

*If Love is a*  
**LOADED  
GUN**

GRACE LEGORE

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HAVEN BOOK ONE

*If Love is a*  
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GUN

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## CONTENT WARNING

*If Love is a Loaded Gun* is an adult novel that contains elements that might be suitable for some readers.

There are mentions of substance abuse, explicit sexual scenes, and dark themes involving violence.

Readers who may be sensitive to these elements, please take note.

Please note that this book is the first in a series of interconnected standalone titles.

There is no cliffhanger to Serita and Finn's love story, and each book will follow the story of a different couple, while the overarching plot will take place throughout the series, and will be best read in order.

Finn and Serita's story teases the edge of darkness, but the series will escalate from here.



*Always be on the lookout for the presence of wonder.*

— E. B. White

PART ONE

*The Fixer and the Performer*

# 1

## SERITA



“The wolf pack cling to their secrets like shields,” I say, going for melodrama. If I squint, I can imagine myself as the narrator for a soap opera with my phone propped against my shoulder like a mic. “I guess that makes me the rogue hunter knocking down their door with nefarious intentions.”

Eleanor laughs lightly on the other end. “You’re still calling them that? And did you just say *nefarious*?”

“If the shoe fits...” Nefarious about sums up the mystery that clouds places like this, old New England towns that cling to days past. A far cry from most other American towns I’ve seen, driven by a fast pace towards sleek modernity, and there’s a long list of those. Idle thoughts swirl while my hands are busy putting the car into park, borrowed from El since I sold mine earlier this year. “Tell me you don’t think they’re shady, and I’ll drop it.”

“I never said the nickname doesn’t fit,” she says over high-pitched shouts in the background. Her younger brothers, since

I have her car and she's not at work. "And *all* rich people are shady. They're not outliers."

I look out the windshield, eyeing the behemoth of a home I just pulled up at. "I won't argue with that."

Motion from the rearview window catches my eye, but when I turn, there's nothing there. I could've sworn it looked like the glowing eyes of an animal. Some small, winged creature. "Weird," I mutter.

"What's weird?"

"Nothing. Just thought I saw something. Probably a bunny." Morning light casts weird shadows across the expansive lawn spread out in all directions. "Something must've caught in the reflection."

Weird, but I'm used to weird. Ghost stories go up and down the eastern seaboard for a reason: it's naturally creepy, fueled by fascination with the macabre. Some lean into it for tourism, others write it off. I'm the former.

Looking out at the house, I wonder which kind my mother is. From what I've seen of it, the place lacks as much familiarity as the woman herself.

Jemima, or mom, recently moved in with her new fiancé, Oscar Vranes. From what I hear, their upcoming wedding will be quite the social event.

Not that I'm resentful. I just don't know enough about either of them to join in their excitement.

"They're not going to be there for lunch, are they?" El asks.

"I don't think so." I check my mirrors for the sight of other cars, but find none. Still, they could've parked inside the garage, but I don't know the code to get in. "Hey, I should get in there. I'll be done here in an hour tops, and drop off the car long before you need to get to work. You're the best."

"You know it," she says cheerily. "Later."

"Later, El." Unbuckling, I step out and approach the house from a distance. I've seen cars swerving in and out of this

place often enough to keep my distance, especially when I'm driving my friend's car. Luckily, the driveway is more of a red carpet. The gravel travels in twist and turns up to a roundabout, surrounded by lush greenery—an elaborate presentation of wealth that intimidates any visitors before they even step foot inside.

I'll admit the ancestral Vranes family home is an impressive step up from Jemima's old loft. I expect she's aware of my appreciation over the Colonial mansion in traditional New England style, because if there's one thing anyone—even she—might know about me, is that I love the extravagant, even the gaudy.

If I'm being honest: *especially* when it's gaudy. Bonus points for a lack of modern interior design. The charm of places like New Haven, Connecticut, lies in the feeling of a place untouched by time. Pretentious, of course, but also sweeping and romantic.

Oscar and Jemima live in a sprawling estate detailed with worn stone benches and regularly-trimmed ivy trellises, extensions of the main focus: the grounds. Oscar's last wife had an eye for exterior home design, I've gathered, but not much else on the woman.

The New England area is littered with towns that consist of perfectly normal people on one side, and the type that have more money than God on the other. The latter might be found far removed from picket fences, opting towards large plots of land that stretch for miles and house grand buildings that could house multiple families in one. These types of houses lie one step above the ones in glossy architecture magazines, and the types of people that live in them? That's the type of family my mom is marrying into, from what I can tell.

Jemima's penchant for high-flung, patterned murals and multicolored mosaics are the only evident changes she's made to her fiance's grandiose place since moving in, but she's otherwise restrained herself.

To be clear, I'm not criticizing her. Not on this, anyway. A tendency towards showmanship might be the only thing we do

have in common besides dad.

Jemima divorced him years ago because he travels often, but the way I see it, she should've known what she was getting into when she married the Master of Haven House. It had a different name back then, but old romantic Daniel Slater renamed his circus after his wife's beloved hometown, where they met in a whirlwind romance, fell in love, and had me.

Once Haven House took off, so did she, right back to its namesake.

Spring, summer, and fall are busy periods for carnies like me and dad, but we'd stop in and see Jemima in the winter or if we were booked in the area.

Right up until dad's diagnosis earlier this year, that is. Cancer. Run of the mill, according to him. That's how granddad went, but I never knew any of my grandparents before they passed, so I never gave it much thought until I found out about dad.

Two years, give or take. That's what the doctor estimated.

Two years, but I want twenty.

And he wants me on the other side of the state so I can't tell how bad it gets for him over in Bridgeport. That's why he strong-armed me into attending college through the kind of guilt trip only a cancer patient can accomplish.

Coincidentally, two years is the amount of time it should take for me to complete an associate's degree, which only adds to my theory that college is an excuse he came up with so I don't watch him die.

There's another possible reason he wants me gone, one that stings when I consider it, but I keep that to myself. The end result is the same, I guess.

Either way, we made a deal: I enroll in Gateway Community College and he gives up life on the road.

College itself isn't so bad. I'm two months in and haven't had any near-death experiences. As a college town, New Haven has decent athletics options, plus business acumen will

be useful when I take over running Haven, on top of what dad taught me with first-hand experience. Navigating classrooms is just one more place to put on a show, and I've been doing that for as long as I've been a flier on the ropes.

On the plus side, my acne's settled since I've stuck in one place for longer than a month. Apparently, water sources can have an impact on your skin. Who knew?

The only condition in our deal I refuse to follow through on is living with Jemima and Oscar. I'll take living in the hole in the wall I sublet from a Yale girl studying abroad over having to make small talk with them over breakfast every day.

Even worse would be having to regularly see Oscar's son, Galen, and his pack of wolves. The ones responsible for reckless driving and overall shadiness.

They're not literal beasts, of course. I suppose *lackeys* would be a more suitable term for the Delsing twins and Jericho Caulfield. Aggressively insular, they'd closed ranks before I even unpacked my toiletries.

Galen might not live at home anymore, but from what Jemima's told me, he's there often enough. He doesn't drop by to chat with her or his dad, but something about this place has him coming back like clockwork. Case in point: the three sports cars skewed across the roundabout driveway like Hot Wheels. High bushes concealed them from where I parked, but now they're impossible to miss.

Flashy sports cars and expensive vintage rides stand out, even in a place filled with Ivy League students.

We're too different to find a common middle ground. Anyone who grew up in a mansion and drives a vehicle right out of a *Fast & Furious* film comes with a different set of experiences from those of us who didn't.

I hardly know Oscar Vranes, but Galen made it clear from the start he has no desire to know me. I doubt his friends made attempts to dissuade him from spewing venom. They probably think like he does: that my mom is a gold digger, and I'm an additional interloper. I don't need them to say the word for the

message to get across. *The townie and her brown daughter*, that's how we're likely described in their social circles, whether it's by them or their friends.

I avoid the four of them most days. It's not hard. I simply stray away from the house. There's no chance of me running into them at Yale, and on the rare occasion I run into Galen or one of his friends, I put my speed-walking skills to good use.

Coming up on the final leg up to the house, I find a familiar sight: Finn Delsing's sleek black Range Rover. The last of Galen's wolves.

Looks like they're already in their cave.

---

"Have you seen Jemima?"

Finn Delsing doesn't look away from the open fridge when I speak to him. Doesn't move a muscle from where his long frame leans in and peruses the wares. The breadth of his shoulders blocks the view from where I'm standing.

"Slater. Come to emotionally wreck your mother?"

Invasive and rude for the sole sake of being invasive and rude. It's surface level, really. A typical Yale boy—the plague of New Haven. Galen and all his snooty friends are enrolled there.

The quintessential All-American guy, inside and out. Despicable, really. He's an unassuming gentleman on the surface, but I don't believe it for a second.

His reputation tells a different story, little that I know of it. College guys tend to lean towards the playboy lifestyle, if they can, and I've seen girls hanging around Galen and his friends more often than not. Idolization of wealth and excess: the backbone of modern America.

Finn is the kind of guy you consider sleeping with because, look at him. He must be experienced, and you're curious. Then, he opens his mouth.



I move forward with my shoulders back, waving my book in his face, the only object I have on-hand. “Have you seen her or not?”

“Not yet,” he says, shifting to the side as he grabs an armful of drinks, not glancing up. Muscular forearms peek out from beneath a crisp white dress shirt, indicating he came here from what was likely one of those upper-crust events Ivy League’s entail, not that I can say for sure. Hazel eyes peek out from where a strand of dirty blond stands out from where he must’ve run a hand through his hair. Nearly identical to his twin besides the jagged scar drawing up the edge of his jawline, though I don’t know how he got it.

“Have you seen Galen, then? Or Oscar?” Today’s the day for the monthly lunch Jemima and Oscar insist on in a futile effort to make us a family of sorts.

“Aren’t you here to use the dance studio?”

My brows crease. “Why would you think that?”

“You’re an acrobat, aren’t you?”

“How do you know that?” I’m sure I’ve never told him about how I spend my time, much less about something so important to me. “Looking for weak spots?”

“Your stuff’s scattered all over the house,” he says half-heartedly, now distracted by perusing the snack selection. “Saw your claw hands too. Jem told us about you before you got here. Take your pick.”

Finn curls his own hand into a fist, and something in me curls inwards too. An instinct telling me shore up my defenses.

Maybe one of those girls I’ve seen with him is an acrobat like me, and that’s how he knows about the claw hands—a result of repeatedly working my grip for years. Now, my fingers curl in whether they’re at rest or curved around a hoop.

“You’re quite the dutiful waiter,” I observe, eyeing the snacks and drinks he’s assembled.

“Dutiful. Quite the insult.” There’s no hint of irritation in him, no matter how hard I try, and I’ve definitely tried.

Whenever our paths cross, anyway. “Try harder. Perhaps insult my hairdo while you’re at it.”

“Have you seen them or not?”

“Not yet,” he repeats. His tone is neutral, but that’s how Yale boys get away with snark: by acting like it’s not.

I wait.

“Galen texted and said to meet here,” he adds with a slight quirk of his lips, lifting the scar on his jaw at the same time, his hazel eyes finally lifting to meet mine. “He hasn’t shown yet, as I said. Not much to add, I’m afraid.”

“That’s surprising.” From what I’ve gathered, wherever he goes, one of his wolves always follow, nipping at his heels. Finn is an (unfortunate) add-on that comes with my soon-to-be *stepbrother*, not that I’ll ever call him that.

“You’ve been paying attention to me, Slater?” Despite his teasing words, a cutting disinterest rests on his face, even in his eyes.

“It’s called watching my back.” Turning to go, I decide on sorting through some of the boxes I stored with stuff from Haven in the bedroom set aside for my unlikely move in.

“Or maybe it’s urgent. Late to book club with Eleanor? I didn’t think Dickinson would be smutty enough for you.”

I stop. Slowly turn, thumbing my volume of poems, required reading for an elective class. I make sure my expression is casual. He never once looked at what book I’m holding.

Regardless, he adds with a full-on grin, “Maybe if my ‘washboard abs ripple in the sun,’ you’ll pay even closer attention. Unless you prefer the guys in those smutty books of yours.”

My insides twist at his nonchalance, his taunts, and I want to chastise myself for having this reaction. For allowing him to make me feel anything, even when it’s annoyance. But not anger.

Not anger—curiosity, no matter how much I try to kill it.

“You’ve been going through my things,” I state flatly. A statement, not a question, and not a refusal. If I wanted to hide my collection of Annalise Arestos books, I would have.

“Faron tipped a box over while he was looking for an extra blanket,” he replies. “Found a feathered boa. A lot of sequins. Costume wear, I assume. Oh, and what looked like a crushed bowler hat. Found it that way. Some poofy shirts with French labels, but sadly, nothing risqué.”

“An extra blanket. In a *mansion*. He couldn’t find a single blanket in any other room. Sure.” I snort. More like the hounds were snooping for something to bring back to Galen so he could embarrass me with it. At least they’re loyal, especially when it comes to his unjustified dislike of me. “And so you know, a lot of stage culture comes from France. The French have a lot going for them when it comes to culture and clothes.”

“Had. They had a lot going for them. That must be where you get it from. French excess.”

“Let them eat cake.”

He considers this, an oddly thoughtful look on his face. “No, you’d be a revolutionary, storming the gates.”

“I am flexible enough for it.” I regret the words immediately after they leave my mouth. *You walked right into that one, didn’t you?*

But miraculously, he doesn’t throw another innuendo at me.

“You don’t say,” he says neutrally. I let a beat pass, thinking that’s all, but of course, he adds, “If the books aren’t enough and you need someone to get you off, I’m here to lend a helping hand.”

He lets out a low laugh as I once again turn to leave, but this time I don’t let his words stop me. “Don’t worry, Finn. If I find any clueless virgins lurking around, I’ll send them your way. You could use some fun, Mr. Fixer.”

For all his joking jibes, Finn’s the ordinary one of the bunch. It’s in the stern set of his shoulders and the rigid

tailoring of his suits, not one thread out of place, everything controlled. If anyone needs to loosen up around here, it's him.

The door bangs shut, but I know he'll hear the rest of what I have to say through the walls. "I hope your fiancée won't mind. Congratulations."

---

"Ugh, why didn't you lock the door?"

Galen's voice drips with acid.

Hand still on the doorknob, my face twists at the sight of my soon-to-be step-brother standing tense in the middle of the tiled room, already half-annoyed. A normal occurrence for us, except this time we're staring at each other from opposite ends of the first floor guest bathroom.

Galen's eerily platinum blond hair threw me off when we first met. I didn't see how it could be anything other than a dye job, but even in photos of him as an infant and a toddler, he had that same shade of hair. Oscar's dark headed like me, so he must resemble his mom.

The strange effect is compounded by his predilection towards wearing all black. Today's choices consist of black jeans, a matching long-sleeved shirt, right down to his shoes.

"Ugh, why don't you ever knock?" he throws back half-heartedly, silver-blue eyes flat and unfeeling.

I don't sound like that, but blurting out '*I don't sound like that, asshole!*' will make me sound like the toddler he mentally is. "Shouldn't you be—are you here for lunch?"

"So what if I am? This is my house." He takes a closer look at me, presumably to find something he can critique. He proves the thought by the visible distaste on his face that follows. And his next statement. "Is that a bow? Why do you have a huge bow on your—never mind. I don't want to know why."

"Here comes the fashion police."

“Don’t be stupid. You came to me.”

I open my mouth on a retort, but then I get a look at the mirror between us. “What is that...” I trail off.

His expression immediately clears, betraying nothing, much like I just did in the kitchen when Finn referred to my treasured paperback collection (which he definitely went through, since I bought the discrete covers).

“What are you talking about?” he says, too neutral to be believable.

On the wall opposite the ornate, vintage mirror hung above the sink holds a bright print Jemima picked up at a farmer’s market in Tuscaloosa when I was eight. It’s one of the ugliest and best things she’s decorated this place with.

In the likely-heirloom mirror is not the eye-jarring art print, nor Galen trying his hardest not to look into the mirror, but at me.

In the mirror is someone I’ve never met before in my life.

*This must be shock*, I think numbly. Finn smoked some experimental drug I accidentally ingested and now—

“Hello,” the person in the mirror says, round brown eyes peering out curiously.

Finally, the scream comes racing up my throat, just as Galen snatches my arm and pushes us both into—no, *through*—the mirror, and we go crashing. Not into glass, but into the very shocked face of a child I’ve never seen before.

FINN



“Did you guys hear that?”

Face tilted towards the ground floor guest wing, Faron waits a beat, then shrugs, leaning back into the couch. “Hear what?” my twin asks, identical hazel eyes seeking out mine in question.

“Never mind.” Head shaking slightly, Jer takes the bottle I’m holding out and takes a swig. An out-of-season heat wave has his raven-colored hair matted to his forehead and me rolling my sleeves further up my arms, even with the air conditioner blasting chilled air over our heads.

“Galen here yet?”

“Nope,” I answer, chucking Faron his drink. “Jem’s daughter’s here, though.”

Faron smacks the bottle out of the air, narrowly avoiding the nearest lamp.

“Cut the shit, Jackie Chan,” I snap.

At that, Jer slides me a look, which I promptly ignore. Nosy bastard thinks he knows everything.

Granted, he knows a lot, but we all know Slater's off-limits, and no girl is worth that much trouble—especially not with the anniversary of his mom's death and his dad's marriage both coming up.

Serita's right about the three of us always 'trailing after him like dogs,' in a way, but the way it looks matters less than the outcome: making sure Galen doesn't do anything he can't take back.

Sure, Galen might've gotten into trouble before, back when we were teens, but age doesn't always come with wisdom. Sometimes, it only makes old grievances grow and grow, until they finally resurface, worse than ever.

Galen was born and raised here, while me and Faron only stayed over the summer until high school. Jer moved during his senior year (when we were juniors), and Luke came when he got into Yale.

Growing up, it was always summer.

High school opened my eyes. The worst of it came as minor trouble with the law or at school. We'd get roped into the antics and dragged along with him, if only to keep him from taking things too far. On the plus side, I ended up with contacts across town—the police force, school boards, and local government. I keep them happy, Galen (and sometimes Faron) kept out of *public* trouble.

"He probably fell back asleep right after texting all of us to come over," Faron jokes. He's the approachable Delsing twin, according to everyone who's ever met us, parents included.

Serita might not believe it if I told her, but Galen and him used to be the most alike. The affable duo.

"Maybe he's picking up breakfast," Jer says, hopeful.

"Doubtful," I tell him. The fridge is full, I just don't feel like taking food requests on top of drinks.

“Would you quit being such a killjoy?” Faron throws out. “You could wait until we eat first before you give us the ‘you’re all such disappointments’ shakedown.”

“How about I start now? Go spray some cologne. You reek of weed and whoever you smoked it with last night.” Best believe I sniffed him when he got here. Loudly and pointedly.

I don’t need a repeat of bodily toting Faron off campus earlier this year after he showed up still hammered from the night before.

Jer snorts, but doesn’t comment.

“Come on, Jer,” Faron pleads halfheartedly. “Defend my honor, you white knight.”

“Keep repeating that and some poor girl will hear and believe it. Get herself locked up in a castle and wait for him to rescue her.” Jer rolls his eyes, but it’ll take a lot more than that to annoy him, so I ignore it. “Besides, we all know Luke’s the one that’d fit the part of the hero riding in on a horse.”

“That’s because he’s the only one who knows how to ride a horse,” Faron points out.

Jer uncaps his drink and takes a swig. “My hair would blow magnificently in the winds of rescue.”

Him joining in shocks both of us enough to keep the joke going, but we’re all aware it’s mindless talk. Especially when Faron replies, “Yes, you’d cut a dashing figure in armor. Now, back to me.”

Once, it came easy to us: joking around like this. Not so much anymore. Jer’s still the same, as far as I can tell. It’s everyone else that’s changed.

If I had to describe Jericho Caulfield, it would be with one word: peacekeeper. Jer’s probably the only person in the world that can put up with the rest of us, no matter how many of our worst traits come out. He always has, even when we were kids on the playground. As an adult, he’s the only one of us that ought to be allowed into polite society.



Comes with being a year older than the rest of us, maybe. The psychology of it. But Luke's also a year older and has the manners of a fish, so maybe not. Him and Luke studied at separate boarding schools and came to New Haven over the summer growing up before Jer's parents moved here full time. Fast forward a bit and they were enrolled at the university when we were seniors in town, and it happened naturally from there.

"Of course I'd look better in a dress than Finn," Faron says, voice cutting through nostalgic thoughts.

"You're identical twins. Did you forget that?"

"But that doesn't change cold, hard facts, does it? *Does it?*"

There's no use arguing with Faron when he's only insisting a point for the sake of getting Jer to engage in the conversation. He's hardly paying attention to the point he's even arguing, I'd bet. Just happy to get Jer talking.

Toeing one of the open boxes marked with *Haven* on the coffee table, I peer in and snort at the sight of crumpled leotards, a busted container of glitter, and more smutty books peeking out from beneath a pair of bright red gogo boots, probably from one of the Slater circus themes they've cycled in and out across the years. Endless leotards and muslin.

A box dedicated entirely to someone named Salvadore Enos, the ringmaster of a troupe based out of Las Vegas. I can't tell what she sees in him. He looks like a douche.

Gaudy is the word for Serita Slater. No, it's her life's motto.

I try not to question why that leaves an impression on me.

Jer might have already done so—psychoanalyzed what he suspects Serita Slater and I have going on. He's too much of an analytical thinker for his own good, making sure no rock goes left unturned.

Not to mention he knows my tastes too well not to have considered I'd be interested, but she thinks I'm happily

engaged. Then again. *I hope your fiancée won't mind. Congratulations.*

Not happily per say, but engaged nonetheless. She probably assumes I'm a lowlife bastard, frankly. I'm not far off enough from that estimate to bother correcting her on my relationship with Jac.

Steering clear of any relationship outside of my public one with her was father's suggestion, and I agreed with his reasoning for the discretion: Jacinta Lin is the daughter of Felix Lin, an important piece on the Salt's chessboard.

It's tedious not having either family within reach, having to work with secondary sources and word of mouth, while trying to crush an empire like the Salt's. They're located on the west coast, same as the Lin's in Vegas, but with open borders and globalization, that hardly matters anymore.

We're all reliant on ever-shifting business models wrecked by a digital age, the skills of translators, and... other interferences.

It's no longer enough to network a city. Now you take on the world.

On the flip side, that leaves the world open for the taking. Allying with the Lin's isn't a new-age tactic, rather one of the oldest. Family ties breed business ones—or they will, once signatures are signed and rings are exchanged. That's the price for the Lin's switching over from the Salt's side to ours.

Arranging that distant day in the future has been less than pleasant, but I expected that early on. The Salt's are notoriously reclusive and distrust even the few friends they have. Hard to find dirt on people like that. The Lin's are our way in, sneaks that they are.

I let out a long exhale, hand reaching for the back of my neck. The day is long, and it's not even noon yet. I should be getting back to Jac on the color swatches she sent last night, but that's a task I'd put off even if I had nothing else to be doing, and today's not one of those days.

“It'll be something he didn't want to say over the phone.”

Turning back to Jer and Faron, I lift an eyebrow in question. “What are we talking about?”

“Our missing duck.” Faron gestures at the empty space beside him. *Ah. Galen.* “I have a few fireworks leftover from the summer in my trunk—not mine, a buddy’s—in case we’re planning on having some fun.”

“Aren’t we here to have a nice, mannerly luncheon?”

“With Jem, Oscar, Galen, and Serita in the same room, you mean?”

He has me there. “I knew I should’ve faked gout.”

“Given your lifestyle, that’s unlikely,” Jer says. “Sprained ankle sounds more plausible.”

“I’ll remember that next time.”

“Hold on.” Faron waves a hand out, all dramatics. “If I leave now, will you two back me up on a sprained ankle story?”

Me and Jer answer at the same time, with the same dryness in our voices. “No.”

---

Out in the hall, I can hear Jer and Faron going at it again. Bickering over who gets to use the sprained ankle excuse or something to that effect.

I answer the incoming call with a swipe of my phone and raise it to my ear.

“I’m calling to make an appointment with the Contractor,” the person on the other end says without preamble. “Based out of New York, but I have available dates spread across the next few months whenever’s convenient.”

The caller’s a woman, sounds professional, practiced. Someone’s secretary, clearly.

“I can meet your employer in the city. I’ll send over a list of potential meeting places, and you can get back to me on

whichever one they find agreeable. Send that list of dates, too, and I'll let you know when I'll be there." If they know enough to have this number, they know not to get into too many details over the phone. There are very few people who would hand it out otherwise. "Any other arrangements can also be discussed at a later date."

"My employer has a very specific request in mind. He also wanted me to stress that he'd like to meet as soon as is possible and convenient for you."

Meaning I'm not the first person he's come to. I usually never am. There's a learning curve that precedes dealing with Contractors.

"Then you'd better have that list sent to me as soon as is possible and convenient for you," I say dryly. Pointed words do nothing to sway me, and the secretary sounds intelligible enough to figure out what will.

"Your reference came with a strict set of instructions on payment methods. I presume those are unchanged?"

*Secretaries tend to be far wittier than most give them credit for, I muse.*

"Your first meeting can be expedited. Sometime this month, once we get those dates and the place worked out." My free hand falls on the wall, tapping lightly. "You'll hear from me."

"Have a good day, sir."

With a *beep*, the line disconnects, and I slip my phone into my pocket with the other two. The first for myself, the second for Delsing Industries, and the most recently used one for dealing out contracts.

Demon worshipping cults are often misled by the stories their worshippers get caught up in. Reality is far less picturesque, more businesslike. You want to meet a demon? All you need is to find a Contractor. They'll lead you to one.

And for some reason, demons have always been drawn to New Haven. I'm required to live here because of it. The Salt's live in Vegas for the same reason. The situation makes travel

marginally irksome, but we're not the only company that holds headquarters outside of the major cities these days.

Contractors broker deals between potential *demounia* candidates and their demon counterparts, so I'd have to travel no matter where I live. Strike a deal, you're granted some of their power, specific to the type of demon. There's the *speculo* type, like Galen. *Cogatari* and *recreo* demons, both unnerving and best kept out of most people's notice. The *sopor*, or even the legendary *cavas* demons, but I've never met one. All of them irritating, most unruly, but also willing to work with Contractors if it means they might have some fun.

On the other end, the less-informed human crowd usually start out by trying to raise a demon on their own. Set up a pentagram, light some candles, and assemble a crowd to impress. After that fails, the determined ones seek out other options, and eventually find themselves calling people like me. I work with their appointed liaison—a secretary, an assistant's assistant, a driver—and select the demon best suited for their wants or needs. The process isn't unlike a personal shopper toting in the latest collection from fashion week.

The only other alternative is to find a hunter, but the outcome of that isn't as cost-effective. They don't let you keep the demon or strike a deal with them before blood gets shed.

*Demounia*, those with contracts in place, are harder to catch than demons themselves, from what Galen's mother once told me. Their diluted blood (not wholly human, but not entirely demonic) and less obvious *otherness* grant them more human traits and mannerisms, making them more difficult to pick out of a crowd. The bane of a hunter's existence, I'm told.

Busybodies. That's what I think of them. But there aren't many left, so there's no point in lamenting over it unless they get in the way of my work.

I know from the buzzing in my pocket that the potential new client's secretary sent over what I asked for. Timely, another positive quality. I should skim what she sent over, send over my share, but I stay standing in Galen's hallway with both hands placed firmly on the wall.

There's a stark difference in Jem's decor choices that makes the oddly shaped, splatter-painted urn in front of me stand out against the backdrop of clean lines of the rest of the house. It's easy to tell where she's made her mark, and where she hasn't. I can also tell where Serita gets her sense of style from without having to ask.

Tilting to the side, I find Jer nodding along amicably to whatever Faron's going on about, hands still waving about. Neither of them notice me lurking from the doorway, so I make my way in the opposite direction, careful to keep my steps light.

# 3

## SERITA



Before dad ever let me on a tightrope, he had me practice balance exercises.

I started out by becoming acquainted with the weight of my own body, then practicing on a padded beam, moved on to orienting my body in the local pool of wherever we were staying at the time, and eventually moved up to ropes and perfecting the motions of swings and tricks before I ever leapt from a platform.

I know my own body. All athletes do. But the moment I land on the other side of Oscar Vranes's antique mirror, I'm stumbling and unable to find my equilibrium. Galen is equally uncoordinated.

The only person here who seems at ease is the stranger we landed on.

The temperature plummets, forcing goosebumps to prickle along my arms and legs, but I refrain from commenting on the

weather. Darkness shrouds my vision even though it's mid-morning, not even lunchtime.

Blinking rapidly to adjust with the new lighting, I can only stare in disbelief. This is unreal. It felt like falling, then like rocking with the rhythm of a boat at sea—it still does, but it shouldn't, right?

“What kind of sick joke is this?” I whisper to no one in particular, gripping the wall to steady myself.

This must be some practical joke Galen prepared with his pack of wolves. He finally escalated from verbal sparring to outright terrorization.

I once heard he gave someone two black eyes *and* slashed all four of their tires in high school. He's always had the upper hand, a wealth of social power, opportunity, and practical means to hurt me, yet he never has, only opting for discomfort and barbed words. Galen Vranes exists to remind me that I don't belong, otherwise there's no point in deigning to acknowledge my presence.

This changes the game we're playing, assuming that he considers it a game, and not an outright act of war.

*What's that smell? Mold? Something rotten?*

*Why is it so cold all of the sudden?*

“Well, that's new,” the raven-haired girl says from the floor. Me and Galen jerk back at the same time, and the three of us stand in a face-off formation.

“Um...” Galen the apparent genius starts, then goes quiet.

“My name is Stormy,” the girl says.

It's almost like—ironically—looking into a mirror at a younger version of myself, only I was never that small. Most of my genes I inherited from dad: straight black hair, warm tanned skin, large brown eyes, and a lithe but tall body.

Stormy matches my coloring, enough that we could be mistaken for cousins, if not siblings.

“You're... in my house,” Galen says.



Stormy doesn't seem particularly shameful at the statement. "The door was unlocked."

Before I can stop myself, I laugh. A high-pitched, hysterical trill of a laugh at a situation that is not even remotely funny. I'm sure that says something about my mental state. I'm not quite sure *what* it says, but it can't be good.

Is this fear, giddiness, or both? Must be both.

"Give us a minute, would you?" Galen doesn't even bother looking at me when he says it. He acknowledges the oddity of the situation.

Then I realize what Stormy just said. "No," I say, only now finding my voice. "I used my key to get in."

She shakes her head, looking at me like I'm confused, which is fair, because I am, but not about the door being locked. "Wrong door," she says simply.

"Um," Galen repeats.

I don't claim to know him well, but I've never seen him like this. Galen's always given off an overwhelming aura of self-contained power behind his facade of harmless barbed words and bad manners. The kind of self-containment that keeps me from telling him how I really feel. I know there are men who parade around as civil, yet are anything but that if pushed past a limit.

Honestly, he's always seemed just close enough to being unhinged that some part of me wants to poke and prod at him to see if I'm right.

None of that comes from knowing a version of Galen Vranes that gets... *nervous*.

Glancing behind, I find the print Jemima bought in Tuscaloosa reflected in the mirror, only when I turn back to Stormy, the wall is blank again.

I might pass out in this bathroom.

Huddling in on myself, I pull my thin denim jacket closer around myself against the chill. It shouldn't be anywhere near

this cold, not inside of an actual mansion befitted with all of the best hardware on the market.

Galen says, “I’ve never actually seen anyone on this side before.”

“*What did you just say?*”

He turns slowly, more nervous than I’ve ever seen Galen Vranes before, which is not at all. “I told you to knock.”

Barely resisting the urge to slap him, my next words are seethed through clenched teeth. “What do you mean *on this side?*”

Him and Stormy share a look, but they don’t appear to be on the same page yet. Good. I might really slap him if that were the case and I were the only clueless one present.

“This is my house in the mirror,” he says slowly, as if I’m the child here, not Stormy, who looks rather bored by our bewilderment. Reluctantly, he continues, “I’ve only been here once by accident.”

“Is that not what just—” In the rush of the moment, I nearly forgot. “I screamed, and then you pushed me.”

“Yes,” he admits. “No one else knows.”

Despite how much I distrust Galen Vranes, that rings true.

“That you have a... ‘house in the mirror’ in your guest bathroom,” I clarify, unable to decide whether he’s insane, I am, or both of us are. Only Stormy still looks bored.

Thunder booms from outside, yet she doesn’t even flinch. My head whips to the window, only to find black clouds gathering in the sky. No wonder the air feels so heavy, ready to burst.

*Is this fear, or is it excitement? What would that say about me?*

“Slant,” she says, as if that one word explains everything in the haughty tone that can only be properly executed by a small child.

“Stop screwing with me. I don’t know what that means,” I say, turning back to her and Galen.

She rolls her eyes, cementing the bratty kid look. “You’re in Slant. Duh.”

“That makes sense,” Galen agrees too quickly, even though it definitely does *not* make sense.

“You care to explain how?” I grind out, sick of being the only one who appears out of the loop here.

“Look around.” With a sweep of his arms, he gestures blindly.

I turn around the room, careful not to look anywhere near the mirror this time, but nothing else sticks out. “At what?”

“The punk’s right. Everything’s slanted,” he clarifies.

I look again, but now I start see what they’re referring to: a world distorted. The room is nearly the same as the one ‘on the other side,’ as Galen referred to it, except it’s not... level.

It gives me the strangest feeling, like I’m a figurine inside of a snow globe that’s fallen to the side, and I’m looking out at a caricature of a room I know, recognizing that this isn’t the real one, only a mimicry. It’s like the world is clouded by a haze. Like being vaguely high on some kind of psychedelic.

That’s why I fell down when he knocked me through the mirror. But that’s not all.

Taking a closer look, I notice other things. Things I didn’t notice at first because they’re not so much tangible as they are impressions. A tentative sensation, one that matches the chill in the air. An intuition that something is not right here.

Like I’m not supposed to be here, that we’re no longer in the land of reality.

Long ago, back when I was a kid, I had the same feeling in a dream.

A dream about a boy who told me he could do impossible things, and that he could make me believe in magic. Without

understanding why, I get the same feeling now that I did back then.

Saying any of that will make me look like the crazy one here, so I only lean back on the countertop. My footing has somewhat adjusted to the Slant, as Stormy called it.

Stormy, who isn't just tilting her body to accommodate the slanted floor or the slanted walls, but actually seems to *be* slanted herself. If I'm not mistaken, one leg is shorter than the other. One arm longer than the other. Even her hair is cut in a diagonal, as if this is her natural state.

Fear trickles in, my breath quickening, but my heart beats too fast for the conscious part of my brain to fully register the full breadth of the feeling. Harsh breaths pull in and out of my lungs. *This isn't right*. I don't know how, but this place, whatever's happening here, it isn't right.

I force calm into my body the way I would if I were dangling from a hoop, or I try to.

"How are we... wherever we are?" I'm looking directly at Galen when I speak, forgoing the questions I have for Stormy. He knows something I don't. More than one thing, most likely, given how quickly he made sure to push us through. So his friends wouldn't hear me yell and come running?

Galen doesn't like me, but I've never pegged him as violent. That's one more reason I haven't slapped him yet.

It's a shock to realize there's more than one reason not to.

He hesitates briefly, but that's no surprise. Clearly, he has secrets. "I heard her."

"Who? Stormy?"

"No. I heard my mom. She was calling out to me from the mirror."

"Quit messing around."

Finally, Stormy is as shocked as I am, but since they've never met before, I doubt it's for the same reason I am.

Andrea Vranes—Galen’s mom and Oscar’s first wife—died last year.

Before I can even begin to figure out what to say to that, an animalistic wail sounds out from somewhere in the house.

Stock still, the sound pierces too-still air, but no one moves. We all know what that scream means. It is the sound of absolute terror.

The paralytic fog clouding my brain dissipates as the scream dies out, and I’m moving. In a split second of panic, I’m throwing Stormy over my shoulder like a sack of potatoes and shoving at Galen the same way he shoved me earlier. Only, instead of leaping through the mirror like before, we smack into glass.

In the back of my mind, I register the sound of shattering, but that’s muted by Galen yelling, “What the fuck did you do?”

“Ow,” Stormy says from my back, as if I didn’t take the brunt of the collision.

Another guttural scream rings out in the empty air, but Galen’s determined to ignore it this time in lieu of scattering glass shards with his booted foot. “Let’s go,” he says, grabbing my hand and rushing towards the door.

“Where?” I demand. “Did you not just hear that?”

“To find another mirror,” he says, completely ignoring the rest of what I said. “Keep up.”

We go tumbling out of the bathroom, Stormy clinging to my back like a spider monkey, and into the house. For some inexplicable reason, all I can think is that this entire experience validates my decision to live in the tiny studio I found instead of living it up in Oscar’s house.

I’ve never felt so out of place, not even when I first showed up on my mother and her new fiancé’s doorstep earlier this year.

The remnants of spiderwebs droop from corners and the edges of the furniture, but even those appear abandoned somehow, as if they're remnants of a time when the people had fled, but the creatures remained. Empty webs and dusty animal shelters—what look like nests and hidey holes, anyway. There are clear signs of the place being overrun by more than abandonment. From the look of it, raccoons and mice were the last inhabitants of the house. It'd been left vacant and feeling hollowed out, curtains moth-eaten and strewn on the cracked floor.

Galen's jabs have never gone this far. I associate him with dismissive commentary, grey-blue eyes rolling at a constant rate, saying he'll be somewhere at a certain time and showing up hours later (much to Oscar's chagrin), and pilfering through the stuff I left at the house to bother me.

We were only in that bathroom for minutes, not nearly enough time for his friends to completely wreck his entire house. The floorboards creak when they didn't ten minutes ago. The walls are crumbling, and I didn't hear any banging.

*Howhowhow—*

“That wasn't there before.” I stop mid-step to point out the words scrawled on the wall in a hurried, jagged black script. This is the only sign of life we've come across other than the scream we're running decidedly away from—and Stormy, who's slouched on my back like she's simply stopped caring about what's happening.

Galen zeroes in on the writing, eyes trailing from line to line. He murmurs the prose aloud:

*I fix mine eye on thine, and there  
Pity my picture burning in thine eye;  
My picture drown'd in a transparent tear,*

I scan the surrounding area for what follows, but nothing. Why end with a comma if that's all there is?

“Who do you think left that here? Who is this message for?” I voice the questions with more conviction than I feel. Someone needs to start talking, or I'll keep spiraling.

“For one of us,” Galen says.

“How do you know?”

If he'd said, “It's for me,” I could try to wrap my head around that. *Try*. It's his house. But he said *us*.

*Oscar. Jemima*. Which one of them is it? All of them?

Stormy says, “That wasn't written there when I came in either.”

“When was that?” I try to crane my neck to the side and meet her eye, but she's looking out the nearest window. Following her line of sight, I walk towards the smeared glass, away from Galen, who's still staring at the same wall with that nervous expression on his face.

There, out on the grounds, I find the source of the scream. Blood pours freely from the woman's center, pooling out around her, blackening the earth.

*There's too much blood—how is there that much blood, and she's still bleeding, howhow—*

Eyes wide open, I watch while she tries to form words, face trembling. I can't make out what she's saying from here, but then Galen's head snaps in her direction.

As if, somehow, impossibly, he'd heard what she said.

# 4

FINN



“Why the *fuck* did you bring her with us?”

I follow the sound of Galen’s voice with dread coiling in my gut—a familiar sensation. Turning a corner quickly, I nearly run into Faron and Jer on my way to the center of the house. They turn in sync, then the three of us are hurrying together at Serita’s answering yell of indignation.

“Who would leave a child in a place where we all heard the sound of someone dying in *your* house!”

“You don’t know that. We didn’t see anyone else. And that’s not my house!”

“I’m not naïve! Did you slip me something? And that’s not the damn point, you—”

“I’m fine with this,” a third voice chimes in, someone unfamiliar.

“Where are your parents, punk?” Galen asks. “How old are you?”



By now, the three of us stand at the staircase, looking up at the open doorway of a second-floor bathroom. Galen, Serita, and a small child are crammed inside together, the kid hanging off of Serita's shoulder, but still gesturing wildly as she talks.

Oversized clothes hang off her frame and her hair hangs a little ragged, noticeably uneven. Something about her feels wrong, but I can't pinpoint what.

"Who the hell needs parents? I'm almost nine years old!"

Faron hums as a response and I shoot him a look to stay quiet. He merely shrugs in response. We're both at a loss here.

"Did I mishear, or is Galen handing out party favors?" Faron mutters.

Serita sets the kid down calmly, then launches herself at Galen, eyes wild. "You *saw* her, you saw that woman *die* in there. We have to—we have to *do something*. We have to go back."

"There's nothing we can do to help someone who's already dead, unless you want to be next."

*Dead?* Jer and I exchange a look, and he starts approaching the stairs slowly.

"Inside voices, kids," I say to draw the attention of everyone on the second floor.

"Mind your business, *dad*," Galen snarks, sarcasm his go-to when he's annoyed. Serita's the same way, not that they'd appreciate me pointing out the comparison.

I roll my sleeves, ready to intervene. "I might when you stop acting like children."

"How did you three get in without any of us noticing?" Jer calls out, ever the peacemaker.

All three turn to face us in a way that resembles how we reacted when they started yelling.

"You already saw me," Serita says, looking straight at me.

"Is there a reason you guys can't, oh, I don't know, use separate bathrooms?" Faron jokes.

My attention lands on the mirror behind them—at the blank wall reflected in the glass. “You took her through the mirror, didn’t you?” I call out, and Slater gapes, fists clenched.

I like that look on her. It feels like an accomplishment to shock someone who regularly flounces around town drenched in glitter and grew up worshiping so-called magic tricks.

From my guess, she just saw her first real one.

But why? Galen doesn’t often willingly use his abilities on his own, much less in front of an *outsider*. Especially not since we were teenagers, back when we learned the dangers it could pose him, that his mother’s demands for secrecy weren’t unfounded.

Nonetheless, Galen confirms my thoughts when he finally says, “She knows. Something else happened, but I’m not sure what.”

After a slight pause, Faron steps forward until he’s at my side. I know his face, our face, is tilted towards me when he asks, “What now?”

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It takes a pack of apple juice for the kid, who says her name is Stormy and that if we call her kid again, she’ll bite our ankles, and an array of pillows for Serita to collapse into, for the general mood to stabilize.

That is, until the questions start.

“It’s not a shadow realm. I thought, at first, but no.” Galen picks at his cuticles idly while he talks. “I would’ve been able to—“

“What’s a shadow realm?” Serita cuts in.

“Nothing you need to worry about.”

“Someone care to explain what’s going on here?” Serita dismisses Galen and eyes all of us warily, suspicion in the way she holds herself tightly coiled, before snatching one of

Stormy's apple juice boxes and angrily stabbing the straw through the tophole. "Either that or I go to the police."

"You don't trust the police," I throw back from the furthest side of the sectional couch as I can get. "You're more likely to stab us with that straw."

"Or a knife. More effective, you know."

"Good thing I have a few human shields at my disposal." I instinctively frown near Faron when I say it. He still hasn't gone to cover up the reek of weed on his clothes. I'd nag at him more over it if I thought he was on the hard stuff, but as is, all I ask is that he doesn't broadcast where he was last night in front of Oscar and Jem.

"You're the one who took her through with you," Jer cuts in diplomatically, veering the conversation away from threats of bodily violence. Even if Galen's temperance doesn't bode well for that. His put-together demeanor never cracks, even in the face of crisis, which is how I consider this situation.

"What did you mean before?" I direct this at Serita. "You said you saw someone die. Explain." If there's a body that needs taking care of, I'd like to know the particulars before acting. "And before you ask," I say, "We didn't drug you or play some prank to mess with you, and I think you know that already, or you wouldn't be sitting here."

"We let you stick to yourself before, but now you're snooping around, seeing things you shouldn't," Galen pipes up. I'd prefer to save the threats for a backup plan, but that's never been his style. "You have our attention, circus freak."

"Someone *died* in your house, and you're—" Serita shakes her head, looking around incredulously at everyone in the room.

"That wasn't my house."

"Then whose was it?"

"They were looking for me," Stormy says quietly, but her words cut through anything else we might've said. "They hunted me like they hunted her."

She has a watchful face, eyes darting and narrowed, as if she's curious but distrustful of that feeling.

I crouch down, trying to meet her eyes, but she stares at her juice box determinedly. "They?"

"That poem was new, though."

"About that," Jer says, holding out his phone for everyone to see. "I looked it up. It is a poem. Part of one—it's the first few lines. Written by John Donne, called "Witchcraft by a Picture." Kind of obscure, but definitely him."

"Never heard of him," Faron says. The rest of us call out our agreements—none of us know the poem or heard of it before today.

"This says he was an English poet. Lived and died there before New Haven even existed as a Puritan colony."

A short silence settles in. How much should we say in front of Serita and the kid?

"Your dad already told Jem anyway." Faron sends Galen a long look, filled with meaning. Leave it to him to play nice.

I shoot him another, deeper frown. "Shut up, Faron."

"Not all of it," Galen argues back. "I've always had to conjure the place I want to go on my own." He shoots a quick glance at Serita, but continues. "I've never had a place *want* me to go there."

Serita waves a hand out, like she did earlier with her book, to get everyone's attention. "My mom knows what?"

"As I said, not much."

"Let's say I believe you. What are we going to do about that dead woman?"

"There's nothing we *can* do. Haven't you figured it out yet? That wasn't my house. It was a parallel realm."

"You're crazy. You're all crazy." Throwing her hands up, she looks like she's on the edge of a breakdown. I have to admit, that'd be reasonable of her. "Actually, give me one

credible reason why I should believe anything you have to say about anything.”

I swivel back to Slater, swatting at her palm. “Right back at you.”

Incredulous, she balks. “How the hell am I the one who’s being interrogated here?”

“*Well,*” Faron starts.

“Shut *up,* Faron.”

“Jem?” Serita asks suddenly—registering what Faron should’ve kept to himself, now that I’ve brought attention to him. She’s shrill enough that Stormy takes a break from munching on her straw. “Oscar told my mom what? My *mom* knows about *parallel universes?*”

“About the kind of *family* she’s marrying into,” Galen corrects, looking like he’s barely resigned himself to this conversation. “Was she told? Yes. In detail? No. Does she believe it? Highly doubtful.” He ticks each question off on his fingers like items on a grocery list.

Faron says, “He said your family’s different from others. There’s not much to disbelieve there. She must’ve assumed he meant Galen’s a terror.”

Galen flips him off. “Pardon me for refraining from giving Jemima a heart attack.”

“Meaning...?” Exasperated, Serita waves a hand in front of his face. Here’s her limit. He bats it away like a fly.

Galen makes eye contact with each of us before answering. “Meaning that I’m half-human, half... not.”

“If you’re not fully human, then what are you?”

“Half-demon.”

“Are we waiting on a half-angel to join us, or is it just you on the menu?” That’s melodramatic, but she did grow up in a literal circus, so I bite my tongue on a retort.

Galen doesn’t share in my decision, openly sneering in distaste. “If you find one, you can take a bite out of them for

all I care. We are the bad guys, if you want to look at it biblically, and I'm sure that makes you happy."

For once, Serita ignores his snideness. "I'm Jewish. Keep talking, spawn of Satan."

This has nothing to do with religion, and she knows it, but she is a dreamer. A distasteful quality, but a valuable one.

Opposite her, Galen shows no reaction to the nickname, but I know it rankles. He must've expected this part of her reaction: her assumption that what he is somehow makes him inherently evil.

The air in the room feels heavy and loaded, other than Stormy sipping on the dregs of her juice while Serita stares and stares at Galen, no doubt waiting for him to call out, *fooled you!*

He doesn't. He can't, not without coming up with a credible lie.

"There's an age old conversation about how some people have a leg up in the world over everyone else," Faron says. "It's literal. It's a demon leg. Magic, if you will."

Jer puts his head in his hands. Stormy takes a loud slurp from her juice, her way of announcing that it's empty, and I hand her another.

Upon closer inspection, I confirm there really is something *off* about the kid. For one, she's in constant motion, jiggling and bouncing her feet in a constant rhythm.

Her nerves are clearly evident. At us, possibly. The constant state of motion also makes it difficult to pinpoint what about her is so unsettling. I'm tempted to ask how one side of her body ended up visibly taller than the other, but I refrain for the sake of more pressing questions.

They found a body.

"Where are you supposed to be?" I direct this to Stormy. "Where did you come from?"

*Did Galen stumble on an alternate dimension where hunters are at his door—and if he did, are they coming here*

*now?*

All I get in return is a shrug. Then, belatedly, “I don’t have anywhere to go. Really.”

“Where does that place exist?” I push.

“Not here. Demons are crawling all over this place.”

*But not there—wherever that is?* Shaking my head in frustration, I barely restrain myself from losing it. I have to remind myself that she’s just a kid.

I change tactics, switching to our other problem. “Slater, I know this is a lot to take in at once, but... isn’t this kind of what you’ve always wanted?” I ask, trying to appeal to the side of her that reads fantasy porn and regularly drenches herself in glitter, according to what we found in the boxes Faron *accidentally* tipped over. “Yesterday you were a normal college girl, and today, yadda yadda...”

“I’m rather spectacular once you get to know me, actually.”

I try again. “Ye’re a wizard, Harry.”

“How stupid do you think I am?”

Jer grimaces, even if his eyes stay sharp, watchful.

“Why would you say that?” Stormy asks, genuinely curious.

Serita swivels to stare at the kid, long locks of silky black hair sweeping around her. I have the urge to wrap a hand just there, where it lands splayed, but now’s not the time. “Look, Stormy, I know you still think Santa Claus is real and all that, but—”

“Santa isn’t real?” Serita blanches at her own outburst when she realizes what she’s just said, but Stormy smiles and says, “Obviously. But demons are. I’ve met one.”

“What?”

She jerks her thumb at Galen. “His mom’s a demon. That’s what makes him half of each.”

“How the *fuck* do you know that?” Galen bursts out, but Stormy’s already reaching for another juice box.

“She’s the one who told me about the demons.”

Simultaneously, Serita leaps up and announces, “I need some air.” She practically sprints out of the room like she can’t bear to hear the rest, aiming for the back of the house.

She disappears into the garden, not looking back. I only need a split second to decide on following her.

“Where are you going?” Galen yells, since I’m already halfway across the room.

“To negotiate peace on all of our behalf.”

“I don’t want peace with her!”

“Too damn bad.” I slam the door shut on my way out.

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Galen’s mom renovated the outdoor spaces surrounding the property of her and Oscar’s home shortly after he was born. Her body needed time to recover, but Andrea Vranes was never an idle woman in the time I knew her. Her mind would have thrashed at the limits of new motherhood, even if she loved her son with her entire heart, and she did.

The garden is a compromise to the need for physical healing. Renovation plans kept her thoughts whirling and minor tasks helped placate her need for movement, while not requiring her to move around much past a few areas of the house or leave a newborn unattended. The rest she oversaw, including a tree house for Galen when he was older (which we made use of often as kids), a fountain shallow enough to curb risks of harm for when he was a toddler, and paved paths simple enough to navigate, no matter of age.

I take a curved path lined with obsidian on my path to the fountain, knowing Serita’s been there before. I’ve spotted her perched on its side more than once before, usually as a way of avoiding her mother on infrequent visits.



The obsidian cost an ungodly amount, Galen's mom told me once long ago. It's not a common material in gardens, nor in the shapes she needed for its use here, but she liked the way it shone in the light, she said.

There she is.

I stalk towards Serita with purposeful strides. Let her hear me coming. "Hiding only makes me want to give chase."

"I'm not hiding," she says without turning her head.

Soon I'm standing directly in front of her curled-up form, and she still hasn't looked up yet, so I crowd her space. Consciously, as I always have, I even out my expression—I betray nothing, not where she can see. It takes more effort than usual, more than I'd like.

Leaning down, I tilt my head close to hers, trying to place some reaction in her. If I have to drag one out of her, I will.

Stubbornly, she resists, lips pressed, so I say the words I know will annoy her most. "That must have been terrifying for you."

"Hardly." Amber eyes narrow a fraction, but then she remembers to smooth out her expression. I consider changing track and telling her the story behind this place. Every little detail Andrea told me, including the little secrets not even Faron or Jer know about this place.

Now's not the time. Instead, I take hold of the column of hair the way I wanted to earlier and force her eyes to meet mine. Her eyes truly flash this time, and she doesn't care to hide it from me.

*There you are.*

"What are you doing?" One slender hand reaches for mine to pull it away, but my other hand comes up to grasp it. Teeth bared, she says, "Get your hands off me."

"If I do, I think you'll run, but you should know that's not a good idea."

"Maybe I'm the one who chases the prey."

I let out a huff of laughter. “We’ll see.”

“I didn’t come out here with the intention of luring any of you to follow me, but I won’t say I’m surprised you’re the one who did.”

“Think you know me pretty well, don’t you?” In spite of myself, I find myself twirling strands of her hair between thumb and forefinger.

*Just a taste.* An addict’s mantra, but it’ll have to do. She doesn’t stop me, but her eyes say, *for now.*

As a concession, I let go of her hand, and let mine drop to my side. One battle at a time.

Her newly unrestrained hand by me grabs onto my shirt, wrinkling where her fist clenches and holds on tight. I don’t give her the satisfaction of reacting to being in her hold.

An internal debate rages to the front of her emotional turmoil, all her emotions laid out like a buffet of treats, and I eat them up.

Eventually, her hand drops back to her side. Smart girl.

“What are you looking for? Money?”

Serita deepens her glare. “Of course that’s your first assumption.”

“Money’s solved just about every problem I’ve ever encountered.” Most of them having to do with Faron or Galen’s antics, but bygones and whatnot.

“Then you’ve lived exactly the kind of life I figured you’d lived.”

I don’t let myself react. Just paste on a narrow smirk.  
“Smart girl.”

“I know you well enough to realize you came out here because that’s what you do. Be the responsible one that lives for his to-do list and follows Galen’s orders.”

“From the way you were yelling when we found you three, maybe I figured you got scared.”

She narrows her eyes in anger and her mouth thins, turning in on herself—a rare show of restraint. She doesn't want to play the game. Something's hardened in the time it took for Galen, Stormy, and Serita to fill us in on what happened. It's hardened her from accepting what she saw.

Stormy's small voice echoes in my ear, *They hunted me like they hunted her.*

*Let it out.*

“You're baiting me. You've always been baiting me. You and your friends.”

“With honesty, sure. You're the one who has no idea what you've walked into by coming here. Worse, by staying.”

“At the house my mother lives in?”

“In New Haven.”

“You just want to make sure I won't tattle on you and your friends. Well, if you want something from me, what's it worth to you?”

“This must be when I ask what you want in exchange.” I let go of my hold on her. “But I won't. I stand by what I said earlier. You won't go to the cops, but they're not the only ones who'd listen if you came running in with some sordid tale about us. You're not going to run, either. You're far too intrigued for that, which tells me you're reckless.”

The comment reinvigorates her, enough to light a spark combative in the way she looks at me. “You think you know everything. Narcissism must run in the blood.”

She wouldn't talk like that if she knew the irony behind her words. *It runs in the blood.* Close, but not quite.

“I'm realistic, and narcissism is hardly the worst thing I might've inherited.” My smile is wolfish, taunting her to speak her mind, like the animals she refers to us as. “Moreover, I'm a patient hunter, Serita. You ought to know that.”

There's more than one meaning in my words, but I don't feel the need to ensure she knows it.

“I don’t see what that has to do with what I do or don’t say about... what happened,” she says. I wonder if she realizes her head’s begun tilting towards the cradle of my palm, but I don’t feel the need to mention that to her either.

“Does it make any sense that we’d want to cover up a murder in the house that we had nothing to do with? Galen told me what that place looked like. You know what you saw wasn’t the same house you’re in now.” I pause, letting the words sink in. *Hoping* they sink in. “We’re not capable of decimating then restoring a house in the span of minutes. No one is. Deep down, you know what you saw was real. You just can’t accept it because that means accepting the body was real too. But it wasn’t a death that happened *here*, in New Haven, and we have no control over a place when we don’t even know where it exists or *how* it exists.”

“Nothing they said in there makes any sense. So why do I feel like the only crazy one?” The bravado’s left her, reminding me again of how small Stormy seemed when she told us there’s someone looking for her. Hunting her. “Are you going to tell Galen’s dad about any of this? Maybe he can help.”

Looking to the adults never helped us in the past, but she won’t find any comfort in knowing that. “I hadn’t planned on it, no.” I haven’t brought it up to Galen or the others yet, but they’re likely to agree. There’s no point in bringing any of this to Oscar. He took up the same stance as his late wife on anything supernatural-related: don’t ask, don’t tell. Everyone’s safer that way.

Act human, and everyone will believe you are one.

I think ignorance really can be bliss. For Oscar, anything demon-related stays buried in the past. For Galen, it’s what he is. His past, present, and future.

“Why not?”

“He can’t do anything about it.”

“I can’t tell if you’re putting up an act right now or not,” she says. “I feel like I can’t be sure of anything.”

“You haven’t left the property,” I point out. “You’re confused. That makes sense. But empty threats undermine your credibility. Don’t put up that false bravado act unless you’re willing to meet the challenge you’re making. Admit that you’re worried over the kid.”

“Don’t let her hear you call her that.” She makes no mention of the rest of what I’ve said, but I can tell it hits home.

“I can handle an eight year old.” Stormy can’t be any worse than Faron was at her age.

“Don’t be so sure of that,” she mutters. “What do you plan on doing with her? And don’t act like your primary reason for following me here isn’t to look out for Galen.”

The words are spoken with neutrality, but I pick up on the deeper meaning behind her loaded tone.

“Galen can watch out for himself.” Usually. Until recently. “Whatever you think of us, let me be very clear on one thing. None of us are going to hurt that kid.”

“Even if that’s the only way you’ll get any answers out of her?”

“If you’re that worried over her, stick around.”

I can tell my answers surprises her, not that it matters. Jemima and Oscar have wedding events scheduled from now until the actual date, months from now, and I suspect Serita isn’t as unwilling to reconnect with Jem as she lets on. If she were, she wouldn’t be in New Haven at all, regardless of the circumstances that led her here.

“Galen’s the one who needs to looked out for,” she mutters. “You’re dangerous. You’re dangerous people.”

“He’s fine once you—”

“—get to know him? Because Galen’s so warm and inviting after months of knowing him. Definitely makes a girl want to make an effort.”

“I stand by the sentence you felt the need to finish for me there.”

She curves an eyebrow. “People see Galen Vranes and run in the other direction. They cross to the other side of the street.”

“No, that’s just you.” And possibly a few others, but no more than a handful. I think.

“There’s another thing,” she says, contemplative. “Back there—in the house, I mean—everyone looked to you for answers, but you weren’t there with us. Why is that?”

“I deal with stuff like this on occasion,” I say airily. “Not bodies.” Again, usually. “Let’s just say I’m in the business.”

“The... magic business?”

“You’ll have to pay a pretty high fee to know more.” I finish with another easy expression, one meant to imply a casualness I don’t feel, but the tightness in her shoulders doesn’t loosen.

“Careful, Finn. If I spend much more time in this house, I might *accidentally* knock over a box or two of the stuff Galen and the rest of you leave lying around when I need an extra blanket or two. Winter’s creeping up on us soon, after all.”

“Feel free, but if you find anything that upsets your stomach, I take no blame.” I’m only half-serious in warning her. “I’m not your enemy, Slater. But if I think you might do something that threatens my friends, then I can rise to that occasion.”

“So can I.”

My responding smile is loaded. So is hers.

“Now that we’re on the same page, you should know that your mother and Oscar walked in after you came out here. Faron took the kid upstairs to wash up and rest in one of the spare bedrooms. If I were you, I wouldn’t mention it to them.”

“Why would I?”

“Because you’re sticking around a little longer.”

“And because I know the truth now, or part of it.”

“No, because you have a family lunch to attend, remember? Play nice, or it won’t work out well for you.”

# 5

## SERITA



Finn goes inside first.

While I wait for some time to pass between our entrances —not that I expect anyone to particularly notice either of us being the only tardy arrivals—I measure my breaths, trying to grasp some sense of calm.

*In. Out. In. Out.*

My head thuds in a constant, grating rhythm. I can't seem to shake it, or self-preservation won't let me. Who knows what's on the other side of panic?

*Deadbodyscreamingpoetry—*

Galen never told me who the message was for, but I know he looked sure of who it was for. By that logic, he must have some idea of what it meant that those words were written on the wall of his house. *An inkling.*

That must be what they started talking about after I walked out. *Damn.* Maybe Stormy heard too? Unless they sent her away. The thoughts whirl and whirl, and my trek inside is



slow. I could turn around and head to the car, but if Oscar and my mother showed up while I was preoccupied, they'll have seen it.

*Get a hold of yourself. Don't ever let them see how they rattle you.*

Especially not Finn. Getting in my personal space, making oblique statements without elaborating on anything much... Pretty lies delivered with a self-assuredness that belies his upbringing and status. He grew up learning how to work people.

The problem is that I thought I knew *enough* about him and his friends to know it's best that we treat each other with slight disdain, but not familiarity. Now I know for sure that there's more to it—to them.

I remember the first time I saw Galen. Bystanders stared when he walked past. For being so tall, so striking in his coloring and countenance. For the ineffable strangeness of how he moves through the world, the way his light eyes seem to suggest he's planning a trick at your expense.

He was with his friends that time, of course. Flashy Faron, classically beautiful and quiet Jericho, and then there was Finn. Everything about the way he carried himself and his outward appearance suggested wanting to blend into the background, but he stood out the most to me—maybe because he was trying so hard to blend in. He saves the charm for clients and hookups, apparently.

Finn's eyes look like they dig right into your soul, ready to tear you apart on a whim.

I take his threat seriously. He didn't even blink an eye at the prospect of the dead woman.

He's the least present of Galen's friends, always on his way somewhere, and never staying long. He sneaks off at some point whenever I'm around, and busies himself with who knows what. I assumed it was harmless college guy stuff, something to do with one of his troublesome friends. Not Jericho, he's the other sensible one. Yet there are rumors.

Students come and go with the seasons in this town, but Galen and his friends are well known, that much I've learned. Granted, what I know about them largely comes from word-of-mouth, notoriously unreliable as it is, and it's all shrouded in fascination. Girls who wanted to marry into their families would *pay* to know more about them, despite their reputations.

It's weirdly comforting to know my unease around Galen isn't unfounded. The otherness in him, it's an instinct I didn't know how to properly wrap my head around.

I've concluded it's mostly looks, the unending bias in favor of good looking people in society. I might not ever pass for a young Selma Hayek myself, but still, I'm no lost cause. My personal hygiene is up to snuff. I use deep conditioner and have my nails done regularly. Where's my freaking applause?

Lots of college-aged communities just give off that air of *yes, I try to sleep around as often as I can because I'm young and figured why not*, no matter the gender. I wouldn't hold it against them if they weren't so disagreeable in every other way.

They're rich, good looking, and popular—qualities of birth, not ones they bought. Except, they let everyone else know it, and that tells me more than any amount of gossip ever will.

Light laughter spills out from inside. I hear multiple voices conversing from just outside the doors. Idling, I pause to try the breathing exercise again. *In* and *out* feels futile.

I think of Finn's wrist around mine, his hand sliding through my hair. The arrogance of him, always sure of himself. He looked triumphant even when I had my hand on him, ready to push, as if it was all part of some game we agreed on playing. As if I'd made some fatal mistake, leaving my defenses wide open for him to make some final move and be declared the winner.

A game I never agreed on playing with him in the first place.

*I'm a patient hunter, Serita. You ought to know that.* What did that mean? I couldn't bring myself to ask—not without knowing what game it is we're playing.

Dad always said I was the kind of person who went looking for danger, but this time danger found *me* instead. If I ask more questions than I already have, the deeper I'll be involved. Do I want that? Adversely, will I be able to move on and never think about what happened today if I *don't* ask?

*Once you've had your first taste of seelie wine, no other drink will ever compare.* Isn't that how the saying goes? It makes everything else going on—buying groceries or going to school—seem trivial by comparison.

I bridge the final distance and walk inside.

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I'm not the last to arrive. Faron must still be upstairs with Stormy. His and mine are the only empty chairs at the table.

At a glance, the mood in the dining room appears casual and calm. Beneath that, my own awkwardness attempts to peek through.

“You could've started without me.” I rush to pull out my chair between Jericho and, of all people, Finn. My only other option would seat me next to Galen and Jemima, so I resign myself to shoveling my food down fast before bailing.

“We had a late breakfast, there was no inconvenience,” Oscar says with a warm smile, leaning to see past Finn. Galen's father shares nearly no resemblance to his son besides their facial structure, the prominent features reminiscent of an actor or a politician. Galen's coloring must come from his mother, but I've never seen a photo of her before.

“Now that you are here,” Jemima says from the other side of the table, across from Jericho. The three of us have similar black eyes and hair, sharing more features than anyone else at the table, but they're noticeably paler than I am. The contrast

makes Jericho look sharp and my mother younger than she is. “How’s school? Are your classes going okay?”

Her skin is lighter than mine, her nose is slimmer. At a passing glance, we don’t resemble each other in the slightest. All we have are our similar styles and body types. That, and the equally uncomfortable faces we wear from across the table.

