



THE  
EMPTY

WISHING  
HOUSE

BOOK 1

LARISSA VINCENTE



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*The Empty Wishing House*

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# **TRIGGER WARNING:**

Dear Reader: this book is intended for mature readers. There are graphic scenes containing violence, adult situations, stalking, language, peril, alcohol abuse, kidnapping, forced proximity, threats and acts of violence, references to domestic violence, and mental health issues.

This is a dark book with intense subject matter.

*Dedicated to my dad, and my children*

*“Never, ever, ever, ever, ever give up”*

*Winston Churchill*

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## CHAPTER 1

“This is so dumb,” I muttered under my breath. “Why can’t we just go to the bar like normal people?”

I was following my friends through the woods in the dark, stumbling, and trying to push branches out of the way. The bare limbs kept whipping back as Madison shoved through them, the twigs clawing at me and reaching out as if searching for flesh. I was right behind her blocking them and attempting to ward off the onslaught and my irritation grew with each step. I was probably covered with ticks already as they, too, sought blood.

Mabel was just ahead of us, using her cellphone’s flashlight, the short beam scattering through the trees and branches. We were navigating what looked to be more like a deer path than anywhere humans should traipse through in the back woods of Massachusetts.

“We’re almost there,” Madison said politely. She was holding a branch back for once, probably because of my annoyed grumbles. “I think its straight ahead.”

I looked up, catching my foot against a root or a rock. It was hard to see with the thick blanket of leaves carpeting the ground, never mind the dark. We pushed through, emerging from the woods, and then stood along the tree line in silence, staring.

The house was huge, a Victorian mansion out in the middle of the woods, undisturbed. How it sat here unknown was a mystery to me. Decaying gingerbread trim and a wrap-around



front porch adorned its exterior. Moss and ivy were eating away at the façade consuming it around the edges.

It sat in a small clearing, surrounded by oaks, maples, and pines. It was hard to tell what color the house had been in its prime- perhaps it had been white, or beige. The paint was curling off in little rolls around the edges of the windows.

“Whoaaaaa.” Madison pushed past Mabel and hurried towards the house. “This is incredible.”

“How did you find out this was here? There’s no road.” I looked around. “There’s no driveway.” The large house appeared completely inaccessible by any vehicle.

I was immediately uncomfortable. I had never seen the house before, but it felt familiar, as if I had been here and had no recollection of the event. An urge to leave swept through me, to run away and never look back.

Instead, I just looked around, smothering the alarm crawling up my back.

There was no way to get to this house other than a so-called path through the woods. There were no signs of life anywhere and it was the middle of the night. I wanted to be home and comfy on my couch with *NCIS* on stream. Whatever had possessed Madison to drag me out here was lost in the ether- I was perfectly fine at home not checking out creepy houses.

And with Mabel, no less. She hardly ever talked, saying only what she felt was necessary, preferring to fade into the background even more than I did which was saying a lot. Maybe her and Madison were just friends because their boyfriends were, and being single I didn’t tag along all that often. I didn’t enjoy being the fifth wheel.

Madison had started dragging me out into the public more often after I had closed myself off for months several years ago. It had been an easy habit to fall into after landing a remote job and I was especially prone to it, considering my “introvertedness”, as she called it. I liked being alone and quiet. It was safe.

“How did you find this place?” I looked to Mabel, expecting an explanation for this expedition into the woods. I rubbed my clothes down hoping to dislodge any hitchhikers and other debris that may have gotten stuck on me.

Mabel nodded towards the wood line behind the house. “I grew up in a house behind here.”

I followed her gaze, not seeing anything, and then looked back over at the house while Madison adjusted her backpack, straightening the straps.

She had a couple of wine bottles packed in it. The plan was for us to do something in the “spirit” of October. That plan being to drink in an old, deserted house in the middle of the woods that no one seemed to know about.

We weren’t that far from the house I grew up in either; mine was in the opposite direction from Mabel’s. I hadn’t driven past it in a long time. Someone had bought it and would’ve had to do extensive renovations to make it livable again, if they hadn’t completely rebuilt it. I didn’t know what it looked like now and didn’t care to. I didn’t want to go back there ever again.

Now I was out in these woods near my old house, even though we weren’t teenagers anymore and should be doing more mature things. Like going to restaurants with bars or to clubs. Something like what we normally did.

Not trespassing in the middle of the night.

My love of old things brought me out here, my curiosity at what I might find. Maybe it wouldn’t hurt to do something a little different for a change, or at least that’s what I was telling myself.

Mabel turned and started walking the rest of the way towards the house with me and Madison following behind her. The clouds parted, showering us with moonlight and the old house glowed under its light.

We climbed the front porch steps in silence, and the wood was so old and splintering I was momentarily concerned my boot would shoot right through one of the steps. We were a

long way from help if anything went wrong. “Is this place safe?” I asked. They ignored me.

Madison took off her backpack and set it down on the porch as Mabel went to the front door. “It’s not locked,” she stated and pushed the door open after a quick glance at the surrounding woods. Old, dried rose petals scattered across the porch as she shoved the door open, disintegrating and crackling as the base of the door tore into them.

The two of them walked in with me right behind them, their footsteps echoing on the dusty hardwood floor. I heard something fall to the floor somewhere in the back of the house and then the sound of scampering footsteps. Maybe a squirrel or a mouse sprinting to safety, angry at our intrusion.

Madison pulled a battery-operated lantern out of her backpack and turned it on, the switch clicking loudly in the stillness. I stepped around my two friends and moved farther into the entryway.

The house looked much more interesting inside than the outside gave it credit for. There were built-in bookcases and shelves, etched glass above doorways, and clear glass doorknobs on several doors. A huge staircase with what must’ve been gorgeous woodwork in the past was towards the left side of the entryway. It was hard to tell how intricate the woodwork was with all the dust covering everything. I trailed my finger along the banister, leaving a line in the coating and wiped my hands on my sleeves. Dead rose petals were clustered in little piles in corners making me think the previous owners really enjoyed their potpourri.

When I turned around, a wall sized mirror caught my attention. There was a bench below it on the stair’s landing and I stepped onto the platform to investigate. My cellphone’s flashlight highlighted the dust covering the warped reflection and distorted the image.

It made me look like I was wearing a long dress, spreading the profile of the jeans I was wearing. I wiped some dust off the mirror with my coat’s sleeve and the light from my phone reflected off the mirror, flashing around the room.

“Wow,” Madison said when the movement of light caught her eye. “Check this out.” She motioned to Mabel and the two of them moved closer to me.

“I don’t remember this being here,” Mabel stated, staring at the mirror. She turned around and stepped down, not seeming all that interested.

Madison stepped off the landing, too, and picked up her backpack from the floor. “Let’s see what else is in here.”

I turned and looked up the stairs, but the flashlight beam couldn’t reach that far. All it did was illuminate the swirling dust. My friends wanted to get to drinking after looking around, I knew. I turned to look at the mirror one more time before following them, feeling slightly bereft. I still wanted to explore some more, and really wanted to go up the stairs. It would have to wait, I thought, and hoped we’d go up there before we left.

We walked through the front hall exploring other areas of the house. Madison’s lamp led the way but I kept my cellphone’s flashlight on so I could watch where I stepped. The house seemed sturdy enough but who knew how long it had sat deserted for and the floor creaked and felt loose in spots.

Every step we took stirred up more dust as we checked out a parlor or living room and then a library with a huge fireplace. Leaves and other unidentified debris littered the hallways as we went from room to room. There wasn’t much left in the house other than broken or dust-covered furniture but there were some knickknacks around that I would’ve loved to take a closer look at since we were here.

“Look there’s a table.” Mabel pulled a chair away from a long table. It was littered with old soda cans and other junk, and she shoved them to the side.

Madison set her lamp down and shrugged off her backpack, setting it on an empty seat, and unzipping it.

She pulled bottles of wine out of her bag followed by plastic cups. I didn’t really feel like drinking in a dusty old

house and *still* felt like we should be doing something else. I was willing to bet the soda cans were left by kids in school.

Humoring my best friend and having a drink since she had brought me out- it was the least I could do. I would've much rather been exploring the house than getting drunk in it. Mabel grabbed a bottle and unscrewed the cap of a cheap white and started pouring it into the plastic cups while I wandered around the room.

It looked like a kitchen and the fireplace was so large you could crouch inside of it. The inside was covered with soot, and I could almost see someone stirring a large cauldron over a fire.

Who had lived here in the past? Maybe a family with kids, and maybe some grandparents. Maybe they ate at this table. Picturing them here, I tried to visualize what they'd have worn. I wished I could step back in time and see how life was lived in this house.

"Kiara," Madison got my attention, "Here." She held out a cup and I took it from her and walked back over to the table.

"That fireplace is cool. I bet they burned bodies in there." Madison laughed, and I rolled my eyes. "It's huge."

I argued with myself for a minute over whether I was having fun or not and took a sip of my drink and went with "fun". There must be a lot of history in this house, lives lived and interesting stories. I might as well enjoy myself for once. I didn't like being so scared all the time and wished I was still as adventurous as I used to be before. Before him.

I couldn't think about him right now though and tried to push thoughts of him out of my head. He dominated my thoughts at the most inconvenient times. Here I was, trying to *live* again, and he still controlled me. It wasn't fair.

It did feel kind of nice to not be wasting away in my apartment, waiting. I'm not sure what I was waiting for but that's what it felt like. I just sat in my home every night, wishing. Wishing that things were different, that I was smarter or prettier. Anything that would have prevented what

happened with my now ex-boyfriend. Wishing for something that would've stopped him and changed our course.

I wished I wasn't such a mess now.

Instead, I had wasted years of my life, precious years I could've done something. Something for myself. Something to propel myself forward rather than to give my all for a pointless relationship while having my every step monitored.

Maybe doing something different was good?



## CHAPTER 2

We sat at the table already on the second bottle of wine and catching up with each other- which mostly just meant Madison talked. She had a job for a media company doing event planning and loved to relay stories about the different characters she met and the weird requests they had. She was currently telling us about seedless strawberries and someone's temper tantrum as Mabel laughed and went for a refill.

I got up, anxious to explore some more of the house. I doubted I would ever come back here. If I went anywhere with my friends, it was usually to a smoke-filled dive bar. This was different. My current surroundings fascinated and intrigued me.

“Where are you going?”

Madison was looking at me like I was about to wander off and get lost. “Just looking around. Don't you guys want to see what's here?”

“Not really.” She waved me back over. “I need to tell you guys something.”

My obedient butt sat back down at the table as Madison took a breath and stared at her cup.

“So... I think James is gonna ask me to marry him.” She looked up at us with a mixture of excitement and trepidation.

“Really?” Mabel whispered.

Madison swatted at Mabel, causing her to almost lose her cup. Wine dribbled down the side, pooling in the dust. “What? I’m just asking!” She giggled and sipped at her wine.

“That’s awesome,” I said, looking back at my best friend. “What happened?”

A slow smile spread across her face. “Well, he said ‘when we have kids.’ So, I think he’s gonna ask soon, right?”

“That does sound long term, right, Mabel?” I turned to look at her and she nodded enthusiastically grinning.

“You need to start dating. You’re going to be my maid of honor and it would be so cool if we could triple date.” I could see the wheels turning in her head, trying to set me up. “It’s about time you started. You gotta be lonely. When’s the last time you got some ass, hmm?”

She had a point, I had to give her that. “Okay, but who? I don’t know if I’m ready.” I could sense her about to object. “Okay, fine. I’m slightly *open* to the idea.”

It had been a long time since anyone of the opposite sex had touched me. If I was honest with myself, I really did miss it.

Madison let out a squeal.

I was doomed.

There was something so compelling to me about old buildings and the stories they held, and the lives lived in them and through them. The people that once occupied spaces existed as shadows after they were dead and gone, no one remembered their faces, no one remembered their laughs or the dreams they had. They crumbled and disintegrated, swept away by the tide, and disappeared forever.

I always thought maybe I should give up my insurance job and do something with local history. Like a museum job or historical society or something. I could help keep people’s memories alive, even if only in my head.

First, I needed to get a handle on myself and focus on living my own life.

“You guys think we should start a fire?” I was eager to change the subject and it was cold in the house, probably around 60 degrees.

No one answered me as the conversation turned to color schemes for a wedding and I got up from the table again. I looked around in case there was a pile of wood somewhere or something else to burn. Other people had been here- enough to leave soda cans around, and I hoped someone had left something behind that could be burned safely.

Or maybe not. I didn't know if there was running water here. We certainly weren't going to throw wine on the fire. Sweating started forming on my forehead, thinking about how crazy it would be to start a fire in this tinderbox of a house.

I had my good days and my bad days. Today seemed to be a bad one with fire, triggering the memory of a burning house. I shoved it out of my mind as quickly as I shoved out *dating*.

There didn't seem to be anything useful for a fire. Suddenly, I didn't even want to look anymore.

A cabinet caught my eye, and I started looking through it out of curiosity, opening the doors and closing them, finding them empty. I kneeled to open the doors at the base of the cabinet as a mouse scurried out. I fell back, trying to get out of the way and leaned down to get a better view of the interior.

Shoved way in the back of the cabinet were several bottles of what looked like wine with a thick coat of grime covering them. I reached in and pulled one out, a dark glass bottle with intricate silver filagree wire entwined around its lower half and winding up towards a cork covered with a waxy substance.

“Guys, look,” I held up the bottle and tried to shine my light on it.

“Oh, wow! Bring that over here!” Madison waved her hand at me, indicating she wanted it.

I carried the bottle over to the table and sat down and Madison grabbed it from me.

“This is so cool. Let's open it,” Mabel suggested as she drained her cup and I cringed.

“You should open it, you found it.” Madison looked at me, “Don’t be such an old lady. At least *one* part of you should be alive.”

“It’s been sitting here for god knows how long.” I shook my head, narrowing my eyes at her dig. “No way.”

Madison handed the bottle back to me and I turned it around, holding it by the neck. The dark glass shimmered under the grime. “Give me a napkin or something.” I held my hand out.

Mabel reached into her purse and came out with a tissue that I quickly grabbed. “That’ll work.”

I wiped at the glass where I could between the silver lines, “I can’t see anything inside. Look, the glass is black or something.” I held the bottle up as if anyone could even see it clearly in the room’s dim light.

Madison reached over and touched the bottle. “Open it.”

The bottle had weight to it, so I knew there was something inside. Either that or the bottle was made with extra-thick glass.

I should probably open it, I thought. The bottle must’ve sat there for years and years and no one had found it until now. Probably no one *would* look for it. Who knew, besides us, that it was even here? No one would miss it. It was in a deserted house, after all.

“Ok, fine.”

I had to ask myself if I was doing this for myself, or if I was doing it for someone else. I was so used to having to do things I didn’t want to do that I forgot to consider what my own desires were at times.

Most of the time.

Abusive relationships will do that, I remembered. My therapist had encouraged me over and over to ‘find my voice’. I think I wanted to open it. I set the bottle on the table after my internal pep-talk, “Anyone have a corkscrew?”

Madison and Mabel looked at each other and Madison started digging around in her bag and handed me a Swiss army knife.

“Since when do you have a Swiss army knife?” I asked. She laughed as she handed it to me.

“Move the lamp closer to me, I can’t see what I’m doing.”

Too late to back out now.

There was a mini corkscrew on one side of the knife, and I shoved it into the cork as hard as I could. The cork started disintegrating before I hit a hard spot. My head was spinning a bit from all the wine I already drank, and I couldn’t quite focus my eyes. Groaning, I threw the knife down on the table with an alcohol-induced flair.

Madison grabbed the bottle from me and picked up the knife. She accidentally pushed the corkscrew back down inside as she tried to pry it free before switching to a mini blade and still not getting the bottle open. “What the hell?”

“It’s old,” Mabel said, “Give me that.” She reached for the bottle, but Madison pulled it out of her reach. I drank some more white wine.

They both started laughing, and then I did, too. It was suddenly hilarious how we were fighting over an old dirty bottle, and I stood up to reach over and grab it. “Hand it over!”

It hit me that I was having fun with my friends for once, rather than being shut up in my apartment going over insurance forms or scrolling through my phone and I really needed to do it more often.

I was going to get this bottle open and at least smell what was inside. I was going to live a little. It was *my* choice.

I wanted to hold on to this feeling while it lasted. Even if it was alcohol-induced. Even if we were sitting in a dark, dusty old house in the middle of the night, out in the middle of nowhere.

Madison drained the contents of the last bottle of wine she had brought into our plastic cups, and I paused to take a swallow before refocusing on the cork. I could still back out of this. Last chance, the voice in the back of my head tried to return me to reason.

“I can’t get this stupid thing out.” Just when I was going to give up, the blade broke through the rest of the cork. “I got it!”

Peeking through the opening revealed a shiny liquid filling the inside. I used the mini blade to slide the rest of the cork up and placed the chopped-up bits on the table. I sniffed the scent flowing out of the now open bottle.

It smelled like copper and herbs and moss and mysterious esoteric things I couldn’t name.

“Wow, this is weird.” I passed the bottle to Madison, and she took a whiff.

“I don’t smell anything,” she said looking at me. Mabel grabbed the bottle, sniffed, and shook her head.

“What the hell?” I took the bottle back and smelled it again. Copper and herbs. “What’s wrong with you guys? It smells good. Like a forest or something, I don’t know.” I frowned at the bottle and sniffed at the opening again, I had never smelled anything like it.

Madison laughed at me. “You’re really drunk.”

Umm, no, I was not.

Well, okay, maybe a little...

I looked inside the bottle again, shining my phone’s flashlight as best I could through the narrow opening. The liquid looked like it might be clear, but it was also somewhat metallic, sparkling with a hint of green. I couldn’t tell but it was pretty. I had never seen anything like it but I could’ve sworn the wine *wanted* me to drink it. “Did you guys look inside?”

I tried to shine the light through the glass again. Disappointed, I put the bottle down.

“You should drink some,” Madison said giggling.



I picked the bottle back up as she started chanting, “Drink, drink, drink!” I looked at her and felt Mabel’s eyes on me and I started laughing too.

“Drink some!”

“What if I get sick?”

Madison rolled her eyes at my protest.

“You got anymore cups?” I asked her.

All the alcohol already in my stomach would probably kill any germs lurking in the bottle. A small sip should be okay. It was too beautiful not to try some.

What was the worst that could happen? I’d just puke, it couldn’t be *that* bad. I had no clue what it really contained. I chuckled. Doesn’t wine get better with age?

The liquid was alluring and beckoning me with its rich, heady scent and all the sparkles.

“My cup is empty.” Madison offered her cup to me.

I poured some of the contents in and looked at the tiny cork crumbs floating on top. I fished out what I could with my fingers and came back with tiny sparkles.

“Look at that. What is that?” I held up my index finger and shined my light on it.

Madison almost fell over laughing. “That’s your finger, you dumbass!”

“No, you idiot- the sparkles!” I held my fingers in the light again. Mabel started laughing along with her at my apparent psychosis.

“Screw you guys.” I picked up my cup and sipped at the fluid. It tasted just like it smelled, not bad at all. It reminded me faintly of a green liquor I had once with a pretty name I couldn’t remember, only it tasted better. It was less mossy and sweeter than the 37 alpine herbs, or whatever it was, drink. It made me feel like I was standing in the courtyard of a sprawling estate, sipping an elegant wine with the love of my

life, perfectly content. I could see it perfectly in my head and I felt luxurious.

It slid down my throat and was spreading through my body covering me and wrapping me with a warmness that wasn't exactly comfortable- but it wasn't uncomfortable either. Then it stopped.

"That was weird." I put my cup down. "You guys should try it."

"No thanks!" Madison said. "You're nuts. I can't believe you drank that."

Thanks friend, thanks.

"Too late, now." I wasn't sorry at all.

"What did it taste like?" Mabel asked and held her arm out to reach for my cup.

I stepped back pulling the cup out of reach, not done with examining the drink, and stepped into- something.

I was outside somehow, suddenly yanked from the house with my friends, and snow crunched under my boots as I turned to look, spinning in circles, stunned.

There was rolling countryside around me, all smooth hills with towering pine trees scattered about, and a thick forest in the distance. Snow sparkled and shined under the moon, but I wasn't cold. The landscape was gorgeous.

Snow was my favorite thing, so beautiful and pure, and I often wished that snow could exist without the bitter cold typical of New England. And here it was, as if I was on a movie set, everything perfect, unmarred and untouched.

I kneeled down to feel the snow, wondering if it would chill my hand, as I noticed I was wearing a dress for some reason. I could've sworn I put jeans on before I left my apartment. The sensation of being watched made my skin prickle and I looked up, drawing my hand back. There was no one, at first, until I turned around.

A figure stood in the distance, watching me. I couldn't make out any details just the dark outline of a figure. They

were a shadow as they blended into the deep green trees, observing me. I stayed down suddenly afraid, balancing on my feet and trying not to attract any attention.

## CHAPTER 3

I blinked and was back in the house, Madison was reaching for my cup. “Let me see that.”

“No!” I yelled as I tried to steady myself, shocked at the sudden displacement, almost falling off my seat as I grabbed the table. I quickly moved the cup out of her reach. “This drink is weird. I don’t think you should drink it.”

She stood up. “What’s wrong with you?”

Calmly, I repeated myself. “Don’t drink it.” My hands were shaking. Please, not a panic attack, please. Not here. Not in front of my friends. Not *again*.

Madison and Mabel exchanged wary looks. *She’s crazy.*

Deep breaths. Deep breaths. In through the nose and out of my mouth. Had I hallucinated? It was as if no time had gone by at all here when I found myself in a winter wonderland. Maybe my anxiety was just getting the better of me. It was always there, lurking below the surface. Maybe it had found a new way to express itself.

“Fine, whatever.” Madison sat back down and gulped the rest of her wine and glanced at me, unsure of what to do. She knew I was on the edge. “You look pale. Are you ok?” Her voice softened.

“I want to leave,” I said as I stood up. “I’m tired.” I had no idea what had just happened and just wanted to go home and sleep it off.

She stood up, concern etched on her face. “Okay. Let’s go.”

## CHAPTER 4

I lay down on my couch, as the room started spinning around me, my phone in my hand. My head was already starting to hurt, and I had no idea what time it was. Thankfully Madison and Mabel were ready to leave when I was. I didn't tell them about my hallucination or whatever that scene was. I couldn't. I didn't want them to think I was crazy, and I didn't want to draw that kind of attention to myself.

It was super weird, whatever had happened in the abandoned house. I didn't want my friends to think I was regressing. I hoped they just thought my freak-out was because I was drunk and tried to reassure myself that's what they would assume.

I didn't want to go back to therapy or give anyone a reason to think that I should. What I needed was to get back to living. At twenty-eight years old, it was about time. I just wanted everything to be normal again.

The sudden realization that I didn't feel the wine while I was in the snow perked me up. What the hell was that about? Maybe I could look up the house's history and distract myself. Reading was good for that. I reached for my charging cord and plugged my phone in as I fought the nausea that was building in the back of my throat.

There were no roads leading directly to the house, so I had to Google the nearby roads. As best as I could tell, at one time the area wasn't so wooded but was farmland. It looked like there had been structures there, the little squares dropping



hints that at least foundations might still be present when I looked over the map.

All the alcohol I had consumed was interfering with my vision and I started plugging random numbers into the search bar along with the street names. I thought I saw my mother's last name somewhere, but then I lost it and kept digging, her last name sliding in and out of my consciousness as I battled my inebriation.

Finally, I found a historical document that piqued my interest. There was a homestead from the 1600s somewhere in those woods. In the comment section someone mentioned the house undergoing renovations at some point.

There were no modern, renovated homes in the chunk of land I was researching. I sighed as my headache started pounding even harder and I tried to swallow the increasing nausea.

I carefully turned on my side and closed my eyes, trying to shut my thoughts away and I fell asleep before I could read anything further.

Something was tickling my face. I tried to brush it away, but it came right back. I opened my eyes and leaned up on my elbow to see what was bothering me and disturbing my sleep. There was grass in my face, and I was lying in the dirt like someone had disposed of my body.

There were trees nearby and I looked around and sat up, a sinking feeling in my stomach. Where were Madison and Mabel? Hadn't they brought me home? We got into the car and drove there; I remembered the drive.

There was no way my best friend and Mabel would leave me in a field like this. They had to be around here somewhere.

I had wanted to start taking more chances in my life and start living a bit more- but being abandoned in a field wasn't how I wanted to do it.

I went to reach for my cell phone and felt something different. I was wearing a dress. Didn't I fall asleep on my couch in different clothes? I had jeans on, last time I checked.

It wasn't my dress. I wore dresses a lot, but they rarely went past my knees. My cellphone was nowhere in sight. I didn't have anything with me, and I was outdoors, somewhere, in some kind of wilderness.

Everything was unfamiliar, this wasn't the woods around the deserted house.

My panic was rising, and I just needed to assess my situation. I took some deep breaths and tried to slow my heart rate down. I couldn't freak out right now. I needed to figure out what was going on, get home, and *then* freak out.

Crows were cawing in the distance, and the air was perfectly still. On the ground, some ants crawling around busily, doing whatever ants do. The air was unlike October in New England. For one thing, it was much warmer. And the light was different, brighter as if it was midsummer.

The leaves on the trees were still green, and birds were chirping. The sun was shining in an oddly cloudless sky. This couldn't be Massachusetts, not this sky. The grass was tall, almost hiding me, with its gold and green leaves. It was beautiful, but I was pissed and confused. I didn't know where I was and wanted to be home, or at least to know where I was.

I was getting angrier and angrier with my friends with every passing second, even though I didn't know if this was their fault or not. A noise broke me out of my panic, and I realized it was horses and I was hearing the clop-clop of their hooves.

I held my breath and lay back down in the grass, turning onto my belly and praying no one could see me. I had no idea what was going on or where I was. Maybe I was near a farm? It didn't look like I'd get a chance to orient myself before I ran into anyone.

The horses stopped. I wondered how close I was to the road, or whatever was over there, and tried to hold as still as possible while dirt and grass prickled my face. I could hear someone walking and closed my eyes and tried to will myself back to my apartment.

*Please God.*

God must've been busy because the footsteps stopped just short of me, and I debated playing dead before opening my eyes. A pair of legs and leather shoes were right in front of me, and I looked up.

“What are you doing?” a man asked me, appearing mildly concerned as he looked down at me. “Are you hurt?” He was dressed in odd clothing- combat boots with leather pants.

His shoulder-length dark hair was loosely pulled back, and he tucked a strand of it behind his ear, only for it to fall right back in front of his face. His eyes were so dark I almost couldn't see his pupils.

I sat up and brushed some grass out of my hair. “I don't know.”

Was I? I looked myself over. I didn't think I was. I didn't even seem to have a hangover. “I don't think so,” I told him.

He reached out a hand to help me up, and I paused before I took it, unsure of letting him touch me.

“Where am I?”

There was a dirt road several feet away from the grass.

In it were two horses, with a man looking towards the distance, sitting on one of them. Brushing some grass from my dress I wondered if he'd come over here and make me even more uncomfortable.

“Where are you from?” the man asked. “Why were you lying on the side of the road?”

“Not here,” I paused. “I don't think. I don't know.” I was still waiting for someone I knew to show up or to wake up at home. I strained to hear a car coming, praying for one to come, but there was nothing at all.

“You're lost,” he stated, and I gazed at him, trying not to panic at my situation. He seemed familiar but I couldn't place him. I felt like I should know him or had known him, and I didn't understand how, and it felt like *déjà vu*.

“I guess I am.” I wasn’t sure how much I should tell him. Nothing looked familiar, and the climate was all wrong. I was very, very lost.

“I can take you into town,” he offered, “and arrange transportation for you.”

I wasn’t sure what that would entail, and I wasn’t sure if I should leave the spot that I woke up in. Was he going to take me on horseback? No, thank you.

There was no way someone could’ve transported me to a place with this climate without my knowing. I had to have gone hundreds of miles from home.

Concern about getting home to my apartment was building inside me, and I thought I should probably stay here and not take off with strangers. Everyone knows you’re supposed to stay put if you get lost in the woods.

With a sick feeling I remembered what had happened in the abandoned house, when the inside of the house changed, and I was suddenly outside. Was this like that?

I *had* to be dreaming or still feeling the effects of the old wine bottle. This couldn’t be real.

“I think I should stay here,” I told the possibly familiar man, “I’m not sure how I got here, and someone may come for me.” I was still hoping to hear a car approaching, but nothing was happening that signaled a rescue.

Nobody was coming for me I realized, as my stomach sank, but he didn’t need to know that. I watched him carefully, trying to gauge his reaction. He tucked the loose strand of hair back again and ran his hand over his face, seeming unsure of my decision.

“I don’t know what to do.” I told him.

All of my senses were engaged, the same as if I were awake. I really wished I remembered what a dream felt like, so I could compare it. The closest thing I had was the snow in my vision.

“How long have you been waiting?” the man asked me.

I wanted to say something other than “I don’t know” but found myself starting to repeat those very words yet again.

Almost on cue he interrupted me and said, “You don’t know...”

This had to be a dream or a hallucination. Any minute I was going to wake up or come to and be back home.

My curiosity started getting the better of me as I looked the stranger over. I wanted to know who this man was, and why I was here of all places, and why he was dressed the way he was. I’d never seen combat boots with leather pants before

“I don’t know how I got here. One minute I was at home laying down and the next, I’m lying in the grass here. I have no idea what happened.” I rushed my words out, caution about confiding in a stranger thrown to the wind.

“I’m Ilya.” He gave me a small smile and looked at me curiously. “I’ll wait with you.”

He didn’t wait for my name, or my permission, and walked over to his companion, who was still by the road with the horses. The other man then left on horseback, leading Ilya’s horse away as well. I sat back down in the grass and took a moment to breathe and try to enjoy the warm sun on my face remembering how home was growing colder. At least it was warm in my dreams.

I would wake up at any moment, I was sure of it.

I started thinking and realized this whole situation was an opportunity. What if it wasn’t real? It must be a dream or a vision, and that meant that whatever I did, it didn’t matter. There was absolutely no way that this was real. I would’ve had to have gotten on an airplane and flown to another hemisphere or all the way to Florida for this to be real. And that definitely did not happen. I would’ve remembered that.

Maybe I could relax for once, just a little, I thought, a sliver of excitement building in my veins. Anxiety was simmering in my belly, competing with the excitement, and I tried to placate it.

Fear doesn't just go away, but it would be easier to practice fighting it here than at home. I couldn't make up my mind about what was actually happening here, or what I should even do, but I didn't have to decide anymore. I didn't have any control over when rescue would come or when I would wake up.

If this wasn't a dream, it was a short pass from real life that came with beautiful weather.

Ilya came back and hesitated just a moment before sitting down next to me. "Are you going to tell me who you are?" he asked me.

"Kiara." I finally introduced myself holding out my hand, and he just stared at it like he didn't know if he should touch me. Strange, I thought and put my hand back down. "Where is this place?"

"The town?" Ilya raised a single eyebrow at me. "Ipswich."

The answer didn't make sense. I lived very close to Ipswich, and it didn't look a thing like this. Maybe it was a part I had somehow missed or a different Ipswich. Or maybe something else was mentally wrong with me. Maybe I had fallen off my couch and hit my head really hard.

I sighed. I didn't want to go back to the hospital and deal with an endless barrage of questions from shrinks. Most of my stay was a haze of pain and my own questions other than the intense concern over my mental state. I didn't remember the things they claimed I said, and I had just wanted to go home.

I wanted to handle my fear and trauma on my own at this point. Maybe this would be a good exercise in not freaking out and just keeping my cool. And in hanging out with a member of the opposite sex.

"Is that a problem?" Ilya chuckled, hearing my sigh and mistaking its meaning.

"No," I began. "I'm probably only a few miles from my house. This just looks all wrong." I gestured towards the



landscape with my arm and looked back at him. “And you’re dressed weird. Not bad, but no one dresses like that.”

I wasn’t super concerned about insulting someone who only existed in my head. It was strange to me how someone would just sit on the side of the road, waiting with me. He probably had better things to do.

“Maybe you hit your head?” He looked concerned and gently ran his hand over my head feeling the top and the back of my skull with a familiarity that made me uncomfortable. My ex was the last male, other than doctors, to touch me.

“My head doesn’t hurt.” He smelled like leather and something else I couldn’t place as he leaned towards me, checking my head for injuries.

“Have you ever had a weird dream?” I had thought about the possibility of hitting my head and here he was asking if I had hit my head. I knew that dreams were supposed to represent our subconscious. This seemed to confirm my theory.

He pulled his hand away and looked at me intently. I couldn’t tell what he was thinking. “Do you mean at night? Of course.”

“Well, I don’t. I never have. Well, not since I was a kid.” If this was what dreaming was, I had been missing out on a lot of adventures.

Ilya started stroking my head again. His touch felt good, but I was having a hard time with a stranger rubbing my head, even if he was probably imaginary. I looked up at him. “Have we met before?”

He looked at me carefully and pressed his lips together before answering. “You remind me of someone.” He looked away. “But you’re not her.”

“Who? Who do I remind you of?”

He looked down and moved a rock to the side with his shoe. He was clearly uncomfortable with me asking. “She died a long time ago.”

I realized I had been hoping for a different answer and was disappointed. This dream I was in could have used some adjustments.

“I’m sorry,” I said softly. “You seem familiar to me, and I was wondering why.” I pressed for more information.

“You look like her. Your hair is different, longer. A little lighter.”

That wasn’t that significant of a difference to me, and I wanted to keep him talking, “How did she die?” He looked even more uncomfortable, and I could tell he didn’t want to answer.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have asked you that. You don’t have to answer.” I felt worse and worse for having asked.

“It’s okay. Like I said, it was a long time ago. She died in a fire. I was too late to do anything about it.”

“That’s horrible.” I knew it was one of the worst ways to die. My mind flashed to my parents’ house, lit up in a grotesque bonfire. “I’m kinda scared of fire.”

“That makes things a bit hard, doesn’t it?”

“Not really.” Why would that make things hard, I thought. So strange. I looked and listened again, hoping for a car.

My objection amused Ilya. “Fire is destructive,” I said, turning towards him.

“It can be,” he conceded.

I thought of what he just said about knowing someone who died in a fire. “My parents died in a fire, too.”

“I’m sorry,” he said gently. He didn’t appear surprised at my statement and gave my arm a light squeeze before pulling away.

It seemed like he had already known that, but I didn’t know what to say in response to the feeling. It seemed odd to me to talk to my subconscious about my innermost thoughts, even though it shouldn’t.

The sun's angle had changed significantly, the dimming light turning the color of a sunflower, and it looked like several hours had gone by without notice as we talked. I found myself sitting closer to Ilya as he shared some fruit with me from a smooth leather messenger-style bag that looked out of place compared to his clothing.

The food tasted a lot fresher and had more flavor than what I ate at home. As the rich berries burst on my tongue, I wished I could take some with me.

Hours passed by and nothing had changed. I was concerned but I didn't want to leave Ilya yet and felt torn. We had fallen into an easy conversation, and it had been a while since I spent time with anyone of the opposite sex.

I told him a bit more about my parents, and he appeared reluctant to share much about his friend who passed away that looked like me. It may have been a comfort to him to spend time with someone who reminded him of her, I thought, and I was enjoying his company. Even if he wasn't real.

