



Can love truly last
beyond the grave?

ONE LAST TOUCH

JADE
CHURCH



J A D E
C H U R C H

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everything i wanted — Billie Eilish

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For everyone who wished Hill House/Bly Manor had a HEA and spice

XOXO

Contents

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Chapter One](#)



Chapter One

I had never seen a ghost before I came to Alswell Manor. They were not ghosts in the way that I had been taught to see them, the way that we all had, as white sheets with eye cut-outs and arms that were tented. No, these ghosts were the much more ordinary kind. A cup of tea left out on the side, not knowing it would never again be sipped. Dust motes that slipped through the air, waiting for a new breeze, a new breath. A painting, half-finished, the brushstrokes frozen, the paint congealing.

I myself was haunted, as most people tended to be. Haunted by the wrong decisions I'd made and the way I'd let time slip through my fingers like it was an infinite pool. But you never knew how much time you had left, and now I often found myself wishing I'd lingered on the phone a little longer, made sure to memorise her smile, had squeezed a little tighter, before those things were gone forever. Just like she now was.

I had made my way steadily through life like a ghost and I imagined that nothing much changed when you were dead. People would still speak over you, speed past you impatiently or cut you up while you walked as if you were never there. Lost like a fingerprint, smudged on the lip of the Earth. But I hadn't known true loneliness until my mother, the only family I had left, faded out of existence six weeks ago. Or, at least, it had been six weeks since I'd known she was gone, but two months since she'd actually left me, and

this world, behind. It was so strange to think that as you walked or talked or fucked or shopped, someone's last breath might be blowing right by you and you would never know it. *I* hadn't known it.

It took a month for them to find her body. Mostly because I hadn't known I'd needed to look—so she'd laid there in the cold for weeks until she was discovered. It wasn't unusual for us to go so long without talking, especially since I'd been at uni and my mother had taken to travelling the world on extended trips. But when I'd got the call, seen that unfamiliar number pop up on my phone, my blood had chilled. Somehow, I'd just known something had happened.

Her body had been found in a private cemetery, discovered by errant tourists travelling through the countryside on the way to the city and I hated that thought. That strangers had been the ones to find her, to see her in those last and infinitely private moments. But then again, better them than me. I preferred to remember her exactly as she'd been in life—slight, dark-haired, blue-eyed, graceful. I had no idea what my mother was doing there at Alswell Manor, although it turned out that wasn't the only secret she'd kept from me. I had to wonder if it was the most dangerous one, however.

Her death had been ruled homicide, but without any leads the police had essentially shrugged and released her body to me—and I'd done exactly as she'd asked in the will I hadn't known existed and buried her body in the same cemetery where she'd been murdered.

What was more shocking than the first call, was the second about her estate. My mother had no family except for me, but it seemed that wasn't always the case. Natalia Cole was actually Natalia Alswell and her inheritance became mine—money, property, even some land. With my studies completed and previously about ten pounds to my name, what other choice did I have but to accept what was being offered to me, pack up my meagre belongings into a battered old suitcase and leave my student accommodation for the manor that was now home? It was the only tangible

thing I had left of my mother.

Warwickshire was quite the drive, though thankfully I wasn't the one who had to do it. I booked a cab, loaded my one suitcase into the boot and nodded at the driver before we lapsed into silence for the next two hours. Perfect.

It was raining and the quiet shush of the water over the windows nearly lulled me to sleep, so I rolled it down to let the cool air in, soothing my skin and filling my nose with the familiar scent of wet earth and leaves. I didn't know what I was supposed to do when I got to the house. I had no clue if there would be someone there to greet me or show me around. I was pretty sure these old houses had staff normally, but nobody had said anything to me about if that was the case at Alswell or if I might be expected to retain them. Though, thanks to my inheritance, that wouldn't be a problem. It took me by surprise initially but made a lot of sense the more I thought about it—we'd always had money when I was growing up. Not ostentatious amounts or anything, but we were comfortable, we travelled, and when I decided to go to university, my mum had insisted on paying for it rather than letting me take on student loans. I guess as a kid it hadn't been something I'd ever thought about. Lucky me. Now I was alone and would have to learn to be there for myself, the way my mother had always done.

The roads were relatively clear and the sky was a grey that bordered on blue, like it was still deciding whether or not to piss it down again, and I rubbed my temples as they throbbed. The sky darkened further and I was relieved as it eased the ache in my eyes from the headache coming on.

I'd already signed over the deed for the house and got a key from the estate executor, I was just hoping the place was actually liveable. In hindsight, I probably should have looked it up before I'd decided to move in, but my university tenancy was expiring and I'd been desperate. I had nowhere else to go now that my mother was gone. The few casual friends I'd had at uni had gone abroad travelling, but I wouldn't have gone to them

anyway. We weren't that kind of friendly.

Besides, as long as it had a roof and four walls, how bad could it be?

The driver turned on the radio and hummed along absently to some pop song I'd probably have known if I'd bothered to go out to any of the pubs or clubs back in Reading. My interests had been elsewhere though, other than the occasional pint on a quiet afternoon, silently contemplating the people that passed around me and offering a smile to the pretty waitress that had worked there on Wednesday afternoons. It was an odd feeling, belonging and yet not, like running your gaze over a group of people and having the prickling sensation that something, *someone* was not quite right. I'd made a few friends in my class, but we didn't hang out beyond that and I didn't mind the quiet—preferring to be lost in the pages of a book rather than in conversation.

The trees outside the window were dense along the side of the road. The leaves bled into a stream of oranges and browns and greens that, while entirely unfamiliar, felt soothing somehow, like something in my soul recognised these woods and this road. The driver had avoided the motorway as much as possible, which I couldn't fault him for really, as long as we got there I didn't mind which route he took.

I faced the front again, tugging errantly on the simple black gem stud in my ear as I caught a flash of my mis-matched eyes in the rearview mirror. The driver looked up and jumped when he saw me staring back at him and I smiled wryly. I supposed it was fairly disconcerting if you weren't used to it—one of my eyes was the same shade as my mother's, a deep blue like the sea during a storm. The other was a perfect, almost clear, grey. My mum had said I was her little storm cloud, what with my dark hair, pale skin, and stormy eyes. I liked to think I looked a lot like her, something in the slant of my mouth, the tilt of my chin... But I suspected I looked a lot more like my father than she had been willing to admit. I'd never met him, had learned not to ask after I'd spent so long as a kid poking and squeezing, desperate to

extract any little detail I could about him out of my mum. Of course, as a child, I hadn't noticed the sadness on her face, or the way she could hardly look at me for a day or two after I'd forced her into remembrance. It was that, more than anything else, that made me wonder if I looked like my father. If his eyes were grey too and I'd been formed as perfect halves of them both. Maybe going to Alswell Manor was my chance to find out the answers to those questions, the ones I'd been too scared to ask my mum. And now she was dead and I would never get to ask her anything again. It was possible the truth had been buried with her.

My breath seemed to tighten in my chest and I bit into my cheeks so hard I tasted blood as I waited for the blur in my eyes to clear. It felt like I was always moments away from crying lately as life threatened to overwhelm me and I found myself reaching for my phone to get her advice, only to remember she couldn't answer.

I swiped at my cheeks angrily. I was *not* going to be one of those girls who cried in the back of a cab. I took a swig from the water bottle I'd brought with me and tried a few more calming breaths before I noticed the car had been slowing and nervousness took me.

What if it was a shit tip? All overgrown and with a caved-in roof? Worse, what if there were squatters? Or bugs? Rats? Did they get rats in Warwickshire? The woods gave way and the cab drove along next to a tall, grey brick wall. It was obviously old, with green moss growing from between the cracks in the stone and the mortar. The car slowed even more as the wall curved around and a gate sat a little further back than the road, a mixture of dirt and gravel marking it as the entrance. There was another set of tyre tracks and footprints in the road dust and for a moment I couldn't pull my eyes away. Was this how she had gotten into the manor too? Were those the last footsteps my mother had made? More likely they were from the police and ambulance units, but still, I couldn't help but let my mind drift, imagining some last remnant of my mother imprinted and encased perfectly in the damp

earth.

The cabbie pulled into the space and turned the car so its nose pointed outwards, ready to depart as soon as I climbed out. I tapped my card to his machine and tried not to wince at the cost—even if it was no longer a problem, old habits died hard. The air was colder than I'd expected it would be, as if the temperature had dropped ten degrees just by going a couple hours up the road, but I breathed it in, letting it sink into my lungs and cool my chest. In some ways, it felt like I had been frozen ever since I'd got the news, like it had sunk its claws into me and refused to let go no matter how hard I burned or cried or screamed. My mother wasn't coming back, and only time would thaw the numbness that had seeped into me.

It felt like the breeze here was familiar. Like the trees themselves groaned my name in a whispered hush that intermingled with the sound of rushing leaves. *Georgina. Georgina. Georgina.* I raised my eyes slowly, examining the gate thoroughly from the bottom to its top, stepping forward and brushing a finger over the places where the metal had begun to peel and rust. It was not ornate, which surprised me, it felt... solid. Like it was just there, as if it had sprouted out of the ground fully formed and ready to shelter its occupants. I left my case next to the seam and walked over to the footprints I'd seen from the car, squatting down and letting my hand rest against the dark dirt, pressed flat by a petite shoe. Whether they were hers or not, I was still retracing the last steps my mother had ever made.

I pulled out the heavy key I'd been given by the estate executor. Apparently the manor didn't actually have its own key, there was only this one for the gate, so I would likely have to have my own cut. It creaked open and it felt like the wind hushed, holding its breath alongside me as I stepped through and finally dared to look beyond at the house waiting for me. Alswell Manor. The place my mother had died. The place I could only assume I had been conceived.

It cut an imposing figure against the charcoal of the sky, the ivy that

crawled across the brickwork making it look like nature was trying to reclaim it. There was a side porch that had probably once been lovely, with a wooden fence running around the outside that was so weathered I wasn't sure how it was still standing and a small portion of decking that raised it up from the ground.

Movement drew my eyes upward in time to see a curtain flutter from one of the front-facing upstairs windows and I fell still for a moment, wondering if it had been a draft or a person.

The gate clanged shut behind me and the vibrations rattled my teeth and the silence I hadn't noticed fall was shattered as sound rushed back. It was a wild unleashing of wind and leaves and birds and grass and somewhere in the distance I could hear the faint *plink* of water as the clouds opened up and rain began to drip down my face.

Georgina. It seemed to say. *Georgina, welcome home.*

Chapter Two

There was grass on all sides surrounding what had probably once been a very stately entryway up to the house, but it was now brown, withered and overgrown. Not quite up to my waist, but it would be a task to get through with a mower. The gravel path up to the house remained clear and there was an old stone fountain before I reached the front door. Like everything else at Alswell, or so it seemed, it too was decaying. The stone was bleached from the sunlight and crumbling in the curves of the swooping arches that had long since run dry. Alswell Manor had the appearance of a place that had once been beautiful but, like so many other things in life, had faded.

I walked down past the fountain and paused, looking out to where I'd heard the soft sounds of water earlier and catching a glimpse of what looked like a lake, dark waters reflecting the stormy sky. I wanted to go and explore, but I had a more pressing issue—there was someone inside my house.

As I peered through the window, I was surprised to see an elderly woman staring back at me with her eyes wide and I met her gaze with an equally startled look of my own. Who was she and what was she doing here? I took a step forward and jumped when a hand closed around my shoulder, pulling me to a stop.

“Who the fuck are you?” The voice was deep and gruff, and despite my

alarm a kernel of interest flickered to life inside me at the bluntness of the question.

I pulled my arm free with a sharp tug and raised an eyebrow at the man standing in front of me. He looked to be in his early twenties and was a bundle of contradictions with his lean but muscular frame but otherwise bookish appearance. “I think the better question is who the fuck are you?”

His face went slack in something like surprise before he scowled, his dark eyebrows slanting downwards. Though intimidatingly tall and broad, the effect was somewhat lost by the pair of round wire glasses perched across his long nose and the plush softness of his mouth. “I asked you first.”

I folded my arms across my chest and smirked while I waited him out. The silence between us stretched on as he mimicked my pose, that generous mouth drawing tight as a muscle in his jaw ticked. Eventually it was the woman from the house who called a ceasefire.

“I’m sorry, dear, but this is private property.” Though her voice shook a little, there was a firmness to her that made me relax. I realised she reminded me a little of my own mother, firm but gentle.

“And you would be?”

“Ms Angelica Weathers.” The words weren’t phrased as a question, but her unspoken *and you are?* didn’t pass me by.

“I’m sorry for turning up unannounced. I didn’t know there would be any staff here. I’m Georgina Cole, the new owner.”

The man behind me made an odd sound that was a cross between a scoff and a choke and I raised an eyebrow in his direction as I spun to face him. “Sorry, is there a problem here Mr...?”

“Williams. Sage Williams.” He didn’t elaborate, nor did he offer his hand, and I wrinkled my nose as I scratched absently at my leg through my jeans.

“Right, well, this house belonged to my mum and now it’s mine,” I said, trying to keep my voice steady to assert myself. “I’m sure you know more

about taking care of this place than me..." I looked around doubtfully at the overgrown grass but mentally shrugged it off as I turned back to them. "So I'm happy to keep you on."

Sage's brown eyes narrowed and he took a step toward me, opening his mouth only to shut it as Weathers shot him a warning look.

"Who exactly was your mother, dear?"

"Natalia. Natalia Cole. Or—Alswell, I suppose." Weathers' pale face seemed to drain further and Sage had gone very still. I sighed, rubbing at my sinuses as I took them in. They were an odd pair, Sage a scowling menace and Ms Weathers looking like she'd stepped straight out of a Disney movie with her flushed cheeks and tiny stature. "I take it I'm not the only one who my mum kept secrets from, then. Listen, it's been a long day. I'd really like to just take a look around and get settled."

A bitter laugh made me blink in surprise as Sage shook his head, a dark smile that barely touched his eyes twisting his mouth. "You can't possibly think you're going to stay here."

"Well it is my house, isn't it?"

The pair of them stood and stared at me, Sage clenching and unclenching his jaw as if he were chewing on words he couldn't quite spit out before he stepped to Ms Weather's side and whispered something in her ear. This was... strange. I hadn't realised I would have to convince my staff to let me into my own house. Ms Weathers waved Sage off with a flap of her hands, stepping forward and smiling hesitantly as her blue-green eyes ran over my face.

"Give us your bag then. I'm your housekeeper—pleased to meet you," she added, glancing at Sage in something like admonishment. "I'll drop it inside the door for you while you explore the grounds. Watch your footing around the lake it's, well—actually, why don't you show Georgina around, Sage?" Ms Weathers didn't wait for a response before hefting my suitcase and hurrying off towards the house. Sage looked like he'd rather do anything

else, so I smiled at him, big and cheery.

“Where to first?” I said, watching him closely for any indication of what that had all been about. Why did he care so much if I was here or not?

His scowl seemed perpetually slapped across his face, or maybe it was just the effect I had on him, but nonetheless he set off towards the lake and I followed with less irritation and more curiosity. I had the feeling that if he bothered to smile, he might be worryingly attractive—the kind of guy you’d probably say something stupid in front of and curse yourself over as soon as he was out of sight. He couldn’t have been much older than me, but something about his stoic silence made me feel young, stupid.

His face was so slim it was almost narrow, with prominent cheekbones and deep-set eyes. It was a shame, really, that in just one conversation I’d already managed to piss him off.

“So what exactly do you do here?”

He shot me a look. “Grounds.”

From his tone, you would have thought I’d just colourfully insulted his mother and then delivered a swift kick to the balls. I raised an eyebrow. “Have you worked here long?”

A twitch of his full lower lip was the only answer I received. I didn’t think it was strange for me to ask though—in a few short weeks I’d become a home-owner and now also an employer, apparently. How much did they get paid? Should I be reprimanding them for the clear lack of upkeep? I had no idea and the thoughts were more than a little overwhelming as I slipped on the slick mud and followed Sage, who seemed to have no issue gripping the ground in his thick gardener’s boots. The ground sloped downwards, off to the right of the house and the smell of water grew clearer even as the grass grew sparser and the path gave way to more mud. It would have felt claustrophobic if not for Sage’s hulking presence and the sun that persistently shone through the black clouds overhead, as if in defiance of the rain.

The grass lightened up as we rounded a corner and there was the lake. It

was bigger than I'd expected and seemed to trail off into several off-shoots, complete with its own wooden boat and oars for paddling. It looked like the perfect place for someone to spend a sunny afternoon, like something out of a Jane Austen novel, gliding along the water with a frilly umbrella overhead. I snorted aloud and Sage shot me a look before continuing on around the edge of the lake where the mud grew stickier amidst the remains of the grass. I couldn't help wondering what this place looked like in the summer, buzzing with life. I bet my mother would have loved it.

The thought sent a pang through me that I pushed to one side as Sage and I walked in silence. There was a small wooden lookout and our footsteps thunked against the surface comfortingly as we walked to the end and stared out at the trees on the opposite bank, swaying in the wind. Weeping willows, I was pretty sure they were called.

"The cemetery is over the back," Sage said, a surprising softness in the rumble of his voice, and I jumped a little, so lost in my own thoughts as I watched the water that I'd half-forgotten he was there. His dark eyes were unfathomable but from the way he'd offered up the information, he had to know about my mother.

"Did you see her go there? That day?"

"Yes."

I wanted to question him further, even for just the smallest details—like, what had she been wearing? Had it been gloomy, like it was now? Or had she sailed over there with a smile on her face in the sunshine? Though, I supposed what I really wanted to know was: *what killed her?* A question to which Sage undoubtedly didn't have the answer. The police would have questioned him, and Weathers, so everything he knew, they knew and the police had seemed... stumped, for lack of better word. She'd been alone, the sole victim with no other similar incidents in the last year,

I didn't ask to see the cemetery, I wasn't ready for that yet, and Sage didn't mention it further. He stood close to the wooden rail in front of us, not

quite touching it and not quite looking at me either when he spoke. “You shouldn’t stay here, you know.”

“Shouldn’t I?” I asked mildly, watching the movement of the trees as I fought my irritation. I’d known him for five seconds and yet he thought it was his place to tell me what I should or shouldn’t do, like it was objective fact?

“Yes,” he said firmly. “It’s not safe here.”

“You’re here,” I pointed out and he looked away from me again, the sunlight catching on the gold of his glasses and making me squint. “Ms Weathers too.”

“It’s different.”

“How?” I tried, but he didn’t answer. Normally a man of few words might have intrigued me, in this case it just pissed me off. “Well, I have no intention of leaving, even if I did have somewhere else to go.”

“You have the inheritance right? You could go anywhere you wanted.” His mouth turned down at the corners as he looked at me and I studied him back with equal intensity.

“True,” I said slowly, nodding as I looked back in the direction of the cemetery. “But I need to be here and, frankly, I don’t think it’s any of your business what I do or where I stay.”

“She wouldn’t want you here,” he insisted, following my gaze to the cemetery and correctly guessing where my thoughts had gone.

“How would you know what she would want? You’re just the gardener, Sage. It’s my decision to make.” My nostrils flared as I stepped closer and the professional veneer I had been trying to project crumbled in the face of my grief, the anger that still filled me since I’d learned of my mother’s death sharpening my tongue. “So why don’t you mind your own business?”

He watched me, dark eyes burning as he clenched his jaw, and I pulled back, trying to recapture some air of unaffectedness.

“Besides, it doesn’t matter what she wants, she’s dead. I’m here. I’m

alive—and there are things she never told me, things I need to know.” My voice broke and I looked away, out at the bank opposite and the headstones peeking through the waving branches of the willows.

“Have you ever heard the saying ‘curiosity killed the cat’?”

“I don’t have a cat,” I said, deadpan and felt a surge of triumph when his lip twitched. “Come on then, there must be more to see than just this.”

Sage sighed and strode back down the small pier and I followed him bemusedly. He headed away from both the house and the lake, instead following a small woodland trail in between the trees. I hesitated for a moment and then followed. I didn’t think Sage had killed my mother, but he’d taken an instant dislike of me and had been strangely shifty ever since I’d arrived. Sage might not be a murderer, but he was definitely hiding something. I took a small amount of comfort that Ms Weathers had seen me come out here with him, so if I mysteriously went missing I was pretty sure it would be a case even the police could solve.

The trees seemed to swallow us whole, wrapping us in a darkness that felt comfortable, like sticking your head under your bed sheets on a warm summer’s day and looking at the sun shining through the threads. A few clouds peeked through the canopy and birds chirped, rustling in the branches above our heads. Sage stopped up ahead, watching me with a small quirk to his lips that raised my eyebrows, he almost looked... pleased.

He met my look with a shrug. “It’s not often that people find the woods here as comfortable as I do.”

“It’s peaceful.”

His lips parted and he seemed to swallow hard before he muttered. “It is.”

We walked quietly for a while, our passage swallowed up by the leaves that had begun to fall to the ground in the last week or so and the large tree trunks that had fallen to the ground, now covered in fresh moss.

“The lake runs into the Avon,” Sage said and his voice in the stillness of the forest made the birds quiet for a moment as I nodded. “It doesn’t have

much of a current, but best not to be out there during the stormy weather.”

“I’m a good swimmer.”

“That may be,” he smirked and I choked, “but even the best swimmers can’t out-stroke lightning.”

I didn’t know what to say to that and settled for staring at him like an idiot until his brief smile faded. The trail rounded off to the right and a path of bushes seemed to follow it, covered in bright purple and white flowers and deep berries that had me salivating. I wasn’t sure how long it had been since I’d eaten, I could only hope there was something in the house, otherwise I’d have to see if anyone from the nearby town could deliver something. I reached absently for a berry and gasped when Sage’s hand gripped my wrist tightly.

I swallowed and looked up into furious brown eyes, softened only by the ridiculously long lashes that seemed like they would interfere with his lenses. I stepped back from the bush and he let go abruptly, but I could still feel his touch on my skin like a goosebump, marking the spot forever.

“Don’t,” he said slowly, “eat the berries. Unless you want to die a slow and painful death.”

My brows drew together in confusion as I looked between him and the colourful flowers. They did look sort of familiar, but from where?

Sage sighed and it sounded irritated—it was almost impressive how he managed to infuse his disdain for me into every ounce of his being. “Belladonna.”

I took a large step away from the bushes as if burned and he smirked, enjoying my alarm. Bastard.

“Don’t worry, they don’t bite.”

My scowl took over my face and I hesitated when he laughed, the sound deep and pleasant and my toes clenched in my boots. I stomped away, his smug laughter echoing after me and I growled, frustrated with both myself and him. I only stopped when he called after me, laughter still in his voice,

“You’re going the wrong way.”

I huffed and changed direction, ignoring the self-satisfied smirk on his face as we headed out of the woods and reached the end of the drive.

“You know, for a gardener, you don’t seem to have done much gardening.”

Sage’s smile vanished. “Things got out of hand while I was... away.”

I raised one eyebrow. Vague much? “Away where?” I wasn’t surprised when he didn’t reply. “You know, technically I’m your boss. You could try to be nicer to me. Or at least answer my questions. Did my mum hire you? Or have you been here longer than that?”

Sage looked out at the grass and his voice was tight with some emotion I couldn’t place when he replied, “Yes. She hired me and then I had to take a—a leave of absence. Things built up while I was gone.”

I watched him steadily as he avoided my eyes. “Well, if the inside of the house is anything like the outside, I reckon I’ve got my work cut out for me.”

“What do you mean?” He turned to me, the snap of urgency in his voice surprising me.

“I mean that this place clearly needs some TLC and it’s going to take some work to make this a home.”

Sage shook his head and I didn’t even try to decipher what he was muttering under his breath. He walked me back to the front door and then left without another word and I snorted.

“Nice getting to know you too!” I snorted but the amusement faded quickly as I stood in front of the door, filled with a sudden queasiness that made my heart race. This could be the key to getting answers, to understanding my mum and my past better, but it also felt irrevocable. Like if I took that final step, my fate would be cemented and tied with Alswell’s for the rest of my life.

Swallowing down my nerves, I turned the handle and stepped inside.



NEAR POISONING ASIDE, ALSWELL MANOR WASN'T NEARLY IN SUCH BAD disrepair as I'd first assumed. Sure, it was a little dusty, it *seriously* needed airing out—what Ms Weathers had been doing all this time I didn't know—but they were easy fixes. Mow the lawn (possibly a two or three day job), open all the windows and get dusting, buy some new linens and, most importantly, some provisions to stock the kitchen. All that had been in the cupboard was Earl Grey tea bags, my mum's favourite, and it had made me wonder just how long she'd been here before her death. I hated the stuff, so it looked like a trip to the supermarket was definitely in my future, unless they delivered all the way out here... though more worryingly was the lack of service. If I didn't find a space on this land that actually had some signal I wouldn't be ordering anything. I mean, this place didn't even have Wi-Fi.

My first impression of the house was *big*. The ceilings were high but the dark wood muffled noise instead of allowing it to echo—or maybe that was just the layer of dust coating everything—and the corridors seemed to stretch on forever. There were small plaid armchairs placed intermittently next to tall armoires that held candle sticks and spiders, and I learned my lesson about sitting in them the hard way when a puff of grime flooded the air, making me cough and my eyes itch.

Ms Weathers seemed woefully underprepared for guests but had clearly done her best this afternoon. I'd definitely slept in more questionable places on the very rare nights out I'd gone on. I'd counted at least eight bedrooms upstairs, four on each floor and most with their own attached bathroom but there had also been a larger family bathroom near the centre of the hall and a separate toilet, then there was one lounge area on the landing that had an armchair next to a long-cold fireplace. I dreaded to think what the plumbing might be like, or even when the last time a tap had been turned on.

Downstairs there was a large kitchen with wooden floor and marble

counters, complete with homey dining table, that Ms Weathers had quickly shooed me out of. Then there had been a formal dining room laid with silver plates coated in more dust an inch thick, a small nook that held outerwear and gardening equipment, and another sitting room with matching chairs and fireplace to the one on the first floor. It was more space than I could ever need, I'd need to adopt at least thirty dogs just to feel like even a modicum of the space was being utilised. It was going to be a lot of work to clean up, but I had the time—plus it would give me the perfect excuse to look for clues as to who my mother had really been and why we'd left Alswell in the first place.

I headed back to the kitchen and sat myself at the table in there, watching Ms Weathers bustling around, cleaning nothing.

“Have you worked at the manor for long?” I asked, hoping Ms Weathers might be in a more conversational mood than Sage.

“Oh yes, dear. My parents worked here before me and I took over from them. I remember your mother from when she was a young woman, much the same age as you now I'd suppose.”

I sat up straighter in my chair. “Really? What was she like?”

“Polite.” Ms Weathers smiled and her eyes crinkled at the corners. “She was sweet, really. Of course, Edward fell for her instantly, or so he said. You look a great deal like her, you know.”

I blushed. “Was she happy? With Edward?”

“Very much so!”

“Then why did she—”

“Leave?” Ms Weathers' face was gentle as it took me in. “That's a question only your mother could have answered, I'm afraid.” Her eyes flicked to a space just left of my head and I turned discreetly, seeing nothing but empty air. “I've prepared a room for you, dear. You'll have to rustle something up for dinner with what we've got here I'm afraid. You'll have no luck getting anybody to deliver anything out here.”

I sighed, having expected as much, and resigned myself to a cheese sandwich for dinner. Even if I could cook, I was too tired to contemplate it at that moment. Sage appeared in the doorway as I finished off the other half and his scowl was back, I rolled my eyes at the sight of it.

“It’s almost sundown. You should probably let Ms Weathers show you to your room.”

I looked down at my watch incredulously, it was barely seven-thirty and he wanted me to go to sleep? I had barely scratched the surface of this place today! Ms Weathers had offered to give me a tour, but I’d declined, preferring to poke around myself—unsupervised.

“You’ve got to be joking.”

Sage’s frown, if possible, became darker and his voice was harsh. “Do I look like I’m joking?”

Ms Weathers looked back and forth between us, wringing her hands until I levelled my gaze on her. “Well it would give you a chance to settle in, dear, get unpacked and comfortable. Do you have more luggage that you’re going to send for?”

“No.” I shrugged. “I travel light.”

“Right, well. You must be tired after such a long day. Let’s get you comfortable and then I’ll leave you to it.”

She rushed to leave the room, her short legs carrying her forward at an alarming pace before she stopped, looking back at me and urging me to follow. I ignored Sage completely, focusing on Ms Weathers as we walked up the wide staircase that ran along the edge of the left-hand wall and made our way onto the first floor. The carpeted red runners on the floor were as dusty as the rest of the house and I made a mental note to hunt down a Hoover tomorrow.

“Here we are.” Ms Weathers bypassed the lounge area and stopped outside of a door that looked no different to all the others, but inside the windows had clearly been open and the sheets on the bed looked fresh. The

room still smelled faintly of dust but the floor had been swept and the cobwebs in the corners knocked down.