“Fine. Good.” It doesn’t escape my notice that my mother’s careful to avoid certain topics, as if I came with a *Fragile* label, left out on her doorstep. Neither can I resent her for it. In the wake of those conflicting emotions, I’m overwhelmed by awkwardness.

Naturally, Galen and his goons are surprisingly quiet, right when I’d prefer them to speak up.

*Fill the empty space so I don’t have to dwell in it.*

Jericho never says much to me if he can help it, and the opportunity only arises whenever me, Jemima—and thus Galen—are there too. We have no other reason to interact.

Faron speaks in jokes and a good-natured manner that easily facilitates small talk, also only when needed.

Galen is a viper in human form, possibly literally at this point, while Finn... I can never tell.

A peek to both sides confirms Jericho eating peacefully, while Finn hides a small smirk on the side of his face that’s hidden from Oscar. Jemima doesn’t seem to notice, eyes on her plate.

I stuff a bread roll into my mouth, biting off more than a polite mouthful, intent on my mission to hurry through this meal.

The monthly lunches are a concession. An apology for (purposefully) missing the engagement party, not that I admitted to that, but I didn’t need to for Jemima to know. Dad wasn’t so understanding on me ditching family duties, so here I am. Ironic, really. One of my first—and last—memories is of Jemima sitting alone before a vanity table. The lights left a waxy film over otherwise clear, youthful skin. Tears streaked

her face, but I didn't yet know why. Later, I knew this was the moment she decided to leave. Not just dad, but me too.

Every time I convince myself I've moved on, that I can handle making small talk or sitting down for lunch with her, I see her face and remember those tears. I remember not only her weakness in that moment, but mine.

"How about you, Galen? School going well?" Jemima redirects the small talk, an attempt to liven the mood I just dampened.

But instead of Jemima, Galen looks at me when he replies. "People around here are curious for their own good."

It's not hard to decipher his meaning. Finn might veil his intentions behind a wall of well-breeding, but Galen doesn't care as much to hide what he is. I poked the bear, and he thinks I brought his wrath down on me through no fault of his own. As if I meant to walk in on him. He would see it that way, I suppose.

"Ah, well, curiosity is the crux of the learning environment, I'd think." Slight confusion clouds Jemima's face, but she's grown better at hiding what she feels than when I knew her.

Galen's hardly sugarcoating who he's talking to here. He could use a slight cryptic air right about now. A little nonchalance to brighten the mood—not that I should be the one to point that out, I'm aware.

"This soup is delicious, Jem," Jericho says.

*You wouldn't think so if you just saw someone bleeding out*

---

She waves a hand in humility. "You're too kind, Jericho, *and* too smart not to know we picked it up downtown and re-plated."

"We're still thankful you're having us over for the meal." Finn's smile is a farce plastered over an unfeeling machine.

I roll my eyes at his sudden politeness. Jericho's too—until I see Galen doing the same.

“How’s that in-town project faring for you?” Oscar says, coming to my mother’s aid.

Finn shoots him a bland but polite smile. “In the early stages, but we’re on track.”

“Sounds vague,” I mutter, poking at my soup and watching it swirl around the bowl. He’s probably building some high-rise or another meant to target the rich students like himself.

*Thump.* Every eye swivels to the ceiling.

“Is some—“

“Faron had to freshen up before lunch,” Galen interjects. “Came from the gym.”

“Oh, we should’ve waited!”

“He won’t mind.”

“Still, I better—”

“Party’s all here, folks!” Faron himself comes flying into the room with no evidence of being winded. Maybe he really does frequent the gym. “What are we having?”

“Homemade soup,” Galen mutters.

Finn’s phone goes off at the same time, and he takes the opportunity to say a quick apology in Jemima’s direction before slipping away from the table to answer the call.

It’s ironic that any proximity I have to Galen and Co. stems directly from Jemima, even more so now because of the wedding events piling up, when it’s clear they’re hardly close to each other.

But Faron’s smile doesn’t waver. Something about the look he shoots to his friends, not just Galen, silently communicates a message I can’t decipher. Possibly about Stormy? They all seem to understand the hidden meaning, but show no outward reaction, other than Finn. His brow creases inwards until he catches himself, shoveling a spoonful of food into his mouth and smoothing out his expression.

He really is the worrier of them all. The stoic one. How boring.

“Soup. Lovely.” Faron plops down into his seat, mercifully putting a barrier between Galen and Jemima. “Bridal shower’s coming up, isn’t it, Jem? How’s that going?”

“Stressful, of course, but also exciting.” She smiles at his gesture to initiate conversation. “It’s the week of the big day that gives me the most worry, but that’s how it is for everyone, isn’t it?”

“Alas, if you’d only accepted me instead. We could’ve eloped in Vegas. Think of how fun that would’ve been.” Faron dramatically sighs in false disappointment, good humor sparkling behind hazel eyes. “Wouldn’t want to steal my brother’s thunder though, would I?”

“I’m having enough of a hard time trying to wrap my head around you kids being old enough to get married without the reminder,” Oscar jokes.

My spoon clinks in my bowl as I stand. “This was lovely. Thank you for lunch. I’ll see you next—”

“Won’t you stay for dessert?” Oscar asks.

I briefly wonder if he and Jemima actually have dessert, or if he’s just offering for her sake. Likely the latter. But it’s not him I have any particular issues with, so I try to inject kindness into my tone when I say, “I wish I could, but I actually have to meet up with a friend for a study date. This was the only time they could carve out to meet, so...”

“We’ll see you at the bridal shower, then,” Galen says politely, though it’s obvious I made up my excuse on the spot. “Let me see you out.”

“Don’t trouble yourself, I know the way.”

Without another glance, I’m making my way to the front of the house. Near silence greets my departure down lavishly decorated hallways, too lavish—even for me—considering they’re just that: hallways.

Just as I’m approaching the entryway, I hear him. What might’ve started out as a whisper now carries to where I approach in the hall, Finn’s anger evident in the harshness of his voice.

“I told you, I’ll work on it, okay? What more do you want from me?”

I soften my footsteps as I move closer, near the anteroom.

“There’s only so much—*Jacinta. Jackie.*” The fiancée.

“It’s one white lie, there’s no harm in that. Not anymore than all the others. Your sister doesn’t need to know. No, she—listen. Just think of it as another business deal. Think of it as a bargain. Give and take.”

I clear my throat. “Ahem.”

Finn whirls when I announce myself. I’m only slightly triumphant at being the one to tilt him off his axis this time, even if only by a little.

From the exasperation on his face, I immediately know the Finn that found me in the garden is gone, and the one on the phone isn’t about to play nice.

“Let me call you back,” he says into the phone, eyes burning into where I’m standing across from him. He *is* the one blocking the exit.

“Trouble in paradise?” I’ve had a difficult time understanding why someone as young as Finn Delsing is engaged. Guys who look like he does usually aren’t ones to settle down so early, if at all.

He swallows thickly, working his jaw, the only visible indication that I caught him unaware. “I hardly think criticism from someone who can’t pretend to get along with their mother for a measly half hour is worth much,” he drawls out, reverting back to placidity.

It makes me curious to think what *Jacinta—Jackie—* might’ve said to draw out the anger in him.

“Neither is the opinion of someone who clearly doesn’t hold much respect for his fiancée.”

“I don’t have the time, nor the patience, to explain the workings of adult relationships,” Finn says through slightly-clenched teeth.



“Nice deflection. Really innovative, hiding behind your age. Especially when you’re only *two, dos* year older than me. I really have caught you off guard, haven’t I?”

“Which is why you’re old enough to have known that acting calm for *one, uno* lunch is the adult thing to do. I would’ve thought your experience in acting for the circus crowds prepared you for such occasions.”

“Turns out you’re the actor here. You make quite the performer. I could almost believe you have enough of a soul to love someone from your engagement announcement, if not for today. Bravo Finn.”

“Careful, Serita. If you think Oscar and Jem being in the house means you’re safe from me, think again.” Apparently, he’s reached his limit of snark for the day.

I was just getting started. “I hardly think of you enough to draw many conclusions,” I shoot back. “But I’ve never been naive enough to think of you as *safe*.”

“Clever girl.” With one last unfeeling smirk, he’s sidestepping me and rejoining the pack of wolves.

---

I wanted to run off the moment everyone started talking over each other about demons and dead people. Not to be callous, but that’s what Andrea Vranes is—dead.

Wouldn’t a demon already be dead? Is that not a prerequisite? I’m surrounded by lunatics.

That, followed up by my meeting Finn in the garden and lunch with Jemima and Oscar. However I think about those encounters, I can’t wrap my head around it. Around *him*. It’s like something between us has changed, but I don’t know how or why. Because I walked in on something I shouldn’t have? But what happened with Stormy and Galen has nothing to do with Finn, not directly.

Or maybe it does. They do act like a pack—the nickname isn't unsubstantiated. I had to navigate past all four of their cars to reach E's borrowed one, and I could point out each of them by their owners. Find one, and the others can't be far behind.

I barely remembered that I had to return El's car after that. Luckily, she got pulled into some little brother drama. I dropped the keys with her mom, who was rushing out of the door, too busy to take notice of my own panic on top of her own.

The only thing to calm me down after an afternoon like that is mindless exercise. Not workout sets in the crowded weight-lifting area or going over my routine—where I'd need to remain mindful of *not* falling to my death while swinging from the ceiling—but a jog will do in short notice.

Running is my least favorite form of exercise, but I recognize its usefulness. For example, in situations where one must run around a slanted house to find a mirror they can jump through in order to escape a possible axe murderer and their victim, who I now realize we definitely left for dead in 'Slant,' as Stormy called it. The *Other* New Haven.

Here lies the need for a mindless run. Suspension of disbelief at the last few hours carries me across town, through somewhat familiar sidewalks and away from snappy children (Stormy *and* Galen).

The logic that ties the world together in logical knots has been cut wide open. I feel like I've been cut loose, clinging to those ties, trying to reattach them in vain.

*Demons, blood, Donne.* It feels like chasing a high, like an addict looking for a hit anywhere they can get it, trying to force reason onto the unreasonable. This must be the consequence of living a small town life, which I thought I'd acclimated somewhat to, but apparently not. All small town roads lead to mental breakdowns.

When dad was diagnosed, I made some stupid joke about the neon pink wig I'd buy him after his chemotherapy—right before I burst into a teary, sobbing mess. That was when

Daniel Slater imparted this valuable nugget of wisdom upon my person: according to him, my instinct is to lean on levity when faced with difficult times. His words, not mine.

I've made a habit of it since Jemima left us high and dry—also his words, but he was the one making a joke. The two of them are still friends, actually. The divorce was amicable and Jemima didn't make a fuss over custody, even if I admit she would've had the right to ask for more than she got. She just didn't want it—me. But the two of them have always gotten along, and when dad told her about his diagnosis, I could hear her fall into a sobbing mess on the other end of the phone.

When the Yale Art Gallery building comes into view, I take stock of my surroundings, and realize I've somehow ended up on Chapel Street—miles from where I started. I've found the most productive runs happen when the runner is so out of their mind they don't even realize where they're going.

Huffing and puffing like a dragon, I find a nearby bench and pull out my phone, cutting off the music and pulling up my messages. I could call dad. Tell him what happened earlier, or complain about college for a while, but should I? I'm not even entirely sure what *did* happen, and school isn't awful enough yet to warrant a call. I'll save that for exam season. Why make him worry? Why make him think I'm losing my mind, even if I possibly am?

Guilt clogs my throat at hiding something that feels so important from him, but there's nothing to be done about it.

What is there to say? *Mom might be marrying into some demon-worshipping cult, call you later?* Lying to everyone else is easy. Lying to dad is a newfound experience, but in all fairness, he started it by not telling me about his diagnosis for *months*.

Worse, he told Jemima long before he did me. Sure, I got over it eventually, but now there's a nagging voice in my head that doubts he'd be honest with me if he did get worse again, and I refuse for my problems to have a hand in that.

I'm about to set down my phone when it *dings* with a text alert from an unknown number.

**Unknown:** We weren't trying to pull a joke on you.

**Me:** Who is this?

**Unknown:** Finn.

**Me:** How did you get my number?

**Unknown:** The phone book.

**Me:** Sarcasm is the lowest form of humor.

**Unknown:** Right back at you.

**Me:** If Galen's an actual demon, which isn't that hard to believe, what does that have to do with the hallucinogenic drugs you must've slipped me?

**Unknown:** You know that's not what happened. Your mom and Oscar aren't home. Stop being a child and come back so we can talk about this like adults.

Looks like he's calmed down since lunch. *Good for him*, I think bitterly. The other assholes are probably looking over his shoulder and egging him on while he types.

Now that I've exhausted my body to its limit, my mind should follow. Instead, my thoughts roam free, same as in the garden. There's something about what happened in the *Slant* that keeps niggling at the back of my mind like a task I forgot to get done. Galen's friends are clearly in on whatever he's

gotten himself into. I probably shouldn't have left Stormy alone with them, mostly because Galen was pissed when he realized I toted her back with us. He wouldn't kick her out, would he?

The beginning of an idea slips in my mind before I can fully process it, shocking even me. *Magic. Dad.*

I'll need backup for this. I'll need *answers* for this, and for that, I need the smartest person I know, who also happened to grow up in New Haven and knows all about the other families in this town.

Ignoring the text from Finn, I scroll down until I find the name Eleanor Altej.

# 6

## FINN



After hours of waiting and busying ourselves with coming and going, making calls and searching for answers, it's clear Serita has no plans on returning to the Vranes house anytime tonight.

Which leaves the four of us with the task of housing an eight year old.

The *tilt* to her body is more prominent than before, when the presence of Serita, then Jem and Oscar, could distract from Stormy's... differences.

Following three hours of arguing with said eight year old on whether or not we should chuck her back through a mirror and into the place she keeps calling Slant, it was decided she can spend the night in a guest bedroom tucked into the corner of the third floor, where Jem and Oscar won't realize she's there.

It's only for the night. Faron dug through some of Serita's clothes he found folded up in boxes and managed to come up with suitable nightclothes amongst costume jewelry and tourism knickknacks.

We couldn't get her to talk anymore about how she knew about Galen or his mom, and anytime mention of Slant came up, she'd shut down entirely. *Tomorrow, I think. That's a problem for tomorrow.*

It'd be an easier pill to swallow if we didn't have our own problems going on at the same time. That, and the four of us aren't as close we once were. We might be around the house or on campus, but by this point we're going through the motions. That's the way it's been since Luke left and Galen's mom died.

Once Stormy's tucked in, I'm half tempted to chain her leg to the bedpost. That kid's a little hell-raiser, especially when anyone calls her 'kid.'

The silver lining in all of this is that we can speak freely without Slater present, even if it irks me that she still hasn't replied to my last text, but that's to be expected at this point.

"So we lie," Faron is saying enthusiastically when I tune back into the conversation. "Tell Jem's daughter some made up story, that we were messing around with her earlier. That's what she already thinks, anyway."

"Is it? It's not like we told her about Galen, she went through a mirror with him. Kinda hard to cover that up in any way that doesn't sound like bullshit," Jer counters.

"Pretty hard to argue with that," the man in question agrees. He's been standoffish the entire day, but that's par for the course with Galen Vranes, worsened by his dislike for Serita and Jem, an extension of his ongoing war with Oscar.

I'm sure Serita won't go to Jem about anything she considers serious, much less what happened today. Based entirely on intuition, but it's enough for now. She didn't go to the cops either, or we would've heard by now.

"I doubt Jem's daughter would prefer to join this scurvy-carrying crew," Faron says. "All aboard the S. S. Demon Carrier."

For privacy, we took the Caulfield's day boat out on the water, a sleek model that's not large enough to draw a crowd, but spacious enough for our purposes. In the past, Jer asked his

dad to teach him how to sail, not out of any particular interest, but so Galen would have a private place to practice his abilities without fear of being seen. Andrea Vranes had a strict no-powers policy at home, but to a group of pre-teen boys, we all thought what Galen can do was the coolest thing in the world.

Now, it's a safe haven, I suppose. Fitting, considering the town we live in and New Haven's history as a port town, as per the name. Everyone who knows we regularly hang out around the docks and on the water assumes we're here to fish and drink on our family's yachts like privileged assholes, but the guise suits our needs.

If everyone thinks we're douchebag frat boys, far be for me to disillusion them of the notion.

"I'm waiting for Baker to get back to me. Howie will be able to find something, if there's anything to find," I say. "We should see if we can get anything else out of the kid later. Tomorrow."

"Did Luke answer when you called?" Faron asks.

Everyone tenses, myself included. It's a conscious effort not to show it with everyone's attention now firmly placed in my corner. "No. He didn't." Not that I, or Faron, expected him to. That doesn't keep the snub from stinging, even if intellectually, I know Lukas not answering any of our calls has less to do with us and more to do with his situation.

"What happened while you were gone?" Jer asks Galen to keep the silence from stretching any longer. "Where did you two go?"

Even in the safety of open waters, we're usually careful when discussing Galen's, for lack of a better term, abilities. He's been reluctant to speak about it, even when we first found out as elementary school kids, having always taken the lead from his mom on the whole demon business. In short: don't talk about it unless you want to be considered crazy and locked up. On top of that, let's just say she made it sound like she wasn't *technically* supposed to be walking around the mortal realm. Whatever that means.



“At first, I called it the mirror house,” Galen says. “I didn’t know it had a name. I didn’t know anyone else was there.”

“The kid, she called it Slant, right?”

“Slant Haven. She called it Slant Haven, as in New Haven, but everything’s, well, slanted. The Other New Haven? Dunno.”

“Uh... what?” Faron says. “That was a joke, right?”

“You’ve been there before?” I cut in.

“Just once, on accident. It’s like New Haven, but the feeling you get in that place, it’s not right. It’s... cold.”

“Literally cold or metaphorically?” This comes from Faron, who looks just as confused as I am. *Literally*, since we have nearly the exact same face.

“How could it be an accident? You learned how to control it years ago,” Jer cuts over, my only ally in keeping this conversation on track. Galen looks like he’s one unruly thought away from checking out entirely.

“Maybe it was one of those cults,” Faron muses. “A zealot finally gets lucky messing around with stuff they don’t understand, and *bam*. He accidentally opens a pocket realm modeled after ours. I bet there was chanting.”

“I can text Luke, see if he’ll consult the family books,” I say uneasily. There’s no harm in it. At this point, I’m convinced he’s switched phone numbers and screwed off to the Bahamas, anyway.

“You’ll think I’m losing my mind,” Galen says suddenly, to no one in particular. “Maybe I am, but I know it was her.”

“Who?”

“My mom. I heard her through the mirror, and when I looked into the reflection, I swear it was her voice coming out of it.”

In the silence that follows, I’m reminded again of my resolve. When the worst thing that can happen to a person,

when the worst thing *does* happen to your best friend since childhood, you have to choose them.

*Not* their ridiculously hot, soon-to-be step-sister.

“You think your mom is in this place, this Slant Haven,” I get out over the roaring in my ears.

He nods. “I know what you’re thinking, but...”

“But they never found the body,” Jer finishes. “You inherited your abilities from your mom. So theoretically, her body didn’t end up lost in the water. She went *through* it. Is that what we’re thinking here?”

“They never found her,” is all Galen says in reply. I wonder how long he’s hoped for this.

I try to speculate what it would do to him if it’s not true. Even if Galen’s mom is in this Slant Haven place, why did she stay there this entire time?

At the grim look on Jer’s face, I know we’re on the same page. This doesn’t feel right.

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My keys land with a *clink* into the dish set by the door. A stack of files with the Delsing Industries logo sits beside it, awaiting my perusal, and they won’t wait long.

I grab the files on my way in, slotting them beneath my shoulder with the intent to get through at least half of the pile by tomorrow.

My loft was designed with simplistic, modern principles in mind. Sleek black and charcoal grey, nothing too grating on the eyes. Enough space that I don’t feel caged in, but not enough to invite unwanted guests, i.e. anyone. A place to rest and relax at the end of the day—nothing more, nothing less.

Moving out amidst tears from Meghan Delsing, the queen of martyred tears herself, was a chore, but a worthwhile one.

Her other half, Andrew Delsing himself, may have a hold on most areas of my life, but not this one.

However much father probably wishes he could buy the building up, Marianne, the middle-aged woman who sold it to me, is an ex-lover of his—a *jilted* ex-lover who wouldn't let him buy this place without being six feet under.

I could've outbid his price before I hit puberty with those odds.

Sighing, I trudge towards the main bedroom, intent on a shower and not much else before heading to bed.

Naturally, that's when my phone sounds off with a text. In fact, a glance at my phone tells me this is the newest message on top of a few others, all of them from Galen. He decided to sleep at home for the night, considering we're harboring a small child in one of the guest rooms, not to mention we have no idea what to do with said child, barring the option of Galen tossing her through a mirror to literally anywhere else.

**Galen Vranes:** Kid's up again. Little maniac is driving me insane What do I feed an eight year old?

**Galen Vranes:** The kid walked right up to the fridge and grabbed onto a rib eye with her bare hands. Thought this ought to be documented.

**Galen Vranes:** Update, she licked the rib eye

**Galen Vranes:** Did Slater decide to show up after all and stab you?

**Me:** I'll be back in the morning. Try not to kill each other before then as a favor to me.

That should placate him enough for me to carve out a shower, at least.

I couldn't bring myself to voice my doubts over the kid without any real reason, but it nags in my mind. Stormy's vulnerable in the way all children are, but more so after the little she told us. Kids stir protective feelings, but those can be deceptive, especially in someone who presents as a regular person, but isn't one.

That makes her a source for information, but also a potential liability. I see no reason to attempt convincing anyone of that. Not yet.

Stormy's given us no reason to doubt her so far, and I know Jer feels the same wariness towards strangers, so we'll both be on alert. Suspicion's part of his nature. Galen's too, under normal circumstances.

Galen's distraction with Stormy's arrival does ensure he'll keep out of trouble for a while. There's that much to say for her.

All I want to know is who hunted her down to Galen and Serita. One of the many questions she evaded. *Is it someone who'll come for us too?* Hunters dwindled with fewer people believing in anything supernatural, but some remain. The Salt's have long been searching for a *cavas* demon, same as me, and if they found one... We should be prepared, keep an eye on her. She's here already, so we may as well feed and house her. We can offer protection from whoever comes, and gather answers in the meantime.

The thought of it has me ready to jump up again and abandon all thoughts of sleep, but I settle for sliding into bed and starting on the files I brought from the office. I've gotten through four, all of them concerning trivial matters I'd rather delegate to someone else, when I give in to picking up my phone again.

**Me:** Hey asshole.

Luke hasn't answered any of my other messages since the car accident, but another can't hurt. He's known me long enough that he won't be surprised by my inability to give up.

Similarly, I'm unsurprised by him ignoring me. That marks one more person to check in with tonight.

**Me:** Stormy, no last name yet. Around nine years old. Black hair, brown eyes, tan. Missing?

**Howard Baker:** On it.

I read through the files he'd already sent on a different request, pausing occasionally to take my own notes on the client that called earlier. His secretary was smart enough to call from a burner phone, but I had a tip-off this specific client would contact me beforehand. I've arranged to meet with Nero Salt, the second son of Lane Salt, in two days.

Rogue heirs aren't hard to come by, unless it's the Salt's. I may as well hear what he wants. Something he can't ask of his own family, no doubt, or he wouldn't be desperate enough to come to me.

The Salt's aren't just public competitors to Delsing Industries—they're Contractors. Nero must really be on the outs with the family, and he's not the only one.

The Salt's never deal out *demounia* contracts to their few confidants and partners, as per tradition—they say it demonstrates unwavering loyalty from their inner circle. In actuality, it's to avoid making their allies more powerful than they are.

That's the in we needed to convince the Lin's to switch sides and lobby for us instead. Felix Lin befriended the Salt patriarch in a futile attempt to give himself some more power, of a demonic kind.

Whatever's going down with the Salt's, their allies are ready to jump ship, and soon.

There's no more word from Baker or Galen, but a few texts come in from past hookups, all of them mediocre, and a number of others whose messages I don't need to check to know they'll want something from me.

Nothing from Serita Slater. That'll need to change. Another person I need to keep an eye on.

Lastly, a missed call from Jacinta and a voicemail to go with it. I consider ignoring her until morning, but I may as well know what she found important enough to leave a message over.

Pressing the play button, I lie back and drop my phone to my chest. Jacinta's low, strong voice fills the space a moment later.

*"Finn, I didn't mean to snap earlier," she says. "It's just... you know how it is. How dad can be."* Felix Lin is a friend of my own father's, so she's not wrong there.

*"I can feel the noose tightening around my neck. Yours too,"* she continues, voice dropping. Fatigue? I can relate there. *"I'll call you, text you, whatever, when I know more. Anyway, that's all I wanted to say. Bye."*

I'll get around to placating her, but it can wait until tomorrow. No more paperwork for the company or on Nero Salt. No more mindless scrolling to distract myself from trying Serita again. She won't answer, but she will know our business isn't done yet. The others wouldn't have reached out to her. I shouldn't, but it's tempting.

It's been a while since I sought anyone out. That's all. And now I'm too tired for the effort of seeking anyone out, but I still can't sleep.

There's two hours of fitful tossing and turning, half-conscious and bleary, before I'm blinking through the fringes of wakefulness.

*She has her hand wrapped at the base, leaning forward to take me into her mouth. One last inch, and she has me stuffed down her throat in one fluid motion, sucking and licking as her*

*head bobs. Throat pulsing and tongue swirling around the shaft*

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*My blood warms to an uncomfortable degree. Blood, blood, it always comes back to blood.*

*I reach out to grab her back, fingers slipping through hair like black silk, tightening into a fist. Thrusting until I hit her throat every time. I'm close, so close, and my eyes slam shut when I shoot my load into her mouth, groaning through the orgasm. Spilling down her throat while she sputters around me, but the hand at the back of her head keeps her from coming up for air, on and on until the pleasure fades.*

*“Turn around.” I barely register the words coming from my own mouth. “We’re not done.”*

*Dark eyes looking down at me while she bounces on my lap, tightening around me—*

*Blinking awake to sun streaming in through the windows, awareness hits me like a truck.*

# 7

## SERITA



Eleanor Altej is the teacher's assistant in my Economics class at Gateway Community College. It took three Monday's, Wednesday's, and Friday's for us to become friends, all thanks to Annalise Arestos.

When my copy of *My Veliktariolin Barbian Mate* fell out face-up, I silently thanked the universe for discrete covers. I have no shame in my game, but that doesn't mean these strangers need to know my business. Except Eleanor knew, and we were on the fast track to friendship after that. She's the type of person that, for whatever reason, I instantly found myself able to speak comfortably with. There were no awkward lulls, not after that first meeting covering some less-than PG topics.

Washboard abs included, not that it's any of Finn Delsing's business.

It's not like I'm some blushing virgin. Up until this year, I spent more time traveling across the country than I spent in one place. Of course I met someone appealing enough to have



sex with at some point. Isn't youth synonymous with being open to trying new experiences? Or is that an indicator of an addictive personality? I'm not sure it matters. I've always been drawn to figuring things out, and sex was no different from anything else.

Back then, I only knew technical details. Enough to go along with what direction he led me in. Enough to follow along with what he did, the motions of the act. Consenting, but confused.

Annalise Arestos was the one who showed me what I like, and what I want. I like being able to think about—*talk* about, with Eleanor—sex without the possibility (however slim, depending on the person) of being judged for it. That's the appeal. I don't care if I'm rereading the same old tropes and clichés, that's not the point. Sometimes, a girl just needs to read about two people falling in love and not letting go. Sometimes, we need to believe in magic.

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Days pass before I to carve out time to see my one and only friend in New Haven—per her schedule, not mine.

**Eleanor Altej:** You can swing by the pool or I can come by after. But warning if you come here, hormones are flying through the air. Come prepared.

After hastily changing into a boxy, cobalt knitted dress—the first on the rack, and the fastest—I'm on my way, belatedly realizing I didn't bring a swimsuit, but there's no point in turning back now. The walk's short and the weather's mild for October in New England.

I'm idle enough to take leisurely strolls these days. It's a new development, but not all bad. I have enough saved up to coast through the year, especially without having to make car

payments or pray for low gas prices, but sooner or later I'll have to pick up the slack.

Theoretically, not working grants me unlimited time to practice. I later realized it also took away a reasonable excuse to avoid social obligations. When a call comes in, I'm out of excuses to make.

Eleanor's one of the only (maybe *the* only) person that's so busy, I could go months without hearing from her and not think anything of it. The last time we hangout was over coffee and working on assignments a couple of weeks ago.

In the meantime, I've made an effort to find out where Stormy came from, to no avail. You'd think a missing kid of her age would be easier to track back to some source, but my lack of experience in tracing missing minors has stalled the solo investigation.

The next step is making it a team effort.

Whenever Eleanor and I hangout, there are two ways it might go.

The first: covertly swapping books like we're doing a drug deal, since we've established our book borrowing habits early on. Most importantly, try not to drip any taco juice onto the pages or face dire retribution.

The second: I bother Eleanor with my rambling, recently concerning the pest that is Galen Vranes, while she nods along and pretends she's listening, usually while working one of her *three* jobs.

Me and dad have never been particularly well-off, certainly not at the level of the Vranes's, but Eleanor has three younger siblings and two overworked but underpaid parents. I hear that's par for the course in these small but prestigious towns. There's the overly wealthy half, then the ones hovering somewhere right above or below the poverty line, and not as many as you think who lie somewhere in the middle.

Eleanor's case inspires a particular outrage, not because she's my friend, but because she was accepted into Yale. She just can't afford to attend, even with the scholarships offered,

not unless she wants to pay off student loans until she dies. Paired with helping out at home, it wasn't a viable option for her.

What's that thing people say about how the next Stephen Hawking or Albert Einstein might already exist, they just don't have the means to do anything about it?

Anyway, the multiple jobs makes it historically hard to track down Eleanor at any given point in time. She didn't answer my text, meaning her phone was on silent because she was at the library, or completely off because she was at the pool. I checked the library first since the pool should be closed, but as it turns out, a middle schooler is having a private birthday party, which explains the lights being on late at night.

The sun went down a couple hours ago, but by the time I walk through the doors and into the chlorine-filled air, the pre-teens are practically rabid.

Excited bubbles of conversation bound off the walls, extra noticeable in such a hollow space. I find Eleanor seated towards the back, overlooking everything with dutiful attention.

“Altej,” I greet with a wave. “Looking fine, hot stuff.”

“Right back at you, hot mama.” Eleanor waves me over, flipping her hair behind her back.

She's beautiful in a classic, old Hollywood kind of way. Long, black hair that holds a natural curl I would saw off an arm and a leg for, large emerald eyes framed by full lashes, and the kind of lithe but sculpted body of a swimmer.

After years of babysitting and flipping burgers, she slowly but surely swapped out the less ideal jobs for ones that actually align with her interests. It was only a matter of time—Eleanor's simply unlikeable, which I say with absolute objectivity as the person gunning for the best friend slot in her life, despite the short length of our friendship.

I snort. “Hot mama?”

“How is that any worse than calling anyone hot stuff?”

“Touché, my favorite low-maintenance friend.”

She folds her legs to give me room to sit, not knowing the bombs I’m about to drop on her, but I’ll start slow.

“So. Galen Vranes, Finn and Faron Delsing, and Jericho Caulfield. What can you tell me?”

She arches her brow, momentarily stunned. “Should I be concerned about their bodily safety?”

“No. Maybe,” I amend. “I realize what you’re implying, but this is separate from me wanting to light their hair on fire, one by one. What do you know about them? You’ve lived here most of your life, so you must know some things.”

Still wary, El scrunches *both* her brows, a habit I’ve come to recognize as her thinking mode.

“Well... A lot of these old towns make a big deal out of settlers and founders, right? Mostly past-tense, but not always. Those old money types. Townie gossip fodder. The rest of the country thinks of New Haven as ‘that place where Yale is,’ but for people that grow up in or around here, you eventually hear about the old families.”

“I don’t.”

“The last time you were here before the move was when you were, what, thirteen?”

I nod, and she parts her lips, racking her brain.

“I think the Delsing and the Vranes families run a hedge fund together,” she says, tilting her head as if to garner my reaction to the news.

I realize that I haven’t given her much to go on, but I don’t know enough to specify what it is I’m asking after.

“I only vaguely know what that is.”

“Same here.”

“Really? Something you don’t know?” I tease.

She sticks out her tongue, smiling lightly. “Finance is not my area of expertise, I reluctantly admit. The guys are all

going for business-related degrees, though. Well, I think.” She shrugs.

“Please continue, Professor Altej.”

“Delsing, Yates, Caulfield, and Thorne—some of the old-timey families. Probably came over on the Mayflower or something. They send their kids off to fancy boarding schools, but they’re from here.”

“Didn’t the Mayflower land in Massachusetts?” I remember that much from grade school.

“Would you like to tell the story?”

“Apologies, Professor Altej.”

“So... I think there used to be others, but they’re the ones that kept their roots firmly planted here, and the Wilder’s died out. Then there’s families that come for Yale and stick around because of what the school has to offer them, but the old families go so far back they’re set apart. The Delsing’s pretty much built this place. Haven means port, right? That’s them. There’s old signs everywhere from when they were a shipping company near the water.”

“Damn.” Should I have noticed that? I run by the shoreline nearly every day.

“Right? Cecily Yates’s aunt is rumored to be the next Supreme Court justice. Y’know, after one of them kicks the bucket. Her parents have firms in, what, four major cities? Maybe more. This town’s seen lots of people like them before, saying they’ll build or rebuild this place into somewhere important, but it never lasts. They just end up somewhere else, and then they’ll drop their kids here so they can claim small-town American values.” Her mouth twists, disdainful. “The Caulfield’s own hospitals all over the country, and the Vranes’s made it big on pharmaceuticals decades ago, so they may as well be one of the old families, even if they’re technically not.”

“Those lowly new money folks,” I jokingly sneer. “We should’ve left them back in East Egg, old sport.”

Small town sentiments do prevail after all.

It's possible that being in Jemima's specific hometown is getting to me, making me hurtle into bad decisions. Some of that teenage rebellion she never got to witness.

Or else I'm reverting to old habits of my own volition—dipping my toes into the supernatural waters. I know I shouldn't be asking about Finn or his friends, trying to unearth who they are, their pasts.

Ignoring my reference, El goes on with her mini history lesson. "Grant Thorne married some heiress out of New York and now he's a Senator, and those two things are *definitely* not connected at all," she says sarcastically. "Her parents probably \_\_\_"

"I don't know any Thorne's though."

With another eyebrow scrunch, El scrutinizes me for a second. "Lukas Thorne?"

I shake my head, and something in her face indicates she's figured out what I'm missing here. "That was before you moved to New Haven," she mutters. "He was friends with all of them. Your stepbrother."

"You still can't say his name, huh?" *Have you noticed anything else about Galen—about what he can do? Do you think I could do what he does?* But those questions would require me to confess what I saw. The blood and the body. Stormy.

Friends give friends plausible deniability.

"Do you want to know this stuff or not?"

Hands raised, I drop the topic and try to smother my amusement at the blush staining her cheeks.

My phone vibrates, but with a quick glance I decide to ignore it. Jemima wants to pick out a bridesmaid dress soon, but I can only deal with either her or semi-sleuthing at the moment, and she's easier to ignore.

El's eyes dart back to the crowd of middle schoolers in forced calm, suddenly a little *too* interested in their wellbeing,

but I digress. That is, until her expression falls and she lowers her voice.

We're only a few inches apart when she asks, "You know how Andrea Vranes died last year?"

Knowing I should somehow find a conspicuous segway into the topic of missing kids, I merely nod, wondering where she's going with this.

Cringing, she says, "She was hit by a drunk driver. The mom of a girl that lives around here. They never found Andrea's body—the cops found her car in the water, and said she must've floated downstream. But they weren't the only two there. The drunk driver? She had her daughter and her daughter's friend in the car with her."

"Shit." I knew Oscar's first wife died—I just didn't know how long ago, nor the circumstances of her death. Still, I didn't ask, thinking it was too sensitive of a topic to pry, and no one offered details.

"The daughter's friend was Lukas Thorne. He used to be an athlete, and everyone said he would go pro after college. Football." Surprisingly, she looks impressed. "He shielded his friend with his own body—isn't that insane? But because of that, he took a bunch of injuries and transferred to a city hospital. He's been gone ever since. The whole family moved away—they used to live nearby."

"How have I never heard about this before?"

"Everyone did when it happened, but your mom and Mr. Vranes probably didn't want to bring it up around, y'know..."

"So they were all friends. Galen, Finn, Faron, Jericho, and Lukas."

She nods. "I always assumed their families would be friends. When you hear anyone talk about the old families, they're all lumped together in twos or threes, if not altogether. Birds of a feather and all that."

"What kind of birds would you pin them as?"

"Hmm... Now that I think about it..."

But I don't hear the rest of what Eleanor says, because when I turn my head towards the pool, every thought and feeling but shock empties out of my head at the sight of four familiar faces peering out from inside the pool.

Four *heads*, and no bodies.

Galen, Finn, Faron, and Jericho stare back.



# 8

FINN



“Do you think she saw us?”

“Without a single doubt in my mind, Faron.”

I speak up before the conversation devolves further. “So Slater’s asking around about us.”

All the old families of New Haven that are still around either have magic in their bloodline or have connections to the ones who do. Mercifully, Eleanor Altej has no knowledge of this, nor any reason to suspect it.

It occurs to me that Serita might think Galen’s not the only one with demon blood here.

She’d be wrong—Faron, Jericho, and me are fully human—but it’s not a baseless theory.

There’s something else that’s bothering her. It wasn’t her friend, but some thought bouncing around in her head that made her twitch, picking at her cuticles without realizing it. Like some part of her knew we were there watching, but that’s not it either. A nervous habit?

“Technically, she only asked one person,” Faron corrects.

“That we know off.”

Stormy cuts in with, “You’re all morons.” Then, in Galen’s direction, “Your demon blood staying hidden this long must have less to do with your secret-keeping abilities and more to do with being surrounded by other morons.”

“You’re a real charmer you know that, punk?” he shoots back. However morally inept harboring a (missing?) child is, she has his attention.

I’m tempted to question him, shake the answers out by force. *Did you see or har anything else from the other side of the mirror?* But I know better than to ask outright, especially in front of an audience.

We’re gathered in a loose circle, Galen and Jer reclining on the floor, Faron and Stormy seated before the fireplace in her temporary room at the Vranes house. After I was relegated to the poof set before Stormy’s feet, I decided on standing by the wall, where I can jump in quickly no matter who throws the first punch.

Howie Baker still hasn’t found anything on Stormy, but somehow, I’m not surprised by that, despite his usual work having always come back prompt and flawlessly informative.

We’ve been shuffling her around like divorced parents since that first night with her and Galen—in retrospect, that was not the smartest decision—given his current temperament and lack of experience dealing with children of any kind.

Tonight, she’s back at Oscar’s house. We’re here often enough that our appearance will go unnoticed.

“Children.” Jer has the bridge of his nose pinched between thumb and forefinger, much like the father figure he’s imitating. “Can we get back to what we were saying before, or do one of you need a time-out?”

“Don’t tell me you’re not dying to correct her,” Galen drawls.

Faron looks up, questioning. “On what?”

“Pre-med is nowhere near related to a business degree,” Jer mutters, more to himself than us.

*We’re* not the ones he’d like to correct.

“We’re just going to ignore Serita blabbing around town about us?” Faron’s hands are outstretched in a questioning gesture.

“She didn’t mention the Slant,” Stormy argues.

I almost start in surprise at how quickly she acts to defend Serita, but she *did* rescue the kid.

“Asking, not blabbing,” I say. “Eleanor Altej is harmless.” Also misinformed on some fronts. Quite a bit of what she told Serita is true enough, but not the whole story.

The Delsing’s and the Yates’ haven’t gotten along in generations, for one.

*Better a Lin than getting hitched to the Thorne girl, or—god forbid—a Yates*, father said recently.

He’s wasn’t wrong, but in Josie’s case, because she’s only sixteen years old. Last I heard from her, she was still enough of a kid to swoon over pop stars and worry over her driver’s license test.

“Who’s Eleanor?” Galen stares blankly. “Am I supposed to know who that is?”

I gesture at the mirror propped in front of us, now reflecting the ceiling of Stormy’s room. “The girl Slater was talking to you. She lives across the street from Gia and Lukas.”

“How come no one told me that before?”

“Anyway,” Jer interjects. “They weren’t talking about anything important. That was all public record and searchable online. Back to—”

“I think we should call Luke again.” Faron’s steeped his fingers together like a cartoon villain in his tufted armchair.

*All he needs is a white cat.*

From the floor, Galen props himself up on his elbows with an incredulous look on his face. “You know he won’t answer.”

To Jer, I say, “She didn’t see us long enough to be sure.” *Hopefully*. If not, I’m moving my car from the driveway and hiding it behind one of those sizable shrubs Galen’s mom had planted around the property.

From the look on his face, he’s thinking of doing the same thing.

“Is that true, what the pretty lady said?” Stormy’s mimicked her hands to match my twin’s, and the effect leaves the two of them looking like they’re conspiring against the civilized world.

“About what in particular?” he says.

“About your families.”

Faron nods. “Speaking of, where’s yours?”

Right on cue, those onyx eyes narrow. “I told you. I don’t have one.”

“Stormy, ki—Stormy. You have to give us something to go on. We can’t hide you in Oscar’s guest room forever.”

“Why not? I’m small.”

“Assuming this *Slant Haven* almost perfectly mirrors New Haven, you must have a home somewhere between the two.”

Faron interrupts, “Are we really calling it that?”

Stormy ignores his question, fixated on Jer. “Who needs one?”

“Eight year olds,” Jer says. “Eight year olds need one.”

“I’m almost nine,” she reminds him with a glare. “I already told you. I’m not going back.”

“Any particular reason why?” Faron leans forward, letting his hands fall to his knees, suddenly far more serious than I’m used to seeing his—our—face.

Bluntly, “I was hiding.”

That’s new.

In the silence that follows, a quick succession of thoughts rush through my head, each worse than the other.

*From who? Kidnapped? Abused? Assaulted?*

Now I'm sure that me and Jer's thoughts are barreling in the same direction. Galen and Faron with him.

Galen's the one who voices the least vulgar question we can think of asking. "From who?"

"Everyone."

"All of the people in the slanted place?"

A single nod. "All of them. If I were you, I wouldn't go back there."

"But if—"

"You and I both know that the fairytales and the movies are *wrong*." The conviction in her voice makes us all pause. "Magic is not kind, but it is *bold*."

"Whatever that means," Faron says.

"If the floods don't get you, the storms will. And if the storms don't, then *they* will."

*More ominous bullshit*, I decide.

"Magic is for the desperate," Galen says, ignoring Faron.

"Why not leave before now, then?" Faron tries again.

"Because..." Jer looks to Stormy. "Because of the same reason settlers came to New Haven and other places along the New England coast in the first place."

"Back then, if you could, then you'd settle near a body of water," I finish, catching on.

My twin quirks a speculative brow. "What does that have to do with *now*?"

"What did you mean about the floods? What kinds of storms? We haven't had much bad weather recently."

"Not on this side."

“So,” Galen says. “The Slant isn’t completely parallel to here. Am I getting this right?”

“Galen, nothing is quite the same from one side to the other,” Stormy says, this time softly. “And that wasn’t your mother.”

“I know what my own mother sounds like, not that I have to explain that to an almost-nine year old.”

She shakes her head in frustration. “That’s not your mother.”

“Then how did you know about me?” he counters.

“He told me.” One stubby finger points directly at... me.

“No, Stormy, I didn’t,” I say slowly when it’s clear she’s not going to continue. “We only met when I saw you with Galen and Serita earlier.”

“Then how do I know you have a star-shaped mole on your ankle?”

“Because my ankle is showing,” I point out, my left leg outstretched.

“None of this makes sense,” she huffs. “This isn’t how it was supposed to go.” Suddenly, she’s standing, already making her way to the attached bathroom, and the door slams with her inside.

“I guess she’s staying, then,” Faron says.

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“That was a shitshow from start to finish.”

“No shit, Faron.”

“Guess you lucked out, getting all your ducks in order before this started going down,” he ruminates aloud, now that we’re alone.

Jer went after Galen after the latter abruptly left, and Stormy went in search of food. I’m can only hope she’s not

devouring raw meat.

On a whim, I decide to humor him. “How do you figure that?”

He shrugs noncommittally, sitting up to leave. “Whenever I see mom and dad, they gush over you. Got the grades, on track for the company spot after that, plus the wife to tie it all together in a neat little bow.”

I roll my eyes and follow him out towards the entrance. “Going down a standard path isn’t the death sentence you think it is, little brother.”

“By *minutes*.”

“A lot can happen in a few minutes.” Placating words, nothing that adds much to the conversation.

“Whichever girl told you that was just trying to be nice,” he says, grasping the door with a flourish and fumbling for his keys with his other hand. “Speaking of, is that why you were busy this weekend?”

I offer a single huff of laughter, not in the mood to play along. “No. Meeting in New York.”

Objectively, I know what Faron’s doing. Teasing me to get me to loosen up is his go-to since we were kids on the playground, and he’s always excelled at it.

We can turn down our marching orders, whatever they may be.

We’d only have to accept what we’d lose in return: any relationship with the family. The company. Our places in society, our inheritances—everything.

Joking over acts of rebellion is a coping mechanism, a pipe dream. Small comforts to soothe the mind.

This time, though, Faron doesn’t have the full story.

“You were in New York? And you didn’t invite me?” he says with mock hurt, leaning back against his car, opposite from mine.

I mirror his stance, my own set of keys in hand. It's cold out, but bearable. "You didn't miss anything. Noise. Pollution. A boring meeting you would've fallen asleep in the middle of."

"The company or the Contracting stuff?"

Faron well-versed in Contractor concerns, on account of the role being his birthright. First son heads Delsing Industries and the second son's slated to takeover *demounia* contracts.

Instead, dear old dad flung the Contractor title at me like a sodden towel in the trash bin, and never explained why. A way to spite Faron, or to test me. Both. I know he didn't expect me to suit the job, or he wouldn't have assigned it.

"Second one. The guy wanted to meet the Contractor."  
Meaning Nero Salt.

I initially considered cancelling on him, but curiosity won out. Just to hear what he wanted. The Salt's are intensely private, even more than me. Some of them are so private that I suspect there are Salt's I haven't heard of, read about, or proven to be real, living people.

"New client, then?"

I shake my head. "This one's more trouble than it'd be worth writing up a contract." True enough. "Business is good, anyway. Don't worry about it."

I gave Nero a condition for my help: introduce me to a friend of his father's, an old timer I haven't been able to get a meeting with on my own, in public and caught on camera. Doesn't matter where—an industry party or a fundraiser, some event of that kind.

Appearances matter, and I want to be seen snatching up Salt's. Nero has to come last so he can help me from the inside. That, and a couple other hurdles for him to jump through before I consider working with him. We both know he's desperate solely based on him coming to me.

Faron's smile spreads, all cheek. "When have you ever known me to be the worrier around here? Besides, that'll be



Jackie Lin's job soon. She can worry over you for the both of us."

I'm growing used to the teasing when it comes to the engagement, but from my brother, it's only a reminder that we're no longer as close as we once were.

I knew explaining the situation with Jac to Faron would be a headache, but omissions can be as hard to juggle as outright lies.

"You're right, though. I haven't seen you around much lately. You're good?" I'm careful to keep my voice neutral.

"Why wouldn't I be good?" Another flash of a smile. It looks real enough, but Faron's been that way our entire lives. He weathers any storm without faltering, but it must get to him sometimes.

*It can't just be me.*

I can imagine him sixteen again, dismissing the scathing opinions with a laugh. I remember opening the video without realizing what I was watching, until I did know, and could never unsee it.

Howie Baker helped minimize the fallout—that's how we met. Faron's embarrassment lasted longer than it should've, longer than it regularly would, but wealth and reputation whet public interest. Countless instances of public opinion flocking to gossip over politicians and celebrities suggests that most people think it ought to—that being in the public eye means we're obligated to play out some social procedure or another for their entertainment.

That's the only way to make up for the transgression of *having* wealth: being a curiosity.

Sometimes, the feeling is mutual. Aristocrats and long-dead socialites reveled in their notoriety. These days, falling under the radar wins out. The problem is that this isn't always possible, depending on how much public interest you garner, purposefully or not.

Faron takes it in stride, doesn't mind playing the game. Hasn't cared for a while now. Me? Not so much.

“Just checking in you,” I say. What else is there?

“Cross me off your list, man. I’m good, I swear. No need to worry about me.”

I clap Faron on the shoulder, brotherly-like. “Good. I better head out, then. Left some stuff to do back at my place.”

“Delsing Industries never sleeps.” Nodding in mock seriousness, my twin stands to leave first. “I should get going too. I’ll catch you later, big bro.”

# 9

## SERITA



Time doesn't feel much like a luxury I have, yet it takes a few days for me to swing by Oscar and Jemima's home without any of the Yale boys around.

I'm not entirely convinced any of them attend class, but that's none of my business.

Stormy *is* my business, I've decided. The thought of leaving her in their care is enough to leave a sour taste in my mouth.

The guys were as freaked out as I am. Almost. They don't know what's going on any more than I do. Galen was as shocked by what happened as I was, and so were his friends. Someone must be looking for that woman—her body.

Stormy swears she doesn't know who she was, but I don't know if I should believe her or not. It's not like we'd think she killed her. When me and Galen found her, she was in his not-house. Hiding? Taking a look around? I have no idea.

Either way, I was the one who brought her with us, so I should be the one to check on her—without anyone else staring over my shoulder.

I could still drop her off at the police station. Run like hell afterwards, so no one knew it was me. But that doesn't feel right, not anymore than it would be to chuck her back where we found her.

So we'll talk, then I'll go from there.

I dressed simply for the occasion, hoping for a casual effect. Less personality than I usually inject into an outfit—no glitter, flair, or fun. A cerulean blue minidress curves over in all the best places to accentuate the places I want, while subtly masking the ones I don't, paired with scrappy sandals and minimal jewelry. The end result is casual. Inviting.

At least, I hope. I'm not sure how to appeal myself to eight year olds, but I figured I'd cover all the bases I could think of, including appearance. How you present yourself to the world does tell something about you, whether it's true or not.

The Vranes house says *money*, and lots of it, but there's no surprise in that.

No one greets me at the door, thankfully. I keep an ear out for any sign of life from the first floor, but find none, so I continue upstairs until I reach the guest room where Stormy is camped out.

It's a stunning bedroom, filled with a wide canopy bed, eclectic but tasteful furniture, and a view from the windows overlooking the garden I've unwillingly grown fond of from my few visits here. To one side, a thickset door leads to an ensuite bathroom, and another doorway to the walk-in closet. Stormy herself sits cross-legged on top of the bed, flicking through an old magazine, one of my own.

"Hello," I say, unsure of where to start now that I'm here.

"Hello," she mimics, chocolate brown eyes trained on her magazine.

"How's it been staying here?"

“Fine.”

“You’re comfortable?”

“Sure.”

“The guys aren’t annoying? Have you and Galen been getting along?”

She lifts a shoulder, indifferent.

Finn’s snappy, easy to irritate, harder to get him to show it. Galen’s worse because he will make you feel as annoyed as he is, if not worse, without even being provoked in the first place. Jericho and Faron are harder to read, but I doubt they have much experience with children.

“Not pouting because we’re missing home, are we?” I taunt, willing her to speak more than one word at a time, even if it’s with some cutting remark.

Stormy cuts me a glance, snapping her magazine shut. “Not breaking in here because we’re a busybody, are we?”

Here’s the reason why I waited to talk to Eleanor, and why I waited to see Stormy alone. I don’t know Galen, Finn, or their other friends well. I can’t talk to them the way I need to—openly.

I can’t hold onto what I know on my own.

Eleanor isn’t just my only friend here, but she’s one of the smartest people I know, and that’s been clear since day one.

But El doesn’t hold the keys to the kingdom. Stormy does. I just have to get her to open up to me. The problem is that I’m not sure I’m the person fit for that job.

I consider her, not just the way she looks on the outside, but how comfortable she looks. She’s comfortable here, more than, well, *me*.

Was her life before now that awful for her?

No, not her life. Her world.

“I just want to know how you’re doing,” I relent. “When a... young person goes far from home, their instinct is usually

wanting to go back there.”

She snorts. “What home?”

Two different worlds, two different lives. Neither of them a home.

My heart aches for her in this moment, but I can tell that’s not what she wants from me, if anything. “There isn’t anywhere you’d like to be right now?”

“Why? Are you kicking me out?”

“No! This isn’t even my house. I don’t live here,” I rush out.

“Then why is your stuff here?” She points to the magazine lying beside her on the bedspread.

“Oh. Some of my things are here, but I’ve never been a resident,” I explain. “I don’t care if you go through the boxes.” *Besides the books*, but I don’t add that, suspecting if I did, that’s the first thing she’d look for when I leave.

“Well... good. Because I already did.” She sniffs her nose up at me, but the effect is more adorable than pompous. An attempt at playing pompous, really. “So... thanks.”

Taking this as my cue, I slowly inch forward, trying to appear casual. “No problem. I was going to, uh, bake some... cookies. Then I realized I didn’t have all the ingredients at my place, so I decided to drop by here. *Then* I remembered I kinda suck at baking, so if you don’t have anything to do...”

Another eye roll. Did Finn coach this kid, or did Galen?

“Hopeless,” she mutters. “You better go check that the parents aren’t home.”

Nodding, I grin, and miraculously, she smiles back.

“I’ll be right back.”

“Don’t make me wait too long!” she calls out, but I’m already gone before she can change her mind.

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No less than two hours later, three full racks of chocolate chip cookies cool at the kitchen island, the smell making my mouth water.

At the sound of wheels on gravel out front, Stormy made a hasty exit upstairs, and I'm left to explain why I suddenly stopped by to destroy their kitchen.

I could let Jemima and Oscar assume Galen came, baked some cookies, then left without cleaning up, but I doubt they'd come to that conclusion. Anyone who's met Galen can tell he's not a pastry baker kind of guy.

"Oh, I had no idea you were coming by or I would've left sooner," Jemima says as she follows the smell of baked goods into the kitchen.

*Too late to run.*

"I, uh, didn't have the ingredients at my place." The excuse sounds even less believable now than it did with Stormy.

"That's alright, we always have room for you," Oscar says as he trails behind.

"Thanks, yeah. Want a cookie?" I scan the unwashed dishes strewn across the countertop, estimating how long this will take.

I hate the part of my brain that reduces anything I have to say to short, stilted sentences—if not singular words—whenever I'm around my mother. It's been like this for years, and never seems to go away, no matter how much time passes. Worse, it's noticeable.

Grabbing dishes by the handful, I scramble to pile them in the dishwasher. Hand-washing all of this will take too long.

"These are delicious," Oscar compliments after a bite. Of course, he'd say so even if they tasted terrible, but me and Stormy did a surprisingly good job. Mostly due to her.

"Thanks," I repeat, throwing in the last of the dishes with relief. "I guess I'll get going then."

“Are you sure—”

“Midterms are coming up.” No, they’re not. Not for weeks.

Luckily, I spot the box I set on the floor by the fridge. Gesturing, I say, “I came to get that to study. Just got sidetracked along the way. I’ll see you at the bridal shower, though.”

Bending down, I pick up the box labeled *Books* and show them, as if I’m on trial and examining evidence. I’d hoped I wouldn’t run into her until the bridal shower.

“You were always such a good student,” Jemima says softly.

And that’s about as much as I can take for one day. *No, I wasn’t. I was a C-average student for most of my life.*

The walk to my car is brisk; I’m hasty to put space between us. The entire time, two words echo in my mind.

*What home?*

*What home?*



# 10

FINN



Professor Smythe drones on about developing compensation plans at the front of the room, but neither me or Jer pay much attention to what he's saying.

*Old* families, as Eleanor Altej put it, like ours, funnel cash through places in this town that the interim population wouldn't think of pursuing. Community-centric funding is often bothersome—too many people with opinions on committees or, worse, concerned citizens—but in some rare cases, worthwhile.

Funding outside of the school in the surrounding areas help pad the image they try to sell on academia. That's what makes us indispensable here, and why we stay. It feeds the egos of the wealthy to touch base in this small town every so often. Checkbooks in exchange for flattery, an old game. One of the oldest there is.

Our degrees are formalities to pad our resumes, to lay it out bluntly. Degrees from the Ivies only matter as much as the connections you make in such places. One right person can get

you through the door, propel you on the path flush with success.

We already know those people. We *are* those people. We'll have no substantial use for higher education outside of anyone important knowing we're either intelligent enough or influential enough to have them.

Less than another year and we're out of here.

Until then, the two of us sit in the very back of the lecture hall. Smythe eyes us warily, but can't be bothered to call us out. He's used to ignoring our blatant disregard for the nap-inducing bore he calls teaching.

A nicer person might not take advantage of his aversion to confrontation, but I've never claimed to be one of them.

Jer scans the class, scrutinizing the masses. "Should've skipped," he declares, without inflection.

I spot a demon playacting as an undergraduate in the front row. He sends me a wink. "Agreed."

Me and Jer have taken a couple classes together, but only ones required outside of his major—there's no amount of money that gets you out of taking general education classes—Smythe's included.

I almost forget he's a year older, and a year further than me in school. He could've graduated by now if he weren't taking courses concerning how to save human lives.

His parents would prefer if he dropped a med degree and went into the Caulfield Group, the same business route as the rest of us, but he's a stone wall when he makes a decision. Immovable.

"You hear back from Clarke?" I ask.

"He's working on it. Baker?"

"Same."

The past few days have been a back and forth of suggestions over what to do with Stormy, which invariably end up circling back to what the kid is hiding from us. *A lot* is

what we all agree on, and not much else. She might be learning a thing or two from Jer. Hell, from Galen.

I still haven't figured out what the kid meant by saying I was the one who told her about Galen and his mom, and not for lack of trying.

"I forgot she's back," Jer says, not bothering to lower his voice. Several people nearest to us turn their heads, but he doesn't acknowledge their attention.

Following his line of sight, it takes me a minute to locate Giada Laredo's small figure, shoulders tucked in, as if trying to disappear. It's no surprise she's sitting as far away from us as possible.

"So did I."

Jer twirls his pen between his fingers idly. "Where do you think she's staying? In the dorms?"

"Possibly. We'd know if she's back at her old place, wouldn't we?"

He nods silently, tense. Eleanor never named the drunk driver that killed Andrea Vranes to Serita, but most don't need to be told. Gia Laredo is the daughter of Reyna Laredo.

Reyna died on impact, no one knew if Luke would live or die, and Gia just... left. The two abandoned houses a few miles off from my own are where the Laredo's and the Thorne's used to live. Luke's family packed up and left when he did, and Gia's followed suit shortly after, though by that point the family consisted of only her and her older brother, Toren.

Toren's a few years older than the rest of us, so he was already working for some mid-level crime boss in New York by the time we were old enough to care. According to rumor, that is. Rumors like that were kept close to the chest back when Luke was here to put a stop to them.

"Something big must've drawn her back to town," I muse. "Can't imagine what could convince her to crawl back."

Jer continues openly staring her down. “We would’ve heard if it could have any bearing on us.”

“Not necessarily. Toren or his *boss* could be involved.”

Gia knows what Galen is. What I do. That makes her a walking, talking liability.

“I can put some feelers out,” he suggests. “Discretely, of course.”

“I will too.” It hasn’t escaped my mind that Giada could be of use in this situation.

Before she turned into the *Mute*, an outcast that moved back to New Haven for some inexplicable reason, she always had something to say. Gia was there that day Galen told us his secret.

Galen, me, Faron, Jer, Luke, and Gia. Sometimes even Josie, Luke’s little sister, would be included. Little Josie, tucked behind Luke, wearing her worn-in *Alice in Wonderland* costume.

Some small, sentimental part of me could remember those times with fondness. The rest of me seethes at how quickly everything changed and looks back in wonder at how we ended up this way

Worse, I know it’s partly my fault. I *know* I’ve pulled away since the deal with Jacinta went into *negotiations*, but I figured that would’ve passed by now.

Only, the distance serves a purpose. I’m the heir to an empire that was raised by its current holder, and so on for every Delsing heir that came before me. This was always the plan. I meant it when I told Serita her involvement complicates things for us—for me. But Stormy’s grown attached to her.

When my phone buzzes with a text, I think for a second that maybe Serita’s found some way to read my mind. That she somehow knew what thoughts live in my head.

**Serita Slater:** All that stuff you said before—I want you to prove it.

## SERITA



“What changed your mind?”

Finn matches my stride, the heels of my boots tapping out a rhythm across the marble flooring. He drove us to a commercial building downtown that houses three small businesses on separate floors. Dark wood paneling on the walls makes me think it’s a historical building, but it might just be an old one. There’s no elevator or chromatic fixtures to indicate any sign of modernity, but various portraits of old white men frown down at us from the walls.

“I’m more interested in what made you make up *your* mind,” I retort, eyeing someone called Augustus Leopold Bracken Barnett, according to the plaque beneath his droopy face. A pre-face lift era kind of guy. “I figured it’d take some more pushing for you to agree to this.”

“I never agreed to anything,” he says. His masculine build is accentuate by tailored clothing that hugs his frame, while I’m in casual jeans and an old sweatshirt. The comparison

makes me wonder if there's a dress code he neglected to mention.

“But I'm here.”

He nods, but I stare straight ahead, only catching the movement from the corner of my eye. “You are here,” he affirms.

“Here being...?” Despite my lack of understanding, I came with him, but his secrecy bothers me the longer it goes on.

“You'll see.”

*Asshole.* “What were you up to before I texted you?”

“I was in class.” We stop in the reception area and he checks the directions on a map before moving on, bounding up the nearest staircase. “Seen Stormy lately, or did she scare you off, twitchy?”

I'm still processing that he wore a suit to class, so it takes a moment for the insult to register. “It's been two weeks. I figured even you four can manage for that long in a house with a home movie theater,” I mutter. “I hear Oscar can cook a mean meatloaf. And I'm not twitchy.”

“You're twitching right now. You also happened to check in on her only when we weren't there. Watch any good movies?”

I speed up to subtly outpace him, but he lengthens his strides so we're side by side, then tries again. “Stormy's filled you in on current events, I assume.”

“Can you keep it down?” I pointedly tilt my head from left to right, indicating the raised ceilings that echo our every move. The judgmental stares of guys like Augustus. Other than in at the reception, we haven't run into anyone else, nor spoken to anyone yet. “And if you're referring to Stormy saying she's met you before, then yes.”

The last time I went to see her, I came armed with muffins to make her agreeable. It worked.

“Did she tell you what she meant by that?” he hedges.

“I think that’s a question for Stormy.”

Finn shakes his head. “Good luck getting her to answer. We could compare notes and see if she’s bullshitting us for fun.”

“Easier than trying to get you to talk,” I say pointedly. “How do I know *you’re* not bullshitting *me*?”

“Believe me or don’t. It makes no difference to me.” We make it to the third floor, still the lone two in sight.

“I thought this was some sort of ruse, but you’re nearly as in the dark as I am. When it comes to Stormy and the Slant, I mean.”

“So?”

“So aren’t you going to try to find out what happened in Oscar’s house?”

“Of course I am. That’s why we’re here.” He comes to a stop in front of a door with there remains of a label painted on the glass. I can’t make out the words, and he doesn’t go in. “I told you I was in the business. This is what I meant.”

“This is your office?”

“No, a client’s. We’re meeting him at workplace.”

“Your business—you said you were involved in some kind of *demon* business. And that I’d have to pay to know more.” I shake my head. This isn’t coming out right. “I know you don’t like me—”

“I’ve never disliked you. It may seem that way, but I didn’t. I don’t get involved with strangers or put up a front for anyone I don’t know well. That’s all.”

Facing each other like this, I watch his face while he speaks. Nothing in it indicates falsity. Oddly enough, I trust that instinct. “I don’t entirely dislike you either, so we’re clear on that.”

“Hmm.”

“I don’t hate you, and I never have,” I clarify. “You amount to some side eye and well-justified wariness. But I

never hated you.”

Finn narrows his eyes. I don’t pretend to understand the response. “Alright.”

“Alright?”

“Would you prefer a formal friendship ceremony?”

My jaw nearly drops. “Wait, we’re friends now?”

“Let’s go with accomplices. Boss and assistant.”

“Partners,” I counter. “I’m no one’s assistant.”

“Partners, then.” His lips twitch upward, just a fraction. “After you, partner.”

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“Serita Slater, meet Jeff Loxley. Jeff, meet my assistant.”

*His what?*

I hold out my hand to Jeff Loxley, and we shake. His hand has a faint bit of sweat—nerves. I take him in: plain green sweater and black slacks, dark-skinned, a tentative smile. He wasn’t expecting me.

Finn didn’t mention we’d meet anyone here. He didn’t tell me anything. He knows I’m too curious to throw my hands up and walk out.

“Nice to meet you,” Jeff says to me, then shakes hands with Finn. “I’m all set up, and uh, he’s inside.”

Finn takes the lead to a corner cubicle. The third floor houses a small office, barely furnished and near neglected. Succulents are placed throughout the room in seemingly random spots, as if one of the people that work here tried to liven the place up, then gave up. Other than the plants, the space is muted in grey—grey walls, grey desk chairs, grey window blinds.