Madison was probably wondering why I hadn't answered any texts. She would worry. I had massively overslept, I was certain, and she would be freaking out because I hadn't answered my phone.

Maybe I'd start dating again, when I got back home. I surprised myself with that thought- while also feeling a little thrill at the idea. Madison's boyfriend had to know some people. Maybe. It was worth considering. I felt more alive than I had in a long time while Ilya was caressing my head. I missed human touch more than I had let myself admit.

For now, I just wanted to enjoy the moment. Everything felt so vivid and real that I kept forgetting it wasn't. I had run out of things to say and berries to eat and we were sitting in content silence. Listening to the crows cawing in the distance and marveling over the deep royal blue of the sky, I wished I could stay here forever.

Something caught Ilya's attention. He sat up straighter, turning his head towards the trees. "We need to go." He stood up and reached for me and I grabbed his hand, staying seated.

“I don’t want to leave this spot,” I said as he held my hand.

Ilya gently tugged on me, looking back and forth. “Not here. You can’t stay here.”

“That’s what I’m saying. I can’t leave unless I stay right here.” I tried to pull my arm back, but he wouldn’t let go.

There were sounds of people in the distance. His expression turned dark. I didn’t know what to do.

He pulled me onto my feet. “Where are you taking me?”

I didn’t like the turn this dream of mine was taking.

Ilya had no way of knowing the situation I was in, and it couldn’t be explained in a way that would make any sense. I had never had a dream this life-like.

But the last thing I wanted was to be trapped here and face whatever was coming that had him freaking out.

“We have to go.” He was practically dragging me across the grass, and I had to start moving faster, almost running, to keep my hand attached to my body under his grasp.

I glanced back towards the road, hoping to see a car driving up, but there was nothing. I was with a stranger and facing an unknown threat, only he didn’t know there was no true danger, and I still wasn’t sure if I should try to tell him.

We entered the woods, passing through a wall of deep green that closed in behind us. Ilya shoved branches and hanging vines out of my way as I followed him inside.

The woods were dark and the ground was full of large rocks and moss, different from the smooth field we had run through on our way to safety. The scent of mountain laurel and honeysuckle filled the air and I searched for the telltale white flowers.

*White flowers.*

Something important about white flowers poked at the back of my mind and I stubbed my toe on something in the dirt before I could grab onto the memory.

Tree roots were sticking up out of the ground forming little loops that kept making me stumble.

There was no discernible trail to follow. After a while of fighting nature every step of the way, we stopped behind a large tree. Ilya took my arm and pulled me with him close to the tree trunk and then covered me with his body like a shield.

I wasn't sure what to think but I was now alone in the woods with a stranger holding me and zero hope of rescue if something went wrong.

"What's going on?" I turned my head to see if anything or anyone was coming, but there was nothing. The woods were getting darker quickly.

I scanned our surroundings as best I could, waiting to see something, anything at all, that would explain why I needed to leave my spot when a light materialized in the distance.

Maybe we were hiding for a good reason. "What is that?"

Ilya shushed me and pushed my arm down to stop my pointing, moving his arm around me. He pulled me away from the tree and looked back and forth, scanning the woods. I rested my forehead against his chest, having nowhere else to lean. I tried to picture my home and told myself to wake up, repeating the words over and over in my head. As if I could think about it, or say it, and then be back there.

It wasn't working.

"What are we hiding from?" I whispered.

He still hadn't answered me. I didn't know what to expect or what had him so concerned. All he had done was look at me for a second and then he went back to watching the trees.

It was frustrating. Not knowing what to look out for made my head spin and my heart pound. If you die in a dream, do you die in real life? I didn't want to find out.

Ilya seemed to think the situation was serious enough to have to hide in the woods. He was all I had, and I wanted to trust him. I thought about making a run for it but that didn't seem to be the greatest idea at the moment. Where would I run

to? Where would I be safe? Going back to where I woke up would leave me completely exposed, if there really was a threat. I had no acceptable options other than to stay put, shoved against a tree, and held in place by a stranger.

I just wanted to go home.

Voices were coming from somewhere near the tree line and the light I'd observed a moment ago was getting closer. It was harder and harder to see, with nighttime quickly closing in. The canopy of trees shut out any possible moonlight and the thick brush of the woods blocked a clear line of sight. I didn't have a lighter or matches on me. I became more and more worried and could tell Ilya was too, his grip on me tightening to the point it was uncomfortable.

"What is going on?" I asked him, trying to keep my voice low and the building anxiety out of my voice.

"He's coming," Ilya whispered. I could barely make out his face with the last of any light leaving the woods, as the sun had completely set. "I'm sorry," he said.

"Who's coming?" I tried to look around him, my heart pounding in my ears. "Why are you sorry?"

I realized the light I had seen earlier was lit torches. Their glow danced across the tree trunks as a small group of people made their way into the woods. My eyes started watering, and I squeezed them shut, trying to will myself to wake up. I felt a trickle down my cheek and wiped it away, and then rested my head on Ilya's chest again.

Why didn't I wake up? Overwhelmed with fear, I was right on the edge of a full-blown panic attack, my breath shallow and my legs shaking. *None of this is real*, I told myself and tried to regulate my breath by breathing through my nose. *None of this is real.*

"Kiara." Ilya said in a low voice, and I tilted my head up. I felt his nose brush my face and his hand under my chin. "I'm sorry."

He repeated the apology again and then kissed me.

I could hear footsteps getting closer, and the closer they got, the deeper Ilya kissed me as he held onto me so tightly I could barely breathe. I didn't want him to stop.

The footsteps stopped. Ilya separated from me a fraction while still holding me close. I felt bereft at the space between us and exposed, my only safe space removed. I took a deep breath and I turned my head to eye the small group of people standing by us.

Two of them were holding torches on either side of a very tall figure

"Kiara." the man stepped closer to me. "How nice to see you again. Welcome back." His smile didn't reach his eyes, shadows flickering across his face from the light of the torches.

My stomach fell. The man was huge and imposing and wore a hooded black robe. He pushed back his hood, revealing long hair so dark it may have been black. He smiled again, one corner of his mouth lifting as he walked back and forth in front of us, looking us over. He was beautiful, but also terrifying. I pushed myself into Ilya's chest, his arms holding me tight, and tried again to will myself to wake up.

I didn't understand the look he was giving Ilya. It was almost playful. Ilya was glaring at him. I wondered how this man knew my name. I had never seen him before.

*Now would be a fabulous time to wake up.*

"Ramone." He addressed the figure pacing in front of us with a snarl. I glanced back and forth between the two men and then focused on the ground, thinking of my apartment.

"Give her to me, Ilya. She's not yours to have."

"Funny, coming from someone who takes stuff that doesn't belong to him."

Ramone stepped closer, raising his hand, and Ilya let go of me. I looked at Ilya in disbelief and then Ramone put his hand on my back.

My legs started to give way underneath me as panic took over while they handed me off. The two men stood there staring at each other with such hatred I expected violence, but nothing happened, and Ramone turned away unconcerned.

Ilya didn't so much as glance at me as I they led me away, stumbling and tripping over the hem of my dress.

He didn't do a single thing to help me. He had just stood there like this wasn't happening, like he hadn't been apologizing to me and holding me mere moments ago.

What a bastard. Just like that, he let me go. He gave me away like a piece of property. Ilya had kept saying he was sorry. Apparently, he wasn't sorry enough to go and hand me off to someone else.

It bothered me deeply. I was furious, and I wasn't sure if my anger was justified. I didn't know him at all, but it seemed like we had a little something together. He had been protective of me. We'd talked for hours earlier. Why had he even bothered to hide me?

I was probably reading too much into it, into the kiss. My subconscious was probably telling me I needed to start dating again. It certainly had a funny way of trying to help me out.

Tears streamed down my face. Escape wasn't possible, not in these woods. All that would happen was I would trip over something and get hurt. I didn't even know where to go.

If I screamed for help, no one would come. No one knew where I was. *I* didn't even know where I was or who to yell for. Ilya didn't seem to care or appear even remotely inclined to help me anymore.

He left without looking back. I watched, stunned, as he disappeared into the blackness of the woods. I was on my own, deserted like I was nothing. Ramone seemed to think he owned me in some way, and knew me, despite me never having seen him before in my entire life.

*He* had thought he owned me, too, I remembered bitterly. My ex had considered me a piece of property. *His*.



Ramone waited until Ilya was far out of sight, raised his hood back over his head, and motioned for me to follow.

We traveled in the opposite direction I had come from and were finally on a rough-hewn path that appeared meant for walking. The trees were starting to thin out and the full moon shone down, covering everything in a soft silver light. When we exited, the path changed and was smoother, free of obstacles.

The grass was shorter than what I'd lain in when I made my entrance to whatever place this was, and it almost looked manicured. A hill lay before us and the two men with the torches stepped in front of us after Ramone motioned them with his hand.

Pine trees dotted the landscape throughout, their branches thick and full, the tops of the trees disappearing up into the night. Despite the glowing moonlight, stars twinkled brightly above, blanketing the sky. It was a view that seemed impossible even in a dream. It was stunning in its beauty.

Everything was completely silent as I turned to look further. There was no wind or rustling of leaves. There were still no planes overhead or cars in the distance, or birds or squirrels or any sign of life besides the four of us walking.

I was still waiting to wake up or just suddenly be in my own house. I kept thinking that perhaps because I wasn't in the right spot; I had missed my chance.

My shoulders slumped, and I hugged myself and rubbed my arms. Now would be a great time to wake up. I was going numb from my anxiety. My limbs felt like they were vibrating. I wasn't breathing normally, and my mouth was filling with spit.

"Are you cold?" Ramone broke the silence and asked, as if he hadn't just forced me away against my will and gave a shit about my comfort.

I wasn't. Not at all. The air still had that occasional summertime quality of a no temperature feeling at all.

"No." I swallowed.

The howl of a wolf broke the silence in the distance, and I gasped, stepping closer to my kidnapper. I backed away and then realized there was zero point. I wasn't going anywhere.

"They won't bother you with me here." Ramone stated.

"Where are we going?" I didn't want to talk to him, but I needed some information about this place. Nothing made any sense. What I really wanted was to ask him why he took me from Ilya, but I was too angry about being deserted.

Who was this guy that I was just handed over to him like I was a piece of property? He had pushed his hood back and his hair flowed down over his shoulders. He didn't appear quite as terrifying now as he did in the woods, but it didn't make me feel any better, and I looked away.

I wondered again if I should make a run or it, but I couldn't figure out where I should run to. Back to the woods? I didn't even know what was in there. Bears, wolves, other people- there could be anything. And I didn't have any food or water, or even a blanket to lie on while I waited to wake up safely at home on my couch.

What if I got lost? I didn't have my phone or a map. Could you get lost in a dream? I hadn't seen any other people that could help. I hadn't put up a fight, but I also didn't know where to go.

Ramone gestured towards a massive house up ahead. "Home."

It was huge, castle-like in appearance, and reminded me of the estates you see on Google when you search different European countries. The dark red bricks of the massive structure glowed under the moonlight, beautiful and ominous.

This was a place where there were probably dungeons in the basement. I pictured myself chained to a wall with rats scurrying around the floors, squeezing in between dirty iron bars as they came in to see if I was edible. I shivered again.

"Do you have a phone I can use?" He glanced down at me, huffed under his breath, and kept walking.

“I want to go home.” I stopped walking. I decided I was done with this. It wasn’t fun anymore. It had stopped being fun a while ago, really. “I don’t want to go to your house. I want to go to my own.”

I crossed my arms like I was six years old and almost stomped my foot. My face flushed, suddenly self-conscious. Acting like a child wasn’t going to help me out here. But what did I care what this guy thought of me? At some point, hopefully soon, I’d never see him again. “Let me go.”

“This is your home, darling,” Ramone stood there, waiting for me to start walking again.

“Darling”. What a condescending prick.

I refused to move a single step and planted myself where I stood. I lived in a crappy apartment, not a massive mansion.

“I don’t live here.”

He reached for me and put his arm across my shoulder to pull me forward. I tried to shrug him away and was unsuccessful when he gripped me.

“You don’t understand. I’m not from here. I don’t know you and I don’t know that house.” I did not want to be chained up in some creep’s basement.

It was futile to argue with him and if I was honest with myself, I didn’t have much choice. I glanced back at the house and the landscape looked different now.

I looked at the surrounding ground, and there was snow on everything in sight, shimmering under the moonlight, “Where did the snow come from?”

My mouth dropped open, and I quickly shut it. I didn’t have the words to describe how pure and beautiful it looked, as if it were lit from within.

“You’ll remember.”

I wasn’t sure if he was referring to the snow or the house. I started walking again and followed him, defeated and mildly disappointed with myself. I was tired, hungry, and my legs

hurt. I was emotionally exhausted. I didn't have anywhere else to go.

Surely, I would wake up soon. Staying outside in the snow just wasn't going to happen.

It occurred to me that maybe he was the one who had been watching me in the snow.

That would mean I wasn't dreaming, so this conclusion wasn't an option for me.

The air and the landscape felt just like the snow I had found myself in a few hours ago. I longed to reach down and touch it but thought I should keep moving.

What else could I do?

## CHAPTER 5

We walked into the house and onto gleaming marble flooring. There was a massive crystal chandelier with hundreds of candles lighting the foyer and an intricately carved wooden double staircase facing us. Someone in a suit walked up to Ramone, took his cloak without saying a word, and walked away.

Dark wooden molding covered the walls, and gorgeous oil paintings lined them. Lit sconces were interspersed between the massive pieces of artwork. I didn't remember this like Ramone said I would, but it was beautiful.

My ideal mansion would look a lot like this, if I were able to design one. I turned in circles, trying to take it all in, forgetting for a moment that I was a prisoner. It would take hours to see everything just in this space and explore.

“Go get changed and meet me in the library,” Ramone instructed me.

I threw my hands up in frustration. “I don't know you. I don't know your house.” I just wanted to explore the house. I'd hoped this man would disappear and that I'd reappear in my apartment, but we were both still annoyingly here.

He stood there waiting, staring at me like I was a bug under a magnifying glass, multiple expressions crossing his face.

I raised my voice. “What is wrong with you? You can't just kidnap a woman and take her to some house and think she

knows you!” My temper tantrum was having no effect on him, and I was sick of being told what to do.

I was acting crazy. He hadn't laid a hand on me in violence or voiced any threat. What had really happened was that he was a stranger who took me from another slightly more-familiar stranger and into a beautiful house.

People in dreams could do whatever they wanted to others, I supposed.

But it was still against my will. I didn't really know what to think. If I was dreaming, then what did any of this really matter? He couldn't hurt me, just inconvenience me. Plus, weren't dream characters just pieces of your subconscious coming to life? I knew my own was pretty bad. Maybe I was just fighting myself.

Ramone took a deep breath. “You're not fooling me.”

He stepped closer to me and looked at me. “Keep playing this game and you'll get burned. It won't go well for you.”

He invaded my personal space, and I felt uneasy. He said “burned”. Was that on purpose? I wasn't very fond of fire. It triggered bad memories, but I didn't tell many people that. My brain was probably trying to process my trauma through him.

“What game?” It felt more like he was the one playing a game.

“You were with Ilya.” Ramone's eyes narrowed, and he added, “I can make sure that doesn't happen again.”

I ignored his subtle threat. I didn't care right now, anyway. “How do I know you? I've never seen you before.”

Beyond exhausted, I just wanted to go to bed. I was done with this, with him, and was running out of hope of waking up any time soon. “I don't know Ilya either. I just met him.”

A wave of annoyance flowed over me. Why was I explaining myself to this man? It wasn't any of his business. Arguing with my own subconscious was unnecessary.

Then it hit me: if I felt like this, felt these physical effects, I couldn't possibly be sleeping.

My blood turned to ice.

*Impossible.*

The idea that I was really trapped somewhere, kidnapped after being deserted, was more than I could handle. No, I was definitely dreaming and stuck in a nightmare.

I pushed the thoughts away.

“Can you take me to my room, please?” If it really was my home, I would have a room here- and most importantly, Ramone would not toss me in a dungeon. I just needed some space to try to collect myself and figure out what to do next. If I was hallucinating, I needed to figure out how to get out of it.

Ramone looked at me and walked towards the stairs. I followed him, climbing up the long staircase, my tired legs hurting with each step.

He opened a door near the end of the hallway.

As I followed him inside, I debated asking him to explain why he thought he knew me. Despite his lack of clarity on the matter, it was clear Ilya knew me, too. And Ilya had seemed familiar to me, like we had been together before, probably even had kissed before, even though that was impossible.

But Ramone was a different story. Nothing familiar about him at all.

I looked around the room and saw a large bed with a thick comforter in shades of brown and red, with pillows piled high against a dark wood headboard. Matching dressers, a tall wardrobe, bookcase and a vanity were sat against the walls. Double French doors were on one side of the room, and I imagined there was a balcony of some sort on the other side of them.

The walls were papered with a deep red linen cloth and flowing gold-toned curtains framed the windows. I didn't recognize the room, but I liked it and the warm shades decorating it.

“Ramone.” I hesitated, then sat on the bed. “Why do you think you know me?”

All I really wanted to do was take the dirty dress off, have a nice warm shower, go to sleep, wake up in my own apartment, and try to figure out what this was all about. I prayed that's what would happen when he left the room.

He stepped over and sat near me on the bed. He was extraordinarily good-looking, I realized. His long black hair shone like glass, and his teal-green eyes were brighter than seemed natural. He was so tall that it was unsettling, and it made me uncomfortable how close he sat. I slid myself over to the side, away from him.

I wasn't certain he would answer me. He had an air about him that exuded authority and confidence and he seemed dangerous although I didn't know if that was due to his intimidating size, or because he had kidnapped me. Probably both.

I had never been very comfortable around men. And I've always been a small person, in height and frame, and it felt like he could swallow me up if he so desired. I'd never been a good judge of people, so I chose to avoid them in general, other than my very few close friends.

"I thought you were lying to me," he said looking at me closely, "but I think maybe you're telling me the truth."

He stood up and glanced down at me. "Get cleaned up and meet me downstairs."

"I'm tired." I didn't think I could do anything else without collapsing.

"Do what I told you."

He left the room closing the door with finality and the assumption that I would obey like I was a little kid. Which I had been acting like, and I knew it. I rolled my eyes. I needed to get a hold of myself, outwit my subconscious, and figure out a way to either wake up or get home somehow.

I let myself fall back on the bed, which turned out to be the softest bed I had ever lain on. It wrapped around me like a hug, soft and firm in all the right places. I wanted to curl up and close my eyes and drift off. It was heaven.



But I wouldn't get any answers if I gave in. And if I did wake up in my own apartment, what if I found myself back here later? I was more and more sure that the vision I had in the abandoned house was a glimpse of wherever I was now.

I must've been awake in a dream, or a vision. It was ideal in some ways.

It was perfect for practicing not being so scared of everything, like I had thought earlier. Maybe this was a chance to try to get better. I was torn between wanting to explore and wanting to be back home, but most of all I was tired.

Turning to get comfortable, I shut my eyes longing for sleep that wouldn't come. The thoughts in my head wouldn't slow down. Twice, in the space of a few hours, I had found myself in this other world or whatever it was. Twice now. There had to be answers somewhere. There had to be a reason I was here.

Maybe my subconscious thought this waking dream was the only way to help me? The argument wouldn't stop in my head as I veered back and forth over what I should do.

My curiosity winning, I sat back up and looked around the room. It was about the size of my studio apartment back home, maybe a bit bigger. A bookcase with glass doors I hadn't noticed before caught my eye, but I ignored it and headed for the wardrobe making a mental note to check it later.

The heavy doors opened with a satisfying click. Inside was a selection of jewel-toned gowns, the kind princesses in story books wear, and I stroked the fabric of a deep crimson one in wonder. These dresses were fantastic. Not practical if I had the chance to make a run for it, but gorgeous none the less. They just wouldn't do, though. I started opening dresser drawers looking for something that would give me a range of movement, like a pair of leggings, but all I found were what I presumed to be undergarments.

I was going to have to wear a dress. I started laughing out loud at the absurdity of my situation and then felt my eyes well up with tears, threatening to spill over. I had to collect myself. I could cry later.

Sucking in a deep breath, I took out the crimson gown, then selected some things from the dresser drawers and changed my clothes.

My reflection in a mirror showed dirt on my cheek and a twig in my hair, a stark contrast to the amazing dress I had put on. I pulled the twig out. There was a jug of water below the mirror, conveniently. I found a hand towel and cleaned off my face. I paused for a moment, looking at my reflection.

Just a few hours ago, I was getting drunk with my only friends in the world in an old dusty house, wishing my life were something more. Now I was held against my will and wearing a dress you only saw in the movies and in a house from a gothic interior design magazine. It defied logic. I giggled at the absurdity of my situation. I darted out of the room before I could argue myself back in.

I wasn't sure where to go after I had walked down the stairs and found myself back in the foyer, so headed for the only open door, the soft golden light beckoning me.

As I crossed the foyer, I took a deep breath and stopped and glanced at the front doors wistfully, wishing I were brave enough to tear them open and run out of the house. Maybe I really was brave enough, but I was also smart enough not to run from shelter.

The man in a suit interrupted my fantasy when he appeared out of nowhere, pushing the door the rest of the way open in front of me. He nodded and leaned back indicating I should enter.

“Who are you?” I asked the man.

He didn't answer or give any indication he had heard me and stood holding the door open for me, expressionless. I gave up waiting for a response and went inside.

The room was a library or an office, and smelled of books, whiskey, and wood, the scent inviting and comforting. There was a large mahogany desk gleaming in one corner and book-filled shelves lining the walls. Two couches faced a large stone

fireplace, a fire roaring inside it, a low table nearby topped with a silver tray that held a crystal decanter and tumblers.

Ramone stood in front of the fire holding a tumbler of a light brown liquid and took a sip, staring at me. He examined me slowly, from head to toe and back up again, his expression withholding his thoughts, and I suddenly felt self-conscious.

I wanted answers for everything, and they didn't seem to be on their way. I wasn't sure what to do with myself and took a couple steps forward. The suited man left silently, closing the door behind him like a ghost.

I clasped my trembling hands together before I looked up at Ramone, who was still staring at me.

"I see you can still control it," he said, and set his glass down on the table, contents drained. "I didn't expect that."

"Control what?" I wanted to be home, and I very much didn't have control of that, or I'd already be there.

"Sit down."

It was getting to me, Ramone ordering me around. He sat down on one of the couches and stretched his long legs out.

As obedient as ever for a lack of something else to do, I sat down and stared out the window and waited. I still hadn't had the chance to really think about things as thoroughly as I wanted to.

He reached over and grasped my hand, massaging the top of it with his thumb. I tried to pull my hand back, but he tightened his grip and moved his index finger under my wrist, pressing on the tendons and veins and I sucked in my breath at the sensation.

I felt like I was falling— that feeling you get when you're sleeping and suddenly hurtling through space, and you land on your bed with a thud— and I didn't like it.

When the feeling stopped, I found myself in a glass greenhouse, standing on cobblestones and surrounded by lush greenery. White flowers bloomed around me, interspersed with soft yellow flowering vines. Palm leaves dotted each corner of

the towering structure and the sun's rays were warming my shoulders.

I was laughing at something and looked up to see Ramone smiling at me, his arm entwined with mine as we walked through the building. I was there, but also not there. The sensation was as if I was possessing my own body and recalling a memory in the most vivid and realistic way.

*People were busy watering the plants and a man with shoulder-length blonde hair sat nearby, angled towards the light with his head down, holding a book in one hand and something shiny and gold that reflected the sun in the other.*

*Ramone leaned down to kiss me, his lips firm against mine. The connection washed over me as I clung to him. He was someone of importance to me, a boyfriend or a husband; I couldn't really grasp which. We were supposed to be somewhere else soon, I knew. There was the feeling of anticipation you got when you had plans, but I couldn't grasp what those plans were, distracted by his lips and the feel of his arms around me.*

I was flung back into the library, the fireplace filling my line of sight and I gasped as Ramone let go of my hand. "What the hell was that?"

I didn't think for a moment he wasn't aware, that he didn't purposely grab my hand to do whatever it was he just did. If this was his way of trying to make me remember whatever I was supposed to remember- it wasn't working.

"Please," I begged him, "Can you send me home the same way you made me be in that greenhouse?"

"You are home." He was driving me mad.

"I'd like to know why you don't remember. And where you've been." He paused, taking a deep breath. "And why you're back here."

Ramone leaned forward and poured himself another drink. "What is the last thing you remember?"

"You taking me out of the woods and away from Ilya," I snapped at him.

“Before that.” He corrected me and I could feel the anger rising in him.

I thought back to the patch of grass, of Ilya finding me laying in it, and wished I was back there and being transported home.

“I was in some grass in a field near the woods. I don’t know how I got there.”

I knew he’d say no but I asked anyways. “Can you please take me back there?”

He leaned back on the couch, ignoring my request. “Where were you before that?”

“At home on my couch.” I paused. “I think.” I wasn’t sure if I had made it home. I’d thought I did, but recent events had me questioning my grasp on reality.

My cheeks grew warm thinking of his kiss. I shoved the vision away and let hope overtake me. He must’ve had the power to send me back to my cozy couch and the security of my cellphone and a life I could control, if he could do all that other stuff.

Thinking of my cellphone brought back the memory of plugging it on the charger. I must’ve made it home... and then I ended up in a random field for no reason.

That had to have been the chain of events. It was becoming a bit foggy.

I suddenly felt overcome with embarrassment, thinking of the two men. I had kissed plenty of men in my life, slept with a couple, but I’d only had one serious relationship my whole life. And not a good one, he being the abusive bastard that he had turned out to be.

Apparently, I had been involved in some relationship with two different men in this place. It was completely out of character for me, despite the growing feeling that Madison was right, and I needed to get laid.

The two men were the most beautiful men I had ever seen in my life. I had much better taste in men’s looks while was

sleeping.

My ex was attractive too, but not like my dream characters.

“I can’t do that, only you can.”

“So, you know I’m not supposed to be here?” This was the first time anything made sense to me. The bastard knew.

“I don’t want to be here with you so if you just tell me how to go, I’ll leave.”

I had sworn off men a while ago, they were too much trouble. I had decided I couldn’t trust my own judgment anymore after my ex.

Ramone seemed to fit the same mold, ordering me around, trying to control me and telling me what to do. But not like one to use for a booty call— which Ilya would’ve been good for if I could work up the nerve.

Plus, Ramone kidnapped women. It would never work between us.

I closed my eyes and tried to will myself back home.

It wasn’t working. Was I not trying hard enough?

“How do I do it?” I just wanted to wake up. “Tell me.”

I wondered if anyone was looking for me back home. Anyone, meaning Madison or Mabel, and remembered my vision in the house and how time had just stood still.

Maybe no time at all had gone by and my friends were just now getting to their own homes. They might have no idea that I was gone. Maybe I was asleep on my couch.

Ramone was looking at me, stroking his chin with his manicured hands, his fingers long and perfectly formed. Everything about him was incredibly attractive, other than his menacing aura. How annoying.

Whenever I looked at him, he was always looking right at me. I felt like he wanted to either burn or squash me like a bug. He was angry with me, and I didn’t know why.

## CHAPTER 6

When I woke up, I was lying on my couch. I didn't remember falling asleep or getting home or leaving Ramone's house, or whatever had happened to land me back home. After sitting up and rubbing my cheeks, I reached for my cellphone.

Great, I had a hangover. Waves of nausea rolled up my throat and I tried to swallow the feeling down.

I pushed my hair out of my face and shoved the knit blanket I kept on the couch off of my lap.

It was disconcerting to be back in my own apartment, and it took me a few minutes to center myself. I browsed social media for a moment and then got up and adjusted the window blinds to let the sunlight in. It looked chilly outside, the trees stark, a couple clouds dotting the sky and the ground brown and bare.

It was hard to reconcile the sight before me, where things were normal and ordinary, with problems like dishes in the sink and laundry to pick up off the floor with what I had just been through.

Completely exhausted, but relieved to be home, I noticed my legs ached. Did people's bodies normally hurt after such realistic dreams?

I wondered if Ramone knew I was gone— a silly thought since he wasn't real. I shook my head trying to forget and move on from my dream.

My cell phone dinged, a carnival type of sound that both irritated and amused me. I had been meaning to change it forever, and just never took the two seconds to do it and alleviate the pain every time I got a notification. But it worked well for getting me to pay attention to my phone, which I had a habit of not doing— and which freaked Madison out constantly.

*What are you doing* was the message scrolling across the face of my phone. Clicking on my friend Madison's text, I sent her a one-word answer saying *sleeping*, trying to preserve a few more moments to wake up and not think about how I had been somewhere else in my sleep.

She texted back asking what was wrong with me and saying she'd pick me up at seven. I had forgotten our plans, but I'd never admit to it, and she knew I wouldn't.

It was tempting to back out, but I figured I was on a roll, never previously agreeing to plans for two days in a row. It would be good for me to get out and be social, even though that was the last thing I wanted to do.

It would take time to go over what had happened and to try to make sense of it, but today wouldn't be that day. Maybe that was for the best, so I didn't sit here obsessing over something that I probably wouldn't get answers about. I could look up a dream dictionary online later and find answers then.

Letting out a loud audible sigh I headed for the bathroom.

After a quick shower I got dressed and put on a knee-length black sundress. I brushed out my long and unfortunately plain brown hair. I'd always thought about dying my hair to make it more interesting, but I didn't want to have to deal with the upkeep.

Maybe one day when I felt motivated enough to make even more changes in my life. I could barely handle the daily stuff as it was.

*One day at a time*, I told myself.

I applied make-up, going heavy on the eyeliner and decided I was ready. If I was remembering correctly, we were



going to some club that Madison heard about at one of the nearby casinos.

My head felt a bit weird, as if I were suspended between two places, hanging in limbo.

Time still felt strange to me, like it did in my dream. I didn't feel present, or real; I felt "off", like I was observing my own life from a distance and didn't know whether it was a weird side effect of my hangover or if the super vivid dream was the culprit.

Obsessively checking my phone, I couldn't wait to get in Madison's car and freak out internally about being out in public and feel normal again.

Madison picked me up a couple minutes after seven and we parked in a parking garage that connected to a massive casino.

The complex was streamlined and shiny with chrome detailing and had hotels, shopping centers, and slot machines that towered above the forested New England countryside. It sent more people into bankruptcy than Beverly Hills but that didn't stop it from being a huge attraction.

There was an amusement park, a massive stadium, museums, and world class restaurants all on the property as well. It was genius, the way the developers and designers had laid the huge structures out in a way that worked in harmony with the landscape. It wasn't garish or full of flashing neon signs but held an elegant sense of excitement.

We walked across the mostly empty parking garage and stepped into an elevator, and Madison pushed one of the buttons. "You're looking more Gothic than usual," she said. I couldn't tell if she was criticizing me or complementing me.

I looked down at my dress. "I didn't know what to wear."

The floor numbers blinked as we ascended. We were above the main floor and still going up. I smoothed an imaginary wrinkle out of my skirt and wondered if I looked ok. *Maybe I should pay more attention to what I wear.* I wasn't exactly

dressed up. I shivered and thought of the sweater I had left in her car.

“You look great,” Madison reassured me approvingly. Not that it mattered to me what she thought, I tried to convince myself.

It was a relief, anyways, to hear I was dressed appropriately. It was my first time going to the casino with her—or any casino, for that matter.

“I can’t believe you drank that shit last night.” She laughed, reminding me of the old bottle I found.

Maybe I should’ve cared about what she thought. She always looked perfect, and she had a knack for fashion. It was too late now anyways—I was stuck with what I was wearing.

“Me neither.”

“Are you all up in your head again?”

I shrugged at her question, not wanting to talk about it.

“I’m seriously considering at least a booty call,” I offered, trying to distract her from my unease.

Madison laughed her approval, “This is awesome. You should find some good candidates tonight!”

“I don’t know about tonight. I should’ve said I’m just open to it.” I smiled at her, thrilling at my tentative decision.

*Live a little. Just a little.*

Tell her, I tried to convince myself. Tell her.

How would I bring up a dream? I had no clue how to explain the vividness of it.

I was still feeling disoriented and mildly hungover. The painkillers I’d popped before heading out the door took the edge off the headache I had been nursing since I woke up, but I felt super weird and uncomfortable.

The elevator dinged before I could say anything, and we stepped out.

It was loud. People were milling about everywhere, in various states of inebriation and excitement, and perhaps even intoxication of another kind. It caught me off guard, even though I should've expected it, and I focused on the surrounding architecture, trying to engage my senses.

The floor glittered like it was paved with gold dust mixed into black marble, the surface so shiny it was like glass, defying the thousands of footsteps it weathered daily.

Waterfalls gurgled and tinkled, the water rushing around us into little streams, following walkways and flowing under faux bridges.

There was a synthetic cliff lining a wall to the right, in different shades of gray, expertly mimicking the notches cut into New England's hills for highways and roads, little waterfalls cascading down into the streams and pools. I watched brightly colored Koi swimming around lazily as we passed by and wondered how many drinks guests had spilled into their water.

As I followed Madison across the floor, we walked under what looked like a treehouse church, and I glanced up to see a floor interspersed with colorful stained glass, marveling at how it didn't break or appear scratched with all the shoes walking across it. I thought I could hear church hymnals coming from it.

Madison grabbed my hand when she realized she left me behind. "What is that?" I asked and looked back up at the glass. It was beautiful.

"I think it's a restaurant," she answered and took my arm. "C'mon."

I was starting to feel out of place, like the energy and atmosphere had somehow shifted. The massive crowds of people squeezed us in as they brushed me with elbows and hips. Looking down at my arm, trying to center myself and be present, I remembered the strange moment when the atmosphere changed like a memory back at Ramone's house.

Or *my house*, seeing as he had called it my home. I wasn't sure what the signs would be before I found myself back in the dream world or what would happen if I suddenly left in the middle of a casino. There was no warning I could think of.

Would Madison even notice? She was my best friend so I was sure she would. I wondered what she would say to the police. "Hey officer, Kiara disappeared. No, she just turned invisible right in front of me."

Hmm, I thought. That would never happen. It couldn't. No time had gone by when we were in the abandoned house.

I suddenly felt silly, thinking of the possibility it would happen again— or rather, assuming it would happen. I didn't know enough about dreams or hallucinations to make any assumptions.

Madison had let go of my hand and I followed along right behind her, turning my shoulders to squeeze through throngs of people. The lights had changed in the casino, and the air didn't feel clear. I wondered if it was one of the casinos where smoking wasn't outlawed yet.

Things just felt weird. Maybe I was about to have a panic attack.

I tried to focus on not losing sight of my friend and getting away from the crowds and hoped this feeling would go away so I could have some fun here with my friends. And just forget about the other stuff pressing in on me, threatening to suffocate me with panic and dissociation.

We walked down a hall lined with double-paned glass, the panes wide enough to have plants growing in between and reaching up to the ceiling. I couldn't tell if they were real or artificial and decided they were real plants. The floor we walked on was the same gold-flecked black marble as when we got off the elevator.

"James said he can get us into the back room," Madison said, referring to her boyfriend. "It should be pretty sweet in there."