“This is perfect, thank you,” I said, surprised. Given the state of the other rooms I had expected this one to be just as bad, but it was roomy, with a four-poster bed that looked classic rather than old, and walls that were a mixture of faded floral wallpaper and exposed brick. As long as I didn’t wake up with a spider dangling in my face I didn’t really mind too much what the room looked like, but the relatively clean state of things helped set me at ease. Had my mother been staying at the house itself? Was that why this room was a little fresher than the others?

“Oh, it’s nothing.” Ms Weathers smiled. “I had some help.”

I wondered when Sage had had the time to help her, or why he would even bother, but for now I decided to just be grateful and not look a gift horse in the mouth.

“Sage and I will be on-site if you need us, dear, but we are off the clock once the sun goes down, alright? We’re just one floor up.” Ms Weathers seemed uncharacteristically serious as she paused with her hand on the door knob, like she couldn’t wait to leave. I nodded and she smiled slightly. “I know it may sound odd, but it really would be a big help if you could stay in here until the sun is up, dear. The house and grounds aren’t safe in the dark for those who don’t know their way and we don’t want you getting lost.” She didn’t wait for my response, just swept out and I found myself straining my ears, half-expecting to hear a key turn in the lock on the bedroom door, but all was silent. I waited a few moments to see if I could hear them chatting in the hallway before turning to the suitcase Weathers had propped on top of the stool at the base of the bed.

The room was grand in size, almost double what I’d had in my student accommodation though that made pretty much anything seem big in comparison. I had my own bathroom with one of those old-fashioned latch handles that always seems to stick when you try to pull them up again. I

poked around the room, cautiously opening the wardrobe and half-expecting bats to fly out. When nothing swooped towards me or ran at me, I set about hanging up the small amount of clothes I owned and folded the rest, putting them in the clean, empty drawers of my nightstand.

The sun had fully slunk down behind the horizon but it was still far too early for me to even consider sleep. I had a handful of books I'd brought with me, as well as my e-reader. I generally only bought hard-copies of my favourites—doing an English degree had taught me to be stingy with my shelf space. I walked over to the largest window in the wall opposite my bed and peered outside. It was beautiful. So far from the city, the stars seemed so much brighter and when I cracked the window the breeze was cool and smelled like night time, heady and earthy. The trees were dark silhouettes against an even darker sky and the white-bleached fountain seemed to stand out like a beacon. The other two windows were so small that I had no idea what on earth they were for—they were too tiny and too low down to feasibly see out of but I drew their miniature curtains nevertheless.

I perched on the end of my new bed, clad in my summer pyjamas and a pair of thick woollen socks. My feet were the only part of me that ever seemed to truly grow cold and the late summer was no exception. I let the unfamiliar sounds of the house settle around me like a blanket. It was still with just the odd bird call or buzz of an insect outside disturbing the silence. It made me wonder where Sage and Ms Weathers slept—she'd mentioned being one floor up but I hadn't seen any rooms that looked particularly lived-in when I'd snooped around earlier. I stifled a sigh, placing my three current favourite books on my nightstand, arranging them carefully so the bookmarks in each wouldn't slip out. *The Fall of the House of Usher*, *The Bloody Chamber* and *The Tell-Tale Heart* seemed to stare up at me, but I couldn't bring my mind to settle enough to read. I felt restless and wanted to explore, to find the answers I needed.

Decision made, I stood and crept as quietly as I could to the bedroom

door, halting when I heard a thud outside. My heart beat a little quicker as the footsteps stopped outside my room and I held my breath. It felt oddly nostalgic. As a child, I'd often wanted to stay up late reading and would sneak out of bed and to the bookshelf in our living room to pick out a new book—my mum had taken away my book before bed, knowing I'd only stay up to read if I could. But somehow, whenever I would attempt to steal away to the shelves in the living room, she always knew. *Always*. I would creep up to the bedroom door, much like I had now, and footsteps would sound outside. I would freeze and the footsteps would stop, my mum's shadow disrupting the light that flowed in from under the door, and I would hold my breath so she couldn't hear me on the other side. The feet never moved, not until I'd retreated back to my bed, my eyes on her silhouette the whole time. Then she would walk away.

I had the same feeling now.

Impossible, of course, my mother was dead. She would never stand outside my door again and chide me for staying up too late reading—but sometimes it hurt less to imagine. I moved back to my bedside and quickly flipped on the lamp, the yellow glow soothing me and the glass top cast swirling patterns on the walls. I glanced back at the door and clasped my hands over my mouth to hide my gasp.

There, beneath the door, a familiar shadow disrupting the light that flowed around it. I blinked and the shadows remained. My hands trembled as I moved closer to the door and rested my cheek against the wood, listening intently.

Nothing. No breaths or rustling of movement.

I blew out a long breath. I wasn't sure what I'd been thinking, it was probably just a chair or something else outside creating the illusion of a presence behind the door.

I let my shoulders relax and turned away to head back to bed when the smell reached me, sweet and floral, and I inhaled greedily before it faded.

I sat down quietly when my legs hit the edge of my bed and then folded my body down, my eyes fixed on the gap between the door and my floor boards. The shadow was gone. It had been a long day, I was tired and grieving and of course I had smelled my mum's signature scent, she'd probably stayed in this room too.

The click of the lamp sounded loud in the silence as I turned off the lamp and felt my eyes grow heavy. But for just a moment as my head hit the pillow, I could have sworn I heard familiar, light footsteps walking away.

Chapter Three

I woke up the next morning freezing. I double checked the windows—all closed—and had eventually put down the draft to the fact that this was an old house. The curtains in my room did very little to prevent the watery sunlight of an early dawn from washing over me and likely less to keep the heat in, but it had been oddly refreshing to wake with the world. I guessed the countryside made me contemplative, because I'd spent the first twenty minutes or-so that I'd been awake just lying in bed, looking up at an unfamiliar ceiling, getting to know the individual cracks in the wall before I even dared to stick one toe out of the bed.

I'd hurried over to the en-suite, the old door creaking in a way that made my skin recoil, and hurriedly brushed my teeth over a tiny sink and spotted mirror. The toilet was tucked away awkwardly into one corner and I used it as quickly as possible once I spotted a spider nearby, slowly inching its way closer to me. The cold seemed to be different here, chilling me to the bone, so I thought a nice hot shower would help warm me up. But as I turned the surprisingly modern shower on, I'd yelped at the ice-cold temperature, jumping away, and then shrieked again when my leap put me face to face with yet another long-legged creature. Movement in the corner of my eye had me frantically waving my arms above my head, batting away non-existent creepy crawlies, only to pause when a familiar scent had a lump rising in my

throat—roses, violets and vanilla. My mother's signature scent.

I'd spun around, looking for her as the smell was so strong it was like she was in the room and the footsteps I'd heard last night had me on edge. I'd yanked open the shower door so fast that I'd skidded on the old tiles, not really sure what I was doing or what I was looking for. She was gone. Maybe being here in this place would do more harm than good, being so close to her and yet so far away. I knew she was gone, had seen her body myself, but still I looked for her. Grief was funny that way. Like seeing the back of someone's head in a crowd and feeling your pulse leap because for a second, for a single split moment, you think they're *them*, even though you know better.

I'd caught myself on a dusty towel rack, panting, and then frozen in place when I noticed a familiar bar of soap sitting in the shower wall recess. The same kind my mother had loved and used every day, no wonder I could smell it... her.

Tears formed, my eyes stinging like my body wanted to punish me for having foolhardy hope when logically my mind knew that I would never see her again but the soul was quick to forget that fact. As was the heart.

By the time I made my way downstairs to the kitchen, I was wearing three pairs of socks. I was normally relatively warm-blooded and though we were now well into September, the air remained muggy as the days attempted to shrug off the final vestiges of summer. I shivered in a thick cream cable knit jumper that was probably the warmest thing I owned, with semi-wet hair and my three pairs of socks and Ms. Weathers fussed over me as she took in the puffiness of my eyes. Sage hadn't even looked at me and that was fine, I supposed. I was here because it felt right, because I *needed* to be here if I wanted any hope of discovering more about my past, about my mother and what had happened to her.

There was a slightly yellowed white fridge standing in the corner of the large kitchen, bare except for a carton of eggs, the last of the cheese, a small

pint of milk that had expired weeks ago, and two grapefruits. That settled things for me—my mother hadn't just been visiting the cemetery coincidentally or popping into the house. The earl grey, the soap, the grapefruits that she liked to eat for breakfast in the morning... she had stayed here. For how long, I couldn't be sure and it seemed like maybe Sage and Ms Weathers didn't want me to know—why else wouldn't they answer my questions? I didn't know why, but they weren't telling me the truth.

“Did she stay here long? Before...” I still couldn't bring myself to put it into words, as if hearing them aloud would somehow make it more real than inside my head.

Ms Weathers jumped, despite the fact that she had been watching me keenly ever since I'd arrived downstairs. “Who, dear?”

My jaw tightened and I gave myself a moment to unclench before saying as pleasantly as I was able, “My mother.”

“I don't think—”

“Please don't lie to me. Please.”

Sage looked up at me, his face was unreadable but soft and I looked away uncomfortably. “A few weeks.”

“Why?”

He shrugged. “I didn't ask.”

I tightened my hands around the top of the wooden chair that was tucked into the rough-hewn table. “Thank you.”

Sage continued to watch me quietly, offering nothing more until the stillness of the air began to unnerve me.

“Is there a car or something I can use to get into town? I need to grab a few things.”

‘No, dear—’ Ms Weather's said just as Sage stood and nodded and I raised my eyebrows, looking between the two of them.

“Follow me.”

“Do you need anything?” I asked her before I followed Sage out of the

room. "From town," I explained and some emotion crossed her face too quickly for me to understand it.

"Oh, that's sweet of you, love. There's nothing I need."

I gave her a nod and a small smile before walking out and finding Sage waiting by the front door. I pulled on my furry winter boots and coat and followed him out of the house and around to the left-hand side. We hadn't explored here yesterday. I still had so much to see at Alswell, still trying to understand its rhythms and routines, but despite the cold shower and creaky floors, I'd slept better last night than I had in days.

Sage managed to walk quietly across the dirt and gravel that was unevenly scattered throughout the driveway, leading us to an open-ended barn attached to the side of the house. A truck sat inside, covered in a white sheet as though it were in mourning, as left behind in this place as everything else.

"Whose is it?"

"Mine."

I looked at him in surprise and he shrugged. "I don't get away from the house often. You're more than welcome to use it, in fact I'd encourage you to do so."

"Still trying to convince me to leave?" I joked, strolling forward and tugging the sheet off, chucking it in the back of the small bed. It had a cover that slid over the depth of the truck, so I could easily fit several bags of shopping in the back without having to crowd myself too much in the two-seater front of the truck.

"You would be a fool to stay, there's nothing for you here." His golden brown hair seemed to catch the light as he walked around to face me over the top of the truck.

I decided to ignore him, he would eventually get the message that I was here to stay. If he had a problem with it then *he* could be the one to leave.

"Do you and Ms Weathers stay on site?"

“You can call her Angelica, you know.”

I folded my arms across my chest and wrinkled my nose. “It feels wrong.”

A flash of humour lifted his mouth and brows before he hid it. “I can see why. You’re what, eighteen? Nineteen?”

I snorted as I tugged open the door to the driver’s side and found the key in the ignition. “Old enough to be your boss,” I said sweetly and then followed it up with, “I’ll be twenty-one in February.”

“So young.”

“Yeah the, what, three years you have on me make so much difference.” I rolled my eyes as I gestured to the keys. “I take it you don’t get a lot of thieves in the countryside?”

“Not many people come up to the house. Most folks recognise a bad thing when they feel it.”

“It doesn’t feel bad here to me.”

“Then there’s something wrong with you.” I looked at him sharply and he rubbed the back of his neck, looking slightly regretful about that last remark but still, he didn’t apologise for it either. “Look, you’re young, you could go out and live your life, rather than wasting away here.”

I shook my head as I climbed into the car. I was too cold to stand around having this conversation with him, why did he think it was any of his business what I did or where I stayed? “Piss off with all this *you’re young* crap. You’re barely any older than me and, frankly, I don’t give a shit if I have your approval to be here. I’m staying, deal with it.”

He blew out a long breath before shoving his hands in the pockets of his blue overalls. “I’m older than I look.”

“Still don’t care,” I said cheerfully and he muttered something that I was certain was uncomplimentary and I pursed my lips. *Older than he looked*, that was the kind of bullshit a sixteen-year-old spouted at the pub when he got asked for ID and the thought made me fight back a laugh. “Now, I would

like to actually get into town sometime this century. Will you help me with the gate?”

For a moment he just stared at me in silence and then he spun on his heel, walking back across the grounds and in the direction of the lake we’d seen yesterday.

“Is that a no? Fine, I’ll do it myself,” I muttered before slamming the car door a little harder than necessary and turning the key. The car sputtered but eventually the engine roared into life and I brushed the dust off of the steering wheel and dash with the bottom of my coat sleeve, sneezing three times in a row before it settled again. I reached for the heat, cranking it up as I carefully backed out of the barn, the wheels gently spraying gravel as I manoeuvred around the central fountain and drove down toward the gate at a snail’s pace.

Sage really wasn’t going to come and help with the gate and seemed to have disappeared. I winced, it had just started to become nice and toasty inside the cab and I climbed out regretfully, pulling the gate open so I could drive through. From here, the house seemed larger than life, like it could hold all the hopes and answers I’d dreamed of finding. Inside though was a different matter, the dust, the quiet, the *age*, it felt more like a place where dreams went to wither.

I pulled through the gate and stuck on my handbrake, intending to get out and close it behind me, but it was already shut. I hadn’t heard or seen a thing, but I had to assume Sage had felt guilty and had come back in time to close up behind me. Or maybe he was just trying to stop me from getting back in, but I’d left a first edition copy of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* inside the house, so I would have come back for that even if nothing else. But I wasn’t going to let him dictate to me what I should or shouldn’t do—he couldn’t drive me away, if that was his plan. I didn’t want to believe that Ms Weathers was involved in whatever was going on with him but I couldn’t deny the way they seemed to whisper and look meaningfully at each other when they thought I

wasn't paying attention.

The drive into town really didn't take long, thirty minutes at most, but it felt like it took longer because of the winding country roads and my unfamiliarity driving the truck. It was a pretty smooth ride, though it had been a while since I'd had to drive anywhere. I hadn't bothered keeping my car when I'd gone off to uni, so some of my gear changes were a little...

The truck lurched forward slightly and I would have been embarrassed if there had been anyone on these roads except for me to see it. It was still relatively early though and I hadn't realised just how remote we truly were up at Alswell. There were a couple of other old manor houses that I passed on my way into town, most even more run down than mine.

Mine. It felt odd to be able to say that. Alswell Manor belonged to me, for better or worse.

By the time I'd pulled into Leamington Spa, my driving had evened out again, though I would need to sort out some insurance for the truck if I was going to keep borrowing it.

I'd never been to the town centre before and it was an odd mixture of independently arty and pretentious, but I supposed all places had their quirks.

The priority was to stock up on food, but I also wanted to get some more jumpers and other warm clothes, as well as get a plumber out to look at the pipes—I wouldn't be able to avoid having a shower forever and that icy water had been too unbearable for me to stick it out. Thankfully, I'd found a number for a local guy who had a small office of sorts just off of the main high street who could come out tomorrow morning and hopefully fix the problem. He'd been shocked when I'd told him where I was staying and, presumably because of how young I looked, had even thought I was trying to prank him. I hoped I'd convinced him I was serious, but I'd agreed to pay a fifty-pound deposit anyway so he knew I wasn't just fucking around with him.

I stocked up on jumpers and blankets at a decently sized *Primark* and

stopped to shove the haul into the truck bed before moving onto the big *Sainsbury's* and dropping possibly more money than I'd ever spent in my life on groceries. But there was nothing in the house beyond the few things my mother had presumably stocked and I couldn't survive off of earl grey. I needed proper tea and snacks and whatever ready meals I could get my hands on to stick in the freezer. I had no clue if the oven or hob worked and, as I stood in the pasta aisle, I realised I was pretty close to freaking out. I had a whole house to basically renovate, no clue what I was doing, and nobody to call if I needed help because everyone I'd had was gone.

I took a few deep breaths to calm myself, ignoring the concerned looks an attentive worker was giving me, and marched my trolley on to the crisps section. I needed comfort food. ASAP.

I loaded all the groceries into the truck and then walked the trolley back before climbing into the car and just sitting there for a moment, not quite ready to go back to the house that was not quite a home. As I often had the past few weeks, I couldn't help wishing more than anything else that my mum was here. But she wasn't, and the closest thing I could get to her was waiting for me thirty-minutes away, buried under dust and neglect.

As much as Sage might wish otherwise, I was going home to Alswell Manor and I was going to find my answers. Even if it was the last thing I would ever do.

Chapter Four

“Look, I don’t know what your game is, sweetheart, but I’d appreciate it if you left me out of it from now on.”

I didn’t know what to say, I simply stared at the plumber until his deep bronze skin graced a blush. “I’m sorry?”

He waved in the direction of the upstairs before slinging a rag down over his shoulder. “I won’t put in a complaint this time, but this better be the last time I’m out here, okay?”

“No,” I said, brows furrowed deeply as frustration and confusion warred inside me. “Not okay. I have no idea what you’re going on about.”

It seemed that had been the wrong thing to say and the plumber tutted loudly, muttering about the ungrateful youth, while I stood there bewildered. He’d been rude ever since he walked through the door, looking around as if the house itself might creep up and bite him and, well, I could understand his trepidation. The place was run down, the corridors were almost perpetually dark and though there was electricity, it tended to cut out unreliably so unlit candles and matches were scattered across multiple surfaces as you walked through the house. He’d given me a brief smile but had completely ignored Ms Weathers, even when she’d politely asked if he’d like a cup of tea. I’d never heard of a plumber turning down a cuppa, but the fact that he’d not even bothered to reply had put me on edge almost immediately.

“Come with me,” he said eventually and turned to the left to go up the stairs to what had become my room. We walked straight through to the ensuite and he didn’t hesitate before immediately turning on the shower. Steam billowed out of the head and I grinned as the warm spray splashed at me.

“You fixed it!”

“No.” He shook his head, brown eyes serious as they watched me before he turned away and stopped the running water. “I didn’t do anything.”

“But it’s hot.”

“There’s nothing wrong with your pipes.”

“Then why was the water freezing this morning and yesterday?”

He shrugged. “Are you sure that it was?”

Was I— “Yes.” I snapped back, folding my arms across my chest. “Look, it’s fine, whatever. I’m just glad it’s fixed. How much do I owe you?”

“Lady, you’re not listening to me. I didn’t do shit to your pipes. There’s nothing wrong with ‘em. If you have me back out here again for this, I’ll report you for harassment.”

My mouth dropped open as he pushed past me. That had been a little extreme—but if he was going to act like that then I wouldn’t be calling him again anyway.

It felt like the temperature of the room dropped by several degrees and I shivered and hurried out after him. He was clearly eager to be gone though and I watched him barge past Sage who was forced to twist out of his way as the plumber stormed out of the house.

“What was his problem?” Sage asked.

“I have no idea.” I slipped my phone out of my pocket to check the time and grimaced. Sage had hustled me up to my room before sundown again last night but I hadn’t minded too much, too tired from my trip into town and the time I’d spent Hoovering the entire house afterward to argue. But if he planned on doing the same thing tonight, I had better eat dinner now and then strike up a conversation about it later.

Thankfully, the oven and hob did work. So I cooked some veggie burgers and, while I waited for them, washed some of the dusty plates in the cupboard as I tried not to grimace. I could understand a bit of disrepair, this place was way too much upkeep for just one person, but it truly seemed like Ms Weathers hadn't stayed on top of *anything*—at this point, I just felt lucky that I hadn't seen or heard any mice. I honestly felt a little confused about what she did all day—she didn't cook or clean, and Sage didn't do much gardening either. I half-wondered if they were actually squatters performing a long con.

Sage sat at the kitchen table and watched me while I worked until eventually I raised an eyebrow at him. The draining board was becoming very full, luckily I'd had the forethought to buy some tea towels yesterday otherwise I'd be a little stuck right about now. "You could help me, you know."

"I could," he said, staying where he was and I huffed out a breath of irritation.

"Where's Ms Weathers?"

"*Angelica*," he said for emphasis, "has gone to bed. She wasn't feeling well."

"I hope the plumber didn't upset her, he ignored her the whole time he was here."

Sage shrugged. "Some people believe staff should be unseen and unheard."

I clenched my hands and soapy water shot up at me, soaking the front of my plaid shirt. "Fuck."

A quiet chuckle had my head raising slowly as I looked at Sage under my lashes. I didn't understand him, was he truly so upset about me being here that he would refuse to help me with the simplest things?

"You know, you don't have to stay here." The light from the sunset

caught on the lenses of his glasses as Sage sat forward, eyes piercing in their intensity and with the light on him I could see that they weren't brown as I had initially thought but a rich shade of hazel that looked almost green against his gold frames. "If you can't stand to be around me or help me, then why not just go?"

He looked away and I found myself focusing more intensely on the muscle that feathered in his jaw than I had any right to be doing. "I can't leave."

"You're young," I said, deliberately parroting his words back to him. "I'll give you a generous resignation package."

A smile kicked up one side of his mouth for a second before he let it drop. "Thanks."

Surprise made my breath catch. "You're leaving?"

Now he really did laugh. "No. But *you* really should." I rolled my eyes as I turned away to pull my dinner out of the oven. "I saw that."

I mimicked him and felt the deep vibration of his laugh wash over me.

I sat down opposite him, burgers slapped into a sesame bun and thrown haphazardly onto a now-clean plate and took a bite as my stomach growled. I actually liked the manual labour of cleaning up the house, it let my thoughts breathe and roam rather than being pinned down as I turned things over in my mind repeatedly. But god, I wasn't sure I'd ever been this hungry either.

"Did you speak to her much when she was here? My mum, I mean."

It felt like the house fell silent, like it was waiting with as much nervousness as I was to hear his answer.

"No, we barely spoke, actually."

"You didn't try to warn her away too?" I sniffed lightly as I finished my first burger and moved on to my second. "Pity, she clearly could have used it more than me," I remarked off-handedly and half-bitterly and Sage was quiet as he watched me.

"Much like her daughter, she wouldn't have listened to me."

“Oh, I listen to you. I hear you loud and clear—you and Ms Weathers, whispering away together. I’m just not going to leave.”

“I don’t know what you’re hoping to find here—”

“Answers,” I said without hesitation, brushing my hands free of crumbs as I leaned forward to analyse him. “I want to know why she came back here and why she left in the first place. I want to know what she was running from.” I bit my lip as I looked out of the large window above the sink, the sun had started to drop low in the sky and I knew Sage would soon be attempting to shuffle me off to my room. I turned back to him and said quietly, “I want to know who murdered her.”

A door banged somewhere upstairs and I jumped. Sage didn’t react to either the noise or my words, just stood slowly and slung a hand casually into one of his overall pockets.

Something tickled at the back of my neck as I stood and I glanced behind me, half expecting to find a spider dangling down from the ceiling, but instead I saw only my reflection in the window. I blinked, staring at it for a moment longer than necessary when it looked like my features belonged to someone else entirely. Mine but not mine. Hair dark but faded, eyes slightly too wide... and they were both blue.

A hand touched my arm, just a brush of fingertips before he let go, and I closed my eyes, breathing shallowly. When I opened them, all that reflected in the near-dark of the fading sun was my own face and the flashing rims of Sage’s glasses as he glanced outside and then away.

“Come on, you’ve had a busy day. Let’s call it a night.” When I stayed where I was he sighed deeply until his fingers wrapped around mine and tugged. As soon as I took a step forward he let go, but I could still feel him there, like the imprint of his hand still held mine. “I think there might be a storm tonight. We get a fair few of them up this way, we’re a little high up out here so the weather tends to be worse than what they get in town.”

I said nothing, just followed him up the long wooden staircase, my hand

tracing the grain as we walked to my room.

“So please, for once, just promise me you’ll take me seriously? The house... Well, at night it’s like it has a mind of its own.”

That piqued my interest and I could tell he realised his mistake because his mouth drew into a hard line as we stopped outside of my bedroom door.

“I mean it, Georgina.”

“I’m sure you do,” I yawned. Connected as I felt to it, Alswell was nothing more than wood and brick. Tangible, but harmless.

“I’m trying to keep you safe. Promise me you’ll stay in your room tonight.”

“And tomorrow night?”

“Maybe you’ll leave before we get to that point,” he teased, the words softened by the slight smile he gave me before he stiffened. “I have to go. Promise me.”

I nodded and his eyes narrowed like he could tell I had my toes crossed. Tonight, nothing was going to keep me in my room. There was something strange lurking here in the dark and I was going to find out what it was.

Chapter Five

I waited until true night had fallen, not wanting to risk running into Sage in the halls in case he had stayed in the house after his shift. It wasn't that I particularly cared what he thought, it was more that I couldn't be arsed with the drama. This was my house. This was my life. Alswell was just a house, *my* house, and if I wanted to leave my room after sundown, then that's what I would do.

The darkness of the room had turned soft, welcoming, and the chill in the air had been warmed through by my breaths as I'd laid in bed, thinking about my mum and, annoyingly, Sage. I was almost sorry to leave the warmth of the covers, but I had something to prove and sitting in bed all night wasn't going to get me the answers I needed.

The floorboards creaked as I padded towards the door and reached for the handle, my breath catching in my chest when a draft tickled my cheek and the handle turned of its own accord, rattling in my palm.

I let go and backed away quickly, staring at the outline of the door with eyes that felt like they bulged in an effort to pierce the darkness. The handle fell still and I took a cautious step forward. Was this Sage's idea of a joke? A desperate attempt to get me to leave? He would definitely try and scare me if he thought it would keep me in my room but Ms Weathers... was she a part of this? Whatever *this* was?

I pressed my ear to the wood and couldn't hear anything on the other side. Resolute, I reached for the handle and then shrieked when a voice came from the corner of my room.

"Get back in bed, Georgina," Sage barked.

"What are you *doing* in here?" I was panting, one hand clutched to my chest as my heart tried to beat out of it.

In the darkness, I could just about see his eyes, the gold of his glasses glinting in a small slither of light that ran through a gap in the wall. The rest of him sat cloaked in the shadow of night.

"Making sure you stay put."

This was just... "You're deranged. Get out of my room." It was funny how quickly this space had started to feel like mine and that he'd managed to get in there without me noticing was more than alarming, it was frustrating. Alswell may be mine, but he knew it better than I did.

"Get back in bed," he said again.

I folded my arms across my chest and squeezed myself tightly when he made a growly huff of irritation.

"What is it with your desire to wander about the house in the middle of the night like a bad actress in a horror movie?"

"It's just a house," I hissed and then shivered at the sound of his hollow laugh.

"I'll leave as soon as you're asleep."

"How am I supposed to fall asleep knowing you're in here watching me?" I folded my arms and stalked back to my bed, perching on the edge of the mattress and trying to ignore the way the sheets called to me, still warm from my body. This was a temporary set-back. Sage couldn't watch me every night... could he? Surely he had some kind of life outside of the manor. He had to have better things to do than skulk around trying to catch me exploring the house.

"Gratefully," he retorted and I scowled. "Seeing as I'm saving you from

breaking your neck, stumbling around in the dark.”

“I’d have taken a candle,” I muttered as I pulled the covers up and over myself. The electrics were still sketchy in the house, I probably should have grabbed some torches or something so I didn’t have to keep carrying open flames around with me. My phone was too crap to even have a torch on it, it had never mattered before as I barely used it.

“Oh, you’d have a *candle*.” I could practically hear him rolling his eyes. “That’ll definitely prevent your inevitable death.”

“Morbid much,” I tutted, stifling a yawn.

“Promise me you’ll wait until it’s light out to go exploring. Or better yet, bring me with you so I can make sure you’re being safe.”

“Sure,” I lied, knowing that his desire to keep me in here after the sun went down would only fuel my curiosity and desire to disobey.

“Go to sleep, Georgina.”

“Fuck off, Sage,” I injected as much fake-cheer as possible into my sleepy voice and tried to ignore the tingle that ran through me at his quiet chuckle. But then a strange thought came to me and I couldn’t help but tense up beneath the heavy duvet. If Sage had been in my room the whole time, then who had been outside the door?

Chapter Six

I got my chance to explore the house the following night after I'd had dinner and made my way to my room. Sage looked weary as he headed outside to prepare for the storm he insisted was rolling in and that would distract him for a few hours. I'd spent the majority of the day trying to air out the house as much as possible, the strong scent of dust pervading every one of my senses until I felt like I was more sneeze than person. Sage had been notably absent for the majority of the day and I could only assume it was because he was worried about me confronting him properly for sneaking into my room now that I was actually awake and had more energy.

It was funny how the dark could change so much and yet so little at the same time. I waited for a while to make sure that Sage wouldn't be back anytime soon and changed into my new fleece pyjamas, pulled on a pair of thick socks and frowned when I noticed my copy of *The Fall of the House of Usher* was lying open on my bedside. Had someone gone through my things while I'd been downstairs or working in the other rooms of the house? I definitely wouldn't have left the book like that, where the spine could get all bent out of shape. I was a bit of a book snob and had constantly berated my mother for folding down the pages and breaking the spines of every book she picked up. It was the main reason I refused to lend her any of my own copies.