At the corner cubicle sits a man clad entirely in charcoal grey. The corner of his mouth upticks in amusement, light



brown eyes the same shade as his hair swinging from his outfit to the decor.

Looks like he noticed the color scheme.

“Oran,” Finn greets the grey man with a slight nod. “My assistant will also act as witness today. She’s new and I’m showing her the ropes.”

Oran turns his smile on Finn, and the sight of him with that expression makes me think of Galen. “I wouldn’t mind you showing me the ropes,” he says. “You can tie me up whenever you’d like, handsome. Just say the word.”

I snort in surprise, louder than I’d like, but the nearly empty office makes sure they all hear. Oran turns to me and his smile widens further. “You’re welcome to join, if you’d like.”

“I don’t sleep with demons, but thanks.”

“Oh, but you’re missing out on so much.” Oran adds a wink, and I decide I like him. Not enough to sleep with him, but he doesn’t seem like the kind of guy (demon?) to take much seriously. “Alas, we’d traumatize poor Loxley here. Maybe another time.”

Finn sits in the chair opposite Oran on the other side of the corner desk, eyeing all of us with supreme boredom, even Jeff, who does look discomforted. He looked that way before the greetings, though. Maybe Oran made him that way before we got here.

I take the chair next to Finn, and Jeff perches on the edge of a chair he drags in from another cubicle nearby. An open manila folder lies face-up by Oran’s elbow, resting casually on the (grey) desk. I catch the words *Child Protective Services* on the letterhead.

“Party A has graciously prepared all the necessary paperwork,” Finn says while jolting me back in my chair with a hand on the chair leg. “Party B has seceded to all pre-arranged negotiations. This is the final stage, and afterwards, we may all go our own ways, never having to see each other again.” He pauses, letting the words sink in, but I don’t know

who's benefit that's for. Jeff or Oran? Both? "I will act as notary to the proceedings. Let's get this over with."

Oran chuckles lowly. Jeff seats some more, hands rubbing at his slacks.

Finn takes out two identical file folders and holds them out to the two men, along with a... knife. A long, thin silver blade with an ornate handle, adorned with a curling pattern and the lettering of a runic script I can't decipher. He keeps the knife to himself, placing it lightly on top of the desk while Jeff and Oran read over the paperwork at Finn's instruction.

Oran hums quietly, barely reading his set of papers. I try to identify the song, but the name escapes me. The melody sounds familiar...

Jeff sets his folder down, then Oran. He looks vaguely bored. So does Finn. I watch their reactions warily, but no one shows any sign of feelings past boredom or slight stress. Not even when Finn picks up the knife.

Jeff and Oran hold out their hands, and Finn makes quick, sure cuts on both their palms. Still no new reactions.

I can't help but think that it feels anticlimactic.

Until the blood begins to pool on the desk, then *move*. Red drips down in a steady stream, sliding across the desk towards in two directions: the open files. I watch while it sinks *in*, disappearing within the crisp white papers and leaving no trace behind. Jeff's blood trails into Oran's papers, and Oran's does the same with Jeff's. Openmouthed, I flick my attention back to Jeff, but he's nonplussed—a little happy, even.

Finn watches the proceedings with the air of someone who's thinking about all the other activities he could be doing right now, rather than sit here. Stern, but utterly calm—in his element.

"Jeff, you feel alright?"

Jeff grins. "Better than ever."

The contracts go up in flames.

Fire licks up towards the ceiling, then falls again, extinguished as quickly as they started and leaving ashes in their wake. No one looks alarmed. In fact, Oran's inspecting his nails.

"Take it easy for the next forty-eight hours. You get any aches, pains, or blood starts gushing—call me." With that, Finn scoots his chair back and gestures for me to do the same. "Otherwise, let's not see each other ever again, gentlemen."

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Finn doesn't speak again until we're in the car, where he says he'll drive me back to my apartment, despite my repeated questions on what I just witnessed.

Eventually he taps the steering wheel, once, twice, then appears to resign himself. "Most people take the easy answer when it's offered. I tell them, *yes, that was a dog, not a hellhound. You're not seeing things, just confused.* Why won't you? Take the easy explanation. Look away."

At least he's talking, no matter that it's nonsensical. "Addictive personality," I say. "Once I pick up on something, I can't set it back down. I have to follow it to the end."

I don't elaborate further, but something knowing glints in his hazel eyes. It sets my nerves on edge, but I won't give him what he wants. I won't get sidetracked.

"Demonology 101. Lay it on me," I bark, channeling the commanding tone dad used to garner the attention of his employees when they were spread out across long open fields. A tone that's perhaps too much for an enclosed space like Finn's car, but an effective one. "Oran's like Galen, isn't he? A demon?"

"We're not starting there," he says calmly. There's no indication of irritation. This is just another normal day for him. "We're talking about Jeff."

"Jeff," I repeat flatly. "What about him?"

“He’s a client of mine, a rather harmless one, which is why I chose him for this little show-and-tell. I’m a Contractor. A supernatural matchmaker, if you will.”

*“Pardon?”*

“Demons flocked to New Haven, so us Contractors followed them here. What you just witnessed was the least interesting part of my job. The ceremonial bit. Jeff Loxley had a specific request, so I paired him with Oran, who has a service to offer Jeff’s request. They tell me their conditions in negotiations, we work through them, and come to an agreement.”

Every word he says feels like a puzzle piece being put in place. Slowly, and I still feel uninformed overall, but we’re getting somewhere. “So you’re well-connected in... supernatural society.”

*Which makes him useful.*

“You could say so, yes. Every demon is different in some way. My job is to find the right fit for every client I take.”

“What made Oran the right fit for Jeff?”

Finn turns the wheel onto my street, coming up to the sidewalk in front of my building. The steady hum of the engine fills the air. “I trust you noticed Jeff works for CPS.” He checks to see me nod. “And you know it’s not the best funded government agency.” Another nod. “Loxley can’t change that on his own.”

He leaves the rest unsaid, but I get it now: *So he found someplace else to get help.*

“I don’t suppose you do this kind of work out of the good of your heart.” After I say it, I realize it sounds combative, but I’m genuinely curious. Why *does* he do this? He’s inheriting a multi-million dollar company one day.

But Finn doesn’t react. “CPS employees have access to certain databases that I don’t. Sensitive ones, since they concern minors. I’ve never had need of a CPS worker before, so when Jeff came to me and wanted to make a contract, and Stormy showed up...”

“You’re having Jeff Loxley look into Stormy in exchange for whatever Oran does to help Jeff.”

“Jeff doesn’t just have access to child abuse cases, open or closed, but other sensitive information too. By making a blood bargain with Oran, Jeff is bound to him, and receives some of Oran’s powers in return.”

I consider him anew. The blond-haired golden boy that never feels, for good or bad. “The blood and the fire. That was a little dramatic. It sounds incongruent to Oran swearing to smite down child abusers.”

“Oran’s a *cogatari* demon. Notorious tricksters, though all demons have an affinity for riddles and poetry. He can read minds.” At the alarm that must show on my face, he adds, “You’d know if he’d done it to you, and he knows better than to try it on me. Jeff can use that to find leads and determine if a kid’s being abused or not. Bargains between demons and humans are sealed with blood—power is sealed *into* the bloodlines themselves. Flashier magic gets used in negotiations, but we weren’t working together then.”

*Flashier how?* I want to ask, but Finn keeps going. “*Demounia* are humans with demon blood in their veins, but not demons themselves. Every demon and *demounia* has a demon’s mark, but a lot of them are easy to hide. It passes down from parent to child. Dad makes a deal, the child usually inherits the power. Sometimes it skips a generation or two, but there aren’t any scientific studies, so we can only guess at why. Galen got it from his mother, Luke from—never mind.”

Finn ducks his head down slightly, but I don’t press him on his friend. I at least know some of what happened to Lukas Thorne, and I don’t need to know more, but Stormy and the Slant are still open mysteries. Galen’s mother, for one.

“What kind of demon is Galen?”

“*Speculo* demon, like his mother was. He can move between reflective surfaces. Highly lucrative, if he ever wanted to sell his services like Oran. Eavesdrop on competitors, cut on travel expenses, and what not. But demon blood carries more than power. They have like traits.”

I have to collect myself and let that sink in. *Demounia* are essentially wizards by association.

“What you’re saying is that Galen’s a human scrying glass, except he can come and go as he pleases, not just look. And before, you said my mom knows about some of this stuff, but we’re hiding all of it from her—Stormy, the mirror place. Oscar.”

“I told you, there’s no point in telling either of them.”

“But *why*?”

“It’ll complicate things. More than they already are.” He leaves it at that. “I have other plans for you, Slater.”

“Such as?”

Then it hits me. I’ve heard that word before—*demounia*.

“Finn Delsing, if you’re lying to me, I will beat you bloody.”

Startled for once, he sends me an indignant look. “Why would you think I’m lying?”

“Because I read the Firebird series! I know who Sadira Dorsey is! Why are you laughing at me?”

As soon as I called him out, Finn’s shoulders started shaking in silent laughter. He doesn’t bother hiding it, and that only makes me more upset.

“You got all that from reading the books, didn’t you?” He’s still laughing, so I keep going. “*When Given Cause to Burn. Rope Them to the Pyre. Forged With the Same Flame. The Fire Never Goes Out.* I remember every one of the books.”

“Sadira Dorsey isn’t very original,” he finally says. “She must be a *demounia* herself, and a bold one at that, or know someone who is. I’m betting on the first. *Demounia* are historically vain. Her readers are probably made up of demons looking for flattery.”

*What to believe...* It’s not like I can call the author up and ask if she has any demon blood, but I don’t want to blindly

believe everything he says and be made a fool later. Especially when Finn's still laughing from the other side of the car.

“When you say bargain, that implies both parties have something to offer. Something to lose. What did Oran gain? What did Jeff lose?” *Please don't say he's just signed away his soul for eternity.*

“Someone who makes a bargain with a demon is referred to as a *demounia*. Demon-linked. The terms of the contract is up to the two parties. The Thorne's have an ancestor that met a *sopor* demon. Dreamwalker, similar to a mindreader.” He smiles, just barely, like that amuses him. It's easier for him to talk about his friend Lukas without referring to him by name. Odd. “Demons are greedy, but so are human beings. Don't worry about Jeff Loxley, he's smarter than he looks. Safe enough for show-and-tell, like I said, but Contracting is still an unregulated market, and those historically give way to violence.”

“He looks like he cares,” I snap. “He cares enough to deal with you for longer than five minutes, and not give way to violence on *you*.”

“You lasted over an hour without jumping down my throat,” he points out airily. “Nor have you asked me what you really want to know.”

It takes immense inner strength not to sock him in the face. I don't understand why Finn does this—annoys me for the sole sake of annoying me. I want to rise above it. I *will* rise above it.

“You know about my dad.” A statement, not a question. “Can you just tell me, without the sidelong discourse, if there's a way to help him? If there's some magical healing practice I don't know about, that you have access to? *Please.*”

There are two ways an opportunist gets pulled in to these kinds of positions. The first kind can't resist the potential adventure, and the second finds themselves—or someone else—in need. Once I felt the pull of adventure, but now I am in need, and not for myself.

Jeff Loxley is in need, but not for himself.

Finn speaks firmly but not harshly. That's how I know to steel myself for disappointment. "That's not the kind of powers they have, nor would they offer them if they could do things like that. I'm sorry for that, but if you hadn't asked, you would've hoped for a cure I can't deliver."

My throat goes tight. *You have your friends and your family. I have dad and no one else.* I can't say the words aloud. Part of me knows it wouldn't be fair, that he's trying not to be cruel. I'm not sure if that helps or not. But it still feels final, like I haven't pressed him hard enough, tried hard enough.

"Why tell me any of this?" I get out. "You said earlier this all has to do with the Slant. The place where someone was coming after Stormy."

Finn turns in his seat to face me, leaning to rest his weight on the console by his elbows. "I've never heard of any type of demon with the power of healing, but like I told you, demons have like traits," he starts, each word delivered with deliberation. "A man named Martin Bartlett once sought me out. His wife and daughter had just died, and he asked me if there was a way to relieve him of his pain. To cut it out of him, however possible. There is no demon that can make a person not feel what they feel, or wipe their memories like that. I told him so, but he set out on his own, and eventually he found a demon who made him believe he could help him. That demon took advantage of a broken man and tricked Martin into letting him take over his body. That demon wrecked havoc on Martin's hometown—killed his neighbors, his friends. Martin died with the whole world believing him driven to murder by grief, but grief drove him to make that deal without understanding what he'd given up."

"Everything," I whisper. "He gave up everything."

Finn sighs grimly. "Martin's body died in a shootout. The demon that possessed him didn't care if he was caught, and after Martin died, he carried on like nothing happened. Like



Martin never mattered. Stories like that are why Stormy doesn't trust Galen or us, his friends."

*Oh, I think. I see now. He thinks I might be useful.*

I think I'm starting to understand. Finn Delsing doesn't belong in an office. He has bigger plans for himself. Maybe the more fitting descriptor is *different* plans. The suits and the calmness he displays are illusions. He acts like a stage extra, but he's the one pulling the strings from behind the scenes.

"Stormy trusts you more than she does us. We're taking turns watching her. Anytime one of us suggests she steps a toe out of the house, she hisses like a cat," he continues. *Where would she go?* "She knows to be wary of Galen because of what he is, and knows we're his friends. She might not trust you fully yet, but it's enough. You might be able to get her to talk, or give something away. In exchange, I can *try*. I'll ask around to see if there's any way I can help your dad, but I can't make you any promises. I've never heard of any magic that cures, or even alleviates, cancer. But I swear to you that I will make every effort to see if there is."

Whatever Jeff finds can confirm Stormy's story. We'll know for sure she didn't run away from Rhode Island or another surrounding state. The woman in the Slant was white, not at all similar to Stormy in appearance.

"Do you know where the 'Slant' is? There should be a record of her there."

He shakes his head. "We don't know."

I don't tell him I told Eleanor about this. I used vague hypotheticals, since she's too rational to believe in demons, but she did have some *hypothetical* ideas of her own. She reacted better than I did. Reading *My Veliktariolin Barbican Mate* probably prepared her for it.

Nor do I tell him I saw Stormy the other day—he might already know—and she showed as much reluctance with me as she did with them. Instead, I extend a hand. "Then we have a deal. I'll try to get Stormy to open up, but I'm going to do it my way."

Finn clasps his hand in mine, warm from sitting in the heated car on the side of the street for so long. “I expected you would.”

## FINN



*Face your shit head on.* That's what grandfather told me once. Some saying to that effect, anyway.

Applicable to just about any situation, no matter if that's what he said or not.

After dropping off Serita, I figure now is as good a time as any to visit home. Coming in Faron's stead, sure, but showing up nonetheless. The man in question is off somewhere getting plastered in substitution for dinner—or any kind of real sustenance—according to the text he sent.

My parents' house sits just down the road from Jer's, one of the reasons we became friends so young, and so quickly.

Designed to subtly suggest wealth, the in-town house has been carefully curated by a long line of Delsing women. No expense has been spared, but God forbid it's showy. The beauty of American wealth is that it isn't steeped in longstanding tradition. Our homes don't come as pre-furnished, centuries-old manors, steeped in an irremovable past.

Every available amenity has been furnished, on top of a sweeping security system and rooms for every possible need, but it's a waste.

The house on State Street only gets put into use whenever a Delsing is in immediate need of close proximity to town, more than they'd prefer somewhere more exciting. The vacation homes are mostly used by mother, sometimes Faron, when they want peace and quiet. More specifically, when they want to *disturb* the peace and quiet without prying eyes.

Other families left over the years, their eyes set on lucrative shores, but I've always thought it was the intangible feeling of stranger powers that eventually drew them back here. The same devilry that drew demons here, of all places. The first class of Yale alumni sought a reason for it.

That's how *demounia* infiltrated the societies. New Haven doesn't function without the college, and the roots we plant here are entangled with its rot.

My parents know it. It's the reason they flee the place so often, making tireless efforts to retreat for good. We all end up getting dragged back sooner or later.

Father's the first to greet me. "Finn, been waiting to hear from you son."

Mother's close behind. "Lovely to see you, dear." Seeing as how it's past noon, mother's too drunk to remember the last time that was.

Meghan Delsing is the picture of a trophy wife, to be blunt. A socialite through and through, she might've rebelled when she was my age, but lacked the skill and knowledge needed to take it further—far away from her trust fund, and her parents with it. Father was the best option out of her available choices. She doesn't mind so long as her credit cards don't decline. True love always prevails in the end, and mother's one true love has always been money. They have that in common.

This must be the first time in the last two years I've seen both my parents in the same room—on the same continent—at the same time.

“Mother.” I lean down to leave a perfunctory peck her on the cheek. “Father. I’ve been busy with school.” He knows it’s a lie. At the same time, he wouldn’t care to hear about grief, engagements other than my own, or anything to do with demonic magic, past how he can use it for his own gain. For *us*, would be more correct, but that implies a familial bond of some sort, which we don’t have.

“You’ll be in attendance at the bridal shower tomorrow, yes?”

Reluctantly. “Yes, mother.”

“I can always depend on you,” she says, clasp my arm in her grasp with a soft touch. “I’ll see you tomorrow. We can chat then.” At that, she exits as quickly as she came, waltzing back to whatever she was in the middle of before my interruption.

“In my office, then.” Father gestures for me to lead, so I step quickly down the hall and towards his home office, offering another nod to Vic, his personal assistant, along the way.

The door clicks shut behind us, and now that we’re alone, I steel myself for what’s to come. Without having to look to the painting hung on the opposite side of the room, Grandfather’s keen eye seems to peer down at us with a frown from his portrait on the wall.

Family prestige is notoriously difficult to achieve, and even harder to maintain across multiple generations. The head of the family, and their subsequent heir, are the ones who shoulder that responsibility for everyone else. So I understand my father, what makes him tick. We may not see eye to eye on much else, but on this, we’re aligned.

“I thought you were in Philly,” I say to start, handing him a batch of folders from the office, ones I’d planned on leaving with Vic.

“Just came in.” He takes the folders without comment, but any comments or criticisms are sure to come through my email within the next day. “How’d it go with Loxley?”

He pours each of us a drink, gesturing again, this time for me to sit before we continue our conversation. In spite of a strained relationship, old habits and niceties prevail just the same as one true loves. It's much of the same for Luke, not so much Jer, but perhaps Galen these days.

"Fine. There was only the signing left to finish." I steel myself for the repeat conversation we're about to have on the many ways I've screwed up in his eyes lately: Jackie, Faron, Loxley, the local building project. I'm almost tempted to tell him about Serita Slater, just to see the old man go red in the face, but hold back.

He sits back, contemplating his drink. "I don't pretend to know why you waived payment with him. I know you have your own affairs going on." Yet he doesn't sound happy about that. "It's your problem if he goes around telling people you've gone soft."

"He didn't strike me as a gossip," I say evenly. My phone vibrates, and I type out a quick response to Galen after checking it, along with a quick snap of a random picture to go with it.

Father notices anyway. "Anyone I know?" I contemplate explaining Snapchat to him, but he guesses on his own. "Oscar's boy?"

I don't deny it, an answer in itself. "Incessant upstart, and now he's marrying that townie. Can't wash away the dirty blood in that family, no matter how much money they have now."

*Blood, blood, blood.* For him, it always comes back to blood, dirty or clean. I've seen enough of it to know there's no such thing.

"I have many fond memories of him from when I was growing up." *And none with you.*

I know from the long sip he takes of his drink that the implication's written on my face. We are cut from the same cloth. "Your brother's been by to see your mother."

“I know.” There’s little to no inflection in how I say it, but father prefers me that way.

“First thing your mother asked after was you.” He quirks a brow, outwardly dispassionate but barbed on the edges, nonetheless. “Haven’t called home or come to see us in awhile, son.”

*Son.* “As I said, I’ve been busy.”

“I know that, and that’s why I made sure your mother didn’t do any prying, but I wanted to make sure you’re not having any doubts about the Lin girl.”

“Why would I be having doubts?” Upholding traditional standards doesn’t interest me, that much is true. What they entail? That’s another matter. Play the game, reap the rewards.

There’s no use trying to upend a dance that’s centuries in the making. You’ll only make a fool of yourself. Stay calm and collected on the surface by day, and shore up your defenses there. That way, no one will ever know what you get up to under the cover of night.

Some consider relationships—ranging from ones of a purely sexual nature to married, twice divorced, and with a gaggle of children—an unneeded distraction. I lean towards entertaining the former for lack of wanting the latter, especially the kids. Jackie comes with obligations, but none of the emotional or time-consuming ones.

Father shrugs and takes another sip of his glass, not bothering to mask his impatience for this conversation, but I don’t meet him halfway. Eventually, he tells me, “Felix called and said he’ll deal with the daughter. Pre-wedding jitters—everyone gets them.”

“I’ll speak with her as well.”

“Your fiancée, your problem,” he murmurs. “He also said the bill’s being pushed through sometime this week.”

“Is that a firm deadline?”

He nods absently. Whatever else is on his mind, I know it has to do with work. It’s always work and old habits. “I should

be there to see it through, but I won't have time to make the trip and still see to the other appearances I have lined up in the area. And you—you'll be around? Of course you will. You have that new building on the outskirts of town, I remember now."

These conversations all end with the same circular complaints. Bitterness that sunk in decades ago and never left. To him, I'm no better than the first Delsing to settle in this town, following a feeling like a hunter tracking a demon's trail by sinking a single cent into its infrastructure. Father signed off on the building so the company can publicize a philanthropic piece in the news. The headline will likely emphasize Delsing Industries preserving small town values and uplifting local communities.

I decide on a vague answer. Vic could be listening in at the door, pen in hand for a direct quote. "We're making progress and moving along on schedule. Ahead, even."

A number of Yale undergrads signed up as interns (free laborers). Ivy kids are reliable overachievers, chomping at the bit to pad their resumes and get in with potential full-time employers, on top of gaining their own bragging rights over *giving back* to local communities during job interviews when we don't hire them.

Father cricks his neck left to right, peering over at me speculatively. I can tell what thoughts flit across his mind for the exact reason he can do the same to me: we're too alike not to. Yet the few differences aren't what cause tension. It's those similarities.

"I don't know why you bother," he says. "Everyone else gave up on this damned place ages ago."

This damned place. Overrun with abandoned factories and plants, the scraps of dreams long forgotten. The legacy of New Haven amounts to the industries it entices, almost none of them successful. Corrupt politicians and ill-conceived operational plans ensure it and drive away any meaningful change.



“Charity looks good for the company.” There’s no use taking any other angle.

Delsing Industries started out as a construction company of sorts, but over the past few generations, it’s grown into other industries: extractive pursuits like logging (when that was fruitful), manufacturing (a brief stint in steelmaking), and shipping.

The rest came as increasingly ambitious Delsing’s battled it out to be the best. Arms and investments, to name a few. Combined, they turn enough profits to make the Delsing name a formidable force in the business plane.

“The Lin’s have friends in that new social platform, some tech start-up,” father says, nodding along, still only half-interested. “Vic suggested breaking the story there.”

Of course she did. She’s nearly my age.

“You know I don’t involve myself in publicity.”

“Your future wife might find herself suited for it.”

Lin Enterprises may as well be a shell company for all it’s worth, but that’s not to say the Lin’s are gold-digging nobodies. The real *worth* in the Lin family lies outside of the company: they breed like farm animals and marry into all the important families. They must know how to work people, get in their good graces.

From those connections, Lin deals in information, in secrets and entertaining those who have them so that they’ll spill them all. Las Vegas is known as Sin City, after all.

The distance between our two cities fits the final piece in the puzzle: we don’t have to deal with each other in-person on a regular occasion, or risk butting heads like they do with the Salt’s. Ally the families, and we both benefit from working together, rather than fight each other over the same contracts.

“I’m sure she has interests that will come in handy.”

His face darkens, and a moment later I realize why. “The sister will be a pain in the ass, of course, but once you’re married, she won’t need to visit home often.”

“She’s called a few times, the sister. I haven’t answered.”  
Couldn’t be bothered, as shitty as it is of me. The same as  
mother. She stopped seeing her sisters shortly after marriage.  
I’ve never doubted whose decision that was.

I don’t know much past Jacinta’s sister other than her role  
in the family. She’s heir to Felix’s empire, like I am to Delsing  
Industries.

Neither daughter has any non-human blood in them,  
meaning there’s no *dirty blood* to pass down. Making Felix a  
*demounia* won’t affect that.

*Keep your demons close, but your own blood closer*, or  
something along those lines.

Translation: use magic for your own gain, but never mix  
with it.

*Never sully the blood*, or however the first Delsing must’ve  
phrased it. Whatever the case, the rule stuck. No little demon  
Delsing babies.

In Andrew Delsing’s world, blood runs blue, or it may as  
well run down the street like sewage water for all its worth. It  
could have ended up being any well-bred girl from the right  
social circle and with appropriate standing with my  
engagement ring on her finger.

Jac wasn’t chosen because of who *she* is, but for the price  
tag she wears. A tale as old as time.

“I never bothered with your mother’s sisters,” he reasons.  
“Bunch of stuck-ups, if you ask me.”

I wouldn’t know, and definitely wouldn’t ask, so I nod  
along amicably. “They live far enough that it won’t be of much  
importance.” Applicable to both mother and Jacinta. “The  
sisters are close. I don’t need to build a relationship myself for  
any... incentive for the older one’s services.” And if the need  
ever arises, I’ll deal with it then.

“Sure, sure.”

Now’s as good as it’ll get to bring up what I came here for.

“Did you hear back about that missing shipment?”

It's the third cargo theft we've had in the past few months. Oddly, father doesn't react or show concern whenever I bring it up.

"I have a man on it."

"You don't think it's an inside job? Feds have been snooping around."

"Never said that. Feds probably ran out of mobsters to take bribes from." Another pour, another sip. "But that's not the only problem I have to deal with at the moment." He drags a hand up to his face, rubbing at his eyes. "This damn place. You know what happened to the Wilder's. This time will be different."

Startled, I take a sip of my own drink to stall.

The Wilder's are the reason why Delsing's don't deal in magic. We deal with people. Marry the normal sister, deal with the other one when needed. People are controllable. Demons, no matter how capable you are, do not yield so easily to control. None of that explains why father's mind went to them now.

"I can come back at a later time if you're busy taking a trip down memory lane."

"We both know you won't." He says it simply, no feeling behind the words, just stating a fact. Knowing where my mind's headed.

I decide to indulge him, eager to end this. "How could I forget the Wilder's?"

I know the story, and he's aware that I do. This is a reminder of the stakes, not a history lesson, nor does he truly believe I'd forget our *own* history—that it was once tied to the Wilder's. Soon, the Lin's.

Back in ye olden days, the first Delsing made a deal with the first Wilder. Only, this Wilder wasn't like the Thorne's or Galen and his mother. He made *multiple* deals with *multiple* demons—lesser ones, at that. He didn't draw from the power of the powerful. He wanted to be the one with all the power. That was his mistake.

With those bargains, Wilder and Delsing built this port town into what it is today. In exchange, they let those lesser demons run wild through the city, wreaking havoc wherever they went.

It's a stain on their legacy. On *my* legacy. No one's ever tied it to our family. One of those in-between Delsing's made sure of it, and now there are no more Wilder's. Neat and tidy.

Even knowing this, I once considered it, and I weighed the pros and cons of making a bargain of my own. Knowing Luke and Galen is what made me decide not to. If I'd done it, it would be for the same reason Wilder did: power. Agency. Control. Maybe he wasn't such a fool after all. He had the right idea, but the wrong partner.

A Delsing always ties up loose ends.

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Galen plops through the mirror and lands on the tiled ground with a *thunk*.

This has happened often enough that I barely register any feelings of surprise. "How'd you know I was here?"

"Snapchat. I recognized Reggie's portrait."

I should've known. Father distracted me, or else I would've remembered Galen would spot grandfather's portrait above the mantle.

"What made you deign to enter the viper's nest?"

Once Vic came to the door with some (contrived) emergency, I excused myself and headed for the bathroom. Galen's lucky I don't have my cock whipped out.

"He wanted to hear about the new building."

Galen leans to sit against the counter, willfully ignoring the room we're in. "Your one-man mission to revive this town? Hate to say it, but the old man and I agree on one thing."

“That bored, are you?” I nudge him to the side so I can wash my hands in the sink. “We both know there’s more to the story than how worn down it is.”

Explaining what I do to Serita made me look at it through a new lens. The sheer number of questions she had. Not all of them ones I could answer.

I hadn’t lied. I never disliked her. If I had, I would’ve simply ignored her from the start.

It felt oddly... freeing. Telling her about *demounia*, a topic I haven’t had to explain before, and grew up with, normalizing it to me. The fear of the unknown is what stays most people’s hand, keeps them in their comfort zone. She fears the opposite: that she’ll die not knowing. What makes a person end up like that? So ready to abandon her creature comforts?

Maybe the new building is my version of recklessness. One with a selfish purpose to it that I haven’t shared with anyone. It’s a dense town, not as suburban as it appears on a map. That’s how it feels, anyway. Chunks of New Haven were abandoned years ago, but empty space never goes unfilled for long, one way or another.

Delsing’s filled those spaces once. Why not again? I want to know what it is about New Haven that makes it *tick*. Why is it a magnet that attracts demons like bees to honey? Is the name indicative—is it a haven for demons?

I don’t fool myself into believing that there’s a high chance I find the answer myself, but like Serita, it brings those enquiries to the forefront of my mind.

Galen must sense my mind is elsewhere. He yanks a hand towel from the wall hanger and holds it out to me. I take it and dry off, still unable to figure out why he’s here. He’s no fan of Vic, that’s for sure.

They hooked up once, so long ago that I forget that fact most times I see her. All I know is Galen would take it back if he could.

“Are the others busy?” I ask.

Face unreadable, Galen yanks at the door handle and I follow suit. I can hear Vic and my father talking lowly from the other end of the hall.

“Oran stopped by,” he says, making for the exit. “He said you have a new assistant.”

I internally groan.

## SERITA



Complimentary floral arrangements artfully placed at regular intervals, both on tabletops and scattered amongst the wide-open space, give off an upbeat feel to an already lively space.

Haven House used to perform at events not unlike this one. Wedding parties, divorce parties (I don't judge how people choose to process their pain), birthdays, holidays, even a few fundraiser galas here and there.

Striking blooms of tulips, thistles, and every other manner of eye-catching floral seems to have found a place among the yard.

Jemima and Oscar have gone for a garden party theme to celebrate their love, both adorned in light colors and breezy fabrics that remind me of couples in fashion catalogues. They've transformed the garden into a fresh, yet tranquil space. An admirable feat, considering Jemima certainly had a hand in organizing the event herself, as evidenced by the use of bright and bold colors. She's turned one of her largest

patterned prints into a garden tent, rather than a standard outdoor tent, strung up by metallic ties and poles.

Almost as if it's a rushed event.

I said hello to the happy couple during a rush of guests coming in, so that was a blessedly brief encounter. Whenever I see Oscar, I can't help but be apprehensive of him. I have no idea how much Jemima told him about me. About why I'm here. If she'd told him just enough that she ended up telling him more, to try and explain, or justify my moving here. There's no knowing without outright asking him, so it's a moot point.

I show up and smile, then go on my way. The same old routine at the same old parties. I've only been here for a few months, and I'm already sick of them.

Throngs of people gather over selections of finger foods and delicacies I'm not able to place, meaning they're absurdly expensive. From where I'm standing beneath the shade of the main tent, sat alone with a glass of plain water, I spot Faron Delsing in a crisp cobalt blue suit and Jericho Caulfield clad in sleet grey amongst the crowd.

Jemima and Oscar greet guests while they trickle in, the festivities having only started within the last half hour or so. Most of these people are strangers to me. Of the few people I've met in New Haven so far, the majority attend GCC or work there.

From what I can tell and what I've picked up since I arrived, most of the attendees live in this town full-time, many of them born and raised here, like the hosts. They've kept to the same social circles since childhood, only to later become Yale alumni together, then business partners or tennis pairs as the years dragged on.

GCC is a barely-there speck on their radar, sometimes not even that. Yale is the backbone of New Haven, and that's not an exaggeration. It *does* fund this town in many ways, and everyone knows it—acknowledging it over doubles at the country club, I expect.



I doubt there's much room where I fit into all of that, not that I'm asking to, nor am I lamenting it. It just makes being at one of their parties... awkward.

Not to mention that the only person I'm interested in mingling with is hidden upstairs. Stormy doesn't stand out only from her appearance, but because of the way she talks. It's unnerving how unsettling she can be, often without meaning to.

The trill of incoming phone call is my saving grace. Turning my phone over so it's face-side up on the table, I find the name *Colette* on the screen. With a surprised grin, I quickly stand to answer, away from the sounds of the violinist's quartet and open chatter.

Swiping to answer, I'm rounding the entrance to the hedge maze to reach a quiet space. "Long time no talk," I say excitedly.

"Phones *do* work both ways, my love." Colette's sultry tone is teasing.

We've always been like this—no speaking for months at a time, but when we do touch base again, it's like we spoke only yesterday, and the conversation can go on for hours.

"I'm surprised you can work yours at all," I joke back.

Colette's only eleven years older than me, not much in the grand scheme of things, but the difference was enough for her to feel halfway between a big sister and a mother figure when I was growing up.

Years ago, Colette worked at Haven House as a trapeze artist. She's one of the reasons I gained an interest in the sport myself, actually.

"You're lucky I'm alone, or I'd reach through this thing and wring your skinny neck for mentioning age."

"Missed you too, Col. What's up with you?"

"Can't an elderly woman call without needing a reason?"

As if turning forty did anything to dull her down.

Careful not to lean into the hedges, I lean my weight onto one leg and continue people-watching while I speak into the phone. “During the day? I thought you’d be busy at the studio.”

Since retiring from Haven House, Colette opened an aerobatics studio in southern Florida. She and a few others teach classes, and they’re often well-booked, from what I’ve been told.

“Taking a mini break between classes. What about you? You’re not busy, are you?”

“Uhh.” I eye the champagne tower flowing freely a few feet away. “Not exactly. I’m at Jemima’s pre-wedding thing, but not much is going on.”

“First time I’ve heard that name in a while. Speaking of, stop calling your mama by her first name before I whoop you myself.” Colette and Jemima got along fine before, but they were never close enough to stay in touch, and she knows how I felt about her leaving back then. “Are you doing alright, babes? Daniel?” she adds softly.

*Not really to the first, and I wish I knew to the second.*

“Yeah, I’m great. So is Dad. His treatment’s doing great, plus he’s comfortable there.” The lie tastes sour on my tongue, but there’s no need for both of us worrying. Dad wouldn’t want that.

At that moment, I spot the last of Galen’s group walks in from my corner of the maze. His tailored suit speaks of money, and so does the watch that shines a glare of blinding light in my direction. Finn looks as refined as ever, at his side in a charcoal outfit of his own, paired with polished dress shoes.

Both look indifferent, borderline haughty on Galen’s end. Neither of them show much enthusiasm at the glint of metal braziers, warming everyone from the autumn chill, or the long swathes of colorful accent pieces decorating his house. I can’t blame them.

“Serita? You still there?”

“Sorry? Yeah. I’m here.” Yanking my eyes away from the scene of them approaching the crowd, I sidle further inside of the maze for cover. “Actually, can I call you back later?”

“No problem, babes. I should probably go check on things up front, anyway. Talk soon, okay?”

“Yeah, talk soon. Love you, Col.”

“Love you back, Slater.”

Now what? Go back out there, or...

“Not hiding, are we?”

When I turn, Finn’s blocking the exit, muscled arms propped up on opposite sides. He’s brought a plate of finger foods of every kind with him, but sets them down on the tabled tray left here, probably by some staff member that was pulled away in the middle of moving it.

Tension gathers in my shoulders, anticipating another loaded interaction. They always are with him.

“Hey, partner. Looking for an update?” I ask in lieu of a proper greeting, sliding my phone in my purse.

“That depends. Did you learn anything useful yet?”

I hesitate. Anything Stormy could tell us could be helpful. I’m more than sure she’s banking on her age as a shield from us wringing information out of her. I respect it, even if that makes my job nothing short of hopeless.

“She has no memories before the Slant. That’s all I could get in such short time.”

“I don’t expect you to learn her life’s story overnight,” he scoffs. “I can be reasonable.”

I look at him doubtfully. “Isn’t that why you showed up to this—whatever this is?” A wedding party of some sort. “To assess the Stormy situation?”

“Ah. Bridal showers,” he says. “A capitalist dream. Flowers, food, clothes, everything’s at a five-hundred percent markup, if not more, for the sake of love. What’s not to enjoy?”

“Of course you’re stingy. The richest people always are.”

“Aren’t you Jewish?”

“Don’t stereotype me, ass. Galen’s probably out there, sweating through his four-figure suit over the possibility of your other rich friends finding out about the middle-class carnie roaming the grounds.”

“I would’ve thought that kind of accusation is why you get in the middle of it all. Do a handstand on the buffet table or something. I’ll clap.”

“Why does he hang around his dad’s house so much if they don’t get along and he doesn’t live there anymore?”

“It was his mothers house too.” *But then she died, and yours moved in.* I don’t know if Finn would think it. I don’t know what it says about me that I did.

“Have you ever wanted it for yourself? Becoming like Galen?”

“No. That’s not why I do it, get involved.”

“If becoming a *demounia* isn’t your end goal, then what is it? There must be something.” I take on a philosopher’s purposeful lilt, or try to. “Do we all have a preordained purpose, or is life meaningless, or is it up to us to figure out our purpose?”

He doesn’t take the bait. “Ask Faron.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“In fact, it is. He’d adore you for giving him a reason to pick apart my philosophical leanings, or lack thereof.”

“You can’t not have one,” I argue. “You can be confused, lean towards a few, but you must have *some* meaning in life.”

I wouldn’t take the point so far, but he’s tireless at deflection. I can’t help but try to drag a real answer out of him. *Anything* real.

“But it’s so amusing to aggravate people like you and my brother by refusing to adopt one,” he says. “Maybe *that’s* my purpose.”

“That would explain a lot.” I reach for the food on Finn’s tray and take a bite of some type of cookie, since he hasn’t eaten any yet. It’s sickly sweet, just how I like... whatever it is. Something fancy. *Too good to go to waste*, I decide, grabbing for more.

“I would’ve thought you enjoy the pageantry of things like this,” he says to fill the silence.

“I’m not all that superficial. Pretty parties, pretty people, and pretty clothes aren’t all it takes.”

“I think that it catches your interest, not necessarily that you like it.”

I read somewhere that strangers subconsciously judge by a person’s clothes before they’re drawn to faces, and not always strangers, but even friends. That’s partly where I get my life’s saying: if they’re going to look, may as well give them a show.

“I think it’s a lot of ceremony leading up to one day,” I say. Unfortunately, this is one of many parties to come. “I thought you just throw a bachelorette party then get married. Sounds stressful enough without finding more reasons to order catering.”

“It’s expected of Oscar’s extended family,” he explains. “*No, Great Aunt Whoever, we’re not too poor to throw a few parties and yes, we do expect you to attend them, so you can see for yourself that we know other well-connected, rich people.*”

I find myself laughing at the imitation. I didn’t know Finn Delsing has it in him to joke around. It transforms him into someone less mysterious, more mortal, yet still not quite approachable.

The thought sobers me with a jolt of clarity that reminds me who he is.

I flick my eyes to the party going on around us. At the happy couple. “You’re next in line after these two.”

He scrutinizes me for a moment, then his demeanor goes from lighthearted to serious, somewhat... eager? “You really *are* paying attention to me, aren’t you, Slater?”

“I asked my friend about you.”

“I know.”

“I know you know.” I think back to the phone call I walked in on weeks ago. *It’s one white lie, there’s no harm in that,* he’d said. *Not anymore than all the others. Your sister doesn’t need to know.*

*Listen. Just think of it as another business deal.*

*Think of it as a bargain. Give and take. Deals. Contracts. Bargains.*

“Does your fiancée know about what you do? What your friends are?”

That makes him pause, and something about the stillness in him makes me think it’s a protective instinct. He contemplates me with an unreadable glint in his eyes. It feels like he’s sizing me up. “Nosy, aren’t you?”

“You were the same way with me in Oscar’s garden, less than a hundred feet away. Very threatening and very recently, might I add.”

“Andrea’s garden.”

“What?”

“It’s Andrea’s garden. Was.” He rubs his neck, almost a self-conscious gesture, but I can’t tell what brings that reaction on. “And if I’d threatened you, you’d know it.”

“That sounds like the start of a threat,” I point out.

“Then you haven’t been properly threatened before.”

“I think you hate feeling powerless,” I get out, cutting him off in a last ditch effort at swaying him. “You were raised to feel powerful, but maybe you don’t. Well, I don’t like feeling powerless any more than you do.”

“Quite a leap you just made.”

“Is it?”

He doesn’t respond. I force myself to wait.

“Feel better?”

“Why would I feel better?”

“All this time, you felt like we had the upper hand,” he says. “We were on a team, and you had no one in your corner. That’s where all the combativeness comes from, isn’t it? Wanting to not feel powerless.”

I say nothing. The truth is, I don’t know how to answer without lying to him.

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Finn rejoins the party before me, same as always, because that’s how he orchestrates our interactions. He makes it clear that he’ll track me down to stress that he can, then he’s gone just as fast.

It doesn’t help that he’s sculpted in a Ryan Gosling kind of way, straight out of *The Notebook*, but add in a constant sneer and his... moneyed polish.

I need to stop thinking about *The Notebook*—immediately.

But now that I’m actively trying not to think about it, it’s like my brain took that as a sign to stick the movie on a projector in my brain. Hell, I’ll say it: Rachel McAdams is hot in that movie, too. No wonder everyone watches it.

“Serita?”

I jolt to a stop at the sound of Galen’s relatives. Racking my brain on the spot doesn’t lead to a name, and I don’t want to risk turning. Eye contact means talking, and talking means staying longer.

Rushing away, I don’t hear a repeat of my name, so I consider it a fluke. Galen might have a third cousin named Serita I don’t know about, I reason.

By the time I do step back into the throng of it all—going through the party leads to the fastest exit route, unfortunately—Finn’s in conversation with Galen and a stranger.

Yet the longer I linger at the sidelines, scanning the crowd for anyone else who might try to rope me into some party topic, the more it comes apparent that the new face is *not* one of a stranger. We've never met, but I recognize him, also from Finn's engagement announcement.

The resemblance alone would tell me this is Finn and Faron's father. He bears a face that resembles the Delsing twins to a tee, only older by a couple of decades or so. Andrew Delsing, if I'm remembering right from the caption beneath the photo of the family.

Swiftly, I make for Jemima, intent on making up some excuse to leave. The couple's shower is in full swing by now, and I greeted her and Oscar when I arrived, so I figure I've shown my face long enough, even if I didn't actually show my face for most of it, but I doubt she noticed with the swell of guests littering the lawn and sipping on expensive champagne.

On my way over to the platform where the musician's sit, instruments in hand, I catch a brief listen in on the conversation happening between Galen, Finn, and his father.

Other groups cluster around them, hanging off to the side, but still in their periphery. I've witnessed this before, but never stopped twice to think about how many eyes they draw their way.

"Just keep everything discreet until you have an heir," Finn's father is saying. "That's what I did. That's how it's done."

"Get with the times," the stranger says. "Divorce is fine these days, Andrew, really."

His eyes catch on Finn—on his scar. Finn's facing partially away from me, so he doesn't see me coming his way, and it's a momentary look, then the stranger's dragging his attention away just as fast, but not quick enough. Finn shows no outward reaction, but he almost never does. I have to concentrate on him to notice the tightening of his shoulders.

Confused but unwilling to linger, I make the split-second decision to go the opposite way so I don't cross paths with



them. Hurrying on, I somehow find the final missing face from the Delsing's portrait—the mother.

She's not alone. Wrapped around some man wearing the wait staff's black and white uniform, she locks lips with someone who's not her husband.

Quickly, I sidestep the scene by hiding behind a convenient and absurdly large houseplant, feeling like a creeper. They're blocking the way out, in all fairness.

I take a look around, racking my brain over the layout of the house. I'm only familiar enough with the place to navigate the main rooms, but thankfully, one of their phones starts ringing, and then they're untangling themselves.

Finn's mom shoves her hand into a cream-colored Birkin, huffing as she does, and says, "It's my son. He's out there with his father. I better go."

"Must you?" The fair-haired waiter pouts.

Her responding giggle is girlish enough to grate my ears. "He's caught me before. He'd never tell his father, of course, but no point in making a fuss."

"Would he do that?"

"Oh, don't worry. He's good at keeping secrets, hiding things from his parents." *Finn the fixer*. "All boys are at his age, but I should mingle a bit. I'll find you later."

The waiter places a dramatic hand to his chest, continuing his act, but relents, removing the other from where it's cupping her bottom. I'm tempted to gag, but they'd hear.

"Later," he confirms.

Once they're both out of sight, I sprint to the door before I can come across any other mind-blowing revelations. I've had enough of those in the past few weeks to last me a lifetime, thank you very much.



We check every lead Jeff Loxley sends us within a week. All are dead ends, save for one.

The drive from New Haven to Providence takes less than two hours by car, practically a straight shot along the coast on the interstate. We'll be in town by nightfall—if we ever leave.

I find an incoming text from Ben Gould while I wait by the car, and somehow I know before opening it that he must've heard we're headed out to Providence.

**Ben Gould:** Round up since you'll be in town tonight, Bonesy.

Gould graduated after my freshman year and took a job that has him traveling between Providence and New York throughout the year. The job's at a Fortune 500 company, being who he is, but I suspect he only took the job so he has an excuse not to go back to the west coast.

According to him, the eastern seaboard smuggles in better drugs. Gould's parties take up far more time than I have to give. He'll have already started with golf or some other competitive sport in the morning, continuing on with a visit to some hotel casino in the afternoon, and a night of partying with every vice available at night—drugs, sex, alcohol, more competitive pastimes, and whatever else his lawless brain comes up with.

Having that many friends does come in handy, though. Gould's the one who tipped me off about the rogue Salt son making his way out east.

“Road trip, bitches!” Serita's shout goes directly into my ear, seeing as she's somehow snuck up on me, and is now leaning over to read from behind my shoulder.

I resist the urge to roll my eyes, knowing I'll have more opportunities later.

“Who's Ben? I'm surprised you have a *friend*. Other than the hounds, I mean.”

“You get a lot of laughs out of that joke, don't you?”

“Never gets old. So, Ben?”

“Leave it alone, Slater. We have a long day ahead of us and I can only handle so many of your questions before I veer off the road and into a brick wall.”

“When have you ever known me to leave anything alone?”

“I may have a vague memory involving superglue buried somewhere in the back of my brain,” I say blithely.

“Galen deserved it,” she brushes off. “And he got me back with the feather fiasco. Speaking of, I'm not sitting next to him.”

“You're sitting in the back. He'll be in the front.” The frown she levels at me in response makes her resemble a cartoon villain, but I doubt she'd appreciate the comparison. “You don't have to come at all if you can't stand being around Galen for that long. Leave now, no hard feelings.”

“Funny, you anointed me with Stormy duty and now you’re trying to get rid of me.”

I don’t tell her that I am frustrated with her. She’d take it the wrong way. Serita’s the one speeding headfirst into a mystery she wants to uncover, but she can opt out at any time and clean her hands of it. That’s not the case for us. But it’s more than I can say for Oscar, who digs his head in the sand. I don’t hate the guy like Galen does or look down on him like father, but Galen’s not the only one who’s changed.

That’s what I thought, anyway. Then she came to me for her dad’s sake, and now I don’t know what to think. “At least tell me you packed headphones. One of those romance books you love so much. Anything.”

“Obviously.” She holds out her bag. Both items sit at the top of the pile. “I’m not about to depend on any of you for scintillating conversation. Trying to hold a conversation with Galen is like brushing up against a porcupine with bare hands. Repeatedly. Until it’s not you holding your hand out to be stabbed, but him throwing his bodily weight against your pressure points with glee. *Glee*.”

“Oh, I know. He’s chased off clients of mine before.”

“Literally?”

“Occasionally. Most times he doesn’t have to escalate past mocking their outfit to send them running.” When we were younger, he’d combine his insults with jump scares. Then-tiny, Galen would come up from behind (not unlike Serita approached me earlier) with silent steps, then mutter something foul right beside your ear.

He grew out of that. Eventually.

Serita doesn’t find it comical. “So he’s always been a menace to society.”

“Ah, but without people like us, who would the do gooders have to compare themselves to? Pray for?”

“Aren’t prayers are meant to ward against demons?”

“If they don’t already, they should.” Not that it would help anyone.

I glance at my watch. Every second that passes is a second closer to when I burst inside the house and drag the others out by their ears.

We’re riding in my car, since I’m the only one with enough space for everyone: me, Serita, Galen, and Jer. For some reason, Faron pulled out at the last minute, and wouldn’t say why. Our parents are off on their respective travels—him on business in Hartford, her for *pleasure*.

Oscar and Jem are only out of town for the weekend. Both on their respective bachelor and bachelorette parties, relaxing at some spa or strip club, maybe one after the other. With them gone, we can make an unexplained getaway of our own.

More importantly, Stormy can stay at their house without tiptoeing around, and we won’t have to worry she’ll be find out while we’re gone. The kid has no idea *why* we’ll be gone, but she still managed to kick up a fuss about us leaving, a tirade that ended with her announcing, “I don’t get to know about any of the interesting stuff. Don’t think I don’t notice. You’re all excluding me. You’re excluding the orphan. That’s cold.”

Galen replied, “Warmer than the Slant,” the threat plain. That shut her up.

With Faron out of the picture, Serita enlisted the help of her friend Eleanor to check in on Stormy over the weekend when she can. The kid is surprisingly self-sufficient for someone so young. But then again, maybe that’s not so surprising.

“Your car’s practically a Honda next to theirs,” Serita points out, her attention having strayed to where I lean against the Range Rover, waiting for everyone to finish last-minute packing.

She’s gesturing towards the curve of sports cars circling Galen’s driveway when I respond, “Remind me again, which one of them is yours.”

“What’s the point of living northeast if you plan on driving a car?” she snorts. “I’ll forgo car payments if I want to, thank you very much. This is the first time in my life I don’t have to drive myself or be driven to places. Walking is good for the soul.”

“I was under the impression that traipsing around the country was your entire life’s purpose,” I deadpan, thinking of all the places Jem’s told me she’s been in the past, and knowing Serita’s travel log must add up to three times that.

“More to it than that, Delsing.” She takes a spin, seeming to finally notice we’re alone, despite the trio of other vehicles. “Where is everyone?”

“Packing the rest of their beauty products, I’m guessing,” I mutter.

“Shouldn’t Jericho be packed already if he’s here? And I thought your brother wasn’t coming?”

“He’s not. Faron came to see us off.”

“Oh. That’s nice of him.”

I grunt in response. Now that Slater’s *part of the team*, she’s less hostile. Still prickly, but that might be her personality. I give it the weekend before her hostility makes a comeback.

Serita Slater has never been sweet like honey, but like a spider’s web—beautiful to look at from a distance, but a deceptive net that sticks when you get too close.

Since she arrived in New Haven this year, she’s never shown interest in us. Now, there’s no escaping her. Everywhere I go, she’s there. The smell of ginger tea. A lone bead ripped from some garish minidress or a spill of glitter left on the counter in her wake.

“Have Jem and Oscar left already?” she asks.

Something has her feeling talkative. I weigh the pros and cons of point that out, but decide against it. “A couple hours ago.”

“Isn’t it late to have their bachelor and bachelorette parties now?”

Do the questions ever end? Am I the lead authority on marital customs? “It’s a step up from eloping with an Elvis impersonator.”

“Eh, at least there’s a story there. Who gets married in the middle of winter?”

“As opposed to when?” I tilt my head to the sky, soaking up the fresh air to balance out the hours I’ll be spending in the car.

“If I ever get married, I want to do it in the summer,” she says, committed to making small talk. “On the seventh day of the seventh month. July seventh.”

“Why? So you can burn everyone to a crisp in the summer heat? I don’t see how that’s any better than freezing them half to death. There are two other seasons available, they’re called spring and fall.”

“I don’t see why you’re so critical of everything and everyone.”

Am I? I would’ve described it as being honest, nothing more and nothing less.

I peek open one eye and find she’s mimicking my stance, eyes shut and head to the sky. “Alright, I’ll humor you. Why the seventh day of the seventh month?”

“I don’t want to tell you anymore.”

The corner of my mouth upturns at that, hidden from her view by the she’s standing.

“So.” Galen’s starts, making Serita start, slamming his hands onto the sides of the twin pillars outlining his entryway. “Anyone want to tell me why I’m spending my weekend driving to fucking *Providence* of all places?”

---

Galen props his feet up onto the dash from my peripheral vision.

I swipe out my hand. He grunts, both feet falling to the floor. “How much longer?”

“Another hour.”

He lets out a groan, squirming in his seat. Galen wasn't built for sitting around long.

A glance at the rearview mirror shows Serita and Jer awkwardly placing as much space between themselves as possible in the backseat.

Loxley pointed us to a missing child that fits Stormy's age range and physical description. Oddly enough, the lead comes out of an orphanage in the area: New Hope Youth Home. How Stormy might've gone from an orphanage in Providence to an alternate dimension, if at all, is beyond me. She's no *demounia*, that much Galen can tell.

Serita went over her stack of potential leads from Loxley with Eleanor without telling her why. Altej hasn't called the cops ranting about the group of people armed with files of missing children, or the sheriff would've tipped me off by now, so Serita must've came up with an explanation.

Altej came up with another place to look, so it wasn't for nothing.

There's a graduate student at Brown University who wrote about supernatural folklore and activity in New England. Namely, in New Haven.

I wrote it off as a hippie conspiracy theorist who got too high one night and went for it, but Robb Zhang did get one thing right in the literary paper Altej and Slater found: demons built New Haven. They threatened to tear it down afterwards, but that's not public knowledge.

Zhang got the next part wrong: that said demons hopped through time and space to get there. In reality, they came by boat, the same way everyone traveled back then.



What's interesting is that there's someone with ideas on traveling from one world to—what we all agree is—another one.

Galen and Jer are headed to New Hope, then me and Slater are going to Brown. Better that Galen and Serita aren't paired together.

Father's words from Jem and Oscar's couple's shower echo as a reminder. *Don't think I haven't seen this before. Men like us like the allure of the damsel. Just remember: a mistress can only ever be that. A mistress.*

*No impurities, demonic or otherwise.* I don't know how he decided I have enough of a relationship with Serita to warrant a warning like that. He shouldn't even have cause to know her name, yet he's made up his mind on how I know her.

I decide it's inconsequential. Let him think what he wants.

---

Robb Zhang turns out to be a lanky, hipster-type who does, in fact, smell sharply of weed and wears *tie-dye* t-shirts beneath his *flannels*.

Hardly the New England mythology expert I was expecting—actually, yes, he is.

To make matters worse, he blends right in on the Brown campus. Go figure.

Zhang walks ahead of me and Slater, discussing some assignment or another with a professor of his, who approached him along the way to the anthropology offices.

“Your classism is showing,” Serita sings. “Brown's an Ivy, too, you know.”

I huff out a short laugh at that. “Hardly.”

“I'd rather go here than Yale.”

“You really would, wouldn't you?”

“They have one thing over Yale, for sure.”

“Do I even care to know what that might be?” I drawl, quickening my pace towards the anthropology building, eager to get this over with.

“Brown doesn’t have any Delsing’s, Vranes’s, or Caulfield’s. I’d say that’s a great reason to come here.” She throws a smile over her shoulder, aggressively quickening her own pace to stay ahead of my stride.

Just to rattle her, I lengthen my own strides, matching her speed. “Coming, Slater?”

“We’re the only ones here.”

There’s a trace of wariness in the way she says it. I stop myself from telling her, *This was your idea*. Right now, she reminds me of an animal who found its cage unlocked. Her eyes swing around the courtyard, distrusting. Stay or go?

Blood’s been spilled—in varying quantities—two out of the three times she was last involved with me or the others. I chalk her uneasiness up to a learned response.

“It’s a Friday afternoon, of course we’re the only ones here.”

“Exactly. I didn’t need to convince him to meet us, despite the day and time. I think he just wanted the company, someone to nerd out with over all this stuff.”

“Get a therapist, then. We have shit to do.”

“You might. Is that what that text was—an invite?”

“If it was, that’s besides the point.”

Robb’s professor veers off, and then he’s joining us, so we let the topic drop there. Instead, him and Serita find common ground over decorative lattes or some other inane line of conversation.

The two of them have gotten along well so far—too well. I tune them out.

When we reach the tiny desk laden with stacks of books and papers strewn carelessly across it, Robb mutters beneath his breath, motioning for us to take a seat on the other side.

When he crawls onto the floor to retrieve something, I abandon all hope of this meeting giving us any useful information.

“We’re on a trip. Let your hair down,” she whispers while we wait. “And would it kill you to be polite?”

“This is me being polite.”

“*I’m* being polite. Robb is a nice guy. *You* have reached a new level of moodiness, which is saying a lot. You could bear to wave the white flag for five minutes without spontaneously combusting, you know.”

“Slater—”

“Don’t tell me. You think I’m not taking this seriously. That I don’t take the right things seriously. I’ve heard that before.”

“From who?”

Her expression closes, like wiping a slate blank. “Actually, I know what this is. You’re judging him, but your real problem is with me. So spill. Get it out.”

“Are you sure you want me to do that?” I level her with a blank stare.

“Found it!” Robb reemerges from beneath his desk like a gopher crawling out of its hole, waving a thick text in his hand.

“All the stuff you find on other worlds mostly comes from modern media,” he says, thumbing through the text. “But a lot of what you see on the screen? Maybe it’s not so far off.”

“I’m so glad I drove this far to hear this,” I interrupt.

Acting like he didn’t hear, Robb continues, “Because a lot of those movies and shows are inspired by old stories. You know how Hollywood’s obsessed with remakes and paying homage to the vintage stuff? It’s because critics eat that stuff up, and a lot of young people don’t even make the connection, but think it’s some shiny new thing. Everyone wins. Sort of. The point is—”

“Oh, good. I’m starving here. We had a long drive over, and so far, I haven’t heard anything new, nothing worth us coming here.”

“—that every story is somehow rooted in something else. The same applies to demons and what they’re capable of.”

I side-eye Serita, but her attention is singularly trained on Robb.

“I had to tell him enough for him to find information that applies to us,” she says. “Otherwise we’d be here all week, searching through dusty old books.”

“Not enough sex for you in the vintage stuff, Slater?”

“Go on, please, Robb.”

Looking half-amused, but moreover, highly alarmed, Robb stutters for a moment.

“You live on a college campus. This conversation cannot be anywhere in the top ten scandalous moments of your life, Zhang. Continue,” I say.

“So, um,” he coughs. “Most myths about demons are rooted in religion, duh. They walk the earth using mortal bodies, true. This limits them while they’re here. Also limits how *long* they stay here: a mortal lifespan. They can be banished back to Hell, also true.”

“So you think.”

“*Finn.*”

“Folklore around parallel dimensions, according to other myths, aren’t really connected in a lot of those old stories. Except for the ones that come out of New Haven. Quite a bit of history comes from word-of-mouth or personal accounts. Diaries, ledgers, the like.”

“Still haven’t heard anything relevant over here, Zhang.”

“See, there was a blacksmith who once lived there, centuries ago. This blacksmith was well-educated, despite the times, which made him doubly useful back then, when settlers were really rich and wanted to get more rich in the New

World. Otherwise, they had some skill worth bringing here. The blacksmith wrote about something weird, though. He'd seen things, heard odd stuff, and watched other colonialists like him go missing in the night, snatched from their beds."

Robb flips the open book around, facing me and Slater, and indicates a scan of an old drawing: a crude, charcoal depiction of a monstrous beast.

"This is?"

"A drawing from that blacksmith's journal. See, he could read and write, draw, had a trade—a real catch back then."

I resist the urge to comment at this, wanting him to finish faster.

"Hmm." Slater nods along.

"His solution was to cast salt into his wares."

"Sorry?"

"He ate it. Slept with it in his pillowcase. Ringed it around his house. All this stuff? It's all relevant to the times, too, since salt was so expensive back then. But it *worked*."

"What worked?"

"What do you mean? It kept him alive."

"How?" I snap.

I've spent my entire life with the knowledge of demons running around the earth, and I've never heard of this last part. Never heard of any blacksmith obsessed with salt either.

Robb Zhang is not just an academic with interest in storytelling or the supernatural, but he's a true believer, I realize.

"Theoretically," Slater starts. "If we didn't want to keep anyone out, but figure out where someplace is, where or how it came from, I guess, how is any of this connected to that?"

"The blacksmith wrote about more than just demons, but what he wrote about them tells us he knew more than the majority around him knew at the time. Witches and ghosts, or

the Christian devil, took the brunt of the blame.” At my pointed look, he switches tack. “Which is why we can place some faith in his theory on demonic magic. It all leads back to a source. Demon magic can fuel a person, and then their kids, it make their grandkids powerful. If powerful enough, a demon’s magic can fuel a place.”

“What happened to this blacksmith?” I ask.

Robb grins. “He went missing. I always imagined he became a *demounia* and left for another world.”

“How romantic.” I go to stand, grabbing Serita. “We’re done here.”

---

“What is *wrong* with you?” she shouts, voice echoing throughout empty hallways.

“The guy’s a nut.”

“How so?”

“None of that is helpful to us, in case you weren’t following along to story time.” I cut her a glare. “Too busy drooling, I suspect.”

“What the fuck does that mean?”

I come to a sudden halt, exasperated by the time we wasted by coming here. “Serita, do you remember what we had for lunch with Jem and Oscar earlier this month?”

“Soup. Why?”

Rubbing a hand across my face, I exhale slowly. “What ingredients are used to make soup?”

Her lips curl. “You want to talk about soup? Really?”

“*Humor me.*”

From the quick change in her expression, I know the realization has snuck in. “Galen can eat salt.”

“Obviously.”

“That doesn’t mean the rest is false.”

I will admit that Robbie boy didn’t get everything wrong. There’s enough lore to eventually land on a truth, and demons do walk the earth in mortal forms, but this does not restrict them from using their immortal powers.

That half-truth doesn’t lend him enough credibility to extend our visit.

I have to give it to her for sticking to her guns until the end.

We continue marching forward, Serita hurrying to keep up, towards the nearest parking lot, where the Range Rover is the only car in sight.

Robb Zhang does seem like the kind of douchebag who drives a bicycle everywhere and sneers at everyone who doesn’t make bi-weekly campaigns to save the planet.

“Just get in the damn car. Maybe Jer and Galen found something useful.”

“Or we go back in there, apologize, and see if there’s anything else we—”

It takes one second to have her pinned, my arms caging her in against the side of the car. “Serita. I’m running on three hours of sleep right now, and *Robb* doesn’t know shit. Get in the car.”

“No. What are you gonna do, accuse me of trying to sell you and your friends out to the news again?”

She pushes at my left arm with both of hers, glaring all the while, but I don’t give her an inch.

Leaning in, I trap her further, eyes locked. “This is not an argument. We are not *negotiating*. You are not going back in there so you can try to flirt your way into something useful, because there’s nothing useful for him to tell us. Got it?”

“So what if I was flirting with him? How else will he tell us the useful stuff? And before you say anything, just because some of it was wrong, doesn’t mean it all is!”

“You don’t get to flirt with him because—”

“Because *what?*”

One hand moves to her neck, the other grasps her hip, my fingers digging in forcefully. I don’t get to touch her as often as I’ve thought about doing it. I try not to think about doing it.

My lips slam down onto hers.

She gasps into the kiss, and I use her surprise to slip my tongue past her lips. On instinct, I grab on to the back of her head, hair like a long spill of ink.

Capturing her bottom lip between my own, I tug, and she lets out another gasp, more restrained this time.

Her hands move to my chest, but don’t push, only grab onto the front, right where the buttons leave a line down the middle. One moves lower, down to my abdomen, and I groan into her mouth.

Tentatively, Serita’s tongue meets mine.

I trace over her teeth, eager for more of her noises, anything. I get as close as I can, aligning our bodies. My hand drags down from her neck to wrap around her hair, the other to cup her backside.

When she moans, I bring our bodies even closer. She’s flush against me, panting.

But then, she’s pulling away.

My eyes flicker open in time to catch hers doing the same. “*Finn,*” she says breathlessly, lips swollen. “I—”

Her attention shifts to somewhere behind me, filling with panic, and then she’s yanking her arms around me, pulling both of us down to the gravel parking lot.

“What the *fuck?*”

A loud *bang* goes off somewhere behind us.

“*Move!*” she screams, tugging my hand, leading us to the other side of the car.



“You bear the mark of a demon,” Robb pants, tilting the shotgun to my face. “So what are you? Demon or *demounia*?”

“You’ve got to be fucking *kidding* me.”

Serita grabs for me again, moving out of range.

Robb sets down the gun a second later, and I lunge.

“What *mark*?” I snarl into his face, ignoring the repetitive pulse of pain coming from my side.

“On your jaw,” he gasps out, clawing at my hands circling his throat.

“I got that scar in an accident as a kid. What does that have to do with anything?”

“But... You’re not...?”