We walked up to a rustic and heavy wooden door that had a wrought iron plaque on it bearing the name of the club, RESERVATION. There were multiple small cameras around the door and lining the hallway we had walked down, and the door opened from the inside when we stopped in front of it.

“This place lets no one in after 8 p.m. They got free drinks, too.” She smiled as I looked up and stared at a camera. It thrilled her to be in such an exclusive space, I could tell. The excitement practically rolled off of her.

We went inside. There were tables with leather upholstered chairs and clear lightbulbs hanging from black chain links strewn across the ceiling. Leather couches sat in the corners, and a beautiful wooden bar was across the other side of the room.

The bar reminded me of the woodwork in the mansion in my dream, all shiny with ornate details. I watched as Madison pulled her cell phone out of the waist of her tight black pants and presumably texted James.

As I waited, I looked around some more. I didn't recognize the music that was playing over the speakers and thought it might be a foreign techno DJ. Several people glanced up at us from their tables, as others milled about, heading to the bar or perhaps leaving.

The atmosphere was very different from the one we had just walked through, less chaotic and more peaceful than out in the casino. I now felt confident I looked okay, seeing not everyone was dressed up. I spotted some couples in jeans and T-shirts. It reassured me I had dressed just fine.

Madison looked really good no matter what she wore. Her thick blonde hair was a defining feature, combined with her deep blue eyes and slim build. She was a showstopper anywhere she went. I didn't get as much attention as her, but I was fine with that, used to being overlooked or unnoticed—plus I didn't really like the attention. She took the focus off me so I could just observe everyone else and watch my surroundings.

A waitress swung by offering us drinks and I gladly accepted a cranberry and vodka. Madison grabbed the same. “James is in here,” she said and sipped on her drink through a little gold straw. “He’s over there.” She pointed across the room to a dimly lit corner.

“Mabel’s here somewhere too.” She glanced around. “She’ll pop up eventually.”

We started walking in the direction she was pointing and came up to a table full of men with dress shirts and suits on. A few of them had multiple gold chains hanging around their necks. James stood up and gave Madison a hug and a kiss. One of his friends, whose name I couldn’t remember but thought possibly Stefan, grabbed some chairs from a nearby table and dragged them over to the table for us.

I had been around James’ friends occasionally. They worked in finance and construction of some sort, maybe, and drove Cadillacs or German cars. Some of them owned or managed businesses, best I could tell.

James was a venture capitalist who I teasingly called an adventure capitalist, as there was always some cool thing going on with him.

They were a fun bunch, always livening up whatever we were doing, and all were relatively new friends of Madison and James.

“How are you, Kiara? Here.” James motioned me to a chair not waiting for an answer, and I sat down. “We’ll go in back in a few. Anyone need anything?”

Nobody answered and Madison started talking to one of James’ friends, Al. I suspected that Al always had a thing for her, the way he held on to every word she spoke when we were all together, but I knew he wouldn’t act on it. Maybe they were just good friends. I couldn’t tell. Plus, he was Mabel’s boyfriend. I envied Madison’s way with people.

I suddenly noticed Mabel. She looked so tiny she was almost invisible, sunken behind Al’s shoulder as they sat on the couch on the other side of the table.

“Hi Mabel.” I said, and she repeated a greeting back to me with a smile as she sat up and brushed her hair behind her ears before taking a sip of her drink.

After a few more minutes of small talk with all of us James looked at his watch and got up. I took that as a cue that we were going to the back room of the club and we all followed him, chatting amongst ourselves as we crossed the floor. I wasn't sure what to say when asked how I was doing, or what I had been doing lately and gave the standard, socially acceptable, answers.

The back room was crowded and loud. There were trays of drinks set on tables everywhere with fresh packs of cigarettes in small stacks, gold embossed matchbooks in little piles on gold saucers, people dancing and lights from the ceiling flashing.

There were girls dancing on caged elevated platforms, barely dressed. I'm pretty sure I saw some people snorting cocaine at some of the tables. It was as if we had stepped into another world. We found a table on the right-hand side of the room, and I hung my purse off the back of the chair, facing the wall.

Madison was beside herself with excitement at being in this area of Reservation. I had never seen her this happy, at least not since we were eight years old, and she got a Barbie Dream House for her birthday.

“Kiara!” she exclaimed, turning to me, “I'm gonna go dance! Let's go dance!” She tried to grab my arm. “Let's go!”

“I'm not ready yet,” I told her, laughing, and James came over and put his arm around her shoulders and led her to the dance floor as I watched them walk away.

She looked back at me with a giant grin, and I smiled back at her, trying to reassure her I'd be fine staying at the table. I needed time to acclimate myself.

I worked on finishing my drink and listened to the guys talk business. They were discussing the casino and the construction of it, which they had contributed to, and how one

of the owners owed someone money and lost majority share and I then lost interest. I didn't really understand business talk. I couldn't imagine being responsible for such large sums of money. Working in insurance like I did was easier, safer, and less pressure.

I went back to people watching after a couple of failed attempts to engage Mabel in conversation. I did my part, trying to be sociable. Not even alcohol got her to talk any more than was necessary.

Turning away, I watched the dancers on the platforms. They were all beyond beautiful, and even their clothes— what there was for clothes— were gorgeous. They gyrated and writhed around as gracefully as prima ballerinas leaving me hypnotized for a few moments.

I saw a few familiar faces, perhaps actors or supermodels, I wasn't sure. I watched one girl with cheekbones so sharp she could cut glass, dressed in an exquisitely flowy knee-length dress gracefully remove a cocktail from a waitress's passing tray and pluck an olive off a toothpick with her teeth without marring her lipstick in one fluid motion. I could never be that elegant, no matter how hard I might try, I thought wistfully.

At a table nearby a group of men were speaking what sounded like German. They looked like the stereotypical bad guys from an action film. One of them kept staring at me, making me feel uncomfortable, so I turned back around in my chair and tried to focus on the surrounding conversation.

"Come." I heard a thickly accented voice directly behind me and turned again. It was the German guy who had just been staring at me. "Come dance."

Dancing with a stranger didn't appeal to me, but I thought, *What the hell*, and stood up. It wasn't much fun sitting at a table alone, listening with no one to talk to, and I followed the guy out to the dance floor. I should at least try, that's why I was here.

Also, I had enough alcohol in me at this point to be more comfortable. He introduced himself as Carlos and I almost



laughed, his accent making me think he gave a fake name, but he looked sincere.

The music was an amazing blend of techno and hip hop, and I began to enjoy myself as I danced. Carlos was a good dancer.

Madison was nearby, and she winked at me, causing me to roll my eyes as I remembered my whole “get laid” goal. Carlos looked at me questioningly, and I gestured towards my friend, and he looked and laughed as she winked at him, too.

“Where are you from?” he asked me.

“Harwich,” I answered, raising my voice over the music. “You?”

“Boston.”

“Are you German?”

“What?”

I yelled, “Your accent, are you German?”

“Hamburg.” I took that as a yes and started to feel awkward in response to his own awkwardness. The way he said Hamburg was so strange, I couldn’t figure out if he was hungry or if he was talking about the actual city.

Weirdo. I needed to get away. The vibe was ruined.

“I’ll be right back,” I lied, extricating myself and grabbing an offered glass of champagne from a server.

So much for trying to let loose and relax a little. I took a sip of the velvety bubbling drink, probably the most expensive alcohol I ever tried, and then immediately took another sip.

I glanced around, trying to catch Madison’s eye, and, upon failing to do so, went to look for a bathroom. “Carlos Hamburg” repeated in my mind, and I choked back a giggle, tipsy from the alcohol.

The air hung heavy with clouds of cigarette smoke, and I had no idea which direction to go, so I headed towards the bar.

The lights were already dim before the room had filled with smoke and I pushed past tables and people, threading my way through the crowd. I got hit in the shoulder by a shot glass and peered down to see it bounce away as someone yelled, and I looked around. No one was paying any attention to me.

Thank goodness.

A few steps further, I felt eyes on me and stopped, thinking of my ex-dance partner. I was stuck, blocked between someone standing at a table and a chair on the other side of me.

The Carlos Hamburg guy was nowhere to be seen.

Someone was leaning over the table, on the other side of the standing man, wearing an extremely nice suit.

He had his longish dark hair pulled back, with a piece hanging forward in his face, and he was talking to someone else.

From the side, he looked like Ilya

My heart stopped.

I froze like a deer in headlights.

Hoping for a glimpse of his face I blocked traffic, trying to figure out if it was him.

I shook my head at the dumb thought— how would I recognize someone I had met only once, in a dream, and from the side of their head?

Just as I went to move on, he turned his head. It was him.

He was looking right at me, his expression unreadable. I waited a moment, in shock, thinking he'd say something or walk over to me, but he didn't seem to recognize me, and he looked away.

It *had* to be him. Nobody looked like *that* except him.

I wanted to get closer to him and ask. I wanted to say something, but what if I was wrong? I wasn't sure how to start a conversation with, "Hey do you remember me from my

dreams?" I'd look crazy and the more I thought about it, the more the panic rose in me.

Sweat from anxiety started dampening my skin and my mostly finished glass of champagne slipped out of my hand, shattering on the floor. I hadn't realized I was hanging on to it so tight.

You're such an idiot, I told myself. I felt myself flushing with embarrassment. What had I been expecting? I was losing it.

The sudden noise of more glass breaking as it was trampled on snapped me out of it and I found my way to the bathroom, shoving through the crowd and pushing people out of my way as I went. I walked over to the sink and leaned against it with both arms and took a few deep breaths, trying to calm myself down.

Don't they say that people in your dreams are someone you've seen somewhere before, possibly in passing? I must've walked by him in a grocery store sometime or seen him at a gas station. No cause for panic. No reason to freak out.

My reflection was as white as a ghost as I stared at myself in the mirror. I had lost weight recently on my already thin frame. At this rate I wouldn't need weird dreams in which to disappear, I thought wryly. I needed to start taking better care of myself, I needed to get myself together. My mental health wasn't usually *this* bad. Not lately, at least.

I suddenly felt ugly and turned on the faucet to splash water on my cheeks. Maybe the cold water would liven me up or sober me up a bit. I kept staring at myself in the mirror, caught in my own reflection as water poured out of the faucet in front of me, the buzzing in my head amplified by the rush of the water from the faucet.

I felt more and more disconnected with the image in the mirror the more I stared and shook my head, trying to clear the dissociation and then washed my hands and forgot about splashing my cheeks. This wasn't the time or place for a panic attack.

Girls came and went as I stood there washing my hands, dressed in Michael Kors and Betsy Johnson, gossiping amongst themselves and reapplying lipstick while I just stood there. Nothing felt real.

My fingernail polish was starting to chip off, and I wondered how much time I lost standing there like a crazy person compulsively washing my hands. They were ice cold and numb as I grabbed towels to dry them off.

My eyes threatened to well up with angry tears. *Why can't you just be normal?* I asked myself. *Why are you such a freakshow?*

We drank alcohol regularly, Madison and I, and I couldn't figure out what was wrong with me tonight, compared to most other nights. I was always a mess, I thought, but this was spiraling out of my control.

Now more familiar with the weird, surreal feeling for a couple minutes after or during a dream or vision, I knew what this was. I wanted the feeling to go away. It was sliding over me tonight, while I was out with my friends, and I had just wanted to have fun. I had felt it when I was in that other place, upon waking, and now it was happening here, unexpected and unwelcome.

I was in a public place, with people I knew. I wasn't asleep or in an abandoned house. I was at a casino with my friends.

I wasn't so sure about blaming the vodka and champagne; we drank all the time, although I wanted to blame the drinks. Was this going to happen every time I had a weird dream? Why had I started dreaming again?

I stepped out of the restroom and started heading back to my table when someone stepped in front of me.

“Dance with me,” a familiar voice said.

## CHAPTER 7

I looked up at Ilya in shock.  
“Do I know you?” I asked, feeling my face coloring, and he just smiled.

He took my hand. It felt familiar as he pulled me closer to him and brought me out onto the dance floor.

He put his arms around my waist, and we started dancing. I wasn't sure what to do with my arms and I decided to put them on his shoulders as he moved us around. I touched his hair and ran a couple fingers through it, drawn to him, liquid courage suddenly running through my veins.

Ilya moved closer to me, our faces inches apart, and I kissed him, all rational thought fleeing my mind as he kissed me back and pulled me against him.

His kiss felt and tasted the same as the kiss in the woods. It had to be him... it had to. He held me the same way, possessively, as if we were both supposed to be right here, right now, in each other's arms.

Keeping my voice low, I asked, “Why did you let him take me?”

Ilya whispered something unintelligible, his breath tickling me, and I realized I was about to turn into one of those club whores, hanging all over whatever guy pays them attention, rubbing all over them, reveling in the attention.

But that just wasn't me. It had been so long since anyone had held me, and I'd felt wanted that I couldn't help myself.

He loosened his grip on me, and I rested my head on his shoulder.

My eyes closed as I tried to enjoy the surreal moment. Dancing with Ilya felt *right*.

Is this what it was like to lose your mind? If it was, I didn't want it back. But really, I didn't want to lose my mind any further than I had already, and it was running away from me with every second that passed.

Ilya seemed to sense my vulnerability and moved away a little more. The energy between us changed and I felt naked and vulnerable as he held me in a loose hug.

Was I actually drunk? I had only had two drinks, I thought.

I had kissed a total stranger and basically told him I missed him, and I was supposed to be mad at him if he was who I thought he was. My face was colored again, and I started to panic and wanted to leave. Was it even him? I was being ridiculous.

“Oh, you met Kiara!” James suddenly appeared, interrupting my thoughts and anxiety. He was also blocking my intended escape route and had accidentally saved the day with his intrusion.

Ilya looked up at the same time I did, and we stopped dancing. Maybe I drank too much. Or maybe not enough. Maybe I needed to have myself committed.

“Kiara?” James looked at me and Ilya. “This is my friend, Levon.”

Levon? My mouth dropped open. Who the heck is Levon? I looked at Ilya-Levon as he turned to me and said, “Hi Kiara.” I felt my blood rush down to my feet and then back up to my head.

“Nice to meet you, Levon.” I squeaked out, wincing at the sound of my voice. I shook his hand and tried to act like nothing was wrong and nothing was weird, and I hadn't just been all over him, and I didn't just have my pride crushed and I wasn't embarrassed, and none of this was happening.

My face was turning redder than a boiled Boston lobster.

“Where’s Madison?” I turned to James. I really hoped my face wasn’t red. I’m pretty sure it was, and I needed to get out of there immediately.

“She’s over at our table. She was wondering where you were,” he said and stuck his hands in his pants pockets. “I’m the search party.”

He smiled at Levon and then glanced towards the table. I followed his gaze. Nobody at the table was looking at us, engrossed in whatever conversations they were having.

Giving James a tight smile, and purposely not looking at Levon, I walked back towards the bathroom.

Again, I pushed through crowds of people in my effort to reach safety. One of the bracelets I was wearing got caught on someone’s tulle, slowing me down as I brushed past them, and I yanked my arm.

The music in the club seemed to be getting louder and had a deeper bassline. I heard the words “better than suicide” screeching out of the sound system and shoved my way into the restroom.

The door swung shut behind me, muffling everything but the boom of the baseline, and I suddenly felt better.

I kissed him. I cozied right up to him, just like he was Ilya. *I am an absolute moron*, I thought, berating myself. Ilya wasn’t real. Rubbing my hands down my face, the horror washed over me in waves of shame.

Not only had I been all over a stranger, but I had also been all over someone whom I thought deserted me. Worst candidate for a booty call ever.

I paced back and forth and then stopped. Maybe Madison would be okay with leaving soon. Or now. But probably not. She was out there having the time of her life. I didn’t want to mess that up for her.

I was drinking too much. That had to be it.

Nothing felt real anymore at all. I wondered how long I could go on like this. I wanted to go home right this very minute. It was crazy to think Ilya was anything other than a character in my dreams. I rubbed my forehead as my confusion pressed in.

Maybe I should tell Madison what was going on. But how could I explain it? I felt like I was having a nervous breakdown.

When I was little, I didn't remember my dreams other than occasionally having nightmares, Nightmares about the normal things that kids feared: witches and monsters, or angry trees.

I hadn't dreamed since I was a kid. Not that I remembered anyways. Lots of people didn't remember their dreams. I closed my eyes in bed at night and then woke up in the morning and that was that. Simple.

It was simple then, but not now.

With a sigh, I walked over to the sinks and mirror and looked at a girl dressed like a nun using the counter. Make-up bag contents were strewn about as she applied a deep red lipstick.

One of the bathroom stall doors was open, and two girls were in there. One was using the toilet as a chair. They saw me looking and one slammed the stall door shut with a glare. Turning away, I sat in a velvet armchair in the corner.

The emerald-green tone of the fabric glowed under the recessed lighting, and I pulled my knees up to my chin with the heels of my boots hanging off the edge. I looked up and saw the nun staring at me from the counter, her eyes glowing red with cosmetic lenses.

"You have wolf fur stuck on your boot," the nun remarked, staring at me while putting more lipstick on. She deftly snapped the cover back on with a satisfying click.

I looked down and saw a black tuft of fur and plucked it off, watching it drift down to the floor.

Wolf fur was oddly specific, I thought. It could've been anything. When I looked up, she was still looking at me,



holding her tube of lipstick. I glanced away from her stare.

Wolf fur. What a freak. And wearing a habit, no less.

What was in my drink?

Nobody touched my drinks but me, right? I was the only person in the whole club losing their mind.

“Do you know what time it is?” I asked the nun, turning back to her, wondering if there was a costume party in some corner of the club.

“Are you a nun?” I couldn’t help myself.

“There’s no time.” She snapped the cover on her lipstick again, flicked a red glance at me, picked up the corner of her habit and walked out. I put my face down in my hands, probably smearing my eyeliner. My head was spinning.

Wishing I could be anywhere else, I sat there, trying to clear my mind. I was being overdramatic. It had to be due to everything else going on in my life. I just needed to get it together and everything would be fine. There was no need to go back into therapy, everything would be fine.

My life proved that I was strong. I could survive even when I didn’t want to. My therapist had said I invented whole worlds in my head to try to deal with my trauma, that I had disassociated and made stuff up as a protective measure to try and process the horror of my parents’ death. I didn’t remember doing that, but I trusted her.

Maybe I was making stuff up again. I sighed.

The nun had said I had wolf fur on my shoe. I steered my thoughts back to the present. Why would I, and how would she know what it was? Wolf fur. Not a common thing in a casino, just like nuns.

A vision of a wolf trotting through the snow alongside tall pine trees, under a full moon intruded my thoughts. I shook my head, willing the thought away.

I need to get out of here. I was rocking in the chair and stopped myself. *Breathe in through the nose and out through*

*the mouth. Breathe in through the nose and out through the mouth.* I felt my heart rate go inch down the tiniest fraction.

Okay. Think, Kiara.

I remembered the server with the tray, and I had chosen a cranberry vodka. Then, after I finished that drink, I grabbed a flute of champagne from another tray offered to me.

Clearly, I wasn't drugged.

If someone had drugged me, then they had drugged everyone else as well, and everyone else was crazy too— but I was the only one acting like a nut job. My anxiety was getting the better of me. This was all about me, nothing else.

“What are you doing in here for so long?” Madison came bursting into the bathroom with a look of concern on her face.

“Are you okay?” she asked, and I nodded. She then turned to the mirror to mess with her hair, combing the part with her fingers and fluffing it. “I couldn't find you.” She looked at me.

I stood up slowly. “I think the couple of drinks I had were super strong or something.” I paused and let out a sigh. “I don't know. How do you feel?”

My heart was pounding in my chest and one of my eyelids was vibrating. Anxiety was annoying.

“About the drinks?” Madison tugged her shirt down and rearranged her boobs in her bra, so they were sitting up a little higher, “I thought they were amazing. That champagne was heaven.”

She paused at the door. “Are you coming?”

She didn't seem to notice my distress. Maybe I was better at hiding it than I thought.

“Did you see a nun?”

“What?”

“A nun. There was a girl dressed as a nun in here.” I heard giggling from the occupied stall. “Is there a costume party?”

Madison shrugged. "I don't know. Probably. Lots of crazy stuff happens here, I've heard." She widened her eyes in the direction of the giggling and looked at me and I raised my arms to gesture that I didn't know what was going on in there.

"Let's go."

I rolled my eyes and sighed. I guess I couldn't spend the night in the bathroom. I followed her out. It bothered me that she didn't seem more concerned.

She didn't know about my dreams or visions, or whatever they were, and how they seemed to be real, as if I lived in two different places at once. I couldn't tell her, even though I wanted to. I needed to fix this on my own.

Nor had I told her how Levon looked exactly like a person I had dreamed about. I wasn't even sure she had ever met or seen him, even though James seemed to know him from somewhere, calling him a friend.

She wouldn't know that I had intended to sleep with him to break my dry spell.

She was my best friend, but I hadn't said anything to her. Weren't best friends supposed to be sort of like mind readers, as in sense when something was wrong? I was probably asking for too much. Or I was way too good at hiding stuff.

Madison couldn't be concerned about things she didn't know were going on, and it really wasn't fair to expect her to be. If I told her now, she'd probably be mad I hadn't said anything to her. I didn't know what to think or do, but I knew I'd lose either way.

"Hey, does James know that guy I was dancing with?" I tried to sound casual, but my voice cracked at the end, and I cleared my throat.

"That German lump?" Madison weaved her way through the crowd while I struggled to keep up, "I don't think he knows him. I don't know." She waved her hand dismissively.

I wasn't going to let this go. "No, the one named Levon. We were dancing and James came up and said you were looking for me."

Hopefully, she would just think I wanted to know what she'd wanted me for and not realize I was fishing for information about Levon. I squeezed my eyes shut, embarrassed, remembering what my intentions had been.

We approached our table and I searched for an empty chair. Mabel must've gotten really drunk, or maybe she had just passed out. Only the lower half of her body was visible. She looked like she was laying down behind Al.

"The guy with the hair," I prompted, as I sat down, knowing that would get her attention. She had a thing for nice hair.

"Oh, that guy," she answered me as she sat down. "They must've worked together before. Ask James about him."

She looked at me, "Why? Do you like him?"

Of course, she wanted to set me up with someone. That was what her tone indicated. This wasn't about dating; this was about something else entirely. But she didn't know that.

I didn't want her to know I had any interest and wasn't sure what to say. It wasn't like having a dream about someone meant anything, anyway.

He wasn't even real. But how would she even know I dreamed about him? I sure wasn't going to tell her. It would be weird to date him just because he looked like an imaginary person. I hoped she'd drop the subject, and I now regretted asking.

It didn't seem possible to get the information I wanted without revealing more, and I had already given the wrong impression.

My friends knew I had some bad stuff in my past and that I had trouble dealing with it, but I didn't want to add to whatever thoughts they may already have about me. Only Madison knew what had happened with my ex, how bad it really was.

"What guy?" James looked at Madison and then me and I felt my face flush at the attention.

I started to say nobody, but Madison interrupted me. “Some guy she was dancing with, that you know.”

She grabbed a drink that looked like it had been waiting for her while she was searching for me in the bathroom and took a sip. “Levi or something.” It had a gold foil umbrella sitting in it and she tossed it onto the table, her hand damp from the condensation on the glass.

She looked at me, “Not all guys are like your ex.” She referred to him softly, seeming to pick up on my mood.

“I know,” I said, thankful he didn’t have contact with James and the guys anymore and that he wasn’t around.

He had worked here, at this casino primarily. He would’ve been here, somewhere behind the scenes, if he wasn’t dead and hadn’t killed himself like the coward he was, taking the easy way out.

“Levon...” James started and then our table erupted in cheers along with several surrounding tables, interrupting him. Everyone was staring at a monitor hanging from the ceiling nearby displaying a bandy match.

It looked like hockey to me, a much more violent form of hockey than normal. I once heard James tell Madison it was bandy, clearing up my questions about the roughness between players. Sports weren’t my thing, and I didn’t pay any attention to them, but it was the focal point of the moment.

Al gestured for a server to bring another round of drinks and one of the other gold-chained guys slapped a thick wad of bills on the table and yelled the same request, knocking over a glass and scattering ice cubes to tumble across the table like dice.

“Watch the money, idiot!” Al laughed and he pushed the pile towards the center of the table.

Saved by the sudden celebration, I thought, as the matter of who I had been dancing with earlier was now forgotten.

The server brought more drinks to the table, and he placed a gold foil umbrella drink in front of me. I wasn’t sure I should have more to drink, but I took a sip anyway and looked around

the room. People had dropped the subject of my ex, so I could breathe a little easier.

Glancing around, I tried to spot the Ilya look-alike, but I didn't see him anywhere. I would have doubted he was real, but I had witnesses. He was here in flesh and blood.

Maybe I had seen him somewhere before, my subconscious had retained his image, and my dreams thrust him into the spotlight as a main character. That would be the rational explanation for Levon being the splitting image of Ilya.

Maybe he had pulled a disappearing act just like I did. Then I remembered that no one knew when I was gone.

## CHAPTER 8

The night ended with Al arranging a limo to bring us all home. He was staying at one of the casino's hotels with Mabel and we were all too drunk to drive. He reassured Madison that he'd have her car brought to her in the morning after she fussed a bit about it.

She was normally very responsible, but I was pretty sure she would have tried to drive us home this time. I was thankful for Al's foresight and to just be going home.

The car dropped me off outside of my apartment and I made my way up the stairs to the third floor. Still feeling a little tipsy, I had to hold the railing the whole way up.

A guaranteed headache was settling in, even though the last one had never completely left. The hallway lights were too bright and their electric buzz too grating as I clumsily made my way up.

Once inside my apartment's door, I texted Madison to let her know I was inside and safe, as per usual. I went straight to the bathroom after to wash my face, dropping my purse on the floor along the way. I couldn't wait to settle on the couch with a glass of water.

I hadn't eaten anything all day, but I didn't have the energy to do anything much about it. After brushing my teeth and wiping the makeup off my face I went and lay back on the couch with my cellphone.

I had some work to do to get a paycheck this week, but it didn't feel like a priority at the moment. Fortunately, I had the

luxury of doing the work whenever I felt like it and hoped that it would stay that way. All I did was read insurance policies, answer emails, make adjustments, and perform a few other tasks. It was boring but decent paying work.

Deciding it could wait until the morning, I scrolled through social media instead. I fell asleep with my phone in my hand and a cat video on repeat as soon as I closed my eyes.

I woke up back in Ramone's house, in the room he claimed was mine, lying on top of the bed. And in the same red dress I had put on before when I woke up here.

I blinked a few times, thinking my surroundings would change, and I'd be home if I could just wake myself up where I was supposed to be. I wasn't in the mood for this again. I needed to get some real sleep.

This time there was a fire burning in the room's fireplace, but everything else looked the same. The colors, the furniture, the ceiling. All the same as before.

Sitting up on the bed, I gathered the skirt of the dress around me, hiking it up so I could move. A wave of exhaustion immediately poured over me, and I flopped back down, hoping to go back to sleep.

At least I didn't have a hangover, just the tiredness that came with one. I felt like I could sleep for a hundred years.

As hard as I tried, I couldn't fall back to sleep. There was no position I could lay in that would bring the sleep I needed and desperately wanted. I flung the covers off, kicking my legs in frustration.

If I was going to keep showing up here, I needed to learn more about my surroundings, I thought. Reluctantly moving off the bed, I opened each drawer on one of the dressers. I didn't find anything but underclothes and some shawls or scarves, the same as last time.

Then I opened the doors of the tall wardrobe again and shoved the hanging rows of jewel-toned gowns to the side and leaned down to feel around the bottom, but it was empty, my hands banging against the sides and scraping the base. I stood



back up and closed the doors and looked around. There was still nothing here that told me anything useful.

The bookcase caught my eye as it did last time. It was set against the wall on the other side of the room, and I walked over to the glass doors. I had meant to check it out last time but didn't get the chance. I pulled out a book and flipped it open.

It was old, leather-bound, and smelled amazing. I took a deep breath. I loved the smell of an old book; it was comforting like nothing else was. Handwriting with scrawling black ink flowed across the pages. I couldn't read the script and shoved it back on the shelf. I could come back to it later.

A book with metal clasps seemed to be a diary or journal of sorts, and I pulled it off the shelf. It had hand-drawn pictures of plants and their parts, and details that looked like recipes. I turned a few of the pages, fascinated, and made a mental note to come back to it as well.

When I went to place it back, a small silver key fell out and tumbled across the floor. I crossed the room and picked it up, examining it. Ornate etching covered the length of the key, all swirls and lines. I unclasped the silver chain I always wore around my neck and threaded the key through before tucking it below my neckline.

The key might come in handy at some point, and it was pretty. I debated whether this counted as stealing and wondered if the key could even leave my dreams.

This wasn't theft, this was a dream. Plus, this was supposedly my room, so its contents were fair game.

A bunch of candles in varying sizes lined the top of the bookcase, the wax on their wicks still untouched, some on silver bases or sticks, and others freestanding. I was relieved to see no matches or lighters hanging around the room and tried not to think about the giant fire in the fireplace—

—Even though its danger was screaming at me in the back of my head. It taunted me as its flames escaped the confines of

the fireplaces' interior and then tucked back in, carrying wisps of memory I wanted to forget.

Spotting French doors, I went to open them and then thought better of it. Did Ramone know I was here? It would have been convenient if he weren't home. The house was silent. I could explore in peace without his presence.

*Why was I wearing the same dress?* I wondered. I had been sitting on a couch downstairs and then I was home in my apartment. Did he watch me disappear? Did I have a body-double or something and she went upstairs to go to bed?

It was just me on the bed. I couldn't be two places at once — unless my double was on my couch at home. It hurt my head thinking about how it could all work. This only made sense if I was dreaming. Maybe I wasn't really here at all.

Maybe I was like a corpse that reanimated with its soul jumping around, body to body. That was too weird though. I laughed out loud.

The doors beckoned me to try them, and I didn't know how much time I had left so I just went for it. I could deal with the consequences later.

The doors opened quietly, and I stepped out into the night. The air still felt wonderful, and I looked up at the sky, marveling at the stars and how the moon didn't dim their light but worked in harmony with them.

It was beautiful, and I wished I had my phone so I could take a picture. I wondered if the northern lights ever made an appearance in this place. How beautiful that would be. I stared at the sky, hoping they'd make an entrance.

I actually felt relatively normal, I realized. I didn't feel as much of a mess as I did when I was home. There was freedom here, the heavy weight I carried— gone

Here, I was free.

Too bad this place wasn't real.

I heard a click and knew it was the door to my bedroom opening. There was nowhere to go to escape.

Now would be a really good time to find myself back on my couch at home. I needed somewhere to go and scanned the room, trying not to panic.

The bedroom door wasn't visible from my position, and I peered down over the balcony. I wasn't that high up. I could see a trellis with ivy growing on it that I could use as a ladder and climbed over, reaching towards it with my foot. Once I was sure my foot was secure, I grabbed on and started climbing down.

My dress kept bunching up around my waist, making me let go and use one of my hands to shove the fabric back down. I thought about how ridiculous this was as I unsteadily climbed lower.

If I wasn't really here, what was I so afraid of? If I let go and smashed my head open on the patio, would I wake up at home? That didn't seem like a great method of return.

My feet now on the ground, I glanced around, unsure of what to do next. I had made it out of the house, but now what do I do? The house was behind me, and I looked across the landscape, undecided on which way to go.

Moonlight bathed the low, rolling hills, letting me see the path that I had traversed not too long ago.

There had to be another friendlier house somewhere around here. None were visible at the moment, but that didn't mean they weren't close by.

Behind the house, the woods were closer, but I was unfamiliar with what it contained after dark. It was smarter to go the way I knew.

The light from the windows lit the snow that had settled on the paving stones I was crossing, and I spotted what looked like dog tracks. The massive prints led towards the back of the house, sealing my decision to go quickly in the opposite direction.

When I reached the edge of the patio, I turned my head to look back at the house. Ramone was standing on the balcony I

had just left, his hands gripping the railing, a giant dark figure under the night sky.

He was too far away for me to see his face clearly, but I could feel his gaze from where I stood, and it scared me.

He was pissed.

I turned and ran.

My feet pounded through the snow, away from the house, and I lost sight of the path. Monstrously tall pine trees were in the distance, and I headed for the cover they would provide me.

A howl sounded somewhere in the background, prickling the hairs on the back of my neck. Wolves. My heart was hammering in my chest, and I pushed myself to move faster, but I couldn't get the speed I wanted, not while running through the snow.

Each step I took felt harder than the last. Every time I placed one foot in front of the other, the snow was deeper. I kept sliding and falling, not able to get much of a grip on the ground.

The trees I headed towards didn't appear to be getting any closer, but before I knew it, I was almost on top of them. I leaned down, hands on my knees, trying to catch my breath while looking around.

The wolves hadn't yet caught up to me, if they were even chasing me. Had Ramone sent them after me? I had heard the howling and automatically assumed he did. He was angry; I knew that for sure. But why he was so angry, I still didn't know.

Shoving through the thick pine boughs and showering snow all over my dress and arms, I squeezed below the branches.

Safely ensconced, I carefully moved branches around and tried to peek through, but still didn't see or hear anyone approaching.

The limbs were plentiful enough that I could climb up, I noticed. I decided I would try to climb as high as I could and stay out of sight, wait for morning, and try to get back to the road where I had met Ilya.

I put one foot on a branch, testing it to see if it would hold any weight. Confident it could, I grabbed a branch over my head and had started to pull myself up when I heard rustling below.

One of the wolves had pushed through the lower branches, and I quickly brought my other foot up just when I felt a tug threatening to pull me down.

It wasn't quick enough. The wolf had the hem of my dress in its mouth and was pulling, trying to yank me down to the ground, when two more wolves appeared under the tree. They stood there eyeing me, probably ready for dinner.

I was too scared to scream or cry as one of the wolves growled and tried to climb up after me, saliva dripping from its mouth in long wet strings. I couldn't get my dress free and continued trying to climb fruitlessly while the animal had a firm grip on the material. Snow kept shaking loose from the branches and it showered down around me, getting in my eyes and blinding me in a cloud of white.

A second wolf then got a grip on the other side of my dress. After scrambling with his front paws, it reached the branch my feet were on.

One of the wolves pulled me down. Branches scratched at my back and chest as I tumbled, ripping my gown as they pulled on my body.

The wolves dragged me out from under the tree and surrounded me, taking turns growling, snarling, and dripping saliva. One snapped at my face, and another jumped, growling and blocking the bite, before it turned back to finish the job.

The Alpha, I thought, they are a pack, and I am their prize.

I closed my eyes and felt them tearing at my dress. One had his snout at my chest, wet and searching, and I imagined

my neck was next. I couldn't fight them off. I had no weapons, no friends around, and no one who cared knew where I was.

I was about to find out whether dying in one's dreams translated to dying in real life.

My last thought was going to be about how it smelled and looked like a Christmas tree here, festive and bright, and I thought of how sad and stupid that was for a last thought.

The wolves stopped suddenly and became silent.

When I opened my eyes, Ramone was standing over me wearing his hooded robe, and I turned my head. The wolves were trotting away silently, paws not making so much as a crunch in the snow.

The absence of sound was so complete that it was its own deafening noise.

He knelt towards me, black hair falling forward from his hood and brushing my shoulder like strands of silk. He lifted me carefully into his arms.