Once the semi-familiar sounds of the house settling seemed to be the only

noise I could hear, I stepped up to my window and peeked outside. No golden light from the house washed out over the lawn, no errant sounds of chatter or life disrupted the wind, and it felt in that moment as if I could be the only person left in the world.

The rain had grown heavy and it seemed like Sage's prediction about the storm had been right. Lightning flashed briefly in the grey sky, illuminating the trees that swayed outside. The rustle of their leaves soothed me somehow, I hadn't even realised I'd been on edge until thunder rattled across the sky in a boom that made me jump with fright. Hopefully the storm would mask any noise I made so that Sage wouldn't come investigating and find me breaking my promise. I didn't owe him anything, and yet he still managed to make me feel like a misbehaving child. But I felt like I owed myself the truth and my mum a chance at peace—at justice. More than anything, I just wanted to understand. What had drawn her back here after she'd spent the majority of my life pretending that Natalia Alswell didn't exist? What was this house, or its staff, so desperate to hide that they would forbid me to leave my room after dark? What did they know that I didn't?

There was a long candle in a lightweight holder placed on top of the chest of drawers that sat behind my bedroom door and I blew a little dust off of it while I reached for the matches. The brief orange glow threw the room around me into sharp relief, illuminating the hulking shape of the wardrobe, before it plunged back into the near-dark my eyes had adjusted to. I lit the candle and shook the match out to extinguish it, trying not to cough at the acrid smell it left behind as I walked to my bedroom door and carefully eased it open.

My socked-feet were quiet on the wooden floor and I stepped carefully, not trusting there to not be the odd splinter where the wood needed retreating, and tried not to wince when the odd creak rang out into the darkness, not fully muffled by the sounds of the storm.

I'd always felt that the dark had eyes, pressing down upon you, prickling

the hairs on your neck, making your pulse race inexplicably. But there was a certain comfort to it too, to seeing but being unseen, to know but be unknown. This felt like bonding, for the house and me, like here in the dark we could finally get to the heart of each other, peer inside and clear out the cobwebs to see what lay beneath.

I started down toward the rest of the first floor and the large window that sat at the end of the corridor, overlooking the front garden. The moonlight washed over me and I blew the candle out, no longer needing it. I was bathed pale as I sat in the window seat and watched the rain hit the earth and the lightning fork through the clouds, briefly illuminating the grounds in a second of clarity.

For a moment, I thought I saw eyes in the darkness behind me, watching me in the glass.

I whirled around and found nothing but blackness, the air behind me empty. I could just make out the red runners on the floor and the edge of the bannister for the stairs and reached for the candle at my side to investigate further before swearing quietly when I remembered I'd blown it out. I would have to relight it.

I got to my feet, intending to walk back down the corridor to my room before I wandered the halls and peeked into bedrooms some more, but then froze as an unmistakable sound thudded from above my head.

Footsteps. It had to be.

I slowly placed the candle holder back on the floor, keeping my eyes on the ceiling above me as the sound came again—a soft *thud, thud, thud*, as if someone was pacing back and forth in a room up there. Of course, it could just be Sage or Ms Weathers, that made sense. But when the sound came again it seemed to be moving further away, like it wasn't in a room but in the corridor itself. Something about it made my senses stand to attention, goosebumps racing across my skin, the darkness pulsing around me.

I took one step forward and stopped as a breeze pushed past, making me

shiver. All the windows were closed, I'd triple checked them earlier after waking up so cold yesterday, but old houses like these... they always had a draft.

I moved forward another cautious step and then another, finding myself at the base of the staircase that led to the floor above as I listened out for more footsteps.

If it wasn't Ms Weathers or Sage... It could be a squatter. Was that why they didn't want me wandering after dark? Because they were hiding someone from me?

It wasn't unheard of for people to move into abandoned buildings, and maybe if there was someone else staying here, somebody that the police had missed, then they might have answers for me about what happened to my mum. *Or maybe they're responsible.* I shrugged the thought off. The police had inspected the house and grounds, if there had been signs of someone staying here other than my mum then they would have noticed, surely—and I didn't think, didn't want to believe, that Sage or Ms Weathers would harbour a murderer.

I made it half-way up the stairs, my ears straining for the smallest sound to indicate where the noise had gone and my eyes felt like they were stretched wide as I tried to take in as much as I could of my surroundings. I'd been up on this floor briefly when I first moved in and then yesterday when I'd been hoovering, but I mostly spent my time in my room or the kitchen so far. The layout felt unfamiliar but my feet found their way regardless, as if instinct guided me to the top of the stairs and around a corner. This floor was where the master suite had been.

I'd been hesitant to go inside, like some part of me just wasn't as ready as I thought for the answers I wanted and that the rooms there might hold. Had Edward, the owner of the house and the man in love with my mother according to Ms Weathers, been my father?

The thump of a heavy tread jolted me out of the thoughts. It wasn't a gait

I recognised. Ms Weathers tended to walk with a speedy shuffle appropriate for her small form, whereas Sage loped everywhere in a casual but confident sprawl, measured steps and paces that I followed keenly for some reason. These footsteps—and I was now certain that was what they were—were heavy, not too fast and not too slow, but something about them seemed harsh. The clunk of them dominating the dark as if it did not exist, smothering all sound like they were a vacuum, and all I could do was freeze in place, my heart hammering.

What if my passing thought had been right? What if there had been someone here when my mum had stayed? What if they were the one who hurt her?

Anger, a great tidal wave of it, unfroze my muscles and made everything in me burn like I would combust until I could find this person and make them pay. The sound drew closer and my breathing felt laboured. I took a step in the direction of the noise and then another, surer step, when a pale hand reached out from the darkness so suddenly I could only stare. How had they drawn so close without me hearing them? But—no, the footsteps were still too far away, coming from the opposite direction of the disembodied hand, the rest of the unknown figure cloaked in darkness. *Shit.*

Were there two of them working together? How was it possible that I hadn't heard or seen anything during the day?

The hand clamped tightly over my mouth as I began to struggle, panic taking over as images of what they might be holding me for overtook my rational thoughts. The footsteps paused before resuming their pace, slightly faster, and I worried briefly that I might throw up as my adrenaline spiked so forcefully that my head hurt.

Another strong arm snatched me out of the air as the steps rounded the corner and I panicked until a voice murmured next to my ear.

“God damnit, Georgina.” Sage’s gruff voice chided and I instinctively relaxed in the arms that held me against a firm chest and they tightened for a

moment that I wasn't sure if I imagined before they let go. "You *promised* me."

He didn't sound as angry as I'd expected him to be, instead a deep pain seemed to resonate there that confused me.

"I—"

His hand pressed against my mouth again as the footsteps paused outside of the tiny closet Sage had pulled us into. I hadn't even noticed it when I was cleaning and it only piqued my curiosity further as I wondered what else this house might be hiding.

My breathing felt ragged, sensing Sage's fear and urgency in the way that he gripped me, the way he surrounded me like he would drive away the darkness with his will alone and a heat pooled low in my stomach in response. My lips were touching his hand and it was so cool it almost felt insubstantial, like I could have pushed away at any time and he would have let me, even if it would seal our fates to whoever stalked these halls at night.

The muscles in my body coiled tight, like I was in the throes of fight or flight but my body had only been able to freeze. Sage slowly pulled his hand away from my mouth and instead brushed his fingers through my hair until slowly, I relaxed.

A thud sounded outside of our hiding place and my tension came rushing back as Sage dropped his hand. What use was hiding? I needed to confront this person, this maybe-murderer who thought they could enter my home, *mine*, and poison it. Because that's what it felt like as I stood inside the closet with the air practically crackling around me. Like something *wrong* stood feet away, tainting the air, weakening my breaths.

As if sensing my resolve, Sage moved even closer in the cramped space and my skin heated. "Please," he whispered so faintly it was more air than words. "Stay quiet."

I hesitated and then gave a barely perceptible nod and my heart thudded unevenly as he relaxed, clearly relieved. I realised I had been selfish. Clearly,

whoever this was scared Sage and if that was the case, then I ought to be careful too. It had been impulsive, foolish, to consider charging out there—they could have a gun, or an axe, or whatever it was that intruders favoured in the countryside.

A footstep fell heavily against the floor and I jolted before holding myself still as another hit the ground, followed by one more. They were retreating back the way they'd come, back to the west wing. I listened intently and heard it when a door creaked closed. *The master suite.*

I let out a shaky breath as slowly as I could and Sage moved as far back from me as he was able in the small amount of space. Moonlight filtered in through the crack where the door met the wall and barely illuminated the space between us. There was a strained expression on his face, his brows drawn together, his soft mouth pinched and his skin so pale I was surprised the small flickers of light didn't pass straight through him.

"I'm sorry," I said eventually, stepping forward slightly and freezing when he cringed back like he couldn't bear to be with me in this space for a second longer. I clenched my jaw and ignored it, resolved to focus on the more important matter at hand. "Who was that?"

Sage looked away. "I don't know."

"Don't lie to me." I grabbed for the place his hand had been and blinked in confusion when my fingers only met air. He'd somehow moved away faster than should have been possible.

He glanced up sharply. "I don't think you're the best person to be lecturing about *lies*. You promised me you would stay in your room, Georgina!"

"Whatever," I said quietly and his nostrils flared as he opened his mouth only to close it again sharply. "I'm not a child, and the longer I go without knowing what's happening the more danger I'm in. So just tell me what's going on."

"What's going on is that I'm tired and I want to go to sleep instead of

following your dumb arse around this house all night.” He pushed past me and I clenched my jaw so hard I felt my teeth creak.

“Don’t you dare open that door.”

He pushed it open but didn’t walk out, holding himself back in the darkness, and I heaved in a breath that felt too heavy.

“I need answers, Sage. If you won’t give them to me then I’ll just go down to the master suite and ask whoever that was myself.”

Tension bracketed his shoulders, creeping up through his spine and I watched him tighten like a string pulled taut with no short amount of satisfaction.

“That would be an unwise thing to do.” His voice was soft and he kept his back to me so I couldn’t even try to figure out what he was feeling.

“Then explain it to me. I need to know. Are—Are they holding you and Ms Weathers hostage?”

His shoulders shook and for a moment I thought he was sobbing until I heard his quiet laugh. It cut-off abruptly and I took a hesitant step forward as he shook his head. “Just stay out of it, Georgina.”

“I—” Before I could say another word, he stormed out, slamming the door shut behind him so that I was plunged abruptly into darkness once more. “Fuck you too.”

Did he really think I was just going to get back into my bed, pull the covers up, and do as I was told like a good little girl?

I smiled grimly as I pushed open the closet door and followed him out to find only the empty corridor waiting. I pivoted on my heel and followed the beams of moonlight spilling in from another window, turned the corner where the fireplace nook sat on the landing, and paused outside of the large doors situated half-way down the red runners. The master suite.

I didn’t stop to consider whether this was ‘unwise’ or to think about any possible danger, this was my house. Alswell was in my blood and I wasn’t going to let it, or its inhabitants, become fodder for some night prowler.

I twisted the brass doorknob in my hand, it was as frighteningly cold as so many other things in this house and I found myself surprised that it wasn't coated in a layer of frost. The door swung inward smoothly, without so much as a squeak. Somebody had to have oiled the hinges recently, then. Was this where my mother had stayed when she'd lived here so many years ago? Had she come back to this room and found she could not bear the way the past pressed in on her and instead escaped to what was now my room? Leaving nothing of herself behind but her soap, small glimpses of her, the last remnants of her soul in existence caught up in fragrance and habit.

The suite reeked of dust, so it wasn't in use despite the door's recent oil, and the curtains were thrown wide, letting in the light of the stars. The bed was unmade, like it'd been frozen in time and never corrected. A tea cup sat delicately perched on a small nightstand, covered in a grey film that made my belly swoop as I took a cautious step closer. Books cluttered every available surface, odd bookmarks stuck in at seemingly random places—a feather in one, a piece of ribbon in another, one was even being held apart by an acorn, the pages spread on either side and I felt dizzy when I saw the identical passage to the book that lay open in my own room.

These were not my mother's belongings. She wouldn't have bothered with a haphazard bookmark. No, looking around the room the presence here seemed far more in tune with... me.

But it was empty. There was no sign, no sense of anyone watching, that indicated that this was the place the person from the halls had come. But I'd been *so sure*, wrongfully so.

It was starting to feel like whatever was going on here might be beyond me. If there really was someone else here and Sage and Ms Weathers knew about it, then I couldn't count on them as allies. If they wouldn't tell me the truth, I would just have to discover it myself.

Chapter Seven

By the time I'd gotten into bed last night, it had been well into the early hours of the morning. I'd stalked back down the stairs, lit a candle in my room, and paced up and down in front of my bed for at least an hour while the wind and rain raged on. In the end, I'd only climbed into bed because of the cold that had started to seep into my bones. I wasn't sure I'd be able to sleep, knowing that there might be someone else in this house other than me, Sage, and Ms Weathers, but clearly my mind had been just as exhausted as my body because I'd dozed off almost immediately.

But now that I was awake, I wasn't sure what to do with myself. Had last night all just been a bad dream? Those footsteps, if they were even real and not some odd echo of the storm created by the house, had definitely retreated into the master suite. I would have staked my life on it. There was only one way in and one way out, so whoever had entered should have still been there. But it was empty. *Unless there was a hidden exit, camouflaged like the closet.* I considered the thought for a moment and decided it was worth exploring. If there were secret passages in Alswell, not only would it be undeniably cool but I would also need to check them out. This stranger could be using them to travel around unseen, it was the only logical explanation for it.

"Are you going to lie in bed all day?"

I shrieked, my head jolting sharply down from where I'd been gazing up at the wooden beams in the ceiling to find Sage reclining on the end of my bed as if he owned the place.

"What are you doing in here?" I threw a pillow at him and he caught it, placing it behind his back as he leaned against one of the wooden poles. "Haven't you heard of knocking?"

"I did," he said, blinking innocently as I narrowed my eyes at him. I looked at the door—closed. There was no way I wouldn't have heard it open with the way it creaked. Was I right about the possible passage ways? Did Sage know about them too and had used one to get in my room? "I can literally see the wheels turning behind your eyes right now and I feel like it spells trouble."

I said nothing, simply waiting him out as he pushed his glasses up his nose slightly.

"Looks like the storm passed, it's a rotten day out though."

So he'd come in here to talk about the weather? I scoffed. "Why are you here?"

"Well, I know it's nearly mid-day but I think it's still a bit too early for such philosophical discussions. We should wait until you're appropriately dressed."

My lip twitched. "I don't think you can really come into *my* room and dictate to me what is or isn't appropriate."

"Perhaps," he murmured, his eyes scanning the room and noting the small changes I'd made after being here the past few days. It had almost been a week since I'd arrived at Alswell but in some ways it felt like I'd been here forever. I'd added a small rug to the wooden floor next to my bed and my thick socks were placed on it, so I wouldn't have to walk on the cold floor as soon as I got out of bed. I'd moved all the long, practical candles out of the way into the corner of the room and the dresser and instead placed scented candles on the desk and my nightstand.

“What are you reading?” He nodded towards the pile of books and I glanced over and froze as I saw the open book was now shut. Was I going mad? I could have sworn it’d been open. I picked it up and inspected it closely for a second, even the familiar smell of dusty pages unable to soothe me. Was this some side effect of all the stress and grief I’d been dealing with lately? Because while it was understandable, I didn’t like the thought of not even knowing myself, not being able to trust in what my eyes were showing me... and last night’s escapades hadn’t helped with that.

“Are we really going to pretend like last night didn’t happen?”

Sage looked directly at me, his hazel eyes back to a more ordinary brown as he stretched his long legs out on the other side of me. “I already told you, the storm—”

“Not the storm,” I growled as I sat up to look at him. “The closet, the footsteps.”

His eyes dipped down and I followed his gaze, blushing as I remembered changing into the lacey vest top before bed. My fleece pyjama top had been soaked in sweat by the time I’d got back to my room so I’d reached for the only PJs I had left that were clean. The strap had slid down my shoulder and I quickly scooped it back up as I pulled the duvet higher. There wasn’t anything wrong with what I was wearing, but the neckline was low and it was more skin than I would normally have on display, especially in front of a guy I’d only really just met who acted like I was the bane of his existence.

Sage cleared his throat but his eyes were warm when he raised them again to meet mine.

“Angie sleep walks.”

“I—What?”

“Angelica. *Ms Weathers*.” He smirked with a wry glance. “Sometimes she sleepwalks, especially when she’s upset. She’s a very vivid dreamer, you know. Clocked me a couple of times once before when I bumped into her on the stairs, told me the next day she’d been in a boxing match in her dream.”

I didn't know what to say. I wanted to laugh, or cry, or maybe hit him, I wasn't sure. This sounded like bullshit. I eyed him suspiciously as I decided to play along. "So why did we hide in the closet?"

He shrugged like it was no big deal. "I didn't fancy being hit again and figured you wouldn't much enjoy it either."

"You are so full of shit." I pushed back the duvet and swung my legs out of bed, quickly pulling on my socks as I reached for the jumper I'd thrown on the chair in the corner yesterday evening.

"Where are you going?"

"To talk to *Angelica*."

"You don't believe me."

"Sage, you could tell me the sky was blue and I'd be inclined to double check."

"Well, right now it's actually grey."

I scowled at him, running my fingers through my hair. "Get out."

"I could just wait here for you while you run and check?"

"Get. Out."

His smile was infuriatingly cocky and only made my frustration grow, something he could clearly tell from the way his grin widened.

He walked past me slowly and I bit my lip as the breeze he left behind carried his scent to me. Most guys drowned themselves in aftershave, not Sage. He smelled like the outdoors, like pine and air and the smokiness of the fire in the kitchen.

"Next time, knock," I muttered slightly breathlessly as I followed him out and down the stairs to where Ms Weathers was bustling around. Though, I couldn't work out what she was doing for the life of me, just moving to and fro almost like she was dancing. She stopped once she saw us in the doorway, smiling cheerfully, and I relaxed instantly. She just had that way about her, made you feel like no matter what happened, she would take care of you.

"Morning." I walked over to the kettle and refilled it before flicking it on

and heading to the fridge to find something for brunch.

“Morning love, did you sleep well? I hope the storm didn’t keep you up too much.”

I grabbed the milk for my tea and hunted down a clean mug once the kettle finished rattling. “I slept fine, thanks. How about you?”

I watched her carefully out of the corner of my eye and saw the almost imperceptible look she sent to Sage and his slight nod in return. “Oh, I woke up in the middle of the kitchen this morning so I think I must have been wandering again last night.”

I wasn’t sure whether to be amused or insulted that they thought I was so stupid. “Oh really? I suppose that explains the footsteps I heard last night then.”

“Yes, dear,” she said softly.

The steam obscured my view as I looked at Sage over the top of my mug as I took a burning-hot sip. Breakfast would have to wait. I needed to get into that suite now and check for any way someone could have left the room without me seeing them.

“There go those wheels again.” Sage sighed as I brushed past him with my tea in hand and a glare before I stopped in the doorway.

“Oh, that reminds me. When the police came after... after they found her, did they search the whole property?”

“Oh, yes, dear. Why?”

“Just curious.” I smiled and Ms Weathers smiled back, though her hands twisted together in front of her.

I drank my tea as I got ready. Not quite trusting the shower yet, I had a quick wash and then brushed my teeth once I’d drained my mug. Sage might be a liar, but he wasn’t wrong. It was absolutely rotten outside but I could see him out there, standing in the waist-high grass and looking at the forest. He turned to my window and I backed away smoothly, if he was preoccupied out there then that was all the better for me.

I left my mug on the desk with the one I'd brought up yesterday afternoon and headed up the stairs to the master suite, retracing my steps from last night.

Despite all the dusting I'd already done, it still seemed to drift in the air with a staleness that was exhausting. Maybe the rain last night had stirred it all up again, the wind blowing through the cracks of the old house and making my cleaning a wasted effort. I couldn't help wondering what the house might have been like twenty-years ago when it had been well-maintained. When my mother had still lived here.

The red-runners in the corridor kept my footsteps quiet as I ran a hand against the faded wallpaper, my fingertips skipping over the seams with ease as I tried to picture my childhood here in Alswell instead of with my mum, moving around from county to county. Would I have been happy here? Would we have been a family? Me, my mum, and my father? Filled this place with a light and laughter that would have sunk into the foundations instead of the rot that was undoubtedly there now?

The door opened as easily today as it had yesterday and nothing looked noticeably different. It was a large room with a deep vanity taking up a lot of the wall on the side of the room furthest from the door. Small glass bottles dotted the surface as well as a hand-held mirror that looked antique. I ran my fingertips over the handle and looked up into the mirror sharply, like I'd expected someone to be standing behind me. Obviously that was just skittishness and paranoia shining through from yesterday night but it still took a moment for my heart to resume its usual rhythm.

There was a photo wedged into the frame of the mirror and I carefully prised it free and brought it closer to my face, my breath leaving me in a *whoosh* that made me feel like I was choking. It was my mother. Natalia Cole, or, as I supposed she must have been in this photo, Natalia Alswell. She was smiling, beaming really, her eyes practically sparkled and the man beside her had the soft kind of smile you only saw on the faces of people in the full

throes of love.

Remembering how my mum had always labelled her photos, I turned it over with shaking hands and bit my lip against the tears that wanted to spill as I saw the names written there—*Natalia and Edward Alswell*. Obviously I'd known there hadn't been a mistake, that this was who my mum had once been, that this house had become hers, but it was one thing to know something and another to see the hard evidence of it in front of you.

What happened? I wanted to ask the smiling woman in the picture. *Why did you leave?* She couldn't answer me. The only way I would get answers now was by searching this house, these rooms.

I tucked the photograph into the pocket of my jeans and opened each drawer of the vanity methodically, stopping to sniff delicately at the perfumes in the bottles on the top and stroke gently over a hairbrush still entangled with dark strands. Small pieces of her that I'd never known, that had faded long before I'd lost her and found them.

Then I found the second photo, buried in the bottom drawer under what looked like spare linens for the bed, now dusty and in need of a wash. It wasn't so different from the last, the man was the same and the woman was the same—but her smile seemed stretched thin, her eyes a little too wide, and when I looked closer at the man his smile was less soft and more proprietary. The photo was ripped along its width, their torsos lost, and the edges were jagged and fraying. I turned the photo over but only found my mother's name, the rest of the caption lost with the remainder of the photo. Why had this been hidden away? And what had changed between the first photo and the second?

After a moment of consideration, I placed the second photo in my pocket with the other and continued searching the room without finding anything else of any real interest. Mostly the space was dominated by books and I couldn't help wondering if Edward Alswell was the father I'd never known, whether this was the more intangible proof, and I also wished I knew what

had happened to him. Obviously, he wasn't alive or the inheritance would never have passed to me. Was his death what had driven my mum away? I would have to remember to ask Ms Weathers.

I couldn't see any obvious exits from the room except the one I'd used to enter, but I ran my hands over the walls anyway, searching for a latch or the seam of a secret door. I leaned back against the aged cream wallpaper and sighed. It seemed like a room that had once been pretty. The walls had a blue forget-me-not design that had faded and smudged into a more mottled colour, like the house itself had wept over whatever had transpired here.

I thumped my head back and gasped as the wall moved and I fell backwards into a closet not unlike the one Sage had pulled me into before. There weren't any other passages that led on from the room, just a small storage space with empty shelves. I sighed as I turned back to the door and pressed on it gently. It didn't move.

Shit. I pressed harder and still didn't feel it give. *Oh fuck.* I couldn't be stuck in here. Small spaces weren't my favourite, but I could normally manage fine. Something about being here in this storage space felt different though. The air was heavy and I gasped in frantically as I thundered my hand into the wall entrance to no avail. How had I not noticed it closing? Was there any air in here? I had to assume these places weren't meant for storing humans, which meant if nobody knew about this space... if I couldn't get myself out...

I hit the wall where the door should be, feeling the impact all the way up my arm as I hit it relentlessly. Surely it should have opened by now? Unless... had someone deliberately trapped me in here? I sucked in big gulping breaths of air and tried to calm myself by blowing it out of my mouth slowly but the air was broken up by my ragged sobs. I didn't know where this panic was coming from, it just felt like... I froze, like a rabbit in headlights as I realised what it was that felt off.

It felt like something was in here with me.

A quiet breath hit the air, but it wasn't mine. My entire body shifted, pressing itself fully against the wall as I pounded on it with both hands, crying and screaming as I felt another breath on the back of my neck. Or was this just my imagination again? What if I was finally breaking under the stress of it all and there had been no breath, no footsteps?

A scuff sounded outside, a murmur of voices that almost sounded like arguing but it was too muffled to tell what they were saying. I slammed my hands harder, more desperately and knew they would be bruised tomorrow if I got out of here. But there was someone there, definitely, I just needed them to—"Let me out! Please! *Let me out.*" My voice had grown hoarse from the volume of my shouts and I slammed my hands forward again, only to have them hit something solid. I stumbled forward and winced as weak daylight washed over me, trickling in through the window.

I sagged in the arms that held me upright as the shudders racking my body finally stilled. I could breathe, I'd got out. "There was something in there."

"What?" The deep voice was gentle but familiar, and I blinked my eyes free of the moisture in them as I repeated my words slower.

"There was something in there with me."

"I'll check." I tightened my hands on the jumper they were clutching and hands pried my fingers away as they moved to the closet. "I can't see anything, are you sure?"

My head felt like it was swimming, everything felt blurry and strange and the room started to sway.

"Whoa." Sage's arms caught me as I realised the room wasn't swaying but I was. "Come on, let's get you back to bed."

I didn't protest, just let the soothing voice guide me down the stairs and back into a room that smelled like eucalyptus and cotton.

"Here, come on, lay down now."

I hesitated, spotting the bright white linens and suspecting that I was

covered in dirt and tears. “No. I need to...” I gestured to myself and I heard a small sigh that made me jump until a hand squeezed mine briefly.

“You’re okay. Go ahead and shower, then. I won’t let anything hurt you. Don’t take too long though, I don’t want you passing out in there.”

I thought I nodded but I wasn’t sure, my body felt sluggish, like I was travelling through jelly as I stripped off my filthy clothes and stepped into a shower that was, mercifully, hot. I washed as quickly as I could, stopping several times to lean on the wall when the room threatened to become dark again. Then I wrapped myself in a towel and padded over to my bed, climbing in quickly to avoid the cold but still feeling shivers start to wrack my body.

“Better?”

I nodded with a sigh and relaxed further when fingers started to comb through my still-wet hair.

“Sleep.” I frowned, my eyes trying to flutter open, and heard a small laugh as firm hands tucked the covers around me. “Christ, Georgina. Just do as you’re told for once. Sleep. I’ll stay right here. You won’t be alone.”

My fingers loosened on the duvet and the worry seemed to drain out of me as I felt the comforting weight of long legs stretched out opposite mine.

“Sage,” I murmured and felt him fall still.

“Yes?”

My eyes slipped fully shut as I breathed out. “Thank you.”

Chapter Eight

For the next couple of days, I focused on tidying the house while I waited for the local police department to come and check the house out again. It wasn't an emergency, so they'd told me I might have to wait until a unit had the free time, I'd told them not to worry even as I felt increasingly jumpy walking around the manor. Sage had been notably absent since he'd spent the night with me, so I got a landscaper from the town over to mow the grass and cut back the bushes and it was amazing what a difference it made to the outside of the house. I had planned on doing it myself but the on-site mower had been rusted through and it likely would have taken me an age to use anyway.

Instead, I focused on hoovering up as much dust as physically possible—though it felt like it duplicated at an unfathomable rate. Ms Weathers had offered to help, as the housekeeper, but I'd declined. Mostly because the physical activity stopped my mind from spinning, but also because I wasn't sure how much I trusted her anymore. Sage had taken care of me, but then he'd vanished without any notice and if his secrets were the reason I had been at risk in the first place...

I'd left some of the rooms that were a little worse for wear, not having the energy to tackle them yet, and would probably need to hire a professional to work on some of the bathrooms that had become mildewed. But the worst of

the dirt and grime in the bedrooms was just going to take perseverance and time.

Ms Weathers had been watching me like a hawk. I wasn't sure if that was because they were worried about me after Sage had pulled me out of the closet or if they were just anxious I might get myself into more trouble. Probably both.

They were right to be concerned—at least about me getting myself into more trouble. Sage had said there wasn't anyone inside the closet with me, but I knew what I'd felt. The more I thought about it, the more sure I was that my mind wasn't just playing tricks on me. I also didn't believe his bogus cover up about Ms Weathers sleepwalking, but right now all I could do was wait for Sage to turn up again and hope that the police could shed some light on the strange happenings at Alswell.

The officer on the phone had tried to talk me out of it after confirming that they'd previously done a check of the property, but I'd told them it would make me feel more secure if they could just take a quick look around and finally they'd agreed to come out today.

Sage's face when the police turned up at the gates was like a storm cloud had descended. He'd glared at me, brows low over his eyes as he bit his bottom lip and shook his head. "What the hell did you do."