“No, I’m not, you braindead moron. Keep talking unless you want the barrel of this gun jammed down your throat and into your bowels.” Threats aren’t my typical method of persuasion—too uncultured for my tastes—but my patience ran out the minute we stepped into the anthropology building and discovered the air conditioner is broken. Of course no one gives enough of a shit about the *anthropology* department to have it fixed.

“I thought...” He looks genuinely ashamed, but I don’t let go. “If you had the opportunity, wouldn’t you?”

“*Wouldn’t I what?*”

“In order to become a *demounia*, you have to overpower one of them. Or a demon, but a *demounia* is easier to beat,” he squeaks.

I level a pointed look back at Serita, who’s now holding the shotgun, pointed away from us and her own body. She doesn’t meet my eyes. Whether it’s her misplaced trust in this idiot, or because of the kiss, I’m not sure. It could be both.

“If I ever see you again,” I say, swiveling back to Robb. “I’m going to use your own gun to blow your brains out. Understand?”

He doesn't reply, only nods, so I drop him and march my way to the driver's side, head pounding.

Serita doesn't fight me this time, merely holds out the gun to my outstretched hand, then climbs silently into the car. I catch Robb whispering a word or two her way, but she doesn't acknowledge him further, so I don't press her on it.

Galen and Jer better find something useful at the orphanage.

## SERITA



“How could you hide this from me?” I scream. “You were shot and you didn’t say a word!”

“You’re the one who made such a big deal about being on campus during a Friday afternoon.”

I restrain myself from strangling him. He’s made similar comments since I noticed the blood seeping from his side, which he waved off. It’s as if he thinks amping up his usual amount of nonchalance will make me find a similar temperament.

News flash, it hasn’t.

After a heated argument (on my side) arguing the case for a hospital visit (sensibly), and an infuriatingly calm counterargument from him, we compromised by stopping at the nearest convenience store for medical supplies.

“Remember the days when you held little to no concern over my physical well-being?” he’d asked. “We should revisit those times. No hospital.”

The only clue he gave on why was this declaration: “I won’t betray the honorable Dr. Jameson Caulfield in such a way,” who must be Jericho’s father or relative of some sort.

Then he’d swiped a hand across his abdomen, yanking like he’d stitch himself up on his own, and I saw how naturally he pulled himself together. A force of habit born out of the self-control he’s learned to exert over himself.

I fire off texts to Jericho and Galen on Finn’s phone, but don’t hear back.

We’re in a nearly empty parking lot, the scant two other cars likely belonging to store workers, given the time of day. Dusk crawls over the horizon in bright, hot orange across the sky, meaning I have decent visibility for what I’m about to do.

Finn’s torso is bare, revealing his muscular build. I place my elbow on the center console for steadiness when I make the first stitch, having already sanitized the area with rubbing alcohol wipes from the first aid kit. I don’t stop to think why he has one.

He stares at my face as I work the needle through his flesh, his own expression void of feeling. Can he tell I’m nervous? I’ve never done this before, only altered or fixed costumes for myself or others at Haven House.

“How do you know how to shoot a gun?”

The wariness in my voice prompts him to snicker, jolting his chest. I place a hand over him, but the heat emanating from his bare skin makes me pull back.

“I know how to do a lot of things.” There’s no suggestion in how he says it, only a calm assuredness. “It was a way to pass the time. I picked it up from Oscar as a kid.”

*Not your own dad?* Instinctively, I know that’s too personal of a question to ask, and I don’t want to talk about Oscar, so I rack my brain for a way to change the subject. “Is this a situation you’re used to? Have you... been shot at before?”

The scar along his jawline. Another crisscrossing his side. Some kind of unidentifiable mark near the one Robb Zhang

made. Is that why he's so wary of outsiders?

"Not particularly."

*Then you're alarmingly well-versed in taking pain. Or hiding it.* "You know, sometimes a simple 'yes or no' response is an adequate answer."

"Adequate, but droll."

I don't bother getting into what's droll and what's not with him. "I didn't realize guns are legal to carry around on college campuses in Rhode Island."

I'm dragging out the conversation, but for once I have him pinned, and I can't resist the urge to take advantage. I want to understand what it is about Finn Delsing that makes him tick.

"They're not. That's what'll keep him from talking. Regret coming?"

"No."

"Sure you don't."

*But it's true.* Growing up, I loved being on the road, answerable to nothing, too busy looking forward to bother looking back.

"What's supposed to keep *us* from talking? Why would he even have a shotgun—do you think he brought it today *because of us?*"

"I seem to have led you astray. Most people don't consider demons harmless." From the way he says it, almost like he's exhausted, I decide not to push.

It's odd that Finn hasn't brought up Robb Zhang's warning to me before we left Brown. It's possible he didn't overhear. *He's at the center of it—he knows what they're capable of.*

*Remember why they fell.*

He made it sound cryptic enough that I nearly accused him of lunacy, but Finn can give off the impression of danger looming ahead, and he must've been talking about Finn. Who else?

“Hmm.” I pinch a bit of skin for accuracy, brows scrunched. He doesn’t look away. “Why don’t you want Jericho or Galen to know you were hurt?”

He doesn’t even flinch. “They’d bother me over it for the next full year.”

“Liar. What about your parents?”

“Ask me what you really want to ask, and I might tell you a truth.”

“Why do you always think I’m not saying what I really mean?” I counter.

“Tell me the significance of the seventh day of the seventh month.”

I pause my stitching before I realize it gives me away and resume the motion.

“I’m not that religious. At all. But my grandmother was, the one on Jemima’s side. She died when I was young, but she was *super* Jewish. Christianity and Judaism are pretty similar, and the seventh day of the seventh month has religious importance.”

“My father’s old school, too,” he says, startling me with such a personal statement. By his standards, at least.

“He must’ve been raised that way. That’s how it was for my mom,” I continue. “I’d do it for her, I guess. For *bobo*. It’s an old tradition for Jewish weddings to read the seven blessings, the *Sheva B’rachot*. Old teachings.”

“About what?” To my further surprise, he sounds genuinely curious.

“Celebration, joy, and love,” I answer. “You do the blessing over a cup of wine, there’s lots of talking involved.” I shrug. “It’s just something you do. I figured, I may not be great—or even good—at being Jewish, but I memorized the *Sheva B’rachot* the same way middle schoolers memorize the preamble to the Declaration of Independence, so I may as well put it to good use one day.”

Eyes closed now, he huffs out the hint of a laugh. “For *bobo*.”

“Stop moving.”

“Sorry.”

I pause mid-stitch. “Did you just *apologize*?”

“Not for moving.”

wait for more, but when he doesn’t continue, I decide to push. “For what?”

The corners of his lips twist. “You really need me to say it?”

“Nah, just wanted to torture you a little.”

“Vicious, wicked woman.”

From my vantage point, I’m able to stare without worrying about his reaction. Finn’s hair is mussed, from me or falling to the ground earlier, I don’t know, but it’s a disturbingly handsome look him. A few strands are swept onto his forehead, making him appear younger, more relaxed.

Until he looks down to scrutinize my stitches, a slight disdainful frown marring the image. I’m a business major. What did he expect?

Resuming my task, I bow my head for a closer view.

“You kissed me back,” he says, voice low.

This time, I make sure not to still my hand, keep going steady, even if it takes all of my concentration. “So it’s true. Finn Delsing does go around hooking up with all the girls.”

“One kiss and you think you have me figured out, huh?”

“You really want to talk about this now?” I shoot back.

“As good a time as any.”

I’m acutely aware that this is one of a handful of times we’ve even touched. Finn is so careful with how he holds himself. I’m used to him setting himself apart as a witness between two parties, or as a lone figure lingering behind the rest of his friends.

“Well, I’m an only child. I wasn’t raised to share.” I snip the thread with a pair of safety scissors—the only ones we could find in stock—and double my concentration to tie off the knot. Not too shabby for my first try, outside of fabric and lace. “There’s nothing to discuss.”

“Noted.” Long lashes flutter open, hazel eyes meeting mine.

*Ever since you kissed me, I feel like there’s something unraveling inside me, and I need it to stop.*

*I shouldn’t feel like this.*

I like his attention on me in the same way I like being center-stage, the main attraction. It bolsters me in a way I’ve yet to replace since Haven House shut down... Until now.

But that’s all it is—flattery.

“We’re not exclusive,” he says out of nowhere. “I’ve never even kissed Jackie.”

“You’ve never kissed your *fiancée*?” I ask incredulously.

“Never. In fact, I’ve only met her once.” Every word falls like a bomb in my brain. “No one but me, her, and our fathers know that. Possibly her sister? She said they’re close, but that might be a reason not to tell her. Me and Jac aren’t close enough to tell each other about our siblings.”

“You didn’t tell your brother?” He shakes his head. “Then... why are you telling me?”

“Isn’t it obvious?”

And as soon as he says it, it is.

---

The orphanage was a dead end. Everyone’s left frustrated.

*In more ways than one*, the small voice in the back of my head taunts.



I drove Finn's car to New Hope Youth Home and dropped Galen and Jericho off at the hotel.

The first words Galen said when he threw himself into the car were, "Someone should burn that place down. With those so-called caretakers inside of it."

He rooted through their records while Jericho distracted the staff.

After Galen's rant, I didn't bother adding to Finn's rundown of how we fared at Brown. We traipsed into the hotel, Finn mouthing off about Brown, and we went our separate ways.

All was quiet for a few hours. I was on the verge of falling asleep when I heard the knock on my door.

Finn offering to take me to some undisclosed location in the middle of the night isn't enough to make me bewildered.

It's that I agreed to go with him.

---

The warehouse sits in an industrial neighborhood whose streets lie emptied—all but one. Expensive vehicles surround the one we enter the nondescript building, abandoned on the fringes of the city. I hear the muffled sounds of activity going on the closer we get.

A masked bouncer confers with Finn at the entrance, we sign NDA's (an odd experience), and then we're in.

It's nearly like walking through the mirror, and I'm disoriented at first, but then my eyes adjust to the light.

Clouded by smoky air, I take in tinkling laughter overlaid with less-jovial, murmured pockets of conversation. The spacious area of the ground floor has been converted to court intimate seclusion: coated in crimson, lending a morose atmosphere, but from the smiles on everyone's faces at the regularly-spaced booths and tables, I gather that's the desired effect.

Sex is a feeling in the air, an omnipresent thud that energizes the room. Some of the women wear lingerie, others nothing. Bodies writhe against each other out in the open, ignorant of other activities at play—card games, mostly. Some sitting alone, only drinking.

Others sit with lazy, focused eyes trained on the scenes playing out in front of them.

My first thought isn't of the dark-haired man licking his way down another on our right. It's that I'm standing here in *pajamas*.

“You have a bad habit of not informing me about pertinent dress codes prior to taking me places.”

“There is no dress code,” Finn says. “What would you like to drink? Water?”

He's changed since earlier, now fitted in a causal outfit of a plain black T-shirt beneath a matching suede jacket and fitted jeans.

Casual enough for him that I didn't think twice about my own attire. This might even be the first time I've ever seen him wear jeans. It suits him, of course, as much as his usual formalwear.

“I don't think they offer water at the bar.”

Both our eyes stray to the cluster of men and women intermingling over drinks while the bartender rushes back and forth.

“They'll have it,” he says. “You don't drink alcohol, do you? Since we met, Oscar and Jem have thrown party after party with open bars. I've never seen you imbibe.”

“I'm not old enough.” It's true enough.

“You don't want to talk about that,” he notes. “How about this: tell me which of them caught your eye when you walked in.”

Instead of dragging my attention back to the man and woman near the shadowy back corner of the room, I flatten the wrinkles in my shirt.

“Why do you assume any of them did?”

“I bet that they would before we walked in here.” He’s lowered his voice, making it sound sultrier, like we’re sharing a secret. “Then I saw your face when we did, and I knew I’d bet correctly by bringing you here.”

“Bet on what?”

“That you’re an adrenaline junkie. It gets you off, doing things you feel like you shouldn’t.”

He nods to the nearest cushioned booth, gleaming leather that reflects the lurid decor. A lingerie-clad woman with strawberry blonde hair and bright blue eyes sits in the middle of the bench, eyeing Finn with interest.

“And?”

“*And* we’re here to meet someone.”

I slide in the booth, not wanting to pick a fight from the get-go. Finn follows, hemming me in. There’s an array of objects on the table, set into filigreed cases and velvet displays, like jewelry. Clamps, a bar contraption, bottles of lube.

“Having fun?” the woman asks, entirely relaxed.

“I will be,” Finn says, laying an arm on the backrest.

None of us look at the items on the table, like it’s only normal that they’re there. I refuse to be the one who brings it up. We’re already ignoring the sounds of moaning traveling across the room.

“I can find someplace else to sit,” I interrupt. “In case the two of you want to be alone.”

“No, I think this way is more fun.” He beckons to someone across the room, but I don’t pay much attention.

Couples and groups grope and slide against each other from the raised platforms set around the room, all in red. I can’t tell if they’re guests or hired to be here. I don’t know if it matters.

In the booth across from ours, a man who looks to be in his thirties leans towards the woman across from him and starts easing down the straps of her dress while she whispers in his ear. Her breasts spill out and the front of the dress pools at her waist.

I'm wide-eyed at the display, but I can't look away when his hand settles on her right breast, teasing her nipple to a hard peak. His other arm falls beneath the table, and her back arches to the ceiling, breasts jutting out.

A new voice calls out, "Tsk, tsk. This one must love trouble. You're in good company, Serita Slater."

I turn away, cheeks heating. The newcomer's around Finn's age, a little older, and stockier, like a bodybuilder. Dark brown hair slicked back, revealing emerald green eyes and a playfulness that betrays his build.

This must be who we're here to meet.

"How do you know my name?" I reply.

"I own this place. Why shouldn't I know who you are?" He plops down next to the blonde we're sat beside and smiles at her before turning his attention on Finn. "I'm shocked you're here without your group from home. They'd love to see Caulfield up there, what with that pretty face."

Even I know it'd be a cold day in hell before that happened.

"Don't worry, I tucked everyone in bed before I went out," Finn says sardonically. "You got my text?"

Ben rests back against the leather, languid as a cat. "I did, but if you're having health troubles, I'd try a doctor first."

*Oh, I think. That's why we're here.*

"Check with Walt at the door before you go. I left something there for you," Ben continues. "Though I can't say if it'll be any help. You'll have to see if any of it's useful."

"I appreciate it."

Ben chuckles. “Until I come calling with a favor in return.”

Finn makes a noncommittal noise in his throat, indifferent, shrugging off his jacket.

“Your favors are out of the ordinary.”

“That’s why you like me, Delsing.”

With a wink, he stands to go as suddenly as he came, proffering a hand to the near-silent woman. He hasn’t spoken a word her way, but they seem to know each other. She might’ve sat here to wait for him, I realize.

“Have fun, kids. I’ll be in one of the second-floor rooms if you need me.” Taking my hand, he presses a light kiss there, reminding me of a gentleman from another century. “Lovely meeting you, Miss Slater.”

“You as well,” I say back.

Him and his companion waltz off towards the stairs and disappear.

“This is so... secret society-like,” I muse, now that me and Finn are effectively alone enough to speak freely. The arrangement of the booths give patrons a certain level of privacy, if not total concealment. This isn’t far off from what I expect the wolf pack gets up to in school. “Skull and Bones, anyone?”

“That’s because it is.”

I whirl on him, mouth gaping. “Wait—that’s *real*?”

Finn doesn’t balk, doesn’t even seem to mind my questions. “Of course it is, Slater. It hardly counts as a secret anymore.”

*Bonesy*, the text had read. A kind of joke, then.

I shift over, feeling conspiratorial. “Is that why I had to sign an NDA?”

“No. That’s all Ben. Only a few of us are alumni,” he clarifies. “This isn’t an official thing. We just happen to know

each other from school. There's some Contractors here, people from overseas."

"If this isn't some creepy ritual sacrifice, then why are we in an abandoned warehouse?"

"Space."

I contemplate him anew. "You didn't need me here for that. So why bring me?"

"I want to make you a proposal."

I raise a brow at him, head cocked. "Like with Loxley? A contract?"

"Not like that, no. Something a bit more... reckless."

"That doesn't sound quite so enticing." I twist an empty glass around on its side, waiting for him to get to the point.

"Then start yelling at me again," he says. "You could run off and leave."

"You know I won't cut tail and run. I'm an adrenaline junkie, remember? I like danger, according to you."

"No, you like things you think are bad for you."

"Same difference."

"I suppose it is in your case. How about this? A trial run." He motions between us. "This thing going on between us, we need to get it out of our systems. You're a pain, and I bet you see me the same way. That makes you a distraction too."

"I don't—"

"From day one," he steamrolls on. "I knew you wouldn't make it here long. You'll go, and you won't come back unless it's for some Jewish holiday I don't know the name of. You're too much of a wanderer to stick around, so... why not? No attachments seems to be your default mode. That's all I'm looking for."

My heart thumps rapidly in my chest.

He wants easy, carnal.

In return, I steal this man away for myself, greed outweighing my sense, all for a taste.

I don't know when it happened, how we got to this place, but now that we're here, something keeps me from retreating, just as he anticipated. There's a challenge in his eyes, the same one mine must reflect back to him.

Betraying that I don't *want* to leave.

"Why now?" I ask, scrambling for a second to *think*. "Got a taste, now you'll finish what you started?"

That brings a smile to his face. A rare one that spreads out and makes him look more like his age.

Then he snatches up the empty glass I was fiddling with, settling it upright. "You talk more when you're nervous, did you know that? It's not an uncommon trait, but—"

"Finnian. You're engaged in a marriage of convenience."

"Slater. It's hardly convenient, but yes. Now, back to you and me. Why not now?" He spreads his hands out on the table, like we really are in a meeting room, negotiating a deal. "When I want something, I come prepared to take it. No point in having regrets. It's not like you know anyone here, besides me."

*Who's going to find us out here, across state lines?*

From anyone else, I'd expect hormones are at play, but Finn could proposition anyone in this room if he wanted. I could walk off and find someone, too. There's no shortage of willing participants.

Not to mention, it's not dissimilar to past encounters I've had. Life on the road doesn't leave much room for anything past casual relationships. Impromptu meet-ups in shadowed corners are the extent of my experience, but never with a guy like Finn Delsing.

But what does that matter? It's not *like*. It doesn't even enter the realm of *caring*.

Attraction is not feeling. It's a mutual interest in getting each other naked. I can admit that. We're both built to take

what we want without hesitation.

Drumming my fingers against my leg, I peer out at the other guests again. Frankly, they look like they're having fun. "I didn't realize you gave in to base feelings like attraction. I would've thought you found such characteristics pedestrian-like. If I'm reckless and go after things that are bad for me, what does that make you?"

"Waiting to be wrecked." All the amusement goes out of him at once, leaving behind that calm exterior I've grown used to. "But not tonight. Think about it, and let me know when you have an answer."



# 16

FINN



WELCOME TO NEW HAVEN. The sign looms like a final warning.

A bittersweet sight, no matter how many times I see it.

The same families that fled this dump all rushed back, dismissing more profitable places on the map and establishing their businesses here. All for the same reason the ones that came before us settled down here: they felt the magic surge, like a spark that ignited the land, strengthening. They felt it come back to life like it did when demons roamed New Haven in the days when they didn't even hide what they were.

I'm starting to wonder if that surge of life was the Slant.

*If powerful enough, a demon's magic can fuel a place.*

In retrospect, Providence was futile from the start. All signs lead back here, to this shitty little town. All clues are here, and I'm anticipating the ordeal it'll be having to talk Slater out of traipsing into murderous alternate dimensions any day now.

We're so close to home, but the gas dial's been steadily creeping downwards for miles now. I should've checked last night, and now we won't make it across town without stopping.

I'm pulling into the nearest gas station when my phone vibrates.

**Oscar Vranes:** You happen to hear from my son in the last few weeks? I've been texting him, but no sign of life yet.

I stare at the message until it clicks: Galen hasn't gotten in touch with his dad since we had lunch with him and Jem about a month ago. Hardly irregular for them, and I'm used to being the middleman for the father-son duo, but I might've forgotten to touch base with Oscar in the past few weeks.

Swiping over to the camera app, I snap a picture of Galen propped against the passenger side window, mouth parted, and send it without adding a message.

Now that I don't need him to sit still, I don't care to shut my car door quietly. Three pairs of eyes glare out at me while I stroll over to the pump, and I send them a salute.

Jericho has a book of poems by John Donne open on his lap. I don't know what he hopes to accomplish with that, and I can't be bothered to ask until I have a cup of coffee.

Serita's gaze holds a sharper edge to it. That's to be expected. If nothing else, she loves to uncover secrets and peer past the curtain. Last night was me giving her a taste of that, my style.

A select number of Bonesmen around the globe are key players in holding that curtain firmly closed. I was tempted to watch her roam free around the room, interrogating strangers, but it'd be futile. The majority of people present last night didn't even go to Yale and had no affiliation with the society.

In part, it's to disillusion her from her notions of who she thinks we are. Some of it probably plays right into her

assumptions, no doubt, but I find her peculiar enough—interesting enough—to play along.

The girl in the backseat of my car still believes in magic, and she believes it might solve her problems if she tries hard enough. As if that might be enough to make her dad no longer sick. I don't know how to break it to her that it won't.

Magic only breeds trouble. Or lots of money. Or both. The prospect of money and power is the only reason so many dismiss the trouble as worthwhile.

## SERITA



I'm cracking my back in a distinctly un-ladylike fashion when Galen approaches, which I know because I'm twisting my head around to crack that, too.

Looks like he had the same idea about stretching his legs after hours crouched in the car.

"You look like you escaped a horror movie," he says cheerily.

I roll my eyes, circling my ankles. *Crack*. "Right back at you."

He takes up the same stance as me, stretching out his back. "Comes with being a part of the team."

"You're a team now?"

"We're a team," he says, nodding over at the Range Rover. "You're a liability. You're deadweight."

Before I can say anything, or circle my hands around his throat, he adds, "We can't tell anyone about the woman you

saw in there. We can't explain that."

"I... know." We're both staring at the MISSING PERSON poster slapped over the window of the gas station. I recognize her from that night. How could I not?

Then, in a complete one-eighty, he barks out a laugh, seemingly out of nowhere. "Smell that?"

Galen takes a dramatic sniff of the air, but doesn't elaborate. I consider not answering, or answering with the choking him idea, but he'll keep going without my input. "Smell what?"

"The ever-present stink of New Haven."

"It's not all bad." I don't know why I say it. I don't particularly love this place, but I don't *hate* it. New Haven ranks higher than he does. "You're just used to it."

He jerks his head back to the gas station, where Finn's grabbing drinks. "He thinks this place is one grand discovery away from hitting it big. A landmine of secrets, waiting to be discovered."

"What's so bad about that?" I ask neutrally.

"I didn't say it's *bad*. He's my best friend. That's how I know" Galen arcs his arms up, the tense expression marring his fine features relaying his tiredness. "I just think he should consider there might be a reason to keep the shit in this town buried deep. You should be careful not to make the same mistake with him."

My eyes stray back to the gas station while he talks. Dark rings circle beneath Finn's eyes, the only visible sign of tiredness. He expected more out of our trip to Providence, that much is clear. So did the rest of us. Otherwise, I doubt he would've bothered going, no matter how much trouble his friends—Galen specifically—might've gotten up to in a different city without constant supervision.

Without Finn ready to jump into the water right along with him.

Part of him must enjoy it, the thrill. Introverts and their extroverted counterparts. I wonder if he knows it, or tells himself it's all about practicality and minimizing damage. Probably the latter.

Some people like to live entirely by their own terms. Some are more comfortable living vicariously through others, with a stopgap of respectability in knowing they're the more sensible one to bridge the distance.

Maybe that's why Finn didn't resist having me around so much. Why he made that proposal at Ben Gould's warehouse party. A safer bet to risk your body than your heart.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Pausing in my stretches, I try to read past the tumult of emotions that are ever-present on Galen. Finn's opposite.

"New Haven was built on blood, you know. I don't mean the kind of stuff you'll read about in history books. Magic's all that keeps it from falling to pieces. You can't build something great out of shit."

"Are there other demon hotspots out there?" The question's bothered me for a while now, but I figured I'd asked enough of them to Finn. May as well give him a reprieve.

Galen appears suspicious at the question, but nods. "Of course there are. Not a lot in the states, or North America overall, but there's a few others."

"Where?"

"Tell me when your mom left your dad, and I'll tell you where they are."

Before I can even begin to process what Galen just said—*Why the hell would he want to know that?*—Finn ambles out of the gas station, arms full of snacks and a drink carrier. I spot some of the same kinds he toted out of Galen's kitchen, back on the day when everything changed.

"They didn't have blueberry, only cherry." Finn thrusts our slushies at us, readjusting the rest of his haul in his arms so he can take a swig of his coffee. "Any complaints, and you'll walk the rest of the way home."

FINN



I give Serita a reprieve.

I'd been frank with her when I laid out my offer in Providence. I'm not making any promises for the future, and she doesn't want any. There's nothing to gain, nothing to lose.

It's a risk, bringing her further into my orbit—into ours. Not a risk I'd normally make, seeing how she's already intertwined with our lives through Oscar through Jem. A calculation I'd veer from, one I'd know better than to make. But she's as willing as I am, and I'm not thinking about risk calculation when it comes to Serita. It's the opposite of the deal I have with Jac, and that suits me fine, damn the rest.

She may as well have walked into the eye of the storm when she agreed to come with me to Gould's warehouse in Providence—that storm being *me*.

I've seen her watch me the same way I watch her, like she wants to slice me open and see inside. Rotten or not.

I've seen enough of her to anticipate her hesitation. When Serita stumbles on something she wants, she turns her back on it, as if wanting it inherently makes it suspicious. As if she doesn't trust herself when it comes to her own desires. I want to see inside her and find out why. Thus, I gave her three weeks without having to hear from me. Less so because I wanted to take the time dealing with other responsibilities, but out of necessity.

Grunt work, mostly. Tests to my current state of mind, to ensure that I'm still on track with my duties. I've been hearing from Jer on the side, usually lackluster updates on the research front. Stormy hasn't been any help, but we're in agreement on one thing: none of us are going back into 'the Slant' to answer any of those questions—not unless it's a last resort.

“No more field trips,” Serita declared on the drive back. “Not until your *literal gunshot wound* heals, or else I'll tell your friends you got shot by a hipster.”

I told her, “It doesn't even hurt.” (It doesn't, but that set her off on a rant.)

Then there was a failed trip to Miami in search of the missing shipments from the company. A man of mine found empty carriers, the cargo raided by the time we got there, and no leads. The only upside was that Nero Salt came through on setting me up with an arms dealer out of Florida, a friend of his father's. I made sure to have the photos of us at, schmoozing like assholes at some fundraiser, in the press the next morning.

Gould's been helpful in the meantime. His latest text reads:

**Ben Gould:** No word of hunters prowling around anywhere near you. Could be they're getting smarter at falling under the radar, but I haven't seen or heard anything.

He has clients who have a vested interest in hunter activity, same as me. We keep in contact for that reason: to share information. Granted, he has more time for it than I do. I've



spent the last three weeks juggling lectures and assignments on top of everything else.

Well, close to three weeks. There's still today: Halloween.

One of the buildings a subsidiary of the company has been hoping to have finished by this month looked like it would go over the planned completion date, so I've been on-site, ensuring all went smoothly until the end. Whether it's contractors, volunteers, or our own employees doesn't matter. They work with the efficiency I expect of them when their future boss shows up.

Springing up on Serita and her friend garners a similar reaction. Maybe not nerves, but trepidation.

"Need a ride?" I call out.

Eleanor turns before she does. We've known each other for a while, but not as friends, and barely even acquaintances. She's a passing face in a sea of equally-distinguishable ones, only recognizable because her parents work for the Nichols family, who are equally horrible, and common faces at local events, given their sizable bank accounts.

"No," Serita answers before her friend has the chance. "Not necessary."

I doesn't miss a beat, having anticipated the frosty reaction. "I was asking Eleanor, but you're free to come too, Serita. You don't need to inconvenience yourself for my benefit."

Rolling her eyes, she turns away. She thinks I'm here for her answer. I wouldn't mind addressing it, but that's not the reason I'm here. Then again, I might've stopped without a reason. She stands out in emerald-green coveralls, layered with a hefty white coat, stark colors against the muted grey of the sidewalk. Impossible to miss.

Eleanor offers a small, awkward smile in greeting, eyes roaming over me in curiosity. I have one arm draped across the open window of the Range Rover, the other on the wheel. Nothing about my stance ought to come off as threatening, but

with Slater as her only source of information, I can take a guess at what she might be thinking.

But the truth is, November's around the corner, and they're both shivering out in the open.

"You have a shift starting at the library, don't you Eleanor?" My eyes zero in on Serita, waiting for her to give in and turn back.

Eleanor notices, of course. She doesn't appear surprised that I know of her current schedule. It also doesn't stop her from saying, "I do. Thank you for offering to give *us* a ride, that would be lovely."

At that, I'm moving from my seat and over to the passenger's side, opening the door for Eleanor to slide in the front seat, all before Serita can voice a single complaint.

She stands rooted to the same spot, face flushed. "Feeling triumphant?"

"The two of you looked like you needed rescuing." I flash her a shit-eating grin, tapping the backseat door. "Your chariot awaits."

"Take El to work. I want some fresh air."

My smile doesn't waver. "It's laughable that you still think you can evade me. Less funny, and more baffling, but still laughable. I find it annoying when Galen or Faron pull this kind of stunt, but the little scrunch on your nose when you're upset is so cute, I look forward to these games of ours."

"Yeah, I'm definitely walking." She stomps a foot forward to make a point, but I grasp her arm in mine before she can set off, and force me and Eleanor to drive alongside her.

"You knew I like playing with my food before I eat it, Slater. No turning back now. Get in the car before I enlist Altej's help."

"You *wouldn't*, and even if you *did*, she's my friend, not yours."

"Your friend's growing fonder and fonder of my heated seats while we bicker out here in the cold. I promise to drop

her off at work.”

“After that?”

“You’re free to walk home.” I open the car door and hold it open for her. “At some point, you’ll learn to stop asking questions and go along with it.”

She steps in, but instead of sitting, she comes close and says, “The day that happens is the day Jericho Caulfield dyes his hair blue and dances a funny little jig in the middle of the Green. *Naked.*”

I slam the door shut behind her, already typing out her near-exact phrasing in a text to Galen. He’ll appreciate the joke, even if he won’t admit it if he knew it came from Serita’s mouth.

## SERITA



“I don’t appreciate being ambushed,” I tell Finn when El’s gone. “We were on our way to see a show on Broadway, and you’ve ruined the whole night.”

“I’ll take you.”

“Sure you will.”

I watch until El walks through the library doors, decidedly pleased. Her dad needed to borrow her car, and she was *not* happy about walking to work in December.

He didn’t give me an opportunity to follow her or walk home, though. I remain in the backseat, and instead of feeling like an important person with her own driver, I feel vaguely like a child. Finn’s already driving away, so there’s no reason to move seats now.

And yet. My spot in the back does give me a decent viewing spot to watch his hand flex on the steering wheel.

“I don’t appreciate being treated like I’m a plague carrier without reason.”

His demeanor's gone back to normal, nothing of the Finn from Providence. I'd worried he and the wolfpack would show up at lunch with my mother last week, but I haven't seen any of them since Providence, and now the lunches are tabled in lieu of wedding prep.

"I'm a busy person. I don't have time for ambushes on the side of the road." Another flex of his hand as I keep talking. "Do you really believe you're the one who has the right to be angry?"

He twists around to contemplate me, eyes searching. "You're angry? I haven't spoken a word to you in weeks. How can you be angry?" He says it with little real inflection, unconcerned. "I don't see any reason why *either* of us should be upset with the other."

Exhaling heavily, I slouch back, temples throbbing. I don't blame him for it. My headache set in before he pulled his car over and told us to get in.

I shouldn't take my frustration out on him. My problem is with Galen. I know that, but the words poured out anyway.

"I was supposed to see my dad last weekend. It didn't work out—he had to go into surgery," I confess. "Did you look over that package your friend Ben left for you? Was it any help?"

When I open my eyes, he's facing ahead. Dread begins to pool in my stomach, working its way through my body like an added sense.

"Never mind about Stormy," he says stiffly. Almost like he's feeling awkward, trying to form the words. The dread spreads. "I'm still looking, but so far, no. I'm... sorry."

I let the words sink in. Accept them. *Do not take it out on him.*

On that note, there's nothing left to say on the subject. He tried.

"Do you ever announce yourself before showing up?"

“If warranted.” He briefly turns his head in my direction, eyes once again searching mine, but for what, I don’t know.

“Because Eleanor baked some cookies for Stormy. If I’d known you’d come groveling, I would’ve brought them with me.”

“After slipping some poison in the frosting?”

“El would never send someone poisoned cookies. She’d find a way to kill someone without leaving a trace.”

“I meant you would be the one adding the poison.”

It’s almost like he’s trying as hard as me to move past the disappointment, but he has no reason to be disappointed.

“See, that wasn’t so hard,” I say. “Not trying to intimidate or annoy me for longer than five minutes.”

“You realize I just accused you of being prone to murderous tendencies, yes?”

He makes a turn into a residential neighborhood. Halloween decorations cascade down the streets, every house lavishly decorated in anticipation of the upcoming holiday and the chance to outdo their neighbors.

“Believe it or not, I can tell the difference between a nasty disposition and a white flag. Looks like you’re not as opposed to peace offerings as you originally claimed,” I say. “Some ass-kissing would be even better, but what do you expect from a Yale boy?”

“I like peace offerings that come with your legs wrapped around my head,” he says blithely. “I’d say we’re not all bad, but you wouldn’t believe me, would you?”

My seatbelt buckle *clicks* open. Climbing over to the front, I plop down into the passenger seat. Finn only shakes his head at me.

“What happened to you?” I ask. “I hear you used to be a lot more fun.”

“I doubt that.”

I don't mention that his own twin was the one who told me that one night, when I'd dropped by to see Stormy and ran into him on the way out.

"The clueless look doesn't work for you," he says.

Remembering the way he infiltrated my personal space in the Vranes's garden, I lean towards his side. He can't go anywhere while the car's in drive. "I never acted clueless just because I don't tell you all my thoughts every time I see you."

"Never time you see me."

"I don't think that's correct grammar."

"You've been learning from reading your smutty books, I see."

"And you're deflecting, as per usual."

I wait, but he still won't meet take his eyes off the road. We're the only car in sight.

"I think you're so used to chasing after danger, you've desensitized yourself from recognizing it."

"What happened to you to make you such a grump?" I inquire again.

"Nothing happened to me, Slater. I did what everyone else does: I grew up," he says, nonplused.

"Sounds awful. But you know what sounds even worse? Going back into the Slant."

Finn jerks the car to a stop, but I already have hold of the emergency handle so I don't go flying into the windshield.

Finally, a reaction.

I latched onto the handle at his timely mention of 'chasing after danger,' anticipating how he'd react to what I had to say in response. It's gratifying to be proven right.

"*Absolutely no—*"

"Hear me out. Galen did."

"He *what?* You were the one who insisted on no more *field trips.*"

“Right after I caught him flashing in and out of sight like a ghost at the pool.” I level him with a flat stare. The message is clear: *and it wasn't just him there, was it?*

I hadn't forgotten, only waited. “But then there was Providence, and you got shot, blah blah. So I meant no *stupid* field trips,” I continue at his silence, “He told me about his plan, and I improved on it. He made a big fuss about how apparently being a wizard—”

“A what?”

“—is some big secret or whatever, but considering I only see the guy when my mom or his dad is involved, I found him out pretty damn fast. Thanks for filling in some of the blanks on the demon business, by the way.” After a moment, I add, “Anyway, back to the Slant—we decided to go back in. Come or stay, it's up to you.”

Going back into the Slant is the one decision me and Galen agree on. Possibly the only one.

“You have access to a former demon and her current half-demon son's house. I wasn't surprised you found out, only that you stumbled on an alternate dimension when you did. And, to satisfy your curiosity, *nice guys* like Robb Zhang are the reason we do keep the secret so guarded. Because not everyone thinks guys like that are conspiracy theorists.”

“Like who?”

“Others like us. People with powers like Galen's, or the ones who want it. Many of whom shouldn't ever find out how to get it.” He runs a hand through his hair, mussing it up. “I know why Galen is so hung up on going back into the not-New Haven, but what do you get out of it? Are you trying to help Stormy? Your—”

*Dad.* He doesn't finish, but he doesn't look embarrassed about the slip of the tongue. Only quizzical. He really wants to know.

“When I told you to take some time to think, I didn't mean for you to drive yourself into Crazytown and think up every single possible thing you could say to goad me into a fight.”



I didn't mean to instigate a fight, I just knew it was an inevitable outcome of making the suggestion to go back through the mirror.

As for his offer, I'm pretty sure that even considering Finn's offer makes me a bad person. If I were a better person, I would care, but I'm not. There's no need to tell him that now.

Finn's car idles in the middle of the road, but I don't acknowledge it. Everyone must be finished with last minute costume shopping, now getting ready inside their homes.

"I grew up begging Fat Joe to teach me magic tricks." I don't know what makes me say it, why I'm revealing this kind of memory with him, but I keep going. "Leo taught me how to use a flamethrower when I was eight. He knew how to do the fire breather act. My dad was pissed, I should add that. Real magic might disappoint you, and you might see it as nothing more than a transaction, but I can't stop thinking about it. About those words on the wall. *I fix mine eye on thine...* Aren't you curious? Even a little?"

"I don't think about that poem as much as I think of what happened next."

"I think about it," I argue. "But we're out of other options. It's been *weeks*. We're at a standstill, we have been this entire time. You're the only resistant one here. I get why, but looking around can't hurt if we're careful."

He spares a brief look at my side of the car, but doesn't react to my reasoning. "Trying to follow your thought process is like trying to climb a wall covered in oil. I can't keep up."

"So stop trying!"

"You're too brash."

"Decisive."

"Careless."

"When I do something reckless, it's precisely because I do care, not that I expect you to understand that."

He makes a noncommittal noise, but doesn't prod at the point with another adjective.

*You do the same for Galen, I think. You'd do the same if it came to them, even if you don't see it that way. That's why we need you there with us. Them.*

“It felt like I was in a horror movie, making split-second decisions at every turn,” I tell him. “But that’s not what’s really going on, is it?”

“Real life is never so simple as one genre. You can’t sum it up that easily.”

“It’d be a whole lot more convenient, though,” I say, more for myself than him. “Isn’t there a show like that? The one where the girl realizes she’s in a comic book, and she wasn’t even the main character. So she tries to rewrite her fate and... and I don’t remember happened after that.”

“Decent attempt at distracting me,” he drawls, erasing my good will as fast as it came. “I could list off the known and unknown dangers of interdimensional travel starting from least to most dangerous, if you’d like.”

“No, thanks.”

“This isn’t a game.”

“I know that.”

“Do you?”

*I want to prove to myself that I'm not afraid.*

I put off the question by pointedly eyeing the road. He puts the car back into motion.

“Who said you have to come, Mr. Martyr?”

“Oh, I’m coming. I want to be there when this all blows up in your faces.”

“Great. Meet me at Oscar’s house tonight.”

“You have somewhere to be?” He nods out at the street. “If so, tell me now. I might be headed in the wrong direction.”

“No, I need to go home first.”

Now that I’ve spent considerably more time in their inner circle, or on the periphery of it, I’m starting to notice

discrepancies I overlooked before.

Most people build up a reputation with a public persona. But over time, consciously or not, who they really are eventually slips through the cracks. One only has to pay attention enough to notice. Finn is no exception.

For better or worse—most of it worse—he’s less of an enigma than before. Finn appreciates logic, accounting for evidence without sentimentality. His lack of regard for emotions is evident in his Public Finn attitude, the crispness of his suits, and the cool detachment he employed with Oran and Jeff Loxley.

He’s pragmatic, and when he’s not, he goes in knowing the risks.

“We didn’t fill you in beforehand because we all know Galen wants answers too badly to not go back, on his own or not, and there was no point in making you worry over it until we had to. You’re the worrier. So we knew you’d come along, despite the fact that you’re an eternal grump.” In an attempt at levity, I tack on, “Plus, I’ll protect you.”

He lets out his first genuine laugh of the night, and I can read his current mood well enough to know it may well be the last, so I don’t push any further. I just laugh with him.

---

I waited five minutes after Finn left before I headed out into the cold again.

When I first got here, I thought perhaps the move was meant to serve as a life lesson on how to tolerate boredom. I thought I was here for the sake of getting used to monotony, a lifestyle I’d never considered.

Then dad told me how often I’d be seeing nurse Fiona.

The walk from my apartment to the clinic is mercifully short.

Peeing into a cup while Fiona watches is not quite so merciful, no matter how many times we do this dance.

When my stream runs out—*I hate my life*—she takes the cup in a gloved hand and snaps the cap on.

There's not much for us to say now that we've gone through this routine a few times.

Her, checking on how often I eat and sleep. Me, rambling, which she says I got in the habit of while I was using. Same for the anxiety and self-isolation, which I've gotten better at, thank you very much.

Nurse Fiona checks the temperature on my *sample*, swishing it around in the light to check its color, then walks from the room, whistling as she goes.

I swing my legs back and forth on the exam table, settling in to wait. There's nothing to do but sit there and think.

*Brash.* Finn isn't wrong.

Dexedrine or Ritalin to wake up and keep the weight off, steroids to improve my performance, and Tramadol to get through the comedowns. Top it all off with the occasional downer to balance everything out.

Then there's the true fuck up. It's the intravenous stuff that blows everything wide open. Suddenly, you've screwed it all up, down, and sideways.

*Careless. Reckless.*

I used to think it was bravery. Turns out, bravado was a façade to cover the secret desire I'd always harbored deep in my heart: for a safe place to land, for someplace to stay. I wanted to give up the unknown for security, but knew it'd make me boring.

And there was nothing worse than being boring.

Delia thought so too.

“There is an illusion of the world as it is that boxes us in,” she once told me. “That illusion boxes us in, it makes us think this is the way the world is *meant* to be. The world *beyond* this

one is all the things this one *could* be. That is where we find our liberty!”

She was deliriously high at the time, of course. I thought it made sense at the time because I was too.

Delia worked for my dad at Haven House, but I never got the feeling he liked her much. When I ended up in rehab, I *knew* he didn't like her.

At first, I only wanted a way to stave off fatigue.

After a while, it was because I thought I *needed* them to get through a practice session, to perform at my best.

Then being me stopped feeling bearable—*survivable*—without an escape route. I might've moved past teenage angst and gotten myself together eventually. Grown up without turning into a statistic. I don't suppose it matters anymore.

Dad found out once it tipped over into once a day, to twice, then on and on. I wasn't registered for any competitions, so I can start over if I want, so long as I make my regular check-ins with Fiona and stay in touch with Jemima.

He couldn't be as vigilant as he wants. Not after his diagnosis.

The worst part was realizing the diagnosis was the *reason* he didn't notice for so long.

The second-worst part is that I'm scared I'll never be as good as I was then. Rehab left me weak, so weak that I'm just now rebuilding endurance and stamina. Lots of running involved and whatnot.

I threw away my health while dad was hiding his own suffering. All because he worried over how I'd feel. I hadn't given him a second thought, not once. I just slipped a pill on my tongue and swallowed it down.

It was that easy.

Now nothing is.

I wonder what Finn would say if I told him I still wake up shaking sometimes.

I *know* how bad dad would feel if I told him that even thinking about a world without him is enough to make me want to reach back into myself and dig out the girl I was, reach for the pills to make me numb enough that I forget.

That's why it's hard to tell him anything these days.

In rehab, they told me to develop some healthy habits. The monotony routine.

But practicing on the ropes *was* my only form of routine. The rest changed by the day, the hour, by whatever state we were in.

Seeing Fiona is a kind of routine, in that the drug tests are random, but it's always her that does them. I'm getting used to her, the route to the clinic, GCC, even Stormy.

Even Finn.

And the old me finds that terrifying. The old me loves spontaneity, the promise of forging my own way. But when you're the only one traveling the offbeat path, you can get... lonely. You can't help but look back, and speculate if you made the right choice.

Forward or back. The road not traveled or the path of least resistance. You only get to choose one.

The way I see it, you end up running no matter which path you take. It's easier to hop from path to path, switch out your mask, like playing different characters in a play. Get good enough at it, and you might even fool yourself.

That's what I did.

You can't lose sight of yourself if you don't have a clear picture of who that is in the first place.

The themes, the costumes, and the pills bolstered me until I felt like I'd finally mastered the art of illusion Delia once ranted over. I was a self-study in being *fake*.

In the stories, the bravest heroes are preceded by a myth of their own making. I never stopped to consider that mythical bravery might be made up of more bravado than actual fearlessness.

False bravado carried me through daily training when I was growing up, through the lack of any meaningful friendships from living life on the road, then from Jemima leaving.

For as long as I can remember, bravado has been the only friend I've needed.



A unicorn tackles a screeching Harley Quinn in a friendly embrace. Mothman looks up at the sky and then down the street, likely calculating how many houses he can trick-or-treat at before his mother, trailing behind looking bored, calls it a night.

Halloween night is in full swing by the time we're all present and accounted for. Me and Faron pulled up at the same as Serita. She leapt out of her borrowed car, rushed inside the house, and strolled back out a few minutes later toting a red backpack and dressed as a witch, explaining, "I know I packed this in one of the boxes here."

It comes to no one's surprise, least of all mine, that she has Halloween-appropriate attire at hand.

Her and Jer awkwardly look anywhere but at each other while handing out candy to the little ones rushing across the lawn. The house-owner themselves, Oscar and Jem, are out on a date, so Stormy's come down from her room to sneak candy off to the side. We pretend not to notice.



Galen's still inside. For some reason he's never explained and I've never pushed him on, using his ability has never been easy for him. At least, that's the way it presents, long before we played around with mirror hopping, and certainly after that went awry. He's never voiced a reason for it, and I won't push him on it tonight.

"This is strictly recon," I reiterate to Serita and Jer. The latter flings a handful of candy at a mummy, but he's not the one I'm warning. "No messing around."

"El said proving or disproving a theory hinges on how much evidence you gather," Serita deflects.

Jer flings out another clump of candy. "True."

*Traitor.*

He doesn't see my glare. Jer bends down to reach for his phone, then holds it out to me. "Tell me what you think of this."

It's a picture of a light blue wall, paint faded over light wood. Over top are a few lines, written in a jerky scrawl:

*When I look lower I espy;  
Hadst thou the wicked skill  
By pictures made and marr'd, to kill,  
How many ways mightst thou perform thy will?*

"Is this what you saw?" I hold out the phone to Serita, and Faron leans over her shoulder to see.

She shakes her head, eyes widening. "No, the words were different. So was the wall." She turns to Jer. "Where did you find this?"

"By the docks. I recognized it from when we looked up the first part of the poem."

Instinctively, I look over at Stormy. She's still distracted, picking out specific candies, but she'll get bored (or sick)

eventually. “This is the next set of lines after the ones Galen, Serita, and Stormy found in September. So whoever wrote them there can cross over from there to here.”

Someone who might know what Galen is. Someone who might be *like* Galen.

*Speculo* demons are rare, but not the rarest of their kind. Then there’s others with similar enough powers...

Serita bites her lip, hunching over the candy bowl to get closer. “Do you think a hunter tracked down Stormy? Followed her here?”

“One more reason to check the place out,” Jer says. “If hunters are back in Connecticut, we ought to know.”

“And if they’re not here already,” Faron adds. “They could be drawn here if someone’s leaving calling cards.”

Bodies in different dimensions are one thing. If they start showing up on this side of the mirror, it’ll draw attention.

“Have you shown this to Galen yet?” Serita asks.

Jer shakes his head. “Haven’t had the chance yet, but—”

He cuts off when Stormy stands. She ambles over and levels a blank stare at each of us. Faron winks back, and she opens her mouth to say something, but Galen walks out the front door a moment later.

The glare him and Serita send each other’s way is half-hearted both ways. By now, they’ve learned to circumvent the process of letting the other know they’re still firmly disliked. A pursed mouth or a pointed sneer is all it takes, then it’s back to business.

Stormy’s not as subtle. Silent rage ripples through the air, emanating from that small body like a storm brewing. A kid-sized storm ready to rip right through stone and carry over into Oscar and Jemima’s sitting room.

Jer stands. “I’m gonna go start up the car.”

“Shotgun,” Faron says.

“You realize we’re not going to Disneyland, correct?”

“Car?” Stormy asks.

Jer walks off without answering, and Galen takes his chair, looking at Stormy disapprovingly.

“I told you this is a bad idea.” Stormy locks eyes with Galen, opting to ignore the rest of us in favor of making him the sole receiver of her venom. “I don’t have parents. There’s no one there to take me back. Someone found me when I was a baby. They named me Stormy because it stormed that day. The end. There’s no point going back.” Then, to me, “You worry too much.”

So she wasn’t distracted by the candy. She was waiting for the last of us to show, instead of telling us off individually then having to do it all over again when the next person walked out.

Serita snorts. “You’re observant, aren’t you?”

“This person who found you—where are they now?” Galen interjects.

Stormy shrugs. “Not important.”

*She acts indifferent, I think, but whatever she’s afraid of, she thinks it’s waiting for her on the other side of the mirror.*

Galen goes to make a retort, but that’s when the trick-or-treater traffic stops lagging. A long stream of costume-clad children come skipping across the yard, their parents hanging back. Stormy trudges inside, muttering to herself, while Faron and Galen shuck candy at the kids.

Serita moves to follow Stormy, making her costume ride up on her thighs, revealing tight-clad legs beneath. The points of studs and star-shaped stones glint in the harsh yard lights.

“You look like you fell into a bin at a craft store while covered in super glue,” I tell her. “While also trying to imitate Fleetwood Mac and Nicki Minaj, somehow at the same time.”

She stops in her tracks. “You know who Fleetwood Mac and Nicki Minaj are?”

“I live in a small town, not a cave.”

“Whatever,” she says, plopping back into her seat. “This is one of the only days of the year where my wardrobe goes unnoticed. I think it’s kind of funny.”

“Doesn’t that negate the point of your wardrobe? We’ve never addressed why you own a bowler hat.”

“And we never will,” she says gravely. “Besides, I was going for a stealthy look tonight. Blending in with the crowd.”

I consider her again. Shiny booted feet. Glitter swathed across her eyes. “You didn’t mention any crowds back in September.”

“I mean, I like to be prepared. Act confident and most people will believe you are. Including yourself.” She smooths down the edges of her dress when she says it, nibbling on her lip again.

“I only meant that we’re not going someplace where it’ll be seen. Appreciated,” I explain. Seeing her waltz out in that dress me wonder what she wore it for. Or who. “You look ravishing.”

“You are my toughest critic.”

“I doubt that.”

Heavy footsteps sound out. Jer’s swinging around the house, scanning our group for any sign of conflict. We parked the cars off the side of the house in case any of the kids scraped them with a a costumed wing or play sword.

“Ready to go?”

My twin’s mid-conversation with *Iron Man*, so Galen answers. “Go grab the little punk.”

Jer doesn’t move.

Sighing, Serita goes to leave again, but I grab onto her wrist and start tugging her away. “You’re riding with me.”

“Why?” She wiggles in my hold, so I release her. She won’t run, but she does glance back at Jer and Galen in front of the house. I guess Faron’s the one who went after Stormy.

“Everyone else has to make a pit stop along the way. We don’t.”

“Where are they going?” She leapt on that like a cat chasing a mouse. “And why didn’t you go start the car? It’ll be cold.”

“You’ll survive.”

“Finn, stop deflecting. It’s getting old. Why can’t Galen mirror-walk us there? I thought that was the plan.”

“Galen was... busy earlier.” Hopping in and out of mirrors across the planet, crossing off leads for possible locations of the missing Delsing Industries shipments. Which I wouldn’t have asked him to do if I knew he’d need his strength tonight. It’s not an endless well of supernatural power. “Besides, haven’t you heard that expression—too much of a good thing ruins the run, or something like that?”

“Don’t you answer a question with another question. That’s my move.”

“Correction: I give a single answer to a single question, and then you sprout off ten more questions in return. I am an exhausted man, Slater, I really am.”

She curses low in her throat, yanking the car door open with a vicious grip and climbing inside. “*Maybe* I ask so many questions because you’re hellbent on being evasive and vague to the very end.”

Withholding my response, I slide in from the driver’s side and peel out onto the street. Instead of Jer’s classic Jag’ XJ220 with him and Faron, or Stormy and Galen in his Spyder, we’re riding in Faron’s Chevelle.

*One. Two. Thr—*

“What *is* at the docks?” Serita asks, lowering her window and letting in the chill, despite calling me out for not heating up the car.

I’ve driven to and from Galen’s house countless times in my life, but I keep my eyes trained on the road as I cruise towards the shoreline. Any excuse not to look at her while I

speaking. “If no one pays attention to us outside of what they assume, we’re doing it right.”

“Doing what right?”

“Blending in. Sneering at the non-Ivy kids like they expect. Driving flashy sports cars *like they expect*. Once they think you’re just some frat douche blowing through your trust fund, they won’t bother to look past our parents’ net worth, and it’s a hell of a lot easier dealing with gold diggers than it is dealing with someone who knows what really goes on around here.”

“You have a trust fund?”

I resist the urge to slant her an incredulous look. “That’s what you got out of that?”

“It’s just a question, Finnian.”

“Yes, *Serita*, I have a trust, but mine hasn’t start cashing out yet.”

“I think you might have an overinflated ego which causes you to think people are always watching your every move, but alright,” she says in an almost academic-like tone, like she’s really thinking it through.

“Try to convince me you’re not one of those people and I’ll give you a cut of the money when I cash out.”

“You think you’re a real smooth talker, don’t you, Delsing?”

“Not usually, no. I’m trying rather hard here, in case you haven’t noticed. Tell me more while you’re at it.”

## SERITA



The first time I fell through a mirror and wound up someplace else, shock propelled one foot in front of the other, fear like a weight on my shoulders.

Faron's reluctantly staying behind to guard the mirror as a lookout, sending puppy dog eyes to each of us as the others line up behind Galen, peering into the glassy surface as it undulates with the movements of his hands. He's an endearingly disheveled mess in varying shades of blue, book in hand to keep him entertained.

Stormy refused to go, and we all agreed for the sake of potential child endangerment charges hanging over our heads. We should be able to navigate our way without a guide, assuming there are no major differences between the Slant and New Haven, but we won't know until we get there.

Logically, I know the Slant can't be an exact replica of New Haven. From the previous visit, I remember spotting a couple of differences in the Vranes house, but not so many that I would get lost.

A similar rush of adrenaline has me watching rapt as Galen presses a hand against the mirror propped against the wall of Jericho Caulfield's boat.

I'm reminded of the vaguely-threatening conversation we had on our way back from Providence. He hates me, but what else is new? He didn't warn me off because of Finn. He did it because he thinks *I'm* bad news, and I can't truthfully say he's wrong about me. That's the reason I haven't held it against him.

He does signal a warning this time, if you can call it that. "Ready?"

Finn barks out a short, "No."

"I wasn't actually asking."

In the interest of moving the night forward, I chime in, "Brilliant pep talk, top notch. Can we go?" Then, when it happens, "Oh, shit, we're going," slips out.

Galen moved too quickly for me to watch him in the act of it last time. I wonder if that was a purposeful, conscious act. If this is one, too. Letting me watch him go through the motion of his strange magic, sweeping back the curtain.

Briefly, I'm struck by the almost electric feeling of it, not unlike that moment when you step out onto the stage and present yourself to an audience. A breathtaking feeling that makes me glance back at the others right before I fall through, just in time to see Faron quirk what I think is meant to be an encouraging smile (that comes off as more of a grimace), but it does the trick.

It feels like being warped from the inside out, being torn to pieces, then hastily put back together again. Nearly unbearable, I grapple at my backpack, choking on air, and then it's over.

Eyes darting, I take it in: the neglect. It's impossible to miss. Next is adjusting to the physicality of this world, tilted on its axis, however that came to be. Rundown and rotted, but still recognizable.



Thankfully, recalibrating my body is less of an effort this time. Sand counters my weight against the sudden reorientation of my limbs.

Wild weeds sprout from the landscape in tangled webs of chaos, in a fierce bid for takeover, a reclaiming of what was once built. *By the Delsing's, according to El*, I think ruefully.

Storm clouds gather above us. I think back to the gloom that permeated the air before, how fitting for Stormy's name. Does the dark ever recede in this unnatural place, or am I viewing this wrong? Maybe the sting of salty air that precedes a coastal storm *is* the natural state, an ever-present omen. A sign warning us to run, to hide.

"I figured this would be a good starting point," Galen says. He's taken us to the Slant's equivalent of Lighthouse Point Park. The Five Mile Point Light stands erect down the shoreline, a pillar of white to offset the dark, even if the lighthouse itself holds no light. Overhead, the night sky gleams an inky black, dotted by stars and marred by clouds.

Galen takes the lead, stalking across the beach. Finn's eyes track his friend, the path he makes, and goes to follow. He staggers momentarily, righting himself with light pink cheeks. I pretend not to notice—no use in rocking the proverbial boat.

I fall back and take up the rear, watching as Finn turns and murmurs something to Jericho, too low for me to hear. Jericho matches his pace, their heads bent together.

Though Finn and Faron are physically identical in nearly every way, Finn and Jericho share more like traits: prim clothes, wrinkle free and tailored in fine materials, and a seriousness that speaks of a guarded front. Like they're turned in on themselves, hiding what they hold dearest close to the chest.

Up ahead, Galen's stands out too much to hide away. His bright hair is a beacon in the dark, making him stand out more than ever. Apparently, he stands out no matter what world he's in. Silent movements and the sharp, marble-like planes of his face betray his otherness in ways that are difficult to hide. It's no wonder he doesn't try, but lately I wonder if he wishes he could.

They have an odd brand loyalty about them—vicious and totalistic, but still odd to view from the outside. Then again, they must not want to lower their guards with me around, which I get. I feel the same about them.

Long stretches of sand soften our steps. We move silently through the night, wary of our surroundings. This place and the dreary weather raise the hairs on my arms through my jacket sleeves, forcing meaningless thoughts to the forefront of my brain.

“What are you doing?”

Looking back, I find Galen side-eyeing Finn, who’s angling his body sideways and seemingly monitoring himself. His motions are clunky, awkward.

“Blending in,” he replies, arms slightly outstretched. “While we’re here, shouldn’t we look less like tourists?”

“Is that how you think you look?” Galen snorts at Finn’s attempt to walk in that strange cadence across the sand.

“Stay close,” Finn snaps back.

“Look alive, people.” Galen starts to imitate Finn, but I refuse to laugh with them.

Finn nudges his friend. “Get serious.”

“Nah, I’ll leave that to you.”

Most of us stand out anyway, not just Galen. He’s in his customary black ensemble, Finn’s in a maroon sweater and dark slacks, and Jericho’s the proper academic: white shirt and navy dress pants neatly pressed.

“Less like tourists,” Jericho says. “More like the kid.”

“Ohhh...” I smother my own laughter at Finn’s attempt to make sense of the name Stormy gave this place, a reference to the strange physics that dictate its nature. Something to do with gravity or magic or both. “I see. This is your attempt at fitting in.”

“What’s the use of that?” We all turn to Jericho. “There’s no one else here.”

Suddenly, now that he's voiced it aloud, I realize my distraction kept me from seeing the obvious.

We're the only ones here. Not just on this stretch of the shoreline, but the only ones in sight at all. With time to take it in, the desolation I felt last time makes sense.

There's a haunted feeling here. Darkness means I can't say with certainty there's no one on the fringes of my eyesight, but from what I can tell, the place is empty.

Internally, I (begrudgingly) admit Finn was right. I should've anticipated... well, I'm not sure what I should've anticipated. All I know is there's no one to greet us this time.

The others make similar observations based on the newfound wariness in their stances. Galen turns in a slow circle, Finn has his hands reaching for his pockets instead of comically slanted at his sides, and Jericho is a calm onlooker, other than his squinted dark eyes.

The further we move away from our starting point, the clearer the differences become.

"Which direction, then?" Finn poses the question we're all stuck on in our heads.

Galen points at some dimly-lit structure in the distance. "Why not start there?"

---

At the first sighting of familiar red velvet swaths and golden-hued lights, I realize where we are.

What I don't understand is how Haven House ended up here in this incomprehensible world.

I remember our shows. I know where we've been and I can recollect the times we've toured. Haven House Carnival hasn't been to New Haven in over four years. Before that, another five.

“How is this possible?” I whisper in awe, threading through the faded attractions with slow steps.

Upon closer inspection, a familiar sign comes into view.

HAVEN HOUSE PRESENTS: A SIGHT THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS.

Leo, our fire breather, retired the year we used the *Alice in Wonderland* theme. It was his idea, and our version of a send-off for him, to implement his idea and incorporate it into the usual acts.

That was nine years ago. This is a theme we *only* used nine years ago.

Slant Haven isn't just a replica of New Haven, a faded and worndown alternative of it, but a replica of how it looked nine years ago. The only visible difference so far is in its decay, clearly worn down over time somehow. Abandonment shows in the cracks and debris, coated with dust.

Old roots push up, weeds tangled in sprawling masses around game booths and food stalls, making the ground even more difficult to navigate than back at the beach. Other than that, from what I remember, it holds all the right features.

Haven House's design was built from what carnivals once were: public revels with feasts and culture, meant to step right on the line of impropriety, wrapped up in excess. Dad wanted his creation to act as more than a reunion spot for locals to get drunk at the end of the summer and forget about within a week. He wanted it to live on as an experience, one you'd want to have again. We wore elaborate costumes and encouraged guests to dress up with us, set aside their everyday lives for a night.

This night lived on here, the backdrop to Stormy's life in hiding.

“This is your father's, isn't it?” Galen asks from somewhere behind me.

When I look away from the impossible sight, I realize they're all staring directly at me, and I bring myself to say, “It

was.”

This moment feels loaded, for some reason. Like I should reflect on the decisions I’ve made that led me here. Back here, I suppose.

Foolishness I mislabeled as adventurousness. Well-meaning behavior and selfish acts. Imperfect and messy, but trying my best to adapt in the face of the unknown. Summarizing it any other way feels too much like oversimplifying the past.

One side of my brain pictures Haven House dismantled, stripped to its bones. The troupe scattered across the country. Colette in Florida and Leo retired in the Midwest.

All because I let it happen. When the torch passed on to me, I let it slip through my fingers. I wasn’t ready. I’m not ready to face it now.

Then there’s the memories of how it was. Talented mentors and friends made this transient house their home. Some stayed months, others stuck around for years. Haven House was built by a network forged over years. It all counted. Every bit of it.

Including what made it crumble. In our world, all it took was one diagnosis, and the pieces scattered on the wind. Here, the devastation is palpable, visceral. Down to the cracks and tears, the mold, the decay.

Turning a corner, Galen comes back into view. He’s holding up a Cheshire Cat mask, washed-out by exposure to the elements, leaving it marred enough to send shivers down my spine at the sight of it. He looks down at it with curiosity, fiddling the ties.

With newfound energy, I go over what I know about where we are, and think that maybe I’m starting to understand just a fraction of why Galen is so drawn to this place.

I said I wanted to see the magic. If I turn back now, I’ll always wonder what might have been beyond the curtain.

Some carnies are born into the lifestyle. Entire families of performers live on the road full-time and hardly understand any other way of life. They grow up around it and don't know how to do anything else with their lives. Similarly, others are just in it for a paycheck. Lastly, there are those few who truly love it, and when they do, they make sure you know it.

Hopefully, they give you a reason to love it too.

Dad had a vision when he started the New Haven Carnival, something to call his own at first, then it morphed into something that was not only his, but *ours*.

So seeing his vision reflected in the bleakness of the Slant... This is a sight I'll never forget.

"How did Galen know there'd be a mirror on the beach on this side?"

"He just looked for one and found it," Finn hedges.

We keep walking, only stopping to inspect the tents and booths long enough to check for signs of life. So far, nothing, but I remember the *Alice in Wonderland* setup to know there's a long list of corners to hide in, our next stop being one of them.

Above artfully-draped velvet red curtains THE HOUSE OF MIRRORS is painted in large, looping letters.

"We have a quick getaway in case things go south," I say, hoping it comes across as levity, rather than an anxious babble.

"Handy." Something else already has his attention, I realize, following his line of sight to a mold-ridden popcorn stand.

"Really? You're hungry?"

"Not hungry. Thinking." He bites softly on his lip, and I turn away. "Why let the entire town fall to ruin? At least one person must live within a ten-mile radius. Even if it's only the one. There are no missing person's flyers for Stormy so far."

He slowly turns, taking in the place further. “You said your dad’s circus act came to New Haven with the *Alice in Wonderland* thing nearly a decade ago, but this looks more like decades of abandonment. Why? How?”

I set my sights on the main tent. “Let’s find out.” I place my hands on my hips, striking a pose. “I feel like the brown Nancy Drew of New Haven.”

“I’ll remember you said that when we find nothing.”

“Haven House being here means we found something, does it not?”

“Walk, Serita.” Finn’s already moving ahead, so I go to follow. “Talkative when you’re nervous, snarky and sarcastic when you’re about to shit your pants, got it.”

“I do *not* do that.”

“Sure you don’t.”

