BOOK OF DANVERS
BONE ISLAND
TALES OF WEEPING HOLLOW
nicole fiorina

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NICOLE FIORINA

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Tales of Weeping Hollow

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nicole fiorina

ALSO BY NICOLE FIORINA

Stay with Me Trilogy

Stay with Me

Even When I'm Gone

Now Open Your Eyes

Tales of Weeping Hollow

Hollow Heathens

Bone Island

The Hendrix Brothers

Ty & Kate

What If: A Novelette

Linc & Lo

Going Going Gone: A Novelette

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BEFORE YOU READ

Bone Island: Book of Danvers is the second book in the Tales of Weeping Hollow Collection. This book can be read as a standalone, but for the best reading experience it is recommended to read books in the order they are published. Hollow Heathens: Book of Blackwell is the first book in this collection. If you have not yet read Hollow Heathens, start reading it by clicking here.

Please read responsibly.
To view all content warnings, visit:
nicolefiorina.com/contentwarnings

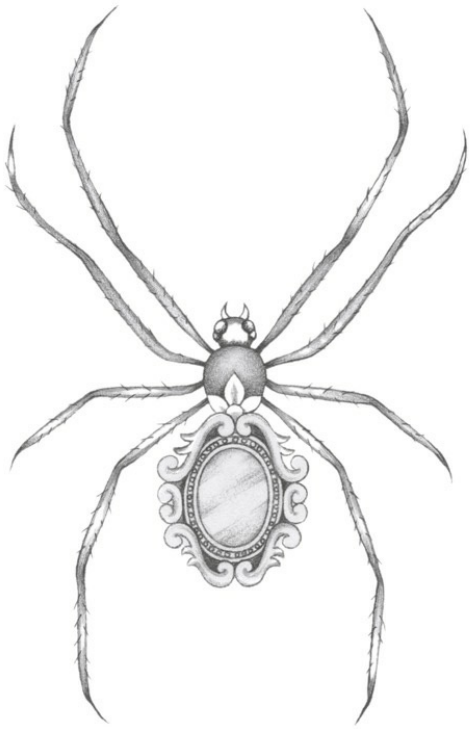
This story contains domestic violence. Please know that any type of abuse in a relationship, whether it be emotional, verbal, or physical is *never* okay, no matter which gender is the abuser.

National Domestic Violence Hotline
800 - 799 - 7233

Bone Island inspired soundtrack available on Spotify:

https://spoti.fi/3LncVKE

Thank you, and welcome back to Weeping Hollow.



“The boundaries which divide life from death are at best shadowy and vague. Who shall say where the one ends, and where the other begins?”

—Edgar Allan Poe

Our happily ever after

This story is dedicated to lovers who've met a tragic end. Here is a happily ever after you deserve.

To my loyal, passionate reader
March 2021 - January 2023

It happens when a song comes on. You know, the ones that are like haunting portals. The first beat, and we're suddenly teenagers again, broken-hearted, betrayed, feeling like nothing will ever get better. Or we're *teenagers again*, knowing we're complete fools making mistakes while we're making them because we don't give a damn about tomorrow, and these mistakes do turn into the best stories. It's all imprinted into that one song.

You know what I'm talking about. Those songs that can remind us of a certain someone who's no longer here, and suddenly their smile is carved into our mind, and it's all we can see, the pain resurrecting like they've died all over again. The one toxic song that absolutely guts us, but we play it anyway —on repeat—because it reminds us of them. Because when this song is on, it's like they're right there. And we're together even though we're not.

For me, it's *Under Pressure* by Queen, and just like that, I'm robbed.

Then there's songs that give us an entire season.

Like every summer when I visited Chicago since I was sixteen. My first love always kissed me as if another year hadn't gone by since we'd last seen each other. He always kissed me as if there was no one else because *they were just temporary to ease the pain and we were forever*. Once, he took me for a ride down I-290 in his red Honda past midnight, the two of us racing toward city lights. *Pretty Ricky* was playing, the windows were down, and I was wrapped up in his navy-blue hoodie. Every few seconds, brown eyes reflected dashboard lights when they swung to mine, the two of us unable to keep our eyes off each other. Just like we couldn't keep our hands off each other. Because we never had enough time. *We will make it*, we promised. And when *Your Body* comes on, I remember us in his red Honda parked outside my aunt's house on the night before I had to leave again, the both of us crying, clinging, and not wanting to let go. Each time that song comes on, I remember what it feels like to be whole-heartedly in love with a boy who lives over a thousand gut-wrenching miles away, and how we never made it.

Or a season like that one senior year with my high school boyfriend—the

boy I was a sucker for, the boy who broke me, the boy who never really loved me at all. *Desperado* was turned up loud, so his parents didn't hear us, in his locked bedroom as we made out on top of a mattress that never wore a sheet. And Usher's *Burn* pumped through my Sunfire's speakers on mornings I drove him to school after he repeatedly broke my heart (like a damn fool). This song was turned all the way up when I wasn't brave enough to tell him how he destroyed me. And each time those songs come on I remember what It feels like to be taken advantage of during a time I was the most vulnerable.

Then there was that one summer at nineteen with the guy I swore *I'm going to marry you one day*. Akon's *I Wanna Love You* pounded from the bass of his white Grand Am, sand sticking to our sun-kissed skin, hair clinging to my cheeks, July wind a stale, hot breath as we drove on the beach. And half the time we got stuck in soft sand, always waiting for strangers to pull us out. But in my black bikini, I danced while we waited. And he kissed me when no one was watching. Every kiss salty. Every kiss tasting like the alcohol we snuck onto the beach. Every kiss too dangerous for a girl who felt everything and too passionate for a boy who knew nothing about love. We were fun and addicted and unable to go a day without each other. Back then, neither of us really believed we would one day get married. And now each time *Akon* comes on, I remember how it felt to fall in love with my best friend. Before the kids, before Death stole from us, before the hardships we fought through together. When we were carefree, irresponsible, and wild.

If powerful enough, I believe moments can leave an emotional imprint on all things in the universe, clinging to a song, a scent, a brush of the wind. And like a song, a book becomes a time capsule of these chapters in a writer's life. The characters, some a direct reflection of us, others we subconsciously throw ourselves into, scenes from situations we wished played out differently, the raw titanic emotions draining from us and becoming our characters' blood, our fears buried in their marrow, our despair, their tears.

I fear the girl I was at the time this book was written, and what she did to me. In return, I dumped my heart into my characters, forcing them to take on all the things that were too heavy so I didn't have to, hopeful that if I could write just *one more word*, that's all it would take for all the heartbreak, regret, and insecurities to go away.

There's a ghastly ache in despair. A phantom agony. For me, it came in a chain of words on a screen, and this story sucked me up until I was dust, then exhaled me into pieces. So, like every book I've written until now, this book

is another one of my nostalgic stamps on the universe. The song that will remind me of the deep ache of wanting something so badly that can never be mine. At least, not this time around.

I'm already prepared for the ache each time Bone Island will be brought up. And in truth, this and the simple fact of being terrified of this story is why I believe it took so long.

One way I got through this book was because of the need to put it into the world for that one specific person. The other way was because of the NF Gang, my constant, passionate, forgiving readers, and the thought of them holding my hand by holding this book, spending time with me with every turn of the page, going on a date with me, the two of us escaping together by abandoning surroundings.

We've always been in this together, after all. Even if we're miles away.

And now we can finally say, *we made it.*

So, grab a coffee before you take my hand, prepare for the little adventure I created for us. There will be slow parts: a drizzle, a quiet snow fall. These are intentional. There will also be raging waves, throats full of daggers, and pages full of blood. There may even come a point where you won't know what the point is, but I promise it will all make sense in the end … *or* maybe the second time around. And I hope somewhere on Bone Island or in Weeping Hollow, I can make you laugh because there cannot be love without laughter.

So, now that we're finally here, there's one last question I have for you.

Are you ready to go on a date with me?

TO MY BELOVED BLACK SEA,

It was full dark when I snuck out of the castle to meet you.

You wore those ripped black jeans and your new friend's boots, with sleet from the forest still in the grooves. You moved awkwardly in your new clothes because you were still creating yourself, like one of your drawings.

We drank vanilla cola from glass bottles and listened to a song about how fast the night changes over and over. Two adults frolicking as youths, French kissing in secret to hide from winter and distract ourselves from the town crumbling around us. The way we touched each other was equally punishing and artful, painting a world where we could be together on each other's skin.

For a while, we pretended. For a while, I was the kind of woman you could be loyal to and fight for, and you weren't the lost, forbidden Heathen.

Now, it's been days since I've seen you. I've decided long ago, and this is my last letter. Everything I've worked so hard for—before you came along—will carry on as if our time together never happened.

Don't bother stopping me. As I once said, the tremor between us will only lead to carnage.

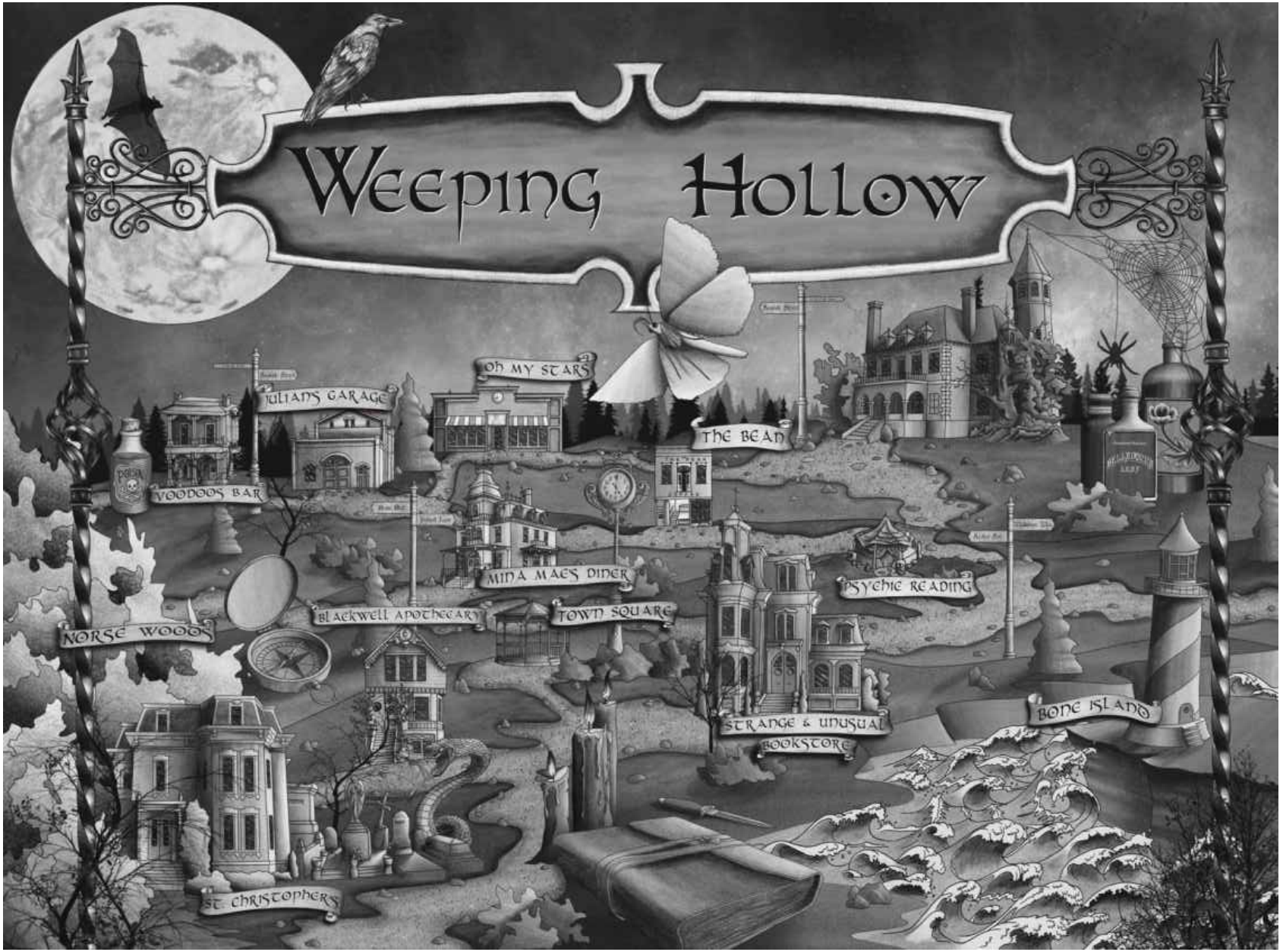
But as I plunge a knife into the chest of the man I once desired to marry, I'll think of all those foolish nights when we pretended, our time on Bone Island, the vanilla cola, our stupid song, and you.

Yes, my beloved black sea.

I'll think of you.

xx, a

WELCOME TO MAINE'S
WEEPING HOLLOW
ESTABLISHED 1803
NICOLE FIORINA BOOKS


Weeping Hollow
Julians Garage
Oh My Stars
The Bean
Voodoos Bar
Mina Maes Diner
Psychic Reading
Blackwell Apothecary
Town Square
Norse Woods
Strange & Unusual Bookstore
Bone Island
St. Christophers

THE FOUNDING FAMILIES

NORSE WOODS COVEN
HIGH PRIEST CLARENCE GOODY

DANVERS

Element of Earth
Current: Stone Danvers
Son of Foster Danvers (deceased) & Clarice Woolf Danvers (deceased)

BLACKWELL

Element of spirit
Current: Julian Jai Blackwell
Brother of Jolie Blackwell; son of Javino Blackwell (deceased) & Agatha Blackwell; ancestors: Horace Blackwell & Bellamy Blackwell.

WILDES

Element of Fire
Current: Phoenix Loki Wildes
Brother of Wren Wildes; son of Hayden Wildes (deceased) & Amelia Ander Wildes; ancestors: Kyden Wildes

GOODY

Element of Air: - Origin: Njord
Current: Zephyr Blue Goody
Brother of Winnifred Goody; son of Clarence Goody & Beatrix Ricci Goody (deceased)

PARISH

Element of Water: - Origin: AEgir
Current: Beckham Brooks Parish
Son of Earl Parish & unknown flatlander (deceased)

Sacred Sea Coven

High Priest Augustine Pruitt

Pruitt

Current: Kane Kos Pruitt

Brother of Koraline Pruitt; son of Augustine Pruitt & Ginevra DeLuca Pruitt (deceased)

Cantini

Current: Cyrus Olen Cantini

Brother of Camora, Kaser, & Cillian Cantini; son of Darnell Cantini & Viola Conti Cantini; ancestors: Matteo Cantini

Sullivan

Current: Ivy Amaya Sullivan

Adora Oria Sullivan: pending initiation

Fable Hazel Sullivan: pending initiation

Daughters of Ronan Sullivan & Marcelline O'Connor Sullivan

The Order of Weeping Hollow

From Sacred Sea

Augustine Pruitt

Viola Cantini

From Norse Woods

Clarence Goody

Agatha Blackwell

From the Flatlanders

Mina Mae Lavenza

The Heathen & The Siren

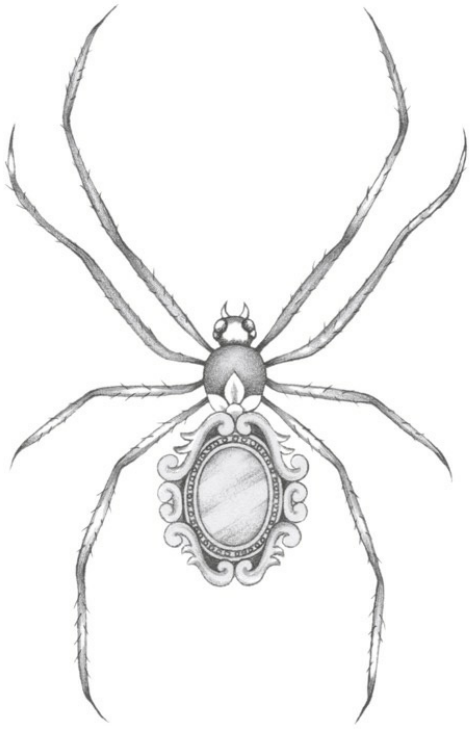
She was born in the ocean,
her heart a thrilling sea,
tears of broken lovers,
begging to be freed.

With emeralds in her eyes,
a sharp blade in her mind,
she was of wicked beauty,
for the lost boy was blind.

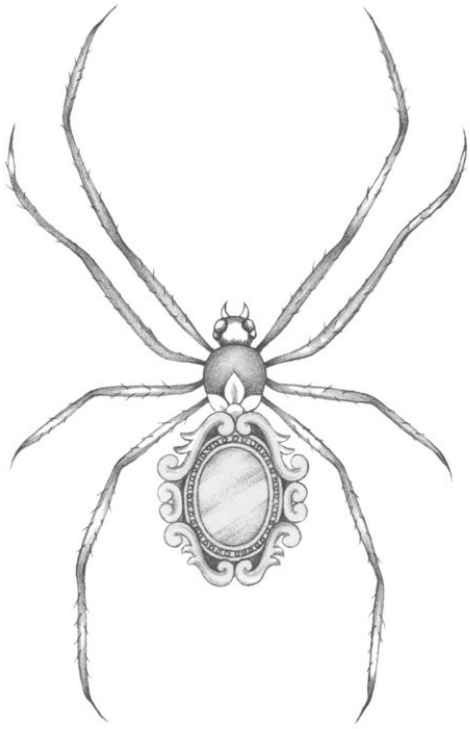
She sang with such sweet sorrow,
calling out to thee,
dragging him into the deep,
a cold kiss in starlit seas.

The love made was forbidden,
unlacing of melancholy
beneath thrashing waters,
as if they'd been set free.

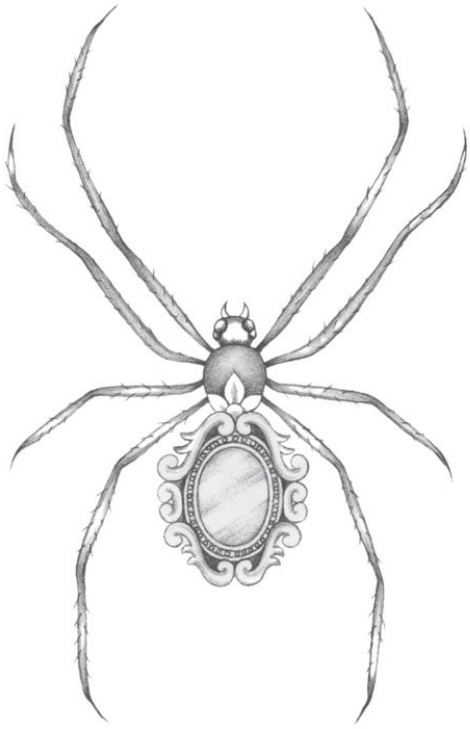
She craved an escape,
he craved to be found,
two silent hearts thirsty,
until they both drowned.



I'VE BEEN WATCHING YOU.



YOU'VE BEEN GONE FOR A WHILE ...
OR MAYBE YOU NEVER LEFT.



THAT'S RIGHT. YOU CAN'T LEAVE, CAN YOU?

I remember seeing you lurking in Town Square and watching the townspeople. You've been watching my neighbors. You've been watching us all, and you probably didn't expect anyone to be watching *you*.

But I notice you. I *always* notice you.

You came around the same time Fallon returned to Weeping Hollow.

She really shook things up, didn't she?

Don't be shy, come out of the shadows.

Let me give you a hug. It's been a while.

Watch your step. Gus Hobb was supposed to fix that crater in the sidewalk weeks ago. Augustine Pruitt, high priest of Sacred Sea and acting mayor, if you will, turned that obnoxious gasbag into his errand boy. A tree branch blew through Gus' grocery store window during a storm a few months ago, leaving him in debt. Working for Augustine was the only way to get his grocery store back. Odd jobs here and there. You've seen Gus around, I know

you have. He's the grumpy geezer with a limp who curses that *the world is conspiring against him.*

That's what happens when you hold your glass half empty. Everyone is out to get you when you're drunk off a negative mindset. And Gus Hobb is always cutting corners and looking for a handout. When you live life taking shortcuts, it will catch up to you as it did for Gus, but he never learns. Take my advice. When money is easy and fast, it doesn't last.

There you go, come on in.

It's good to be inside, isn't it? Winter has arrived, it's almost December, and do you know what that means? Founder's Day is soon underway, with the annual lighting of the fire in Town Square, and the annual ball at the Cantini Manor. That's right. Founder's Day is only weeks away, and I can't wait for you to see what we have in store!

It's cold out there. I'll close the door before the snow returns.

I haven't seen you in the shop before.

Welcome to The Strange & Unusual Bookstore!

And don't let the name of this place scare you away. Strange and unusual is the norm here, and we want you to stay awhile. For as long as this town will let you.

I'll light a fire and brew a cup of joe. Go ahead and make yourself comfortable. The couch in front of the fireplace is just fine. That thing you're wearing won't fight the chill this time of year. Grab an extra blanket. It's right there.

If I were you, I'd head over to Oh My Stars Boutique and get yourself something warmer when the snow stops for when it starts again. Adora Sullivan has an eye for design. She'll make you something custom, and you won't find her clothing anywhere else. I would say she's Weeping Hollow's best-kept secret, but, as you can see, everything is a best-kept secret when the whole town of Weeping Hollow is.

How did you find us, anyway? How did you even get in?

It's different here. December is almost with us, which shouldn't make a difference. Flatlanders should be walking around as if autumn never left, but Weeping Hollow is a ghost town lost in a fierce winter. Like we're trapped in a snow globe.

Oh, that reminds me. Do you like sugar in your coffee?

Sure, you do. Everyone with a sweet face like yours wants sugar.

When Mina Mae from the diner asks, *"Would yah like coffee with yah*

sugah?” it always makes me laugh. I’ll tell you what, the only good thing left in this town is that woman’s hotcakes. She makes them just right, on time, every time. Fluffy and butter-soaked with the crispy edges. You would think she’s a witch, able to flip pancakes that delicious, but Mina Mae is nothing but a flatlander and a damn good cook.

If I’m being honest, the syrup has changed over the years. For better or worse? No one will admit it. Not even me. The gossip trio right outside the window, sitting on the bench next to the gazebo, in their marshmallow coats and puffy earmuffs, would tell you she made a deal with a Heathen. That Weeping Hollow’s fairy godmother stopped using Pruitt’s maple syrup, and now we’re pouring Goody Farms over our hotcakes. They’re always whispering about it between judgmental glances and trash-talking, but Mina will deny, deny, *deny*. Some have taken it as far as boycotting the diner. However, you’ll see them at Mina Mae’s, hiding under hoods and eating her pancakes because no one can resist them.

Mina Mae is a good one.

Oh, you like that, yeah? Watch it now. This music box is older than your soul. There are many things I’ve collected over the years, but the one you’re holding is definitely something special. It belonged to a witch named Circe. Wind it up and put it to your ear. Listen closely.

Hear that?

Such an eerie yet hypnotizing sound.

Careful, though. Listen too long, and everything’ll fade around you, and you’ll get lost in it. Better yet, let me just put it away. It’s not for sale, anyway.

This book? Not for sale either.

Well, if you must know, come here, and I’ll tell you.

A little closer.

Closer …

This book holds all the answers to breaking the Curse of the Forbidden Girl.

Don’t roll your eyes at me, I’m telling you it is.

I’ve read the book many times.

There’re hidden clues tucked between the pages, but I could never figure them out.

Look! Over there, through the window and across Town Square.

Officer Stoker stands on those damn Town Hall steps between nine and

noon every morning. The police station is too small to manage the daily crowd, and the crowd grows and grows each day that passes. From here, Officer Stoker looks like a respected man with a good head on his shoulders, but others would tell you otherwise. He's as useless as the H in *anchor* or a grave robber in a crematorium.

No, Carrie Driscoll isn't here anymore, but I have a feeling you already know what happened to the mysterious blonde who was close to Sacred Sea. It's a shame. She was a young, beautiful woman who disappeared from town, just like River Harrison.

Well, come here, and I'll tell you a secret.

A Hollow Heathen killed them both just before burning their bodies, leaving their ashes scattered throughout this town. *Hey,* you don't have to believe me if you don't want to, but you could find out for yourself. You'd have to travel back in time to another tale, another story. But I must warn you, time is a bit tricky here.

Speaking of time, no one notices, but Kioni Ali—you know, the young artist who sells paintings in her grandmother's fortune tent during events—is the one who graffitied the side of buildings. Once, she painted a white moth mural on the brick wall of the hardware store, and Jeremy Clayton covered it up with a fresh coat of white paint. Jeremy's the hardware store owner who lost his daughter, Beth Clayton, back in September. And not long after, sweet Beth died. Everyone knows those moths are the bringers of death, and if I didn't know any better, Kioni tried to warn him.

She returned soon after and painted a bouquet of black balloons with a quote I can't remember. He did not bother to repaint it that time since he had no care left in him.

The painting is still there to this day. When you get a chance, take a stroll by the hardware store and take a look for yourself. And before you ask, I know it's Kioni. I see her do these things. I see everything around here.

Ah! You're asking about the latest issue of The Daily Hollow.

Things have changed, wouldn't you say?

After the Heathen's curse broke, they canceled all nighttime social gatherings outside of Founder's Day. Without sound music, good times, and Mina Mae's Poisoned Apple Cider flooding the streets, there isn't much else to talk about other than townies dying. Sure, many people have died over the last few months, more than usual, but this is different.

Our days are shorter, our nights are longer.

It’s not your usual winter blues hours, either.

It’s something else.

After the sun sets around three in the afternoon, the streets are abandoned, and Town Square is deserted. Shutters are closed, doors are locked, which doesn’t do much to keep the townies safe. Still, it’s better than being left outside all alone. Anyone who doesn’t make it inside before nighttime is forced to fend for themselves, and no one wants to be left behind.

Decades from now, this thing going on in our hometown will be printed in the history books for future generations to see.

The Panic started the day the Heathen, Julian Blackwell, broke the Curse of the Hollow Heathens. The same curse that kept their faces hidden generation after generation because if you saw what lay beneath, you’d only see your greatest fear, and your heart would stop.

He almost killed Fallon and himself, too. Some say he pushed Fallon off the cliff, and she took him down with her. Others say he jumped in after her, but you and I know the Heathen would die for the moon girl. We were both there that day on the cliffs. At least I think I saw you there, but you look a bit different now. Have you cut your hair?

Anyway, you know what they say about conspiracy theories. They’re only true if you believe them. And Julian broke the curse by bringing Fallon back to life, restarting this town with the moon’s heartbeat.

Ah, that’s what you’ve been waiting for all this time? You wanted to know whether the curse was broken. All you had to do was ask.

The curse is broken, but you won’t catch those Heathens walking around without a mask. You won’t see them walking around at all. No one has seen them aside from the Order. They held a closed meeting that day, and only the Order, four Hollow Heathens—Zephyr was missing—and Fallon were there.

Well, I was at the meeting, too, but no one saw me watching. And I shouldn’t be telling you this, but Julian Blackwell was acting as if he was hiding something. Like he was protecting someone.

You know more than one desires, anyway, always creeping between buildings and spying on townies as if we were pages of some book. If I had all the answers, I wouldn’t tell you. And you should keep quiet, too. Secrets are like currency here. The more you know, the richer you are. If you give away what’s in your pockets, you’ll become useless and deemed untrustworthy. Keeping your mouth shut keeps you safe. If you talk, you may even get called a kook, and no one will believe you. Look what happened to

Crazy Jasper.

Though, I'd have to admit. You've been here for a few months now.

Whether you like it or not, you're one of us.

I will say that Augustine told Julian Blackwell that if he broke the curse, he would be pardoned for his crimes. Augustine couldn't hide the lack of confidence on his face. No one believed he could do it. But despite it all, Julian broke the curse.

After that, Augustine had no choice but to grant Julian freedom.

The Order can never go back on their word.

That's right. By breaking the curse, Julian avoided the Wicker Man. He accomplished what no one could. You won't see him boasting about it, though, especially with everything that has happened since.

The Heathens are in hiding.

And Fallon Morgan goes by Fallon Grimaldi now, taking Benny's last name. She's still working at St. Christopher's Funeral Home.

Geneva, a young and hell-bent journalist fresh out of the academy, cornered Fallon at the intersection of Bram Boulevard and Main, asking her about the event on the cliff a few weeks back. Fallon kept a tight lip. According to the article printed in The Daily Hollow, Fallon fully supports Norse Woods Coven, even though she hasn't been officially initiated.

If Fallon is anything like her mother, she'll become a lone wolf, too.

Since the curse broke, the brave, early risers who make it through the night and to The Bean are high on Wicked Death Wish by nine-thirty. They catch Fallon driving that hearse up and down Main Street, picking up the aftermath from the frightening hours of the night—the people who lost their lives.

If you thought the curse could break without consequence, you were wrong. There's always a consequence—a balance.

The Shadows living inside those Heathen's faces had to go somewhere, and the moon girl has been busy chasing their deadly trail for weeks.

What are the Shadows, you ask?

Do you remember I talked about the days being shorter, the nights longer, and townies locking their doors at night, all the death surrounding the town? With only six hours of daylight, we're spending eighteen gruesome hours fighting the Shadows—five spirit-like silhouettes released into our hidden coastal town after they left the Heathens' faces. Some say they cause the blackout nights and the messing with time we've been experiencing lately.

We were all wrong when we thought breaking the curse would bring the covens together. The town is more divided than ever. Breaking the curse of the Hollow Heathens was only the beginning.

You're lucky you haven't come across the Shadows yet. No one makes it past their first encounter, and the Shadows' desperation is only spreads and stains this town.

You can't kill them, either.

These Shadows aren't trapped inside a face anymore.

They creep in the dark, on standby until that moment comes when you think you're safe. They hunt you like a swirling black predator, stalking you until you can no longer keep your eyes open. And once you close your eyes, the world is forgotten. Only darkness. When you close your eyes, you are all alone, even when you're not. This, my friend, is when they strike, whether it be a dream or a nightmare.

For now, that's all we know.

Take it from me, don't be stupid. Sleep with both eyes open.

If you thought the town was living in fear before, you've seen nothing yet.

Ah, would you look at that? The snow stopped just in time.

You should hurry before it returns, but don't use the front door. Leave through the black door in the back, between the two bookcases. I promise we'll see each other again. In the meantime, let's keep this conversation between you and me a little secret.

My name?

Oh, you know my name, darling. You've heard it before.

I'm Freddy in the Mourning.

THE NIGHT AFTER THE CURSE BROKE

TOWN OF WEEPING HOLLOW
NIGHT OF NOVEMBER 4, 2020
NORSE WOODS

NIGHT APPROACHED FASTER THAN IT SHOULD, AND TALL, SKINNY TREE TRUNKS creaked in the wind under a yawning gray sky. Julian Blackwell neared the middle of the forest, two silver eyes casting upward and watching the sun sink with an impossible swiftness. The storm from earlier had rolled away, leaving in its wake a moonlight drizzle.

Julian stood beneath the dimming sky, welcoming the rain.

The teeth-chattering drops slid down his cheeks. Each one chilling him was a reminder of his past and a pardon for his sins. What he'd done and couldn't undo, but forgiveness all the same.

On this day, he'd accomplished the unimaginable.

He'd broken the *Curse of the Hollow Heathens*.

And at his side, Fallon took his hand.

For the first time, she had spent her day admiring the face of the Heathen she'd fallen for. The color of midnight in his hair, sterling silver eyes, strong cheekbones, straight-fitting nose, the crease between his brows. But the smiles were brief with the impending night.

"Something's happening," she whispered, staring at the same foreboding sky. Julian neededn't reply, but his crease deepened, causing Fallon's worry to intensify.

It had only been that morning that they broke the curse that had haunted them for centuries. It seemed they didn't have a chance to take pleasure in the

good news before something else, something sinister, was happening all around them.

Then a scream bounced from the branches of the trees, catching their attention.

Julian regarded Fallon with a stricken panic, then tugged on her hand before taking off through the woods.

November's cold pierced their faces as the night's wind rushed past them.

At the edge of the woods, Julian and Fallon came to an abrupt halt.

Both were face to face with a terrified Mrs. Edwin, who was lying on the ground. Beck Parish stood only feet away, a fear-stricken figure in the background. Mrs. Edwin's eyes were round and wide as if struck by a current of electricity, and a sheet of color had fallen from her face. Panic grabbed her by her arms and legs. She couldn't get up, she couldn't run. She couldn't move at all. Five shadowy figures surrounded her and kept her in their circle. Their limbs were like somber liquid smoke. Tall, nimble, and swaying with the sharp, icy breeze.

Mrs. Edwin's cries echoed, breaking Julian from a paralyzed stance.

He pulled Fallon behind him, and with fear soaking their vision, they watched the strange figures close in on the elderly woman.

"Julian, do something!" Beck shouted from the other side with unstable emotions beaming in his voice. His watery eyes darted back and forth between Julian and the threat surrounding his keeper.

Julian caught the desperation folding inside Beck and was unable to avoid it from consuming him, too. If he didn't do something fast, Fallon or Beck could be next, and this thought caused a bolt of the same desperation to shoot through him.

With a fist full of vigor, Julian released a mind-bending scream, dropped to one knee, and punched the forest floor. The ground trembled beneath them while the ear-splitting scream was ever-perpetuating.

Beck hunched forward with his hands pressed to his ears, his eyes tightly shut.

Julian's scream felt like clawing at his brain.

Like jagged teeth sawing at his bones.

Then, when all fell silent, the five shadows evaporated into the night like mist, leaving nothing behind but ink-smeared memories.

Inside a disturbed circle—with leaves blown out of the way and all that remained was dirt—Mrs. Edwin lay with a blanched white face, dead.

Beck sprinted to her, sliding across the ground to where she lay, collecting her body in his arms.

Julian stumbled backward. All strength had been exhumed from his being.

One by one, others from Norse Woods Coven appeared, including Mr. Edwin and Josephine, their daughter.

In a blubbering mess, Mr. Edwin cried, shaking his head. *"No!"*

Fallon stood frozen with both hands cupping her mouth. Tears halted in her eyes, too shocked to fall.