"Me?" I shielded my face from the sunshine that had finally broken through the clouds today while I'd been gardening. "Nothing. They must just be doing a routine follow up, you know, given the murder that happened not so long ago?"

"Seems a little overkill."

"Oh? Want to tell me where you've been for the last two days?"

His face shut down. "Around." Sage folded his arms across his chest and I worked hard to keep my eyes on his face and away from the muscles that bulged in his arms and chest. It was surprising that he could be so defined given the leanness of his frame but his biceps definitely—

I tugged my eyes back up at him, annoyed at myself, and caught the light, amused look in his eyes as he watched me.

“What are you expecting them to find?” He moved closer to me until I was forced to look up at him. I wasn’t really that short but he was *tall* and my neck ached until I gave up and took a step back.

“I told you, I didn’t contact them. But maybe they’re looking for whatever it is you’ve been trying so hard to hide?”

“I wish I believed you,” he said with a wry smile, completely ignoring my pointed question.

“That sounds like your problem, not mine.”

The cruiser stopped in front of the fountain and the officer who climbed out of the driver’s side whistled as he took in the shorn grass and freshly dug flower beds I’d been working on all afternoon. “Wow. You’ve been busy.”

“Yep. No rest for the wicked.” I smiled when he laughed and two more officers came out of the car as I walked closer and murmured, “Thank you for coming.” Louder, I asked. “You’re here to check the house?”

He gave me a curious look but nodded. “Yes. We’ll have a look around, make sure we didn’t miss anything the first time around and then be out of your hair.”

“I appreciate that. Thank you.”

He nodded and they headed inside without so much as a glance at Sage. I guessed the locals really did act like staff were just part of the furniture, it felt ridiculously old fashioned to me.

Sage watched the four men traipse inside with a thoughtful look on his face. “Didn’t you spend all day hovering recently?”

“Yeah, why?”

I could hear the grin on his face when he spoke as he walked away. “I’m pretty sure they just walked mud from the flower beds into the house.”

I swore under my breath and Sage chuckled as he walked off towards the lake. “Where are you going?”

He shrugged. "To feed the ducks."

To feed the—I shook my head. He was a terrible groundskeeper. He'd mostly watched me plant the seeds for the flowers, occasionally offering snarky commentary, but I didn't think I'd seen him touch so much as a shovel so far. I think he knew as well as I did that what I really needed right now wasn't someone to mow the grass, though it did look nice now, I mostly just needed the company.

After a couple of hours the officers filed out of the manor and I stood up from where I'd been kneeling in the grass and brushed my gloves together to get rid of the dirt.

"Find anything?"

"It all looks fine in there, Miss. But if you have any other incidents please do get in touch." He looked up at the house for a moment, his face looking paler than it had when he went in. "It's likely that all you heard the other night was some kids screwing about. These old houses... Well, they dare each other to go in. Think they're abandoned and haunted. But don't worry, I'll make it clear to the locals that you're not to be disturbed like that any further, okay?"

I nodded, even as I felt wholly dissatisfied. I couldn't shake the feeling that something wasn't right but I didn't want to become a nuisance as they'd done a thorough sweep and found nothing.

"Thanks for your time," I said gratefully. "I appreciate it."

"Of course." The officer in charge smiled down at me kindly. He was old enough to be my father and clearly modelled himself in that sort of role as he said, "Listen, you should invite some friends down or something. Bit of company will liven this place right up. Don't stay here alone."

I tilted my head at his words. "Of course. I mean, the house and grounds keepers live on site."

"Good," he said, clapping his hands together as the other officers climbed into the vehicle. "That's good. It's nice to see a bit of life breathed back into

this place. Keep it up.”

Before he could leave, I found myself blurting out a question I hadn’t meant to ask but suddenly needed the answer to. “Officer, have there been any updates in my mother’s case?”

“I’m afraid not, dove. We’re considering it to be cold. If anything changes we’ll let you know.”

I nodded slowly, disappointment sinking through me. If they didn’t find something soon I was worried they never would. All they knew so far was that my mum had been found in the cemetery with blunt force trauma to the head. I’d gone in to identify her, which had been as horrifying as it sounded, and after that I had her buried per the wishes in the will I didn’t even know she’d had. She had asked to be buried in the same cemetery she’d been killed in, next to Edward. I hadn’t been to see the headstone yet and hadn’t organised a funeral—there was only me there to mourn anyway and I wasn’t ready to let go yet. Not until I knew why she was here at Alswell and why she’d been killed minutes away from where I now stood.

The police car drove away and I jumped when I realised Sage had appeared next to me. I had been so caught up in my own thoughts that I hadn’t noticed him approaching.

“Do you want to see her?”

I knew exactly what he meant and figured he had to have been standing close enough to hear my question for the officer before he’d left.

“No.”

“I’d come with you, if you wanted.”

“Why?”

He didn’t reply and when I looked back, he was gone. I let out a long sigh as I turned back to the house, feeling mentally drained. Every time I seemed to make any progress with Sage, he disappeared and we were back to square one.

I stripped off my clothes, streaked with dirt from gardening, and dreaded

having to work out how to use an unfamiliar washing machine. But I couldn't just keep buying new clothes... could I? No, no, that would be wasteful, and ridiculous. My mum must have needed to do washing while she was here, so chances were good that the machine did at least work, unless she and Ms Weathers had hand washed everything.

I hopped in the shower and yelped when the water came out cold again, at least this time there were no spiders there to complete the humiliation but I'd had enough.

"Can. You. Fucking. *Not*," I shrieked at the head and, to my surprise, the water instantly grew warmer. I huffed at it for a second before vigorously washing my hair. "Knew anger fucking solved problems..." I muttered away the whole time I scrubbed but felt like I'd half-washed off my bad mood by the time I stepped out and into the cool air.

I'd bought new towels recently and needed to wash them before I could use them. The ones I'd been given were scratchy as hell and barely covered my arse and I made a mental note to bump them up on my laundry list too. Feeling calmer now that I was clean, I walked out of the bathroom and immediately swore.

"Why don't you *knock*," I growled at Sage and he opened his mouth to reply when I held up a finger. "No. No you didn't. *Liar*."

He laughed, surprising me. The sound was rich and warm and had heat pooling in my stomach as I watched him. I think it was maybe the first time I'd heard him laugh properly, from his belly and I was surprised at how much I liked it. He stopped pretty quickly with a little cough, like I'd shocked him and he hadn't meant to laugh at all, which only baffled me more. Sage liked me, I knew he did, otherwise why help me or rescue me or offer to see my mum's—

I pulled my thoughts away from there and re-focused on the infuriating man in front of me. I frowned at him disapprovingly and the shadow of a smirk flitted across his mouth again before he held up a mug of tea that was

still steaming in his hands.

“I thought you might want this.”

I took it from him suspiciously, sniffing it and then taking a small very hot sip. “Did you poison it?”

“No.” His forehead furrowed and it even looked like there was genuine hurt in his eyes.

“Well, then, thank you. Now unless you’re here to tell me what’s going on around here, get out.”

“Georgina—” His voice sounded oddly strangled and I looked up from the leg I’d been moisturising to see him focused intently on my skin.

“If you’re staying, then close the door. You’re letting all the warm air out. If you’re not, then speak quickly, because I have a lot more surface to cover,” I said, wiggling the bottle at him and feeling a flush take over me when something like hunger flashed across his face. “I’m not kidding.”

He laughed lightly and then spluttered when I dropped my towel. “What are you—you’re *naked*.”

“That is generally how you shower, yeah. If it bothers you, then close your eyes. Or turn around.”

I watched him swallow hard and fight to keep his eyes above my shoulders and couldn’t help the smugness I felt. He deserved a little punishment for watching me so knowingly whenever I got distracted by his arm muscles.

I reached for my bottle of moisturiser and the sound that left him might have been a whimper.

“What are you doing?”

I paused with the cream in the palm of my hand and my other leg propped up on the edge of my bed. “What does it look like?”

“It looks like you’re about to touch yourself in front of me.” His eyes went wide. “I mean, not touch yourself, but like rub—I mean—”

I bit my lip and looked down so he wouldn’t see my smile.

“Georgina,” he said warningly and when I looked up he’d taken a step closer to me. “Stop.”

I shrugged lightly and watched his eyes dip for a second before he jerked his head back up. “If I don’t moisturise my skin will get dry, it’s been getting so cold up here the past few days.”

Sage followed the movement of my hand as it glided over and around one thigh and calf and then the other. His hands clenched and unclenched at his side as I added more cream to my palm and smoothed it over my stomach, up and over my breasts and it was at this point that he lost it completely.

“Fine,” he bit out. “I’m leaving.”

I laughed under my breath as I continued smoothing on the shea butter. “Thanks for the tea.”

He paused in the doorway, the muscles in his back and shoulders tense, and for a second I’d thought he might turn around, come back inside the room and touch me. The moment passed and my mirror rattled on the vanity as he slammed the door.

Good. He was being stupid.

I heard the front door slam and walked calmly over to my window to watch him stalk outside and lean against the fountain heavily, back bowed as he gripped the stone like he might crack it in two.

“FUCK,” I heard him shout and barely held in my laugh as I smiled. He liked me, but he didn’t *want* to like me, I realised. And that, in and of itself, was the most stupid thing I’d ever heard.

Fuck, indeed.

Chapter Nine

There was water all around me. I could feel it washing over my skin, lapping up to my chin, climbing over my mouth, my nose. I coughed and the sound startled me. I hadn't realised my eyes were closed until I opened them and saw nothing but darkness, was I still in the depths? Had it been a dream?

"Shh, sweetheart. You're okay."

It was a voice I'd know anywhere. I licked my dry lips and convinced my voice to work. "Mum?" I called out feebly.

She hummed idly, a song she'd always murmured whenever I'd had a bad dream, lulling me back off to sleep so smoothly I could hardly remember being awake in the night.

"Am I dreaming?"

The humming stopped and suddenly I could see her eyes, deep and blue, staring at me from above. "I rather think you must be."

"I miss you."

"I'm with you always."

"You promise?"

"I do." Her hands pushed through my hair, soothing me like she hadn't done since I was a child. "I wish you would leave here, darling. If I'd wanted you to be in this place, I would never have left."

“Why did you?”

I was no longer concerned with whether or not I was dreaming, I had to be, but god how much I longed to be able to ask her these questions in real life. How desperately I wanted to see her and hug her one more time. It was a physical ache and I closed my eyes again to hide from the pain.

“It’s complicated.”

“Mum...”

“I know that’s not what you want to hear, but it’s the truth.”

“Is... Is Edward my father?”

She sat up, pulling her hands away from my hair and at once I missed her touch. I sat up too and realised I was not at the bottom of the lake as I’d initially worried, I was in my bed and she was perched on the end. Her skin let off this silvery-blue glow that made my lips part in awe until she turned her head and I caught a glimpse of the wound on the back of her head. The one that had killed her.

“Mum,” I whispered, my eyes filling with tears. I’d had a lot of dreams like this in the first few weeks after she’d been found, dreams where I saw her or she came to me, half-rotted and wanting to bring me with her to the land of the dead. This didn’t feel like that, though. It felt... sadder. More honest.

“I don’t know,” she said, ignoring the tears that dripped steadily down my cheeks. “I never could tell.”

“Tell what?”

“Shhhh.” Her pale finger touched my lips and I recoiled, she was cold and the sensation raised the hairs on my arms. “He’s here now, darling. I have to go.”

“You told me you’d stay!”

“I’ll be with you.” She pressed a kiss to my forehead and brushed several tears off my cheek. “Listen to him, darling, won’t you? This is a place for the dead.” She held me tight for a moment and I couldn’t breathe. “I want you to

live.”

I stared up at her, confused and unsure and she pushed me back down onto the bed gently.

“Close your eyes, darling.”

I did and when I next opened them I gasped.

The room was empty.

Of *course* it was empty. I had been dreaming of her, my mother. I touched a hand to my cheek, feeling the dried tracks of tears— had I been crying in my sleep again? I pressed my hand to the end of the bed where she’d sat in the dream and let the grief grip me for a moment, pressure mounting so hard and fast it felt like my head might explode from how tightly I held on, how deeply I spiralled, as I let the ache touch me down to my soul.

I sniffed hard as I slowly sat up and tried to breathe past the imagined scent of roses and violets and vanilla that still lingered on the air. It felt so real, like I could still reach out and touch her if only my imagination would let me.

I padded out of bed to the bathroom, blowing my nose and splashing some water on my face before I checked the time. It was only 4am so I got back into bed. I’d obviously fallen asleep early that night after all the gardening work, and I still felt exhausted now. I settled back against my pillow before reaching for the water on my bedside. Instead, my hand met pages. Another of my books had been opened. It lay open on Angela Carter’s *The Werewolf* and I knew I hadn’t been reading it recently. In fact, it had been at the bottom of my book pile. Someone had been in here, messing with my things.

My mouth ran dry. What the hell was happening to me? The dreams, the things I kept thinking I had seen or felt... I felt unhinged, like Alswell had cracked me open for the night air to rush in and freeze my soul.

I leaned forward, shining the light from my phone screen down so I could

see the passage that had been highlighted. My mouth went dry and I shone the torch around into each corner of my room before looking back down at the page. *The Devil is as real as you or I.*

I definitely wouldn't have drawn in my book. Why would someone highlight that and leave it for me to find? Was it a warning? A prank? I set my jaw, switching off the torch light. Whatever it meant was irrelevant. If somebody was trying to scare me off they would have to do a better job—including my own subconscious. I hadn't thought there was a single part of me that agreed with Sage, that I should just leave and start over and live my life. I wasn't built that way. I couldn't just shove all my grief into a box and bury it in the ground with her. No, I needed to rage and scream and I needed to *know*.

That someone had been in my room, messing with my things, didn't even scare me any more. No, it *pissed me off*. That was the best they could do? Leaving a spooky little quote? Running around upstairs? Pathetic.

I got out of bed, muttering under my breath as I pulled on my socks angrily and stomped over to the door. I pressed my ear to the wood and then pulled it back sharply, my eyes wide. There, outside the door—the same breaths I'd heard trapped in the closet.

I leaned in to listen again and bit my lip when I heard it clearly. A sharp knock followed and I jumped, stumbling back away from the door. It was a trick my mum had used when I was a kid and had been out of bed on a book hunt. I would listen to see if the coast was clear and if I couldn't hear anything, begin to slowly turn the handle. She would snap it back up from the other side, stronger than my small hands could best, or rap sharply on the door one time and I would scramble back to bed.

"Mum?" I whispered and then felt like an idiot, until another sharp rap had my heart in my throat. I moved closer, pressing the left side of my face against the door, ignoring the roughness of the wood grain as I listened desperately for any more movement. I rested my hand on the handle for a

moment debating whether it was worth risking Sage's agitation to leave my room, before slowly turning it and feeling it yanked viciously in my hand.

No. It couldn't be. It wasn't possible. *I want you to live.* Had it been... Had I been awake? No. That was... ridiculous. Impossible. Maybe I was still dreaming right now, just a very vivid, confusing dream.

My mind span as I took a step back from the door. Haunted, the officer had told me. The kids dared each other to go in. Surely that was nonsense. Ridiculous rumours.

I glanced back at the open book on my table and stopped and stared. It was closed. No, that wasn't right. It had been open just a second ago, hadn't it?

Listen to him, darling, won't you? This is a place for the dead. I was losing it. I had to be. My mother was gone. I couldn't have spoken with her, the book must have been closed, I hadn't heard anything outside the door. It was all impossible. A dream or, more accurately, a nightmare.

I needed to clear my head. I needed to find Sage. He would... *Listen to him, darling, won't you?* Was that who she'd meant? Sage?

No, no. She didn't *mean* anyone. She was my imagination. Some part of me wanted me to give up and I couldn't listen to it.

I hauled open my bedroom door and stepped outside quickly into the empty space. I heard no footsteps, no breathing, and I glanced around uneasily before deciding I would feel better if I checked all the rooms and then went to see Sage and Ms Weathers.

Most of the doors were kept open now and that gave me a small measure of comfort for some reason, like it was better to be able to see whatever lurked in the dark.

I started out on my floor, looking through the east corridor. Nothing. So I headed up the stairs, eyeing the corner that led to the master suite with no shortage of trepidation. The moonlight guided my way as I walked, stopping when I reached the opposite end of the corridor to the master suite. All the

doors were empty, all the rooms unused, and now my toes were cold. I gave up, deciding to walk back to my bedroom, but instead stopped at the window seat that overlooked the lake.

It was so serene. The water was black and the moon reflected on the surface like a white orb, illuminating the grassy banks on either side. I was reminded uncomfortably of my dream for a moment, the water closing over my head, before I shook it off. Maybe I would just sit here for a while, maybe Ms Weathers really did sleepwalk and I would bump into her wandering around. I hadn't found a trace of her or Sage in any of the bedrooms.

The corridor was quiet aside from the house settling, creaking and groaning in the quiet language that only buildings seemed to know and that spoke to an owner's soul. Maybe it was weird to feel so attached to a house, but it was mine. In some ways it felt like I was always going to end up here at Alswell, like it had been waiting for me.

I looked out at the lake, letting the movement of the water lull me as the perpetual draft chilled my skin and my eyes grew too heavy to keep open.



I'D WOKEN UP IN THE WINDOW SEAT WITH THE SUNRISE AND HEADED BACK TO my own bed. Someone had laid a blanket over me and tucked it in around my feet, but I had an awful crick in my neck now. That had been hours ago and while I'd found Ms Weathers in the kitchen that morning, I hadn't seen Sage all day and it was starting to worry me. I would have felt slightly better if Ms Weathers hadn't also seemed concerned too.

"Oh, don't worry, dear. He's probably just off resting, or working in the forest."

I raised an eyebrow. "Sage? Working?"

Ms Weathers chuckled but it sounded forced. "He'll turn up."

I nodded as I got on with the housework. It was too cold outside today to

try and plant anything, and the sky was far too gloomy. If the sun didn't come out at some point then I wasn't sure anything I'd planted would grow.

"At least the rain is giving them plenty to drink," Ms Weathers said when I complained and I shrugged.

"I don't want them to drown though."

"It'll be fine, dear. You're doing such a good job."

I smiled, grateful she was here. "I think I'll go for a walk."

Ms Weathers waved me away and I grabbed my boots and coat from the hooks by the door before making my way outside, tugging up my hood against the rain.

It would be nice to get away from the dust, even if just for an hour while I walked through the forest adjacent to the lands.

The grass was already soaked and I took care with my step so I didn't slip and land in the equally slick mud where I'd begun planting. The rhythmic raindrops against my hood settled me, grounding in a way that nothing else could be as I increased my pace, heading in the direction of the lake and pulling my hood forward to stop the wind throwing the water in my face. I didn't turn to the dock though, instead I moved to the right and inhaled the fresh scent of the forest. Wet leaves, damp wood from toppled trees, the mud splattering me with each step as I sped up, enjoying the sound of my own breath in my ears.

The sky was grey, but the sun still shone weakly, illuminating the small trail Sage had shown me on my first day. I followed it all the way around, stopping at the trunk of a large tree and spinning around quickly.

"I'm pretty sure I can walk through the woods alone," I called and smirked when Sage stepped out from the brush. "You are possibly the worst stalker I've ever met."

"I'm not a stalker."

I snorted. "No, just a very hands-on, inattentive gardener." He rolled his eyes and I bit my lip on a smile as I turned away. "Don't follow me, Sage."

No footsteps sounded aside from my own and I chuckled quietly, had he really thought I wouldn't know I was being watched? My smile faded as I neared the place where the belladonna bushes grew and I gave them a wide berth, instead veering close to the trees as they opened up at the edge of the driveway.

The fountain looked sad as I walked past and ran a hand over its rim. Dry and crumbling, I decided I would make restoring it a priority. It would be a shame to let something so beautiful fade away.

My boots were fully caked in mud and my fingers were freezing despite being shoved deeply into my pockets. I gazed up at the house thoughtfully as I drew closer, noting the disrepair and the places that had clearly once shone with beauty. My eyes flicked up to the roof and the trail of Ivy that laced up the brickwork before stilling on what had to be the attic window. I hadn't been up there yet. It was partially because it was out of sight and out of mind, but also there were more important rooms that needed some love first. Yet, in that moment, the attic became the most important part of the property. Because that was my mother's ethereal face looking out at me.

I was frozen mid-stride, staring up at her as those familiar eyes seemed to burn into me in turn. Then I was running towards the house, keeping my eyes glued to her as if my gaze alone could keep her in place. Did my reaction make any sense? No. She was gone. Dead. I would never laugh with her, hug her, speak to her, ever again. And yet, I pumped my arms as quickly as I could, uncaring about the mud I tracked in as I reached the staircase, slipping only a little and knocking my shin against the stair.

I followed the stairs around, growing dizzy, until I came to the top of the house, the attic. The scent of decay was even stronger there than in the rest of the house, but as I stood in the doorway, panting, I felt my shoulders slump as grief threatened to squash me.

Empty.

And really, what had I been expecting? Of course it was empty. I'd seen

her body, had verified that it was her, and I hadn't been lying. My mother was gone, whatever I'd thought I'd seen had to have been a product of grief and exhaustion. Hope, maybe, even though it was foolish.

I walked over to the window where I thought I'd seen her face and analysed my own, not dissimilar, features. Maybe there were no answers to be had here at Alswell, maybe all I would find was pain, stealing my breath and sucking my spirit out through my marrow as I chased a justice that didn't matter—it wouldn't bring her back, after all.

I turned away from the sight of the treeline and my mother's face within my own and looked instead at the contents of the attic. Who knew what they were storing up here, maybe I might find some of my mum's things.

Intrigued and soothed by the thought of finding a small, tangible, part of her, I moved to an old-fashioned free-standing clothes rack and slid the garment bags open one at a time. The zipper on the last bag had a smooth rasp that raised the hairs on my neck as I parted the material to find a dress. White, exquisitely beaded, with a lace mesh overlay that was both ornate and tasteful. I had no doubt that it had been my mother's. Was this the dress she'd married Edward Alswell in? Maybe one day, she might have presented it to me—something borrowed, or maybe something old, but those moments had been stolen away from us.

I sank to the floor in front of the dress as it seemed to morph into a figure of my loss in front of my eyes, everything I would never get to have with her. Everything that could have been.

The sob caught and burned in my chest as I clenched my jaw, refusing to breathe as the pain tried to find its way out and my body only tensed further. Eventually, when the pressure became too much, it left me in a wave that left tracks under my eyes, dripping onto my still-wet coat.

I stood abruptly. I couldn't look at it anymore. Wasn't sure I could stay here any longer with the reminders of her all around me, the lies she'd told and secrets she'd kept, pulling at the still-healing wound of her loss, re-

opening it over and over. If I didn't leave now, who knew how deep the scar tissue would run.

I turned for the door and slipped on the wooden floor in my muddy boots, arms pinwheeling back until I was caught.

I choked, the hand that had flashed out of nowhere closing around my throat and holding me in place, my spine bowing backwards as I hung there. Saliva pooled in my mouth, tasting metallic like blood as I felt my face flush red. The large, thick hand didn't let up and grey eyes not unlike my own appeared like beacons that glowed with anger before darkness swallowed me whole.

"Georgina?" The voice was soft and then panicked as the ground shook beneath me like someone had fallen to their knees by my prostrate form. "Wake up, Georgina." The command was firm but with an edge that had me stirring.

"What happened?" I coughed as I sat up slowly and Sage peered at me with hazel eyes full of a mixture of relief and something else that I couldn't place.

"You tell me," he said, dark brows slanting low over his eyes as he watched me. "Angie said you came storming past and then I found you here on the floor."

"I—" What *had* happened? I'd stood, turned and slipped, but before I'd hit the floor... "How does my neck look?"

"Your neck?" Sage's eyes sharpened as he brushed his fingers over the skin of my throat. "It looks fine."

"Not... red?"

"What the hell is going on, Georgina?"

I bit my lip before shaking my head. "Nothing. I slipped and must have hit my head." There was nobody there, I had probably just let all the local talk of hauntings get in my mind and mess with me. Nobody had been here except me—Sage would have seen them on the stairs otherwise.

I wasn't sure if I was just concussed, or if hitting my head had knocked some sense into me somehow, but I no longer felt the urge to leave. The anger and grief bottled inside had been released, for now, and all I really wanted right then was a hot shower and a cup of tea. Besides, I'd said I wanted answers and I'd meant it. I couldn't leave.

"Come on." Sage held out his hand and I took it, stumbling a little as I moved too fast and fell against his chest. "You're trouble, Georgina Alswell," he murmured as he steadied me, the presence of his hand against my back filling me with relief, and I swallowed hard.

For so long, I had been Georgina Cole. It was only now that I was standing here, in this place, with this man, that I realised the name had never fit me at all.

Chapter Ten

After spending the majority of yesterday out in the rain and mud, I'd decided it was past time I hunted down the washing machine. I found it in a room adjacent to the kitchen that I hadn't noticed before. Thankfully it had been fairly easy to use. I'd cleaned out the filter and felt a lump in my throat at the sight of several long, dark hairs that were caught in there. Fucking ridiculous, crying over fluff and dirt but it was *her* hair and after last night, I had been feeling somewhat delicate all day.

"Are you crying over fluff?"

My head jerked up and a smile broke out across my face. "Sage!"

"Yes," he said cautiously and I cleared my throat, arranging my face into a more neutral expression, unsure why I'd been so happy to see him.

"Where have you been all day?"

"Around," he said, waving his hand vaguely when I raised an eyebrow. I would have pressed him more except... he looked exhausted. Oddly pale, like he was faded around the edges.

"Are you okay?" I brushed the fluff out of the filter and into the bin and he nodded.

"Yeah. Just tired running around after you," he teased before nodding to the bin. "So, the fluff?"

I pulled one dark strand free and bit my lip. "It's hers."

“Ah.”

“Yeah.” I cleared my throat. “I think I’m going to go and see her today.” I had wanted to wait until I knew, until I could tell her what had happened, who had killed her. But after the weird dreams and strange visions I’d been having, I wanted to go sooner rather than later and remind myself that she was really gone and that dreams were just that—whatever I’d thought I’d seen had just been the product of stress and grief.

“Do you want me to come?”

I eyed him, noting the frail cast to him, and shook my head. “Thanks, but I’ll be alright. You should just get some rest.”

He smiled like I’d said something funny but nodded. “Sure. I hope…”

“What?” I held my breath as I waited to hear what he would say next. We hadn’t spoken since he’d found me yesterday and I wondered if it was as fresh in his mind as it was in mine right then.

“I hope it goes okay.”

“Oh, thank you.” For a moment we just stood staring at each other before I cleared my throat and clapped my hands lightly. “Well, I’m going to—” I pointed off into the distance and he smiled slightly as he nodded.

I was nervous about going to the cemetery later, but it needed to happen, and soon. Before I lost my damn mind.

I slotted the filter back into the machine and got the washing going, standing and staring at it for a few minutes as dread filled me. But there was no more reason to put it off. It was time.

I pulled on my coat, scarf and gloves and by the time I’d laced up my boots I was clammy under my layers, although maybe that was the anxiety.

The walk to the cemetery was surprisingly pleasant, all things considered. The leaves on the trees had turned fully orange and decorated the ground, crunching softly under my boots as I walked on the woodland trail and followed it around to the left as Ms Weathers had instructed. I could have taken the boat across the lake, but I wanted to stretch my legs a little. It was

so peaceful out here that sometimes I felt guilty. Guilty for enjoying it, guilty for loving these woods and the life I was slowly building, because it was only possible because she wasn't here and that was a complicated emotion for me to dig into. Was it okay to feel happy? Especially when that happiness was a result of my mum's death?

I wasn't sure. It didn't feel right. But at the same time, what else was I supposed to do? I couldn't stop living because she was gone, nor would she have wanted that. My mind drifted as I remembered how elated and how simultaneously crushed I'd felt seeing her in that dream, glowing blue. *I want you to live*. I truly believed that was what she would have told me in real life too, if she could.

The trees began to open up and the birdsong started to fall away as I left the cosy shroud of the forest and stepped out onto a stone road that had been well-maintained. It was technically part of the land I now owned, but some rights had been sold off years ago to the council to allow it to be a public space. The Alswells still had their own mausoleum though, tucked right at the back of the cemetery. Neat rows of headstones lay ahead of me, some newer than others, and it felt like a fist was in my gut, squeezing tighter with every step forward I took. Because this was it, and the moment I saw it, it was real.

Identifying her had been awful, not because she was gone, but because she was *right there*. How could she be dead when she was right in front of me? This though, here in the cemetery, was a different kind of grief entirely.

As I stopped in front of the Alswell mausoleum and plot, I spotted another familiar name. *Edward Tobias Alswell*. I brushed my hand across his name and date, dead the same year I was born. Was this why she'd left Alswell?

I took a deep breath, letting the smell of the fresh air into my lungs and then pushing it out all in one go as I looked at the headstone next to Edward's. There had been no room in the mausoleum for them, the space had been filled long before their time, but they were laid to rest together, just

metres away from the rest of the Alswell ancestors.