We continue wandering around tents and stalls, some familiar, others distant memories, long out of use. Artwork lies slashed through with something sharp, gouged beyond recognition. Multiple missing cars on the ferris wheel give it a half-finished aura. Various other rides have rusted with time.

Dad’s trailer, RINGMASTER written on its side. A joke I made years ago.

“Tell me you’re not taking that with you.”

Caught, I stuff the contraband into my backpack, zipping it closed. “Mind your business. There’s snacks and water in here too.”

There’s no way I’m drinking or eating anything that comes from here. This place looks completely and utterly abandoned, but then again, what about Stormy and the people she remembers? What about Andrea Vranes?

The answers must be here. Not necessarily Haven House, but nearby.

Galen and Jericho split off from us to search from the other side, citing that none of us ought to wander around alone.

“Andrea? Andrea Vranes?” I call out, feeling mildly foolish. The likelihood of finding anyone feels like it’s slipping through my fingers with every step.

Before we left, Faron said Galen has a few places in mind where his mother might have gone, knowing she’d recognize the similarities to New Haven enough to navigate her own way. Yet in our trek here, having seen no other living people, we forged ahead towards the lights—the only sign of the living. Galen’s mom or not, someone’s been here recently.

I turn to see how Finn’s doing, but he’s stopped a few feet behind me. “Did you find something?”

His back turned, Finn’s voice goes hollow, as if he’s dazed. “This is in the wrong spot.”

Everything in me goes cold. “How do you know that?”

“Nine years ago, I was here.” He turns then, hazel eyes seeking out my own. “It was you.”





“Why wouldn’t they say anything before wandering off?”

I have no immediate answer to that, so I stay silent.

We’ve searched the rest of Haven House. Galen and Jer must’ve found something, because they’re gone. Add them to the list of people we’re looking for, along with the latter’s mother.

Serita thinks aloud, voice steadily raising in panic, as we backtrack from where we came in, towards the main entrance of Haven House Carnival. “I feel like you, Mr. Eternally Nervous. I mean, they could’ve heard something and left to investigate, but still, why not say anything? Even if they somehow forgot, we should’ve heard or seen them leave.”

Wind rolls in, unnaturally quick. It whistles and whirls, like a warning, shrill and demanding our attention. It sounds like a cry of terror. Debris rolls around, nearly jerking her off her feet. I latch onto her arm to steady her, as well as myself.

“It’s near silent. If they heard or saw anyone nearby, we wouldn’t have missed them.” The words are tight in my throat, harsh to come out, but everything she’s saying is true, and none of that bodes well.

Remembering myself, I quickly slip my phone out of my pocket, nearly tripping as I do.

It’s one thing to hear Galen talk about the Slant and explain the meaning of the name. It’s another thing entirely to experience your body never quite adjusting to the ground it stands on, to have the world tilt quite literally on its axis. I expect to acclimate at some point, to feel more settled over time, but it never comes: the discomfort is ongoing.

My phone nearly slips, but I catch it at the last second. No signal. Of course not.

I have a hunch the blackout applies to more than our phones. Telephone poles lie strewn on the roads, torn from their posts. There’s no hum of electricity emanating from stores, nothing out there to illuminate against the dark.

There’s nothing in sight for miles but the circus.

I have to stop anticipating sensible normalcy. The devil’s in the details—in the differences that mark the Slant as *other*.

I should have paid more attention to our surroundings, not her. Serita’s a lifelong athlete, she can take care of herself. That doesn’t mean I’ll actually leave her on her own when she can barely keep herself from stumbling over slanted ground with every few steps, not that I’m faring much better on that front—I just have the added advantage of longer legs.

“Finn?” Serita struggles to keep up, still unused to the landscape. Only her athleticism means she hasn’t fallen too far behind. I can’t let myself slow down to meet her pace.

“Finn,” she repeats. “What did you mean before? What was me?”

“Jer!” I yell, taking a pause to listen, but there’s no answer. “Galen!”

Nothing.

I squint out at the dark. Was that movement? I wait to see if it happens again, but the world stays still. A trick of the light? Feels too coincidental.

And getting jumped in this shithole would feel far too on-the-nose for Serita's horror film analogy.

Driving to the docks and taking the boat out on the water does remind me of the day everything went wrong. The day I got the scar, when mirror hopping went from a game to a fight for our lives. Following Galen into the Slant felt like daring fate to go another round. The feeling worsens the further we stray from the shoreline, and it's solidified in my gut since finding the carnival.

"*Jericho!*" Thunder rumbles across the sky, muffling my words, so I yell again, louder, "*Jericho! Galen!*"

The first drop of rain makes me blink once, then jerk my head to the sky.

Lightning strikes in a blinding bolt down the sky near downtown, and my head spins wildly at the bone-deep sound of the earth crackling, splitting. Or maybe that's me.

I got the idea from reading the book she dropped that day—this day, in a weird kind of symmetry. Nine years ago at the Mad Hatter's tent.

Somehow the words bleat in my head, as if being here makes them inescapable all of the sudden. '*Since I have no sweet flower to send you, I enclose my heart; a little one, sunburnt, half broken sometimes...*' What was the rest?

When did it start down-pouring?

The rain bleats down in a torrent—a flash flood. Dirt's packed in to prop up the tents. Mud's about to start sliding around any minute now.

"*Finn!*" She's still close enough to hear, even over the rain, so I forge on.

I hadn't heard of Emily Dickinson before that day. Does that matter? No. *No.*

*Think.*

Some kind of demonic magic must have this place in a... hold, or a binding, of some sort. Some magic we're unfamiliar with. That would explain it.

“GALEN! Where are you?”

It makes sense now, why Serita felt so familiar to me all this time. We'd already met before, I just didn't realize it yet.

Some inexplicable magic that has something to do with *this day*.

“GALEN!”

There—we've made a loop around the perimeter, and find ourselves back where we started, but from the back this time. The back exit of the House of Mirrors isn't painted like the front. No one's meant to find themselves back here.

Except, someone must've anticipated we would. Written in a recognizable scrawl, the words bright red and impossible to miss:

*But now I've drunk thy sweet salt tears,  
And though thou pour more, I'll depart;  
My picture vanished, vanish all fears  
That I can be endamaged by that art;*

# 23

SERITA  
NINE YEARS AGO  
AGE 10



Delia stretches a worn leotard from left to right. Long manicured fingers twirl the useless piece of fabric without much thought. She'll throw the costume piece away when she stands from her seat at the tidy vanity table before her, but for now, it keeps her hands busy.

I hesitate at the door. She asked me to grab her medicine box, but sitting there, she looks sad. She must be practicing late into the night. Her eyes are bloodshot, slightly glazed, and she's lost weight. But she's still Delia, so she still shines.

That's why she performs the closing act. Delia wears the prettiest costumes with long, jeweled sleeves (she told me she's embarrassed to show more skin than she needs to) and never wears shoes with a single scuff.

I inch forward and hold out the shiny purple case without speaking.

“You’re back so soon?”

“It wasn’t far.”

We meet eyes in the mirror, and Delia takes the case.  
“You’re a doll, Serita.”

Her and the other dancers stand out from the rest of Haven House. They share the same thin bodies and fine, fair features.

Blonde hair haloes Delia’s head in the light, and not for the first time, I compare it to my own. Where she’s light, I’m anything but. Most of the aerialists I’ve seen in-person and from other acts are. I can’t understand why.

Delia leans over the vanity with her medicine, and I go over to the dressing rack she shares with Colette, smoothing out the edges of the Salvadore Enos poster on the wall. He’s my idol, the second-best ringmaster in the world (after my dad).

From the dressing rack, I slip on one of Colette’s old dresses, a sparkly blue dress with bell sleeves and tufts on the bottom that shrunk in the wash, and leave Delia to her thoughts.

On my way out, I make sure to grab my copy of *Letters of Emily Dickinson* for when I’ll have to wait for dad after the carnival closes.

Haven House is opening soon, and this year’s theme is *Alice in Wonderland*.

Adjusting the sleeves on Colette’s dress so they puff up right, I raise a dusty brown arm up in the air so it’s under the light, pinching at the fat.

“There are ways to lose that weight, you know.”

---

The Ferris wheel arcs over the sky, letting everyone know we’re here. Guests stream through the open gates, families and pairs and kids my age running around with wide smiles on

their faces. One's headed to the funhouse, toting their friend along by the hand. Another races to the line for the Tilt-A-Whirl, but their mom's dragging her feet.

I don't have a clear destination in mind yet. This is the last night we're in New Haven, and the novelty wears off after the first couple nights.

Nothing sticks out. I decide to look for dad and see if he needs my help, but then it happens.

I'm drawn by the commanding tone of the voice. It carries from the merry-go-round to the balloon stand.

"My mommy will sue you if you make me mad."

The girl looks like she's around my age, but she has her nose turned up in the air the way Delia sometimes does when she's annoyed. She even has the same strawberry blonde hair.

"Look, kid—"

For a split second, I think I see some kind of glow in her eyes, a shift in their shade of amber to a shade more like gold, but then it's gone.

"I'm calling mommy." In a whirl, she's gone, stomping off towards the picnic tables.

Standing there is a boy with hazel eyes and blond hair, hidden beneath a Mad Hatter's top-hat. "She's like that with everyone," he says to Marty, the balloon attendant. "Don't mind her. I don't."

"It's fine, kid." Marty plucks two balloons from his stand and offers them to the boy. "Give her one for me, will you?"

The boy shrugs. "If she hasn't run off, sure, but I don't need one."

"Ah, just take the balloon and go have fun, kid."

"I'm eleven, not a kid." He pouts and a small crinkle appears in his nose, but he takes both balloons.

Right as I pass by, the boy falls into step with me. I peer up at his face. He's only a year older than me, but he's so tall already.

He doesn't say anything, so I say the first thought that comes to mind. "Your friend is rude."

He doesn't seem to mind. "She's not my friend, and she is rude." Then his hand is outstretched, both balloons floating in the space between us. "You can have them."

"But Marty said—"

"If I give Cecily one of these, she'll just pop it."

"Oh. Okay." I take the blue balloons in my free hand and tuck my book into my bag for later. There's no point in wasting good balloons. "But I don't have anything for you."

"You'll think of something."

"What?"

"Come on. I heard there's a man that breathes fire by the Funhouse."

"Wait!" I say, hurrying to follow after him. "What's your name?"

He winks, making me blush.

"You can call me the Mad Hatter," he says warmly, tilting his hat. "And you can be the White Rabbit."

---

We don't just watch Leo breathe fire like it's coming from his lungs, or get lectured when I try to sneak off and show Finn his flamethrower (which Leo is very protective of).

Soon I've taken the boy—the *Hatter*—on a tour of the best spots. He didn't believe that my dad is the Ringmaster of Haven House until I introduced him to members of the troupe. In return, we planned on meeting up with his friends here, but we never found them.

Secretly, I'm glad I have him to himself. Boys are annoying when they're around other boys.



“This is so cool,” he says in wonder. I like to think I’m part of bringing that out of him. “We don’t have to use tickets for anything.”

*Oh.* I’ll ignore that. “Why won’t you tell me your name?”

“How do I know I can trust you?” he responds.

“What do you think I’ll do with your name?”

He leans in close, like he’s about to share a secret. “You could write that I’m a bad kisser on the wall behind the gym. A guy can never be too careful.”

I stare at him, uncertain. “I don’t even know what the gym is! And we haven’t kissed! *And* I still don’t know your name! That’s a terrible reason.”

“Everyone’s doing it,” he justifies. “You should see what Cecily wrote about my friend Je—Jimmy.”

“You have a friend named Jejimmy?”

“Uh. Yeah. Let’s go find something to eat.”

I am hungry, so I stop asking about Jejimmy and lead him to the concession stands.

My hands fumble to unwrap the bag of popcorn, ripping clumsily at the *Eat Me* sticker sealed on top. Our drinks wear matching *Drink Me* stickers as part of the theme.

Most attractions stay the same across different themes, but dad had a lot to work with this year. Jugglers and contortionist call out to guests. There’s a Queen of Hearts hedge maze, but it’s actually just a maze that was already here, now with a sign we brought ourselves.

We won face masks depicting playing cards at the shooting booth; he’s annoyingly good at that game, while I was only able to keep up due to having played before. I’m guessing the adults have started drinking because of how much fun they’re having on the human chess board when we amble past.

Starting to run out of ideas for things to do, I point to the long line of rose bushes that separates the fringes of the

carnival from the nearest parking area. “Do you want to paint the white roses red?”

“That sounds like a cash grab to make customers pay for labor.”

“It is,” I admit. “Kind of. Dad bought special paint that will come off with water, but it might be fun. We don’t have to color inside the lines that way, do we?”

“What about your dad? This is his business, after all. We shouldn’t make the place look bad.”

“Tonight’s our last night here. I don’t think he’ll mind. Besides, I prefer peonies. Blue ones are the best, don’t you think?”

He watches me with some look on his face I can’t place, but I can’t tell what his expression means. “I’ll paint some peonies over the rose leaves, then. I’m no artist, though—that’s Josie. So don’t be disappointed if they’re not the best.”

My heart sinks. “Josie?”

“My friend Luke’s sister. She’s been annoying today, though. Josie loves *Alice in Wonderland* so she’s been squealing over coming here all day and running around like crazy. That’s why I left for a bit. She’s not all bad, though. Josie’s the one who gave me the hat.”

Even though I know it shouldn’t, his words lift me back up, just a little.

True to his word, he adds peonies to the rose leaves, and if I didn’t know what they were meant to be, I probably wouldn’t have guessed. Especially because they’re red instead of blue, but that can’t be helped.

“They’re lovely,” I say.

“The paint is bleeding together into blobs,” he observes. “So, where to next?”

“We could go watch the dancers,” I suggest. “They’ll go on stage soon.”

“You like dancing?”

“I want to be one myself one day.”

Colette and Delia go on as a pair before the final act. It’s a new routine that pulls from *Black Swan*, but only as a starting point. The rest of the act is about changing the ending.

That’s what I want to do when I’m older. Watching the aerialists gliding high in the air makes me want to fly with them.

Especially Colette. She’s the kindest dancer here. She says that when I grow up, she’ll gift me with her collection of Annalise Arestos books. I don’t know why she wants to give them to me then instead of now, but I agreed and thanked her because Colette is lovely inside and out.

I think I’ll like Ms. Arestos’s books because Colette is the one who introduced me to Emily Dickinson, and I love her writing, so she must be right about that other author, too.

But the best thing about Colette is her clothes. She says sparkles are an essential item in her wardrobe, and platform boots are for everyday, not just when you’re feeling brave.

*Maybe now’s my chance...* “Or we could ride the ferris wheel next,” I mumble.

“Isn’t that for couples?”

My cheeks flame red and I turn to the side, hoping he doesn’t see. “Not necessarily, but if you don’t want to...”

The end of my sentence lingers in the air a beat too long to pass for casual.

Mercifully, he ignores it.

“No, let’s do it. We can watch the dancers later. I want to show you something.”

My new friend doesn’t need me as a guide to find the ferris wheel. It stands tall at the very center of Haven House, like it always does.

When we reach the front of the line, I flash my brightest smile. Everyone in the troupe knows what this means.

“Don’t want to give someone else a chance to sit at the top?” Midori, who’s working the ferris wheel tonight, clicks her tongue.

“I asked if we could,” the Mad Hatter says, drawing her attention. “I want to show her something.”

Midori shoots me an amused look. “Alright, then. Only because it’s the last night, okay?”

Once we’re both seated, I’m glad I suggested it, even if my heart races when the ride reaches its peak.

“What did you want to show me?”

He looks around at the ground for a bit, then a spark lights up his eyes. “There.” I follow the direction to where he’s pointing until I pinpoint the Five Mile Point Light on the coast. “See the boat past the lighthouse? That’s my friend Jer’s dad’s boat. He says when Jer’s older, we can take the boat out by ourselves. You can come, too, if you want—I mean, if you’re in New Haven in the future.”

“I’ve been out on the water over there before,” I say, smiling broadly. “Dad took me a few years ago.”

“I thought you travel all the time. Do you and your dad come to New Haven often?”

“My mom is from here. She moved away with my dad once, but now she lives here again.” Thinking about her sours my mood, even though I try to stifle the emotion. “She left us, though.” She didn’t come at all this weekend, or the last one when we first arrived in town.

Bright, hazel eyes skim my face. He’s quite for a minute too long, and I start to think I’ve ruined his mood, too, until he says, “She’s the worst.”

At my start of surprise, he adds, “Look at this place.” He smiles down at Haven House. “She can’t be worth getting upset over if she’d give this up. Who wants to live here when you could do this? Giving people a taste of magic wherever you go.”

In an attempt to appear bashful, I say, “It’s not real magic, though.”

That makes him laugh. “Real magic isn’t—it probably isn’t nearly as great as this.”

“What would it be like, then?”

To my awe, he considers the question with real effort before he answers. “Real magic comes from the heart.”

“By being good?”

He shakes his head. “Your living, breathing heart. The thing that pumps your blood.” At my lack of understanding, he tries again. “Real magic doesn’t come from what you have to offer. It comes from holding your own heart in your hands, and being ready to tear it out. You have to be prepared to tear it out, and have it *taken* from you.”

“I don’t think that sounds worth it,” I say slowly.

His face closes up immediately. “I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“You didn’t scare me. In fact, I think you’re trying to be nice.”

“If you knew me, you wouldn’t think that.”

“Why not?”

He shrugs. “I don’t see any point in lying.”

I raise an eyebrow, and he clarifies, “When you lie, you have to keep track of that lie, or else you’ll get caught, right? What’s the point in that? Just don’t say anything in the first place. So when I tell you something, I’m not being nice. I’m just being honest.”

“Still...”

“You didn’t have to show me around today. I saw you had stuff you were supposed to do.” I blush again, but he doesn’t appear like he’s about to reprimand me for it. “You’ll still have to your chores after you guys close up, right?”

“I usually put them off, anyway. It’s easier with less people around...”

The look he gives me tells me he knows I’m lying, but he’ll let it slide. “If I’m being nice, it’s because there’s no reason to be an ass to someone who’s nice to you. Not anymore reason than to lie, anyway.”

My eyes nearly bug out of my head. “You’re only eleven! You can’t say that!”

“What? Ass?”

“Shh!”

He laughs harder this time, until his whole face shows it. “Look around. No one’s here to catch me.”

Yet right as he says it, we start moving again, and there’s a whole line of people beneath us, waiting for their turn. “*Shh!*”

“Alright, alright. You’ve been nice to me, so I’ll keep you out of trouble.”

“I can think of something else you can give me instead,” I say back.

“Like what?”

“I told you a truth. That means you owe me one in return.”

“A truth?”

“Or a secret. A truth for a truth, a secret for a secret. Take your pick.”

At first, I think he won’t answer seriously, then not at all. He’s quiet for so long that I think he’s regretting coming with me, but then he says, “Don’t you ever want to make a run for it? Just go and not look back?”

The only thing I can think to say in response to that is, “Why don’t you?”

“I’m the oldest. I should be the responsible one,” he answers.

“I don’t think that sounds fair.”

To myself, I think, *he was fair with me when I gave him my truth.*

“That’s how it works in my family.”

“That doesn’t make you their property,” I counter. “Running doesn’t mean you can’t ever come back, and why not? You can meet me here in the morning and ride out with us.”

“Hilarious.”

“Who says I’m joking?” But even I know it’s a pipe dream at best.

“You know, Rabbit, that sounds nice.”

“So say yes. But if you run without me, I won’t forgive you.” Once the words are out, I cringe. Joking my way through isn’t working, but I can’t think of any other way to make him smile again.

Moonlight streaks over the unlit spaces, left unfilled by the areas set alight by Haven House, its namesake. The night is nearly over. I really do feel like the White Rabbit, eternally nervous over the time, just not for the same reason he was. I don’t want this interesting boy to leave yet. I don’t want to be the one that leaves either.

The playing card masks we won earlier sit at the top of my bag. Reaching in, I take one for myself and hand him the other. “Want to find your friends now? They can go see the dancers with us.”

“Why do we need the masks for that?”

“We’re going to scare them, of course.”

He fits his mask to his face, just beneath the tall hat he wears so well, but not before I see his lips turn up at the corners. I feel a rush every time I find a way to make that smile light up on his face.

It isn’t until I turn around and find myself alone that I realize the mistake I’ve made. We’re not the only ones wearing masks, and despite his tall hat, the Hatter wore all

natural colors—blacks and greens, instead of a flashy dress like me.

Twenty minutes later, I still can't find him, and my heart really sinks, far deeper than it did before when he brought up his brother's little sister, Josie.

The crowd begins to trickle down. No Hatter. I never saw his other friends, so I can't find him through them. I never even got him to tell me his real name.

That's how dad finds me another twenty minutes later. "Have fun tonight, kiddo?"

"Yeah, dad. Lots of fun."

Later that night, I'm laying in bed when I realize the cute boy isn't all I lost: my book of Emily Dickinson's letters are gone.





“We have no way out without Galen,” Serita says after half an hour of fruitless searching. “Then there’s the possibility him and Jericho got separated.”

I’d been about to suggest spreading out our search into the nearby area. Initially, we wanted to stay close in case they hadn’t wandered off too far, but that’s looking less and less likely with the more tents we search. The steady rhythm of rainfall and occasional lightning worsens our odds.

In turn, my own panic has quieted to a dull thud reverberating in my skull. Strained and present, but muted. I’d hoped it would take her longer to realize that we’re screwed too.

I face Serita, resolved to find some way to keep her from going into full-blown panic mode, but she’s calm. Outwardly calm, internally? I have no idea.

She’s staring at the ferris wheel. I’m thinking of Stormy being hunted, possibly in the same place where we’re at.

Or maybe they've already been here and left.

"Did you see something?" Searching the center of the carnival, I don't find anything out of the ordinary, but she knows this place better than I do.

Step back, look closer, and it's like staring at a hundred towers of Pisa at once, made of varying heights, and trying to make it stand upright with your eyes. Like looking at wax drip down the side of a candle, changing what was once there.

"Maybe they'll find us."

"Galen won't be able to smell us with the rain."

"Smell?"

"He'd explain better than I can."

She goes quiet again, contemplative. There's no reaching her when she's like this. I've seen the same introspection on mother, a glass of wine in hand. There's no rushing it, so I wait her out.

"We were so little back then. So much has changed. I didn't even realize it was you." She's in a dreamlike state, going through memories from years back. "I remember you said there's no point in lying. When lies start to add up, you have to keep track of them, so it's easier to tell the truth."

Some foreign feeling builds up in my chest, but I don't interrupt.

"But that was a lie. Ironic, I guess," she finishes.

Despite myself, I ask, "What do you think I lied about?"

"Your engagement is a lie, for one."

"Implying there's more."

A flicker of emotion shines in her eyes, something forlorn. I think I feel it too. "They think you don't care, that you're so aloof, that you're a control freak, all because you refuse to let them know you care. I think it's because you care too much, or you think it's too much. That's why you came to Providence, came here, and cover for Galen, your mom's affairs."

I jerk back, startled, but manage to reel myself in right after. “How do you know about that?”

Blinking, she stammers, noting the cause of my reaction. “I—I saw you. Her. I saw her and that waiter a while ago. At Oscar’s house.” Face flushed, her throat bobs. “But that’s not my point. The point is... Secrets isolate you. They’ve isolated you for a long time, I think. Years, even. I know because I think you want me to become one of them, and I’m starting to realize what secrets can do to a person. It took seeing what they’ve done to you for me to realize what they’ve done to me, long before we met.”

“A creeper to the end, I see. Way to prove me right, scared little rabbit.”

Nostrils flared, her chest puffs out in indignation. “More deflection, same as always. It never means anything to you. Nothing does.”

“I agree. It doesn’t mean anything.” My lips curl into a mocking smile. “Since we’re trading hard truths, why didn’t you take your dad’s carnival gig up? No amount of schooling will amount to first-hand experience, and you act reluctant about living in New Haven, but really, you’re scared of trying. I don’t pretend to know why, but it’s fear,” I push. “You haven’t been dancing lately. No practices. Just running.”

That gets her attention. “How do you know that?”

“I pay attention to you,” I say plainly. No point in lying, as I’ve told her. “Stormy, the Slant, Jem. Those are all convenient excuses not to take a good look at yourself.”

I leave out mentioning her father, knowing that’s too far, even for me.

I may as well have said it. Serita’s expression tightens, barely noticeable, but I catch it.

As I just told her, I pay attention.

“You’re one to talk. All you do is torture yourself whenever anything goes wrong, not just with you. Your friends too.”

“I don’t think you pay enough attention to me to make that kind of assumption.”

Planting her feet, she huffs out a breath. “You would think that. Too busy trying to control everything because you need to feel secure, because that’s what you’ve always done.” There’s a pause, then she steels herself, lifting her head. “You’re different than I expected. Less... controlled.”

I’m honest. “That’s because I want to fuck you. Doesn’t really apply to the guys. I don’t think about getting them naked and on their back.”

Her blush is immediate, spreading down her neck to her chest. “Don’t joke.”

“I wasn’t joking.” But I send her a smirk, giving her the reprieve she needs to not take me seriously.

“I still don’t see why someone your age is getting married.” Her hands rub at her elbows, moving back and forth. A thoughtless action, one that gives her away.

“You think I’m being coerced into marriage,” I state.

“Aren’t you?”

“I’m not marrying Jac because of my father.” I don’t see any reason for her not to know. “She’s a solution to a problem.”

The entire time I’m speaking, Serita gets increasingly narrow-eyed, following along with utter vigilance. Finally, she says, “I see you too, Finn.”

I contemplate her stance, the harsh breaths that have her chest heaving, maybe some of it in lingering anger towards me, but most of it’s fear she won’t ever admit to feeling. Our little discussion helped distract her to some degree, but not wholly.

“Perhaps you do. We’re like magnets, drawn here. Knowing we shouldn’t be.”

*Drawn to each other*, I left unsaid. “Maybe even drawn back to this town.”

“Like the pulling of a thread until you reach the source.”

“But what is the source? I’ve been thinking that we might not feel drawn here metaphorically, but because it’s a real conduit.”

“Like a magical source?”

“A demonic one,” I specify. “If that theory is even half true, then Galen must’ve gone—”

“Home,” she finishes.

I nod. “*She* would’ve gone home.”

Hidden like this, I feel like I can finally say it, despite the circumstances—or maybe because of them. Being here in this place that should no longer exist, not in the way it does. It fills me with resolve, despite knowing I won’t find the appropriate words to speak for nearly a decade of changes in both of us.

“*“Since I have no sweet flower to send you, I enclose my heart; a little one, sunburnt, half broken sometimes...”*“ I still can’t remember how that line ends.

Her hair a sheen of raven black from the rain, Serita nods, like she already knew what I’d say. Then again, I suppose she might have. She might’ve been recalling the quote herself.

“I suppose I should thank you for the balloons.”

“I found the book by the rose bushes.”

We have years behind us where nothing took place, but the past few months have shown me that you can experience years over the span of months.

---

We’re forced to find cover from the rain. I’m hoping the reason we can’t find Galen or Jer is because they’ve done the same.

Wishful thinking or not, there’s nothing for us to do until the rain lets up. At least we have a guess for where they went.

“Isn’t this when you get all many and emphasize how ‘it’s not even cold’ then walk off in the middle of a hailstorm?”

As if on cue, thunder precedes a strike of lightning, further away than the first.

“And leave you here? Not while I’m still a gentleman.”

Serita snorts. “A *gentleman*?”

“I’m *not* cold, by the way.”

“You’re a lot more talkative than you used to be,” she observes. “It’s almost alarming.”

“You’re the one who won’t stop talking. Am I meant to sit here silently while you rave about glitter?”

“I do not do that.”

“Yes, you do. I’m only responding to your *drivel*.”

Another snort. “*Drivel*. Okay, grandpa.”

The aforementioned hailstorm slants to the side, nearly hitting us in its trajectory.

“Have you always been reckless?” I ask, genuinely curious.

“I see you’re still on that.”

“Half on the reckless side,” I amend. “The other half, it’s like you’ve chained yourself to the ground by your own hand. I’m trying to understand.”

“I think you’re right.” Serita tilts her head to the side so that our faces mirror our bodies, sat side-by-side in an alcove for cover. Close enough to touch. I’m about to call her out for agreeing with me, possibly for the first time ever, but she keeps going. “Galen must’ve gone home. To his other home, I mean. If he couldn’t find us, he might’ve had a similar theory and assumed we went there, or decided to look but got caught in the rain before him and Jericho could make it back.”

“There and a handful of other places we passed on our way here that showed no sign of life. But it’s a logical line of thought.”

“Maybe she’s hiding like Stormy did.”

“You really think someone might be *hunting* people around here?”

“You do too, at least in part, or else you would’ve brought Stormy to show us where to go.”

She’s not wrong, but I have a feeling we should’ve tried harder with Stormy harder either way.

“You believe her? About Galen’s mom?”

Unease filters over her face like a cloud in the storm over our heads. “If I did, that opens up a lot of questions.”

“Like why she’s been here this whole time.” Galen inherited his ability to travel through reflections from her.

Despite the circumstances, steady rainfall lulls me into a calmer state. We’re here now, so whatever happens next is already set in motion. The tension lets up while the weather worsens. The drum of rainfall could put me to sleep, under different conditions.

“If the rain doesn’t let up in the next five minutes, we could go back out there and keep looking.” she suggests. “We can search on foot instead of yelling ourselves hoarse.”

Without phone signal, I see no better option. “May as well.”

“Oh, look.” Hidden in a backpack by our feet, a bag of popcorn sticks out from inside. “*Eat me*. This must be nine years old. I dare you to eat a piece.”

“What are we, five?”

“Now that you mention it, being here kind of makes me feel like a kid again. Don’t you?”

“More like the opposite.” Being here with her sidled next to me in this tiny alcove hardly makes me feel like a *kid*.

“I see. Your bones are creaking, aren’t they? I think it’s time for your medicine, old man.” Another attempt at brightening the mood, like earlier at the House of Mirrors.

She's the type to mask nerves with jokes, or attempt it, in any case.

I can think of one way to get her to relax, but... restraint. These days, I feel like the only one who doesn't know the meaning of the word. A role reversal if there ever was one.

Awareness of our proximity, of where my own thoughts are shifting, creeps in at the same time Serita says, "In retirement homes, orderlies give the patients sponge baths. When we find your friends, they might sponge you down if you ask nicely."

Sometimes I wonder if she knows what ideas she puts in my head when she speaks like that. *You could test how much she does know*, a small voice in my head says. *You still have those five minutes.*

An unfamiliar feeling stirs in me, one I can't quite place, that coils and burns, but I recognize what its outcome entails. A kind of hunger. A feeling I keep close to the chest.

*Who's going to find us here, hidden in another world?*

*Why not?*

It's borderline comical how many reasons I have to stay put. *But we're here, waiting out the storm, with all my worries out of reach, just for a minute... In this unknown place, where no one ever has to know.*

I can't bring myself to care. We may as well be back in Providence. Another world.

Secrets are best traded under the cover of night, hidden where they won't be expected. A blade between the ribs, or a silencer slotted over the barrel.

Waiting here, the rain and the quiet lulling me into what I *recognize* as a false sense of security, it leaves the consequences feeling like a target scope aimed at my chest. Close to the center, where I feel the emptiness fester and grow the longer I let it happen.

She holds out the bag of popcorn, challenge in her eyes. I eye the sticker laid over top. *Eat me.*



Her costume sticks to her skin, goosebumps from the cold visible on her arms.

*Maybe I'm bewitched.*

The longer I look, the more I notice, like how her dress rides up, another reason to thank the rain.

Nothing in me wants to take the expired food.

“Tell me you made up your mind.” It comes out gravelly, more telling than I’d like. “Tell me you have an answer. Tell me anything. Just let it be honest.”

I can just make out her face in the shadowed light. Lips parted, she stares back, brown eyes black in the dark. She says nothing, but then she’s bridging the distance.

Her lips fall on mine tentatively, nothing like the last time. Soft and warm, but insistent. I sweep my tongue into her mouth, deepening the kiss, pushing forward until she’s against the wall. One hand creeping towards her face, the other grasping her hip.

Pressed near her lower abdomen, her hand covers mine, near where her dress rides up.

“You asked me,” she says softly against my mouth. “Which one of them caught my eye in Providence. Do you still want to know?”

## SERITA



Finn thinks me half-reckless and half-chained, per his wording. It's the assumption of someone who doesn't feel caught between two worlds: the present and the past.

Then there's the future. I don't want constant reminders of the past dragging me down. Homesickness for a place that was never permanent, always transient. I don't want to sit around and remember all I've lost, and everything I still have to lose.

The Slant holds no memories, nothing that can make me reminisce. So why shouldn't I take the distraction he's offering? He's so pent up, that it makes me want to bring out something scandalous in him.

In films and shows, the rich guy falls for his Cinderella. In reality, the wealthy, eldest son ends up with someone who matches his pretty pedigree. I'm not that, and I'll never be that, so what's the harm in entertaining this for a little while?

Maybe then, he won't have this power over me.

On the other side of the mirror, he presents himself as a gentleman.

There is no trace of a gentleman in the way he looks at me now.

He pulls back, awaiting my answer. His attention trails down my body, stopping where my dress scrunches at my waist. There's so little space in the alcove, I moved to straddle him. Needing to get closer. He maps out my body under his heavily-lidded gaze, and I resist the urge to squirm.

Last time we did this, it didn't feel so much *intimate* as it did a power play. This time, if I had to put a word to it, I would call it... revealing.

"Let me give you a hint." I trail my lips to his ear, voice low. "Her nipples were clamped, puffy and red. There was a man with his head between her legs, and another one kissing her. Worshipping at her altar. I couldn't look away, but I knew I had to, or else you'd see me watching, and you'd know."

His throat bobs once. I resist the urge to trace my fingers up his throat.

An anticipatory gleam enters his eyes. "Know what?"

His cultured appearance is only another form of a mask, one I overlooked.

There's no overlooking it now, the wildness in his hazel eyes, darkened with lust.

"You don't know much about me, or who I was before I got here," I say. "That's why my answer is *yes*. I'm tired of being treated like I'm fragile."

The scar on his jaw stands out, white against the leftover of the summer's tan that warms his skin. Tracing it lightly with my forefinger, he stares intently at me while I explore.

"Fragile how? Like you're made of glass?"

"Like a bomb about to go off."

"Even better." With one brutal tug, the hand on my hip reaches to tug my dress out of the way, and he rips my panties

from my body. His thumb lands on my center, dragging down through my wet lips. I groan as he thrusts two fingers inside me without pause—it's rougher than how I handle myself, *deeper*.

I roll my hips against his palm, working myself over his hardness.

Chilled nighttime air causes every sense to come alive, making me shiver and shake in his lap when he says, "If I'm part of a pack of wolves, that must make you a lamb."

Without thinking, my eyes snap open. They bulge at the predatory way he's watching me. I feel myself getting wetter from it.

He feels it too.

"I'm the lamb that bites back."

He yanks at my neckline until my breasts spill out, lips descending on naked flesh, teeth tugging at a turgid nipple, then the other. I arch into his mouth, tugging at his hair, bucking and writhing.

He responds just as harsh, teeth clamping down, making me squeal.

I go to tug up his shirt, but then he falls to his knees, yanking my legs open even wider, spreading me out.

His mouth descends on me before I even register what he's doing, and the squeal of pleasure I let out echoes around us. "Oh, *fuck...*"

Again and again, he works me over with his merciless tongue and fingers, thrusting and curling into me, lapping at my clit.

Still, he holds me open with the breadth of his own body, making a display out of me. Hot breath fans over where I'm exposed to him, then he's humming into my slit, and my eyes snap shut when my orgasm washes over me.

My legs tremble from where he's slung them over his shoulders, propping me up, and my hands scramble for purchase on the wall at my back.

Another finger joins the first two, thrusting into me with no warning. He curls them inside, knowing just where to do it, how to make me tumble over the edge.

Through it all, he doesn't relent, continuing to drag his tongue up, down, swirling into and over me. Waves of electricity move through my body, forcing my back to arch further, moan louder.

There's no one around to hear us over the rain.

"Are you on birth control?" he bites out.

"Yes." My eyes flutter open, just in time to catch the sight of him sinking into me with one hard thrust. "Oh, *shit*."

He's thick, so thick that I bite down on my lower lip when he enters me for the first time, breaking the skin.

I cry out, hips bucking into his by instinct, and my head spins from the lewd sound of his balls hitting my ass. Finn doesn't hold back in the slightest, snapping his hips fast, rolling into me as deep as he can get.

My nails sink in and drag down his back, sensitivity making me tumble over edge of feral, and I'm rewarded with a hiss of approval.

Then he's lifting me, hoisting me higher. I have to grasp his shoulders for leverage, and combined effort has me slamming down onto his length, deeper than before. Cries of pleasure blend into one, loud enough to redden my cheeks.

"After tonight, you'll have stored away the memory of it," he murmurs into my ear, even while he's moved to my grasp ass, spreading me open. "Rubbing your pussy alone in your bed, reading your smutty books, fingerfucking yourself and wishing it was my cock."

My hands slide forward and slap to his chest, forcing him onto his back and putting me in control of the pace.

"But it will never measure up again," he breathes out, unfazed. "It will never be enough."

"Are you done talking?" I say, fingers reaching his nipples, remembering his mouth—his *teeth*—on mine. Before I can

*tug*, rattle him back, he's flipped us.

His lips meets my neck, teeth gliding along the sensitive skin. "Not until the rain stops. But you'd like that, wouldn't you? Every time I whisper dirty shit into your ear, it has you clenching around my cock."

I shudder in his hold.

"Let's see how many more times you can come before then."



*Thump.*

*Thump. Thump.*

My head whips around at the rhythmic sound of heavy footsteps approaching, but I can't spot anyone, not in the dark.

Not like Galen could.

I shift my body to cover Serita's, yanking at her clothes and rearranging mine until we're decent. She's just as alarmed, going to flatten the wrinkles in her dress, still disoriented.

I yank my hand from her thigh, reaching for my boot and grasping the 9mm Beretta, just in case.

But, speak of the devil, it's only Galen.

The three of us tense. His demonic senses must pick up on what just happened. There's no point in hiding. The tells are in the sweat on our brows, our rumpled clothes and harsh breathing.

Serita jerks away, scooting off the edge of the alcove until she's standing a few feet away to retrieve her backpack. She might not know particulars when it comes to what Galen's lineage, what his mother passed on to him, nor how it sets him apart. Not really.

But based on her reaction, she can tell we're caught.

Nothing on his face indicates what he's thinking or feeling. There is no sign of annoyance, or even surprise. There's nothing but heavy steps that lead him to where we've hidden out from the storm. I expected him to do the same, but he's soaking wet. His current state doesn't tell me anything. It's pouring down hard enough that he could've been out in the rain for two minutes or twenty.

Ignoring our disheveled state completely, he says, "I found her."

Serita gulps. "Found who?"

Realization trickles in, snuffing out any warmth there'd been previously.

"My mom," Galen says, voice cracking slightly. A sound I've never heard from him before, not even when we were kids. Not even at the funeral.

*This is what you were trying to protect him from, some small voice taunts in my head. This is why you came with them... or did you forget?*

"Where?" is all I can get out.

Where is she, but also, why isn't Jer with him?

---

We follow Galen silently through the wreckage of Haven House, retracing our steps from the way we originally came, but not towards Galen's house.

Instead, the three of us traipse through downtown. We pass theaters, artistic gallery venues, and residential neighborhoods



without speaking a word. They build up inside me, wanting to be let out.

I feel Serita's eyes slide from me to him, wanting to say something too.

Time passes incrementally, to the point I can't be sure how long we've left Faron and Stormy waiting. Surely more than five minutes. The rain's weakened to a gentle and bearable sprinkle.

Galen set a brisk pace, that uncanny grace propelling him forward without making a sound. The audible approach from earlier was for our benefit, so we'd have time to collect ourselves.

We tried getting him to talk, but he said it'd make sense "when we got there" and that Jer wandered off first, headed for campus.

I rack my brain for a plausible justification that might've led to the Slant's version of Yale (Slant-Yale?), and come up with nothing. The longer the silence stretches out, the more I expect some kind of disturbance to happen, but nothing. No scurrying of feral animals. No creaking from the wind. Signs of habitation, but as a past-tense. The fixtures are long abandoned. There's Ashley's ice cream shop. The parking lot where I taught Faron how to drive. Turrets towering high in the sky on the fringes of campus.

From Broadway to Elm and Old Campus, this is true desertion. The closest indication of recent life is the intermittent scatterings of animal bones, about the size of small animals: cats, dogs, rat, and maybe some birds. White bone dusted with dirt and grime coats everything in the Slant like powdered sugar on a cake.

Oddest of all, the blighted areas. There's no apparent pattern to it, only random plots of land scorched through, leaving nothing behind in its wake. Some spanning entire streets, others about the size of a sedan.

Serita swing her backpack around, rifling through its contents. She pulls out her phone, tapping away. I'm about to

tell her she can't send out any texts, but she thrusts it at me. It reads: *Where's he taking us?*

I shrug my shoulders, but she doesn't look convinced, so I tap out a response. *Pick-me-up at Starbucks? It's close by.*

She smacks my torso. The sound carries, but Galen doesn't react. *Be serious. Do you know where we are?*

I nearly roll my eyes, then realize she's serious. She has no idea what part of town we're in, and why would she? Serita only ventures downtown—or anywhere near it—for classes. The rest of her time is spent holed up at home, with her one local friend, visiting Stormy at the house, or being dragged out by familial obligations. Out of all her acquaintances, only Altej has reason to frequent downtown.

*You're practically a tourist.*

Unimpressed, her tapping harshens. This message takes longer. I know she'd rather yell. *I take great pride in being a tourist. I am a tourist no matter where I go, not all of us have ancestors that went around building entire towns in their names. But I bet you never went around doing any of the fun, touristy things because it's uncool. Thinking your too cool for things is the definition of being uncool.*

I repress a snort. *Galen's not leading us to our deaths. You don't need to be so nervous. And is that why you brought the hiker-sized backpack? For tourism purposes?*

*I'm not nervous!!!!!! And I only wanted to be prepared!!!*

I count out the number of exclamation points she used: ten. *Then why are you babbling in the Notes app?*

Glaring, she plucks her phone from me and shoves it back in her bag as we come to a stop on the edges of the Green, situated at the center of downtown. A historical landmark, like much of the rest of the city. The city's founding and the structures they built, the meetinghouse that sat here included, were meant symbolize a new age.

I've found it hard not to consider what they might've built over in the process, or what the settlers might've drawn here with them when they came.

I haven't been here in ages.

Dead tress enclose the Green. Dark stains splash across brown, stiff grass. We stride down worn stone paths, and I take out my own phone to fill Serita in: *This is the Green. Over four thousand people are buried here.*

*How do you know that? And why would you tell me that right now???* she types.

*The Delsing's are longstanding members of the Green's Proprietors committee.*

“Am I supposed to know what the hell that means?” Serita explodes, apparently sick of typing. (So am I). “You always do this! Say rich people stuff like it's normal!”

A *snap* further punctuates the silence, somewhere close, and that's all it takes. Whirling around, I'm reaching for the Berretta when Galen rushes forward.

“*Wait!*”

I take an involuntary step back when I see who comes to meet him. It's like looking into the past. Eerily platinum blond hair and silver blue eyes. The fine features that Galen inherited, making him appear ever-prideful. The same jut of the chin and arch of the brow.

“Mom,” Galen says, in that same forlorn voice from before.

Andrea Vranes wraps her arms around her son in a tight embrace, tears in her eyes. Distantly, I hear Serita's gasp from behind, but I'm unable to look. I can't get myself to move.

Galen's mother lifts her blue-grey eyes from her son's back, peering over at me, but she doesn't flinch at the sight of the semiautomatic pointed at her. “Finn,” she says.

I lower the gun. “How?”

Andrea detaches herself from Galen, smiling down at him with warmth in her eyes, and that's when I notice what's wrong with the picture in front of me: how much she reminds me of Stormy.

“Galen...”

“I told you that I heard her,” he tells us, expressionless. “I knew it was her.”

“My boy,” she whispers through tears in her eyes. “I called to you through the mirror, but I didn’t dare hope that you’d hear. I didn’t dare think that you’d come.”

My attention drops to her feet—to where one side stands taller than the other.

Soundless, incremental steps lead back to Serita, urging her back. Stubborn as ever, she leans her head around to stare. I hold eye contact only long enough to check if she sees it too.

Wide, chocolate brown eyes meet mine, confirming what I know. In the barest of motions, she shakes her head.

“I couldn’t let myself hope,” Not-Andrea goes on. “Not after I saw you die.”

“What? *No*,” Galen interrupts. “*You* were the one...”

But she doesn’t stop. “That doesn’t matter anymore. You’re here now.”

*How do I get him to understand? To see past his grief?*

“I’m right here. I’ve been looking for you the whole time.”

Not-Andrea’s face contorts, as if in pain. Or as if she’s trying to let go of it. “I thought you were gone, like those strays.”

“What strays?” Serita cuts in. “You’re the only one we’ve seen since we came. We haven’t even any insects.”

Not even insects.

“Pet or beast or creature, they’re all gone.” More pain clouds Not-Andrea’s eyes.

“There was a woman who died nearby. At your house,” I say, voice raised. *What happened here?* “I don’t know how much you know about us, but we’re kind of new around here, so anything you could tell us would help.”

“Dead?” Not-Andrea echoes. “There’s so many, I don’t know. I can’t keep count... The Ringmaster, he’d know.”

Behind me, Serita goes to say something, but I keep going before we get off track. “And a kid named Stormy. Do you know her?”

At that, her head tilts, long silver hair catching in the barely-there light. “The storm is brewing. They’ll be ready soon... It won’t be long now.”

“The poem,” I try. “John Donne. Did you write it? Do you know who did?”

“I don’t know of any poem. I’m sorry, I don’t... I don’t know.”

Frustration eats at me, but short of grabbing her and shaking the answers loose, I can tell she’s speaking honestly. She’s nearly as confused as we are, maybe more.

Behind her, I spot more of those dark stains I saw on the perimeter of the Green, but on the sides of the elms, dragging down the tree trunks. Dripping blotches and... scratches? It’s too dark to properly tell, but the harder I concentrate, the more they look like claw marks, parallel indents scraped deep into the bark, chipping away at the surface.

“Galen,” I say, hesitant. “Where’s the last place you saw Jer?”

## SERITA



My eyes swing from Galen to his *mother*. Galen. *Her*.

Thoroughly distracted, Galen doesn't pay me any mind, but Finn's ready to spring into action. I see it in his crouched stance, the tautness of his broad back muscles. I can tell he's on the verge of turning forceful, demanding answers.

His back tightens further at the sound of an additional approach. Measured footsteps, not meant to go unnoticed, forces everyone to still.

Someone Galen and his mother weren't expecting.

Craning my head in different directions, left then right and back again, I don't spot anyone. "Jericho?"

We can't leave until we find him. Finn won't abandon him here, and neither will Galen, his only way back.

In the back of my mind, I'm dimly reminded of meeting Stormy. Her brave front, then more recently, her fear at the idea of coming back here.

Under different circumstances, I'd jump down Finn's throat when he once again raises the pistol I didn't know he brought with him. I'd launch into a long-winded interrogation over why he thought it was alright to bring a deadly weapon without telling anyone.

*Maybe he got the idea from Robb Zhang.*

"Jericho?" I call out again, my voice weak.

The person that walks out onto the street isn't Jericho Caulfield. Sleek black hair, mussed into a disarray, falls over tanned brown skin and sweeps over dark brown eyes. Hair like mine, skin only slightly darker than mine.

Confusion clouds everyone else's faces when I call out, "Dad?"

Finn doesn't lower his aim. I move to block him, but he's insistent, sliding in the way every time I try to push past him.

"Dad," I repeat. "How are you *here*?"

Daniel Slater has never been an overly pushy person. No one would ever mistake him for a helicopter parent, but he was the one that *stayed*.

Charismatic and kindly, but not invincible, I've learned. The first of the two traits built him connections that meant Haven House traveled the country with consistency throughout its tenure on the road. My father has no difficulty in working a room, making people feel welcome.

That's the person I expect to respond. The person who'd embrace me, ask me what's going on, why I'm here.

He lunges.

"*Who are you?*" His question is demanding, but his hands are wrapped around my throat. "Why do you wear my daughter's face?"

Galen curses. "Oh, you gotta be kidding me."

A panicked, guttural shriek rings out—his mother.

I claw at the hands on my throat, filled with panic and trying to loosen his grip and say something to right this, to

undo whatever's being done.

“Dad,” I croak, grappling at him. “Dad, *please*.”

There's a bleakness in his eyes, some sort of desperation, but awareness too. An animalistic response. “You don't deserve that life. You don't deserve that *skin*.”

I kick my leg out, hitting at him blindly, trying not to give in to hysteria.

Galen comes up from behind and wraps both arms around his middle, yanking him back, making him stumble. As he does, my boot-clad foot sweeps at his shin, the move reminding me of doing a turn on the hoop, crazily enough.

But it reminds me that I'm not helpless, and that if there's one thing I can rely on, it's my own body. This time, I'm the one who advances, aiming for the gut.

Finn's goes crashing into us at full speed, driven by momentum. At once, reality crashes in like a clap of thunder, and we're sidestepping on the balls of our feet, flying to the ground.

*This person wears my father's face, but he is not him.*

*He sounds like he does, but this is not him.*

We hit the gravel hard.

I hear a clatter nearby, and I assume it's the gun. *He didn't shoot*. I don't let myself try to figure out why.

Finn leaps back into the air and bounds off the path, rushing for my—not my dad. They crash into each other, but Finn scythes his legs out from under him and aims a fist at his face, again and again, flesh meeting flesh.

I scramble to my hands and knees in time to yell, “He has a knife!”

Long-handled and coated in a dark liquid of some kind—*blood?*—the person wearing my dad's face brings it down, aiming for Finn's chest.

Finn rolls so that it catches on his shirt, shearing a thin line through his shirt but not the skin, from what I can tell. They



grapple for each other, Finn trying to avoid the blade, and only narrowly missing the blows each time they rain down. Dirt flings from the soles of their shoes and the rain makes everything slippery, but there's barely any of it coming down anymore.

I crawl towards where my backpack fell, lurching for the zipper and tugging it open. Off to the side, Galen's got his eyes set on the gun, and then he's moving, unnaturally swift. My eyes can barely track him in the dark, but there's something else to it, something about the demon blood that runs in his veins, I'm sure of it.

In seconds, I'm on my feet again. "*Get out of the way!*"

Wrenching the handle open, I point the nozzle of Leo's flamethrower at the man masquerading as my dad, barely resisting the urge to shut my eyes as I do. Finn leaps out of the way with a roll right before the night lights up in burning red light.

Horror strikes the fake man's face, worse than that of being beaten or outnumbered, but that of a bone-deep fear.

*But dad isn't afraid of fire.*

I advance with the shaft held out in his direction, keeping my aim trained on him, pushing him further and further back. "Don't come any closer!"

He scrambles back, teeth bared. Finn swings around the lawn to get out of range, and Galen's standing there with Finn's gun in his hand.

Finn asks before I can. "Where'd she go?"

My attention strays only for a split-second, but it's long enough for the man to get to his feet and make a run for it, but not at us. He vaults across the Green and disappears out onto the street, ducking behind a corner and out of sight.

I turn the nozzle again, dousing the flames, but scramble to redirect my aim when *another* pair of footsteps comes stomping across the Green.

“Finn?” Jericho Caulfield comes flying from between the leafless trees, halting in a moment of confusion at the sight of us. Then he’s sprinting.

Jericho reaches us in no time, not even winded. “We’re too exposed here, we should move.”

“And go where?”

He doesn’t look at me, but to Finn. “What happened here?”

Possibly as annoyed as I am at being left out, Galen seethes, “What happened to *you*?”

He’s more himself than he’s been since the start of the night, though he must’ve realized one of us is missing. I think Galen’s mom counts as one of us, anyway. In either case, I don’t comment on it myself, and neither does Finn.

When I take in the rest of our surroundings, I cringe at the devastation we’ve left. It wasn’t exactly pretty before we got here, but now it’s looking near unsalvageable. Me and Jericho, in a rare moment of possible solidarity, share matching grimaces.

Galen’s looking... hopeless. He pants lowly, staring at the ground with an empty expression. I don’t know what to tell him, or how I’d say it if I did, so I turn to Finn, huddling closer to him and Jericho.

“Galen said you were at your school’s campus,” I say. “For what?”

“I thought I saw something, and I told Galen I’d be right back, but when I did, he was gone,” Jericho explains, not winded in the slightest. “I’ve been looking all over for you guys, and then I heard the yelling.”

“Jer,” Finn starts. “Don’t you remember Josie running around with her blue dress with her teacups? ‘How do you know I’m mad?’”

Jericho stares at him for a moment. ““You must be, or you wouldn’t have come here,”” he finishes.

“Where’s that from?”

“Alice.”

“Like *Alice in Wonderland*?”

Finn nods his head, but he’s looking at Galen.

“So what about you?” Jericho prods at a scorched bit of the Green with his shoe. “I gather I missed all the fun.”

“How about we get out of here first,” I say, raising my voice to deter interruption. “*Then* we have this conversation.”

## PART TWO

### *Smoking Gun*



“That went about as horribly as it could,” Galen says, all snark. The first words from any of us once we’re back on Jer’s boat, Faron and Stormy in wait.

“Do tell.” By contrast, Faron’s cheerful, reclined on the floor with his phone in hand. Stormy appears similarly content, rifling through boxes of supplies we’ve stored here over the years.

“So?” she prompts, halting her task to focus on me, Serita, Galen, and Jer. “*Do* tell.”

From the expectancy in her tone, I’d bet she already expects some version of what we’ll say—or else, that it won’t be cheerful.

Stormy and Faron had front row seats when Galen stumbled in last, mirror still rippling, dripping blood onto the hardwood floors.

Serita chose that moment to get a word in. “Do none of you think it’s sensible to tell anyone when you’re injured? Am

I the only sane person here?” she’d demanded, dripping with sarcasm. “Martyrs everywhere I go! I can’t keep up!”

In response, Jer had picked up on what I’d hoped he wouldn’t and asked, ”Who else was injured and didn’t say anything?”

So I’d said, “He’s dripping everywhere. The longer he drips, the more Faron will have to clean up.”

“What do you mean *me*?”

Jer, his dad being a surgeon, grabbed Galen and strong-armed him from the cabin to the cockpit so he could bandage him up. Serita started freaking out, and even Stormy looked concerned, but Faron informed them that Galen heals faster than the rest of us.

If it were a fatal wound, he wouldn’t have been able to bring us back.

“He swiped at me. I barely got grazed,” is all the explanation we got out of him.

I went to help Jer (and stall the interrogation), only coming back into the cabin for wet cloths. I set out at my task without comment, nor while meeting anyone’s eyes, merely taking count and checking for other missed injuries as they moved restlessly around the room. Jer used the cloths to wipe at Galen’s black jeans and matching sweater, deftly avoiding the batting of his hands.

After, the three of us walked back in and readied for the firing squad to start shooting.

“No one broke any bones or died,” Serita murmurs, facing Galen, who shows no indication of shock or loss. If anything, he’s indifferent. He found what he wanted, even if we don’t know where she went.

I expect a reaction from him, but nothing. He takes up one end of the couch, sprawled inelegantly, while I’m crouched down at the other end. Faron’s settled by the back wall, one foot neatly crossed in front of the other.

“What else?” Jer says.

Stormy scrunches a brow. “Shouldn’t you know?”

“I got separated from the others. When I showed up, there was some guy passed out on the ground, and we hauled ass.”

Faron and Stormy blink at us. *At least no one’s yelling this time*, I think, remembering when Galen and Serita brought Stormy to the house that first time.

I zero in on Jer. “You said you saw something on campus. What was it?”

“Scouting the area. Excuse me for not wanting to waste time and endure the lecture beforehand.”

Faron chokes out a laugh. “I hear you, man.”

I expect this from him and Galen, but not Jer. He’s not the type to deflect, and I’ve come to recognize when someone tries that on me, Serita being the worst offender.

“But you did find something,” I push.

“Not something, someone. Lots of them.” He rolls his shoulders back, coming out of a slouch. “A group of people that look like Stormy. They were standing there, doing nothing.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s it,” he confirms. “I waited to see if they’d do anything, but eventually I knew too much time had passed, so I went back to find Galen, and he was gone. You know the rest.”

Serita stares and stares at him, a pained look on her face.

“I froze,” she says, and it clicks. *Standing there, doing nothing*. “I just *froze* there like a *moron*.”

I don’t have the words to console her, so I don’t. But even I’d hesitate to attack my own father, ass that he is. Instead, I lay out what we know. “We confirmed it with our own eyes. The Slant? Name checks out.”

“I could’ve told you that.” Stormy rolls her eyes. “Oh, wait, I did.”

Ignoring her, I go on. “We didn’t find any ‘kid hunters,’ but we did find Galen’s mom.”

That makes Faron yank himself up off his elbows. “*What?*” he demands.

“We found her... in a way,” I amend. “Saw it with my own eyes.”

Jer sits up, face scrunched in alarm. “I didn’t see anyone else. Certainly not Galen’s mom.”

“I didn’t know you were armed,” Serita says, accusatory. “But I saw her, too. It was like she...” She pauses to consider Galen, but nothing about his demeanor suggests any change from natural. “Like she was in a trance. She was crying too. But not necessarily *bad*, nothing to suggest the child hunting thing.”

I practically hear the words she leaves unsaid. *That version of her father could, though. If he could attack someone with his daughter’s face, he could hunt a child.*

“It could’ve come in handy, don’t you think? One of the company’s most profitable subsidiaries is a federally licensed weapons wholesaler. Of course I came prepared. So did *you*,” I say in a rush of defense. That, and I knew nothing can be traced back to me. Fifteen rounds, and they went unfired, so what’s the harm? “And that’s not the point. Slater’s dad was there.”

“I bet you’re glad I stole this.” Serita holds out her open backpack, bulging with the weight of the flamethrower. “You can’t tell me it didn’t come in handy.”

“I’ll admit that it wasn’t the worst decision you ever made,” I admit. “I wouldn’t categorize it under ‘The Best,’ but not the worst.”

“A ringing endorsement if I ever heard one.”

“*Ahem.*” Stormy curls her lip. “Her dad?” She jerks a thumb at Serita. “The one in Bridgeport?”

Slater must’ve told her about him during one of their baking sessions. “Yeah.”



Not looking at Galen, I run my palms through my hair, readying myself. “It wasn’t him, though. It was like... he looked like the k—Stormy. So did his mom.”

*Slanted*, as it were. It really is a fitting name.

Haven House, but not. Andrea Vranes, but not. Serita’s father, but not.

“I think I can explain that,” Jer says. “After Galen and me got separated, I searched the surrounding area. Eventually, I found Finn.” He hesitates, frowning. “I *thought* I did, but then he started speaking.”

Understanding hits me like a wall, and I face Stormy. “Before, you said I was the one who told you about what Galen is, what his mother was. But you didn’t mean me as in *this* version of me, did you?”

“Might’ve helped if you’d warned us about that.” Galen’s attention trains solely on the kid, too, who’s been uncharacteristically silent, I notice. “Or, you know, anything at all.”

“I didn’t know,” she says, so quiet I strain to hear. “I swear, I didn’t know.”

“Which part?” he demands.

“That there were two of you.” She frowns, defensive in the face of our attention. “And the stuff about nine years ago. I wasn’t even born then, or barely, remember? Eight and a half here.”

“Guys...” Faron inches to the side, shielding her with his body, as if he thinks we’d rattle answers out of her now, after all that’s happened. That pisses me off more than the situation itself.

“We all have doubles, then,” Jer says loudly, an obvious attempt to defuse a growing tension in the cabin. He does love this boat. “Double New Haven, double us to match. Anything else?”

“If there’s a Slant-Stormy, then there must be a real Stormy somewhere on this side too,” Serita says, seeking out our

agreement, trying to determine if we think it's a viable theory.

And it is.

Nodding along, I say, "Meaning Stormy must exist somewhere in New Haven. She was found there, so she's at least from somewhere nearby, or has existed here before."

Galen plops down next to Stormy. "So it wasn't a complete fuck up?"

"She might've left at some point," Serita says, ignoring him. "That's part of why we couldn't find her, maybe. But we looked for *weeks*, online and offline. There's no one born at the same time as her in any of the surrounding areas that—"

"That went missing," I finish. "Which assumes she's missing on this side. Stormy's a name she was given in the Slant. She could be under a different one here, field under a different date. Her's is only an estimate."

"We looked for babies born during that entire month. That entire *year*."

Jer has his head tipped back, unseeing eyes trained on the ceiling. Everything in him appears to relax in increments the longer we acclimate from the off-kilter tilt of the Slant, instead rocking to the gentle lap of the water against his family's boat.

He's has always been more at home out on the sea than on land, like a pirate or a merman from some old bar parable. It's a wonder he never seemed interested in the supernatural. You'd think someone who's so drawn to the open sea would feel the same way about magic. Pirate legends all describe the ocean as a living entity, something unknowable and wild, like magic being wielded the way it used to be—not in boardrooms or smoke-filled offices, but as something mighty and fearful.

"Guys," he says without abandoning his stare-down with the ceiling. "If Stormy has a version of herself wandering around on this side, that doesn't help us. They wouldn't know about any of this. It'd have no bearing on them whatsoever."

"So, it *was* a complete fuck up *and* another dead end?" Galen prompts. "What do we do with the kid?"

“*Don’t* call me that.” Stormy rages instantly, leaping for Galen with both tiny fists raised.

He bats them off lazily and sits her back down, but it’s a front. “Make me, punk.”

“There was something else,” I say, grasping the back of Stormy’s shirt and hauling her to the middle of the couch.

Between me and Serita, we give a rundown of what we saw (minus each other), including the next few lines of the poem. Jer confers with the original on his phone, and reads through the full poem. Fourteen lines total, and we’ve seen eleven.

Only three lines left.

---

Out on deck, Serita and I lean over the railing, arms nearly touching.

“It all felt like an adventure until now. We all fall down the rabbit hole together, but in the stories, you know there’ll be a happy ending.” She shakes her head. “It felt like just another...”

“Game,” I finish for her. “It only felt like one more game we’re playing, and now it doesn’t.”

I didn’t miss Galen watching us before we stepped out from the main cabin, but he made no comment, so neither did I.

The Caulfield day boat is slim, not much for privacy amongst the others onboard. We’ve only ever used it with the need for privacy from everyone else.

As if she has that in mind, Serita lowers her voice and leans in conspiratorially. “You always do that. You always... handle it.”

It’s not what I expected her to bring up, but when does she ever?

“I’m not sure I follow.”

She props her chin in the palm of her hand, thoughtful. “Try to fix other people’s messes, I mean. Like with Galen, then your mom. That was a very heroic shove you gave me back there.”

A bark of laughter escapes before I can think better of it. “Are you joking right now?”

She shrugs her shoulders, but the start of a smile plays on her face.

“You said it. I talk and joke when I’m nervous.” Then, she turns serious, once again contemplative. “Why didn’t you shoot... that man, back there?”

“Would you have ever forgiven me if I had?”

“I... don’t know. Maybe not.”

“I didn’t shoot him for the same reason you hesitated to hit him. But I’m no saint.”

“At first. I didn’t hit him *at first*,” she clarifies, indignant. “And I doubt that we had the same reason.”

“Doubt all you want, Slater.” In a moment of weakness, I relent. “I noticed. Nice kick.”

“I know you’ve done bad things. I’m not perfect myself. Turns out, I’m the kind of person who freezes when hit with a freeze or fight scenario. My ego didn’t need that hit—or maybe it did, who knows.”

“We all could benefit from taking a hit, on occasion.”

“Even you?”

I snort. “Especially me.” Working my tongue over my teeth, I think of how to phrase what I want to say. It’s a novel feeling. “You’re brave, and we all fear failing, but you can see past the fear. I know you can. You’re more capable than you think you are. More brave than you believe. You’re capable of more.”

I don’t say it to comfort her. I say it because it’s the truth.

Her hair falls to cover her face, as if she's bashful, but I've never known her to do so. She takes insults and twists them into compliments. "Another silver lining, you didn't get shot this time."

"Grazed."

"You would make the distinction between the two," she mutters, shaking her head. "The difference between me and my dad—and I do realize that wasn't him—is that he can charm his way into getting what he wants. I don't have that talent, so I had to learn how to bulldoze my way through."

For once, both our grins come easy. Neither of us fail over in laughter or joy, but there's relief.

"That's one way to describe setting your enemies on fire."

"*Almost.*"

"It was badass," I tell her. "You know it, and you love it."

She rolls her eyes, playacting at being coy. "You know, that's the most I've ever heard Jericho talk in one sitting before. The most I've ever heard him speak compared to every other time combined."

"Don't get used to it."

She shifts, watching the water with a placid look on her face. "Did you see those huge black spots in there? I stepped in one. It kicked up a bunch of ash."

"I saw them. The blights. Another question in need of an answer."

Huh. *Would this be a bad time to voice another one?*

"What are you guys going to do about Stormy now that we're out of other options?"

As gruff as Galen acts, none of us plan on throwing her out. "Let her stay for the meantime, unless you have a better idea."

"For the meantime," she repeats. "You have no idea what to do with her, do you? If she was born in an alternate dimension and we can't find her other self, there's no record of

her here, and she has no one to go back to, that leaves your options pretty limited.”