Phoenix Wildes arrived, collapsing before a disoriented Julian, who remained weakened on his knees. He grabbed Julian's jaw to gauge the expression in his eyes, but a somber face stared back at him.

Julian's expression crippled Phoenix. He was not used to seeing Julian's true face. This was still new for him—for all four of them.

"What happened?" Phoenix asked, despair carving into his syllables.

Julian remained silent, still processing what he'd seen.

"Julian!" he shouted, louder this time with terror in his eyes.

"I don't know," Julian croaked, his eyes bouncing around the forest for answers. He fell back on his palm, the shadowy figures burning a hole into his memory. "I tried. I tried, but I was too late," he said under the seams of his fear, then lifted his horror-filled eyes to Phoenix, a revelation forming in his mind. "It seems I've broken the curse trapped inside us and, in the process, let all our monsters out."

Members of Norse Woods gathered, including Agatha Blackwell, with a thick braid tumbling down her waist. She laid a hand on Julian's shoulder.

"Whatever it was will be back," she said to her son, trying to keep all emotion from appearing on her face. "I have a strong feeling this is only the beginning."

Agatha turned to the other Heathen, at first not recognizing Phoenix without his mask. But when Phoenix's golden eyes blazed with familiar agony, her heart melted.

Her gaze traced his angles, narrow chin, the two freckles under his eyes, and the crease between his brows. She saw him as the boy she had always treated as a son since Phoenix's mother passed.

Phoenix turned away from her. "We need to find Zephyr. No one has seen him since the curse broke." His fiery gaze slid across the grounds of Norse Woods. People were gathering, the ensuing panic spreading like a ripple

effect.

The Heathens knew. *My god*, they knew.

They felt it with every fiber of their being.

A ghastly wickedness was creeping into their midst, and the Heathens had never felt so entirely human until that moment. It hadn't taken long for them to realize that these evil shadows were the very beings that had lived inside them.

The darkest monster of all had unleashed into their home of Weeping Hollow, and the night was its awakening.

Agatha watched her coven fall apart under tall trees in the heart of Norse Woods, branches wilting as if their limbs were weeping, too.

"Snap out of it, Julian," Agatha demanded in a cutting, yet low whisper. There was a tremor in her voice, too. One she couldn't mask. "The both of you. You are Norse Woods Heathens. Get up and stand on your feet."

Julian's eyes lifted to Phoenix.

Together, they planted their boots on the ground and stood tall.

Julian's spine straightened, and he settled his silvery eyes on his mother with both fists clenched and veins popping in his forearms.

Agatha cleared her throat. "Julian couldn't stop it." She looked at Beck in the distance, who was surrounded by the Edwin family and clutching his dead keeper to his chest. "If those *things* come back, it will take all four Heathens to save this town."

"Five," Julian corrected through a clenched jaw, then looked at his mother with guilt. The secret of the lost Heathen that he'd been keeping from them was buried deep and only intended to surface if the curse broke. He supposed now was a better time than any. "You mean, it's going to take all *five* of us."

PROLOGUE

ADORA
SIX YEARS OLD

ON THE NIGHT OF THE FULL WOLF MOON
THE SULLIVAN COTTAGE
JANUARY 7TH, 2004

HUSHED WHISPERS TWISTED LIKE RIBBONS AND SLID ACROSS WOODEN FLOORS throughout the cottage.

"For crying out loud, talk to me," Dad pleaded. I'd never heard the hurt so deeply threaded in his voice before, but I could tell he was trying to keep his voice low so we wouldn't hear. "Please just talk to me, Marcy. I don't want to do this."

Momma never said a word.

The front door *screeched* when it opened, and the floorboards groaned under Sacred Sea feet. There must have been at least three of them in the cottage. Maybe four or five, I couldn't tell.

"What are they doing down there?" Fable was scared, clutching her stuffed unicorn close to her chest. The faint glow from the kerosene lamp sitting on the floor between the three of us touched her soft, freckled cheeks. "Are they going to take Momma? I don't want them to take Momma."

"*Shh* … No one's taking Momma. We can't leave Weeping Hollow,

remember? We're all safe here together," I whispered with a bright smile. "They're just here to make her feel better. Remember *Are You Afraid of the Dark*, the game we used to play? The one where we'd hide and seek—"

Fable nodded, two hopeful eyes now. "With flashlights!"

"That's all. Momma's going to have fun, you'll see. Now, try to keep quiet. I can't hear what they're saying down there."

Ivy leaned in. "You and your stories."

The air was thick with all three of us huddled on the other side of my bedroom door, but it was cold. So cold. I was wearing Momma's pretty red dress—the one with thin straps and silky fabric. With my back against the wall, I covered my bare feet with the skirt of it. I had to get closer to the hushed voices slipping under the door from the other side. But I still couldn't make anything out.

I climbed to my knees and reached for the door handle. The brass knob was like ice under my fingers, and the hinges creaked when I opened the door.

Ivy gasped. "Don't, Adora. They'll hear you," she whispered frantically. "It's safer here."

"I need to know what's happening." I opened my bedroom door a little more, just enough to slip through. Then I stood and carefully walked to the stairs.

Ivy crept behind me. She could never let me walk into the unknown alone.

The wooden spindles at the top of the stairs were cold in my fists, and I stuck my head between them.

For a moment, I thought I heard Momma's voice telling me that *if you pop your head between the spindles, it will get stuck there forever*. But Momma's voice was nothing but a memory.

Below, Mr. Pruitt, Mrs. Cantini, and Dad formed a circle by the front door, speaking low. Our high priest was here, and the seriousness of what was to come on this night sent a chill crawling up my spine. I shivered when Dad stepped to the side, revealing a young boy standing in the middle of them, but I couldn't see his face. I wanted to see his face and know who he was.

Dad's eyes were red, sockets swollen like his tears had punched him repeatedly. "She never said why," he cried. "She's never done anything crazy like this before."

“This doesn’t seem like Marcy at all,” Mrs. Cantini muttered. “With all the secrets of Weeping Hollow, this is one I cannot explain. I’ll need more time.” She laid a hand on Dad’s shoulder. “We will figure this out, Ronan. I swear to you, we will figure this out and make sure your girls are safe in the meantime.”

They talked for a moment longer while the boy stayed quiet and hidden.

Then Dad shook his head, and they all walked out of view.

Fable cried out for us in a whisper.

Ivy pinched my arm. “Fable’s scared. Let’s go back.”

“Who is that boy?”

“I don’t know. I can’t get a good look. Let’s just go back.”

“No.” I had to know who he was and what they were doing here.

“Adora …” Ivy pressed her entire body against my back to whisper in my ear, “there’s a reason they don’t want us to see whatever they’re about to do.”

“If you’re too scared, then just go back to my room. I’m staying.”

I heard Ivy’s footfalls descend. She’d left me to comfort Fable.

I waited until the silence stretched out and the voices came again. The slow seconds waiting at the top of the stairs with Momma’s pretty red dress puddled at my feet ticked by and by.

After they settled in the living room, I inched down the steps.

Slow, careful. Unheard and unseen.

The cool shadows at the bottom of the staircase hid me, and I stayed on the last step, craning my neck to see into the living room.

The women of Sacred Sea circled Momma, each holding a black candle and whispering an incantation I’d never heard before.

Momma sat in her rocking chair by the window, her long black hair curtaining her face. She seemed so small in her chair, and though her feet barely touched the floor, the chair rocked as she stared out into the midnight ocean. Hard and fast and with phantom ferocity. A pounding like a heartbeat. The chair rocked so hard that the floorboards came up beneath it.

Dad cupped his mouth, then moved his hand over his eyes.

He doesn’t want to see, I thought. Dad didn’t want to see, and neither did I. Still, despite the horrid sight before us, I couldn’t escape this spot. Much like Dad, I was trapped here. Unlike Dad, I couldn’t lift my arm to cover my eyes.

Mr. Pruitt stood beside Dad, squeezing his shoulder in a comforting way.

Ivy was gone. I had no one to squeeze mine.

I gripped a wooden spindle in my fist until my fingers lost their feeling, watching Momma's chair beat the floor as the hushed incantation painted the room. The window burst open, a wind rushing in, but they didn't stop. Momma rocked harder, the witches chanted louder, and the cold wind howled past my ears.

Seconds passed slowly, lulling and weaving into the night.

Then the women of Sacred Sea halted their spell, causing them all to take a step back at the same time, a force snatching them up by invisible puppet threads.

The boy standing before Momma in the middle of the circle turned his head and looked *right* at me. His hazel eyes glowed like lightning had struck them, and a dry gulp stuck in my throat.

Kane Pruitt, my mind echoed.

The boy there'd been whispers about. The one who'd been trapped inside the Pruitt house, having not stepped out until this night.

I palmed my mouth to quiet both my breathing and screaming. *What did you do to her?* I wanted to shout at him. *What did you do to my momma?* But all the words froze inside my head, building sharp ice sculptures of fear.

He flashed me a cynical smile.

One that was much crazier than Momma's. By far.

Kane turned his back on me, and they left our home through the back door. Not a word. Not a word at all.

After Mr. Pruitt and Mrs. Cantini exchanged farewells, Dad poured a drink and sank into the tufted twill chaise beside the rocking chair.

For a while, he stared at Momma. Her rocks were rhythmic this time. A soft beating on the hardwood. Dad watched her through bloodshot eyes. He didn't speak a word. He just stared until exhaustion stole him, and he snored into a slumber.

I waited a while, and when all was quiet, I stepped out of the shadows.

That was when the rocking chair came to a stop.

Momma's head turned ninety degrees until her empty blue eyes pierced me, pinning me to the wall among the happy family photographs.

The imprisoned smiles of yesteryears swayed above my head. Gilded silver-leaf frames became a whispered *whoosh, whoosh* in my ears, like one may fall and crash to the floor at any given second.

Momma's black hair, usually tucked behind her ears, fell flat against her pale cheeks. *She doesn't look like Momma.* I shook my head. *She doesn't*

look like Momma at all.

"You're wearing my dress again," she said to me in a strange voice I'd only heard once before. Accusingly. It was the first time she'd spoken all night.

Her fingers flexed around the arms of the rocking chair. "Come to me."

I didn't answer. I didn't move, I couldn't. The bottom of the dress was long and piled over my curled toes, trapping me here and not wanting me to go, either.

I twisted my fingers in front of me.

But she was my mother, and I had no reason to be afraid.

"Come, Adora," she said again, more familiar this time. "Come here and let me tell you a tale."

I took an uneasy step closer.

And another.

I passed Dad, whose snoring caught in his throat, until I was standing in front of Momma.

She was looking right at me. An unwavering look.

Like staring at a portrait. And the picture staring back.

With a hesitant hand, I leaned forward and tucked her hair behind her ear. She didn't move when I did it. Not a flinch. I fell back on my heels and looked at her—really looked at her this time. She seemed pretty now, like the same momma I'd always known. The momma I knew from the photographs in the hallway. The momma who'd sung in the morning and swum with me in the sea. The same momma who'd tucked me in at night and told me stories of mermaids and handsome pirates.

But there was something different about her.

The light was missing in her eyes.

I crawled into her lap.

"My sunbeam, look at me," Momma whispered, stroking my hair while the burnt scent of incense—notes of petals and hints of disturbed earth—still floated in the cottage. I turned, and Momma took off the chain around her neck and slipped it around mine. Attached was an empty antique setting.

Momma always wears this necklace.

It was special to her, and she gave it to me.

Then she wrapped me in her arms, and we looked out the window together as she started the story. "This tale, unlike all the other tales I've told you before, begins with a boy—a lost boy whose name is still a mystery. And

right now, as this tale begins, he is an outsider among the trees …”

PART I

THE SHORE

CHAPTER 1

STONE

AGE THIRTEEN

Chesapeake Forest, Maryland
April in the year of 1853

The white-tailed deer stood only feet away from us as we hid outside the small village. We tracked it for some time, and Paco still had not moved from his position. Unlike me, he hadn't found whatever it was he needed to snatch the breath of a living creature, even if it meant feeding and nourishing his family.

It was neither courage nor bravery. No amount of skill would suffice, though skill did help. I could never pinpoint what trait someone needed to have to kill something. Perhaps if one had known hunger like Mother and I had—before we'd been trained to go days without food to know what it was like to be without it—it did make it easier.

It was spring. The sun was low, and the morning was cold. It hurt to breathe in April, and the bite in the air frosted my lungs after the long, winded sprint. Paco remained quiet at my side as we crouched behind Bloodroot bushes, cloaked in bearskin and fur. Watching, waiting, poison surrounding us.

The forest was quiet.

The morning made no sound. The deer made no sound.

It was tired from running, and exhaustion was what we had intended.

Three souls occupied this space, yet there was not a stir in the forest.

Paco's chances were dwindling. If we did not return with something, his father would be disappointed like many times before.

I could not understand Paco's struggle.

It was only a few years earlier that I found comfort in hunting.

On mornings before a hunt, I prayed for the gods to provide. I made offerings to Mother Earth and Father Sky before asking Spirit to unite me with the animal. With every kill, I felt it internally.

As the years passed, I simplified my ritual. It wasn't necessary for me to show my spirituality externally; I knew what I was doing. Whether it be fish, snowshoe hares, pheasants, or buck with velvet-wrapped antlers, they were a part of me as much as I was a part of them.

Paco's face was pinched as though he was in pain or fighting a queasy stomach. He wore that look each time his eyes were set on his kill. Nerves gripped him as he tightened his fingers around the blade in his sweaty hand, watching the deer push her wet black nose across glossy leaves.

The top layer of snow melted, slipping beneath my frozen snowshoes as I waited. "*Go on, Paco,*" I whispered at his side in his native tongue. "*Do it*."

Most boys, including myself, knew how to hunt. However, while other thirteen-year-olds tracked rabbits and squirrels, my sights were set on animals that could feed more of us for longer than a day.

To me, no challenge was out of reach. Killing with precision would ensure a painless death. But what if Paco could not give the animal the deserved peace? How much suffering would the innocent creature endure before surrendering to their death if Paco could not do it right?

I had taught him many times before and showed him how it was done. A single puncture in the wrong place could cause the gentle mammal insufferable pain.

With sweat beading on his brow, Paco stepped forward, and snow crunched beneath his shoe. The deer snapped her head at the sound, and Paco froze. Then the deer froze.

Silent seconds passed, and then—"*I cannot*," he whispered as though the thought pained him.

My gaze drifted back to the deer, sensing it was about to sprint through the trees again. Without another second to risk, I snatched the blade from Paco's fist.

With the carved wood end clutched in my naked palm, echoes of the place it had once resided flashed in my mind. My throat swelled. A thick black stain spread behind my eyelids until a single memory remained. *Wolfish looks inscribed into strange faces as a spirited tribe passed; hunger and fear held in the palms of their eyes.* The cold around me quivered, winter rushed into my ears, and the memory flickered before breaking apart and falling to pieces.

Now. The single word collapsed in my brain, my thoughts dispersing.

I charged after the deer, the Hemlock branches creaking as they bent to clear a path from me to her.

The first time the past came to me through the touch of an object, I knew there was something different about me other than the mask I wore. Mother had said not to think of it, not to speak of it. It was neither normal nor a gift, the same as how the Earth guided me. The same as the stretch of darkness carved into my face.

In a swift sprint, my breath and heartbeat pulsed in my ears.

I lunged forward and wrapped my arms around the deer's body. I used my strength and speed to take her to the ground. Like many times before, I grabbed her nose, pulled her head back, and sank the sharp blade into the space below her ear, slicing across vital blood vessels and splitting her throat apart.

"*May your body nourish ours, and may your memory nourish our souls,*" I whispered in the native language, finishing the deer with a deep jab. Her lifeless brown eyes stared up at the gray morning sky. "Nos omnes connexae," *We are all connected,* I whispered, lying with her in my arms, chest heaving, staring up at the same gray morning sky as her blood drained over my skin.

I could not kill an animal and not have it affect me.

I could not kill and not have it take a piece of me.

Only later, after consuming her meat, would I feel whole again.

Paco walked beside me as I carried the deer back to the village, knowing the remains of the animal would be respected. We passed a tree where a buck's head from the day before sat in the crotch so its spirit could watch the sunrises and sunsets. This was a message to other animals and a reminder to yield their bodies to what the gods have planned for them.

Paco's father approached with a proud smile. "*Oh, very good, Paco.*"

"*It was—*" Paco began, when I finished, "*It was done without trouble.*"

Paco's startled gaze tapped mine, surprised I had spoken before his father. I nodded. "*Paco did a fine job. You should be proud*."

Lying to Paco's father was wrong, but I could not bear to see the disappointment on his face.

The deer's body slipped around my shoulders and fell to the ground. I dusted off my bloody hands and noticed the tremors in them. They wanted nothing more than to be cleansed of blood and feel my gloves again.

Mother appeared at my side, and the two of us walked to the riverbank to wash the blood from my skin before it set.

"You have a fight within you, but a paper heart. This will be your downfall," Mother said knowingly in English when it was only the two of us.

"Paper?"

Long blonde hair slipped from behind her ear when she pulled off the hood of her cloak. She rushed toward me and shoved my chest with all her force.

I took a step back, and Mother scowled.

"Do not crumble, Stone. Do not step back. You're bigger than me, stronger than me, and could easily have overpowered me. The only reason you took a step back is because I'm a woman." She firmed her jaw, a scold in her eyes. "Your heart is weak. Paper."

The grain sack felt heavier. "A woman and my mother."

"This should never matter. The only person you must protect is yourself. You cannot back down to anyone. Not even a woman, not even me." She turned and started walking again. "Protecting Paco does him no favors. You're only enabling him. He needs to learn, and you need to remember to keep quiet," she said with her nose in the air. "Invisible and invincible, remember? Be stone, not paper. It's the only way you will survive in a world full of people who will only disappoint you."

I turned away from her.

"You're right," I admitted, avoiding her disapproving eyes but still imagining them. "I won't do it again. I won't speak to them again."

After we approached the stream, I crouched, cupped water into my palms, and splashed it onto my arms and neck, scrubbing my hands raw. In the water's reflection, a large grain sack stared back at me, making my head look thrice its size. Beside it, an intensity marred Mother's face. I lowered my head, the weight of my reality suddenly weighing on me. It could only mean one thing.

“How much longer until we leave this time?”

In all our travels, we had never spent this amount of time in one place. Before long, we would be moving on to the next village, the next tribe. We looked for spirited people in a small community rather than a flourishing city crowded with those who could fall victim to me.

Mother had exchanged her cooking talents for shelter, and I had offered my hunting skills for acceptance onto their land. After some time, people always questioned the grain sack on my head. They always demanded answers as to why I could not show my face and why I wore gloves on my hands in the summertime. Even so, I knew never to remove my shields.

Their questions warned that it was time to flee before they forced Mother’s hand, demanding her to show them the terrifying black abyss swirling beneath the sack.

My face, as Mother had explained, was cursed, and whoever looked at it would succumb to their deepest fears before falling to their death. Just the same, there had never been a time when I’d seen myself in a reflection because there was a possibility the curse could claim me, too.

Death was supposed to be a natural part of life’s cycle. Rather, the death I caused was a fate so cruel and unlawful, and my face’s only hunger.

“It’s the fault of your grandfather,” she had once said, but this always preceded a period. The end of the subject. She’d never spoken of his or my father’s name, should I have one. Of course, there were times when I imagined a father and what he looked like. I’d drawn his face, certain that if I could find his, I could find my own.

Only a blank face ever stared back at me.

My heart was not rigid or hollow. There was something there.

I’m capable of more. I have more to offer.

But I was unsure as to what *more* represented.

Mother reached into her dress pocket and offered my gloves to me. “They’re starting to ask questions. We should move on now that winter is coming to an end. It will be easier for us to travel.”

I slipped my hands inside and nodded despite disappointment creeping into my chest. Paco had become my only friend. A person who had never questioned the oddity of my mask.

Alas, the disappointment was my fault.

I knew better than to form attachments.

Mother always disapproved of our friendship, but it was with thoughtful

intentions. To keep people safe from me, and me safe from others, Mother's only motive was to cure me. She had never been able to accept me for what I was, this creature she had birthed.

As long as my face was covered, I would remain benign.

I was no more harmful than a man with two fists and a temper.

Though hardly a soul had given me a chance to prove myself otherwise.

It had always and only been Mother and me, but at what point had I begun to long for things I would never have? Was it selfish to be thirteen and wonder what it would be like to be a part of something more than this? Would it be so wrong to live like this, be *this*, and want more of everything?

Each night I read chapters of my twenty-first book before falling asleep. The spiders alerted me in my dreams, and I would open my eyes to the present surrounding me again. I lay awake, knowing the spiders were reminding me of things, of greatness pressing inside me, and I would get this powerful sense that someone was out there waiting for me.

CHAPTER 2

ADORA

Morning of the New Moon
The Sullivan Cottage
November 15, 2020

THE SEA WAS A COLLECTOR OF THINGS.

My earliest memory was when I was six. Mom had carried me on her hip in the sea, even though she was unable to touch the ocean floor. Violent waves toppled over us again and again, and it had become a struggle to keep our heads above water. But I remembered her crying. It had been a manic sort of cry. The kind nothing could stop.

I'd never told her that when she was crying, the ocean was curling its salty fingers into my hair, ripping away my favorite lilac hair clip. Or that my sea was shoving her salty fingers down my throat, stealing away my breath.

When I was eight, my sisters, and my best friend, Adeline, and I had matching pastel two-pieces. One June, after Mom could no longer speak, we waded in the shallow while Dad held Mom in the deep. Mom returned with puffy eyes and no smile, and Dad returned without his wedding band. He'd said a wave slipped it right off his finger. After all this time, the ocean never returned her smile or his wedding band.

When I was ten, I awoke on the shore the morning after Adeline died. I had my head lying on praying hands and was consumed with the kind of grief that made everything hurt. The tide had come up and over me like a blanket,

wiping away my tears.

On a cold October night when I was fourteen, after Mom could no longer walk, my sisters and I built tents with driftwood and worn tarps from Dad's fishing shed. We camped through the night on shore and didn't make it to morning. The tide had rolled in and choked our fire, and as her waters slipped back into the ocean, she took my purple glitter jelly sandals with her.

I haven't seen them since.

The sea was a collector of things. It took things we cherished—most things we'd forgotten—and I still found myself drawn to her, unable to resist her call, needing to step into the graveyard of the lost, wild, and treasured.

My foot let off the last step of the stone stairway, and I laid my hands on the weathered gate, feeling the sharp imperfections scratch against my palm. There, I looked out into the expansive, milky-white horizon, my gaze falling upon my beloved black sea.

A sliver of wood pierced my skin, and I sucked in a sharp breath, turning my hand over to find a splinter in my finger. Deep and stuck. Ugly and imperfect. I pressed against it, and the slight burn was somewhat satisfying, like a tiny knife cutting into me every time I flicked my fingernail against it.

There was pleasure in pain for someone like me—someone who was a pretty shell holding in an ocean of rage. So, I closed my fist and decided to keep the splinter for as long as I could. Until I wouldn't need it any longer. Perhaps that could last forever, like this unexpected winter which arrived one night and never left.

It was different here. Snow flurries drifted, gentle and dreamy, wrapping the town in a gloomy silence, like a film noir. I dropped my hand and dragged in a full breath until my lungs filled with the winter chill. Then I let it go and unlatched the gate, my collected splinter pounding in my index finger.

The beach was crisp and frigid, and my dress was trailing across the sand as I stepped closer to the shore on bare, clandestine soles. A cool morning mist flipped over the waves and howled in my ears, flicking tiny grains of sand against my cheeks and into my eyes.

At the shoreline, I gathered the bottom of my dress in one hand, pinned it to my thigh, and clutched the glass bottle—with my message inside—in my other hand. I stood deathly still, keeping my feet just behind the waterline, daring the sea to come and collect me, too. Come treasure me, too. Come love me, too.

Anticipation scratched up my spine, then her denim waters came, wrapping around my ankles and teasing me. My numbed feet sank, wet sand slipping out from under my toes and pulling back without me, the ocean loving her shore but never loving me enough to fight for me in return.

Though the sea and I had been here before, disappointment still flooded my chest. As it would time and time again.

As I looked up, I let the bottom of my dress go, and the linen was swept up in her waters. The new sheer moon was a ghost, a transparent sheet pinned to the ashen, pre-morning sky. It was time, and I uncorked the bottle and slid the message into my palm.

All my wicked thoughts were tattooed inside.

Inky messages wept in fluid cursive, punched into the brittle ivory.

I pushed the letter back into the bottle, re-corked it, and tossed it into the fog.

The tide pulled back, grabbing my ugly message with foamy white fingers.

As if she had been thirsting for it, my secret drifted in her deep waters. She craved only my dreadful evil. The letter after the last full moon hadn't been enough. The ocean was never satisfied, craving each and every new moon, too. Every end and every new beginning.

My love for the sea was an unrequited, toxic sort of love.

She took and took, I gave and gave, and my love for her remained. But I still held on to the day she stopped taking, or until the day she'd take me completely.

"Adora," Fable's sing-song voice called out, penetrating the seams of the salty breeze. I clutched the chain around my neck. The lightness of this spare moment alone was gone. "Everything all right?"

Fawn hair whipped around my younger sister's face and shoulders as she stood atop the porch balcony. Her freckle-dusted cheekbones shone down at me like dawn stars, yet a heaviness hung under her eyes. "Come inside. Dad made breakfast."

A MID-MORNING SNOWFALL TICKLED THE FLOOR-TO-CEILING WINDOWS AT THE back of the cottage. If one listened closely, the almost-muted sound was like a soft thumping. Rhythmic. A melody that was beautiful and belonged in a song and not in Weeping Hollow.

Dad made crepes from scratch. A variety of jams and jellies covered the kitchen island, each jar with a gingham lid.

Ivy sat at the breakfast nook, surrounded by embroidered, hand-stitched pillows. She was tying knots in ropes for fishermen for when they could ship back out to sea again.

My older sister depicted a stormy night. Black hair parted down the middle of her full-moon face, and navy edges struck her pale-blue eyes. But this morning, after many sleepless nights, she sat dazed in the kitchen, her fingers working on frayed ropes with robotic fingers.

I sat on a barstool at the island beside Fable, and Dad slid a jar across the island. “I picked up your favorite. Hazelnut peanut butter.”

I caught the jar in my palm, and Adeline’s face instantly took shape in my mind. *“It’s impossible,” she mumbles with a mouthful, catching crumbs falling out of her mouth, but it sounds more like ih ipaw-ih-ble. A plate of crackers coated with peanut butter sits between us on the floor, challenging each other to eat six of them in under a minute. We’re giggling in the middle of the night. With ten seconds left, we shove two more crackers into our mouths. When the alarm sounds, we fall onto our sides, our faces and fingers sticky, laughing so hard our laughter turns silent, mouths agape, saltine sludge sliding out, and we can’t breathe.*

The blaze from the fire crackling in the stone fireplace behind me licked the nape of my neck, pulling me back.

I lifted my eyes, catching Dad watching me as I traded the peanut butter for the jelly. “I thought Mrs. Cantini wiped out all that was left,” I said, spreading the jelly onto a crepe.

“Viola sure did,” Dad rushed to say, pacing the kitchen with flour caking his forearms and dishes clinking together in his hands. “I had an early start this morning. The Shadows took her handyman, Tim. So, I was over at her property to help fix a broken railing.” Dad swiped a dish towel from the edge of the sink and dotted his forehead, not looking at me. “Then I’m walking up our porch steps just as Mrs. Madder spotted me. Perfect timing, as always. I had to board up her windows.” A groan. “Don’t get me wrong, I adore Mrs. Madder, but that woman drives me nuts.”

Of the three of us, I looked the most like our father. We both had blond hair, though his was graying on the sides, and green eyes. When he smiled, wrinkles fanned around the edges, but the days of Dad smiling were few and far between.

As it was, youthful skin ran on my maternal side. Mom once said it was because of the ocean, and that her waters would keep us young and beautiful forever.

“Viola knows how much my girls love jellies with their pastries in the morning. And you, Adora, with the peanut butter. It was the least she could do.” He’d said it as if he rehearsed what Viola had told him. From her lips to his ears, then ours. But if they’d paid attention, they’d know I hadn’t had peanut butter in over twelve years.

As Dad rambled, Fable faced me with humility shining in her eyes. Freckles splattered her cheekbones and the bridge of her nose, and they moved as she fought back a doubtful smile. One that also recognized Dad’s strange behavior.

I followed Fable’s gaze to Ivy sitting in the corner of the kitchen, and for a moment, we all exchanged knowing glances.

Sometimes in moments like these, it reminded me of when we were kids —before Mom left—when all five of us were together in this kitchen. A time when the Curse of the Hollow Heathens remained, and their remnant shadows weren’t haunting the streets of the town. A time before the Panic and piles of unpaid dues. A time before Kane took Mom away. A time before a Heathen took Adeline away.

Dad leaned over the island and shoved a fork-full into his mouth. “What?”

“Oh, nothing,” Fable sang, sliding one of my magazines closer to her from the end of the island. A vintage December 1949 Vogue issue from my collection. It had been sitting on the island from the night before. I’d been working on Viola’s dress and needed inspiration.

Dad stabbed his fork into another buttery layer. “I ran out of wood on Mrs. Madder’s windows. I have to go back into town for more and start on ours. That is if there’s any wood left.”

The boards weren’t there to protect us from the Shadows because the Shadows didn’t come from anywhere. They just appeared. The boards were needed to stop those on the west side from breaking in and stealing food or money. Sometimes both. Anything they could get their filthy hands on.

“Adora,” he pointed his fork at me, “could you close your shop an hour early? We must be at the Pruitt’s by one and home before nightfall.”

“Close early?” I was already closing early, with nightfall coming at three in the afternoon. “No. There’s still so much that needs to get done with barely

any time left. There's no way I can leave early."

The Founder's Day Ball was only six weeks away, and I was already behind. Most women in Weeping Hollow paid their deposits a year ago, the day after the last ball, expecting me to have finished their dresses by this time. Their pantry may be empty, windows not boarded, empty batteries in their flashlights. However, they would still pay me what was due for the ball, the most prestigious event of the year. And we needed money. I had a responsibility to uphold, regardless of the Panic.

Which had me worried. How much longer could we go on with a reduced income? Dad was unable to fish, the docks were closed, and the entire town was suffering while slowly dying off one by one.

Luckily for us, I had Founder's Day to keep us afloat. People still cared about the ball. People would always care about the ball, no matter what threat came upon us. But what would happen to my family if the town ever canceled the ball?

Beside me, Fable slowly flipped through my magazine, the scratchy sound of the waxy pages filling the awkward tension.

"Make a way," Dad insisted. "There's a meeting in the Sacred Sea chamber. Augustine, Viola, Cyrus, and Kane will be there, too. We're all required to attend."

Fable's fingers paused. Her and Ivy's expressions abandoned them.

The sound of Kane's name struck a chord inside me, and I gripped the edge of the stool. The splinter in my finger rubbed against the wood, and a jolt of pain rushed through my hand. I pressed my finger into the stool to keep the ache there and lasting. It was a way to blanket the rage and focus on what Dad was saying. *A meeting. Ah, yes, a meeting*.

It was the first time any of us had heard about this meeting.

Could it be the reason for Dad's bizarre behavior?

"Is it about the Shadows?" Fable asked, flipping another page in my magazine. "Did they take someone else?"

She didn't look up when Dad said, "No, and you know I can't talk about it."

We already knew his response. It was the same each time. It was put out due to the heavy nature of the topic, like everything else that stirred up in the Sullivan cottage. Water over fire.

I thought about Mrs. Edwin. The last time we'd spoken was when I'd accused her of stealing from *Oh My Stars*. Hours before the Shadows took

her life, we had a heated argument, and it didn't end well. She'd accused me of lying, and I'd threatened to burn her rickety cabin down with her and her sick daughter inside it. A flatlander had called Officer Stoker shortly after, and he showed up outside my shop and escorted Mrs. Edwin out.

I hadn't meant to say these things. I didn't know where these words had come from. *This isn't me*, I'd wanted to tell them. I'd been swept by cruelty like one was swept by illness, and I hated myself for it. I didn't know when it started. As the years passed, this evil inside me had only worsened, and if I didn't toss my letters into the ocean twice a month, was burning down their home something I would act upon?

"Watch, they're going to confirm the Shadows took Freddy this time," Ivy said, her voice disinterested as she tightly pulled another knot. "Weeping Hollow can't function without Freddy in the Mourning. Ever since he went missing, it's like no one knows what's going on anymore."

At my side, Fable tapped on an article that read *The Decline and Fall of Blondes* and side-eyed me with a smirk, perhaps trying to lighten the mood. She was good at that.

I peeled the magazine from her jelly-smeared fingers, but the news of this meeting still twisted in my head, layering another worry.

Ivy went back to tying knots with the same worry in the creases of her eyes.

AFTER THE LAST DISH WAS CLEAN, IVY DRIED HER HANDS OVER THE SINK AND turned, coming face to face with Dad. He held a breakfast tray with crepes, fruit, and a glass of orange juice between them.

His expression softened. "Bring this to your mother?"

Their eyes met for a brief stand-off until Ivy turned away.

Dad always tried. Ivy always turned away.

His crestfallen eyes turned to me for help.

Mom's bedroom was down the hall and to the right, just before the staircase. I balanced the tray in one hand and clutched the brass knob in the other, closed my eyes, and sucked in a full breath.

A four-poster bed with an ivory canopy and crisp-white lace trim greeted me. Tucked inside a made-up bed lay Mom, eyes closed with a steady beeping of her heart on the monitor at her side. Dad had pulled back the curtains, hoping for natural light to flood into the room. But the only color

this morning was gray, much like Mom's soul.

"Hi, Mom," I set the plate on the nightstand, grabbed the breakfast tray, and pulled out each leg, humming the tune to *You Are My Sunshine*. It was the same song Mom had sung to us every morning from room to room.

There was a crack in my pitch, my voice shaking from the memory.

But I didn't stop, hoping she could hear me, hoping she could find comfort while trapped in her nightmare.

Mom hadn't moved on her own in almost nine years. She hadn't walked, she hadn't spoken. She only lies behind the bedroom door, sleeping. Her blue eyes were always shut, but I still saw the same nostalgic color every time Ivy looked at me.