Natalia Margerie Alswell.

My breath caught in my throat and if not for the hand that landed on my shoulder, I would have sunk to my knees right there.

At first I'd assumed it would be Sage standing there, having followed me even after I told him I was okay. It was the sort of stubborn thing that I guessed I would do too. But it wasn't Sage.

Instead, a man with dark hair and light eyes stood behind me, his white skin only a little lighter than the clouds that were gathering and turning a darker shade of grey by the minute.

It felt like he looked through me more than at me, his eyes tracing over the letters of my mother's name with the kind of reverence that made it feel like I was the one intruding.

"Hello," I said quietly and he blinked, letting his hand drop as he looked around as if confused as to how he'd gotten there. "Did you know her?" I nodded to the headstone and his eyes turned distant once more.

"Better than I know myself," he said and his voice was the kind of gravelly that put you at ease, commanding, but gentle. "She didn't deserve what happened. Neither do you."

Alarm bells rang in my mind as I took half a step away. "What do you mean?"

"She never would have wanted to leave you." He barely looked at me, just continued to stare down at the headstone like the world had fallen out under his feet and left him in freefall. "If I could have stopped it, I would have."

Not necessarily a ringing endorsement of innocence but... "I would have too." He finally looked up at me and the sharpness of his gaze speared me as I choked. "Your eyes..."

The man looked to the left-hand-side of my face and smiled slightly. "Quite remarkable."

The shape of his jaw, the cleft in his chin, the soft smile that graced his face—it wasn't possible. I'd come here to affirm my sense of reality and only lost it further. There was no way Edward Alswell was standing in front of me.

"Are you Edward?" I whispered it, barely daring to breathe the words. Had I gone completely mad?

"I think you already know the answer to that." He crouched down and brushed several leaves off of the earth at the base of the stone. He made it sound plausible, like this wasn't further proof that I was losing my fucking mind.

I managed to choke out words. "Why did she leave?"

"Because she had to."

"You forced her to leave?" I stuttered.

He smiled as he looked up at me and I stared, numb. That mouth, that grin, it was a mirror image of my own. Was this a breakdown? "Nobody could force Natalia to do anything she didn't want to do."

That was true enough. "Then why?"

He sighed. "Things had gone too far. It wasn't safe anymore. She wanted to protect you." He stood and took a few steps away. "She still does."

"Protect me from what?"

Edward looked up sharply, like he could hear someone calling his name from a great distance and started to fade before my eyes.

"No!" I reached for him and my hands slid right through. I stared at them in shock, clenching and unclenching my fingers. What was happening to me? Was this another dream? Another hallucination? Had I pushed myself too hard coming to her grave and fainted?

"It was good to see you, finally." His words echoed, like he was no more than a memory fading fast until I was alone in the cemetery again. Or had I always been?

I backed away from the grave, their names blurring together as the world

seemed to spin around me faster and faster. I ran.

I couldn't feel the ground beneath my feet or the air in my lungs, so I pushed myself harder, no longer sure if I was alive or dead or if there was any difference between the two.

The birds squawked at me as I stumbled through the underbrush, stomping through leaves and trying to avoid nettles. I lost the trail, the world seemed an unfamiliar place and I wasn't sure what I could trust, what was real and what was my own mind, playing tricks on me.

I sank to the forest floor, the dirt cold and grounding beneath my palms. I wasn't sure what had happened to my gloves, I'd likely dropped them at some point while I'd been stumbling around and generally losing it. The sky had darkened to a deep black and the wind blew fiercely, shrieking through the branches and rattling the trees where they stood. Thunder boomed out, so loud it shook my bones and made my eyes ache and I huddled under a large tree for shelter while I reached for my phone.

Some kind god must have been shining down on me at that moment as I had two bars of service, enough to be able to use maps to direct me back to the manor. I was embarrassingly close-by—fancy being lost five seconds from your front door. Sage was likely going to freak out that I was not only out after sundown, but that I was roaming the grounds in the dark.

I laughed maniacally, the sound echoing into the air as my breath fogged, billowing smoke up to the sky as I blinked around at my surroundings without recognition. What was he so worried about anyway? I laughed again and then screamed when the heavens suddenly opened and the rain pelted the floor like a hammer. Leaves scattered and jumped with the force and I slid several times on both wet mulch and mud, skidding and slipping until at last the house was in view. I hurried out of the woods and onto our perfectly shorn lawn when the air began to crackle, the scent of ozone absolutely unfamiliar but the strong tang left me with no doubt as to what it was as my hair began to float.

I looked up at the sky in awe, seeing the stars shining brighter than ever before, or just the one star really, forking and slamming down—

I screamed as I was thrown out of the way of the bolt. My body thunked to the ground and the breath was knocked out of me as frantic hands turned me over. My eyes instantly went to the spot where I'd been standing only moments before and the large scorch mark that now scarred the earth. Lightning.

A giggle broke free the longer I stared at it, the shock forcing the unhinged sound out of me. Oh my god, I had almost been struck by lightning. I laughed harder until the hands gripping my shoulders shook me and I looked up into the face of Sage, caught in the moonlight, glowing bright silver-blue.

“No.” The word was a whisper but it felt like a shout. “Am I mad, Sage?”

“No,” he echoed. “You’re alive.”

“I can be alive and mad,” I reasoned. “You look like her. You’re glowing.”

“Who?”

“My mother.”

“You’ve seen her?”

“I don’t know.”

Sage clasped my face between his hands, his brown-green eyes serious as they searched my expression. “When did you see her, Georgina?”

“Before I saw Edward.”

Sage swore and I giggled again, the sound turning into a whimper. I was delirious, feverish. None of this was real. I tugged Sage’s hand and when he turned to face me I pulled hard, sending him stumbling closer to me. I relinquished his hand and cupped my own around his jaw. Nothing made sense, like the rule book had been thrown out of the window.

“None of this is real,” I told him quietly, looking deeply into his eyes and searching for the calm he usually brought out in me, and then I kissed him.

I'd expected his mouth to be warm, but it wasn't. In fact, I could barely feel the pressure of his lips on mine. It wasn't enough—I needed to *feel*.

"Georgina," he groaned and pushed me away gently as I reached for him. "Stop. It is real. This is real."

"No." I shook my head for emphasis. "None of this makes sense. I've lost my mind. Why else would I see things that aren't real?"

"Look at me," he murmured, turning my chin when I neglected to do so. "Do you think you could make this up? That I'm not real?"

I considered him before sighing. "My imagination is good, but not good enough to dream up you."

A broad grin split his mouth and I felt dizzy with want until it faded. "This is real."

"But she's dead."

"Your mother is dead," he confirmed.

"Then how could I see her? Why did she glow? Why do *you* glow?" A terrible feeling had begun slinking through my gut. How quiet he was when he walked, how tired he'd been lately, how neither the plumber nor the officers had greeted him or Ms Weathers.

"Georgina..."

"Tell me." My lips felt numb, had they even moved? I couldn't be sure, so I repeated myself. "*Tell me.*"

Sage stood, his long legs unfolding gracefully as his hands clasped behind his head and he paced up and down before dropping them and looking me square in the eye. "I'm dead, Georgina."

I was shaking my head before he'd even finished speaking as my gut roiled. "No."

"I died the same night as Edward, the same night as Angie, the same night as... him."

"No." I stood and walked towards him on wobbly legs. "Sage, why are you saying this? You're not dead. You're not. You're—You're right here."

“Georgina—”

“No. Stop lying to me. Just fucking stop.”

“I’m not lying and I think deep down, you know that.”

My breaths came quicker as the sky rumbled ominously above us, the moon shining down on him and highlighting the otherworldliness of that glow as I fell to the earth once more and pressed my hands to the cold ground. This was what he’d been hiding? Him and Ms Weathers both?

“Is it because I kissed you? Is that why you’re saying this?”

“No! Of course not.” Sage dropped to his knees and his face was tight with a mixture of pain and frustration. “I cannot feel for you, Georgina, it would lead to nothing but heartbreak. Do you understand? I am dead. I am gone. You are *alive*.”

Tears spilled from my eyes and I tasted them on my tongue as a wind I didn’t feel began to rustle the branches of the tree I sat beneath. “But you’re not gone,” I pleaded. “You’re here, you’re right here.”

“I’m fading.”

“What?”

“Ghosts are not infinite. I don’t know how you can see what nobody else can, but to interact with your world it costs us energy. To hold your hand, to brush a leaf out of your hair... it uses up a little more of my soul until eventually there’ll be nothing left.”

I stilled, biting my lip and focusing on the pain to stop my tears from flowing. “Then why do it,” I whispered, scared to know the answer, and he laughed brokenly.

“Because I *do* care, even though I shouldn’t. It hurts far more to see you and be unable to touch you than to die a true death with my hand in yours.”

I didn’t know what to say, so I said nothing, tilting my face up to the sky and letting the rain blend with the tears I couldn’t hold back any longer.

“You’re dead.”

“Yes.”

“Ms Weathers too.”

“Yes.”

“Who killed you?”

“Georgina...”

“Who did this to you? Tell me.”

It felt like every element of the storm turned its ear to us at that moment. Like it was waiting, daring, Sage to say the words, to name his murderer.

“If I tell you, he’ll kill you.”

“Did he kill my mother too?”

Sage hesitated, his eyes soft and apologetic on mine as he nodded.

“You knew this whole time?” I wasn’t sure how to feel. Betrayed, yes. But also, how could he have told me? *I know who killed your mum, because they killed me too* sounded insane.

“Yes. I’m sorry, we’ve been trying to protect you—drawing him away from your room every night and keeping him distracted until I could convince you to get out of here.”

I smiled wryly as I blinked back more tears. “And I have been making it so easy on you.”

He laughed shakily, placing his hand next to mine in the dirt.. “Yes. You’ve been a royal pain in my arse.”

“Is that why you’re fading?”

“Partially,” he admitted and a stab of guilt sliced through me so cleanly I felt nauseous. “Whenever I’ve been unlucky enough for him to catch up to me, he takes my energy. It makes him stronger, increases his ability to cross the divide between the living and the dead even when the sun is up. It also makes me weaker.”

“I never asked you to do that.”

“I know.” He shrugged. “I wanted to.”

“Do you still think I should leave?”

He looked away from me, back out at the manor waiting for us to come

home. “It’s the thing that I want the most and am terrified of at the same time.”

“I don’t want to go.” He wouldn’t ask me to stay, I understood that now, but he couldn’t force me to leave either. “You need to tell me everything.”

“It’s dangerous,” he warned.

“It’s dangerous for me here anyway,” I insisted.

He nodded slowly before standing up and offering me his hand. I frowned down at it.

“Don’t waste your energy.” I stood up and wiped my wet face on the sleeve of my coat.

He scowled at me and I could admit that I’d missed the sight of it. “It’s not a waste.” I shivered as another, harsher, breeze swept through the air and Sage walked a little faster. “Come on. I don’t want you to catch your death out here. Angie is the one who should tell you the story anyway, she knows more than I do.”

I frowned at him as I struggled to make my frozen legs move faster. “It’s a little too soon for death jokes, thanks.” He snorted and the sound made me smile even as I studied his faintly luminous profile in the dark. “Is this why you wanted me to stay in my room once the sun goes down?”

“Yes,” he said as we approached the front door. “He can’t interact with the world while the sun’s up like the rest of us can, though the more of our energy he steals the easier it becomes for him. After dark, everything’s fair game though.”

“Even you?”

“Even me,” he said grimly, but then smirked as he drifted backward through the front door.

“I knew it,” I hissed as I walked through the door, unable to follow him by just drifting through physical obstructions. “I’d thought maybe someone left the master suite through secret tunnels—I obviously didn’t account for the ability to walk through walls.”

“Yes, well, that’s where you went wrong.” Sage snorted. “Silly you.”

“Tea,” I said firmly after hanging up my coat and shivering some more.
“Maybe a fire too.”

“Right away, madam.”

I rolled my eyes. “Well at least I know why this place was in such a state when I first arrived. I thought you were just—”

“Incapable? Lazy?”

“Both,” I admitted and he grinned.

“At least you’re honest.”

“If only you could say the same,” I quipped and then stilled when Ms Weathers walked in the room, a disapproving frown on her face as she looked between us.

“What on earth is going on here? It’s far past sundown.”

“She knows, Angie.” Sage sighed and when he bent to sit in a chair I gasped. Just like my mum’s head wound, Sage had his own death blow imprinted on his spirit.

“Is that a gunshot wound?”

He shook his head. “Knife.”

I winced. “Shit. Sorry.” How had I not noticed it before?

Ms Weathers and Sage looked at me funny before they started laughing and when she tilted her head I could see the necklace of bruises around her neck. Strangulation.

“Twenty-odd years,” she said, “and you’re the first person to say you’re sorry we’re dead. The first person who’s been able to see us long enough to actually apologise, I suppose.”

“How can I see your—” I grimaced, unsure how to word what I wanted to say. “Um, wounds?”

“The moonlight.” Sage sighed and adjusted his overalls slightly as if to hide the blood from me. “Something about it shows our souls as we really are.”

“Dead,” Ms Weathers added, as if it was unclear. “Including our death-mark.”

I eyed the fingerprints ringing her throat before alarm shot through me. “Do your families know—”

“Yes, yes.” Ms Weathers waved me off. “The police handled everything once we were discovered. For all intents and purposes, we’re buried and at peace.”

“Then why are you still here?” I filled the kettle to the brim and then frowned at them both. “Can you even drink this?” They shook their heads and I swore, thinking of all the tea bags I could have saved had I known. “Sage said you should be the one to tell me the full story, that you knew more than him.”

“That’s true.” Ms Weathers nodded and then her eyes flicked between us again. “But first I need to know how this happened. You were never supposed to know, dear. I promised your mother.”

“Well maybe she should have thought about that before she decided to pay me a late night visit,” I said dryly and Sage chuckled. “Oh and then, of course, that was followed up by an encore with her very dead husband at her graveside.”

“Oh my.” Ms Weathers sighed deeply. “Well, I suppose there’s no helping it now then.”

The kettle wobbled at my back, the hot steam billowing out the top and I took a moment to just breathe before I bustled around filling my cup.

I sat down at the table next to Sage and opposite Ms Weathers, clenching and unclenching my hands until Sage took one of them in his. It was an odd sensation. I could see his hand, I could even half-feel it, but it wasn't the same as touching someone who was... alive. I pulled my hand away after squeezing his in thanks. I didn't want him to waste his energy on stupid shit like comforting me.

I took a deep breath and asked the question that was at the forefront of my

mind as I looked into Ms Weathers' eyes. "Did Edward Alswell murder you?"

"No," she said simply. "It was his brother. Jared." She hesitated and I bit my lip nervously. "To understand our fates, you need to know what happened. From the beginning."

I nodded quickly, impatient, but then stilled as I realised this was perhaps the first and possibly *only* time that they had been able to tell their story. Ms Weathers smiled knowingly as she watched me settle.

"When Edward met Natalia, he was instantly smitten. I'd never much believed in love at first sight until I saw those two together. Edward came from money but he also ran the business side of things at the cemetery before the family decided to partially sell it to the local council. Your mother, as I understood it, was working as a translator when they met. She could speak several languages fluently and often spent her time travelling, she once told me she'd never felt the need to stay in one place until she met Eddie."

Eddie. I wanted to ask if he was my father, if I had assumed correctly, but I didn't want to interrupt—it was the kind of knowledge I would have killed to have as a child. They were finally telling me the truth and I was getting the answers I'd long craved. But more than that, this was about *them*. Jared's victims. I didn't want to take this away from them and make it about me.

"They were wed very quickly and everything seemed perfect, until Edward's twin brother came to visit. He'd missed their wedding, what with it occurring so abruptly, and had come to finally meet the wife of his beloved brother. The only problem was that once Jared laid eyes on Natalia, he coveted her. Soon, he was finding all sorts of reasons to visit and became a semi-regular fixture around the manor. Eddie was blissfully unaware of his brother's feelings but Natalia... she always was a good judge of character."

The pictures. Two men who appeared identical but in one she had been filled with joy and with the other...

"Jared became obsessed. He'd convinced himself that Natalia loved him

and if not for his brother, the two could be happy together. He began to impersonate his brother, and at first, Natalia did not think anything amiss. It was Edward that eventually worked out what had been going on. It was small things—Natalia mentioning conversations they'd had that he couldn't remember, or plans they'd made that he'd had no hand in. Of course, then came the bigger clues. Big enough that Natalia came to notice too how Eddie's temperament, his anger, would change throughout the day. Her sweet husband in the morning and her raging lover by the evening."

My face paled and Ms Weathers noticed, patting my hand as she nodded. Realising what I'd put together. My mother had visited me in the dream—that wasn't-a-dream and when I'd asked about my father... she'd said she didn't know. *I never could tell.* Oh god.

"It's okay," Sage whispered, leaning in close to my ear. "It's alright."

I nodded, breathing in and out slowly and Ms Weathers waited until I nodded before continuing her story.

"When Eddie found out what was happening, he was furious. He banned Jared from the house and the fight they had... Oh, it was awful. I'd thought for sure that one of them would end up killing the other. But in the end, Jared left the manor and we all breathed a sigh of relief. He was not a kind man—maybe he had been, once. But love, though powerful in the right hands and circumstances, can warp the mind as easily as it can free it. The former was the case for Edward's twin."

I glanced at Sage and found his eyes already on me. To live through this much suffering... I gave him a watery smile and turned abruptly back to Ms Weathers as she continued.

"Your mother was distraught, of course, and by then she had realised something frightening that normally would have been a cause for joy. She was pregnant, unbeknownst to us all. Though knowing what I now do—" Ms Weathers smiled at me. "The signs were all there. I think she had planned to stay at Alswell, to raise you as Edward's, regardless of your origins. But

Jared came back.”

I shook my head, blowing out a breath as anger stung my insides. Anger at Jared, yes, but also at my mum too, for never telling me any of this. For making me find out this way.

“Edward had gone off to a meeting with the council and Jared burst in. He thought this was his chance, that Natalia would want to ‘escape’ with him and when she refused, he grew volatile. I called Eddie and left him a voicemail, but in the meantime, Natalia had taken matters into her own hands. She had knocked him out with a blow to the head and ran. Of course, at the time I thought this a little callous of her. Leaving her home, her husband. Now I know that she ran to protect you, deeming Jared too great a threat to risk him finding you both.”

“When Jared awoke, he flew into a rage. I attempted to soothe him, to assure him we would find Natalia and contact Eddie, but he had gone mad. He killed me and then Sage for attempting to stop him. By the time Edward arrived home, the house was in disarray, his wife missing and his gardener and housekeeper slaughtered in the sitting room.”

I blinked rapidly. It was hard to hear, I couldn’t imagine what it had been like to live through. It was made harder by the fact that they sat here in front of me, despite knowing they did not make it out of this story alive.

“Jared lay in wait for his brother. He had searched all afternoon for Natalia after his rampage and nobody had been able to give him any information. She had run, and in turn doomed us all to his rage. Edward found Jared in the sitting room, pacing as if our bodies didn’t phase him. He ranted and raved and when Eddie took a step forward, Jared took the hunting rifle mounted on the wall and shot him once through the heart and then turned the gun on himself.”

I gasped and Ms Weathers nodded sadly. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault,” Sage said and logically, I knew that. But this man who had done these terrible things might have been my father. Sage seemed

to read this thought straight off my face. He shook his head. “We are more than what our blood makes us.”

“I hope so.”

Sage slid his hand over my cheek and cupped my jaw. “I know so.”

I gazed into his eyes for a moment longer than was probably wise, knowing that anything between us was over before it began. But the heart wants what it wants and I had started to fall for a ghost.

Chapter Eleven

“Why didn’t she come back til now, do you think?” I asked Sage and Ms Weathers, anxiously drumming my fingers on my leg as it bounced up and down a little later on when I’d had some time to think.

“I honestly think she didn’t know. Jared, and the Alswells more generally, were powerful allies but also frightening enemies to have. They had money, connections, she probably didn’t want to do anything to tip him off as to where she was, not realising that he was dead.”

“So she took me and ran,” I said quietly, my head felt like it was reeling from trying to process all of the information they had thrown at me. “I went off to university and what, she decides it’s finally safe to check in, only to find her husband and the household murdered by the possible-father of her kid?” I swallowed. God, saying it aloud didn’t help.

“I know it’s a lot,” Sage said quietly and looking at him made me want to cry. The both of them had just been swept up in the drama of my family and paid for it with their lives, for trying to do the right thing. “We can stop here for tonight, talk more about your mother tomorrow—”

“No, no. I’ve come this far. Tell me.”

Sage looked over at Ms Weathers before focusing back on me. “I don’t know what’s different about you, Georgina. Why you can see us. Your

mother couldn't. I wasn't lying before when I said I didn't speak to her, I physically couldn't. Short of tearing up the place and scaring the shit out of her, there was nothing we could do to warn her about Jared."

"He's still here like you?"

"Yes, but not like us. He's a malevolent spirit and that seems to make things harder for him in some ways."

"Like what?"

"Well, like I told you before. He's not able to manifest during the day, but once the sun goes down he's even more powerful than either of us. Every day, he lies in wait, and every night, he hunts us."

My face must have betrayed my confusion because Sage grimaced, his mouth working but clearly unsure what to say. Ms Weathers stepped in.

"Ghosts are energy, dear. We are not corporeal, though it may look like that to you. We are, as best as I can guess, a manifestation of our souls. The brighter we shine, the more energy we have."

I looked worriedly between them. "Why is Sage barely glowing compared to you?"

Sage fussed with his glasses, avoiding my eyes until Ms Weathers sighed.

"He's been leading Jared away from you almost every night."

I frowned as the tension seemed to rise.

Sage finally looked at me, his mouth pinched like he was eating something sour. "He hunts us for our energy, to make himself stronger. Once we run out..."

"What? What happens?"

Sage looked at Ms Weathers and shrugged. "I assume that's it. We're gone. We move on, or we fade out of existence, I'm not sure."

My alarm rose. "How can we stop it?"

Ms Weathers sighed. "By stopping *him*. We'd thought after he killed your mother, we would be free. She was the thing tethering him to this world and he was the thing tethering us. Only—"

“She wasn’t his tether.” I swore. “I am.”



“ARE YOU OKAY?” SAGE ASKED AS WE WALKED UP THE STAIRS. I’D HAD enough information, enough bombshells dropped on me for one evening. I wasn’t going to let them all continue to suffer, stuck here while Jared drained them dry. But I wasn’t sure what to do yet either. I needed to sleep, reset. It had all been such a shock and the problem would still be there for me in the morning.

“I don’t know,” I said honestly, trailing my fingers over the bannister as we stepped up onto the landing. It was late, ridiculously so but I didn’t feel settled yet. There was too much on my mind.

Sage paused at the entrance of my bedroom and I tried not to blush, remembering how I’d teased him in here before and kissed him earlier. He probably thought I was an idiot. *Because it hurts far more to see you and be unable to touch you than to die a true death with my hand in yours.* Maybe not.

He made to turn away and I bit my lip. “Wait. Will you stay?”

Sage’s eyes were soft as they met mine, the small hints of sunrise sending shocks of gold through his hair as his strange glow faded. “If that’s what you want.”

“I do,” I whispered and he nodded, following me to the bed and closing his eyes when I changed into my pyjamas. “I’m sorry that I refused to listen to you before. I know you were just trying to keep me safe.”

The softness on his face sent butterflies cascading through my stomach as we settled on the bed. “I’m sorry I couldn’t tell you the truth—I just didn’t want to scare you, even if you did believe me.”

We watched each other for a moment and we both relaxed, accepting the honest regret for what it was before I reached to turn off my lamp and

snuggled into the covers.

“Sage?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m sorry you’re dead.”

“Me too.”

The silence settled around us like a blanket, warm instead of stifling, an ease between us now that hadn’t been there before. I understood him better, I realised. He’d been withdrawn, even rude, because he’d had to be. He’d lied to me to protect me.

I wasn’t sure if that made it okay, but it made it bearable.

Sage settled next to me, his long legs stretched out against my body and his head at the opposite end to the bed. It felt like my mind was made of questions, each flitting into my head and bouncing around harder than the last until it was a constant hum. I stared up at the ceiling, waiting for them to subside and then huffed, rolling onto my side in frustration when they didn’t. There were small gaps in the wall of my bedroom, probably in all the walls of the manor if I looked close enough. They were small, but wide enough that I could see the light and the shadows in the hall running together, flickering like someone had run their fingers through the beams. The gaps were probably the cause of the inescapable chill in the house, unless—

“Are you cold?”

Sage’s eyes opened and looked at me from the end of the bed. “I’m dead.”

I snorted. “I wasn’t asking if you wanted to come under the covers. I meant the house, it’s always freezing. Was it like that... before?”

He shrugged. “It’s been so long that I don’t remember warmth, save for your touch. You’re so hot it almost burns, like trying to hold the sun.”

I fell quiet, my eyes fluttering closed as I listened to him breathe—it had to be a force of habit. “Do you have to concentrate to sit on the bed with me?”

“No.” I could hear the smirk in his voice when he spoke again. “I can get in bed with you any time, Georgina.” I shook my head at him and he chuckled. “I have to concentrate to become insubstantial, like I did earlier when I passed through the door, but it’s easy really, like deciding to walk or run. But this...” His fingertips brushed over my calf through the duvet. “This takes effort.”

It hurt to say the words, to move my leg away, but I did it regardless. “Then you shouldn’t. You’ve already given too much.”

“When it comes to you, I’m not sure such a thing as *too much* exists.”

“Who knew you were such a romantic under all those scowls you gave me.”

We laughed quietly together, the sound of the rain filling in the silence like we were in our own cocoon of protection.

“How do you think—”

“*Georgina*,” Sage said with an exasperated sigh that was more than a little amused. “Turn off your brain. Go to sleep.”

“I can’t.” I untucked my arms from the duvet and thudded them down on top of the covers. “I can’t stop thinking about the fact that I might be the daughter of a murderer. Doesn’t that bother you?”

“No.”

“No?”

“No,” he repeated simply. “I know who *you* are. You’re not him. I don’t think you could be even if you tried.”

“I would do terrible things for the people I love,” I whispered, thinking back to the night I’d almost come face-to-face with Jared, how I’d felt such anger, such a need to *hurt* the person responsible for killing my mum.

“So would we all,” Sage said. “But you are good, Georgina.”

“Why do you say my name like that? Nobody else says my name so much or in the way that you do. Most people shorten it.”

“I like the way it feels in my mouth. A beautiful name for the most

beautiful woman I've ever met."

I blushed and hoped it was still dark enough that he wouldn't see. I almost wished he wouldn't say every thought in his mind, it made it that much harder to keep a level head, to try and protect my heart from the inevitable pain of letting him go. He wasn't supposed to be here, none of them were, and as soon as we got Jared to move on... they would all leave too.

I sighed. Despite the ugliness of its past and the dark that crept in the halls, Alswell felt more like home than anywhere I'd been before, typical really, that the place I fit in best was full of the restless dead.

"What were you going to ask me before?"

I cast my mind back, having already forgotten as other thoughts and questions consumed me. "Oh. How do you think Ja—" Sage shushed me and I winced. "Is there a reason I shouldn't say his name?"

"Sometimes it draws attention and I think we've risked it enough for one evening."

"How?"

"Well—" I could practically hear Sage's brain working as he tried to describe what he meant to me. "Ghosts aren't always conscious. Time isn't the same for us as it is for you. I've been dead for over twenty years, but I haven't felt them all. Sometimes we drift, thinking and feeling, caught up in the moments of our lives and stuck in our memories. Me and Angie... It was like electricity when you walked through the gates. You were change, you were *new*, completely different from the cycle of our existence that we'd fallen into."

"You're saying I woke you up, or something?"

"Sort of. But it's different for all of us. Take your mother, for example. I bet she'd completely forgotten that she'd asked Angie to keep you in the dark. New ghosts sometimes drift more than others, their memories and cycles still fresh and vivid."

“And... *him*?”

Sage blew out a breath that I didn't feel. “He's almost as alert as me, and I'm only like this now because of you—your arrival. But it's easy to lose who you are when you're a ghost and saying his name all the time...”

“It reminds him of who he is, what he lost.” I sat up in bed as Sage nodded. Despite the topic, with the sun peeking through my curtains and his eyes on mine, I felt.. safe.

“How do you think he knew? About me?”

“That's the thing, I don't think he did. He was still obsessed with Natalia, would yell for her as he roamed the halls and grounds. Things changed when she came back here. *He* changed, and that's uncommon for a ghost.”

“You changed,” I pointed out and he gave a small smile that was edged in sarcasm.

“That had more to do with you than me. I had to be creative to keep you out of trouble.”

“Right,” I said, shooting Sage a pointed look that told him not to argue with me. “How did he change?”

“He watched her.”

“And?”

“That's it, he just watched her. Didn't threaten her or harm her, didn't hunt us. For three weeks, he just watched.”

“Then what changed?”

Sage bit his lip and I tried to nudge his leg with mine but, of course, I passed straight through him. “Ah, sorry.”