So much for escaping. I shivered despite the lack of cold.

Exhaustion washed over me as the adrenaline coursing through my veins slowly slipped away. My neck ached, so I leaned into him to alleviate the pain and just let him carry me. My fight was gone. There was no escape and nowhere I could go.

I looked down at my chest and saw where one of the wolves had broken my skin. It looked shallow, but it was there, a gash shedding ribbons of blood to stream down my pale chest.

My head bounced gently against his chest as he carried me into the house. He lay me down on one of the couches in his library, turning me so my neck was resting on a pillow at the armrest.

"You're hurt," Ramone said brushing his finger thoughtfully along the scratch on my chest below my collarbone. He slowly pulled his hand away and examined the smear of blood on his long finger.

“It’s not bad.” I said, shivering from his soft touch.

“If you wanted to go for a walk, you could’ve just said so.”

He wasn’t laughing, and I felt like a scolded child. Why wouldn’t I try to get away? I don’t need his permission for anything.

I was not under any circumstances going to ask him if I could take a walk.

“Those are your wolves.” He had trained them exceptionally well to track people down.

The same man that had opened the door for me presumably a few hours ago appeared back in the room and walked over, handing Ramone a couple cloths.

He took one of them and gently dabbed at the scratch, the cloth coming away pink stained. It stung, and I winced, sucking in air between my teeth.

“They are my guardians. They know what’s mine.” He continued dabbing at the edges of the scratch.

“What do you need guards for?” He seemed like the type to be able to handle himself just fine, even if it was solely his sheer size that kept most people in check.

There were no signs of anything needing guarding against except the wolves. And him. I thought of the woods. Maybe something lived in there. I didn’t want to find out.

“For people like you.” He dabbed at my chest again, a little more roughly this time, leaving tiny pinpricks of blood bubbling back up. I tried to sit up, and he pushed me back down with his hand and looked at me, fixing his bright green eyes on me.

“You’re not leaving.” I wasn’t sure if he was referring to my pathetic attempt at escape or the fact I was here yet again.

“You seem to forget that I just randomly disappear.”

“Don’t leave this house.”

He grabbed the second cloth, which was damp, and pressed it against my chest as I wiggled myself upright. He

slid an arm underneath me and helped me move into a sitting position, my legs stretched across the length of the couch and then he sat down, placing my legs across his lap.

“They’ll bring you right back to me.”

“You haven’t answered a single question I’ve asked you,” I accused him, ignoring the physical closeness. “You seem to know me, but I don’t know you.”

“What do you remember of your boyfriend?” Ramone asked about my ex. The question from him shocked me, and I was instantly nauseous.

“When you were in the hospital. Do you remember?” He asked.

How the hell did he know about him?

My memory was hazy, shoved down, and locked in a box that I hadn’t and didn’t want to open, but he was opening it for me. I could barely talk to my therapist about it back when I was in counseling.

I remembered fragments. Screaming. Begging. An image of my parents’ house burning and the feeling of heat on my face seared permanently in the back of my mind. No one around to call 911, no cellphone anywhere around me.

No neighbors, just red taillights disappearing through the web of trees. Some noise. Blacking out and waking up in a hospital bed.

I had a heart attack and died, and doctors brought me back. Then I was in a medically induced coma for months. Madison knew a lot of it, Mabel a small bit, but it wasn’t something I talked about with anyone.

It didn’t make any sense that Ramone would know about him.

He set my house on fire, the fire that killed my parents, because of me. I killed my parents. It wasn’t a memory I cared to dig out. I wiped a tear off my cheek.

“Of course, I remember.” I paused, unsure of how to proceed. “How do you know about that?” I didn’t expect an



answer. It wasn't like he could give me one.

"I was there." He hesitated, seeming unsure of how much he should say. "That night."

He swirled his drink around in the tumbler, ice cubes tapping the sides of the glass.

He was not. There was no way he could have been. "If you were there, why didn't you help me? Or help my parents?"

It was years ago, and even with the span of time, I thought I would remember him being there. He didn't exactly blend into the woodwork.

"It was too late to help them. Against my better judgement, I did help you."

Ramone got up, moved towards the crystal decanter, and poured himself another tumbler of liquid. He leaned against the fireplace, inches from the flames, and my breath hitched.

Our eyes met, and he stepped away and back towards me. He held out the glass. "For the pain." But I didn't take it.

He was lying to me, and I wasn't sure why.

Ramone wasn't there when my life was torn apart. No one was. If someone had been there, things would have gone differently. My parents would be alive, and I wouldn't be all alone or so messed up.

"Why are you lying to me?" Against his better judgment—what the hell did that even mean?

"You laid there, on the lawn, broken and terrified." He ran a hand through his hair and stepped closer.

"Why were you there? That's impossible. You're not even real," I scoffed.

Ramone sat on the edge of the table, facing me, and looked at my scratch. It had stopped bleeding, and the remaining blood flow had dried up into a soft scab faster than I expected.

We sat in silence for a bit. The only sound was the crackling of the fire and the ice cubes in his glass.

He seemed unaffected by my telling him he wasn't real, but what reaction should I expect from a subconscious projection, anyways?

"Why did you take me away from Ilya?" Not that Ilya was all that upset about giving me up. He hadn't even looked back. I frowned at the memory.

Ramone raised an eyebrow as he leaned forward and sneered at me. "Do you miss him?"

"I don't even know him." I thought about the tree and rubbed the back of my head. It felt like I was forgetting something important, and it was just out of reach.

"Or maybe I do." Ramone flicked a glance at me, and I thought I saw a hint of disgust before he looked away.

"I don't belong here," I said, despite the gnawing feeling that was growing inside that maybe I did belong in this place. It wasn't a terrifying spot, other than the men. I felt comfortable in the environment.

The problem was I didn't know *where* I was, or who these characters were supposed to represent, or why they wouldn't leave me alone.

"Then you wouldn't be here. Tell me why you came?"

"I tried to leave." I swung my legs over the side of the couch and Ramone stood up.

"Come," he said.

"I need to go to sleep." I thought of the bed upstairs. Maybe I'd be home soon.

He was right behind me, herding me like I was a sheep, as I walked to the stairs. He followed me up and into the room he claimed was mine and walked to the other side and closed the balcony doors before locking them and giving me a pointed look.

Ramone looked at the candles on top of the bookcase for a moment, and I followed his gaze. Dots of light topped the white pillars, and grew, stretching up to create flames. When

he looked back at me, the flames withered, and tiny streams of smoke ribboned drifted away. “Light them.”

Light them? I looked again for matches or a lighter, and then glanced at his hand but didn’t see anything. Real people couldn’t light candles just by thinking about it. How had he done that?

There had been nothing to use earlier, when I searched the room. There were more than enough flames around us. He couldn’t mean for me to light them with my mind.

“Light them.” Ramone strode across the room and came over to where I sat perched on the edge of the bed. “Look at them and light them.”

A glance at his hands told me they were empty.

“Think about them being lit and light them.” He turned to me, indicating I was to do what he said.

Ok, fine. I might as well try. You could do anything you want in your dreams, right? I got up and walked over to the bookcase and studied the white candles in their various positions, the wicks still untouched— despite being lit a minute ago.

If this was just a dream, then I had to be able to start a fire without a match. My body felt real, my skin felt warm, and I felt Ramone’s energy in the room. Everything felt way too real. Apprehension gnawed at my chest “I stay away from fire,” I told him.

If anyone understood, Ramone would. He knew I lost my family in a fire. He just stood there silently staring at me while I fought the battle in my head. I knew my fear was unreasonable, and it *had* dissipated over time, but it was still there.

“Why do you want me to light these candles?” I turned to face him. “You just lit them on your own. You don’t need my help.”

“I want to see how much you remember,” he said softly.

I did not remember ever lighting any candles with my mind. “I don’t light candles. I don’t *do* fire.”

The bed called to me, and I turned towards it and paused when I smelled the heady scent of gardenias. I didn’t see any flowers anywhere or remember smelling them when we walked into the room.

Gardenias were my favorite flower, so pure, delicate and sweet.

Ramone crossed the room and grabbed my wrist, rubbing it with his thumb.

A dark, orange-tinted fog edged into my vision, and I saw myself with him in this same room.

*He was dressed more casually than right now, and he was standing by my side with one hand on my arm, explaining something to me but I couldn’t grasp it. The words sounded garbled and distant.*

*I was staring at the candles with a singular picture in my head of a tiny flame, and I watched it slowly grow in my mind. He touched my forehead with a single finger, stroking my skin lightly as I focused on the bud of light.*

I blinked as the memory faded away. He had been touching me like he knew me, like we were friends or something more. Definitely something more, a lot more.

The vision evaporated, but the floral scent lingered. It was me, with him. I had no conscious recollection of him teaching me to light candles or of that intimate moment.

The Ramone I had seen didn’t match the Ramone standing in the room near the bed. I didn’t feel like a prisoner in the vision. I had *wanted* to light the candles, and I had wanted him near me. Even now, I felt a magnetic pull towards him. I pushed the feeling away.

“I want to go home.” I pulled myself up towards the wooden headboard, grabbed a throw blanket from the bed, and lay back and shut my eyes. No wonder I didn’t dream, if this is what dreams were like— creepy and filled with too many questions.

I had been doing just fine without them. I was doing just fine not having to think about stuff and not having to deal with anything. I didn't need more things piling up on me.

And I didn't want to think about how I really wasn't ok. But those thoughts could wait, too. All of it could wait.

Before I could get my life in order, all of *this* had to stop.

Suddenly, he tore the blanket off of me. "Get up." Ramone grabbed my arm and pulled me up, and I wrenched my arm back in anger.

He had some nerve manhandling me, knowing what I'd been through. Except maybe he didn't— he only said he had found me.

"Don't touch me!"

He narrowed his eyes at me, not moving from where he stood. "Do you remember what I taught you?"

"I saw, yes. I saw the picture you stuck in my head. Thanks." I rubbed my arm and lay back down, daring him to yank me up again.

"I'm going home."

"You'll be back. You can't stay away." Ramone smiled, a satisfied look on his face. "You can't keep running. And I'll touch you as often as I want, darling."

## CHAPTER 9

*I* pulled on my boots and laced them up and took a sip of my coffee. Everything had changed after I drank from that bottle, and it interfered with me getting my life back. I wanted to see it in the light of day.

It was silly thinking that a sip of whatever that was had this big of an effect on my life, but I couldn't think of any other reason. It was just an old crusty bottle in a forgotten house shoved unceremoniously in the back of a cabinet.

I wanted to see if it was real, and I left my house with the determination to find out.

Ramone wasn't real, and neither was Ilya. I was pretty sure the bottle was, though.

Again, this morning, I had woken up with a start, feeling like I had fallen. I had woken up trying to grab onto anything around me just to find I was back on my couch.

I was losing my mind and annoyed that my past— which I had neatly tucked away—resurfacing because of characters in my sleep. Someone had to have drugged that wine.

The idea of letting Madison know lingered. She would think I was crazy. I didn't want to make a big deal over what was probably nothing. I'd handle this myself, just like I'd handled everything else.

Leaves were crunching under the tires as I angled my car as far off the road as I could before getting stuck in any of the ruts.

The dirt and grass dipped down into a shallow trench that bordered the woods, and I stopped right before my car would be stuck in a ditch if I kept going. It was the same area as the other night with my friends, the grass still flattened by Madison's tires, and I knew I was in the right spot.

Maybe I could take it to the police. They would be able to test it for hallucinogens or PCP or whatever concoction it contained. Did they even have PCP in the 1700s? 1600s?

Maybe there were mushrooms in the bottle. Or possibly the mold from rye that I read about back in school with the witch trials. I had no idea how old the bottle could be. I couldn't even really guess. I probably watched too much NCIS.

The sound of my car door closing echoed under a rare clear blue sky as I weaved my way carefully through the tall grass and headed into the woods.

It had been nighttime when I came here with Madison and Mabel, and I had followed behind them. I had no landmarks to look for or anyone to guide me.

There was no discernible walking path, so I settled on an area that looked like the leaves were trampled on more so than the surrounding brush. I started pushing through the branches of the wood's undergrowth, making a ton of noise, and paused to look around. I didn't see anyone, thankfully. I didn't want anyone to find that bottle but me.

When a larger branch blocked my way and snapped back after I pushed through, I felt confident I was headed in the right direction, remembering the branch in my face from Madison. I needed to get back to that house.

The woods were eerily silent other than the occasional call of a crow and the crunch of leaves and twigs under my boots. Roots sticking up out of the ground reminded me of running through the woods with Ilya.

I thought of how we hid behind that tree and waited to be found. Why was Ilya hiding from Ramone? He just ended up

passing me off to him anyway. It seemed like a lot of trouble to go through when you were just going to cave in anyway.

My footsteps echoed off the small rocks littering the ground, and I saw a squirrel dart up a tree as I traversed the woods.

The stillness both chilled and comforted me. Nobody was around to disturb my peace and solitude, and no one expected anything of me. I had the woods to myself and fought off the little voice in my head saying *no one will hear you scream*.

I was being ridiculous.

The house looked different, but still familiar, when I came into the clearing where the Victorian house stood in the light of day. I noticed moss growing on the roof and some window trim hanging precariously. Leaves and acorns dotted the front porch. I thought I heard wind chimes but didn't see any.

There were low crumbling rock walls near the back of the property, typical of New England, and I looked around some more. There was an old stone chimney standing in defiance of nature, just inside the tree line behind the house, and I remembered my Google search from the other day. There was no sign of a house from the 1600s and guessed perhaps the chimney was a remnant.

Trees towered in the background, and I felt very small as I crossed the dry, browned grass to climb the front steps of the old Victorian. It looked more foreboding in the daylight, more dangerous, and like less of the fancy historical site I made it up to be in my head.

The front door was still unlocked, and I let myself through. The dust was more visible, a thicker grayish coat than I had noticed before, and the house's disrepair was more obvious.

I headed straight for the kitchen and leaned down in front of the same cabinet where I had found the bottle before. I thought I had placed it in front of the other bottles, but it was again hiding behind the others. In all likelihood, I had been too drunk to remember details like that.



My previous handling of it had disturbed much of the coat of dust covering it. The silver filigree wrapping around the bottle showed signs of tarnish that I hadn't noticed before under the light of our cellphones and flashlights.

I stood up and removed the foil we had placed over the opening, scraps from our own wine bottles, and tilted the bottle into a ray of sunlight that streamed through the dust. The kitchen's curtainless windows let in plenty of light.

The dark glass of the bottle was frustratingly opaque, and the light wouldn't penetrate the bottle's neck for me to examine the contents. I hadn't brought a flashlight, either.

Needing a second container, I dug through the other doors of the cabinet. I debated running home quickly to get something and then just come back, but that seemed like too much trouble to go through. Besides, I was trespassing, and I was alone.

I was also pretty sure I would come back.

The last thing I wanted to do was to try to explain to the police what I was doing in an abandoned house. I was supposed to bring some of the liquid to them, not have them come to me.

Maybe it wasn't a good idea to bring it to anyone.

My plan to take a sample to the authorities was becoming less attractive the more I thought about it. It would give away that I had trespassed, and I wasn't so sure I wanted anyone else to be in on what I now considered my secret. This was solely mine, something just for me.

When I turned around to leave, my gaze fell to the table, and I saw one of the red cups that we left here the other night. I had thought we cleaned up after ourselves— left no trace.

Taking the foil off, I tilted the bottle, pouring a stream of the mystery fluid into the cup.

It wasn't as thick as syrup, but it wasn't as thin as water, either. I swirled the maroon fluid around in the bottom of the cup under a stream of sunlight and watched as iridescent

flecks sparkled. What color was it before? I couldn't remember.

The metallic herbal scent filled the air as I gave the cup another swirl. The flecks looked like suspended galaxies, as if the cup was the Hubble telescope. It was so pretty, the glitter suspended in fluid.

I couldn't believe I'd drunk it. Was it even safe? I thought of the liquor with real gold flakes in it that people used to drink- this couldn't be much different from that. Maybe just fancier and more mysterious. And much more hallucinogenic.

*Maybe I should drink some again and see what happens.*

I stood there swirling the drink in the cup. If my suspicions were correct, this was what made me dream.

*You don't know if you don't try.*

I always came back or woke up or whatever happened to me. This did not seem like the ideal place for that though. There was nowhere to lie down. Did I have to be lying down for it to work? Assuming, of course, that this wine was behind everything.

I thought about what would happen if I never went back to that place, if someone else were to come to this house and take the whole bottle with them when they left. If that happened, I'd never get any answers.

It didn't seem like I could get *too* hurt there. I just needed to stay away from Ramone.

It felt like the bottle belonged to me, like it had wanted *me*. I didn't want to think of other people going there. That space belonged to me and me alone.

The dreamscape was mine, my secret escape.

Except for the whole issue of wolves that want to eat me. And excessive use of fire. And unusually attractive, vaguely menacing kidnappers.

Somehow, I was able to will myself back home last night. I remembered Ramone's scowling face when I lay on the bed and told him I was leaving and then how I found myself back

at my own house. I wasn't sure how I had done it, but it happened.

Ramone said I had control. Maybe I had created the whole space somehow? It could be a world I'd invented, like my therapist said.

My anxiety was telling me to just leave. Leave the cup, leave the house, and go home.

But some part of me wanted to go back. There was a spark of curiosity that wouldn't go away. I thought of everything that could go wrong.

What if I got trapped there? What if I died there? What if I ended up someplace entirely?

The "what ifs" didn't seem to end.

I had wasted years of my life running away from "what ifs". Running was safe and secure and nothing bad happened and no one could hurt me.

But nothing good happened either, and I was trying so hard to live again and be less afraid.

I picked the cup back up from the table and drank before I could convince myself not to, feeling the liquid pour down my throat and coat my insides. It felt like the softest blanket wrapping me up, just slightly too tight, slightly uncomfortable, yet familiar this time in a reassuring and comforting way.

As I waited, I watched the dust dance around in a beam of light through the windows. I listened for the birds or the wind and heard nothing but a crow cawing. Several minutes passed and nothing happened. I was standing in an old, abandoned house and felt stupid.

It was so dumb of me to think anything would happen. I really needed to get it together. My eyes started watering, threatening to spill over, and shame washed over me. What an idiot, I told myself.

I put the bottle back in the cabinet, shoving it all the way to the back, and rearranged the other bottles in an attempt to hide the one I drank from. Carefully, trying not to smudge any

of the dust on the other bottles and trying to handle them only by the very top of each. I didn't want anyone else to find it. It was mine, something special just for me. I didn't want it ruined even if it had stopped working.

Satisfied with my work, I closed the cabinet door and stood up, wiping my hands on my legs, leaving faint smudges on my jeans, and took a deep breath shoving my feelings back down.

Closing the front door behind me, I trotted down the front steps scattering dead rose petals with my boots and headed back for the path to the road without looking back.

I retraced my steps, pushing through branches while dodging tree roots. New England dirt was ridiculously full of rocks, and I had to watch out for those too.

It figured that when I talked myself into taking a chance, it was pointless. Maybe I'd get lucky when I went to sleep tonight and find myself back in that house or back in that field. I didn't understand how it all worked, other than at some point I'd return home to find myself on my couch.

Maybe it would never happen again. I thought that possibility over and felt a twinge of regret and sadness.

I really wanted to know why Ilya had just let Ramone take me, and why he had been so scared of him. Why did we have to hide? Nothing had really happened in Ramone's house. He just wanted me to light candles without a match for some reason.

He was creepy, but he had seemed pretty harmless in general. Other than taking me against my will or forcibly grabbing my arm. I shook my head. I was making excuses for a criminal.

What I most wanted to know was why they thought they knew me. Ilya did seem familiar, but not Ramone. But they both knew me, of that, I was sure. I didn't know them, and I was involved somehow in something to do with the two of them. And I wanted to know what that thing was. What was my psyche trying to tell me?

I found my car after coming out of the woods a bit further down than where I had entered. I must've been so deep in thought I got sidetracked or something. I let myself in and sat there. Why hadn't I disappeared? I drank the stuff just like I did before, and it didn't do a damn thing this time. It didn't make sense.

I should have felt relieved, but I didn't. I was more disappointed than anything else. I guess I would just have to see what happened tonight when I fell asleep.

Hours had gone by between when I'd drunk the wine last time, and when I'd found myself in that other place. I had been stressing for nothing. Good old anxiety. I chuckled to myself and went to put the keys in the ignition.

Wait, why didn't I just take the bottle? I glanced back at the woods. It hadn't occurred to me once while I was in there.

*Another time, I'll come back.* If it'd been there undisturbed this long, it would be safe. It wasn't like I was going to tell anyone what's there.

As I pulled out of the grass, I realized I hadn't even taken the sample I went for. Maybe that was for the best.

When I got home, I worked for a bit. It was too early to fall asleep, as tempting as it was. Madison had texted me to meet her for dinner downtown and I agreed. I was still on a socializing kick, and wanted to keep it up while I could.

Eventually I would crawl back into the hole of isolation, but I wasn't ready for that mood to descend where I just didn't talk to anyone and waited for the world to end. I wouldn't answer any texts, wouldn't answer the door.

Not that anybody ever knocked on my door. I was too much of a recluse for the neighbors to try to borrow sugar or something and I liked it that way.

When I went down, I tended to go down hard. Just work, read, and sleep. Staring out the window occasionally, hoping for a meteor strike to break the monotony. Anything to pull me out of the dark hole I descended into.

I was going to push off the inevitable as long as possible.

I changed into something free of forest debris and brushed out my hair. I thought about cutting it all off and changed my mind. I still wanted to dye it. There were a lot of things I wanted to do but just couldn't bring myself to commit to.

Baby steps, my therapist had told me. One thing at a time. Don't rush yourself, she had said. I wasn't sure if I was progressing too fast or too slow but as long as I kept going, and at my own pace, I'd be okay.

## CHAPTER 10

Madison was getting out of her car as I was pulling into the restaurant's small parking area. She saw me and waited while I parked and walked over to her.

"Hey how are you?" She fussed with her hair, straightening out the blonde pile on her head. "That guy you were dancing with? Carlos? He asked James for your number." We headed across the parking lot to the building's entrance as I grimaced.

My heart had stopped beating when she said, "guy you were dancing with", and then fell down to my kneecaps when she said Carlos. I had been hoping she meant Levon. That would mean I wasn't as much of a reject as I thought I was.

"Ew the Hamburg guy." I made a retching sound as I opened the door. "He did NOT give him my number, right? Please tell me that didn't happen."

*Dear God, please no. I'd be so mad if he did. Yuck.*

We walked into the restaurant and were greeted by overly loud country music. "I told him I'd ask you first." Madison laughed at the expression on my face. I can't believe she gave him hope, said that she'd bothered to ask me if she could. She should've known better.

"Thank you. There's no way. He was so weird." I made another face as a hostess took us to a booth and then got our drink orders.

"Appetizer?"

We both shook our heads, turning down the offer.

“Carlos could’ve been your booty call.” Madison snickered. “Put you back in the mood for dating.”

“As he whispers “Hamburg” in my ear.” I laughed and rolled my eyes. “That’s so gross. Stop it. All that comes to mind now when I think of him is greasy burgers.”

Madison laughed as we took sips of our drinks and looked around while waiting for our food.

“Where did you get that necklace?” Madison pointed to my neck.

“What neck...” I reached up to the silver chain I always wore and felt the key I had strung on it in my dream. “How did that get there?” My hands started trembling.

“What’s wrong?” She reached over the table and touched my arm. “It ‘s pretty. What’s wrong? Where did you get it?”

I didn’t know what to say. This didn’t make any sense. How did I not notice it? I should’ve seen or felt it when I got changed or took my shower. I hadn’t meant to wear it anywhere; I had intended to tuck it away in my jewelry box *if* it came back with me. Which I hadn’t expected it to do. It certainly wasn’t supposed to.

At a loss for words, I mumbled, and Madison looked at me, puzzled. “Is it something your ex gave you? I didn’t mean to make you feel bad. You can wear it if you want.”

“No, it’s not that. He didn’t give it to me. I found it and just forgot about it.” I had to think of an excuse to cover this development. There was no way I could explain it to her when I couldn’t even explain it to myself.

“I don’t think it’s supposed to go in the shower. I meant to take it off. I don’t want it to tarnish or anything.”

She looked at me, unconvinced. I bet she thought it was something he gave me, and this was a sign of my trauma. Something crazy Kiara would do: put on a necklace her murdering ex-boyfriend gave her.



“I’m okay, really, I am. I’m trying.” A waitress had brought us our drinks and set them on the table. I pulled mine closer and took a sip. This wasn’t the time for a therapy session. This was not the time or place to revisit it, or to rehash everything.

Out of sight, out of mind.

I was stunned the key came back with me. The dress didn’t come back— although I wouldn’t have minded if it did. It was a nice dress. Then I remembered the wolves shredded it, and I must’ve frowned enough that Madison interrupted my thoughts.

“Hey, we don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want.” She folded her hands in front of her on the table. I felt like my trauma was the proverbial elephant in the room. Had I been acting differently lately? I wasn’t sure.

I dug into my clutch for the little mirror I carried with me, took it out, and angled it towards my chest. The wolves’ scratch didn’t come back with me, only the necklace. There wasn’t a single hint of my near-death experience on my skin.

“Look at the design on it,” I said. “It’s cool right?”

She leaned closer to me to get a better look. “It’s really beautiful. It looks almost like words on it.”

I hadn’t noticed before, but as I looked at the reflection, it was obvious there were words on it. Not any words I recognized, and time had worn down some of the etching, but I could see she was right. There were lines and elaborate swirls on it in the form of cursive writing.

Madison took a sip of her drink, and I followed suit. I wondered if we were turning into alcoholics. *I should really do something with my life*, I thought, *other than drink*.

Maybe I’d go back to school and study history. Working in a museum sounded good to me, like something I could really get into.

She placed her drink back down, looking at me intently. “Wait. That necklace is familiar. Isn’t that the one you used to wear all the time?”

“Huh?”

“He didn’t like it or something?”

“What are you talking about?”

Madison leaned on her elbows. “I swear I remember that necklace. No, I know I do. Your parents were weird about it, and *he* used to give you a hard time. I know you still don’t remember everything but I—”

“I never wear any jewelry, I never have,” I interrupted. “I’d remember wearing a necklace.”

“Okay, fine. Whatever.” She raised her hands up, surrendering.

“We’re going back to that club next week. We should go shopping or whatever, get some new clothes.” Madison looked at my necklace and then changed the subject.

I wondered if that was a dig at the black dress I’d worn last time. “I don’t have money for that this week. I probably have something in the back of my closet that would work.”

“It’s okay to spend some of your parents’ money. You haven’t touched it,” she said in a low voice, referring to my parent’s estate. I stiffened. “It’s okay, really. They would’ve wanted you to take care of yourself.”

It was not okay. It was my fault they were dead.

I didn’t get away from him on time. It was all my fault. I didn’t expect her to understand. She’d been with James for years and they’d never had any problems. Not any serious problems, anyhow. Their problems were nothing like mine.

But I couldn’t explain that to her. I had never let anyone know what was going on behind the scenes, how bad it really was. I was responsible for my parents’ death.

“I think I still have that red dress. The one I wore to my graduation.” Madison’s face lit up at my words. “I’ll wear that.” I felt my shoulders relax.

“That’s perfect! You’re gonna be soooooo hot!” She squealed and laughed. “Carlos won’t stand a chance.” She

lifted her cup and took a long swig.

Lifting out of my seat a little, I leaned over the table and drawled, “Haaaamburrrrg.”

“Yes baby, yes!” Madison squealed.

Smiling, I choked on my laughter. “Don’t get overexcited.”

“That dress might be out of style?” Graduation was years ago.

“It was just a fitted dress, right? It’ll be fine. Just wear the boots I gave you on your birthday.” That would work, I thought. I wouldn’t have to spend any money that wasn’t mine. Blood money.

I looked down at my drink while Madison fiddled with her phone. Maybe I should say something to her about my dreams. She was my best friend.

She accepted me no matter what and stuck by me through everything. Maybe it would be good to get another perspective. I could tell her a little bit. *Just* a little bit. That wouldn’t hurt anything, right?

“Hey,” I started, “so I’ve been having these weird dreams.”

Madison looked up from her phone. “What?”

I took a sip of my drink. “Weird dreams. I keep having these dreams that feel really real. Like the people in them know me.”

Her face brightened. “Like sexy time dreams?”

“Oh my god Madison, no.” I rolled my eyes at her. “No sex, just super vivid and always the same place and the people in them know me and know stuff about me. It’s super weird. I don’t ever dream, and now this is happening.”

“Oh, like when you were a kid. Your mom used to get so upset, telling you to ‘come back to earth.’” Madison laughed.

I didn’t remember that. I only remembered a few random nightmares, like any other kid. “What are you talking about? I’ve never really had dreams. That’s why this is weird.”

Madison crinkled her face. “No, I remember how annoyed your mom got. You used to think your dreams really happened. But you were a kid, so...” She trailed off and picked at the edge of a napkin.

“I don’t remember that at all,” I said quietly. “I guess I forgot. I wonder why it’s happening again.”

“Maybe it’s part of your healing process? You *have* been doing more stuff and starting to open up a bit. You never would have gone to the casino with me if you were in a spot like you were last year.” She raised her eyebrows. “Or danced with men. That’s for sure.”

Was she right? Could it be that the dreams that I didn’t remember having as a kid, could have come back because I was changing and healing? I didn’t know, but it sounded like a good possibility.

The dreams felt so real, though. They felt like I had a whole other life. And I had brought a key back with me. It could’ve happened while I was drunk.

“They just feel so real,” I sighed, “and I’ve been feeling messed up lately. I don’t know what’s going on with me but you’re probably right. It’s probably me just doing more stuff and healing.”

Madison raised her eyebrows. “You can get laid.” I knew she was trying to lighten the mood, but I rolled my eyes at her anyway.

“Hey, you said you were trying! I just think if you get yourself back out there, work out some of your angst between the sheets,” she said wiggling her eyebrows at me, “you’ll start to open up again.”

“You’re obsessed with sex. You know that, right?”

“When you’ve got it as good as I do...”

“Ew. No. Stop that right now.”

Back at my apartment I decided to look up schools online for a history program. I needed to do it while the inspiration struck and before I tucked it away. There were too many choices as I

browsed, and it looked like I'd have to study anthropology as well. It was overwhelming. I lay down on my couch, pulling up a blanket around me and gave up.

I was feeling uncomfortable from opening up so much to Madison. Maybe she'd forget about it? I hoped she wouldn't turn it into a big deal. It made me feel vulnerable.

It bothered me that she had memories of my mom that I didn't have. I didn't remember having vivid dreams as a kid and her getting annoyed over them. Normally, I tried not to think about my parents. Their absence left such a huge hole in my life.

I had always felt like I was closer to my parents than other kids were to theirs. I treasured the memories I had and rarely took them out, the pain being too much to bear.

I had spoken to them every day, even after I moved out, and then I brought death to them through my relationship. I had betrayed them. I knew they would've wanted me to do something with my life other than drink and work a pointless, boring job, but here I was.

They had been so protective of me, overly, ridiculously, protective in most people's eyes. But I had always felt safe and loved. They were the best parents any kid could've ever asked for.

I'd been feeling like a rudderless ship, like I was just existing, taking up space or just wasting the time I was given. They would've wanted more for me, more than this.

While I was in therapy, my counselor told me to start being social again, said that it would help me, and I had reconnected with some of my friends. I didn't think that was enough. I still had no direction in my life.

Why did I live, and my parents die? That question never had an answer. I shouldn't be alive either.

I squeezed my eyes shut and re-opened them, clenching and releasing my hands several times trying to relax before reaching for my phone and lying back, wiggling into a comfortable position.

I woke up back in Ramone's house again. In the room he had said was mine, although I still didn't recall ever choosing it. I had wanted so desperately to be back here, after drinking more of the strange wine, and now that I was back, I wasn't so sure I wanted to be. I knew I had to decide, and not be so wishy washy, and really, I was trying.

I fought and fought against the waves of fear and dread that suddenly washed over me. I wished I could just decide to not have anxiety and it would just go away. It clung to me like a jilted lover that I couldn't shake off, stalking me constantly. I hadn't expected an anxiety attack here, after feeling so good the last time.

There wasn't really anything to be so afraid of, not if this wasn't real.

I had been doing pretty well controlling my fear here, I thought, and its return was unwelcome.

As I sat up on the bed, I looked down at my lap. I had expected to be back in the red dress, even though the wolves had torn it to shreds, and I was disappointed to be in my leggings and sweatshirt. I walked over to the wardrobe and looked for another dress, my heart still pounding as I told myself I could do this.

I chose a forest green dress with an empire-style waist, the square neckline trimmed with clear crystals, and a short pair of boots.

The clothes in the wardrobe looked a bit old-fashioned, but there was something modern about them too, as if they were costumes. The materials weren't in line with the implied styles.

I stuffed my leggings and sweatshirt under the pillows at the head of the bed as I crept around the room attempting to be as silent as possible before stopping myself. Why was I being so quiet? I didn't need to be. I knew from the lack of a scar on my chest from the wolves that whatever happened to me here didn't apply to real life.

Except the necklace. I would have to figure out what the key unlocked soon. I tucked it out of sight under the dress's neckline.

Sitting back down on the bed, I tried to calm myself, focusing on my breathing. Here, I had a chance to do something different, to live a little differently, to take some chances. It was what I wanted, I reminded myself.

I couldn't decide if I wanted to go exploring or confront Ramone and demand an explanation from him. Both options were scary to me. In the end, I figured I should try to keep going.

The house was silent and still as I stepped into the hallway. The flames from the lit candles in the chandeliers hanging over the foyer were the only thing stirring. The door to the library was cracked open, with light spilling out and reflecting off the glossy floor.

Everything seemed unnaturally quiet. It felt like the house was waiting for something, I wondered if it was waiting for me to decide what to do.

I found myself walking carefully down the hallway towards the staircase.

Stopping, I considered that I hadn't ever bothered to explore the rest of the house and looked up and down the cavernous hall, taking note of the corridors and wondering what they led to, marveling at the sheer size of the building and its ornate furnishings. I felt like a princess in here, staring at the chandeliers lining the ceilings of the long hallways. It was magical, and the beast was probably downstairs.

Deciding that further exploration could wait for another time, I descended the staircase that was closest to my room. The carpet silenced any noise from my footsteps. It was a different story once I reached the marble floor, and I tried to balance my weight towards the front of my feet to be as quiet as possible as I headed towards the light.

I reached the open door, looked to my right towards the front door, and sighed. Escape was right there. It was within

reach.

But the answers were to my left.

When I walked in, a fireplace that was roaring and bathing the large room in a comfortable warmth greeted me. Ramone was sitting at the large desk, a pile of books stacked in front of him. When he looked up, a flicker of surprise crossed his face, which he quickly corrected.

“You’re saving me the trouble of having to go find you?” He stood up and walked around to the front of the desk, smirking.

“How do you find me?”

“It’s really not that difficult,” He answered smugly as he examined me.

“But how?” I sat down on the same couch where he had tended to my injuries before, my heart hammering in my chest. “Maybe I don’t want to keep running.”

I really did want to run, but I also didn’t.