When the Panic first started, I lay beside her to protect her from the Shadows, but the Shadows never came for her. They never would. A more powerful form of torture had already taken precedence over Mom.

I didn't know why Dad insisted on making her breakfast and delivering food to her room when she never awoke to eat it. He'd believed the routine, the scents, and the visits would bring her back. But after all this time, none of it ever did.

When I was fourteen, despite what the coven had done, Dr. Morley diagnosed her with an extreme case of catatonia—a depression so severe, it had put her into a catatonic state. It was just a formality. According to him, the only thing preventing her from living, loving, caring, and being a mother and wife was her.

As they all said, Mom gave up a long time ago.

Ivy had given up on her long before that.

But I never gave up on her.

"There's a Sacred Sea meeting today," I said, holding a spoon-full of orange marmalade close to her cracked lips so she could smell it. Not eat it because she hadn't eaten anything in years. Something was feeding her long enough to keep her healthy. Magic, perhaps. "No one knows what the meeting's about, but Dad seems nervous, which is making all of us nervous." I laughed lightly. "You know how Dad gets."

I set the marmalade down and retrieved vanilla lip balm from my dress pocket to coat her lips. "It could be about the Shadows. It could be the announcement of Ivy and Cyrus's marriage," I said with an injection of hope in my voice. "Could you imagine a Sullivan-Cantini wedding? Who knows, maybe weeks from now, I'll be designing Ivy's wedding dress." I shrugged.

“Either way, I’ll keep you updated.”

Though I never gave up on Mom, it still pained me to come every day and see her like this. A body without a warming smile, a contagious laugh, and a musical voice that once carried delicate notes in her wake.

Dr. Morley had said Mom could hear us, that her ears weren’t broken. However, it was her choice whether she wanted to listen, and it was her choice whether to come back. But when Eleanor came to visit, she confirmed Mom was trapped in a nightmare in the middle of the ocean, screaming out for me.

Mom didn’t do this to herself. This wasn’t her fault.

She was supposed to be the strong one. Now, I had to be.

I kissed the top of Mom’s head when Dad walked into the bedroom.

His arm wrapped around my shoulder, and he looked at the love of his life with water in his eyes.

“Dad?” I hated to see him like this.

“I just miss her.” He pushed the heel of his palm into his eye to smother a tear. “She’s right here, and I just miss her, is all.”

“I know,” I said, leaning my head against his shoulder. “Mom will come back one day. She has to.”

CHAPTER 3

STONE

AGE FIFTEEN

Adirondack Mountains, New York
Summer in the year 1855

Around me, chickens and sheep roamed freely, clucking and *baa-ing* as the smell of sweat and manure blanketed the next small village we had stumbled upon.

It was another ordinary day, another tribe, and I stood on the sidelines, skinning fish with covered hands and watching boys learn to fight inside a barricaded area. No grain sacks were worn to cover their faces. The boys had found a sameness in one another and moved about the village with a sense of belonging. A pack.

Helmets made of leather adorned their heads, some thrice their size, and they fought with bare fists and wooden clubs, sharp stones driven into the ends. Dusty air refused to settle, stirring with every match and transition.

Strands of Mother's blonde hair fell from its pin when she nudged my shoulder with hers. "Keep your eyes down."

I chopped the head off another fish. The sun was high, and I felt every drop of sweat sliding down my hairline beneath the grain sack.

"Again!" a burly man named Bly shouted, shoving his son in the chest. Chayton fell to the ground, the back of his head bouncing off the earth.

Chayton's pet dog growled, showing its teeth from the sidelines.

A wet bark with drool flying from the mouth.

All around, the boys laughed. It was a sound I had grown accustomed to.

And Chayton resembled my dear friend Paco in a way that made me think of him. I wondered if Paco had noticed my departure. If he ever rid himself of the fear of hunting. I imagined him at the age of fifteen, too. Taller and stronger. But then the mockery aimed at Chayton snatched me from my thoughts. To this land. To this tribe.

With my eyes fixed on the scene before me, I slammed the blade down on the wooden block. The fishtail popped up before falling onto the dirt-covered ground at my feet. I did not break my stare as I reached into a nearby bucket for another fish.

Bly stomped on Chayton's ribs, and Chayton turned his face into the dirt, letting out an empty cry. The kind that takes your voice away.

"Get up, you coward!" Bly shouted in their native language.

My muscles stiffened, and I gripped the knife's wooden handle in my fist.

Mother begged me in a whisper to leave it be, but before I could stop, I already found myself within the barriers of the wooden fence with only one goal in mind.

Bly turned to me, wearing animal hide as armor.

"*What is the matter with you, wendigo?"*

Monster. Assumptions had already been made about me.

Everything about me differed from them. My height, my hidden face, my gloved hands that were two doors into the past, and my eyes which I had been told many times mirrored the soulless creature living within me.

Though Bly could not see my lack of expression or hear my angry-stricken heart pounding inside my chest, I remained stoic beneath the sack.

I shed my gloves and picked up the club from the ground.

I tossed it into the air and caught it with my left hand.

The training club was heavy and unbalanced, intending to build muscle in the arms, when a memory invaded me: *skinning wood into stakes under a sweltering sun and a pot of melting iron hanging over a fire, blistering my feet.* A reminder that I had built them that way.

The boys surrounded me in a circle, howling with laughter at my brazenness toward Bly by standing here. I tried to shut them out of my mind and took a step forward when one shoved my left shoulder blade.

"Why do you not take off your sack?" the boy asked.

The question paralyzed me.

Then another shove to my right shoulder from a second boy.

“What are you hiding under there?”

And another. *“Will you feed on our souls like the malevolent cannibal you are?”* asked a third, and I urged my foot forward.

By this time, Chayton was standing again, but the insults had already shifted from him to me. Perhaps it was what I wanted. The reason I’d jumped the fence. To take back the taunting because I couldn’t bear to see it targeting someone who did not deserve it.

One more step, and I was peering down at Chayton’s domineering father.

Bly cocked his head with a challenge in his smile. *“Are you just going to stand there?”*

I scanned my surroundings. All the boys had their humor-filled eyes narrowed at me. William, a European settler the tribe had taken in, watched from afar under the tree’s shade, peeling an apple with the sharp side of his blade. Even he had stopped what he was doing to witness the exchange.

Bly poked the point of his club into my shoulder.

“Come on, then!” he shouted.

An animalistic growl left me, and I charged after him.

Our weapons clashed, and Bly blocked my advance. Kicking him in the midsection, I swung my leg up, followed by another blow to the staggering brick. Bly used his shield to block the impact, took many steps back, flexed his chest, and narrowed his eyes.

“Again!” he shouted, angrier than before.

Right step, swing, blow. Left step, swing, blow. Thunder erupted between us, the earth sustaining me in the fight, its pulses spreading through my feet and legs. All the boys stepped back and formed a large circle around us.

Bly was known to be the fiercest warrior in the tribe, and though he met each advance, he could not get ahead. While he remained on defense, sweat leaked from his brows. He was tiring, much like the white-tailed deer I would hunt every morning.

I took Bly to the ground and sat atop him. My blade pressed against his throat.

At times, I was sure the sack had turned me into a shy boy who disliked being the center of attention. Other times, especially at this moment, my desire to cut through cruelty overpowered me.

“Admit defeat,” I said in their native language, gripping the club with an

angry hand. The sharp and metallic sound of my voice shocked us both. It was the first time I had spoken a word to any of them since arriving.

In the reflection of Bly's wide and angry eyes, I saw my own.

My eyes were black, and in them, all the colors of every cold, storybook night.

Bly covered his surprising loss with a chuckle.

"Concede!" I shouted again in English, disdain clutching the two syllables.

Bly looked away with a false smile, his head falling to the side and his quiet tribal words meeting my ears. *"I give up."*

I jumped off him and threw the club to the ground at his side. The crowd parted down the middle as I walked past. The grain sack attempted to block their insulting whispers that wanted to violate my ears, but it failed.

"What have you done?" Mother hissed as I blew passed her.

MY BACK WAS PINNED TO THE OUTSIDE WALL OF OUR HOGAN, AND ON THE other side, Mother's screams poked the night's eye. She would be fucking for hours.

The red moon set off a summer haze in the sky, settling high and offering weak lighting as I threaded the envelope between my fingers. Although this envelope was the only gift that had ever been given to me, I was unable to open it. Thus, I slipped it back into my waistband and returned to my sketchpad that was resting on my knee. Head down, a set of familiar eyes stared back at me from the drawing. The burnt drawing tool was still warm between my fingers, and I upturned the eyes, the charcoal lines gliding smoothly across the rag paper like glass.

Routine was my savior. In the morning, I hunted, and at night, I read and drew the face engraved in my mind. It was a face I'd never seen before, but one I could not rid myself of as it held me through the loneliest of nights.

A startled babe let out a strangled cry. My gaze lifted to a woman sitting across the way, breastfeeding under the full moon.

The babe held on to the mother's finger in a strong grip.

It was a familiar trust I understood all too well, but at what point would the babe grow to need more or begin questioning everything he knew?

A loud shout *boomed* across the land.

It had come from the direction of Chayton's hogan.

I rolled the sketchpad and tucked it into my waistband as I stood.

Moonlight landed on Bly storming back inside his hogan. Beside the door, Chayton sat against the wooden siding, clutching his dog to his chest. The commotion stirred the rest of the tribe, sending them into their hogans for the night, doors closing all around.

I whistled to call Chayton's attention.

Though I was used to the whispers of the others, Chayton had never paid me negative attention. Perhaps he was different. I had not made a friend since Paco, and there was a hunger within me for a connection with someone other than Mother.

Chayton's sad eyes lifted and found me.

Standing to his feet, his expression morphed into anger. I carefully approached, seeing his dog lay limp with a broken neck in his arms.

Another cautious step closer. "Did … Did your father do this?"

Chayton looked at me as though I were not human, as though the words I had spoken were foreign to him. Perhaps he did not understand English. Before I could try again in his language, Chayton hugged his beloved pet one last time before dropping the heavy, dead animal into my arms.

"This is your fault," he said to me.

His shoulder shoved mine when he stomped past.

With my arms full, I stood in a daze, my heart battling sheer malevolence. Had his father been so angry over what I had done that he broke the dog's neck? I turned back, watching Chayton walk away, fading into the night, a boy trapped and inured to the dark and ill side of humanity. *I was only trying to help,* I wanted to call back to Chayton, but it was my fault. Mother was right, and as always, others suffered the consequences of my actions.

I laid my hand on the dog's side. He'd already been dead for hours. All body warmth had left, and his chill rushed inside me. The animal deserved to rest in peace, so I descended into the woods to seek a burial place.

After reaching a small clearing, I knelt down and laid the dog on the ground. I closed my eyes and stroked the rugged black fur, recounting the details of this day leading up to this moment, wishing I had not made things more difficult for Chayton. If only I had stayed back as Mother advised.

But how could I not do something that was within my nature?

How could one witness cruelty and do nothing to stop it?

It was a reminder that I was not one of them. Praying to the same gods and eating from the same animal would never unite us. What would it take,

and how far would I have to go to prove myself?

The constant battle I struggled with repeatedly triggered something within me. Rage and grief came into existence, sending hot tears sliding down my cursed face, making the sack feel like a furnace.

I continued stroking the dog's fur, out of my head, out of my mind.

The air around me turned cold. The paper thing in my chest crumbled. The wind rustled between the branches, and vibration came from the soles of my feet and rushed to my fingertips. I felt it everywhere—a white-hot energy blasting through me.

Then the dog's lungs expanded beneath my palm, taking a full breath.

My eyes popped open.

The dog's tail thumped against the earth with a wag.

My breath caught in my throat, and I fell back onto my hands.

I watched as the wolfish thing lifted his head before climbing to his feet.

We locked eyes.

"You were dead," I whispered into the night. "I am certain of it."

He shook out his fur, perked his ears, and took off through the woods between the trees.

He disappeared as if he was never dead.

CHAPTER 4

ADORA

Weeping Hollow, Maine
November 15, 2020

Just face the wall,” Kane’s voice slithered into my ear from behind.

He placed my hands on the wall in front of me, dragged his palms down my sides, then piled the skirt of my dress on my hips.

“You know I hate it when you talk to me like that.” I turned back to look at him with daggers in my glare, only to be met with a cold, elegant man.

Kane Pruitt was understated, never trying to attract attention or impress people. For him, it just came naturally. He had thick coffee-brown hair that girls in Weeping Hollow would love to hold on to, but the only person he cared to be with was me. Only because I was his friend for fifteen years, and he refused to let his walls down for anyone else.

He flipped his tie over his shoulder and leaned over me, pressing his chest against my back as he undid his buckle. The cold metal of it grazed my backside when a whisper pushed into my ear. “We’ve been doing this for seven years, and you keep coming back. You know you love it.”

He could not have been more wrong. Heartless sex didn’t leave an imprint. It didn’t penetrate—not the heart, not the soul—no matter how deep I took it. Which meant seven years of faking countless orgasms.

The only ones I’d ever experienced were from my own doing.

Kane’s hand dipped between my thighs, fingers sliding through my sex,

numbing my thoughts. “Seven years, and you’re still dry as fuck,” he deadpanned, and an annoyed sigh left him.

I squeezed my eyes and fists closed at the same time. “You literally shoved me in here when we have a meeting in less than five minutes. It’s called foreplay, Kane.” I dropped my head between my shoulders, staring at my feet. “I swear, I don’t think you know how the female body works.”

“I’ve been inside you long enough to know how your body works.” I felt Kane’s smirk graze my neck. “I need you now, A. We don’t have half an hour to get you going.”

I rolled my eyes. “It doesn’t take half an hour.”

“Okay.” He laughed, unconvinced. “Besides, if you didn’t come to my house wearing this dress we wouldn’t be here.” Then he inched back, spat in his hand, and palmed my pussy. I closed my eyes, letting my head fall back on his shoulder as two fingers pushed inside me.

He inched away, grabbed my hip, and dragged his thick head across my center before prodding my entrance. Then he exhaled, a sigh of relief, as he sank inside me. I held my breath from the pressure, and his palm met the wall in front of me.

“Holy fuck,” he moaned, his fingers digging into my flesh. “Why do I do this to myself?”

“What do you mean?” I asked, feeling the man I hated most inside my body.

“I get off on the deprivation.” He dragged himself out. “I hold back until I can’t fucking take it anymore.” He sank back in. “Because it makes everything feel ten times better.” He inched out, then thrust hard. “Why must torture both pain me and give me pleasure?”

Why must we be more similar than I desire?

Why must he share what’s on his mind?

He pulled down the front of my dress and grabbed my breast.

Another rugged moan escaped him. “Fuck, we have five minutes.”

I pinned my gaze to the clock on the left of the small room, watching it tick by as he took me against the wall. I focused on the second hand, the rest of the world fading away, the ticking marching to the sounds of his heavy breathing in my ear each time he pumped into me.

At times, if I closed my eyes, I could imagine Kane as someone different. Someone with the single-minded goal of pleasing me, adoring me, wanting to kiss me while inside me. Never mind a gentle prince sweeping me off my feet

in one night. Instead, what I truly wanted to know after sleeping with the same person for seven years, was how it felt to make love to someone. I didn't know if sex was supposed to feel differently than this. But I knew that it had to because each time he plunged himself inside of me, I repeatedly ached for this feeling I'd never experienced before. One I grieved but always been denied of.

While the discreet room we were in next to the chamber filled with the heady and arousing mockery of us, the walls closed in on me, and a scream piled in my lungs. Not a scream of pleasure but a scream of anger and sorrow.

But I didn't scream at all.

I stood there, watching the clock, unblinking as my eyes glossed over.

Kane's hand moved to my shoulder, breaking me from the stare, and I chanced a look back. His weary eyes were lowered, focusing on watching himself enter me from behind. A faded bruise colored his right eye and jawline, and a cut split his bottom lip, most likely a punishment from his father's heavy fist. However, no matter how many bruises marked his face or how visibly tired he was from the Panic, Kane was disgustingly handsome.

But none of this mattered to me. Kane was the source of all my anger.

Since I was sixteen, I'd suffered through every sexual encounter to be close to him. This gave me the opportunity to rid this coven and town of the one who brought my family and me into a life of misery.

In only two more months, I would kill the *prince* of Weeping Hollow.

On the night of the Crimson Eclipse, Kane Pruitt would be dead.

Each time he fucked me, if I wasn't fantasizing about a dreamt-up man, I was fantasizing about slitting his throat. In my mind, I could see my reflection dancing inside the stainless steel of my box cutter. Perhaps I'd use my precious dagger, or even Kane's knife. I imagined it would be worse if he realized I was using *his* blade to kill him—if he recognized the engraving of his initials in the steel before it happened or while it was happening. Either way, I would lie there next to him after he fucked me for the last time, warm blood soaking into white sheets and watching life float from his hazel eyes. And once he was dead, Mom would awaken from her catatonic spell, and this evil stirring inside me would finally leave me for good.

It all started when I first found him in my living room all those years ago. The brown-haired boy was the hue of fall, embodying Mom's tragic end, my vengeance to bring her back, and her awaiting justice. Throughout the years, I

remained close to him, threatening any girl standing in my way of this plan, including Fallon when she first arrived in Weeping Hollow.

A heartless friendship with him had been my only chance to get close enough for him to blindly trust me without manipulating my thoughts, as the Pruitt men were capable of doing.

If I couldn't take Mom outside of this town to break Kane's hex, then I wanted to live a liberated life within it. One where he was dead, and she was awake. And once he was dead, no other would endure the same fate.

It amazed me how desperate I had become. The passing years only fueled the fury, leading a life with an ambition to kill a man. The one whom I had allowed to steal my innocence. The one who I'd given pieces to, and the one who'd scooped me hollow.

And if I made the wrong move, the one who could steal my life as well.

Footsteps echoed just outside the door as members of Sacred Sea retreated to the chamber under the Pruitt Mansion.

"It's two," I edged out. "The coven will be wondering why we're late."

Kane leaned back, holding my dress up with one hand, holding my hip with the other. He pounded into me until his thrusts slowed, body seized by an intoxicating force.

After all these years, I knew his body language as well as the tide, and on cue, he pulled out, coating my backside with his climax. I dropped my forehead to the wall, and it didn't take long before the sound of his buckle *jingled* as he pulled up his pants.

"Moment of truth." His breath was shredded. "I bet it'll be a meeting to remember."

I remained there, trying to keep my dress raised around my hips. "I need something to clean up," I tried to say without letting the anger out.

"You're good. Just leave it until you get home."

I looked back with an arched brow. "And stain my dress?"

"Relax," he said, fixing his tie and sleeves. "I'm fucking the seamstress who owns the boutique. I'll have her make you another."

"Kane, I'm serious."

He gave me a gentle look that showed that, despite the things he said, he had a soft spot for me. He loosened his tie around his neck and pulled it from his collar, then handed it to me. "Just toss it when you're done."

SACRED SEA COVEN HAD BLOSSOMED SINCE THE DAY MY ANCESTORS ARRIVED in 1803, but the chamber under the Pruitt mansion was only large enough to hold thirteen of us comfortably. Not all members, but a few from each original family. In the beginning, there were four, which consisted of Pruitt, Cantini, Sullivan, and Morgan. But as far as we knew, Fallon was the last Morgan, and it seemed she chose Norse Woods.

With only three families remaining, Augustine Pruitt became high priest after our former high priest, and Fallon's father, Tobias Morgan, left the invisible shield twenty-four years prior. And I often wondered what the coven would be like today if he and Fallon had stayed.

The cold, damp air and the anticipation humming within the chamber fell flat when everyone took their seats.

Dad sat at the opposite end near the bookshelves, wearing his navy-blue jacket that matched the other men: the Trinity Celtic knot embroidered on the front pocket.

I sat between my sisters. Ivy to my right and Fable to my left.

Despite winter's cold, my sisters, like myself, wore strappy dresses that touched the floor beneath their coats. These dresses were crafted from cotton, linen, and hemp, fabrics harvested directly from the earth. The bracelets wrapping around our wrists revealed the contrasting shades of our whimsical souls. They would make a sound reminiscent of laughter each time we moved —a song of our childhood at sea.

The sound reminded me of Mom, before she could laugh no more, and brought the colors of sea glass to my mind—a time when we used to collect them across the shoreline and drop them into a jar.

A jar full of mermaid tears, she'd once said.

"Please, that's enough," Mrs. Murphy cried, stealing me from the memory. "I beg you, Augustine. Please don't do this to my daughter!"

Shackles clashed when Lena, Mrs. Murphy's thirty-two-year-old daughter, slapped her palms against her ears with a guttural scream. The cry shook the walls within the chamber, and tiny loose rocks fell and broke apart once they hit the ground.

Clenching my teeth, I peered around Ivy to make a silent plea to Kane.

A void took over his eyes as his father's magical pulses ripped through Lena's head.

I imagined it to be painful, like pointed nails stabbing your skull or an electric shock that started in the brain and stampeded down the spine,

crawling through every vein.

When the next cry came, I flinched, ready to stand in protest.

Ivy noticed and grabbed my wrist to keep me pinned down.

I fired a warning glare at her. “Someone has to stop this. I can’t just sit here and do nothing.”

“Yes, you can, and you will,” Ivy whispered back. “Or you’ll be next.”

Viola Cantini clutched the table’s edge and leaned over it. “Control yourself, Mrs. Murphy, or you’ll be removed from the chambers,” she scolded, authority seeping from her tone. “Lena understood the consequences before she recklessly used her magic, and now another life has been taken because of it.”

“She was only trying to save her husband from the Shadows, you see,” Mrs. Murphy cried out in despair. “She was only trying to save him. She didn’t mean to hurt anyone. Isn’t losing her husband and now her grandmother enough punishment?”

Lena fell to her knees, another cry rattling our chests.

Fable dropped her head and grabbed my hand. She squeezed it as if her sorrow had no place left to go but through me.

I pushed a whisper into her ear, “This will be your coven, Fable. You have to watch and not turn your eyes away. Don’t let her be in this pain alone.”

Fable lifted her chin and hesitantly gazed at the torment.

“This is our future,” I said, more to myself that time. But then, despite all efforts, my eyes caught on to the black spring swirling behind the shared glass wall beside Fable.

The black waters sucked me in, and I concentrated on the spring with tunnel vision in a way that was like using my eyes to milk a fleeting escape.

I remembered the spring as it used to be when it was an iridescent blue hue.

Once upon a time, it sent spotlights into the windowless chamber and spoke to me. Though no matter the color, each time I came to the chamber, I could not avoid its call. I believed to belong in the water as a sparrow belonged in the sky.

Dad once said that I was born in the ocean and was surprised I didn’t have scales for skin or fins for limbs. When I was younger, I thought I could have been born a mermaid because two of my toes were mended together on both feet. As it was, I still found myself one with the sea and always searched

for her salty, shapeless arms. The adoration she teased me with, the bottomless love she took. Cold and cyan, silky and strong. But nothing was ever enough for her.

Yet this spring no longer swirled an enchanting blue shade.

All that lay on the other side of the glass were black, cloudy waters.

Its haunting effects were not the same as they once were.

It now pulled on different heartstrings—told a different tale.

One that consumed all my attention and put me into a trance.

Unable to pull away, pain pierced my chest, and I found myself overcome with grief that wasn't my own. A sorrow that wasn't for Lena, either. I felt this pain in the deepest parts of me.

Ivy moved my hair off my shoulder, her blue eyes speaking to me in a way that commanded my attention to the front of the room, where Kane and Cyrus stood before our High Priest.

Lena had been taken away. The grand show of her punishment, and an example of what would happen should we use our magic, was over. She would be taken to the cell, then to the Wicker Man, where she'd burn on the border of Weeping Hollow.

"Adora," Ivy nudged into my ear.

Augustine, our high priest, must have said my name. He was studying me from the front of the room, prompting me to break latency and come forth. He stood sickeningly still, his thoughts at ease with deceivingly comforting creases cornering his eyes.

Cyrus nodded, a silent invitation to join him, to stand by his side.

Why did Augustine call my name? It was rare for me to be nervous, yet a foreboding still crept along the back of my neck.

"Step forward, Adora," Augustine said with impatience.

Dad watched me from the end of the aisle with both pride and guilt in his eyes. His mixed look confused me as I joined the sons of Sacred Sea.

Cyrus was the firstborn of the Cantini family, and the man Ivy was in love with. He stood taller than me with hair as black as a velvet night and the color of the ocean in his eyes. Perhaps that was why I felt entirely safe standing beside him. Since Adeline's death, he'd become my best friend, and I held him close as I held the sea. But like the ocean, the color of his blue irises changed depending on his mood.

Cyrus had seven shades like the seven seas, and this was his curse.

The Cantini line had the ability to know your every emotion, whether you

were lying, horny, crushed, or desperate. Hyper-sensory, is what he'd call it, and in return, their eyes were a direct window into their soul. But one would have to know him well to decode the shade.

At this moment, his eyes were cobalt blue.

Cyrus was nervous.

I clutched the empty setting hanging from the chain around my neck, and Cyrus took my other hand in a comforting manner. As everyone else, we faced forward and awaited the reasons for being here.

I closed my eyes, imagining Augustine telling me it was time to start my initiation. In a few short months, my magic would ascend completely.

I remembered as if it were yesterday when Ivy stood in this very spot just last year, with Cyrus on one side and Kane on the other. Only this time, Weeping Hollow was under attack by the Shadows—and the Hollow Heathens from our rivalry coven, Norse Woods, were no longer cursed. Perhaps starting my initiation early would show Sacred Sea hadn't surrendered to the dangers our home faced.

Before, when the Heathens had been cursed, my coven was the best choice and the only means to keep the town safe, balanced, and in order. Though Norse Woods Coven was dying, with the curse broken, there was a possibility the balance could tip in their favor. This stirred a thick tension in the chamber, and it had been on Sacred Seas' minds since the curse broke.

To be frank, I hadn't expected this to be the day my initiation would be announced until Augustine had said my name. I'd been waiting sixteen years for this day. *One step closer*, I thought. If the moment had arrived, I couldn't wait a moment longer.

I contained my excitement, anticipation coursing through me with every passing second. Cyrus's thumb brushed mine, and I gripped my necklace tighter and stroked the metal prong. An iota of pain from the splinter shuddered through me, and I found myself at ease.

"Adora," Augustine began, and I opened my eyes, fighting back an all-knowing smile. "With recent events, we must convey that we remain united through this and that we are stronger together as one. It has been decided to announce your engagement at the Founder's Day Ball. You will have a winter wedding in January, and your betrothed will lead your initiation in February."

Engagement? Wedding? January?

The Crimson Eclipse is in January.

It had always been an initiation before marriage. For over a hundred years, it had always been customary to see what magic a woman would possess once she reached the age of twenty-three. No Sacred Sea man wanted to be tied to a useless vessel for eternity.

My gaze darted to Kane, never expecting to marry him before killing him. His smug grin shuddered my entire existence, but it would never be powerful enough to deceive me or change my mind. It didn't matter which came first in January, the wedding or the eclipse. Either way, Kane Pruitt was going to die.

Augustine cleared his throat, stealing our attention.

"You will marry Cyrus Cantini," he finished.

My mind paused.

The room paused.

Complete shock benumbed it.

Those five words felt like branches growing from my bones and wrapping tightly around my throat. Ivy gasped from behind, and I turned back to look at her. A bone-white hand cupped her mouth under her watering eyes. Her palpable heartbreak crushed the entire room.

Cyrus turned to me, his eyes darkening by the second as he took in my reaction. "Adora," he said, but nothing else. Just *Adora*. Because he knew this was going to happen, and he didn't know what to say.

But this wasn't the plan.

"This wasn't the plan," I said aloud that time, gripping my necklace tighter and trying to make sense of this. I swallowed to clear my windpipe and set my eyes on Augustine. "If your plan is to find a wife for Cyrus, then Ivy should be standing here. Not me. She already underwent initiation and has been waiting for this moment with him."

I stood tall, disguising this outcome's effect on me, and narrowed my eyes at Augustine, the man who held my future in the slam of a fist. Threats and demands exploded in my mind and burned in my throat. All the things I wanted to say but none that would have made a difference. In the Sacred Sea chamber, this was what was ordered of me, and my refusal wouldn't make it go away.

I understood this, and still— "I refuse to marry Cyrus," I said slowly, unwavering. Cyrus's hand left mine when he hung his head and pinched the bridge of his nose.

"Adora!" Dad urged me from behind. I turned to see him jump to his feet

with a demand for obedience in his eyes. His cheeks beamed with embarrassment.

I grabbed Kane's bicep. "Say something," I begged him in a whisper.

Kane looked at me then back at his father.

His mouth opened, but nothing came out. And he *shrugged*.

I squinted at him with a shake of my head before facing Augustine again.

"Why can't I marry Kane? Is it because your plan with Fallon didn't work, and now you're saving *your son* for someone more powerful than me? Ivy, perhaps?" I no longer cared if I sounded desperate. And my assumptions were not all that ridiculous, considering Ivy was the firstborn and assumed to be the most powerful among us Sullivan girls.

But I couldn't let this happen, and I couldn't do this to my sister. I had a plan. I'd suffered through heartless sex with no reward since I was sixteen. I'd already given Kane my virginity and made him believe he owned my mind, heart, and body for him to trust me. For years, I'd prepared myself to live a life with murder on my hands.

"Your accusations are absurd, Adora." Augustine looked at me with an expression of boredom, and Dad's mortification radiated off my back.

"Are they? Because regardless, this is not what I want." A forest of anxiety cultivated inside me, creaking and groaning and growing and stabbing my chest and lungs with its sharp branches. "If you force me to marry Cyrus, I will make this difficult," I promised, knowing my words were foolish as soon as they left my lips. But even as I said them, I felt the warmth of Ivy's last flame of hope from where I stood. I had to try for her. "You know, as the rest of the room, I am better suited for Kane."

"Whether you want it or not, this is your future," Augustine said, silencing my threats. "Do as you wish, but let me remind you, only you and Cyrus will feel the brunt of your animosity. May as well obey with a smile on your face."

In that instant, all hope was lost. A coldness swept the room.

My gaze slid between Augustine and Viola when their plan became clear.

Augustine, at some point, had changed his mind and was saving Ivy for his son to keep the Pruitt family the most powerful. But also, Augustine wanted to remain in power while still giving the coven and our town peace of mind.

It was brilliant, really.

If Augustine had announced the marriage of Kane and Ivy on this day, it

would bring Kane one step closer to taking the title of High Priest away from his father, and Augustine wasn't ready to give up power.

To our standing high priest, Cyrus and I together was his only option.

It all made sense.

It felt like soil packed into my chest, suffocating my options and my ability to think of a way out. Before Augustine could dismiss us, I turned and left the chamber with a held breath.

How could I marry the man my sister was in love with and it not come between us? What was worse, how would there be a chance to murder Kane on the night of the Crimson Eclipse if I were promised to someone else? There would be no reason for us to be alone together anymore. All opportunities would lead to me being caught. After sixteen long years of waiting, with only two more months left, time had run out.

The sky was dimming as I ran through the cold. Every gust of wind was like a whispering warning. Soon, the sky would soak in the shadow-clad night.

I ran until my feet hit sand and the black sea frosted my feet.

"You failed me again," I screamed into the coming night, my chest heaving, the bones in my chest splintering, slapping the sea in the face with my temper as if it were a disloyal lover. And perhaps it was.

There was no response. There never was.

I spun to my left and right, arms raised at my sides. "Do you hear me? Are you even listening to me?" The wind rolled over the waves, pushing me away from the sea I was calling out to.

I marched forward again, calves pushing past the current as tears pooled in my eyes. I clenched my fists tightly to keep them from falling. I squeezed until my nails pierced my palms, forcing my tears to just sit there on my lashes.

"I've given you so much of me, and you still failed me," I screamed. "This was my only chance to save her, and now she's stuck for eternity!"

THE PORCH STEPS OF MY COTTAGE CREAKED WHEN I CLIMBED THEM IN HASTE.

"Oh, good! Adora! Could yah tell yah fathah, if it's not much trouble, to fix thah wood that fell from mah window? One got loose, yah see, and..." It was Mrs. Madder next door. She was bundled inside a hideous green scarf and her late husband's long, black puffy jacket. She stood in her half-opened

doorway, hiding from the descending sun.

“If it’s not too much trouble,” she repeated in a craggy voice. “I’m afraid a tree branch is gonna come straight through like it did down there at Hobb’s Grocery a few months back. Do yah remember?”

It was almost time.

The sun was dying, and I was in no mood to care about her window.

And why must she stir my agitation on this night of all nights? I took a deep breath and dotted the corner of my eye with the tip of my finger. “My father can’t do everything for you at your beck and call, Mrs. Madder. Night’s almost here. You should get inside, and if he isn’t busy in the morning, I’ll have him stop by.”

“Oh, tomorrow’s no good, yah see—”

“Unfortunately, it will have to do.”

“That’s why I—”

“Mrs. Madder, please!” I shouted, stopping her. “He has three daughters and a sick wife. Give him a break!”

I left her standing there and pushed the front door open to walk up the stairs, a hot soothing bath my only clear and welcome thought.

In moments like these, the need to submerge in water matched the need for my next breath. It was the only way to wash away my new reality.

I turned on the wrought iron faucet before lighting candles that lined the cedar walls surrounding the clawfoot tub. Once the water reached the brink, my dress slipped off me, and I stepped in.

The water turned my skin pink and the steam allowed me to breathe. I slid down the porcelain, sinking until I was submerged, my head under water, with silence embracing me.

As my breath was held in my chest, my first thought was what could be running through Cyrus’s mind. I’d run out of the chamber so fast, not thinking about stopping and asking him how he felt about the decision that had been made.

Then my thoughts strayed to Ivy, and how her entire life crumbled in seconds. What would this do to her?

I squeezed my eyes tight under the water, and after so long, my lungs tingled and my diaphragm spasmed, imploring me to take a breath. It reminded me that I needed air and didn’t live in water. Anyone else would have succumbed to that painful urge, but I held on. Whenever that feeling would start, it felt like I wouldn’t make it. That the water would kill me. But

each time, I fought it, strengthening my lungs, strengthening myself. Proof that I was good enough for the sea.

As far as I understood it, there was no choice in the matter. I had to hold on because on the other side of holding on, it didn't hurt anymore.