He snickered but it faded fast. “Sorry, if I'm not concentrating then I'm not corporeal at all. Anyway, I think what changed was you.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don't know, but one moment he was docile, peaceful even. Didn't interact with her at all. The next he was furious. He must have seen something or heard something while he was watching her that enraged him.”

“Something like secreting away a hidden child that might be his,” I guessed and Sage nodded.

“I won’t let him hurt you,” Sage said, voice hushed. “Even if it costs me my soul.”

A chill skated down my spine at his words, because that was what scared me most.

Chapter Twelve

The next morning, I woke up feeling disoriented as the sun poured into my room, hadn't it been light when I'd finally fallen asleep? Sage lounged next to me in bed, reading one of my books, and looked up quickly when he saw that I was awake.

"What are you reading?" I asked and then winced at the huskiness of my voice. "Fuck. How long was I asleep for?"

"A full day. You needed the rest."

"What about—"

"He didn't bother us."

I nodded as I sat up and nervously smoothed my hair before taking a much-needed gulp of the water on my nightstand. It tasted stale and I wrinkled my nose as I set it down again. Sage was watching me quietly when I looked back up at him and I bit my lip nervously.

I'd had sex before, I wasn't a stranger to that kind of intimacy, but waking up with someone—even if they hadn't been asleep—was new and slightly nerve wracking for me.

"Hi."

"Good morning." He closed the book with a smile and I looked at it out of the corner of my eye, trying to check none of the pages were bent.

"What are you reading?"

Sage looked strangely sheepish as he cleared his throat and nudged it towards me. Forgetting about his lack of energy, I immediately snatched it up and held it to my chest before he could even think about picking it up. I glanced down at the cover and a loud laugh escaped me.

“Really? *The Haunting of Hill House*? What are you, a glutton for punishment?”

“Says the girl in bed with the ghost.”

“Touché.”

I could have easily spent the day in bed with Sage, but my muscles were aching and my bones cracked and popped when I stretched out my arms. I needed to get up, to get away from this place and its tightening tethers for a moment.

“Fancy a walk in the woods?”



I WASN'T SURE I'D EVER GET USED TO THE QUIET IN THE COUNTRYSIDE AFTER being in the city for most of my life, but I wasn't sure I'd ever get sick of it either. It was a gift I woke up grateful for every day. I'd always thought that the hustle and bustle of the crowds, of being alone but never lonely, that was the life for me, the setting I needed. But now that I was here I wasn't sure I ever wanted to leave.

Sage looked like he was made for the autumn. He walked at my side, his passage not disturbing the leaves coating the floor at all so I made up for it by kicking and wading messily through every pile I found. The amused smile on his face hadn't faded as we walked and I found myself glancing at him every few minutes to check that it was still there.

I realised I'd never seen him in anything but his jumper, overall and boots. I guess I'd just thought it was some kind of unofficial uniform or something that he liked to wear. A thousand pairs of the same clothes. I

wished it meant they were dirty or rumpled or that he looked sloppy from working in the garden, but the reality was that the sleeves of his thick jumper were often rolled up to expose his strong forearms and the khaki green of his overalls brought out the same colour in his eyes.

“Georgina.” His voice was a rumble of warning and I made a small hum in response at the stern sound. “Stop staring at me like that, unless you want me to do something about it.”

A thrill swept through me at the words even as I looked away. I’d spent a lot of time thinking as we walked, the birdsong an accompanying tune to the melancholy and guilt that churned in my gut as I remembered all the times he’d brought me tea or touched my hands with his. Small slices of comfort or thoughtfulness that now had more meaning when I thought about what he’d risked doing those things. Though he might not admit it, deep down, Sage Williams was a romantic.

“What if we just left,” I said suddenly as we turned and made our way towards the dock. The cold was starting to seep through to me under the layers of my jacket and scarf. Though it had been clear all day, the remnants of the rain and stormy weather seemed to be held within the leaves and the mud, like a chill I couldn’t shake as I remembered the flash of lightning so close to me. “Me, you, Angie, whoever else wanted to come, and just got away from this place. From him.”

Sage looked down at his feet while he walked and I tried not to frown when I realised his smile had finally faded. “I can’t leave the property.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know.”

“I know you’ve been here a long time and I get it, it’s like the house has claws that sink into you and the further you step back the tighter they slice. But if we left, he couldn’t hunt you any more. You wouldn’t have to go.”

His hand on mine startled me as he pulled me to a stop. “It’s not that I wouldn’t leave with you if I could.” He pressed my palm to his chest and I

fixated on it, feeling nothing where there should be a beat. “I physically cannot leave the grounds. I am bound to Alswell, but you’re not.”

“We’re back to you trying to convince me to leave again? I thought we were past that.” I pulled my hand out of his grip and continued walking on, dodging a muddy puddle neatly and taking a deep breath to soothe my irritation.

“You’ve got the answers you needed. Leave this house and its demons to rot.”

The word *demons* had me glancing at him sharply. Had it been him who’d left me the message about the devil in the Angela Carter book? “You really think I would just abandon you now? You’re only in this mess because of my—” I couldn’t bring myself to say the word *father*, was still filled with hope that I might have been brought into this world through the other brother. The good one, in as much as any of us were good anyway. “I’m the reason he’s still keeping you here. I can’t leave you here, trapped, while he sucks away your soul.” Without meaning to, I’d stopped again, stepping close enough to Sage that I could see the gold flecks in his eyes behind his glasses as he watched me with a soft expression that only made me angrier.

“I’m already gone,” he said and I shook my head violently.

“Don’t,” I warned and he clenched his jaw as he looked away from me.

“I know it’s not what you want to hear,” he explained as I shook my head and started to stride away. “But you’re alive, Georgina. Even if I could leave here, what life would that be? People would think you’re crazy, talking to imaginary figures.”

I turned to face him. “If my life was going to be impacted by what other people thought about me, I wouldn’t get out of bed every morning.”

He shrugged. “We could never marry. Have kids.”

“Watch it.” I smirked as I started walking again. “You’re showing your age.” He gaped at me and I laughed. “So the reasons you think I should leave you all to a miserable fate is because I should be out there, fucking other guys

and getting hitched?”

His brows slammed down, the tightness of his voice filling me with a smug confidence when he replied, “Well, I mean, that’s not exactly what I meant—”

I laughed and after a second he joined in. We followed the dirt trail around in a wide circle and I jumped when there was a rustle in the trees up above, sudden movement darting about that had me stepping instinctively closer to Sage. Leaves scattered, flying up into the air and I gasped, the rustle growing louder until a small, grey head popped out of the leaves and my hands shook when I laughed breathlessly. Scared by a squirrel. I’d been spending too much time thinking about ghosts, clearly.

“So how exactly do you break a tether connection between a ghost and the point of their focus?”

Sage shrugged as we stepped onto the wooden dock and looked out at the water. “I have no idea.”

“But with my mum, you guys thought he would move on when she died, right?”

“Yeah, I mean, it made sense. If she was the thing tethering him to this plane and she no longer existed on it, then he would have nothing to hold onto.”

An icy chill descended on me and my blood ran cold. “Do you think there’s a way to sever the tether without me... dying?”

“That’s not an option, so we’ll find one.”

I nodded but my footsteps felt heavier, like something in my soul felt that my time was limited, tenuous.

“If killing me would break his connection to our world, why would he do that though?”

Sage stared out at the sea of trees, the branches had begun to sway more vigorously and I knew we needed to get home before the weather had a chance to turn on us. “Maybe he doesn’t care about staying here. Knowing

him, he just wants revenge. No matter the cost.”

I would do terrible things for the people I love, I’d told him and I couldn’t help but wonder what Jared might do in the name of revenge and what I was going to do to stop him.

Chapter Thirteen

“Mum,” I whispered the following night as I crept around the halls on the second floor. “Mum, are you there?” The darkness was so complete my lit candle barely seemed to penetrate it and I hissed as melted wax dripped onto my thumb.

“Natalia,” I tried instead. “God fucking damn it, where are you?” Normally using language like that would have resulted in a full scolding, but only silence greeted me. I kept my breaths even, trying not to let my frustration weigh me down as I spun around and walked out of the master suite. I blew the candle out and let my hand graze the wall for direction as I walked around the corner and into the nook where the cold fireplace sat next to the window seat. The moonlight was weaker today, only a crescent filling the sky, but it bounced off the lake water and up through the window as I looked out.

I’d gone into town again yesterday and grabbed pillows and blankets from a few different shops and had used them to pad out the wide wooden ledges that accompanied the big windows on each floor. Looking out at the water, this was probably fast becoming one of my favourite places to sit and think. And there was a lot to think about, so much that I’d learned. I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t scared. There was a ghost in this house whose sole focus was hurting me.

So far, Sage said the others had been pitching in to lead Jared away from the house and me until we could figure out how to get rid of him, preferably without killing me. We hadn't had much luck yet.

I swung my legs over the edge of the seat as I looked out into the house, into the darkness. "I'm mad at you," I said eventually, not knowing if she could really hear me, but needing to say it anyway. "I'm mad at you for leaving, for not telling me about anything that happened here, and I'm mad that you didn't tell me about him. Either of them. At least I would have had my whole life to come to terms with who I was, where I came from, instead of having this ache inside me because I just..." I breathed out all at once and it felt like I deflated, my anger burning away until all I felt was tired. "I just needed to know."

I stood up and grabbed my candle from where I'd left it on the floor. From here, the light from the window could guide me to the stairs, illuminated by the matching window on the floor below that sat facing the steps up to this floor.

It felt good to confess those words to her, even if she was too lost within herself to hear or understand them. Admitting them had been just as much about me as they were about her. It was hard to be angry with someone you loved after they were gone, it felt wrong somehow, but I was only human and so was she.

My steps were quiet on the floor as I walked carefully to the staircase and went down it. That was probably the one thing I missed about my university accommodation—it had a lift. I started to smile, glancing up into the window opposite me as I did and then froze, a startled shriek escaping my mouth as I saw somebody standing behind me, reflected in the glass. "Wait—"

Eyes as grey as mine burned out of a face that was so like Edward's but not, twisted with a kind of darkness. He thrust out one hand and slammed it into my back.

The world slipped into smears of brown and black as I fell, my ankle

twisting painfully as I cried out.

He made no move to come after me, just stood on that same step, his face blank and cold as I tumbled until solid arms caught me before I could hit the last few stairs.

Jared's face burned into me before he vanished, the first emotion I'd seen on him so far—hell, the first time I'd seen him, period, and it was eerie how closely he resembled his brother. How horribly they resembled me.

"I've got you." Sage. Of course.

"I'm okay." I breathed through the pain and winced as a sharp stabbing sensation came through my side and my pulse throbbed in time with my ankle.

"Okay? That bastard almost killed you. What are you doing wandering around in the dark when you know how dangerous it is?"

I couldn't take a lecture right then, so I did the only thing I could think of to shut him up, the only thing I really needed in that moment. I tugged Sage's jaw down slightly and pressed my lips to his, cutting him off as he mumbled around my mouth before surrendering.

I gasped as his tongue stroked along mine, taunting, before he bit my lip and took it for himself, sucking and teasing until I automatically pressed closer. Needing more. Wanting him.

And that was exactly why I pulled away, panting. I was certain that my lips were probably puffy from the force of our kiss but right then I didn't care. It took all of my willpower to take a step back, and then another, wincing as I put weight on my ankle.

"I'm sorry," I said quietly as I turned around with an awkward shuffle and limped my way back to my room. "I shouldn't have done that."

"On the contrary." Sage sounded frustrated and I knew I was probably confusing him as much as I was confusing myself, running so hot and cold I could barely keep up. "I think we should be doing a whole lot more of that—before you leave here for good."

“The cost isn’t worth it.”

“Why don’t you let me worry about the cost.”

Then his hand was in mine and his arm around my waist as he lifted me, twirling my body effortlessly until our chests were flush and his eyes dropped to my lips. I licked them, unable to help myself as I tasted the faint sweet smokiness he’d left behind.

Sage leaned in slowly, giving me plenty of time to pull away but I was hypnotised as his mouth brushed mine, coaxing it into a deep kiss that made me moan. He pulled back and his eyes were heavy as he watched the blush I knew I was spreading steadily across my cheeks. Then he leaned in again, his lips whispering over mine like a language I hadn’t realised I could speak but that my body responded to.

He rested our foreheads together and I closed my eyes as the kind of pain that made my body draw taut forced me to ask, “What are we doing here, Sage?”

“Kissing, Georgina.”

I pushed out of his arms gently and he watched me, standing glowing faintly in the last of the light coming through the window. “You want me to leave, you want me to carry on without you, but then you kiss me like it means something and I just don’t *know* what it is you want from me.”

“I want you,” he whispered, “in every capacity possible.”

“You told me that you couldn’t feel those things for me—”

He shook his head. “I thought I could stay away from you. I was wrong.” His fingers traced my cheek and I jerked my face away.

“Look at you,” I cried. “You’re fading in front of me, more every day. You *can’t* touch me, or kiss me, because I refuse to be the reason you fucking die.”

“It’s not enough,” he growled. “Whatever it is that’s between us... I need more than just a taste, Georgina. While I still can.” He took a step forward and I retreated. “You know that I’m already—”

“So that makes it better? That makes it hurt less to know that if it wasn’t for me, none of you would be in this situation?”

“Love is fickle.” Sage’s mouth hardened into a flat line that I wanted to trace with my fingertips. “It’s rarely uncomplicated. And I don’t think you’re masochistic enough to put the blame of all of this onto yourself. Not when you know who the real issue is—in case you missed it, it was the guy who just *pushed you down the stairs*.”

I folded my arms across my chest and his eyes dropped down, making me grumble with exasperation until I dropped them again. “I’m going to bed. *Don’t follow me*.”

“Georgina—”

“I mean it, Sage.”

He sighed, running a hand through his thick hair until it stuck up at odd angles before it fell back into place. “Goodnight, then.”

“Goodnight,” I murmured, watching him walk away for a second until I closed my door and leaned my back against it. *Love is fickle*.

Had Sage Williams just told me he loved me? No. Surely not, it was just an expression, he didn’t say that love was fickle—just like what he felt about *me*.

I climbed into bed and gingerly stretched out my legs before I tentatively squeezed the ankle that hurt. It was a little swollen, but it seemed like I’d just twisted it. Not broken.

I’d gotten lucky that Sage had been there to catch me.

But I didn’t understand why Jared had let us walk away? Did he not have enough energy for more than one push?

Maybe he’s not in a rush. I shivered at the thought but drew some comfort from the fact that we were biding our time too and as soon as we knew how, Jared Alswell was not long for this world.



EVERYWHERE I MOVED THE NEXT DAY, SAGE WAS THERE. HE WAS LIKE A NOT entirely unwelcome, but completely unruly, shadow. I would round a corner and there he was, leaning in the doorway as if he'd known exactly where I'd be, then his eyes would drop to my lips and he would straighten where he was standing as if in anticipation. Of course, I would then hurry in the opposite direction only to find him reclining casually in an armchair by an empty grate, or sat at the kitchen table with his legs kicked up. It was *maddening*.

Every time, that same reaction, the slow perusal that made me feel as hot as if his hands were following the path his eyes were taking. The problem was that I didn't *want* to say no to him. I wanted his hands on me so badly that by the time it hit mid-day, I was exhausted from running from him and imagining all the things he might do to me with his talented tongue. I shivered as I put on a load of washing and then jumped when I looked up and found Sage watching me from the doorway.

Slowly, he rolled up one sleeve and then the other before sticking one hand in his pocket and leaning his other arm above his head against the doorway. I was staring. I knew it, he knew it—and he had clearly done it on purpose. Was he just trying to tempt me all day, wear me down? Surely a good fuck wasn't worth the price of his life?

Though, what kind of life is it to be trapped in this house, unchanging, alone, forever. I shook the thought off. That wasn't the point. We had bigger things to focus on and—

Sage stretched, turning and offering me a glimpse of the pale skin of his side when his jumper rode up beneath his overalls.

“Do they come off?” I closed my eyes, inwardly berating myself. Now I'd gone and done it.

“My clothes?” he said dryly. “I'd be more than happy to show you.”

“Who knew ghosts could be so horny,” I muttered and he smirked like he heard.

“You were the one who asked.” He blinked innocently at me but his eyes were heated, his full lips parted and I swallowed hard.

“Yes, well, we have bigger—”

Sage prowled forward and I fumbled my words.

“Bigger?” he taunted and I gaped.

“Um, bigger—problems,” I gasped the word as he leaned past me, his cheek brushing mine as he caged me in with his arms, straightening something on the countertop that I didn’t even glance at as I focused all my attention on breathing.

“Oh definitely,” he agreed, pulling back and leaning against the counter in front of me. “But I think better with a clear head and right now all my thoughts...” His voice was low in my ear as he moved closer, “...are occupied by you.”

He raised a good point. I’d spent most of today trying to avoid him, trying not to think about how good it’d felt when he’d kissed me last night. Plus, I’d missed having him in my bed. The room felt too empty without him, as if the echoes in the space he’d left behind were louder in his absence.

“What are you suggesting?”

The slow grin on his face was one of triumph as he shrugged one shoulder casually. “Oh, I don’t know, I’m just so spoilt for choice.”

I rolled my eyes but couldn’t help privately agreeing. “Well, what’s at the top of your list?”

“You could ride me.”

“Basic.” That seemed like every guy’s fantasy, usually so they could sit back while you did all the work and they came about ten seconds in.

He raised an eyebrow. “No, no, you misunderstand.”

“I think you were pretty clear.”

“Let me be crystal, then. I want you to wrap your pretty thighs around my head and let me drown happily.”

I felt myself flush red. Nobody else that I’d ever slept with had spoken to

me this way. He continued on, watching my reaction attentively and if I didn't know better, I would have said he enjoyed making me squirm.

"I mean, I don't need to breathe, I don't ever get tired..." He took half a step closer and his lips hovered just a breath away from mine. "I could make you feel so good."

It felt like the kitchen had grown hotter by approximately ten degrees and while I would love to have him put his money where his mouth was...

"I have a better idea."

His face radiated amusement, his eyes flashing green as he stepped back and the sunshine hit him. "I doubt that."

"Okay, well, I have a *safer* idea." Intrigue had him raising his eyebrows and I smirked as I walked past him. "Are you coming?"

"Hopefully," he muttered as he followed me and I snickered, pushing through my bedroom door and sitting down on my bed. Sage followed but before he could sit I shook my head.

"Take off your clothes."

"You want me to strip for you?" He looked disappointed and I bit my lip to hide my grin.

"To start with."

Clearly reassured, he unclipped one of the straps that hooked over his shoulders and then did the same on the other side, pushing the top of his overalls off to fold over at his waist.

"Did you want me to dance or something?"

I laughed. "Not unless you want to."

He grinned and my breath caught at the way it lit up his face. Sage reached down and hooked his hands under the bottom of his jumper, lifting in one fluid motion that had my stomach tightening in anticipation. There were a few pale scars that decorated his arms, likely from a life of manual labour in the garden, but the muscles in his chest, shoulders and stomach were defined, a sprinkling of hair making my gaze fall down as it led beneath the barrier of

his trousers.

“You know, I’m suddenly feeling at a disadvantage.” He raised one eyebrow at me and I smirked.

“Oh, well I guess we can’t have that.” I stood and unbuttoned the flannel shirt I was wearing deliberately slowly, each button had his face darkening and I was certain that if I moved any slower he would come and rip it off me himself. I slid the shirt off and he breathed in sharply, his eyes roving over the white lacy bra I had on and then his eyes widened when I took it off. “Fair’s fair,” I teased and he nodded quickly.

I sat back down again and Sage reached for the zip on the side of his overalls before blushing. “Um, so, depending on what you have in mind this could get awkward. I wasn’t...”

I perked up, managing to pull my eyes away from the happy trail on his stomach for a second to tease him. “Sage... Are you telling me you’ve been commando this whole time?” My voice came out throatier than I’d intended and he bit his lip.

“I wasn’t wearing boxers the day...”

It wasn’t funny, really, but somehow we managed to chuckle together but mine cut off with a dry croak when he pushed the trousers down all the way and my eyes widened.

Put simply, Sage was a work of art. His thighs were strong and the muscles bunched as he walked over to me. His dick was already hard and it bobbed in front of my face for a second. I fisted my hands so I wouldn’t be tempted to reach for him and breathed out shakily as I looked back up into his face.

“How can you even...” I blushed and he looked amused.

“Be hard? I don’t know, but right now I’m grateful otherwise this might be getting a little awkward for whatever you have planned.”

I nodded over to the desk chair and tossed him a blanket as he walked over. “Sit there.”

He fumbled and nearly dropped it and my smile dropped. It was too easy to forget that he was barely here, barely clinging on. He saw the change in my expression and his face softened. “Don’t worry, I was terrible at catching when I was alive too.”

I laughed weakly but stood when he sat. I unzipped my jeans and laughed again at the sudden attentiveness he showed. I stepped out of them and then my underwear, pushing them both off to one side of the room. I let him look his fill before I sat back down on the bed.

“So...”

I shot him a look as I pressed myself back up against the headboard and slowly parted my thighs, hearing his soft gasp of breath even from across the room.

“Why,” he said through clenched teeth, “am I all the way over here for this?”

“I didn’t want you to get tempted,” I said as I brushed a hand over my stomach and up to my breasts. “Or me,” I amended and he sat back in the wooden chair, his hand slowly reaching around to stroke himself.

“This what you meant by safer,” he hissed out through a gasp, his eyes on me made my skin tingle as I moved my other hand down and stroked gently between my legs. “Georgina—” He made to stand up and I paused the motion of my hand.

“No.”

He sat with a whoosh of breath that he didn’t need and I circled my clit as he watched.

“Tell me.”

“Tell you what?” His voice was hoarse and I watched his hand tighten around his dick smugly as the speed of my fingers increased slightly.

“Everything on your long list. Tell me.”

Understanding dawned and he slowly started to pump his hand up and down and the sight distracted me enough that I barely blinked as I watched.

His head tilted back, exposing the strong column of his throat.

“I want to kiss you,” I started. “Your lips, of course, your neck.” I lowered my eyes to his dick. “Other parts of you too.”

His smile was full of promise. “Okay, love. I’ll bite.” Sage rocked his hips into his hand and my own shifted helplessly in response. “But only if you keep those lovely fingers moving.”

I obeyed his command and was rewarded by his moan, throaty and deep, he looked at me like he wanted to consume me, like he would combust if he didn’t.

“I want to make you beg,” he said finally. “Stubborn woman, making everything harder than it needs to be.” He smiled grimly but it faded when he saw my hand wasn’t moving. “Don’t stop.”

I resumed my slow strokes and his eyes dipped down to look at me before they rose again, his breathing laboured.

“I want to kiss you until you’re dizzy, run my mouth down your throat and worship your breasts.” He groaned as his hand rolled over his head. “I won’t rush. I’ll make you whimper before I move my hand lower, sliding it through your wetness like you’re doing for me now.”

I gasped a little as my hips moved and he bit his lip. “That’s right, love. Just like that. When you start to pant and beg for me, when your hips are rocking uncontrollably, I’ll slide in one finger. Two. Do it for me now, love.”

I obeyed him, a short moan leaving my mouth as my head fell back. I heard the speed of his hand increase and fought the pleasure running through my body so I could watch him.

“Then, before you can get too wet, I’ll run my tongue over you. Sucking and feasting until all you can remember how to say is my name.” He smirked and I would have teased him if I had the breath. “Say my name, love.”

“Sage,” I panted and watched his eyes slide closed for a second as his hips jumped.

“Once you’re absolutely soaked, I’ll pull away and hitch your legs over

my shoulders as I push inside of you. Not too deep, not yet. I want you to beg for it.”

My breaths were coming faster as my fingers moved quicker, the weight of his eyes and the gasps of his moans spurring me on.

“I’ll tease you with shallow thrusts until you’re going wild, hips bucking and voice hoarse from begging me—and then I’ll fuck you deep.” Sage’s voice was hoarse and my face flushed as we became lost to our own bodies, to watching each other in the here and now. “Fuck, Georgina—”

I needed no other encouragement, crying his name as my hips lifted and I came so hard I felt dizzy. I slumped back against the bed and felt the stirring of air as Sage got up and laid next to me.

“Did you...?”

“Yes.” I could hear the smile in his voice. “First time in, what, twenty years? I’d almost forgotten how good it could be. Though I do seem to be limited in some ways, no clean up.”

I shrugged sleepily. “Convenient.”

He chuckled. “Yeah.”

I rolled on my side so I could look at him. From across the room, Sage was stunning but up close I could appreciate him even more. He had a smattering of freckles across his shoulders that made me imagine him gardening in the sun, topless, sweaty... Thankfully, my body was too blissed out to be turned on by the imagery.

“Were you with someone? Before, I mean.”

He shook his head. “I dated, yeah, but I was single when it happened.”

“What about your parents?”

“What about them?”

“Have you seen them at all?”

“No.” He looked at me and I wanted to smooth away the pain on his face. We were like two halves of one whole, both missing our parents, our lives, but from different sides of the veil. “Not since my funeral.” He laughed

bitterly. “Not something I’d ever imagined I would experience.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I’m sorry, too.”

“When’s your birthday?”

He smiled slightly and my heart beat quicker. “April seventeenth.”

We went back and forth, asking each other questions and I let him tell me about his life and I tried to catch him up on what he’d missed in the twenty years he’d been stuck here. And as we laughed, I had that same feeling again of being exactly where I was supposed to be.

Chapter Fourteen

There was something different in the way Sage looked at me now after what had happened between us. There was a shared sense of intimacy that only came from knowing exactly what someone looked like naked, and maybe knowing what lay beneath the surface too.

We'd stayed up chatting for hours until he had chastised me, practically bullied me, into getting some sleep and I'd reluctantly closed my eyes and been glad to see him when I opened them again in the late morning.

I'd packed a flask full of tea and allowed him to drag me outside into the weak sunshine early this morning. The smell of damp earth and water from the lake had become a familiar comfort, slowing my pulse as I breathed it in. I'd never been in a boat before, but Sage thought the lull of the water would ease our minds as we tried to think of a way to get rid of Jared without causing my death or risking the others. It was hard, there wasn't exactly a handbook that we could refer to and despite the fact that I maybe loved one, I didn't consider myself an expert by any means.

"What about the bible?" Sage suggested, keeping his eye on the paddles I'd balanced precariously across my legs as the soft current in the lake let us drift.

"You want to pray? Now?"

He rolled his eyes, the shade from the weeping willow making them look

darker than usual. “No. I mean, what if we performed like, an exorcism or something.”

“He’s not a demon.”

“Close enough,” Sage muttered and I had to agree.

“Even if that was possible, I wouldn’t want to exorcise you all. It feels like it’s more of a blanket attack than a targeted approach,” I reasoned and Sage blinked at me. “What?”

“I don’t know, it’s just kind of hot when you talk about *strategy*.”

My laughter echoed around us and several ducks swam hastily in the opposite direction to our small boat. “I can’t believe you just said that.”

Sage shrugged but a smirk curled the edges of his mouth. “Okay, so you don’t think scripture would help. So maybe we need to force him to move on somehow, fight him.”

“He’s incorporeal,” I pointed out and Sage grinned, opening his mouth and I waved my hand at him, knowing he had been about to say something inappropriate. “Get your mind out of the gutter, we’re supposed to be concentrating.”

He leaned back against the other end of the boat with a sigh. “I know, I’m just... I don’t want to miss a single moment or wish I’d said something when I could have.”

I frowned. He was acting like he had already left me. I knew it was a foregone conclusion, he was a ghost and I was very much alive, eventually he would have to leave me and go wherever it was spirits were supposed to. It didn’t mean I wanted to focus on that though, I would rather just enjoy the time we had.

“Maybe we just need to salt and burn his bones,” I teased, trying to lighten the suddenly heavy mood and Sage cocked his head.

“Why would that help?”

“I—” I coughed. “Oh my god. You died in what, 2000?”

“Yep.”

“You never got to see *Supernatural*.”

“Oh. Is it a ghost hunting show?”

I stared at him. “Kind of.”

“Well, I don’t think that would necessarily do anything to him. Plus, I have no idea where he was buried, I’m pretty sure he wasn’t put in the Alswell plot unlike the rest of us.”

I nodded absently, letting the sound of the water wash over me. It was surprisingly soothing out here, quiet, but completely alive. The ducks splashed errantly and I dipped my fingers into the water every now and then, loving the way it felt like silk slipping through my fingers.

“We’ll work it out. We have time.”

I wasn’t so sure about that but I nodded anyway. Suddenly, the ducks lifted out of the water, flapping their wings as they coasted along the top of the lake and Sage glanced up at the sky when the boat rocked.

“We should probably head back, it looks like the weather’s turning.”

It did that a lot up here, something about the fact that we were higher up than the town made the weather more unpredictable. I didn’t fully understand it, but it sure kept me on my toes. I picked up the paddles and tried to move them as Sage instructed me until soon we were sailing somewhat clumsily back toward the short wooden dock and pier.

