Juni came over on Saturday to make sure I had everything finished, I was in the middle of a minor panic attack — in all the chaos of preparation, I didn't have the time to pick out a dress.

After she convinced me again that everything was going to be fine, I got upstairs to get ready. Juni waited for me as I searched around my closet for the right dress. As much fun as Halloween-costume-birthday parties were, I decided I wasn't going as anything but myself tonight.

Juni spoke from the other side of my closed door. "I heard you ran into Sergio the other day at school. Why didn't you ever tell me about it?"

I grit my teeth as I pulled out a sparkly peacock-blue cocktail dress from my closet; a nice little number I got as an impulse-buy last summer but hadn't found a reason to wear until now. It was slim-fitting and matched my eyes. Slipping into it, I deliberated on what to say. A part of me wanted to ignore Juni, pretend I never heard her, but I knew that wouldn't fly.

Still, I thought I had left that uncomfortable run-in moment behind me. I couldn't hide the venom in my tone. "I told you not to say his name."

I hadn't said anything to anyone, except Gemma. She was the only one allowed to know about my social life, and she obviously couldn't tell anybody else about what happened at the library. Why would I *want* to tell others, anyways? They wouldn't understand. I just wanted to forget everything that had to do with Sergio. How did Juni find even out?

“Oh, sorry,” Juni said, and I heard the wood creak as she shifted position in her high heels. After a moment of awkward silence, she asked in a voice that could barely be heard past the door, “Was it...bad?”

I admired the dress on my form in the mirror. Covering in sequins, I glittered in the light. I pulled at the sleeve on my left arm, bringing the hem over my wrist. “It wasn’t *anything*. We bumped into each other, he said sorry, and I left. That’s it.”

“He said sorry?” She asked. I glared at the door, but my gaze couldn’t pierce the wood. Would she just drop it already? “About bumping into you or breaking up with you?”

“The first one, what do you think?” I snapped.

“Hey, chill out,” Juni said, reproachful. The door groaned a little as she leaned against it. “I don’t know what happened. I heard he got a nasty bump on his head from walking into a shelf.”

“Where’d you get this from, Juni?”

“He told me.”

I chose the wrong time to move a trophy out from in front of my mirror to the collection on my shelf. At her words, I dropped it and the marble corner of the trophy landed right on my bare foot. “Ow!”

I thought I heard snickering on the other side of the door as I hopped around, clutching my foot. I threw a dirty look in Juni’s general direction, but she couldn’t see it.

“When did he tell you?” I shouted, falling on my bed to nurse my injury. Ugh, how was I going to dance with a gimp foot? I glanced at my window, noticing how dark it was outside. The guests were going to be here pretty soon. I better pick up the pace.

“*Morgan*,” Juni groaned. “I have class with him. You *know* that. He sits right behind me in Biology! And he was talking about you.”

I had been reaching for a Band-Aid in the bedside table when I paused. The curiosity was practically toxic. For the past nine weeks I’ve been trying to forget about him, convince myself that whatever he did or said wasn’t important. I guessed I had to try harder. “...What did he say?”

“Eh, I don’t know.”

“You said you talked to him!”

“Oh, did I? Sorry, I meant eavesdrop. Technically the same thing, right?”

“Juni!”

“Okay, okay!” Juni said, cowed by my anger. “I mean, it wasn’t *that* interesting. Mostly about the things you guys did together. Kind of nostalgic, you know. He — he almost sounded like...”

She didn’t finish her sentence. I waited a few seconds before asking, “Like what?”

“Like he missed you.”

I finished opening and putting the bandage on my foot before my mind finally registered what my ears heard. Then I started to laugh.

Juni peeked inside my room, as if to make sure I hadn’t completely lost my mind. She wore a costume — a scarlet red dress with six-inch pumps, with feathery wings on the back. Her curly dark hair was pinned up in a Mohawk, the ends dyed caramel brown and sides of her head shaved. Looking like a killer Cupid, Juni was ready to rock, although her expression said otherwise.

Her brow furrowed together. “What’s so funny?”

I didn't actually think I'd have to explain this to her, since we used to talk about it so much. But she kept giving me that look, so I complied. "*He* broke up with *me*. And *he's* sad about it? Give me a break."

Juni frowned. "Well, I don't know. After all, it was *you* that said —"

"Whatever," I snapped, cutting Juni off before she could say any more. I got up to put on my shoes. I didn't want to talk about him anymore. He just made everything too complicated. "I'm going to open the doors. You go make sure the punch bowl is filled."

Juni huffed as she crossed her arms and stalked out of the room. I watched her go, bewildered. What was *her* problem?

I didn't think much of it, however. I glanced at my reflection in the mirror, saw some imperfections, like the abundance of freckles that needed to be toned down, and spent the next ten minutes touching up.

I was not particularly curvy, with a body shaped like a ruler, or maybe even a stick. If I cut my hair short and wore baggy clothes, I'd look like a younger version of my older brother Tommy; Because of the cheeks and freckles, I'd maybe look twelve or thirteen except no twelve or thirteen-year-old was as tall as me. I'd grown five inches since last year, but I decided to wear heels anyways, because nothing is more intimidating than a girl who stood just over six feet tall. It made me feel powerful, if a little tottering.

I didn't do anything with my hair, just kept it as it was — bone straight and black, swinging past my shoulders; naturally perfect. Juni would call it unimaginative, that was just something I could ignore.

After confirming I had achieved the show-stopping look, I headed downstairs. I wished everyone was already inside, so they could appreciate my grand entrance. Oh well.

Addison Hollows could be considered a small city, but most of it was concentrated to the Northeast, where Juni and Sergio lived. Coventry Hall was at least a half-mile, if not more, from my closest neighbors, at the far edge of the city district. I mean, the trees were more familiar to me than those who lived in the houses near mine. I didn't mind the privacy (it's surprisingly hard to come by when your mother worked in Hollywood), but considering the long driveway was now packed with cars, I couldn't help but feel as though this place was meant to be full of people. The living kind, I mean.

Juni was nowhere to be seen in the foyer that now resembled an ancient Mayan temple; complete with cobwebs, prop torches, and some pretty realistic mummies. And kudos to Aaron, who created atmospheric lighting with some special lanterns Alyssa made. Honestly, the rooms that were decorated didn't even look like my house anymore. Most of the furniture was covered or put away, replaced by props from the near-by mall, packed with Halloween merchandise.

The pool had turned into a piranha-filled moat (the piranhas were plastic, but I knew some who were gullible enough to be fooled); the surrounding lawn and woods filled with booby traps; my kitchen into a mad scientist's laboratory; the ballroom into a dance floor equipped with a DJ and fake-bone chandelier that took an hour to hang up; and billiard hall into a torture chamber. I had to say, the commitment paid off. Time I could be doing homework well wasted.

While the entire upstairs floor was closed off from the party, there were a few rooms downstairs that were also locked, like Grandfather Teddy's office and the library (as well as the wine cellar); but I didn't think that would be a problem. The pool, dance floor, and hayride would likely be the most popular place for people to be.

A line of Academy kids and everyone else invited had already formed outside my doors. They saw me appear and I heard a muffled roar. I waved at the excited partygoers; a lot of them had decided to come costumed and masked. With a grand sweeping motion, I swung open the doors and let the guests stampede inside.

Less than five minutes later someone changed the Halloween soundtrack to a deep pounding beat that shook the floor and rattled the windows. The DJ I hired had mysteriously disappeared from his post, now replaced by Frankenstein's Monster.

If I thought I'd get a chance at dancing, I was wrong. Not that this surprised me, but keeping track of everyone was much more difficult when everyone was disguised as something else. I was beginning to regret the costume idea; it wasn't making my problems any easier.

For example, I had to sort out a disagreement between Dracula's three identical brides and a very confused Robin Hood. Then I had to mediate a feud between a Phantom, Christine, and Raoul — before things could get nasty and the skeleton chandelier destroyed.

Then there were those who hit the alcohol early and wanted 'private time' in the upstairs bedrooms. Trying to keep people from going upstairs while I was in another room was one of the worst things I had to worry about. Aunt Temperance surprised me by patrolling the upper halls, keeping frisky kids from entering any of the bedrooms or

bathrooms with her handy-dandy umbrella; she'd smack anyone who got too high up the stairs, eliciting surprised yowls and sending embarrassed teenagers scuttling back down.

I guessed she got to keep her promise after all.

It didn't help with the rumors of this place behind haunted. Then again, they were preferable to strangers rolling around on my bed.

I had my work cut out for me, needless to say. The hall of mirrors, directly to the right of the foyer, led straight into the game room, and kept the guests out of the parlor and the library, full of stuff I didn't want anyone to touch.

As much fun as parties were, things could get bad with one unchecked cup of fruit juice or a hidden stash brought in via nondescript duffel bags. Any alcohol being drunk was coming from unopened cans and bottles — nothing someone slipped into another's cup when they weren't looking. I could be irresponsible sometimes, sure, but I had standards.

Again, my family came in to help out. Gemma acted as my personal spy, helping keep things in check and away from disaster. It actually helped me relax a bit, enough to start enjoying my own party.

I thought things were actually going well. People were having fun, no one was puking up their guts, and the hayride was getting a lot of attention. Despite the anxiety of playing hostess, I was enjoying myself, allowing myself to drink, at the behest of Aaron and Winnie, who were already smashed. Soon, I started to feel the buzz, and I finally got to enjoy the moment.

The pounding music from the house created waves that splashed against the sides of the pool. The lanterns hanging from the trellises surrounding the patio cast a cheerful

glow to the area. People were shrieking as they pushed and jumped into the ice-cold water of the pool. Someone had managed to start the hot tub and a group of boys and girls were singing pop songs as they waved their glasses in the air.

It was enough to get me to relax and really feel the rhythm of the music. Juni pushed me onto the dance floor, saying I had to have the ‘full experience’ of my own party, and I finally got to do what I wanted this entire time: dance.

I was gladly welcomed into a circle of dancing individuals. Some of them urged me to do ‘your ballet thing’ but that was kind of hard with the beat of a techno song. To satisfy them I did a simple pirouette. This got them clapping and with drunken glee forgot about it, and I could finally just do whatever I wanted.

While ballet was an extracurricular I regularly took part in (as opposed to actual class, which didn’t happen *nearly* as often), I couldn’t say if it made me great at free-style. Not like I cared. It wasn’t like someone would dare try to tell me I was bad.

It didn’t take me long to get into the groove. That song and into the next, I switched from swaying my hips to bouncing with my arms in the air. There was a spark of satisfaction in my chest when I saw others trying to copy my dance moves, and I went a little faster just to show how much better I was.

Then something flickered in the corner of my eye. I was a little tipsy from the dancing and the music and the beer, so I couldn’t quite focus on the sight right away.

I could tell that it was a person, but it was strange and at first I couldn’t figure out why. Then I realized that amidst the twisting, surging bodies, this one soul was entirely still.

My first thought was that it was Aaron playing a trick on me — because it was male, lean and completely unaffected by the bodies around him. But he didn’t have Aaron’s

face. He certainly had a great costume on, though, with the ragged clothes and make-up that made his skin a white-greenish color and eyes hollow and dark, giving him a gaunt, zombie-like appearance. The guy even had those weird contact lenses that made his eyes milky white.

The very sight of him was chilling. I was impressed by the work done, but I couldn't understand the point; since the guy didn't appear to be enjoying himself.

Actually, he looked angry.

I jolted when our gazes connected. It was unnerving to look into those undead eyes; fake, but convincing nonetheless. For some reason, he seemed vaguely familiar, but I couldn't pinpoint exactly where I might've seen him before. It occurred to me that the boy still hadn't moved; had he been staring at me like that the whole time?

Some werewolves passed between us, momentarily blocking my view. When they left, the boy had gotten closer, seeming to move in a flash. I could see his face in better detail, how his cheekbones stuck out and the dark purple of bruises around his throat. Man, he really went all out for the look, didn't he? It was actually starting to border on the side of morbid.

He was still staring at me.

Was that normal? It didn't feel normal. Fear was starting to puncture the buzz of alcohol. The small piece of my brain that hadn't been inebriated was telling me *this is bad*.

I now had a full-body view of the guy, and when I looked down, I was surprised to see a puddle of water at his feet. He was dripping wet, like he had taken a swim in my pool. Instead of ruining the look, the water only enhanced it.

I thought about asking if he needed a towel, or maybe congratulate him for winning the Creepiest Guy at the Party award.

Then I blinked and he was gone.

I gasped, my stomach dropping out in surprise and, oddly, fear. *Not again.*

Before I could make the logical conclusion — my mind was still spinning with shock and beer — someone elbowed me in the gut, causing momentary distraction.

“Hey, watch it!” the dancer’s voice was awfully familiar. I only got a glance at his face before the old anger returned.

Sergio.

I was so infuriated that I wasn’t thinking about the wet, dead-looking guy anymore — in fact, I had completely forgotten he had ever happened.

“What are you doing here?” I demanded, shouting over the pounding music.

“I was invited!” he replied, not looking any happier than I at this confrontation.

I made a face. There was no way anyone would bring him here, knowing about our current relationship status. What was more likely was that Sergio snuck in, to piss me off. “Really? Who?”

“None of your business,” He snorted, crossing his arms in defiance.

“That-that’s not ...” I didn’t know how to respond to that at first. Maybe I was too drunk to be my usual quick-witted self. In fact, I had probably given Sergio the advantage. He was probably taking pleasure in withholding the information I wanted. I clenched my fists, blurting, “That’s not fair!”

It just made him laugh. I didn't blame him; even I could tell how whiny I sounded, like Bernard whenever I sided against him in an argument. "Oh, okay, Morgan. I'll remember next time when you don't get exactly what you want."

"Who invited you?" I asked, trying to ignore that comment to the best of my ability.

"You know, if it bothers you that much, I'll just leave," Sergio said, rolling his eyes. This, however, was not the reaction I wanted.

"No!" I grabbed his toga — Sergio was dressed as a Roman emperor, or maybe a Greek god, hard to tell — pulling back just as he started to back away. "Tell me!"

"Hey, let go!" Sergio tried to pry my fingers from his costume, but that just got me to cling to his wrists instead. The movement sent the laurel wreath on his head askew.

"Jeez, what are you, an octopus? This is crazy!"

"Morgan!" Gemma appeared at my side. I felt her arms on my shoulders, trying to pull me away. "Morgan, darling, leave the boy alone! This is not appropriate behavior for a hostess!"

"Don't touch me!" I snapped at Gemma, too angry to even care about the fact that, to Sergio's eyes, I was talking to empty air. We had already started gaining attention. I couldn't even fathom what anyone else was thinking right now.

"Who're you talking to?" Sergio asked, giving me a weird look.

"None of your business!" I snapped, feeling a bit of triumph for being able to throw his words back at him, even though it probably didn't help my case in the long run.

"Don't make me get Aunt Temperance," Gemma warned.

I refused to heed it. Still speaking to Sergio, I said, “Why did you come here? Are you trying to ruin my party? My birthday?”

“It’s your birthday?” Sergio’s eyebrows shot up and he froze. His expression turned to one I didn’t like: Hurt. Sadness. *What does he have to be sad about?*

Sergio’s voice was soft. “You never told me that.”

I couldn’t remember why he didn’t know. That Juni was the only person I had ever told.

“Morgan, Sergio!” Speak of the devil. Juni arrived to the sound of her heels *click-clacking*, going so fast that she almost overbalanced and nearly toppled, before grabbing my shoulder and propping herself up. “What’s going on? Why are you fighting?”

“Ask her that!” Sergio said, throwing a hand in my direction. “She’s the one getting all grabby and talking to her invisible friend.”

“Hey!” Gemma complained, but no one heard her.

“He’s the one who’s not supposed to be here!” I added just as quickly. My voice slurred, making me sound even less coherent without the added emotion. “He’s at *my* party! And I didn’t invite him! Who invited him?”

“Is it really her birthday today?” Sergio asked Juni, who was starting to look a little overwhelmed by the situation. “Did you know that?”

“Uh...” Juni looked at me for confirmation. It was too late now for me to redact the truth, so I just sighed and shrugged. “Y-yeah, it is. But no one else is supposed to know, so you can’t tell anyone!”

“Seriously?” he asked, looking around at the hundred kids dancing around us.

“They’re not paying attention! The music’s too loud, anyways,” Juni said, before taking my arm in one hand and Sergio’s in the other. “Come on, let’s go somewhere quiet so we can sort this out.”

“No way!” I ripped my arm from her grasp. Sergio, for his part, seemed up for the idea, and that was enough to convince me that I didn’t want a diplomatic ending to this fight. “I want him gone. Just make him leave and then maybe I’ll have a good time!”

“Morgan, you can’t —” Juni, for some reason, was siding with Sergio, even though she was *my* best friend. But Sergio just held up a hand, interrupting her.

“You know what, its fine,” He heaved a sigh, shoulders sagging in defeat. It was a sight to behold. “I’ll just go, okay? This was a bad idea.”

“Chicken liver,” I muttered, the same phrase Fronie used to test her brother’s patience. It was louder than I meant.

“Morgan,” Juni and Gemma said at the same time in the same reproachful tone. I had to admit, it made me titter a little bit.

“I’ll just show myself out.” Sergio just shook his head, not taking the bait. He was already walking away and I was just about done with the situation before Sergio paused, turned back and looked at me with those sweet, downcast puppy-dog eyes. He said, “I hope you have a happy birthday, Morgan.”

There was no denying the sincerity in his tone, even in my current state. There was even a small smile on his face.

Behind me, Gemma let out a little gasp, “Oh.”

It rendered me speechless. My stunned expression was probably the last thing Sergio saw before he turned back around and disappeared among the throng of dancers.

Juni waited until he was gone before crossing her arms and scowled at me. “You proud of yourself now? I can’t believe the way you treated him. He used to be your friend.”

Her voice rocked me out of my reverie and I focused on her. “Yeah? Well, he was also my boyfriend, and we all know how that turned out, don’t we?”

“Vividly,” Gemma said.

“Shut up,” I snapped at her over my shoulder. At Juni’s bewildered expression, I demanded, “What? See something funny?”

“Wow, you’re *really* drunk, aren’t you?” Juni said, eyebrows rising. “How many beers have you had?”

“I don’t know,” I said with a shrug, swaying on my feet. “Two, three...maybe six...”

“Nice,” She did not sound pleased. It occurred to me that Juni didn’t seem very drunk. Or drunk at all. Was she staying sober this party? Strange. “Maybe you should lie down; you look ready to pass out any second now.”

She reached out for me, but I stumbled back, refusing to be treated like that. “I’m not a baby! I know what I’m doing! I just want to have a good time, all right? Why do you have to ruin all the fun?”

“I’m not —” Juni started, but then just huffed, threw up her hands and backed off. “You know what, fine, have it your way. I’ll just let you cool off for a little bit.”

“Yeah, whatever,” If I hadn’t been drunk, I would have known better than to end a conversation (two of them, in fact) with a fight. But right now, I felt like I had won. “Just leave me alone.”

“Darling, she’s just trying to help,” Gemma said as Juni stomped away. She gave me a pleading look. “She’s your best friend. Best friends shouldn’t fight.”

“That goes for you, too,” I said, brushing past her to go deeper onto the dance floor. I wanted to get closer to the speakers, so I didn’t have to hear anyone’s voice, my own thoughts, to dance again. Gemma, thankfully, did not follow me.

So I danced. I danced to forget my anger, my frustrations, my worries. It was incredibly liberating, to only feel the notes, the lyrics, and the euphoric rush as my body seemed to fuse with the beats.

Dancing erased my mind of any and all thoughts — in that moment, I wasn’t Morgan. I didn’t have a name. I couldn’t see ghosts, I wasn’t half-crazy with keeping secrets. I had become one with the music.

I moved with the crowd, aware of little more than my sore eardrums, the bumping bodies, and my own twisting body, my hands running through my hair. I felt a chill in the air but kept dancing, figuring the sweat would keep me warm.

The cold temperature continued to rise and I realized something might be wrong.

My veins felt like someone had poured ice down them, and it only got worse the more I danced. My neck tickled at the presence of watchful eyes, but I ignored it. Of course people were watching me; I was the life of this party.

But something was wrong. An inconceivable crisis I couldn’t place.

Then he was there. The guy from before. The pallid skin, the marble eyes, staring directly into mine. A clammy hand gripping my arm. Where had he come from? How did I not see him approach?

“Who are you?” I demanded, yanking my hand out of the zombie’s grip. My hand still tingled from how cold his touch was. No one just *grabbed* me and got away with it.

“Hey, Mr. Creepy, yeah, you! Who invited you? Who said you could come?”

The boy dressed as a zombie just stared at me with those hollow white eyes. I wondered how he could see through those contacts. It wasn’t him who said, “Who, Morgan?”

I glanced to the left, at the one who spoke. A Junior from the Academy, Nina. We were in Track together. I pointed at the pale-faced boy, who remained frozen to the spot. “Him! Does he - does anyone know who he is?” I demanded, stumbling over my words. My tongue felt thick in my mouth, and it was becoming a struggle to speak clearly.

“What, me?” A boy in a sombrero pointed at himself. He was partially obscured from my view by the zombie boy. “Morgan, we have gym together! You seriously don’t remember me?”

“No, not you, Jason,” I sighed, rolling my eyes. “God, why are you guys being so stupid? I’m talking to *him*, obviously. Does he even go to the Academy?”

Some people had stopped dancing to stare at us now, even though the music kept going. Nina and Jason in particular were looking concerned, but I had no idea why. Nina said, “Morgan, we don’t know who you’re talking about. You keep pointing at Jason.”

“No, the kid with the wet clothes, not the stupid hat.”

“Hey!” Jason complained, at the same time someone in the crowd said, “Sorry, I got pushed into the pool. I didn’t mean to leave water everywhere.”

I couldn't see who said that, so I looked at the floor, but strangely, it wasn't wet. I frowned; was this some sort of joke? Why would he say that if it wasn't actually water everywhere?

Speaking of which, although the zombie was also dripping, none of the water reached the floor.

That was so bizarre that I just couldn't wrap my mind around it, much less form words to point it out.

Instead, I demanded of the crowd, "Can someone just get him out of here, please? He's creeping me out." When I heard a whiny noise, I snapped, "Not *you*, Jason! Oh my god, the kid that dressed up as a zombie, he's standing right there!"

This time I pointed at the floor where he was standing, in the clear space between me and everyone else watching. That way, there was no confusing the zombie with the matador or whatever the hell Jason was supposed to be, not that you could really confuse the two to begin with. I looked around, made sure everyone understood what I was talking about, but the number of confused faces only seemed to grow.

"Uh," Nina raised a glitter-painted finger. "There's no one there."

I thought she was playing with me. I laughed, stumbled a little, then said, "Oh, come on, I'm not *that* drunk." I squinted at the zombie, raised a hand and pushed against him; the boy gave against my weight, if just slightly. I leaned against him. "See? Totally real."

Nina looked like I just grew antlers out of my head. "H-how are you doing that?"

"Dude, that's the best Michael Jackson impression I've ever seen!"

"What are you talking about? She's clearly being a mime."

I looked around, confused by their comments. A part of me knew I should be shutting up; that this was wrong, that this zombie wasn't real and I shouldn't be pointing him out. I vaguely remembered the promise I made to myself, to act normal.

I tried to cling to this idea, to this wrongness of the boy I was touching. He was there and also...not. I knew, deep down, that he was a ghost, but somehow I couldn't comprehend it. How could there be a new ghost in my house? No one new died. No one I knew who had looked like they died in the swimming pool, at least. This was all wrong and I knew it.

Then the thought slipped away, replaced by the more discernible feeling of dizziness in my head.

It all came back to the fact that he shouldn't be here. A problem I was still trying to fix. I pulled away from the zombie boy, who made my hand go numb — until he grabbed my arm and nearly yanked me off my feet. “Hey!”

I managed to stay upright, and had to snap my arm back just so he'd let go. The zombie boy shuffled after me, but paused when I raised a clenched fist. “Don't touch me, you freak!”

“Whoa, what's going on?” Juni appeared out of the crowd, perhaps drawn by the commotion. She saw me facing off the zombie and demanded, “Morgan, what are you doing?”

“He tried to grab me!”

“What? *Who* tried to grab you?”

“Him! Right there!”

“*Nothing* is there,” Juni said, then threw her hands out. “Morgan, no one is there!”

“That’s what we’ve been trying to say!” Nina added.

“But he’s right there!” I gestured with both hands at the boy, then reconsidered and drew them back.

No one said anything, except for a few snickering in the background.

Why was everyone acting like this? The noise of the room was starting to grate on me; it didn’t sound like music anymore, just a bunch of discordant high-pitched sounds that gave me a headache. My hands were hot and my vision a little blurry as I stared at them; Nina, Jason, Juni, everyone watching and not saying a thing, just gaping at me. I saw a few with their phones out, aimed at me, and that’s when I finally realized what was going on.

It occurred to me before, but now it was pissing me off. I said, “What, is this a joke? Are you guys all in on it? Because this was funny the first time, but now it’s getting really old —”

“No, really,” Nina urged, stepping forward, but immediately pressed back when I glared at her. “Morgan, we’re serious. No. One. Is. There.”

My breathing was coming out in harsh pants. “That...that doesn’t...”

I couldn’t finish my sentence. I felt like I’d just been punched in the gut, which didn’t make my headache any better. I turned my gaze back to the zombie, who returned it unblinking. He was here. I felt him. I could see him.

But no one else could.

And it didn’t register to me that I should shut up *right now*.

“You’re probably just drunk,” Juni must’ve noticed how worked up I was getting, because she approached me and spoke softly, like a mediator intervening during a

political faux pas caught in action. “Or really high. Hey, it's okay, it happens. We'll just, uh, you should just lay down for a bit, that's all.”

“No,” I said, pushing her away from me. Juni stumbled in her high heels, and I could see in her eyes that our last argument still wasn't over with, but I didn't care.

Instead, I just got angrier. It made me smile, but not a real smile. A smile you make when you realize you're the butt of a joke, and you're too good to cry about it. “No, I get it. I really do. This is just some really funny prank you're all pulling — you know, ‘Get the Birthday Girl!’, ha-ha — well, you got me! It's a great joke, guys! You can stop now!”

Nina started. “But it's not a joke —”

“Isn't it?” I cut her off, jerking my hand at the people holding up their phones. They seemed a little cowed, but it didn't stop them filming. “You're all watching me! You're all acting like I'm the *crazy girl* who's talking to no one! Well, it's not my fault that none of you can see it!”

“See...what?” Juni made a face, her hands rising in apprehension.

“Oh, you know,” I just flopped my hand around. I realized I was moving too much, exaggerating, and that I probably looked even more unhinged than I was pretending to be; but the thought flittered away as a new buzz filled my head. “Just the whole *seeing dead people thing*. I'm such a cliché, guys!” I shouted, laughing, spinning around with my arms open. “You think you only see this stuff in the movies, but then you got Morgan Molloy! And it's pretty freaking real to me!”

“Is she saying she sees ghosts?” I heard Jason whisper behind me. I spun around to face him, and the boy went stock-still.

“So what if I am?” I demanded. “Is that a *problem*?”

Jason’s eyes were wide as he quickly shook his head. “Nope.”

“Ghosts aren’t real!” said someone else.

I tried to spot who said it, but I stumbled in my attempt to find them, and people were quickly backing away before I got too close. I just smirked as I righted myself, saying, “Yeah, my mother said the same thing, too, when I told her! Everyone else in my family think she’s crazy for not sending me away, but then again, I guess that’s why she left! And then my aunts and my brother. You guys remember Tommy? Yeah, guess why he went to California! Not that I’m surprised, everyone leaves eventually.”

I was rambling now, my arms gesturing vaguely. I nearly forgot why I was angry in the first place. But the Zombie-Ghost-Whatever boy was still there, still watching me with those creepy dead eyes, not saying a single word. Why was he being so quiet? Why hadn’t he said anything yet? It was bad enough he looked *off*, but now everything about him was just unnerving.

“Just say something already! God, you’re so - so - so -” my tongue got stuck on the word. I huffed and finished, “*Annoying!*”

“Wow, okay,” Juni said, stepping forward and taking me by the arm. “I think we’ve had enough of your one-man-show, Morgan. I really hope this doesn’t make it to the Internet...”

At that point I had worn myself out with all the shouting and the moving. My hands were still hot, and I kept touching them to my face to make sure it wasn’t just me or something. But my cheeks were cold, and the ghost was still there, and I didn’t really

understand what was going on. Now, I was too tired, and I was starting to think everything just wasn't worth it anymore.

But when I stepped away from the ghost, he lunged again.

This time for my throat.

I gasped as cold, wet hands found my neck, yanked me back, choked me. I reacted instinctively — my elbow slammed back into his side, loosening his grip. I reached up, my nails clawed into his skin. My hands felt like they were on fire.

The actual word 'fire' just ran in my head when someone repeated it. "Oh my god! Fire!"

I had managed to turn around, back to facing the ghost who looked far too dead than any ghost had right to be, his hands grabbing at my wrists — before I lashed out, and marveled how my hand glowed in the dim lighting of the room.

Red-orange flames licked at my skin, eating at the sleeve of my dress. Sequins went up in sparks and pops, and the ghost flinched away, releasing me instantly. He stumbled away, a grimace on his face, as I continued to stand there, staring at my hand, while people shifted in the background.

Then I looked up, focused on the ghost, flickering against the crowd. He seemed unsteady, angry, and the chill in the room grew. "Why can't you just leave me alone?"

"What?" I heard behind me.

The ghost was looking at me. His face was turned into a snarl, as he crouched on the floor, like some sort of animal. I was breathing hard; why wasn't he listening to me? My hands shook, still too hot; my throat was sore, and I yelled, "Just leave me alone!"

My shout sent the whole room into silence. Even the music came to a stop, but I didn't see or feel the fact that every eye was on me at that moment. Right now, it was just me and this ghost, who didn't belong here.

He just stayed there, glaring, while the people behind him backed away, muttering amongst themselves.

I jabbed a finger to the door. "I said — get *out!* *Now!*"

The windows rattled and the walls creaked. Something exploded — a glass bottle? A lightbulb? Something made everyone jump, create a wave of movement as they pushed away. The screams didn't help in the growing panic. Colors swirled in front of my eyes, costumes and dressed blending in together in some incoherent swarm of chaos. My mind couldn't make sense of what I was seeing, so I had to look away, to keep it from hurting.

Then there was a rush of movement — heels clicking, shoes shuffling, people shoving others out of the way. The doors creaked open, a breeze came in. Paper cups and plates were dropped on the floor, streamers drifted to the floor, masks and monster gloves and random pieces of candy left behind in their haste.

And finally, in what took only a few minutes, but what felt like eternity, the room was empty. The entire house, even. No voices, no music, no dancing. I didn't even tell them to stop. I didn't do anything. I just stood there, like a rock in the stream of their exit, none of them ever daring to touch me.

I just stood there, my arms hanging at my sides.

The ghost was still there.

“Why won’t you leave?” I asked, my voice a rasping whisper. The shouting had turned my throat raw, and I felt anxious, desperate to get this ghost to leave.

Something brushed against me, cool satin, and my hand sparked again. The ghost’s eyes flicked to it, and when I raised my hand, he disappeared. The sudden warmth caught my attention, and I turned my head, but the world turned with it, falling lopsided. My stomach flipped and my knees buckled.

And then everything went dark.

Chapter Five

“What a night, huh?”

I blinked, unable to see the owner of that voice (familiar, I noted). My vision was blurry, comprised of basic shapes and colors. My mind tried to recollect my last memory, but returned with a blank. Where was I? *Who* was I?

Oh, right — Morgan Molloy, greatest party-thrower ever. Now I remembered.

I was momentarily blinded by bright morning sunlight. Wait, sunlight? I didn’t even remember going to sleep. What the heck happened? “Wha...”

My mouth hadn’t quite caught up with my brain, but my eyes were now up to speed. I was lying on the plush, overstuffed pink couch in my great-grandfather’s office. His portrait hung over the fireplace, watching over us with a disapproving look on his mustachioed face. At the bottom of the ornate gold frame was a plaque that read:
THEODORE ERNEST MOLLOY.

Dressed in uniform, the man had a helmet tucked under one arm and held up a pocket compass in the other. Said compass was a relic of the Molloy family that my great-grandfather used throughout WWII, and mysteriously disappeared after his death some years ago. I figured Aunt Charmaine, who didn’t get a lot in his will, found it and pawned it off for a bit of cash.

The man’s visage contrasted with the girl in front of me. Juni was perched on the matching ottoman to my couch. She was unusually perky for this hour, watching me with a big grin. She looked like a bird of paradise with her wild hair and red-orange dress. Did

she change during the party? Because I distinctly remembered her dress being redder. And longer. Or maybe that was just the alcohol.

“*Wow*, you don’t remember a *thing*, do you?” she asked, accurately gauging my dazed expression. She laughed when I just gave her a bewildered look.

“Why? What happened?” I asked, looking around once more. The study was impeccably clean, full of bookshelves filled with the works of Darwin, Tolstoy, and Chaucer. Yawn. Libby was sitting in the corner, untouched with glazed eyes staring out into space.

(Wait, I remembered locked this place. How did Juni get us in here? Did I unlock it while I was drunk?)

I tried to think of anything bad that might have happened. “Was anyone in the bedrooms?”

“No, you locked them, remember?” Juni reminded me, then rolled her eyes. “Oh, of course not. You have party amnesia.”

“I have *what*?”

“Never mind,” Juni said, shaking her head. She noticed the look I gave her and quickly justified her decision. “You said you wanted to know what happened, right? Trust me, it’ll make more sense when you’re more awake and not looking like a hot mess.”

I took a deep breath, closing my eyes. Getting a dose of Juni and her unrestrained enthusiasm so early in the morning was not a good idea. “How considerate of you. So what happened? How many got drunk?”

“Pretty much everyone, but some left early. Everyone else just decided to stay.” Juni grinned. Then she held up her fingers, starting to count off the numbers as she said, “Let’s see, the hayride was as awesome as ever: six football players screamed, three freshmen didn’t know about the blood bucket and forgot to duck; the guy dressed as the serial killer got spooked by his own reflection in the hall of mirrors and peed himself...”

As Juni continued with the statistics of last night’s party, I looked down at my left hand.

My skin seemed oddly *not* burnt considering the fact that it was most definitely engulfed in flames some hours ago. Despite my ‘party amnesia’, I definitely remembered myself on fire. And the boy in the zombie costume.

Something tickled at the back of my mind, but when I reached for it, it disappeared.