Minutes had passed by. I didn't know how many. I'd lost count and focused on my body, listening to what it had to say. My heartbeat slowed, and the leaky faucet dripped, *dripped* in a rhythmic way.

I felt disconnected from myself, a calmness sweeping through me while my mind took me to a place I'd never been before. Memories that couldn't have been mine.

The first thing I saw was his face and how his hair bounced off his sun-kissed forehead each time he looked up at me from across the square. The memory was like a faded pastime, and it caused my pulse to race.

There were flashes of him. A man I'd never met but somehow knew.

His striking eyes took advantage of every second with me, leaving me feeling sick. Not as I would feel after drinking too much wine, but as if the wine were a vessel sailing through a raging, unpredictable storm. Motion sickness, perhaps.

Wind tickled windchimes as the sun reflected off the colorful hanging sea glass. It sent bluish-green stars dancing about the market, blinding me and stealing him away.

My body jerked forward. *Where did he go?*

Before I could make sense of what was happening, my head broke through the surface.

I gasped for air, the water in the tub rocking against my shoulders.

When I opened my eyes wide, a flame's soft amber glow haloed Ivy's sullen face. Her shadow shivered on the Cedar wall behind her.

"Almost thirteen minutes." Her tone was low and hushed as she sat on the wooden chair beside the tub with a glass of pinot noir dangling from her fingertips. "You're getting better. Almost as good as me. Imagine what you could do come February."

My shoulders shook at the memory that had invaded me. I slid across the tub to hide it and laid my head atop my crossed arms. I peered out the window and into the darkness that lay ahead.

From here, I could see the unfinished harbor, where the unprotected boats swayed against the docks. My breathing calmed, and the lighthouse's beam circled Weeping Hollow again.

“I thought I had everything figured out,” I said, feeling her intense gaze on me. I closed my eyes. Nothing I could say would make this go away or make things right. Perhaps if I squeezed my eyes harder, I could manifest a different future for us. One where she was with Cyrus, not me. “I never wanted this. You must know that. It was supposed to be Kane. I’ve always wanted it to be Kane.”

Ivy’s lashes fluttered, and pinot noir swirled in her glass as she circled her tiny, agile wrist. When her eyes fell over me once more, mistrust spoiled her beauty. “You and Cyrus have always been close...”

She blamed me. I should have known. “You think I asked for it?”

“With the two of you together all the time, I’m sure it planted the idea in someone’s head. Look at yourself in the mirror.” She lifted her chin, and I caught my reflection in the French vintage mirror on the wall behind her. “Adora, you’re the embodiment of perfection, and you’ve always been drawn to beautiful things. Have you ever seen a man as beautiful as Cyrus? Two perfect people who make the perfect couple. In their eyes, you two belong together.”

She saw perfection, I saw something entirely different.

I couldn’t stand the sight of the girl in the mirror anymore, so I tore my eyes away. “Cyrus is just a friend, just like you and Maverick are friends. Like we’re all friends, Ivy. I would never do this to you.”

“If you keep telling yourself something, eventually you’ll believe it to be true,” she started to say, standing from the chair, “but it still doesn’t change the facts. I love him, and you took the only man I’ve ever loved away from me.”

I wrapped my fingers around the edge of the tub. “I’m not marrying—”

“You will because Augustine ordered it. What’s done is done, and what’s worse is I can’t leave. I’ve spent my whole life protecting you, and now I’m forced to watch you spend the rest of your life with someone who invades all my thoughts.” In her eyes, I saw the deep ache filling her as she took a full breath. “There’s no one else for me, Adora. At this point, I just need to decide whether to live in this pain you caused or continue fucking your fiancé to dull it.”

Ivy spilled what was left in her glass into the tub.

And upon her exit, she took the steam with her.

The deep-red pinot noir from the Cantini’s wine cellar swirled in the bath water, the threat bleeding all around me.

Anger climbed my spine.
It always did.

CHAPTER 5

STONE

AGE FIFTEEN

NIGHT OF THE CRIMSON ECLIPSE
ADIRONDACK MOUNTAINS, NEW YORK
SUMMER OF 1855

IT AMAZED ME THAT EVEN WITH MY FACE COVERED, THERE WAS A DESIRE within me to cloak my emotions, hide my strangeness, and push away all the things I was capable of. After so long, this desire had become a part of me, much like the grain sack had—like an organ I could not survive without. It was the only thing that kept me human.

Chayton's pet never returned. I hadn't told anyone about the dog resurrecting from the dead. If Chayton or anyone else found out what I had done, they would surely think of me as something of the supernatural. A reason to take my life, or perhaps Mother's for birthing such a thing.

A complete moon cycle had passed since the strange event, and the parody of my mask had only worsened. Compared to the other tribes I'd stayed with, the people here were quite different.

Here, they negotiated with settlers, exchanged land and weaponry, took the gods for granted, and glorified a man though they promised to worship the sun. I noticed a change in Mother and how she routinely *shooed* me out of the hogan during the night as English men came and went. This tribe was

splintering, fading, and falling apart, and my plan was to take her away from here and leave at sunrise before leaving turned difficult.

I sat beside a blazing fire, drawing the same face that had always haunted me. Full, youthful lips that were familiar to me. Feline eyes I'd become intimate with. Every empty space was filled with delicate jawlines, lashes, and cheekbones I'd never touched yet somehow known—a collection of a girl who lived in my mind and my mind alone.

I would often find myself stuck in the details, overcritical of my drawing because no matter how many times I drew the face, something was amiss.

A freckle. A dimple. A wrinkle.

Her face was too perfect for the likes of a monster.

Around me, elderly men smoked tobacco from wooden pipes as I waited for the English settler to exit my hogan. It was what nighttime was for, Mother had once said, in fear of shaming the sun. If one were to fuck during the day, it would give the impression *I love thee more than the light of the sun*, and the sun was supposed to come before all. In this tribe, however, Chief Etu and his brother, Bly, were revered as gods.

I had thought about asking Chayton to come with us. He hadn't spoken to me since that night, but if he let me, I could teach him how to hunt, read, and speak other languages, among other things. I could protect him from his tyrannical father until he could learn to protect himself. In return, he could be my brother.

I had brought the idea to Mother, but she was against the idea.

"A boy stays with his tribe," she had said.

"Then I should find a tribe to belong to as well."

"You do not belong to a tribe, my son. You belong to the trees. You belong to the earth. You do not need anything more."

The flames licked my ankles, and I wondered what it would feel like if I lay upon the fire. If it burned me up until I turned to soot and absorbed into the earth—the place she had said I belonged. It seemed like an eternal paradise for a monster. A coffin made of sticks and stones for broken souls, allowing the elements to take me. *Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.*

It was the first time I thought about disappearing.

Perhaps here was where hope was born, a dreamt-up reason to go on when all the real reasons were gone.

All I had left was the face I drew and the spiders, with their skittering legs like whispers speaking to me in a way that said to *hold on* and that *the time*

was almost here. So, I pulled back my leg, and a burn in the shape of a web blistered across my ankle bone.

Moments later, a distant scream floated upon the leaves, bolted across swaying branches, and stabbed the night surrounding me. I cocked my head to the sound, not surprised no one else heard it. Most were in their hogan for the night. The rest were naïve to what the earth was trying to tell them.

I walked to the hogan the sound had come from, leaves crunching beneath my moccasins on the far side of the land. A nightly summer wind ruffled a cloth curtain hanging from a carved-out window. My ears were filled with the pulse of my heart as I peered in.

A flame lit from a single wick glinted off William's face.

He had a young, spirited woman on the dirt-covered floor. Both her wrists were bound by one of his hands, his other palm clasped forcefully against her mouth. Her clothes were torn, dirt stained her skin. Tears shot down her frightened eyes and sliced her cheeks as he forced himself onto her.

William managed to pry her legs open with his, and he jolted his hips forward until his manhood disappeared inside of her.

In a brutal instant, they were connected.

Two people joined in an act I'd only read about.

I'd never witnessed fucking. Most tribes I'd crossed hardly allowed anyone to speak of the act. We were told boys succumbed to urges; men controlled them. I'd been able to control them as well until this moment.

Not due to a lack of interest. I'd often wondered what it would have been like each time I drew the pair of eyes imprinted in my mind. But with every face I'd crossed, I'd never found the woman in my drawings. The one worth risking everything to speak to.

But the longing, the scene playing out before me, and the lust-filled appetite snaking inside me made my cock come alive in a way that it hadn't before. I didn't have to peer down to feel the tightening of my testicles, the stiffness of my manhood, the friction against my trousers. The desire to be connected with someone as well.

William held her down until all the color left her forearms. Then he plunged himself inside the girl again. I imagined it to be me inside my unknown girl, the one from my drawing, warm and connected. The monster and his masterpiece. Two people cracked open to let each other inside.

My hand slipped into my trousers, and I grabbed my cock, squeezing tightly and tugging it. Everything inside me felt heavy, as though I was

drenched in a warm, comforting embrace.

The girl repeatedly cried for him to stop, but a grotesque grin stretched along William's face. Perhaps this was the way it happened, I thought. Though was it always pleasurable for one yet painful for the other? No wonder most women were always reserved and didn't engage in promiscuous behavior. This was why men, too, must learn control.

The young woman's breasts bounced out of her torn clothing from the jerking movements. William grabbed one, and my head fell back to stare at the starry sky.

A buzz shot up my spine, wrapping its hot fingers around it. My body spasmed, one more iron-grip jerk, then hot semen filled the palm of my hand. The sensation was fleeting, but I felt peace, happiness. If only for a moment.

My shoulders sank. My entire body melted.

William's harsh stare cut through the window's opening, and our eyes locked. I ducked beneath and pressed my back against the hogan.

I shouldn't have watched. The act was too intimate, only for the gods.

My breath came out sharp and loud.

Then a door slammed, shaking the exterior walls.

Seconds later, William was standing before me, peering down.

"What do we have here?" His harsh words echoed into the night. "Do you think you are a man? Do you consider yourself brave enough to endure a woman and fuck her? You will learn!" He towered over me, spit flying against my cheek as he launched forward and snatched my arm in his fist. He yanked me off the ground, but I pulled away from him and stumbled back.

"You cannot escape this," he seethed. He was right. There was nowhere to flee, and nowhere to hide. If I resisted, it would only make the situation worse for me, disobeying Chief Etu's sworn ally. So, we stared at one another until William's laughter chilled my core. "I will take you to Chief Etu. It's time for your Rite of Passage."

Words clung to my throat, but nothing would come.

Don't speak, don't say a word, Mother reminded me from within, a chant inside my head as I followed William across the land toward the fire.

The commotion pulled tribal members from their hogans. One by one, they gathered while flames from the fire painted a glow across their questionable expressions.

Chief Etu broke through the crowd, with Bly following close behind.

"William?" he called, but the Chief's dark eyes were on me. Chatter and

hushed words scattered the land, and Chief Etu held up a palm to quiet them.

Mother emerged from our hogan, wrapping a cloth around her sweaty body. “Stone!” she cried. “What happened? Chief Etu, please! What are you doing with my son?”

“All this time, our assumptions have been correct. You have a monster living among you!” William shouted, and the people I’d been walking with every day exchanged glances. “A disgusting, wretched wendigo. You cannot trust him with your women. I saw it with my own eyes. Only moments ago with Dezba.”

Tribal members gasped.

“My daughter?” Bly shouted in his native tongue, his jowls shaking.

Scowling faces turned to me with spears and arrows in their eyes. A tell that what I had done was damning.

I’d imagined my Rite of Passage by circumcision many times. Becoming a man and a part of a tribe was always something I desired. I knew it would be painful, I had witnessed many circumcisions before me when other boys had become men, but this was not how it was supposed to be done.

Fear catapulted inside me. I looked at the ground. It was all I could do.

The string of events happened too quickly. I was snatched up off my feet, and the grain sack’s thick twine was pulled tight around my neck and hooked to a tree. I hung there with my sack cutting into my flesh, unable to breathe. The toes of my shoes scraped dead leaves, trying to find ground as I clawed at the twine for air.

Bly pulled a knife from his leather sheath.

Mother’s sharp cry echoed off the branches.

Hot flames reflected off the dagger when he hovered it over the fire. My trousers were yanked down, and linen piled around my ankles. Then he waved the sharp dagger in front of me, causing my body to freeze in fear. A cool summer breeze made my skin shiver, but I hung deathly still in the cold.

It happened instantly. Fast. A swipe of his hand, a slice across my flesh.

Warm blood sprayed the inside of my legs as he slashed my thighs.

The burn was intense and paralyzing.

It engulfed me like a massive hot flame.

He slashed me again and again and I prayed for the twine around my neck to kill me faster, but it didn’t.

I prayed for the shock of the pain to numb me, but it didn’t. So, when he was done with my thighs, he moved to my cock, and I felt everything. A

soul-slicing burn. I bit back a cry, piercing my bottom lip with my teeth.

Holding back my cry was easy when there was no breath in my lungs. No air.

It had all been stripped from me.

Hot, rich blood pooled in my mouth and dribbled down my neck.

Hot, thick blood slid down my thighs. Tears slipped from my eyes.

I was weeping from everywhere.

It was the first time I remembered crying. I let the tears go because no one could see them beneath my mask. The pain was excruciating, but I still understood they could never see them. I may not be deserving of anything, but only the Sun and Moon were worthy of my suffering.

Mother screamed out in horror.

I never made a sound. I did not bless Bly, William, or even Chief Etu with the sick satisfaction of my agony.

William's laugh was grating and echoing and carried on forever when the next slice came. One that caused me to fade from the pain, and if I were standing, I would have stumbled away from it. But I was hanging.

I fought through it. I didn't have a choice. I forced my eyes open and my conscience to stay awake because if I faded, it meant I was not strong enough.

William bellowed. A loud and full laugh. "Stone, a monster with a name that does not make a sound." I heard him, but the voice was muffled, coming from behind the pain. The earth was spinning, failing me.

Mockery ensued, then, *"Get on your knees, wendigo."*

A knife cut through the rope in one swipe, nipping my neck.

I was freed from the tree.

My legs buckled as I collapsed, my knees hitting dirt.

Kneeling at his feet, I gasped for air. A dry heave that never seemed enough. Oxygen clawed the walls of my hoarse throat, scratching down with hesitance.

I heard Mother's cries. They'd come from far away, from another time, a forgotten place, where things were no longer the same. I heard her, but I could not look at her. I could not face the horror mixed with the shame she had for me.

"Do you pray to a sun that isn't here to protect you?" Bly shouted into the night. *"Or do you pray to me?"*

"Enough!" Chief Etu shot a disapproving glance at his brother, but I

already felt myself changing from the rage, torment, and humiliation flooding inside me.

I felt it as I understood it. Was I so desperate to become a part of them that I was blinded by their thirst for power?

My head lowered, and I gazed at the ugly thing hanging between my legs. Blood mangled flesh. My vision dimmed, the pain taking me in waves. It was summer, but I was freezing. My entire body was trembling in the aftermath.

Bly grabbed my covered jaw and lifted my head.

I looked into his eyes. I looked deep into them.

"Pray to me!" he demanded.

I swallowed a mouthful of blood. "Never."

He fisted the grain sack, the very thing that had become a part of me, like an organ I could not survive without, like my beating heart. And once my heart was gone, I was nothing more than the monster they claimed me to be.

Above, the blue blood moon passed through a rare eclipse, lighting the sky in a crimson glow as though the night had popped a vein and was bleeding too.

With his fist full of my grain sack, I inhaled a rich breath and faced the eclipsed moon hanging in the night sky. I thought of the face my mind had created, desperate for comfort, for my fictional thing to hold me. On my knees, I didn't look away from it, shutting out the rest of the world until it was only us two, my only friend and me, and I thought to myself, could she see me, too?

Don't let me go, my mind whispered.

Then he ripped off the sack.

CHAPTER 6

ADORA

THE SULLIVAN COTTAGE
NOVEMBER 15, 2020

A FACELESS MOON HUNG IN THE SKY.

It was nothing more than a faint silver ring facing a different world, out of reach, comforting arms elsewhere, wherever it needed to be. Though I'd seen the moon like this many times, on this night it somehow, like a door, flung open my heart, breathed across my bones, and haunted my soul.

While it had its back to me, the new moon was guarded by stars. Some dimming and dying—a midnight graveyard. Others bright and alive—a work of smashed art.

I couldn't tear my eyes away.

"Adora," Ivy called. "Close the window."

I flinched, breaking free from my stupor, and closed the window, locking out the wind that felt like an icy eternity. It was time.

Even though Ivy was angry with me, she began to sing to me while I lay wedged between her and Fable on the attic floor. Like Mom, her voice was a balm to my restless mind, and each night she'd sing it kept me from sleepwalking in the middle of the night.

The sage we'd burned drifted in the air, black candles flickered on the antique furniture, and black salt circled the pile of pillows and blankets. We'd done this ritual each night since the Shadows came, knowing it couldn't keep

us safe. The Shadows were unconquerable, but we found a sort of comfort in our new nightly routine. It gave us hope.

After Ivy and Fable fell asleep, fear never allowed me to close my eyes. But even with my eyes open, the nighttime could still take on sardonic faces; scornful smiles, sneering eyes, and sharp fangs gleaming from the dark corners of the attic. I clutched my silver chain against my chest and rubbed the metal prong with my splintered finger, my gaze latching on to Dad.

He was sitting at a table by the window with a giant magnifying glass, constructing a topsail schooner ship to fit inside a glass liquor bottle. Each time a scream penetrated the window, it aways caused Dad's fingers to flinch. I wanted to squeeze my eyes closed but never could. Every cry hit me in the chest.

There was nothing we could do to save them.

A sort of selfishness consumed me, silently thanking the Shadows for not choosing my family. So far, they've been kept safe, and I didn't know how long that would continue.

And for the first time, I wished the Shadows would take me to grant me freedom from this marriage. That way, I could die knowing Ivy still loved me in the way a sister should. Since my plan was falling apart, it seemed to be the easiest way out. *"The Shadows took her,"* Dad would tell the neighbors.

"Just before her wedding? What a shame," they would say.

My poor sister, Ivy would think. *She died young and refused to marry Cyrus until her dying breath. Why couldn't I see that until now?*

A smile coasted along my lips just before a gut-wrenching shatter pulled me from the mattress. I sat up fully in bed. It was the kind of ringing shatter that, as soon as you heard it, you knew was a sound that could never be forgotten. One that would haunt the silence.

Dad and I exchanged panicked glances.

It sounded as if it had come from next door. "What was that?"

"I'm not sure," he whispered, but I didn't trust his tone. It was sad. Knowing.

Then another clamor came.

It *was* from next door.

I got to my knees, my heart racing in my chest. "It's Mrs. Madder." An image of Mrs. Madder standing on her porch steps—the place I'd left her—entered my mind. "We have to help her, Dad. She's all alone."

The look on Dad's face stopped me. His jaw was fastened tight, and he

flexed it with wide eyes that said *don't move*. Then he slowly shook his head.

Another scream pierced the attic walls and ripped past us.

I jumped to my feet and beelined for the attic door.

I didn't know if the scream was because of people from the westside or the Shadows. I didn't know, but I had to get to her. If it were desperate and dangerous people from the west side, and she died because I'd been rude and said horrible things only hours earlier, it would all be my fault.

Before my hand could touch the doorknob, Ivy's arms came around me and pulled me back. Dad, like a shield, slid in front of me to block the door, arms stretched out and his tall, slender frame as solid as a steel pole.

"Let me go!" I clawed at Ivy's arms, trying to kick her away from me.

I imagined Mrs. Madder locked inside her dream. In my mind, the sound I'd first heard was her bedside lamp crashing to the floor after her body fell out of the bed, bumping into the nightstand. I imagined five tall, black ghosts surrounding her unconscious silhouette.

Mrs. Madder's scream ricocheted. I'd imagined them having her in an invisible chokehold and forcing her to see the fears she had buried in her soul. Maybe it was a fear of birds, their black inky wings flapping, the sound of wind slapping against her ears. Or maybe it was the fear of someone breaking into her home, like the westside coming in with bats and knives and tying her to a wobbly wooden chair. Then I imagined them beating her senseless. *Leave no witnesses behind,* one of them would say. *Dead people can't talk.* And with the last blow, I pictured one leg of the wooden chair snapping in half, sending Mrs. Madder to the ground. They kicked and used their bats repeatedly until she could never talk again.

The thought of it all threw my body forward at Dad, but Ivy yanked me back. "There's nothing you can do, Adora, stop!" Ivy screamed with her body pinned to mine. Tears flowed like desperate rain on my shoulders as she cried.

Mrs. Madder's terrifying screams thrashed in our ears and mixed with the chaos.

Fable was crouching in the corner of the room with her hands over her ears and her eyes squeezed shut.

I tried to unlatch Ivy's hands, but she was much stronger.

"Let me get to her!"

"No, I can't let you do that." Her voice was weak, and she squeezed me tighter against her chest. I kicked backward, my heel colliding with her knee,

but Ivy didn’t buckle. “I know, Adora. I know you want to save her, but there’s nothing we can do.”

Dad didn’t move from the door. He didn’t drop his hands.

Fable’s eyes didn’t open.

Ivy didn’t let me go. She wouldn’t.

I shouted and fought, and she would not let me go.

The four of us did all these things, and it carried on like this until Mrs. Madder stopped screaming.

And when all was quiet, I turned quiet too.

But anger roared inside me, pulling tears until I found myself clenching my fists to keep them at bay. My fingernails sliced open the scabs, and blood was wet inside my palms, but I kept squeezing. My tears clung to my lashes. They never fell. They just hung there like jeweled ghosts.

“I’m so sorry, girls,” Dad chanted, coming from behind and stroking the back of my head. “I’m sorry it has to be like this. The Heathens should have never broken that damn curse.”

CHAPTER 7

STONE

AGE EIGHTEEN

STOCKBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS
YEAR OF 1858

THERE WAS NO REASON OR NEED TO COMPLAIN OR MAKE MOTHER'S LIFE ANY more troublesome than it was already. She had not deserved a son that was born cursed. Therefore, I had committed to being loyal like she had been loyal to me on the day we'd escaped the Adirondack Mountains.

Mother had survived my face after Bly took off my mask. She knew all too well what my curse was capable of and found safety before it had a chance to kill her. As for the rest, my parting gift was a graveyard full of dead bodies. Including Chayton, who did not deserve my wrath.

As it was, it had been the annihilation of a tribe.

Piles of wide eyes, blanched faces, and stiff limbs.

Three years had passed, and I hadn't been the same since.

Day and night, a constant flow of people surrounded me, never allowing me to be alone and also reminding me of how lonely I had indeed become. I had once read there was a difference between alone and lonely, but somehow my existence could smear these words together into one. People turned their heads, steered their eyes, and shut their jaws when they slipped past me. They not only ignored me, but they also avoided me.

Some did not see me at all.

Mother was right. I didn't need them. I didn't need anyone.

However, on days like this, when the shunning became unbearable, I wanted to be alone. Truly alone.

During the mid-summer days, I enjoyed coming to the lake to watch the storms roll. Aside from my sketching, it was entertainment. I'd leave my fifty-seventh and fifty-eighth books under a shady tree and wait until the rain broke apart the pewter sky like a drawing back of curtains in a theater. The earth was the stage upon which musical thunder and rain performed like a symphony.

I was the conductor, and at this moment, the rain was almost here.

I removed my gloves, linen shirt, trousers, and burlap sack from my head. Naked and carefully avoiding my reflection, I sank into the refreshing and remote water.

The lake was like ice against my skin as I floated above the surface. The cold rain came down on my flesh, my face, my lips, and I closed my eyes, imagining them to be fingers. Delicate, adoring, and everywhere, this was how I believed it should feel to be touched by a woman.

So, I floated, imagining the one from my drawings—her face painted on the backs of my eyelids—with the riveting sound of rain piercing the water and pulling me into her embrace. A warmth spread throughout my body, keeping me dizzy and in the moment.

I was tempted to touch myself, the mutilated flesh, the ugliest part of me, but without my gloves, it would only take me back to the memory of three years ago when it had happened. Even with gloves, I couldn't find pleasure in the thing that reminded me of the night that had become my recurring nightmare.

Nevertheless, this was enough, with my deprivation and imagination keeping me spiraling by her. The rain. The water. The music.

At once, a commotion had come from the woods.

I flinched, recoiling into myself, sinking below the surface, a sudden shamefulness consuming me for feeling an ounce of pleasure. My fingers twitched atop the water, about to take off into a swim to retrieve the burlap sack. But I paused, letting the sheet of rain sweep across my face with one last invigorating kiss.

“WHAT IS IT?” I ASKED THE HANDFUL OF WOMEN HUDDLED AROUND OUR cabin. But they all stared. They always stared. I imagined them seasons from now suffering the same fate as I had left the others. If, perhaps, they attempted to bring me to my knees, too.

“Your mother passed on into the next world,” one wept in her native tongue, and it felt as though everything inside me had become cold.

Mother had been sick for some time, and the tribe had done what they could to bring the fever down, but I had selfishly left her alone to swim. All I wanted was a moment of peace. *I should have been here.*

My vision was fogged, tears welling in my eyes as I pushed through the doorway and fell to her bedside. “No!” I pleaded with a thickness in my throat, taking Mother’s hand. “You’re stronger than death.”

“Her body may be gone, but her spirit is with you,” Hopi confirmed carefully, keeping her distance from me. Even so, her brown eyes still emitted ease and comfort, but nothing could soothe this ache.

How could I go on without Mother? She was all I had.

“No, I detest it,” I said out through gritted teeth, gathering Mother in my arms. I left the small cabin, her feet dangling from one side and her head on the other. She weighed close to nothing. An armful of bones and flesh.

The crowd broke apart as I marched past them into the forest.

I lifted her head and rested it against my chest when a memory from when I was much younger came to me. Ten years of age, perhaps. It was different than seeing the past from touch. This one didn’t live in anything but within me.

IT’S NIGHTTIME, AND I’VE SPENT THE LAST FEW HOURS STROLLING THE MUDDY streets of Baltimore without a sight of Mother.

As I sit on a bench drawing in my sketchpad, women in starched petticoats point at me, the boy wearing a sack on his head. And men encased in buttoned overcoats, finished off with top hats, stare as they pass me by.

Across the way, inside a home, a father carrying his son snuffs the candle in the window, and it brings a burn to my chest. Then a landau clatters by, its wheels spraying mud and saving me from the heartache. I look down at my drawing which is now dotted with mud.

“This is why I prefer a writing desk and a door,” a voice said.

I freeze, staring down at my drawing, unsure of what to do.

“May I have a seat?”

I can feel his eyes on me, urging me to look at him.

I don’t, and when I don’t say anything, the man sits and rests a book on his knees. “Why must one deride what is strange when it is your strangeness that has allured them?”

I look at him then, and he’s a young man. Beneath his tweed cap, he has light brown eyes the color of baked bread set in dark-rimmed lashes.

“Are you an artist?” he asks, his gaze falling to my sketchpad. I can’t say anything. I cannot move. “Can I have a look?” And before I can stop him, he has my sketchpad and is flipping through the pages. “She’s darling,” he says, turning the sketchpad in a landscape fashion. “What’s her name?”

“She doesn’t have one,” I say.

“Of course, she does.”

“But ... I do not know her.”

“And yet your talented hand still lays her soul on a canvas.” He closes my sketchpad and hands it back to me. “You’re brave for sharing your work with me. In truth, I am finding it difficult to part with something of my own. However, I also feel it is no longer mine to bear.” His hand sinks into his coat pocket, and he retrieves an envelope. For a moment, he’s hesitant, placing his elbows on his knees and twirling the envelope in his hands. “The pieces of ourselves we leave behind may not be appreciated by all in the now but they deserve to be immortal, whether it be drawings, stories, wisdom, love ...” his eyes veer back to me “ ... because one day, it’s time will come.”

The envelope beckons my name as I stare at it. “Are you a writer?”

“Yes, I am, as well as many other things.” He sighed, leaning back on the bench. “Although, when it comes to books, it seems people do not want to feel or think for themselves anymore. Pages are getting shorter, the attention span is diminishing. They want to be entertained without having to slow down. This is who we leave our pieces to for now. Nevertheless, have we a choice? We are artists; we live with loudness inside our heads that need to be spat out like a curse,” he says, then lifts his chin forward. “Do you see that man across the street?”

An older man was stumbling upon the sidewalk. Bystanders scoffed, and the man braced himself against the gas lamp post to keep himself from falling.

“He looks like a drunken fool who may not make it to morning. But underneath the alcohol, the madness, and the fact that he believes he’s a time

traveler, there is a brilliant poet this world will adore for many decades to come."

He removes a loose paper from the book. "I am handing this over to my editor for publication in the New York Daily Tribune in a few days. It's a poem he wrote inspired by a love greater than love, where one lies in a tomb and the other sleeps beside it. Even death cannot keep them apart. Could you imagine a love like that?" he asks, his gaze drifting back to me, and I shake my head. He chuckles, folding the poem and stuffing it into his jacket pocket. "I suppose you're right. Where he gets his inspiration is beyond me. Love is hopeless for creatives like the three of us, who are much more handsome and charming on paper."

"I believe everyone with a face is handsome."

The young man chuckles again. "I will remember you said this."

He's clinging to the envelope tighter than ever. The feeling is familiar to me.

"Can I see now?"

"Do you know how to read?" he asks me.

I shake my head.

"This envelope is very special, and I want to give it to you ... but first," he slides his book over, resting it on my lap, "you must promise me you will learn to read this book, and when you're done, you must read ninety-nine more," he says, holding up a finger. "After you read your one-hundredth novel, then you are welcome to read what's inside this envelope." He finally lets go of the envelope he's been clinging to. It feels heavy in my gloved hands, and I look him in the eyes. "I have a darling, and sometimes it feels like we're centuries apart. But no matter what separates us, I can still feel her, and I believe this girl you draw is someone you feel, too."

I have never known anyone to say the things I have been feeling. My heart is galloping in my chest, and I pinch my fingers together, making sure the wind doesn't steal the envelope. No one has ever given me anything before. "Thank you."

"Can you tell me the name of the gentleman I had the pleasure of speaking with tonight?"

He said gentleman, and it brought tears to my eyes. I'm relieved he cannot see. "Stone. That's it, only Stone. What's your name?"

There's a dimple beside his smile. I catalogue it in my mind with the rest of him, determined to sketch his features so I can always remember the man

who gave me a book and an envelope.

"Remember me as Ambrose," he says.

"Stone!" I hear Mother calling out.

Ambrose stands. "Remember our agreement and take good care of what I've given you. Care for it with the utmost importance."

"I will," I promise. "And I will read one hundred books before I look inside."

Ambrose nods, then walks off as Mother paces across the road.

"Oh, Stone. What on earth are you doing out and about?"

I watch the man walk away, wondering if I will ever see him again.

"Stone, please. Don't be angry with me. I didn't mean to leave you alone for so long," she says, breaking me from my stupor just as the man turns the corner.

I don't want to be mad at her, but anger is still here.

Mother crouches in front of me and sets a basket at her side.

"What did he give you?"

I glance down at the book and hide the envelope behind me in my waistband, so she does not see. Mother tries to pry the book from my lap, and my heart pounds in fear of what she may do with it. I snatch the book from her because it's mine.

Mother's shoulders fall. "You can't be mad at me forever."

I can, and it's very simple, so I look away.

"I was just on my way back to you. I brought maple syrup gingerbread for tonight," she says, and even though it's my favorite, I shake my head. I'm angry at her for leaving me here alone for an entire day and night. I won't be left alone in the tiny room again if she sees how I feel, with my turn of the head, my stillness, my silence.

"But you'll love it," she coos, pushing the basket closer. "Don't be stubborn, Stone." I still don't move, and Mother sighs. "If I promise to next time think about bringing you"—at this, I look at her, and she narrows her eyes—"I'll think about it," she reiterates, "then will you at least forgive me?"

I set the book and sketchpad down on the bench and stand to hug her, but she grabs my shoulders and holds me back at a distance. Then she takes my wrists and pins my arms down at my sides, where they are safe. I was not thinking and reacted to an urge. And therefore, we stay like this until I am calm. Until my emotions disappear.

Mother smiles. “I think it’s time you learn to read.”

“YOU *WILL* COME BACK TO ME,” I SAID LOW, ANGER WINDING INSIDE ME. I had done it before, and *dammit*, I would do it again. I would do whatever it took to bring her back.

Silhouettes passed beneath the thread of blue moonlight. The tribal members were following me through the woods as the storm lit the sky above, their curious steps between rolls of thunder.

I turned to face them and flinched forward. “Leave us be!”

They froze, and I took another step toward them as a warning. They could not see what I was about to do.

“Turn back!”

The tribe scurried back to the village, where a fire had died in the distance, the storm smothering its smoke.

When I reached a clearing, I laid Mother across the forest floor. She looked enchanting in the way she lay with deathly serenity in the raging chaos of the storm. No pain, no worry, she looked content with leaving me alone.

Betrayal ripped through me as I tore off my gloves.

I looked up at the pelting, ice-tipped rain that felt like rocks hitting my skin, then pressed both palms against her chest.

Lightning struck a nearby tree, splitting it in two.

A branch crashed to the ground at my side, but this did not stop me.

My jaw clenched with desperation, and I pumped into her chest.

With it, thunder erupted, a deafening boom shaking my insides and catapulting through my bones.

A second pump, and I tasted salt from my tears as they slid into my mouth.

Trees screamed, branches thrashed, and the white-hot energy returned, this time visceral and looking for a taste of blood.

One last pump, and Mother’s back arched into my hand as she gasped for air.

CHAPTER 8

ADORA

WEEPING HOLLOW, MAINE
NOVEMBER 16, 2020

THE SILENCE WAS LOUD, COUNTING DOWN THE SECONDS UNTIL THE SUN ROSE.

When morning arrived, there was no new beginning. Daylight spread, but Mrs. Madder was still dead. It was high tide, but Lena was still trapped in the cell in the underground tunnels for using magic, on standby for her execution. Darkness faded, but the Shadows hadn't been conquered. And though it was a brand-new day, I was still engaged. Of all that had happened in the last twenty-four hours, I could make a difference in only one.