I stood slowly as the boat bumped into the pole and I tied it off as I tried not to fall. The current had definitely picked up and the water turned black as the clouds sunk from light grey to charcoal. Sage moved out of the boat and onto dry land, reaching his hand back for me and I accepted it only out of sheer necessity—there was no way I’d be getting out of this boat by myself.

I lifted a leg up and over the boat, reaching for the dock, when a pale hand emerged from the water and wrapped itself around my ankle. My head snapped up to look at Sage, a scream shooting out of me, my eyes wide with panic, as he shouted my name and I was yanked out of the boat and into the depths.

Oh god, it was like the dream I'd had days ago, the first time I'd seen my mother, but so much worse. Everything was dark. I opened my eyes wider and shuddered at the cold pinpricks of ice that coated my skin as my eyes stung. The hand continued to drag me down, its shocking whiteness around my leg the only thing I could make out as I tried to kick out and up, my arms clawing and reaching uselessly, generating nothing about bubbles and force that buffeted me even further.

I looked down, trying to see the bottom as shivers began to rock my body, making me shake violently and my muscles stiffen. Grey eyes stared back at me, practically luminous in the darkness. My hair floated around my head, so dark it blended with the water, and when the hand finally let go a wave of relief swamped me even as I whipped my head around in confusion. Why would Jared let me live?

My lungs were burning, like fire in my throat, begging me for a breath and I tried to swim up towards the surface but my legs had stiffened.

He hadn't let me go, I realised. Jared knew I was already dead, deprived of oxygen and too far below the surface to swim to safety. My eyes slid closed as my body adopted a sort of weightlessness that was surprisingly peaceful, my arms went slack and my fingers splayed, feeling the current buffeting me.

Then a new sensation, something harsher, harder. A slap on my back, a frantic voice in my ear, lips on mine.

My eyelids fluttered and I looked into wide, hazel eyes and a pale face.

"Breathe."

I obeyed, my body bucking as I was forced onto my side and Sage pounded the water out of my lungs. He had come in after me, risking himself to save my life—again.

The cold air stung my throat as I coughed violently, more lake water splattering onto the dock under my nose before I rolled back over and heaved in great big gulps of air.

“I thought you said he couldn’t manifest when the sun was up,” I rasped out and the relief on Sage’s face was like ice melting, sunlight pouring through grey clouds, as he reached for me, slamming his lips into mine.

I met his need with my own, kissing him even as everything felt numb. I couldn’t feel my fingers, but the texture of his hair was soft beneath my palms, I couldn’t feel my heartbeat but I knew it was racing in my chest.

“Thank you for saving me. Again.” I smiled as I opened my eyes but my teasing tone turned into a cry of horror as Sage seemed to blur in front of my eyes. I blinked frantically, thinking there was still water obscuring my vision but he remained the same, his eyes closing as he swayed and fell to the ground. “No!” He must have burned himself out, swimming down to me, pulling me from the depths and resuscitating me, it had been too much on top of the energy loss he’d already been facing.

“It’s okay,” he said, his voice was so quiet it might as well have been a sigh and suddenly it felt like I couldn’t breathe again, like I was still floating in the lake, suffocating slowly.

“It’s not okay, it’s not,” I cried, fresh tears falling down my face as I crawled to where he lay. “I need you, you can’t leave me. Not yet. Please, not yet.” Sage didn’t reply and I felt my teeth start to chatter. “No,” I said firmly. “No.”

I didn’t know how it worked, whatever Jared did to steal the energy of the other ghosts, but energy was energy and if he could do it, Sage could too.

I thrust my hand out, resting it on the place Sage’s heart would be if he were corporeal and I breathed deeply, ignoring the way his form wavered, turning a pale white.

“Take it,” I murmured in his ear. “Let me help you. *Take it.*”

For a second nothing happened and I wanted to scream, thinking it hadn’t worked, when a white light came blazing out of my palm. And god, they’d never told me how awful it was before, to be drained. They had been willingly sacrificing themselves for me despite the fact that it felt like this—

like burning fire sweeping my veins, making my head spin as it rushed out of me and into Sage.

His body became opaque and his eyes flashed open, taking me in with alarm. And then I felt something impossible—his heartbeat against my hand. Sage choked, looking down at where my palm rested over his chest as he shoved it away.

“What did you do?”

I couldn’t answer. I slumped over, impossibly tired as Sage’s panicked cries grew louder until he scooped me into his arms. Had I given too much of myself? What happened when a living person gave up their soul energy?

“Angie!” he yelled and I felt an odd swaying sensation. “Angie! Please!”

I didn’t hear her approach but I wanted to laugh when I heard Ms Weathers swear. It just seemed so out of character and my amusement faded as I realised that probably meant nothing good for me.

“What happened?” Ms Weathers voice was urgent and Sage sounded unusually worried. Scared. For me.

“Jared attacked her—”

“While the sun was still up?” She sounded shocked and I agreed, who had he stolen that energy from?

“He pulled her under the water, I saved her but...”

“She gave you her energy.” It wasn’t a question but Sage answered anyway, voice incredulous. He hadn’t known it was possible either, but I’d been desperate enough to try.

“She made my heartbeat. Just once. But it was...” I felt him shudder and realised I had to be clasped against his chest. “What do I do?”

“Is she breathing?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Get her warm.”

“And then?”

Ms Weathers sighed. “And then we’ll see if she wakes up.”

Chapter Fifteen

I woke to a heat so stuffy that it was oppressive.

“Christ,” I muttered as I tried to push the duvet and what seemed like five blankets off of myself.

“Georgina.” Sage’s voice was coloured by his relief and he immediately moved up from his perch at the end of the bed to stretch out beside me. “You’re awake.”

“I’m roasting.” I heard a familiar crackle and widened my eyes. “You lit the fire too? Are you trying to cook me?”

“You were freezing,” he protested and I shuddered, suddenly remembering the terrible cold, the dark. “What is it? Are you still cold?” Sage reached for the blankets and pulled them back over me, tucking them in tightly under my chin while I stared at him.

“You almost died,” I said quietly and his mouth dropped open.

“Are you joking right now? You swallowed half the lake before I pulled you out.”

“And you nearly faded out of existence,” I countered. “Completely unacceptable.”

He watched me, drinking me in like he’d thought he wouldn’t see me again, and then pressed his palm to my cheek as he raised my head to meet his lips. “You’re terrible,” he murmured against my mouth and I smiled

before I pulled back.

“I thought it was about time I saved you for once, speaking of—you need to be more careful.” I glanced meaningfully down at where his hand still pressed against my cheek but he shook his head.

“I’m fine, practically the newly undead with the amount of energy you gave me.” His hand dropped as he shifted away. “I almost killed you. How did you do that?”

“I don’t know, I think it was more you than me—I just tried to open myself up to you, to offer you what I had. I’m okay, I think, but it would have been worth it to save you.”

Sage’s eyes flashed and his nostrils flared as he ground out between his teeth, “Don’t say that. How many times do I have to tell you that I’m already gone?”

“You don’t feel gone. Not to me.”

His face softened, his jaw relaxing, and he muttered something I couldn’t hear as he tucked me into his chest. “I don’t know how it happened.”

I sat bolt upright and nearly clocked him in the chin. “I had a thought.”

“Do tell,” he said dryly, leaning carefully away until I narrowed my eyes at him and laid back down.

“I knew it didn’t make sense before, that he’d push me but not follow to finish the job. I think it was a test.”

“For what?”

“To see if he could steal from me like he does from you all.”

Sage went very still. “You made my heartbeat.”

“I felt it,” I said quietly. It had probably been the most bittersweet thing of my life, to see the man I loved alive for one breath before I nearly died myself. I froze and Sage looked at me curiously as I swallowed hard. There was no use denying it any longer. I loved him. It didn’t matter to me that he was a ghost because our connection was real. I wanted to cry and laugh simultaneously and Sage pressed a hand to my forehead.

“Are you okay?”

“Fine,” I said but my voice came out all weird. “Fine,” I tried again, sounding slightly better. Should I tell him? Was it fair to do that knowing this could never last? That we had no future? “Um, so yeah. I think you were right, he couldn’t manifest during the day normally but after stealing some of my energy...”

“He could pierce the veil.”

I nodded and Sage blew out a breath, playing with my hair absently as he looked up at the ceiling. “I don’t like this. I especially don’t like that your energy seemed to temporarily make my heart beat. If I had taken all of your energy, would I be alive right now?”

Alarm bells clanged loudly in my head as I remembered Jared letting me go beneath the water. Was that why? Had he intended to wait until I was on the cusp of death before stealing my life—literally, and rejoining the world? Would that be a permanent solution? Or would he eventually have to... top it up?

“This is bad.”

Sage’s jaw was tight and I found myself fascinated by the small freckle at the bottom of his cheek. “You need to go.”

“What?”

“This is worse than we thought. He’s not just planning on killing you, he wants to try to be *alive* again. We can’t let that happen. It’s unnatural.”

“There must be something else we can try—”

“If there was, we’ve run out of time to find it. You need to go, as soon as possible.”

“I don’t want to,” I whispered and he smiled as he turned to face me.

“I know.” Then his mouth was on mine and his fingers were in my hair and I pressed closer until there was no space between us, like my body was trying to fuse our souls into one being. “I wish we had more time.”

“Me too.” My breathing was ragged as I kissed him again, slower, softer

this time.

“Do you regret ever coming here?”

I considered his question for a minute and shook my head. Despite all the bad, Alswell felt like home. Or maybe that was just meeting Sage. “I’m exactly where I need to be.”

I didn’t want to leave the house, Sage, or the others. It didn’t feel right. I had a decision to make but I wasn’t sure I was ready to make it.

“Give me a day,” I said eventually. “Just to make sure there’s nothing else I can do.”

He nodded slowly. “A day.”

The fire popped and I jumped, giving him a sheepish look when he grinned. “How long was I... asleep?” Unconscious sounded so much more serious and I didn’t want to dwell too much on how close to death I’d been.

“Not that long, a few hours.” Sage stroked my hair and I sighed, stretching my legs beneath the covers.

We were quiet after that, just basking in the fire and each other’s company. The night stretched on and I found I didn’t want it to end. Not yet. There were too many things in this place that I didn’t want to let go.

“Where do you think you’ll go next?” Sage asked finally and there was a pained expression on his face when I looked at him that told me he both did and didn’t want to know.

“I’m not sure. Maybe somewhere warm, though truth be told, I’ve grown fond of the rain.”

He smiled. “You know, when you first arrived I was shocked twice.”

“Oh?”

“Firstly, when you could see me. I’d grabbed you out of instinct, spoken as if it mattered, and then you turned around with your eyes practically glowing like you’d commanded the universe to *see* and so you did.”

“And the second?” I said softly and he pressed a kiss to my hair.

“How beautiful you were. It felt like it had been a long time since I’d

seen any beauty beyond the gates of Alswell and then all of a sudden, there you were. It felt a little like the universe or god or whoever was fucking with me. Showing me everything I couldn't have."

"I'm yours anyway."

Sage's fingers slid between mine, a contented breath leaving him as I relaxed, my eyes sliding shut. "My soul is yours in every sense of the word."

Chapter Sixteen

It was my final day at Alswell manor, so I decided to go for a walk. I'd made my decision last night, with Sage's words running through my mind on a loop. The fresh air, crisp and sharp, helped me to clear my head. Jared needed to be stopped and the souls he was holding hostage, freed. But first, I needed to try and speak to my mum, just one more time, so I made my way to the cemetery.

The grass was crunchy under my feet, coated in a generous layer of frost and I shook my boots out as I stepped onto the stone road. It was empty, quiet, it would have been unnerving if not for the cloudless sky and the ghost that sat on the floor outside of the Alswell mausoleum.

"Natalia?" Edward called, squinting against the sunlight and then smiling when he saw it was me. "Oh, you're back."

"Yes. I hope that's okay."

"Why?"

I raised an eyebrow. "Because I don't want to intrude."

He laughed and the cadence of it felt familiar. "No, I meant why are you back?"

"I wanted to try and talk to her again." I shrugged. "It's probably stupid. But I just feel like she's avoiding me on purpose, I haven't seen her since the night she came to me."

“Your mother...” He sighed. “She finds it harder than the rest of us to stay focused, to keep her memories all in order. Sometimes it’s like that when you’re new. She wanders aimlessly, just remembering. It’s been a few days now.”

“You haven’t seen her either?”

He smiled slightly. “I’ll see her when she’s ready.” He watched the way my shoulders slumped as the energy I’d clung to so tightly washed out of me. “I see.”

“Do you?” I smiled and it felt as tired as I did. I was happy to fight for my loved ones, for myself, but when the days turned to weeks, it was hard not to feel exhausted.

“Sage wants you to leave, I presume.”

I nodded and Edward hummed noncommittally.

“Doesn't everyone?”

“I’m not sure that it matters,” he looked up at me and I was struck again by the similarities between us. “Do *you* want to leave?”

I fiddled with the button on my coat but looked up when his stare felt like it grew heavier on my face with every second that passed. “You know, for the first time I’m grateful I didn’t have a father growing up.” He looked startled so I finished quickly with a slight smile, “With a stare as good as that I would have got up to far less mischief.”

He laughed with me for a second before pulling himself to his feet. “Oh, I don’t know, your mother’s looks of disapproval could rival my own. One time, I suggested to her that we should get a puppy and the look on her face nearly withered me where I stood as she said—”

“*Whatever for.*” I laughed and he nodded enthusiastically. “I asked her the same thing once. I was ten and lonely.”

The smile on his face filled my chest with a gentle warmth and I found myself wishing once more that things didn’t have to be this way.

“You wanted to say goodbye.”

“Yeah.”

“There’s no need.” Edward strolled forward and took my hand in his. His grey eyes were the opposite of Jared’s, I realised, because not once did they ever seem cold. “She’s with you always.”

I chuckled ruefully as I nodded, wondering if he’d been there when she’d told me the same thing.

“I’m sure I’ll see you again.”

I wasn’t as certain as he was, but I waved goodbye nonetheless as he walked away into the woods. It had been so different from our last meeting that it was nearly strange. The last time I’d come to this cemetery, I’d left feeling unhinged and unmoored. Today, it only affirmed that I was doing the right thing.

I sat at her grave for a little while longer, talking into thin air as the sun began to slink behind the trees and I decided I’d tested Sage’s patience enough. Ever since Jared had appeared during the daylight that one time, Sage had been worried he would do it again. I didn’t think he had the juice to do that twice, and he definitely hadn’t been by to power up since.

The sounds of the forest at night had become as familiar to me as breathing. The low call of hunting birds and the occasional rustle of leaves and bushes as foxes ran next to the trail, it was like food for the soul and sometimes I’d felt like mine was dying. Lost wandering the corridors of Alswell in search of answers, in need of hope, and now it was in danger again—but this time for love, for family.

Footsteps thudded behind me and the forest fell silent, as if it knew there was a predator amongst the leaves. I bit my lip, hesitating as I slowed my pace and then spun around, breathing out a short huff of air when I found Edward lurking in the trees.

“Back again already?”

He didn’t reply and ice swept through me when he stepped out into the slither of light, a ghostly glow taking him. His dark hair was rumpled and his

clothes were different to before, his jeans and jumper out of place with the formal stiffness of his shoulders.

The silence stretched on and I swallowed hard as I took in the hollow expression on his face—*that isn't Edward*

“A little dramatic, don't you think?” I said, trying for bravado as I faced down my mother's murderer. What did he want? Was he here to kill me next?

Jared stood metres away. I couldn't understand how two people could look as similar as the brothers did and yet have such different vibes. It was like Jared had killed some fundamental thing inside of himself, his skin paler, his eyes nearly translucent instead of grey, his lips were bloodred and darkness seemed to radiate from him like the pigment in his hair was bleeding.

He'd wanted me to hear him. Wanted me to know he was coming. But the fact that he'd waited until nightfall made me more confident that what he'd stolen from me was nowhere close to the life-force I'd given to Sage to save him. Otherwise he wouldn't be back so soon.

“I fear it's a quality you may have inherited from me,” he said and I jolted. His voice was smooth when it felt like it should have been a rumble or a growl. That was the thing with monsters though, sometimes they were far too human.

“Then you clearly don't know me very well.”

“I don't know you at all. Your mother took care of that.”

“Thank god she did.”

His eyes narrowed and I wanted to back away but held myself still. “We wouldn't be where we are now if she had just loved me.”

“So you admit now that she didn't? That she never did and never will? I love seeing personal growth.” The snap of anger in my voice made me flush but it was hard not to lash out. This was the bastard who'd killed my mum. Who'd murdered Sage and Ms Weathers and Edward and god knew who else. How could anyone look into the face of evil like that and not burn with

anger at what they'd done?

Jared smiled and it had all the markers of pleasantry whilst somehow seeming terrifying, too wide, too toothy. "Ah, yes. Let it all out, Georgina. You got your anger from me too."

"No part of you lives in me."

He tutted. "Such strong denial. It's sad, truly." One heavy foot hit the ground as he moved closer to me and as the moonlight hit him, he began to glow. I had been right, it was muted. Would he try to kill me now? What else could he be waiting for? "You can run, if you want. It didn't help Natalia."

I clenched my fists and tried to tune out his words. Should I run? Somehow that seemed like a trap, like dangling temptation in front of an animal and expecting it not to pounce.

"I could make it quick for you, if you behave."

"You're a ghost," I said finally, "so I can't spit on you. But if I thought it would land, trust me, I would do it."

His head tilted back as he laughed and then he lunged at me, his hand solidifying as he grabbed my cheeks and squeezed. "You have spirit and I have to tell you how much that pleases and enrages me." I jerked my head and he held on tighter. "So much like your mother."

I smiled devilishly, even as it stretched my cheeks uncomfortably and he watched me do it with a kind of fascination on his face that alarmed me.

His other hand came up between us, becoming corporeal as he placed it on my chest over my heart. "Don't worry, I won't kill you yet. I want Natalia to watch as I take the last thing she loves from her and she's a little... lost, right now. But soon," he promised as his hand pressed down harder and that same energy I'd given to Sage rushed out of me once more. "Soon."

He vanished as quickly as he'd appeared and I gasped, falling to my knees as sound slowly trickled back into the night. He hadn't taken that much because while I was dizzy, I was nowhere near unconscious like I had been last time. In honesty, I think he'd mostly just wanted to speak to me, take my

measure while he threatened me. If he'd been hoping to scare me, he'd failed. I now felt more strongly than ever that I'd made the right decision.

I'd once told Sage that I would do terrible things for the people I loved. Now, time was running out and I could only hope that he would forgive me.



"THERE YOU ARE." SAGE AND MS WEATHERS WERE IN THE KITCHEN WHEN I got in, the former looking like he was moments away from pacing the room. "I was worried."

"I'm okay." I smiled at him as I hung up my coat, making sure I tucked my berries securely inside and took only a handful of leaves out as I rushed to put the kettle on. "It's gotten so frosty outside, I'm pretty sure some of my hair froze on the walk back."

"Did you find her?" Ms Weathers watched me bustle around the kitchen with something like envy and I shook my head.

"No. I spoke with Edward though."

"That's nice, dear."

I stifled a laugh. In so many ways, Ms Weathers was like the grandmother I'd never had. Both of my mother's parents had passed away when I was young, or so she'd told me. I guess there was no real way of knowing what was truth and what she'd hidden to protect me from her past.

I was grateful, of course. She'd given up everything she knew and loved to raise a baby by herself. I'd thought we moved around a lot because she liked to travel, but now I suspected it was more about safety. But it was a lonely way to live. I never really got to make friends, moving from school to school, plus I was shy after the kids at one primary school had shunned me for having 'freaky eyes'. That had become my nickname and I'd endured it for an entire year before we moved. For a long time, it was only me and her. Now she'd gone somewhere I couldn't follow and that would have been okay

if she hadn't left such a mess behind for me to figure out.

I poured the hot water onto the fresh leaves, leaving the strainer in the mug to infuse for a few minutes. The steam wafted up, smelling tangy, and I breathed it in deeply even as nervousness overtook me.

"Have you decided what you want to do?" Sage's voice was quiet as he came to stand behind me, a hand settling on my waist as he rested his chin on my head.

I nodded. "Tomorrow, before the sun goes down again, I'll leave." I watched his expression in the window as I felt him nod. Relief, disappointment. I understood his mixed feelings. But there were some things in life we all had to do. For me, this was one of them and I could no more avoid it as I could stop breathing, even if it meant lying to him. "How're your energy levels today?"

"Not too bad." He pulled back but let his hand fall into mine, squeezing before he let go. "I haven't felt this strong in a long time, but it's already fading."

That's what I had been afraid of. How much energy would Jared need to rejoin the world of the living? And once he was alive, would he be able to sustain himself? Or would he need more to stay that way?

I pulled the strainer out and squeezed a dollop of honey into the mug, stirring it absently and then blowing gently, hesitating before I took my first sip. There was no going back now. I'd set my plan into motion, and I just had to hope it worked. If they really thought I was going to just leave them here alone to rot, then they didn't know me at all.

Ms Weathers watched me with a strange look on her face and I smiled as I drank some more, letting the warmth creep back into my bones.

"I can't believe you're really leaving," she said and I relaxed as her suspicion eased.

"Me either."

"It will be... empty here without you."

“It will be empty out there without you too.”

There was a gleam in her eye that made a lump rise in my throat and I swallowed hard as I avoided looking at Sage entirely.

I drained my mug, searing my tongue slightly and I winced as I placed it in the sink. “I’m going to get some rest. Busy day tomorrow.”

Sage moved to follow me out of the room when Ms Weathers called me back, so I waved him on.

The older woman moved close to me, concern shining in her ocean eyes. “I hope you know what you’re doing.” She nodded to the mug I’d place in the sink and I tried to keep my expression blank as I looked away from her, taking in the empty kitchen behind her head.

“I do.”

“Then sleep well, love. I’ll see you in the morning.”

I walked up the stairs slowly, an itchiness at the back of my throat as if the half-lie was caught there. I’d told them once and I knew it to be true once again.

I would do whatever was necessary. Jared was going to burn in hell, where he belonged.

Chapter Seventeen

Sage thought I was nervous about leaving. Maybe I was, but I'd sweat through one vest top already this morning and whenever I blinked it felt like the world blurred as the tea I'd been drinking constantly started to take effect. I hadn't told him about seeing Jared last night, knowing it would only worry him when nothing much had happened. What was a little energy loss at this point?

I sipped at my tea, smacking my lips as my mouth ran dry and took another sip for good measure.

"Have you started packing yet?"

I jumped. Sage stood in the doorway, watching me with a soft look on his face.

"A little." I gestured toward the half-empty suitcase that I'd haphazardly placed in the middle of the floor. So far, I'd filled it with books and pyjamas. I was planning on leaving all the blankets and cosy furnishings I'd slowly accumulated where they were. I didn't need them and I liked them where they were. Where I was going, I would need to take anything with me.

"You need to get a move on if you're going to be ready by the time the car gets here at four."

I could tell how much he hated saying the words, the way he looked slightly off to the side instead of directly at me and the tight set of his

shoulders. But he was trying to be supportive, this was what he'd asked me to do after all. He hadn't even asked me where I was going next, and I knew it was because neither of us wanted to acknowledge this was happening—one way or another, I *was* leaving him... just not in the car I'd booked to pick me up for appearances sake. Not only to soothe Sage, but I wanted Jared to think this was his last chance to do whatever it was he was planning.

"Don't worry, I'll be ready."

He nodded but didn't move from the doorway so I drained the last of my tea and moved to stand in front of him, twining my arms around his neck and holding them steady so he wouldn't have to expend any energy to keep them there.

"I'm going to miss you," he said softly and my eyes tingled painfully as I blinked away tears.

"I'm still here."

His shoulders appeared beneath my arms. "I know. I want to remember you just like this—in my arms, content." I smiled and he continued. "I'm going to miss your smile and the way you smell and the way you look at me."

"How do I look at you?" I teased, pressing a kiss to the air above his cheek.

"Like there is nothing more real to you in the world."

My heart thudded hard and I bit my lip. "Sage—"

"Don't." His smile seemed flimsy, like it had taken everything inside of him to prop it up. "Don't say it like a goodbye."

"How about as a promise?" I whispered and his lips parted. "Because I promise to love you, always."

"Always is a very long time."

"Oh, you're right." His eyes lit up when I laughed and then smirked. "I hadn't realised."

"I love you too." This time, when his eyes dropped to my mouth I didn't protest, I didn't stop him. I just waited, my breath caught in my throat as his

lips covered mine. It was a slow kiss, a promise of forever and the hopelessness of goodbye, but I didn't let it stay that way.

I kissed him with all the heartache I possessed, and all of the strength too. Rising up onto my tiptoes I slid my hand down over his shoulders to where his heart was silent between us and pushed a small bout of energy into him. Enough to bolster him, but not so much that he would suspect or feel it.

Sage kissed me thoroughly, like I was a delicacy he wanted to both savour and devour, and I wasn't ready to let him go.

Not one bit.

I left him with a final kiss, one last touch, before I took a step back, cutting off the flow of energy. He blinked like he'd felt something and I tried to hide my dizziness as I sat back into my desk chair, flushing when I remembered him sitting in it, looking at me in much the same way he was now—like I was something to be cherished.

He didn't say anything else and I didn't blame him, what were words in the face of emotion? Of the desperation we clearly both felt but could do nothing about?

I wandered downstairs a little while later, deciding to sit and actually eat breakfast for once, scooping a handful of blueberries onto my cereal and chewing thoughtfully as I watched the garden through the kitchen window.

This place had felt empty when I'd arrived and slowly but surely it felt like life had returned to Alswell. The gates were still rusty and the ghosts were still very much present, but the sunlight didn't avoid the grass or flinch when it came through the windows. The dust motes still curled through every room but they no longer hung oppressively in the air, smothering you as you breathed. What had changed most was the *feel* of the place. It was not quite free of the horrors that plagued its past. Not yet. But soon, if everything went according to plan.

"You're up!" Ms Weathers hurried into the room and I smiled. She was forever hurrying somewhere and it never failed to amuse me—what could

you be late for when you were dead? “Are you all packed?”

“I’ve got everything I need.”

“Oh good. Another tea?”

I nodded, surprised when she expended a little energy to flick on the kettle and grab me a cup. When she reached for the leaves, she hesitated.

“Are you going to tell him?”

My breath rattled and I coughed as I tugged uneasily on my earring, glancing up at the ceiling as the berries started to take effect. “I don’t know what you mean.”

She nodded slowly. “Well, the choice is yours. It’s not too late.”

But it was, so I said nothing and let her set the tea in front of me. Understanding now, why she’d felt the need to do so. Gratitude wasn’t necessary but it made me feel a little better as I steadied my hand and sipped the tea. “Thank you.”

“Your mother would be proud.”

“I hope so.”



THE AFTERNOON PASSED SLOWLY AND I DID MY BEST TO AVOID SAGE, lingering in the attic and looking through a photo album I’d found. When four o’clock came and went, I wondered how long it would take Sage to come looking for me. I’d had so much tea it felt like my bladder was going to burst at any given moment but as I walked to the fridge I felt calm, even as I swayed.

I grabbed the berries and then headed to the sitting room, feeling like it was fitting that he should be called back there at last. Ms Weathers walked in and sat on the couch opposite me, looking for all the world like we were about to have a family meeting other than the worry on her face. “He’s coming.”

I wouldn't do this without him. It would be wrong, so I waited until Sage burst through the door and ran his eyes over me in confusion before I called the name I knew he dreaded most.

"Jared. Come out from wherever you're hiding. We need to talk."

Nothing. Well, nothing except for Sage's fury hitting me like a ton of bricks as he threw himself onto the couch beside me. "What is wrong with you? Why are you still here?"

I sighed. I hadn't really wanted to have this conversation but it was only fair that he was here. "Because this is where I'm needed."

"No." He stood up and paced in front of me. "It's not too late. I'll call you a car myself."

"I don't have long," I called out and Sage's eyes went wide as he realised I was no longer talking to him. "So if you want one more chance to make things right, you'd better hurry."

"What do you mean?" Sage whispered and I couldn't look at him. Couldn't bear to hear that tone in his voice. "Georgina." I looked up and the wounded look on his face was almost enough to stop my heart. "Georgina, what did you do?"

"Yes, Georgina. Tell the class."

I let my eyes linger on Sage for one more moment before I looked at the man responsible for so much terror. So much pain. I couldn't leave them here with him, they had tried to protect me, and now it was my turn to do the same for them.

Jared prowled forward and caged me into the barrier of his arms as he leaned over the sofa to look at me and I sat back, nonplussed. Because what could he really do to me? I would be dead in a matter of minutes anyway.

Sage stepped forward but it wasn't his hand that pushed Jared back. No, this hand was more delicate, pale in a way that nearly glowed.

"Don't you dare lay a finger on my daughter."

My heart shattered at the sound of her voice, my eyes filling with tears as

I turned and found her standing behind me, like she had followed my footsteps across this place to end up by my side. “Mum.”

Jared straightened from where he’d stumbled back, clearly having been surprised by the force of the shove. “I think you mean *our* daughter, Natalia.”

“Georgina is, and always will be, *mine*.”