Ramone came and stood facing me, watching me as several seconds passed, rubbing his chin. I felt like I was under a microscope. “What do you want with me?” I asked. “Why do you give me these visions? Why am I here?”

“After all this time, why *are* you here now?” He looked like he wanted to say something else but thought better of it.

I didn’t know why I was here. I glanced back up at him, meeting his eyes.

You seem as mystified as I am,” he stated.

“I don’t think you are as surprised as you are saying you are. What about the visions you stuck in my head? You had me lighting candles just by thinking about it.”

He lowered his voice, “And now you are terrified of fire.” He gazed back at the fireplace and the flames shot up, burning furiously, before settling back down.

I felt faint. “Please don’t do that again.” What a jerk. “If you really did meet me where you said you did, you’d know



why I don't like fire."

"It can't hurt you. It can only help you."

"It killed my parents."

*I killed my parents.*

"You survived." It sounded almost like an accusation. He stood there staring at me like I was a science experiment.

I scoffed. "Barely. You call this surviving?" Maybe he didn't know what my life was like, or what my head was like.

"What world is this?"

"It's whatever we want it to be," Ramone smiled, curling one side of his mouth up.

I rolled my eyes at him, and he beckoned me with his hand. I stood up and waited.

"Come."

I followed him.

He walked over to a chest of drawers against the wall next to a large multi-paned window that looked out over the front courtyard. Heavy brocade curtains dressed the window with graceful draping and tiebacks.

A velvet runner covered the top of the chest, which had several thick candles set on brass and gold stands decorating the surface. I looked up at him and met his eyes.

"Light them," he said.

"I can't. You know I can't. I don't know how you expect me to do that. It doesn't matter if they're upstairs or downstairs, it's the same answer." I glanced around for matches or a lighter. "There's nothing to light them with."

Ramone took me by the shoulder and positioned me in front of the chest. He stepped behind me, leaving both his hands on my shoulders, his chest against my back. "Look at the candles and think about them being lit."

He leaned down, his rough voice right above my ear, softly urging me to obey. "Close your eyes and concentrate."

My eyes shut, I tried to recreate a picture of the chest and the candles on top of it in my mind. I added a lighter for good measure and imagined reaching for it.

Ramone's hands slid from my shoulders down my arms, and he held them firmly in place. I put the lighter back down. It was hard to concentrate with his body pressing into mine. I could feel his chest against my back, his leg pressing against the back of my thigh.

I refocused on the candles and directed my attention to their wicks, trying to light them through sheer force of will. Ramone was moving his hands up and down my upper arms, slowly caressing them. I couldn't decide if I wanted him to be doing that or not.

My mind went to the vision of him and me as we walked through the fancy greenhouse and the kiss. I was growing intensely conscious of the feeling of him against my back with his body heat soothing me.

It had felt right in that moment, in that beautiful space filled with glass and iron, and different from the man here with me now.

I thought of the floral scent that permeated that space, the sweet heady scents of gardenia and jasmine, and wondered when it was that I had been there, still not remembering or recognizing the space.

Sighing, I snapped back to the candles and pictured them with blue dots of flames, telling myself they were lit.

Ramone turned me around and I could have sworn I smelled the flowers again. I then felt his lips on mine, and I wondered if I was back in the greenhouse. Responding to his kiss as his tongue gently probed my lips, I opened my mouth.

I reached up for him and found his shoulder and grasped it, holding on. He caressed the side of my face and dropped his other arm around my waist, pulling me up against him, just like I had imagined. I wanted more of him and held on to him tightly, encouraging him, responding to this mysterious energy

between us. There was a connection, like what I had felt in the greenhouse.

He released me suddenly, turning me roughly and breaking the connection. “Look.” The candles were all lit.

I gasped. “How?”

My thoughts swirled as I gazed up at him. I was stunned both by the flames and stunned by my physical response to him. *Maybe I did know him*, I thought, and tried to toss the intrusion away. I didn’t want to think about that.

“You tell me how you lit them.” His eyes met mine, and I thought I saw a hunger in them. I looked him over, noting what I could see of his musculature through the layers of clothing he wore, his thick straight hair reflecting the candlelight as it flowed past his shoulders, his bright green eyes searching my face, and I ached for him, to be back in his arms, surprising myself.

“I... I pictured it?” I stumbled over my words, suddenly self-conscious, and worried that I was turning red and starting to sweat.

“What else did you picture?” He snaked an arm around my middle, just under my breasts, as he stepped behind me. “What else did you remember?”

His fingers brushed the underside of my small breasts, and my legs weakened. I didn’t understand this different reaction to him, an attraction rather than a threat.

“The other stuff you put in my head. I remembered that.” He was still caressing me. “I don’t remember it happening, I just remember you making me remember.” He moved back in front of me.

“Why are you doing this to me?” I pleaded with him.

“I’m not, it’s all you.”

“It’s not fair. I don’t know who you are to me.”

“But you will.”

“Then tell me.” I shivered as he ran a hand down to the small of my back. “If I’ll know anyway, you can tell me.” I warred with myself, wanting to know and not wanting to know. I couldn’t decide which would be worse.

“I can’t, I see that now,” he said, removing his arm.

Was he angry? “And I can’t make you remember anything, unless you let me in.”

Ramone leaned down and drew me in again, his lips brushing mine lightly with his own, as he pushed me over to the couches. “It’s always been you.”

I felt the edge of the seat against my legs, and he scooped me up as he turned to sit down, placing me on his lap. His hand traveled down my side slowly and glided over my belly, coming to a stop between my legs. I wanted him to move his hand further and I squirmed against him, feeling his desire, and parted my legs.

He moved my dress up as I lifted myself, holding onto his shoulders, and I shivered against the feel of the air against my bare legs. “Ramone...” I started.

“Don’t move,” he ordered as I went to settle back on his lap, and I held myself up gripping his shoulders more tightly as my desire for him built while his hand glided up my thigh.

His thumb reached my panties, and he pressed against them, and I responded by parting my legs farther.

“You’re so wet.” He moved the band and plunged his fingers in and out of me without resistance, never taking his gaze off my eyes, watching me respond as he slid them in and out.

The pressure building in my core was becoming unbearable as he teased me and moved his thumb to push on my clit. “I can’t do this,” I moaned softly.

My body betrayed me as I moved my hips to push myself harder against his thumb, seeking release, and I thought I couldn’t take much more before being pushed over that sweet edge.

My mind wandered back to the moment with Ilya at the tree in the woods and I briefly wondered what would have happened, had we not been interrupted. Would we have gone this far?

This is what I wanted, I remembered. *Booty call.*

Ramone suddenly pulled his hand away and pushed me down onto the couch, holding himself up over me. I opened my eyes and looked up at him, distraught at the sudden stop, and surprised at the look on his face. He looked conflicted, angry, hurt.

“Why did you stop?” I reached up to pull his head back towards me and he grabbed my wrist mid-air, holding it. I shouldn’t have wanted him, but I did.

It was so, so wrong.

Ramone searched my face— for what, I didn’t know. It had been forever since I had been intimate with a man or let anyone touch me, and I didn’t want this opportunity to pass me by.

It was safe sex, safe everything.

Totally impersonal. I could wake up and it would be like it never happened, just a sweet memory in my head. And here he was ruining it. As soon as he took it away from me, I realized I really did want it, and I wasn’t sure what to think of this new me.

I used his grip on my wrist to pull myself up until I was sitting on the couch, my legs still trapped under him. “Why did you stop?” I repeated. He was not behaving the way I wanted him to. My dream characters needed some serious work.

He still didn’t answer me. I looked over to the candles and watched as they sputtered out, and as they did, they took the floral scent that had filled the room with them.

Ramone released me, running a hand through his hair and got up, leaving me with a chill after being wrapped in his warmth. He walked over to his desk.

I smoothed out my dress and focused on my lap. A character in one of my dreams had just rejected me. I shouldn't have felt embarrassed, but I was. I was so damaged that even the projections of my subconscious didn't want me.

I sat there and watched Ramone move stuff around on his desk like everything was normal.

If I had been awake and on a date, I would have gotten up, walked out, and driven away, pretending it never happened. That wasn't a possibility here.

I had gone without dreaming for so long, and it didn't seem fair to have such amazing dreams that remained unfulfilled. I guess that's what I got for trying to move past my fears. It was embarrassing. I had let him in where I hadn't let anyone else in, in ages, and he had turned me down. Who cared if he wasn't real? It was still affecting me, and I felt humiliated and ashamed.

I stood up and moved towards the door, planning to go upstairs and lie down, intent on waking up in my own bed and putting this all behind me.

"Sit down."

I turned to look at him as he came out from behind the desk.

"I'm going upstairs."

The door to the room shut with a slam, seemingly on its own, as he walked over to me.

"I'm done with this dream." I reached the door and pulled on the handle, but it wouldn't budge.

Ramone stood there watching me get frustrated.

"Do you mind?" I pulled on it again, to no avail. "Let me out of here."

"You can leave any time you want." He closed his eyes, furrowing his brow.

"Apparently not," I snapped at him. "WHAT do you want with me?"

“You’re not dreaming.” He opened his eyes, stroked his chin, and gazed at me thoughtfully. “I’d like to know why and how you are doing this. What happened?”

“You’re crazy!” I was dreaming. This wasn’t real life. Nobody magically went to another world, or received entirely new wardrobes, or lit fires just by thinking about them.

Why did he say I wasn’t dreaming? How would he even know?

It then hit me that *I* was the crazy one. My subconscious was telling me that *I* thought this was real. I groaned and rubbed my face.

“Leave me alone!” I tried the door again and it still wouldn’t open, and I walked back to the couch to lay down and try to wake up.

This dreaming stuff had to stop. It was clearly time to go back to therapy. This was what I got for not taking proper care of myself. It was just too much.

“Kiara, you asked for me.” He was standing over me, furious, and I opened one eye and looked up at him. “You called me, and I came, just like I said I would.”

I did not. What was he talking about?

At least I had an eye for hot men, if that was true. I shut my eye again and tried to focus, picturing myself back in my own bed, at home.

I couldn’t seem to control when I showed up here- or where, or when I left. Other than the one time. I needed to stop this altogether, though, it was getting weirder and very out of hand. I needed help badly.

Nothing was happening and I couldn’t shake his statement out of my head. “I never called you. I don’t even know you.” I opened my eyes.

Except, it seemed, in a memory of a greenhouse. Could you dream inside a dream? Or dream that you were dreaming? I was getting a headache thinking about it.

Maybe the strange wine I drank was causing these hyper-realistic dreams, and it really did contain shrooms or something. I'd have to ask Madison if she'd ever heard about hallucinogenic wine.

My mind wandered to Ilya, and I wondered why I hadn't seen him anymore. Maybe he was ashamed of letting me get kidnapped. What was my subconscious trying to tell me through that story line? He had seemed trustworthy, and then he had let me down when it mattered the most.

For some time, I'd been making poor decisions and floating through life. I had never really done anything. Sometimes just existing was the safest thing to do.

“Why would I call you? How would I even know who you are? You're not real.” I felt my anxiety skyrocketing and knew I'd have a full-blown panic attack in seconds if I didn't calm down.

Ramone sat next to me and grabbed my hand, placing a finger on the underside of my wrist. The contact sent a pain up my arm all the way to the back of my head. I gasped and tried to pull away, but he tightened his grip.



## CHAPTER 11

All of a sudden, I was in my parents' house, in their kitchen with all the country duck plates and knick-knacks, and my mom and dad were sitting at the table. It was dinner time.

Whatever Ramone had done to me, I was watching myself in the past again, possessing a past version of myself with no power over whatever was about to happen, and I looked around.

*There was a pan with a ketchup-caked meatloaf, my mom's specialty, in the center of the table. They were laughing and talking, and I remembered this exact moment, and my heart felt like it had been shattered it.*

*I wanted to warn them, but no words came. I was laughing at what I was overhearing and had to just go along with it.*

The voices sounded like they were underwater, muffled and hollow, and I looked towards the entryway knowing what was coming in a moment. The past Kiara only knew he was late for dinner and was annoyed at his rudeness and arrogance. *No one told him what time to be somewhere. He had important things to do.*

Like staring at himself in the mirror. Or the sudden need to shuffle papers around that he hadn't touched in weeks. How dare she ask anything of him or where he went when he came home late, or who he was with, or what he was doing? None of her business.

Just stay home and be ready for his dick. That was it. That had been my existence.

The past me had anticipated a fight later that evening. He was late just so they could fight. Just so he could stress how important he was and not one to be questioned— especially not by her. She wouldn't say a word, but he'd bring it up— and tell her she was mad at him. She wasn't capable of her own feelings.

I did not want to go through this again and tried to close my eyes to will myself away, but they stayed stubbornly open. I struggled fruitlessly against whatever hold Ramone had put on me. What kind of monster would make me relive my trauma? Why would he put me through this?

I had shoved the pain down, buried it deep inside, and locked it in an iron box. This bastard had torn through the dirt I'd piled on top and was serving it up on a silver platter.

Through the eyes of my past self, I watched my mother cut into the meatloaf as he walked through the kitchen's entryway. He ran one hand down the front of his shirt, smoothing away invisible wrinkles, holding a cellophane wrapped bouquet of red roses in the other. Such a showman.

Everything went black.

I was free-falling through space, thrown off of a cliff. Then I was in the middle of the living room, face down on the carpet. I lifted my head, my hands pressed down into the carpet's beige fibers.

Turning over, I stretched out my arms to lift myself up and felt a sticky wetness. Smoke was filling the room with a rolling, gray fog.

I looked down at the red substance on my palms. Red liquid dripped from my face, sliding off me before pooling near my hands. Pain shot through my skull like a knife, and I grabbed the side of my head. What happened?

The smoke was getting thicker, and the light in the room turned dark, with a tint of orange. Something heavy fell

somewhere else in the house. I heard myself calling for my mom, and then my dad. No answer.

I knew I needed to get out of the house. There was too much smoke and too much noise. My vision narrowed, and I was having trouble focusing my eyes.

I tried to raise myself up to my knees so I could crawl to the front door, but my left leg wouldn't work, and pain was shooting up my side. My eyelashes were sticking together, and I paused to wipe my eyes, but that just made it worse. I had blood running down and felt a lump near my eyebrow that felt like loose skin.

The carpet was soggy, squishing beneath my hands as I used one leg and both my arms to drag myself to the door. The noise in the house got louder and I realized that the sound I was hearing was fire. Unable to comprehend the magnitude of what that meant, I forced myself to turn around and save my parents.

I couldn't vocalize the words; I couldn't get past whatever restraints had been placed on me. It was like I was trying to run and scream while trapped at the bottom of a pool, tied up in iron chains. I was completely helpless to change a thing and Ramone was dangling it like a carrot in front of me, taunting me.

I made it to the front door and reached up for the knob, which felt warmer than it should've, and I pulled the door open just far enough to drag myself through, using the edge of the frame for leverage. This scraped my leg sending sharp bursts of pain up my side that turned the side of my vision black and threatened to pull me under before I made it out.

I was coughing and hacking as the fresh air hit my torn lungs and I flopped over the step onto the landing right outside the door. I was almost safe but knew I still had farther to go.

I couldn't see anything anymore as I pulled myself slowly away from the house, dragging my body through the grass. My mouth was filling with blood, and there was a wetness in my cough. I couldn't move anymore, couldn't think, couldn't breathe. There was no one around.

No one was coming to save me.

I welcomed the closing darkness. I was in so much pain and just wanted it to end. There was nothing left for me. I tried to yell for help but couldn't form words, the sounds I made unintelligible as I shrieked helplessly. I needed to just die.

It was over, and I was done. The last sounds I heard were tires spinning and a popping sound like firecrackers.

It felt like someone had thrown onto the couch. My whole body jerked like I had dropped suddenly. I opened my eyes as Ramone let go of my wrist.

“You asshole!”

I scrambled to get up, getting my leg caught in my dress and stumbling instead, catching myself on the low table by the couch. He didn't move to help me, which just made me angrier.

“Why would you do that?” I yelled at his expressionless face as I struggled to stand up.

“I told you that you called for me.” He sighed and pressed his lips together as he repositioned himself so that he was facing me.

“You needed to remember. I couldn't tell you, so I had to *show* you.”

I needed to think. I needed time to understand. How many layers deep into a dream could a person go? I wasn't dead—I didn't think so, anyway.

He had somehow made me possess myself in the past. Asshole.

There was no way he could have helped me. There was no one there. I had been screaming nonsense, nothing understandable in my fear and pain. I hadn't called for him—and how could I have?

Running my fingers along the chain around my neck, I left the key pendant tucked out of sight. I thought it a good idea not to let him know I had it, even though I wasn't sure why

yet. It had traveled back and forth with me. That had to mean something.

He seemed to believe this was all real, that it wasn't a dream. Bringing a key back and forth was pretty weird. Unless that was all in my head too?

Ramone was just sitting there quietly, watching my fingers as they trailed along the necklace chain and looking at me like he expected me to say something.

The expression on his face resembled pity.

I didn't know what to say; I needed time to think, to try to figure this all out. Right then, I was brokenhearted, humiliated, and scared. I wanted to slap that look right off his face. He needed to do the talking, not me.

Too many thoughts were tumbling around in my head, and I felt like I was drowning and struggling to swim to the surface, my already shaky sanity one tiny thread from snapping.

I needed to leave. I needed to be back at home, on my couch, with my phone. Where one day blurred into another and I wasn't being assaulted with bad memories.

I'd almost had sex with him. What if he was actually real?

Another wave of embarrassment washed over me as I covered my face with my hands.

"I'm leaving," I told him. "Do not stop me. Do not send your stupid wolves after me." I walked up to him. "Do not come after me." I was so angry I was shaking.

"Just how far do you think you'll get?" Ramone stood up, looking down at me with a smile that didn't reach his eyes. "I'll give you ten minutes."

It was all a game to him, I realized.

"I'm not going to keep letting you go. You can't keep running from this, you need to fix it."

Ten minutes where he wouldn't mysteriously lock me in this room or send his guardian wolves to trap me, or torment

me in my own head making me relive moments I wanted to forget. Ten minutes where I could get some peace.

Would I ever be free? It was worth the shot I needed to take.

I ran out of the room and to the front door and yanked at the handle, thinking I'd meet resistance. It opened easily, startling me. I left it open as I ran outside into the dark.

The snow was gone. That was the first thing I noticed. The second was that there was no way for me to track the wolves if Ramone sent them after me. I didn't know where they were, where he kept them, or if he would really give me the ten-minute head start. That wasn't much time, especially when I didn't know where I was going.

I ran across the patio and towards the hill that would lead me back to the woods. I didn't dare look back, but I couldn't feel him watching me with those green eyes of his. Maybe he'd honor what he said. Maybe I'd get lucky and come across someone who could help me.

Ramone seemed vindictive enough that he would set something up where I'd end up back at the house. I was totally out of my element here. I didn't know where I was or where to go. I hadn't seen any people I could consider friendly.

What kind of sick fuck made you relive the worst moment of your life?

The hill lead past the pine tree I had climbed earlier, and I eyed the lower branches warily, wondering if one of the wolves was lurking behind the thick boughs, just waiting until the right moment to come barreling out and drag me down. There was nothing but silence as I made my way to the edge of the woods. I couldn't let my guard down.

How much time had already gone by? Five minutes? Ten minutes? There was no way to measure, and I broke into a run again, shoving my way into the woods.

I picked my way through the branches, remembering the moment Ramone took me. Ilya hadn't put up a fight at all.

Ramone claimed I wasn't Ilya's to have, implying he owned me. And he had literally said he owned me.

Were the visions and memories he put in my head really real? If they were, why didn't I remember them? In those memories, I was somehow able to light candles just thinking about it, with Ramone's help. Which was fascinating, if I was honest with myself—but still impossible.

He had touched me, and I had *wanted* his touch, wanted it so very badly. Outside of those moments, he obviously hated me. He'd made me relive my parent's death.

The idea that this wasn't a dream I was in right now was starting to make more sense. I felt as real here as I did at home, even though the environment was different. I'd always pushed the things I didn't want to think about out of my consciousness, filing them away in little compartments so I could keep going.

Ramone was tearing them all down, in the most brutal way possible.

It made sense that I would create characters to help me work through my subconscious and conscious trauma. That would be smart.

I moved the key I had threaded onto my necklace chain back and forth, thinking of my parents, and missing them.

It was too dark to see where I was, exactly, and I pushed through navigating rocks and slipping on some moss as I headed in a direction that felt right.

The full moon peeked through small openings in the canopy of trees in a few places, casting a glow on the occasional tree trunk. I followed each one as if it were a street sign, completely reliant on the tiny bits of light.

The ten minutes I had been so *graciously* granted had likely already come and gone and I found myself on the other side of the woods when I broke through to the small field where I had met Ilya.

Hugging the tree line, I scanned the area in front of me, looking for any signs of life, and breathed a sigh of relief.

There were no wolves, or Ramone, waiting for me. No Ilya, either.

I walked across the grass, passing the exact spot where I had first made my entrance to this place, remembering how I had sat here with Ilya, confused and scared, thinking my friends had dumped me on the side of a road.

I always jumped to the worst conclusions. Madison would never do that to me. And I didn't have any reason to believe Mabel would, either. It really wasn't fair to my friends to think like that. Waves of shame washed over me as I thought of how I assumed the worst of my friends, and then how I had the worst taste in men.

What would Madison do in a situation like this? She'd probably see it as a great adventure.

It didn't matter what she'd do, I corrected myself. What mattered was what I would do.

To me, this whole vivid dream thing was a chance to try and function the way I really wanted to without being scared all the time, a chance to work through my trauma— yet I still kept running away from everything.

The only way I had opened up so far was to let beautiful, mysterious men touch me. I wanted to judge myself for that. And who was to say what I could or couldn't do, anyway? I was free and single so who cared?

I tried to push my shame and guilt away. I could figure this out.

Ramone had to be tricking me with those memories of the two of us. If they were real, I'd remember them. I'd remember something like that.

If I could, maybe all of this would make a lot more sense.

There was another man here with Ilya when he had stopped to help me, I suddenly remembered, the man on a horse, and I stopped in my tracks.

That meant there were more people than just Ramone and his torch-bearing goons and Ilya. They had to have gone



somewhere. I decided to follow the road in the direction away from Ramone's house, staying as close to the tree lines as possible. It wouldn't help me if he showed up with his wolves, I thought as my stomach sank, but it would be my only chance.

The night was still and silent, the moon's light reflecting off the dirt road as I walked. It was eerily quiet, just the sound of my footsteps scuffing the ground and lightly echoing around me. I strained to listen for the sound of paws or of footsteps other than my own. I wouldn't be that hard to find once Ramone decided my time was up since I didn't have any allies or even know where to go for shelter.

As I followed the road, the trees closed in around me. The smooth rolling hills were behind me, and this area had a decidedly different feel.

Trees stretching overhead formed a tunnel, blocking most of the meager light I had been using to navigate. As the road lowered, it was edged by rocky soil and outcroppings of jagged stone along its banks.

My eyes adjusted to the lowered light, and there were large fluffy ferns bordering the road and the edge of the woods above me. I pictured a wolf stalking the wood line and leaping down once it caught my scent and hurried my pace, wanting more than anything to be secluded and safe at home.

## CHAPTER 12

The throw I kept on my couch was tangled around me again as I woke up with a start, hanging halfway off my couch. How many times was I going to almost fall off my couch? It was getting old and annoying.

I remembered the ten minutes I'd had to get away from Ramone. How would that work out now that I was back in my own house? Would he be waiting for me when I went back there— if I went back there? Would he make me look at my parents' bodies? I felt a sharp pain in my chest that took my breath away and squeezed my eyes shut.

He wouldn't do that to me. He *couldn't* do that to me. No one would.

I hoped.

No point thinking about what he'd do to me next, I had to get out of bed. I had stuff to do.

Thin streams of sunlight peeked through the blinds at my window. I had no idea what time it was. I untangled myself, sitting on the edge of the couch, and grabbed my phone.

Madison had texted me at 2 am informing me we were going out tonight. She hardly ever asked. She just always told me what we were going to do. It was easier to let her make the decisions.

That was pretty late for her to be texting me and I wondered what was going on. I figured I'd find out later.

It was already the afternoon; I had missed the whole morning. I cracked open my laptop, brought up my work app and sat for a few hours going through forms before participating in a conference call.

My boss wasn't too thrilled with my "lack of participation" in answering work emails, or my having missed a couple of previous conference calls. I promised to do better and mentioned I hadn't been feeling well lately, which took the pressure off me a little.

He knew what had happened to my parents, and even though it was a while ago, he'd given me a lot of grace in that area. He had lost his parents in a horrific car accident several years ago and was familiar with the pain.

We had bonded over our losses during my interview process when I mentioned I needed to take a couple hours off every week for an appointment—and I was up-front about it being therapy. I hadn't seen the point in trying to hide what it was.

When I finished, it was already after six. I still had to shower and try to figure out what to wear. I was running out of clothes and starting to wear the same things over and over again.

I thought of the gorgeous gowns I got to wear in my dreams. They would be stunningly unfashionable at the places we went to, but I missed them. I sighed and grabbed a short dark green skirt and a black low-cut shirt instead of the red dress Madison had thrilled over and got ready to go.

I debated wearing the pretty key on my silver necklace chain but took it off. My shirt left nowhere for it to hide.

She texted me around eight, saying she was outside. I got into her car and realized I had no idea where we were going. I stared out the window as we headed for the highway, trying to see the night sky, but there was too much ambient light, and no stars were visible.

"What are you doing?" Madison asked as I was craning my head, looking for stars.

“Nothing. Just looking.” I sat back in my seat. “Where are we going?”

“To the Back Room at Reservation.”

“Again? We were just there.” I looked at her. She usually mixed things up a bit more than this.

“James has his work guys meeting him there again.” She didn’t sound disappointed.

“Oh. Okay.” I really didn’t mind. I kind of liked familiar places. I knew what to expect.

We made our way through the casino, stopping for me to gawk at the glass treehouse again along the way, and then down the corridor with all the cameras. This time, we didn’t have to wait in the outer club area; a hostess led us straight into the back.

Someone had changed the décor, although the beautiful wooden carved bar was still there. The tables were closer to the walls, leaving the center more open than before.

There were garlands of ivy and roses in different shades of brown wound around pillars scattered around the large space below the arched ceiling, and small chandeliers sparkled and cast light around the room. Pool tables had replaced the platforms with dancing women in cages.

James, Al, Mabel, and a few of the men I had nicknamed Gold Chain Guys in my head were sitting at the same table where we sat last time, with everyone in the same seats. Again, someone got up and brought over a couple more chairs, so we had somewhere to sit.

“What’s up Kiara.” James greeted me, Mabel smiled at me, and I smiled back. I watched Madison kiss him in greeting, and he hugged her and pulled out a chair as she went to sit down.

Mabel and Al were whispering to each other, and she giggled, like they had a private joke, and he kissed her forehead.

Servers dropped off drinks for me and Madison, cranberry and vodka—the same drinks we’d had last time, even though no one took our order. *Impressive*. I picked mine up and took a sip, thankful I wasn’t hung over as usual.

Madison was leaning against James as he talked to the other men, and Mabel was with Al, and I wondered what it was like. I couldn’t remember the last time I was in a healthy relationship. At this point, I wasn’t sure I would even know how to be in one. Maybe it wasn’t my destiny? Maybe I was doomed to wander the planet alone like the Incredible Hulk. That was okay, I told myself. I knew I could find plenty of things to do. There was a whole world to explore, if I could just force myself to explore it.

By myself. All alone.

I shook my head softly, trying to clear my head and focus on the here and now.

I looked at the men sitting around the table while some type of ambient electronic music played in the background. James was a good-looking guy. Not my type, but certainly attractive by anyone’s standards. He met the “tall dark and handsome criteria”, checking off every box. He looked a bit like the grown-up version of a high school star quarterback would, with his dark hair, angular face, and tall firm build.

Al was another good-looking guy, and also not my type. He was too hairy, with his beard and bushy eyebrows, but I could still see that he was exceptionally attractive. I thought of Mabel’s pale skin getting all scratched up by his hairy face and turning red. Nope, not for me. I liked them clean-shaven.

There were several other men with us. I wasn’t sure of all their names as they just ignored us women and drank their vodka and beers, watched sports and gambling and talked about business stuff.

There was a blonde one I’d heard referred to as Julian before who came across as eccentric and standoffish. He reminded me of an archangel with his bright blue eyes and flowy hair. He didn’t look real and carried a pocket watch with a little chain tucked into his suit jacket. Who has a pocket

watch these days? I didn't think he'd ever spoken a word to me. Julian always acted detached, wherever and whenever we went somewhere together as a group.

The other few men were just kinda always *there*, once in a while one or two of them had a girlfriend that they dragged along, but I didn't pay them much mind, just sticking to Madison and occasionally, Mabel. Their girlfriends didn't last all that long, anyway.

Tonight, however, was different. I caught Julian's attention several times, which wasn't normal. He wasn't gazing at me in any special way that I could discern, but I had his attention. I took another sip of my drink so I wouldn't keep looking back at him.

I usually forgot he was even around.

I finished my drink and glanced around for a server, hoping for another, when a fresh glass was placed in front of me and my old one was swiped away. I turned and saw the back of a server. When I settled back in my seat, Madison was smiling at me.

"Want to dance?" she asked me.

I took a couple of sips of my fresh drink and got up just as she was standing up. The ambient techno music had picked up tempo and other people were heading to the center of the room to join the few that were already there.

The club had filled up since we arrived, and the atmosphere was different than the last time we came. It felt more upscale, but maybe it was just the better décor.

"I don't see that Carlos guy," Madison said to me as we moved into the center of the dance floor. "Guess you're stuck with me."

I laughed. "That's fine." I glanced back at our group. "Who's that guy who grabbed the chairs?"

"Oh, that's Stefan." I nodded. I had thought that was his name. He seemed quiet and was always in the background.

"Are you interested?" Madison gave me a hopeful look.

I laughed. “No.”

“He’s hot, though.” I nodded. She wasn’t wrong.

James joined us after a few minutes, pulling Madison away. He offered to let me dance with them, but I felt awkward. I was going to head back to the table when I came face-to-face with Julian.

“Excuse me,” I said moving to get around him.

“Where are you running off to? Dance with me. My partner is away, and I would love to be in your presence.”

Julian didn’t move. He just stood there with his hands pressed together in front of him, as if begging me.

I moved to continue on my way and hesitated when he said, “Please.”

I looked up at him and his small smile and nodded. He took my hand and then led me into a waltz-like dance but still matched the music that was playing as he gracefully moved me across the floor.

With the carved dark wood furnishings, garlands, and beautiful lighting in the club, our dancing felt magical in its uniqueness, and I was enjoying myself and laughing at the marvel of it.

After a bit, Julian increased the space between us and started looking at me in the odd way he had back at the table. I didn’t know what to do or where to turn my attention and wanted to stare right back at him to make a point but couldn’t bring myself to do it. I didn’t want to be rude. I didn’t even know the guy.

“You’re different lately, Kiara.” He gazed at me expectantly.

“How am I different?”

Different from what? And what does he care? He’d never paid any attention before.

“You don’t seem as scared, and the color of your eyes is brighter. It’s as if you are a new person.” He gazed at me, and I

couldn't look away, sucked into the blue of his eyes. They were like glaciers.

“Would you care to share your secret with me?” I immediately thought of the mysterious wine I drank in the abandoned house, and then my vivid dreams and dismissed the thoughts. They weren't really secrets; how could they be?

The wine was in an area the public could sneak into. I had told Madison about my dreams. Kind of. But I wasn't going to tell this man we had trespassed, and I wasn't sure why I suddenly felt guilty.

“I don't have secrets,” I said. “And if I did, I wouldn't share them with you. I don't know you.” I smiled to soften my words.

“I didn't ask for your secrets. I asked what your secret was.” Julian arched an eyebrow as he twirled me around and then placed his hand on my hip. “Do you remember?”

“My answer remains the same.” I was getting annoyed and decided to change the subject. “I like your pocket watch.”

Julian smiled. “Thank you. It is a family heirloom.”

“I didn't know people still used them. Everyone has a cellphone these days, you rarely see even a wristwatch.”

“I do have a cellphone.” He laughed lightly. “I prefer my watch.”

“Why?” I asked a bit quickly and slowed my voice. “It's beautiful, so I think I would rather use it as well, if I had one that gorgeous.”

“It is one-of-a-kind. I always have it with me.”

I nod, and he stops moving us and takes it out of his pocket and opens it, showing me the face, as the bodies around us keep dancing.

When he clicks it open, I see multiple clock faces, etched and worked to perfection with tiny gears that spun and whirled smoothly in intricate patterns. It was beautiful and hypnotic, and the gold metal glowed under the recessed lighting.



“That’s amazing, and beautiful. Why are there multiple clock faces? Are they for international time?”

“No, not for international time. For other time.” He put it back in the pocket of his suit jacket.

Other time? He was definitely a strange one. “Other time zones?”

“That would be correct, so to speak.” Julian held his arm out towards the bar. “Let us get a drink for this occasion.”

“Oh, thank you, but I have one back at the table. Thank you for the dance.”

“No, Miss Kiara, you do not.”

I fruitlessly tried to see through the ocean of dancing bodies to catch a glimpse of my table and spot my drink. He was probably right. A server had probably disposed of my drink by now, which would have been watered down anyway from melting ice after this much time had passed.

Julian beckoned me with a nod of his head, and I followed him to the large bar.

“Sir! Welcome. What can I get for you?” The bartender bowed and raised his head after a look of surprise crossed his face when he saw Julian. He then grabbed a towel from under the counter and anxiously wiped at an imaginary blemish on the gleaming surface.

“Hello Thomas,” Julian said as he reached into his pocket, taking out a small silver key. “Two please.”

The bartender gently took the key and disappeared through a door as one of the female bartenders crossed in front of us and rolled her eyes at me nodding her head towards Thomas. She put something down under the counter and then came back over and asked if we needed anything else, to which Julian shook his head and said no.

Usually, Madison would’ve come looking for me by now, but I wasn’t sure how much time had gone by. I wondered where everyone was.

I pulled my phone out of my waistband. About an hour had gone by, and there were no missed text messages. I looked around again but didn't see her. I would have just this one drink with Julian and then go back to the table.

"Here you go boss," Thomas came up to the counter with two crystal tumblers and a tall black bottle. I watched him pop the cork out and he poured the liquid into our glasses—sparkling, iridescent, fragrant liquid that looked like it held the mysteries of the universe.

The rich, green scent filled the air and wrapped around me.

My blood ran cold. I swayed on my feet and gripped the edge of the counter.

"Is everything okay, Kiara?" Julian asked softly as he looked at me. I couldn't answer, so he asked me again, and I shook my head up and down.

I pulled my glass over with shaking hands and lifted it to my nose. It smelled exactly like the wine I had found, and it looked like it, too. Since when was this a common drink? Even if it was under lock and key, it was still available.

My whole adult life I had been drinking alcohol, and I had never seen this liquor, or even heard of one like it, until that night. Not even a commercial or advertisement. Nothing.

I had thought it was special. I had thought *I* was special, having a secret, beautiful drink only I had tasted for god knew how many years. I felt so stupid. I had just assumed it was some mysterious antique bottle that was a one of a kind. I chuckled out loud, and Julian cast a glance at me before picking up his own glass to toast me.