When a witch was guilty of breaking a law, the Order would imprison them in the cell. There, they were starved and left to the angry spirits that haunted the tunnels. These ghosts kept the prisoner awake for a week until their final day, when the witch was forced to walk through the tunnel to Weeping Hollow's highest peak. It was there that their body was thrown into the Wicker Man. Death by fire kept the magic surrounding our town bound and balanced. Both a sacrifice and a punishment.

But I was determined to sneak into the cell before the afterlife would take Lena. She couldn't die believing no one from her coven stood by her side.

But that would have to wait until just before nightfall.

I slipped out from under the quilt, and the attic door creaked as it opened. Behind me, my family slept soundly. After the night we had, nothing would

wake them.

On this day, I picked clothes from a special drawer—the bottom one filled with ugly clothes saved for bad days such as these. Inside, worn jeans and holey tees, washed too many times to count, and sweatshirts I wouldn't typically wear lay folded neatly. I picked the over-washed denim and a pale blue Weeping Hollow sweatshirt.

Soon, our cottage would be surrounded by nosy, concerned neighbors, Officer Stoker, and those from St. Christopher's Funeral Home. I left before Jonah wheeled Mrs. Madder out of the house, wishing not to see, and walked through Town Square with her screams echoing in my mind.

Sidewalks were empty, lamp posts were out, and the town was suffocated by an eerie silence. Muted skies, flurry-kissed flesh, and a whisper in every harsh breath. The dreary season held us close, desperate to have Weeping Hollow as its chilling secret. Its only motive was to keep us locked away in a harrowing glass snow globe with no chance of escape.

In front of Tuck's General Store, where barrels once filled with penny candies kids shoveled into pails and weighed at the register, and postcards once swiveled in tall carousels, I passed the crack in the sidewalk that looked like a middle finger. It had always been there, just as Johnny Blackwell's tiny handprint in front of Blackwell Apothecary marked this town. And initials from teenagers, who were sick in love, were carved into the weathered wood of the gazebo.

Kane had never carved a K+A for Kane and Adora, as some would believe.

Kane had carved a K+A for Kane and Adeline.

Other landmarks such as these were littered around town, and I found a sort of comfort in them. Anything and anyone outside the spell's barrier wouldn't understand the emotional attachment of a crack or handprint. Despite the Shadows and winter, these things made this town what it was. Nothing could take away the scars of Weeping Hollow.

With my satchel hung across my chest, I entered The Strange & Unusual Bookstore and spotted Milo Andrews with his back to me. I slipped past him and beelined to the back of the bookstore to avoid him.

As I walked down the aisle, leather-bound spines lined the shelves, and the scent of chocolate and the finest coffee in all of Weeping Hollow swirled in the dusty store. Here, the coffee was rich, creamy, and like home. The Bean's coffee was a knockoff. But if others knew, this place would be

swarmed.

Milo's head popped up through an empty space in the shelf between us, appearing suddenly from thin air, almost scaring me.

A newsboy hat covered his curling chestnut hair. Headphone wires dangled from his ears, and his head bobbed to a beat only he could hear.

He slid a book onto the shelf. "I'm having a hard time finding another vintage Vogue issue. I'll need more time."

I pulled my lips tight. "That's not why I'm here." I tried to sound like I had nothing to hide, but we both knew why I lurked inside the bookstore every now and then, and Milo being my vintage Vogue dealer wasn't the only reason.

Milo pulled off one side of his headphones, and his honey-brown eyes behind black eyeglasses looked at me. He leaned down to reach into a nearby book cart to pick up another novel. "You know, you'll have to let go at some point."

Sometimes he knew too much about me. My eyes shimmered from trying to hide behind them, and I blinked before settling them back on him and his unwanted advice about my mother.

"How did you end up with a job here, anyway? Shouldn't you be out there reporting or doing whatever it is you're best at?" I imagined a black and white image of Mrs. Madder in the obituaries.

Black and white didn't seem to do the colorful woman justice.

"I'm tired of writing articles about death. I needed a break."

My laugh was empty. "Hide in here with all the books, Milo. I'll come and get you when it's over."

He slid another book onto the shelf between us with an arched brow.

Normally, he was used to the bite in my words. This was how we communicated. But I was on edge, and he could tell.

"In case you didn't know, Mrs. Madder died last night, and Lena will be executed in a week. People are suffering and you just don't want to care anymore and would rather ignore it all and live in your dream world."

"That's not fair," he said. "I care. Everyone cares. Not that I need to explain myself to you, but some of us can only handle so much before our sanity ruptures and we spiral into darkness." He turned his gaze away and began sliding another book on the shelf. "Besides, look what happened. Lena used her magic, and it accidently killed her grandmother. This is what Augustine has been trying to warn us about. Enforcing the anti-magic law is

the only way to maintain order. We can't live in a lawless town. If witches ran wild, imagine what kind of place this would be. Secondly, I'm not killing anyone here, so don't take it out on me."

"Lena is a good person."

"I know. And if I were in her shoes, I would have done the same. It's an impossible situation to be in, but we all have the freedom to make decisions, but with each choice comes a consequence."

Milo was right but that didn't mean I wanted to hear it.

"It shouldn't have to be like *this*, though. Things need to change."

Seconds passed in solemn silence, and then, "I can't imagine what she's going through," he said, returning his attention to sliding another book onto the shelf. "I'm hoping Founder's Day will lift this town up. At least for a day."

The Founder's Day Ball. The night the engagement would be announced. With every new reminder, another piece of me was ripped out of my body. "Yes, because that's what these people need..." *An arranged marriage and false hope. Let's give them something else for their happiness to depend on. Or distract them from a woman currently stuck in a cell, awaiting her execution.*

"If I remember correctly, the Founder's Day Ball is your favorite event of the year," Milo added. Another book slipped between us. "Shouldn't you be hiding away in your shop making dresses, or, you know, *doing whatever you're best at*?" A nonchalant smile slid across his face.

"Get back to work, Milo." I ran my finger across the shelf, collected dust, and blew it into the shelf's pocket between us. "And clean this place up while you're at it."

Milo laughed and shook his head. "Always a pleasure, Adora."

I stalked off, tightening my satchel around my shoulder, and headed for the area marked off as Rare Books & Special Collections.

I'd donated Mom's book years ago.

It was the one she'd written after Kane tarnished her soul. Years passed as she slowly faded, and she used those years to get this story out before the catatonia took her indefinitely. Every so often, I would stop in to ensure it was safe. Seeing and touching it took me back to times she'd told my sisters and me tales after dinner and before shut-eye. I was convinced her soul had left her body and buried itself among the pages. The reason I didn't want her book in the house. It was something else for Ivy to destroy after *Mom had*

destroyed us. I felt obligated to do what was right for the book. It was the only one she'd ever written. But when I approached the tall maple shelf, there was an empty space where it should have been.

"It's gone," Milo confirmed. He was leaning against the bookcase, arms folded over his chest.

"What do you mean, it's gone? It wasn't for sale. Where did it go?"

This store was supposed to keep it safe.

Anxiety started a slow crawl inside me, and I squeezed my fists to fight it.

My nails opened the crescent moon-shaped scabs in my palms, and I felt the heartbeat of my splinter pound.

"You're not the only Sullivan girl who comes in here, you know."

I gnashed my teeth together. "Fable?"

Fable was only four years old when the coven came to our house, but she missed the idea of a mother and always asked questions about her.

Milo chuckled. "You would think, but no. It was Ivy. She was just in yesterday, took it right out from under our noses." He sighed. "A deal's a deal. Fitz has been on my ass about it. That book is part of the town's history. You need to talk to your sister and tell her she needs to bring it back before I'm fired." Then he walked off.

My fists relaxed, and a warm trickle of blood dotted the inside of my palm and slid around my wrist. Ivy must have found out that I'd donated the book. She could have followed me, seen me through the shop window when I was careless. But why hadn't she confronted me about it? Did she think I would never find out that she had stolen it?

An hour later, I paced Ivy's bedroom after searching almost every inch of the cottage. A trunk sat at the foot of her bed, and I dropped to my knees and began rummaging inside.

"What are you doing?" Ivy asked from behind.

Her presence didn't stop me, and there was no point in lying.

"You stole it. I know it was you." I continued pulling items out of the chest and tossing them onto the floor.

Ivy grabbed my shoulders and yanked me backward just as my fingers latched on to the missing book.

"I can't believe you," I said, pulling away from her and holding up Mom's book between us. "What are you doing with this? Were you planning to burn it? Tear the pages out? How much will you ruin before she's gone forever?"

Ivy jumped forward, trying to snatch the book from me.

I retreated, my temper in my throat and ears.

"Adora, give it to me." The blue vein in Ivy's forehead popped, and she launched at me again, taking me to the floor. "Mom's already gone, Adora. She's gone. She left us. She left *you!*"

"No." I pushed her off, but she grabbed my hair and yanked me backward.

I bit back a yelp and took a fistful of her hair.

Physical violence. This was what it had come to. The Panic had turned us into two hysterical adults, rolling around on the floor, fingers in each other's hair, claws tearing at each other's clothes. We were acting like children with madness in our blood.

I suppose we both reached our breaking point, and the lack of sleep was bringing us to insanity.

Ivy hovered over me on all fours and slapped the wooden floor. "You need to give up on her. Of all people, do you honestly believe she cares when you visit? Then you had the audacity to hide her book in Town Square. Mom's words don't deserve to be read." Ivy breathed hard, then tried again to pry the book from my grip. "Give it up. She's not coming back."

"You're upset," I told her, trying to use the heel of my foot to keep her at a distance. "You're upset about Cyrus and taking it out on me."

Finally, Ivy let me go. The two of us tried to catch our breaths. Then seconds passed, and she became weak, sliding off me and rolling onto her back on the floor.

I crawled backward until my spine hit the wall beneath her window, and a cold draft slipped through the frame, burning a cut to my chest.

I pinned a glare at her, my breath coming out ragged. "I hope it's the Shadows because if not, whatever this thing is between you and Cyrus makes you crazy."

"Don't you dare. You know nothing about Cyrus and me."

I laughed, my temper heated. "You just attacked me over a book."

She covered her face with her hands and started crying. "I've tried," she whispered through her tears. "I've tried so hard, but it's pointless. You must ruin everything good because a part of you is just like Mom."

"*You've* tried hard?" I asked, my voice straining in my throat, my cheeks burning. "Every day, I'm the one who has to keep this family pushing forward. Every day, I'm the one who must pick up all the pieces she left

behind. I work my butt off to keep money coming in because Augustine's too scared to send Dad out on the boat." I slammed the book down next to me, and a cloud of dust exploded. "Fable's paintings don't feed us. You do the laundry and cook dinner and sweep the floor but none of it pays the dues. Every day, I'm making dresses until my fingers fall off, keeping us afloat, and I still find a way to care for Mom *every day* because we can't give up on her. And I'm the one who *ruins everything*? Shame on me, Ivy. Shame on me for not being ready to give up." Another angry laugh sputtered out of me. "What if it were you, Fable, or me stuck in that bed? Don't forget, I watched what the coven did to her all those years ago. You didn't. You couldn't!"

Ivy looked at me, her gaze ablaze. Like the oceans in her eyes were on fire. "If it were one of us, that would be different, and you know it."

"Really? How so?"

"Because you two are worth fighting for," she whispered. Then her voice steadily inclined. "She's gone, and it's for the best. She left us with this useless book to say goodbye because ... Mom knew she was leaving us, and now she's gone." She paused, and I found myself digging my nails into the book. "She made her choice. She doesn't get to say goodbye to you." She pointed to the book. "Not like this. Not in a damn book."

My splinter throbbed, easing my breathing. "You do not get to decide when and where and how Mom says goodbye. That's hers, not yours." I instantly thought of Lena, and how her choice of a farewell could be ripped away from her, too. "Just because you choose to spend this time hating her doesn't mean I want to. To you, she's gone. But to me, she's downstairs, alive and breathing."

Ivy climbed to her feet, looking down at me. "Why can't you see what she's doing to you? She's not even conscious, and she still has a sick hold on you. She should just die already."

Then her eyes opened wide, shock paralyzing her for a heartbeat.

Her truth seemed as if she'd punched herself in the face.

Another tear left Ivy's eye, and she quickly wiped it. "Did you even read the book?"

"What?"

"You heard me."

I sucked in a deep breath. "No, I've never read it."

I never had the courage to read it before.

Ivy's smile was faint. "Then keep it. Read the book for all I care. Maybe

then we can open the debate on whether she wrote that book to say goodbye. Because who knows, she could have in her own twisted way. Unless, of course, you're even more scared to find out the same truth the rest of us already know." She took a step away, but an incredulous laugh buckled under her breath when she whipped back around. "You know, Augustine, the coven, they all did us a favor. She's not the problem anymore."

She was entirely wrong, but then she was gone.

My chest heaved as I watched her go, staring at the empty space where she had stood seconds before, her words burying into the cracks of the floor, her tone seeping into the door frame, how wrong she was painting the space she stood, marking a memory that would, most likely, never go away. It resonated. And each time I would pass that space, I would remember what she'd said. More importantly, the way she made me feel. Like I was a heartless, insensitive slave to our mother.

After calming myself, I crossed the hall into my bedroom and closed the door behind me. Carefully, I dragged my dresser out of the way, and the jewelry hanging inside my jewelry box *clanked* against the glass enclosure. I crouched in front of the secret door I'd carved into the wall as a little girl.

I buried Mom's book inside next to all my other treasures.

Much like my beloved black sea, I was a collector, too.

Magazines, sea glass, seashells, my dagger. And the grimoire I'd stolen from Kane and had to keep hidden. I glanced at my closed bedroom door, then slowly slid the grimoire into my lap. I flipped the pages until, once again, the spell to save Mom stared back at me. For years, I'd studied this spell, memorized it.

London, England
April 1586

<u>Wake one from a deep sleep:</u>
A bloody eclipse must fill the sky,
During the witching hour on a full moon's night.
Collect the blood upon Death's kiss,
Paint it over the sleeping one's lips.
Chant the following spell:
Wake, wake, I plead of thee
To a place of love, a land of pain

From the other side, come back to me.

The Crimson Eclipse only came around once every other century, and 2021 was the year of its return. On January twenty-eighth, the bloody eclipse would fill the sky for the first time in 165 years.

This was my only chance. I would not get another.

Only two months until Kane would be dead, and I could bring Mom back.

I had to find a way to push the wedding date to after the twenty-eighth.

LATER THAT DAY, I WAS GRIPPED BY THE LIGHTHOUSE BEAM SPREADING throughout Weeping Hollow on my way to the tunnels to visit Lena. The beam cast a quick nova light on the cobblestone pathway, wind howling with every step of the way. I pulled my cloak's hood higher over my head so no one would notice me.

I only had an hour left before the Shadows seized daylight.

I had to be quick.

The tunnels were empty. My boots echoed, and a shaky glow from my lantern lit the way to the cell.

A rat squealed as it rushed past, trotting along the stone wall.

Cringing, I kept my eyes on it until it disappeared, hugging my body close.

Spirit's shadows leapt and twisted on both sides of me, and as I grew closer, noises drifted and swelled. Soft at first, until it built up into a subtle cry. My palms were sweaty when I reached for my box cutter tucked into my waistband. I'd brought it just in case, having no idea what would be waiting in the tunnels near nightfall.

Once I reached the turn, I hid behind the corner, peeking around at first to see where the noise was coming from. Lena was lying against the wall of the cell, her cheek crushed against the stone. Dirt, dead leaves, and twigs were tangled in her hair, and tears smeared her blotchy face.

The water droplets splashing into puddles from cracks in the stone matched my steps as I ran to her.

"Lena," I said upon a gasp, setting the lantern down and clutching the bars. My palms sizzled as soon as my flesh met the steel, and I yanked them back.

Lena lifted her head at the sound of my voice.

A dark void curled in her eyes.

“They’re coated with nightshade,” she whispered, exhausted.

The one herb poisonous to the Witches of Weeping Hollow.

I looked at my palms. “How did nightshade get back into Weeping Hollow?”

Lena sank further to the ground, her shoulders slumped, like the only thing holding her together was her spine. She looked up with a defeated yet humorous expression. “*Oh*, Adora, there’s so much you don’t know.”

I peered down the tunnel to my left, then right. “Where are your guards?”

“It’s almost nightfall. You should probably go while there’s still time,” Lena said in a croak, her nails scraping the ground as she curled her hands into fists.

She had to be in pain after what Augustine had done to her. Enough pain to account for the dried blood down the sides of her neck from her ears. But not enough to fill the emptiness in her eyes. Half of her was already dead.

“No, I’m not leaving you.”

“Who would have thought I would end up here?” She dropped her head until the side of it rested against the wall. “I told Grandma no, but she insisted on helping me to save Jeremy. She was too weak, Adora. Now I’ve lost them both.”

I shook my head, knowing I would have done the same as her grandmother. Even if it meant burning in the Wicker Man. “You don’t deserve this. Any of this. The law needs to change. This isn’t right.”

“As if there’s anything we can do about it.”

At that moment, I wanted to tell her I planned to kill Kane. If Augustine’s only son was dead, perhaps Cyrus would be next in line for high priest. The Pruitt lineage would end. There was a chance killing Kane could fix more than I’d imagined.

“I’m going to do everything in my power to make sure your death is the last punishment for using magic,” I promised.

Lena turned and faced the wall, mumbling incoherently. Like what I said was absurd. Hollow words to make dying a little easier.

But my words held weight. A whole town of weight.

“Lena, come here,” I begged, but she didn’t move. I leaned forward, clutched the poisonous bars, and bit back the painful sting. “Please come here.”

Lena was ten years older than me, but she crawled on all fours slowly, like a toddler would do, until she was sitting in front of me with the bars between us.

That was when I noticed a trail of blood sliding down the inside of her thigh under her dress. I glanced back at her with tears in my eyes, and I squeezed the bars tightly. “Did Augustine do that to you?”

There were still four more days left of her sitting in the cell. What more would she endure during that time without a guard to keep watch?

Lena didn’t answer. The truth was too horrific to put into the air.

“What can I do? Just tell me what to do so I can help.”

Lena looked up at me as her eyes held swirls of death.

Empty expiration.

The end.

“I just want to die,” she whispered.

I could do this for her so she didn’t have to suffer any longer.

For her, there was only one way out, and I could help.

I reached in to pull her closer to me. Nightshade sizzled the flesh along my arm, and I sucked in a breath through clenched teeth to fight through it.

“I’m going to make it all go away,” I promised her, taking her delicate hand in mine. Dark circles embroidered her vacant blue eyes. “You will not suffer another night.”

We looked at each other for a long moment, a knowing passing between us. Tears begged to burst from my eyes, but I didn’t blink. Not once. I looked at her, eyes unblinking, strong. Despite it, my fingers still shook as I reached for my box cutter. I couldn’t stop trembling as I cut into her flesh. A deep, jagged gash down the middle of her forearm to her wrist. Lena’s face contorted, her eyes wide and anguish consuming her.

“Once upon a time,” I whispered, “a waitress worked at Portside Pearl. It was late, everyone else had left, and she was stuck cleaning up for the night.” Lena whimpered, but I continued, “That’s when Jeremy walked through those double doors on his eighteenth birthday.”

I repeated the same slash along her other arm.

Lena let out a cry. It ripped through my chest and penetrated my heart, but I continued the story, taking her back to when she could’ve been the happiest. “He said he wanted a celebratory shot. The bar was already closed, but he stayed anyway.” I tried to force a smile. “*I have to know you*, were his words, never caring about how late it was, or how sober he was.”

The box cutter *clanked* on the ground when it fell from my shaking hands, and that was where I left it.

"Because he never went there for a shot, did he?"

Blood pumped from her arms.

It flowed like currents in the ground's cracks between us.

"And it wasn't even his birthday."

Her cry turned soft.

"He just wanted to be with you."

I held her close while nightshade sizzled our skin.

I couldn't let her go. Not yet.

"I'm here," I whispered, kissing the backs of her hands, staying with her long enough to watch the last bit of life drain from her eyes. "I'm right here."

I WIPED MY FACE ONCE MY FEET TOUCHED THE GROUND AT TOWN SQUARE. Her sticky blood was drying on my lips, and I rubbed them raw until crumbles fell along the pathway back to the cottage.

I could already feel the change inside me.

I wasn't the same girl I was before the tunnels.

No, I was changed by my killing.

I'd always imagined Kane Pruitt being my first since he was my first for everything else. I never imagined it to be a dear friend from my coven.

I always believed that evil was always rooted in me, wicked weeds wrapping my bones and fatal-black thorns choking my soul. Some would think I did this for her, but it wasn't all true. Some part of me, some sick and small twisted piece lingering like an unwanted spirit waiting to burst from the entrapment of my sweet soul, wanted to know what it would be like. And this visitor had been waiting for a while to awaken.

My stomach flipped, and I stopped halfway to the cottage to vomit in neighboring bushes. As if the other part of me detested what I'd done. How could I go on like this?

When I returned home, Fable, Ivy, and Dad were already upstairs, preparing for the night. The old floorboards groaned beneath my feet as I pushed through the kitchen's swinging door.

Leftover hot embers glowed from the fireplace carved into the wall, offering me weak lighting. I looked around the kitchen for the tea pitcher, but something caught my attention. I stopped mid-stride.

Mom’s book screamed at me from the kitchen island, searing the place it had been abandoned. Except, it wasn’t me who had left it there. And I vividly recalled leaving the book in my bedroom. Inside the wall.

No one else was in the kitchen. I was all alone.

I picked up the book and held it close to my chest.

The house fell into utter silence as I crept up the stairs.

“There you are,” Ivy said, yawning after I reached the attic. I paused, wondering if she saw the change in me too. Was Lena’s death tattooed on my skin? Did crimson color my eyes? Could she finally see I was a killer and not the kind-hearted sister I was always supposed to be before evil crawled in and shaped me with its sharp claws? “I was worried about you. Five more minutes, and I would have left to look for you.”

The other two were already half asleep.

“I’m here. Ready for the long night ahead.”

“I’m sorry about earlier,” she continued, her voice tired, her eyes sleepy half-moons. “I just don’t know what to do anymore. So much has changed, and I can’t fix any of it.”

“I know,” I said. Then Ivy closed her eyes.

I sat beside the window with Mom’s book on my lap.

Silver foil glinted off the light from the lamp.

And I cracked the book open.

“No siren did ever charm the ear of the listener as the listening ear has charmed the soul of the siren.”

—Henry Taylor

I CLOSED THE BOOK AND HELD IT CLOSE TO MY CHEST.

I wasn’t ready.

Not yet.

CHAPTER 9

STONE

AGE TWENTY-FOUR

PORTSMOUTH, NEW HAMPSHIRE
YEAR OF 1864

I MISSED THE FOREST, TREES, MOUNTAINS, AND TRIBAL CULTURE THAT HAD dominated eighteen years of my life. A pungent smell of fish suffocated me when I only desired pine and fresh mountain air.

Before the break of dawn, the three of us would board a ship called the *Sorceress of the Sea.* This ship would take me back to a town where Mother had said my curse could be broken. I no longer cared what would happen to me, but Mother had only become more relentless over the years.

She would walk about the small basement where we lived, rambling about things in a foreign language all hours of the night. Odd behavior possessed her. Strange dreams, too. At one point, she was certain sinister things were being whispered into her ears.

The dark magic Celia had taught her brought a sort of insanity. As though it were a thing with a soul of its own that had come between us. Or had this insanity arisen because I'd brought her back from the dead?

Six years ago, after Mother died, I confessed to her that I had brought her back to life. She hadn't left me much of a choice since she remembered watching us from above on that awful night.

Shortly after her resurrection, we'd left behind our last tribe and, for a while, drifted on our own. It was hard during winter when it was only us, but we had suffered far worse.

A year later, Mother crossed paths with the woman who called herself Celia. She was a stubby old woman with thinning gray hair, deceivingly soft brown eyes, and a wrinkled face.

I didn't trust her.

I could never identify my reasons for not trusting her, but Mother felt utterly at ease with this woman who practiced magic. She had a charm about her that Mother latched on to. I had reminded Mother repeatedly, as she reminded me, that we did not need anyone but each other and were better off on our own.

Mother assumed my reason for not trusting Celia was because I was envious she had someone when I didn't. Her hypocrisy had only stunned me to silence. Furthermore, she could have been right, so I never spoke of my insecurities regarding Celia again.

After learning about our situation, and my curse, Celia promised Mother she could guide us to the town of Weeping Hollow. Not long after, the three of us had traveled east until we reached the coast's fishing ports.

The witch had her own reason for needing to escape New Hampshire and find the ghostly town, but it was a reason I knew nothing about.

"It doesn't matter," Mother once said. *"As long as we can get to Weeping Hollow, everything will be all right."*

Because of Celia, a flame of hope ignited in Mother's eyes. She was confident all the pieces were falling into place, believing I would soon be free of my curse to live a normal life. Though, at what expense? This thought never left my mind, no matter how many miles we had traveled to get to the coast. This was the first time I had seen Mother with such hope in her eyes. Who was I to strip it away after all she had been through?

Standing miles away from where the tribes lived, I unloaded crates of fish and tossed them into marked bins along with other workers while orders were shouted in our ears.

Workers never spoke to me. Though they were different from the English settlers we worked for, I was different from everyone. The abomination in a burlap sack.

The small port was wedged between two shipbuilding centers. Oncoming ships blew their horns, and squeals and whistles from trains whipped by in

ten-minute increments as they chugged across the railroad behind us.

Trout, salmon, and sea bass were emptied onto my table. With gloves covering my hands, I sifted through them quickly, dividing, tossing, and weighing. My life had become a tedious routine, but I kept moving as the ocean breeze blew past me from every angle. The captain's cost wasn't cheap, and Mother needed the last fare before departure.

During the entire walk home, I clutched the cigar tin in my pocket, and inside the cigar tin was the rolled envelope. I'd always kept it on me, having just finished my ninety-ninth book.

Fourteen years had passed since Ambrose gifted me this mysterious envelope. At this point I'd become more attached to the idea of the mystery than to wanting to peek inside.

When I returned to where we were staying, the small basement was dark, except for the oil lamp. It lit a weak glow across the floor, landing on mattresses shoved into the corner.

Mother and Celia were sitting at a small wooden table, a candle melting between them. In the few years I had known Celia, she had gone out of her way to avoid speaking to me directly.

I emptied my coverall, fanning coins across the wooden table for them to see. "The last of it is all here," I assured her.

Celia twitched her nose, flipping her top lip up in a way that looked as though she was smelling it, a tic she often did. She then took half the money. The coins clanked together when she dropped them into a drawstring pouch. She stuffed the pouch inside her white dress pocket, a few pats against her hip for good measure.

"We will leave an hour after midnight. The ship departs at four in the morning." She slid the remaining coins to Mother. "For our departure."

"And Stone?" Mother asked.

My gaze slid between them.

Celia twitched her nose once more, refusing to look at me. Much like everyone else. "Everything will go as planned, Miss Clarice. Don't you worry."

Her words should have been reassuring, but an uneasiness stirred in Mother's tired eyes. She knew the only way to break the curse was to journey to a town she had only spoken of in her nightmares. She had hardly said the town's name when awake, almost as if each time *Weeping Hollow* was uttered, it had cost her.

I had worked tirelessly for her and Celia. After tomorrow, Mother could live out the remainder of her years without spending one more day worrying about mine. She could put down roots and start a family. She was a beautiful woman with many years left to live. But if Mother wanted to end this plan, I would not show resentment. Upon her request, I could free her of me, walk away, and never return.

Celia set a plate and drink in front of me.

I disregarded it, reaching out to take Mother's hand into mine.

"We don't have to leave. You have the choice to stay here."

For the first time, Mother could not look at me. Her gentle hand slipped from my gloves and fell into her lap. "Eat dinner and get some rest. We have a long day tomorrow."

I dropped my sack-covered head and leaned back in my chair, turning my attention to the corner of the room where a spider spun its web in the dark cranny.

After working for almost eighteen hours, it was a battle to keep my eyes open. I peeled off my gloves and picked up the cup, entranced by the web and the shapes it was hiding.

I gulped down the drink through a soggy rye straw that was slipped under my mask.

The drink left a grass-like residue on my lips ... and something else.

The taste was bitter on my tongue, and once it settled inside me, there was an unimaginable stabbing pain in my chest. The cup slipped from my fingers, no flashes, fades, or memories attached to it, and I clutched my heart and lungs, unable to breathe in.

All the air was sucked from my lungs. My voice was gone.

My insides felt as though they were being pulled apart and lit on fire.

Confused, I widened my eyes, my gaze springing to Mother's for help.

But her sorrowful eyes turned away.

I did not understand, and the room spun and spun.

I inched my hand closer, trying to reach out to Mother, but she backed away in her chair.

My arm slipped from the table, and I was falling. Every muscle inside me contracted as though my spine was being squeezed by an iron fist.

Then I collapsed to the floor with a loud *thump*.

My back arched and thrashed at unnatural angles while ice climbed inside me, attacking my legs and arms. It was so cold it felt like fire.

I tried to call out for relief as my body stiffened from spasms, but no noise came from me. No tears sprang from my eyes. My screams echoed in my head and bounced off my skull.

I had experienced hypothermia before, but it came to me in stages, taking me slowly. There was no warning, no name for what was happening to me.

Celia pulled Mother into her arms as she wept.

One moment, I was drinking from the cup, and the next, I was sure I was dying. And Mother was turning away from me as everyone else had always done.

All I could do was gaze up at the web and surrender to the soul-slicing freeze. But before my eyes closed, I realized it was a perfect circle inside the mesmerizing web.

A sign that I had reached the edge of death.

PART II

THE SHALLOW

CHAPTER 10

ADORA

November 17, 2020
72 days until the Crimson Eclipse

There were days when the wind was so cold.

Days like these always follow the cruelest nights. The kind of cruel nights that shook me, and for a split second, I felt like a little girl again needing the comfort of my mother. It didn't take long for this ache to shrink and for my strength to return, but this ache didn't leave me. Not entirely. It moped inside me like a sad, dark cloud.

I killed a woman. Soon, Augustine would return to the cell and find Lena in a bed of her blood with her wrists slashed in a peaceful sleep at last.

The only way to keep my promise to her and save Mom was to kill Kane, and Cyrus had become a thing standing in my way. If Cyrus or anyone else caught me during my efforts, they'd take me to the Wicker Man. But it was a risk I was willing to take. So much was riding on Kane's death. If I didn't move forward with the plan because of this sudden arranged marriage, then I would have wasted the majority of my life.

I descended the attic stairs to the second floor and dipped into my bedroom. Outside my window, daylight crowned the ocean.

To fight the chilling temperatures, I dressed in layers. My vintage coat, a cotton pullover, and a tank. My steps were quiet as I left the cottage's premises through the gate and down the stone stairway.

Gray was the sky, black was the sea, and white was the beach. The only sound during this time was the crashing waves, the whistling wind through the cliff's edge, and the faraway cry of a gull. In the distance, the lighthouse beam on Bone Island cut through a blanket of fog, the horizon blurring like a somber oil painting.

I walked along the snow-capped beach stretching across the east end of Weeping Hollow when about thirty feet down the shoreline, a strange object partly wedged between rocks bobbed in the shallow waters.

The closer I got, the larger it was—a coffin-shaped box about seven feet long, three to four feet wide, covered in muck and barnacles, debris floating with the tide surrounding it.

I chanced a look around, and no one else was nearby.

I took cautious steps closer, broken glass crunching beneath each step and water splashing up my legs, spilling into my boots and soaking my ankles.

It wasn't black muck but spiders blanketing the box.

Hundreds of black spiders.

My insides curled, my shoulders tensed. I kept my gaze on the box, afraid of it leaving my sight, as I leaned to my right to pick up driftwood.

The large stick was heavy in my hand as I scraped it across the top of the box, spooking the spiders. They all scampered away like ants would do after their home was disturbed, revealing a glass enclosure underneath.

With water sloshing in my boots, I crouched down to get a better look, then swiped my palm across the grime-caked glass to see what was inside.

Behind two holes in a burlap sack were a pair of eyes sealed shut by frosted lashes.

It's a coffin. The driftwood slipped from my hand as I fell back with my heart punching through my chest. I looked away, then looked back at the coffin to ensure that it was still there and that my mind hadn't played tricks on me. That the morning fog hadn't played tricks on me.

The coffin was still there, and a winter breeze rushed past me as I gazed at it.

Another wave came, pushing the coffin up and over on its side when a man's body broke through the glass enclosure. His limbs sprawled over rock and his covered head was submerged in water.

Whoever it was didn't move.

I should run. I should tell someone.

Everything I should do rattled in my mind, but my body didn't listen.

My feet didn’t run in the opposite direction.

Instead, I found myself going to this stranger.

I didn’t know what made me do it, but I had to be sure he was dead.

I picked up his hand, and his wrist was cold and heavy between my fingers.

I closed my eyes, waiting for a pulse.

Then there it was. A weak, spaced-out *thump ... thump*.

“You’re alive.” My harsh whisper sprang the rest of my body into action.

I hooked my arms under his and used all my strength to turn and yank him from the water. Every coming wave gave me leverage to pull as the sea pushed us both to the shoreline. Once my spine hit the snow-covered sand, he fell on top of me with all his weight.

I removed the burlap sack from his head and tossed it into the ocean.

Beneath the sack were delicate features on an enchanting face.

Then, from blue lips, the stranger coughed up water, the sea spilling from the corners of his mouth.

He took a breath, fingers curling around my leg.

He took a breath, holding on to me.

He took a breath, sinking in my arms.

He took a breath.

I melted, holding his head close to my chest as dizzying relief filled me, and I squeezed my eyes closed to fight the sudden strange emotion. His fingers relaxed, his hold loosened, and I opened my eyes again.

He was unconscious. But he was breathing.

I looked down the length of him.

Spiders were crawling onto our boots and up our legs.

In a frantic, I kicked to get them off when another wave came.

One much bigger this time.

In my twenty-two years of waiting, the wave was stronger than ever, wrapping around my ankles, grabbing the man, grabbing me, trying to pull us both into its current. I clung to the rock and clutched his body close to mine until the desperate wave passed, taking the spiders with it, collecting them.

The sea left us shivering from the frozen water-world I’d saved him from. His skin was as cold as ice, and his unusual clothes were stiff from the frost. He wore linen pants and a shirt that was stained with fresh blood.