“Hiding her isn’t a permanent option.” I try to put into words what I’ve come up with so far, but it’s not much. “Can’t send her back on her own. I might have an idea, but I’d have to ask Stormy, amongst other steps.”

“I think you were right back there.” Her hands skim the railing, back and forth. “Something that happened nine years ago must connect us. Both of us were there. I’m assuming your friends were too. I don’t know how Stormy fits into all of this, if at all, but... some inexplicable force is at work here. It sounds ridiculous, even to me.” She shakes her head, biting her lip.

“I’m no stranger to ridiculous. Look at who I hang around with, and yeah, they were all there, as far as I remember. Me, Galen, Luke, Jer, Faron. Luke’s sister too.”

“Another girl was there. I can’t remember her name.”

It takes me a moment, but when I remember who she’s referring to, it prompts another snort. “Cecily. You’d hate her.”

“Sounds ominous. You know how much I love that.”

I grasp her jaw, tilting her face so she sees me when I say, “So no more secretive alternate dimension plots?”

“Because our evil twins might try to kill us?”

“Because they might want more than that.”

She must sense the implication. There’s no protest, merely a nod. “I’m not the one you need to convince of that.”

“You mean Galen.”

Another nod. “I understand why, or I can try to empathize.”

“But at the end of the day, he’s the only one who can come and go without needing anyone else.”

She arches a brow. “Without any of us knowing.”

He'll always have the urge, always want back what he's lost. Eventually, he'll be tempted enough to give in, and take it back, even if deep down, he knows it's a lost cause.

---

Jer's head pops out, arms framing the doorway so they block the light from inside. "Have you checked your phones?"

Me and Serita turn, both shaking our heads.

"Check." He looks at me when he says it.

I dip my head, silently asking for context. At my unspoken question, he carries on. "Luke called while we were Indiana Jones-ing our way through the Slant. He left a voicemail."

"Did you listen to it?" I ask, newly alert.

"We're waiting for you."

I rush inside, Serita right behind, and we join the loose circle gathered in the middle of the cabin. Looks like the others were already filled in, from their expectant faces.

Jer whips out his phone, taps a couple times, while all of us stand there in silence. After a few beats, Luke's low tone comes through the speakers.

"I dunno if..." As he trails off, we all lean close, not having heard from him in so long that we're all expectant. "I'll be at Oscar's wedding. Thought I'd let you know." I try not to react to Galen's subtle flinch across the circle.

We wait for the rest of the voicemail, but that's all there is.

*Beep.*

## SERITA



That night, I dream of gunfire closing in from every side. I take shot after shot, but I never die, only bleed. A sea of red trails ahead, flames licking their way towards me. I try to scream, run, and force an attack. No matter what I do, my enemy remains faceless.

Ceaseless panic swells, and I'm *helpless*. I'm back in the Slant, staring into my own father's face while he lunges for me.

Jerking awake, awareness seeps in gradually. I run my hands along the coarse fabric of the sofa while I wait for my mind to clear.

Galen resembles a ghoulish figure in the shadowed threshold of the den. I must've woken him. My tired eyes squint in confusion—not because he woke, but that he deigned to get up.

In the spirit of acting normal, I greet him with, "You look awful."



“Says the ingrown toenail that slept on my mother’s couch,” he fires back instantly.

Did he have that one written down beforehand in case he ever got the chance to use it on me, or in case anyone he dislikes came around and slept on said couch?

“Grow up.”

“Right after you.”

“What are you doing there lurking in the dark?”

He stretches his hands behind his head, yawning. “I grew up in this house. Why shouldn’t I lurk in it?” Reaching to rub at his eyes, I wonder why he doesn’t go back to sleep. He’s clearly half-awake. “So you know, what I said after Providence wasn’t a threat.”

I nearly tumble over the edge of the sofa in a stupor. “Then what was it?”

“A warning.” He’s oblique, terse. But not angry.

“How is that any different?”

“I can’t help how you take it. I—” he breaks off, jaw working. “You know what, do what you want. Whatever happens is on you. I wash my hands of it.”

“And everyone wonders why I don’t jump at the chance to swing by here anymore,” Faron says cheerfully, strolling in fully dressed.

Finn follows with a grunt, bleary-eyed. “Morning.”

*How did I not recognize him? How could I not know him?* If I’d known who he was, I would’ve steered clear of him from day one. The Finn Delsing I met years ago was, I dare say, nice. He was *fun*.

I try to recount the dream, already fading from my conscious mind: *blood and burning*.

Shivering, I swing my legs off the sofa and settle into a more formal sitting position. He glances at me once, but nothing in his countenance hints at what we did last night.

And now Galen's so-called warning is fresh on my mind. Should I feel embarrassed that he knows? I don't. All I care about is that he doesn't tell anyone else.

I don't have a reputation to speak for, but I don't *want* one either, and I have an inkling that strolling around town on Finn's arm when he's publicly engaged to someone else would invite attention neither of us wants.

Not that there would be any strolling. As it were, me and Finn are lucky Galen showed up after the fact.

Jericho looks thoughtful, trailing in last. They situate themselves on available furniture, some splayed lazily, others—Finn and Jericho—perched in their chairs with backs straight, subtly watching Galen. Feeling for his mood?

Jericho was as tightly wound as Finn last night. I'd watched him track the other with worried attention during their ministrations over Galen.

It might just be in my head, but we all let out a small breath when Finn reinstated his usual calmness over himself, having assured we all came back alright. Once he relaxes, so does everyone else.

I slump back down so I don't have to look at any of them. Initially, we'd decided to go our separate ways at the docks, but strategizing over Stormy and muscling Galen home took precedent. I must've fallen asleep at some point.

Last night, I'd waited for Finn, only so we could finish our conversation, but he never came. In retrospect, I can't pinpoint the reason I assumed he would.

He left his mark on me. Another mark, another piece of evidence for my own weakness, and his. I can't help but feel a slight tingling down my body, starting from that mark and ending where his hands were last.

I feel asleep last night the same way: thoughts of his hands on my skin, his lips, his *teeth*. There's a heady ache, one I want to replicate. How it felt *neither* of us had any control over it. Not even stable Finn, who likely has a perfect attendance record, takes care to remind his friends to eat their

vegetables (no kidding), and spends his weekends reading over industry reports.

It *is* heady to make a person like that unable to take their hands off of you. I'm tempted to do it again. Is it a craving for power, to know that I can?

I can barely concentrate on any other thought for the next few days. I'm still dazed by the events of Halloween, and no wiser on what to do with myself in the aftermath.

I could voice every question and idea I've had since then, but part of me resists the urge. I can't imagine talking to Galen alone; look how that's turned out in the past. Jericho is even more of an enigma, and Faron's the nicest of them, but also distant. Which leaves Finn.

The only rationale holding me back from reaching out to him is how *familiar* that sounds. It's different when we shed our clothes or talk strategy in the face of impending magical weirdness. Anything else sounds foreign, too intimate for my liking.

Then there's the other reason: *I don't see any point in lying*. The words of a boy, but not just any boy: one who formed his convictions early on in life, and stuck with them. *So when I tell you something, I'm not being nice. I'm just being honest*. The memory, once distant, now lodges in head on a loop.

I've heard enough harsh truths to last me for a while.

My indecisiveness ends up being a blessing, anyway. It turns out that those few days end up making the decision for me: Finn's left on an impromptu business trip with his father for the weekend, via Faron, who's quick to offer up unsolicited information. Part of his charm, I think.

In the meantime, I suffer through Fiona watching me pee in a cup only once, and El's working over the weekend, but dad calls with more regularity than usual. His surgery went well, and he sounds like he's enjoying his time off from working. I considered rescheduling my visit to Bridgeport, but

he cited meeting up with friends as an excuse for me to stay in New Haven, and I relented.

After the wedding, I'll see for myself how dad's holding up. No excuses or emergencies.

There's only one other thing nagging at my mind. During our last call, he'd asked after Jemima. I know he wishes we'd get along like they do, amicable to the end. That, paired with that mixture of relief and grief Galen has over his own mom, morally obliges me into making an effort with mine.

I guess I'm not as strong as I like to believe I am, because even after all this time, when it really counts, I still want a mother to lean on.

---

“You two don't look much alike,” the salesperson says. “I couldn't tell you were related.”

I've always favored my father in most aspects, including looks.

Growing up, Jemima Brum resembled a fleeting aunt in my life, despite me and dad being the ones who went on frequent trips.

“Her father has strong genes,” Jemima says from where she's seated on a waiting chair while I try on my bridesmaid dress.

Here's our one similarity: style. Appliqué butterflies and sparkling gems dot the bodice, trailing off along the knees. Swaths of deep, imperial plum satin engulf my frame. The dress borders on upstaging the bride's, layered and accented the way it is, but I trust she's gone above and beyond herself.

That unkind voice in my head snarks over how freely Jemima can spend money now that she's leveled up in the world. Rationally, I know my *true* money complex stems from not having enough of it at a so-called impressionable age. As a result, I abhor the feeling of a limit being placed on anything

with monetary value. I don't react well to a restriction that's based on a price tag.

I consider my mother's lifestyle one more tally on a long list of differences that she sets herself apart from me and dad with.

But I don't voice any of that. Common sense has me saying, "It's pretty."

"Purple suits you so well," the saleslady says. "A fitting choice."

"I wore a purple dress at my own mother's wedding," Jemima says, startling me. "Well, it was my parents' wedding vow renewal, but the bridesmaids in the actual wedding wore purple too."

I've seen the photos, yet I'm still surprised she thought of the detail. I can count on one hand how many times she's spoken about *bobo* in front of me.

Now that I'm dressed and ready to be fitted, the saleslady regards me critically. "The alterations won't take long. You have a nice build, toned and tall, and there isn't much work to be done. Let me go grab my measuring tape, and I'll have you out of here in no time."

Once we're alone, an awkward silence settles in.

Jemima being Jemima, she can't resist an attempt at pleasant chitchat. "Are you adjusting fine on your own?"

*Not necessarily.* "Yeah, you could say that. I'm fine."

She gnaws on her lip, unmistakably nervous, though I can't tell why. "The people here, in these old towns, they can be... intolerant." *Ah. There it is.* "The college ensures there's lots of people coming and going, too fast to count, but the ones that stay... They're the kind that close ranks."

*Not on you.*

"I grew up here, so I'm used to how things are by now," she continues.

*She grew up white here.*

“Anyway, I know you don’t think I worry over you, but with your father in Bridgeport, I want you to know you can count on me. If you need to—or want to.”

At my continued silence, scrambling for a response, she tries again. “When I was your age, there was never any extra money for clothes. I think that’s why I can’t help but go the extra mile now that I’m older, and more financially stable.”

“Dad said you two spoke recently,” I mumble. “Checked in.”

“Does he seem well to you?” she responds. “I can’t help but worry he’s trying to act like he is, so I don’t stress over his health, on top of all the wedding prep.”

My heart clenches, because that’s exactly the kind of thing he’d do, ex-wife or not. “I’m going to visit soon.”

She nods absently, picking at her cuticles. “He called to check in on *you*. He must not have wanted to come off as too interfering by going directly to you.”

“As I said, I’m fine.”

“Actually,” she says, turning to check the door. The saleslady’s still absent, for whatever reason. “I’ve been meaning to ask you if you’d consider giving a speech at the wedding. I would’ve asked earlier, but you know how it is.”

How *I* am, more like it. Is there a non-terrible way to turn her down?

“Oh, uh,” I stall. “Are you sure?”

“Only if you want,” she rushes out.

“I…”

“Found it! Martha borrowed it and forgot to put it back,” the saleslady says, strutting in with the measuring tape unspooled and trailing behind her. “Now, arms up.”

FINN



“Your dad called mine, or mine called yours. Might’ve been a mom talk,” Jacinta says through the phone. “Anyway, they want us to start building up a love story, something headline-worthy. We met and instantly fell for each other, sparks flied, the works.”

“That sounds acceptable,” I reply, head pounding. The family plane touched down in New Haven less than three hours ago. In the time since, I’ve been on my feet, half-asleep and operating on Hong Kong time.

Jac’s on a roll. “The Cayman’s, maybe? I can see...”

Timezones exist to screw with my head. Earlier, I thought I saw a stray cat following me around town, until I realized that’s the first sign of insanity. Must’ve been hungry, that’s all. The animal looked feral, abandoned a while ago and injured since then. It’d been limping along, favoring its left side.

An incoming text interrupts Jac’s list of romantic plots. Interestingly, it’s from father—who I saw only a few hours ago at the airport.

**Andrew Delsing:** Suitable time to meet up, preferably sometime this week. Let Vic know. She'll schedule you in. AD

The only matter I can think of that's urgent enough to warrant an in-person sit-down so soon after our last meeting is the missing cargo shipments, but he brushed that off last time.

There's the Salt's, ever a pain in my ass. Every step forward follows with one step back. Charges brought up and acquitted just as fast. Nothing sticks. Nothing lasts on either side. Too much wealth and too many people are involved for any one of us to go down.

I decide to deal with the family drama later. Scheduling and the day-to-day minutia get sidelined for the end of the day in my book. Daytime is for the real work.

Except when it comes to tyrannical, pre-pubescent children.

My arms hold a mix of supplies, ranging from food to toiletries. Replenishments for everything I can think of Stormy's used up at Oscar's place to keep them from realizing there's a house guest hidden upstairs.

The store's located on the newly moneyed side of town, so there's plenty of groceries Oscar and Jem might stock up on. Oat milk and the like.

“This is one of the rare parts of town that didn't get left behind when the rest of the money fled,” Faron once told me, back when he had a fixation for the town's history, inherited from grandfather. He grew out of it, but moved onto philosophy, not much of an improvement. “It's close enough to campus that the pretensions stay in place. You should go with me and grandfather to the countryside. It's way more rundown the further you get from campus.”

Grandfather made Faron love this town. It took a while for him to learn how to unlove it, but we all get there eventually—even if losing interest in this place is another matter entirely.



“We’re stuck on the color theme,” Jacinta’s saying while I snag a pack of apple juice. “I didn’t know if you had an input, or if you wanted to leave those parts to me. *Plus* my mother. *Plus* the wedding planner.”

But something in the way she talks makes me think there’s a right answer here. “Bright colors,” I throw out. If I can find something for us to agree on and feel like we’ve accomplished something, she’ll take the win and I can hang up. “Summer weddings mean bright colors.”

“The date’s set for fall, though.”

My brow furrows, and I rake a hand through my hair, the other throwing my haul onto a conveyer belt. “Right. Guess I got mixed up. You know what, pick out whatever you want, Jac.”

The cashier communicates silently, waving his hands about, given that I’m on the phone, and I’m checked out in minutes. Jackie goes on about aesthetics and vendors, but I’m barely pretending to listen at this point.

Once I’m out the door, motion and, ironically, bright colors catch my eye from across the street: Serita and Jem. They’re impossible to miss, the first from her neon cropped shirt, and the latter standing out with a riotous ensemble of prints layered over top of one another: polka dots, stripes, and whatever else.

I have other obligations to get done in the next few hours, but then I think, *screw it*.

“Sounds good. Send me any bills,” I say into the phone. “I have to call you back later.”

I backtrack to the store entrance. The checkout lane’s vacant.

“These too.” I approach the cashier to throw down my final item, and a few minutes later, I’m crossing the road and calling out, “What a coincidence.”

Jemima smiles at the sight of me. Serita doesn’t bother, and I half expect her to walk away, but she doesn’t budge.

“Finn, I thought you were out of the country,” Jem says. “We were just going for ice cream. Won’t you join us?”

For once, Serita appears relieved to see me. This might be the first time that’s happened. I’m the buffer between her and Jem, then. Not my usual style, but I’ll take it.

I thought she’d lose her allure by now. In any other case, I’d have gotten bored and moved on. But why quit the fun when we’re just getting started?

I crack an open grin Serita’s way. “I’d love to, Jem.”

Holding out my add-on purchase to Jem, I watch for her daughter’s reaction to the full bouquet of blue peonies.

“For me?” Jem exclaims. “They’re lovely. Thank you, Finn.”

I was raised to respect my elders. *Plus* I’m fond of ice cream. *Plus* I planned on tracking down Serita later tonight, anyway.

When I say jump, Serita doesn’t ask how high. She sits her ass on the ground and stays there to prove a point. Approaching her when she’s in public and not alone lets me cut corners, and ensures she won’t run off. Even if she does, I’ve got enough energy left to give chase.

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I lick at a plain chocolate cone, single scoop. Ashley’s on Broadway is a staple for students. Well, it swings in and out of popularity, but still a staple. I used to come here back in high school on occasion.

Serita’s eyes flick to and fro, from me to her mother. For once, her discomfort isn’t directed at me, but Jem.

It doesn’t escape my notice that they avoid any mention of their past, including childhood. Careful talks of the near future and small talk move the conversation along. I know their relationship’s strained. Anyone could tell by watching them together.

Faron's the one who'd ease the tension here. Well, he'd have a shot at it, which is more than I can say for the rest of us. Galen, Jer, and Luke, or the new Luke who leaves awkward voicemails and doesn't respond to texts. The old one might've been able to charm Jem enough to make her leg stop shaking beneath the table.

No boardroom etiquette or understanding of Delsing Industries' assets prepared me for a dynamic like theirs.

"I can't believe you have time to sit down and relax," Jem says. "You're more like a parent than most parents I know."

I smile blandly. "You flatter me, Jem."

Behind her cone, Serita mimes gagging.

"It's the truth! I wasn't half as responsible as you are when I was your age."

*Because I'm the oldest.*

*Because when I'm strong, the others feel strong, too.*

*But I'm tired. I feel like my body's folding in on itself.*

"There's only so much trouble to be had in a small town like this." I inject mirth into my voice, despite my migraine having amped up in full force since we sat down.

"That might work on me if I didn't grow up here too," she says. "I know it makes me sound ancient, but I miss the local music scene from when I was a teen. Everything was cheaper, and there were less rules than there are now. Or maybe I'm just feeling nostalgic."

"My mother says the same, so it's not just you." She doesn't, but Serita's not offering anything to the conversation.

"How is she? Last I saw her, she was heading for the Seychelles. That sounds glorious right now, given the weather we've had this fall."

Inwardly, I snort. Off with her lover, more like it. To be fair, Andrew takes Vic—full name *Victoria*, his full-time personal assistant and part-time lover—everywhere he goes. Vic reminds me of a tumor, or a needy toddler.

“Having the time of her life, I imagine.”

“Good for her. It’s always a nice reminder to us old people we need a bit of fun in our lives too. When we were younger, I remember your mother once telling me all about motherhood.” I subtly watch Serita out of the corner of my eye when Jem says it, but her face is closed in and hard. “How you lined up your toys as a child, so meticulous. Faron’s toys as well. I thought it was adorable.”

“Huh, I don’t remember that.” There’s not much else to say without breaking it to Jem my mother definitely wasn’t the one who witnessed that. Must’ve been the nanny before she cut her losses and tailed it for the Midwest.

We’re seated at a four-person table, cool beneath the shade. Tourists are rare this time of year, so it’s only students milling about, going about their Sunday errands. The tinny sound of someone’s playlist is set at a low volume over the speakers, and I recognize the song.

“Someone in there has taste,” I say, since Serita’s intent on keeping up her silent act. “The song,” I clarify when neither of them seem to understand.

That gets her to talk. “For some reason, that’s not a phrase I thought I’d ever hear you say.”

“Boring guys can’t like music?”

“They don’t have favorite songs or admit they appreciate music, no.”

Jem eyes us both.

“I never said it was my favorite,” I say. “When I was a kid, I remember this song playing when I was having a pretty shitty day. I can’t remember why, it must’ve been something trivial, not worth remembering. I got roped into going to some fair by my friend’s sister.” I watch her breath hitch with no small amount of satisfaction, but I smother it down for Jem’s sake. “Dunno why, but the song stuck with me when I heard it on the way home that night. I think of that day when I hear the song. Call it childhood sentimentality.”

Jem's even more perplexed by the sudden switch in topic, but neither of us pay much attention to her puzzlement.

"Nice? It's nice?"

"How else should I put it?"

"It makes you happy. Even Finn Delsing feels happy sometimes. Go figure."

"Serita," Jem admonishes, but there's not much feeling behind it.

I tilt my head, considering her. "Having fun?"

"Hardly. You?"

"The time of my life. What's your favorite song?"

Surprisingly, she doesn't say anything snarky. "Off the top of my head? "Listen to Your Heart" by Roxette. It came on while we were shopping, and I haven't heard it in a while."

"Of course you listen to '80's music. Explains your closet."

"Of course you were a goth kid. Explains your frown lines."

"You don't have frown lines, dear," Jem cuts in.

"He will."

When Jem's phone rings, her relief is palpable. She must realize there's a tension between her daughter and Galen's friends—me included, different as it might be from the one they share.

"It's the wedding planner, I better get this."

Likely a tug of war over the merits of elegance versus bedlam in tackling the theme. Oscar's on his own if I'm tasked with wearing a clown suit. Serita could convince me if she went about it the right way, preferably involving handcuffs. A little role-play. Definitely naked. She has options, really.

The thought of Serita trying out a butt plug improves my mood considerably. "Take your time, Jem."

## SERITA



“Leaving so soon?” Finn calls out from behind me, calm and determined. “We were just getting to the fun.”

“Tell Jemima I had to go to class,” I reply. With Jem off to deal with her wedding planner, there’s no reason for me to stick around.

Out on the street like this, I feel the remainder of the poem hanging over my head, over everyone’s that’s involved. Those words are embedded in my brain like a brand.

I think I see the last three lines written at the grocery store, on the ceiling of my apartment when I wake up in the middle of the night. I think I see it written on the side of the vet’s office, at the ice cream shop. Every time it happens, I’m transported back to rehab, lying on the tiled bathroom floor, hallucinating through withdrawal. Wanting a way out, and incapable of finding one.

“What do I get out of that?” He comes up from my right side, slowing to match my pace. “Don’t be hard on Jem. She’s

trying.”

“How would you know?”

“She’s only going through with the fuss and pomp to blend in like a WASP because of Oscar,” he says. “To keep up his image in front of his *friends*.”

“I don’t see what that has to do with me.”

We round the corner, only a few blocks off from my place, and I realize I’m not sure if I want to lead Finn there. He already knows where I live, but what if he tries to follow me in and continue this line of conversation? My least favorite one there is, at that.

He tries again, turning so he’s walking backward and faces me while he talks. “Don’t you want to know how Stormy’s doing?”

“I can ask her myself when I see her.”

“Galen moved your boxes to her room for her to rifle through,” he says, conversational. “Thought you might want to warn her off what she might find in there.”

“Nice try, but I only left behind PG-rated materials.” Back when me and Stormy baked cookies together.

“Is this our thing, then? You running, me chasing.”

“This is a brisk walk. Neither of us are winded, much less involved in a chase.”

“We could be, if you want to stop by my place. It’s nearby.” His sandy blond hair shines in the sun. He looks like a fashion model, and that about sums up how unfair the world is.

I’m fumbling with a button I forgot to do up after changing back into my own clothes. Wearing the neon-green mock turtleneck is the product of putting off laundry. I didn’t expect to run into anyone I know; I hardly know anyone to run into around here.

“Is that code for ‘let’s have sex’?”

“Crude as ever, Slater. I’m going for casual conversation. We’re in the middle of the street.” He spreads his arms wide, grocery bags hanging off them like birds on a telephone pole. “We could try and see if we could get away with it during broad daylight, but we’re both too good looking for prison, so I wouldn’t recommend it.”

He’s oddly playful today. Usually, there’s a firm line that divides the two Finn’s: public and private. The line creates a tenuous divide: propriety on one side, abandon on the other. Thin as razor wire, or a dollar bill. The real Finn hides beneath both versions of him and a veneer of control, one he weighs for wins and fails, like a quarterly performance report.

I wonder if, consciously or not, he does the same to us. If he keeps a running list of checks and balances on where we stand. If Faron or Galen or anyone else in his life came to the same conclusion.

He clutches to control so tightly because it puts him in the best position to watch while he makes everyone else squirm.

I choose my words carefully. “You look busy.”

“You once asked me how I got the scar on my jaw,” he says, stopping on the sidewalk. I do the same with a few feet of distance.

Why is he bringing that up all of the sudden? This feels like a game I don’t know how to play, and didn’t sign up for.

“I was just making small talk.”

“No, you weren’t,” he fires back. “A truth for a truth.” *Or a secret for a secret. Take your pick.* “I gave you one, this will be a second. You owe me two.”

“It doesn’t count when I didn’t ask for them.”

“Sure it does. We’re assholes,” he says, as if sensing my urge to turn and run again. “We’ve always been assholes.”

“Shocker.”

“Will you shut up and listen?”



I don't reply, but I don't leave either. He's right—I wasn't just asking small talk when I asked how he got his scar.

“A few years ago, Galen went through the mirror we keep on Jer's boat for that purpose. For the first time ever, he was nearly caught. There was a fight, and one of the guys, well. Someone made the idiotic choice to—they tried to follow him back. The mirror shattered in the process.” He's off-handed, like he's remarking on the weather. It resembles nothing of how he talks about his friends. This is how he talks about himself.

“By ‘the mirror shattered in the process,’ I assume you mean it got ugly.”

“Yes, Slater, it got ugly. I'm paraphrasing here. The whole ordeal basically amounted to prove why Galen's mom insisted he be discreet. Lesson learned. Your turn.”

“I told you that doesn't count!”

“Alright, I'll fit it in for you.” Finn goes to lean against the lightest, and I consider walking off. “That time before, I thought you were running from fear of failure.”

“*Excuse* you.”

“But I was wrong. I'm surprised you mustered up the balls to confront me about the Slant and about what Galen is. Did you ever stop to think that, out of all the things you run from, this is where you drew your line? That it might not have had much to do with Stormy or what *demounia* can do, but because you got tired of being alone?”

“I like being alone.”

“You're used to it. We're partners, aren't we? We can do it Bonnie and Clyde style.” He rubs his hands together, the fall chill seeping in. “Now. It's fucking cold outside, so if you don't have anywhere you have to be right now, can we pack it up and go inside? You're the one who had the bright idea to snack on ice cream in November.”



Serita runs a critical eye over my loft, resembling a a realtor in the way she frowns at the barebones decor.

“There’s so little furniture, it could almost be a dance studio.”

“Or a gymnast’s,” I suggest. “A trapeze artist’s.”

She waves me off. “I didn’t realize you have your own place. It never crossed my mind, but this makes sense. This matches your personality.”

“Plain?” I drawl, ready for the jab.

“At a glance, sure. But if you keep looking...” She marches forward, aiming for the bedroom. “I know you have some freaky white boy shit in here. Rich boy toys. Where’s the *Iron Man* suit?”

“I hate to disappoint, but you won’t find much in there to satisfy your curiosity, or the image you have in your head on skeletons in the closet.” There are people who dispose of those

for me. “I don’t need to flaunt my money to remember I have it.”

“The size of this place says otherwise. You pay for space as much as what’s inside.” Without looking back, she disappears into my room. “You’re not as hard to read as you think, Finn Delsing. You put so much effort into repressing all feelings, that when they do spill over, it’s in waves. That’s what it’s like knowing you. I feel it too.”

I have nothing to say to that. Nothing I’d say aloud.

My phone rings with a call, and I go to silence it. “Business. I can take it later.”

“My dad took me with him for meetings too, you know. Vendors and city event coordinators. I can understand the basic lingo.”

“I do know,” I tell her. “That’s why I’ll take it later.”

“Afraid I’ll steal your client from under you? Or is it that project you’re working on, the one Oscar was talking about at lunch?”

I’m shocked she remembers that. He mentioned it months ago. “Can never be too careful with you.”

Her eyes catch on the bookcase and she scoffs, running a finger along the shelf with, admittedly, the boring titles: *An Arcane History of the New World’s False Haven*, *A History of City Planning Structure in Colonial New England*, and *The Industrial Age: Connecticut in Order*.

She turns away, like she can’t bear to continue perusing nonfiction. “So. Your mom’s in the Seychelles?”

“Yes.”

Where’s she going with this?

“Why Hong Kong for you?”

“The pursuit of location-based tax incentives.”

She huffs. “Forget I asked.”

“Ask me what you really want to ask, Slater.”

“There it is again.” She rolls her eyes to the ceiling. “Have you always wanted to takeover as CEO of your family’s company? Truly?”

I’m tempted to follow her around the loft, oversee what moves she makes, what objects catch her attention, but I stay rooted in place. “That’d be three truths you owe me, Slater.”

She has to strain her voice to be heard from the other room, voice echoing from the minimal decor. “Then I owe you three truths.”

“On paper, I’m still a student, but I’ve been involved with Delsing Industries since I was in middle school. I’ve written countless reports, fired employees, overseen hiring new ones, and taken the heat when I made the wrong choices. I helped close an M&A for my sixteenth birthday. Does that answer your question?”

The past leaves a bitter taste on my tongue, biting like the wolves Slater thinks me and the others of as. Old, unrelenting memories that have gnawed on me for so long, it’s any wonder they still find any piece of me left to ravage.

“No, but it’ll do,” she acquiesces. “You really do like your job. I thought you just like the money. That, and lording over people.”

“I take a profit because of what it would say about me if I didn’t, but most of it gets funneled right back into Delsing Industries.”

She tosses me a look that says, *sure it does*. “What would it say about you?”

“Weakness. Lack of power. Whatever you want to call it.”

They’re about the same to me. *Lack of control*. Neither of us voice it, but the thought lingers in the air, and we both know it.

“If I cash in one of those truths now, will you answer honestly?” I ask.

The apartment goes quiet for a beat too long, but then I hear her coming closer, rounding back to where I’ve taken up

residence on the L-shaped sofa. “Depends on what you ask.”

“Why did you stop practicing?”

Another note of silence. It’s so noiseless, that I hear when she exhales a heavy breath of displeasure. Her steps have halted somewhere in the hall.

“I always knew what I wanted,” she says, still hiding. The wolves start to howl. “Not what I was bred for, but a dream I decided on for my own. I chose it for me, not my dad. But now that the dream’s within my grasp... I’ve done everything in my power not to reach out and take it. I know why. I can barely admit it, but I know.” She’s lowered to a whisper, and I have to lean forward to hear what she says next. “It’s that paralyzing fear I felt when I first crashed into the Slant with Galen. That moment before the fall, except I just keep falling, and haven’t stopped since. I’m not sure if I’m brave enough to take the next step forward, and I hate myself for that, especially when it’s clear you and your friends, you’re all alike. You don’t hold back at all.”

Her breath stutters, then starts up, more firm. “I wanted it more than anyone. I thought, if I wanted it enough, if I tried more than anyone else, that might be enough. I thought... maybe, I’d be enough, even if it took everything I have. Turns out, I’m not the best, and that matters. There’s number one, and then there’s everyone else. I don’t have what it takes to be the best.”

I take in everything she’s saying, and everything I’m starting to think she’s leaving out.

“You’re the only person I know who tells me the truth,” I tell her. “If not with words, then with actions, or through whatever method that mind of yours comes up with. You’re fearless. Granted, Galen can be testing. So can I.” That gets a huff out of her, but without malice. “Think of us as an obstacle on your way to bigger and better things, if you want.”

“You really are awful at pep talks.”

“I’m new to them. You’re practice for me too.”

Slow steps take me towards the hall. She's leaning against the wall, eyes closed. I move to stand next to her. Slowly, I take her hands in mine, the contrast of our coloring creating a stark line. Softly, I tell her, "I've known about this my entire life. I was shaped into a person before I ever had the chance to choose for myself."

"I know. I realized something while you were gone."

"Hmm?"

"Your *betroted*. If you didn't agree to marry her, it would've been Faron who's getting hitched."

My spine stiffens. "Why do you think that?" But I don't deny it.

"Because it's the truth. That's what you asked for." Those brown eyes narrow. "I've thought about it, and you used to have girls constantly hanging around you and your friends. I don't think you have any problems in finding someone to sleep with."

Casual relationships where both parties were clear: we wanted nothing more from each other than sex.

"It's the scar." Funnily enough. "It makes people think I'm the dangerous bad boy of their dreams. Then I pull out a briefcase and they wilt like a flower. It's a sight to see, really."

"Don't tell me that disappoints you," she teases.

"No. I thought of adding glasses and a comb over to the look to keep the thrill seekers from making that mistake and wasting their time, but figured it'd be more trouble than it's worth."

"Or you like being a pretty boy."

"You think I'm pretty," I echo.

"You love it. I bet you're lying. It works on all the girls, even when you pull out your briefcase. I should keep digging around until I find your treasure trove of stolen panties."

"You're the first person I've brought here," I admit. The wolves scratch to be freed, they whine to be let out. They're

filled with *want*, same as me.

She barks out a laugh. “Diversion to the very end.”

“It worked when I closed that first M&A.”

“Did you make any money on commission?”

“You’re standing in it.”

“You made enough money to buy a place this big?” She turns in place, reevaluating the apartment.

“And then some. Frustrated?”

The grinding of her teeth gives her away. “No.”

“How about sexually?” I say it as a joke, but she stops turning in place a second later.

A myriad of emotions flash by in quick succession. I follow each and every one of them as they flit across her face, a reflection of my own thoughts. Predominantly: surprise.

More importantly: want.

Her responding smirk is lethal. “Yes. Did you expect me to deny it? Why else would I come?”

“Honesty gets you hot. Noted. I’ve thought of trying out some nipple clamps on you since Providence. So have you.”

“No, I haven’t,” she refutes automatically.

“Yes, you have.”

Serita goes to smack my shoulder, but I beat her there, tugging her arm to the wall.

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Pinned between me and the wall, Serita has nowhere to go.

I watch the bob her throat, the twist of her hand in mine, where I have them trapped above her head.

It’s fitting, more so than she realizes, that she was the one who named me part of the pack of wolves. Despite my half-

delirious exhaustion, I'm tempted to devour her whole.

"Whenever I get you like this, it's always some kind of tulle or buttoned monstrosity I have to unravel." I pluck at the eyesore of a shirt she has on, before twisting it into a fist.

"Pajamas, a witch, what's next? One of your circus costumes?"

"Who says there is a *next* time?" All the while, she's arced herself against me. By now, she knows the game.

And it has to be a game. The fight, the barbed words thrown back and forth, the push and pull, both of us probing for weakness in the other. Something in me howls at the need for pretense, but the rest of me sees red.

"I say, and so do you, if you're still committed to being honest with yourself."

She squirms, not to get away, but for the friction I deny her by holding her in place. Her hips buck against mine, forcing me to hiss, but it's not nearly enough.

Frantic now, she fights against my hold, but I fasten my grip. I force my leg between hers, right where she wants it, and she groans a low, breathy noise of pleasure that shoots straight to my cock.

My lips latch onto her neck, and I lift her for better reach. She moans against my lips, reverberating between us, through the skin, and down to my bones.

"*Up.*"

Slim legs wrap around my waist in compliance, and I move my mouth to hers, eager for a taste. She's a hellion, biting down on my lower lip with a harsh tug. I return the favor, yanking our entwined hands to support her back, moving towards the bedroom.

She lands with a soft *oof* on the bed, but I don't give her time to adjust herself, yanking her ankle to the edge and her with it. I trail my hand down her flat stomach until I tease the button of her jeans, deftly undoing it, tugging the zipper, and ripping them off.



Serita watches me undress her without shying away, practically arching herself into my hands, all boldness.

“What do you want?”

She worries at her lip again, nearly breaking the skin. “I want your mouth on me,” she whispers.

“You like it when I use my mouth?”

Her blush spreads from her face to peaked breasts, hidden by her bra. “No one’s ever done that to me before,” she admits.

Abruptly distracted, my brow furrows, halting my motions. “But before you said—”

I stop to recalculate in my head, trying to remember her exact words. *I’m not some clueless virgin*. But again, it’s what Serita *doesn’t* say.

She can’t mean... “You’re saying that you skipped the best parts. Is that it, Slater?”

Eyes wide, she gulps. Not a virgin, but not fully *practiced*. Whichever ass it was, he overlooked a few things.

“This is going to be fun,” I breathe out.

“What is?” Her eyes narrow, thinking I’m poking fun.

I’m back to my task, tracing over soft skin. “Filling in the gaps.”

When she’s bare, I’m on her, pressing forward so she has no choice but to lay down. I trail my hands up her thighs, spreading her open.

“Mine,” I rasp. “You’re mine.”

“You wish.”

“Keep telling yourself that if it makes you feel better.” The gleam in her eyes only spurs me on. “I need to taste you.”

I lower myself to her cunt, flush with her lips. Languid licks have her clenching the sheets, so I slip my tongue inside her, insistent. She can’t keep those breathy little noises in for long.

I thrust two fingers into her cunt, then a third. Pounding inside, slapping the heel of my palm against her swollen clit, wrenching her first orgasm for the night out of her.

“Were you always this sensitive?” I say nearly right against her lips. She doesn’t answer, so I pull my hand back and lick my way up her torso, laving at her dusky pink nipples.

“Oh, *fuck*,” she cries.

“Answer me.”

“I-I don’t know.” Her hands dig into my hair, tugging lightly.

Twirling my thumb, I watch her other nipple pink, and twist the other.

“*Finn*.”

I let go, ducking my head to soothe the ache with my tongue, then trailing back down to devour her cunt. “Take it all. Take all of it for me. Soon you’ll be taking far more than this, little rabbit.”

Serita shakes into me, and when I press down hard hard against her bundle of nerves, her legs clamp up with her orgasm. Limp on the bed, her breathes come out shallow.

“Eyes on me.”

For once, she does as she’s told.

“You keep your eyes on me when I take you,” I tell her.

“Not if I’m the one taking *you*.” Her sneer is nothing short of a provocation, a way of forcing me out of control. I’m tempted to let her.

“You can try,” I taunt back.

In an instant, she has me flipped on my back, hands splayed on my chest. I lay back, content. Serita lowers herself onto my cock with aching slowness, and I grit my teeth to keep from forcing her down, but I do bring my hands to her hips.

She works herself up and down, then back and forth, testing out how she like sit. I wonder if she's ever been on top.

“I think you're enjoying being the one to torture me for a change.”

In response, she rakes her nails down my chest, a hazy but triumphant look on her face.

I can't fault the view.

Eventually, she settles into a rhythm that has her breasts bouncing and her breathing shallow. Groaning, I press my palms to her ass cheeks, tightening my grip, working her over me harder. “Come on, Slater. Fuck yourself onto me the way you need it.”

At my challenge, she speeds up her movements, and our bodies collide with harsh slaps that reverberate throughout the room. She keens out of nowhere, whining at the renewed pace. My thrusts are rough, punishing.

“There's no better feeling in the world than you coming on my cock,” I groan into her ear, yanking her face to mine so she can't control the speed any longer. Louder and louder, until she's clenching around me, biting down into my shoulder with a scream.

Every moan is a victory to be won. Every scream is another round in the game we play.

Now that she's pliant, I takeover completely, spinning her so I'm once again on top. I hook my elbows under knees and keep her spread wide, all the while, she's still coming. Her head falls back, jolting every time I piston into her, chasing my own release.

“I bet you'd let me come use you any time I want now,” I say harshly into her ear, my fingers bearing down on her mouth so she can't protest. “I could tear those costume clothes right off your body and pound this tight little cunt until everyone in town can hear your screams. I could slip into your shower every morning and fuck your tits, stick my cock down your throat till you gag on your knees, *and you'd let me.*”

Slowly, she smiles, a vicious sight to see. “In every one of those scenarios,” she says breathlessly. “You come to *me*.”

I bear down on her as I come, gyrating our bodies as close as possible.

“Keep telling yourself that.”

## SERITA



Finn's hips snap into mine from behind, brutal and unyielding. I grind back against him, arching out with my hands slapped to the wall.

His face falls to the crook of my neck, biting down lightly. "The perfect fuck," he groans. "I can't stop thinking about pounding this perfect fucking pussy. You're driving me mad."

"*Good.*"

I hear more than feel the *clap* of his hand against my ass, then the sharp bite of pain.

"*Fuck you,*" I snap out, going to flip around, but he grabs hold of my hips, fingers biting into the skin.

"No, fuck *you,*" he says, tone needling. "Like fucking a hellcat."

My eyes roll back in my head and my body stills, release hitting me an instant later, but he only speeds up. We're both panting, scrabbling for purchase. At last, he bites down on my shoulder and warmth fills me, leaking out when he steps back.

I slump, trying to regulate my breathing. “Wake me up in five minutes. I need a shower.”

---

Both of us were busy all week, but I managed to carve out time tonight, and Finn lugged his work home.

Probably brought it in a briefcase.

The sleek lines of his apartment are spread out on all sides, and I can't get myself to move from the sofa. After my shower, I allowed myself another five minute nap before I leave, but exhaustion keeps me from moving.

Because of the nature of our arrangement, I never need to find an excuse to leave. I come over, we get down to business, and I walk out within a ten minute, self-imposed window when we're done.

I'm staring at the neat stack of paperwork and office supplies lined alongside the coffee table when Finn strolls in, dressed only in a towel hung from his waist.

“Drink?”

I groan. “Carry me to my apartment, if you would.”

“Take a nap. I won't draw a mustache while you're knocked out.”

“Okay, now I'm definitely leaving.” But I still don't move a muscle. “I should've skipped my run earlier.”

He neatly pours the decanter, not spilling a drop, and takes a swig. He sets my drink in front of me, the coaster lined up straight, like his papers.

It occurs to me that growing up with Faron for a brother (as surprisingly nice as he's turned out to be) and Galen (who's as bad I originally thought) as a best friend, exerting control through orderliness in his life might be a coping mechanism in the face of their chaos.

The thought makes the corner of my mouth turn up, and I nearly break out into a full-blown laugh at the idea of voicing it to him.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“Slater, I don’t mind the game,” he says. “But at some point, you’re going to have to realize, loathe as I am to admit this, we’re basically friends now.”

My favorite aspect of sleeping with Finn is that he’s such a safe option. He’s not, and never will be, mine. We have a clear end date to our arrangement, spelled out on a *Save the Date* card.

He’s a friend. He’s the safe option because I’m not obligated to hand over any part of myself to him, no more than a friend would.

Not unless I want to.

Maybe that’s what makes me tell him. If there’s anyone that might understand the need to create a persona you show the rest of the world, it’s Finn. That’s what he did to make himself the stable, reliable one of his friends.

I don’t know if anyone else would’ve thought to do it.

---

The sun’s gone down, a small mercy.

Telling someone is one thing. Looking them in the eye when I do it is another.

I start with telling him about the pills. I thought it’d hurt, like reopening a wound, but once I start, the words keep coming.

“It was like a slope,” I say. “A slippery one, but not a *steep* one, if that makes sense. Gradual—that’s the word. But then there was the comedown. *That* felt like being jerked around by a bungee cord, and then it snaps, and you’re plummeting off

the face of a mountain. All those feelings, all at once... I can't untangle them, no matter how hard I try. It's maddening."

*It makes me want to say fuck it, stop trying, and get high.*

"When I was using, I was at my best," I continue. "That sounds bad. I know it does. But I tried to get back into it after rehab, and it wasn't the same. I wasn't... The stage is the only place where my faults feel like strengths. But after rehab, it felt like I'd accumulated more faults than I realized, and that I don't have as many strengths as I once thought."

I stop there, pausing to reorient my thoughts. I didn't meant for this to come out sounding self-deprecating.

"Nurse Fiona—she does my tests downtown, watches me pee, the whole spectacle—said it was the drugs screwing with my brain." *But I'm sober now, and still as confused as ever.* "The Slant reminded me of Delia, this older girl who used to work for my dad. She's been in and out of rehab since she quit a few years ago. It took a while to track her down, but after I went in myself, I felt like I had to know what happened to her. I tracked down her mom and talked to her over the phone. She's doing better now, but..." I shrug lamely.

Because Delia's mom made it sound like she had a bet on when Delia would fall off the wagon again. She also told me Delia's struggled with substance abuse ever since her dad died when she was young.

I ran to the bathroom and vomited after we hung up.

"I was high when he told me he was sick." The words come out like rasps, my throat clogged. "I thought I'd gotten good at hiding it, but he knew, and he told me he knew after... after everything. He begged me to go to rehab so he could go to Bridgeport. He said he couldn't leave for his treatments until he knew I'd be getting treated too. If it were for any other reason, I don't think I could've done it."

Rehab is a blur of long nights, when being stuck as *me* made me feel sick. Thinking, *stupid, stupid, stupid, you couldn't make it one year on the ropes without plummeting down.*



After, I decided to live based on a system. I sort any actions in one of two ways: justifiable versus non-justifiable. Going to college? Justifiable. Running off and eloping with someone I just met? Not justifiable. Consorting with demons for familial purposes? Justifiable.

The brave face I show the world, my wardrobe like armor, craft an image that's meant to say, *nothing's changed, nothing's wrong with me. Don't look too close.*

"I know," he says, and the breath rushes out of me in a wave. "I suspected you were an addict for a while now."

"I... How?"

He appears vaguely uncomfortable, half-shrouded in shadows. "My mother's the same way. That's why she's 'in the Seychelles.' Actually, she's probably more like Delia. My father books her 'getaways' whenever he needs her to accompany him to an event after."

"That's..."

"I know," he repeats. "And, so you know, I didn't ask you because I could tell you're not using. You didn't even drink when Oscar and Jem had an open bar. You're doing better than it sounds like you think you are. I figured you'd tell me on your own if you wanted. *And*, while we're on the topic, I felt bad when I realized why you were so panicked back in September."

"What about September?" I ask.

"After you came out of the Slant with Galen and Stormy. You accused us of drugging you, which makes sense. You didn't know what Galen is at the time, and you thought you'd fail your drug test because of us. So... I apologize."

There's a thousand different things I could tell him, but I leave it at, "Thank you."

He's the only person I know of that's ever guessed. Not anyone back at Haven House, when I was actively using. Not even dad. He found out at the same time I overdosed on the side of the road after tumbling out of the car, dry heaving and unable to breathe.

When the dust settled, and no one had found out from how I'd been acting, I had the irrational and selfish thought that I almost wish they had. That someone, anyone, could tell something was wrong, and then they'd reach their hand out to me for help.

I knew it was wrong to want that, to ask for it when there's so many others who needed it more, and they weren't in a bed of their own making. But I wanted it all the same.

"Let me make sure I have this right," he starts. "You make bad decisions when you have an itch to scratch—when you have a safety net in place. Or no?"

"I don't always trust myself to make the right decision," I say slowly, trying to voice what's going on in my head in a way that won't come off as 'junkie crazy.' He might not think it, but I will. "It's not just when I'm using. I wasn't perfect before that."

"No one is," he points out. "You're nineteen. You're biologically meant to be confused at that age."

"But you—I mean... I didn't realize before, how my decisions effect other people. I thought that if I got hurt, that's on me, but that's not all there is to it. You're barely older than me, by the way."

"So you'll live the rest of your life half in and half out? Second guessing every decision you make?" He scoots closer, only a few inches, but I track the movement and a weird feeling presses down on me. "I never said I have it all figured out. You'll probably be as confused at my ripe old age of twenty-one as you are now. But you owe it to yourself to forgive the mistakes you made in the past. You didn't know what would happen, and I'd go so far as to say you've paid for them."

His voice goes to a whisper when he adds, "I think the problem is that you feel like you can't be angry with your dad because he's sick."

"I'm not—"

“He was the one and only person you could always depend on for everything—including honesty. But he told Jem he was diagnosed before he told you, didn’t he? It made you wonder if he has other secrets. His letdown hit harder than it would from anyone else. But we all have secrets, Slater. They all make us bleed.”

I want to tell him, *I thought you were the ordinary one of the pack. You try to be the ordinary one. You’re anything but that. You see too much for that.* Instead, I say, “I hate when you’re right.”

## FINN



The rest of November flies by, laden by inane tasks from father, wrapping up the semester, sneaking around with Serita when we find the time, and occasional stopover to see Stormy.

So far, I've received three scarves across the span of three visits, none of which I ever plan on wearing in this lifetime. Turns out, the kid's taken up knitting.

Jac texted to schedule a photo op. I was in a meeting with a client, and then I forgot to reply, and I'm dreading it now. I should get it over with, but then Serita was here.

Her newfound purpose in life, as it turns out, is wrecking my apartment.

"Too neat," she declares upon every visit, despite upending something or another from its original place every time she's here. I haven't had time to right any of it yet, so the place is a mess. I haven't brought it up to her either—she's been getting bolder, escalating from a misplaced book to moving the couch a few inches over.

When I walk in, it's quiet, but I know she's here. Serita's last class ended over an hour ago.

I find her in my bed, flipping through a textbook. She's agitated. "Why aren't you worked up over finals?"

Yanking up my shirtsleeves, I roll out my shoulders to loosen the tension. "I had projects and tests throughout the semester, so I only have to show up for one final exam."

She hums idly, twirling a pen, frown tugging at her face. "I can't afford to fail this class, much less any others," she says without looking up. "It's an elective. Electives exist for the sole purpose of being an easy pass. Go away."

"This is *my* place."

"Should I leave then?"

"Depends," I say with fake contemplation, index finger tapping my chin. "Do you plan on getting naked?"

She throws a pillow, and I catch it mid-air with a *tsk*. "Feisty, I like it."

"I thought you'd be out."

"I didn't interrupt your snooping, did I?"

"Actually, I planned on planting an explosive. You caught me redhanded," she says dryly. "I should go home soon, though. My bridesmaid dress is coming in."

I nod along. "Ah. Wedding stuff. Speaking of, is there a particular type of wine glass you're supposed to break? Do I bring one especially with the purpose of breaking it, or are they provided?"

"Uh. Why do you ask that?"

"Because you're Jewish? You said all that stuff about it. I figured I shouldn't look like a complete jackass by not knowing anything on Jem's big day. Why are you looking at me like I'm crazy?"

She bursts into laughter, smothered by her hand over her mouth. "Finn, it's not a Jewish wedding. Jemima's about as religious as me."

“Well, neither is Oscar. You know, demon wife.” Smashing the glasses always looked fun. I guess I can still do that, just without any religious connotations. “Why are you avoiding your apartment, again?”

“My upstairs neighbor is renovating something.”

“Renovating what?”

She sobers and cuts me an irked look. “Something involving a power drill that he never shuts off. So, I’m studying here, where it’s quiet. Sex later.”

I flop down by her feet with an overdramatic groan. “How do you know your neighbor is a guy?”

“I’ve seen him in the mailroom.”

“You talk to him before?”

“No,” she says. “Wait—why?”

“Good,” is all I give her. “Don’t.”

“Don’t... talk to him?”

“See, you don’t need college. You figured that all out without needing an explanation. Now, what do you want for dinner? Thai or—why are you looking at me like that again? I thought you’d be hungry.”

Nostrils flared, a frown tugs at her face. “You don’t get to tell me who I can and can’t talk to. I’m not a child, and this isn’t the seventeenth century.”

“Is this neighbor single?”

Her textbook slams shut with a *smack*. “Look who’s talking.”

I almost tell her about the meeting I had with my father. I consider bringing it up, now that we’re this close to the subject.

“The date for the wedding has been moved up,” I nearly say. “Not Jem’s, but mine.”

I should tell her.

I should've pushed father on it more, and we did argue over him agreeing to push up the date without consulting me.

Turns out, the missing Delsing Industries shipments didn't only include the cargo outlined in our defense contract. Father's been smuggling in drugs with them, under the protective banner of a government sanction. That's why he brushed me off when I mentioned it. We're bleeding money replacing the stolen weapons to smooth it over.

The Salt's have been stealing the shipments, and tried selling the stolen goods through the arms dealer I met in Miami through Nero Salt last month. Apparently, I've been rocking the boat by looking into the matter.

If the Salt's go down, we'll get dragged down with them. The Lin's are aware of the situation, and Felix will drop the ball if I call it off with Jac.

So I say nothing.

Serita stalks off, presumably to the kitchen, given the sounds of drawers slamming.

"I'm being perfectly reasonable," I yell out over the destruction happening in my kitchen. "He could be using that power drill on his young, female victim above your apartment."

"You're insane," she yells back. "And I am hungry, but you eat out too much."

So she's not *that* mad. "No such thing."

"Only rich people say shit like that. I'm making a sandwich. It's faster."

"How about two?"

"HA!"

I try one last argument for my case. "You don't like to share 'cause you're an only child. I don't like to share because I can admit I'm a selfish bastard. We're both selfish. Get over it."

“There’s no logic in what you just said, and you know it,” she sing-songs, sure she’s won.

She hasn’t. If some asshole shows up offering to drill holes in *her* apartment, I’ll have his ass evicted.

“Now that we’ve got that out of the way,” she continues, though we haven’t gotten it out of the way, as far as I’m concerned. “I keep thinking back to those black patches of land we saw in the Slant. Maybe someone else found Leo’s flamethrower before I did?”

“Who the fuck is Leo?”

“You met him the same day you met me!”

“He didn’t make an impression on me, unlike you,” I tell her. “I knew you’d be hot one day.”

Serita flops onto her back, causing her books to go flying.

“I won’t argue against that.”

---

After we eat, Serita takes her now-routine call with her father in my home office, where there’s privacy.

In the meantime, I text Jer. Him and Galen are watching over Stormy tonight. Technically, one of them would do, but Jer knows as well as I do the recent change in Galen isn’t for the better.

“We look like two parents checking in on their kids with the babysitter,” Serita announces, strolling back into the bedroom, phone going to her back pocket. She must’ve just finished her call. “You more so than me.”

“He’s not as awful as you think,” is all I say on the matter. She’s too smart not to have realized where my mind often heads these days, creeper that she is.

“Alright, convince me. What’s going on with him?”

I hesitate, unsure of how much to tell her, if anything. “It’s not my place to say.”



“I’m not asking for details, or his life story. Just... why are you so worried about him?”

Galen’s temperament, for lack of a better word, isn’t a reaction to her and Jem entering his life via Oscar. Sure, it plays a part, but Galen and his father have always butted heads. The only thing they’ve ever readily agreed on was playing nice for Andrea’s sake. Galen held back on using his abilities for her, which says a lot. But then she died.

That’s the point where Serita thinks Galen’s bad temper originates from, but that’s not the case. Back when we were teens, sometimes I’d find him sitting alone in the dark, doing nothing. He’d stare right through you, like he was a million miles away. Everyone tried to get him to confide in someone, say anything. Nothing worked. It was like he was prone to it. One day, he started acting like his old self without any discernible cause.

So when he’s like that, if he’s about to end up that way again, we have no idea how to bring him back.

What happened in the Slant makes me think it will.

Then there was the weird conversation he had with Faron.

“The animals have been acting weird, don’t you think?” he’d said at some party. The nonsensical talk, that’s a sign of it.

After that, Stormy told me something else weird when she gave me the second scarf. One night at the house, she thought she heard him talking to himself. I’m not so sure. I think it’s more likely that he was talking to someone, and they weren’t physically in the house, but in the mirror.

Is it insanity? Grief? Worse, did not-Andrea see that in him, and decided to take advantage of him? But if it is her, she could walk through the mirror herself.

At my continued hesitation, Serita continues, “You’re used to keeping secrets. All of you are. You’re used to keeping *Galen’s* secrets. You said so before, when it came to the whole boat thing. Jericho learned how to sail for the sake of it.”

“That’s not all it was.” But even I hear the defensiveness in my voice. “He’s not some kid that needs to be coddled.”

“Isn’t he?”

“You don’t know the whole story,” I scoff.

“I’m only asking for one reason. *One* reason why I shouldn’t think he’s exactly the kind of person he’s shown himself to be, time and time again.”

*The breaking and entering charge back in high school. When I showed up, Galen was so messed up he didn’t even know where he was, how he got there, or recognize me.*

*Because the magic in his blood has a hold over him—controls him more than he controls it.*

“When’s the last time the two of you fought? Exchanged words, nice or not?”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

I drink her in, the nerves playing out on her face. “Humor me.”

“Not since the Slant. *But,*” she says quickly, cutting me off before I can interrupt. “Just because he doesn’t go out of his way to piss me off doesn’t mean anything. He’s just saving up his vitriol for the next time I see him, same as usual.”

“He said something about animals.”

She blinks, incredulous. “Pardon?”

“Not-Andrea said something like that too, in the Slant.”

*I thought you were gone, like the strays.*

*Pet or beast, they’re all gone.*

“Galen’s trying to convince you to go back. That’s no surprise. We all know the real reason why,” she rationalizes.

“What if he’s not? He knows what he’s talking about when it comes to this kind of stuff, better than we do.”

“Explain.”

I meet her eyes, reaching out to her with both hands, trying to communicate how serious I am. “His mother’s blood. It makes him different in more ways than one.”

“I know that. Look at his hair.”

“Serita, I’m being serious.”

“Did you just call me by my first name?”

“Slater,” I correct. “Galen may act human, but he’s always been, and always will be, more demon than not. He senses things we never will. He... feels things we never will.” The ever-present migraines, for one. But privately, I’ve asked myself if he’ll ever voice any of it. He’s always hidden parts of himself away out of necessity, but also because of who he is. Closed off from the rest of us.

“I don’t attack him unprovoked, but he still hates me,” she argues. “I see no reason not to reciprocate the feeling, or waste my time trying to psychoanalyze him when I have my own stuff going on.”

She lifts her textbook pointedly.

“It’s nothing personal. Galen doesn’t like anyone, and he doesn’t have favorites. He disdains everyone with an equal amount of vigor.”

Exhaling audibly, her mouth purses. “You’re too young to carry so much on your shoulders, Finn the fixer.”

“That’s not—”

“And you can’t fix everyone else’s problems, no matter how hard you try.”

“That’s not what it’s about,” I reason.

“Where did you learn to cover up other people’s messes?”

“No one else was going to do it.”

“Your parents?”

I barely repress a laugh. “There’s a difference between how I handle things and how my father does.”

“Your mother?”

“Doesn’t handle them at all.” Not in any meaningful way.

“Why you?”

“I’m the firstborn.”

## SERITA



“I’m nosy, I can admit that.”

Eleanor laughs, nudging me with her elbow playfully.  
“That’s a start.”

I fake a glare her way, nudging her back with my toe.  
“And a finish. Can’t we save the soul searching for after I’ve had a drink?”

It’d warm me up. Fall fled with a vengeance, leaving bone-chilling winter conditions in its wake: occasional snowfall, leafless trees, and nothing to do but complain. Me and dad always strived to stay near the equator when winter months came around, and it’s a shock to remember how cold it can really get when you stop chasing after the sun.

But I’m no quitter. I’m determined to master the cold, armed with puffy jackets and warm mugs of tea.

“I second that,” Stormy pipes up from between us on her bed.

I prod her too. “Nice try.”

Stormy's wares are spread out before us, still in their bags.

"This is from Finn." I nudge the supplies he bought earlier. He knows what kinds of foods Oscar and my mom stock up on, and Stormy's favorites, so he's the one who's been stocking the house with replenishments. Before I left him to catch up some much-needed sleep, I offered to haul them over, and he agreed.

He's more involved with working at his family company than I originally thought. I figured he'd steadily acclimate for a permanent role after he graduates, but he may as well work full-time for his father.

We've managed to build a system that works for both of our schedules. He's unavailable two nights per week, sometimes more. We ignore each other most days, then meet up at night. It isn't a relationship, but that's the best part. The ease of it.

Finn insinuated he has a plan for Stormy, but what that entails, I have no idea, and I've been too... preoccupied to ask. Faron snuck her out of New Haven to an amusement park, since we have to be careful with her in New Haven. Avoiding people we know, specifically.

"These, I picked up in Cleveland, or some of it, a while back. The rest is new." Next is a bag of books, yarn, and knitting needles. The former from a well-stocked, second-hand bookshop in Ohio, and the knitting tools a spur-of-the-moment idea after realizing I have no idea what kids are into these days. If she ends up hating it, there's always the multiple streaming services Oscar has subscriptions to, so long as she doesn't try stabbing anyone (me) with a knitting needle.

Stormy inspects everything with a critical eye, but she doesn't seem displeased. Not enough to stab, anyway. "Thanks," she grunts.

May as well be a bear hug coming from this girl.

"I brought eclairs," El squeaks, tugging on a black curl of her hair so it springs back to her head.

Me and Stormy lurch forward at the same time. “And you’re just now telling us?”

Our excitement seems to bolster her, and El slips off the bed to reach inside her bag for the eclairs. We spend the next few hours munching happily, watching a movie, and taking a stab at knitting. El’s the only one with any measure of success, but even she struggles, having never tried the hobby before.

Every friend I ever made was either a fleeting figure in my life, an online acquaintance, or employed by my dad through Haven House. El is the one exception.

Soon enough, we’re all tired out, but intent on fitting in one last movie before the night’s over. Stormy scrolls through our options, engrossed in the screen.

“That’s... a lot to take in,” El hedges. “Matter displacement, inter-dimensional travel. It’s all so... sci-fi.”

She’s been debriefed on the Slant situation. First by Stormy, then again with my own rundown of events. My report came with less grumbling, and more detail on what happened while we were there, sans Finn and me.

One day, I’ll find someone who’s stable and go on nice, normal dates. But for now: fun. Eleanor isn’t the kind of friend who demands I tell her my life story (messy as it is), and I do the same with her. I think that’s part of why we get along so well.

Sure, I never pictured Finn Delsing as my idea of fun when I added casual hookups to my college bucket list, but when he stops running his mouth, and uses it for other purposes...

There’s freedom in how we effectively pick each other up and subsequently set the other down, off to the side, when we need it. We go on our with our own lives without feeling like we have to check in on each other all the time. No promises. No comforting lies or obligations.

“Maybe it has something do with him,” El says absently.

Did I miss something? “Who?”

“Galen.” She blushes, the same as when she rushed in here. El always gets nervous at the prospect of running into anyone, Galen included, at the Vranes house, but I can’t fault her there. I’m the same way with Jemima. “You said there was an *Alice in Wonderland* theme.”

“So?”

“In the book, mirrors act as a metaphor for opposites and time running backwards.”

Even Stormy stops scrolling to stare. At her age, brutal honesty and a snappy emotional default are the norm, but that also means she picks up on emotional changes easier. Her mind is malleable and open to the weirdness.

“You read the book?” she says. “I didn’t even know there *is* a book.”

“I only watched the movie.” I once considered reading the novel version for a school assignment in high school, but my teacher decided I’d need to read the sequel too, and nothing kills my excitement over reading a book more than doing it for school.

El smiles fondly at me and Stormy. “Unlike you two, I prefer for my adventures happen in books, thank you very much.”

“We’re young,” I say. “If an adventure comes my way, I’m obligated by youth to experience it.”

Stormy glares at the pile of books strewn in front of the bed, left there by El. “Books make me want to fall asleep.”

“What’s this have to do with mirror metaphors and time?” I ask, attempting to get back on track before Stormy starts ripping up El’s books (they’re hardcovers).

“You all have evil twins, that’s opposites. The nine years ago enigma is related to time running backwards, in a way,” El says, and I’m feeling vindicated in my decision to lay out everything with her, Galen included.

Part of me thinks she still sees this all as a hypothetical, or the plot of some story I’m writing, but I’m not going to be the



one to burst her bubble on that front.

Stormy sure looks impressed. “Huh. I see why they call you the smart one.”

“What are we saying, though? That Galen has something to do with the Slant existing out there?”

“The demon boy’s not so bad, actually.” Coming from Stormy, that may as well be a ringing endorsement. I’d worried they wouldn’t get along, but perhaps their equally gruff personalities match well.

“Not necessarily, but it’s odd that he’s the only one who has access to it. Then again, maybe he’s not, and we just don’t realize it.”

“Potentially plausible,” I agree, not really understanding. “Go on.”

El’s mouth opens and closes a few times before she forms her answer, deep in thought. “There’s Stormy, Galen’s mother, your dad, Finn Delsing... did you see anyone else with a double?”

I shake my head. “No one. Jericho said he saw other people, but didn’t mention names.”

“When you say they looked like you, would you say they were the same *age* as you?”

“I didn’t see all of them, and I never met Galen’s mom, but that’s what Jericho said about Finn, and my dad looked about the same age as he does now.” I eye Stormy. “And, you know.”

“All of you were there when your dad’s carnival came to New Haven? You didn’t use that theme anywhere else? And you didn’t go anywhere else in the Slant?”

“Double nope.”

She clicks her tongue, brows furrowed. “What if... Everyone who was there that day, nine years ago, has a match? We have to assume there’s some purpose, or causation, or else we’re just reaching blindly through the dark. It’s not just an alternate place, but has alternate people, to match. Something about that place, or the people there, made it happen. Big

Bang, demon style.” She nods to herself, eyes unfocused.  
“Add in those demons to the mix, and does that make sense?”

“Uh. Run that back for me one more time.”

---

Bringing up Jericho Caulfield without feeling weird about it is a new experience.

I hadn't thought of how I'm getting used to not just Finn, but the others. It all started with the Slant and Stormy months ago, but it's more than that. They're no longer strangers to me.

We're not friends, per say, but more than acquaintances. Is there a name for a group of people who share a secret, and are forced to impart some amount of trust in each other, but don't have sleepovers and braid each other's hair and whatnot?

We've gotten to know each other on some level, and only on occasion. That's the only way I can phrase it properly.

I meet Finn alone at his apartment, but it's like the Baader-Meinhof phenomenon. Once I started noticing Galen's wolf pack on a closer level, it's like I see them everywhere.