“Juni?” I asked, interrupting her story about how some people were infected with the Stupid Mentality and started throwing batteries into a fire pit. I brought up my left hand. The sleeve was scorched and ruined, but the skin underneath was completely fine. “What happened to me last night? Did I...pass out?”

Juni stopped to look at me, then glanced at my hand when I held it up.

“Uh...yeah. It got really cold in the hall and I guess you were tired. I mean, you seem fine now. You even woke up and went right back to dancing. It’s not like you were the only one, though. Some people were so hyped up they were hallucinating fire. Probably because of your dress. You were like the Human Disco-Ball.”

Yeah, my *ruined* dress. “But look at the sleeve! How did *that* happen?”

Juni leaned in, peering at the damage. “Huh. Well, we did have some candles around, and there were tiki torches, too. Maybe your sleeve caught fire from them.”

I looked at her. “Maybe? Weren’t you there?”

She scrunched up her face, tapping her finger to her temple. “I’m sure it’s in here somewhere. Everything gets blurry sometime after one o’ clock in the morning — that was after our fight. Oh! But I *do* remember some kid jumping from the roof into the pool — now *that* was a belly flop!”

“Juni, focus!” I snapped, examining the singed sleeve more closely. I wish I could tell what had really caused the burns, but it wasn’t like I had CSI expertise. “Did anyone take pictures?”

“I don’t know. If they did, it’ll be online by tonight. You can check then.”

I huffed, impatient but too tired to do anything about it. Instead, I just laid my head back and tried to wait out the headache. There was movement throughout the house as kids, passed out like I had been, got up and found their friends before heading home. To avoid trouble, they’d climb into their rooms through unlocked windows without waking their parents, who probably had a pretty good idea where they went anyways. Maybe those kids would take a quick shower first, to remove any suspicious traces of glitter or silly string still left from their costumes.

Oh, god. Cleaning up Coventry Hall and its surrounded estate was going to take forever.

Juni left to get some coffee to help wake us up. I took the time alone to recollect my thoughts, trying to get back whatever memory I lost, and maybe convince myself that the blue fire wasn’t as real as I thought it was.

Even now the memory was hazy. I didn't remember waking up at all after I fainted, but I'd find proof soon enough. I looked around for a clock, and was surprised by the time. It was almost noon already. No wonder I felt so hungry.

"I hope you're proud of yourself," came the reprimanding tone of Aunt Temperance, who appeared under the portrait of her great-grandson. She peered at me under her beaked nose, scowling something fierce. "Considering the levels of debauchery that have taken place in our ancestral home, it better be worth whatever respect you've earned from your peers."

"I think I can live with myself," I replied, not at all perturbed by her disapproval. From the sound of it, things had gone well, at least what I could remember.

"Oh, don't listen to her," came Gemma's drawl. She was leaning against the couch, taking a long drag from her cigarette. I couldn't imagine what it was like to smoke as a ghost; did it even taste like anything anymore? "She's just a big ol' party-pooper. How many kids did you have to beat off again, Aunt Tempe?"

"Thirty-six," the woman harrumphed, stamping the floor with the end of her umbrella. "And not just between girls and boys, either. There were boys with boys and girls with girls. We never allowed that sort of thing in my day!"

"Times change, Aunt Tempe," I told her. Aunt Temperance was the definition of traditional. I didn't expect her to understand how things were today. "It's completely natural."

"Well," she sniffed, the feathers in her hat ruffling as she jostled her shoulders. "I would appreciate it if you could inform me of these changes next time, Morgan. You know us ghosts not very good at keeping up with current events."

And with that, the woman stalked out of the room. Gemma sniggered into her hand, careful not to speak until Aunt Temperance had left. “She took that better than I thought. She blew a gasket when TV was invented. Still does, sometimes. Busting screens, messing with the transmission signal. I can never figure out how she might react to something.”

I had to admit, I was a little surprised as well. There was a reason I didn’t tell Aunt Temperance about all sorts of things — she rarely took it well. I was glad that she didn’t go on a rant this time. Then something else occurred to me and I asked Gemma, “Do you remember when I burned my sleeve? I don’t know how it happened.”

“I’m not sure, sweetheart,” Gemma just shook her head in mourning for the ruined dress. “I don’t think so. I was in the foyer.”

“You don’t think anyone else saw?”

“The kids didn’t mention anything. And Theodore still isn’t back yet.”

“So no one saw the zombie guy?”

“There were a lot of undead at that party last night, honey.”

“This one was different,” I knew of various zombie dress-ups, some gorier than others. “He had white eyes, and completely drenched. Not exactly the rotting kind, just ...dead. I don’t know, he seemed familiar, but I don’t think I’ve ever seen him before.”

“Hm, doesn’t ring a bell,” Gemma said, furthering my disappointment. I was hoping someone, anyone, could have seen something. “Maybe it’ll come to you later. Heaven knows, I’ve had more than my fair share of hangovers when I was still alive and kicking.”

I was about to make a joke about that when Juni returned, laden with two cups of java and some toast. I took mine with a small note of thanks, sipping it before finally asking, “Are you still mad at me?”

Juni gazed at me for a second in silent contemplation, expression carefully neutral. From that alone, I got my answer. Still, she said, “A little bit. You said sorry to me later, but since you don’t remember it, I can’t tell if you were being sincere or not.”

“I was,” I said almost immediately, then added, “Well, I am now. I’m sorry, really. I was drunk — like, *really* drunk. And if I had known Sergio was going to be there...did you know who invited him?”

“I dunno,” Juni said, shrugging her shoulders. “Maybe he came just because he wanted to.”

“Hm,” I wasn’t so sure. Sergio, for all his faults, wasn’t particularly malicious as I knew him, and coming to my party *knowing* I didn’t want him there seemed out of character. And after he said happy birthday to me...it seemed like he still cared about my feelings. I just couldn’t understand why.

“Well, anyways,” Juni said, changing the subject. “You had an awesome party, end of story. Now, was that such a bad birthday?”

I didn’t get a chance to confirm it when the door to the study opened. In came a frazzled Alyssa Pelkey, her hair awry and the bloody coat to her mad scientist costume twisted around her shoulders.

We turned to her, stunned to silence by her rather abrupt and kind of freaky appearance. At first I thought she might be looking for her cell phone (because wild teen parties are notorious for losing valuables) if the terrified look in her eyes and the tears

down her cheeks were anything to go by. But the way her fingers gripped the doorknob and her gaze flicked from side to side, I got a bad feeling that maybe cell phones weren't the biggest problem.

"Ally?" Juni asked, getting up. She cupped her hands around her empty mug, then set it down on the table. "Is something wrong?"

"Did you lose your cell phone?"

She shook her head.

"Are you feeling sick?" I asked. "Did your parents find out you're here?"

"No, no, that's not it," Alyssa sniffed, wiping at her nose. She shook her head, choking on her words, and for a second I was worried she wouldn't be able to speak. But Alyssa took a deep breath and said:

"Aaron is missing."

Chapter Six

Okay, for the record, this was not the first time Aaron had run away.

This might sound strange, but it helped if you understood his family situation.

See, the expectation when a child had a big argument with their parents, the child was grounded and sent to their room. But not Aaron — oh no, when he didn't get his way, he went out and *made* his way. If Mr. and Mrs. Pelkey refused to let him see a concert one weekend, he'd sneak out anyways and then spend the rest of the week traveling, just to spite them.

The last time Aaron ran away, it was because his parents withdrew his allowance for getting three D's on his report card. In response, Aaron left in the middle of the night and took a bus to Boston, where he spent three days hiding from authorities and giving the news stations something to talk about.

This time, however...this time, it was different.

Alyssa burst into tears as soon as she told us what happened. She had last seen Aaron in the front hall, chilling with some drama kids on the stairs. She heard that they were going on the hayride, but she never saw him after that. She tried calling his cell, but no one picked up. Juni got her some tea to help with nerves. We agreed to look in every room, closet and car and make sure that Aaron was, indeed, missing before calling for the cops.

Aaron was nowhere to be found. When the obvious places had been cleared, I checked every spot I could think of: the locked bedrooms, bathtubs, and the pantry, even the chandelier where one kid had managed to climb onto and subsequently passed out

from vertigo. The more rooms we checked, the more upset Alyssa became, and I realized that he may not even be in the house at all.

I had my family continue the search, check every possible space. Since none of them were drunk (well, except Uncle Charlie), they all remembered their experiences. Temperance had remained upstairs, protecting the virtue of the youth as she promised. Fronie and Bernard had been too busy having their own fun to notice too much around them, but Gemma, Red, and Dave could not recall seeing Aaron after midnight.

For that matter, they didn't remember me getting into a tussle with a party-goer dressed up as a zombie or my sleeve catching fire, so maybe I shouldn't have been expecting too much.

Juni double-checked every room while I changed into actual clothes. Dressed in a fleece sweater, jeans, and spanking new pair of hiking boots (one guest had excellent gift-related foresight), I took to the wilderness that was my backyard. There weren't as many kids out here, considering how freaking cold it was, but I woke up whoever I could find and started asking questions.

I expected Alyssa to join in the search outside, but she remained in the house, stuck in a phone conversation with her parents. Instead, Juni took her place and followed me out the door, borrowing some clothes she always seemed to leave here for herself.

Fear struck me as we inspected the pool, and a sigh of relief rushed out of my lungs when I saw that Aaron (and for that matter, anyone else) hadn't drowned. We checked all the cars in the area, including the trunks, but none of the sleeping teens we found had any idea where he went.

“That leaves the forest path.” Juni pointed to the wagon full of hay that the residing horse was munching on. “Last place he’s been, right? He could still be out there.”

“In the woods?” Dismay made my stomach twist. The trees behind my house extended to the state border. “But that’s *huge*. What if he wandered off? We wouldn’t be able to find him then.”

“It’s only been, what, twelve hours?” Juni reassured me, but looked a little doubtful herself. She frowned at the trees, apparently doing some calculations in her head. “Aaron couldn’t have gone far. It’s also cold and everyone got delirious from the party. He’s probably passed out somewhere. I’m sure he’s close by.”

Juni wasn’t as good a liar as I was, but her attempts to bring confidence in finding Aaron boosted my spirit a little.

Together we entered the woods, following the leaf-padded trail. There were puddles of mud where the wheels of the wagon and tractor had worn in, and more than once I stepped in deep puddles disguised under foliage. A little wet but nonetheless determined to find Aaron, I kept walking, looking through the trees and bushes for any sign of life.

The trail made a giant loop back to the house. We came across the remnants of the horrors, which now looked decrepit and kind of silly in the cold daylight. Blue jays and cardinals perched on the shoulders of a blood-covered, chainsaw-wielding serial killer, pecking at the mannequin’s head. A skeleton hung from the tree branches, activated by a tripwire the wagon would go over. We cut the rope and let it drop to the ground in a clatter of plastic bones. It looked dumb now, what with the casting lines and ‘Made in

China' sticker, but it could've fooled any giddy kid, whose perception was hindered by the darkness and alcohol.

We made it to the half-way mark, at the nameless pond deep in the woods, when the anxiety came back, stronger than ever. The only sign of life we saw was a deer, chewing on something a little off by the reeds, before we spooked by our crunching footsteps. When we appeared around the bend, the deer dashed off with its white tail high in the air.

I looked to Juni, who was peeking around a particularly large tree, and asked, "What if we never find him?"

"Don't think like that, Morgan," She said, pulling away from the tree and kicking over a pile of leaves, even though it was too small to hide anything. She stuck her hands in her pockets, hunching up her shoulders. "You can't think like that."

"It's just...I'm worried. What will the police think? It's not exactly like I've been on their good side lately."

"You're a troublemaker, not a psychopath," Juni replied, continuing forward. I picked up my pace to keep up with her. "Besides, they're experts. If we don't find Aaron, they will. They've got dogs that can smell stuff, track where he went."

"Yeah, sure." I wasn't privy to a lot of the police's tricks to finding people, since I spent so much time avoiding them, but Juni again succeeded in calming me.

This time, though, it didn't last for very long. A rush of wind picked up, scattering leaves into the air and disturbing the water on the pond. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a strange discoloration on the surface.

At first, I thought it might have just been a piece of driftwood. But when I really looked, I saw that it was something flat, rather large, and silvery under the sunlight.

“What’s that in the water?”

Juni looked to where I was pointing and squinted. “I dunno. A big leaf?”

“From what tree?” I asked, looking around for a long stick I could use. I eventually just broke one off from a dead tree, then went to the water’s edge. Still not close enough, I jumped onto some rocks sticking out above the surface of the pond, before reaching over and prodding with the stick. I could make out the color more clearly now, green and white. It seemed familiar but at first I couldn’t figure out why. “It’s...it’s like a shirt or something. Hold on, I think there’s writing on it.”

With the stick, I lifted it up out of the water, brought it over to me. I figured it out just as Juni gasped, “That’s a football jersey,”

I frowned, hopping back over to shore. Juni took the other end of the jersey, stretching it out so we could see the entire thing. “But Aaron isn’t a football player. And these aren’t our school colors.”

“He was last night.” Juni came up beside me, pointing to the painted white number 12 on the fabric. “I remembered him bragging he took it from his dad’s football memorabilia. It’s signed by some star athlete.”

“Well, there’s no name so clearly it can’t be Aaron —” my voice faltered when Juni pulled out a fold, revealing a signature written in black marker. “Oh, no.”

Juni dropped the jersey, turning 360 degrees as she scanned the forest, covering her eyes from the sun. “I don’t see him nearby. Why would he take it off? I mean, I know

things could have gotten pretty heavy last night, but it's not like Aaron doesn't know value when he sees it. What if —"

She stopped, voice faltering. Then her gaze turned to the pond. Her voice was barely a whisper. "Oh, my god."

I knew what she was thinking before she said it. I glanced at the water, before saying, "You don't think —"

"Drunk people aren't very good swimmers," She said. "Are they?"

"He wouldn't go into the lake," I said, shaking my head. I refused to believe it. Aaron could be dumb sometimes, and maybe he liked alcohol a little too much, but he wouldn't go into freezing water in the middle of the night. "Someone would have stopped him, even if he did."

"How can you be sure?" Juni asked, voice shaking with uncertainty as her eyes grew wide and shimmery. "How can you know for sure?"

I couldn't answer that.

We looked around a little bit more after that, but found no more sportswear. Then I remembered the deer from earlier, and wandered over to where it had been. It was tough to see through the weeds, and I wasn't even sure if there was even anything to discover.

Then I stepped on something soft and spongy, and looked down. Beneath my boot was a splash of color. Moving around, I picked up what was another piece of fabric, this time long and thin. Blue and gold, the scarf was instantly recognizable in the Academy's colors, but it didn't look like the cashmere sort you'd buy in a store, but rather wool, like someone's mother knit this for them.

“What did you find?” Juni called over, seeing me holding up the scarf. “Is that one of yours?”

“No, I’ve never seen this before,” Like I would own anything like *this*, yuck. I made a face and held the scarf away from me, only touching it with two fingers. “Maybe some other kid lost it here.”

“Well, it’s not Aaron’s,” Juni said as I came over, refusing to let the scarf touch any part of me. It was soaked with mud and water, the colors almost hidden in the muck. There didn’t seem to be any tag, either, affirming my idea that it was handmade. “He only wears brand labels.”

I had half a mind to throw it back, but Juni reminded me that someone might be looking for that, so I held on to it, if reluctantly. It was a strange discovery, but it was safe to say we were both disappointed that the scarf turned out to be insignificant. It could belong to just about anyone in the school, and considering their treatment of it, probably didn’t like it very much.

Any more searching was half-hearted. What we found seemed damning enough. We eventually headed back with the jersey, utterly silent.

Returning to the green field behind Coventry Hall, I noticed empty patches of grass where sleeping kids had lain. Even now, I could hear sports car engines revving up and squealing out of the drive-way, determined to leave with the greatest fanfare. Going back in the house through the kitchen, Juni made a point to wake up anyone still sleeping off last night’s libations. We made our way to the front of Coventry Hall, onto the porch so we could watch people leave, on the off chance that we might see Aaron. It was unlikely, especially at this point, but it felt worse not to try.

A few minutes later, Alyssa joined us, teary-eyed as before. She had ditched the lab coat and had wiped away most of her make-up. Her cell phone hung limply in her hand as she approached us, speaking in a voice hoarse from crying. “They’re not going to do anything.”

“Who?” Juni said, tossing me the jersey behind her back so Alyssa wouldn’t see. Now I had to clutch both soggy materials behind my back, and it was becoming difficult to hide my disgust.

“Mom and Dad,” Alyssa said, wiping at her nose. She looked around before sitting on the porch swing. It rocked gently beneath her, old rusty hinges squeaking in protest. Blue eyes dull, Alyssa spoke to her feet. “They think he’s just run away again, so they’re not going to do tell the police he’s missing.”

“Why don’t you tell them, then?” Juni suggested with a light tone, doing her best to be diplomatic.

It didn’t work. Alyssa snapped, “You think I didn’t try that? I called the police after I finished talking to my parents. I told them what happened, everything I know, and you know what they did? They laughed! They laughed at me and hung up.”

“*What?*” Juni said, going zero to furious in point two seconds. She threw her arms up in the air, saying, “They can’t do that! I thought the police were supposed to take all calls seriously!”

“Except, you know, the only times we ever called the police were prank calls,” I pointed out, wincing a little. Sure, those antics got us fined, but it was pocket change for our parents, who probably wouldn’t even notice who they were addressing when writing the checks. “They probably have their own policy for handling us.”

Juni threw me a *not helping* look, and I just shrugged in response. After crying wolf for so long, what else should we expect when there could be a real problem?

But if my words had any detrimental effect on Alyssa, it didn't quite show. She just sighed, planting her chin in her hand and said, "I guess we really screwed ourselves over with that one, huh?"

We gave noncommittal sounds of agreement. Alyssa's eyes flicked up to us, perhaps detecting something off. "Did you guys find anything?"

Juni and I exchanged uncertain glances before I pulled the jersey from behind my back. Alyssa's eyes widened at the sight of the green fabric. I said, "We found it in the pond behind the house."

Alyssa frowned, reaching out with pale, shaking hands towards the jersey. She brought it close to her, rubbing her thumb across its wet surface. "Aaron went swimming? Why would he do that?"

"I don't know. He might have been drunk."

Her gaze met mine, tears brimming on the edge of her lashes. "Y-you don't think...that he might have d-"

"We didn't see anything else," Juni said before Alyssa could complete the dreadful sentence. She sat down next to Alyssa, an arm on her shoulder. "I'm sure Aaron's fine. He'll be back before you know it. You should probably go home — do you need a ride?"

"No," Alyssa sniffed, clearing her face of tears with an absent wipe of the jersey. Neither me nor Juni mentioned anything. "No, my sister is coming to pick me up. Maybe *she'll* believe me."

“We also found this,” I said, holding up the scarf, glad that it wasn’t touching my back anymore. “Does it look familiar to you?”

“Mm, no,” Alyssa frowned at the scarf, her nose wrinkling at the quality. “I don’t know anyone who would wear anything like that. Maybe someone was dressed up as a Hogwarts student?”

“Maybe,” I draped it over the banister to dry out before sitting on the end of the swing. Together, we filled up the entire seat. It wasn’t too tight, although I was surprised the structure could take all of our weights. “I guess it doesn’t matter.”

We continued to watch as more kids left the property. Alyssa perked up every time she saw a dark-haired boy appear, only to deflate whenever it was revealed that it wasn’t Aaron but someone else. Juni kept trying to keep Alyssa talking, comfortable, but each topic seemed superficial and never lasted for more than a minute.

Starting to get bored, I tried to think of something to say or do, when the front doors burst open, making us jump and turn in surprise.

“What up, losers?” out popped Winnie, her curly hair a bird’s nest from a night of drinking and partying hard. Not one to be brought down by a hangover, Winnie had a bounce in her step and a grin on her face. “Was that not the most bodacious party ever?”

There was a distinct lack of enthusiasm on our part. I tried to smile at the compliment, but it felt forced. Winnie, not entirely tactless, took one look at us and our expressions and said, “What’s with the long faces, guys?”

“Winnie, sit down,” Alyssa heaved a sigh, clearly not in the mood to deal with any melodramatics today. “There’s something you have to know.”

Winnie took the chair beside the swing, listening silently as Alyssa explained what happened. I watched as the energy in Winnie started to dwindle at the bad news, and for once the girl had nothing to say aside from a remark of sympathy when the story was finished. Once more, the group was plunged into silence, broken by the occasional text or update.

“I can’t believe I’m saying this,” Juni muttered after I cleared through all the messages that had been piling up on my phone. “But I think your birthday might be unlucky.”

“I told you so,” I glanced at Juni. “I knew this was a bad idea. I should’ve never made that speech. Then I wouldn’t have had to fix the Homecoming and have it here, and then Aaron wouldn’t have run away. Or gone missing. Whatever.”

“Morgan, stop it,” Alyssa grimaced, closing her eyes. She tugged a wool blanket around her shoulders, one I found in a closet. It was cold outside, but no one seemed to want to go back inside the house. “Look, there was no way anyone of us could’ve known this would’ve happened. You were just trying to help. I just wish it hadn’t gone so badly.”

I was relieved she didn’t hate me, but it didn’t make me feel much better. I shrugged because what the hell could I say to that? I had already done everything I could.

Juni, of course, had to be the one to ask the big question that was on everyone’s mind. “You think it has anything to do with the other disappearances?”

“Other disappearances?” I said, throwing Juni a look of shock. Although this was our first time talking about it, I had the odd feeling I might have heard about this before, but I couldn’t say for sure. “*What* other disappearances?”

“I have, it was back in July,” Alyssa murmured, rocking the chair gently with her foot. She couldn’t seem to look either of us the eye. “He didn’t go to the Academy, just a kid from Eastside who had recently got out of Juvie. I remember because Aaron had that awful date to the movies and came back home when the news just started. Well, anyways, that kid went out with his friends on a joyride at night, and I guess they took it all the way to the Lake. They started drinking and mucked around before passing out. The next day the boys wake up to their missing their friend. They say the Lake took him.”

“They?” I asked, skeptical. I was familiar with the story of Lost Boy Lake, but never took it seriously. I also doubted that Alyssa, who was more concerned with logic than myth, would fall prey to superstitions, anyways. “Who’s they? Can’t be the police.”

“No, the police think he ran away,” Alyssa said with an unenthusiastic shrug. She looked up, scanning the yard in front of my house, the trees on either side. She seemed lost in thought, but she might as well have been looking for Aaron. “The kid lived with his aunt and uncle, and they waited a while before reporting him missing. Apparently disappearing for nights on end was normal for him, so they didn’t think too much of it until his friends came around asking about him. And, you know, no one knows anything so they go to the cops, who think he just ran away to New York City or Philadelphia or something. The news only kept up the story a couple weeks, and I never heard about it again.”

Juni shivered beside me. “That is super creepy. I don’t think that guy ran away at all. I mean, where could he have been, for so many months?”

“I don’t know, but he wasn’t the only one.” I replied, hugging my knees. Alyssa’s story had left me with a sense of déjà vu, and now I remembered why. “Do you guys know Kelly Borst?”

“Yeah, didn’t she graduate two years ago?” Juni said, looking up, then at me. Her expression turned to one of dread. “Oh, wait, don’t tell me.”

“She disappeared, too.” I said, scratching a spot behind my ear and looking up as one of the last cars, a low-rider, left the driveway on two wheels. “It took me a while to remember her name. You know how she’s always on the news, usually getting drunk and kicked out of clubs? Well, one night in August, she leaves a club, tries to walk home instead of calling a cab, and is never seen again. Some think she was taken.”

“Wow,” Alyssa said under her breath.

“Man, she always had the best parties, too!” Juni slapped her knee, looking frustrated. “She didn’t deserve to get kidnapped. Or killed. I wonder who did it.”

“Well, it’s obvious what happened,” Winnie said with an eye roll, gathering surprised looks from the rest of us. When we didn’t immediately jump in, she did a double-take and said, “Oh, come on! It was the Lake! The Lost Boy of Lost Boy Lake took them.”

“Aaron, too?”

“Duh!”

“Right,” Alyssa frowned. “Winnie, you do realize that’s just an urban legend, right?”

“And that its fifteen miles away?” Juni added, eyebrows rising as she glanced at Alyssa. We were both wary that Winnie might say something else that would upset Alyssa, who was in an emotionally delicate state of mind.

“It’s meant to scare kids, to keep them from going into the water and drowning,” I added. Almost everyone knew the story of Lost Boy Lake and its history — as well as the myths — but usually they were tales of caution, not actual hauntings. At least as far as I knew. “It’s not actually *real*, Win.”

Lost Boy Lake hadn’t always been that way. Once, it was called Willow Lake, for the abundance of weeping willows that laced the shore; at least until the place earned its notorious reputation for drowning children. Kids would wander away from their parents and into the water, when they started screaming for help — the parents would come running, but by the time they had reached their child, he or she would be gone, dragged under the surface and never to be seen again.

It had been over seventy years ago, but five dead kids in one year tended to leave an impression. Not finding any bodies was an interesting factor. There were also witnesses over the years claiming to see a boy with pale hair and pale skin drowning in the water, screaming for help, then vanishing before they got too close. Always the same story, over and over again. Thus, Lost Boy Lake.

I didn’t think it was ghosts. I’ve swam and ice-skated on that Lake enough times to know if there was one. It wasn’t worth investigating at the moment; Aaron could still be on the run, for all we knew.

“Yeah, it is!” I was kind of surprised that Winnie was the only person here who would believe in the unbelievable. Not that she had any idea that ghosts actually existed,

but considering *she* didn't have any proof, I felt a little apprehensive. Still, she was adamant: "It's not a coincidence. The Lost Boy doesn't just show up in his lake, but other bodies of water, too! There's a pond by the path in the woods, right, Morgan?"

"Well, yes, but —" I said, already knowing where she was going with this, but Winnie interrupted me.

"And that's where his jersey was found, right?"

"I don't think that's —"

"So, *obviously*," Winnie concluded with a triumphant smirk, tossing a lock of curly hair out of her face. "Aaron was drunk, wandered too close, and the Lost Boy took him."

"Winnie," Juni's tone had gotten low, and it was then I realized how Alyssa had turned absolutely livid, crimson and shaking. "Stop. Talking. Now."

"But it was the Lost Boy —" Winnie scowled. Either she didn't know the effect her words were having on Alyssa, or she didn't care. I couldn't tell.

"There is no Lost Boy!" Alyssa shouted, jumping to her feet and sweeping an arm out, almost hitting me in the head. "A ghost didn't take Aaron! Someone — a living, *breathing* person — kidnapped my brother! Not some stupid myth for babies!"

Winnie shrank back in her seat with downturned gaze and hunched shoulders. Rightly humbled, she could only mutter a small, "Sorry," before going completely silent.

Alyssa huffed, somewhat mollified by the apology. She turned to the rest of us, saying, "I don't want to hear anymore about this ghost stuff. It's not going to help bring Aaron back."

She started to sniffle and Juni tugged on her arm, bringing her back down on the seat for a hug. With Winnie sulking and Juni preoccupied with an upset Alyssa, the conversation was officially over.

The silence was stiff and awkward, with some unsubtle resentment between Alyssa and Winnie, a situation that was probably not going to be rectified too soon. When I looked at Juni, she just gave me a helpless shrug; there wasn't much either of us could do in this situation. For now, we had to wait it out until the emotions died down a little and hurt feelings could be mended.

Unfortunately, with nothing to talk about, I had to rely on my own thoughts. They were filled primarily with everything that went wrong with the party, and I couldn't shake them from my mind. It was unbearable. Absent memories, bad birthdays, and missing friends were starting to freak me out, and a wave of nausea overcame me and I stood up. The chair rocked back and forth, the other three girls looking around in surprise. I didn't really know what to say after this little bomb on my life, "I'm going inside. Ally, I think your sister is here."

They looked over towards the sleek silver car coming down the driveway, a woman with blond hair at the wheel. Alyssa's sister was older than us by about five years, in the midst of college at MIT. She was one of the better examples of students that the Academy had to offer, and probably the person Alyssa looked up to.

I headed inside while Alyssa rushed out to the car and tackled her sister as she exited the vehicle. I could hear the muffled crying through the door as it began to shut. A couple seconds later Juni followed, closing the door behind us. "Morgan, you going to be all right?"

“Of course I am.” I said. I had just stepped onto the first step on the staircase when I turned around to look at Juni. I could sense another question in her tone. “What?”

“Do you believe Alyssa?” Juni said, proving me right. The look on her face spoke of indecision, and I had no idea what she was thinking at the moment. “About what she said about Aaron?”

That was a tough question to answer. Yes, Alyssa was my friend, and yeah, I took her seriously. But if she was right, then that meant Aaron was in trouble. Or worse. What if he was hurt? What if he couldn’t get help? What if I never saw him again? The growing dread was a weight on my shoulders that I had never felt before.

And that was too hard to think about.

So I said, “I’m sure Aaron’s fine. He’s probably at the Ritz in New York City, curing his hangover in complete luxury. We’ll hear from Aaron by Monday, I bet.”

It was a weak hope, but one I was willing to live with for the time being.

Chapter Seven

Monday came around. No one had seen or heard from Aaron.

That evening when we first discovered that Aaron was missing (*no, he's just hiding out somewhere, remember that*), I had a moment of weakness. I was scared, and for once believed that the only place I could get the advice I needed was from my mother. Not from the people I actually talked to everyday, like Juni or Mel or Gemma; but the woman who gave birth to me, who raised me on her own, and then wiped her hands of me when I started seeing ghosts.

I didn't *want* to call her. The very idea made my insides twist. I couldn't even remember the last time I had a decent conversation with her, and I didn't know what to say without feeling that crippling self-consciousness. Maybe we'd actually talk — if she even had the time.

I had hoped that maybe this time would be different. Although I only got to see that woman four months out of the entire year thanks to her regularly scheduled vacations, I thought maybe she might take this differently; because now it wasn't just about me. It was about my friend. And I didn't know what to do.

I had called her cell phone, the contact near the bottom of my Favorites list. I had been pacing in my room as the phone rang on the other end. Once, twice, three times. I thought maybe I'd get lucky on the fourth, was desperate by the fifth, and knew by the sixth that it wasn't going to happen.

I had only gotten her voicemail.

I left a message, just in case. “Hey, it’s me...you know, Morgan. And I, uh, I just wanted to talk to you, I guess. I don’t know. Something bad happened here. Aaron’s gone missing, I — *we* — don’t know what to do. I mean, I normally wouldn’t call but, well...I hope you get this message. Can you - can you call me back? Thanks.”

“Bye,” I had remembered to say just before I hit the end button.

Now, Monday’s here, and I still hadn’t gotten any reply.

Not that I was expecting any, of course. I mean, that’s what I get for actually thinking it would actually work this one time, when I needed it most.

So I got up that Monday morning, decided I was over it, and went on with my life as if it never happened.

I didn’t think about her as I went on my morning jog through the forest path. I didn’t think about her as I put on my school uniform. I didn’t think about her as I jumped in the waiting car and headed off to school.

This was the quiet before the storm — the part where I got to plan ahead my moves. I focused on this instead of my mother. Word of Aaron’s disappearance had spread like viral videos on the Internet, and there was absolutely no way on Earth I’d ever escape it at school. My phone was loaded with messages I had yet to read that morning (none from my mother — surprise, surprise). There were hundreds of status updates over the weekend I hadn’t had the heart to look at until now.

I hoped to find something from Aaron or at least about my sleeve on fire. But the former had no new posts, and the latter didn’t turn up any pictures to prove it happened. I found some pictures with the boy dressed as a zombie, always in the background, blurry

and out of focus, not doing anything interesting. For a guy that got all gussied up for a major blowout, he didn't seem to be having much fun.

One picture caught my attention as I was going through the last of them. Taren had taken a selfie with Elliot Saenz and Amaya Morii — dressed up as an Egyptian pharaoh, a 60's astronaut, and a sexy fox, respectively — but they also caught the face of someone else.

Maybe he didn't notice the picture was being taken. But there he was, looking off somewhere to the left, pale marble eyes glinting dully from catching the camera's flash. Most of his body was obscured by the three prominent faces, but I didn't need to see the rest of him to finally recognize that face.

He looked like Houdini. If Houdini was taller, bigger, with weird veins protruding all over his face, and in general looked a whole lot deader.

But it resembled him. The nose, the jaw, the brow — set in a bitter scowl.

I printed out the picture to examine it closer. Somehow, I hoped I made a mistake, because there was absolutely no way Houdini could've been here at my party. He was a ghost — he couldn't just *leave* the school, anymore than any of my dead family could leave this house. Ghosts were stuck in the place they died, to haunt it until they either reached some sort of spiritual epiphany or managed to complete whatever goal that trapped them there.

It was literally impossible for this to happen. And yet, here he was. Pictures didn't lie, and my memory wasn't, either.

And I thought I was curious before. *Now*, Houdini had some serious 'splainin to do.

I tried to keep this in mind in school. I didn't think it'd be so difficult.

Something was off when I showed up at the Academy.

When I stepped through the doors, I could feel the eyes on me, which wasn't unusual. I was used to people watching me wherever I went — usually more of them waved or said hi, but maybe people were still a little exhausted from the party. Still, I didn't like the way they couldn't hold my gaze for very long, whispered to each other when they saw me coming. I thought I saw a few finger points, too.

That was not the kind of attention I was used to.

I tried to ignore it, though. It was probably just because of Aaron. Everyone was wondering where he went.

First period class, Algebra, offered no answers. No one really talked they were too busy listening or falling asleep to Professor Finch's droning lecture on the Pythagorean theorem. Sitting in the middle, I saw no suspicious activity in front of me. There was the occasional whispered conversation behind me, but I didn't pick up on any of it until I thought I heard my name.

I remember reading somewhere it's called the Cocktail Party Effect — where you can hear your own name being spoken, even in a loud, crowded room. In the slightly echoing silence of Finch's class, my name sounded that much louder. I perked up, suddenly wondering why someone was talking about me.

Risking a peek over my shoulder, I caught sight of Jacob leaning across his desk, speaking to Belle next to him. They're faces were turned to each other, heads ducked low. Jacob was gesturing subtly with his hand, using his pencil to gesture forward.

At me.

The same time I realized this, Belle and Jacob glanced up and met my eyes. Jacob flinched, shutting up almost instantly. Belle's cheeks went red and she pulled away from Jacob, suddenly very interested in her textbook. Jacob held my gaze for a second longer before he slowly sat back in his seat, hand coming up to scratch the back of his head as he turned his gaze to his shoes.

They didn't move again for the rest of the class.