I turned him slightly over, seeing a large, jagged piece of glass wedged into him under his ribs. A dreadful breath escaped me, and I looked around,

not knowing what to do next.

Behind us was the cave that hid in the bend of the cliff.

I laid him on his back, stood, and grabbed his wrists, trying to pull him.

He had to have been close to two hundred pounds, and it took every bit of strength from me. The snowy beach felt like quicksand, and each time I looked back, there were still so many more feet to go. I dug my heels into the sand, sucked in a breath, and yanked until I was gaining traction and leaving drag marks in my wake.

Once inside the cave, my arms felt weak and heavy, but I still managed to free him of his wet clothes down to his undergarments. There was no time to make sense of anything or think about whether the man was dangerous. Glass protruded from his bloodied flesh, and if I did nothing, he could die.

If I ran for help, the Order would take him away.

They would only save him to kill him.

Kneeling at his side, blood pounded hot and fast in my ears, imagining him surrounded by people he didn't know who were shoving him inside the Wicker Man. I could smell the ghastly scent of gas and burnt wood, and just before the fire touched his feet, he'd give me a helpless look. One that clawed my insides until my cold heart bled. *Why didn't you help me?* he'd whisper. And I wouldn't know what to say because the truth didn't make sense to me anymore.

Because I was doing what I was told.

The sight of his striking features caught my gaze, and my bottom lip trembled. The thought of the Order taking and killing him instilled terror inside me. A different brand of terror I'd never felt before.

At last, the sea had given me something in return.

I had to protect him. I was his only chance, so I couldn't tell anyone.

I studied the angle of the glass in his side, knowing there was no time to run back to the cottage for supplies. I could pull it out, but he'd bleed to death without something to close the wound. The only way to heal him was through magic.

Mom once told me how much power water possessed, and the human body was made up of at least sixty percent of it. I'd never accessed the kind of magic it would take to save him, and I didn't know if I had it in me. There were still a few more months until my twenty-third birthday when I would ascend, but even if I could heal him, that magic was forbidden. And Lena's punishment flashed in my mind.

If I used magic, and Augustine found out, would he burn my brain to a crisp before I had the chance to save Mom? Was this stranger worth the risk?

I studied his stone-cold face, his glacier-blue lips, something telling me that, *yes*, he was worth it. After what I'd done to Lena, I couldn't let him go, too. I had to help him, or at the very least, try.

"Okay, okay," I chanted, slipping out of my coat. I wrapped one of the sleeves around my hand so I wouldn't cut myself, gripped the glass, and pinched my eyes closed as I yanked out the sawtooth piece.

The stranger lay unconscious as blood gushed out. In a hurry, I tossed the glass aside and pressed down on his wound. Warm, thick blood slipped under my hands and between my fingers as I summoned any power buried deep inside me.

Outside the cave, the ocean's waves crashed around shallow rocks, and I became mesmerized by it, allowing the sea to shape my thoughts and guide me. I tasted Her brine on my lips and breathed Her in until a song emerged from within and rolled off my tongue. I squeezed my closed eyes tighter, imagining his body repairing from the inside out.

My song surrounded me.

My mind felt dizzy. My arms went numb.

But I didn't open my eyes or let go of our connection.

Not until my body gave up on me, and all I saw was black.

IT DIDN'T HAPPEN ALL AT ONCE.

First, there was the sound of a beating heart thumping in my ear, then I felt the slow rise of a chest against my cheek. Lastly, the taste of brine coated the inside of my mouth and tongue, my gums numb from it, as if I'd swallowed a mouthful of ocean water. It took a moment for me to blink my eyes open again. When I did, I found myself in the cold, damp cave, snowflakes leaping and spinning like tipsy ballerinas just outside the opening.

My mind then settled on a single thought. *The stranger.*

And everything came rushing back.

I lifted myself off his chest, and his wound had been repaired from the inside. Blood still seeped from the gash, but it wasn't heavy and not enough to kill him. I pushed out a relieved breath.

"I can't believe I actually did it," I confessed as if he could hear me. "I've never done that before."

If the Order ever found out that I'd used my magic in the open—on a stranger—I could be executed, and I'd never felt more alive than in this moment.

I'd done something extraordinary, and I couldn't tell anyone.

Not even my sisters.

The man lay unconscious with a staggering pulse.

I looked around. "I'll be right back."

It only took a few minutes to return to the cottage, and once inside, I slipped a blanket from the closet and clothes from Dad's drawer. I grabbed water, medicine, and matches. The house remained quiet, with everyone still asleep, and I quickly shoved all the essentials into a basket before slipping back into the morning.

The horizon was a blanket of soothing sapphire and ivory next to my racing mind. My feet plodded through the sand back to the cave as I thought about how crazy this was. I'd spent over ten years plotting the death of a man I'd known my whole life, only to save a stranger, someone I didn't know at all.

Once I reached him, my knees hit the sand at his side.

I tried to keep my thoughts at bay while pouring alcohol. *What are you doing, Adora?* my mind repeated as I layered the wound with medicine. But something kept me anchored here, caring for him, unable to stop.

Mine, my heart proclaimed as I wrapped a bandage tightly around his torso. *The sea gave him to me.*

I couldn't help my eyes from flicking back and forth at the sharp edges of his face and the wound. His lips were still pale blue, and his skin was still cold to the touch. He was frozen as if winter had wrapped him in its arms. He needed warmth, so I struck a match to start a fire.

It was strange that I didn't spare a second to think about it, and how I stripped off my clothes and pulled the heavy fur blanket around us to trap our body heat inside. His eyes were still closed when I rolled him onto his strong side and pressed our bodies together for warmth. I was tall, five feet eight, but he was much taller yet still curled into my body in a way that told me he needed me. He was harmless and hurting and needed me.

He trembled in my arms, so I curved his head into my neck and rubbed his back, trying to bring color to his muted skin.

And there we were, two bodies clinging to each other before a fire.

An hour passed as we lay like this, wrapped in the cocoon I'd built for us.

Strange cold lips hit my neck, and the icy tips of his hair scratched my cheek. We stayed like that until his chilling breath came out in long, even strokes.

Outside, snow pitter-pattered against the white shore.

A hesitant fall, like the sky wasn't ready to let go.

"It's okay," I whispered in a comforting way. The sound was odd coming from me. Motherly for someone who had killed a woman less than twenty-four hours earlier. I pushed the thought away. "You're going to be okay," I said again, my hands sliding across his ridges as I admired his face.

For now, he was alive.

He, whatever his name was, would live.

And after a while, the fire heated the small cave.

I swiped his defrosting white hair from his forehead, imagining his name and where he'd come from. William or Foster, possibly a painter from the other side of the Atlantic who jumped ship to come to America for a new beginning. From Paris, perhaps—if the stories were true. A traveler in search of *something more*.

The ocean dripped from the tips of his hair and down the sides of his face and neck. My eyes followed its pathways.

He was an unread story of tragic-black lashes, wolfish-white hair, and delicate blue lips. He was the horizon in winter.

The fire's blaze was a hot breath on us as I admired how his chest expanded and caved with every strong breath he took with mine. As if my every breath encouraged his. His body hadn't stopped trembling, though, and his fingers clutched on to me like one would a pillow.

It was painful. In a way, for both of us.

After some time had passed, he thawed into a cold sweat.

Droplets beaded his tight pale skin and slid down my naked breasts that were pressed against his chest. He had lips too sensitive for a man, and I wanted to feel them beneath my fingertips. Of course, I didn't. Lying naked with a strange man had only been to save him, I'd convinced myself. But the need to touch him was for different reasons entirely, and that somehow felt like a breach of integrity, like taking something that didn't belong to me.

These anxious thoughts pushed me back in my clothes. Afterward, I returned to his side while he slept under the blanket beside the fire, watching the snow fall onto the beach through the cave's opening, waiting for him to wake.

There was a possibility that this stranger could open his eyes, and darkness would ignite within them. The chance of him being a witch hunter who'd come here to hang us from trees like ornaments in Town Square crossed my mind, too.

This thought made me uneasy, and I looked him over to see if there was an indication of trouble outlining his silhouette.

There wasn't.

His landscape was a blank page awaiting a new story to unfold.

This man was an adventure. Quite possibly a dangerous one.

With that, a prickle of excitement blossomed down my spine.

Either way, the night was coming, and I couldn't stay to find out for sure. If I didn't return to the cottage before dark, Ivy would break the rules and leave the house after curfew to look for me.

I left water bottles at his side and pulled the blanket tightly around him.

It was up to him to make it through the night.

And I wondered if, on this night, it would be him that the Shadows would choose.

CHAPTER 11

ADORA

November 18, 2020
71 days until the Crimson Eclipse

A secret lived within me.

Neither Fable nor Ivy could see it in my expression, in my walk, or heard it in my voice when I'd returned home. Though, my lips tingled with a faint smile whenever they weren't looking.

I never had anything that was all my own. So, while Ivy sat behind the register, every stitch from the sewing machine left a bead of my secret woven within the fabric.

The argument we'd had must have driven Ivy to come into the shop to help with inventory so I could get ahead on dresses.

Both of my sisters had always worked part-time, but since the Panic had started, I hadn't been able to pay them. Dad was without a job, and every dime was allocated to managing the household.

And Ivy hadn't been the same since the news of Cyrus and me. While my mind had been occupied with the stranger tucked away in a cave, I still noticed how closed-off she had become in such a short amount of time. It was to be expected, I was sure. I'd made it my life's purpose to kill Kane and break Mom's spell, and Ivy had fallen in love.

I wondered if our desires were reversed, if a man could ever love me in the way she loved him. Not only desire me, lust after me, or spend their days

fantasizing about me, but truly love me.

The store was quiet, no customers had come.

Ivy appeared in the doorway of my office.

"In case you hadn't heard, the autopsy came back," she said. "They're saying Mrs. Madder's death is consistent with the others." A few more awkward seconds passed, then, "I'm heading out. Inventory's done, and it's my shift to watch over everyone tonight. I want to try and get a few hours of sleep before nightfall."

I let my foot off the pedal and reached around the sewing machine to raise the needle. The top half of Mrs. Cantini's dress fell into my lap, and I held it out in front of me, imagining my future mother-in-law wearing it. My smile faded.

"I'm finished," I said to her, but it felt as if I was saying it to myself, too. Everything I'd worked so hard for was slipping away from me.

I was done with the evil that lurked within me.

Done with the Shadows killing people in my hometown.

Done with being alone in the fight for Mom.

Done with this marriage before it even started.

It was true I loved Cyrus, but not in the way a wife should love a husband—not in the way Ivy loved Cyrus.

Besides, how could Cyrus ever love me after Ivy?

I'd once wanted more than a life of vengeance, but Kane took it all away that night, turning my heart to ice and never giving my ambition to love a place to wander. Next to the anger, my fantasies stirred inside, like the secret I was keeping, and with the Order forcing me to marry Cyrus, it was as if a part of me had died, too. My dreams were nothing more than castles in the sky.

"What do you think lives outside the town?" Ivy suddenly asked.

I raised my head to look her in the eyes. To search them.

It seemed the time had come.

If Ivy couldn't be with Cyrus, she didn't want to be here at all.

She continued, "What do you think it's really like out there? Could it be as terrible as Augustine says it is?"

We'd had these discussions before. Growing up, tucked inside forts with flashlights during the nights, my sisters, Adeline, and I had read about the bustling nightlife of New York City, the taste buds of Paris, and the different shades of the Caribbean. We had made up stories, pretending to be living in a

place where men didn't manipulate a coven or use a woman's body for magic or power. For a brief moment in time, our imaginations were passionate and gave us a sense of what living and love should feel like, but it also cut deeper and made us vulnerable to disappointment. Then we grew up.

"I know you can't stand the thought of a future without Cyrus, but it's also not something you can run away from. We can't leave. And besides, Weeping Hollow is our home. There are good people who need us." I leaned in, so she could feel the sincerity in my next words. "If you coddle the pain, it'll never heal."

"Says the one who's marrying my boyfriend," she muttered.

I hated this. "I'm still trying to stop it. Let's not give up hope just yet."

AFTER SHE LEFT, I WORKED QUICKLY TO RETURN TO THE CAVE, BUT IT WASN'T quick enough. The stranger would have to wait out another long night, and I was sure he would be all I could think about until I would see him again.

Strong winds picked up from the east. With groceries hanging from one arm, Mrs. Cantini's dress zipped inside a garment bag folded over the other, I struggled against the wind to close the shop door behind me.

Town Square used to feel alive and festive, but the town's colors had dulled in only two weeks. Snow covered the grounds and the gazebo. Shades of gray hovered like a graveyard in the sky. A drabness replaced the cozy, and tired flatlanders held up signs, shouting, *"Drive the Heathens out!"*

With only six hours of daylight, this was how the townspeople chose to spend it as if it would make a difference. As if the Heathens coming out of the woods would make the Shadows disappear.

The Heathens were useless beasts.

Other townies were closing their shops at this hour, too. Mina Mae flashed an encouraging smile at me from across the street as she locked up. I bumped into Crazy Jasper, who was waving his arms frantically in the air, chanting, *"We need to find the sun!"*

Ocean, the homeless man with the hairy face who usually slept in the alley behind the diner, hurried to Town Hall with a large canvas bag slung over his shoulder. He rushed past me to make it inside before the day ended.

I pulled the hood up and over my head, ducking from the wind and keeping forward along the cobblestone walkway when a pair of black beady eyes snatched me up and spun me around.

“Eleanor!” but the elderly woman who owned the hole-in-the-wall psychic store kept walking.

I sprinted, juggling groceries and the dress, peering around at our surroundings to see if anyone was watching us.

“Eleanor,” I said again, grabbing her coat.

She turned to face me, and a fierce wind blew between us.

“Please,” I begged. “You haven’t come by in over a month to see her. I need to know.” I was out of breath, and I looked up at the sky. “There’s still time. Please, it won’t take long.”

Eleanor looked from side to side before her gaze landed on me.

“Nothing will change, Adora. Each time it is the same.” She took her coat back from my grip and leaned in. “Until the spell is broken, your mother is imprisoned in her internal hell.”

Then she was gone, walking between two buildings and vanishing into the alleyway.

ELEANOR’S VOICE FOLLOWED ME HOME ON THE EDGE OF SEASIDE STREET.

When I arrived, Dad was next door, balancing on the top step of the ladder, driving a nail into a loose plank over Mrs. Madder’s window.

She was gone, but Dad couldn’t let her go.

“Dad,” I yelled, the wind picking up and carrying my voice. “What are you doing? Get inside. It’ll be dark any second.” The wind carried Dad’s reply. I shook my head, pushing open the front door, and a brutal wind knocked me from behind.

It was warm inside the cottage after closing the door. I hung Mrs. Cantini’s dress in the entryway closet and entered Mom’s bedroom.

It was dark with barely any light left from the day cascading down on her body. The steady heartbeat on the monitor should have put me at ease, but it never did. I approached the bed and laid my hand on her forehead, pushing her hair back, unable to erase all that Eleanor had seen.

“’Adora!’ she screams, but all I see is blue. The deep blue, the ocean, and bubbles and waves. It is the same hellish record, spinning and spinning. She’s splashing, and each time she makes it to the surface, there is no land in sight. Like a rat on a sinking ship, frantically swimming in circles, desperate to find something to cling to. ‘Adora!’ but she cannot hold herself up any longer, so she drowns once again, and all falls quiet, sinking down, down.

Until she wakes up, finding herself in the middle of the ocean, with no land in sight.' Eleanor says. 'This is where your mom is. She's in the deep.'"

Adora, Adora, Adora, Eleanor's voice echoed in my brain, and I swallowed all emotion, exhuming any source of strength inside of me. To be strong for her, to move forward.

"Goodnight, Mom," I whispered, then kissed her forehead.

I stole another second to watch her sleep, seeing her eyes flick rapidly under her lids. On my way out, I held my breath until I gently closed the door behind me. Then I let it go.

Shelves lined the walls in the hallway, displaying dozens of glass bottles with corks at the ends trapping wooden ships inside. Once I reached the kitchen, a fire flickered on the stone hearth.

Fable was standing in front of the stove in deep thought, staring out the frosty window at the lighthouse.

I dropped the bags on the island. "Making tea?"

Fable jumped, then turned to face me. Her usual golden skin had a pink hue, and she turned off the burner. "I figured Ivy would need caffeine," she said with a yawn, then leaned back against the counter with bags under her eyes.

"Don't tell me you're tired. You snored all night."

Fable's eyes grew wide. "Did not."

"Yes, you most certainly did. You sounded like a humpback whale," I said with a laugh, unpacking the bags as Dad came through the back door. He shrugged out of his coat, and snow melted off his shoulders.

"Lies." She couldn't wipe away her shocked smile. "I do not snore."

"You snore," Dad confirmed. "Have been snoring since you were a baby. A drooler, too, if I may add." He sat in the breakfast nook, leaned back with exhaustion, and looked up at me with a glimmer of hope in his eyes. "Make any sales today?"

I unloaded the ingredients I'd picked up to make stew. "At this point, it's costing us more to keep the store open than what we're bringing in. Everyone is too busy protesting in Town Square."

Fable's brows were pinched together. "Still?"

"After what happened to Mrs. Madder, people are only getting angrier. They're desperate. They want answers," Dad said. "I don't blame them."

Fable rolled her head back. "It's not the Heathen's fault that this is happening."

I leaned into the island, my palms gripping the edge. “Fable, don’t you dare,” I seethed in a whisper, afraid if I spoke any louder my voice would buckle. “Don’t you dare say that when Adeline isn’t here.”

Guilt filled her eyes, and she cast them downward.

I let go of the island, my palms and splinter throbbing. “How many people have disappeared in the last five years? And that’s just the last five years. Imagine if we looked back ten years. Twenty.” She said nothing. “These are our friends, family, our coven, flatlanders, who can’t even protect themselves ... Adeline and River, these were your friends, too. And no one has seen River in almost three weeks. I’m sick and tired of the town staying quiet and the Heathens hiding behind a curse, not taking responsibility.”

“But they say the curse is broken now,” she whispered.

“Exactly,” I said, looking at her. “The Shadows didn’t come until *after* their curse broke. And now that it’s broken, those things that were in their faces are running rabid in our town, killing us. The Heathens got what they wanted, then left us to fend for ourselves. When does it end?”

Fable’s eyes flitted around the kitchen as her head shook back and forth. “They’re as much a victim as you and I.” And I looked at her dumbfounded, unable to understand how it wasn’t getting through to her. “They could be trying to figure this out for all we know. You don’t know what they’re doing in the Norse Woods.”

Dad jabbed a finger in the air. “No one does, that’s the point!”

“Do we even know for sure that their curse is broken?” Fable asked.

Two weeks had passed since the curse broke, and no one had seen a Heathen.

“My sugar pie with the kindest heart,” Dad sighed, “Augustine saw Julian Blackwell’s face. The curse isn’t only broken, it’s unleashed.” And a somber mood settled between us.

We’d always wondered what the Heathens’ faces looked like. I’d imagined them to look like the ugly things they were because I couldn’t fathom any creature who could kill someone with their face being even somewhat alluring.

The Heathens killed. Without a reason. Without remorse. This was what separated us. My brand of *wicked* tasted different from theirs.

As if it mattered. Those who didn’t want the Heathens gone wanted a part of them, women begging at their feet and offering a night with no restrictions. The unknown of them appealed to some flatlanders, who desperately craved

to be with them out of sheer curiosity, but the Heathens never entertained the idea. I never understood it either. It was as if their cocks were far too superior for anyone. A respectable woman of Sacred Sea wouldn’t go near a Heathen. Cursed or not.

Apart from my loud and venomous mind, dinner was eaten in silence.

And after Ivy awoke from her nap, the rest of us laid our heads in the attic.

The stranger from the shore consumed all my thoughts. Was he alive? Would I make it back in time? Who was he, and how did he end up there? Where did he come from? I tried to shove my thoughts back down, but images of him sleeping in the cave, so vulnerable and peaceful yet struggling for his life, flashed across the forefront of my mind no matter how deep I tried to bury it.

Ivy sat quietly in the dark corner of the room under candlelight, drinking tea. Her gaze moved to look out the window when the lighthouse beam moved past her, and sadness rimmed her round eyes.

I watched her, the moon becoming the night’s sun in these haunting hours, until I forced my eyes closed. Sleep was the only refuge from my thoughts of the stranger the sea had delivered to me.

CHAPTER 12

ADORA

November 19, 2020
70 days until the Crimson Eclipse

Another day without sunshine had passed.

Daylight meant ash exploding across the sky. Thick sad clouds hanging low, contemptuous fog, and cynical flatlanders. Sometimes snow and sometimes rain. A drowsy black and white film.

The bottom of my dress dragged across the sand, the charms of my bracelet jingled against my wrist, and November's fierce temperatures numbed the tip of my nose, all while I maintained a brisk walk to the cave.

When I turned the corner, the cave was empty.

All that remained was charred wood from a dead fire.

Cold winds took my hair with them, blowing tendrils into my face as I turned, my gaze skimming the grim horizon. If the stranger wasn't in the cave, it could only mean he was still alive and had made it through both nights. And he'd left.

Then why did I feel a pang in my chest?

I pulled my winter coat tight around me and leaned back against the cliff, unable to deny the disappointment of his absence creeping in. He was gone, and I was ... out of sorts. Disheartened. Which was appalling for me to think of a word that contained *heart* in it at all when it came to a stranger but disheartened all the same.

I gazed out into the horizon, trying to make sense of it, when a mop of white hair broke through the ocean's surface.

It was him, and he shook his sopping hair, spraying water all around like a wild wolf would do. I'd never seen one before, only read about it in stories, but I'd imagined it the same way he'd done it. In his element, untamed.

I pinned my back to the cliff, my heart hammering against my chest, watching him push his fingers through his hair and down his face. The temperature had to be in the low thirties, and I'd concluded that the man was either inhuman or insane.

My fist tightened around the handle of my dagger in my coat pocket, and my splinter pressed into the wood, the comforting ache pulsing through my finger. This time, I'd come prepared.

Then the traveler laid his palms on the water, flirting with the ocean's waves. A little boyish, a little free in the way his hands floated over them. Not quite splashing but seeking the water's fingers. I imagined the icy, shapeless silk gliding through my fingers, too, and a shiver staggered up my spine, my breath coming out in a shudder. I clutched my necklace in my other hand as icy clouds fell from my lips, taking shape and disappearing.

He hadn't seen me, didn't know I was standing here, and the thought of him catching me staring at him in such a natural, unspoken moment made me feel like I was the intruder. But my eyes couldn't sail away from his carved chest and lean torso as he walked closer and against the tide.

His indents cut around his hips when he stepped out of the water, and he ran a palm down the contours of his pale chest and stomach.

Despite the cold, a blush heated my cheeks. I lowered my eyes and traced his movements, knowing it was wrong to be staring. A buzz danced through my body at the sight of him. My secret, wild and gentle, in my ocean.

When my gaze made the journey back to his face, he was staring right at me.

I tried to turn my head, but his stare nailed me in place. A wind ruffled my hair and howled in my ears as I stood with his eyes fastened to mine.

Shock distorted his expression.

He looked at me like I was a creation of his mind. And he ran a palm down his face and back through his hair as if to wipe me away.

For a few seconds longer, we remained where we stood.

Then he walked toward me, the first to break the invisible thread, with undergarments hanging from his trimmed waist. His expression was hard, a

shield, and a rush of adrenaline pulled me off the cliff to create space between us, but it was too late. He was here, his body surrounding me, and I found myself staring into cold, black eyes. Ones that managed to knock the breath from me. Like deadly nightshade.

Droplets rained down his flesh. The muscles in his body flexed. His lips twitched. But he didn't say a word. He searched my face, his eyes like two drops of ink, confusion stirring within them, drifting down to my heaving chest and bouncing back up.

It felt like my lips were held by invisible shackles, but my grip remained on the dagger in my pocket, prepared to plunge it into him if he made a regrettable move. I wanted to say something, *anything*, but no words would come from me. I didn't know why I couldn't speak. Never in my life had I been paralyzed by a moment—by a man. Yet, he was standing over me, and I could smell the fresh salt of the ocean's waves dripping off him.

I heard my own breathing. I heard my heart beating in my ears.

I saw my reflection in his glass eyes. The crack in my expression.

I was slowly coming undone, but he remained impassive.

Then, he tore his eyes from mine and stepped toward the cave.

My spine softened. My shoulders dissolved.

I thawed from his grip into the resolute woman I'd come here to be.

"I thought you left," I whispered, chancing to look him in the eyes again should he turn back around.

The traveler did, and his brows pressed together, leaning closer.

It was odd how his eyes squeezed closed, then opened again. Wide, blinking rapidly, almost like they were unable to focus. He started to lean to one side, and I knew something was terribly wrong with him. His foot stumbled, and he dropped a palm on the cliff beside my head to steady himself.

The tall, perfect statue is about to go down, I thought.

Would he shatter like glass or turn into boneyard dust?

Before his body failed him, I released the dagger and wrapped an arm around his wet torso to keep him upright. "You were hurt. You need to lie down."

The man was ice-cold and heavy with his weight against me. I guided him into the cave and to the ground to lie on his back, fully aware of everywhere my hands were touching.

Faint groans rattled in his throat, and his eyes were heavy, droopy behind

long black lashes. His body trembled, finally feeling the chilling effects of November's ocean.

I pulled his head into my lap and pressed a palm to his forehead. Much like everything else about him, his forehead was cold to the touch. Deathlike.

"You're freezing," I said, pressing my fingers to the artery in his neck to ensure a pulse was still there because everything about him seemed unnatural.

I'd been in the ocean before during winter when it felt like rusty nails thrust into every pore. But he was breathing steadily, even with ice-cold blood circulating throughout his body.

A gentle beat thumped against the pad of my finger, and I shook my head.

"How are you so cold?" I tossed a glance at his wound.

I'd managed to heal it from the inside, and though the gash was still open and bleeding, it wasn't infected.

I freed a relieved breath. "It's too much, too fast. You have to rest until your body heals," I said with his head in my lap.

He looked up at me, his wet locks soaking my dress and the cold water slipping between my thighs. A groan scraped up his throat as he gripped on to anything within reach, fingers curling tightly around my dress, shoulders curling into the space between my thighs. He was freezing and in pain, seeking warmth and relief.

I reached for the basket, wriggling my fingers to latch on to the handle, then dragged it closer. The towel I'd packed was still inside, and I used it to dry his hair, arms, and chest, being careful around the wound. Afterward, I tossed it towel to the side and pulled the blanket around him.

His painful sounds scratched my heart, and I willed my hand to comfort him. For a split second, my fingers hovered close to his hairline. Every piece I gave of me was a piece that could not be taken back. I knew this ... but I still pushed my fingers through his thick, white hair until he drifted into a deep sleep.

THE NEXT DAY, I RETURNED TO THE CAVE.

He was asleep. I could tell he hadn't gotten up or looked inside the basket because Dad's clothes were still folded neatly. He hadn't moved from the corner, and the blanket was still wrapped around him in the same spot I'd left him in.

I started the fire and pulled Mom's book from my bag.

"I brought something," I said to him, even though his eyes were closed. I took a seat beside him. "I haven't been able to read it yet. But I was thinking, since you're here, we could do this together so I wouldn't have to do it alone."

For hours, I read pages of Mom's book to him while daylight broke through a sheet of gray and haloed the mouth of the cave. Only the stranger and me. Flurries caught on a breeze, movements lazy then darting like embers would do over a fire.

Each time I stopped reading, his eyes opened and he looked for me. Our gazes would tether and hold. He never talked to me. He never said a word, but my presence must have brought him comfort because after his eyes found mine, they fluttered shut again. Each time, I continued reading until he was in a deep sleep. Once his eyes flickered beneath his lids, hopefully dreaming of soothing dreams, I dragged my palm up and down his back.

When night was approaching, I inched closer to say goodbye.

"Until tomorrow," I whispered, grazing the back of my fingers across his cheekbone.

THE FOLLOWING DAY, I FOUND MYSELF RACING UNDER GRAY SKIES TO HIM.

My secret in the cave. He was always where I'd left him.

The only light in the cave was from the flames, and the only darkness came from the shadows they cast inside. A low groan came from him, the pain waking him.

He looked up at me, and we stared at each other for a string of hard seconds. I found that we would do this often, and it had always put us both at ease. This quiet connection between us was a relic I wanted to collect.

I scooted closer until my knee touched his arm, and I stroked his head with my fingernails. "I'm sorry. I was in such a rush that I forgot the book today."

With nothing left to comfort him, I started to sing. I didn't know what made me do it. I'd never been the comforting type, but each time his eyes squeezed tight from the pain, it felt as if it were pinching my heart.

His groan began to fade, so I continued the song—a song I hadn't heard since I was a little girl. A story about a siren who fell for a mere mortal.

It was a sad song, one without a happy ending. I didn't know why it had

dawned on me, but the man seemed comforted by it. The same way I once was.

When the song ended, his hand inched closer until his fingertips brushed the side of my leg. Like he was searching for me and wanted to be sure I was still here.

My breath held in my chest when his hand moved, fingers outstretched and splayed across my thigh. He squeezed it as if exhuming something from me and pulled me closer until his face was curled into the warmth of my skin.

I let my breath go and started the song all over again.

ON THE FOURTH DAY, THE HIDDEN SUN HADN'T SOFTENED THE DIP IN temperature from the night, so I heated soup and carried it back in a thermos just in case he had the strength to eat. This time, I was determined to get answers if he awoke, like his name and why he was lying in a coffin in the Atlantic.

I would like to think I was not a naïve woman. I understood what my sisters would think of me if they knew about my time with him. *In a few short days, you've already formed an attachment to this strange man who hasn't even spoken to you.* And perhaps it was true. But what would happen if he said things I didn't want to hear or accept?

With every small step to the cave, the point of my dagger pricked my hip, reminding me that even though I saved him, even though I built this unspoken bond with him, I couldn't be opposed to killing him if need be.

Only a small number of strangers had crossed Weeping Hollow's magical borders. Mr. Pruitt had warned us of witch hunters, whose hatred for us was the reason the town remained hidden from the outside world. It was why our ancestors escaped, coming here more than two hundred years ago. The safety of the town had to come first.

I'd brought Mom's book with me and began to read aloud. Much like all the other days, the man was comforted by my voice. And after half an hour passed by a slow-burning fire, a painful breath sputtered from his lips. I closed the book and craned my neck to catch his eyes opening.

He looked at me for a moment with eyes that were two swatches of asphalt and lacking any substance. And heavily hooded lids that wanted to hide them.

He blinked his eyes away and whispered in a croak to himself.

His voice was smoky yet strangled. Almost like he didn't mean to say anything aloud outside his head. But I couldn't make out what he had said. I couldn't make out if it was a spell he was chanting, a question, or his name.

And I wanted to hear him again. "Excuse me?"

His eyes narrowed, and he tilted his head as if the decision of whether to speak to me was difficult. It seemed he didn't want to, but he knew he might not have a choice.

"Ouroboros," he repeated, looking back at me again. And this time, his voice was harder around the edges and flooded my ears.

The sound of him pulled me to my knees, and I set the book down and grabbed the thermos. I was just excited to hear him, to finally speak with him, and I couldn't let this moment fade.

"You should eat. I brought you soup. The broth will be good for you. Can you try sitting up?"

The man clutched his side and struggled to lift his back off the ground. I reached out a hand to help him, but he curled his shoulder away from me, inching farther until his back met the cave wall.

"Okay," I said, holding my palms up and backing away to give him space. "You don't need help. I get it."

He dropped his head back against the wall, keeping his gaze on me, watching me through thick lashes as if I was going to harm him.

"Ouroboros," I said, wondering if his meaning of the word was the same as mine. "What does it mean?"

I had to keep him talking to get answers, so I sat back on my legs and found patience. As I unscrewed the thermos lid, my gaze bounced back and forth between him and my hands. Mistrust embroidered the both of us.

The man lifted his head off the wall, laying his unbroken eyes on me. A frank, intelligent gaze. At his side, he drew a circle in the sand with a lazy fingertip.

He retraced it again and again.

The cycle of life, death, and rebirth.

Then he leaned back against the rock, studying me with black, velvet eyes. "Though I cannot say if this is an end or a beginning."

I swallowed, trying to find my voice. "Where did you come from?"

The stranger didn't answer, but his unwavering stare remained.

I pulled away first and lowered my chin to my chest, realizing I'd been clutching the thermos tightly with both hands. I lifted my eyes to his once

more, and the steam from the soup rose between us. The smell of vegetables soaked in broth smothered the salt in the air.

I tried again. “Do you know how you got here?”

But he only stared at me.

A deep stare that arrested me.

I cleared my throat. “Well, then, do you remember your name?”

At first, he was hesitant.

Then, “Stone,” he said. And I watched the way his mouth barely moved as he said it. He left his blue lips parted, and I traced their shape with my eyes. Demanding yet generous.

“Stone,” I repeated, not only feeling his name rush through my teeth but also the chill of it sweep across my bones. The name was fitting and new to me, like him, considering the conditions in which I’d found him.

Stone dropped his head to the side, his eyes catching mine. “What is your name?” His voice was curious, and he looked at me as if I were the most interesting person in the world. Like he’d never seen another human before me.

No one had ever looked at me like this before.

I wondered if it was the same way I looked at my sea.

My jaw snapped shut. If I told Stone my name and he was found by another, it could be used against me. A weapon, a threat. I had to remain in control of the situation. Not him.

“Here.” I offered him the soup. “I made it last night for dinner. I’m not a very good cook, but everyone always says leftovers taste better the next day.”

Stone didn’t make a move for the thermos. He only stared.

“You’re weak. You need to eat something,” I insisted.

And he reached for the thermos and brought it to his nose to sniff it.

The act was odd and animal-like.

“It’s not poisoned,” I assured him, flashing an innocent smile.

The one word hung in the air as though he didn’t believe me. Then his eyes squinted, sweat dotting along his hairline as the fire left a glaze across his paling chest. His muscles tensed when he pushed the thermos into my lap. “I am more than capable of fetching my own food.”

The soup spilled over the rim and stained my dress.