Tonight, Finn picks me up (I love not having to drive anywhere, I truly do), and we detour to pick up Faron and Jericho from a nightclub I haven't heard of.

I'd thought the guys tended to trail behind Galen, their odd way of caring about him, in lieu of openly talking about whatever's going on with him (in front of me, at least), but as it turns out, they do have their own lives.

Jericho's as neatly dressed as always, and Faron's equally disheveled, also the norm.

But appearances can be deceiving. These Yale boys are no exception. I thought I'd avoided prejudice against them. I'd actively tried to avoid it, to do to them what I thought they'd done to me, but I see it now. I see *them* now.

Finn's refined politeness and mannered upbringing speak of how he and the guys talk themselves into places, and out of trouble. He's not a natural performer, but he speaks with straightforward, if not entirely forthcoming, sophistication. His lack in charm is padded by obvious wealth in his upbringing: a leisurely assurance of his place in the social hierarchy—at the top. He never learned charm because he's never needed to learn.

Jericho's the one who can reason them out of trouble with pragmatic intellect, and then there's Faron pulling out the charm.

As a last resort (according to Finn), Galen doubtlessly resorts to threats.

Faron might be a clumsy, gentle giant. He seems that way, and he's also the most approachable of the pack. Even with closer, semi-consistent proximity, Jericho has so far stayed an enigma with a carefully curated image, tainted only by the sharp edges of mystery that come with his last name. Moreover, the combination of all their last names. Vranes, Delsing, and Caulfield, though according to El, there should be one more in the lineup. Thorne, a name I've been reluctant to investigate.

The one distinction they all have in common is the ability to pay for what they want. That's the case in the nightclub, after Faron accidentally damages a multi-thousand dollar DJ setup.

Afterwards, we make it back to the loft, no worse for wear.

There is one oddity, though. "That car's still there," I point out.

Finn barely glances across the street. "One of my father's men."

"Um, what?"

"He has a PI tail me. Occasionally. I'll take care of it." He says it so *casually*.

"Again, *what?*"

“Old habit of his,” Finn says. “Started back in high school, once I could drive myself.”

“Why would your own father have a PI follow you when you were a teenager?”

“You want a rundown of my rap sheet now?”

At that, I’d have to ask, “You have a rap sheet?”

His answer? “Officially, no.”

I’m about to dig for more (at this point, he should expect I will), but he goes to leave the room.

“Would you mind if I make a pot of coffee first?”

Does this guy ever sleep? “No, I can wait.”

“I’ll make you a cup.”

“One—”

“Sugar, I know.” He pads out of the room, his movements unhurried.

I may have self-imposed rules about how long I let myself linger around here after getting dressed, but I won’t stop him from giving me a caffeine fix beforehand.

Settling into the mattress ovetop Finn’s silky black covers, I pull out my phone and scroll through Instagram for a bit while I wait. In no time, I hear Finn’s footsteps coming back, but then the doorbell rings.

I don’t hear his footsteps changing direction; instead, I’m scrambling for the closet, hiding before I can think about what I’m doing.

My heartbeat thumps rapidly in my chest, adrenaline surging.

It isn’t until the murmur of voices goes quiet and I hear the front door shut that I breathe easy again. Once I have the headspace to study my surroundings—leather dress shoes lined up expertly, racks of tailored suits arranged the same way, expensive watches visible through the glass covering the

case they're stored in, a neat stack of casual wear that goes largely unused—that it hits me.

When did I develop *that* extinct? That, and how should I feel about the fact that it's equal parts fun and awful at the same time to sneak around with a secret like this?



Something's wrong.

Serita has a natural liveliness. She doesn't think to mask her steps, or identify exits when she enters a room, and moves through the world—not carelessly, as I first thought—but purposefully boisterous. It's apparent in her clothes, how she speaks, how she walks.

So when she steps out of my home office, worrying at her lip and rubbing her fingers together, I think, *she heard some bad news on the phone.*

There's only one type of bad news I can think of that would make her go quiet.

But then she says, "I accidentally knocked over the vase and some of the files on your desk."

"Oh. That's alright."

She comes to stand by the coffee table, not sitting on the couch or at the dinner table, where I have my laptop set in front of me.

“Is there something else?” I ask.

“I went to put them back where they were, I...” Silently, she reaches into her bag, and pulls out a thick folder.

I know without opening it what’s inside. “Let me explain.”

“What good would that do? You had a private investigator look into me, like the one your dad had tail you,” she states, brokering no argument. “Or is it the same one?”

My phone goes off with a call further down the table, but I ignore it. “After you found out about Galen, my first instinct was to find a way to protect the secret,” I say in a rush. “You didn’t seem interested at first, thought we were messing with you, but then you didn’t. You came in, guns blazing, and looking for answers. I thought you might become a liability. So I thought, in case that happens, we’ll need leverage.”

“Leverage,” she repeats, voice flat.

“Howard looks into everyone. I’ve given him the name of virtually *everyone* I’ve ever met, not only you,” I stress. “That’s how I’ve always done it. If they strike first, I’d strike harder.”

“You lied when you told me you weren’t sure if I was an addict. It wasn’t a *suspicion*, you saw it written down in black and white.” Her voice raises as she speaks, chin held high. “You were looking for something to hold over my head, and you found it. Who were you going to send that to? My school? My contact list? Yours?”

“I did suspect it, and the file confirmed it,” I admit. “It’s not what I was looking for, and I did know for sure when you told me.” There’s no hiding that. “But I know there’s a difference between the person behind the actions and what’s written down in a bloodwork report.”

“Thank you for telling me, I wouldn’t have been able to figure that out myself,” she bites out. “But none of that explains *this*.”

Held between index and forefinger, the note to Howie is written in my own hand, and reads: *Carnie druggie, no*

*surprise there. They're not the smartest lot out there. Fwd J. Caulfield.*

“Jericho knows about me? What was this for? You and him teaming up to make an offensive strike against me?” Each question comes out more and more demanding. “If this is what you think about me, you must be one of those rich boys who get off on screwing around with ‘my lot.’ *Say something.*”

My phone rings again, another call. I ignore it.

“I don’t throw out any of my files.” It sounds ridiculous, such a lame excuse, even to me, but it’s true. “I haven’t looked at that in a while—since before you and I slept together. But I’ve never thrown away paperwork, it’s a habit. I wasn’t keeping it thinking I might use it one day. What should I do for you to believe me?”

“Nothing.”

*Don’t say it. Don’t say it, dumbass.* “What if I tell you there’s more to it than sex for me?”

“I don’t believe you.”

“But if—”

“Because if it were, you wouldn’t be moving up your wedding date,” she spits out. *How does she know?* “That’s not how someone acts if they—” She breaks off, red-faced. “I might not be one of the best, virtuous people out there, and I’m not asking anything of you. All I’m saying is that, if you meant what you just said, if you *really* believe that, then I feel sorry for you. However you think relationships are supposed to work, it’s not like this.” Again, she shows the note, the one I wish I never wrote. “You hide parts of yourself, and I do too, but certain honesties are nonnegotiable.”

“I *can’t*.”

“Why?”

Another phone call. Fucking hell.

“You know what,” she says, speeding to the door. “Just answer the phone, I’ll go.”



“*Serita.*”

The front door slams shut behind her. I get another call.

“*What?*” I bark out.

“*I know.* I’m in the middle of something, can it not wait?”

She cuts to the chase. “You’re needed at home. *Now.*”

Instantly, alarm bells blare in my head. “You’re home? Why are you back so soon? Is it Faron?”

“Family emergency,” is all she says. A *what?* “Come over. Your brother’s already here.”

---

Later that night, I lie in bed alone.

I lurched inside the loft only a few minutes ago, exhausted beyond belief, but my mind refuses to get the memo. Blood dots the covers, smeared into the silk, but I can’t be bothered to care. Most of it isn’t mine, anyway.

Serita left the beach around the same time as I did, but I have no idea where she’s gone, and I haven’t checked. I doubt she spent the rest of her night much like I did mine.

I briefly consider moving to charge my phone, see what’s on it, but it’s been silent for hours. I wish it’d ring, that there were some kind of noise to pierce the empty air. I’m not in the best shape for much at the moment, but I’m always ready to solve a problem that *can* be solved at a moment’s notice. Something I could cross off a list.

My chest constricts, and I twist around, trying to alleviate the sudden discomfort. It feels like there’s a caged beast clawing at my insides, straining to come out.

It’s an ache. Everything in me aches.

But I can’t bring myself to do anything about it now, so I stare at the dusk crawling across the ceiling, and then the dark coming in and taking up its place. The world tilts on, like the

Slant, but not. My heart does, too, with a steady rhythm I feel acutely with so little else to focus on in this empty room.

My heart beats on like a dulcet chant, a drum banging with each pulse striking the same note.

*Serita.*

*Serita.*

*Serita.*

## SERITA



The worst part is that I don't have any ground to stand on when it comes to feeling betrayed.

*No promises.* Perhaps I should've had him make one promise.

It's that he sat on the secret after we got involved. This whole time.

He didn't only do a routine background check. It was my whole life. My birthdays, my shopping habits, who I've been friends with and stuff about my *dad*, school reports—everything. Not just on me, but my family and the names of everyone I've ever met. Some names I haven't even *thought of* in years.

Never mind. The worst part is that I should've seen this coming. I should've expected this. He practically told me. *One of my father's men.*

*He has a PI tail me. Occasionally.*

I'm not only mad at him, but with myself. Comfortable, but not too familiar—that was the arrangement. At least, I thought it was. In the aftermath, I realize how easily a person can get used to someone else. How willfully oblivious I was, and not so different in how I rationalize my own choices to myself, high or sober.

He may as well have been a drug tailored for me. All I had to do was rationalize using him.

I felt like a thief in the night, sneaking off with his time, his attention. But Finn might've taken something from me too.

Am I ever going to get it right? Am I ever going to not be wrong about myself? And if I'm wrong about myself, how do I know I'm doing anything else right?

*You were starved of affection, that's why you're thinking like this.*

I'd done it to myself, but I'd starved nonetheless. That's where these feelings are coming from. Time and distance will fix it—fix *me*.

We always planned on making a clean break when the time came.

Now's the time, before this blows up in my face. Get through the wedding, then get out. My bridesmaid dress came, and it's a perfect fit.

But first: finals.

Actually, one final exam, then I can leave behind GCC, and tie up my loose ends.



The ceremony rehearsal is tense, so tense that it's almost palpable. Not only because of Serita, but neither Galen or Oscar plan on playing nice today.

Lucky me.

Jem might be the only one glad to be here, along with her wedding planner. She was smiling the last I saw her. That's the purpose of this exercise: a walkthrough of what will happen tomorrow, for her benefit, so I try to give off a peaceful manner, lest she catch on.

"A little to the left," the wedding planner says. Her name might be Dede. Delia. Something that starts with a 'D.' Who cares? "Great, Galen. On to you, Oscar..."

The aforementioned moody trio have no such compunctions about letting everyone know how displeased they are. You'd think this is a funeral parlor, if not for the staff milling about the house, putting the flowers and benches and whatnot in place.

They've turned the ballroom into a wedding hall overnight. Well, the start of one. We're in the way. Coordination is born out of practice, so we're meant to familiarize ourselves with where to walk, how to stand. An old fixture from days past, I've never spent much time in here, used to passing by and barely noticing the canvas drop cloths.

"I only have another ten minutes before I'm out of here, so you have that long to get to the point," Galen drawls to Darcy.

"No, you don't," Oscar answers for her. "You have half an hour."

"Looking to take up a secretary job now, are we?"

I don't bother hiding my exhale of annoyance. "I drove you here from your place. You leave with me *in half an hour*."

Most days, Galen doesn't bother to read the room, but it's not because he can't. He doesn't care to, as evidenced by the few instances where he takes out someone's heart and shows it to them—without them ever realizing he's even done it until it's too late to hide. It makes having conversations with him either combative or outright hostile.

"I've taken up jogging," he says now, apparently too exhausted or not interested enough in revealing any harsh truths.

The wide-open space ensures everyone in the room hears every word, but most of the staff are acquainted with the Vranes men by now. They don't even turn their heads to watch the spectacle, preoccupied by the task of assembling the surround system. A few take occasional peeks from dusting the miniature stage for the band, but they'll have all signed NDA's before stepping into the house.

Besides, they'll soon have so much to do, they won't even care. Same applies to the rest of us glorified mannequins.

Today is the longest day of wedding bullshit yet. After the rehearsal is the accompanying dinner (who's idea was that?), then another little get together, as if we won't all see each other tomorrow.

“If anyone manages to make it through this weekend without a single drink, I’ll give them my Chevelle,” Faron says, winking at... Daisy?

But it’s Serita who speaks, for the first time I’ve heard all day, no less. “What kind of person makes a bet they’ll be the first to lose?”

She’ll talk to Faron before she’ll talk to Jem. Or me. Noted.

“Charity quota for my tax write-off.” Faron sends her another wink. It gives me the idea to infect hm with pink eye. That way, he’d have a reason for it. “It’s also fun to play dress up.”

Serita laughs, but it sounds forced. She’s been withdrawn up until now, uncharacteristically apathetic and dressed down in a plain hoodie and jeans of muted colors.

We’re all wearing casual clothes. Tomorrow’s a full day of dressing to impress, so we get no flack for it. Galen even strolled in wearing the same outfit he wore to bed, if I’m not mistaken.

He grumbles and groans, but always shows up.

Galen never fails to show up.

It never occurred to me before recently. I’ve been too preoccupied to give it much thought, that Galen might’ve been making excuses for us to be in the same room, showing up based on Snapchat clues, and searching for reasons to bring us together, and not just because of what he heard from the other side of the mirror, but because it puts us all in the same room.

I’ll add him to my list.

“Like playing court in some old-age historical fiction novel,” Serita says, frowning. “Where we all get to play stuck-up verbal chess. So much fun.”

“It might be if you didn’t have the upbringing of a farm animal.” Dammit Galin. “Gotta know the rules to navigate the game.”

Oscar and I groan in unison. “*Galen.*”

Faron's mouth twitches with humor. "That's freaky."

"Tell me," Serita starts. "Should I have removed my pig-shit covered shoes at the door, or are you okay with me stomping my farm boots on your face? I have no problem with showing you how we do things in *yeehaw land*."

I should be getting paid for this. I make a mental note to send Oscar an invoice for my time and presence. He'll realize it's a joke, albeit I'm tempted to hand deliver it myself to make a point of why he thought putting all of us in the same room was a good idea. The girls are the only ones who have to do any walking, so Galen and me aren't needed.

He's watched me grow up, so he knows I'm a dick, and won't bat an eye.

"Onto the bride's entrance!" Dakota (maybe Doris) gets increasingly shrill with every syllable. "I'll go get her. Be back in a flash."

A convenient escape, I'll give Dolores that.

---

Serita ducks into the bathroom, thinking she snuck away without anyone noticing her absence.

I slip in behind her before she can shut the door. "Not hiding, are we? I know every inch of this house."

As it turns out, chasing after her is a full-time effort. After our last interaction, I expect nothing less than her fleeing the scene.

She sneers at the sight of me, hair tied in a loose ponytail. I like her like this, without any pretense. "Stalking isn't a good look on you."

"Everything's a good look on me."

"I don't recall asking you to follow me," she insists.

"I warned you I would." September feels like ages ago. "Why aren't you answering your phone?"



Another sneer. “I blocked you. Look who’s the creeper now. So you know, I’m glad I am too, otherwise I might’ve never known about your dossier on me.”

She poses herself against the sink counter, feigning indifference, a cool expression on her face. That facade has never worked on me before, and it doesn’t now.

“That’s fair.” I stand between her and the door, but I don’t block her way, leaning on the wall like I have all the time in the world. She’s too proud to leave, now that I’ve caught her in the act. “You ought to know that Drusilla isn’t coming to your rescue, though. Faron spilled a bottle of champagne on one of the tablecloths.”

“Drusilla?”

Scratch that name off the list. “Jem’s wedding planner.”

“First, I’d think you’d be more concerned by Faron drinking alcohol this early in the day than you are by my bladder.” She holds up her hand, two fingers raised. “Second, her name is Emily.”

‘E’ comes after ‘d’ in the alphabet, so I was close.

“You don’t have to take a piss.” I speak fast, leaving no room for her to make assumptions. Serita’s always needed a nudge to admit her true thoughts. “You don’t want to talk to me, I get that, but there’s more to the story that I haven’t been able to tell you yet. There are things you should know.”

“I don’t want to hear any of it.”

“And I don’t want you to think I regard you as disposable. I don’t want to go back to the way things were.”

“There’s not as much neon and boho overkill out there as I predicted,” I say, jerking my chin at her puffed sleeves and glittered shorts with my arms crossed across my chest. “Figured Jem would go all out.”

“Go all tacky, you mean.”

“I’ve come to appreciate tacky.” Nothing. No reaction at all. “All I’m saying is that there doesn’t seem to be much of Jem’s personality showing in her own wedding.”

“I don’t see why that matters to you.”

“You told me how you imagined your wedding will look. Maybe it has something to do with that.”

“I didn’t mention how it’d *look*. That was just...” She shakes her head, arm reaching to rub at her neck. I doubt she even realizes she’s doing it. “I don’t know why I said that.”

“I do.”

“Oh, really? Want to enlighten me, since you’re so all-knowing?”

I push off from the wall. She watches me warily as I close the distance, but doesn’t retreat. More bravado.

“*Maybe* you were reminded of my upcoming nuptials, what with all the reminders,” I say slowly, mimicking deep thought. If I scratch my head like I’m that clueless, she’ll be pissed enough to leave, so I refrain from furthering the act. “*Maybe* you were picturing *ours*.”

“Hilarious,” she deadpans.

“I’ve spent so much of my time congratulating Jem and Oscar on their big day that there’s a whole rack in my closet dedicated to it. That’s how many little parties they’ve hosted since he put a ring on your mother’s finger.”

“Weddings make you fashion-conscious and testy. Got it.”

“Unless the next words out of your mouth sound anything like, ‘*I’m going to let you talk without accusing you of some cartoon-villain deeds, Finn,*’ then I’m going to politely ask you keep the snark to a minimum for longer than five minutes.”

“You want pig shit stomped on your face in your sleep too, huh?”

I’m in love with her.

*Where did the love come from?* The question clangs through my head, completely at odds with the situation—that and the expectant look on Serita’s face. *When did it start?*

But I know. Of course I know. I love her.

Not for what she's just said. That has nothing to do with it. Or maybe it does—her sense of humor, that is, in the face of confrontation. Snark in place of actual barbs, her way of holding back, even if she doesn't realize that's what she's doing.

They'll want us back in the ballroom soon enough. I couldn't care less about Oscar's nuptials at the moment.

"How did you picture our wedding, Slater?"

She gapes. "I didn't."

"Sure you didn't. I'm also sure you really *do* have a supply of feces lying around, in case someone pisses you off. How'd you picture it?"

"Why do you think I would *ever* do that?"

Because somewhere along the way, amongst all this pageantry, there's not much else to keep our minds off it. Nothing but the Slant.

"I pictured a destination wedding. Somewhere far, so we wouldn't have to invite more than a small number of people, and they'd all have a reason to decline the invitation."

Her face twists, eyes widening and mouth opening. A part of me knows her first instinct is to cast doubt. She's retreating in on herself in the same way she's retreated from me, the way she retreated from her dad and her ambitions.

The silence lengthens the longer she stands there, curiosity waging against stubbornness.

It's enough to bolster me. Enough to show her my hand, offer a truth.

So I forge on, less because I think she wants to hear it and more because she *should*. "We wouldn't announce a damn thing in any newspaper or to any journalist. They only want gossip fodder for the society section, and anyone who reads that isn't worth telling, because you like making a spectacle of yourself, but only on your own terms. Jem's the same way, and you get it from her, even if you deny it 'till your last breath. It'd happen during summer, on the seventh day, of the seventh

month. For *bobo*, whatever the hell that means. You'd find an eyesore of a dress to wear, and I'd peel it off you. We'd sweat our asses off, and so would our guests. Everyone would be sunburned on their way home, but you'd like that, wouldn't you? If it left a mark that didn't fade, at least for a little while?"

"Finn," she warns. "Why do you have to take the long route? Why do you have to make this so much harder than it needed to be? Harder than it already is, I mean."

"Or maybe I am playing with you. I'm just messing around with your emotions because I can." Then, because I can't help myself, and because I need her more calm, I add, "You remember our little virginity talk?"

She balks. "Seriously? Neither of have been virgins for a while."

"Serious as can be. You and I, we're the same."

"Non-virgins? Look, if you're going to talk nonsense—"

"I don't have *relationships*," I interrupt, and the rest bursts out of me before I can rethink what I'm doing. "I'm not used to explaining myself. No one's ever wanted an explanation for why I do the things I do. You thought I was some player, but I chose those girls and they chose me back because we wanted *easy*. Girls that didn't want anything serious—that's how I thought this was going to turn out. That's how this was *supposed* to turn out. But everyone that came before, they didn't bother to figure me out. They didn't *want* to figure me out. I don't *know* how relationships work. Neither do you. We skipped right past learning how to know someone and that's how we ended up here, completely and utterly confused."

It couldn't be because I liked her, I'd decided back then. I never considered the possibility of wanting more.

Look how that turned out.

The list of causes I let myself act irrationally over is short: Galen, Faron, Jer, and Luke. I didn't realize she'd end up on that list. I didn't *know*.

“Neither do I!” she explodes. Her eyes search mine. I can’t tell what she’s looking for, but she doesn’t find it, given the tiny frown that pulls at her face. “That’s part of self-preservation! You think I wanted this? I didn’t, but then I ended up liking you anyway, idiot that I am!”

## SERITA



“Why can’t you ever take the easy road? It wasn’t like this with any other guy. It’s never been as hard with *anyone* else as it is with you, and it never...”

“Never *what?* Just *say it.*”

“I wasn’t supposed to care.” My voice trembles, so I clear my throat before I continue. I won’t waver, but I do need closure. “You know I’m not as experienced as you are. I thought, since the last guy didn’t matter much to me, neither would you. You weren’t supposed to *matter*. And that’s partly my fault. Because you held up your end of the deal. I’m the one who had too much fun playing detective, getting involved. But the deal’s off now. Count me out.”

“What if I’m not out?”

“We don’t file joint taxes. I give you full custody of Galen, and we can share Stormy. A clean break.”

“You still joke when you’re nervous, Slater.”

Halfway to the door, having pushed off the sink with urgency, I stop, but don't turn.

"I know you heard Oscar tell Jem to add Jac onto the guest list. That had nothing to do with me." He stress that last part, enunciating every syllable. "I've still never hated you, but I judged you, and that was wrong. I knew it was, that's why I didn't want you to know. I can explain everything, but only if you want me to. Okay? I'm trying to see if it will ever be possible for you to stop doubting me at every turn and trust that I'm not screwing you over, as Galin's friend, as a Delsing, or as someone you expect to let you down ever again. Because I can take a shot at wooing you if I want, but I'll warn you now, that'd be new for me. I can go all nine yards, but if you don't want me to keep being the one who follows you into gardens or bathrooms or *anywhere*, then say so now. If you want me gone, then *say it*."

I look at the door. Finn. The mirror hanging above the sink.

"How can you think it's reasonable to demand anything of me now? More than the creepy dossier, you won't do the same. Won't be honest with me. Omission is the same as lying, and you're a liar, but I see who you are, Finn Delsing." It pours out of me, everything I've held back. Everything I shouldn't say. "You care so much, why do you hide it? You're scared someone will write a story about you in the news? Why do you fix everyone else's problems? What do you get out of it? Because you want them to need you. You think that if they don't depend on you, they'll disappear. You must be used to it by now, I bet you can count the number of days you saw your parents on one hand throughout your childhood."

"Look who's talking. You have one friend."

I'm not even mad. All I feel is *relief*. We're finally being honest, no holds barred.

"Then there's covering up your parents' affairs. Faron's noticed. Wanna know how I know that? Because *I've* noticed, and if I have, so has everyone else. You're the runner, not me." *The fixer*. "I saw some of your other files with the one on me."

Faron. Galen. The things you've done to cover up what *they* did. I get it now. You need them to be happy and healthy, because if they're not, then it meant nothing. Years of your life gone. If they're not okay, then it was all for nothing. Everything you gave up. Your *life* means nothing. But did you ever think what they'd say—what they'd *do*—if you asked? If you gave them the choice, didn't make it for them? Did you ever think how guilty they'd feel if they ever found out what you gave up for them, without even asking? That they'd think you thought they'd refuse you? That you would think that low of them?"

By the end of it, he's stunned, but I don't want to give him an inch. He's the one who started the speech-giving. *Practice for tomorrow*, I think sardonically.

"I did those things because I knew they'd do the same for me if our roles were reversed."

"Gratitude can feel like a weight like any other."

"And this thing going on between us, what does it feel like to you?" *Like something worth throwing away everything else for*. "I'm not trying to martyr myself. I just don't want to let anyone down. That's how I knew you're not as hurt as you are afraid."

"Pray, tell me what you mean by that," I say through gritted teeth.

"You said it wasn't about Jackie, which is how I knew it had everything to do with her, not what Howie found."

I nearly laugh. If only he knew the names that I've fixated on in the last few days.

Diana Spencer and Camilla Parker-Bowles. Olivia Pope and whoever the wife was—the one deemed First Lady material. I remember the mistress's name, but not the wife.

*Are you a Jackie or a Marilyn?*

"If you think I want to waste my life as someone's mistress—if you think so lowly of me—then I'm sorry to disappoint, but I'm leaving after the wedding. I'll be gone before the day after the wedding."



“Can you just—stop,” he says, faltering. “This isn’t how I wanted this to go.”

“Oh, *really*.”

“Don’t act like bringing up Jackie when you ended things had nothing to do with your feelings. You got scared because I was about to tell you *I’m falling in love with you*. You got angry so you’d have ammunition to keep me from saying it. From admitting you feel it too.” He runs his hand through his hair, a familiar gesture. “I couldn’t break it off with her because if I did, then I’d be dragging a shit ton of other people down with me—”

“*You think I’m dragging you down?*”

He blanches. “No, that’s not what I meant. There are things you don’t know.”

“You don’t say.”

“*Serita*. I mean *prison*.”

Did I hear him right? “What?”

“Look, if shit does hit the fan, you don’t want to know everything. Plausible deniability. I just need time. You... you’re a conflict of interest.”

He really *is* awful at expressing his feelings.

“There are people involved who want to see me fail,” he continues. “I deflect and omit certain truths because every move I make has to be infallible or they’ll strike.”

“I see how people react when you walk into a room,” I point out. “People look to you for approval, they love you.”

He shakes his head in frustration. “Nobody actually loves people like me. The point is that I have been bullshitting around, but there’s moving parts you’re not aware of.”

“Okay, I need you to stop insulting me with business lingo, and then I need you to stop overcomplicating what was always supposed to be a casual—”

“Don’t finish that sentence. We both know we were lying to ourselves when we said that.”

“Then answer me this. If you were playing some long con all along to get me to care about you, why did you go about it the way you did?”

“I told you. It wasn’t a *con*. When it comes to me and you, I guess I was... willfully ignorant, alright? My parents have cheated on each other for as long as I can remember. I know that means I should’ve realized how shitty it is, but I didn’t let myself think about it. I haven’t let myself dwell over their marriage in years. I... didn’t think. But when this thing between you and me, once I figured it out, I wanted to pull out from my deal with Jac, but—look, we’re closing in on a location within hours, okay? Just give me a few hours—”

I don’t want to believe him, but I’ve never seen Finn like this: unsure of himself.

“What location?”

“This wasn’t supposed to come out like this,” he grumbles.

“I’m no saint. I went into this knowing your situation. If I were in your position, or in hers...” Is there any way to finish that sentence without sounding flippant? And am I seeing things, or does he look like he’s about to pass out cold? “Finn, when’s the last time you slept?”

“There’s that too,” he says, eyes drooping. It’s like he’s telling the floor, not me. “Seri—Slater.”

“*Where is my maid of honor?*”

“Fuck off, Delaney,” Finn bellows at the door, but the effect is undermined by the yawn that spills out of him mid-name.

“Emily,” I correct, advancing towards the door. “I’m needed out there. I’m a bridesmaid.”

“You’re needed in *here*.” His palm slaps down onto the door before I can reach for it. “Can you not leave *right* as I’m getting to the point?”

“I gave you time to get to the point, and you wanted to talk about our nonexistent virginities and prison.” My glare is

glacial, unflinching. “And in case you forgot, your fiancée’s probably waiting for you.”

“You may have decided you’re done with me,” he calls out, not caring that Emily can hear every word. “But I’m nowhere near done with you.”

# 40

FINN  
NINE YEARS AGO  
AGE 12



At first, it was fun.

I thought we were playing a game.

Me and Faron hide, they seek.

It sunk in gradually: how long the semesters at boarding school were, the trips to granddad's house that followed.

No parents to be seen.

Fine.

If they don't need us, we don't need them.

It isn't until the dead of night, lying in bed with no one to turn off the light when I'm too tired to do it myself, that I let myself hate them.

When I start to feel something in me clawing its way out.

It isn't until I see the moon sitting high in the sky and know everyone else in the house is asleep, I let myself resent them for making me be the one to tell Faron to do his homework and make sure he eats his vegetables. For making me be the one who has to come in and shut off his light when he forgets to turn it off before he falls asleep.

One day he won't need me to do those things for him, he'll remember to do them on his own.

One day he won't need me anymore.

I hate them for making me the one who'll miss the boy he was when that happens.

And when it does, I won't be surprised if he doesn't want anything to do with his barely-older brother who only ever told him to do his homework and eat his vegetables.

The house must be completely silent before I let myself wish that there was someone out there who'd miss the boy I was, but he's already gone.

## SERITA



Jacinta Lin flew in on a red-eye this morning. I don't think her appearance was planned, or she would've been added to the guest list ages ago. Since she's not part of the ceremony, she wasn't at the rehearsal, but she does show at the rehearsal dinner after settling into her hotel.

She's not participating in the wedding as part of the bridal party, but she is as attending as Finn's date.

"I'd hoped to fly out sooner, but you know how busy life can get," she's saying, a cultured smile lighting up her face.

Jacinta is beautiful in a glamorous, playfully mysterious sort of way. The kind of beauty that draws the eye, like a viewer lured by an enticing art piece. Large, coal-black eyes and equally dark hair frame snow-white skin. She's clad in a fitted, serpentine dress of deep forest green, nearly black in the low light. Everything about Jacinta Lin sells a show of power and wealth, set in a different class from the majority.

There's no reason for it, but somehow, she reminds me of Delia. They don't have that many features in common, besides the near-translucent fairness of their skin, but they share the same flair for glamour.

Jacinta and Finn look like a well-matched pair. That might sound masochistic, but I won't deny what's staring me in the face.

In my head, she made for a faceless figure. Someone disconnected from everyday life, far off on the future's horizon. It was so easy to forget she exists, to rationalize what we'd been doing these past months, even before Providence. Back then, all I knew of her came from a single article and Finn telling me she was involved with other people too. That was that. Fair is fair.

Sitting at the other end of the dinner table next to Finn, she's impossible to ignore. I can't outrun the image of them as a matched pair. Her presence makes it real in a way it wasn't before. Not for me. Ignorance really was bliss. It meant I could make up whatever story I preferred to hear in my head.

But I don't want to be some cunning, manipulative person who knowingly hurts other people. I might be outspoken, but I don't ever want to be intentionally cruel, much less the kind of person who expects others to put up with it.

Finn gives pretty speeches, but I know which option he'll choose. He strives on control. He might want me, but not at the cost it'd take to have me. The way he made it sound told me he has a lot to lose, more than I'm aware of.

Utensils clutter against delicate dinnerware, softened by lively conversation and soft classical music playing in the background. Galen and his dad aren't speaking, but they aren't arguing, so everyone considers that a success.

I sit near the head of the table, by Oscar and Jemima. Some of the Vranes relatives have flown in, including Great Aunt Corinna, her sons (whose names I've forgotten), and a gaggle of their children, who've run off to play. Galen and his friends are seated at the tail-end. Only him and Finn are

official groomsmen, but where Galen goes, they rest of the pack follows.

Jericho and Faron ensure there's distance between Galen and everyone else—also part of the success. Human shields still count as shields. The Delsing's included: Finn and Faron's parents, also not participants in the wedding, but Galen and Finn's fathers are close, I've heard.

I try to train my eyes anywhere but their end of the table. Anywhere but at Finn or Jacinta.

The private room of the swanky restaurant provides enough room for everyone to breathe comfortably. Pockets of conversation travel up and down the length, but everyone sticks to whoever's sitting closest.

Somehow, I ended up with one of Corinna's sons seated on my left, and Faron on my right. I'd question him on why he isn't mingling with his friends and family over on the dark side, but from the little we've spoken so far, I've gathered he's drunk. He's in constant motion, much like me, which I suppose is how I notice his tapping feet and twirling hands.

The slurring of his words would be enough for me to say it with utter certainty, but the smell emanating from him makes it too obvious to even mention. He knows everyone here knows, and he doesn't care.

A high-functioning addict is still an addict, but Finn only mentioned his mother's substance abuse, not Faron's. I don't know what to make of that.

Looks like I'm not the only one having a bad day.

On the other hand, Faron might consider this a considerably good one. What little I know of him comes down to his penchant for partying.

What I wouldn't give to hold this guy down and attack his clothes with an iron.

Our eyes snag over our glasses, mine water, his not.

"The lovely Serita," he slurs, eyes dancing. He's in a spirited mood. "Looks like you're on the outs with my bore of



a brother.”

I halt with my glass poised on my lips. I hope he’s too drunk to notice, but no, he zeroes in on it. “Yup, trouble in paradise. Don’t worry, he’s an enigma to me too these days.”

He’s more observant than I gave him credit for.

“You knew?” It hurts to look into that face, so much like his twin’s.

He considers me, face slackening. “I didn’t realize it was a secret. None of the other Delsing’s tend care for discretion.”

*With their affairs*, he leaves unsaid, because he doesn’t need to.

“You’re low on charm tonight,” I remark. “Compared to your normal amount, I mean.”

“I didn’t think you were in the mood for charming.”

“Mine’s a secret too,” he says, startling me further. “I’ll give you one guess why.”

Through the stink of booze and his perky demeanor, there’s sadness in how he says it. Faint, but there. I wonder if Finn knows the engagement he agreed to for the sake of his brother’s romantic prospects didn’t end up making much of a difference. As upset as I am, I don’t want to be the one who breaks it to him.

“This girl you’re seeing,” I say. “She won’t leave the person she’s with?”

Faron slouches in his chair, looking relaxed. It’s a lie. Maybe it’s always been a lie.

“Can’t,” he corrects. “She can’t leave. But why should I be the only one who has to see them together?”

“You want to make this girl jealous?”

His head falls to the back of his chair, and still, his smile never falls. “What do you think? Is it working on you?”

“That’s not what’s going on here.”

“If you say so.”

I sigh, slouching with him. “And if it were, that’s not a healthy way to fix a relationship.”

“Sounds overrated.” He places his hand over his heart, mimicking alarm. “Why are you looking at me like that? Did I spill?”

I arch a brow at that, unsure if I should comment, or even take his words seriously, but I’m curious about this new side of Faron, so I cave in. “Relationships overall, or healthy ones?”

“Both.”

“Do I know this person?” I hedge.

“Yup.”

“Well, point her out to me sometime. I’ll help you make her jealous.”

His lips twitch wider. “Aren’t you fickle. I thought you were against the idea.”

“In principle, sure, but in practice...” I smile back conspiratorially. “I can’t resist trouble. Never could.”

“I knew there was a reason I like you,” he says.

I realize Faron’s distracted me from the others at the table that my mood’s already lifted, not enough to save the night, but enough to appreciate him in the new light.

“Why fight for it if it’s so hard?”

“When you love someone, *truly* love them, you make a decision to enter that fight. A conscious decision, with both eyes open.”

*Surprises on surprises.*

“But for how long? How far should you be willing to take it?”

He shrugs, taking a long drink of his glass. His eyes lower to the floor, downcast. “That depends on how much you love them, I guess.”

“Sounds painful.” I take another sip of my own.

He chuckles darkly. “Try trashing her husband’s bar when I was hammered off my ass.”

My jaw *drops*. “You’re kidding.”

“Nope,” Faron says, completely unabashed. “I didn’t do it on purpose. Not *entirely* on purpose. When I woke up, my big bro already took care of it.” He rolls his eyes at that last bit. “He thinks we’re incapable of taking care of our own shit, but if he’d just give me a few hours to sober up, I could work wonders.”

“How did he take care of it?”

“Paid for the repairs, had a statue replaced.” Another eye roll. “I told him he shouldn’t have bothered. A toddler could come up with something better. That’s why I’m stuck to you all like glue today. Finn cleaned up my mess, and I’m avoiding him until he forgets it happened.” He flicks a hand off toward the end of the table, but I don’t look.

*I don’t think he’ll forget any time soon.* “Solid plan.”

Despite Faron’s ever-present jokester persona, a lot’s weighing on him tonight. It sounds like it’s been eating at him for a while. Long enough that he can’t help letting it out.

Finn raised Faron in a lot of ways, and there are things no child can bear to tell their parent in fear of disappointing them.

Jacinta Lin’s burst of twinkling laughter travels down the table.

“I think he’s trying to have me committed,” Faron slurs. “I heard him on the phone the other week. He’s having some doctor flown out. The flight’s for Bridgeport, though. When my brother snatches me off the street and tries to *Old Yeller* me up the coast, I trust you’ll head my rescue mission, Serita.”

“What did you just say?” I whisper. *Why would he fly a doctor out to Bridgeport?*

But I know. Of course I know.

“Do you have siblings? Galen notwithstanding. Do you know what it’s like having your brother, who’s only a few minutes older than you are, mind you, think you’re no better

than a kid?" He's not bothering to look my way anymore, barely noticing I'm here. "But he's the one that changed first. What was I supposed to do with that?"

"I wish I knew."



Serita left in the middle of dinner, citing a sore stomach and a need for fresh air, according to a drunk (but still lucid) Faron. This meant going off the grid.

She's spent so many years on the move, traveling from city to city with little regard for one over the other, that she doesn't consider running as a form of retreat. It's her way of not forming habits, not letting herself form any kind of reliance on anything, anyplace, or *anyone*.

It gives me time to think. She's amusing, in the argumentative but whip-smart way I savor when she's gone. I probably should've led with that earlier.

I've checked her dingy apartment, blown up her phone (I'm still blocked), and Eleanor Altej was of no help (foreseeable), so I circle back to the restaurant. She might've had a change of heart if she knew I'd left.

She'd relish in this. All rationality, gone. No part of me is willing to deny her, and oh, how much fun she'd have with that knowledge if she knew, no matter how much she hates me

right now. In fact, it'd only please her more because she hates me.

So here I am, shaking sand out of my leather Brioni's, like a moron. After dinner, some other moron (I'm betting on Faron) decided to throw an after party out on the beach, despite it being December.

As I approach, I find a few intermittent bonfires along the coast is their solution to the New England winter chill. Internally, I'd pray for snow, but we're not that deep into winter yet. Not to mention, I'm Galen's ride, so I'm sticking around, snow or not.

"One hour," he'd stressed, stomping out onto the beach, swayed only by the promise of more alcohol.

Faron had slapped his back, and that was that. The two of them went off to warm up by the nearest bonfire, and I've just sat down to check my phone. Nothing important, but nothing troublesome.

"I can't believe he's marrying her," someone stage-whispers further down the beach. I immediately recognize what rumor they're thinking of, but refuting them only makes it worse, so I only note who's speaking and stay silent. For now.

A minute later, Jackie plops down next to me. "I wondered where you went."

I make a noncommittal noise, leaving it at that, but she's undeterred. "What color is your tie for the wedding? I brought half my wardrobe, so there must be a match in there somewhere."

It takes me a moment to remember. "Purple."

"Lilac? Bright purple?"

"Dark purple."

She nods. "I can work with that."

I angle my head, wondering why she's here, but Jac's like me: unwilling to give anything away, not if she can help it.

We have a lot in common, to be truthful. Our backgrounds, our outlooks on life, and what we consider important. I think so, from what I know of her.

That's how I recognize the look she wears on her face now. I've worn a similar one for my whole life. The face we show the world, forced to keep up appearances. Forced to be someone you never chose to become.

Jac would've assumed we would hire a private investigator long before even considering her as a potential match. Serita hadn't, and in retrospect, why would she? That must've influence how she reacted to the news, I just don't know *how much* of it is due to that. I only thought I did.

"Jac, why are you here?"

"Do you not want me here?" she counters, in a way that suggests she's indifferent to whatever answer I give.

"It's not that," I say. "But I know my father insisted flying you out here."

I hadn't planned on having this conversation tonight, but I may as well get it out of the way. In fact, it's relieving to tell someone—anyone—even if I know what I'm about to say won't give Jackie much relief on her end.

Again: I'm not the nice one.

"That may be, but that doesn't mean we can't have fun. I'm here by choice."

*Have fun.*

"Are you?" I watch for her reaction, knowing what it will entail.

She smiles blandly. "Of course," she reassures. "Better if it's you over the other guy my dad chose."

I can only blink at that closed-off face, resisting the urge to visibly cringe—at her answer, and at my own brain suddenly picturing mother. I can't immediately pinpoint why, but it leaves me feeling cold.

Jackie Lin is the kind of woman I always knew I'd marry one day. She's the perfect fit for how I imagined my future, the kind of partner who can play the part of the socialite in public, but was cast in steel behind closed, gilded doors.

But if Jackie was cast in steel to form the foundation of an untarnished house, then Serita is the opposite. Made from a mix of materials—lead, copper, and yes, steel—from every corner of the country, every place she's been to and every person she's met, to make her as sharp as a bullet headed straight towards you. On impact, it's like being shattered apart into pieces.

I check that we're alone, no one within eavesdropping distance. When I'm sure we won't be overheard, I turn back to Jackie, smoothing out my expression so nothing on my face gives it away. "Jac, I need to tell you something."

"Me first," she blurts. Hurrying on, "I know about the girl you've been seeing."

"That's related to what I wanted to say."

"I don't mind, Finn. Just... keep it quiet, okay? That's how everyone else does it."

"Jac," I try again. "I need to tell you something. Tonight, before you see it on the news, and I wanted to say it before, but this should be done in person."

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Once the flames die out, so does the willingness to stick around in the cold.

"Mhmmm..."

I take a quick glance at the backseat. Galen's eyes are closed, head lowered as if asleep, but then he murmurs, "All this grandstanding for a couple of frauds."

I don't answer. Galen would talk in his sleep when we were kids, back when we were young enough to have



sleepovers and pass out playing video games. I didn't realize he still has the habit.

“*Frauds,*” he seethes in sleep. “In her house.”

The only other noise comes from the engine. I wait, but he's quiet for the rest of the drive, passed out cold. I leave him at his place, then all I have left is going back to mine.

Halfway there, Jer texts an update on Faron, who was in a similar state to Galen, and says they both made it back. He knows that if he doesn't text, I'll drop by. He surprises me by following it up with another text, this one concerning Gia Laredo.

**Jericho Caulfield:** Clarke came back with nothing. He says she doesn't see anyone—sits in her house all alone, day in, day out. Can't tell why she came back in the first place.

After she slunk back home, we had some people look into the reason why. My side didn't find much more than his did, nothing worth mentioning.

I leave it for now, deciding to table Gia Laredo until further notice. Let Luke haul *his* ass back to town and deal with her if he's so inclined. He's meant to show up tomorrow, but I doubt it. I suspect Jer's come to the same conclusion. Galen and Faron might've, given Luke's radio silence since leaving Jer that brief voicemail on Halloween.

After I arrange for IV's to be on standby at Galen and Faron's places—no nurse needed, they've pulled these kinds of stunts before, and often—I haul out of my car, dreading the scant minutes it'll take to get upstairs.

I'm exhausted, dragging my exhausted body up the steps to the loft, ready to catch a few hours of sleep before it starts all over again.

When I reach my front door, I can only let out a ragged groan at the sight of my father.

“It’s...” I check my watch, bleary eyed. “Three in the morning.”

“I wouldn’t have been able to catch you at your doorstep if you hadn’t gone out to waste your time and your liver on childish endeavors,” he observes, misreading my undone tie and ragged appearance.

I wouldn’t have yanked the tie down if I’d known anyone is on my doorstep, but it’s too late now. “Alright, let’s have it out. It’s not like I planned on getting any sleep.”

“Don’t get smart with me, kid.” But he steps aside, so I unlock the door and push in. All talk, no bite. “I have half a mind to drag you and your fiancée to the courthouse and tie you down before you drive her away for good.”

Steeling myself, I toss the keys and take a seat. “Jac called you.”

It’s beyond me why he thinks he has enough sway over my decisions to show up in the middle of the night and make demands. A few years ago, he might’ve been able to make threats, but I’m not beholden to him anymore. Our only connection is through the company and mother.

“You’re well aware of the shitstorm we’ll have on our hands if you call off the deal with the Lin’s.”

We’ve had this fight. Recently, in fact. I knew he wouldn’t let it go without another one, but I didn’t anticipate it happening in this moment.

“So you flew out my ex-fiance to flaunt her around like a peacock, hoping it would fix everything,” I say. “Delsing Industries is untouchable to the Lin’s. They wanted us far more than we did them. Our stocks are at an all-time high, despite your dubious side hustles endangering everything.”

He shakes his head in disappointment, but it’s a farce. There’s no disappointment in Andrew Delsing’s entire body, only manipulation. “First the useless one, now the arrogant one. I should’ve had daughters.”

“Because you’re the only one involved in the process.” I chuckle. “It’s funny that you think a daughter would’ve been

easier to control. Every woman in your life who kisses your ass like it's made of gold only do it for your bank account.”

“Watch yourself,” he growls, dropping the act. “I can still cut you out.”

But we both know it's an empty threat. The all-mighty Delsing bloodline and all that bullshit.

“Did you ever stop to think that I'm not a kid anymore?” I throw at him. “That maybe, just maybe, I have enough foresight to plan before I act?”

He mimes looking around the room, as if the answer will pop up out of the floorboards. “Where is it, then? What's this grand plan of yours?” His voice raises with every word, until I know the neighbors must be hopping out of their beds in alarm. “I have given you *everything* there is to give, and *now* you think it's acceptable to steer off course? I should've sent you away. Might've toughened you up. It's your mother, that's why you're turning out like your useless brother.”

“I'm not a kid anymore. I have connections of my own, and I'll handle the Salt's on my own.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“It means that your interference didn't work. Flying Jackie out here didn't work. It's too late, old man.”

“*What did you do?*”

I give him a wicked smile, teeth bared. “Worried it involves you? Or is it the idea of losing control over the company that has you ambushing me at home? You won't disown me, and that's the only card you could play that I couldn't fight against. Not yet. But if you did, I can bet who'll take my side over yours. You've managed to piss off just about everyone you've ever met, while I'm at maybe half. I like those odds.”

“We're a *family*,” he stresses. “These decisions are meant to be made as a *family*.”

The moment you step into the big leagues, you become a target. Having a valuable last name and clout in important

social circles is one thing, but publicly trading in the top five-hundred is another matter entirely. Your own father starts accusing you of sabotage, for one.

“Don’t worry, *dad*. Delsing Industries will be better than ever after I deal with the Salt’s.” *And you’re next*. “But first, it’s time for you to fuck off from my apartment. I have more important things to deal with right now, thanks to you.”

## SERITA



Everyone's frantic, rushing past in droves.

"Dress, shoes, makeup... I think that's it," I count off, racking my brain for any remaining bridesmaid duties. My mother should know better than I do, considering she's done this before.

She officially marries Oscar Vranes in less than half an hour, and the bride herself is on her final legs of getting ready.

"I think we just have to wait for the cue," she says. She's been calm all morning, also from having done this before.

"That's good." I can't think of what else to say when it's just the two of us, but I try to throw her a bone. "You look beautiful."

She smiles softly. "Thank you, honey."

It's not a lie. Jemima *does* look beautiful in her long-sleeved, lace-overlaid wedding gown. It clings in all the right places, and she's taken care of her health over the years. Effortless and carefree, somewhat boho-esque, but tamed to a

refined silhouette that suggests a classical style. It fits the traditional vibe going around amongst the guests I've seen so far. Nothing that screams Jemima Brum. A concession to propriety. The comparison between public and private reminds me of Finn for some reason. In theory, not practice, though I wouldn't mind seeing Finn wearing a dress. It'd serve him right.

The wedding gown is light, off-white, but in a cool shade that compliments the deep violet the rest of us wear. Even Emily has on a pristine, lilac pantsuit.

Emily, the most frantic of them all, went to check on last-minute wedding planner duties. I'm unsure of what that entails, but glad that she's taken her panicky energy with her.

The Vranes house holds the upper crust of Connecticut, on top of the out-of-towner types coming in from throughout the rest of New England and New York. I've been told (not too gently) that New York isn't part of New Haven.

Chatter filters in through the open windows of the spare bedroom, temporarily designated as the bride's dressing room. Instead of holding the ceremony in the garden and moving into the ballroom for the reception, they've done the opposite. Heat warmers are strategically placed throughout the external area, because for whatever reason, Jemima and Oscar wanted a winter wedding.

"I heard a couple of guests got engaged recently," I tell her. "They're getting married next summer. Must be something in the air."

"It's the end of the year. People are thinking about their resolutions for the next one, planning their futures."

"Mhm." I pop my head out of the window long enough to spot the last of the guests ambling their way into the house, hastened by Finn and Galen, as is their job as groomsmen.

So far, their designated duties have depended on whatever event is being hosted. Likewise, I've been present at some events, and technically am the maid of honor, but didn't

coordinate the bachelorette party. Jemima went on a weekend spa with an old friend or two and called it a day.

Better than hiring strippers for your own mother.

“Emily did a number on this place,” I try again at being amicable for the special day.

Finn was right. The place was beautiful before, but it’s a fairytale now. Whimsical and elegant, nothing like the kind of ornamentation I grew up used to. I can objectively admit it looks better than anything I’d come up with.

“She’s young and new to the job, but she grew up watching her mother do the same thing,” Jemima answers. “A bit like you and your father, I think.”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

Galen stands by idly while Finn greets a middle-aged couple. From what I can tell, he’s as cordial and polite as ever, leading them in with the wife by the hand.

Part of me wants to march out there and demand he explain himself. What reason does he have to help my dad? *I heard him on the phone the other week.* That’s what Faron said. *Whywhywhy—*

But the answer’s obvious: to make him comfortable. To ease the pain and give him his last shot.

Right as I’m pulling away, his eyes flick up to the third floor, and we make eye contact. I jerk back before I can reconsider showing any reaction, cheeks burning at being caught.

“Did you see something down there?” Jemima says.

I shake my head, resisting the urge to yank the curtains shut. She’d definitely realize I’m acting weird then. “The sun got in my eyes. I’m just gonna...” I trail off, waving a hand towards the bathroom.

Once I’m inside, I whip out my phone.

**Me:** Everything going good out there?

The reply is instant, thankfully.

**Eleanor Altej:** Fine and dandy. Right as rain. Stop worrying!

Amazingly, it was Galen's idea to sneak Stormy out of the house, and then promptly back in it. It'd be cruel to have her watch everyone else celebrating outside from her window like some fairytale princess.

Galen suggested sneaking her out in the early morning, then having Eleanor bring her as 'her cousin from Maine.' Everyone else knows each other's families, so the lie wouldn't have held up long.

Stormy was armed with one kitten heel and one flat shoe, covered by a floor-length dress, along with a haircut to... straighten her out, so to speak. Anything brash that might come out of her mouth can be chalked up to her age.

It'll help, I hope, to intermingle with other people. Kids her age would be preferable, but I still don't know what Finn has planned as a solution to her illegal alien status. It's out of my hands now.

There's something about Stormy that doesn't quite fit, in the same way that Galen stands out, but amplified. She's no *demounia*, and I can't think of any other reason for why she is that way, but all the guests at this wedding are looking to stand out alongside her.

There's way too much tulle in my view—even for me, and that's saying something.

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I'm entering the ballroom when it happens.

“That's a lovely dress.”



I recognize her voice from when I (somewhat) accidentally eavesdropped on her months ago. “Thank you, Mrs. Delsing. You look lovely as well.”

It’s a miracle I can think of anything to say to this woman, but it’s a genuine compliment. Finn and Faron’s mother looks remarkable with her blonde hair coiled up on top of her head in a complicated, twisting style, and her teal silk dress hugs her frame in a flattering way.

“I’ve always imagined what Jem’s daughter turned out like,” Mrs. Delsing says, running her hazel eyes over me, somewhat... disbelieving? “She talks about you often.”

“Oh,” I say, rather dumbly. “I hope the real thing isn’t a disappointment.”

Internally cringing, I’m scrambling to make that sound less, what? Familiar? But she doesn’t appear deterred. I’ve never seen an awkward Delsing. Maybe they culled that gene a few generations back.

“No, not a disappointment,” she says, cryptic. “New, yes. Unpredictable, but not a disappointment.”

This is worse than trying to make conversation with *my* mother.

“You haven’t seen my son, have you?” she asks. “Finnian, I mean. As a bridesmaid, I expect you know more than I do.”

“He should be with Galen.” *Why is she asking me, of all people? Does she know?* “They’re probably inside by now.”

“He’s a dutiful boy.” Nothing in her face betrays any emotion, any indication of knowing more than she’s letting on. Meanwhile, I’m ready to combust. “Cautious and conservative, very much of his class, his father would tell you. I think it rather makes him the constant in the storm. Handy at events like this.”

She knows something. Thinks she knows, or she would’ve said this before me and Finn ended things.

Thankfully, the wedding planner rounds the corner at that moment, looking harried already.

“Serita,” Emily exclaims. “Time for you to get in place.”

“I’ll be right there.” I attempt a small, polite smile at Mrs. Delsing. “Enjoy the wedding.”

“Oh, I think I will,” she says coyly, slipping inside the ballroom doors and heading for the rest of her family.



“We are gathered here today...” I tune out the minister, my attention straying around the ballroom. Oscar and Jem wear wide smiles on their faces, beaming from ear to ear, eyes only for each other. I’m glad for them. I have no reason not to be.

Galen is a dark cloud to the side, barely awake.

On the other side of the aisle, Serita stands a few feet to the side of her mother, gnawing on her bottom lip, barely concentrating on the ceremony. The sequined, geometric shapes on her dress sparkle in the daylight, and light her up like a beacon. I can’t make out what the shapes are from here, so I make a mental note to find out later.

She’s avoided looking at me since I caught her watching me and Galen earlier. Hasn’t spoken a word.

Just as well. I have the rest of the day. The reception is the perfect opportunity. After last night, I can give her a reason to stay.

I told her yesterday: *We're closing in on a location within hours.* Now I just need to draw out the whole picture for her.

But if you try to rush a hacker, they'll only start talking nonsense. A few hours ended up meaning four in the morning.

For once, I'm the one to blame for Galen's fatigued state. I owe him one. We snuck in through a bathroom at the Salt's off-books warehouse to recoup the cargo and get rid of any evidence.

Well, not the guns, but I have a plan for that.

If Serita hadn't made the decision to leave with the rest of the wedding guests tomorrow, I could've dealt with the missing drugs and equipment after today.

Part of the reason I'm standing instead of sitting has to do with staying awake. Days without sleep takes a toll, and if I sit, I'm not getting back up until tomorrow, and she'll be gone by then.

I'm positioned at the back of the ballroom, rather than the front, though I'm meant to sit with Faron and Jer. I'd planned on it before the adrenaline of this morning left me. Then I'd spotted someone who made me want the visibility that comes with standing at the back.

Gia Laredo sits a few feet in front of me, back ramrod straight. If I didn't know her, I might not have been able to pick her out of the crowd. She's petite, compact and appears even smaller than she is, hunched over in her seat. I recognize her by those corkscrew curls and her multicolored hair.

She swept in, left a gift with Galen without speaking a word to either of us, and sat as far back in the ballroom as possible, despite having shown up early. I'd bet she only plans on staying long enough to greet the newlyweds. She must feel our eyes on her. Galen's kept an eye on her. Alone, no sign of her brother.

I flick my attention to Jer and Faron, but they're staring ahead. They're preoccupied by the letdown of Luke not showing, but they must've doubted he'd show.

Eleanor Altej and Stormy. I'd voted to send her a slideshow afterwards, but here the kid is, sat in one of the middle rows. So far, she's behaved, watching the proceedings with curiosity, so I move on.

I do find one last surprise: Lily Caulfield. Jer's dad is nowhere in sight. The Caulfield's and the Thorne's are allied with the Yates family like how mine are with the Vranes's, no crossover. That doesn't keep the mighty Andrew Delsing from looking down on Oscar, but they both benefit from the guise of friendship.

*Maybe Jer's mom is a spy*, I muse, but it's more likely a gesture of neutrality for Jer's sake.

My attention snags on mother and father, seated with Jackie on Oscar's side of the aisle. Not my problem. Except Jac, but she'll keep up appearances for propriety's sake. People would have questions if she left without attending the wedding, and that's about the only reason keeping her here after our conversation last night. I wish it'd happened differently, but Serita might go through with jumping ship and leaving New Haven entirely if I don't get the plan in motion, so here we are.

Another benefit of standing at the back: avoiding those three. "It's a fine match," mother said last night after the rehearsal dinner. I didn't want to ruin her night, so I'd only nodded in agreement.

She didn't feel quite so lively this morning.

"Did you see that new display case Jemima Brum had installed in the foyer? How gauche," mother had told me hurriedly when I ushered her and father to their seats. I haven't seen the new display, nor do I care to.

"Excuse me, sir? They need your signature." Vic's voice is like flesh on a cheese grater in my ear. She's just slipped in through the side door, heels in her hand like she's sneaking from my father's office.

Vic abhors playing nice with me. Speaking to me like a superior grates on her even worse, but she's one of the few

people I enjoy lording over, and she knows why I do it.

I snatch the file from her harsher than needed. “Victoria, in case you haven’t noticed, we’re at a wedding. Fuck off for a bit. I’ll have this back to you later.”

“Yes, sir,” she grits out, retreating as fast she came.

It’d take mere seconds to sign the form—I know before opening the file what it holds, and I don’t need to look it over. That doesn’t mean Vic should feel comfortable enough to come within a hundred feet of my mother, especially not in public.

Cheers ring out across the ballroom, and I swing back to watch the front. Jem and Oscar are leaning in for a kiss.

Looks like I missed the big moment.

## SERITA



Polite clapping and a few lively cheers (thanks to the open bar) follow the conclusion of my maid of honor speech.

Galen was meant to follow it up with a toast congratulating the newlyweds, but he snuck off. I saw him swipe a bottle of champagne earlier, but the metaphorical dark cloud hanging over his head kept me from approaching him. Instead, one of Great Aunt Corinna's sons holds the toast.

Everyone's moved from the ballroom to the grounds, heated to compensate for the winter chill. Twinkling garden lights aim up at the house, illuminating the mansion in a warm glow and inviting merriment from the guests.

The gardens extend in all different directions surrounding the house, captivating in the dimmed light. Couples whirl atop the newly constructed dance floor, sit in pairs on the benches, stroll through clipped hedges, and gather around the dinner tables.

I mean to cut across the dance floor and head for a table, but I'm ensnared by a muscular set of arms pulling me in and guiding my arms around his neck.

"You wouldn't make a scene in the middle of your mother's wedding, would you?" Finn murmurs, head lowered to whisper by my ear, arms circling my waist.

"I won't see anyone here again," I say, not bothering to lower my voice. "I wouldn't count it out."

"I don't believe you." He twirls us to the side, his movements practiced. "You won't lash out at her to spite me."

"Shouldn't you be dancing with your fiancée?"

"I saw *you* dancing in some scrawny fuck's arms for one song, and it nearly drove me insane. That leaves us with two options. We dance, or I go hunt down that horny shithead here and now." He pulls back enough to look me in the eyes. His resemble the deep green of the maze hedges in nighttime light, ringed with evidence of exhaustion. "We dance, and you tell me it was you who requested they play this song. My favorite song."

"Tell me you didn't have a doctor flown out to see my dad. Some kind of specialist," I counter. "Despite knowing there never was any way for you to help my dad, was there? Oh, and by the way, I believe the 'scrawny fuck' you're referring to is one of Galen's cousins. Possibly second or third cousin, and definitely underage, so leave him alone. *I will be.*"

I don't tell him that I saw him watching us while we danced. That, despite everything, it made my heart pound. It's still pounding now.

"I knew there was nothing to help your dad, but I needed an excuse for you to stay," he admits, expression unchanging. "When that was gone, I made you an offer. But I couldn't make that first promise and do nothing. Your turn."

*But why? That isn't something you do for someone you have casual sex with.*

*That isn't something you do when you're about to get married to someone else.*



“I didn’t tell your fiancée anything.” Talking to Mrs. Delsing was awkward enough on its own.

“Tell me you didn’t request my favorite song yourself, then.”

“Maybe it was Faron. Did you ask him?” *Why assume it was me?*

“Here’s what I really want to know: Did you do it before or after Jackie flew in? Before or after you found that file?”

I laugh, but there’s no humor in it. “What do you think?”

His finger rubs a circle on my waist. I’m itching to yank his hand off, but he’s right: I won’t make a scene.

“I’m starting to think you really do want my rap sheet,” he tries. “Including every single thing I’ve ever done, and every thought I’ve ever had, so you can weigh my transgressions against me before you stop running away with your tail between your legs and let me make my case.”

“Make your case?” I abruptly stop swaying. “For *what?* We had a deal: have some fun. No one has to know. I put up with you annoying me, and vice versa. You think I’m a carnie freak, got it. Your fiancée showed up, and I’m not into that. End of the story.”

“I also think we’ve spent too much time ignoring our truest thoughts, stuffing them down.” Another twirl from him sets us back in motion and takes us from the middle of the dancing couples and off to the sides, nearly at the tables. “A truth for a truth.”

“Again, why aren’t you dancing with your fiancée?”

“Because she’s left by now, I imagine,” he says. “Here’s my first truth for the night: because I don’t have a fiancée.”

I’m the one who pulls back this time, stumbling over my own feet, but Finn rights me easily.

“As of last night,” he continues, face expressionless. “My mother was the one calling the last time you were at the loft.”

“What does that have to do with me?”

“I thought Faron had gotten into some kind of emergency, but it wasn’t about him. It was about me. Everyone in my family has a PI they prefer, including my mother. Howie’s mine, Elise is her go-to.”

“You all need therapy.” It’s not even a dig. I genuinely think so. I might be a mess now, but before therapy, I was a dumpster fire. “Don’t tell me. Elise tails your father.”

“Obviously.” He waves that off, inconsequential. To him, it is. “Ensuring a family line’s survival comes down to pragmatism and, when need be, ruthlessness. Better to be prepared for the worst than regret overlooking someone out of apparent harmlessness. That’s the Delsing way. I have Howie on speed dial. I’ve had more NDA’s passed out than candy on Halloween. I never said it wasn’t screwed up. But I know all there is to know about you on paper, so I’m showing you my hand. You can leave or stay, but make your decision with all the information.”

“Are you... debriefing me?” I ask. “Why can’t you ever get to the point? I may ask too many questions, but I consider that a feat. It takes skill to get that many questions in when you won’t shut up.”

“This isn’t the speech, this is the buildup to the actual speech. Context for it, if you will.”

“I won’t.” I go to stomp on his foot, but he sidesteps me. Next, I consider stomping on my own foot. Escape the wedding reception altogether. But that would mean I can’t leave when he finally gets to the ‘actual speech.’

“If you fake passing out, I’ll let you fall,” he says, as if reading my thoughts. “Trample an ankle, maybe. Just enough to sprain, so you’ll hear me out.”

I stomp at his foot again, and he dodges again. “You’re lucky I’m out of practice.”

Ignoring me, he quickens his steps when a more upbeat song starts to play. “Remember when you eavesdropped when I was on the phone with Jac? It was months ago. She told me

she felt like ‘a noose was tightening around her neck. Mine, too.’ I was already doubting going through with it then.”

“But you didn’t call it off.”

“Jac fought for me for the sake of appearances, so her father doesn’t choose someone worse for her. It disrupted the way I’d been handling the engagement until then: by not thinking about it. Don’t ask, don’t tell, and don’t complain. But I’ve met enough desperate clients to realize when’s someone feels like they have a gun to their head. Then my mother found out.”

“Found out...?”

“The terms of the engagement,” he spells out. “It spiraled from there. I didn’t realize she’d care. I chalked it up to how her own marriage turned out. It was a needless debate—I’d been planning to call it off with Jac for a while.”

“Since when?”

“Since before you.” He stops. Stops speaking, stops dancing. Now we’re both immobile on the dance floor. He’s split open, raw and vulnerable. I can’t look away. “At least, I’d started planning on it, without even realizing that’s what I was doing. It’s in my nature to consider the options, think of how things might play out, weigh the risks. But then there was you. That’s when I realized what had to happen. I’ll take the responsibility. It was my idea, and I broke it off, so it really is my fault. It’ll look bad on Jac in our circles if I don’t.”

He must’ve had good reason to make the deal in the first place. I knew that, but it felt too personal a subject to broach.

“I can’t imagine how that conversation went,” I comment. *Listen, Jackie, I can’t marry you, but I won’t throw you to the wolves, so don’t worry. Have a nice life.*

“Badly,” he brushes off. “I see you’re wondering why I didn’t tell you any of this yesterday.”