Jared opted to ignore my mum, focusing his attention on me as he cocked his head. “There’s something different about you.”

“Maybe.” I chuckled and his eyes flashed with anger, but he stopped after taking only one step forward. Not, as I first thought, in fear of my mother or Sage who lingered nearby but because someone else had finally joined us.

“My invitation must have become lost in the post,” Edward remarked before hauling back and punching Jared in the face. *Interesting*. So while Jared was the stronger of the two spiritually, it seemed like he wasn’t immune to an old fashioned socking. “That was a long time coming, brother. Maybe if you hadn’t hidden your cowardly face in the shadows whenever I came calling, I might have done it sooner.”

Jared sneered before his arm snapped out, as quick as a snake, and struck Edward. He flew backwards and my eyebrows furrowed as I watched this unfold—clearly the more spiritual energy you had, the more capable you were to affect things on both planes.

“What is the point of this? Why have you called me here, girl? Is this some attempt at a reckoning?” His face was like ice and I blinked as it melted and re-formed, the room streaming around me in a whirl of colours.

“In a sense,” I said, trying to steady myself.

“*Tell me!*” he roared and I wanted to laugh but could only cough, deep wracking hacks that made me feel like my lungs were falling apart inside me. Clearly he didn’t know that patience was a virtue. I straightened, wiping my mouth with my hand and jolting at the smear of purplish-red that came away. I had expected it, but somehow it was still a shock. “*No*.” Jared’s face was a mask of shock and then fury as he lunged towards me and found himself held

back by Sage.

“If you touch her,” Sage whispered, just loud enough that I could hear, “I will rip out your soul and send it to burn in hell myself.”

“I expected an escape attempt,” Jared snarled, “but this is beyond stupid. You would really die for them?”

“As long as it means you’ll go with me.” I smiled as he strained to reach me, to try and end me before the poison I had consumed could do its job. “They deserve to be free.”

My mum’s hand tightened on my shoulder and I reached up to touch it, flicking a quick look at her as the room spun and warped. “I missed you,” I choked out and she brushed my hair back from my face.

“Are you sure about this?” Her eyes on mine were completely clear, her faith in me absolute.

I nodded. “This is the only way.”

“I’m sorry,” she whispered and I tried to smile and wasn’t sure I succeeded.

“I love you.”

My eyes found Sage and my hands shook at the tears that streaked down his face as I opened my palm to reveal the last three berries I’d brought with me. I didn’t want to suffer—Sage was right, I wasn’t a masochist and the tea I’d been drinking infused with the belladonna leaves were taking too long. They couldn’t hold him back forever.

“Wait for me?” I asked him as I blinked away the tears in my eyes, letting them slip down my cheeks undaunted as I slid the berries into my mouth and bit down.

“No!”

Jared lunged for me as I swallowed and I grinned at him as my body began to convulse, seeing my purple lipped smile reflected in his pupils.

“Rot in hell,” I choked and the last thing I saw was the horror on his face as I toppled to the ground.

Chapter Eighteen

“You are perhaps the most infuriating woman I’ve ever known.”
The words sent a complex rush of joy and despair through me. My eyes opened, the bitter taste of poison still on my tongue. Had it worked? Was I dead? Was Jared gone?

My eyes found Sage’s and, for a second, I relaxed. Until I noticed his eyes were more grey than brown, his pale skin bordering on insubstantial.

“No,” I breathed as I sat up and pressed a hand to my own chest, feeling my heart beat where there should have been none. “What did you do?”

His smile was weak and I screamed when he fell to the ground at my side, the sound torn from my throat instinctively as the glow around him burned bright silver in a way that I hadn’t seen before. “Couldn’t let you die, love. I’d be a shit boyfriend otherwise.”

No. No. How could he even be joking about this? “But Jared—”

“Is gone,” he said faintly, “I managed to give you enough of my energy to bring you back.”

“I don’t accept this—”

“Live,” he whispered and I could almost see myself reflected in the brightness of his eyes. “Live, Georgina.”

I reached out my hand and placed it on his chest, determined to keep him with me, but nothing happened. I was too weak. I had nothing to give except

what sustained me, my body refusing to cooperate.

Another hand covered my own and I looked up into familiar blue eyes.

“Mum,” I sobbed and she brushed away one of my tears with her free hand before reaching behind her to clasp Edward’s.

“It’s okay, darling. Know that I love you, I will always be with you. Live well, okay?”

“Don’t go—”

“It’s time for us, Georgina. I’ll wait for you wherever we go next.”

I opened my mouth to reply but only a sob fell out as light exploded from her, streaming from Edward too and into Sage’s chest beneath my hand. My hand shook as the light slowly began to fade and my parents smiled at me before the remainder of their souls faded completely and Sage’s chest moved beneath my palm. A breath.

I blinked frantically, trying to clear the moisture from my eyes so I could see him as I clasped his face in my hands. “Sage? Sage, can you hear me?”

Colour had returned to his face, his hair shining brighter than usual and his cheeks a flushed pink. I cautiously moved closer and set my face against his chest, hardly daring to breathe as a sound that was gloriously out of place filled my ears.

Lashes fluttered and golden-hazel eyes found me. “Georgina?”

A laugh fell out of my mouth as I threw my hands around his neck. “You—Sage, you’re alive!”

His face turned pale as I pulled back to look at him. “What did you—”

I shook my head, taking his hand and placing his palm to my own chest. “Not me. My parents, I think they gave you the rest of their energy.”

“They moved On,” he said, wonder in his voice as his other hand came up to cup the back of my head. “I’m so absolutely mad at you, but right now I need to—”

I kissed him and he met my mouth with a desperation I felt all the way to my soul, his tongue coaxing mine into a rhythm that had us panting. I pulled

away and he groaned. “Don’t you think we should take a second—”

“Absolutely not,” he said firmly and I laughed breathlessly. “I think we’ve waited long enough, don’t you?”

Our mouths met again and this time there were no more interruptions, just us, his taste in my mouth, his body shockingly warm beneath mine. Sage’s hands roamed over my body, squeezing and stroking like he’d been yearning for this moment forever.

“I’m conflicted,” he mumbled as he pressed a kiss to the hollow of throat beneath my jaw. “On the one hand, I really want to savour this. On the other, I just need to be inside you. Now.”

“We’ve got forever to savour it,” I said between kisses, biting at his lip and grinning when he moaned. “Right now, I want all of you.”

“Thank fuck,” he said and then breath of relief that left him made me laugh until one of his hands cupped my breast, peaking the nipple through my clothes before he pulled my top away impatiently, bringing his mouth to my skin and making me gasp.

The relief still coursing through me was heady, a strange high that left my head swimming as he worked to taste all of me. His mouth sucked at the skin of my throat, a prickle of stubble filling me with awe because he was *here*. Sage was here and alive and we could have all of this.

My hands stroked the ends of his hair along the back of his neck as he moved to worship my breasts, hot mouth laving and sucking until my spine arched into him, my thighs straining wider around his hips.

“Georgina,” he murmured, the sound like a prayer. “Georgina, Georgina.”

I shivered and moaned my approval as one of his hands slid down my stomach and lower, to caress me through my underwear.

“Clothes,” he mumbled as his mouth worked to taste every inch of me. “Off. Now.”

I stood up and swayed for a moment before shucking off my clothes as quickly as I could. I was hungry for him, letting him look his fill of my naked

body for only a moment before I climbed back atop him.

“You’re beautiful.” His breaths were harsh against my bare shoulder as I moved against him and my hands trembled with need as I pulled away to help him remove the final barriers between us.

He’d called me beautiful, but I wasn’t sure I’d ever get over how stunning he was. I’d seen him naked before, but now he was alive he was an absolute vision. My body settled against his, revelling in the feel of our skin against one another as his deft fingers moved between us to press against me, testing.

“You’re so wet, so hot.” One finger circled my clit before pressing down and I gasped, wanting more, practically demanding it as I rocked my hips eagerly. One finger pushed inside me and I whimpered, loving the friction, the stretch, and when he added a second I pulsed around him, making him freeze. “Don’t come yet, Georgina. I want you wrapped around my cock when you do.”

“Then you need to hurry up and fuck me,” I said breathily in his ear and felt him jump against my stomach, his need rising with my own until we were frantic, encouraging each other with our hands, our mouths.

Both his hands cupped my inner thighs, pulling my legs further apart as he slicked himself against the wetness I could feel before he pressed his head inside.

“Yes?”

“Yes,” I gasped and cried out when he thrust into me in one long stroke that was my undoing. I clamped down around his dick, the muscles in my pussy quivering as he fucked me through the orgasm. The wet sounds of our bodies joining made my hips tilt, wanting more, knowing he could give me it.

The motion of his thrusts increased and I knew he had to be close too, his every movement wringing sparks of pleasure within me as he circled his hips tightly. I shattered, and he broke, calling my name as his head pushed back, the muscles in his throat tensing as he pushed into me one more time.

The adrenaline faded and pleasure overtook my body until I was drowsy,

lounging naked against his chest as he stroked a hand up and down my spine.

“That was...”

“Good?” I teased but genuinely wanted to know. It was his first time in about twenty years, I would have hated to disappoint. “Because I’m pretty sure I’ve never had sex on the floor before.”

“Better than good. It was everything—you are everything.”

I relaxed and nearly purred when his hand moved from stroking my back to combing through my hair.

“I wish you’d told me.” His hand tightened against my head, cradling me as his other arm came around me and held on tightly, like he’d only just realised how close we’d been to losing it all. I huddled into his chest, my head fitting perfectly beneath his chin.

“I didn’t want you to worry and I knew you would try and stop me.”

“You’re right, I would have. I never would have wanted you to do that for us.”

“I know.” I breathed deeply, letting the scent of him fill me. “It’s why I love you.”

“I’m mad at you,” he said firmly and I nodded.

“Well, I have forever to make it up to you.”

I climbed off of him slowly, reluctant to move away from the comforting vibration of his heart against mine. “Shower?”

His eyes widened, likely as he contemplated all the ways the world had once again opened up for him. He deserved this. His life before had been cut-off too soon, now he would get to live. We both did.

Epilogue

The sun shone brightly overhead as I stood at her graveside. I'd told myself before that there was no need for a funeral, not when I had no answers and there wasn't anybody else to mourn her. It was different now.

Natalia Alswell had many secrets, in both life and death. Some of which I may never get real answers to, but maybe it was better that way. Everything had happened so fast after I'd died and Sage had brought me back—I didn't really get the chance to say goodbye. If nothing else, that was what a funeral was good for.

It was strange to stand by a tombstone and mourn her, mourn them both, when I knew that wherever my parents were, it wasn't beneath the dirt. I could only hope that they had found peace. They deserved it.

I had found my own peace, Sage and I both. For better or worse, the manor was home and the very air on the grounds felt different. Infused with hope and light. The trees still sang to me and the moon bathed us in a glow, but we were very much alive. Alive, and dreaming.

I stood from where I'd kneeled in the grass and Sage's hand brushed mine as we walked to another grave. There was so much death between us, but I found it didn't bother me as much as it could have. I'd fallen in love with a ghost and had been lucky enough to get to keep him. There wasn't much I

could be ungrateful about.

We stopped by Angie's stone and laid out a flower, clasping each other's hands tightly as a breeze kicked up, carrying the scent of lake water and spring.

Alswell was thriving. We were thriving. And I knew that the next time we heard footsteps in the halls, it would be in service of life. Not death.

About the Author

Jade Church is an avid reader and writer of spicy romance. She loves sweet and swoony love interests who aren't scared to smack your ass and bold female leads. Jade currently lives in the U.K. and spends the majority of her time reading and writing books, as well as binge re-watching *The Vampire Diaries*.



Acknowledgments

Thank you for reading *One Last Touch*, I hope you guys found this book to be the perfect romantic spooky-season read! To keep up to date with my releases, don't forget to follow me on social media and sign up to my newsletter. If paranormal romance and morally grey vampires are your thing, then **carry on to read the first chapter of *Ashvale: The Vampire's Thrall* for FREE!**

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AT ASHVALE THE BLOOD RUNS FREE AND THE
SEXUAL TENSION NEVER SLEEPS...



ASHVALE

THE VAMPIRE'S THRALL



Chapter One

Life sucks and then you die. Except, sometimes you don't stay dead. It's this thought that stood out as I blinked blearily at the rows and rows of tombstones, the neat lines stretching out in front of me. I didn't know where I was. I couldn't remember how I'd got here. All I knew was that, judging by the incessant tug somewhere deep in my belly, this wasn't my final destination.

The sky was a cheery blue and the stench of pollen and freshly cut grass overwhelmed my senses, making me gag. Up until that moment, I hadn't noticed the way the sun seemed to beat down on me, making my limbs shake and my long, dark hair tremble against the ground with every strangely hollow breath that rattled my lungs.

Where the fuck was I?

The tug in my gut seemed to swell as if in answer, clenching so tightly a gasp escaped my mouth. I would have screamed if I'd had the breath. Had I eaten something bad? Was this the worst period cramp ever? My breathing sped up as I turned my head from side to side and spotted nothing but more graves and grass. Biting my lip against dizziness as the world threatened to go black, I swore when something sharp split my bottom lip.

Warmth cascaded over my chin and I fumbled a shaking hand up to scrub it away, freezing at the deep red that was smeared over my palm.

My hand flew up to prod my teeth, so fast I nearly knocked them out, and I sucked in another gasp of air when I felt the odd curve of my canine as the pad of my finger split.

Had someone strapped razors to my teeth? Oh god, had I been abducted for some kind of organ harvesting? Or experimentation? But then, how had I escaped? And why couldn't I remember anything? I racked my brain, trying to remember what I'd been doing, where I'd been going, hell, who I *was* and came up with nothing.

The grave to my left was old, green growth beginning to creep over its stone base and up. If it wasn't for the oppressive heat prickling my skin and the ache in my head and jaw, it would have been surprisingly comforting, cocooned safely between the stones rising up above me. It was tempting to stay here, to just lay down and hope that my memory came back, but there was a shivery sensation that kept moving over me, like I was feverish despite my sun-reddened skin being cold. I propped myself up on my elbows and swallowed heavily when the pain that was radiating throughout my body increased. I needed to take stock of what I did know so that I wouldn't panic about what I didn't.

I was wearing plain blue skinny jeans that stretched tight over thighs that curved impressively, the waistband uncomfortably tight around the soft roundness of my stomach. A red vest top covered my top half and breasts that looked barely constrained threatened to spill over the top the longer my breaths heaved. They were clearly casual clothes, I wasn't dressed for school or for partying—in other words, there were no clues here.

The next wave of pain made me double over and I staggered forward a step without registering that I had even stood up. I careened into the tombstone to my left, rebounding to the one on my right as the pain tugged me forward and I blindly followed, shuddering when the pain eased so suddenly that I straightened in confusion. I wiped absently at my neck and then paused when I caught sight of my skin. Colourful, sweeping designs

covered each of my arms down to my hands, partially obscuring my paleness. Tattoos. Roses and birds and berries and daggers, all looped together with impressive shading and pops of colour that curled effortlessly around my forearms and biceps. *But nothing that helpfully said, oh, I don't know, my name?* But then again, why would you get your own name inked onto your skin?

I lowered my arms as I scowled at the hot sun, shining cheerfully as I looked in both directions surrounding me. It was like I'd crawled out of a grave, slap bang in a cemetery in the middle of nowhere, but I couldn't see anything on the floor where I'd awakened to indicate how I'd arrived. Aside from the wind in the trees and a cricket buzzing somewhere close by, I couldn't hear or see any signs of civilisation. Was I drunk? Or on something? Was this just a seriously intense trip?

Another pulse of pain spiked through me and I hissed as I moved forwards, anything to make the unbearable ache ease. Someone was fucking with me. My hands curled into themselves, fingers digging into my palms with a strength I hadn't known I possessed as I gazed out over the headstones. I followed my gut like it was a compass, and took another step forward. The pain eased further and I took another, surer, step. Someone was fucking with me, and I was going to find out why.

A breeze kicked up and I tensed. Nothing had changed, yet I had a strong feeling that I was no longer alone.

"You must be hungry," a voice said from right beside my ear and I spun with a curse. A snicker sounded from my other side and I whirled again, the world tilting oddly like my centre of gravity had changed. That's when the scent hit me.

I saw it before I saw him.

Blood. Thick and dark. Fresh. Sliding slowly down a stark white palm and I moved forwards a step before I even registered making the decision. The stranger smirked, waving his hand like it was a treat and I was a dog,

grinning wider when I followed it with my eyes. I swallowed and my tongue felt thick in my mouth, like I hadn't had a drink in months.

"Who are you? Did you do this to me?" I rasped, eyes never leaving the red spill that inched further down his forearm.

"I didn't do a thing—except watch over you until you woke up, I suppose. It was my turn to do the retrieval" I finally dragged my eyes upwards and frowned at the man standing in front of me. It hadn't escaped my notice that he'd neglected to explain who he was. Though perhaps *man* might have been a bit of a stretch. He looked maybe twenty and was made up of sharp angles. His jaw, his cheekbones—if not for the sharp blue clarity of his long-lashed eyes and blond hair, he would have been unattractive. Like a piece of artwork that was stunning in fragments and beautifully odd when knit together. The stranger cocked a smile at me and I stilled at the sight of the curling fangs that seemed to wink at me playfully. "I guess you could say I'm your guardian angel."

I couldn't hold back a laugh and it burst out of me with a startling force that made the newcomer blink and then run a hand over the short buzzed side of his head. If this man had been sent from anywhere, it was hell. His cold beauty and unnatural stillness told me that much, at least.

"You were awoken too early," he said in a bored tone, as if I was supposed to understand what that meant. "I know it can be confusing at first, but your memories will come back. If you come with me, I'll explain it all."

I frowned disbelievingly. I may have been stuck in the middle of nowhere without knowing so much as my own name, but that didn't mean I was going to follow a strange person off into the wilderness to be murdered.

"I'm good, thanks."

He snorted. "Oh yeah? And what about this?" He clenched his fist and more blood streaked down his hand, coating his fingers, and I moved forward shakily as an unbearable ache began in my jaw once more. "I think you're hungry. I think you need me. If you follow me, if you follow that annoying

pull,” he winked at my shocked look, “I promise everything will make sense.” He waved his hand airily as the breeze shifted and the full scent of his blood hit me. I expected it to smell metallic, heavy, but instead it was light, like honey and vanilla.

A soft gasp brought me back to myself and I stumbled away, shocked, as his finger slipped out of my mouth, now free of blood. His blue eyes were still wide but something about the way he bit his lip made my senses stand to attention, like his blood had awoken something in me. A ragged breath left him and I realised my right hand was still clasped around his elbow, like I was going to restrain him... or pull him closer.

“You can trust me,” he said in a low voice and everything in me ached to believe him, which was the exact reason I took another step back, letting his arm fall away from my grip. Who knew what I was feeling, or why, right now? I certainly couldn’t trust some random, bloody stranger who’d approached me in the middle of nowhere and claimed to have all the answers I sought. Maybe we’d escaped from a hospital together or something—none of this made any sense.

The stranger turned his back to me, wiping his arm off on the hem of the dark distressed jumper he was wearing. “Do you want answers or not?” he called when I stayed where I was before I shuffled back several steps.

The pain in my stomach was building the further away I moved, and I cursed as it grew unbearable again, faster than before, so I began to stomp after him, the pain dulling with every inch forward.

“Good,” he said, “good.”

I wasn’t sure yet whether or not I agreed with his assessment.



We seemed to cover the open ground surprisingly quickly, though I had no idea how the blond stranger knew where to go. He seemed to walk without

direction and appeared unbothered by the sunlight that continued to make me cranky. It wasn't pain exactly, just discomfort. Like seams rubbing on a fresh sunburn. The agony in my gut had faded to a dull ache the longer we walked, so I at least knew that the stranger was taking me in the right direction—as far as my body could tell. The absence of the pain would have been good, except it meant that my attention settled instead on the gnawing burn in my throat and my growing irritation toward the stranger.

We'd left the cemetery behind and made our way across dry grass that rose higher as we moved further in, until eventually it reached my waist and the stranger's hips.

"Do you have a name?" I asked, finally breaking the silence and he glanced back at me with a look of intrigue that instantly made me wish I could snatch the words back out of the air.

"I do."

Okay, then. "Do I have a name?"

He paused in between strides, a hesitation so slight I didn't know how I'd caught it. "You do."

"I suppose telling me would be too much to ask."

"It would," he said but I could hear the smirk in his voice and I could practically feel my blood pressure rising in response. Who was this asshole? Why was I still traipsing after him in this fucking field? It was so noisy I could barely hear myself think, the bugs practically screamed at me and the long stalks slid across each other with a ceaseless dry rustle that was maddening. I had the urge to cup it in my palms and rip it from the ground as we moved, just to make everything shut. The fuck. Up. "Come on," he said without glancing back, and I scowled. He'd done that a lot so far, somehow knowing when I'd stopped moving or when I was hesitating without even turning around.

I grunted in response and hoped it accurately conveyed the meaning of *fuck off and die*. But I started moving again. Whatever had happened to me...

whoever had done this... it was possible he could get me answers. He certainly seemed to know more than I did right then, anyway.

I wasn't sure if I was a violent person, but considering the rage I currently harboured, smouldering hotter the longer we walked, my suspicions were veering onto the side of 'yes'.

"Where are we going?"

"Somewhere safe."

I tried to keep my tone pleasant and largely failed. "Safe from what?"

He stopped, considering my words with a gleam in his eye that made me tense as he turned to me. "From you."

What the hell was that supposed to mean? He smirked like my confusion was palpable and I closed my eyes, letting out a sharp breath through my nose.

His footsteps crunched on the dry grass as he continued walking and, after a second of staring at his retreating form, I followed.

A gleam up ahead made me squint as sunlight broke into refracted rainbows that made my head ache and eyes blur. A lake. There was barely a path around the outside but the stranger continued marching in that direction and I stumbled along after him, cursing the heavy combat boots that, though comfortably worn in, kept catching in the long grass.

"You said you were sent for me. By who? And why you?"

His heavy sigh made my teeth grind as he spun abruptly around, the amusement falling from his face as he stepped closer to me. "You ask too many questions."

"Maybe if you answered some of them I wouldn't keep thinking of more." I scowled and was pleased that he was the one left looking annoyed this time.

"It was my turn."

His turn? I opened my mouth and he turned away, resuming his walk at an increased speed that forced me to quickly follow.

The sun felt like it was getting hotter as we walked and I groaned, my tongue feeling too big for my mouth. I was just so damn *thirsty*.

I squinted at the blond head walking in front of me. I couldn't remember why I was following him, only that I had to, but right then it didn't matter. "Hey. I don't know who you are, or what's going on here, but I need water. My throat is on fire."

He didn't stop moving and my vision blurred as I stumbled after him. "Hey! I said—"

"I heard you the first time," he said, voice casual and I frowned.

"Who are you?" I rasped and his footsteps didn't falter. "Did you do this to me?" There was a stutter in the rhythm of his feet, like he was listening to me, before he resumed his pace. "Do you have a name?" I let the tug in my stomach continue pulling me after him, my head feeling stuffy like static-filled cotton wool. "Do I?"

He shot me a look and the strangest feeling of *deja vu* hit me. Where were we going? Why was I following him? My throat hurt too much to ask, so I continued in his footsteps instead, hoping this wasn't a mistake.

A low *thud-thud* joined the cacophony of buzzes and chirps and I groaned, covering my ears with my hands. What the fuck was that? Some bastards dragged bongos out to the lake to swim and vibe with the earth? It was like the universe was conspiring against me, the drums beating hard behind my closed eyelids until eventually I couldn't separate it from my own pulse that seemed too quiet in comparison.

My own breathing was loud and I pressed my hands against my ears harder, the sensations washing over me in a confusing jumble that made me want to scream. But then another sound reached me. An odd gurgling, like bubbles in a can fizzing and popping and then whooshing like a great breath of air that was exhaled in one go—

I opened my eyes, finding the lake ahead instantly. There. Barely visible in the water. I didn't have time to question how I could see her, or that the

drumming I'd heard seemed to be coming from her direction and was growing rapidly fainter. I just moved.

The water was cold as I dove, cooling my feverish skin that had begun to turn a light pink under the harsh sun. The water smelled like the air, fresh and clean, and like dirt. But overlaying it all was the girl whose fingertips reached desperately for the surface, finding nothing to cling to and curling limply back down.

I swam across the lake faster than I would have believed possible, but it's said that adrenaline can make the human body capable of so many things. I reached her in seconds, mere breaths, and when my head pushed beneath the surface, her eyes were already fluttering closed.

Her fingers were too thin in my hand, her pale arms too fragile in my grip. Her blonde hair floated around her, catching the light until the sunshine made it look silver. Green eyes snapped open and then rolled as I pushed us up towards the surface, snapping the reeds that had tried to entangle us as easily as swiping away a cobweb.

The air seemed cooler and the world was noisier than ever compared to the relative quiet beneath the water, but the girl was still in my arms.

The stranger stood on the bank closest to us, watching impassively with his arms crossed as I dragged her out and shot him a glare. "Thanks so much for your help."

He said nothing, which was becoming pretty standard for him, and I scowled harder in response before thumping the girl's back once, twice, and breathing a sigh of relief when she expelled a fuck-ton of water. The drumming started up again and the sun warmed our bones and the insects screamed at me until I wanted to dive back under. To slip away and never resurface. Maybe I would have, if not for the graze on her knee. Or the scrape on her arm. Worst of all was probably the slice on her neck where one of the reeds had wrapped around her, keeping her in what would have been a watery grave. Then all I could see was red, and my jaw felt like it would shatter, and

my hands turned to claws on her shoulders, her green eyes flicking open and her mouth rounding in terror as I sank my teeth deeply into her neck.

“Leonora, no!”

The words were muffled, unimportant. Heat cascaded into me like it could wash away my aggravation, my worries, and I let it, moaning deeply as the world seemed to pause before I realised the overwhelming noise had simply hushed. My throat moved as I took the warmth in and my tongue laved the skin as I pulled back, smiling at the girl who’d made the world quiet again.

But something was wrong. Her skin, already pale, was practically translucent and the blue of her veins stood out sharply. Her chest didn’t rise.

I stumbled back and felt a warm hand grasp my shoulder. The stranger. His eyes flicked once to the girl before he sighed.

“It’s okay. I’ll take care of it.”

Take care of it? What did that mean? What was there to take care of? The stranger moved away from me and slid his arms beneath a girl, easing her up from the ground like she weighed nothing but the muscles in his forearms tensed as he cradled her and waded back into the water.

I was too shocked to speak, to ask what he was doing, until, abruptly, he let the girl go and I slipped forward a step in the slick mud we’d stirred up.

“What are you doing?” I pushed forwards, the water slapping at my calves as I splashed into the lake in loud stomps that rattled my teeth. “No, no. I-I just pulled her out. Didn’t I? Didn’t I pull her out? What are you doing?”

“Taking care of your mess,” he snapped and his eyes seemed colder than ever as he grabbed me around the shoulders and pushed me back onto the bank.

“What did you do? *What did you do to me!*” My hands started to shake and I tugged restlessly at the ends of my hair as I watched the water ripple, a few bubbles escaping towards the surface as the girl sank once more. “I need

to get her out. I've got to get her—"

"She's gone. Leave her be." His hand thunked down on my shoulder and I screamed with rage, slamming my hands backward and into his chest.

"What do you mean she's gone? I saved her! She was drowning and I saved her. I—"

"You killed her," he said, raising his arms as he got to his feet slowly. A muscle in his jaw ticked as he brushed grass off his front and pushed his hair back out of his eyes. "You ripped out her throat."

"No, no..."

"Yes. You sank in your fangs and drank her dry."

"No."

"Leonora—"

"That is not my name."

"How would you know?" he shot back and I moaned, digging my palms into my eyes.

No, he had to be wrong. I hadn't killed that girl. I'd saved her. I'd saved her.

"You killed her," he said and then shrugged. "It's okay, everyone has their first."

I screamed, rage bursting through me as I picked him up by his throat, raising him into the air and squeezing so hard his delicate face turned pink before I slammed him back down as the grass greyed beneath my feet. "What did you do to me? *What did you do?* I don't want to be a monster. *I don't want to be like you!*"

His eyes were wide as I stood over him, wrath making my limbs tremble and my anger seemed a living thing, rumbling loudly inside me, demanding I take him, sink in my fangs and—

No. No, no, no. I didn't have fangs. I didn't want to kill people. I dropped to my knees and my face tipped to the sky as the previously sunny day gave way to rain that dripped onto my face as if to cleanse me.

I'd killed the girl. I saved her, and then I killed her.

"I'm sorry," the stranger said and I blinked up at him dully, confusion swirling through me. His pale skin seemed to glow against the sudden darkness of the thunder-struck sky, lightning flashing until he seemed like some avenging god ready to cast me down for my sins. "It's better this way. Should have just done this from the beginning," he muttered and I couldn't make sense of the words. "I promise you won't feel a thing."

Reason seemed to war with my senses as he moved closer, until instinct made my muscles clench and as he snapped out his hands towards my head, I dove for his throat.