Going back to the board, I scribbled nonsense into my notebook. This had to be just a one-off. I was getting paranoid. And besides, wouldn't it make sense for Jacob to be talking about me? I vaguely remembered yelling at him during the party, and wondered if maybe I'd gotten a little out of control. Alcohol tended to do that to me.

Of course, there was significant chunk of hours I couldn't remember, either. That, too.

It wasn't until the next period, while under the strict silence of English class, did I really start to get an idea of how badly I screwed up.

The constant silence was already starting to get to me. Every whisper was starting to feel like daggers behind my back, and there was no way for sure if anyone was really talking about me or not. Unlike Jacob, others were either smart enough not to mention me by name, or kept their voices too low for me to hear. Still, I couldn't concentrate, my pencil tapping against the desk as I stared blankly at the vocab sheet in front of me.

I had been staring at the word 'circumlocution' for the past five minutes when my phone vibrated. The muted buzzing jarred me out of my reverie, and I glanced down at the screen resting in my lap, out of sight from Crusoe. A message from Juni, something about lunch.

I glanced over my shoulder, my eyes falling on Juni, who was sitting at different table today, to the right. I didn't consider it weird until now; we tended to move around. She was texting in her lap, but glanced up at me. She jerked her chin at my phone, an urge to read it.

Frowning, I glanced back at my phone. Making sure to keep my actions hidden by my textbook, I opened the text, and read it. Then read it again, because I didn't understand. A third time, and that's when it finally clicked.

<i don't think u should sit with us at lunch today.>

My response was hesitant. I didn't want this to mean what I thought it meant.

<Should we move to a diff table?>

A few seconds later, I got an answer. *<No. They don't want YOU to sit with us.>*

<What why?>

I didn't get a reply for almost five minutes. It felt like an age, and I was acutely aware of the tapping sounds behind me, Juni texting. I could feel my hands start to shake a little, and I clenched them. Who was she talking to?

My phone buzzed again. *<b/c it'll b awkward>*

Awkward? What did *that* mean? Did something happen that I wasn't aware of? Did everyone just decide to be weird today? I wanted to look at Juni, see her expression, but that might make it obvious we were texting in class. That didn't stop me from making a hasty reply. *<who said that>*

<It was a consensus> Juni replied. I knew she was trying to be diplomatic, because she was being careful with her spelling, and using her dad's words. *<I tried to talk them out of it - but u make them uncomfortable>*

I tried to think of everyone who I normally sat with during lunch. There was Juni and Mel, obviously, along with Winnie if she's not with her team, but also Nina, Aaron, Alyssa, and the last two weren't here today. Aaron, for obvious reasons. I hadn't seen Alyssa anywhere today, and assumed she stayed home, for obvious reasons (they were the only ones I was currently okay with not returning my texts). That meant there was extra room, which would be quickly taken by other people — would they really not want me to be there?

<??> I thought maybe this was a joke, or some stupid misunderstanding.

<*Some things u said @ the party. U were acting weird*>

That last word glared off the screen. I couldn't take my eyes off it. Weird. They thought I was crazy.

The exact opposite of what I wanted, what I planned. The entire point of the party — it blew up in my face. <*Crazy how? Everyone was drunk*>

There was an unsettling long pause while I waited her reply. I glanced over at her, saw her hunched over, writing something. I figured it'd be a long response, that it'd explain everything, but I got exactly the opposite. <*Rumors. Vids. U started a fire in ur house. They call u things now*>

My breath caught in my throat, a lump forming. That couldn't be right. I thought I'd been imagining things, even with my ruined dress as evidence to the contrary, but it really happened? Maybe it was an accident with the candles...how could I have started a fire, anyways? It wasn't like I carried a lighter or matches with me. <*Call me what*>

<*Arsonist. Pyro.*>

Dammit. I dropped my head into my hands. Oh, God, there was nothing worse than being known as the school's resident pyro. No one trusts the pyro. No one wants to *know* the pyro, because the pyro's two seconds away from climbing aboard the crazy train. Who knows, maybe people thought I'd set fire to the school next.

The last one the Academy had was Cecil Norman — I never met him, but he'd been in Tommy's graduating class, and had a record of ten fires related to the chemistry room, and three near expulsions. As far as I knew, Norman was still in jail, for torching his dad's garage full of vintage sports cars.

So yeah. That was the reputation I was now falling under. Crazy people who tried to blow up the school, and everyone in it.

Great. Just great.

I had to figure this out. It couldn't be this bad; everyone acted a little weird when they got drunk. Drunk people did stupid things all the time, and it wasn't a big deal. Why was it different for me? They were just rumors, some stupid videos — and no seemed to have gotten hurt. Surely everyone was just overreacting. This wasn't a big deal.

I tried to explain this to Juni, but her stance was adamant. *<Just don't with with us today. Please? I promise, i'll sort it out>*

I hated relying on someone for this. Not that I didn't trust Juni, if anyone, she was the best person to this, with Mel being the second. I needed them to keep my good rep going. Still, would it be enough?

Thirty minutes later I found myself heading for the dining hall. This time, I was acutely aware of how people seemed to stay out of my way, the side glances, the whispers behind hands. It was everywhere. I swore, it seemed to have only gotten worse

since this morning, like the exponential growth rates Finch talked about in class. This did not seem like something Juni could handle.

I thought I could head the problem off at the pass by finding a table first and sitting down. It wasn't our usual table by the windows overlooking the football field — prime seating for anyone — but I had to make it different so I didn't appear desperate. Besides, it was common knowledge that a seat with me was better than the windows. With an empty table all to myself, the seats were essentially up for grabs to anyone who wanted them, my usual clique or not. Eventually, people would sit at my table, and I'd still be sitting pretty with my head held high.

Or so I thought.

I didn't eat right away, picking absentmindedly at my food and constantly checking my phone for new messages as more and more kids spread out across the hall and filled tables. It took maybe ten minutes for the entire line to get their food. I watched, one by one, as Juni, Mel, Winnie, Nina, Belle, and others walk past me, setting their plates and trays down at tables that were not mine. Far away enough that I couldn't eavesdrop, and they wouldn't accidentally meet my gaze.

Not once did any of them meet my eye. Only Juni gave me an apologetic wave before taking her spot with the the others.

I watched, with sagging shoulders, as her table filled. No one saved a seat for me.

No one looked over and waved me over to sit with them. No one even paused to consider my table, although I certainly saw a few give me uncertain looks before turning their backs on me. Even the other kids who sat by themselves (as few as there were)

avoided my table like the plague. The seats next to me remained empty; cold, judging statues that I wanted to kick away.

One by one, I watched as each student here betray me.

Then everyone was seated, and that was that.

The dining hall slowly filled with a low roar of chatter and noise, clinking utensils and scraping porcelain. I looked down at my phone; I'd found the video, or rather *videos*, that Juni had mentioned earlier. I watched them all, witnessing from various angles as I gestured and interacted with the zombie ghost that no one else could see, and then the burst of fire when the ghost grabbed me. The videos were blurry due to the darkness and shaking image, but there was no doubt it came from my hands, that it caught on my sleeve.

Still, the flame burned only for a few seconds before going out again; the videos cut out at various points, but I was fairly positive that indeed no one got hurt besides the ghost (another thing that baffled me, but really low on the priority list at the moment). To me, it still didn't seem like a big deal, and yet I couldn't fathom just how awful this was going to be.

They saw me interacting with a ghost. I exposed myself. Now people thought I saw things that weren't there, along with the whole fire thing.

I sucked in a breath, unable to watch anymore. But I had nothing else to keep myself preoccupied with, so I continued pretending to be invested with my phone while trying to push back tears. It felt like the whole world was conspiring against me; and it didn't even have the balls to at least say it to my face. At least then, I could punch back.

I hated the fact that this stupid event would make me cry. *Almost*. Almost made me cry, let's remember that. Was I really that vulnerable, that weak? I was better than this.

No one was allowed to hurt me like that.

And then, incredibly, I heard the last voice I wanted to hear at that moment.

"Going solo, huh?"

I looked up, startled to see Sergio sitting across from me, eating a banana. He looked entirely causal, his arm slung over the back of the seat, both feet on the table. He swallowed his bite before adding, "I never thought I'd ever see you sitting alone before. Doesn't feel too great, huh?"

"What're you talking about?" I muttered, scowling down at my food. I took one unenthusiastic bite of the rice pilaf, deciding I could stomach the plain stuff.

"I'm talking about your current state of exile," Sergio said, with a tilt of his head, mop of fluffy hair flopping to one side. He raised an eyebrow. "You know, like you did to me last year?"

"I didn't *exile* you," I snorted, taking another bite of rice. It took me a second to understand. "Wait, are you talking about the breakup?"

"Uh, hello? What the hell else am I talking about?" Sergio threw up a hand, chomped off another bite of banana. There was no other food around him. He must've dropped by from the football table, apparently deciding watching me suffer one-on-one was better than laughing it up with his buddies. "It's the only thing *we've* been talking about since last whenever, if we ever *did* talk."

I just shook my head. “It was the end of the school year. It couldn’t have been that bad. Besides, you dumped *me*, remember?”

“But you got to sit with the rest of our friends, right?” Sergio pointed out, and gave me a rueful smile when he saw the look on my face when I understood. “Yeah, that’s what I thought. But you see, *I* didn’t get to sit with the rest of you because *you* told them to tell me I wasn’t invited anymore. That I didn’t belong anymore.”

I had to think back to Freshman spring — I didn’t remember saying those words exactly, but I did remember not having to see Sergio constantly after the breakup. Kicking him out of table privileges would’ve been my idea of revenge, that’s for sure. Still, it didn’t mean the same thing. “So? It’s not like you didn’t have other friends to sit with, right? You still had your team.”

“Oh, yeah, because they were real psyched to have me around, the guy who dumped Morgan Molloy,” Sergio said, then twirled a finger around his temple. “They thought I was nuts, and they knew if they stood up for me, they’d get shit on, too. It’s not like you cared who got in the way, did you? How many people do you have blocked on Facebook now?”

“Does it matter?” I worked my jaw, glaring at my soda because if I looked at Sergio I might break. I couldn’t remember him ever speaking so harshly with me; even after the breakup, it seemed like he tiptoed around me. And for good reason. I never thought he’d ever fire back with the same kind of force I did.

Sergio didn’t have a mean bone in his body. He apologized after he tackled player on the field, always shook hands with his opponents, win or loss, complimenting their

skill. He didn't *have* to do that, but he did anyways. So him throwing shade at me suddenly felt like I discovered this other side of him, one I never wanted to see.

I could only huff. "Are you just going to gloat at me now? You should probably invite your girlfriend, Jordan, I'm sure she'd like to join the fun."

"What?" Sergio threw me a baffled look, a short reprieve in my humiliation parade. "I'm not dating Jordan! I never have. You got some vendetta against her, too, now?"

"So you're saying she *didn't* ask you out after you dumped me?" I asked skeptically, my eyes narrowing. There was no way she wouldn't take the shot. "She'd love to be your rebound."

"Okay, yeah, right before summer break," Sergio admitted with a roll of his eyes, taking another bite of his banana and speaking around it as he held up his other hand. "But I said no. I'm not interested. You know that, Morgan, jeez, I used to tell you how much she bothered me back in Eighth Grade. You really think I'd go for a rebound? That I'd need a rebound at all? Did *you* need a rebound?"

"I'd like a punching bag instead."

Sergio snorted, wrinkling his nose and shaking his head in disdain. "Wow, do you just not hear yourself talk? That is the least healthy thing I've heard."

"Why? Because I was pissed you dumped me?" I snapped.

"Just because you're angry doesn't make it okay," Sergio countered, then he shook his head and flicked his hand. "Anyways, that's not the point. I just wanted you to know that what you're feeling right now, the same thing happened to me last year."

I didn't say anything to that, frowning at the table. I glanced around the room, at the chattering groups, at Juni and Mel and Winnie, laughing together like they didn't even miss me. It wasn't a matter of me being a freak or a pyro or not; I just stopped mattering anymore.

My stomach twisted painfully, but I did my best to hide it. I couldn't imagine a worse experience than feeling irrelevant, than feeling not only ignored, but forgotten.

Did Sergio really have to go through this, for weeks? Considering our relationship came to an end early May, and school break wasn't until June, that meant he had to go through this for *weeks*...the realization was like a waterfall crashing over me, daunting and suffocating at the same time. This was only one day, and already it was unbearable. Would I have to go through the same thing as him? How long would this last?

"Oh." I eventually said, my voice small as my eyes drawing back to Sergio. I couldn't read his face. I couldn't tell if he was pleased or not I finally understood. "I-I didn't know. But it couldn't have been this bad. You had all of summer —"

"To what? Not be invited to parties?" Sergio cut me off, which was probably revenge for all the times I did it to him. "To not go to movies, or the beach, or anywhere, with my friends? It's easier to avoid people when you don't have to see them everyday, I guess. You don't have to look them in the eye everyday in school and have to explain why they just 'forgot' to send you a text about some fun trip everyone else was going to. I'm an idiot, Morgan, I knew that it was all because of you."

"But I didn't do any of that!" I protested, holding out my hands helplessly. Yeah, so I told people not to have him come to *my* parties, *my* trips. "I don't care if you hung

out with other people! Besides, everything's okay now, right? You're sitting with your pals again, I don't see what's the problem."

"Because I had to fix it myself," Sergio said, planting a finger on the table. "I had to talk to them, everyone one-by-one, and make it better on my own. So if you think all of this, the rumors and the stupid video and all that stuff, is just going to go away and fix itself, you better think again. The only way you're gonna get out of this is if you do something about it, and not make others, like Juni, do it for you."

I just scowled, wanting to say something but feeling like anything I might say would be wrong. That seemed to be a recurring theme today. What the hell was going on? Didn't Sergio get that I was a victim, too, like him? "Why do I have to fix something that wasn't my fault to begin with?"

Sergio fixed me with a disgruntled look. He pulled his legs off the table, then leaned forward and said, "Well, I guess you'll just have to figure that out yourself."

And with that, he stood up, chair sliding back, and left me to stew with my thoughts at the empty table. All alone again.

I watched Sergio's back recede, returning to the table filled with other sports jackets and jerseys. I almost wanted to ask him to come back. Argument or not, at least I had someone to talk to. I wanted Sergio to see my side of things, as impossible a feat as that was going to be. But I guess I just pushed him too far — the silent treatment, the run-in at the library, the fight at my party... His patience had to run out at some point.

I slumped over my food, swallowing the bitter taste in my mouth. There was something ironic in knowing that it was me who did that, who turned the one guy who

might actually be sympathetic to my cause against me. Hindsight was always twenty-twenty, wasn't it?

Luckily, my stint as pathetic lone eater was interrupted by an announcement on the PA system. "*Morgan Molloy to the office, please. Morgan Molloy to the office.*"

I looked up at the speakers hooked up in the vaulted ceiling, surprised, before getting out of my seat. Ignoring the stares and turned heads that followed me, I kept my chin high and didn't look anyone except Juni in the eye. She only gave me a passing shrug.

What could this be about?

There was someone already waiting in Demille's office when I got there, so I took one of the seats against the wall outside; I was once again alone, with only Ms. Burns and Mrs. Vicks, secretaries at their desks, who were either absorbed with their computer screens or handling calls. At least, my loneliness here was circumstantial.

I could hear Demille's soft voice in conversation with another in the door opposite me. I couldn't quite hear the muffled conversation, but my guess was another student getting reprimanded. Probably the same reason why I was here.

Another glance at my phone screen revealed no new messages from Juni. She sent one text asking about being called to the office, but I knew much as she did, I didn't have much to impart. Her last text was hopeful. <Good luck>

It made me feel better, just for a little bit.

"Are you always getting into trouble?" Said someone right next to me.

I jumped, barely containing a yelp before turning my gaze on the boy sitting in the seat next to me. A seat that, two seconds before, had been completely empty.

Houdini was back.

I'd forgotten all about him since this morning, due to aforementioned problems. I blinked several times, settling back in my seat and trying to keep my breathing steady. My mind was already a little out of sorts due to my newfound status at the bottom of the social totem pole; I couldn't remember what it was I wanted to talk to Houdini about. "What're you doing here?"

"They say things about you now," he said to his knees, hands gripping the chair like he might fall off at any moment. I wasn't entirely sure he heard me at all. "New things, when you're close but not too close."

I just rolled my eyes. This was not something I needed to hear from a dead kid. "Yeah, I noticed. Old news, pal."

That's when he looked at me, dark eyes focused. "They say you're the girl who can see ghosts."

His gaze was both serious and confused, and he didn't blink once. I tried to hold his gaze, but it wasn't a competition I wasn't going to win, caught completely off guard. Wait, so people were saying *that*, too? Seeing ghosts was way worse than being known as the pyro. Why didn't Juni mention anything like that to me earlier? Did she just not know, or was she trying to hide it from me?

Speaking of which, why hadn't Sergio brought that up? He must have heard the rumors, too, because he didn't seem at all surprised about why I was sitting alone. Considering how primed I was for a reaming, and the fact that he seemed to really enjoy rubbing it in, I was surprised Sergio didn't also take the advantage of my new reputation and go for the low blow. Maybe he was just saving it for a more opportune moment.

I glanced away, at the window, at the cool blue October sky, trying my best to keep cool. Why did it feel like my life was suddenly spinning out of control? Keeping my voice in a low hiss so the secretaries didn't hear me, I said, "Well, I'm talking to *you*, right?"

"They think you're crazy," Houdini continued in a monotone, again unresponsive to anything I said.

I couldn't tell if he was even having a conversation with me or just talking to himself, and I was being an idiot for not realizing it. Houdini never acted like this before, at least judging from our last two lovely interactions; what had changed between then and now?

The answer was actually quite obvious. I suddenly remembered the photographs, the videos of that strange ghost who looked uncommonly like Houdini. If that had been him, then maybe it wasn't so surprising he was acting like his brain had just been scrambled. It wasn't like I ever burned a ghost before. Although the Houdini beside me looked fine, unhurt. Not at all like the ghost at my party.

I would've asked him about it right, but my mind was elsewhere. And considering Houdini probably still didn't believe the truth, pursuing this new matter wasn't going to get me anywhere.

I switch my gaze to the door, as shadows move behind it. Demille seemed to have finished with the meeting, finally. My words were bitter. "Well, maybe they're right. Maybe I'm just talking to a figment of my imagination, maybe I really did inherit the family craziness and only now I'm starting to get it. It's not like there's anything I can do about it."

“But I’m not you,” Houdini said, straightening in his chair. I glanced at him and noticed the scowl. “I’m not anything like you. I’m real...I just don’t know how.”

Oh, good, I offended him again. I was really good at that. On the bright side, at least he believed me now, and knew he was dead. I just sighed and shrugged my shoulders; I declared this conversation officially boring, and I had no desire to ever run into this ghost again. “Yeah, well, nice to see you’ve finally hit the ‘Existential Crisis’ stage of being a ghost. Doesn’t change the fact that no one else can see you but me.”

The door opened and none other than Alyssa shuffled out, her eyes puffy and her shoulders hunched. But Alyssa came out at the same time as I finished my sentence, and must’ve heard what I was saying, because she picked up her head and gave me a strange look. Alyssa casted her eyes about the seemingly empty waiting room. “Morgan? Who’re you talking to?”

“Uh,” I sat back in my seat, my heart skipping a beat. Why was Alyssa at school? I thought she stayed home. Had she heard the rumors as well? I could see Houdini out of the corner of my eye, but refused to acknowledge him. “Just talking to myself. You know.”

“Come on, Miss Pelkey, back to class,” Miss Demille said, prodding her gently on the shoulder so she’d get out of the doorway. Demille motioned for me to come in. “Alright, Morgan, I’m free now. Thank you for being so patient...”

Demille kept talking as I got up, Alyssa shifting past me with a vacant look in her eyes. I wanted to say something more to her, but couldn’t think of anything that would be helpful. Alyssa must still believe Aaron was missing. What could I say that could make *that* better?

Reluctantly, I looked back to the office as Demille disappeared inside. It was then I heard Houdini whisper, "You're not crazy. I've seen the Lost Boy, too."

I froze and whipped around, but Houdini had disappeared once again.

Chapter Eight

“Morgan? Something wrong?” Demille’s voice had me turned around again, a little out of sorts. I didn’t want to talk to her right now, not when I had a million questions for Houdini spinning around in my head. But the small woman was waiting for me expectantly behind her desk, and she probably wouldn’t be very happy with me running away.

Since I still had no clue what I was in trouble for, I decided not to push my luck. With a resigned sigh, I said, “No, it’s nothing.” And stepped inside.

Demille’s office was small and rather dark, mostly due to the fact that she always kept her curtains closed. The office was on the first floor, with the view outside the window being the front lawn of the school and the driveway. Prime spying location, if you asked me, although Demille never seemed like the sneaky type. Still, it wasn’t as nice a view as Lovejoy had, on the second floor, with a view of the fields and woods.

As I sat myself down in one of the two chairs in front of Demille’s desk, she said, “So, do you know why I called you here?”

“Uh,” I wondered if it was best for my to hazard a guess, then decided it wasn’t worth it. If I didn’t know what was wrong, then chances were I was innocent, right? “I have no idea. Is there a problem?”

“I’m surprised you have to ask,” Demille raised her eyebrows at me, lacing her fingers together atop her desk. Even though we were both sitting down, she still had to look up at me. “Does a certain Halloween party ring any bells?”

“Last I checked, it’s not illegal to have a party at my house,” I said, crossing my arms. Okay, so *now* it made sense. Maybe I should have expected blowback from the school about the party, but I would’ve expected some forewarning.

“No, but serving alcohol to minors is,” Demille replied, and apparently the feeling of blood draining from my face was visible because she smiled softly. “Yes, we know all about that. The wonders of modern technology, Morgan. Thanks to some public profiles on the Internet, we — that is, the school board — are well aware of what happened at your party, and we’re quite concerned.

I sat there, stunned. I’ve been in Demille’s office a few times, for various stupid things I’ve done in the past, but this was the first time I ever felt *scared* of her. Demille didn’t strike an imposing figure, in stature or voice. Unlike Lovejoy, she always maintained an even tone and a kind expression. I don’t think I’ve ever seen her actually angry before. Even now, she almost seem more amused than upset that I broke a few laws.

“It wasn’t my idea to bring the beer.” I protested, leaning forward in my seat, probably looking more desperate than I meant. “It was a huge party, I couldn’t control that! How is it my fault?”

“It’s your house, it’s your responsibility,” Demille countered without batting an eye, and it was all the more infuriating because I couldn’t refute the point. I was on a real losing streak today, wasn’t I? “Just because it’s your first party, Morgan, doesn’t mean you get away scot-free. There are always consequences.”

“So, what, you’re going to arrest me now?” I demanded, trying trying to sound cool but probably sounding a little defensive instead. I wasn’t prepared for that. I couldn’t

get arrested. I couldn't go to *jail*! I've heard horror stories about juvenile hall and I was so not interested.

Despite this daunting prospect, a situation I've thought about more than once, there was a surprising lack of cops present. It was just me and Demille in the office. I looked around, behind me at the door, wondering if one might step in at any moment. I couldn't help but wonder what the average punishment was for a kid who got caught with stuff like this. Man, as if things were bad before, I didn't think they could get much worse.

Demille's response was pursed lips and she hesitated, glancing away at the phone on her desk before answering, "...No. As it stands, neither I nor the board have any intention of pressing charges. We came to an agreement, that this being your first criminal offense and some...circumstantial evidence, that bringing this to court would merely be time-consuming and overkill. A call with your mother helped settled the matter."

"You called my mom?" My jaw dropped. "And she *answered*?"

"Yes," Demille frowned slightly at that, apparently not getting just how rare this was. Only once in a blue moon did my mom ever answer anything from me. And all it took was one call from the school board to get her to talk? Unbelievable. "The school board recommended in-school punishment, as your mother didn't want you missing out on your education. She also agreed to pay for any damages your party may have cost the Academy."

Well.

“So, that’s it.” I said, working my jaw and turning my gaze to the ceiling, barely containing a laugh. “So that’s what this is about. You’re still pissed about the Homecoming dance.”

“I think you’re misunderstanding the point of this conversation.” All humor vanished from Demille’s face, her lips pressing into a thin line. She didn’t have to admit it, but I knew I was right. “And watch your language. To be honest, the Academy has been quite lenient with you, Morgan, and I don’t think you truly appreciate that. I’m not fond of rule breakers myself, but I’m willing to give you a chance, due to your youth and naivete. In any other situation, I would’ve gotten the police involved; but I believe in second chances, in the same way I believe you can improve yourself, Morgan.”

Improve myself? That just meant community work. I snorted, “Yeah, and how do you plan to do that?”

Demille wrinkled her nose. “Please don’t be flippant with me, Morgan, I’m only trying to do what’s best for your future. The board has agreed that the proper punishment would be revoking your status and privilege as Student President —”

“What?!”

“— of the Sophomore class,” Demille continued without pause, although I swore I saw her smirk a little. “As well as ten hours of service work for the school. Professor Hawthorn has been kind enough to offer supervision in this case.”

“This is so not fair.” I said, which only later would I realize to be a pretty lame comeback.

“Oh?” Demille raised one eyebrow, tilting her head just a fraction. “Would you prefer it be Dean Lovejoy who handled this? Because if you really want to make a big deal out of this, Morgan, then I’m perfectly fine with taking this up with him —”

“No!” I said, gripping my chair with a sudden panic. I might really hate this right now, but I’d choose Hawthorn and Demille over Lovejoy and his hour-long rants any day of the week. There was no way I was going to have *him* on my back. “No, i-it’s fine! I’ll take it, whatever. I just want this to be over with.”

Demille settled back in her seat, a prim smile on her face. “Well, I’m glad we could see eye-to-eye on this, Morgan. You may go now.”

* * *

Well, this royally sucked.

What the hell was I going to do now? First I lost the power of my friends, then the influence of being President, and now I had to stay after school for two weeks, helping Professor Hawthorn with whatever his idea was of punishment. Today, after just receiving the H-Bomb from Demille, he made me grade the multiple choice tests of another class. At least it wasn’t something barbaric, like writing lines on the chalkboard.

This day was utter torture, I thought I’d never get home. I kept texting Juni, but if there was any improvements to my rep, she had yet to say. Considering it had been four hours since English class, I did not have high hopes.

Coventry Hall was a welcome sight, and I pressed my face against the window of the car as Mr. Bentley drove down the road to the front door. I didn’t even wait for him to

open my door before getting out, heading straight inside and trying to decide what I should do first; break down into tears or take a nap.

The last one seemed more favorable, since I still had to deal with everyone inside the house. I really didn't want them to see my like that.

"Hey, there, darling," Gemma said as soon as I walked through the door. She sat waiting for me on the steps, her smile positively beaming. There was a reason she won beauty pageants back in her day.

But the smile faded when she saw the look on my face. She planted her hands on her knees and stood up. "Oh, what's the matter? Did something happen today?"

"You mean the utter destruction of my entire life?" I asked, throwing out my arms, stopping in front of her. I had to fight hard to keep from sniffing or choking on my words. "First, my friends won't talk to me, they don't even want to sit next to me, everyone's whispering behind my back; even worse, I got kicked off the student council because of the party. Everything happened because of that stupid party. Oh, God, that was the worst idea I've ever had. Why did you even let me do it?"

"Darling, you couldn't know how bad things would get," Gemma said, wincing in sympathy. Easy for her to say. Her winged eyeliner was eternally perfect. What did she have to worry about? "None of us did. I'm sorry things went so badly for you, but it's not like you can't fix it, right?"

I gave her a disgruntled look. This was not the advice I was hoping for. "Gee, thanks. That never occurred to me."

“Morgan,” Gemma frowned disapprovingly and I tossed my head, annoyed. She placed two hands on my shoulders, making me look at her again. “This is not forever. It’s only been a day. I’m sure it’ll get better from here.”

“Yeah, well,” I muttered, frowning at my feet. “I think I’ll just sleep until I get there.”

There was an envelope on my bed. It was propped up on my pillow, ivory in color. I glanced around, as if I might see who had put it there. Did one of the ghosts do this? It seemed a rather strange thing to do.

Walking over, I picked it up, felt the thickness of the paper. It’s heaviness belied something expensive. On the back, written in thick blue ink, was a fancy script I’d never seen before. It wasn’t until I read it did I finally understand.

To Morgan,
From Your Devoted Father
Happy Birthday

I nearly dropped the letter like I was a hot coal. No, no way, this wasn’t real. I was so not dealing with this right now. There was no way, after sixteen years of absolutely no word from this man I’ve never met before, that he had just now sent me a letter.

That somehow made it to my bed? Did one of the maids leave it here? Of course now I couldn't ask, since they'd come and left while I was at school.

Bzzz! My cell phone started to ring, and I paused before answering. Who would be calling me? My friends just texted me because it was faster — phone calls usually meant something bad happened.

Then I saw the ID and sighed. Not an emergency.

Tapping the button, I brought the phone to my ear. "What do you want, Tommy?"

"Seriously? No hello?"

"What do you *want*?" I said again, my voice a little tense.

"Oh, is it illegal to tell you 'Happy Birthday' now? I didn't get the memo."

"My birthday was last Friday."

I heard him heave a sigh on the other end, his breath making the receiver fuzz.

"Yeah, yeah, I know. I'm sorry, Mo. I had a mid-term test and I was so busy studying...I just forgot."

"Sure." I said, unimpressed. Tommy's excuses usually involved school in one way or another. It wasn't my fault he chose to major in environmental engineering.

"Okay, can you please not do that? I'm telling you the truth. I'm sorry. How many times do I have to say that?"

"I don't know." I picked at the bed covers, frustrated that I couldn't put my thoughts into words. Well, it wasn't like he didn't already know why I was still angry at him. "Did Mom tell you to call me?"

“Did you talk to her?” He sounded surprised, hopeful.

“No.”

“Oh,” And there was that familiar disappointment again. At least it wasn't with me this time. *“I can go talk to her, if you want.”*

“Must be pretty easy, only living an hour away from her.”

“Hey, I would've visited if I could. Like I said, I had mid-terms.” He replied in defense, then sighed. *“Are you really still angry that I chose to go to California? I told you before, it was the best school for what I wanted. Did you think I was trying to get away from you?”*

“What was I supposed to think?” I demanded, tossing my head in annoyance.

Tommy had lived here until he graduated from the Academy three years ago, and he had plenty of acceptance letters to choose from. *“You went to the only school on the West Coast that you got into. Seems like the easiest way to get away from your crazy sister.”*

“Not everything is about you, Mo.” Tommy said. I could just see him leaning over his desk, head in his hand, like he always did when solving impossible math questions or dealing with me. *“Tell me this, if I was trying to get away from you, why would I be calling you right now? Because I'm not, that's why. And I don't think you're crazy. No crazier than any other little sister in the world.”*

I almost smiled, despite myself. If there was one person who always sounded sincere, it was Tommy. But my spirits were dampened by the fact that my family - the living half - knew that I saw ghosts. Or, more specifically, that *I* thought I could see ghosts.

Of course they wouldn't believe five-year-old me asking about her cousins Fronie and Bernie; the sibling had died in the early 20's, long before any of my current family was born. My mother thought I was doing it for attention. But then I started repeating things the ghosts told me; things they'd seen no one else had. Where to find Charmaine's secret stash of chocolate, the calls Violet had been making to her new boyfriend, who was also Ada's ex-husband.

As one could imagine, my aunts were not big fans of me. Violet even slapped nine-year-old me for mentioning her secret relationship at dinner time.

Tommy had been the only one to defend me, time and again. I didn't know why, but I appreciated it at the time. That was probably why I was so sore about him leaving. Maybe he just got tired with me.

"Everyone else does." I muttered. I didn't even know if he believed what I said those years ago - I didn't talk about ghosts out loud anymore. I'd rather not be made a laughingstock of the whole family, thanks. I was practically ostracized already. "It's not like you believe me, anyways."

"I —" Tommy stopped himself, huffing a breath. There was a pause. "*Look, our family is messed up, okay? I'm not going to deny that. I just don't want to be a part of it.*"

"You didn't answer the question." I said.

"*What? About the ghosts?*"

"If you didn't believe in them, why would you defend me?" It was a question I had for ages, but one I never asked before. Why? Maybe I was too afraid of the answer. I wanted to think Tommy believed, too, even if he couldn't see ghosts.

“Because you didn’t know any better.” the words bit me, and I had to keep myself from retorting so Tommy could finish what he was saying. *“Everyone else was being unfair. You were just a kid.”*

I bit my lip, studied my feet. When I didn’t say anything for a while, Tommy asked, *“Morgan, are you still there? I’m sorry, I wasn’t trying to be mean.”*

“No, I get it,” I said, even though a part of me didn’t. “Truth hurts, I guess.” I got enough ridicule as it was because of my behaviour, I couldn’t imagine Tommy being better off by siding with me in all those arguments. Charmaine didn’t even send a card one Christmas because we made her so mad at the previous Thanksgiving. It took four months of simmering resentment and a reluctant hand-written letter to get her to come back to Coventry Hall.

“I’m sorry,” he said again, and I was really starting to hate how much he sounded like he meant it. *“You don’t have any problems at home, do you? Nothing weird happened?”*

I glanced at the unopened letter to my left, my name in handwriting I didn’t recognize. A part of me knew that if I so much as mentioned the letter from “Dad”, Tommy would drop everything and take the next flight out of Los Angeles, no questions asked. Something like this would bother him so much he had to face it in person, and not over email or phone like regular folk. Tommy liked our father even less than I did, which was saying something because I don’t half-ass the way I feel about people. This might be the biggest thing that happened between the two of us since that time five years ago when we got lost in the woods behind for seven hours.

Should I tell him? Had Tommy been home, had this happened before he left, I probably would've gone to him immediately. But now?

I knew better.

"No." I said lightly, picking up the letter and turning it over. Tommy and I had never received anything from our father before, and for some reason I was really pleased to know that it was me and not Tommy to be the first one to get his attention again. Even if it was long overdue. "No, nothing weird. Just another old birthday, I guess. I had fun."

"*Oh, good,*" the sheer relief in Tommy's voice almost made me feel guilty for lying to him. He probably expected I'd burn down the house or something in my wild teenage antics. "*That's good. I'm glad. Look, I gotta go. But, uh, if you need anything, don't be afraid to call, all right? I always have my cell with me. And I know you do, too.*"

I made a face. "Yeah, sure. Can't imagine how I'm gonna get myself out of trouble without you."