One that I’d sewn when Mom stopped talking. I’d designed and created it to deflect her decline.

The scorching liquid burned my skin, its contents like fire eating my

fingers, hand, and wrist. To prevent all emotions from reviving, I clenched my fists hard.

Stone watched me carefully. So, I stretched out my fingers as though he hadn't affected me. I screwed the cap back on, anger finding its way inside me and distracting the painful burns.

All I'd done was save him—a stranger—which had been a colossal risk using my magic at all. If he only knew the lengths I'd gone for him.

I bristled. "After everything, you don't trust me."

Stone moved back, throwing more space between us. "Evil is often wrapped in all things I can only hope to see. In the end, someone like you doesn't happen to someone like me." His eyes settled. "I can't trust anyone, mostly you."

All that I'd imagined him to be left my mind, and what was left was the thought of the very witch-hating monster Augustine Pruitt was protecting us from. A murdering spy with the intention of burning our town to the ground with us in it.

With a quick hand, I pulled the dagger from my pocket and held the blade to his neck.

Stone didn't flinch, and our lips were only inches apart, two enemies sharing the same breath.

"Who are you?" I asked through my teeth.

He didn't answer. The blade's sharp edge skimmed his dampened neck, and the apple in Stone's throat bobbed when he swallowed. I tightened my hold on the handle, my eyes turning to slits. "How did you find Weeping Hollow?"

Stone picked his head off the wall, and the blade cut into his neck.

"Tell me," he said, his icy breath hitting my lips. "Does holding a knife to the throat of a man who is in no position to defend himself make you feel powerful?"

It felt like nine-inch nails lined my throat.

Scratchy, dry, and hard to swallow.

I couldn't find anything sensible to say. Words were lost on me.

The air around us thinned, and he stretched his neck like an offering, testing me, unafraid.

Lena was already dead the moment Augustine threw her into the cell.

This was different. And he was mine.

Could I still go through with it? Could I slit this man's throat if I had to?

No one would ever know, and I'd imagined this moment with Kane so many times.

My eyes bounced between his, and before I had a chance to understand how much wickedness possessed me, Stone's fingers curled around the sharp end of the blade, his jaw flexing.

Jagged teeth sliced his palm when he ripped the knife from my fist.

He held the blade between us, thick red blood weeping down his wrist and forearm like wet paint. "If you are to slit someone's throat, ensure the correct side is facing accordingly." He turned the blade for me to see, then slammed it down at his side.

My shoulders tensed as I stared at the blood-painted blade in the sand.

Then Stone's woolly and warm voice stole back my attention.

"Only the starving, evil, or insecure prey on the weak." His hooded eyes narrowed as if to puncture my soul. "Which one are you?"

A chill ran down my spine and rooted itself in my gut.

It was an answer I'd always known without a question to attach itself to.

A question no one had ever cared to ask.

"Starving."

Stone's stiff posture weakened with my confession.

Like he somehow understood the whisper woven into the single word.

"How did you find Weeping Hollow?" I was firmer. More in control.

Stone relaxed against the wall, his dark eyes never leaving mine.

"I didn't find Weeping Hollow. It seems this place has found me."

Seconds ticked by, and the crackling of the fire counted each one. All the time spent tending to him over the past four days had meant nothing. No gratitude, no appreciation.

My gaze steered around the room at all the unopened bottles of water he hadn't touched. He didn't trust me. Not yet. It seemed somewhere along the way he'd built a tombstone of himself—a way to survive. Cheekbones made of granite. Stiff lips to prevent unnecessary words from slipping through. Hardened gazes to guard himself against opening up or getting close to anyone. And I wondered if anything sincere had crossed his mind—if he was as empty inside his tomb as he appeared, as dead as he was cold.

It would take more time to gain his trust and learn about him.

With that, I couldn't let him leave this cave.

Forcing my chin high, I looked him in the eyes. "Since you have everything under control and don't need me, I will leave and give you some

time to yourself.” A bite had seeped into my words as I collected my belongings and shoved them into the nearby tote bag, feeling his watchful gaze on me.

I stood, flattened my stained dress, and peered down at him. “Leaving this cave would be a deadly mistake,” was all I could think of to say. A threat for the time being, as if he was in any condition to travel anywhere. Either way, I needed more time to consider my options—if I should turn him over to Augustine or keep him all to myself because if I turned him over, I’d have to reveal that I’d used magic to save him.

And as much as I didn’t want to admit it, my ridiculous attachment to him kept me from wanting to hand him over to anyone. He was a challenge, and I suddenly wanted nothing more than to break through his tomb and unearth all the secrets he was keeping.

He was a place to escape to.

I gathered the bottom of my dress and crouched down to leave through the cave’s opening when his voice came, stopping me.

“But you never gave me your name.”

I didn’t turn back to face him, keeping my eyes on the Atlantic. “You’re right. I didn’t.”

SACRED MOMENTS

ALEC & CIRCE

SHE WAS A BOTTOMLESS OCEAN.

The water slipping through your fingers.

A mystery caught between fantasy and reality.

She was loud, fierce, and invisible.

Her assumptions remained proven one day after one other she'd paraded in the square, stealing from three merchants without being seen. But it wasn't because she desired the possessions. She had access to the finest clothing and jewelry and exquisite foods. In truth, she'd done these wild and forbidden things believing it would fill one void inside her.

She longed for sleepless, drunken nights and holding her breath for longer than five seconds in places she felt entirely weightless. She longed for filthy pirates with even filthier minds to take her for just one day.

She went about her long hours hoping for a fleeting moment of pleasure.

She was the siren who craved adventure.

Her name was Circe, but she hadn't always been this way.

As she walked across an oyster shell walkway to the market, she greeted four townspeople who passed by twice. None of which heard the emptiness in her seven words, or saw the waves in her smile, or looked into her rain-soaked eyes.

Inside, she was screaming. Though, on the surface, her misery had

stunned her into submission. And her heart wept, too—a horrific heaving of her chest. Like six brittle bones inside were trying to crack open so her soul could flee her, too.

Not a soul had noticed how she was always deep, distant waters.

But on this day, Alec noticed.

He rarely left the island, mostly four times a year.

He was an ancient language.

He was the anchor and the ground beneath your feet.

An islander caught between truths and lies.

He was coffee, books, and lonely nights.

Alec stood in the square, having not visited in six months, feeling as though he didn't just live on an island but that he was an island. Nevertheless, he didn't really need anyone. He had the sound of the ocean waves, the touch of every breeze, and the entire galaxy above. In truth, there was still a hollow in his heart and home, and a void to whisper in his ear and remind him of it.

He longed for sleepless nights inside the gentle warmth of a woman and someone to whisper carnal-soaked words in his ear. He longed for a wild soul with an even wilder heart and delicate fingers to touch him for just a day.

He went about his long hours hoping for a fleeting moment of pleasure.

He was the mere mortal who craved to be found.

On this day, he brought three months' worth of smoked sea bass to the market. Having not seen Alec around the square often, ladies found him mysterious and handsome. They giggled and batted their lashes, but there was only Circe in Alec's entire world at that moment. And he could not tear his eyes away from her.

It seemed that as soon as Alec noticed Circe, nothing else mattered.

Inside, his heart was a loose cannon. Though, on the surface, his isolation had stunned him into silence. And his nerves rushed, too—a racing of his pulse. His body froze from it all. So, all he could do was gaze at her in the crowded market.

He admired how the sun had kissed her skin and the color of sand in her hair. And he waited, seven seconds and more, watching to see if she would smile.

"Excuse me," the lady at his table interrupted, offering him coins for the fish, but she was blocking his view of Circe. Alec held up a finger, stepping to the right, needing not to lose sight of her.

And Circe could've sworn that day she felt Alec's eyes on her before she

turned around. When the wind came, and tinkling bells from the chimes surrounded her, she paused mid-stride. Fabled love was calling her name.

Five ... four ... three ...

Circe turned, and between bodies of townspeople, a man stood across the way behind a table, a line of ladies before him. But then he looked back at Circe, his chestnut hair bouncing off his forehead and an imposing gaze arrested her right then.

Oh, how she'd never been looked at in the way he was looking at her.

His eyes, smooth and dangerous delight, held both freedom and pleasure as he trailed them over her body. She felt them, like clandestine hands on her skin.

Then Lacie, her lady, appeared. "Everything all right?"

Circe clutched the stone around her neck. It took everything within her to tear her eyes away from him. "Do you know who that man is?"

Lacie followed Circe's gaze. "The man selling fish?" she asked, and Circe nodded. "That is the lighthouse keeper's son. He lives on the island and only comes a few times a year."

"Oh." Circe all but sighed, looking back at him, sick with disappointment and the possibility of not seeing him for a while.

Lacie took her hand.

Alec watched Circe walk away.

Circe watched Alec as she walked away.

The sun reflected off colorful hanging sea glass, sending blueish-green stars to dance about the market, blinding them.

But Alec, a romantic, returned the next day.

That time, when he locked eyes with her, she smiled.

Alec clutched his chest, weak in the knees, causing Circe to laugh.

The day after that, he waved. A small lift of his fingers.

It went on like this for an entire year, the pining, the patience, the anticipation. No one knew of Alec and Circe's silent, sacred moments. These were theirs, and theirs alone.

But that was all they were.

Silent gazes. Sacred moments. Surreptitious seconds.

Until one of them was unable to hold back any longer.

CHAPTER 13

STONE

NIGHTMARES TOOK ME FOR A RIDE, AND WHEN I AWOKE, CRIES PIERCED THE black sky. The gentle weeping of the cliff was like a creature prowling the ever-night. I lay silent, still, listening to them and wondering what was happening here.

This place was called Weeping Hollow—a town that wept after evenfall. *Weeping Hollow*, the two words Mother had whispered in her sleep under all phases of the moon.

When daylight came, I fed the fire and wrapped the blanket the lady had left around my shoulders. Once the soft fur brushed the inside of my hands, scattered memories ransacked my mind. Keepsakes clung to the stitched-in hair.

The image appeared distorted at first, blurry, like a haze trying to work itself out. Once the smoke cleared, I was transported to a cozy room: *warped, black and white animated images bouncing off an ivory wall like a moving picture; tiny hands tossing popcorn kernels and little girls with smiles carved into their faces; giggling, a lot of giggling, hushing, and clicking.*

The image morphed into another memory: *a woman with black hair lying in a bed and the girl curled beside her—tears soaking into the fur blanket.* Locked in these memories, I clutched the blanket tightly with my other fist as the image seesawed and fizzled. Desperate, I clung tighter, wringing every drop until the last memory of the same blonde-haired girl was all grown up. *She lay beside me with tear-drop breasts pressed against my chest, fire licking our skin. Shadows shivered on the walls of the cave—her song surrounded me like an ocean ballet.*

The wind whistled through the cliff's cracks, sucking me out of the final

memory like my soul was exhumed from my body.

My ability to still unearth memories hadn't left me, and disappointment threaded through my bones. I ripped off the blanket and tossed it to the side, wishing I had not known. Lying naked with the woman who bore the same eyes and face I'd drawn was a rare moment. One that would forever be a part of me, but a moment I may never be a part of again.

I never had a thing to my name, but here in Weeping Hollow, I had this memory of the two of us together that belonged to me. Another curse if the demons had their way.

"They will only disappoint," Mother's words rang inside the cave. A shudder. I looked around, but Mother was nowhere to be found.

Only the ghost of her whispers in my head.

I heard her whispers since I'd escaped from the frozen place. Though Mother was gone, her location unbeknownst to me, the mockery she left behind ran deep in my blood. It had a way of carrying on, reminding me that I shouldn't feel this way toward the first person who'd shown me kindness. I shouldn't get attached or set myself up for disappointment. But even when winter felt like ice, it was much colder each time Mother called out to me.

"Come, Stone," Mother's voice swelled inside my head this time.

With my spine stiff, chest bare, knees bent, and long arms wrapped around them, I lifted my head and looked upon the lighthouse in the distance as if it were the place she was calling me to.

Breathing hard, I shook my head, wishing Mother would go away.

I remembered what she'd done to me—what she had put me through.

I remembered everything.

I remembered not being able to move, not being able to breathe.

I remembered lying awake, staring up into the dark blue waters from the ocean floor before every death. And each time my eyes opened, my lungs burned in the fight for air. Although I sometimes fought it, there was never any more air inside the sealed casket. Most times I had given up, feeling defeated, wishing for the gods to take me for eternity and never bring me back.

It didn't matter, the magic still pulled me back from the other side just to kill me. I must've died thousands of times in that coffin, alone, each death a slow and quiet one—a sweet suffocation.

When Mother's voice came again, I maintained a rigid gaze on the horizon, trying to shut her out. Hearing her was the least of my worries.

I was wounded with no clothing, the unknown on the other side of this cliff, and a past life so far away yet as clear as if it had happened only yesterday.

The lady had left packaged food in the basket, but I felt sick each time I thought about eating it. Throughout the night, I reminded myself that she had saved me. If she wanted to harm me, she had plenty of chances to do so. However, I still couldn't find it in me to trust the only one who was immune to the curse inside my face. The one who was born from my sketchpad. The one who'd sung to me, her voice like a celestial embrace. The one who'd spent hours by my side, reading to me.

No, I couldn't trust her, but perhaps one day I could.

But what if she didn't return?

Each morning, I managed to make it to the ocean. Saltwater healed my wound quicker, but the effort it took to make it to shore weakened me and left me to sleep for the rest of the day. My body felt like someone had drained me over the last hundred years. And I suppose this was true.

I searched the cave for my gloves and found them beside my dry clothes.

While slipping them on, I caught sight of the cut from when I had ripped the knife from the lady's hand. I ran my thumb over it, a deep, angled slice from my index finger to my wrist, and I remembered how her breath scattered across my lips.

It hit me then.

My envelope. My cigar tin.

Fear consumed me as I snatched up my pants and clutched the pockets, only to find them empty. I spun in the cave, scanning the sand. I grabbed the blanket and shook it out. I searched the basket, but it was nowhere to be found.

I stood wide eyed, heart in mouth, until I collapsed, the earth catching my bottom. *Fourteen years, ninety-nine books,* and I dropped my head in my hands, an onslaught of regret rushing into my chest.

"Dammit, Mother," I cursed. If I had the energy, I would have thrown my fist into something, but there was nothing left in me. So, a tear slipped down my cheek, and my vision was blurry when I looked out into the ocean again, utterly helpless. I bit my lip, tasting my heartache.

A fishing spider darted across the cave's wall and grabbed my attention; eight eyes, a chestnut body, and black rings around its legs. The creature dipped half its body into a crack and turned, frozen and facing me.

We stared at one another. Her curious, me defeated.

It crawled up the bend and hung from the roof, hovering there until the spider released its web and landed on my head. I sat with a statue-like posture, feeling its legs trickle down the side of my face until it sat on my shoulder. *You're safe here*, I wanted to believe she was saying. *Everything will be all right.*

A gasp mingled in the air, and my gaze steered toward it.

I hadn't heard the lady coming.

I collected all emotion with one swipe of my palm down my face, and there she was, in a fur coat, frozen in place with horror in her eyes.

A black bag hung from her shoulder, and she reached her fingers into it, withdrawing a shoe, her eyes narrowing at the spider.

I jumped to my feet and caught her tiny wrist with my gloved fist.

She was standing so close I could feel her body warmth.

It wanted to pierce through her clothes and touch me.

She was breathing hard, too, and I couldn't help but watch how her breasts moved each time she took a breath. I wanted to know what it would feel like with her chest beneath my palm; when her lungs caved and when they would fill again; other memories I would see of the girl I'd drawn so many times before; the picture that had a voice, a warmth, a gentleness; the wild that was her heart.

I swallowed, clutching her wrist in my hand.

"Don't," I said, my voice strangled from fighting back the staggering pain in my side. It was a voice I hadn't used often, and if Mother had her way, it wouldn't have been used at all.

The lady's green eyes squinted at the spider on my shoulder, and she tried to pull her arm from my grip, but I would not let go. The spider clutched on to me, digging its skinny and fragile legs into my skin as if it knew I was its protector.

Her ill-tempered eyes sailed to mine.

For a second, it was like staring at one of my drawings again.

I kept finding myself paralyzed by her, unsure how much time was passing.

"A spider," she said, pointing to the thing with her chin.

I shook my head. "You will not hurt it."

The lady would not budge in her efforts to kill the spider. She gripped the shoe tightly, so I yanked it from her stubborn fingers and tossed it to the

ground.

A winter breeze *whooshed* between us when I stepped back.

“Must you always resort to violence?” I asked her, walking to the cliff.

She didn’t respond.

She only gazed at me with both curiosity and hesitance.

I held up my hand for the spider. It crawled onto my finger and skittered across my glove. It was odd in the way the spider acted toward me, scampering around my wrist and along the length of my knuckles like a wicked friend.

I lifted my hand to the cliff, letting the spider go and out of harm’s way, then sank back down by the fire until my bottom met cold sand.

My attention returned to the lighthouse as I tried to avoid eye contact with her, but it was impossible. Each time she was here, she surrounded me. Her eyes were bewitching, drawing me in until I had no choice but to see them. A presence that inhaled all the air around me until I had no choice but to breathe her in.

“People say creatures here don’t act as they should,” she said, her melodic voice speaking to me in a way that left me no choice but to listen. “In the books I’ve read, spiders don’t trust humans, and ravens don’t squawk at night. It’s different here.”

I cleared my throat. “Like how the days are shorter?”

She slung me a curious glance as she fed the fire. “It’s winter.”

“Light appears at nine and dies at three. It doesn’t set but dies as though snuffed out by night. Even in winter, I’ve never seen anything like it.”

The lady glanced away, refusing to acknowledge my claim.

Flames jumped to the top of the cave, and she turned toward me.

“I brought you warm clothes.” She set the bag beside me, and it angered me that I was in this position to need clothes at all.

“The clothes should fit just fine,” she continued. “There’s a coat and boots in the bag, too. And some socks. They’re my dad’s, but you need them more than he does. He has plenty.” She crouched down before me, stealing my gaze. The length of her dress pooled in the sand around her feet. “You don’t have to eat my food, but at least wear the clothes. You’ll get sick if you don’t.”

I spared a moment, letting myself take her in.

She was beautiful, a porcelain ocean, with silver hoops crawling up the shells of her ears and jewelry lining her agile wrists. I lowered my eyes,

following the gentle curve of her neck, collarbone, and chest, where a chain hung between her round breasts. The prongs held nothing in the setting.

There was a strangeness in seeing the face my mind had always turned to.

I was always intimate with the way she looked back at me.

Like how she was looking at me this very moment.

She smoothed her dress around her bent knees, and her long golden hair fell around her shoulders and arms as she reached out her hand. “How’s it healing? Let me take a look.”

At this, Mother’s haunting laugh shivered through me. A grating sound.

I pulled away. The lady was only trying to help, and I was retreating.

She sighed when she said, “Do you think that maybe we could start over?” My gaze found hers again. “I’m Circe.”

Two light jade eyes shifted between mine, and she lowered them with a nudge, hinting at the bandage wrapped around my waist. She offered a smile.

There was a desire within me to keep her here.

I wanted to continue hearing her voice.

I wanted to continue looking at her.

“Like in the story,” I said, afraid of saying anything more that would easily offend her.

But Circe smiled. “You’ve been listening.” She glanced sideways at the leather book poking out of the bag she’d brought. “My mother wrote the book,” she explained, sadness soaking her voice. “I hadn’t had the courage to read it until I found you.”

I studied her profile while I had the chance. “Daughter of the sun.”

She faced me again. “Hm?”

“Circe means daughter of the sun,” I repeated.

The corner of her mouth jumped with quickness. “Well, I promise not to pull a knife on you today unless, of course, you give me a reason to do so. And if that’s the case, I know how to do it correctly this time.”

Leaning back, I allowed her to examine my tattered bandage that was still damp with blood.

“May I?” she asked, and I nodded.

When Circe unwrapped it, she darted a nervous glance up at me. “It’s been almost a week, and it’s still bleeding. I don’t get it.” She shook her head, her mind benumbed. “For some reason, you’re not healing.”

Circe’s fingers lingered across the sensitive, bruised skin on my side, tracing the colors of my stomach, and I couldn’t speak. Her touch was

delicate, light, and intense for a man who'd hardly been touched at all.

I closed my eyes, trying to control myself from reacting.

Then Circe pulled her hand away and shuffled to her bag.

When I opened my eyes, the scent of vanilla from her hair engulfed me as she turned back around. I stayed quiet, watching her return to my side with a small jar and a metal box.

"I'll need to stitch you up to stop the bleeding. It won't feel pleasant," Circe said, soft and careful. "I wish I had something to numb the pain."

"Why do you choose to help me?" My voice sounded like it didn't belong to me. It sounded confused. Perhaps at the lengths she'd taken for me when I'd done nothing to deserve her assistance.

Circe bit into her bottom lip in deep thought, the jar twisting in her hands.

She was nervous as was I.

Then finally—"Just because a ship is inside a glass bottle does not mean it is safer than a ship at sea. Anyone could decide to reach their fingers into the bottle and pluck it out. Not all at once, though. It will be piece by piece until there is nothing left." She paused and sucked in a breath as though she'd taken a blow to the chest. "At least the ship at sea has a chance to sail away." Her fingers stopped when her eyes met mine, and she lifted a shoulder. "You're my sailing away."

A long bout of silence stretched. It had taken longer than it should to process Circe's words, and it occurred to me that she'd revealed more than I'd expected and more than she may have wanted. But there was a sameness between us—something I had never had with anyone else. We had been trapped in places where we couldn't come up for air.

"What are you sailing away from?"

Circe opened the jar and dipped her finger inside, unwilling to answer.

I remained quiet with her refusal, trying to steady my breath and the jagged rise of my stomach as she spread the ointment across my skin.

Her touch was gentle but also felt like she was flaying me open.

I glanced down, and at the ends of her lilac half-moon-shaped fingernails, there was a silver star. They were odd—a decoration on fingers I'd never seen before. And when she held the needle over the fire, I caught sight of four small stab-like wounds on the inside of her palm.

Perhaps she was trying to sail away from herself.

Circe's fingers shook, and the needle dropped into the sand. She leaned over, swiping hair from her eyes, and plucked the needle from the ground.

“Sorry,” she hesitated. “I’ve sewn over a hundred dresses but never sutured a wound. This is a first for me.”

She was endearing when disconcerted. “You must clean the sand off your hands,” I instructed. “And now the needle, too.”

“Right, of course.” She grabbed a bottle and doused her hands and the needle in water. Afterward, she brought the needle to the fire again and threaded another string.

Then she settled herself between my spread thighs, and her eyes met mine.

We gazed at each other candidly, openly. Time was strangely suspended.

Nothing had prepared me for this moment, for someone to feel safe enough to be this close to me. Nothing had prepared me to be face-to-face with a woman who made my heart beat out of my chest. It was easy to allow myself to be penetrated by her when my entire body locked up under her gaze, and to penetrate her because she wasn’t pulling away.

When she lowered her eyes, I dropped my head back, freeing a breath.

“I’ve gotten my ears pierced four times now,” she said, and I flinched when she laid a warm hand on my side. “It’s easier when you’re touched first by a hand than a needle. It’s not as shocking when the needle comes.”

I swallowed and kept my head back, looking at the roof of the cave as the pad of her thumb stroked the other side of my stomach. She hadn’t known I was more familiar with the feeling of something sharp than soft. I was more prone to a needle than a finger.

Her palm dragged across toward the wound, and when the needle pierced my flesh, I felt Circe’s eyes on my face. “Did you not feel that?”

“The needle piercing through my skin? Yes, I felt that.”

A soft laugh escaped her, and I lowered my head to see it.

I hadn’t meant my words to be amusing, but she’d laughed all the same.

“Okay, Mr. Tough Guy,” she said, continuing to stitch the wound.

Then it was quiet between us. Though I could feel every sharp piercing of the needle driving into my flesh, all I could think of was Circe being entirely too close. While she concentrated on stitching my wound, I admired all her details. All the ones I’d gotten wrong in my drawings. The tiny baby hairs curled along her hairline, the freckle on her chest, the shape of her brows. As she moved around my torso, my skin thinned, causing everything to be more sensitive.

The next burn came, more painful this time, and I clenched my jaw.

She dared a glance at my face, and I should have looked away but couldn't.

"I need you to talk to me," I confessed through an exhale.

"Talk to you?"

"Yes, talk to me. You have a nice voice, so anything will do," I admitted.

Circe's mouth parted, but nothing came out. A small smile curved her lips, and she lowered her gaze and continued stitching.

I scanned her face. "Will you tell me why there are cries in the night?"

Her hand stopped briefly, but she didn't look up at me this time before resuming. "Cries?" She shook her head, her hair like lazy ribbons of blonde silk falling around her striking features. "Sorry, I don't know what you're talking about. It must be the wind. Sometimes, the wind is so strong at night that it sounds like it's screaming at the cliffs." She smiled a small smile that was only hers and meant for no one else. "Maybe it wants to get out, too."

"You don't like it here," I said, more of an observation than a question.

"I didn't say that. This is my home."

"You said—"

"There are many ways one can feel imprisoned, Stone."

My heart raced when she said my name.

I'd never met anyone like her, with a vault as a mind, everyone else an outsider. Between her lines were hidden meanings—none meant for me, but meanings I still somehow understood. She spoke with a tongue shaped like a secret, and I wondered if anyone had, or ever would have, the key to unlock them. Would I know her long enough to find out?

"And there?" I asked, eager to know what information Circe would offer. Or perhaps I enjoyed the singsong in her voice after a long bout of loneliness. "What's out there?"

Circe glanced up, and I poked my chin at the lighthouse in the distance. A place I'd felt a pull since arriving.

"Bone Island." She snipped the end of the thread after tying it off. "No one has been there for almost twenty years. Nothing but trees, water, and an abandoned lighthouse on an abandoned island."

Abandoned, abandoned, much like me.

"I need to go there," I told her, able to breathe steadier now that she had finished. If I could get to the lighthouse in the distance, I might find answers buried inside. I could find out what had happened to me and why Mother was haunting me.

Circe focused on wrapping a fresh bandage tightly around my waist. “And why is that?”

“I need shelter. It’s not safe for me here. Not until I’m healed.”

Circe was the only one immune to my cursed face, and I couldn’t risk stepping into town, unable to defend myself.

Also, it had only been days prior when she had told me not to leave the cave, and she hadn’t offered to take me to a doctor. If I was forced to guess, we were both keeping secrets. Whispers of deception and scratches of lies slung between every lull and flick of her eyes. For all I knew, this woman was a liar. So, how was she both crashing and calming like the sea surrounding me?

“If Bone Island is abandoned, I can stay there while I heal,” I added.

Circe sat back with her arms at her sides. “You will never make it across the ocean on your own. You don’t even have a boat.”

“Then you will be the one to take me.”

On her knees, she appeared to be in deep thought as she placed her things back into her bag, perhaps considering my request.

“If I do this,” she said, facing me again, “you must eat something.” She pulled a red apple from her bag and held it between us. “I know you’re hungry, and you’ll need energy for the long walk to the boat tomorrow.”

I gritted my teeth, facing the lighthouse in the distance.

“I stayed by your side for three days while you were unconscious. If I wanted to kill you, I would have simply done it then so I wouldn’t have to look you in the eyes.”

I settled my gaze on her. “Why would a beautiful woman like yourself bother with the trouble of cleaning up blood afterward? Poison is far less messy.”

“Beautiful ...” Circe raised a brow and her mouth parted slightly. “You really don’t know me at all.”

“And this is my point. I know very little about you, yet I am utterly dependent on you.”

“You’re right.” Her eyes slid between mine. “Maybe I should tell you something about me.”

“Perhaps you should.”

Her shoulders softened, and she settled in place, rubbing her thumb across the glossy apple. “When I was seven, I stole a bracelet,” she said.

My eyes darted between hers. This was not what I expected her to say.

“There used to be a quaint store in town ... the Mad Hatter,” she continued. “The walls were covered in book pages and hats and clocks. It was like stepping into a museum of lost things, and the owner was such a genuinely kind woman. Odd and somewhat animated but kind.” She paused, and though I couldn’t see the memory passing through her, I knew one was there, taking shape, drawing lines, painting emotions. “Mrs. Madder could hold heartfelt conversations with just about anyone who walked through those doors, and you just don’t meet people like her anymore.”

I stayed quiet, interested in how this story would end.

Because Circe was a part of it.

“She had one-of-a-kind items in her shop you couldn’t find anywhere else, and as a child, I’d stop by every Sunday morning to see everything she’d collected from the week. But then one Sunday,” she continued with a grin, “I came across a bracelet made of black pearls. Mrs. Madder told me a tale about a boy who swam from Bone Island to the mainland in search of oysters with these rare black pearls.”

“Why would he do this?”

“For a girl, but it was probably a lie. Mrs. Madder was a great storyteller and an impeccable saleswoman, but I just had to have it. Not even because it was attached to this story but because it was something found in the sea.”

“Why was this important?”

“Because”—she leaned in, another secret—“things are only lost at sea. Nothing is ever found. So, when she wasn’t looking, I stole it.” She shook her head. “That same day, I swam in the ocean, and it slipped right off my wrist.” She shrugged a small shrug and dropped her head. “I guess, in a way, the pearls are finally back where they belong. In the end, the ocean always takes back what’s hers.” When she looked back up, her gaze tangled with mine. “Now you know something about me. Something no one but the sea knows.”

“Murderer *and* a thief,” I said with a sigh, and if it weren’t for the slight lift in her smile, I was afraid she may have been offended by my comment. “If there comes a day you decide to use your dagger on me, would you do me the honor of waiting until I can put up a fair fight?”

“Deal,” she said, then bit into the apple.

Juice slid down the corners of her mouth, a drop splashing on her breast. The sight made both my stomach and my heart rumble. It took immeasurable strength to hold myself back from licking it off her skin.

When Circe pulled the apple away, she quickly wiped the corners of her

lips with a shy giggle. “See?” She smiled, covering her mouth with the palm of her hand. “I much prefer messy.”

Heat flashed across my face.

It was an odd feeling. One I hadn’t felt before.

I swallowed. “Duly noted.”

Circe tossed the apple in the air, and I caught it in my fist.

“Your turn,” she insisted. “Trust works both ways. Eat the apple, and I will take you to Bone Island.” Adventure tangled in her voice. She was a rare and wild thing, with ferocity wrapping her bones but as delicate as a snow flurry as it drifted upon the beach. When I hadn’t made a move, she offered me a weak smile. “You can trust me, Stone.”

Taking a bite of this apple was difficult after what Mother had done to me. Somehow, it felt personal. I’d been poisoned before, and taking a bite signified an immeasurable act of trust between us she may never understand —the destruction of a barrier standing in our way.

As she sat on her knees before me with a soft expression, I recalled the way she held me days earlier. There was no place I’d ever felt safer than in her arms.

My stubbornness and fears slid off me, and I gripped the apple and brought it to my mouth.

Then I bit into it.

CHAPTER 14

ADORA

NOVEMBER 24, 2020
65 DAYS UNTIL THE CRIMSON ECLIPSE

A WINTER MORNING HAD RISEN FROM A GRAVE LIKE A RESURRECTION. BLACK snow to frosted white. Water to ice. The sun winked behind strokes of clouds, promising to stay a while. Although, I knew my reality, and the truth was we only had six hours of daylight.

For weeks, the boat docks were abandoned. The Order forbade fishermen from shipping out, afraid they wouldn't return in time before the silvery day turned into a night of horror. The current and unfortunate events gave Stone and me the perfect opportunity to get to the jon boat unseen.

Stone had been silent the entire walk down the shore.

We stopped a few times so he could catch his breath and bear the pain. Like a pregnant woman would do when a contraction hit. He hardly flinched when I'd stitched him, so I knew something had to be terribly wrong if the agony was too much to hide.

"We're almost there," I promised as the cold threatened to steal my breath.

I glanced over at him as he stood with his head back and his eyes pinched.

I reached out my hand. "Give me the bag. I can carry a bag, Stone."

He refused, gripping the bag around his shoulder. "Let's keep moving."

He was stubborn, painfully so, and the way he seemed not to need anyone reminded me much of myself. I wondered what made him believe he was all he ever needed. Had he escaped a place that held him too tightly or a person who made him feel like he was suffocating?

It was true that a man had many faces, but Stone only showed one.

He'd never smiled, never frowned.

He hardly gave anything about himself away.

Despite his strangeness, the gloves he always wore, and the way he spoke in a forgotten language, I couldn't deny that he was handsome. But he was also precocious, a man of marble and brash in a chilling way.

At times, I caught him looking at me, but even as I caught him, he never turned or looked away. In those fleeting seconds tangled in a web of disarming stares, I imagined us together in a way that caused my core to drum and my flesh to turn to liquid and pool into the ocean. In my mind, I would lay under him, with the gentle curve of his lips tickling the shell of my ear and his velvety erection pressing between my thighs.

The coat Stone wore grazed my sleeve when he walked past, and his scent traveled by like a gypsy. He smelled like Christmas morning—of pine and gingerbread and mistletoe.

"Is anyone missing you?" I asked, walking up beside Stone, then instantly regretted my question. The sea had given him to *me*. In my twisted head, there was only one version of Stone. *My Stone*—the one with no past and created by the tide, shaped by waves, and kept safe by snowfall. Did I want to know anything more than this? We were slowly learning each other, and I couldn't imagine him with anyone else.

Although, the last thing I needed was another intruder coming into my town, asking questions, or causing chaos.

My neighbors had enough to worry about.

He walked quietly beside me.

I tried again. "Do you remember anything, like how you got into that coffin in the first place?" I'd put off the daunting question long enough.

He still didn't say anything, walking beside me with his attention in front of him.

"Please," I said, placing my hand on his arm.

He stopped, peering down at me with gloved fingers curling around the bag's strap. I lifted my head to meet his gaze.

"I'm risking a lot by taking you to the island. The least you could do is

answer me. I don’t like surprises, and the last thing I need is unexpected company.”

He adjusted his stance. “It was mostly Mother and me, and, if you must know, she poisoned me and laid me to rest in a coffin at the bottom of the ocean.” Sadness curved around his eyes. I was stuck in them, watching flakes cling to his lashes as his gaze fell over me like the breadth of the blackest night. “No one is searching for something that no longer exists.”