"To mysterious discoveries, my Kiara."

Our glasses clinked and I looked at him. Was he fucking with me? Discoveries? Interesting choice of words. My eyes welled up as I sipped at the mossy drink.

I really needed to stop lying to myself, about everything, I decided. I did not want any more of the dreams. I did not ever want to go back to that house. If I really did have the control

and the power as the imaginary Ramone said I did, then I could choose not to have any more dream adventures.

I was done.

I would have to continue to try to heal here in the real world, and not in a fantastical beautiful dreamscape with sexy gorgeous men and massive wolves and fabulous mansions that supposedly were mine.

I didn't really want to let go, though. I *wanted* those things. But I knew I had to let go of it all for my own sanity. I would get over it. I sighed out loud, placing my cup down on the counter in front of me and turned to seek out Madison.

"Would you like anything else tonight, boss?"

"Thomas, please call me Julian."

"I mean no disrespect, I just—"

"Thomas, please, address me by my given name."

He held out his hand, and Thomas placed the small key in his palm. It looked nearly identical to the one I had found in the bedroom. Instinctively, I touched my silver chain, and then I remembered I had taken the key off. I looked up and Julian was staring at my chain.

"Why does Thomas keep calling you boss?" I ignored his stare.

"I am his boss."

"Can you elaborate on that?" I was snippy over the drink and starting to take it out on others. My mood was going downhill fast.

"I own multiple establishments. This is one of them." He looked at me. "Was that information withheld from you?"

"I have no idea. I don't think you've ever said a word to me, ever, except maybe a hello once or twice."

I took another sip of the drink that was now halfway gone. I had never taken more than a few sips the other times I drank it and was enjoying the warm sensation and watching the sparkles glitter and swirl under the lights. It was so pretty.

“I never had a true reason to speak to you before,” he said as he moved closer to me. “I thought I would have one, one day.”

His eyes seemed to glow a brighter blue. “Let me correct myself. I knew I would have one.”

He was starting to be a real creep, and I scanned the room for Madison, not finding her.

“You’re starting to remember. I can see it.” He moved his head and hissed into my ear before putting his face directly in front of mine. “It’s right there.”

“You’re not supposed to remember.” He nipped at my ear with his teeth and grabbed me as I tried to get away.

“Stop it!” I yelled. He covered my mouth with his hand, pulling me against him.

This wasn’t happening. I looked around, but no one was looking at us. He had to be drunk.

“No one’s paying us any mind.” He removed his hand and waved it around.

I wasn’t sure if it was the lighting or an effect of the liquor, but I couldn’t tear my eyes away from him. My anxiety was building, and my heart was pounding.

Where was Madison?

I backed away from him, stopping when I bumped into someone’s back.

“You have something that belongs to me, I believe, Kiara. And I want it back.” Julian was slowly moving closer and closer to me, leaving only a few inches between us. “I’m going to retrieve it from you.”

“Julian, I don’t have anything. Stop this.” My eyes were starting to water.

He stroked his chin with an elegant finger. “How are your friends doing? I hear James’ business is doing *quite* well.”

Was he threatening me? This was insane. This wasn’t Julian, not the fancy, eccentric Julian Madison and I had

giggled over and admired.

I tried to turn around, but I was still trapped by a body and now a bar stool. My heart was pounding so hard I couldn't hear anything anymore other than the sound of my blood rushing to my head.

Sliding the bar stool out of the way, I grabbed the edge of the counter and took off, pushing through anyone in my path as I headed for the table. I still couldn't see Madison anywhere.

Pausing a moment, I looked back and didn't see Julian either. He seemed to have disappeared into thin air. I took a few deep breaths and headed for the bathroom.

I settled into the green velvet chair, the bathroom happily devoid of people, and pulled out my cellphone and tapped out a text to my best friend. Where the hell was she? I wanted to go home. Now.

He had threatened my friends! He bit my frigging ear! I got up and walked to the mirror. There was no mark on my ear, no sign that it had just been in someone's mouth. I ran my finger over it. Nothing. Not even any pain. I shook my head.

Julian had been implying that I had his key, and he'd threatened my friends. No matter how I tried to frame it, that's what had happened.

That meant that my dreams were real. The key came back with me from *there*. From that other place. He had that same wine. The same key.

It all had to be connected. He implied that I was "different", like he knew something had happened. I don't know how he knew, but he certainly seemed to.

But maybe he was right that I'm different. I didn't feel quite as much of a mess. I didn't understand it, but it was a move in the right direction.

If the key unlocked the wine, why hadn't I seen the wine in my dreams? I didn't actually see Thomas unlock anything with the key. I was just assuming it. It could mean something completely different from what I was imagining.

Why wasn't I freaking out more? I was starting to get concerned about my lack of a freak-out. I laughed a little out loud. I was getting anxiety over *not* having a panic attack.

“Kiara?”

Madison came into the bathroom, slamming the door open, and walked over to me. “What happened? Where were you?” Her eyes were like saucers.

“I couldn't find you.” I wasn't sure how much I should say to her. “Please don't say anything. PLEASE. Julian got really weird with me tonight.”

“Julian?” She looked at me in disbelief. “Julian? How...?” I watched her deflate in relief. Julian was almost a nonentity in her eyes, just like he was to the rest of us, never really interacting with our group much.

“I know! I totally didn't expect it and I'm not even sure how to explain it. He was almost threatening. Just being really creepy and he was standing all close to me.”

“I know he's weird. I didn't even know he liked women. That's so strange.” She walked over to the sink. “Did he touch you? I thought he had a boyfriend. At least that's what I heard.” She frowned.

*He bit my ear.*

“No. I don't think he touched me.” I couldn't tell her the truth; I couldn't mess things up for her.

“He bought me a drink and spoke in some strange way, like really formal. Did you know he owns this place?”

Madison ran her fingers through her hair. “Yeah, he owns a lot of places. Didn't you know that?”

I shook my head. “I had no idea. What does he have to do with James?” I was not looking forward to having to see Julian next time we all went out now that I had his attention. What would he do to James?

“Business stuff? I'm not really sure. He doesn't talk about those things with me. He makes deals between people like

James does. I still don't think everything they do is on the books or whatever."

She shrugged, "I don't ask. And I don't really want to know. I don't think he actually does a lot with Julian though."

She never really talked about his work. She enjoyed the privileges that came with having a boyfriend that had lots of money and was madly in love with her and let her use his credit card. I knew that his business and opportunities were growing, but I'd never really given it any thought. I had enough to think about already.

"Well, that just means you definitely need to NOT say anything. I don't want this turning into a thing or anything."

I checked my makeup in the mirror and glanced at her, "Please? I think he was really drunk. He must miss his boyfriend." I did not want to lose my nights out with her. I'd be lost.

Madison hugged my arm. "Don't worry, of course I won't. However, if he pulls some shit in front of me, I will smack that bitch face of his right off."

I laughed. "While you're at it, steal his pocket watch for me."

Madison doubled over with laughter, and we headed back out into the club.

"Who's his boyfriend, anyway?"

"I don't know, probably some rich hottie. Julian is freakishly good-looking." Madison laughed.

*Freakishly hot with a taste for ears.*

I was still stunned.

Julian was nowhere to be seen when we got back to the table and fresh vodka cranberries quickly appeared in front of us. Madison turned to me. "You seem to be doing a bit better?"

"Oh god, not you too." I rubbed my cheek. "He said the same thing." I hoped no one at our table overheard her.

“It’s true though, you don’t seem as out of it. And you weren’t a disaster in the bathroom.” She looked at me and cringed. “Sorry.”

She looked around, “Where did he go?”

“I don’t know.” The seat in the far corner where Julian had been sitting remained empty. I wanted to tell her about the drink he served me up at the bar but couldn’t bring myself to and decided to ask about it a different way.

“So, hey, I’m still having those weird dreams.”

“Pleeeeeease tell me you got—”

“No, stop,” I said. “I’m trying to be serious here.”

“Ugh. Okay. What’s wrong?”

“They’re just so realistic. I don’t know what to do.”

Madison motioned for more drinks right as they were placed in front of us and giggled.

“Do you remember when your mom called in an exorcist, and then our moms almost punched each other?” She laughed.

“Umm, no?”

“It was ‘cuz of your dreams, you wanted me to dream with you. We were like ten and your mom thought you’d get me demonically possessed or something.”

“What the hell? I don’t remember that!”

Madison was laughing so hard she almost spilled her drink. “No exorcists, okay?”

I shook my head. “That’s crazy. I don’t remember that.”

“Some pastor came over and you ran outside and hid in those flower bushes you’d made your mom plant. It was wild.”

She motioned for me to take a sip of my drink. “You passed out in the bushes, and I drew on your face with markers.”

“Jerk.” I laughed and took a sip of my drink. “I wish I remembered that. Don’t pass out near me, ever. I’ll get you back.” I sat back.



“Why would my mom call an exorcist? That’s so odd.”

Madison shrugged; she didn’t know.

“Did you ever dream with me?”

Madison looked at me like I lost my mind and called me a weirdo. I dropped the subject.

“Remember that wine I found in that house we went to with Mabel?” I took another sip of my drink, feeling the alcohol coursing pleasantly through my veins.

Madison put her drink down. “Yeah, I still can’t believe you drank that. I thought you’d get sick or something.” She shook her head. “Crazy.”

“I wonder what kind of wine or liquor it was? I’ve never seen anything like it. Have you?”

“No. It was really weird. I mean, you thought it sparkled.” She looked at me and giggled. “Are you hoping they have some? They don’t have crusty old drinks here.”

“No, I just wondered what it was called, that’s all.”

“I have no idea; it was just a weird old bottle. Probably some kid’s ancient science experiment. Let’s have a toast.” She held up her glass, and I raised mine. “To better days!”

We both downed our drinks and drained our glasses. As soon as we put our empty cups on the table, a server whisked them away and replaced them. We laughed loudly, attracting everyone’s attention.

“What are you girls doing?” James looked amused as he raised his voice across the table.

Madison raised her fresh glass in the air towards him. “Having the best time ever, babe!” she yelled back.

I really wanted to hold on to this moment. Was I turning a corner? I’d take whatever I could get, and I just let my joy run through me.

I smiled at my friend’s antics as James blew a kiss to her. He gazed past us and tilted his chin up, greeting someone

behind me. I turned to see who it was, and my mouth dropped open.

James' friend Levon stood behind me and placed his hands on the back of my chair, invading my space. He tilted his head, acknowledging James' greeting. Madison widened her eyes at me and then gave me a little wink.

Rolling my eyes was my first instinct, but my head had started buzzing and I was thrown off by the Ilya look-alike having his hands on the back of my chair.

Quickly, I took a big gulp of my drink and sincerely hoped he'd go away. Could I just *wish* him away?

"Stephan, get him a chair," James ordered someone and turned back to Levon. "How are you?" One of the Gold Chain Guys got up from a nearby table to get Levon a chair.

"I'm good, thanks. You?" Levon asked, and James lifted his hand, indicating he was good, too. "I don't need a chair, thank you. I'm not staying," he said.

I felt him turn his head towards me even though I was trying my best to pretend he wasn't standing right there, over me. I refused to look at him again. To look at the man I had made a fool of myself with on the dance floor.

"Come with me for a moment, please."

My stomach sank.

Not wanting to make a scene, I got up slowly. Madison looked concerned for me, as if she knew I really didn't want to

go anywhere after what happened with Julian. I gave her a little smile, trying to reassure her.

I couldn't object without it being super uncomfortable.

He was James' friend, and I didn't really feel like I had a choice but to go along with his request.

The conversation at the table quickly resumed as we walked away, with me trailing behind Levon. He led me to a corner opposite where my table was, to a tiny private alcove with small couches.

"Do you want to sit?"

I shook my head, indicating I did not want to, fighting the panic coiling in my chest. It threatened to strike me down at any moment in an embarrassing heap.

Levon sat on one of the couches, crossing his legs with his ankle resting on his knee, and waited while a server brought over a small tray with a couple drinks on it and a pack of cigarettes in a fancy carton. They placed it on the low table in front of the couch with a gilded Zippo-style lighter.

The walls in the alcove were papered with a thick dark covering, embossed with copper-colored patterns. A couple of large potted plants sat in each corner with large salmon-toned flowers blossoming in them. The space was cozy yet rich, and he fit in like it was his own domain.

"Why are we over here?" I stayed standing, refusing to sit down.

Levon pushed an errant strand of hair behind his ear. "What did Julian want with you?"

"Julian?" I didn't know where he was going with this, and I wasn't going to say anything that would get me in trouble with Madison and James, ever.

My friends were the oxygen in my lungs.

"Yes, Julian. What did he say to you?" He leaned forward, grabbing a cigarette and deftly handling the lighter before taking a long drag.

“When? He’s always around,” I said dismissively. He wasn’t, but Levon sure as hell wasn’t either and wouldn’t know that.

Levon sighed. “Earlier. At the bar.”

“Nothing. We had a drink.” Why did I need to explain myself to this guy? I danced with him once. Just once. I didn’t know him, and it was none of his business what I did with my time.

I would dance with him again if I had the chance, I knew. But that wasn’t going to happen. Not to a girl like me.

“Kiara.” Levon was getting impatient. “I saw you. I saw how he cornered you. It wasn’t an ordinary conversation. What happened?”

“Look, it’s none of your business. I don’t know you. I don’t know what you think you saw, but just stay out of it.”

It was ridiculous how much he looked like Ilya, even the way he repeatedly had to tuck a strand of hair back behind his ear. I had the sudden urge to push his hair back myself, just to touch him, and shoved the image away.

“It is my business—”

“How?” I interrupted him. “How is it your business?” I turned to walk away; I was done with the conversation.

Levon got up and blocked me right before I was able to make my exit and stood in front of me.

“Move,” I ordered him. I hung onto my anger like a lifeline. It was either get angry, or dissolve into an anxiety-ridden mess on the floor.

“I need to know what happened.” Levon now had his hands on my shoulders, and I felt myself relax a fraction, against my will. “What did he say to you?”

“Why is that so important to you? Why not ask him yourself?” I couldn’t ignore the feel of his hands on my shoulders, the warm pull that was sucking me in, and my mind flashed back to the moment in the woods with Ilya and how had I felt in his arms.

“No one asks Julian anything,” he explained. “I think you can see why not.” Levon arched an eyebrow for emphasis.

“You’re not giving me any reason to tell you anything.” I realized too late that my statement gave away that there *was* something to tell. Levon’s hands still held my shoulders, preventing my exit and holding me in place.

“Look, I know I’m probably the last person you want help from right now, but it’s important. You’re not safe.” My eyes flicked up to his. “You need to tell me what happened between you two.”

The last person? “I’m not following....” The only danger I faced was my own head and what it did to me.

“Julian is a harmless weirdo with a really nice pocket watch, that’s all.” I tried to pull away from his hold, but he still held on to me.

“Do you have the key?”

Startled, I took a deep breath before I played dumb. “What key?”

“Did you find a key at Ramone’s house?” he asked again, irritated.

My legs weakened at the sound of Ramone’s name as my blood turned to ice in my veins.

He’d said Ramone. He knew.

How did he know what I dreamed? Was I dreaming right now? I tried to look around, casting for safety and reassurance of where I was. Suddenly, nothing felt real. I heard Levon call my name, but I couldn’t answer.

The floor was moving under my feet. I reached out for something to grab as the floor finally dropped out from under me, and a darkness crept into the edge of my vision before everything went black.

When I came to, I was lying on Levon’s lap, my head cradled in his hand. Levon must’ve caught me. *Not dreaming.* This was real.

“What happened?” I struggled to sit up, confused about being on the couch and on his lap. It all came rushing back. He had said *Ramone* and my anxiety had won a fresh and embarrassing victory.

“You fainted. I caught you,” Levon said as I pulled away from him. I had no idea what to say. I couldn’t even thank him. I felt like I was going to throw up.

He didn’t appear alarmed or concerned that I had just fainted in front of him, which confused me almost as much as his asking about the key I found. Almost as if this was all normal.

“Here.” He handed me a bottle of Fiji water, opening it for me before I took a sip.

I stared at him. Ramone was only a character in my dreams — I thought. But I also thought my dreams were too realistic to just be merely dreams. And here was Levon, looking just like Ilya. Ilya had thrown me to the literal and figurative wolves.

Here, in the real world, he was apparently trying to protect me. If Levon was actually Ilya. And if he was trying to protect me.

I couldn’t wrap my mind around it and didn’t know what to do with myself. Had I truly lost my mind? Like, finally lost it? Was I really in a hospital somewhere and just thought I existed here, hanging out at casinos with my friends, and this was all in my head?

“What is going on...” I whispered. My brain was numb trying to make sense of what he was saying. This just couldn’t be real.

Levon gently held me in a loose hug and gave me a small smile. “You don’t remember, do you? I heard you didn’t.” He looked at me thoughtfully, like he wanted to say something but was holding back.

“You’re Ilya, aren’t you?” I squeezed my eyes shut.

If he said he wasn’t, well, I wasn’t sure what I’d do. And if he was, that brought consequences too. We seemed to have a

relationship, however minor, of some type, both inside and outside of that dream world.

He nodded, letting me know he was. “I use my middle name here.”

Somehow, I’d always known that he was Ilya, but it still didn’t seem possible.

“Is Ramone here too? I haven’t seen him.” I felt panic rising, thinking of him showing up suddenly. I liked keeping him compartmentalized.

And I had almost slept with him— what if Ilya found out? I winced, thinking of the complications that could bring me. I didn’t want to be caught between two men.

“He’s not. Well, he rarely is. He stays away unless absolutely necessary.”

“How is this possible? Every time I go to sleep at night, I’m awake in that other place. What is it?” I wondered if I was there now. My skin felt too tight, and my head was buzzing as if all the cells of my body were fighting this new reality that threatened to choke me.

“It’s here, just another existence.”

“But how do I end up there? Ramone said I can control it, but I can’t. I can’t control when I go there or when I leave. Not that I know of, anyway.”

Continuing, I blurted out, “And why does nobody know about it?”

I was fighting the urge to run away, run away, grab Madison, and never come back.

“Not everyone can go there. Some can get there with assistance.”

Immediately, I thought of the mystery wine.

“What kind of assistance? My friend Madison said I used to have very realistic dreams when I was a kid, but I don’t remember that. And I didn’t dream for years until recently when I found myself in that place.” I threw all caution to the



wind in my relief that I wasn't as nuts as I had been suspecting, not worrying about the consequences, as I started spilling out some of my secrets.

"There are ways. We like to keep them protected." Ilya lit up another cigarette.

I wondered how much time had passed and looked towards the center of Reservation. We were mostly hidden back here, but I could see a good portion of the club. Nothing seemed to have changed, and it was still as busy as ever. It looked real, but how would I know?

I didn't want to ask, but I couldn't help myself. "Why did you hide me from Ramone and then just leave me with him?" I tried not to sound too mad, but I was still angry about it.

Ilya shifted a bit and took a long drag of his cigarette. "We have some disagreements," he said, evading my question. "It seemed the safest option in the moment."

"You know you're an asshole, right?"

"Nobody says no to Ramone right now," he said with irritation.

"I do."

"How's that working out for you?" he replied, mocking me.

"You're still an asshole. You didn't have to leave."

"I looked for you."

"Not very hard," I snapped at him.

He took a drag of his cigarette, smoke swirling around. "I'm here now."

Yes, he was. "Still an asshole."

He laughed under his breath. "I could've left you on the side of the road." Ilya grabbed my hand, and I looked at him. "Left you all alone out there."

I didn't know if that would've been better or worse.

"How did he find us, anyway?"

“His wolves. They’re always lurking. Nobody can get near his house.” He stubbed out his cigarette in a cut crystal ashtray.

He was so confident here, compared to the more reserved version I had met previously.

“Why did you look and seem so familiar to me when I met you?” I asked softly. I still felt a level of connection with him I rarely felt with anyone.

It was strange. It felt like we had been remarkably close and as if it had always been like that.

“Because we do know each other. We were together there.”

He paused, thinking for a moment, and rubbed his temples nervously. “You loved me.”

Ilya pulled me closer. He pushed my hair back over my shoulder and placed a soft kiss at the base of my throat.

Before I could react, he ran his hand up my arm, threading his fingers through my hair, and held the back of my head as he pulled my lips to meet his.

I reached for him as I felt a familiar tingle travel through my veins from when we kissed on the dance floor here. He deepened the kiss, thrusting his tongue in my mouth and pulling me onto his lap so that I was straddling him, our tongues dancing together.

I had loved him? Maybe that love was why he felt so familiar, why our bodies connected so perfectly, as if they had always known each other.

His lips separated from mine and moved to my neck, kissing and nibbling, sending shivers down my spine and I ran my hands over him, feeling the firmness of his arms and back, and pulling gently on his hair as his mouth traveled to my upper chest.

I was floating; I felt like I was alive for once, and exactly where I should be.

Someone cleared their throat and broke the spell. I reluctantly let go of Ilya.

“I hate to interrupt,” Madison said, looking way more amused than she should have, “but we need to get going. It’s like three in the morning. James has to work tomorrow. Unless you have a ride?”

She walked a little further into the room, eyeing Ilya, and held my purse towards me. I knew she would never let me live this down after my protests about dating again.

All of my normal guards were down when it came to Ilya. I couldn’t explain the effect he had on me.

I gave Ilya a small smile and moved to get up and he grabbed my waist, the warmth of his hands seeping through my shirt and holding me in place.

“You can just leave that here.” He motioned for her to put my bag on the table. “I’ll make sure she gets home.”

Madison eyed him. “You’re James’ friend, aren’t you?”

“Yes.”

He didn’t offer her any other information, and I sat there, trying to decide if I wanted Madison to take me home or Ilya. He didn’t ask if I wanted him to take me home or not and I ought to be mad, but I wasn’t. I couldn’t find it within myself. I knew I wanted this, wanted Ilya.

“You okay, Kiara?” Madison stared pointedly at me, and I smiled at her and nodded. She placed my purse on the table, narrowed her eyes at Ilya, and told me she’d text me later.

“You are okay, right?” he asked me after she had walked away, caressing my arm.

“I think so. I mean, I’m confused about everything. Everything is weird now.” I glanced in the direction Madison had just left.

“But I’m okay here with you,” I added quickly. I still had a lot of questions about everything. I wanted to be okay with Ilya being a real-life person. I wondered if I was in some type of shock.

“I thought you had died by now. It was interesting finding you on the side of the road.” Ilya nuzzled my neck.

“How did we meet? Originally?”

“There, in that place. A long time ago.” Ilya turned my chin, searching for my lips again.

“Why don’t I have any memories of you but have memories of Ramone?” Ilya let go of my face, his eyes darkening.

“I’m sorry. I’m just trying to understand,” I explained.

He stood up. “I can’t answer that. We should get going.” He handed me my purse and moved his arm to my lower back to guide me out of the room.

The club was only half full now. I could see Thomas the bartender across the room, wiping down the counter and moving glasses.

All of my friends had left, and the table we were at earlier was spotless as if we had never been there, as if I had only imagined sitting at the table drinking and laughing with Madison.

Ilya and I walked out of the club and started across the casino towards the elevators when he took a detour down another hallway. “Where are we going? The elevators are the other way.”

“Not the one we need.” He smiled down at me.

I looked him over. He wasn’t dressed the same as he was when I saw him in my dreamscape, in leather pants and boots. He was wearing an expensive charcoal black suit, judging by the cut and material.

The contrasting images messed with my head, the picture of Ilya when he left me to Ramone, the image that constantly replayed in my mind, and the sleek form beside me now.

We stepped into a mirrored elevator that had a couch inside and end tables. We had stepped into a parlor, and I wasn’t sure what to do with myself, so I just stood there. The opulence was in direct opposition to the more utilitarian elevator I had ridden in earlier.

I tried to ask myself what I was doing, being in this elevator right now with him. I wasn't sure if I wanted to back out, but I also wasn't sure if I could. Something unstoppable was relentlessly pursuing me, rolling over me like a wave in the ocean, tumbling a piece of driftwood.

The doors closed behind us, blocking any escape. Peering at my reflection in front of me, I watched as Ilya stepped behind me and put his arms around my waist. He met my eyes in the mirror as he left a trail of kisses down my neck and slid one hand down my front, moving it over my chest, and stopping on my lower belly.

He was gauging my reaction, I realized.

The elevator gave a gentle chime and stopped. Ilya let go of me and moved towards the door as it opened and reached for my hand. We then stepped into the nicest underground car garage I had ever seen.

A uniformed man informed Ilya he would retrieve his vehicle, and I looked around while we waited. The garage interior was black—the walls, the pavement, the fixtures. LED lights brightened up the space.

I didn't see a piece of garbage or even a rogue crumb anywhere.

No oil or transmission fluid stains marring the pristine flooring, nothing. It was immaculate, shiny. It didn't feel real, just like everything else that was happening.

After a moment, the valet pulled up to us in a two-door matte black Audi, and Ilya opened the passenger door for me to get in.

“What's your address?” he asked when he slid in behind the wheel. I gave it to him, and he programmed it into the car's GPS.

I was starting to feel overwhelmed. Fate had turned my life upside down. Too many things were happening, and too quickly. I hadn't had a chance to adjust. How did you adjust to your dream characters turning out to be real, actual humans? People you were supposedly in love with?

One moment, I was having a great time with my best friend; the next I was in an Audi with a figure from my dreams, and everything I thought I knew wasn't true at all.

Which Kiara was I? The panic-ridden mess that hated leaving her house and was scared of everything, or the Kiara who was slowly getting a handle on her emotions and starting to live life again?

I was split in two. This Kiara was getting into a beautiful car with a gorgeous man.

Was this who I really was?

I must've made some kind of noise because Ilya grabbed my hand and asked if I was all right.

"I don't know. This is a lot to take in." I glanced up at him. "I don't want to go back there tonight. I don't know how to stop it from happening."

I was too exhausted and confused to handle a run-in with Ramone. I couldn't even decide if I should've been in the car with Ilya now, if this was what I wanted.

Maybe I'd wake up, fall off my couch tangled up in my blankets, and everything would be normal again.

Ilya was flying down the highway, passing every car in sight smoothly, as the car roared across the bridge spanning the bay. I was too spent to even pretend to be concerned for my safety. I pictured us launching over a railing and sailing through the air, and I stared out the window at the city lights reflecting off the water, numb.

"I don't want to deal with Ramone, or being lost, or any of that stuff. How do I make it stop?" I pleaded with him, shaking my head. "How do you make it stop?"

He looked at me quickly and then back at the road as we passed what might have been a Toyota. "It's different for everyone. No one can really tell you how to do it."

"That is so not helpful."

"I'll take you to my place. You can sleep there. If I feel you start to leave, I'll pull you back." He cut across the road to

take an exit and we circled around onto the highway to backtrack towards the city.

“My doing that may help you learn,” he added gently.

We pulled into another underground garage in the city below a towering bank of windows and parked. The chime of the Audi’s alarm echoed as we walked to the elevator. I realized I didn’t have any of my stuff with me, but I was too tired to care as much as I should have. I could barely stand up at this point and leaned against Ilya for support as we waited for the elevator to bring us to wherever we were going.

Once we reached his floor, he led me into a big, open space with floor-to-ceiling windows facing us. You could see almost the entire city, and I wanted to go gawk but waited for him to show me where to go as he stopped to check something on a laptop at the counter.

I pulled out my phone. It was four in the morning. I had five missed texts from Madison inquiring about my physical safety and I sent a quick reply reassuring her I had all of my body parts and was fine.

I left out that I wasn’t home. I’d have that conversation another time.

“Come.” Ilya stood in front of me, and I followed him down a hallway with black marble walls.

We walked into a bedroom, and after he showed me where the bathroom was, I promptly made use of it, washing my face and cleaning myself up as best I could. I dug around in the drawers for a toothbrush and found a new one.

I looked pale, with dark circles under my eyes. Sighing at my reflection, I ran my fingers through my hair, trying fruitlessly not to look as bad as I did. I was a mess. I hoped for a good night’s sleep.

When I exited the bathroom and re-entered the room, Ilya was in the middle of pulling off his T-shirt. His tan body was a work of art. He didn’t have any tattoos that I could see, but he didn’t need any.

His shoulders were perfectly sculpted, his waist perfectly tapered, and his arms exquisitely formed. He saw me staring and gave me a small smile, waving me towards him, turning down the covers before removing his pants.

I couldn't look. I couldn't handle it anymore and just got into the bed in my clothes, facing the other direction.

"Do you want a shirt? I don't have any women's clothing here, but you can wear one of my T-shirts." He nudged me and handed me a shirt.

I sat up as he climbed into bed and lay down next to me, and I stripped off my shirt. I decided I didn't even care what he saw. We'd been all over each other at the casino. I pulled his shirt over my head and reached under the covers to wiggle out of my skirt, my leg brushing his, and made myself comfortable.

"Thank you." I turned my head to look at him.

"You're welcome." He pulled me close. "I'll bring you back if you start to go," he said, reassuring me.

"How will you know?" I rested my head against his arm.

"Your breathing changes."

"Changes?"

"It decreases, as if you were dying, no matter what is happening there."

"Well, that's creepy." I thought for a moment. "If you die there, do you die here?"

It took a moment for him to answer me. "Sometimes."

He pulled me so I rotated onto his chest and my hands rested on him, his heart beating so hard my hand rose and fell with the movement as I looked at him. "I won't let you die," he reassured me.

I kissed him in response, moved by his voice. He pulled me all the way up, my legs falling on either side of his hips, and he held me by the waist. I ran my hands over his smooth chest, enjoying the feel of his skin under my fingertips, and



reached for his lips again. He gently turned me over and raised himself over me, caging me in his arms.

“Ilya, have we done this before?” I was suddenly nervous, and self-conscious. I hadn’t even showered. If we were together before, this wouldn’t be our first time. Was I worried about showering the last time? I had nothing to measure this moment against.

It felt like I was trying to step into someone else’s life, and I wasn’t sure I fit into this new reality. Yes, Ilya was beautiful and yes, I wanted him, but what was I doing?

I moved myself out from under him and snuggled against him when he lay down, not wanting to hurt his feelings.

Ilya started to answer, but hesitated. He ran his knuckles back and forth over my shoulder. I could feel him thinking.

“We have, Kiara. But it’s been a while,” he finally said. He kissed my forehead and wrapped his arm around me as I fell asleep.

## CHAPTER 14

Sunlight was filtering in through tall vertical blinds in the bank of windows to my right when I woke up. It took me a moment to remember where I was and a few more minutes of lying there to shuffle through all the revelations of last night.

I sat up in the bed and pushed my hair back from my face, running my fingers through it in an attempt to detangle the long strands spider webbing around me, trying to decide how I felt about everything.

Ilya walked in and handed me a cup of coffee. He was fully dressed, in yet another gorgeous suit.

“Good morning, beautiful.” He kissed the top of my head.

“Good morning.” I took a sip of coffee that was made exactly the way I like it. “Thank you.”

“Enjoy your coffee. I’ll be back in a few minutes to bring you home.” He walked back out of the room as his phone rang and he answered it.

It was so strange, seeing my dream character doing normal things and living life. It made it hard to picture him the way I met him in my dream, in leather and riding a horse.

I went into his bathroom and showered quickly, putting my own dirty clothes back on after, having no other choice. I left the bedroom in search of Ilya and found him in the kitchen on his laptop. “Ilya?”

“Yes?”

He smiled at me. Smiled like it was the most normal thing in the world for me to be here, in this space, with him. He looked like a god, standing casually in the kitchen at his laptop, sipping at a bottle of water, his hair all perfectly wavy around his tanned face, dressed in a gorgeous suit.

“Why were you on a horse?”

“What?” He furrowed his brows.

I leaned against the countertop, placing my coffee cup down. “Why were you riding a horse when I saw you? When you found me in that place.”

He gave a small laugh. “Why shouldn’t I ride a horse?”

It was weird, that’s why. I couldn’t reconcile the Audi, the suits, the club in the casino, and this penthouse with him hanging out in the wilderness on a horse. Something was bothering me, and I couldn’t figure out what it was.

I didn’t know what to do or what came next. Nothing felt real now.

“Why not just drive a car?”

Ilya snapped his laptop shut and slid it into a leather bag. “I could, and I do. You were in the car with me last night. It’s just easier to ride a horse sometimes. It depends on what I’m doing.”

“What were you doing? What do you do?” I turned to face him as he walked over to me.

He picked me up and I wrapped my legs around his waist and my arms around his neck to hold on as he gently bit my lower lip and started kissing me.

“Whatever I want,” he said, as he pulled his hair back with an elastic.

He sat me on the countertop and pushed my skirt up around my waist as he assaulted my mouth with his tongue.

I forgot how messy and dirty I felt in yesterday’s clothes as his hands slid up my sides and under my shirt, reaching for my breasts. He grabbed one of my nipples and lightly pinched it

with his thumb and finger, sending a tiny twinge of pain through my chest as I moaned into his mouth.

“Ilya,” I breathed, not knowing if it was too much for me, or not enough.

“I’ve missed you,” he said as he brushed my hair away from my face.

I pulled his neatly tucked shirt out of his pants and started unbuttoning it from the bottom when his hand traveled up my thigh.

“Do you know how long I’ve waited for this?” His lips brushed my ear as he whispered, “There’s no way to measure.”

His fingers found my center as he pulled my panties away and barely brushed me, and I moaned into his mouth.

His touch was too light, and I wiggled forward to increase the pressure. He was teasing me and laughed softly.

“Do you want more?”

I bit him back in answer and resumed trying to unbutton his shirt. My hands were shaking and instead I pulled the hem of his undershirt out and unbuckled his belt when he thrust a finger inside me.

He dipped his lips to my chest as my head tilted back and sucked my nipple into his mouth, alternating between biting, licking and sucking before adding a second finger to his efforts between my legs.

His thumb pressed against my clit as his fingers slid in and out of me. I was falling back onto the counter, and he propped me up with his arm, my legs still wrapped around him. My thighs were shaking, and I leaned back up, and he pulled me closer as I reached for his belt again.

I wanted to feel his skin and moved his belt, the buckle falling to the side, as I unzipped him. I wanted to come with him inside me, and I was running out of time as Ilya relentlessly thumbed my clit and I felt the pressure building. He was wearing too many clothes, and it was driving me crazy.

I smoothed my hand over his stomach, tracing the etched muscles that led below his waist, shoving his partially unbuttoned shirt out of my way.

“What do you want?” he spoke over my lips as I gasped for air. “Tell me what you want.”

“I want you,” I said. “Please.” I couldn’t take much more and reached for the elastic of his boxer briefs. I was feeling reckless and Ramone was completely forgotten.

“Say it,” he ordered me, his voice thick with satisfaction, loving the effect he had on me.

I knew what he wanted me to say but couldn’t bring myself to and whimpered instead. He rubbed his thumb back and forth slowly against my most sensitive spot and I felt my wetness spreading and starting to drip down the inside of my thigh.

He was torturing me, his eyes glinting, knowing exactly what he was doing to me. He looked at me like he could see all the way inside my soul, down to my anxious, traumatized self, and he didn’t turn away.