"*Please keep it that way. Mom's only got another few weeks before filming is done, and then you won't have to be by yourself all the time.*"

"I'm not *alone* all the time. Ms. Pearl checks on me all the time," I said, referencing the housekeeper in charge of making sure I didn't burn down the house.

"*Ms. Pearl is sixty-eight years old and can barely keep up with her baby poodle. Please don't make life harder on her. I'd like to make it to Thanksgiving without hearing about another disaster. Promise me you won't do anything bad.*"

"Okay, I'll try." I said, then frowned. "Wait, *another* disaster? What's that supposed to mean?"

“*Goodbye, Morgan.*” Tommy said quickly, then hung up. I pulled the phone away from my face, scowling at the screen, before deciding the matter wasn’t worth pursuing.

Tommy probably meant the time I

Gemma peeked in through the doorway. “Well, that was interesting,”

“Seriously?” I threw the phone down, glaring at her. Ghosts didn’t surprise me often, but when they did I didn’t like it. I especially didn’t like it when they did it on purpose. “How much did you hear?”

“I’d say all of it,” she shrugged, stepping in. Her heels clicked lightly on the floor. “Did you really have to lie to him, darling?”

“He’s the one who said I had to grow up.”

“No, he said you didn’t know better when you were little. Don’t you think the letter is more important than that? I think he should know, Morgan.”

“Well, it’s too late now.” I said, even though calling him back would’ve been easy. Okay, not easy for *me*, but physically yes. I wasn’t going to admit I lied to him. “Let’s just see what’s inside it all ready.”

I reached for the letter, but before I could pick it up again, Gemma’s hand came down on mine. I looked up, met her blue eyes. Her brow was drawn together in concern.

“Promise me you’ll tell Tommy if it’s bad. Please.”

“Why does everyone keep asking me to make promises?” I pulled my hand away, drawing the letter with it. Before Gemma could stop me, I stuck my nail under the wax and peeled it off. Peering inside, I saw a single piece of paper. A birthday card, really? I thought I was going to be angry, but then I pulled it out.

I stared at it. The card wasn't the fold-up kind, it was too thick, and had two faces to it. One side was dark blue with a pattern of stars decorating it. The thickness of the ink made the paper stock heavy. I thought it might've been a playing card, even though it was far too large, the size of my hand. When I flipped it over, however, I realized this wasn't the sort of thing you'd play poker with.

The hooded figure was my first clue. It took up the majority of the image, looming, face hidden in shadow. A white flower-like halo framed its head. One hand, pale skin stretched across boney fingers, held aloft a small blue butterfly. In the other hand, protruding knuckles gripped a scythe.

I was so startled by the imagery that I didn't even notice the Roman numeral XIII at the top, or the word DEATH printed at the bottom. The image seemed pretty self-explanatory to me.

I could feel Gemma going still beside me, perhaps shock. I was a little disturbed myself. What kind of father sent their kid this sort of thing? On their birthday, no less? *Thanks, Dad. It's nice to know you care.*

"Well, that's not ominous at all." I said with raised eyebrows, highly aware of the fact that Gemma was probably waiting for a reaction from me. I was hoping for another joke, even a little laugh, just to ease the tension, but when I didn't get anything but silence, I glanced at her. "Gemma?"

But she wasn't looking at me. Her eyes were fixed on something over her shoulder.

The back of my neck prickled, and my shoulders stiffened at the sensation that we were suddenly not alone. I turned my head, slowly, to see what had caught her attention.

A silent black form stood in front of my window, featureless against the sunlight streaming in.

“Jesus!” I jumped at the sight of it, scrambling back on the bed. I was too soon reminded of the image of Death on the card, panicked that my time had come.

But as my eyes adjusted against the light, I realized this wasn’t the hooded form of the Grim Reaper coming to get me, but that of a woman, her voluminous dress shimmering as the blue folds of the hoop skirt cascaded to the floor. It was old fashioned, with ribbons and a cinched waist; older than even Aunt Temperance.

My eyes fell on her face, and that’s when it hit me. The blonde hair, the ringlets, the rouged cheeks, the black ribbon around her throat that I’ve only seen depicted in oil paints; I knew who she was. “Y-you’re the Lady.”

An immediate sense of foreboding came over me. I had never met her before, but seeing her now, just after my birthday, just after getting this card, couldn’t be a coincidence. The Lady didn’t seem to be here to give me a pep talk.

I looked behind me for Gemma, hoping for reassurance that this wasn’t as bad as I thought it was. But I was startled to see that Gemma had disappeared; terrified by the Lady’s presence, perhaps. Well, that didn’t make me feel much better, either.

When I turned back around, the Lady had closed the distance between the window and the bed. I jumped, wondering how she moved so fast without making a sound.

“W-what do you want?” I asked, edging further away, before my hand fell on thin air and I almost fell off the bed. I caught myself and stared at the Lady, a little furious with myself for looking so stupid in front of her. Then, refusing to let myself be intimidated by her, I demanded, “Is this about the party?”

But the Lady only blinked, shook her head. Then she spoke, voice soft as leaves rustling in the wind, gentle and distant.

“It’s in the attic.”

* * *

I didn’t like going into the attic. Not because it was creepy, but because I had to pull down a ladder from the ceiling to get there, and I *really* didn’t like ladders. They were the least safe thing in this house, and that’s counting both the pool and the finicky gas stove in the kitchen.

“Is there something I’m supposed to find?” I asked as I struggled to push open the trapdoor over my head. It was made of heavy wood, and I didn’t feel very steady standing on top of the ladder trying to get the door out of the way.

The Lady stood behind me, watching silently as I struggled with the door. When she didn’t answer my question, I looked down and scowled at her. “Well, don’t help or anything. I’m not getting into up there if I can’t get this op - whoa!”

I yelped when the pressure of the wood suddenly flew from my fingers overhead, slamming down onto the floor above. Unbalanced, I wobbled on the ladder for a wildly uncertain second. Before I earned a very unfortunate broken neck, I caught the lip of the hole, and sagged, relieved.

Taking a second to catch my breath, I glanced back at the Lady, who appeared as impassive as ever. I muttered, “Thanks.”

Clambering upwards, I pulled myself onto the rough wood panels of the attic. Dust coated my hands and knees, and more was in the air as I tried to brush it off. I shook my head and sent particles spiraling away.

It was a little chilly up here, but not as bad as it could be considering it was October. Light streamed in from the windows at either end of the long room, the roof slanting down on either side. I had to bend over if I went anywhere not dead center of the attic.

Boxes were stacked on either side of walls, cardboard crates and plastic bins filled with things that hadn't been touched in what was probably twenty years. There was a velvet footstool wrapped in plastic; on top of it were textbooks from the 80's. As I made my way through the stacks, trying to find whatever it was the Lady wanted me to find, I stubbed my toe on something heavy. Looking down, I was a little peeved to discover that someone had left their old record player behind. Who just leaves stuff on the floor like that?

To my left was a standing mirror, gold leaf and club-footed. Aside from the dust, it seemed to be in good condition. But when I wiped my hand across the glass, my hand grazed against a series of edges -- the mirror had been cracked, leaving behind a misshapen reflection.

The Lady's face appeared behind mine, a phantom out of the shadows. I jumped for the third time in the last ten minutes -- her utter silence and long gray stares were really starting to get to me.

"This yours?" I asked, pointing at the mirror and looking at her through the reflection. This mirror had been up here since as long as I'd known about it -- too old to

fix, too big for Charmaine to sell off. I had no idea who it actually belonged to, or why it was up here.

Instead of answering me, the Lady pivoted and walked out of my sight.

Rolling my eyes at my reflection, I left the mirror to follow the Lady to the spot on the other end of the attic. She stood silently as I hunched over and peered over the brown boxes, before spotting a different shape underneath them. I moved the boxes aside, creating space so I could get a good look at what turned out to be a large chest, black with metal corners. There were some scratches along its surface, but otherwise the chest seemed in good condition.

I tried to drag it out but discovered it was too heavy. I couldn't even budge it from its spot under the roof. Sighing with resignation, I got to my knees and examined the padlock. Now I had to find the key?

"He left this for you."

I pulled my chin up, meeting the Lady stare for stare. "What?"

"Your father left shortly after you were born," The Lady said in that same monotone. Her lips barely moved. And I thought my mother was more robot than human, but at least she could put on a convincing smile when she wanted to. The Lady's face seemed to be carved from marble; utterly smooth and frozen. "He knew what you were. What you might become. So he assured that his legacy would be continued."

I opened my mouth, flabbergasted and speechless. This was more information about my father in five minutes than I had ever learned in my life. Did my mother know about this? My mouth was dry when I said, "Why...why did he go?"

“He didn’t belong here.” The Lady said, tossing her head in contempt, the greatest display of emotion so far. “So I convinced him to leave.”

“What? *Why?*” I demanded, getting to my feet. All this time I thought my father abandoned my mother, when all along it was the Lady who scared him away? Is she the reason why Mother was so far away right now, why I essentially lived alone? “Why would you do that? Does my mother know?”

“And give her reason to find him?” The Lady asked, her eyes narrowing. I could sense her anger at my outburst, her body stiffening, the tension in her face, but she remained still, hands clasped in front of her. “No. The family was better without him. *You* were better off without him. Your future would be safe so long as you were protected from him.”

“Protected?” I made a face. What did *that* mean? “What did he do? Why did he make you angry?”

“The second child,” she said and the blood drain from my face. “Your father was the reason he died.”

I blinked, reaching for the mirror in my pocket as I processed this information. There were a few forbidden topics that my entire family shared, both the living and dead. This was one of them. Half-scandal, half-tragedy, my stillborn older brother was something only whispered behind hands, and never in front of me, Tommy, or my mother.

Tommy had only a vague memory of his little brother; when I was ten and he fourteen, Tommy told me what he could remember. A dark-haired infant with blue eyes. The faintest echo of laughter. It had taken Tommy a while to figure out it wasn’t me he

was recalling, that the memory was from before I was born. At that time, we had no idea that we had a second brother, my mother had kept us that sheltered. Being the curious kids we were, Tommy and I had asked around.

I supposed I didn't really blame Mother for that secret; I just wished it wasn't down to Violet to tell us what really happened.

"He was stillborn." I said. "That's what everyone told me."

"They were right," the Lady said with a tiny shrug. I frowned at her, confused, and she elaborated, "It was a complicated pregnancy. Your father thought he could fix it. But he only doomed the child.

"Your mother was never the same after that," the Lady said, which was not news to me. While I never got to know what my mother was like before, I knew from stories that she used to be happy. She continued: "What he did was unforgivable. I *warned* him. I warned him that his actions would lead to disaster. But he didn't listen. He thought he knew better."

A prim smile pulled at her lips, vindication sparking fire in the Lady's eyes. "But I am never wrong. I ensured he would never bring shame to this family again."

I trembled at little, swallowing hard. I didn't know whether to be terrified by what the Lady could do, or upset by this revelation of my father. "He could...he could see you?"

I was so hopeful. Out of everything, I wanted this. I wanted it to make sense. I wanted to believe I wasn't alone.

"No." her word crashed down on my head, making my shoulders sag. "But he knew what I was. He knew we were not myths. He carried a knowledge of things even I

had only inklings of. Knowledge he stored away, so that you may eventually discover it for yourself.”

“In there?” I asked, pointing at the chest. I faced it again. “Knowledge of what?” The Lady was silent for a long moment. For a second, I thought she disappeared, but when I looked at her again, she was still there, glaring at the chest. Then she said, “I did my best to get rid of it. But it is shielded with a power older than mine.”

“Power.” I repeated, voice flat.

The Lady sneered, the lines marring her face and turning it into something monstrous. But the next second her face was back to normal; I realized I had just gotten a glimpse of the creature that had tormented my father so many years ago.

She met my gaze. “Magic.”

“W-what?” I did a double-take. I shook my head, snorting in disbelief. I thought it was a joke, but the look on the Lady’s face said it was nothing short of the truth. She didn’t seem the type to joke, anyways. I gaped when I finally comprehended what she said. “You’re serious. My father had Magic?”

“He knew you had potential.” She replied, which was about as close to a ‘yes’ as I was going to get. “He was disappointed by Thomas, so I imagined he has great hope in you. You will find the answers you are looking for, but I fear you don’t truly want to know.”

“I know what I want,” I said to her, my hands clenching into fists. I had waited years for answers, and the Lady showed up only now to tell me, with the caveat I was *better off* kept in the dark? I knew the Lady was more than a little biased. “Just because you hate him doesn’t mean I don’t deserve to know the truth.”

The Lady's eyes bored into mine. "Open the chest, and you will be irrevocably drawn into the world of Magic and your father's design - *or* keep it closed, forget about it, and remain safe in the life you know."

I blinked, then held out my hand. Her lips pressed into a thin line, the only movement in her entire body. Then, with rigid muscles, she extended her arm, hand to me, fist closed over mine. Her fingers unclenched and something small landed into my hand. A wrought iron key, so cold it frosted at the edges.

I barely contained my smile as I faced the chest again, getting down to one knee as I inserted the key into the lock. I had just started to turn it when the Lady spoke again. This time her voice was loud, commanding. "One last warning, Morgan."

"What?" I snapped, throwing her a hard look over my shoulder. I had lost my patience with the Lady, with all the secrets and shame and bitterness locked up all in one house. I didn't know how much she knew, or how she knew it, but she had the opportunity to tell me all of this a long time ago, but she had no intention of helping me. She just wanted to win.

The Lady didn't appreciate my tone, if the stink-eye was any indication. She spoke nonetheless. "I've seen what futures lay in store for you, Morgan. You choose this path, and only Death will follow."

That gave me pause. I frowned at the floor. After receiving the card, after everything that happened recently, I had a good feeling that the Lady's warning wasn't an empty threat, less about her grudge against my father and more of a desire to protect me. Even if she was bad at showing it.

But I wasn't a stranger to death. It was all around me, every day, impossible to ignore. I couldn't escape it. Willful ignorance like pretending this chest didn't exist sounded like the worst possible solution to my problems. I wasn't being careful by sticking my head in the dirt.

Strange things were happening in Addison Hollows, and I wanted to do something about it.

So I turned my back to the Lady. The lock clicked as the mechanism released.

There was a sigh of air as I opened the chest lid. A stale gust wafted into my face, slightly musty with the smell of leather. I peered inside.

I was underwhelmed by the sight of folded blankets and old clothes, none of which seemed to contain the kind of danger the Lady was worried about. I dug my hands in, pulling out one item after another, getting closer to the bottom without finding anything vaguely interesting.

There were suits zipped in plastic bags, a jewelry box filled with watches - I was surprised to find both were designer brands. I had always been under the impression that my father might've been a gold-digger going after my mother's fame, but if he had, why would he leave all this behind? I imagined he would've at least pawned it off...unless he already had plenty of money of his own.

I shook my head, deciding to keep going. Fancy clothes were hardly what I was hoping to find in here.

Then my fingers brushed against something hard and smooth, and I latched onto it. I felt the crunch of papers before I saw the leather cover, the metal corners cold against

my skin. Out came a book, dark green with flaking gold leaf. An intricate pattern of vines bordered the edges, faded and soft from age.

It was completely bizarre and didn't fit with anything else in the chest. It was too old, too rugged to match the fancy suits and bejeweled watches. The book seemed to be from a different world altogether. Maybe the one my father went to after he left.

I opened the cover, read the inscription on the inside.

Personal Property of M. Silas Aurelius

I scowled at my reflection, finding everything wrong were usually so much was right. My black hair was bone straight and thin, to the point that the ends of my ears stuck out from the sides like a head from a stage curtain. If I pulled my hair back and widened my eyes, ears looking even more prominent, I'd resemble a deer. A really stupid-looking deer.

Everything about me seemed to be made of long, straight lines. I looked like someone took either end of my body and stretched me out like a rubber band.

I wondered if this was how others saw me. A freakishly tall girl with black hair, pale skin, and long fingers. I probably looked like a walking, talking stick bug. Or a creepy, skeletal doll, like Libby.

Or a witch.

That last thought clung to me, and didn't improve my already plummeting mood. I knew analysing my appearance like this wouldn't help my current state of unpopularity. I had hoped maybe there was some secret I could find to making myself look better. But that wouldn't make anyone forget what happened, would it? Even if I dyed my hair

platinum blonde and got boob implants, it wouldn't change the fact that I was still the weird girl who set fire to her own house. In fact, it'd probably make it worse. I'd just look like a try-hard, a lost cause.

And now thinking about my father's message, the Grimoire, just reminded me that they were right, and I'd never be able to fix this.

Scowling at my reflection, I pulled my hair forward so it hung over my face, like I used to when I was a kid. It made it easier to hide when I didn't want to be looked at, when I didn't want to talk to anyone who wasn't already dead.

Mom hated it. Charmaine didn't like the way it covered my eyes sometimes. Aunt Violet said it made me look troubled. Rosalind always teased me, half good-natured, half-condescending when she asked me what I had to hide.

Apparently, more than I thought.

Chapter Nine

Scene One: Morgan's return to school the next day (Tuesday), her situation not improving with her friends. She finds Houdini again in the library, and it's revealed that he can't tell her his name not because he doesn't want to, but that he can't, because he can't remember it. Nor can he remember any of his memory trips when he returns. Least to say, he has no idea why she saw a ghost of his likeness at her party. Talking about it upsets him, and he once again refuses Morgan's help, but does tell her what he knows of the Lost Boy. She starts to believe in the Lost Boy, or at least suspect he's dangerous.

Scene Two: After school, she is stuck cleaning windows with Sergio (who is in detention for something unrelated) while Hawthorn supervises. Morgan continues to be somewhat abrasive towards Sergio, even when he later apologizes for making fun of her in Chapter Seven. Hawthorn mediates this conversation, trying to foster understanding between the two, but after a point Morgan refuses to speak out of spite. To get Hawthorn off her back, she accepts a car ride from Sergio to the cafe, where she will meet her friends later.

Morgan also brings her father's grimoire/journal to school. It's mostly a journal, in particular his search for the lost city of Lutece (the reason as to why he is not present in Morgan's life), but it also provides key information that Morgan will need for later; in particular, his escape from Templars, witch-hunters who are also looking for Lutece. Although the entries were written before Morgan was born, he writes as though he intended for someone else to read it. Both Hawthorn and Juni ask about it when they see her reading it.

Chapter Ten

Scene One: A tense conversation while Sergio drives her into the city. Without Hawthorn there, they speak more honestly with each other. He's sorry she lost president, admitting that he didn't think Demille would be that harsh/cold-hearted. He relates one experience where he once had to clean the trophy case, and nearly broke the sapphire mirror within — according to him, Demille nearly lost her mind, and was the only occasion in which he'd seen her actually furious. Although he didn't actually break it, Sergio had a string of bad luck afterwards, small things that mostly occurred in school. This is foreshadowing to the haunting Morgan will experience later after touching the mirror, as well as Demille's true character.

Scene Two: Morgan manages to meet up with her friends after school, at the cafe. Juni expresses her approval of seeing Morgan and Sergio on speaking terms again (the others relate how annoying she was being before), and although Morgan personally isn't happy with it, she goes along to make the rest happy. Alyssa surprises the group when she suddenly brings up Aaron's disappearance, but only Morgan is sympathetic to the idea that he is missing rather than run away. After they leave the cafe, Alyssa stops her just outside and asks for her help in finding Aaron. Feeling guilty and willing to do anything to get back on her friends' good side, Morgan agrees.

Scene Three: Later that night, Morgan experiences the Lost Boy haunting her — first seeing him in the reflection of her bathroom mirror, then having a nightmare in the woods. Both Aaron and the Lost Boy are there, and it takes several repetitions of this

dream (getting longer/more detailed each time over the course of the story) does she finally figure out it's not a dream, but a memory.

Chapter Eleven

Scene One: (Wednesday) Morgan, tired and unsettled from the previous night's dream, learns of a scathing article from Jordan Kasprsak in the school newspaper, which sours her mood. She reads it during Study Hall, with Mel and Juni (who decide to speak to her in public again) try to convince her it's not that bad, but Morgan is a little angry that Mel let Jordan publish it. She has difficulty accepting the fact that Jordan is well in her right to do so, with Mel saying that the 'Social Awareness' column Jordan writes is very popular. Morgan can't figure out if she has a right to complain it as bullying, since everyone feels it justified due to her behavior, making her feel quite victimized and alone.

Scene Two: This resentment boils over when she speaks with Houdini again; this time *he* finds *her*, skipping class by hiding in a stairwell. Jordan's article upset her more than she let on, and she's rather unhappy that he caught her crying. Houdini manages to get over his dislike for Morgan in a moment of empathy, and they talk for a little bit without argument. This scene is what kickstarts a genuine friendship between the two, and Houdini finally lets her help him, although he is still doesn't know why, since Morgan's personality led him to believe she didn't do much without some selfishness involved. Morgan herself isn't sure, but chalks it up to curiosity, as well as Hawthorn's lesson of responsibility from the other day.

Alyssa is not in school that day, which concerns Morgan, but because of her texts, doesn't think anything is wrong right away.

Chapter Twelve

Scene One: At home, Morgan attempts her first spell — going by her father's book, she practices boiling water in the kitchen. Teddy watches her, expressing amusement when her efforts only lead to her melting the metal of the pot. Her family expresses their ideas of Morgan's magical powers, with Temperance being the most disapproving, citing Morgan's lack of skill and no mentor means anything she does will be dangerous. On top of it all, she only has her father's journal for guidance, and no one seems to like him. She continues to use it despite their apprehension. It's not like she knows any other witches or wizards, and the journal provides no way to find others, due to her father's fear of being caught by Templars — the identities of his friends are well-hidden. Fronie throws out the idea of Morgan not being a 'real witch' due to this, a light comment, but Morgan takes it to heart.

(Her attempt at trying to bring out her fire again panics the ghosts, beyond the mere hazard of it, and she doesn't try it again in their presence. It's implied here that her fire may have supernatural effects, in being able to hurt ghosts when normal fire cannot).

Chapter Thirteen

Scene One: (Thursday) Morgan, now set on helping Houdini, shows him her father's grimoire, while also explaining a bit of her family history to him. Houdini takes the idea of Morgan being a witch better than her own family; he thinks it's the reason she can see ghosts, although Morgan isn't so sure. Passages of the grimoire reveal her father's own theories on ghosts and souls, but there is no indication he could see them, or knows anyone else that can. Still, his theories of them are quite wild, several things that Morgan had never considered before, and the two come up with three possibilities as to why Houdini can't remember who he is and why she saw someone like him at her party.

1. He cannot remember his past because he died an amnesiac, or had a psychological disorder while he was alive. Morgan finds this the least likely.
2. Houdini may have family, a brother or some sort, who died and came back as a ghost as well. Due to Morgan's own prolific family of ghosts, she finds this more believable, although she can't explain why a relative of Houdini's would be doing in her house. The grimoire holds little information on "transitive" ghosts.
3. From the grimoire, something may have happened to Houdini's soul when he died. He may have lost a part of it, which could explain his loss in memory.

Where that piece would have gone, however, is another thing entirely. Morgan knows of anchors, things a ghost was attached to while they were still alive and now holds some power over them in the afterlife, but what her father describes is different. While an anchor may contain a piece of a ghost's soul, they are not separated from each other, and if the anchor is destroyed, the ghost will be fine (if

upset). On the other hand, a vessel (as her father names it), keeps a part of the soul separate and unattainable to the ghost. This can lead to constant distress and may even lead to poltergeist-like hauntings with the ghost trying to locate the vessel.

The truth is a combination of 2 and 3, but Morgan doesn't figure that until later, after she figures out what Houdini's vessel is (the mirror). He has no ghostly relatives, but the Lost Boy is a piece of him that was separated in the Lake, and can travel to any local bodies of water or locations that are connected to the lake (via pipeline, water supply, etc). The mirror contain a third piece, smaller, but enough to keep his memory from returning, and traps Houdini within the Academy. Because Morgan had no idea how to find Houdini's vessel, or if he even has one, option 3 doesn't become too important until later.

Near the end of the scene, Morgan picks up Houdini's book (an anchor), and a picture slips out. It's an image of him and a woman, presumed to be his mother, standing in front of the school. In it, he is wearing a familiar scarf (Morgan doesn't recognize until she finds it again at home), a clue that he and the Lost Boy have more in relation than she realizes. Also provides clues as to his background, and the time/place he died.

Demille and Lovejoy are who ends the scene, in deep conversation with each other when they find Morgan in the library with her grimoire, and tells that the last bell rang and she should be heading over to Hawthorn now.

Chapter Fourteen

Scene One: While Morgan is doing chores for her punishment, Hawthorn casually brings up the grimoire she's been reading, expressing that he's never seen her so involved with a book before. Morgan doesn't want to talk about it, considering the grimoire her personal property and very private, so she gives a very brief explanation and takes it away before he can read what's inside. Still, Hawthorn manages to catch a bit, particularly about Templars, and asks her about them. Morgan admits very little, and in return Hawthorn gives her a brief history of the Knights Templar, on which the modern Templars her father fears originate from.

Morgan tries to feign disinterest, since she hates these forced learning opportunities, but she is quite intrigued, and eventually asks what the Templars might be doing in modern day, what could possibly motivate them now aside from a Crusade. Since Hawthorn knows very little about them (although Morgan later suspects of him of being an actual Templar), he believes that they would be looking for valuable treasure and artefacts, as their predecessors had; this coincides with the idea of the Templars looking for the lost city of Lutece, although Morgan still isn't sure what/where it is, or what it might contain. She brings up Lutece as well, but Hawthorn admits he's never heard of it.

Chapter Fifteen

Scene One: At home, Morgan practices more magic, which inadvertently leads to the rediscovery of the blue scarf she found the day after the party. It's in the laundry room, cleaned and hung by one of the maids, who assumed it was hers. She's distracted from the scarf when Teddy finds the photograph of Houdini and his mother (she kept it), and manages to identify the time period as the earlier 40's, due to the types of cars in the background, as well as the dress of the two in the photo. This leads him to talk about his recent trip into his memory (which he hadn't talked about until that point, due to emotional weight), telling Morgan about his time during WWII, in particular the climate of America before and after Pearl Harbor. Morgan, hoping he might know more, asks if he knows about any murders at the time, but Teddy had been sent off to war very quickly, and thus doesn't remember much local news at the time.

Scene Two: the scarf seems to have triggered a second haunting experience for Morgan. When she takes a bath, she suddenly "hallucinates" being grabbed through the water and brought down, something trying to drown her. While nothing seems comes of it, later that night Morgan is left with visions of faces, warning her to stay away.

Chapter Sixteen

Scene One: (Friday) Alyssa returns to school, but something's changed. She appears haggard and exhausted, with red eyes and bags, but she's grown a strange obsession with the Lake that trumps even Winnie's. In a manner similar to Morgan, people are wary of her and leave her alone, but Alyssa doesn't seem to notice. During class together, Alyssa shows Morgan all the research she's done on the lake, including the seven original victims (which Morgan recognizes from her dream), and the strange similarities in all of their deaths. She's convinced that the Lost Boy took Aaron, but for some reason doesn't think he's dead yet. Morgan can't tell if Alyssa really believes in the myth, or is confusing it with the idea of a serial killer, or perhaps both. Either way, Alyssa plans on exploring the Lake for clues, and asks Morgan for help. Morgan reluctantly agrees, afraid to let Alyssa go alone. When Juni finds out about this later, she is not happy, and disapproves of Morgan enabling Alyssa's obsession. (Hawthorn also disapproves, after school).

Scene Two: Morgan presents the scarf to Houdini, but he reacts badly, resulting in him vanishing with little answers. Near the end of the day, Morgan discovers her locker has been trashed, several of her things missing, and believes it to be ghostly revenge from Houdini. It baffles her, and the event only fuels the idea of ghosts in the Academy; some students are starting to wonder if the school is haunted, or if Morgan is cursed. Frustrated that her search for answers has only backfired on her, Morgan questions just how sane Houdini really is.

In reality, the scarf triggered a memory for Houdini, which is why he ‘disappeared’ again. Thus, due to his absence, he could not be responsible for the “pranks” on Morgan. The locker was actually trashed by Demille, who was looking for the grimoire, hoping it was inside (Morgan actually carries it with her most of the time).

Chapter Seventeen

Scene One: (Friday Evening) Morgan meets with Alyssa at the Lake. It gets dark soon, and due to prior engagements both of them end up skipping dinner in order to look around, armed with flashlights and cell phones. Morgan personally isn't very invested in the endeavor, but she humors Alyssa, hoping that the lack of evidence found would convince Alyssa to leave the Lake alone, and perhaps drop the matter entirely. Morgan is still wary of the faces in her dream, the warning to stay away. She tries not to fall prey to her fears, but ends up jumpy and paranoid when they split up.

The situation goes upside-down, though, when Morgan hears a scream, recognizes it as Alyssa, and goes racing back for her — only to find her gone. Morgan searches for her, calling Alyssa's phone, but gets nothing. Just as she's starting to panic, she sees someone in the water, struggling to swim. Thinking it's Alyssa, she goes in the Lake (it's implied that the Lost Boy has some enchanting magic that makes it difficult for someone to resist the urge to go into the lake), but the figure is gone when Morgan reaches it; bewildered and cold, Morgan doesn't know what to do, when she's suddenly pulled under.

Morgan tries to fight it, but the creature (Lost Boy) is stronger, and she passes out underwater.

Chapter Eighteen

Scene One: Morgan wakes up in a cold cement room, soaking wet but alive. It takes her a second to recover and get her thoughts straight, but she eventually finds herself in what appears to be an old boiling room. Around her are large black lumps, which later prove to be bodies. Horrified, Morgan goes into a panic, and actually finds both Aaron and Alyssa there; they are still breathing, but she cannot wake them up. In one corner of the room is a deep pool (that leads into the lake) in which she sees the Lost Boy. He pops up, and Morgan reacts with hostility (fire magic), frightening him. It occurs to her that he appears a lot less menacing here, but before she can ask him questions, a door opens behind her.

Morgan just barely manages to hide before someone walks in, and she watches furtively as the person, what appears to be a large man, inspects the bodies. Then, to her surprise, she watches as he pulls out a hand mirror (the sapphire mirror) and speaks to it; at first it appears the man is speaking to his reflection, Morgan can see the Lost Boy in the corner, and can witness his visceral reaction to it, as though the effect is hurting him. She manages to figure it out pretty quickly that the mirror and the Lost Boy are connected somehow, but she has no chance to act on it before she's spotted, and the man attacks her.

Chapter Nineteen

Scene One: Morgan gets into a very uneven battle against the strange man, who quickly makes it clear he has magic, too. He orders the Lost Boy to catch her, but strangely the Lost Boy refuses, much to the man's frustration. Morgan uses what little skill she has to ward off the man, eventually succeeding in her escape by distracting him and shutting the door behind her — it locks automatically, leaving him trapped inside for the time being.

Morgan finds herself in a hallway, with cement walls much like the boiler room, and quickly runs into a worker with a hard hat — she nearly attacked him by mistake before he catches her and calms her down, quickly identifying that she's in a panic, and freezing cold. He asks her where the hell she came from (Morgan will realize later that she's in the town dam structure), and she points to the door she came from. The worker just gives her a strange look, and when she turns around, Morgan is stunned to find that the door to the boiler room is no longer there.

Chapter Twenty

Scene One: (Monday-Wednesday) Morgan summarizes the weekend, stating with unemotional distance (implied to be shock/numbness from the experience) that she had been gone for a day and a half, apparently spending that time unconscious in the dam. She still doesn't know what to make of what she saw in the dam, only that whoever is behind the disappearances now know she's onto them, and that she survived. Morgan's worried they'll find her because of the news coverage on the matter, but because of her status as a minor, her identity is concealed. She doesn't know why she woke up when the others didn't, although she believes it to be because of her magic.

At school, Morgan's ostracization increases tenfold. Everyone now avoids her entirely, considering her a freak, and perhaps responsible for Alyssa's disappearance; Alyssa, who still hasn't returned, although now Morgan knows why. Unfortunately, she feels unable to tell anyone because of the outrageous story; the police didn't believe her babbling when she recovered her outside the dam, and a second search revealed no room filled with bodies. Since the man who attacked her was also not found, Morgan rightly assumes he escaped, and is terrified of him finding her again. Coupled with more "pranks" and bad luck seemingly brought on by ghostly revenge, Morgan feels alone and trapped.

She is on edge throughout the week, and tensions rise quickly between her and Juni, who already expressed her disapproval, and their conversation in the hallway between classes explodes into massive shouting match. Sergio eventually jumps in, actually coming to Morgan's defense, but that just confuses Morgan and infuriates Juni

even more, who accuses Sergio of absolving Morgan of responsibility, she feels is undeserved. Juni tries to defend her stance, saying she was only trying to make the best of a bad situation, that she was just trying to help Morgan, and that Morgan took advantage of that. Morgan and Sergio come back with the fact that Juni's (and others) treatment of Morgan, with the rumors and the bullying, has been the opposite. Morgan accuses Juni of valuing her public appearance than their friendship, reasoning that's why she cut off Morgan and only communicates in text and has refused to speak to her in public. However, the fight quickly gets out of hand, and due her anger, Morgan's hands accidentally catch on fire, causing a brief panic before the professors get involved and everyone is sent to the office.

Chapter Twenty-One

Scene One: Demille tries to mediate between Morgan and Juni, still furious with each other, but the two girls refuse to apologize and make up. Due to the fire incident, Demille suspends Morgan for the rest of this week and all of next week, much to her dismay.

Sergio tries to speak to her afterwards, but Morgan is too upset to deal with him at the moment.

Scene Two: Morgan, desperate to find Houdini before she's cast out of the school, finds him in the library. He appears vacant and confused at her anger with him, and it's revealed through a brief argument that Houdini had nothing at all to do with the recent bad luck Morgan's been having. Whoever's been messing with her, they are a living person.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Scene One: (Saturday) Morgan's feelings of anger quickly subside within a day, and by Friday she starts apologizing to people (online and by phone, since she cannot come to school; Hawthorn recommends this to her over phone before she does it, though, but Morgan, showing growth of character, doesn't fight the idea too much). On Saturday, however, she has achieved no grounds with Juni, who seems determined to give Morgan the cold shoulder. Likewise, most of her apologies have gone unanswered, mostly due to the rumor of her involvement with Alyssa's disappearance spreading, along with her reputation as a pyro, and no one believes her when she tries to declare innocence.

This eventually leads to her frustrated and helpless on Saturday. She finds several articles and posts about herself online (several friends have blocked her, done right after she tried to make amends, much to Morgan's dismay), which works her up to the point where she goes on a run through the woods to clear her thoughts, but it doesn't go as well as she expected.