“With good reason.”

He nods, acquiescing the point. “I didn’t think it’d work out so soon. I thought I had time to figure it out, but then you

said you were leaving, and I had to rush the timeline. You remember what I said about plausible deniability?

“With much confusion.”

“Then I remembered Providence, when Robb Zhang fell into my lap. Well, yours.”

“He’s attractive without the tie dye,” I justify. “Get over it.”

“I needed something Jac’s dad could give me, but he’s not the only one who can,” Finn says, apparently intent on ignoring all my quips tonight. “He was the best option at the time, so I found another one.”

“You consider Robb a best option?”

Why is that more shocking than the rest of what he’s said combined?

He lists off his points like he’s reciting from a brochure. “I only went for Jac because the Lin’s are associates of the Salt’s. The Salt’s have been fucking with the company for years, and with me, through my side business.”

“As a Contractor, right.”

“I befriended Ben Gould because he’s an acquaintance of Nero Salt, and the whole point of marrying Jac was to fuck over the Salt’s eventually, but Gould was a dead end. He knows how to throw a party, but the Salt’s are recluses.”

“So how were the Lin’s meant to help? And Robb?”

“They weren’t. Felix, Jac’s dad, thought he’d try to make it as a big fish. It’s an old cartel tactic. The little guy tries to instigate two of the big suppliers into fighting each other, then he gets to stand back while we wipe each other out, and take our place in the midst of the chaos.” He clicks his teeth, a vicious smile on his face. “Then there’s Zhang. In exchange for not burying his ass for—”

“Carrying a gun on campus?”

“—selling coke his cousin imports from overseas, I enlisted his help. The gun he tried to sheet me with had the

serial number scratched off a very specific model.”

“Finn. *The point.*”

“Zhang has some interesting cousins?”

I shouldn’t care enough to ask. I really shouldn’t. “What’d you have them do?”

He nods to an empty table set apart from the ones encircling the main garden, and we head over. Apparently, he doesn’t want anyone to overhear the answer. “You’ll hear about in on the news soon enough. I didn’t want to ruin Jem’s big day with her guests gossiping throughout the ceremony.”

“Oh, screw you. Tell me.”

“Need to know. The Salt’s have friends in media, and if they get wind of it, they’ll try to buy their way out.” But then, he winks. “Lane Salt is running for office under a ‘*Screw foreigners*’ slogan. I’m sure his party will be happy with him when he’s found gunrunning over their border. A friend of mine interns for the Nevada attorney general, and he’s looking for a flashy case that’ll get him re-elected for a second term. Taking down corporate America and all that.”

“How’d Robb find all that out?”

He waves a dismissive hand. “Zhang barely found shit. His cousin’s a decent little helper, though. And anyone with wealth is practiced in hiding their shit, Salt’s included. It took a while to find what we were looking for, but blackmail’s a great motivator, yadda yadda. Me and Galen were the ones that went and found the missing goods.”

“With a mirror or two, I’m guessing.”

“And I left a few things behind.” The whole while he’s talking, Finn’s animated in a way he usually represses, especially in public. He played the game and won. “Felix Lin and Lane Salt’s oldest son, Octavian, are going down with him. The former is my parting gift to Jac. Her and her sister won’t go down with him, I made sure of it.”

Like a kid in a candy store.

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“You are *such* an asshole.”

That wipes the grin right off Finn’s face. “For what?”

“Why didn’t you just *tell me* all of this?” I demand. “I’m a big girl, I can understand perfectly fine! Instead, you jerk me around however you please, leaving me in the dark, letting me stew in my own anger—”

“I know you’re capable of understanding,” he interjects hastily. “But, look. At first, my business with the Salt’s was separate from our business, and adjacent to Jac’s. It didn’t all come together until *this morning*. There wasn’t time.”

“And that’s all? There’s nothing else I’m in the dark about?”

He *hesitates*.

There must be some emotion on my face that indicates I’m about to tackle him across the table, because he scoots his chair closer, then goes to do the same with mine.

“I told you I wanted you to know all this so you made your choice with the facts in mind,” he says, grasping my hand. “I wanted you to know that being in a family like mine, it strips you of your identity, then it forces you to develop a suitable one. One fitting for a Delsing. It can feel like it’s killing you slowly, being like that. And then I met you, and it felt like I was transforming into someone else again. I didn’t know what to do with that, but now I do. Whatever happens next, I wanted you to know that I chose you, whether or not you choose me back.”

I tense when a waiter comes near our table, making Finn pause, but he doesn’t linger.

“I’ve always looked at life like personal gains and losses that reflect on the family as a whole. Outsiders are either people to be used or people that aren’t useful enough for consideration. That’s why I didn’t see how this could affect you from the start, but I see it now.” He’s looking at me the

same way he did while we were dancing, stripped raw, no pretense to speak of. “I see you in ways that mean I look at the world differently because of you, and it’s terrifying, but it’s also beautiful. I don’t often take what I want without knowing there’s more to be gained than lost, and not in any qualitative ways, only the bottom line. This isn’t that. You’re more than that.”

“I thought of using you once.” I may as well tell him.

“I know.”

“You don’t mind?”

“No, because I know why.”

Dad.

“It physically *hurt* me to think what made you so jaded, so different from that boy who took me on the ferris wheel. I wanted to understand why you do the things you do for your job and your friends,” I tell him. “And then you hurt me, and I realized you can hurt *me*. I wanted you to lose control over *me*.”

“What do you think I’ve been doing this whole time?” he asks softly, eyes tracking the bob of my throat. “Neither of us are great at letting go of control.”

“But for me, when times get tough, I panic,” I go on. “Trying to stay sober, it... it’s complicated.”

“That’s alright.”

“I didn’t want to listen to you during the rehearsal in the bathroom. I didn’t want to consider you were being honest with me in a way you’ve never been honest with anyone. If you went to nurse Fiona’s office and picked up a brochure on drug abuse, I could tick off all the symptoms I showed. I’m sober now, and I’m still a mess, and a lousy pessimist, *and* a wide-eyed romantic. All together, I don’t know how to reconcile all of that together. I didn’t want you to see those parts of me all at once and decide I wasn’t worth the trouble.” My eyes fall to the pristine dishwater, the spotless tablecloth. The picture they paint of who lives here. “When we found Stormy, I accused Galen of pulling some prank to terrorize me.

I always wondered why he never escalated things before, if he really did dislike me that much. It never made sense. I figured it out eventually, though. You're always cleaning up after their messes, Galen included. You're the one that held him back, aren't you? Not just me. Not back then, before we... But you're the one who kept him from taking it nuclear with Jemima, and with me.

"You overrate me, Slater."

"No, I don't think I do."

Both our voices are hushed, even though we're alone, like we're sharing a new secret. Together.

"Why would I care to look after you and your mother?"

"Because that's what you do. I know what you did for my dad. You're Finn the fixer. It's what you do: carrying people." Jemima was right. *You're more like a parent than most parents I know.*

So was Mrs. Delsing. *The constant in the storm.*

"I think you hide behind Galen's seat of power in the hierarchy because you don't want another responsibility on your plate. Can't take on more without folding. You carry too much as is."

"And if that's the case?"

"Then let me carry some of it with you."

He stares for so long I start to panic, wondering if I got it wrong, said the wrong thing, but then he's kissing me.

Right here, for anyone to see.

"Finn, aren't you supposed to stay low-key for now?" I say, lips barely pulled back from his.

He sighs. "Maze. The maze is closer."

---



“I thought we were done here,” I tell Finn. “Now that you’ve coerced me into making a speech of my own.”

“I learned something new about you today,” he replies cheerily, leading the way further into the less-populated areas on the grounds. “You have a vein that bulges when you talk about your feelings.”

“Stop it.”

“Make me.”

This feels surreal, too fast. It’s hard to believe so much could have changed in so little time, but that’s the thing. He had a plan in motion all along.

“Does this mean you’ll put out the stops?” I ask. “Woo me like the heroes do in my books?”

We stroll along one of the trimmed paths, but I don’t know which. Finn doesn’t look worried, and he’s spent enough of his childhood here that I’m content to follow along for once.

“Depends on which books you’re talking about. The smutty ones, I hope.”

We arrive at a shed, a bit dusty but not overgrown. The light grey paint of the exterior is unstained, the windows clear.

I give him a shove, but there’s no force in it. “You did joke about trying... new things.”

“What of it?”

“Well, you hold back with me. I know you do, but you don’t have to treat me like glass.” May as well throw in another truth while we’re on a roll. “In fact, don’t. I’m not super experienced, but I wasn’t more than half-virgin when I met you, at most. Actually, I don’t know how to calculate that, but you get the point. The first for me, he wasn’t so bad. I think I took him by surprise.”

“I’m so glad to hear this.”

Hastening to the point, I add, “What I mean is, I was the one who came onto him.”

“Don’t virgins usually do the opposite?”

I'm tempted to ask if that's what it was like for him, but I don't really want to know. I'm only telling him about my first experience because of how it happened. How it didn't happen, more like.

"I talked myself into it, kinda jumped him a little. I just... wanted to know what all the fuss was about. Sure, that was kind of a let down, and *that* you will be glad to hear, but I don't need kid gloves. No more bubble wrap. Do all the things you warned me against."

The greatest victory is making Finn Delsing lose his hold over the self-imposed discipline he feels the need to impose on himself. I want to see how far I can push him.

He can start the wooing tomorrow.

"You like putting on a show, don't you?" he asks silkily. "Someone could stumble out here any minute."

"I suppose they could."

"Hmm, better hope no one does before we're done." He pulls me in by the hip, fingers digging in. Our lips crash together, every pent-up emotion pouring out in a rush.

I grip his collar, tugging it to the side and groaning into the sensation, having this back. *Finally*.

He steers us towards the shed until my back hits the wall. Without breaking the kiss, he squeezes my thighs, and I wrap my legs around his waist.

"They won't go for it."

I ignore the voice, coming from somewhere off to our left, but Finn pulls back. "Oh, come *on*."

Panting slightly, my eyes blink open and find his swollen lips. "Why'd you stop?"

"Galen."

That fast, the spell's broken.

FINN



“You went back in and brought her out,” I state, brokering no room for argument. “You went in alone and brought her *here*.”

We all agreed we wouldn’t go looking for answers in the Slant again, but Galen didn’t agree not to bring the Slant to *us*.

“Don’t get mad.”

I whirl on Serita, slack jawed. I’d expect Faron to come to Galen’s defense, but never her. “Are you kidding me? How are we supposed to explain how she’s here? We’re already harboring one illegal alien as is.”

*Another person to keep track of, to be responsible for.*

“How can you deny him the chance at saying goodbye?” she whispers furiously.

“*Now* you’re on his side?” I don’t bother with lowering my voice in return. “He didn’t bring her here to *say goodbye*. Even if he did, that’s not her. She’s taking advantage of him.”

“You know that’s not the point.”

“Isn’t it? Have you forgotten what happened on Halloween?”

She cringes, and I reel back, collecting myself. Trying, anyway.

“Are you going to let me make my case, or is this lovers’ spat?” Galen intones, tensed in front of his mother’s caricature self. She peers out at me and Serita from behind his shoulder, wide-eyed and frazzled looking, the same as the last time we saw her.

Alive, Andrea Vranes was a force to be reckoned with. The kind of person who took on wifhood and motherhood as additional roles in her life, but never buckled from the weight. She never showed weakness or distress. She could handle anything and anyone.

She certainly never looked deranged, clothes torn and silver-blond hair ragged.

“Fine,” I spit out. “Talk.”

It hits me that we’ve reversed our roles. Is that’s what’s unsettling here? How calm Galen’s acting? *Is* it an act?

“We just talked through the glass,” Galen says, dusting a dead leaf from his tux. “She wanted to *warn* us.”

“Warn us about what?” Serita asks. “You snuck off to meet with her during my speech, didn’t you?”

“I did.” He looks from me to her, making some calculation. “Remember what I told you before? About the animals?”

“Yes,” I confirm.

“They were fleeing. I went to look into it, and I could feel their fear.”

“Feel...?” Serita’s eyes narrow slightly, trying to puzzle out his meaning.

The fake Andrea whimpers. She *whimpers*.

*Pet or beast or creature, they’re all gone.*

“They were test subjects,” Galen continues. “To see if there’s a way to get out.”

“Out from the Slant?”

He nods gravely. “Every cat, dog, insect, and farm animal in the Slant was out looking for cracks between here and the Slant.”

“Did they find one?” I demand. “Why didn’t you tell anyone about this?”

“When she told me what was happening, I decided to act because I didn’t want to waste time sitting around and waiting for the council meeting to commence. I don’t need to hear the pity speech again. I needed answers, and I wasn’t going to find them here. She has the answers, just hear her out.”

“But did they find one?” I repeat.

“What do you think she came to warn us about?”

“That, or someone followed you out,” I say, thinking of the partial poem written by the docks. “Someone could’ve followed us back.”

“Guys,” Serita interjects. “Calm down. Let’s tackle this rationally. Freaking out won’t fix this.”

Galen narrows his eyes at her. “Fix this?”

“We still have to send her back,” I reiterate. “We can’t keep her here, there’s no way we could explain it.”

“Dammit,” she mutters, crossing her arms.

“After what I just told you,” Galen explodes. “You still want to send her back *there*? Why shouldn’t she be the one that gets to stay?”

His eyes cut over to Serita. Looking for backup? But then he adds, “The mistress gets to move in, but my mom can take care of herself on her own?”

“The what?” Serita exclaims. “My mother is no one’s *mistress*.”

“Why do you think my parents got divorced? Why do you think she was *in that car* the night she died?” he snarls, face flushed. “She *knew* he was fucking the maid, the biggest cliché in the damn book! You’re not supposed to fuck the help, let alone *marry* them. I’d rather have her here than dear old dad.”

Galen gestures at not-Andrea, who’s trembling but silent.

“My mother was never a *maid*,” Serita argues. “I would know. How would I not know what job she had? Are you insane?”

Galen tilts his head to the side, brow furrowed. “You didn’t know.”

I told Jem she should’ve come clean with Serita about what she did for a living. I never knew Galen’s version of events. He never told me. I can’t blame him.

“She was embarrassed,” I say, filled with dread. This isn’t how I saw this happening. I wouldn’t have thought I’d be here when it did. Jem was meant to tell Serita on her own. “She didn’t want Serita to think she’d had a hard time after she left. But it wasn’t an affair.”

“How do you know?” Surprisingly, the question comes from Serita, not Galen. They’re both worked up now, for different reasons.

“Oscar checks in with me sometimes,” I remind Galen (and tell Serita). “I hang around their place often enough that Jem and I talk. She doesn’t have many friends, other than Oscar’s, which don’t really count, so she gets lonely.”

“So she lied,” Galen says, shaking his head. “The only person she has to talk to is half her age, and she didn’t want you to think badly of her, so she lied.”

“You know me better than that.” I look at him pleadingly, trying to get through to him and move on from this conversation so we can get back to the person hiding behind him like a wounded animal. “Jem’s not a skilled liar, and even if she were, you think I wouldn’t be able to see through her?”

“I think you’re developing a weakness for Slater women,” he spits out.

Serita balks. “How about—”

“How’d you get here so fast?”

Stormy walks up to the shed, frowning at our assembled group. Galen rolls his eyes. He must’ve heard her coming.

“Who?” he asks.

“You.” Stormy points at Serita, who appears torn between starting in on Galen or asking Stormy what she’s talking about. “Everyone’s talking about your dad showing up. I think I saw him, but he was pretty far away. Looked like him, though.” When Serita doesn’t react, she keeps going. “I saw you and him walk off with Eleanor. Where’d they go, and how’d you end up on this side of the house?”

For a few silent moments, no one moves. I realize how little we’ve had to go on, how little we know about what we’ve gotten involved with. Stormy came out of the Slant wanting to forget it exists. Me, Faron, and Jer went along with Galen and Serita’s half-baked plans because we couldn’t come up with better ones.

I never stopped to consider that leaving the Slant to rest didn’t mean it would leave us alone in return.

“Stormy.” I crouch down so we’re on the same level. “This is very important. Where did Serita and her dad take Eleanor?”

---

The five of us—me, Galen, the fake Andrea, Serita, and Stormy—race across the lawn, running flat out.

Serita has her heels swinging from her white-knuckled grasp, and Stormy’s trailing behind, legs shorter than ours.

A scream pierces the air, puncturing through the jovial sounds of partygoers trailing behind us, coming from the furthest fringes of the property. None of them will be able to hear it over the music and laughter. No one else will come.

Part of me is glad for it. I don’t relish lying.

We pass the furthest edges of the maze, rounding the corner and jolting to a stop. The edges of the Vranes property is marked on this side by a modest lake on the other side of a low stone wall.

Right beyond the wall, we find Eleanor. She's not alone.

There's so many bats, a swarm of them clouding the view from above. *Test subjects*. They sweep across the night sky, not as a singular mass, but each of them hemming Eleanor Altej in from different sides, as if they've gone rabid. They arc downwards, slashing out at her, swerving to avoid the long branch she's swinging around in a protective circle.

Eleanor's curly black hair snags on a wing, causing her to wince and grit her teeth, green eyes narrowing on her attackers.

Galen's the first to snap out of it. He says something to his —*not* his mother, and sprints forward, into the fray.

He takes a swing at one of them, with a metal bat, ironically.

I follow suit, Serita only a step behind me. All I have is a worn lacrosse stick, taken from the shed, but I get a few hits in. The bats don't move like they should, animalistic without much forethought. Instead, they change trajectory and peel past us, almost tactfully. Human-like.

Serita curses at them, a fierce look on her face, trying to get closer to her friend. She slashes her way through, armed with a metal crowbar.

The skill Eleanor shows at protecting herself has me in awe; I've only thought of her so far as a good girl type. Quiet and reserved.

Her reflexes are better than I expected, but it's not enough. There must be at least a hundred bats, maybe more, closing in rapidly.

From the corner of my vision, I spot Stormy hurling a shoe up into the air, spitting out expletives.



“We need to make a run for it,” Serita shouts. “There’s too many of them!”

“Where’d they go?” Eleanor yells back.

“*Who?*”

“Down,” Galen instructs. “Get *down*.”

I drop to the ground on instinct, slashing at a rabid bat during the ascent.

Eleanor screeches, but it’s too late. Raising up on my elbows, I catch the sight of Serita tugging Eleanor by off by her hair. Eleanor claws out, scratching at her arms, kicking her legs out wildly.

I jerk my head away and find Serita. The real one is scrambling onto her feet, readjusting the crowbar in her grip.

The other Serita barely spares her a glance. Instead, she pulls out a basic kitchen knife, one you’d use to chop up a chicken or a cut of beef, and stabs it right into Eleanor’s leg.

*Where’s Galen?* There’s no time to parse it out. I’m racing to catch up with the real Serita, trying to get there first.

“Come any closer and the next one goes in her heart.”

Serita stumbles, nearly pitching over in her haste to slow her pace. I come to a stop just a step in front of her.

“If I tell you to wait for Galen’s signal and stay behind me, will you listen?” I murmur.

“The only situation where I take orders from you is the one where we’re naked,” she hisses back. Louder, she calls out, “What do you want?”

“My blood bag ran off,” the other Serita says in a way that suggests she’s not talking about an inanimate object. “I came to collect her.”

“El isn’t—”

“I’m not talking about your nosy little friend here.” Serita’s twin smirks. “I mean Andrea Vranes.”

“What do you mean when you call her your ‘blood bag’?” I ask, stalling for time.

*Galen, where are you?* Did he leave so he could get her to safety?

“Exactly what it sounds like. I know Vranes blood is the key to opening the door, so I’ve been taking hers. Only a *little*, I’m no monster.” She adds that last part at the grimace of disgust my Serita sends her way. “It hasn’t worked yet, but it hardly matters now, does it?”

It hits me in an instant. In order to broker a demon’s bargain, the blood has to be willingly given both ways. It’s a swap: both parties exchange their blood in order for the bargain to take hold.

Serita only knows this because I told her, and I never told this version of her. Neither did the false Andrea Vranes.

I surreptitiously scan the wall marking off the Vranes property, searching for Serita’s dad. I’ve only seen him in photos, but anyone without a bright head of silver hair is another potential enemy.

“How’d you get it to work on the bats?” Serita asks her other self.

I wonder if she’s coming to the same conclusions that I have, or if she’s thought further ahead, anticipating her own actions. I’m not sure if it’ll be of any help. None of the other selves have shown much likeness to their original’s so far.

“Who said anything about the bats? We only gave them directions to take the places of the ones here. All I had to do was set Andrea free and make sure she found her son through the mirror.”

That injured bat I saw months ago wasn’t injured, it was watching me. She did something to them. The blood might not have worked on them, but something definitely worked on the animals in the Slant.

“Galen wouldn’t leave the mirror open for any of you to get out,” I snap. It doesn’t sound like not-Andrea would either, though I still don’t trust her yet.

“Neither of them had to know.” Not-Serita rolls her eyes, trailing the knife along Eleanor’s collarbone.

Eleanor shakes from the effort of standing, mostly propped up by the maniac beside her. I’d decided whatever Galen’s doing justifies stalling on his behalf, but the more Eleanor’s eyes droop and the longer her blood flows, I second-guess the choice.

It isn’t bleeding enough to make me think she hit a major artery, but if she keeps bleeding out...

“You’re the one that followed them out.”

*And Serita’s other dad.* Another option for where Galen went.

Her smile widens. At least they didn’t find another way in.

“You left the poem too,” Serita accuses.

Her near-twin stares the original down, hungrily drinking her in. It’s as if she’s scrutinizing herself in the mirror.

*“Though thou retain of me one picture more, yet that will be, being in thine own heart, from all malice free.”*

The last three missing lines. She knows the poem by heart.

“What’s it mean?”

“It doesn’t *mean* anything.” She snorts. “The poem was a trail of breadcrumbs to spark your interest, so you’d keep the doorway open between worlds. A *demounia* can never resist a good mystery. She always loved poetry, the idea of someone riding in, writing some for her. Saving her.”

“She who? Andrea? She’s not a *demounia*,” I say.

“I wasn’t talking about her.” Though the other Serita looks pleased at catching us in one more piece of information we don’t know. “She learned we all have to save ourselves. That’s what I’m doing.”

“You’re hiding,” I tell her. “Hiding out here in the dark and cold.”

“Only so long as it takes to pry the door open all the way, and the others will join us.” *Others?* “Find me Josefina

Thorne, and bring her here.”

“*Josie?*” I look at her incredulously, thrown off. “You’re saying this has to do with *Josie?*”

“*Josie,*” Serita echoes, eyes widening in understanding.

“We shall come for you next, Galen Khur Vranes.”

Galen hurtles out of the lake, springing into the air—he used the reflection to get back, that’s what gives him the momentum to defy gravity.

However not-Serita figured he’d react, this wasn’t it. She’s distracted just long enough for me to bridge the distance, tackling her to solid ground. Eleanor goes sprawling, but I leave her to Serita for now.

I roll to my side, and Galen’s there. We haul her towards the edge of the lake, and that’s when it happens.

The Slant’s Daniel Slater springs out from beyond the tree line, coming our way. We hasten to the lake, but he’s running full-tilt, so I angle other-Serita further into Galen’s hold and go to cut him off before he reaches Serita carrying a limp Eleanor.

But there’s no need. Galen’s mother’s right behind him. She’s holding Galen’s bat, and it connects with the back of his skull. A loud *crack* sounds out, and he goes down.

I don’t pause to reconsider. The two of us start dragging him over to the lake, intent on throwing him in with his daughter. Galen’s straight-faced, holding onto a struggling not-Serita at the water’s edge. The reflective surface of the lake ripples and waves cascade, revealing another world within its depths.

Something hard hits my back, and I go flying forward, face first. There’s no time to react, to yell out. The last glimpse I see of the real world is Serita holding onto Eleanor, the horde of bats bearing down on them.

Lake water fills my lungs in an instant, and I’m dragging everyone else with me.

Down into the dark.

---

The same house sits off in the distance. The same maze, the same lake, but now we're in the Slant.

Galen holds the reflection open when we fall through, but we're on the wrong side. Instinctively, we formed two lines. Me, Galen, and Andrea on one side, not-Serita and her father on the other. They're cutting off the exit.

Rather than leap right back through, they charge.

When the burst of force hits me, I realize whatever the other Serita did when she was experimenting on the animals of the Slant must've worked in more ways than one.

Not demonic magic, but magic all the same.

And all I have is a lacrosse stick.

But I didn't come here to die, so I thrust the stick out at her, ducking at every gust of magical force, narrowly dodging her attacks. I let her think she's forcing me into a retreat, careful not to cross my feet and lose balance, trying to get around Andrea's open side.

Galen's on the other end, cutting off not-Daniel from getting to her.

*My blood bag ran off. I came to collect her.* I remind myself this is not my Serita.

She pulls out another blade from her boot, this one much longer. Our weapons meet halfway, if you can call mine that, and I angle forward so the flat of hers connects with mine without slicing it in two.

She traverses, spiraling towards me, intent on finishing this. I throw everything I have into taking advantage of our size difference, knocking the short sword from her wrist. It falls with a clatter, and I knock her down by the knees.

That's when the world goes white. Bright light blinding my vision, screams ringing out, more than there ought to be. Ten of them? Twenty?

When the light fades, the land is scorched to black. There's no one in sight besides me, Galen, and Andrea.

No one at all.

But there are scorch marks that appear different from the rest, almost resembling bodies. Fourteen of them in total.

"I'm sorry," Andrea whispers, falling to her knees. Galen skids to the ground with her. "I saw they had backup waiting for them, and you couldn't take all of them."

"What did you do?"

I'm seeing it with my own eyes, and I still can't believe the sight. Where blood is meant to run faintly red beneath the skin, hers shows stark black, climbing up distinctive veins. On her arms, what's visible of her legs, crawling up her neck.

"They mixed something into my blood, trying to make it work for them," she says tearfully. The tear runs down black. "That's when it started. The blight. It... *bursts* out of me. I can't always control it. I knew it'd kill me, and soon." She takes Galen's face in her hands, but she's no longer trembling. Something in her has finally gone still.

*Oh, God, I think. It's happening all over again. He won't survive this.*

*Not again.*

"When they told me what was on the other side," she says to him in a low voice. "I knew I couldn't let them find you there. I'm so sorry. I just wanted to see my son one last time before I go."

I can't look at Galen. I can't even move. The blackened blood won't stop spreading.

"Mom," he says, so quiet I barely hear him. "I know it's not you, but it still means everything."

There's something lodged in my throat. A word, a feeling, I can't tell what.

"I choose to believe this world exists so that we might find our way back to each other in it," she finishes. Her hands fall

from his face. They've gone limp, along with the rest of her.

Galen follows her to the blackened ground, the same way he used to chase after his mother when we were little and could barely walk, toddling around on stubby legs.

*Mom, mom, wait for me.*

Not everyone in the Slant was born out of evil. They were born into a dead world, and it made some of them cruel, but not all. It made at least one dreamer.

## SERITA



When Finn and Galen step out of the lake on their own, Andrea nowhere in sight, I feel my breath catch.

“I texted Jericho and Faron. You dropped this when you fell through,” I say, handing Finn back his phone. “I told Jericho to bring the first aid kit from your car. They should be here soon.”

We each tell our sides of the stories. Finn summarizes what happened in the Slant, and I run through how me and El got away by dodging the bats around the maze, then hid in the shed. When it went quiet outside, we came back to the lake to look for them and waited.

“Where is she?” El asks, leaning heavily on the wall, white-faced with pain. “The woman who was with you?”

Finn’s voice comes out thick. “Why?”

“I want to thank her. I saw her help us.”

Galen finally looks over at us. So far, he’s sat a few feet away on the wall, slumped with what looks like exhaustion.



Now, his light-blue eyes land on El. He stares her down, that unnatural stillness of his in full force. He's stripped away any pretense of normalcy, of being human. In its place, a predator.

She doesn't balk, doesn't back down. There's that quiet strength in her that I saw when we found her alone, fighting off the swarm.

I look to Finn, seeing if he can parse out whatever's happening here, but he's moving to hop the wall and meet Jericho and Faron. The three of them converse amongst themselves, led by Finn's coverage of what happened, while Jericho's opening his bag as he crosses the wall, heading for El. It's not the first aid kit from Finn's car, but a batch of supplies equipped to handle injuries worse than scrapes and bruises.

I *might've* panicked after Finn and Galen disappeared.

"It sounded fun when you were telling the stories," El says, breath hitching when Jericho takes her leg in his hold, but she relaxes after a beat. His touch is clinical, unfeeling.

I toss another look over at Finn, but he's not paying attention. I doubt he'll voice any qualms to my confiding in Eleanor, especially after tonight.

"She wanted us to bring Josie to her," Finn's telling Faron, the two of them following behind Jericho. "She didn't say why, but what I don't understand is how she even knew her name."

They can work through that on their own. I barely recognized Josie Thorne's name. A thorough rundown can take place later. Me, asking lots of questions. Finn, begrudgingly answering them.

"Are you alright?" I slide down the wall so I'm sat next to Stormy. "You did warn us about the Slant."

"Now you listen. I freaked out because the bats are gross" She rolls her eyes. "And... the man that was with the other you. He was the one that was looking for me."

*Hunting her.*

Strangely enough, hearing her say it fills me with relief. *He* can't come after her anymore.

I smile at the sight of Stormy clinging to El's leg surreptitiously, her pinky finger looped through the end material of El's dress. Clinging for comfort.

El turns to Galen again and says, "It's you, isn't it? You're the one it called out to. You found the Slant."

His jaw works, and he rolls the wrinkled shirtsleeves of his tux up to his forearm. "Whatever you think you know..."

"I think you all have other selves," El cuts in, unabashed. "Since you were all here nine years ago. I wouldn't. I hadn't moved here yet. The Slant is an alternate dimension that was created on that day. Something that happened on that day specifically."

Jericho doesn't let up on mending her, but the expression on his face tells me he's listening. The rest of us are leaned in towards El, like flowers to the sun.

"That's the day where your paths stopped crossing with theirs," she theorizes. "The differences in them, not including the physical ones, all occurred over the past nine years. Obviously, New Haven came first. We're in the real one. None of that matters as much as the outcome of the Slant being made. The people over there want to crossover to here."

"But there can't be two Serita's or three Faron's walking around town at the same time," Faron says. "I already have one evil twin, I'm in no need of another."

Finn sighs.

"I think that's why Slant-Serita and her dad came here tonight," El replies. "In order to take their place, they needed to get rid of the originals."

"And then they failed," Finn says firmly. "They never found a way in without Vranes blood, and we..." He falters momentarily, eyes darting to Galen. "They won't find any in the Slant."

“Unless they get their hands on a *cavas* demon,” Jericho says without looking up from Eleanor’s wound. “Then they could come and go as they please.”

“If they were able to summon one, they would’ve, and they didn’t, which means they don’t know how,” Galen says. “They wouldn’t find anything useful on the *cavas* in any book. My mom never even met one.”

“Neither have I,” Finn says in the brief pause that follows. “I’ve never met anyone who’s met, or willing to admit they’ve met, a *cavas*.”

I give into curiosity. “What’s a *cavas*?”

“Portal demon,” Finn answers. “They can open gateways like Galen can, but without needing a mirror. Some other stuff too, based on rumors. You’d have to meet one to know for sure, I suppose.”

“And there’s zero chance whatsoever anyone in the Slant will ever meet one?”

He doesn’t answer. *Because Finn doesn’t like lying, I realize.*

“We don’t enough to say anything with absolute certainty,” Jericho says smoothly, unrolling the hem of Eleanor’s light pink dress he’d set to the side while he worked. There’s an unopened water bottle in his bag that he hands to her, and she takes it with a thanks.

He snaps his bag shut and goes to stand. “But now that we know more, we’re not reaching around blindly in the dark.”

For some reason, Galen’s still staring at El. “When I went in for the first time, it showed them they could cross over like I can,” he states, but there’s no inflection to it. “I took Slater with me so no one would hear her scream at what she saw in the mirror. They would’ve heard the scream on the Slant side, though.”

“That’s not necessarily true,” I say.

“Serita said it was abandoned of animal life by then,” El adds, backing me up.

He doesn't reply. Faron, in a valiant effort to do what he does best, says to El, "You live across from the Thorne house, right? In the three-story with an indoor pool?"

"Um, no. In the back." Her shoulders slope inwards, cheeks pinking, but I don't understand why.

"I swear I've seen you there when I'd stop by Luke's. Over on the outskirts of town?"

"My parents work for the family that lives across from the Thorne's," El says, straightening up, but still red-faced. "Not in the main house."

Looking around at the grandeur of this place, I realize she's embarrassed to say it in front of this group that grew up with money. To tell them her family can't afford to live in a neighborhood like that; her parents work for the couple that own the house with an indoor pool.

Jesse and Katherine Nichols. I've only met them once, and hated them on sight. Otherwise, I've only seen El around strangers or her family, sometimes Stormy. I've never seen her like this, never heard her say anything on the matter.

*But I would've understood.* I won't pry. That's what we do: don't pry.

Faron fumbles, clearly at a loss. "Oh, um, I'm sor—"

"Don't be." She's short, but not unkind.

"So," he says, awkward for the first time I've ever seen. "The Slant. We're still calling it that?"

No one acknowledges Faron's question.

I stand, poking Stormy with my toe. "We should get her back to the house while there's still guests around. She'll blend in better with a crowd."

"I'll join you." El stands too, understanding my not-so-subtle attempt at buying her an out.

Stormy goes to help her. I'm glad they're getting along so well. I've been too preoccupied with my own mess to see it, but it's a relief now that I do.

Finn's the last to get up. I don't miss how he watched his friends, Galen especially, but Faron and Jericho are with him.

"I'll walk you back," he announces.

The rest of the guys don't move, Faron likely intuiting the reason for our sudden exit. To no fault of his, it was an honest mistake, but we're all exhausted.

Galen's eyes stay fixed on Eleanor and track her movements leading towards the house, barely blinking. The predator in him unleashed by the blood that was shed tonight. I fight the urge to leap between them, knowing that his nonhuman instincts are on high alert, wary of further danger, and that's all it is.

As we're about to round the corner of the maze, Finn lingers, and I hear his parting words for his twin and his closest friends. "I know I can be overbearing. I accuse you both of doing shit, and frankly, I'm usually right about that—"

"This is so heartwarming to hear." I can identify Faron's sarcasm from here.

"*But* it's because I care. Bye." Finn hastens to get away so quickly after that 'heartwarming' declaration that I feel a breeze when he passes me.

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"Are you tired?"

"No. I'm not tired," I tell Finn, eyes trained on the windows. Rain patters down, audible over the faint sound of classical music playing over the speakers. A habit from studying for finals.

I feel like a zoo animal, watching warily while he peruses my dingy little apartment. Is that the same look I had on my face when our roles were reversed?

Light green walls, clutter and clumps of discarded clothes, and my line of miniature snow globes on the built-in shelves. My collection of teas, purchased from obscure marketplaces

and store brands, stacked on the linoleum kitchen counter. The rickety bed frame, a castoff from Jemima's old apartment, the rest an assemblage of furniture I found around East Rock and Dwight after Yale's most recent graduating class packed up for home.

All of it packed together on worn hardwood floors. Everything's worn to some degree, but it's mine, and I've come to love it.

"I wondered what it'd be like," he says, briefly holding my snow globe depicting the Seattle skyline, then setting it back down. "You never invited me over, so I built this place up in my head, guessed at the reason for all the secrecy. Something you'd find embarrassing? Too personal? An extensive collection of dildos?"

I throw a pillow at him. It hits his back, then falls pathetically to the floor. "That last one would come in handy."

He halts mid-step. "Now?"

"I had a long day." I roll my eyes, twisting a strand of semi-wet hair around my finger. "After the longest, weirdest day of my life. Well, one of them. Distract me. Finish what you started earlier."

He's as soaked as I am from the rain, bright eyed and chest heaving from sprinting inside. I lay out on the bed, waiting.

"No more bubble wrap," he says, an echo of my own words flung back at me.

Nodding, I spread my legs.

---

My pulse hammers at his closeness.

Finn's hips straddle mine while he yanks at the ties, ensuring they won't give, no matter how hard I pull. One length of rope for my hands, two on each ankle, leaving me at his mercy.

When he's done with fastening me to the bed frame, he sits back on his knees, completely naked. The length of his cock slaps down against my stomach, and I shiver violently.

My eyes widen at the sight of his thick base, so close to where I want it, but he only stares down at me, smirking.

The rain pelts against the windows, a bolt of thunder crashes, but above the din of the weather, the sound of him snapping the dark piece of fabric against his hand with a *crack* is the most deafening.

He looms above me, a hot presence lording from above. One hand falls to his cock, stroking slowly, and I wiggle, silently communicating for him to *touch me*.

The other hand comes around my head, and then he's deftly tying the fabric so it sits across my eyes. Everything goes black.

Without warning, he palms one of my asscheeks, hard. "Stay still."

I can't help it. My arms shake, fingers clutching the rope so hard they tremble, feeling his hand on my ass like a brand, he's gripping me so hard. My breaths come out as pants, anticipation running through my chest, my center, down to my toes. I can hear my own heart thundering, my thoughts hazy.

I feel him climbing up my body, and then the feeling of his cock jutting against my parted lips.

"Open." My mouth widens, and he shoves forth so fast I choke. "Wider, little rabbit. You'll have to do better than that," he tuts.

I moan around his length, unable to do anything else. Finn loves the control, and I gave mine willingly.

Wriggling, I open my mouth as wide as it can go, trying to accommodate for his thickness. I feel myself blush, but he doesn't relent, never lets up. When I don't suck fast enough, hard enough, he takes hold of my head by the hair, angling to fuck my mouth. His balls slap against my chin, over and over, and I'm a mess.

Drool trickles down my chin, tears leaking down the same path.

“That’s it,” he groans, tightening his hold on my hair. “Look at you, my perfect little cocksucker. Is this your first time giving head?” My cheeks darken, and he takes that as my answer, chuckling darkly. “Aren’t you a natural?”

I can’t see his expression, but I know there’s a smirk on his face. Forcing my head down further, I give it my all, milking him with all I have, but then he’s yanking my head back.

Gulping in air, coughs rack my throat. “Is that all you got?”

*Click.* Was that a bottle?

I feel a tug near my feet, and then my legs are free. Immediately, I kick out, urging him to get on with it. *Do something to me.* “Will you—”

I cut off with a yelp when he abruptly flips me so I’m on my front, breasts hitting the mattress. Then he slaps his hand down on my clit.

“More questions?” he taunts. “Think your upstairs neighbor can hear you?”

*Slap.* I shove my head into the mattress, groaning into it so the sound’s muffled, but he yanks my head back.

“No hiding. Not from me.” His hand slips further, until it’s at my back hole.

“Finn...”

“Has anyone ever fucked you here?” he asks, unnervingly calm. “Anyone ever shoved their cock in your ass, Slater?”

Slowly, I shake my head. Wetness trickles down, right through my crack and streaming down my ass, dripping onto the covers.

“That’s about to change.” His finger slips in, twisting up. “Fuck, you’re tighter than a vice.”

My legs tremble with the effort of keeping my ass in the air, the promise of what he’s about to do to me.



“That... that’ll hurt,” I say.

“It will,” he affirms. “At first. But you’ll take it like a good girl for me, won’t you?”

My legs go to close together, but he slaps them apart again, the oily residue of the lube left behind. Another finger, then another.

“It’s... too much,” I plead. “*I’m so full...*”

He hammers his fingers in, so hard that I hear his hand slapping against my slit with every thrust. *Slap. Slap.*

“But your ass takes my fingers so well. If only you could see.” He curls them inside me, stroking. “You’re practically sucking them in.”

My orgasm hits me so fast that I lose balance, about to topple over, but Finn’s there to hold my weight. I ride through the sensation of electric-white shock, moaning into the pillow while I ride it out.

He shoves his cock inside me so fast, I scream.

I scream so loud that I wouldn’t be surprised if my neighbors hear it. His cock sinks in my asshole in a singular stroke, finally bottoming out with another groan.

“Fucking made for me,” he whispers, and then he’s making shallow thrusts, letting me adjust to the feeling of having him in my ass.

For a blinding moment of pain, it’s excruciating.

Then his fingers stroke my clit, his strokes pushing me forward and making my oversensitive nipples brush up against the bed again and again, and I feel more wetness trickle out of me and onto the covers.

“Oh... *God.*”

He slaps my backside again, a *crack* ringing out in the air. “The only name I want to hear from your mouth is *mine.*”

I thrust myself back at him, grinding down, and lose all control of the noises that leave me. They come out as moans and sobs, elongating into drawn-out whimpers and mewls,

each a strain on my sore throat, in tandem with his cock entering and leaving me.

Everything is heightened, my sense of sight gone. I can only go off of what I feel, and it's overwhelming.

It's freeing.

My toes curl and I strain to hold myself upright by the rope, knowing I'm on the edge of coming again.

He slams into me relentlessly, driving my whole body across the bed, and my head tips back with a cry. From behind, Finn plants kisses up and down my shoulder blade, so gentle, the opposite of how he's fucking me, until his kiss turns punishing.

Bites to my shoulder, my neck. I'm held taut like a bow, incapable of doing anything other than take it. This is what I love about how he handles me: how unapologetic he is, how sure of himself in bed.

Finn's never treated me like I'm made of glass.

"No, no," I whisper into the bed. "I can't..."

Despite myself, I come undone with his cock buried deep in my ass, letting out a high-pitched whine, pussy tightening and clenching around empty air. The second orgasm leaves me gasping for breath, held up only by Finn and the ropes on my wrists.

Finn pulls back, and then there's hot liquid spilling across my ass, my back, into my hair and dripping down to my clit. He comes all over me, like he's trying to mark me with it.

"There's one first we can cross off your list," he says, hand rubbing along my back. Rubbing his come all over me. "Let's see how many more we can cross off before the night's over."

"Like what?"

His answering smile is lethal. "I told you not to make me want to give chase."



Sunlight streams in through a crack in the window curtains, waking me.

Eclectic, like Serita herself. Her personality shows in the haphazard assortment of dresses and heels strewn across the floor, the hanging print of some book character on the wall.

She lays curled into me, her legs thrown across mine. This is the first time I've ever woken to Serita Slater. This is the first time I've ever woken to any woman in the same bed as me before.

It's nice. I like it, the feel of her warmth. The clutter and the smell of ginger tea permeating the air. The feeling lets me breath easily, like nothing in me has anything left to bay at. Nothing to howl at, to want.

Someday soon, that'll change. If there were over ten people lurking around the Slant that even Galen couldn't sniff out, there'll be more. They'll want out, and we'll have to act. I'm not sure what we'll do when that happens, but for now, all is well. Better than it's ever been.

She's peaceful in sleep, no worries to be had, no glittered armor for her to wear like armor against the rest of the world, just her. Just mine.

Serita stirs, groggily stretching her arms and legs out, circling her ankles. "Good morning."

I raise a brow at the huskiness of her morning voice. "I like you like this."

"Naked?"

"That's part of it." I ruffle her hair, mussing it up. She swats at me, but she's still blinking out the sleep from her eyes. "I have a gift for you."

Sheet held against her chest, she sits up. "You're kidding."

I reach for the bag I left on the nightstand, holding it out, barely out of reach.

"Is it an Annalise Arestos book?" she guesses, reaching over.

"I'll be the one to teach you all about that from now on," I mutter. "Try again."

Leering at the size of the bag, her mouth works. "Don't tell me it's a butt plug."

Huffing out a low laugh, I reach into the bag and take out the envelope. She practically rips into it, brown eyes gleaming bright, the shade of amber.

"You *didn't*," she exclaims, jumping up and down on her knees, making the bed creak. That I'll replace for Christmas. Wait—Hanukkah.

And a new apartment on her birthday. I haven't forgotten about her *Bob the Builder* neighbor.

"How did you get these?" She flips the tickets over, reading the back. "Salvadore Enos's shows are *always* sold out! I've never been, holy *shit*! It's in New York! How did you know?"

"How many times do I have to tell you? I know all there is to know about you."

“As many times as I want to hear it.”

“You like them, then?” I ask to be sure.

She throws me a wicked smile. “I can’t wait to bring El with me.”

I roll over her, pinning her down with one clean move. “Hilarious.”

Smiling up at me, she presses a quick kiss to my nose.

“What do you think about...” She pauses, hesitating. “What do you think about going with me after taking a visit to Bridgeport?”

I lean to the side on my elbow, trying to gauge how serious she is. “Do you want that?”

Rallying herself, she nods. “I do. If *you* want that.”

“Then we’ll go see Bridgeport over break, as boring as it is there,” I say. “Parents love me. Your mom loves me. I’ll make quick work of your dad.”

Serita bursts into giggles, making her appear younger, more vulnerable. “Just wait,” she says. “Make sure to bring your first aid kit.”

I cage her in with my legs pinning hers, watching her gulp. “Duel at dawn?”

“Something like that.” Her voice goes wistful. “So we’re dating. You and me, we date. You want to date.”

“If you come up with any other way of phrasing it, do let me know,” I tell her with only the slightest hint of sarcasm.

*I’d marry you now if you wanted.*

I don’t know where the thought comes from. I have no idea what to do with it now that I’ve had it.

“When we went through the lake,” I say, “There was a moment when I thought I’d have to...”

“Kill me,” she finishes, face unreadable.

“Yes,” I admit.

“You would have. For Galen. And I love you for it, for how much you care, but you didn’t. If you had, it wouldn’t have been me. I believe it, so should you.” She runs her tongue over her teeth, hesitant on continuing. “This town makes me feel uneasy. It always has because of... her. It’s so quiet, it can be so peaceful and homey. I’ve always lived on the road, kept moving. I didn’t know any other way of being, and quiet places like this made me feel too seen. In small communities, people get to know each other, grow together over time. I didn’t want anyone to see who I am inside, that I don’t belong. I didn’t think I ever could. *Let them see the costumed performer, but don’t linger, or you’ll stop long enough for them to see.* But I don’t feel that way anymore. Maybe this is the peaceful place I didn’t know I was looking for.”

“If it’s not, we can keep going” I tell her. “Nice speech, by the way. I’m rubbing off on you.”

“We,” she echoes. “We’re speechmakers. And I can tell how much you love it here. Sometimes you act like you hate it, but a part of you will always hold this tone in your heart. The people here, at least. The ones you can take your mask off with.”

“You think I wear a mask?”

She makes a *pfft* sound. “*You* know you do.”

“Not with you.” I roll over and settle onto my back, head to the side so I can keep looking at her. “Things are about to get hectic around here soon. We could make a run for it.”

She tosses me an unimpressed look. “Are you done with the dramatics? You know you’ll come running back if there’s any sign of trouble. And I’m here too, aren’t I?”

“You don’t have to be,” I say, because one of us ought to. “You could live your life, live out your dreams, and then, every so often, you could come back.”

“You’ll be here,” she says simply. “You plan on waiting for me?”

“I’ll remind you I have more money than God, Slater. I could meet you there, wherever you go, if you’d like.”

She sends me a knowing look. “Would *you* like that?”

“Will you come outright and say it plainly for once in your life, or do I have to drag the words out of you, as always?”

Her brow furrows. “Say what?”

I spell it out for her. “That you love me, obviously.”

“You first.”

“I love you. Happy?”

“You’re a nightmare.”

I flick her across the forehead, the hit light, but she still tilts her head up to bite my finger. “Right back at you, little rabbit. Say it.”

“I love you, obviously. Satisfied?”

The bed creaks as I lean over to cup her face, capturing her lips in mine. “Planning out our July wedding as we speak.”

“You wish.” She laughs against my lips, and I feel hers curve up. “That was just something I came up as a kid. I’ve only devolved in my Jew-ness. In fact, it might be a testament at how bad at being Jewish I am.”

I fall back against the pillows and pull her into me so her legs twine with mine again.

“I haven’t been to church since I was eleven,” I say. “Weddings and funerals notwithstanding.”

“Is that meant to make me feel better?”

“Does it make you feel any worse?”

“Deflecting. Ha.” Wrapping her arms over me, she loosens a tired sigh. “Talking about the future makes me want to go back to sleep. I’d love to join a troupe, you know, but working behind the scenes on one wouldn’t be so bad. Haven House was my dad’s, not mine. We’ll see what happens.”

“We’ll see what happens,” I agree.

We stay in bed for the rest of the morning, only surfacing when hunger rears its head. I have Serita repeat Eleanor’s fairytale-like, Galen-centric, time-warp hypothesis three times

before the implication settles in: someone made the Slant, purposefully or not, nine years ago. It's been there this whole time. This, compounded by her theory that however it was created means something to do with that day. We covered most of this last night, but a full night's rest makes me look at it with a clear head.

Literary mirror metaphors. Demon talk. Big Bang universe expansion.

“That other universe helped me find you. Helped me fall in love with you,” I told her. “Because of that, I can't hate the Slant. Not entirely.”

Because of the other Andrea Vranes, and what she did for love.

Still, I'm wary. The other Serita told us we were looking in the wrong places for answers. I believe her. Poems and riddles are child's play. Figuring out what kind of magic the Slant Slater's used on the animals there and on themselves is at the top of my priorities.

There's another me out there, the one who told Stormy about Galen and his mother in the Slant. Another me that might want out.

It's a lot to mull over, but not until after the funeral. Not the one for the Andrea Vranes that lived and died here, but for the one that died to protect a man she didn't get to raise—and Galen is a man now, like the rest of us.

We grew up. When did that happen?

I bring a bouquet of flowers and set it on the grave of a dreamer, for the woman who saved me from having to pull the trigger on a face that I love.

Because that's part of why she did it. For the most part, it was so that Galen could return to his life, so he would be safe.

But a part of it was because she saw the hesitation in me, my unwillingness.

It's the least we can give her.



Afterwards, the drive to Bridgeport. Me and Serita haul over there the next week while Jem and Oscar are off on their honeymoon in Hawaii, Jem soaking up the sun and Oscar slathering himself in sunscreen.

Serita has a long, unfiltered talk with her dad, which helps smooth over the whole meeting the boyfriend aspect of it.

I take no small amount of pleasure at proving her wrong with how quickly Daniel Slater warms up to me. It didn't take much apart from neglecting to mention Jac and pointedly mentioning his care will improve in scale from now on.

I'm not one to flaunt my bank account, but in case he *does* think to look me up on the Internet and find Jac's name in there somewhere, I want to incur some favor beforehand. Sue me.

The trip's illuminating, to say the least.

"You're a Slater through and through," her dad said over lunch on our last day. "Stronger than you get credit for, wanting to do it all your own way and on your own. Never content to live in a world that won't accept you. You live in your own. I knew you'd be fine in New Haven, and if you didn't strive, you wouldn't give up until you did."

Followed by tears and hugging. That part was uncomfortable to witness as a third party witness, I'll admit, but I'm no stranger to the awkward back pat of comfort.

A decent chunk of Serita pulling away from him recently has to do with the version of him she saw in the Slant, this much I've guessed at. That man's death reminded her that his could follow, but for now, we're in the clear. I've come to learn that shortsightedness isn't always a drawback.

We'll do our best, and see what happens.

## SERITA



Spring semester starts in a week or so, and I'm scrambling to be ready on time.

The outcome of my planned dramatic exit backfiring on me in spectacular fashion. There are textbooks to rent, job applications to apply for (I'm on the verge of running low on funds), and loose ends to take care of.

Following that, there's the fallout of what happened on the night of Jemima and Oscar's wedding. Strategizing for what happens next.

We took a break from running around and getting things done to celebrate Hanukkah. The holiday fell pretty late in December this year, and Finn acted as a buffer, wielding his charm against my mother to avoid any awkwardness between us. We ate some of *bobo's* old recipes, made an effort on both ends, even if we haven't become close enough to celebrate the entire holiday in each other's company.

Breaking out *bobo*'s menorah was a start. No one wants to start a fight with her memory hanging over our heads. I wouldn't put it past *bobo* to raise from the dead and beat us with the family heirloom if we didn't behave on Hanukkah.

Then the smear campaign against the Salt family went live. A public reputation takedown, witnessed in real time. Finn dug up a number of mistakes and oversights, culminating in a reckoning that's partially true, mostly falsified evidence against the two most influential figures: Lane and Octavian Salt, father and son.

Enormous public scrutiny surrounds them in the fallout, along with a series of high-profile lawsuits currently being filed, a government investigation, and innumerable executives scrambling to get away from the chopping block.

Finn oversees it all with nothing short of glee. I knew he would, like how I knew he was dangerous from the moment he set about ensuring my silence after we discovered the Slant, rather than run in and try to act the hero.

I don't want a hero. I like him as is: the fierce protector of the few he cares for. For those few, he'd do anything. Everyone else? Don't get in his way.

With that in mind, imagine my surprise when he manages to get all of us in a room together without threats of danger hanging over our heads.

Towards the very end of winter break, they find out about us, forcing us to come clean, and it dawns on me that there's no reason to hide our relationship anymore.

Jericho, Faron, Stormy, and Galen sit in the back row of the Vranes's home movie theater, taking advantage of Oscar and Jemima being out of the house. I'd thought Stormy would be home alone, or I wouldn't have been holding Finn's hand when we walked in.

Finn talks them through a condensed version of events, leaving out the most private parts, including any mention of romantic speechmaking. He does tell them about what ties we have to the Slant, having met when Haven House was in

Connecticut nine years ago, and some of how he resolved matters with the Lin's.

Jericho's face remains unchanged, making me think he suspected all along, and Galen barely pays attention, seeing as how he definitely knew. What's odd is that he sat on the information without any of the disdain he showed for me after Providence, or before then.

Now that I know Galen's anger isn't directed at me, I try to act civil with him. Minimal interaction for the sake of common good.

Stormy and Faron are the only two interested in pestering me and Finn, but once they learn Galen knew before them, it starts a whole new round of back and forth.

"I'm the only one who knew?" Galen confirms.

"Yup," I confirm.

"I knew this town is full of idiots, but that's a new low."

"How *did* you know? I didn't even know how I felt yet. Neither did Finn." Not about what we were doing, but how we *felt*.

"You two assumed that because you've never been in love before that it couldn't possibly be what was happening." Galen says it with deliberate slowness, as if explaining something to a child. I resist the urge to kick his shin. "Like it was outside the realm of possibility. News flash: we all traipsed around an alternate dimension the other day, it's all possible. Sex can come with feelings sometimes, morons. You've never been in love, which means you didn't know how to recognize when your heart was breaking."

The declaration stuns me, more so than learning about said alternate dimension. "I didn't think you believed in love and broken hearts," I tell him.

I don't say that there's more than one way to break a heart, more than one way to care about someone. I don't tell him that I think his heart is broken too, but not for romantic reasons.

“Why else would you two make such a fucking mess of things?” he reasons, but then Stormy’s leaping over his seat to get my attention, ignoring his exclamation of, “Punk ass kid.”

“Does Eleanor know?” she asks. “When’s she coming over again?”

“She knows.” El takes on extra shifts over holidays, so I had to wait until her schedule freed up to tell her, and only barely managed to catch her on a coffee break earlier today. She had to run off right after. “And I’m still trying to convince her to come around the house. Once school starts up again, and before assignments start rolling out, she’ll have a lot of free time.”

“Your nerd friend?” Galen interjects from behind Stormy. “That one looks sane on paper, but she has that lamp thrower thing going on behind the eyes.”

“Do I even want to know what that means?” Stormy drawls.

“Glenda the Good on the outside, full of teeth on the inside,” Galen clarifies. “The smart, shy ones are always crazy when you get them in bed. Then clothed again. The crazy comes out after all those wardrobe changes.”

“You realize *you’re* the one who sound unhinged right now, right?” I quip, hands clapped over Stormy’s ears while she struggles to pull them off.

I tighten my hold, wary of what Galen will say next, but he merely says, “Trust me. *Lamp thrower*. Stay safe out here, punks.”

---

“This is what I’ve been working on in town.”

Finn brandishes an arm out at the freshly painted building, only a couple of workers milling about. They greet him with a silent nod, and him the same way back.

It stands out, sleek and gleaming, in a modern architectural style. Elongated panes of glass give us an unobstructed view of the information desk, laden with stacks of paperwork, presumably on the building itself.

Atop the front door reads: DELSING AGRICULTURAL RESEARCH FOUNDATION CLINIC. Part research center for local geographic needs (and a base for Finn's Contractor duties, I suspect), funded by Delsing Industries, and open to the public without cost. Anyone outside of the state can call in from around the country, a poster mock-up pronounces.

They can come to find job postings around Connecticut, make pitches for funding any charitable work concerning farming in their communities, climate change programs, and nature preservation.

A venture that'll shell out millions per year. It's the last type of charitable organization I'd ever expect Finn Delsing to come up with—unless there's more to it than that.

"I didn't realize you cared so much about the environment," I tease. "What's the catch?"

"I don't," he admits, though he lets out a laugh. "My grandfather did. Faron's childhood superhero. Grandfather's the one who planted the idea in my head, but he thought New Haven could amount to something greater. I think its roots are tangled up in centuries old shit. Either way, money's up for grabs, and Delsing Industries runs campaigns on eco-friendliness."

"And behind closed doors...?"

"I want Faron to have something of his own," he finishes. "If he wants to take on the Contracting role someday, it's there for him. But I thought I'd give him this too. See, when me and my father fight, we're only going through the motions. I'm his only option for an heir, not only because he disregards Faron, but because Faron's never wanted the role. He's set his sights on lots of interests, but never the corporate lifestyle."

"So you'll keep doing both? For now, I mean."

“I have an idea for who’ll take over the contracts if Faron doesn’t. That’s part of why I put up the building. It stands mostly separate from the rest of Delsing Industries.”

“When Oscar first brought this up at lunch a few months ago, I assumed you were building a bar or something like that.”

“I thought you would,” he says. “That’s probably what Oscar thought too. That’s what I’d think if I were him.”

“Why didn’t you correct him?” I ask.

“I’d rather not hear the cliché remarks on charity that are meant to boost my sense of self, from Oscar or anyone else,” he says. “Well meaning or not. Not unless they sink some money into it, and even then, Faron’s the one that’s suited for charming money out of people without making any kind of deal. When I solicit donations, it comes with incentives.”

He doesn’t pretend, doesn’t bother working the room. Give away nothing without gaining something in return.

“Tax breaks?” I guess.

“It’s good PR for the parent company.” He takes my hand, moving my body so it’s pressed up to his. I blush, turning away from the workers walking about, but he keeps me firmly against his body, not budging.

“I only showed you the bad parts,” he says, grasping my chin with his thumb and forefinger. “I thought you should know what you were getting into, so I let you meet Loxley and Oran. But it’s not all horrible.”

“What does that have to do with a research foundation?”

“You’ve seen the worst magic can do,” he says, eyes searching mine. Making sure I understand he’s referring to what happened to Galen. “I think it’s time you see the best of it. That’s why I answered your questions, back when I had no concrete reason to trust you yet. Why I took you with me to Gould’s warehouse, when I could’ve dropped in and left on my own. I like seeing the look on your face when I show you parts of the world you never knew existed, as small as they may be, as normalized as they are in my world.”

He guides me to the doors, holding them open for me.

“I’ve harbored questions about why New Haven is what it is, how it ended up this way,” he goes on. “Questions that have followed me my entire life. I want to know why it draws demons. I want there to be resources available for people who live here, whether or not they know about the creatures crawling around this place. Human troubles can get ugly too. It’s ambitious. It’s expensive, but I have hope for it.”

I remember the collection of books in his apartment, titles like *A History of City Planning Structure in Colonial New England*. “There’s more?”

“Plenty of it,” he says. “I can show you everything, if you want. But I should warn you: every part of e you’ve seen so far, it only gets worse from here on out.”

Finn’s warnings against the supernatural never worked on me in the past. Neither did warnings meant to deter me from him. Finding about magic only made me hope again. It made me *believe* again.

“It sounds to me like you’re searching for a lot of answers in this one place,” I say. “And you’ve decided magic can help you find them. That’s a far cry from the Contractor who made me his assistant. Show me your worst.”

One of those rare smiles lights up his face in amusement. The kind of smile that makes the past few months worth every tear, every moment of doubt and restlessness.

“I’ve decided we should christen the place by moving this conversation to my office, partner.”

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When we return to the Vranes house, there’s an unfamiliar car parked beyond the roundabout.

Must be a friend of Oscar’s or Galen’s. I’d recognize the cherry red sports car if I’d seen it before, that’s how much it stands out.



The thing is, Finn seems to know who the car belongs to. He's climbing out of his in the same instant I'm unbuckling my seatbelt, trying to read his mood.

I burst through the doorway only a few steps behind, then halt in my tracks, tacking in the scene.

"We have an unexpected guest," Galen says, a bite of anger in his tone, but it's not directed at me.

The sports car owner faces Finn, arctic blue eyes darkening at Galen's introduction. He's stocky, more muscular than even Faron. An athlete's build. Chestnut brown hair cropped short, a recognizable head of hair. I've seen him in photographs, though his hair was longer.

This is Lukas Thorne. *Luke*, Finn and his friends call him. Or are they no longer friends?

"I'm moving back," Lukas says to Finn. "Re-enrolling while I'm at it."

I guess he told the other guys before we showed up.

Perhaps *right* before we did. He looks remarkably healthy for someone who nearly had his spinal cord shattered a year ago. I know that the demonic blood running in his veins kept his injuries from being fatal after the car accident that killed Galen's mother, but there's no sign of any wound on him.

Well, there's always the ones beneath the surface. Those I wouldn't know about.

There's a tense few minutes where no one seems to know what to do. Stormy comes down from her room, drawn by the sound of multiple voices.

"Here comes the Scooby Gang," she'd greeted, then stopped at the sight of Lukas. "Who's this?"

She's been watching a lot of *Scooby Doo*, cooped up in the house.

"I call dibs on Daphne," I'd replied to fill the stilted silence that settled in.

Finn backed me up. "Does that make me Fred?"

“Faron can be Scrappy,” Galen said, still staring down Lukas.

Now I know who got her into Scooby Doo, because it didn't come from the boxes in my room.

However, our efforts don't lighten the mood. Jericho's more quiet than ever, and Faron tries suggesting we take this over to the living room (where the nearest alcohol cabinet sits, and I don't doubt he's in want of a drink, but he looks hungover already).

Finn eventually gets everyone into the kitchen, using coffee as his excuse. I think it's more likely he wants to draw Galen and Lukas away from leaving in their cars.

I have a faint memory of the voicemail Lukas left Jericho, stating that he'd return in time for the wedding. He hadn't.

So Finn puts in one last effort at easing the tension, and I tune out during his concise recounting of the last few months.

The way they're arranged around the clear kitchen counter, some leaning forward, others back, the five of them almost resemble a five-pointed star. The sight is all too fitting in my mind, as they were born for stardom in one way or another—in business, or politics, the medical field.

Future leaders in the making, all of them in different ways, but somehow they came together, despite all the differences between them.

I listen in when everyone else joins in, knowing Finn must've finished going over recent events.

“Physical therapy,” Lukas is saying, voice gruff, at odds with his golden boy looks. The star athlete, I remember. “It's been sorted out.”

He inhales deeply, twisting his mug of coffee around by the handle, though I notice he hasn't had any of it. Continuing, he says, “The mirror realm. What did it look like?”

Galen begrudgingly starts speaking, describing the Slant, since he knows it best, and then there's whatever senses he has

that we don't that can fill in more than just how the place looks.

I look at him again, intent on figuring out what it is about him that's bothering me. There's a memory, somewhere deep down, that I can't quite reach. One that feels familiar, in a way, but not in any tangible way.

A feeling that... I had in a dream. A dream about a boy who told me he could do impossible things, and that he could make me believe in magic. A boy with arctic blue eyes and chestnut hair.

A *sopor* demon. That's what Finn told me when he introduced me to Jeff Loxley and Oran: the Thorne's have an ancestor in their family line that made a deal with a *sopor* demon. Dreamwalker.

"You're the boy from my dream," I blurt.

"He's what?" Finn grind outs, whipping his head in my direction.

Lukas stares.

"He talked to me in my dream when I was a kid," I get out. "It was definitely him."

Finn lunges over the kitchen island, knocking two coffee mugs onto the floor as he does. Startled, Lukas doesn't defend himself, just lets himself get tackled to the floor.

"Nicely done," Galen says, eyes dancing now that he's not the one to make a mess of things.

I hear more than see Jericho sighing on my other side while Finn knocks Lukas into the floor with a punch to the face.

"I think I know what the Slant is," Lukas says through a mouthful of blood. "I know where it came from."

## WHAT'S NEXT?

Thank you so much for reading *If Love is a Loaded Gun*.

If you enjoyed it, please leave a review!

The next book in the Haven Series is coming soon.

*If Want is an Open Wound* will follow Eleanor Altej and Galen Vranes.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Grace LeGore is an author of steamy romance reads that take her from small towns to new worlds. As a longtime lover of writing and creating fantasy worlds, she's obsessed with the characters and love stories she finds within them.

A hopeless romantic at heart, she delights in taking her characters to the brink, just so she can be the one that pulls them back from the edge. In her view—twisted or not—the greatest love stories all take us on the wildest of rides.

She lives in the southwestern United States, and most of her days are spent begging her three dogs to let her write in peace. This book is the product of many bribes in the form of doggie treats being doled out.



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