“Ilya, please.” I shoved my hand down the front of his briefs. He was rock hard—and huge, as I tried to grasp him. I felt clumsy attempting to pull him out and couldn’t begin to imagine how he’d fit inside me. I’d slept with two men my whole life, and they were nothing like *this*.

I didn’t know if I was doing any of this right, or if I was making a fool of myself. Someone like Ilya could have literally anyone he wanted, but he was here with me, and I just couldn’t wrap my mind around it.

I looked up at him as I stroked him, and he lifted me before yanking my panties down and tossing them to the floor.

He moved my hand to his waist and repositioned me on the edge of the counter before taking his cock in his hand and sliding me forward so my ass balanced on the edge of the counter.

He guided his tip to my entrance, our eyes locked together, his expression unreadable, as he moved forward and grabbed

my hips to stabilize me. I leaned back on my elbows as he pushed inside me, and heat spread through my core. “Jesus you’re tight,” Ilya said huskily, pushing in more, and he groaned.

He was slowly filling me with his length, and I felt every little jolt, and every ridge and vein, and as if I would tear in two.

“Ilya, I don’t know if we can do this.” But I wanted him to fill me up, fill up every corner and crevice that had lain barren and lonely for so long. The pain of his cock, and the ache of a building orgasm were competing inside me. I was dizzy with lust and this *need* to be joined with him.

Ilya brought his mouth to mine again, devouring my lips, and slid his hand to the back of my head where he grabbed a fist full of my hair and pulled before shoving the rest of the way inside me.

“Ilya!” I screamed as he suddenly tore into me. “Oh god...”

He moved slowly in and out of me, watching me as he moved above me. “I want to watch you come all over my cock.”

I looked at him before my head fell back and closed my eyes. He held my hip with one hand and ran the other down my body, from my neck to my pussy. I shivered beneath his touch.

“I need to come,” I whimpered. I was right on that edge of ecstasy; I needed it more than I needed oxygen.

“Open your eyes, Kiara.” He curled one hand around my neck as I obeyed. “Say my name.” He increased the speed of his thrusts and shoved his hand under me, lifting me higher. “Say my name.”

“Ilya,” I cried, “please.” I put my arms around his neck and pulled him back to me, taking his mouth with my own as he slammed his hips into me.

He moved his hand down between my legs and gently pressed and flicked my swollen clit and shattered me into a

million little pieces as I tightened my legs around his waist.

He held me in place as I convulsed around him, and he groaned out his own release. He leaned over me, resting on his arms, his palms flat on either side of me.

His hair had come out of his ponytail and sweat beaded his hairline. I moved the strand that fell in his face behind his ear, and he looked at me.

My heart rate had begun to slow down, but it picked back up when I wondered what was next. I'd go back to my apartment and have no clue what to do with myself.

Would I see him again in my dreams? There were too many puzzle pieces, and I didn't know how they fit together.

Right now, here, I was with this beautiful man that I hadn't known was real, in a stunning penthouse, who had made me come faster than I ever thought possible. But I was heading back to my tiny apartment and no true, actual, sleep.

*Ramone.* Oh fuck, I thought. Maybe I'd end up in a dungeon eaten by rats after all.

“What's wrong? Ilya asked softly as he untangled us.

I let him help me down off the counter and did my best to sort out my clothes and make myself presentable. “I need to figure out how to not go back to that other place.” I had no idea what it would mean if I did, after what had just happened between us.

Ilya was re-buttoning his shirt and putting himself back together. He stopped and looked at me. “Do you have the key Julian was looking for?”

I blinked. The key. Was that all he wanted from me? Was that why he had brought me here? “What key?” My voice hitched and pain needled at my heart.

He tucked his shirt in and walked over to me. “A key from Ramone's. You may run into Julian again. I can almost guarantee you will.”

He pulled me against his chest and held me, waiting for my answer.

“I don’t. I don’t know anything about a key,” I lied.

I felt a pang of guilt but couldn’t bring myself to tell him I had it. A need for secrecy I couldn’t explain wouldn’t let me be honest with him. I just knew I needed to protect the key.

Ilya sighed and ran his hands down my arms. “Let me know if you find one.” I nodded in consent as I felt a separation building between us, a tiny wall forming that I feared could become an impenetrable barrier.

Wasn’t that what people did in relationships, trusted each other? I didn’t know how to do romance. This was supposed to just be sex for me. Still, I couldn’t bring myself to give him that. My anxiety wouldn’t let me.



“Girl, what happened last night?”

Madison called me. She actually *called*. No sending a text message, just straight up called me.

“I don’t know,” I said with annoyance.

“Well, did you get some?” I winced.

“Yes—” I was interrupted by Madison’s squeal and heard annoyed grumbling in the background. Probably James, and I felt his pain.

“How was it?” Madison was overly excited.

“You’re annoying, you know that? It was great, of course. It’s been a while.” I probably shouldn’t have said anything. Now, I’d never hear the end of it.

“So, when do you see him again? Maybe we can double date!” I winced.

“I don’t know, Madison. He didn’t say anything. I just got home a few minutes ago and I need to get changed and check my laptop. I’m probably behind at work.”

“I knew you’d get back out there. You just had to do it. Can’t hide forever. I’m proud of you. Don’t you feel so much better?”

Ilya had been silent, for the most part, as he drove me home. He had reached over once and touched my hand, rubbing it lightly. He had kissed my temple before I got out of the car.

But he hadn't said anything. And neither did I, my brain swirling and buzzing, remembering his touch when he took me on the counter, and now feeling the weight of an uncertain future.

I felt bereft and unmoored, with an unsettled feeling similar to returning home after a fabulous vacation where you need to re-acclimate and try to find your bearings and get back to the drudgery of daily life.

"Hmm. Well, we'll be back at the club again soon, so maybe you'll see him." Madison giggled. "Maybe you'll have his babies."

"OH MY GOD MADISON!" I screeched. "What is wrong with you? Are you still drunk?" She knew how I felt about kids.

My ex had wanted more than anything to impregnate me and had forced me to take ovulation tests so he could make me have sex with him at the ideal times. A memory of him forcing himself on me surfaced, and I pushed the image away.

It had turned me off to having kids at all, the power games. It would just be worse with kids if someone could use them against me. I was *not* interested.

"No! I was just trying to be funny. Calm down."

I rolled my eyes at the annoying phrase.

"No kids. Nope. Zero. Zilch."

"I know, I know." She paused. "What are you up to tonight?"

I was pacing my living room, wearing a deeper path across the carpet, and stopped by the window. "I think I'm going to stay home. I have a lot to think about." I sighed. "Too many things happening lately. I just want to rest and relax for once."

I wasn't sure if that was actually possible, but I'd try. We hung up, and I was left with my thoughts—an unwanted swirling mass of confusion, unease, anxiety, and fear.

What had I gotten myself into? I was starting to wonder if Ramone was less threatening than Ilya. He hadn't really asked

anything of me, other than I stay with him.

Ilya had seduced me, and I had let him. Then he tried to get the key from me. Not to mention the time when he had completely deserted me in the woods.

But had he actually seduced me? The only thing missing was a silver platter when I offered myself to him. And even though I should have, I didn't regret it. Even if he'd acted like all he wanted was the key, there *was* something between us.

You couldn't fake the way he looked at me, and I know he felt the same connection. It was there, like a sparkling cord, joining us together in some mysterious way, even if I didn't understand it.

I just didn't know *why* it was there. Whatever I had gotten myself into seemed to be out of my hands, despite Ramone's insistence that it was otherwise.

Ramone wanted me to remember. Remember what? My parents dying? He certainly helped with that. Not that I forgot, but he made me face it all over again, reminding me of the tiny little details that tore my soul to shreds.

My mind flashed to the moment I dragged myself through the blood, theirs and my own, and the tears threatened to spill over. I felt the ache in my hip, the pain in my head, as I relived it once again.

*I can't do this.*

My vision edged to black, and my heart seized, on the precipice of a full-blown panic attack. I can't relive it again. I desperately tried to fill my lungs with oxygen, but I was suffocating and dropped to my knees, dry heaving and shaking.

Tears and spit were running down my chin as I started sweating. My heart was cracking, and I couldn't breathe. I saw my arms covered with blood and the scent of blackening air filled my senses.

Falling to the floor, I was choking and heaving. My face and chest were soaked, and I waited for it to pass. Waited for someone to save me. But no one came.

I was alone, just like always. I wondered how long it would have taken someone to find my body if I died in my apartment. Hours? Days? A week?

No one was coming.

I woke up with a start, shocked to find myself on my couch with nothing amiss. I wasn't on my floor. I wasn't tangled in my blankets or hanging precariously off the edge or exhausted from being somewhere else. I hadn't gone anywhere.

Everything was normal for once. I sat up cautiously, feeling mildly disappointed, I would've liked to escape to my dream world.

Did this mean I had imagined it all the other times? Madison had met Ilya. And Julian. I *knew* I wasn't crazy. But I'd bring up Ilya to her later just to check. To be safe. Just in case I had dreamed that she knew them.

The way things were going for me, that was entirely possible.

While I brushed my teeth and when I showered, I was still puzzling over why I hadn't gone to the other world last night. I tried to remember if I had dreamed at all and didn't think I had, which was even more in keeping with what was normal for me. I felt weird about it, missing the dreamscape's beauty, but also appreciated the best night of sleep I had had in a while.

My eyes were still slightly swollen and red from all the crying I did last night, and I fished around in a drawer for some eye drops and winced at the sting as medicine-induced tears streaked down my cheeks.

Ramone had given me ten minutes. What would happen if I did go back there? I shook my head. It looked like I didn't have to worry about that anymore.

I got dressed and put some mascara on and heard a knock on my door. What the fuck, I mumbled.

I opened my front door a little too hard in irritation.

“Hi. Let's go get something to eat. Come.”

I stared at Ilya, dumbfounded. He looked so out of place standing in the dingy hallway, all sleek, gorgeous, and clean.

“I only had your address,” he said in apology, explaining why he hadn't called.

I remembered him entering my address into his car's GPS, and he had dropped me off here. He was the last person I had expected to show up on my doorstep. I hadn't even been sure I'd ever see him again.

“Umm...” I looked around. “Hang on.” I let the door close on him standing on the other side and grabbed my phone and bag. I checked my necklace, making sure there was no key hanging from it, and opened the door and stepped out into the hall.

He kissed my forehead, and I followed him down the stairs, the contrast between where I lived and his home humiliatingly stark in my mind as we stepped out the front door into the bright sunlight.

His Audi looked outrageously out of place in my neighborhood. I saw a few people gawking at it, probably wanting to scratch it or steal it—until they looked at Ilya. He seemed unaffected as they scattered under his gaze, and he opened the door for me.

Letting himself in and starting the car up with the push of a button, he asked, “Why do you live here?”

“Because I want to.” It always seemed like everyone wanted me to use my parents' money. I couldn't. I wasn't a criminal, just a murderer. Not that he would know about my inheritance.

He looked at me quickly and sighed as we pulled away from the curb. Something hit the back of the car with a dull thud, but he ignored it. He didn't even look in the rearview mirror.

“Do you have a security system?”

“No.”

“Do you have a gun?”

“No!” A gun. I shook my head at the thought. I'd probably shoot my foot off by accident.

“You should have something.” He rubbed the steering wheel, clearly bothered by what he thought was my unsafe living space.

“I have my scowl.” I glared at anyone who looked at me the wrong way as if I was about to throat punch or murder them, and it had served me well. No one bothered me, at all, ever.

Ilya raised an eyebrow at me and started laughing at me. Until I fixed my scowl at him.

“Huh.” He appraised me. “Okay. That works. I wouldn't want to come across you in a dark alley,” he said, amused.

“Told you.” He nodded, not taking his eyes off the road.

“No one has ever bothered me.”

“I believe you.”

We pulled up to a place downtown, which of course had valet parking. I wondered what he did for a living but didn't ask.

Ilya led me into a restaurant, his hand on my lower back possessively. I was instantly uncomfortable with the unofficial dress code for a place so nice.

“What's wrong?”

He must've felt me stiffen. “I'm not dressed for this.” The typical restaurant attire there was at a price point I doubted I

would ever own or wear. Some of the women even had hats on, seated out on a veranda.

I was in leggings, boots, and an older V-neck shirt with a ragged sweater over it. I looked like I should've been shopping in a big box retailer or a thrift store.

"You're fine, don't worry," he said, reassuring me. "Look over there."

Following his gaze, I saw someone dressed similarly to how I was. I'd bet money their leggings were by Ralph Lauren. I didn't even know if Ralph Lauren made leggings, but they were still out of my league.

I didn't want to worry about it, because really, who cared? No one would even remember me. I tried to shrug my discomfort off.

They'd all be looking at Ilya. Just like the waitress who came over to bring us water and take our order. She made sure she brushed him with her hip when she walked away after undressing him with her eyes.

We sat in comfortable silence for a while. I loved that I didn't have to say anything. I could just look around and observe, and it wasn't weird or anything.

Birds were fluttering around above the lattice overhead, and I listened to the dull drone of the cars passing by. The soft chatter of voices surrounded us, and heat from hidden vents kept us warm. It was pretty cool being able to eat outside this late in the year.

"How did you make out last night?"

"What?" Ilya had interrupted my thoughts, and his question took a moment to register. "Oh. Nothing happened. I slept through the night."

"Huh." He leaned back in his chair, not expecting that answer. "That's strange."

"Why is it weird? I needed the sleep."

"I know you did." He looked deep in thought. "I guess I was expecting a different answer. But it's good that you slept."



He smiled at me.

We ordered and then went back to the comfortable silence. Ilya quietly answered his phone, walking away for a moment. He sat back down and stared at his phone after ending the call.

“Ilya,” I waited for him to look at me. “Why did Ramone want me to light candles with my mind?”

He ran his tongue along the corner of his lower lip and looked back down. “I don’t know. What do you remember?”

“I really wish someone would tell me what’s going on. I don’t remember much at all,” I said quietly.

“What if I don’t ever go back? I’ll never know what all this is about. I’ll never even know how I met you.”

Something flashed across his eyes, an emotion too quick to pinpoint. “I don’t think you have to worry about that. Something is in motion that you can’t stop.”

“But what? What is in motion? I feel completely lost.”

“What else happened with Ramone?”

So many things. Too many things. Things I would never tell *you*, I thought, remembering sitting on Ramone’s lap on the couch.

“He put memories in my head. Whether I wanted them or not. He forced me to relive my parents’ death— in person.” My eyes watered, and Ilya looked at me in regret before anger flashed across his face.

“He put other memories there too, only they didn’t feel like memories because I don’t remember them. It was weird. One was in a greenhouse.”

Ilya looked down and wiped at his phone with a table napkin, and I watched his chest rise and fall before he let out a breath. Did he know about the greenhouse? He didn’t appear surprised.

“Where is the greenhouse?” I asked. “Is there one?”

He cleared his throat. “There is.” He was tensing up; I could see it in the stiffness of his shoulders.

“So that was real?”

“Probably.” He put his hand across his mouth, leaning to the side on the table, and wiped his fingers along his lips before sitting back up.

“Probably?” What the hell? What was I supposed to do now? Was I caught between two men?

Ilya shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “I’m sorry.”

“Why? It has nothing to do with you.”

He raised his eyebrows and looked away.

*I can't do this*, I thought, and sighed. I took a sip of my water and stared at the tablecloth, eyeing the delicate pattern of tiny ivory flowers and embroidery.

This was a problem I intensely did *not* want. And I had no idea what to do about it other than hope I never went to that other place ever again.

“So, when I go to that other place, what happens to my body?”

“What do you mean?” He looked at me, puzzled.

“I mean where is my body, is it like dead or something, here?”

Ilya gave a little laugh, “No. It goes with you. But it’s here, too. That’s why I told you I wouldn’t let you go if you didn’t want to.”

“So... it disappears?” How strange.

“I guess? In a way, I suppose you disappear.” He looked like he was trying to think of an explanation. “Your brain waves change to allow you to move elsewhere while also being here.”

“So, it is a dream,” I said thoughtfully. “Two places at once.”

“Yes, and no. Have you ever heard of lucid dreaming?” I shook my head no.

“It’s like that, in a way, but with real-world consequences. In lucid dreaming, you have no physical world constraints. You can fly, for example. You can jump off a building and be fine or just enter another dream.”

He folded his hands together and continued, “With what you do, what we do, there are physical constraints but not many mental ones. Some people think it is the only plane where magic works to affect change here, and where fortune telling gets its information. Myths and legends likely originate from there.”

He paused, deep in thought. “If you ever hear of something strange washing into Boston Harbor—it likely came from there. If you hear about a legitimate witch that truly performs spells or predicts the future, they probably spend a lot of time there.”

“Not many people know about it, and even fewer can get there.” He pulled out a black credit card and placed it on the edge of the table, where our server grabbed it moments later.

“The ones that do know about it will stop at nothing trying to get there themselves. Some people *can* completely disappear—and come back.”

I sat back, stunned. “So that’s why Ramone wants me to light candles. He was trying to show me where I am, when I’m there, I guess?” I looked up at him, trying to process all the new information and seeking confirmation.

Our server brought our card back on a small saucer, and Ilya nodded a thank you to her with a slight smile that didn’t reach his eyes.

“I guess,” he conceded in irritation. “Let’s go.”

“What’s your problem with Ramone?”

Ilya stiffened. “He took something from me.”

“What did he take? Can you get it back?”

“That’s my plan.”

“Can I help?” I added quickly, “I’ll probably end up back there. Do you want me to look for anything?”

“You’re already helping me, Kiara.” He gave a dark laugh, not meeting my eyes, and stood up.

I followed him out and we waited for the car as I stared at the passing traffic, not really seeing anything, my mind going over all that I had just been told. How was I helping?

Ilya stood beside me, his arms crossed in front of him, and I could sense the turmoil inside of him. He hadn’t wanted to tell me any of what he just did; I knew. I could sense his anger and annoyance, and a bit of something else I couldn’t quite put my finger on.

I glanced up at him as the valet dropped his car off beside us, but he didn’t look at me. He opened the passenger door and closed it after I got in, looking at everything but me, and drove me home in complete silence.

He walked me to the door, placed a quick kiss on the top of my head, and left. I almost wished he hadn’t told me a thing.

His answers *did* make sense—and I had heard the term lucid dreaming before. It was vaguely familiar, but I’d never given it any real thought.

I put my purse down and flopped myself onto the couch, pulling out my phone, and quickly looked up “lucid dreaming”. Yep, it still did not apply.

The article I read did mention willing oneself to be conscious when you dream but as far as I could tell I couldn’t will myself out of a paper bag if I wanted to.

Was that it with Ilya? A little fling and it was over? I had felt the energy between us. There *was* something there. I couldn’t deny it, even if I didn’t know what it was, and even if I had only wanted a one-night stand.

Maybe it was good he had backed off—if that’s what he was doing. I still had to figure out what the story was with Ramone.

Remembering what Madison and I had talked about last night, I had to wonder if I had gone there as a little kid. Was that what Madison was talking about when she said my mom had gotten mad? For thinking my dreams were real? I had no

recollection of it, and no one to ask. I had no brothers or sisters, and no family at all—that I knew of, at least.

All I had was Madison, if she even remembered something as trivial as details of my dreams over twenty years ago. It was a long shot, but I texted her anyways.

Her response was that I had acted like I had a second life. She'd thought I had a really good imagination and told fun stories.

No, she did not remember details. None at all. Why was I asking her? Could I go out tonight? Did I get more sexy time with Ilya?

Plus, some questions about his anatomy that I sent her six eye-rolling emojis in response to and did not answer.

I needed to go back there. Back to the other place. I started shaking, my heart rate speeding up at thinking about Ramone. Would he be able to tell I spent time with Ilya? What would he do?

I tried to calm down, telling myself it was none of his business. I wasn't committed to either one of them. I wasn't committed to anyone at all, anywhere. It was my body, and I could do what I wanted with it. I was an adult.

Plus, it wasn't my fault he wouldn't tell me a damn thing about what was going on. But Ilya had. He was the only one who actually told me *something*.

While I wasn't completely convinced, it gave me some information. It let me know without a shadow of a doubt that I'm wasn't crazy.

He'd said I had *loved* him. Something tickled at the back of my mind, a memory, a wisp of memory, that I couldn't grab on to before it floated away and out of my reach.

I got up, walked into the bathroom, and took the key out of the medicine cabinet from where I had tucked it into a box of bandages, before returning to my bedroom. I considered putting it into my jewelry box, a small wooden cabinet my mother had given me for my twelfth birthday. I really wanted to wear it, but I wasn't confident that it would be smart.

The only one who hadn't asked for it was Ramone.

The box had little doors with hinges and small drawers, and a scrolled mirror on the upper half of one side. The little doors opened to reveal banks of tiny velvet-lined pull-out drawers, another space had a roll-up door inside, and in another spot, there was a secret compartment. Even as an adult, I felt a little thrill knowing it was there. The box was unique, complicated, and full of surprises.

Shoving the key in the hidden spot in the box, I looked around my room. I really wanted to wear it, but I didn't know what would happen or who would see it and decided the responsible thing to do was to tuck it away in the compartment.

I couldn't remember the last time I had slept in here. It was dusty but otherwise neat and orderly and sparsely furnished. I preferred sleeping on my couch and had done so for years.

It was less lonely, for some reason, and much easier to get out of my apartment when I was closer to the door. At this point I was used to my couch and comfortable there. I doubted I'd ever sleep in my bed again.

I closed the door and walked out.

## CHAPTER 17

Settled on my couch with my throw blanket. It was a constant source of comfort, one of the very few things that I'd salvaged from my parents' house. It had taken a while to get the smell of smoke out of it, but it was in one piece, a hand-knit red, green, and blue blanket that my grandmother had made for my mother.

When I was young, I'd confiscated it from the back of my parents' couch. I'd wrapped myself up in the blanket and let myself feel the absence of my parents like a punch in the gut. I missed their hugs, I missed their love, and I missed feeling safe.

Tempted, I almost pulled up a photo of my mother and father on my phone. but stopped before it was too late. It was too much to handle right now, not if I wanted to do anything else. I wiped the tears from my face with my hands. I had stuff to do.

I snapped my laptop shut after catching up on work emails and forms and heated up a frozen dinner. My mind wandered to Ilya, and Ramone, while I stared at the microwave's timer counting down. I needed to see Ramone again, and get some answers, but with his whole ten-minute countdown thing, I had some reservations about looking for him on purpose.

If I somehow got back there, where would I reappear? On that road that I disappeared from, or back on the bed? Maybe on the edge of the field where Ilya had found me. But the field was only that one time and hadn't happened since, so I figured that was unlikely.

Why had he given me ten minutes? What was he gonna do, throw me in a dungeon?

I ate my dinner without looking at my phone even once. Madison had texted me earlier, but I didn't open it. Mabel had, too, which wasn't all that common, but I ignored her text as well.

I need to be able to go back there, but back to my room in Ramone's house, I decided, dungeons be damned. And I should probably bring the key and go look through the bookcase where I found it more thoroughly.

Any time I had spent in that house, I'd been either distracted or scared. I needed to maintain a level head in there and focus. I'd deal with Ramone's threat if I had to.

Laying down on the couch, I pulled the blanket around me, thinking about my room in that house, and trying to picture it. Trying to immerse myself, I thought about the bed there, so comfortable I hadn't even known a bed like it could exist, and the beautiful rich warm colors of the room. Shades of deep red and warm gold.

Him.

*I saw him yelling at me about my necklace, a piece of jewelry that had been handed down throughout my family, mother to daughter, for as long as anyone knew. The necklace was "cheap" looking he had said, and he hadn't wanted me wearing it, so I never did. Except for this one time.*

*He tried to grab it off my neck, scratching me, as I tried to wrestle my way out of his grip as we rolled around. The key pendant fell off and tumbled under the couch. I was scared and angry and he shoved me onto the couch and unclasped the necklace and then reached under the couch, his hand coming back empty. "Where is it? I know you have it, you bitch."*

Stunned, I sat up abruptly as the memory faded away. He wanted my necklace. Was he looking for the key?

That was the night my parents had died.

He'd always made sure I looked a certain way and wore certain clothes. I couldn't leave the house without makeup on.



There was an endless number of things that would make him angry, and that list changed on a whim.

I didn't understand how a key I had found at Ramone's house ended up on my neck while I was with him—unless I really had been with Ramone before.

The more I thought about it, the worse everything got.

I went and grabbed the key out of my jewelry box and threaded it on to my necklace chain. He couldn't tell me what to do anymore. Even though he was gone, it made me feel just a little more in control of my life to do something he wouldn't have approved of.

Silly, I knew, but it was a step in the right direction. I didn't remember how I got the necklace back, but I was grateful I had. He must've put it down somewhere and I'd grabbed it. Why didn't I remember the key?

*I heard a beeping sound and saw machines hooked up around me, an IV connected to my hand, a heart monitor nearby. My vision was foggy, and I felt like I was under water, things blurring around me. I sensed movement and tried to turn my head, but failed.*

*Someone was in the room with me, but I couldn't open my eyes all the way. Something touched my neck, gently moving my head, and carefully moving my long hair out of the way. I felt lips brush my forehead and the back of a hand caress my cheek. I tried to lean into it, but I couldn't move at all.*

*"Come back to me," I heard, and I struggled against the darkness that was taking over again, "Don't go. Don't do this. Please." I sank into the blackness, escaping the overwhelming pain.*

Memories were starting to come back to me, things I had forgotten and didn't really want to remember.

I still didn't recall much about my stay in the hospital, other than when I left and was checking out with doctors, therapists, and the police—in case I remembered any new details. I didn't remember anyone visiting me, but I had been in a coma most of the time.

He had committed suicide, they said. Set himself on fire. He was a pile of bones. Underneath his bravado, he was a coward.

Madison and Mabel had visited, but it wasn't my friends in the memory that had just come back. The voice I'd heard wasn't clear. I had no idea who was there whispering to me.

They had said not to do something. Don't do what? I couldn't do anything while I was there. The memory felt important, but I didn't know if it would turn out to be.

All I knew for sure was I needed to be back at Ramone's house. I tried to clear my mind and lay back down, to picture the inside of the house again. I tossed and turned for a while as my thoughts flitted to random things, and I pulled them back, trying to focus.

I woke up on the bed, back in the room Ramone said was mine, and looked around. I had actually done it. *On purpose*. I had made my way back with intention, successfully. I felt a sense of pride.

Was that all it took? Thinking about it? That hadn't really worked before. It had seemed like I had just popped in and out without warning. No matter, I was here, just as I had intended.

Everything looked the same. The gorgeous furniture, the warm tones on the walls and bed, the gleaming hardwood floors with a huge intricate carpet placed in the center.

I walked over to the bookcase where I had leafed through the books and found the key. I grabbed the small leather-bound book with the fancy writing and flipped through the pages. I didn't see any drawings of a key, just the same plant sketches and Latin words and measurements.

This time, instead of an incomprehensible recipe, I could see that it was directions for a tincture or elixir and wondered if it was a recipe for the wine I had found in the abandoned house.

It couldn't be, though, because no one would leave that unsecured in a crumbling house, not if it was supposedly so valuable. Anyone could find it there.

But I'd left it there. I cringed.

I would have to go back and get it.

I had to assume it was valuable, since I'd drunk it with Julian. He had handed off a key similar to mine to the bartender, who then then came back with the exact same drink—the same as the one I had discovered in a dusty cabinet.

The book was shaking in my hand as my anxiety built up, thinking of Ramone storming into the room and catching me here. I squeezed my eyes shut and tried to modulate my breathing.

*No one can hurt you here*, I told myself, before a thought of the wolf who scratched me intruded on my thoughts. My heart started pounding harder, and I let myself sit down on the floor and wait, trying to breathe.

It felt like minutes went by, but it could've been hours as I sat there, waiting. My right leg started shaking for no reason, although I knew it was anxiety.

Every time I thought I was getting so much better, my anxiety had to pop up and remind me it was there and try to suck me into its black hole.

My leg stopped shaking, and I stood up. Reaching for my neck, I felt my chain with the key and tucked the pendant under my neckline. I was in the green dress again; the same dress Ramone had shoved up around my waist while I was on his lap.

Would he know about Ilya? Would he be able to tell?

I stepped out into the hall, pausing to look down the long hallway to my left. The moon was at just the right angle to cast light through a window at the end, causing the crystals hanging from the chandeliers to sparkle in the moonlight, little rainbows shimmering on the marble flooring and carpet runner. "Beautiful," I said out loud.

Heading that way instead of down the stairs as always, I paused to peek into any room that had an open door. Some of the rooms had sheets covering furniture; others were empty.

I pushed one door fully open, thinking I had found the greenhouse, but it was just a small atrium. Gorgeous, and full of large ferns and Calla lilies, but not the greenhouse I would've explored had it been the right one.

A large window was at the end of the hall, and I walked down and looked out. It faced the forest with the full moon skimming the treetops. Searching for stars, I gasped when I saw the northern lights.

Green waves of misty light slowly swirled overhead, just as I had been wanting to see. I stood transfixed, watching their motion in awe. I had always wanted to see the northern lights and had never found them.

“Not as beautiful as you.”

I whirled around at the familiar voice. “Ramone.”

He looked at my chest, where his wolf had scratched me. “It didn't leave a mark,” I said, touching where a scar should've been.

“I wasn't concerned it would.”

“Oh.” All my bravado had left me, and I wasn't sure what to say. He wasn't wearing his hooded cloak or even a suit jacket, just dress pants and a long-sleeved black button-up shirt that he had rolled the cuffs on.

He stood there staring at me, his hands in his pockets, more relaxed than I had ever seen him, and it threw me off.

“You've created quite a stir.” He raised an eyebrow.

I wasn't sure what he was referring to. There were too many things going on. Julian. The necklace. Memories of Alex. *Ilya*. “What do you mean?”

“I thought you were lying to me before.” He stepped closer, eyeing me, and I started trembling.

“About what? I still don't know you. What was your ten-minute thing about? What are you going to do?”

“Ahh, but you do know me.” He stepped around me and leaned on the windowsill, right next to where I stood, and took

my shaking hand in his own.

“What am I going to do? Nothing.” He let out a breath and shook his head. “You never did listen to me.”

“Not again,” I protested, pulling away, not wanting to get sent on another memory journey.

“How do you do that? Make me remember stuff?” He was standing right next me. We were inches apart, and I didn’t trust him not to send me against my will.

“Energy. There are certain places, or ways, you can touch someone to accomplish something. It wouldn’t work if you weren’t open to it.”

“Energy? How do I stop it?”

“Close that part of yourself off. Though if you do, you might close off the useful things too.” He stood up, and I backed away. “You are exceptional at closing things off, so it shouldn’t be a problem for you.”

“Obviously it is for me when it comes to you,” I said bitterly, thinking of his hold over me.

“Kiara, what happened with Julian? Yes, Julian,” he added in response to my reaction at hearing his name.

“How do you know him?” I asked, shocked to hear his name from Ramone’s lips.

Ramone took a step and grabbed my necklace, yanking the key out from my neckline. I reached for his hand, trying to stop him from taking it. He looked at me, down at the key, and dropped it back down against my chest.

“Why does everyone want this key? And don’t tell me you don’t know.” I stepped away from him.

“Who is everyone?” He narrowed his eyes.

“Julian. I guess my ex had wanted it too. Ilya asked for it.” He scowled at the sound of Ilya’s name. “What is your problem with Ilya, anyway?”

“Ilya would sell his own mother if he thought it would benefit him.”

Not my Ilya, no. I couldn't believe what Ramone was saying. Ilya clearly cared about me; we were at least friends. He didn't know what he was talking about.

"You're wrong." I shook my head. "What does Julian want with it? It's just a key. What does it go to?" He already has one key, I remembered.

"It keeps something safe, something connected to you—"

"Julian had a key that looked just like this one." I held the pendant up, interrupting him. "It had the etching on it. It could have been the same exact key."

Ramone rolled his eyes and shook his head as if I was a child. "It wasn't the same. Julian was trying to trick you. There's only one, no matter what he implied."

"He didn't say anything about it, just handed it to a bartender."

"Mm. And they brought the wine out, I'm sure, shortly thereafter."

"What's that drink?" I asked. "What is in it?"

"You've had it," Ramone remarked, looking at me.

I nodded. "Yes. The night I did is the same night you took me from Ilya."

Ramone looked deep in thought and paced back and forth. To my surprise, there was someone walking down the hall towards us.

"Ramone?" I nodded towards the approaching figure.

He glanced at me and then down the hall, sighed in irritation, and then stood still, waiting for the man to approach. I recognized him as the man who had been on horseback with Ilya.

I looked at Ramone, waiting for instructions or an explanation. I was uncomfortable at the intrusion. I didn't know what to expect in this place and it had me on edge. Ilya had said other people could come here, but I had enjoyed thinking it was all mine.

He squeezed my shoulder lightly, reassuring me, as the man stopped in front of us. A glimmer of recognition flickered across the man's face when he turned his head towards me.

"Branko," Ramone greeted him.

"Ramone." He reached out grabbing Ramone's shoulder and shaking his hand. "Your mute butler let me in," he said, laughing.

So, it wasn't just me, I thought. That guy really didn't talk. "Branko, you know Kiara."

He smiled at me. "Yup. Nice to see you." I didn't remember ever being introduced and wondered if it was yet another thing I forgot, and Ramone was just being polite in introducing me. I smiled at him.

"Your office?" Branko suggested, turning away from me. I knew I was being dismissed. I glanced at Ramone, and he nodded, indicating I was to go.

I went back to my room, unsure of what to do with myself, annoyed at being left out. I didn't have my cellphone with me and missed it. Then realized it probably wouldn't work here. I lay down on the bed. Would any cellphone work here? *This is a missed opportunity for Verizon.* I laughed quietly.

What if Ramone tried to trap me here, even though he said he wouldn't do anything? He was being nice this time. I wasn't sure what had changed. It was unsettling, the difference. He was convinced I wasn't lying now, so maybe that was the change.

He had started to say the key had a connection to me somehow, but I had interrupted him. I'd wanted to get back to our conversation but not if he was going to force me to stay.

Why was one of Ilya's friends here if Ramone didn't trust him? I was getting more and more annoyed at being left in the dark and sat up on the bed.

I went to the bookcase and sat on the floor, determined to look through the handwritten books more thoroughly. If I had been here before my parents died, which was becoming more

undeniable by the minute, maybe eventually the words would start to make sense.

I paged through the one I really liked with the little metal clasps. It was odd to me, knowing I had paged through the same book years and years ago and now couldn't remember.

Had my parents' deaths really affected me that strongly, wiping my memory clean? It didn't seem plausible, but I didn't know what else would be an acceptable explanation.

Little things had started coming back to me lately, and not just from Ramone forcing them. Snippets of memories teasing the back of my mind, and I tried to grab onto them, just to find them slipping away as if I had tried to seize a plume of smoke. I was left with an impression of a memory, but not the memory itself. I wanted them all back, even if they were bad.

I leafed through the booklet, tracing the outlines of plants and herbs with my finger, as if feeling them would trigger a memory, but I felt nothing.

Some names sounded familiar, such as vervain and acacia, but I didn't know where I had heard them before. I turned a few more pages and I saw my mother's maiden name, Thorne, in the book. My heart leapt in my chest.

My mother had gardened extensively, so I knew herbs such as basil, oregano, and thyme, and I missed the smell of her garden, so aromatic and green. My eyes welled at the memory, and I slapped the book shut and shoved it back on the shelf and looked at other titles.