* * *

Juni was ignoring all my calls and texts. Melanie kept giving me vague answers whenever I asked, clearly trying to avoid me. It wasn't until I got a text from Winnie saying Alyssa was my fault did I finally lose my patient. With a frustrated growl I threw my phone — it bounced off the kitchen table and cracked on the floor. I didn't care, I was already out the back door.

I was already running before I reached the trees. I had no idea what I was doing, I didn't typically go on runs when I was in a bad mood. But it felt like the entire world was against me, and I just wanted to move. To do something. To get away.

It wasn't fair. None of it was. All I was trying to do was help, and all I got was more trouble! Trying to talk to Houdini just got my ass haunted, and then when I finally managed to calm him down, get him to like me enough to start talking, he freaks out when I show him the scarf. And anything I did to try and help Alyssa just made it worse. Now she was gone, and everyone blamed me. They all thought I was crazy.

My eyes burned at that. All my friends, everyone I trusted, thought I lost my mind. There was no way to prove them wrong. Everything I did just made it worse.

I wondered if I should call Tommy. I wanted to. I wanted him to just make this all better. As I ran, my gut twisted, and knew it was a bad idea. He'd be angrier that I lied to him than anything I told him afterwards. Would he even believe what happened, that there was an honest-to-God ghost in the lake trying to drown kids? That someone had found the bodies, keeping them preserved, in a room you couldn't find?

My feet pounded across the worn dirt path. Leaves crunched beneath me, crackling and loud. I felt like an elephant trampling around, graceless and noisy, out of control. I couldn't make myself calm down. I didn't want to stop, either.

That wasn't to mention the magic, the Grimoire, the fact that my father apparently knew what I was and decided not to tell me until almost too late. Or maybe it was already too late, I didn't know. Nothing made sense anymore.

My breath was hot in my throat, burning in my chest. A branch whapped my arm, hair stuck to my face. I had to shake my head to clear my vision, only for it to be blurred by tears.

I couldn't do this alone. But I had no one. No one to call, no one to ask for help.

What could I do?

I wasn't paying attention. When I came to the edge of the hill going down, I didn't notice then root that stuck out just before the drop. I knew the trail so well that avoiding it wouldn't even have taken a thought.

But my mind was elsewhere, my eyes gazing too far ahead to notice what was right in front of me. I had a hard time seeing past my tears; I should've known to stop running then, but I was *just so angry*, and I was going so fast.

My foot slid in the soft dirt. It was only when my ankle hit the tree bark and I felt that tremor of inertia racked up my leg did I realize: *oh, crap*.

A sickening crack preceded the lurch as my whole body jerked forward, anchored by my foot caught on the root. I gasped and shot out my arms to brace for impact, an instinct that unfortunately did not aid me when the ground dropped lower than I expected.

I landed wrong. I knew it before it happened. The ground, on a steep slope, was covered in pine needles and leaves. I threw my hands out to brace my fall, but slipped on my palms and instead took the brunt of the fall on my left shoulder. Pain shot up my arm and into my neck, and I buckled.

Good news: my foot was no longer stuck in the root.

Bad news: I hadn't stopped moving yet.

Like a training exercise gone wrong, I tumbled head-over-heels down the hill. Shoulder, knee, hip, elbow — each bump like jolt to my system, another bruise to count. I made a mad scramble to grab onto something — *anything* — to stop my fall.

But my hands found nothing, and I was going too fast and too hard for it to really make a difference. I couldn't see anything, either; just a jumble of sky and leaves and branches and dirt, around and around. I might have hit my head on something, but everything was happening so quickly I hadn't the thought to spare over it.

Then the instant passed and I had yet to reach the bottom.

I fell and fell, an endless cycle. This had never happened before, I had never gotten hurt on this trail. It was an entirely new experience and it occurred to me, mid-fall, that I would be in serious trouble if I couldn't get back to the house. Would anyone (and by that I mean my ghost family) know if anything was wrong? Could they help me? None of them had been able to go this far from the house before, so maybe they could get help.

Only ghosts can't make phone calls.

Whump!

I came to a surprisingly abrupt stop in a thicket of dead leaves. I skidded on my side before the momentum of my fall died, and I just lied there, too sore and delirious to move right away. Everything hurt, mostly my ankle, which I learned was pretty much useless as soon as I tried moving my leg.

A jolt of pain shot up to my knee and I gasped, clutched my foot. I felt sick to my stomach, but somehow convinced myself it wasn't so bad; I tried to get up, test my foot — it couldn't be so bad, could it? I hadn't been going *that* fast —

“Ah!” As soon as I put weight on my right foot, it gave way beneath me. I managed to catch a nearby tree for support, but I couldn't stand upright for very long. I slid to the forest floor, taking deep shaking breathes. *Do not cry, do not cry, just don't cry, you're going to be all right....*

My throat let out a little sob. *Oh, God, I'm so screwed.*

Who was going to find me down here? I was stupid to not take my phone — in trying to get away from Juni, from life, from everything, I had also removed my only lifeline. How long would it take for someone to realize I was missing, and come looking for me? Juni knew I was upset and wouldn't check up for a while if she thought that was why I wasn't replying to texts or picking up the phone. The same would go for everyone else.

I looked up at the sky. The clouds were already starting to turn orange. Dread filled my gut as I realized it would be night soon. I hadn't taken into account how soon the sun would set, either.

Ugh, why was I being so stupid lately? First I'm jumping into freezing lakes after homicidal ghosts and nearly drowning, now I'm getting myself trapped in the woods with a gimp ankle and no cell phone. I was on roll lately, wasn't I? Such an idiot.

Well, I couldn't just wait here. I looked back up the way I fell. It was the quickest way back. I could go the other way, but that was longer, and it would be dark by then, and I knew there was just another hill I'd have to climb, anyways. Might as well get it over with now.

There was a trail of upturned dirt from where I had fallen, gouges in the path. There were some undisturbed patches of leaves where I must have bounced, taking air and earning more bruises. Just looking at it made me wince.

Aside from the ankle, I didn't feel so bad. It was going to hurt later.

With less than an hour before sunset, I decided to take action. Since walking was not an option, I had to crawl. And just barely, at that. Any movement sent waves of breathtaking pain through me; I barely made it three feet before I was panting. Every little jerk forward was made in agony. Going up the hill made it slightly easier since there was more weight on my knees than my feet, but that left me with little to get purchase on.

I kept sliding back a little with each inch up that hill. I felt pathetic, being reduced like this, like a *baby*, crawling and mewling in helplessness. A part of me was glad there was no one here, because I couldn't stand the idea of anyone seeing me like this.

I looked up, gauged the distance. I was maybe a quarter of the way up. How long had that taken? I hadn't been keeping track. I sighed, braced myself for more of the pain, before putting one hand in front of the other.

What would they think? That I was weak and stupid and sad to look at. Who was I, to act so cool and aloof, when I couldn't even manage myself when I was in a little trouble? How could anyone ever respect me if I needed help?

Then, one palm slid out from beneath me. It was too late by the time I realized I lost my grip. I couldn't help but cry out, "No, no, no!" as I fell back down the hill, coming to a stop at the bottom.

My breath came out in a whoosh and it was then I understood that the phrase "weight of defeat" had a very literal meaning. That hill was impossible to climb like this.

No one knew I was hurt. No one was going to find me. And those that did know I was out here couldn't help me anyways.

I was all alone.

I let my shoulders drop as I hit the ground, curled up, and started to cry.

* * *

...*Gan!*

I heard a noise, distant and muffled.*Gan!*

At first, I thought it was an animal, maybe a bird or something, and didn't pay it any mind as I continued to wallow in misery.

I heard it again. This time, though, the sound was clear.

"Morgan!"

My name. *A voice.*

It took me a second to fully acknowledge the meaning of this. Then my head shot up and I shouted, "I'm here! I'm down here!"

"Morgan! Where are you!" The voice came closer the more I heard it, followed by the sound of crunching leaves and hurried footsteps. My brain was running in circles, so mired in pain and emotions that it couldn't identify the person until they crested the hill.

"Morgan!"

I completely blanked at the sight of him. "....Sergio?"

He was panting, sweaty in the evening light. Still, he managed to avoid the root as he came down the hill, but was going so fast that he skidded, before sliding to a stop at

my side. Landing on his hands to steady himself, Sergio said, "Oh, Jesus, are you all right?"

"I-I hurt my ankle, I can't walk," I was so surprised I almost forgot I was crying, but my voice was hoarse and I had to swallow before I could make myself clear. "...w-what are you even doing here right now?"

He didn't seem to hear my question, too busy surveying my body for injuries. My ankle had swollen up to twice its size, but he seemed to be focused on my face. He reached out, as if to touch me, saying, "Morgan, you're bleeding,"

"I am?" My hand flew up to my head and I winced when I found the wound by my hairline. My fingers came back sticky with blood. I felt woozy. "Huh. I don't remember that."

"What happened?"

"I tripped on the root and fell."

"All the way down the hill?" He looked alarmed, and for some reason I couldn't understand why. "How long were you down here?"

"I don't know, a while," I was shaking, and really felt it as Sergio took me by the elbow, helping me up. I bent my right leg, careful to keep my foot in the air, but lost my balance. But Sergio was faster, getting his arms under my own. If he hadn't caught me at that moment, I would've fallen again.

"Whoa, be careful. You might have a concussion." He said, motioning to my head again.

"I'm fine," I scoffed and knocked his hand away, trying not to dwell on the fact that I was practically leaning my whole body on him. I wasn't *that* uncoordinated, was I? "I think I'd know if I'd have a concussion, thank you very much,"

"Uh-huh, right," Sergio didn't look convinced in the least. He had both hands on my arms to keep me upright. I didn't realize I was cold until I felt his warm hands on my skin. "I think we need to get you to a hospital, let the doctors decide."

"I don't need doctors," I snapped, pushing away from him. Who did he think he was, acting like he knew everything? I didn't need anyone's help, I could take care of myself. "I just want to go home, and I'll be — ugh!"

As it turned out, letting go of Sergio was a bad idea. I had turned away from him, but as soon as I took a step, my ankle bent and I crumpled to my knees, arms useless at my side. "...I'll be fine."

"Morgan, please, you're hurt. Let me help you."

It wasn't angry or frustrated, just a statement of fact.

I couldn't fight the bile rising inside. His sympathy infuriated me and I hated that he wasn't as angry at me as I was at him. It wasn't fair — I wanted him to hurt just as much as I did.

Good thing I had just the right words to say.

"Why?" I asked, bitterness sharp on my tongue. "You always make everything worse."

Sergio physically recoiled at the words, his brow drawing up and gaze wavering in uncertainty; the pain that I wanted, exactly as I expected. What I didn't expect was the

guilt that sunk in my stomach, just how awful I was for not only wanting this, but achieving it.

Still, he had the gall to say, “You don’t mean that.”

“Yes, I do. Just go away. I can take care of myself.” My throat choked over the lies. Sergio frowned, glancing away, and for a second I was afraid he might actually do what I said. I didn’t want him to leave, not really. I knew there was no way I was getting out of here without him. But it was too late; my pride had done its work. I couldn’t take those words back.

Then Sergio looked at me with steel in his eyes. He said, "I'm not going to leave you alone."

At first, I didn't do anything. I could only look at the ground beneath my knees. My throat hurt and my face burned. I squeezed my eyes shut, refusing to cry in front of him. But the recent attempt at walking left my ankle in fresh agony, and there was nothing I could do to stop the shallow, shaky sob. I bit my lip, tried to hide it, but it was too late.

Then I felt something warm drape around my shoulders. Sniffling, I looked down, recognized the blue and gold of the varsity jacket. It was so soft and comforting that I'd didn't even think to shrug it off. Somehow, the kindness was overwhelming and I tried not to succumb to another wave of tears, with mild success.

Arms wrapped around me and I heard Sergio's voice in my ear, "Hey, shh, don't cry. You're going to be all right. Let's get you out of here, okay?"

I turned my head away from him, but it was only a half-hearted attempt. I could barely speak, and what words I could say were barely above a whisper. It was the only way to keep my voice from cracking. "Yeah, okay. But you can't tell anyone about this."

He actually laughed at that. "I promise. Do you think you can stand again?"

I tried, but my ankle had had its last hurrah some time ago and even with Sergio's support it was too much. So he just picked me up like it was nothing, carrying me in his arms as we made our way back up the hill. Normally, I would protest to being treated like a baby, but I must have knocked my head real hard, because instead of doing that, I just wrapped the jacket closer around me and rested my head against the crook of his neck.

I couldn't believe he wasn't completely out of breath by the time we were at the top of the hill. Maybe I had underestimated him, or I was too tired to really check. Sergio didn't complain or take a break, so I assumed everything was all right and closed my eyes, feeling so tired I could sleep for a week.

"Hey, hey," he jostled me a little, making me pick up my head and blink the blariness away. "You need to stay with me here, you can't fall asleep."

I didn't even care, I just bent my head back again. But Sergio shook me again, speaking louder this time, "Morgan, I'm serious! You need to stay awake!"

"Why?" I could only complain in a mumble.

"Because I really do think you have a concussion," he replied. I was cowed by the earnestness in his eyes. Ugh, why did he make me feel so guilty? I felt like I just kicked a puppy, those warm dark eyes looking at me like that. "And if you fall asleep, you might not wake up again."

There was a moment of silence as he let that sink in. I sighed through my nose, conceding the point. "All right, fine. Then tell me how you found me. You just decided to take a walk in the woods behind my house?"

"I came over to talk to you," Sergio admitted. He saw the look on my face and added, "Yeah, I know, I know, you're still angry at me and you didn't want to talk to anyone, but I knew I'd be dead before you ever came to me, so I decided to take the initiative and go to you first. But when I got to your house, no one was there."

"You went inside?"

"Well, yeah, the door was unlocked," he said with a shrug. I frowned, wondering how *that* happened because I never left it unlocked, when Sergio continued, "I knocked and rang the doorbell, but you never showed up. The house was completely dark inside, and you weren't picking up the phone, cell or house, so I went inside. I called for you, no answer, but I heard a noise and the lights turned on in the kitchen. I thought you might be there."

"Obviously I wasn't,"

"Obviously," he agreed with a smirk, but it faded away into seriousness again. "So, I found your phone — you've got, like, a hundred messages by the way — but nothing else. The back door was open, though, you had that creepy doll propping it open. I figured you went outside for a jog. So I followed the trail. It was getting dark and I was afraid I might've missed you. I didn't think you'd go so late in the day. After what happened to Aaron and Alyssa..."

He paused, then cleared his throat. "I'm just glad I found you."

I didn't say it, but so was I.

I was smiling, though, just a little bit. I didn't think Aunt Temperance would let him into the house, knowing how I felt about him (and her own opinion on boys my age). One of the others must have convinced her to let him in. And then they guided him my way, little nudges to get him on the right path.

And he didn't suspect a thing.

Eventually, we emerged from the forest. I sagged in relief at the sight of Coventry Hall — a small sign of civilization.

But Sergio surprised me by not going inside. Instead, he passed it, going around and to the bright red car parked on the other side. I started to shift in his arms, feeling apprehensive. "Wait, Sergio, are you serious — I don't want to go to the hospital."

"Well, unless you have some sort of secret remedy that heals broken bones, you don't really have much of a choice," he replied, managing to open the passenger door with me still in his arms. "You're not very good at self-diagnosis."

Despite everything, I didn't resist when he helped me into the seat. Still, I asked, "Well, can I at least get my phone, then?"

He sighed. "Yeah, all right, I'll go get it —"

But when Sergio let go of me and withdrew out of the car, my lungs seized and I panicked. Before I could think about what I was doing, I grabbed his arm, making Sergio stop and look at me in surprise. "No, wait!"

"W-what's wrong?" He asked, brow furrowing.

"I just..." The thought of him leaving had scared me; I didn't know why, it was completely irrational, and I wasn't going to admit it. Instead, I tried to save face, letting go and retreating into the spacious jacket, looking at my feet. "Never mind."

"Um, okay," Sergio still seemed concerned, but took a step back now that I didn't have a vice like grip on him. "I'll be right back."

I tried to calm myself while he was gone. What had gotten over me? Was I suddenly forming attachment issues? I was never this clingy before. Maybe it was the concussion. I *did* have a pretty major headache, maybe that's why.

Yeah, that's probably it. The concussion was making me act all loopy.

I liked it better than the other explanation, which had something to do with Sergio and me missing him, an idea I refused to consider.

He returned less than a minute later, phone in hand. Getting into the driver's seat, Sergio gave it to me and said, "Does your house have faulty wiring?"

"Uh," I tried to guess why he was asking. I couldn't imagine it being good. "Maybe, why?"

"Some of the lights are on," he said, frowning as he started the engine. "But they were off when I left."

"Yeah, that happens sometimes," I said with an uneasy smile, hoping he didn't see right through me. It was lucky he didn't suspect anything strange last time, but if he continued to ask questions, I wasn't sure if I could hold up, or even have the energy to.

"The house is pretty old. I guess I should have someone check it out."

"Maybe after you get to the hospital," Sergio said with a wry smile, pulling the car out of the long driveway and onto the road.

A silence filled the car after that, calm but awkward, like we both understood we were behaving under false pretenses. Being nice, funny, for no good reason. Avoiding the

thing that was really bothering us. Of course, I was doing it on purpose, because I knew if we kept talking, it would invariably lead back to the fight, and I just wasn't in the mood.

And yet, it continued to bug me, as we kept driving. I tried to distract myself with other thoughts, mainly my ankle and how much it hurt, but funnily enough that really wasn't very pleasant, and even thinking about Sergio was better than that. And I was confused on top of it all; why was Sergio being so nice to me, time and time again? He didn't have to reach me first. No one would blame him if he just expected me to apologize first. We still weren't friends, as far as I was concerned.

Sergio just didn't seem to care.

It made me glad. Well, annoyed, but glad, too. Sergio didn't do what people expected of him; he just did what he wanted, and luckily for me, what he wanted was often nice things.

I had to say something.

Finding the will to do so, however, was another matter. I tried to think of different ways to say it, how to ask, but couldn't think of anything that didn't make me sound stupid. It wasn't until we reached the hospital, that Sergio helped me to the emergency room lobby and fill out the papers, did it hit me.

And still, I waited, staring at the floor while my information was processed. The lobby was relatively calm, with other injured people waiting around, nothing too serious. A TV played against one wall, while the light from the windows grew dimmer by the second. It was twilight now, sure to be utterly dark whenever the hell I got to leave. The waiting time here was atrocious, and I had no idea when I would be called.

Sergio sat beside me, patient as ever, reading something on his phone. Mine was still in my pocket, ignored. It seemed almost rude to take it out, like I was wanted to make it obvious I was avoiding Sergio. And I wasn't. Not this time.

Eventually, I had to do it.

"Why did you break up with me?" I asked, my voice barely a whisper.

The words sort of just popped out. I had completely forgotten what I planned to say, so instead that came out. There was a heavy sigh from Sergio's direction. Obviously, not the best choice on my part. I glanced at him, not quite turning my head in case he decided to meet my gaze.

After a pause, Sergio said, "I just felt like I had to." I opened my mouth to argue but he held up his hand and quickly added, "Wait, just hear me out, Morgan, okay? Just...just listen to me."

The breath I had taken IN to shout left my lungs in a long whoosh and I deflated back into my seat. I crossed my arms and huffed, "Fine."

"Okay," Sergio tensed his shoulders as if trying to make himself smaller, but they were so broad that it didn't do much. "So can we both agree on the fact that the only reason we got together was because everyone else kept telling us to?"

"Yes," I said, my jaw a little stiff at having to admit it. No one wanted to be a victim of peer-pressure. "Juni said we were perfect for each other, Mel thought we could be the 'it' couple, and Winnie called us Bonnie and Clyde, blah blah blah..."

"Didn't Bonnie and Clyde kill innocent people?"

"They also died in a hail of bullets."

"Romantic."

“Good thing we’re nothing like them.”

“Ha! Uh, yeah, anyways,” Sergio coughed, trying to mask a chuckle. I hid a smile behind my hand. I didn’t want to ruin this serious conversation with too much joking, my go-to avoidance tactic; Sergio had yet to fully explain himself. “And can we agree that the whole thing basically sucked?”

I nodded, wondering where he was going with this. “Yeah. It was pretty bad.”

“Then why did you want us to stay together?” he asked, frowning at me.

“I…” I didn’t expect him to turn it around like that. This was about his mistakes, not mine. But I said, “I don’t know. It was supposed to be perfect, you know? That’s what everyone else expected and I thought, if it went along long enough, it would just…work itself out.”

“You don’t really know how relationships work, do you?”

“It wasn’t supposed to be so hard!” I exclaimed, holding out my hands, insulted by his skeptical tone. “We already knew each other, we already got along just fine as friends! You had to make things complicated by expecting more!”

“How was *I* expecting more? I never asked you for anything. We only kissed, like, twice!” Sergio’s face had flushed red; out of embarrassment or anger, I couldn’t tell.

“Maybe *you* just *thought* I wanted more?”

“*Shouldn’t* you?”

“No!” Sergio snapped back, so loud we started getting looks from others in the lobby. But Sergio ignored them as he faced me, arms out, saying, “Jeez, not all guys are like that, Morgan. And besides, I never wanted to hurt you! Why do you think I broke up with you?”

“Because I made out with a guy from Hoboken while I was drunk?”

“Well, yes,” Sergio blinked, then shook his head, swiping the air with his hands as if to wave away the thought. “But no, no that wasn’t it! I mean, it wasn’t the reason why.”

“*What?*” I made a face, wrinkling my nose at Sergio’s example of non-logic. “Look, I get it, you were pissed, but I was *drunk*. I can barely even remember it. You didn’t have to just throw it all away out of revenge -”

“*Revenge?*” Sergio gawked at the word. “I never wanted revenge! Why do you always think everything is an attack against you?”

“Well, isn’t it?” I demanded, so furious I got to my feet to stand over Sergio in his seat. “Why else would you break up with me? Was that the only way you could think of hurting me? Because, congratulations, sunshine, it worked! How about that, huh? Are you happy now? Are you satisfied that you’ve won? Or do you want to see me cry, too -”

“I broke up with you so you’d be happy!” Sergio blurted, jumping to his feet.

My mouth hung open, speech abandoning me. I stared at Sergio as if seeing him for the first time. He was breathing hard, fists clenching and unclenching at his sides after having weathered through my barrage of rage. The only word that came out of my mouth was, “...what?”

“I broke up with you,” Sergio repeated, looking me dead in the eye. He enunciated each word, modulation tightly controlled. “To make you happy. That was my plan. I thought it’d make everything better, make things like it used to be.”

Speechless, I dropped my arms and just stood there. Then I said, “That is the dumbest plan I’ve ever heard.”

“Well, I know that *now*.” Sergio said, rolling his eyes. “But you said it yourself, you weren’t going to do anything.”

When I opened my mouth to argue the fact, he held up his hands and said, “Just listen! For once, just don’t say anything, okay? You hate it when people help you. Neither of us were happy, but you were too proud to admit it, so I thought I’d just make it easy and end it myself. I...didn’t know it would backfire so badly.”

Sergio gave me the most earnest puppy-dog eyes I had ever seen. “Do you understand now?”

At first I wanted to say no, just because it meant he didn’t win the argument. I didn’t want him to be right. But then I realized that no matter how much I tried to prove him wrong, *I* would still know he was right. About me, my pride. I didn’t even understand it. Maybe I just hated the idea that I couldn’t make a relationship with my best friend work. That I was a failure.

But I didn’t want to deal with that. It had been easier to hate Sergio than admit that.

“Morgan?” Sergio asked when I didn’t say anything.

“Yeah,” I whispered, brought out of my reverie. I was staring at the ground, not even realizing I was doing it, but I couldn’t make myself look at Sergio anyways. My chest ached with shame. I just wanted to disappear, feel invisible. “I-I didn’t know. Why didn’t you ever say anything?”

“Because sometimes you get really scary,” When I finally managed to glance up at him, Sergio gave me a small smile, chagrined. He tilted his head to meet my gaze better. “I think it’s safe to say we need to work on our communication skills.”

I nodded, pausing to let that sink in. Then I threw myself forward, hugging Sergio before he could flinch away.

He froze, caught by surprise. He held his arms away from me, almost too afraid to move. “What’s this for?”

“This is me saying thank you,” I said, pressing my face into his jacket. I had partially hoped it would muffle my voice and he wouldn’t hear it, but I knew he heard when Sergio returned the hug. “And I’m sorry.”

“That sounded like it hurt,” Sergio chuckled into my hair, shaking his head to get it out of his face. “But I’ll only forgive you if you promise me something.”

“What?”

“Next time we get into a fight, can we just talk? It’s a lot easier than this weird passive-aggressive stuff in the past four months,” Sergio said, heaving a sigh and sitting back down. With nothing to support me, I followed suit. “And I think after this, you and Juni should talk, too.”

I groaned, my head falling back against the seat. “Seriously? What, do you want me to build Rome as well?”

“Morgan, she tried really hard to get us to make up. I think you owe her.”

“She kicked me out of our group!” I pointed out. “I can’t sit with her at lunch, she thinks it’s my fault that Alyssa is gone, and when I try to explain what *really* happened, then —” I just grit my teeth together and shook my head, frustrated. I forgot Sergio didn’t know, either. “Never mind. Forget it.”

“No, what?” Sergio leaned in a little, frowning at me. “What is it? You never told me what happened. Is it true you went to the lake the other night?”

I tapped my fingernail on the armrest, afraid to look at him. “Yeah.”

“And?”

“You wouldn’t believe me.” I told him.

“Try me.”

“Trust me, you wouldn’t,” I scowled at him. Why was he pushing this? He must’ve heard what people have been saying about me. What did he think would be different, hearing it from me? “I’m not kidding. What happened — you’ll just think I’m crazy.”

“*Try* me,” he repeated, imploring.

“Ugh, fine,” I said, rolling my eyes. “But you’re going to regret asking.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

An hour later, my ankle was in a splint and the nurse had left me in the recovery room while she looked for a pair of crutches. I was only given an ibuprofen for the pain, but at this point I was busy thinking about other things.

“Pumpkin ice cream, just like you ordered,” Sergio appeared, a small cup of ice cream in each hand. He handed me one, before hopping up on the gurney beside me. “How’s the ankle?”

“Doctor says it’s just a sprained ankle.” I said, kicking out my leg to examine the bandaging. “I’ll be stuck like this for a month, at least. Which means I probably won’t be doing any ballet auditions for the winter.”

“I think ballet is the least of your worries right now,” Sergio commented, sticking the spoon in his mouth.

His tone was too light, and I knew that what I told him hadn’t gone down well. Sergio, at least, was trying to be civil about it. I wasn’t sure what part had him more freaked out, though, so I said, “Look, I get it, you don’t believe me, its fine, but you don’t have to act like everything’s fine. When it’s obviously not.”

“I don’t know what I believe,” Sergio cut me off, frowning at his dessert. “What I do know is that *you* believe it.”

“You must think I’m weird. A freak.”

“You were always a little weird,” Sergio told me, smiling a little, giving me a wry look. “I just didn’t get it until, well, until the party. Living in a house all on your own, all that creepy shit that bothers other people but not you, the fact that you really hate

museums for some reason — I don't know, the fact that you can see dead people just sort of...makes sense."

"Well, thank god for that," I muttered, tasting my ice cream, but I didn't have much of an appetite.

"And I don't blame you for being upset," Sergio went on. "Hiding that stuff for years, your family treating you like that, any sane person would just snap eventually."

"I didn't just *snap*, okay?" I said, picking up my head to glare at him. "It's a ghost. A specific ghost, the Lost Boy that's been following me, that's been taking kids, pulling them into the lake. First, he got Aaron at the party, then he got me and Alyssa when we went snooping around the lake for clues. I'm just lucky I managed to get out before someone saw me."

"What do you mean, before someone saw you?" Sergio made a face, shaking his head. "I thought it was just the ghost behind all of this."

"Technically, yes," I said. "But I think there's someone who knows what he's doing, taking advantage of it. There's a room in the dam, a secret door that disappears when you leave the room. It's, um, Magical."

"I am so lost right now."

I just sighed. "It'd made more sense if I could show you the Grimoire. It's full of information that could help, but I left it at school. And the Lost Boy isn't the only ghost I'm worried about. There's another at the Academy. I call him Houdini because, well, he can't remember his name."

"Is that unusual, for ghosts?"

"Pretty much, yeah."

Continuation: Morgan attempts to heal her ankle using magic, using her grimoire as guidance, but only succeeds in making it hurt more (requires intense concentration and knowledge of anatomy to do, both of which are difficult with the pain distracting her). Sergio recommends she just lay off for the time being and let it heal on its own until she has her head on straight. Together, they work out a plan for the future; they both agree Juni should know about this, and perhaps Mel and Winnie as well. Since saving the twins and the other victims is tantamount and magic is kind of out of league for the local police, they decide to do this themselves (not the best decision, but Morgan doesn't feel like they have much of a choice).

Chapter Twenty-Four

Scene One: (Tuesday) It takes Sergio some time to convince Juni to finally speak with Morgan again; in the interim, Morgan practices more magic, finding some improvement, while constantly worrying about Houdini. The nightmares get worse, and Tuesday morning she wakes up soaking wet in her own bed. She quickly grows terrified of any substantial body of water, and she is afraid to leave the house. Juni doesn't fail to notice this when they meet again Tuesday afternoon. Their conversation is tense at first (Mel, Winnie, and Sergio bear witness, while also giving their own input occasionally), and Juni is disparaging when Morgan finally admits to being a witch, but is convinced rather quickly when Morgan proves it, summoning up a flame in her hand.

The entire atmosphere in the group changes as soon as Morgan does this; this leads to a barrage of questions, and Morgan is able to explain everything that happened in the past couple weeks; her ability to see ghosts included, which everyone takes much better now that they understand what's going on. Morgan even shows them her father's grimoire, added proof of what's going on, as well as the enemies they're facing. She doesn't believe Templars to be behind this, and only mentions them in passing (considering the man that attacked her used magic, and the Templars are anti-magic, she assumes that they are unrelated). She then goes on to explain Houdini, who lives in the school, as well as the Lost Boy. Juni acts as the skeptic of the group, but all four want to help Morgan in saving their friends.

Morgan believes this can be achieved if they steal the sapphire mirror, which she witnessed being able to control the Lost Boy. If they have it, and go to the Lake, then she

believes that they can demand the Lost Boy to return his victims (the still living ones) unharmed.

Mel brings up the “bad luck” Morgan’s been experiencing, asking who’s been doing that if it wasn’t Houdini. Morgan admits she doesn’t know, but it keeps the question relevant for later.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Scene One: Morgan thinks stealing the Sapphire Mirror will be easy, since this isn't the first time any of them have broken into the school. They spend that evening planning, and agree to do it Wednesday night; security is highest during the weekdays, but the kids decide to risk it due to urgency. Morgan warns them that they aren't the only ones who want to control the mirror, but she's the only one who really takes it seriously, as the others don't really have the concept of magic down as much as she does.

After the summary, Morgan switches to real-time as she and her friends make it inside the school. It all goes well, and no one shows any apprehension to breaking the law, which at least saves her the trouble of some last-minute convincing. The sapphire mirror is kept locked in Lovejoy's office, which is notorious for being always locked and difficult to open. Juni assumes Morgan will use magic to unlock the door, but Morgan doesn't know how to do that and while frantically looking for such a spell in the grimoire, Sergio breaks the tension by pulling out a key from his pocket; he nicked it off the janitor's keychain earlier, when he was in detention mopping floors, just for this occasion.

The three go inside, feeling victorious (Mel and Winnie act as look-outs), only to discover that the mirror is gone.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Scene One: Tension increases when the following search of Lovejoy's office reveals nothing. The mirror isn't there, and the three start to get worried. Then Sergio remembers that the mirror is often removed from its case to be cleaned (in-house), and they agree to look around for the school for it. Chances are that its in another office, so they split up. Morgan sneaks into Hawthorn's room, considering him the most trustworthy of all the professors, and probably the one trusted to handle something as delicate as the mirror.

She runs into Houdini again, who expresses his anxiety over her breaking into the school, and seems to have a strange reaction when she mentions the mirror. He gets defensive and even more afraid, demanding why she'd want it, but when she questions this reaction, he's hesitant to reply, and doesn't quite seem to know himself. Then he asks her about the strange men who've been walking around; Morgan has no idea what he's talking about. However, before she can ask him what he means, Morgan is interrupted by none other than Demille, who walks in on her going through Hawthorn's stuff. Caught, Morgan gives herself up, and follows Demille to her office for retribution. She expects to be dressed down, but Morgan is caught off guard when Demille demands for Morgan's grimoire.

"Is there something I could help you with, Morgan?"

I spun around, surprised. Standing in the doorway of the classroom behind me was Miss Demille, her arms crossed, her face disapproving. "I thought I made myself

very clear when I said you were not allowed on grounds during your suspension. But nothing really gets in your way, does it? I knew you would come back at some point.”

“Did you take my stuff?” I asked, pointing at my locker. For some reason, I was less concerned about being caught than I was at the idea of someone going through my stuff - and taking it — *again*. “Isn’t that illegal?”

I touched my phone through my jeans. My phone hadn’t vibrated in several minutes; I wanted to warn the others to get out before Demille found out about them, too, and got in trouble.

“As a matter of fact, it is not.” Miss Demille replied lightly, stepping out the doorway. Her little heels *click-clacked* down the hall as she waved a hand for me to follow. “Lockers are school property, and I reserve the right to inspect them at my discretion. I guess I was right to assume you had contraband in your possession.”

“Contraband?” I asked, making a face as I went after her. I tried to think of anything I had that would be against school regulations, but came up with nothing. The last thing that would’ve gotten me in trouble would’ve been the water bottle filled with vodka, but I got rid of that weeks ago. “What do you mean? I didn’t have any *contraband* in there! Where did you put my stuff?”

“Calm down, Morgan,” Miss Demille sighed. “It’s in my office. Just come with me. I’m sure we can settle this without the authorities being called.”

“Authorities?”

“You’re trespassing,” she reminded me. “At the very least, I think a call to your mother is in order.”

I had to restrain groaning out loud. “Yeah, good luck with that.”

I followed her to her office by the front office. As we stepped into the main atrium, I glanced around, but didn't see Juni or the others. Did Miss Demille know they were here? As she unlocked her door, my hand drifted to my pocket.

"So, how did you hurt your ankle?" Miss Demille asked casually, like we were having normal conversation and she wasn't, you know, escorting me off the premises or anything. She glanced back, looked me up and down. "It must've been recent."

"I fell the other day," I said, not really in the mood to explain. I was limping slightly, and the ibuprofen was starting to wear off. My pride and refusal to let Juni ever know she was right kept me from complaining.

"And the cuts on your face?" Demille prodded, pausing to squint at me, as though she thought I was lying. "Must've been quite a fall."

"It kind of was," I said, casting her a side glance before passing her.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Scene One: Morgan feigns ignorance, confused as to how Demille knows about it, and wondering why she even cares. Demille dances around the subject at first, testing Morgan as well, on her knowledge of the Templars. Morgan figures out pretty quickly that Demille is aware of magic and is startled to learn that Demille is being her trashed locker and the other bad luck she'd been experiencing.

However, Morgan is abstinent in her act, and Demille eventually loses her patience and reveals all. She calls in her back-up, two large men who have Juni and Sergio in their custody. Demille expresses her desire to find the city of Lutece, and Morgan's grimoire is the only thing she's come across in years that may actually help the Templars find it. Morgan demands to know why they're so interested, but Demille evades the question; instead, she threatens Morgan's friends if she doesn't hand over the book. Juni and Sergio, although they don't really understand what Demille is talking about, protest and tell Morgan not to hand it over. Morgan is encouraged by this, so Demille offers the mirror in exchange for the book, knowing that Morgan came here for it.

Morgan asks her why it's so special, why she'd been using it, and Demille reveals the Templars have been using the mirror ever since they found out about its power, and have been using it to get rid of people they find troublesome. The Templars are all about finding and using artefacts of power, and it was rather easy for them to figure it out after hearing legends about the Lake. The takings of Aaron and Alyssa, however, was not their doing, but rather Morgan's involvement with Houdini and his connection with the Lost Boy (which she doesn't realize until later). Had Aaron, and later Alyssa, two innocents

completely unrelated to the Templars, had never been taken, it would've been unlikely that Morgan would have ever stumbled upon the conspiracy.

Demille is willing to give up the mirror because of the more power/mystery the grimoire promises with the location of Lutece. However, the trade still doesn't appeal to Morgan, and when Demille finally loses it, Morgan strikes, using her fire to distract Demille and her back-up, steal the mirror, and escape Demille's office with her friends.

"So," Miss Demille began, returning to her desk and facing us. She was carrying something under her arm, something wrapped in green cloth. "What made you convince your friends to help break into school at this time of night?"

"That's a leading question," Juni said before I could answer, then hissed at me, "Don't answer her!"

"Thanks, I hadn't noticed," I muttered. There was definitely something weird going on with Miss Demille that had me on edge -- and it wasn't just her new body guards. It could've been the timbre of her voice, low and commanding, or the fact that she looked more like the judge of my trial rather than just the assistant dean; all beady eyes and stern-faced, like she already knew I was guilty of a crime I had yet to commit.

"Please be quiet, Juniper," Miss Demille said at the same time, earning a scathing look from Juni. Again with the cold look. "This is between me and Morgan."

"Like I said earlier," I told her, leaning forward in my seat. "I just wanted to get something from my locker. I would've gotten it earlier, you know, when school was in, but *someone* didn't want me inside. So."

“So,” Miss Demille continued, nodding her head like this was exactly what she wanted to hear. “You decided to break the law. Well, I can’t say I’m surprised. And I suppose you brought your friends to gather the rest of your supplies?”

“I — what?” I blinked, confused. Supplies? What was she talking about?

“Perhaps *this* is what you were really looking for?” Miss Demille said, pulling out the cloth from under her arm and nearly slamming it on the table. The cloth pulled back, revealing the sapphire mirror kept in the main hall. “Did you really think I wouldn’t find out what you were up to, Morgan?”

“Uh,” I stared at the mirror, then back at Demille, wondering if maybe I was missing something. “No?”

“Wait, were we going to take the mirror?” Sergio asked, frowning at me. “I don’t remember you mentioning that.”

“Because I didn’t!” I said, throwing up a hand. To Demille, I said, “Look, I don’t know what’s going on, but I don’t want the stupid mirror. I just came for my book!”

“Ah, yes, your book,” Demille rolled her eyes, smiling sagely. She reached down, opened a drawer in her desk, and dumped the Grimoire next to the mirror, making it rattle. “You can imagine my surprise when I found it in your locker, read what was inside.”

“You read it?” I raised an eyebrow, skeptical. Not that it was unusual, but the way Demille said it... “What, like you understood it?”

While Sergio and Juni leaned forward to peer at the book, Demille continued, “Do you really think you’re smarter than me, Morgan? Of course I did.”

I stiffened in my chair, shocked. Is *this* what Houdini meant? That Demille knew that Magic was real? Had the book convinced her, or had she already known? I glanced at Juni and Sergio, wondering if they realized it, too, but they seemed too interested in the book. Juni was already reaching out, like she wanted to read it for herself. “B-but how...?”

“It had an interesting section about mirrors,” Demille went on, as though she hadn’t heard me. She tapped the cover of the Grimoire, and a part of me just wanted to snatch it away from her. But I could feel the eyes of those cops on me, and resisted the urge to move. “Something about how they can contain power. Souls, even. That if they’re broken, they can release the kind of *magic* no one — especially not *children* — have any right to have.”

I blinked, still a little speechless. I hadn’t read that far into the book, but something in Demille’s disgusted tone made me feel that she was telling the truth. A chill went down my back when several things occurred to me at once.

One, that Demille might not just be assistant dean to Graybridge Academy.

And two, this mirror might be somehow related to Houdini.

I didn’t have a lot of proof for the last one. Hell, I didn’t have a lot of proof for either, really, but Demille was seriously starting to freak me out, and I decided to trust my gut on this one.

Houdini had always seemed nervous about the mirror, or any mirror, really; he never liked standing in front of one, the way he recoiled when I showed him mine; and there was the fact that I saw not only his face in the sapphire mirror, but also the Lost

Boy's at home in my bathroom. Granted, it was in the water, but it counted as a reflection, right? Was I wrong to think that these two were related somehow?

"Whoa, who said anything about Magic?" Juni said, reeling back a little. Once more, I was reminded that not everyone was on the same page as me. "I thought this was just about ghosts?"

I winced, regretting I hadn't told them *everything* when I should have, but before I could apologize and explain, Demille just laughed. "Oh, please! Of everything that's possible, you think ghosts are real? The accidents were only meant to scare you, I didn't actually think they'd convince you ghosts were real. I must admit, the author of this grimoire makes quite a convincing case. Too bad he's never actually seen one."

"Wait, accidents?" I demanded, shaking my head. I was still having a little trouble with Demille believing in Magic, but somehow *ghosts* were a stretch for her. "You mean how my locker was trashed? My bag up on the flagpole?"

"And the fire in the gym, yes," Demille added, looking almost annoyed that I had to list it all out. "Although you helped that along. It was all very easy to do, making sure none of you were around when I acted. I suppose it makes sense now, why you would think it ghosts. It's easy to believe in things you can't see."

Beside me, Juni made a noise of surprise.

Instead of shock, I felt ashamed. I had blamed Houdini for all of that, when he claimed he was innocent -- well, okay, he was still responsible for the library disaster, but he confessed to that one, eventually. But still, this whole time, it was Demille? "And for what? You were trying to scare me to prove a point?"

“I was looking for *this*,” Demille said, pointed at the grimoire again. The look she gave me was triumphant. “I knew what you were since the day of your horrendous party. That you weren’t like the rest of us.”

“Understatement of the year,” Sergio muttered under his breath.

“My suspicions were only confirmed after Aaron went missing,” Demille went on, stepping out from behind her desk to face us directly. She crossed her arms, tilted her head at me. “And how funny I thought it was, when his sister started asking too many questions, and then disappeared after a night out searching with you. She thought he drowned in a lake, and then you claimed the same thing happened to her only a few days later. In the same lake where other children have gone missing in the past. Coincidence? I think not.”

“You think *I* did this?” I jumped to my feet, suddenly furious. I had always known the implications of my actions, what it must look like to someone else, but I didn’t think anyone would take it as seriously as *Demille*. Why would she even go through with all of this? She wasn’t the police. “

“Sit down, Morgan,” Demille said, gazing at me coolly. “Sit down and tell me what you plan to do with those kids.”

“I’m not *planning* anything! It’s not me!” I protested, throwing out my arms.

“I said,” Demille tensed when I remained standing. Her eyes darkened as we entered what seemed to be a staring contest. “Sit. Down. I’m giving you one last chance to explain yourself, before I lose my patience.”

“Explain what? I didn’t do it!”

“Boys,” Demille sighed, raising a hand. At once, the policemen behind her moved, stepping forward and

“This is what happens when you play dumb, Morgan.”

“W-what’re you gonna do?”

“What do you think?” Demille threw back at me, getting up from the desk. Although she was smaller than me, the woman held an imposing presence, something that I had never seen before. I didn’t know if it was because of her back-up, or the fact that she definitely knew more than she was saying. Or maybe both. “This isn’t a game. I came here to put a stop to this madness. I found those children, their bodies, in the dam. I bet you thought you were clever, hiding them in that room. But I figured out how to open the door; if only I knew what spell you used to keep them asleep, I might have been able to save them.”

“It was you,” I breathed, my eyes widening. The black form creeping around in the boiler room, checking the bodies. So they weren’t keeping them there after all. “You were just trying to help.”

“Help?! I was trying to stop *you*!” Demille snapped, her fists clenching, and her calm facade finally broke as she grimaced. “I can’t believe how long you kept ahead of me? I thought I’ve seen it all; I’ve dealt with greater threats than you, those far older, with more experience, but none of them has ever given me as much trouble as one little rich brat with an old book!”

I stared at her, everything finally starting to click. “...you’re not with the police.”

“You think?” Juni choked behind me. She kicked against her captor, but he held her up in the air, and her legs dangled uselessly over the ground. “You are going to be in -- *so* much trouble w-when my parents find out about this, Demille!”

“I’m afraid they won’t,” Demille shrugged, looking surprisingly unaffected by the threat. “You two are guilty of association, I’m afraid. Aiding and abetting a known witch. And I’d rather not make this an international incident. We have such a lovely reputation with the Brazilians.”

I didn’t know if she was being sarcastic or not, but that wasn’t important. My hands tingled, pinpricks of heat traveling up my arms. “You’re a hunter.”

The chapter on witch hunters had seemed silly at the time, when reading it; I thought my father was just being paranoid, that there couldn’t possibly still be crazy witch hunters in this day and age. That people would have more sense than to hunt down what wasn’t real.

Except Magic *was* real. Witches and wizards were real. So, by that logic, were the people who wanted to get rid of us.

“We prefer the term Templar,” Demille said, looking down as she picked up the Grimoire, opened it to a random page. “Aurelius, whoever he is, was careful not to mention us, which is why I imagine you have such a look on your face. Well, I suppose your youth has given me one advantage. You truly have no idea who you’re dealing with, do you?”

I almost didn’t hear most of what she said. The only thing I could think of was that she was a witch-hunter -- Templar, whatever -- and was here to kill me.

She was going to kill me.

My first instinct was to panic. I wanted to run. But Juni and Sergio were still here. Mel and Winnie were still somewhere in the school, presumably uncaught. I couldn't just leave them behind; they clearly weren't going to get much better treatment for helping me, especially after knowing the truth.

No, I had to do something. I had to get us out of here.

"How about this," Demille's voice broke me out of my thoughts. She set the Grimoire back down, folded her hands in front of her with a sweet smile on her face. The same smile she used to congratulate students on their scores, the one she used when handing out trophies, the kind you'd never suspect of being capable of hurting kids. "You turn yourself in. You, Morgan Molloy, do not put up a fight when we arrest you. You will tell us everything you've done, everything you're planning, and what you know about Lutece. And I will let your friends go."

"You will?" I said, frowning. I didn't know what Lutece was, or why Demille wanted to know. I didn't particularly care at the moment. My mind was racing, searching for some other outcome. I didn't want to do this. It felt too easy. And I knew it wouldn't mean well for me in the long run, either.

Juni had gotten very still, and when I looked at her, she returned it with a stricken one of her own. She was scared. A glance at Sergio said the same, although he seemed to be giving his guard more trouble. I wanted to see Houdini, to talk to him, to tell him something, I don't know, try to help while I still could.

But he hadn't returned. Not since Demille took the mirror.

Back to her, I said, "Just like that? You won't come back for them? You'll leave them alone?"

“After today,” Demille nodded. “They’ll never see me again.”

Sergio made a sound behind me, faint and strangled. I couldn’t tell if he thought it was a good deal, or a bad idea.

It didn’t matter, really. I had already made my choice.

My eyes were on the mirror, still on the desk beside Demille. I said, “And how can I be sure that you’ll keep your promise?”

“Because I don’t have time to waste on irrelevant people,” Demille snorted, as if it were a dumb question. “I have better things to do than chase a bunch of teenagers who once helped their magical friend who thinks she can see ghosts. There are, surprisingly, more important people out there than you, Morgan.”

“Aw,” I pouted. “And just when I thought you put in all this work for me.”

Demille scowled at me, a little bewildered. “What are you —”

She didn’t get a chance to finish before I set the room on fire.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Scene One: Morgan and her friends quickly make their escape with the the grimoire and mirror. Mel and Winnie, who are just catching up, are startled to learn that Morgan deliberately set fire to the school, and have already called the cops/fire department. However, it's too dangerous for any of them to stay, and they run outside.

Demille escape and use of a gun is what deters Morgan from following the rest of her friends in the car. She doesn't want to put them in the line of danger, and they still have to save their friends; she gives the grimoire to Juni while Morgan keeps the mirror; for the first time, Houdini appears outside of the school and slows down the Templars long enough for Morgan to head into the woods. Because of her limp (slightly better thanks to a healing spell Morgan tried earlier in the day), she needs the head start, and can't quite run anyways in the thick, dark woods.

It was probably not my best idea.

It was, however, the only one I had, and subjectively better than anything Demille had to offer.

I didn't know if Magic was, in the wider world, some terrible crime. I did know that it was probably the only thing I had against Demille, and I wasn't about to pass up a chance like that. My hands had been getting hotter and hotter the longer she and I spoke, and I was having a hell of a time hiding the smoke while also trying to keep my pants from catching on fire.

And no, the irony was not lost on me.

I wasn't sure how much Demille knew about my powers, what she could do to protect herself, but from what I could tell everything in this room looked pretty not-fire-proof -- a theory confirmed when I threw out my hands and globs of fire came spilling out onto the carpet.

Whoosh.

The carpet went up instantly. Demille uttered a cry, falling back against the desk as flames licked her feet.

Behind me, Juni shouted, "Oh, my god!"

I realized I hadn't told her this part, either.

The Templar guards cried out, apparently not expecting a witch to use her magic powers when cornered in a really bad spot. It actually made me smile, and I had to wonder what exactly they had planned to do if this didn't go the way they expected.

A split-second later, the fire alarm shrilled, and water came spewing out of the sprinklers, dousing the room instantly. But to my relief, the fire wasn't smothered, continuing to spread across the desk and to the shelves against the walls.

Demille was already recovering, grasping the desk, reaching for the Grimoire, but I grabbed it first.

"You know what," I had to shout to be heard over the shrill fire alarm. The rising smoke burned in my eyes. "I changed my mind! I *do* want the stupid mirror!"

Then I took that, too, and with a swipe of my hand, set the rest of her desk on fire.

Demille cried out, throwing her hands up to cover her face, and for a second I wondered if I burned her. My gut twisted in regret before remembering I didn't like her anymore, and I slammed my shoulder into her, knocking Demille down.

“Come on, Morgan!” Juni’s voice made me turn around. She and Sergio stood beyond the now open doorway, their captors now on the ground with growing bruises on their heads. That’s when I noticed the broken lamp in Juni’s fists, the bloody cut on Sergio’s face.

He yelled, “We have to get out of here, now!”

I didn’t need more convincing. Not even glancing behind me, I jumped over the two guards, who were already getting back to their feet. Juni and Sergio didn’t wait for me as they started running.

“Morgan —!” I heard Demille shout, but I just slammed the door behind me. I had the Grimoire. I had the mirror. I had Houdini, Juni, Sergio. Now we had to go.

The three of us tumbled down the stairs, smoke trailing at our feet. My ankle protested to each step I took, but I couldn’t slow down simply because it hurt. The newest problem in my life was distracting enough to keep me running regardless.

My heart slammed into my chest, fear and excitement coursing through my veins. Were my hands still on fire? I couldn’t tell, I just had to keep going.

Juni tripped and cursed, while Sergio grabbed her arm and pulled her along. “I can’t believe it!”

I wasn’t sure which part of the last ten minutes was unbelievable to her. For me, it was most of it. “Yeah, the Templar bit through me for a loop, too!”

“No, I mean what you did!” Juni came to a stop at the bottom of the stairs, throwing me a look akin to horror. Or maybe awe. “Morgan, you just set the school on fire!”

“Oh, right,” I said, pausing to catch my breath. Water continued to pour down on us, and I looked down to see ash washing off my hands. I tucked the book against my chest, trying to shield it. “Yeah, that, too, I guess.”

“Look, I don’t want to be a downer,” Sergio huffed, wiping at his bleeding lip. “But I really think we should keep going. I think she’s still pretty pissed.”

Above us echoed the sound of a door being slammed open. We all shared one look of panic before we took off sprinting.

I had no idea what to do after this, either. I mean, for one, this isn’t something you could go to the police about. What the hell was I supposed to say, the assistant dean was Templar hell-bent on hunting witches like me, with the intent to kill -- while I not only broke into the school, but stole a priceless artifact *and*, as Juni mentioned, set the building on fire. I was clearly more in the wrong here, right?

My plan to turn things into chaos may have worked a little too well, perhaps. I hadn’t given myself any time to think of any way to fix this. I still had my promise to keep to Houdini. But how could I help him now that Demille was after me? She seemed to make it pretty clear she wasn’t going to stop until I was arrested or worse.

None of this was supposed to happen. Had I just made the situation worse by refusing Demille’s offer? Had I just put Juni and Sergio and everyone else on the line because I did the worst possible thing?

Well, it was too late now.

Luckily, we remained ahead of the chase, and we reached the main hall unhindered. The front doors were already open, Mel and Winnie waiting for us.

“Is there a fire?” Winnie said, her curly hair limp from the sprinkler system. She had her hands over her ears, wincing at each peel of the fire alarm. “We got your texts but we didn’t think —”

“Guys, what the hell is going --” Mel demanded as we approached, but stumbled back when we just blew past her. “Hey, wait!”

“No time!” Was all I could say as I skidded on the slick stairs, water from the sprinkler system spilling outside. “We have to get out of here!”

“Wait, please!” Winnie’s call was what had me slowing down in the driveway, nearly out of breath. My ankle was screaming at me anyways, and I slowly turned to face the other four as they caught up with me. “Morgan, what’s going on? Is Demille really here? Why do you smell like smoke?”

“I set Demille’s office on fire, okay?” The words fell out of my mouth in a rush. I really didn’t want to recap everything for Mel and Winnie, but I guess they deserved something of an explanation. “She’s not who we thought she was, okay? She knows what I am, and she’s trying to —”

Bang!

Everyone flinched and ducked, and suddenly my right arm was burning. I cried out, reeling back and dropping the Grimoire to grasp at the hole in my sleeve, the blood pouring out. The pain in my ankle was now blinded by this, and I just barely had the sense of mind to look up at the Academy.

In the doorway stood Demille, pistol in hand. Her other hand was against her face, covering a redness I couldn’t quite see from here. “Give it up, Morgan!”

Winnie let off a string of curses as everyone turned around to face Demille and the two men that appeared behind her. Above them, the window of her office was open, smoke billowing out as yellow warmth flickered inside. The window next door, the hallway, was already starting to glow, too. The fire, spreading.

I wondered, off hand, what would happen to Houdini if the Academy burned down.

“Morgan.”

Speak of the devil.

Houdini stood in front of me, appearing as if I summoned him myself. But his image flickered, like it was a bad connection, and his face was pale, almost transparent, by far the worst I had ever seen him. Why? Because I had the mirror? Because I had taken it outside the school walls?

“Morgan.” He repeated. “Run.”

Then he was gone.

Several things happened at once.

First, an explosion. Glass flying everywhere, shimmering like deadly raindrops, as every window in the building shattered at the same time. At the same time, the front doors slammed, right in the faces of Demille and her cronies. I actually got to see her cry out, caught completely off guard, as she was knocked back by the heavy doors. Then the stone lintel came crashing down on the front steps, blocking the door even as it began to open again.

I watched for a few seconds, completely aghast, before I realized that this was Houdini giving me a chance.

And I knew exactly what to do.

“Take this!” I picked up the Grimoire and threw it at Sergio, who caught it in surprise. “Take the car, leave before she gets out again!”

Sergio didn’t even argue as he stumbled back, book under one arm while he pulled the keys from his pocket, darting over to the car and hopping right in. Mel and Winnie followed; I expected at least Mel to ask more questions, but it seemed that Demille’s gun had frightened her to the point beyond investigation.

Only Juni remained behind, as the engine started. She grabbed my arm even as I turned to go, hoping they’d be out of here before I was. “Wait, what about you? You have to come with us!”

“Yeah, so she’ll keep chasing you?” I threw back, which earned me scandalized look. I was panicking, I knew, and I had to shake my head, level my voice. “I’m sorry, Juni. She’s got a gun, and she’s not afraid to use it. I don’t want her to hurt you, any of you, because of me. All of this is my fault, anyways.”

“But we can drive faster than her,” Juni pointed out, not letting me go. It was, of course, my bad arm that she had a hold of. “We can go to the police! We can —?”

“What? Get help?” I said, almost scathingly, before realizing she sort of had a point. There was a fire that needed attending to. “You do that. But I can’t be there. I have to do something else, first.”

“Do something aside from running for your life?” Juni asked, while a bang echoed across the yard. We both looked at the school, the rattling doors. Inch by inch, they were shoved forward, opening. It wouldn’t be long before Demille could eventually

get out. Juni looked back at me, her eyes wide. “Morgan, you’re crazy. You can’t outrun her!”

“I don’t have to.” I said, glancing again at the door, while Sergio honked behind us. I held up the mirror to Juni. “I have this. I’ll be okay, trust me.”

She just gave me a long look, her lips pressed thin. “Why do you have to be such a good liar?”

I could only shrug helplessly. “It’s a gift. Among others.”

Sergio was really laying on the horn now, one long, incessant beep. Juni just threw back her head, let me go and started towards the car. “Ugh, fine! I’m coming already!”

As she got into the back seat, Sergio started pushing the car forward, not even waiting for her to buckle her seatbelt. They pulled away, everyone staring at me as I just stood there in the road, with only a mirror to protect me.

Passing under the gate, Juni stuck her head out the open window, pointing at me and yelling, “If you die, I’ll never forgive you!”

I just grinned at her.

Then I turned around and started to run.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Scene One: Morgan tries to go through the woods as fast as she can, but the thick underbrush, the darkness, and her limp severely impede her. At best, she's going at a brisk walk, if she can go in a straight line at all. Demille & Co. Are hot on her tale, and gunshots ring out. One grazes Morgan's arm and another hits a tree right next to her face; Morgan goes down, then stays down, waiting for Demille to lose track of her before getting up again and sneaking as quietly as she can through the woods. It takes quite a while, and Morgan experiences what is maybe thirty minutes to an hour of tense, fearful silence as she navigates her way to Lost Boy Lake.

She's caught again by one of Demille's goons, but burns him with her fire and escapes. The chase ignited once more, Morgan makes a break for a nearby clearing and finds herself at the foot of the Lake, across from the dam. Now on clear land, she really starts to run now, or at least tries, and manages to make it about thirty meters before Demille comes out with another gunshot. It's enough to deter Morgan from going any further.

"Go."

Tree branches whipped against my face.

Juni was right, of course. I couldn't outrun Demille. But I could sure as hell try.

I couldn't see anything in front of me. Bushes and trees and rocks just appeared out of the darkness only moments before I ran into them. I startled a sleeping bird, which promptly flew past my ear, screeching in surprise.

I definitely wasn't making it difficult for Demille to follow me.

Right now, I just needed to reach the Lake first.

I didn't know the route directly, as there was no route, but any map of Addison Hollows could tell you that Lost Boy Lake was about a mile and a half southeast of Graybridge Academy, separated only by a dense forest and a few houses -- none of which I had ran into yet.

I could make it. I knew I could. I've won the mile dash two years in a row at Track, and I didn't have a gun-toting angry woman chasing after me then. Adrenalin was a hell of a drug.

It made me forget my ankle. It made me forget the pain in my arm -- probably only a graze, from the scant time I had to look at it. Demille had been at a fair distance when she made that shot. I'd had to imagine how good she was if I let her get any closer.

I could hear her, too, somewhere behind me. Branches breaking, cursing, shouting. I didn't know if it was at me or not, but I wasn't slowing down to find out.

Moonlight filtered down from the trees. After what felt like an hour running through these woods, I realized I *could* actually see, a little bit. The silver outline of trees, the pine-covered ground reflecting soft light. I almost smiled in relief, if I wasn't too busy just trying to breathe.

It was just enough to keep me going.

My right arm was warm. At first, I thought maybe it was my fear that might ignite another fire, but a glance down at my hands revealed no glow of fire. Instead, I saw the sheen of blood, and upon that realization, a sharp pain went up my arm. I gasped, nearly tripping and once more aggravating my ankle.

I stumbled, caught a tree trunk, pushed off, kept going. *Don't stop don't stop don't stop* -- don't look back, don't get distracted, just run.

The trees were silent as I raced by, something that sent chills through me even as I sweated. There were no crickets chirping, no animal calls. Not even the wind to rustle the branches. Just quiet, as though they were an audience to a play, watching me as I acted out what may be my last moment of life.

It didn't help that I kept seeing silhouettes among the tree trunks, what looked like people appearing and disappearing as I passed. Like the trees, they didn't make a sound, but I had the creeping feeling of them turning to watch me go. What were they? Ghosts? Ghosts that lived in the woods?

"Run."

No, not ghosts. *Ghost*. Just one. Houdini.

He flashed by, almost a mirage, as I managed to skid over a rock, passing encouragement as I went. Well, it sounded more like a warning. I couldn't see his face, didn't stop long enough to check. I just knew he was following me.

I still had the sapphire mirror. I wasn't sure how or why, but this was Houdini's anchor. Offhandedly, I was a little miffed that Demille figured it out before I did, and she didn't even believe it.

I could've started another fire. I could've made it harder for Demille to follow me — the forest was filled with dead leaves, dry trees, forest of kindling. It would've gone up instantly.

But it felt wrong to hurt the trees. To kill wildlife. And lighting myself up would just paint a bright red target on my head. Demille didn't need to catch up if she could just shoot me.

My lungs were molten lava, heavy and burning. I felt like I was slowing down with each breath I took, grating against my throat, pulling down on my feet. My legs were numb while my ankle burned like I was stepping in acid. My grip was so tight around the mirror's handle it felt as though it might just snap.

Blood pounded in my ears, wracking against my head, disorienting. Stars flashed in front of my eyes, like the darkness was too thick around me, my brain couldn't comprehend it.

Was I even heading in the right direction anymore? I knew which way I had turned back at the Academy, that my initial track had been more or less correct. But in the darkness, I couldn't be sure anymore. For all I knew, I was going north.

Another gunshot rang through the air, sending up a flock of birds to my right. I gasped, veered in the other direction, and nearly tumbled down a hill I didn't see coming.

I managed to slow down enough just to keep from falling on my face, smashing the back of my hand against the side of a tree.

Chapter Thirty

Scene One: Morgan and Demille face-off, with her two goons as back-up, one already injured. They circle and corner Morgan while Demille rants, demanding the grimoire before she's furious to discover Morgan doesn't have it, only the mirror. But this doesn't bother Demille too much, gloating to Morgan that after she kills her, she'll go after Morgan's friends next, and Morgan only made it worse by giving the grimoire to them. Morgan tries to fight back, but she is severely outmatched.

Morgan, with nowhere else to go, steps into the lake. The effect is almost immediate. The waves get rough and a storm starts to brew over their heads, wind picking up and quickly turning into what feels like a mini-tsunami. The goons are quickly taken care of by nature, and Morgan's own magical handiwork, leaving only her and Demille, who continues to point her gun at her despite the decreasing visibility. Thunder crackles and strikes, the water continuing to rise behind Morgan.

Demille's rage briefly turns to awe at the storm around them, and it quickly shifts to fear as it becomes clear that the weather is getting out of control. She demands Morgan to put an end to it before it gets worse, but Morgan has no control over this. They fight over this, with Morgan helpless to convince Demille to stand down, that there was nothing she could do. Demille eventually panics and fires her gun — Morgan flinches in response, raising the mirror as if to shield herself. The bullet goes through the mirror, but before it hits Morgan, lightning strikes and she's swallowed by the waves.

Chapter Thirty-One

Scene One: Morgan finds herself in an underworld of sorts, with Houdini and Lost Boy. She doesn't yet realize they're the same person, but she does know now that they were both connected to the mirror somehow. They're trip through the underworld reveals the truth behind Houdini's background, as they walk through his memories leading up to his death; he can pass on once he knows himself again. Morgan can only leave once she makes a decision, the underworld acting as a test of her compassion, a major theme throughout the narrative.

Morgan, unaware of this metaphorical "test", chooses to help Houdini when in the void the souls of the Lost Boy's victims attacks him, blaming him for their death. She defends Houdini, not quite understanding their rage; the victims' ghosts tell her that she can leave earlier if she helps them finish off Houdini, as due Justice, but she refuses. In turn, they warn her she's going down a more dangerous path, deeper into the underworld, where it is more difficult to escape. On top of it all, the longer they are down there, the more attention they will attract, and if Morgan doesn't solve the question of Houdini's identity and bring justice for the Lost Boy soon, then they both will be devoured by the darkness.

Morgan shows strength by sticking by Houdini's side, and as they traverse his memories, they are soon swallowed up by the encroaching darkness. Near the end, the Lost Boy is nearly taken by it, before Morgan saves him, too, finally understand who he is and rejoining the two halves and bringing peace to all the souls involved.

My feet dragged against the bottom of the lake, but there was no water down here. My eyes flew open at the realization, just as gravity caught up and I dropped to my knees.

Heart pounding, I sucked in a lungful of air, my fingers digging into the dirt. I could still feel the water rushing down my throat, punching the oxygen out of my lungs.

Shoulders heaving, I managed to get back to my feet. I looked around, expecting to find myself underwater — only to find myself surrounded by utter darkness. There was a soft light on me, allowing me to see myself, but I couldn't find the source of it.

What was this? Where was I? I rubbed my hands over my arms, hugging myself. I wasn't cold, but this didn't feel right. Looking up, I hoped to see stars, but saw none. Was I still alive? Was I even on Earth anymore?

“Morgan?” Houdini's voice made me turn around. He was standing behind me, shoulders hunched. He was covered in grime, a streak of dirt across his face, his hair awry. “What — where are we?”

“I...I don't know.” I shifted closer to him, tilting my head. Our voices echoed in this strange place, reverberating off walls we couldn't see. As much as this situation terrified me, I was now more concerned about Houdini. Was this really him? Where had the Lost Boy gone? “The last thing I remember w-was the lightning, the storm, and being pulled under, and then —”

I stopped myself, shaking my head. I wanted to say what I really thought — that we were dead — but I didn't want to scare Houdini. Even though he probably had more experience with this than me.

Before I could think of anything else to say, Houdini spoke instead. “I remember, too.”

I didn't completely acknowledge his words at first. I thought maybe I was dreaming, if this wasn't already feeling like a nightmare already. I blinked, did a double-take as I reached out for him. "You — what?"

"I remember," Houdini whispered, looking down at his hands. That's when I noticed they were covered in blood. "All of it."

Recoiling, I stepped back. The blood looked fresh, dripping from his fingers. It didn't seem to be his own. Whatever Houdini remembered, I couldn't imagine it being anything good. Nothing that I didn't already want to get involved with. Houdini saw my reaction, and threw down his hands, pressing them to his sides and turning away from me, bowing his head in embarrassment or shame.

I bit my lip. Every part of me wanted to run, but I had promised him that I'd help. And I was stuck here anyways, it seemed. Swallowing, I steeled my nerves, taking a second to find my words. "It's...it's going to be okay."

The lie was so bad, I couldn't even convince myself.

"I'm not so sure about that." He muttered, and I was about to reply when something flickered out of the corner of my eye, catching my attention. Houdini, too, paused to look. "W-what's that?"

A wall had faded in from the darkness to my right, from its stone steps that led to cobblestone streets that appeared under my feet. I followed the progress as a street formed around me, stone buildings and dark windows, hollowed out doorways.

"Are you doing this?" Houdini asked, and I could only shake my head dumbly. We weren't at the bottom of the lake anymore, or some nameless void, but rather in the middle of a city street.

I expected the walls, what looked like apartment buildings, to climb up and up, but their edges were ragged, stopping short of completion — actually, destroyed. No roofs, broken windows, collapsing frames. A hazy skyline appeared in the distance, smoggy and yellow; what I thought was skyscrapers were actually plumes of black smoke, scattered across the city.

There was no sun in the sky, but at least there was *a* sky now. Thick gray clouds that threatened rain. None of the architecture was familiar, from what I could make out of what wasn't already in ruin.

I managed to state the obvious: “I don't think we're in Addison Hollows anymore.”

“No. No, I know where we are.” Houdini spun in a full circle, taking in the sight. It was like we had just been transported to another place entirely. It looked real. It *felt* real. The wet and well-worn cobblestone was smooth and slippery beneath my bare feet. “This is my home.”

I had to restrain myself from making a face. “Uh, not much of one, I think. Are you sure?”

“Yes! Yes, look!” Houdini ran down the street, coming to a stop at the corner, pointing to the street sign. Siren horns were attached to the pole, one having fallen off. The metal was bent, so the sign hung at a 45° angle, and I had to bend my head a little to read it. “Cobbs Street, East End. I-I grew up here.”

My gaze drifted upwards, over the intersection. There were cars in the street, empty metal husks burnt out and flipped over. Past the buildings, back to the skyline,

where a lone tower appeared out of the thick fog. It had a clock face on its side, and I could hear a faint gonging of bells. My jaw dropped. “You’re from *London*?”

“Y-yes,” Houdini sniffed, looking around as he took in the destroyed city. “It’s all so real...How is this happening? Are you doing this? Is this your Magic?”

“Me? No,” I shook my head. I had no idea what was going on, but I was pretty sure it wasn’t me this time. “This isn’t familiar to me. You know where we are, right? Maybe...maybe this is like a memory. Wherever we are, it’s constructing a world from your mind, I guess.”