Thorne wasn't that uncommon of a name, but I still found it strange that it was in there. Maybe it was an old-fashioned spelling for rose thorns or something. Maybe they mistakenly added the last letter.

The bookcase was an eclectic mix, with some classics, and a Bible. Other titles, however, were strange. Lemuria, Solomon, Psychotronics, Ancient Esoterics, and some titles I couldn't pronounce if my life depended on it.

The rest were handwritten journals, some of which I hadn't opened yet, and I chose one.



Folded papers fell out when I lifted the cover and I found that they were maps. Crude hand-drawn maps, showing forests, hills or plains, some roads, a few lakes.

There didn't appear to be any oceans. Weird. I opened every map and couldn't find an ocean. I made a mental note to ask about that when I had the chance.

I went to look at the time and again remembered I didn't have my cellphone. There were a couple of clocks in the room, one on the mantle and one on an end table by the bed. The time didn't match on either one.

What was Ramone doing downstairs? Maybe he'd leave me in here forever.

Sighing, I went to the balcony and opened the doors and stepped out. The northern lights were still putting on a show and I leaned against the railing and watched the lights dancing across the sky, perfectly content.

"You're still here." Ramone crossed the balcony and stood beside me, done with whatever he had to do, and looked up at the sky.

"I've never seen the aurora borealis before, but I've always wanted to."

He turned around, his back to the railing. "Where have you been? All this time... why did you come back?"

"I don't remember being here before. Apparently, I was, though. That guy clearly recognized me. Ilya, too. But I have no recollection."

"And I as well, I know you." Ramone gave me a small smile, reaching out like he was going to touch me before pulling his arm back. "How did you get here if you don't remember?"

"Were those *all* real memories you gave me?" I asked, referring to the greenhouse. He nodded and looked away.

"What about the whole ten-minute-start thing? What was that really about?"

“I was angry. You didn’t need ten minutes. I didn’t need ten minutes. I knew you’d come back, eventually.” He sounded very satisfied with himself, and it was all I could do not to roll my eyes.

“You shouldn’t have come back after what you did.” His mood darkened. “I should’ve left you there when you ran away. The wolves are always hungry.”

“So it’s fine if I wander this wilderness alone and get eaten. Got it.” What a guy, letting me get lost in another world or whatever this place was. Another dimension, if Ilya was to be believed.

*That sounds safe*, I thought wryly.

Nowhere was safe anymore for me. “What is it you think I did to you?”

“My wolves tracked you the whole time—which was much longer than ten minutes.” He traced his finger along my neck, sending a shiver down my spine.

“Why won’t you tell me?” I moved away from his touch.

He looked at me, searching for something. “That’s something only you can do. You’re blocking me from telling you.”

“I’m not blocking anything. I’m trying to figure this out, which you know.”

“Kiara, what did you let them do to you?” Ramone was staring at me, and worry crossed his face, surprising me.

“What do you mean? Nobody did anything to me, nothing that you don’t already know about.”

He shook his head back and forth. “No, there’s something else.”

“There’s nothing. Stop that. You’re scaring me.”

A look of determination filled his eyes. “I’ll find out what happened.”

Dismissing his idea, I shook my head. There wasn’t anything I could do but wait. Wait for answers, search for

answers. I didn't know where to start and gazed out over the landscape, wishing for something to reveal itself and give me the information I needed.

"Would I have really died? What's out there? Who's out there?" I examined the tree line, searching for anything, any type of life, but I didn't see any movement.

"Nothing comes around here, for reasons you already know. We're safe here." Ramone stepped towards me, reached for my chin and stroked my cheek.

"I'm the only thing you need to worry about here." I glanced up at him and looked away quickly, pulling from his grasp.

Did he know he both scared and fascinated me? Did he know I ached to be on his lap again? I shook the thought away. My body kept insisting on betraying me.

He let out a deep sigh. "What happened that caused you to come back? I hadn't seen you since you were in the hospital."

I thought of the mystery figure that had visited me and wondered if it was him. "You saw me in the hospital?" That was sweet of him. But maybe he had been there to kill me. He had literally just threatened to feed me to his wolves.

"I don't know if I should banish you or kiss you." He turned around and leaned on the railing, looking away from me. "So, what happened that brought you back?"

"You can't banish me, not when I don't even know how I get here."

Ramone let out a frustrated grunt. "You got here somehow."

"I don't think you mind so much, not if you went to the hospital to see me."

"Tell me how you got here. What happened?"

"Fine," I said, taking a deep breath. "I went with my friends to an abandoned house to drink." He was looking at me like I was ridiculous, and I cleared my throat before

continuing. “And I was looking through cabinets and found an old bottle of wine and drank it...”

The pained look on his face was too much for me and I had to look away. “It was the same stuff Julian had brought out at the club in the casino.”

“You took what you thought was an old bottle of wine and just drank it?”

“Uh, yeah. I did.”

“Why would you do that?” He was incredulous. “What the hell is wrong with you? It could have been anything,” he yelled.

“Me? What is wrong with *me*? You just threatened to kill me, and I’m surrounded by death!” I took a deep breath before continuing. “I killed my parents, my family home burned down, my boyfriend beat the shit out of me on the regular, I had a heart attack, and I was in a coma. Then, I got kidnapped by what I thought was an imaginary man in a dream I can’t get out of!”

“I did die—in the hospital, and you said you should’ve let me die, and now, you’re worried I’d get hurt by an old bottle of wine,” I added. “I can’t make sense of anything!”

I let all my frustration and anger pour down on him, yelling at him in a torrent of fury. “What *isn’t* wrong with me? Maybe let’s start with that. The list’ll be much shorter.”

Tears were pouring down my face and I sniffled. I wiped my face with my hands and Ramone grabbed me, pulling me to his chest and cradling the back of my head.

“You didn’t kill your parents, Kiara.” I stiffened at his words. “That was all your ex.”

More tears streamed down my face. I missed them so much it felt like someone had stabbed me and left the knife in my heart, the pain bleeding out in a never-ending deluge. I let Ramone rub my back and hold me.

The contact was comforting. I breathed in the scent of him and closed my eyes, wishing things were different, wishing for

strength, wishing for the warmth and sun of the greenhouse and for my pain to go away and for everything to be normal. I thought of the way he had held me, trying to get me to light candles, and that feeling of *belonging* I had had. Like I was *home*.

I wanted to ask Ramone if he really was the one who visited me in the hospital, the shadowy figure just out of sight, that had gently begged me not to go.

It couldn't have been him, not this huge bossy man that thought he owned me and threatened my life.

If it was, why hadn't he saved me?

Maybe he did want me dead. He had let me go, left me in the dark clutches of my mind to the point where I didn't care if I lived or died. I could barely function on my best of days.

He gently moved my hair back from where it had fallen across my forehead and kissed my forehead softly.

I turned my head from his touch and pulled away. He was so wrong about everything. If I had just gotten away from my ex, I would still have them. It was my fault I didn't.

"I didn't leave him, though. I should've, but I was scared. Too scared. He threatened to kill them if I did. And they still died anyway." I choked back a sob.

"It was you or them. He was going to kill one or the other. There was no way around it."

"How can you be so sure?" Maybe it was only okay if *he* killed me.

"He needed your blood. Blood from your family line."

"What? He never asked for my blood." Why would he? This made no sense.

"It wouldn't have been enough if he did. He'd have to kill you." Ramone ran a hand through his hair and stepped away from me.

"That wine you drank? It's made from your family's blood, and a few other ingredients. I'm not sure why there's

some in a deserted house somewhere, but that wine has special properties. Properties *you* don't need—until you did, I suppose.”

“That bottle shouldn't be there,” he said thoughtfully. “It needs to be removed.”

“Wait,” I said. Special blood. Why had I never heard of this before? My parents never said a thing. It seemed vitally important, and not something that you should keep from your kid.

“What was he going to do?” The thought of him being here in this beautiful place seemed blasphemous, and I couldn't imagine him defiling it.

Why didn't my parents tell me about my blood? What if I needed a transfusion, or if I donated blood?

I suddenly understood their excessive protectiveness. It must've been to protect my blood, but it still wasn't right to withhold that information from me.

“There's a price on it, which places a price on *you*. Lots of people want to be here that can't get here without it.” I backed away from him cautiously. “Kiara, stop it.”

Hearing that there was a price on my head was terrifying. I didn't know what to believe. The stuff he was saying was too fantastical, too unbelievable. He made me sound like vampire bait or something.

Here I was walking around with some super rare blood flowing through my veins that my ex had killed my parents over. I didn't know who I could trust or where I could go, where I would be safe.

I still had a giant blank space where Ramone was concerned. Perhaps with good reason.

There was too much I didn't know about this new world where I was an unwilling participant. Suddenly, I was in some fight over a key and my own blood. I was just barely managing to tackle issues in the real world. I didn't want to be a pawn in anyone's game.

I needed to go home.

Trembling, and sensing a panic attack coming on, I tried to breathe, to concentrate on breathing and being home.

Ramone reached for me, and then I was gone.

## CHAPTER 18

A lot of time had passed. The light in my apartment indicated it was almost evening, and I checked my phone and saw that sure enough, it was late. I was tangled up in my blankets, one leg hanging off my couch and my toes stuck as if caught in a fishing net.

I brushed my hair back with my hands, smoothing it away from my face, and got up. I had lost a whole day while in that other place. Time seemed to move much more slowly there.

Everything I had learned came rushing back. *I have weird blood.* The thought was so strange to me. It wasn't like I could get it tested. Or was it?

It didn't sound like the greatest idea, and I imagined my blood getting stolen, or my getting locked up in some type of hospital or government place. That wouldn't really happen though, would it? I figured the safest thing to do would be nothing. Just leave it alone.

Did Ilya know?

He must have. He had asked if I had the key. He knew more than he was saying, even though he had told me more than anyone else. I wanted to see him but wasn't sure if I should. I was surrounded by unknowns.

Maybe I should give myself a day off. *Self-care.*

My therapist would be so proud.

I didn't have his phone number, anyway. I looked at my front door, remembering he had just shown up here uninvited.



Just in case, I decided to get dressed.

Thirty minutes later, I checked my cellphone. A bunch of notifications scrolled across my screen, mainly from Madison, the last one threatening to tear me out of my apartment. I chuckled. The others asked inappropriate questions about Levon. Madison must've been drunk.

One of the texts said she was on her way to pick me up.

Madison said we were going to a party, one she had briefly mentioned, and I had forgotten about. She'd be here in an hour. I had to hurry.

I put on a long-sleeved burgundy dress with a high neckline, the hemline ending mid-thigh. I added a black pair of strappy heels, curled my eyelashes and then put on eyeliner. I felt as ready as I ever would.

The party was on the North Shore, an area I had only driven through when I was younger to stare at the houses lining the waterfront. Madison and I, and a couple friends we lost touch with over the years, had skipped school one day and driven up.

We trespassed on private roads and picked out which houses we liked best, fantasizing about what life would be like in the huge manors and what the future would bring for me and my friends. It certainly looked a lot different from where I found myself today, I thought. This future was not what I had planned.

A couple of hours later Madison and I pulled up to a gated driveway entrance. The tall brick walls seemed to extend for miles on either side and we waited as a red light flashed on a camera overhead. The gates opened, and we drove down a long cobblestone road where a parking valet waited to open the car doors for us.

"Well, this is something," Madison said, her eyes darting around, taking everything in.

"I guess we wait?" There were people ahead of us, being helped out of their cars.

"I guess. Do I look okay?"

I had never seen Madison this nervous before and quickly reassured her she looked great. She was used to some aspects of a rich lifestyle due to James, but this was a whole other level. And he wasn't here to guide her, he was meeting us inside.

A valet came and opened the door, reaching for my hand and helping me out. "Thank you." I waited for Madison to come around the side of the car.

A sweeping staircase led up to the house, a massive pile of limestone and red brick. Gloved men in tailored suits held the doors open for us as we approached. I got a weird feeling as I walked through the entrance, a surreal, dream-like feeling, and Ramone's house came to mind.

There had been so much change in my life lately. While this didn't feel like that other place—the place I went to in my sleep—it still felt so strange. It didn't feel real.

Madison and I had never attended an event as fancy as this, and I'd thought the casino was upscale. I felt underdressed in my simple outfit and like I wasn't "pedigreed" enough to be in this estate.

Madison was wearing an ankle-length silver-toned sheath dress and matching sandals, her hair curled and piled on the top of her head while my mousey brown hair was hanging down my back, held in place by a simple gold headband.

"You look beautiful, as always." It was like she could sense my insecurity before I had time to even process it.

"Ugh I don't know." I look around as we walk through the foyer. "I feel like I should've rented a ballgown."

"We're fine," Madison insists. "We're not the only ones dressed like this. And you're way more beautiful than you give yourself credit for."

She was right about my clothes—others were dressed in simpler dresses. Some wore clothes that looked like they came out of an evening edition of a high fashion magazine or fairy tale, but many others wore attire similar to ours.

"I don't think I know anyone here."

“James and Al and Mabel are here somewhere. Let’s get a drink and look for them,” Madison said.

We passed through the cream-colored foyer, towards a throng of people. A massive cut crystal chandelier hung overhead, sparkling and twinkling, almost taking up the whole ceiling. I wondered if the gilded edges and accents on the walls were made of real gold, or just painted to look that way. I decided they were real.

There were black marble statues of gargoyles, dragons, and lions strewn about in little alcoves, their eyes seeming to follow me. It was like walking through a museum and suddenly, I felt very young and out of place, and mildly uncomfortable.

I really needed that drink Madison mentioned.

We entered a large room where people were mingling and speaking in low voices, laughing and enjoying themselves. The voices were low, but there were so many that the effect was louder than I expected. I grabbed Madison’s hand, and she looked at me and giggled as she clasped it in hers. We started across the room, pausing at a waiter passing out champagne.

She passed me a glass and we stood there and gulped down the champagne. She giggled, “This is crazy!”

Relieved I wasn’t the only one of us who was uncomfortable, I nodded. “Who would’ve thought we’d end up here?” I asked.

“Why are we even here? How’d you get invited?”

“James. They’re celebrating some kind of merger and made some new contacts or something, I don’t know. He closed on some huge deal. He said I could bring you.” Madison grabbed us two fresh glasses when the waiter came to take our empty ones.

“So, he got promoted, kinda,” she said.

I took a sip of my drink. “That’s cool, what kind of deal?”

He wasn’t nearly as well-off when she had first met him, when he was young and full of big ambitions, ambitions he

had presumably realized.

“Yeah. But he might get busier, I guess.” Madison looked a little conflicted and then added, “Some kind of new virtual reality thing? But not really virtual? I don’t know.”

“I don’t know anything about that kind of stuff.” I wasn’t really into the tech stuff a lot of people my age were. I never even played video games.

“I don’t either,” she giggled. “I’m definitely into black credit cards, though.”

I laughed and looked around as we stood there people watching, not quite sure what to do. “It looks like people are outside on a deck or something. Wanna go over there?”

“Yeah, let’s go.”

We headed across the floor and walked through a huge set of French doors that were propped open, framing a view of the Atlantic between fluttering gauzy curtains.

The full moon reflected off the surface of the water, the ocean stretching out for miles and miles. We were up on a cliff, and the view extended across the manicured lawn to a rocky border that blocked a drop off to the water below. It was beautiful.

“Wow.” Madison said, standing beside me at the stone railing. “This is cool.”

There was a lit stone fireplace at each end of the expansive patio, and small firepits were burning scattered throughout between cushioned benches and marble tables. The ambiance was warm and inviting, in contrast to the cold bricks of the floor we stood on.

There were probably heat fans inconspicuously placed as well to fight off the early November chill. I stared at the fires, waiting for a vision of my parents’ home to affect me, but it didn’t happen.

“Hi babe.” Madison greeted James with a kiss when he came up behind her and gave her a kiss.

“Hey, Kiara,” James greeted me. “Levon is here somewhere.” He looked around and then went back to holding Madison.

*Levon.* It took me a moment to remember they knew Ilya as Levon. I hoped I hadn’t called him Ilya in front of anyone; I didn’t think I did.

My eyes scanned the crowd, skimming over the tables, benches, and clusters of people, and I didn’t see him. I thought I saw Thomas, the bartender from the club in the casino, but lost sight of him before I could confirm.

Julian could be here, I realized, and shivered. I wasn’t sure how I would react if he were. I touched my neckline and felt the key pendant under the material.

It wasn’t easily visible through the fabric, although the chain was exposed at the back of my neck. My hair covered it for the most part. I felt an urge to be back at Ramone’s house, where I felt safer than I did here after thinking of Julian.

*They want my blood,* I remembered. The thought terrified me. What would they do to me? I looked around again, hoping not to see Julian. He was already willing to bite me.

Madison was cozy on a couch with James and Mabel and Al sat across from them, a low table in between. I need more alcohol for this. I was starting to feel like the fifth wheel again.

Mabel gave me a little wave as I walked away from the railing and towards where they sat, to an empty couch across from them.

One of the firepits was just on the other side and I shoved away the image of my parents’ burning home that it triggered out of nowhere, determined to enjoy myself. The fires were to keep us warm.

It wasn’t every day that one went to a party at a mansion. I wanted to just enjoy it, enjoy the moment. I couldn’t control what other people did; much as I wished I could.

I could only control myself; my therapist said that all the time. I had to let go and just relax.

Al put up his glass of champagne as if he wanted to clink glasses with me, noticed I didn't have anything in my hand, and chuckled and motioned his hand in the air. A waiter came over with a tray of champagne and I grabbed two glasses.

"Go big or go home Kiara," James said, laughing.

"I need it," I said and took a sip. "What is this about? Who owns this place?" I motioned around with my hand.

Al was tugging on one of the springy curls on top of Madison's head saying "Boing!" and she was swatting him away as Mabel giggled.

James rolled his eyes before answering me. "Can't take them anywhere. One of the investors in the company, celebrating a merger and a deal."

"Oh, well, congratulations."

"Thank you." He smiled. "Al, stop touching my woman." Mabel giggled again.

Stephan and a couple of the other Gold Chain Guys strolled over and settled into the seats that were just behind us, bordering our own, and Al and James greeted them.

Madison, Mabel, and I made small talk for a little while as they talked, getting louder the more they drank, the alcohol setting firmly into their bloodstreams.

I was having fun, I realized, and a sense of peace washed over me. Thoughts of Ramone, Julian, Ilya and my other pressing issues were tamped down and locked in the neat and tidy box I kept them in.

I felt relatively normal, almost as if I didn't have a care in the world. I was a regular girl, without *special* blood, without strange and beautiful men pursuing me, firmly anchored to the earth.

No snowy starlit wolves were chasing me, and my emotions were free of the chaos that tried to drown me. Here, under the light of the moon with my best friend, was exactly where I was supposed to be.

I felt fingers trail on my shoulder, moving my hair as they traveled down the top of my arm.

Ilya. I stiffened as I looked up at him, not sure what to expect.

He hadn't said a word to me after we had stepped out of the restaurant. And he *still* hadn't asked for my phone number. I didn't know how to bring that up without seeming awkward or needy.

He kissed the top of my head gently before greeting James and Al. Madison gave me a little smile, and Mabel looked at me like she had never seen me before. I guess I had neglected to update Mabel? No matter, it's not like we talked all that much.

Ilya came around the couch and James stood up and gave him a side hug while patting him on the back. They walked away, trailed by Al.

"What was that about?" Mabel asked me, all wide-eyed, as I took a gulp of my champagne.

"I know him."

"He took her away from the table the other night, remember?"

"Oh yeah. I forgot." Mabel turned to me. "Are you guys together or something?"

"I guess? I don't know." I felt my face heating, and my eyes darted in the direction they had walked. Al was staring off into the distance and James was grinning and gesturing with his hands.

Ilya was standing there, arms crossed, listening to him intently and nodding occasionally. He noticed me watching and sent me a knowing smile, like he knew what we were talking about, before I turned away.

"I don't know. But we have spent time together." How much time was an entirely different story, one that I didn't have any answers to. "What is James doing with him?"

Madison interjected, “Well, lock it down—he’s hot.” She drew out the word, like we were still teenagers, fanning her face with her hand pretending to swoon.

The champagne was getting to her brain. “Acquisitions? Something like that.” she answered.

“I’m not trying to rush anything. I do really like him though. And yes, he’s hot.” I laughed. Acquisitions, she said. Must be something to do with the casino.

I badly wanted to tell Madison what was going on, but it was too crazy for me to explain, and I didn’t know if she’d even believe me.

How did you tell someone that what you thought were dreams were real? That you had this whole other life now, that you’d had it forever, but couldn’t remember it?

I need to get back there and finish my conversation with Ramone.

My mind wandered to Ramone, wondering what he was doing at this very moment. Did he have any way of knowing what *I* was doing?

The things Ilya had said about magic made me uncertain. I had no idea how that all worked, and I didn’t know what he meant. If that place was really so special, maybe Ramone could track me if he wanted to. The thought worried me. He would know about me and Ilya.

I reached for the other glass of champagne and drank it all down, placing the glass back on the table. Ramone didn’t own me, much as he seemed to think I was his. Ilya never claimed I was his, just that we had been together.

It was so confusing. Ramone terrified me, but I wasn’t sure why—other than him saying he could kill me. There was a pull I felt, but I didn’t want to feel it or give in to it.

I smelled the rich, heady fragrance of gardenias, and took a deep breath. It smelled so wonderful, and I closed my eyes letting the aroma fill me.



*My mind flashed to a memory of petting a fluffy wolf in a garden full of white blooms. They were bursting around shiny deep green leaves and green grass. A younger version of Ramone petted and played with one of the huge black wolves.*

*The sun shone down on us, and the air was crystal clear under a blue sky, the bluest sky I had ever seen. I laughed as it licked him and they rolled around, and he tried to pull its head away from his face.*

It was the day I met Ramone, I realized with a start. *Gardenias.*

Some of my champagne splashed out of my glass as I gasped and glanced around, hoping no one saw my reaction.

“You okay, Kiara?” Madison asked, concerned.

“Yeah. I think I need to walk around.” Here, at this party, was the last place I wanted my memories to come tumbling back.

Ilya was staring at me from across the patio and excused himself from James and started walking towards me. By the time I had stood up, he had already reached me.

“Do you want to walk for a while?” He cradled my elbow with his hand as he leaned over me and whispered in my ear.

I stood up and let him lead me away, his arm light around my waist. Ramone wasn't here. He wasn't here to make me remember things against my will or manipulate me. This was all me.

“What happened?” he asked.

I wasn't sure what to say. I had met those wolves before, and at one point they were *much* friendlier and a lot less scratchy.

“Are there flowers here?” I looked around, not seeing any. I didn't smell any either, just the salty, tangy scent of the Atlantic Ocean.

It was too late in the year for there to be any flowers blooming on the lawn. We were at a quiet corner of the

expansive patio, separated from the crowds, and I scanned what I could see of the grounds, just in case.

“I don’t think so. Why?” He pulled me closer to him, holding me by my hips so I was pressed up against him.

“I smelled flowers.”

“That was an interesting reaction to flowers you had.” His hands moved to my lower back, gently massaging me.

“I remembered something.”

Ilya stiffened around me, his hands stilling. “What did you remember?”

“Ramone. A garden.”

“Really.” Ilya’s voice turned dark, and his arms traveled up my back, nudging my arms up so that I had no choice but to put them around his neck and look up at him.

“I don’t know what it means.” I was hesitant to tell him anything more. Would he ask me for the key again? Ramone had warned me about him, but *he* wasn’t here with me. Ilya was.

“Do you trust your memories?” Ilya turned his head and kissed my arm gently before leaning in and taking my lips in his.

I didn’t get to answer him before his tongue was in my mouth and he pulled me against him. I gripped his shoulders through his suit, holding onto him, as he ran his hands down my back, gripping my rear and pushing me closer.

His hardness against my belly made me wish we were at his penthouse. He could make me forget. Forget about Ramone and the wolves.

I ran my hand up his back and gripped his hair, which was hanging loose instead of being pulled back in an elastic and pulled on it lightly, earning me a moan against my mouth.

“You’re coming home with me tonight,” he promised.

Someone cleared their throat. “Levon, you’re needed.”

He released me abruptly, angry at the intrusion. A man I had never seen before was talking to Ilya and gave me a quick glance, dismissing me after looking me up and down. “The library,” he said before walking away.

Ilya gave an irritated sigh and shoved his hair back, raking his hand through it. “I’ll be back, don’t go. You’re coming home with me when I leave.”

I watched him walk away in the direction the man had gone. It was awfully presumptuous of him to assume I’d go home with him. But I wanted to and knew I would.

A knot of guilt formed in the bottom of my chest thinking of Ramone, even though I knew it was ridiculous. He had no hold on me. Neither of them did. I hadn’t committed to either man.

And Ramone was nowhere around. He didn’t come here. So why did I feel so guilty?

I should’ve asked Ilya what was going on. Were we together? Was he my boyfriend? There were so many things I was unsure of.

Madison was waving me over, standing up near where we were all sitting earlier, and I headed her way. “We’re going into the ballroom. Where’s Levon?” She looked around.

“He was called away. He’s here somewhere.”

Mabel, James, and Al joined us, and we walked through the large foyer and found our way to the ballroom.

A high arched ceiling gilded in gold and black stretched above us and elaborate gold lampposts lined the walls, with lit candles sparkling inside crystal holders on top of each.

Deep curved windows were between each lamp, with satiny curtains draping against the glass in front of matching cushioned bench seats. Each window was like a private room.

I counted at least ten crystal chandeliers suspended above us, with lit candles and crystal pendants glittering like the icicles on a Christmas tree. I felt vastly underdressed under the golden flickering light.

We stood there, gaping. “This is *ridiculous*.” Mabel gasped in awe.

I turned towards her, surprised. She was a woman of few words. “It’s amazing. It’s even fancier than Ra—” I cut myself off.

*Fancier than Ramone’s house.*

“Huh?” Mabel turned to me.

I shook my head. “Nothing. This looks like the castle in *Beauty and the Beast*.”

“Girls, we’re blocking everyone.” James pushed past us, and we moved to the side, towards one of the window alcoves.

“Maybe we should’ve dressed fancier,” Madison whispered in my ear. I heard someone tuning a violin, and possibly a cello. I was no music expert, but I was getting excited. I couldn’t even begin to dream of being in a place like this, yet here I was.

“Maybe. But others are underdressed, too.”

Some men were in tuxedos, and I thought I saw someone wearing a top hat. The variety of dresses I was staring at was incredible. Some looked like they stepped out of a fairy tale, others the latest issue of *vogue*. Some looked similar to Madison and me, with simpler dresses. I was glad I’d worn heels, at least.

It felt weird standing there staring at everyone, and I turned to look at the bench seat. Al and Mabel were embracing, with her sitting on his lap. James and Madison were making moves to go towards the dance floor and join the couples that had started dancing. The musicians had finished warming up and started playing.

“I’m going to find a restroom,” I announced, and no one paid attention, so I turned to leave.

The crowd was growing as I weaved my way through, trying to find my way back to where we had entered and found myself back in the foyer. There were a few people milling

about, headed for wherever their destination was in the huge building.

I looked around, trying to spot signage or something that would indicate a bathroom, but I didn't see anything and headed down a hallway, examining the doors.

Most were locked. I couldn't tell if that indicated that it was an occupied bathroom, and I didn't want to stand in a hallway by myself.

Frustratingly, the hallway led me further and further away from people. The owners had to have a bathroom; they were human too.

The sound of low voices stopped me. They came from a door cracked open a little bit further down the hallway.

Finally, a bathroom.

It was male voices I was hearing, and I remembered this was someone's house—they might not have separate men's and women's rooms. I was unsure where to wait or what to do when I recognized one of the voices as Ilya's.

He was speaking with someone else, and I couldn't make out what they were saying. I took a couple more steps towards the door.

"She's remembering," I heard Ilya say.

They were discussing me.

I carefully took a few steps even closer to the door while making sure I stayed out of sight. Who was he talking about me with, and why? My personal life was no one's business but my own.

"Indeed, that is problematic."

*Julian.*

My heart hammered in my chest, all my blood rushing to my head. He was with Julian. I would recognize the odd cadence of his voice anywhere.

I peeked through the narrow opening as best I could, keeping several feet away and saw Julian, his blonde hair

brushing the tops of his shoulders in waves like he just came from the salon. He had a look of disinterest on his face.

They were both standing at a table that had papers scattered across its surface, and a laptop was open. Ilya was smoking a cigarette and reached out to spin a large globe that was sitting on an edge of the desk, letting his fingers drag along its surface as it spun.

“What do you suggest?”

“Time is passing.” Julian opened his gold pocket watch and clicked it shut, putting it in his breast pocket. The fob chain caught on something, and he smoothed it. “Time will not wait for you,” he said.

Ilya rolled his eyes.

“And neither will I, Ilya.” Julian warned and looked at him, watching him stub out his cigarette.

“Stop speaking in riddles, Julian.”

“Address the issue or it will be addressed for you.” Julian sat down in an upholstered chair, gripping the edges of the armrests.

“I can’t make her *not* remember. She’s strong.”

Julian gave a harsh laugh as he leaned forward and lowered his voice. “She’s a trainwreck, my friend.”

A “trainwreck”. He called me a *trainwreck*. My eyes started watering. I was an issue that needed to be addressed. I wasn’t sure what “being addressed” meant, precisely, but I knew it wasn’t a good thing.

I tried to modulate my breathing as it was getting louder. This was the last place I wanted to have an anxiety attack. I *was* getting better. I wasn’t *that* much of a trainwreck anymore. What an asshole.

*They don’t want me to remember.*

The one thing I didn’t remember was my relationship with Ramone, or my dreams of him. Dreams that turned out to be very real. I still didn’t remember a thing about Ilya in the past,

although he had seemed familiar when I'd met him in that place on the side of the road.

I didn't remember much about being in the hospital, either. Just a hazy memory of tubes, and beeps, Madison visiting once in a while. Mabel being there once or maybe twice? Clinicians, doctors, and therapists trying to absolve me of guilt, my brain split in two, and unspeakable pain.

I didn't really want to remember, and I'm wasn't sure if I even could remember.

Now, I had memories of him here. Ilya. Here in real life. Neither of them knew I had seen Ramone again, did they?

Ilya had acted like he wanted to protect me from Julian, that night he took me to his penthouse. He had said I'd loved him before. He had told me what that other place, that dream place, really was. He wouldn't have told me if he didn't care about me, right?

So why was he with Julian right now, talking about me?

"Procure the item or we'll take what we need."

"Don't hurt her." Ilya looked bored and lit another cigarette.

"You're a man of your word," Julian stated confidently. "Wrap this up. Soon."

"Julian..."

"What consideration does the lion have for the lamb?" Julian brushed invisible crumbs off his leg and raised one of his hands in the air, as if to say it didn't matter.

"Sometimes..." Ilya began, "the lamb has sharp teeth."

Julian laughed loudly. Ilya turned as if to leave, and I backed away slowly so as to not make any noise. I heard footsteps further down the hall and used the sound to walk away as quickly as I could, back towards the ballroom.

The further I got, the less I worried about making any noise and I hurried my pace. I turned around, right before the foyer, and saw Ilya stepping out of the room, running one hand

down his face. He dropped his cigarette on the floor and ground it out with his heel.

He didn't glance my way as I entered the ballroom.

Nearly everyone was dancing, the room awash in a swirling sea of colors under the flickering candlelight.

This couldn't just be for some business merger thing that James had. I slipped into an alcove and sat on a bench. Someone else sat on the other end, busily typing away on their phone.

I pulled my phone out of my purse and typed in the address of the mansion. It looked like they had an Autumn Ball every year. There were photos of glamorous people and extravagant decorations, with a different muted color scheme each year. Some headlines appropriately called it the "Gargoyle Mansion", due to all the statues of different creatures.

There were no references to an owner. I guessed this year James and everyone were invited because of his job. He must've made new contacts. That was the only thing that made sense for us to be here.

Thoughts of what I'd overheard twirled around in my brain, threatening to ruin my night. My heart was pounding, and I didn't want to ruin my friends' night, either. There was no way he could've been talking about me; I was jumping to conclusions.

"Come dance with me." Ilya stood in front of me, startling me as I was wrapped up in my phone and my thoughts. I quickly closed the search page and shoved my phone in my bag.

He held his hand out towards me as if he hadn't just been talking about me with Julian, like everything was normal. I needed to get better at trusting people instead of automatically assuming the worst.

Wordlessly, I took his hand and let him lead me out to the middle of the dance floor, and he led me into a waltz. I had so many questions I wanted to ask him, they zipped around in my



head like bees in a clover field, never settling in one place for long.

I realized I *had* come to trust him to an extent. I still wasn't completely over him leaving me in Ramone's clutches—and he had never given me an answer as to why he had done that.

There had to be another explanation for the conversation I overheard. There had to be. I tried to push away the warning sirens in my head. My whole body was screaming at me as I tried to calm down my worry.

I pressed myself up against him and spoke in his ear. "Ilya, why did you leave me to Ramone? In the woods, when he took me. Why?"

He stiffened and then rested his chin on my head, not answering.

"Why won't you tell me?" My stomach felt like it was sinking, and I was starting to succumb to the pool of anxiety threatening to tear me down.

"Calm down, Kiara," he instructed me. "I can feel you trembling."

Seeking comfort in his firm body I pressed into him, tucked under his chin as we slowly danced. We stepped back and forth as couples twirled around us. I remembered being next to him, lying in his bed, his arm around me while he gently caressed me. I tried to take comfort in those memories.

I should've been running away instead of letting the monster under my bed hold me, part of my brain told me.

His actions told me two different stories. In one story, he protected me and helped me to navigate my new, strange world. In the other, he was a villain I couldn't resist.

Ilya was sexy, beautiful, and made me feel alive—something I hadn't felt in a very long time. I didn't know which story to believe.

He said I was going home with him tonight. I needed to trust people and live my life. I would just go with him and see

what happened. Maybe he'd open up to me some more.

He pulled on the back of my neck so that I looked up and covered my mouth with his. I placed my hands on his shoulders, trying to get as close to him as possible, my breasts crushed to his body as our tongues tangled together.

He tightened his grip on me and placed his arm around my waist, our bodies inseparable. Heat pooled between my legs as I breathed him in, taking in his cologne and the scent that was uniquely his. I felt his need growing again, pressing against my belly.

“We should go,” I whispered against his lips. He sighed and released me, opening the space between us.

He rubbed the back of my neck, and his hand ran over my necklace chain. My hair had caught in it, and I lifted it to relieve the pulling sensation and reached for him again.

I caught sight of Julian in the background, talking to someone whose back was turned and I was trying to take note of the direction he moved in. I lost sight of him in the mass of people and ballgowns.

Madison and James were nowhere to be seen in the ocean of moving colors. It was just me and Ilya, and I reached for his him again.

Our lips met. I heard my name being called behind me and felt a hand on my shoulder. As I turned to look, Ilya let go of me.

*Alex in a top hat. My ex.*

**The End**

To be continued in *The Watcher and the Witch*

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Larissa Vincente lives deep in the woods of New England with her cat and a small child. Previously, she has had short stories, poems, and manuals published. This is her first full-length novel.