“My memory? *I’m* doing this?” Houdini shook his head, his expression a combination of fear and awe. “How? *Why* am I seeing this?”

“I don’t know,” I had a feeling I would be saying that a lot. Not surprisingly, it just seem to scare Houdini further, so I thought of a distraction. “Why don’t you, er, tell me about this place? What do you remember?”

“Uh, okay, I-I suppose.” Houdini paused to look around as he considered the area. I wondered if it was possible, considering the state of the neighborhood. Then his eyes widened as he stepped back, pointed at a storefront across the street. It was burnt out, but I could just catch the scent of cake in the air. “That was the bakery we always went to. We could only have one loaf for rations, but if you had some whiskey, you could trade for another. Under the table, of course.”

As he spoke, his accent changed. I almost didn’t notice it at first, but it started with him dropping his ‘h’s and ‘r’s, while the ‘th’ turned into a ‘v’ sound. By the time he was done speaking, I recognized the Cockney accent.

It was so bizarre hearing him speak that way, almost comedic, that I grinned despite myself. He frowned at me. “What? What is it?”

“Your voice,” I said, pointing at him, and Houdini raised a hand to his mouth, self-conscious. “It changed. I always thought you were American but — why did you sound like one before?”

Houdini tilted his head, thinking about it for a moment. “I’m not sure. I can’t...not everything is coming back yet. I had forgot all of this, while in the Academy. Forgot my own name. Maybe I forgot that, too. I’ve been surrounded by you guys for seventies years, after all. Maybe I thought that’s where I was from, and it made sense, in a way. Is that bad?”

He asked this last question with a sharp note of worry, and I just held up my hands, said, “Hey, sounds good to me, don’t worry about it. I’m sure it’ll make sense later. Hopefully. Just, er, keep going. What else did you do here?”

“Well, I remember playing in the street, when I was younger.” He said, speaking slowly as he returned to the task at hand. I wasn’t sure if this would help, but it seemed better than just standing here, doing nothing. “The other kids, we played football with two baskets tied together. One time, we managed to get a real ball, but it turned out it was stolen, and when the parents found out, they said we either had to pay for it or give it back. None of us had money, so...we went back to playing with the baskets.”

Before us, I saw the forms of children, hazy with age and nostalgia, darting across the street, chasing a ball and leaving ghostly trails behind them. Maybe ten years old, dressed in skirts and pants with suspenders. Faint laughter came in on a breeze, distant

but sweet, and I smiled as we strolled behind the children, who faded into faintly glowing wisps as they grew farther away.

“Down that way was the fish market,” Without hesitating, he turned and gestured back down the way we came, his voice becoming stronger as he got more into it. “And th-the factory where — where my mum worked. She walked there, every day, and always brought back herring for dinner. I really hated seafood, but my father loved it. Of course, we didn’t have much herring after the war started.”

A woman appeared, walking past at a brisk pace, in her arms a bag of red meat wrapped in paper. Houdini stared as she went by, and I saw they had the same eyes, the same mouth. He reached out a hand to her, but it went right through, and she disappeared again.

The woman was replaced by the scent of food cooking. He wrinkled his nose as the smell of seafood wafted past, which made me laugh. “No, I’m serious, it was disgusting! I hate fish now because of that.” But he just shook his head, laughing at himself. “I think Mum got it just to spite me.”

There was a dizzy, wistful smile on Houdini’s face as he went across the street, saying, “And here was the post office! My father sent us a letter every day, and when mother was at work I always checked in to see if one came in. He was a-a-a pilot! He flew all over Europe. He didn’t say much of what he did, always asking me questions. If Mum was okay, how my grades were, if the neighbors were giving us any trouble. I missed him, but it was fun, in a way. I was a stupid kid. I didn’t think I’d have to worry about him.”

I had a dozen questions spinning in my head, and this really wasn't answering any of them. "If you lived here, then how did you end up in America? In Addison Hollows?"

"Oh. Right." Houdini came to a sudden stop, his shoulders dropping. He seemed to have forgotten that he was dripping blood everywhere, arms hanging limply at his sides. "One day, I didn't get a letter. That day turned to two, three. I thought maybe he was just busy. Maybe he was on a mission. Then the telegram came."

There was a tremor in his voice at that. I came up to his side, but he wouldn't let me see his face. "I'm sorry."

"He was only missing in action, but that was just a way to say that they couldn't find his body. Mum cried. I remember that, too," Houdini kept his face bowed away. "Not in front of me. But I could hear her at night, when I was supposed to be asleep. And just when I thought nothing could get worse...the bombs fell.

"We were prepared for it, at least. Britain expected the Germans to attack from the air, since the last war," he continued, gesturing to the broken sign. "They installed sirens everywhere, so no one could miss the drills. Lessons in school were changed so the teachers could tell kids how to act right during the Blitz. Some were evacuated. Some had nice places to go in the country, or to camps where they learned to hike or whatever. I had to stay with Mum. We didn't have other family in Britain, couldn't afford to go anywhere else.

"I think the biggest thing that scared me was that they came at night," he admitted, and just like that, the world changed again.

I jumped when a loud siren pierced the air, joined by hundreds more in a terrifying chorus. The sky blacked out like a lightbulb switched off, and suddenly there

were people all around us, running, crying, screaming -- lights flashed and the streets went dark as people snuffed out lights, or turned them on as they darted outside, pulling children, friends, old folk behind them.

I almost lost Houdini in the chaos, but he was still standing right next to me. The people around us blurred and faded in and out, going through me, like ghosts. No one noticed us just standing there — I felt strange, out of place, and had to remind myself that this wasn't real. Probably.

"Perry!" A voice shouted, male. A middle-aged man in plaid pajamas and a ragged robe stood out from the rest as he scrambled around, searching desperately through the dark street for his son. His bowler hat was perched awkwardly off his head, before it was blown off by the wind. *"Perry, dammit, where are you?"*

I nearly clung to him, and he continued to speak as though nothing happened, his voice clear over the sirens. "I was in bed when it happened. Mum practically threw me out the door. We didn't have time to grab our things. I could already hear the bombs dropping, the whistling, the explosions. People screaming. Fire everywhere. We hid in a bomb shelter that we shared with the Jamison's. I knew their son, Perry. He was younger than me, but we played sometimes.

From the crowd, a dark-haired boy broke away, running straight into the man's arms. *"Dad! Dad, I'm here!"*

"Oh, Perry, for the love of God, I thought I lost you." The man hugged his son, before grabbing his arm and yanking them both of them back into the fray of the panicking crowd. *"Come, we have to go! Now!"*

“I didn’t see him after that night.” Houdini started walking back the way we came, weaving through the heavy crowd, then stopped in front of two houses. One still stood, nearly perfect aside from some singing and broken windows. The other was in ruins. “Perry and Mrs. Jamison left the next day on the first train out of London. Their house was fine, but they didn’t want to take the risk. Ours was destroyed. Mum didn’t feel safe here anymore; or anywhere in the country. And with Dad gone, there was nothing else keeping us there.

“So we moved to America.” Houdini shrugged. I couldn’t discern his expression; it seemed he was retelling his story from a stranger’s perspective, and I wasn’t sure if it was a good thing or a bad thing. “You were still neutral in the war. Mum thought we’d be all right there, that Germany couldn’t invade all the way across the ocean, that America wouldn’t fight. We were terrified that Germany would invade, so it seemed like a good idea. I didn’t want to leave, personally. I had friends here, people I knew all my life. Places I loved. But I was too scared, and most of those things were already gone, thanks to the Blitz. There was nothing left for us here.”

Once more, the world changed, this time to a more familiar setting. Panicked citizens changed to much more languid teenagers moving between classes. I was startled when I recognized the hallway, the lockers, the outdated uniforms of the boys and girls around me. The sky came down to form a ceiling, and a warm orange glow filled the space. I relaxed a little, glad to have the siren out of my ears, and turned to see that Houdini seemed relieved as well. There was a faint smile on his face; not as prominent as before, when he first recognized his home, but something sadder.

“We ended up in Addison Hollows. We didn’t have a lot of money — not ever, really, but Mum found work in another factory, and I got a scholarship to Graybridge Academy. Mum was so proud that I was going to this school, the best in state. We never really had anything *posh* in our lives before.”

“Was it hard? Coming here?” I said, looking around, taking in the differences of the hallway. We were on the first floor, and from the way everyone was dressed, with their striped scarves and navy wool coats, it was late fall, maybe early winter. The lockers were painted a different color, and the lights above us were yellow-ish incandescent light bulbs instead of the brighter, eco-friendly ones the school switched to in my freshman year. The speakers of the intercom system were also older, and the classrooms were notably lacking any white-boards or TV’s on carts.

“We came by boat,” Houdini frowned, tilting his head. “It took a while, and Mum was petrified of U-Boats. But we got through fine. No, I don’t think the hardest part, for me, came until I started going here. I remember not fitting in. I mean, I stuck out, obviously, for a number of reasons — things you’ve already pointed out, like my uniform and my accent. The students here were all American; they thought I sounded funny.”

Before us, I watched as a group of boys came into view. A big fella was at the lead, his arm raised, dragging a smaller boy along with him, then pushed him against the lockers. It took me a second to realize it was Houdini — not the one next to me, who just watched silently, but a past version of him, one with life in his eyes and spirit in his bones.

I could see it in the way the other Houdini struggled against the grip that fisted his shirt, pinning him. “*Put me down, Blake. I did the homework like you asked!*”

“You filled in the wrong answers, fathead!” The bigger boy, Blake, snapped, while the other ones jeered. They seemed to be his moral support, and to keep other-Houdini from escaping. *“You tryin’ to fail me out of Graham’s class?”*

Houdini didn’t answer right away; in fact, I was pretty sure I saw him smirk a little, as if proud he got away with it.

Clearly, Blake saw it, too, because the next second Houdini was on the ground, clutching his stomach and groaning. I jolted, wanting to jump in and help Houdini, before remembering this was just a memory, and there was nothing I could do.

Blake just laughed, straightening as he shook the hand he used to punch with. *“Teach you to mess with me, wise guy. Don’t try that again, or next time I’ll rearrange your face!”*

“Swell guy,” I muttered.

“I didn’t have a lot of friends,” Houdini said in a monotone, stuffing his hands into his pockets as we strolled slowly down the halls, passing the younger Houdini, who was still wincing as he picked himself off the ground. “Wasn’t good at making them, I guess. Not with the accent, at least. So I changed it. Not all at once, in case people caught on and thought I was just being a flake. But a little bit, day by day, I kind of just...made myself sound more American.”

“Did it get that guy,” I stuck a thumb over my shoulder. “Blake or whatever, did it get him off your back?”

“Not really. He didn’t get any smarter, so he still needed someone to do maths for him,” Houdini said, although I saw a wry smile form on his face. “I didn’t do him too many favors. He still had to do the tests himself; Blake failed himself out of that class.

Had to retake it the next year. Even after the summer passed, he came back and still had me go over those worksheets. Either that, or I got to be his punching bag.”

I glanced over my shoulder. The other Houdini had since vanished into the crowd, but I had a feeling Blake was the kind of guy who followed through on his threats. “You must’ve been beat-up quite a bit, then.”

“I had a new bruise every other week or so, nothing bad.” He made it sound like it was so normal. Like it was just another little thing in his life.

“Your mom never did anything?”

“I didn’t tell her,” Houdini’s gaze went to the floor. He kicked at a fallen book, but his foot went right through it. He huffed in frustration as we passed over it. “I didn’t want her to worry. She was already working long hours at the factory, and she was so happy about me coming here, I didn’t want her to change her mind. I *was* learning. I wanted to go here. The Academy was a good school. It was just the other kids that made it bad.”

I bit my lip, thinking back to all the things I said to him, how it sounded so much like Blake. I didn’t use my fists, sure, but the words felt familiar. I didn’t really want to point it out, in case Houdini hadn’t already noticed. “I guess not much changed over the years.”

“My memory being stuck here is still...blurry,” Houdini waved a hand beside his ear, making a face. “You already know. I remember different parts, at random, in the seventies, the eighties, whatever...nothing really came into focus until after I met you. I remembered stuff. Not as a ghost, but...before. The kids I used to know here. Blake, mostly.”

I cringed, folding my hands under my arms. I was right about him noticing. “I guess I’m not that much different from him, huh?”

“Well, aside from that one time you shoved me,” Houdini remarked with a startling lightness. When I looked at him, I was surprised to see he didn’t seem as hostile as I expected, considering we both just agreed I had a more than a little in common with the resident bully. “I thought you’d be just like those other kids, who’d just push me around and tell me what to do. Which you did, at first. But you weren’t like them. You changed.”

“I did?” I made a face. I didn’t feel any different. I didn’t *think* I was any different. I mean, aside from the whole magic thing, but that didn’t have to do with Houdini.

“You listened.” Houdini said, and when I opened my mouth to retort, he quickly added, “It wasn’t just that you could, but that you didn’t have to. I was just another dumb ghost in your life, one you hated. And I didn’t even *want* you to listen to me, anyways.”

“I didn’t *hate* you,” I said, a little offended, though not really surprised he saw it that way. “That last part was kind of a big motivator, though.”

“What, doing the opposite of what people tell you to do?” Houdini raised an eyebrow. “Or acting out of pure spite?”

“Um. Both.”

“Ha. Yeah, I noticed.”

Above us, the bell rang, making me jump. After hearing those air-raid sirens, any loud noise like that had me on edge. The students merged into a blur of motion as they shepherded back to their classrooms, passing through us and giving me an all too clear

idea of what it must've been like for Houdini when he was trapped here as a ghost. Surrounded by all these people, yet alone, unseen, and forgotten.

We kept walking forward. I wasn't sure if we were heading anywhere in particular, but I kept pace with Houdini nonetheless. The school, luckily, hadn't changed all that much, and I realized we were still following the Other Houdini. The crowds parted as students filed off to different classrooms, and unintelligible PA call echoing across the hall. Calling someone to the office, perhaps?

That seemed to be the case, as the Other Houdini, looking a little haggard after his run-in with Blake, made a beeline towards the Dean's office on the second floor.

The silence was getting to me, so I asked, "Did you get in trouble often?"

Houdini had to think it over for a second. "Not for anything bad, I don't think. I didn't exactly go out of my way to break the rules, like *some people* I know. No, it really only happened whenever I got caught in a fight with someone else. I wasn't exactly hard to pick on."

I let the offense slide, deciding to focus on what was happening then have a bit of light teasing ruin my chances of understanding Houdini. It was only a half-hearted attempt, anyways; Houdini's voice remained slow, steady, although his words seemed to drift sometimes. I wondered what this was like for him. For any ghost, really, reliving their memories.

Was this what it was like for ghosts, losing track of reality and finding themselves trapped in what might possibly be the worst moments of their life? Theo had always told me war stories, but it never really occurred to me until now just how visceral an experience it was to go through it again. The Academy was inescapable, every detail

either in sharp contrast or frustratingly blurry no matter how hard I looked. Stuff like this could easily become a nightmare, without any extra scary things involved.

We passed right through the closed Dean's door, after the Other Houdini went in. The Dean himself wasn't there yet, so the Other Houdini just sat himself down for a wait. He was already peering at something on the Dean's desk, something wrapped in green felt cloth. I took a step closer, and recognized the blue stones, the silver metal. The mirror, a little tarnished, in need of cleaning.

The Other Houdini picked up the mirror, admired his reflection for a moment. Well, "admired" might be a strong word for it; *scowl* at himself was a more accurate description.

I wondered why this particular memory was important. So far, nothing special or telling had happened. What could he possibly —

That's when something in the glass flashed. The Other Houdini yelped and dropped the mirror.

All three of us winced in unison when a loud *Crack!* filled the room. At the corners of my vision, those strange shadows writhed, black forms like tentacles, as though disturbed by the noise.

A part of me wasn't entirely surprised that Houdini had managed to break something. Maybe it was a little mean, but Houdini had never come across as particularly graceful, and he *was* easy to startle. It didn't explain the flash in the mirror, but still. I frowned, watching as the Other Houdini picked up the mirror — now with a long crack bisecting the glass, something that definitely hadn't been there seventy-odd years later. "Wow, good job."

Houdini threw me a disgruntled look, and had opened his mouth to retort when we heard footsteps, the knob to the door rattling.

The Other Houdini jumped at the sound, nearly dropping the mirror again, before wrapping it back in the felt cloth. I thought he'd just leave it on the table for the damage to be discovered later. I couldn't believe my eyes when instead, the other Houdini stuffed it in his bag, just seconds before the door opened.

"You *stole* it?" I hissed over the dean, a middle-aged man with round spectacles, who addressed the Other Houdini as he entered the office — he seemed completely oblivious to the fact that the boy just stuffed a near priceless artefact into his dingy bag. I wasn't sure if I should be offended for his reputation, or impressed that he got away with it. "What happened to honesty?"

"I panicked!" Houdini shot back, face red. At least he had the decency to feel embarrassed. "I didn't know what to do. I was sure I was going to get caught. And it wasn't like I could afford to replace it. They might've even had me expelled."

I sized up this Dean of Yore, who had a twinkle in his eye and spoke with a smile, giving the Other Houdini a pat on the shoulder as he went around his desk. This was no Lovejoy, who might blow a gasket if he caught you so much as sticking a piece of gum under the desk. This Dean seemed almost fatherly, and much more understanding of the fact that Other Houdini was a victim rather than the instigator of the fight.

"I dunno," I said, pursing my lips. "It was just an accident. I don't think they'd be that hard on you."

"Well, it doesn't matter now, does it?" Houdini made a face, clearly not appreciating my optimism. Too little, too late, I guess. His gaze only continued to darken

as we watched the Other Houdini was dismissed, and ducked out the door like his feet were on fire. “I didn’t keep it for long, anyways. I had other things to worry about.”

“You mean, aside from committing a crime?” I smirked, but Houdini just turned on his heel, not waiting for me as he strode out the door. “Hey, I was just joking!”

Apparently it wasn’t that funny, because Houdini didn’t slow down until we almost reached the end of the hall. I caught up with him at the stairs, where the Other Houdini had disappeared. He just scowled at the floor, hands clenched at his sides.

I was about to say something, maybe apologize, but he spoke first.

“Why is this happening?” Houdini demanded, wringing his hands. They still dripped blood, still wet; it occurred to me it should’ve dried at least a little bit by now. “I mean, why are we here? Are we...are we dead? Because I really didn’t plan on reliving the worst events of my life when enjoying the afterlife.”

I didn’t have an answer right away, so Houdini just stormed off down the stairs. Watching him go, I had an idea — and I jumped after him, stopping Houdini at the bottom of the stairs, taking his sleeve with my fingers. “Wait, maybe that’s it. Maybe we’re supposed to see what happened.”

“Happened to what?”

“Happened to *you*, dummy,” I said, rolling my eyes. “Your story. Let’s see how much you really remember. Why you’re...” I gestured vaguely to his body, trying and failing not to stare at his hands.

I wasn’t very good; Houdini flexed his fingers, looking down at himself and closing his eyes. “It won’t end well.”

“It usually doesn’t.”

He opened his eyes again, meeting my gaze for the first time since this happened.

“But what if it gets bad? Do you really want to see that?”

“I’m already here,” I threw out my arms, gesturing to warm the Academy hall constructed around us from Houdini’s memory. I stepped towards him, not going to let this pass before he understood. Putting my hands on his shoulders, I said, “I promised you I’d help. Apparently, that clause applies post-mortem — but hey, we’re making progress! I think. It feels like it, anyways.”

“So you won’t run away?” He asked, a nervous smile on his face.

“I didn’t run when your evil half tried to drown the city in a monsoon,” I said. “I think I can handle your auto-biography. So let’s get on with it.”

“Well, okay,” Houdini frowned, but nodded, looking around as he collected his thoughts. “I managed to get through the year just fine. I remember listening to the radio every night, keeping track of the Allies’ progress. Mum didn’t care for it, but I thought it was fascinating, marking their movements down on a map. Of course, it just made me look like a bit of a wackjob to the other kids. But it seemed like a game at the time. I felt safe here.”

He drifted down the now-empty halls; they were covered in posters, most of which were hand-drawn club posters, as well as advertisements for donating extra metal and scraps for the war effort.

As Houdini passed, the images flickered and changed. “Of course, that was before Japan attacked.”

He came to a stop in front of a large recruitment poster for the Airforce. It was one of those old-fashioned painted ones, with rosy-cheeked, handsome pilots saluting

with the Stars and Stripes in the background. “I had only been living here for about a year when America declared war, and it wasn’t until then I realized what I was going to do.”

“I remember,” I said this time. “You were going to enlist.”

“I tried back in London.” Houdini admitted with a sheepish smile. “Mum was furious when she found out; it was also the reason we came here. I can’t join the army for a country I’m not from, in a war they weren’t fighting in. The first time, I wanted to be like my dad. I wanted to fly planes with him. Like I said, I was stupid. I looked too young at the time anyways. This time around, though, I thought I had a chance.”

“So you weren’t just going to lie about your age,” I said, shaking my head. Who had that kind of determination to put themselves in danger like that? “You were going to lie about —”

“Everything, yeah.” Houdini shrugged, like it was no big deal. “I knew two boys who lied to get in. I thought it’d be a cinch. My fake accent was already pretty good, I was a little taller. The other two were already gone before their parents found out. As soon as Roosevelt gave his speech, Mum knew what I was going to do. She wasn’t going to let it happen twice. She told the recruitment office about me before I showed up.”

Glancing over my shoulder, I found myself standing not in the Academy, but the Town Hall atrium, before it was renovated. Instead of glass walls, they were all wood and plaster, with nice wallpaper, and a lower ceiling. There were even more posters here than in the school. In the middle of the room were a series of tables set up, and a line of boys and men in front of each.

The Other Houdini, with his thin frame and too-big clothes, stood out in the line. He seemed even younger than the one standing next to me, even though we had to be

closer to his death right now. The Other Houdini shifted nervously as he got closer to the tables, before it was his turn and stepped up to the recruiter, who raised a skeptical eyebrow.

As the memory played out, Houdini spoke to me, “They humored me for a little bit. I guess they wanted to see how eager I was, how much I could make a fool of myself in five minutes. But then...”

The recruiter gestured to another man on the other side of the room, and a woman came storming through the line, shoving aside men and grabbing the other Houdini from behind. He barely had a chance to speak before she had an iron grip on his collar and dragged him out the front doors. I expected her to shout, to make a scene, but instead Houdini’s mother just spoke in his ear, the words drowned out by the laughter and general chatter of the room.

“She doesn’t seem like the lady to make the same mistake twice,” I said, trying not to smile at his expense. Houdini himself seemed to be amused by the scene, so it felt all right not to hide.

“And I underestimated her.” Houdini said wryly, but his tone went grim in an instant. “She would’ve locked me in the basement for the whole war just to keep me out of it, if given the chance.”

The scene changed again. This time, the backyard of a small house in East Side of Addison Hollows — it was night again, but the air was quiet, and frost covered the ground. Our feet sank into it, but made no noise as we stepped close to the back porch. A single light was on, and through the window I saw a kitchen, and the silhouettes of two people. A muffled argument could be heard through the window.

Peering through the window on the door, we witnessed Houdini in the midst of an argument with his mother. He was red-faced and her hair was on end, pulled loose from her bun.

“...specifically forbade you from ever doing that again!” She shouted, jabbing a finger at him. *“I did not travel across that blasted ocean just to see my boy shipped back!”*

“We’re at war, Mum!” The other Houdini protested. He sounded distinctly American again. *“We can’t keep running away from it! Sooner or later, we have to do something.”*

“Do something?” His mother let out an incredulous laugh, pressing her hand to her forehead. *“Ugh, you sound just like those damned politicians, those warmongers! You’ve been listening to the radio too much, it’s addled your mind!”*

“Mum, it’s the radio, not a mind-control device.”

“And what’s with your voice all of a sudden?” She went on, seeming not to hear that last comment. *“Why do you talk different now? What, did you think if you sounded like a Yank, they’d let you join?”*

Houdini shook his head, trying to object. *“What? No, that’s not —”*

“Are you ashamed?” His mother asked, her voice soft as her arms fell to her sides. She shook her head, almost disbelieving. *“Is this because of me? Are you ashamed of where you’re from? Is that it?”*

“No, Mum, I was just trying to —” Houdini couldn’t finish his sentence, and shifted his gaze to the floor. It took him a moment to admit quietly, *“I wasn’t doing it because of what happened. I just trying to fit in.”*

“*Fit* —” his mother did a double-take, clearly not expecting this answer. “*At school, you mean?*”

Houdini only nodded silently, his face pinching as he turned away from her.

“*Oh,*” her shoulders fell, and she stepped forward, pulling Houdini into a hug, just as he started to cry. “*Oh, my dear, sweet boy. My stupid boy. Why didn’t you say anything before?*”

Houdini just shrugged in her arms, too upset to speak. It seemed she got the message anyways, in that way mothers do, because she sighed, “*You know, I’m never too busy for you.*”

When he mumbled something into her shoulder, she said, “*I’m not -- I’m not angry at you. I just, I can’t bear to lose another one of my boys to this Godforsaken war. I won’t let you be their cannon fodder. You are staying in that school, or so help me. It’ll do you much better than a gun or a plane will.*”

I shifted on my feet. Even though I couldn’t really feel the chill in the air, I felt awkward watching what was clearly a private scene.

“Wow, uh, that was,” I scratched my eyebrow, trying to find the right word without ruining the moment. “That was...sweet.”

The Houdini beside me had been absolutely still the entire time, but when I looked at him, I realized he was shaking, his fists clenched at his side. He was working his jaw, as though he were trying to maintain a straight face, but could barely keep from grimacing.

I frowned. “What’s wrong?”

His eyes were glassy. “Just wait.”

Chapter Thirty-Two

I found myself standing in the parking lot of a factory, alone.

“Houdini?” I asked, looking around. He had disappeared almost immediately after the memory switched. I had no idea where he’d gone, or what might’ve happened to him.

“Hey, where are you?”

I got no reply. The parking lot was entirely empty, and there was no sound from the factory. It was the end of a work day, no one was here. The sun was setting behind the building, casting long shadows across the ground, blending almost perfectly with the shifting darkness out in the distance, rippling like heat waves over hot tar.

Then I heard footsteps, looked around, nearly jumped at the sight of Houdini — the Other Houdini, coming down the road and heading towards the gate in front of me. He was wearing his school uniform, appearing to have walked all the way from the Academy. There was a scarf around his neck.

The same scarf I found. The same clothes Houdini wore.

A chill went down my back. Was this it? Were we close to the end now?

The Other Houdini passed under the gates, wide open after the last shift ended. Across the clearing, his mother was already stepping out of the factory, buttoning up her coat and fixing her hat. When she looked up, she jumped in surprise to see the Other Houdini coming her way.

“*Good Lord, you startled me!*” she pressed a hand to her chest, taking a second to breath as the Other Houdini came to a stop in front of her, his shoulders rising and falling rapidly. She frowned at him. “*What’re you doing out here? Shouldn’t you be at home?*”

“*Well, yes, I-I just,*” Other Houdini stuttered, waving his hands around as he tried to find the words to speak. “*There’s, um, there’s something I have to tell you.*”

“*Couldn’t it wait until I got home?*” his mother asked, making to stride past him, but he grabbed her sleeve.

“*N-no, please, it’s important! I have to tell you, right now!*”

I wondered what had him all riled up; was he finally going to fess up to taking the mirror? He was carrying the same bag he had stuffed it in. It must have really been bothering him if he decided to meet his mother here, instead of just waiting at home. The Other Houdini practically buzzed with nervous energy, which his mother didn’t fail to notice.

The woman turned to face him, suddenly alarmed. “*Oh, my God, did you try to enlist again? You did, didn’t you?*”

“*What? No, of course not! This doesn’t have anything to do with that.*” Houdini shook his head frantically, his hands now fiddling with the buttons on his bag. He seemed unable, unwilling even, to open it and show her what he did.

“*Then what’s so important that you had to come all the way out here for?*” his mother asked, her expression changing to one of concern. Peering at his face, she raised an arm, bringing the back of her hand against his cheek. “*Gracious, are you feeling alright? You’re pale as a ghost! Do you need to sit down?*”

“*No, I don’t!*” Other Houdini pulled away from her hand, looking a little miffed. “*I’m fine!*”

His mother withdrew her hand, brow furrowing at his rejection, before planting her fist on her hip. “*Then out with it! What’s got you so worked up?*”

“It’s, um, it’s about school,” Houdini visibly swallowed and he ducked his head, scuffing his heel against the dirt. *“Something happened the other day. I, uh, took something.”*

“You took something?” she repeated, raising an eyebrow. *“What do you mean?”*

A noise behind me pulled my attention from the scene, a distant rumbling that grew closer and closer. Wondering who could possibly be interrupting at this moment, I turned around, scowling at the newcomer.

A car appeared from the hazy distance, its inky paint pulling out from the darkness. Its engine was a distant rumble, but it hardly seemed to make a sound as it came to park beyond the gates, too far for the two at the center of the scene to hear. I expected the driver to come out, but instead the car idled, and I noticed something move in the corner of my vision.

It was one of those dark, flickering forms that didn’t seem quite real, that weren’t a part of Houdini’s memory. I thought it would disappear as soon as I focused on it, yet this one became solid, as I watched it detach itself from the factory’s shadow. It took the shape of a man, wearing a suit with his hat canted low over his face.

The man kept himself pressed against the brick wall of the factory, sidling up to the corner until he could peer around the edge, at Other Houdini and his mother, who were completely unaware of their new audience.

A chill went down my spine, and I took a step forward, passing through the gates. There was something wrong about all of this — the car, the man, the shadows — something that spoke of deliberation, of a plan, a trap.

I had to do something.

The man stepped out from the shadows. He reached for something at his waist.

It was a memory. I couldn't do anything. Everything here had already happened, had already ended, long before I was even born.

But that didn't stop my instinct. I opened my mouth just as he drew the gun.

"Hey!"

At the same time, Houdini's mother looked up. But she hadn't heard me. Her gaze was on the man, frowning in confusion. *"I'm sorry, can I help —?"*

Then she saw the gun. How her son stood between them.

Her jaw dropped. Houdini, confused, started to turn. *"Mum, what's —"*

"No!" she threw him out of the way.

He hit the ground just as the man pulled the trigger.

The gunshot rang out, making me blink. When I opened my eyes again, Houdini's mother was on the ground. She didn't move.

Houdini picked up his head. He stared at his mother, eyes wide. *"Mum?"*

As he scrambled over to her, my attention flicked back to the man in the suit, who was now checking his gun as he leisurely strolled closer to Houdini. I heard a car door slam, and looked around to see the driver get out of the car; another man, dressed in a dark suit, looking to join the other one.

My breath was locked in my throat as I watched it all fall into place. I knew what was going to happen next, and in a vain attempt to stop it, I darted forward, reaching for Houdini. Only I went right through him, my hands slipping through air, and I nearly tripped from my own momentum.

Houdini didn't notice either of them, too panicked to see anything beyond what was happening right in front of him. Leaning over his mother, hands pressed against her chest, trying to stem the bleeding — his breathing haggard, shoulders shaking, bag and mirror long forgotten as he begged. "*Mum? Mum, can you hear me? Open your eyes! Please, open your eyes!*"

Even as I came back around, standing over them, I knew it was too late. She wasn't breathing, and the blood kept pooling out. It soaked Houdini's hands, and my stomach lurched in nausea. He even took off his coat, tried to use it to staunch the wound that just seemed to bloom red across his mother's stomach.

I wanted him to look up. I wanted him to see that there was still danger, to see that the bullet hadn't just come from nowhere. Only a few moments had passed, but each wasted second felt like the gong of a bell, pounding and shaking. He didn't have much time left.

In what was only a few seconds, the entire world seemed to collapse.

The flickering shadows at the edge of my vision closed in. The sun had set, and darkness swept in, swallowing the last dregs of daylight. The two men came closer, now in step with each other. It wasn't until one of them muttered something I didn't catch, that Houdini *finally* noticed them.

"*P-please,*" his voice shook, tears staining his face, and I realized too late how blind he was. "*You have to help.*"

It was still too late.

One of them laughed, and I burned.

“*Sure we can,*” the one of the right chuckled. The driver. “*Once my friend here fixes his mistake.*”

“*Not my fault the old lady saw me first.*” The first one muttered, and Houdini flinched back when he saw the gun in his hand. With the sky turning a bruised purple, I could barely see their faces, and it only got darker by the second. I doubt Houdini could see them very well, either. Or if he recognized them at all. “*Lucky for us, this one ain’t very smart.*”

“*W-who are you?*” Houdini asked, his voice shaking, gaze flicking between the two of them. “*What do y-you want?*”

“*I know, it’s too easy, it feels like cheating.*” The driver said, ignoring Houdini. “*Think we should give him a running start? You know, sporting chance.*”

“*You just want to see me miss, don’t you?*” the gunman snorted, and I just wanted to scream at Houdini to run. Why didn’t he run?

But Houdini seemed frozen to the spot — in terror, shock, or confusion, maybe all three. The men’s utterly casual conversation, their cold regard, was utterly bizarre, and between my own horror of the situation and frustration that Houdini didn’t just *move*, I was furious. More rage than I had ever felt. If they could see me, I’d probably be on fire.

I could feel the heat in my hands, and it made me clench and unclench my fists in helpless defeat. Glancing down, I could see my hands starting to glow, red warmth seeping up under my skin, but it cast no light in the air, on the ground, on anyone near me.

The void was like a heat sink, devouring my magic before it could do anything.

“We’ve wasted enough time as it is. You got the car running?” the gunman continued. When the other nodded, he added, *“Then bring it ‘round. Boss just wants the kid.”*

The driver turned and walked away, and Houdini jolted. Finally, *finally* he was moving, rising to his feet. His mouth moved wordlessly; a cry for help? Was he calling them out? It might’ve even been a prayer.

But it was too late.

I saw the gunman bring up his arm again, a smirk on his face.

I lunged forward, trying to grab the gun, to push it away from Houdini.

My hand went right through, and the man’s arm vanished through my body. I didn’t feel it when his body tensed, when he pulled the trigger.

I didn’t see it when Houdini fell. But I heard the gunshot. I heard the sound of a body crumpling in the dirt.

I choked on air. It was pointless, obviously, but somehow I couldn’t help but feel like I failed. That if only I had been strong enough, I could bend time and space, and somehow stop all of this from happening.

I could only stand there, an invisible weight falling on my shoulders, my arms dropping limply to my sides. The gunman backed up, enough that I could see him fully now, putting away his gun, just as the car came through the gates.

The brakes squeaked as the car parked itself in front of the bodies. I still couldn’t see them, I couldn’t make myself turn around.

“All right, get him into the trunk,” the driver said as he got out of the car, adjusting his coat.

“What about the woman?”

“Leave her. Someone will find this in the morning. And we’ll be long gone by then.”

That had me going again. I couldn’t bear the thought of them touching Houdini, and it had me spinning around. I regretted it almost instantly.

I wasn’t prepared to see Houdini like that. Curled up on the ground beside his mother, pale, unmoving. The blood, a growing stain on his shoulder, seeping into the gravel.

Dead.

A strange sound came up my throat, something between a sob and a scream, strangled and beaten. I had never heard myself make it before. I dropped to my knees, reaching out to touch him, even as the men came around, passing through me to pick up Houdini’s body.

I realized with a sort of morbid fascination that of all the ghosts I’d seen, I had never actually seen anyone die. I had never seen a dead body.

Ghosts, their state of being, had never bothered me before. It just...*was*. I never gave it any real thought as to *how* it happened, not really. But now I felt sick. I let out a deranged laugh, despite myself. Only now I realized *death* wasn’t the same thing as *dying*.

It felt so cruel. I recalled the Lady’s warning: *Death will follow you*. Is this what she meant?

I didn’t get the chance to ponder the answer; something else had caught my attention, brought it back to the situation at hand.

The men had opened the trunk, dumped Houdini in it — bag, mirror, and all. They treated it as business, carrying on in casual conversation that had nothing to do with Houdini or murder. Maybe that was why they didn't see what I did.

A twitch. I stood up, my knees uncertain, my neck crawling as I stared at Houdini. Did I just see that?

I thought maybe I was just dreaming, seeing what I wanted to see, but no. It was there. His chest, rising and falling. So gently, so shallow. Barely there. Barely clinging to life.

He was still alive.

The driver raised his arm, pulled down the trunk lid.

Right before it closed, Houdini opened his eyes.

And I swore, he looked right at me.

Chapter Thirty-Three

I stood by the lake.

There was a sign next to me. It read: *Weeping Willow Lake*.

I stared at it, scowling in confusion, before I remembered this was before all those drownings.

The world had changed once again, but Houdini — my Houdini — still hadn't returned. Maybe reliving his death was too personal to watch from afar. Maybe the Forces That Be had a bad sense of humor.

It was night time. The same night Houdini died? I wasn't sure, but the season was right. The trees next to me had no leaves, and the grass beneath my feet was dry. The moon was higher in the sky, outshining the stars. I might've admired it if I had been in any other circumstance. The water lapped softly a few meters away. Soft and innocent.

Not for much longer.

Just as I was beginning to wonder if anything was going to happen, headlights appeared in the distance, down the road. I watched as the car came down the road, before pulling off into the grass nearby. It was the same car that the men drove, that Houdini was locked inside.

Trapped. Breathing. Dying.

I didn't move when his murderers came out of the car. I knew I should still feel anger, that I wanted to set the car on fire, but I didn't feel anything at all. My body was numb, and I couldn't find the energy, the motivation to lift my feet, to get a better view.

The gunman leaned against the side of the car, lit up a cigarette. The driver friend joined him, and as the gunman leant his lighter so they could share a smoke. The gunman asked, after taking his first drag, *“So, when are they supposed to meet us?”*

“Midnight, or so I was told. They’ll probably be late, especially after with what’s going on lately.”

“Hell of a thing.” The gunman agreed. *“One attack from the Japs, and now we’re at war with both them and the Nazis. I’ve never even heard of Pearl Harbor...”*

Their conversation trailed off into irrelevant musings and I quickly lost interest. This was by far the longest memory so far, and so far the most boring. What time was it? Would we really have to wait until midnight until... whoever shows up?

I stepped closer to the water, feeling the sand and its wetness, but none of it stuck to me. Peering into the water, I nearly jumped when I saw my own reflection, glowing in the moonlight.

Why could I see myself? I wasn’t in this memory. The lake shouldn’t know I was here.

But then again, I *was* in the lake, wasn’t I? Years from now, and apparently traveling on another plane of existence, but my body was still in there somewhere.

Sinking. Drowning. Dying.

I shuddered, stumbling away from the water’s edge. I wasn’t ready to deal with *that* just yet. I still had Houdini to see through.

I turned around to face the murderers again, who had suddenly gone still. A bolt of fear went through me, wondering if they could suddenly see me, but their gazes were both turned to the left, towards the rear of the car.

The gunman pulled out his cigarette. *“...Did you hear that?”*

I craned my head to listen. Seconds passed, nothing happened. And then:

Thump.

It came from the trunk. A faint sound. Apparently, Houdini was trying to get out. But I couldn't imagine he'd have much strength left. Not with a wound like that.

"*Aw, shit,*" the driver muttered, all at once straightening and coming around the end. "*I thought you finished him off!*"

"*I did!*" the gunman protested, not moving from his spot as the driver opened up the trunk, threw his arms in, and pulled out Houdini.

His chest was covered in blood now, and his breath wheezed. I flinched; it hurt just to watch as the driver dropped him, letting Houdini writhe sluggishly in the grass. Something fell out after him, shiny and flat. It reflected a beam of broken light before disappearing into the grass.

The mirror. It must have fallen out when they were driving.

"*What the hell?*" the driver noticed it, too, bending down to pick it up, just about ignoring Houdini as he inspected the mirror. "*What's a kid doing carrying this thing around? Doesn't this mirror belong to that fancy school?*"

"*Lemme see,*" the gunman walked over, taking the mirror to spin it around. The gem glimmered, and the man let out a low whistle. "*I bet this thing costs a pretty penny. Hm. Too bad the glass is cracked.*"

"*Well, fix it, why don't you?*" the driver said, going back to Houdini and picking up one of his arms. "*While I take care of him.*"

“Don’t worry about it,” the gunman waved a hand. At first I thought he was just gesturing at the other man, but something flashed, and I heard a loud *crack!* Then the gunman said, *“There, better. Can’t even tell the difference now.”*

He held up the mirror, and I was shocked to see it was fixed. How it would look when I’d first see it at age thirteen, how it would look until I smashed it again. The glass flat and smooth, as if it had never been broken at all.

Like magic.

Before I could even comprehend what this might mean, the gunman continued, *“Don’t worry about the kid. He’s gonna bleed out eventually. He’ll be dead before the meeting.”*

The driver paused, considering it for a second. But before he could decide, Houdini suddenly lashed out, snarling, his hand catching the driver across the face. The man recoiled, swearing, and I saw blood dripping from his collar.

My eyes went down to Houdini again. He was trying to pick himself up, but there was something different in the way he moved. Hunched shoulders, bowed head, clawed hands. It was like he had a sudden burst of energy, his survival instinct finally kicking in on his dying breath.

But I knew that wasn’t it. It was the mirror. Fixing it had done something. A part of Houdini had been trapped in that mirror when he was in the trunk, and now it seemed to have been separated from his body.

Houdini was still alive. But it wasn’t Houdini anymore. These idiots had no idea what they just did.

The driver snarled, grabbing Houdini's arm again, grappling with him as he started dragging Houdini over to the water. *"You want it that way? Fine! Don't say we didn't give you a chance to go quickly!"*

Houdini kicked and struggled against the driver's grip, reaching up and digging his nails into the man's skin. But it didn't stop the driver, who seemed too furious to care.

My chest squeezed as he all but threw Houdini into the water. He thrashed, perhaps stunned by the cold, and tried to get up, but the driver was on him again in a moment, hands around his throat, pushing him down.

The water wasn't deep. But it was deep enough.

"Whoa, hey, hey!" the gunman nearly dropped the mirror again when he saw what the driver was doing. Taking considerable care to set the mirror gently on the hood of the car, he then raced over, shouting, *"Christ, man, what are you doing?"*

"This one's still kicking, you idiot! You should've shot him in the head!"

"What? You're the idiot! You know the orders! We're not supposed to leave a mess!"

Throughout their argument, the boy struggled, gasping as he fought to bring his head up, scratching and pulling and hitting the driver. It created a terrible ruckus, incoherent shouting and splashing water. But the man was much bigger, stronger, and the boy only getting weaker. I could see it, in his limbs, as the combined blood loss and the water in his lungs, slowly succumbing to exhaustion.

And I realized what this was. The birth of the Lost Boy, some shallow copy of Houdini, only wild and desperate and scared.

Still dying. Forever in a state of dying.

No wonder I couldn't get through to him. If these were his last moments, then it would be the only thing he relived, over and over, for decades.

Then the air went silent. The water grew still once more.

The driver paused to make sure, before standing up, knee deep in the water. He was huffing, anger abating. *"Well. That takes care of that."*

Their shadows blocked Houdini's body from view, but I could still see a hand floating in the water, rocking gently in the waves.

Then it sunk, disappearing entirely from sight.

I didn't think this was strange until both men jumped in fright.

"What the — where did he go?" the gunman yelped, stumbling back.

"I don't know!" the driver stumbled forward, throwing his hands back into the water, searching the low tides. *"He was right here! I saw it! The water just — it just swallowed him!"*

"That's impossible! The body can't just disappear!"

The two continued to freak out, scanning the water for wherever Houdini might've gone. But the waves shifted, getting larger and rougher, rising up so it was nearly reaching the grass. It forced the men back out of the lake soaking wet and panting, leaning on their knees.

"What do we do now?" The driver asked, throwing a hand to the water. *"We lost the body! They're gonna kill us!"*

"I don't know." The gunman was silent for a long moment. Then he straightened, taking a deep breath. *"We did the job. The kid's dead — don't matter how or where he went. Now we get the hell out of Dodge. Leave before they get here."*

“What about that stupid mirror? They know it’s gone. What if they come looking for it?”

“So we put it back. Make it look like nothing happened. There’s no proof to tie us to any of this anyways,” the gunman threw up his hand, then made strides towards the car, determined as he took charge. *“Then we wait a few days. See if anything bad happens.”*

“And if it does?” the driver trailed behind him, looking hesitant to get back in the car.

“We’ll cross that bridge when we get there. Now get in the car and drive!”

And just like that, they were gone.

I sneered as the headlights disappeared down the corner. Bunch of cowards. Of all the things, I found my greatest emotional reaction to be one about their escape. As far as I knew, they were never caught.

A noise behind me made me turn around.

The Lost Boy. I went stock still at the sight of him, but he didn’t attack me. Just stood in the water — in the spot where he died — just staring at me.

I was so used to seeing him angry, I wasn’t sure what to make of when I recognized the sadness in his face. The fear.

Neither of us moved at first. I wasn’t entirely sure what was going on, but I knew he could see me, that this was his ghost, returned. So I took a step forward, and without really thinking brought up my arm. I didn’t know what I wanted to do. Touch him? Make sure he was real? That he was still here?

As soon as I moved, the Lost Boy flinched, stumbled back, keeping distance between us. I blinked, surprised. Was he afraid of *me*?

It seemed so bizarre at first, but when I thought about it, I started to see it. I had been the one to break the mirror, after all. I had been a jerk to Houdini, provoked the Lost Boy. I burned him — twice, if I remembered correctly.

“I’m sorry!” I blurted the first thing that popped into my head. I was louder than I intended, and made the both of us jump. Embarrassed and furious with myself, furious with everything, I shook my head, took a deep breath, and spoke in a softer tone. “I’m so sorry. I only wanted to help.”

The Lost Boy continued to watch me. He didn’t speak, not that I expected him to. I tried approaching him again and this time he didn’t move away. He didn’t move at all, in fact, and when I was close enough, I slowly reached out, wrapping my arms around him. He was stiff and cold, and from the look on his face, a bit confused. I was, too. I didn’t think he’d let me do this. I could ignore the seeping, cold clamminess of his skin for that, the same feeling that gave me nightmares only a few days before.

I didn’t know if this would help. I didn’t think it’d do anything at all. It just felt like the right thing to do.

I was just about to consider letting go, when I felt hands press into my back; the Lost Boy started hugging me back, pressing his face into my shoulder. He shook in my arms, crying.

“It’s okay,” I whispered, even though I didn’t know if this was true or not. Something still felt unfinished; this journey, whatever it was, wasn’t quite over yet. Still, I had to believe that the worst was over. “I promise, it’s going to be okay.”

He leaned into me, perhaps a sign of trust, and I had to drop to my knees in order to support him. He sunk with me, clinging a little too hard, but I didn't complain. Nothing really hurt me here. I stroked the back of his head, not really sure what I was doing, but this always soothed me when I was upset, so I hoped it helped him, too.

And we just sat there. I gazed over the dark expanse of the lake; how it glittered silver under the moon, the calm water that made it seem everything was all right, the fact that I could no longer see shadows at the edge of my vision — although I wasn't sure if that last part was just because it was nighttime.

But I felt safe. It didn't seem like we were being watched anymore.

Then the Lost Boy spoke. As if that wasn't surprising in itself, what he said really stunned me. "Thank you."

Before I could think of how to respond, he pulled back, and I nearly jolted when I saw that his appearance had changed. It was Houdini again. But also not Houdini. He wasn't wet anymore, which made me notice that we were no longer standing in water, either. His eyes were clear, his skin now with a pink tone instead of that cold pallor. But there were bruises on his throat, and a hole in his chest. It wasn't bleeding — he was dead, after all — but it still made my stomach twist at the sight.

"F-for what?" I managed to choke out. I was still a little messed up from seeing his dead body that I wasn't sure if I wanted to laugh or cry at seeing him alive (or... well, you know what I mean) again.

The tiny smile he gave me relieved some of the tension. "For helping me. I honestly didn't think you could do it."

“Excuse me?” I threw him a look. “I think I did just fine, thank you. So, what now? Where are we?”

“I think,” Houdini started to answer, looking up. I followed his gaze, startled to see that we were in London again. And not the one smoking in ruins — but warm, sunny, with upright buildings and colorful signs, cars pattering by, and music playing in the distance. Every color saturated, flags waving, people dressed in nice clothes. They passed right by, some holding suitcases, others newspapers, giving cheerful greetings to us. To *us*.

We stood up together, and Houdini finished, “I think we’re home.”

“Your home, maybe,” I said to myself, but I couldn’t help but smile at the blue sky and the birds, this utter perfection of life. This must’ve been what it was like, before the war.

Houdini pulled away from me to take it all in, beside himself in joy. It was certainly a sight to see, after everything we had to go through. I was just glad to see him up and walking again, and couldn’t take my eyes off of him as he ran into people — physical people, who saw him, said hi, went on their way — and grabbed an apple from a nearby fruit stall. The salesman didn’t ask for any money, just grinned and waved him off.

That part stuck out to me. This place was perfect. *Too* perfect.

It couldn’t be real.

Houdini took a bite of the apple as I wandered over to a nearby newspaper stand and took one away. But I couldn’t read it — the words were blurry, no matter how close I

brought my face in, and there was no date. It sort of scared me, before I started to realize: maybe this world wasn't meant for me. This wasn't my home. This was Houdini's.

It was his home. His idealization of home. A heaven.

Oh.

As soon as I realized it, I heard someone call out in the distance. Houdini and I turned around at the same time, towards the woman appearing out of a store with a basket full of warm bread. She gave us a great smile. Someone else followed her out, a handsome man in a blue military uniform, silver wings on his chest, a hat perched on his head. He had blond hair, and a smile identical to Houdini's.

"Mum! Dad!" Houdini cried, dropping his apple and running towards them.

They collided into one big embrace, and although the sight made me smile, there was a sudden pull in my gut. Him with his family, delirious with joy, not a problem in the world. This was it. This was the end for Houdini.

His mother confirmed the thought with: "It's been a long time, my son. Let's go home, and I'll make your favorite dinner."

Houdini pulled back. "Really? Just like that?"

"Just like that," His father repeated with a confident nod.

"Oh." Houdini said, his chin dropping. I thought he'd accept immediately, that he'd just go, but instead he paused, seemed to consider it. I didn't know what it could be — everything was here. His family, his dreams. It wasn't like he was leaving anything behind.

That's why I was a little surprised when he said, "I'll be right back," to his parents, before stepping away, turning to me. His expression wasn't a happy one, like it should've been.

"What's wrong?" I asked as he approached me, and I gestured to his parents, who stood there with patient smiles on their faces. I guess they had no reason to be in a rush. "Why aren't you going with them? Isn't this what you wanted?"

Houdini stopped in front of me, still with that frown. "I-I guess? I don't know. Something doesn't feel right."

"What, like this isn't real?" I felt a jolt a fear, that this might not be as safe a place as I thought, but Houdini just shook his head.

"No, no, it's not that. I mean," a pained look crossed his face. "I don't think I'm ready."

"Well, uh," I hunched my shoulders, helpless to give him an answer he wanted. "I don't know what to tell you, pal, but I don't think you really get a choice in this. You're dead. That's not exactly something you can change. And besides. You'll be happy here. Forever."

"Will I, though?" he raised his eyebrows, giving me an uncertain look. He held out his arms, adding, "How can I be happy when I don't even know why I died? Who killed my mom? Who wanted me dead? What did I do to deserve this?"

I opened my mouth, but no words came out, and I realized with a sense of dread that he was right. I stopped the Lost Boy, I made him whole again, but I hadn't helped him discover the whole reason behind this in the first place. Why it all happened. Could a ghost really be put to rest when those questions were still unanswered?

Apparently not. “But if you come back with me...it might be worse. I don’t even know if there’s anything to come back *to*. I might be dead, too.”

Houdini didn’t look convinced. “No, I think we’d know if you were. Please, Morgan, you have to help me. I can’t go just yet.”

“But they’re waiting for you.” I said, glancing at his parents. They still seemed happy, and I wondered if they could hear what we were saying, if they were worried about what Houdini wanted to do.

“They’ll still be there,” Houdini said, not taking his eyes off of me. “The next time.”

I wasn’t so sure about that; hell, I wasn’t really sure of anything at the moment, and I certainly couldn’t say that would be true, that this would still be here if he *passed on* again. As if sensing that, Houdini grabbed my hand, his grip tight, almost pinching.

His gaze was earnest, almost desperate, when he pleaded, “Morgan, I have to know. Can you help me?”

“Of course I’ll help you.” I snorted, a little annoyed he even had to ask. I had to admit, though, I wasn’t entirely happy with how things turned out, either. Seeing Houdini’s life hadn’t provided as much answers as I thought. “I don’t know how, but I’ll try my best. As usual.”

“Are you sure?” Houdini smiled, a hopeful smile, as if he couldn’t quite believe this. “Because I don’t think it’s going to be safe. Not for you. Someone made sure no one ever found out about me. If you try to uncover that, they — whoever they are — they’ll try to stop you. With all that, you still want to help?”

To be honest, it didn't scare me at all. Maybe I just wasn't really considering it, or maybe I was feeling pretty good about my abilities, considering how I made it this far on my own. Or, well, with my friends' help. You know what I mean.

"So you'll stop asking me that, yeah," I said, finally returning the grip in our clasped hands. "Whatever happens, we'll find out what happened, together. I promise."

Houdini grinned, right before the ground shifted beneath our feet.

I lost my balance, but didn't let go of Houdini as I fell. My stomach lurched as I slipped through the cobblestones that no longer held my weight, and descended into the darkness below.

I didn't get a chance to cry out before the lake crashed down on top of us

Chapter Thirty-Four

Water.

Storm. Lightning. Fire.

Air.

The cold came in sharp and sudden. I gasped, only for water to rush in. I spit it out, barely holding onto the lungful of oxygen I still had left, before remembering I still had arms and legs, and pulled them into action.

Alive I'm alive I'm still alive

The words spun circles inside my head as instinct kicked in and I swam upwards — or what I thought was upwards. I felt dizzy and nauseous, as though I had just been on a rollercoaster.

I could only hope that I was close, that I wasn't slowly drowning myself in an attempt to survive.

Seconds passed as I kicked my legs, and they stretched into an eternity. My chest burned and I was all too aware of what happened the last time I was in this lake.

At least I wasn't being dragged down anymore.

Then, just as I felt like my chest would explode, my face suddenly met cold air — nearly indistinguishable on my numb skin, if not for the fact that I finally opened my mouth and started coughing freely. My heart skipped a beat, surprised and elated — for all I knew, I had been at the surface this whole time, but with closed eyes and panicked thoughts I had no idea until now.

My eyes flew open, but it took me a second to adjust to the darkness. Looking up, I saw the roiling sky, dark clouds no longer raining, and the dying drums of lightning flashed in the distance.

My arms splashed in the water, clawing at the air as if I could pull myself out of the water on that alone. Before I could even consider what just happened — in my head, the memories, or the storm of the Lost Boy — another head shot out of the water in front of me.

Houdini.

He gasped, choking on air, and splashing wildly as he tried to keep himself afloat. I couldn't help but laugh hysterically at the sight. I was so cold that it didn't seem wrong at all.

"Can you — can you swim?" I had to yell over the water, which covered my ears and made everything sound much quieter than it actually was.

"Of cou—" Houdini's indignant reply was drowned out by a wave crashing in his face. He spluttered, sounding doubly annoyed when he could speak again. "Of course I can! I'm not helpless!"

He didn't seem pleased to see the smile on my face. Maybe he thought I was laughing at him. "*What?*"

"You're *swimming!*"

"I..." He seemed like he was going to argue the point, before he looked down, saw himself treading water. "I'm swimming?"

Houdini gaped, choked on water, speechless at this revelation. I myself was having a hard time seeing it, wondering if my eyes were deceiving me. Could ghosts swim? Could they drown?

It was hard to really think. The water was freezing, as per usual. Just staying afloat was a chore, even without the fear of being dragged under again. The cold was in my lungs, in my bones, jagged knives in my throat.

And yet I couldn't be happier to feel it.

Behind me, I heard a splash, a shout. "*What the — what the hell!*"

Startled, I spun around. Or rather, I flailed uselessly, my limbs slow and graceless, but managed to turn my head around just enough to see another in the water behind me. Even though it was dark, I recognized him. I never thought I'd hear that voice again. "Aaron? Aaron! You're alive!"

"M-Morgan?" Aaron sounded equally shocked, somehow awake, in the water, alive. Last I saw, he had been unconscious in some secret room beneath the dam. How was he here? I could see his eyes, glimmering white and wide in the faint moonlight, clouds parting over us. "I-Is that you? Why — what're you d-doing here? Wait, h-how did *I* end up h-here? All I remember — I r-remember the party, the pond, and-and the water, but after that — was I a-asleep? How l-long was I out? What the hell's going on?"

"Long st-story!" was all I could manage to shout. The water seemed to clench around my chest, making it hard to talk for very long. Even then, I wasn't sure if I could provide all the answers. "Are you okay?"

"Aside from b-being in a lake in what I-I hope is st-still October?" Aaron called over, teeth chattering, starting to swim closer. "I'm g-g-great, I think! Hey, wh-who's that

with you?”

“Huh?” I glanced back at Houdini; he appeared utterly baffled, still enraptured by his ability to swim, but my attention was drawn by a noise beyond.

Another head popped up out of the water, spluttering and crying for help. I recognized her a second before Aaron called out, “Alyssa? Is that you?”

“Aaron! Oh, my god!” she cried, gasping as she struggled against the waves.

“We-we were looking for you, but then something grabbed me —”

I wanted to hear the rest, but I was distracted by a distant shout. “*Hey! There’s something in the water!*”

My gaze turned to the shore, surprised. Red and blue lights as far as the eye could see; camera flashes, news reporters, ambulances; people, police, bystanders, all clambering to get a good look, noise echoing across the water. I hadn’t noticed them before, but now I couldn’t think of anything else. There had to be almost fifty people, if not more; all hectically scrambling back and forth, apparently startled by some teens in the water. Were they drawn by the storm, perhaps? Had they come looking for us? I had no idea how much time had passed, but it seemed as though the police had time to cordon off the area.

We should all be dead right now. No wonder they were freaking out.

Taking a deep breath, I stuck an arm out of the water, waving and shouting, “Hey! Hey, over here!”

As I yelled, more heads popped up around me, like bubbles rising to the surface. Kids, like me, first bewildered and dazed, before their voices joined mine. A chorus of kids, which was returned by an equal and opposite reaction of panicked adults, answering with

a dozen floodlights turned on us, and what appeared to be the commandeering of a civilian motorboat.

I couldn't keep my arm out forever. As the rescue team gathered themselves, I had to stop and catch my breath, keep my head above the water. My mind was racing, but my heart was steady. It was over. We were safe. Everyone was back. We could go home now.

I didn't even know how. Aaron and Alyssa and the other lost kids, suddenly returned from their watery grave? I knew they weren't dead, not yet, and I could only imagine that the release of the Lost Boy also meant their freedom as well. Lifting the spell that was on them, the magical room they were trapped in. And none of them seemed any the wiser — aside from waking up underwater, that is.

I felt a hand on my shoulder, arm slinging around my neck. Houdini, panting and exhausted, probably because he hadn't exercised in over seventy years. Although he was still kicking, his weight brought me down a couple inches, almost made me swallow water. "Whoa! Hang in there, pal. We're almost there."

"S-sorry," he stuttered, his breath clouding in front of his face. "I-I'm tired. I've...I've never been tired before."

I stared at him, speechless. There was something different about Houdini. A presence he didn't have before. I couldn't remember if ghosts had to breathe or not.

Before I could ask, though, something brushed against my back. Aaron, finally joining us. He accidentally kicked me, cleats grazing my shin, and I realized he was still wearing his Halloween costume, minus the jersey. He linked his arm around mine, helped support Houdini's weight.

“Damn, Morgan,” Aaron huffed, reaching out for Alyssa as she drifted closer.

“Your skin is burning!”

The other swimmers joined us, confusion melting into some sense of teamwork, instinct to survive. Together we jostled around, a living organism, a giant buoy as the boat’s roar filled the air, blinding floodlights getting closer. I took in all their faces. Aaron, still alive, grinning deliriously at me. Houdini, looking ready to pass out. Alyssa, who had stopped crying, and all the other kids who went missing in the past year, confused and cold, no idea what was going on. There was almost ten of us in total.

One by one we were plucked from the water. Wrapped in blankets, nestled together like shivering newborns, too exhausted to speak. The boat was just large enough to fit us all, and it took its time returning to shore, being careful not to rock too hard.

While it may have taken less than a few minutes between boat and land, it felt like an age. The world was a haze, relief turning my sense dull, and I was barely aware of the thick gray blanket. I grasped at it uselessly, trying to bring it tighter around with my stiff fingers. My hair dripped in my face, and our collective wetness now made the bottom of the boat slippery.

My attention was solely on Houdini, now sitting across from me. The sight of him being picked up by the rescue workers, of the towel draped, falling across solid shoulders, being asked his name. Houdini didn’t respond to them. Or maybe he had, and I just hadn’t heard it. My ears were filled with roaring, a combination of the boat’s engine and my own pounding heart beat.

I wasn’t sure if this was real or not. The floor didn’t feel solid beneath me. I still felt like I was floating.

But I was already starting to grasp the truth, as the boat came to a shuddering halt. Once more we were picked up; normally I'd protest to being carried around like a baby, but I could barely move my legs, and to be quite frank, I'd done enough work tonight.

My head lolled back as a man brought me across the deck, his footsteps reverberating in my head. The world shifted as I returned to land. It almost made me sick, like I'd gotten used to being in the water. The sky spun over my head, clouds and moon and stars and unending darkness, too fast, dizzying. It was all I could do to keep the contents of my stomach inside. I had completely lost track of Houdini. Any attempt to lift my head, look around, just made the nausea worse. Still, I had to know. Was he okay? Was he awake? Was he...

Alive?

The thought grounded me, surprisingly. I was set down. On grass? No, a bench. My feet were still bare. A car was nearby. An ambulance. It's lights joined the rest, flashing colorful bursts at the edge of my vision. I huddled there, waiting for the sick feeling to pass, keeping my thoughts on Houdini, on the impossible fact that people had touched him, people who weren't me who could see him and talk to him and treat him just like every other normal, living human being.

Shadows. Voices. A woman asking my name. She wore a white shirt, caduceus sewn on her collar. I might've answered with something sarcastic.

The other questions blurred together. I was pretty sure I answered most of them — the paramedic checked my pulse, my temperature, told me I was in shock. Replaced my wet blanket with a dry one. Asked me if anything hurt. Nothing did. Well, maybe my head. I kept squinting at her, making sure she was real, her face a blur. A part of me just

wanted to close my eyes and sleep. The world swayed back and forth beneath me. I wanted to ask about Houdini, how he was.

“You mean the magician?” was her reply, a low chuckle. “Been dead for a while now, Miss Molloy. Unless the rumors are true, and you can see him, too.”

Now her face came into focus. I returned her laugh with a smirk of my own. “I just might. What me to introduce you?”

It was a meaningless bluff; I was annoyed, impatient, and done with pretending. If she wanted to know the truth, well, here it was. See if I cared.

I got the desired effect.

The paramedic shifted nervously on her feet, eyes flicking side to side as if she didn’t want to be here anymore. “I, uh...you know what, never mind. One of the others wants to see you. I’ll send someone else to with the papers...”

The woman couldn’t leave me fast enough, and I vaguely wondered if I laid it on a little too thick with the weirdness. Well, she *did* ask, after all. The paramedic was replaced by a small, hunched form, with a red-blue halo, standing there silent and faceless for a moment, for a moment appearing lost. It wasn’t until he sat next to me did he finally speak again.

His voice was hoarse. “Is this really happening?”

“Fraid so.” I replied, casting him a shaky smile. “Any regrets?”

Houdini huffed, a short laugh. “A few. Maybe I can fix them now.” He paused, then looked at me, eyes shining and intense. He looked scared, like he didn’t want to hope. “Is that what this is? A second chance?”

“If you want it to be.” I shrugged, then nudged into him, and Houdini responded by leaning into me. I could feel the warmth from him, through both our blankets. “How’s it feel to be back in the land of the living?”

Somehow, it just made sense to me. I saw Houdini and I just knew. From the heat, his shadow, the looks everyone gave him. Us. He was here. Really here.

“How?” Houdini asked the same question I had been thinking. “You?”

“I don’t know.” I said, making a face. Once more, I was stuck without all the answers. But I knew enough to connect the dots. “Maybe. Probably. I mean, who else could it be, right? I guess we’ll have to wait and find out for sure.”

Houdini opened his mouth to answer, but was interrupted when two pairs of arms suddenly grabbed me, nearly knocking my off the bench. Bodies, dry, around me, hugging me, practically squeezing me to death.

“Morgan, oh my god!” Juni’s voice was like a bell, clear and ringing inside my head. “When we saw you go under —”

“— We thought you were dead,” Sergio talked right over her, their voices panicked and happy and possibly one of the greatest things I heard all night. There was a bruise over his eye, like someone struck him. “First, Demille, then the storm — now Aaron’s back! Did you see him?”

“I already called Aaron and Alyssa’s parents,” Juni said before I could ask. Her lip was puffy, bleeding a little, but she hardly seemed to notice. “Their mom screamed so loud, I thought I might go deaf —”

“—What happened? You were under water for so long —”

“— all the missing kids are back, its great —”

“— that storm was the craziest shit I’ve ever seen —”

“— best night ever! Thank you —”

“Guys! Guys, slow down!” I had to shout in order to be heard over them, raising my hands so they’d back off a little. Sergio and Juni had gotten themselves wet from me, just because they were so excited, and it seemed as though they didn’t even care. Juni’s face was full of excitement, while Sergio just seemed glad I was still alive. *Join the club.* “Wait, you said something about Demille. Is she —”

“Gone,” Sergio said, his face turning serious. “Soon as the cops came. No idea where her friends went, either. Sorry, Morgan. I know she tried to kill you.”

“She tried to do a lot more than that,” I muttered, glancing at Houdini. Great, if Demille was gone, then chances were I wasn’t going to be seeing her at school again. How were we going to explain all of this? Who was going to be held responsible?

“Who’s he?” Juni’s voice cut through my thoughts. I looked at her — she was focused on Houdini. So was Sergio. It seemed just now they noticed I wasn’t alone, that they were being stared at by someone who had remained entirely silent so far. Juni blinked at me. “Morgan, are you okay? What’s going on? I don’t know him.”

Sergio, on the other hand, didn’t show a shred of hesitation. He just stuck out his hand, grinning, “Hey, I’m Sergio! You know Morgan?”

Houdini stared at the hand, then at Sergio, then back at his hand again. Slowly, he drew his own hand out from beneath his blanket, clasped Sergio’s. He jumped a little when Sergio held on, instead of going right through. “Uh, y-yeah.”

“Well, any friend of Morgan is a friend of mine,” Sergio replied with a smile, right before Juni elbowed him. “What? I’m just being nice —”

“He’s a stranger!” Juni hissed.

“He just said he’s Morgan’s friend,” Sergio pointed out, smiling at me for confirmation. “Right?”

“What? Yeah,” I shook my head, almost forgetting I was part of this conversation. That I still had to explain to them what really happened. “Guys, um, this was the ghost I was talking about earlier. The one I was helping. Houdini. But, er, he’s not a ghost anymore. Apparently.”

Juni just gave me a blank look. “What.”

“Y-you were serious? He was real?” Sergio did a double-take, turning back to Houdini just to make sure. He reached out, poked Houdini’s shoulder, and recoiled. To me, Sergio demanded, “He used to be *dead*?!”

“That’s not my name,” Houdini said, frowning at Sergio.

“What?” all three of us said in unison, turning to look at him.

It was there. The certainty, the knowing. I should’ve seen it sooner. Of course, there was still the shyness, the caution that seemed ever present in Houdini. But there was also a new clam there, a self-assuredness. He wasn’t afraid to look anyone in the eye. This wasn’t Houdini. And he wasn’t the Lost Boy, either. Not anymore.

“You remember?” I whispered. He nodded.

“Felix?” he said, inhaling as a small smile grew on his face. “My name is Felix Griffin.”

AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Renée Levasseur, a student of the University of Maine, Orono, is a Double Major in English and Studio Art. Expecting to graduate with a BFA in May 2016. Concentrating on Figure Drawing and Charcoal Drawing, but she also has experience in Painting, particularly with water-based oils, and Digital Art with Photoshop and Illustrator. Born and raised in rural Maine, used her spare time between school and farming chores to experiment with her creativity.

She finds Digital Art exciting to experiment with, and combining it with her other interests, such as Drawing and Creative Writing. Also an avid writer, putting into words what can't be adequately told visually. Has entered short stories into journals and competitions, and intends to publish a novel by the end of 2016. Planning a career path as an animator, eventually a storyboard artist working for a large movie company, and perhaps putting her own ideas to screen.