My heart leapt into my throat. My breath came out in a shallow shudder.

Stone averted his gaze and resumed his pace.

“Your *mother* did that to you?” No wonder he couldn’t trust me. No wonder he refused to drink or eat anything I’d given him for days. Stone kept walking. I grabbed his hand to regain his attention. “But why would she do that to you?”

Stone looked down at our joint hands. He froze before meeting my eyes. The moment sharpened. “I suppose some things aren’t meant to be born.”

“Who’s down there?” someone shouted from above the cliff’s edge.

With eyes wide, my first instinct was to push Stone out of sight.

I shoved my palms into his chest, and his gloved hands came over mine as he took many steps backward, taking me with him. Our bodies collided against the cliff, invisible to Irene.

I placed my index finger on my lips, urging him to stay quiet.

Stone’s questionable eyes darted across my face.

“Adora, is that you again?” Irene shouted from above.

I sank deeper into Stone and pulled his hood over his white hair, trying to hide our faces under it. He stood so still, his mouth only inches from mine.

I felt the shape of him press against me.

I felt his every cool breath graze my lips.

“You don’t want to cross her,” I whispered with a mischievous grin. Sneaking around the shore with a strange man ignited a spark within me. “She probably smelled your blood from a mile away. Rumor is she snacks on wounded travelers with a dry sense of humor. Skins their flesh and roasts them over a fire pit like a pig on a spit.”

The corner of Stone’s mouth twitched.

For a moment, I thought I’d see a smile.

“I know you’re down there!” Irene shouted again, calling back our attention. “Come out so I can see your face to be sure.”

Stone’s black eyes shifted between mine. “She sounds hungry.”

Another smile broke out of me, and it seemed I'd been smiling more with him these past few days than I had in a long time. "Famished."

More cold winds came, biting the exposed skin across my collarbone and tossing my hair about my face. I moved in closer, burying myself in Stone's chest as we waited for Irene to give up and leave.

This was when I noticed his fingers gently placed at my sides, the flare of his nostrils, and every drop of mist on his lips. We woven together so tightly it took everything to breathe steadily.

"Did you know you flare your nostrils? You do it every time you're nervous. Or in deep thought. Or want to say something but can't find the words. I can't quite tell which one yet."

Stone seemed taken aback by my confession. "No, I didn't know."

My foot shifted, causing me to lose my balance, but he grabbed my sides and pulled me flush against him to keep me steady. Body to body. Chest to chest. I bit the center of my bottom lip, trying to control the slapping of air against my lungs.

"I'm sorry your mother poisoned you," I finally whispered to him.

The darkness in Stone's eyes slipped away, and I could feel his two leather thumbs stroke the small space at my sides. "I'm not. Not anymore."

WHEN WE REACHED THE DOCK, WAVES SPLASHED OVER THE PIER THAT stretched into the sea, spilling over golden grains and seeping into the spaces between the planks. We'd passed by numerous fishing vessels, lift netters, and trap setters until we reached the *Finneuma*.

A burn crept inside my chest as soon as I laid eyes on it.

Stone paused next to the Sullivan boat. "What does it mean?"

"In my … religion," I began to say, quickly catching myself, "we believe every person has a perfect match, their other half, a soulmate, but not every person finds them. When they do, it's a pretty big deal. *Finneuma* means *Final Breath*."

"*Finneuma*," he repeated.

"Your air. Your inhale. Your reason to take your every next breath until your last." I smiled. "My father built this boat and named it *Finneuma* for my mom. It was his way of saying, *I finally found you, and no need to look further*." I forced the pang of sorrow back down, realizing I shouldn't have mentioned my mother after what he'd told me, but the words had tumbled out

before they could be stopped. Even so, I felt lighter afterward. Like the top-heavy longing to mention her emptied a space inside me. And chances like that, reasons to say *Mom*, were few and far between when you no longer had one. The feeling was like wanting everyone to know it was your birthday on your birthday, without having to tell them.

"Have you found your soulmate?" he asked.

I peered down the length of the boat. "You can't find love when you're consumed with hate."

I could feel his eyes on me. "Hate only consumes you if you let it."

I tossed him a glare. "Welcome to Weeping Hollow, where monsters called Heathens kill your friends, neighbors, and even children. A town where shadows appear in the middle of the night and murder you while you're dreaming." I bristled. "This town only lets you be two things: scared or angry."

He looked at me as if he didn't believe me. "Then why do you stay?"

Deciding not to answer, I grabbed my bag from Stone's shoulder and unzipped the front pocket to search for the key.

Stone didn't push, either. I liked that about him.

I stepped onto the *Finneuma*. The boat was wrapped in cedar, and the antique pirate helm was a gift, as my father had said, handcrafted by a long-ago friend of an ancestor and passed down through generations. It had wooden handles, spokes, and spindles to steer us as we sailed the unforgiving sea without ever crossing the border.

When I looked up, my eyes fell on the jon boat swaying from behind.

"We're taking the small one in the back." My voice was mournful, so I replaced it with something lighter so he wouldn't notice. "My sisters and I used to sneak out after midnight and get drunk on moonshine in the middle of the Atlantic. It's not easy to spot the jon boat if you're not looking for it." The memory of our laughter dotting the night air yanked on my heartstrings. I clutched the key tighter and looked up at him. "If there comes a time you cross anyone from town, and they ask questions, don't tell them anything. Remember that. No one can know about me, you, anything I've done, or anything that will become of this."

Stone wet his bottom lip. "You have sisters."

In one ear and out the other. "Promise me, Stone. Promise me that if you come across anyone, you won't tell them about our time together."

Stone's mouth parted slightly, a white cloud slipping out. "I promise."

I climbed into the boat before crossing over to the jon boat.

Many years had passed since I'd boarded *Finneuma*. The memory of Dad teaching us how to tie rope with his weathered hands left a warmth inside me.

As Dad had taught me, I unlocked the attached jon boat and released the rope. After Stone joined me inside the small boat, he pushed off the dock, and we steered to Bone Island with the motor rumbling beneath us.

Stone sat across from me with his hand curled around his side. The waves were angry, and we hid under hoods while the sea sprayed our faces. Each time a new wave slammed into us, it felt like we hit a block of ice, and Stone clenched his jaw to fight the pain.

I wanted to ask him if he was okay, but each time I looked at Stone, he was already studying me from the other side of the boat. An intense gaze under his hood flapping in the wind.

I bit my lip, tasting salt seeping into my mouth, and forced my eyes out in front of me. It was difficult to see through the fog and mist, but I kept the motor straight, hoping there was enough gas to get me to the island and back.

It wasn't until this moment that I thought about what would happen once we arrived.

Many have talked about the abandoned island being haunted. After all these years, the lighthouse's rotating beam still worked each night as if it were controlled by ghosts. And perhaps all towns had them, but the ghosts of Weeping Hollow were deeply rooted in all of us.

I saw the lighthouse first. Tall, black and white, and traversed through time. The tide carried us closer, and because of the rainwater and salt, the colors weren't as sharp as they once were. The black was faded, the paint eroded—a gray compared to Stone's eyes, but it still stood resolute and strong and the voice of danger ahead.

As we drew closer, the fog cleared, and shipwreck lay scattered among the rocks to the left of the lighthouse. I avoided the snow-capped rocks and steered the boat to shore. When the entire island came into view, Stone turned his gaze to the dreadfully enchanting landscape.

It was a winter cemetery of rotten branches hanging like black skeletons. Naked trees dashed up from shattered ground and soared high, lost in the dark, bruise-black skies. There was a quiet here, too, and I wondered if Bone Island was the birthplace of the Shadows. It seemed like the sort of place they could have been. Their home. Their womb.

The bottom of the boat hit sand, and I tossed the anchor.

Stone jumped out, soaking the pants I'd given him, and looked across the horizon. He slipped off his hood, revealing his damp hair.

I sat inside the boat for a moment longer. I wanted to look at him without him looking at me. I wanted to see him in deep thought and staring out into the horizon as he always did with quiet desperation. It was a moment between moments.

"It seems a few boats crashed into the rocks to the north," he said.

He took a few more steps up the beach before his legs weakened and he stumbled, his arms stretched out to catch his fall.

My heart jumped into my throat as I stood to see if he was okay.

A painful groan left him, and I jumped off the side of the boat, trudging through shallow waters, over sharp rocks, and onto the shore to get to him.

"Stone!" I shouted, sand tearing at my heels as I ran across the wet beach. I collapsed at his side. "What is it? What's wrong?"

He threw his head back with his eyes squeezed shut.

I worked fast, lifting his shirt to undress his wound to have a look.

Puss leaked from the stitches. The surrounding area was purple.

It was infected, and I felt all the color drain from my face.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

He looked at me for a moment, then looked away.

"Your stubbornness is stupidity," I mumbled under my breath, wrapping the bandage again to avoid the sand from getting in and making it worse. I peeled Stone's hand from his side and wrapped his arm around my shoulder to help him to his feet.

Stone slowly rose, planting one boot on the sand, then the other.

Aside from the waves, there was no sound for miles.

The island was indeed abandoned.

I took his gloved hand in mine at my shoulder. "We need to get you to the lighthouse." Stone was a slim and obstinate tower, arms braided with taut muscles, who had no choice but to lean on me. I adjusted my grip, folding our fingers together. "Only a few more steps. Just up the hill."

Stone stayed silent at my side. He didn't take a step, and I tried taking as much weight off him as possible.

"You don't have a choice, Stone. Tell me what you're thinking."

Grimacing, he lifted his gaze and peered ahead under heavy lashes. "I'm thinking that," he began, short breaths laced with an ache between each word. "I'm ashamed of how incapable I am at the moment." He turned his head

until our eyes met. His were heavy, hooded. And when they flicked across my face, warmth rushed to my lower belly. “Not my fondest moment.”

I swallowed, needing to say something. Anything. “You’ve come this far. After everything you’ve been through, ending the story here would be a shame. You must keep going ... ‘til death.”

Stone gave our tangled fingers a slight squeeze, and I felt his muscles relax as he exhaled. “Not even then,” he replied.

I STOOD ON THE WOODEN STAIRCASE, WORKING THE DOOR HANDLE AND battling the ripping cold winds. Snowfall hit my face, and I peered up to see gray clouds sliding across an acrid sky.

“Is there a problem?” Stone asked.

A loose step creaked under my boot when I glanced at him.

He was where I’d propped him, leaning against the lighthouse.

“Nope.” I jiggled the handle again and used my shoulder to give it a shove. I didn’t know why I assumed the door would be unlocked. Since Kane’s family owned the property, only they had a key.

Stone’s voice came again. “Are you certain no one lives here?”

“No one has been here for over twenty years.”

Stone steered his head away from a nearby window and plunged his elbow into the glass. A loud *crack* stabbed my ears, and the window shattered into pieces.

My eyes grew wide. “What are you ... how ... That glass must be at least four inches thick! How did you do that? Not to mention, if you’re not careful, you’ll break a stitch—”

Stone removed his jacket, causing the tee beneath to lift up and expose a rigid and wounded torso. The sight managed to silence me.

Shivering, he fell back against the curved wall and wrapped his jacket around his hand to remove the rest of the glass from the sill.

“As you said,” he hunched over, possibly regretting the pain that took him afterward, “the island is abandoned, and we need to get inside before the snowstorm comes.”

I picked up the bag and walked through the rocky shrubs to where he stood.

Stone laid his jacket across the sill, and we came face to face when he took a step back.

A moment passed where we held our breaths.

A shade of purple scalloped under his hooded eyes.

His body was already exhausted, almost wanting to give up on him.

Then he took the bag from around my shoulder. “After you.”

Inside, the floor creaked as I walked carefully through the abandoned space. Though it was dark, murky daylight shone through fogged windows, revealing spider webs in every deserted nook and white dust sheets on furniture.

After Stone came in behind me, he instantly collapsed to the floor, propping himself against a wall.

The lighthouse was even colder, with a draft blowing in from the broken window. I lit a fire in the hearth using old, dried-out logs and matches I’d shoved inside my backpack, seeing a bedroom on the other side through the hole. The flames cast a vintage glow across the room, allowing me to look around.

We had entered the living room. On the opposite end of the fireplace, I assumed it to be couches under the dust sheets. By the door, a small table and chairs, with a bundle of fishing rods in the corner. Next to the living area was a tiny kitchen, and to the right of that was a bathroom. To the right of that was the door to the bedroom. The two-way fireplace separated the bedroom and living area. In the middle, a steel pole shot through the structure with a spiral case wrapping around it.

I walked to the shelves beside the fireplace, where antiques were hidden under layers of dust. Books, records, a projector, reels, trinkets, vases, and old picture frames. I spotted a record player plugged into the wall, and I dragged my finger through the dust across the edge of it. “I wonder if it still works.”

When I flipped the switch, even though there was no electricity in the lighthouse, the record spun, pouring a song into the room. As if by magic.

It was a song I hadn’t heard before, and it crackled, filling and rushing to the deprived holes of my soul like a wave meeting the shore. The tune sounded crispy and far away as if we accessed a piece of a world outside the barrier. I closed my eyes in its cadent touch, having not heard any collection of notes since the Panic started because Freddy in the Mourning was gone.

With the song combing my heart, I opened my eyes and looked at Stone.

He was already watching me.

I let a few seconds pass, and then—“I like this song,” I finally said.

Stone's mouth parted as if he didn't know what to say.

He dropped his head for a moment, then glanced back up at me. "I think the song likes you, too."

I smiled and sat on the floor in front of him to remove his bandage. The song continued to play in the background. "There's a projector here. Since the record player is working, maybe that will work too. You could watch films."

"Films?"

"You know, movies? There are tons of reels. Movies I haven't seen in ages. I'm sure you can figure it out," I said, cleaning him and trying to keep my focus on the stitches and not the tight lines of his torso or the way a light trail of hair dipped inside his pants, leading to places I'd only imagined.

"I need to keep this under control."

I didn't know if I meant the wound or myself.

Both were very accurate at the moment.

Stone remained silent, and I felt him watching me.

I was used to men admiring me, but it was different with Stone.

His eyes looked right through me—penetrating me, almost as if he could see the evil embroidering my soul. And I wanted him to see so I wouldn't be burdened with it alone. I wanted him to understand that I was kind but also capable of killing for the greater good. I wanted him to know that despite the small moments we found ourselves lost in, if he ever crossed me or threatened my home, I could slit his throat. I needed him to see the wicked starvation inside me and understand it. This way, there wouldn't be a shocked look in his eyes should it ever come to his death. There wouldn't be anything. Just the usual quiet desperation he always wore. Like he'd known it was coming all along *because* he understood me. And he could lay there the same way Kane would one day, blood pulsing from his throat with every last slow beat of his heart. But with Stone, I would lay with him, my head against my secret's chest, his blood oozing down the sides of my face. Maybe even read him to sleep one final time. Because … he saw me, and I let him.

"What?" I asked, catching his eyes still on me while I was lost in crimson thoughts. I applied an herb-crushed ointment to his wound, a recipe from Blackwell Apothecary, pretending to be aloof, all together, and not a mess.

Stone touched my arm with his gloved hand, stopping me.

"Why did you do it?" he asked.

"What do you mean?"

“Why did you agree to bring me here?”

I shrugged, but the truth was, I wanted to hide him, to hang on to him for a bit longer. Bone Island seemed the perfect place to keep him, just to prove I could. The sea had returned a piece of me I’d lost so long ago—an adventure in the shape of a man. It made me feel alive during desolate times, and I wanted to see what would become of it.

“Circe.” His hand cupped my elbow, demanding my attention. I bit my lip and focused on his wrists, the blue veins popping under his skin. When I lifted my gaze to him, he moved in closer with eyes that looked deep into my own. “Thank you.”

It was the first time he’d thanked me. I could tell it was hard for him to do and how sincere he was because when I looked into his black eyes, they went on indefinitely.

He remained still. Stone carved from stone.

A thickness filled the room, and our gazes knotted together. A bridge between us. Almost as if neither one of us could break away from the connection.

If it were anyone else, I would have been able to pull away long ago.

If it were anyone else ...

My hand fell from his torso, and my finger brushed the top hem of his pants. A pinch of pain rushed through me from my fingertip to my shoulder.

I winced and yanked back my hand.

The area surrounding the splinter in my finger was red and agitated.

“You’re hurt.” Stone reached for my hand.

I pulled back. “It’s nothing.”

He was forceful, snatching my wrist and turning my palm so he could have a look. It was odd in the way he did it. Blunt.

“It seems we’re both infected.” He ran his fingertips lightly over my scabs, then back up my finger. With a dry throat, he continued, “If you don’t remove it, the infection will only get worse.”

I shrugged. “I like the pain.”

His eyes pierced me. Not with pity but with understanding. Like he’d known my secrets all along. And then, “A person only welcomes pain to either feel, distract, or suffocate something that hurts more.”

I narrowed my eyes, trying to pull away from his grip, but Stone grabbed my wrist.

My body jumped into panic mode. “What are you doing?”

He brought my fingers to his mouth.

The fracturing pain in my finger throbbed with my heart each time his bottom lip brushed the splinter. Like he was feeling the foreign thing for himself. Seeing how deep inside me it was.

All my thoughts curled into the corners of my mind.

I didn't know what would come next. It both terrified and excited me.

With my hand in his, he trapped me with his gaze.

We were trapped in the daring spaces in the middle of seconds with his cold breath ghosting over my skin. Then his lips wrapped around my finger.

I inhaled a sharp breath. It lodged in my throat.

My heart flipped and turned and raced.

He had my hand in his gloved one, and he tilted his head, dipping my finger into his mouth. Then his eyes closed as he drew the splinter out.

The way he did it wasn't to seduce, but to take care of me. No one had ever put me in a position like this. To be honest, I didn't know what to think.

The pain dissipated when he slowly pulled my finger from between his lips. He swiped the sliver of wood from the tip of his tongue, and it met the floor. A bead of blood appeared where the splinter once was, and Stone's gaze darted to it as if he sensed it. Then he licked it, collecting blood on his tongue.

"There," he whispered, and everything had gone serious.

Somehow, I'd found a hidden passage winding into the tomb he'd built around himself. Inside, Stone had a heart that wasn't as black and cold as his eyes. He just didn't know how to use it.

His face was like a marble statue as we stared at each other. His breaths were quiet again, whispers through carved blue lips. He looked into my eyes, and each time he blinked his lashes splayed across his muted cheeks like soot.

I inched closer and pressed my lips to the center of his forehead.

His skin was like ice, so I kissed him softly, secretly, as if I may break him.

An exhale trembled from my lips as I pulled away.

His gaze slammed into mine again.

"You kissed me," he said in a rasping, confidential voice.

I could feel my heart slam. I didn't think one could ever feel their heart beating until I met him. "It was only a peck on the forehead. It was no big deal."

Stone's eyes shifted between mine. "No one has ever kissed me before."

"It was nothing more than what a mother would do when her child is sick. I promise it was nothing."

"I have never known what that is like."

"Your mother has never kissed you?" I asked, then regretted my words. Stone only stared at me, a dark gaze dragging across my face. My shoulders softened as I was sitting between his spread legs. "When I was a little girl, whenever I was sick, my mother kissed me right here on my forehead." I rubbed the pad of my thumb across the space between his brows where my lips once were. "It was her way of checking my temperature, but also a small gesture to let me know she cared for me."

The snowstorm was raging outside by this time, beating against a fogged window while the wind whistled through the covered one that was broken. A cusp of white from daylight threading through snow stroked his face as he looked at me with eyes that were vast but transparent.

Then his gloved fingers were light as they came down on the nape of my neck.

I held my breath, waiting to see what he'd do.

Stone inched closer with caution, and he pressed his lips to the center of my forehead. The same way I had done to him.

I released a broken sigh. My heart collapsed.

Stone cares for me, too.

He didn't pull back. Not right away. Stone let his mouth linger, and I squeezed my eyes closed to keep my breath from coming out in a shudder.

When he edged back, his lashes swept across my forehead as he peered down at me. He was so close that I felt his breath on my cheekbones. The song looped on the record player, the fire crackled, and the snow from the snowstorm *pitter-pattered*. But it all fell into the background of this moment where a tangled heap of silence hardened between us as we looked at each other.

Then I lifted my chin and nudged my lips against his, suddenly craving to kiss the stranger who'd never smiled, never frowned. The one who never gave more than necessary, until now. Just once to know what it was like.

Stone curled his hand into a fist, bunching the seams of my dress between his long legs, one of them bent at the knee. At the nape of my neck, his other hand relaxed but never left.

I moved my lips to the corner of his mouth, and his jaw went lax.

My eyes closed when I kissed him there for a handful of soft seconds.

A gentle and merciful kiss, like I was trying to catch time and trap it in a glass bottle.

He remained still, skin flushed, eyes intense and squinting like he'd come from another world—a look that was eternal on him.

I didn't know why I wasn't pulling away.

Something had to have been possessing me, keeping me rooted here.

My mouth moved across his bottom lip.

His cool breath shuddered, and I looked up to catch his eyes close.

Every second passing had my heart slamming against my bones, and I heard it in my ears, turning the song coasting in the room into fog.

I'd never made an advance on a man before, but everything about Stone was new and exciting. I couldn't stop myself in fear of never finding out what it would be like, in fear of never having this chance again.

Here, on Bone Island, we were two people from two different worlds who found ourselves across the ocean in a lighthouse where secrets screamed to be kept, new stories to be collected like dust.

Stone lifted his chin, seeking more of me, and I imagined myself forty years from this moment, should I survive that long, finally telling Fable about the stranger I shared a kiss with on Bone Island. A man she'd known nothing about. How one kiss with the traveler made my heart untether and flee from my wicked soul, wanting to take flight. And how could she ever believe me, anyway? I would be an old lady with a faulty mind.

Plus, nothing could truly leave this place. Not even my heart.

With his lips slightly parted, I kissed the top one, then the bottom one, then pushed a slow tongue into his mouth and dragged it across his. Warmth piled inside me, my lips catching his, holding our kiss that I felt slide through my body.

At first, Stone just sat there, frozen, as if shocked, but when I pulled back, his fingers pierced my skin at the nape of my neck, pulling me closer and wanting more. His seductive tongue curled into my mouth, tangling with mine. My body tripped at the gentle thirst in his kiss, and I melted into him. I *melted*.

His taste transported me back to my earlier years when I'd lay upon the sand during autumn under an afternoon shower, with the sea sweeping across my toes. Kissing him was much like kissing the cold rain in the fall, with my head underwater and dewdrops skipping in my ribcage.

And just before I sank into him, Stone turned rigid, like terror flashing through him, as if he detested it or was in pain, and he turned away.

When I opened my eyes, I saw his eyes tightly pressed together.

Then he pulled back.

It all happened in an instant: him kissing me, then the moment being ripped away.

My gut twisted, and I couldn't catch my breath.

For the first time, insecurity crept in.

It was a foreign feeling. And I absolutely hated it.

His chest heaved. "I apologize. I shouldn't have done that—what I did—" the words stumbled away from him, and I laid a hand over his arm to stop him.

"What you did was the most human thing you've done since I met you."

Stone's eyes met mine, and they held a nightly rainstorm that was magnetic.

He didn't say anything. He only stared at me.

I felt like I was drugged and coming down from a high. Time moved faster. Everything around me was no longer blurry but rough, dull. Concrete. "What time is it?"

Stone cast his gaze out the window, and mine followed.

The sky was nothing more than a sheet of dark gray. Any hint of light had moved to the west behind Norse Woods' trees.

"I have to go," I said in haste, shoving fresh bandages into the bag. In my peripheral view, Stone adjusted himself against the wall, exhaling a jagged breath. "This should take care of that infection. There're toiletries in the bag. Toothbrush and such. Water bottles, vanilla cola, coffee, lunch meat, snacks and fruit to hold you over, too. Please don't be stubborn and just eat. You'll need the strength to fight off the infection."

A dreadful blue hue scalloped under his heavily hooded eyes when I looked back at him. Like the ocean was slowly stealing him back.

"When will I see you again?" he asked me.

I stood and clutched my necklace against my chest, unable to look at him. My gaze touched every surface except him. The brick wall on the other side, the giant pillar climbing up the middle of the room, antique furniture, cobwebs, and coastal oil paintings. Everywhere except him.

"I don't know," was all I managed to say. My heart and mind were at war. After that kiss and what he'd revealed about his mother, the last thing I

wanted was to leave him alone with an infected wound, but I didn't have a choice. I had to believe that he would be all right.

Stone cleared his throat, capturing my attention. "It would be wise to stay until the snow stops."

"It would be wise not to underestimate what I'm capable of." I tried to mask the worry in my voice, but it was no use.

I didn't allow him another word. The old wood flooring let out a protesting creak under my panicked footsteps as I rushed to the door.

I flew down the lighthouse steps and sprinted through snow and wind back to the jon boat, still feeling his eyes on me.

When I glanced back, Stone was standing on the other side of a foggy window, watching me go. He was hurt, his wound was infected, and he still got up to watch me go.

I didn't know what this meant exactly, but it had to mean something.

The boat bobbed on the frothy shore, and I swung one leg into it, then the other.

After pulling up the anchor, I started the engine, and the boat whipped on its stern, the bow pointing to pewter gray skies. The sea was ferocious, with waves crashing into the tiny boat and water pooling at my feet. The icy winds sliced into me, but I didn't care. My eyes fell into the distance, arresting to Weeping Hollow's border, where a lonesome cliff, both somber and savage, lay ahead. It was a deceivingly beautiful view attached to my beloved black sea. At what point did the town I'd do anything for become so heavy?

I looked back over my shoulder.

Stone was still standing at the window, arms at his sides.

His expression was frozen like a picture, and I watched him until the speck of him faded away.

THE DAILY HOLLOW

REMEMBER THE FALLEN
ARTICLE BY GENEVA KING

Six days left until the Beaver Moon. If the Shadows are not stopped, death will follow us into the chilling month of December. After four weeks, The Order is at a loss for words as to why this is happening to our home of Weeping Hollow. Word has spread, some believing it could be because the Heathens broke their curse. The two events happening close together cannot be a coincidence. We have lost more of our neighbors, the latest, Jacob Taylor from the eastside, who was only twenty-two years of age and on the brink of initiation into Sacred Sea. These were not only neighbors but friends, family, and loved ones. There is no pattern. It is only during the horrific night, which lasts for eighteen hours that these killings occur. We still don't know the motives behind the Shadows. So far, each victim seems to be chosen at random. Our victims include those of different classes, sex, and races. The Shadows are serial killers without a particular appetite, and they are serial killers without remorse. In my opinion, this is the worst kind of killer imaginable. And I say this because anyone could be next. In the meantime, we will hold a memorial in Town Square, where you can pay your respects.

Rest in peace Weeping Hollow.

CHAPTER 15

ADORA

November 25, 2020
64 days until the Crimson Eclipse

The Cantini's manor was settled on the bend of Seaside Street, towering over a cliff and bold against the tempest of black ocean waves. Iron gates surrounded the castle-like structure, and defiant rose bushes climbed trellises around the Gothic-inspired home.

To Dad, it seemed only fitting to have dinner—or lunch at these times—with my soon-to-be mother-in-law, husband-to-be, and the rest of the Cantini family, which felt wrong to be coming together like a celebration.

We were having dinner with fake smiles while people were dying.

And when I should have been thinking about why Lena's death wasn't mentioned in the latest issue of The Daily Hollow, with much guilt, I wasn't. All I could think about was Stone silently suffering on Bone Island and the kiss we'd shared.

Viola Cantini was an elegant, pale Italian woman with black hair pulled severely back from her face. She preferred form-fitting dresses that belonged to the nineteenth century, and kept her neck and chest free from heavy jewelry. Viola, and those who'd come before her, had made a small fortune in wine, but they'd never boasted or flaunted their wealth in town.

They were the Keepers of Secrets, the only family in Weeping Hollow who held the secrets and truths of this town. They'd practiced fairness and

kept their loyalty to their centuries-long oath, living in a way anyone would assume a Keeper of Secrets would live, which was in secret.

At the expansive mahogany dining table, both families gathered around. Cyrus's father, Darnell, wasn't present, but it was no surprise. Not many had seen him in years.

Black candles flickered on three black candelabra centerpieces. Fine china and aged wine in crystal adorned the embroidered silk tablecloth. And Ivy's gaze felt like bullets piercing me from a few seats down.

For much of dinner, everyone remained quiet as they ate.

The maid cleared the dinner plates when Camora, Cyrus's younger sister, broke the tension. "Have you thought of a design for the wedding dress yet?"

I cleared my throat and brought a napkin to my lips to buy more time. If only I could rid myself of the picture of Stone standing at the window of the lighthouse. The one that had become a permanent fixture in my mind.

Viola observed me from the head of the table, awaiting my response.

She looked at me as if she could see Stone standing there in my mind, too.

Her voice flowed like velvet when she said, "A Saturnalia wedding would have been spectacular. It's a shame we must wait until January, but I do have the most gorgeous dress in mind for the announcement."

My thoughts were safe, my secret secure.

My shoulders relaxed, and I eased back into my chair.

"Saturnalia? Do you mean Christmas?" Fable asked. "A *Christmas* wedding?"

"I prefer to keep to tradition," Viola countered. "If we don't, who will? Ronan, would you agree?"

Dad nodded. "Of course."

Ivy's eyes flicked skyward.

I imagined a Christmas wedding.

Stone smelled like Christmas.

I cleared my throat and thoughts at once, fixing the napkin resting on my lap. "Since we're discussing preferences, it is mine to choose a dress for my announcement. I have little room to make decisions, and I'm taking this one."

"You will look beautiful in whatever dress you wear," Dad said, then turned to the table. "Adora's been busy designing everyone else's dresses for the ball, on top of taking care of the house and her mother in the scarce free time she has—" I coughed into my fist, but Dad resumed, "—Believe it or

not, she always puts herself last. Don't you, sunshine?" He leaned in and searched my face with a smile.

Guilt should have slammed into me for all the time I'd been spending with Stone, but it didn't. I didn't feel guilty about it one bit. Dad was right, I'd spent way too much time taking care of everyone else for so long. All I wanted was this time with Stone until I was either burned for killing Kane or forced to live out the rest of my days married to Cyrus.

Keeping my posture, I reached for my glass. "You don't have to talk so highly of me, Dad. Cyrus has no choice but to marry me," I settled my gaze on Cyrus, who was sitting across from me, "regardless of where my priorities lie."

Viola cut in. "If Adora is taking care of everyone, then who is taking care of Adora?"

The question struck a chord inside me, remembering how Stone's lips felt wrapped around my finger, and the way he looked at me as he drew out my splinter.

My heart raced, and my gaze turned to Ivy for help out of habit.

A silent knowing passed between us as we stared at each other. Something that said, *regardless of you marrying the love of my life, I'll still be here*. At least, this was what I hoped to hear from her.

Viola exchanged glances between the two of us. "I understand, Adora. I do," she began, sincerity in her eyes. "Though you should know Cyrus has always been smitten with you. If anything, this marriage will be the most ideal for both families. I couldn't have chosen a better daughter-in-law."

My gaze lingered back to Ivy with panic.

She looked away, stayed silent, her black hair attempting to hide her misery, and peered into her empty wine glass with a heated gaze.

The maid appeared at Ivy's side and poured more red wine into her glass.

Ivy never broke her stare.

I turned back to Viola. "Since we're on the topic of the wedding, I'd like to be the one to choose the date." Viola's brows shot in the air, and she rolled her wrist, probing me to continue. "If it must be in January, then I'd like January thirty-first."

Cyrus sat up straight in his chair. "The absolute last day of the month."

I smiled. "That's right." The Crimson Eclipse was on the twenty-eighth. If I were caught, I would die before I could marry him. If I weren't caught, and Mom awoke, there was a chance she could stop the wedding from

happening.

“Adora, I prefer sooner than later.” Cyrus leaned in, lowering his voice. “We should talk about this first.”

“Nonsense,” Viola interrupted. “After what happened in the chamber, this is a positive change in attitude, Cyrus. If this is what makes Adora happy, then the thirty-first should be the day.”

I grabbed my wine glass, sitting back in my chair with a victorious smile.

Cyrus’s eyes turned navy. He was bothered.

Viola continued, “The reason for this dinner is because I had a conversation with Ronan. We’ve come to an exciting decision.” She clapped her hands together, stealing all our attention and bringing the rest of the table back to life. “You will move into the manor to allow time to prepare for the events and adjust to your new home. It will be quite a change in such a short time, and we should all be together as much as possible.”

My spine sprang straight again. “Me?”

Then a sudden *shatter* took us all by surprise.

Ivy’s wine glass had exploded in place without her ever touching it, red wine spilling across the silk tablecloth and dripping onto the floor. Her emotions had won, allowing magic to slip through. Her chair screeched against hardwood when she pushed backward. She jumped from her seat and darted out of the dining room without a word.

Dad, Fable, and I stood to go after her.

“It’s fine,” Viola waved her hand as if it were no big deal. “Sit, relax. She just needs more time to come to terms with this new arrangement. The maid will make sure she’s all right.”

The maid rushed to the spill and began cleaning. “Of course, Mrs. Cantini.”

Dad returned to his seat with a worried expression. “Perhaps you’re right.”

The rest of us followed suit.

Cyrus was distracted, swirling wine in his glass with his eyes on me.

Viola adjusted her posture. “Where were we?”

“Adora moving in,” Camora said, lifting her glass.

“Ah, yes.” Viola nodded. “Alice is preparing your room as we speak.”

I choked on my wine. “This is happening tonight?”

Cillian, one of Cyrus’s younger brothers, chuckled behind his napkin.

Kaser, the other younger brother, at only ten years old, winked at me

from beside Cillian. Fable darted her eyes to me, gauging for a reaction, and I couldn't understand how Dad had agreed to this.

"What about Mom?" I asked, turning to face Dad, but Stone's face also flashed in my mind. How could I continue to see him if I was constantly surrounded by the Cantini family? "We're in the middle of the Panic. You can't manage Mom and the nights without me."

Dad took my hand and gave it a squeeze. "The wedding will be here before we know it. We would have to let you go eventually because who knows how long this Panic will last? Now's a better time than ever to figure out a new routine with you gone." He patted the top of my hand and looked into my eyes. "Don't worry about us. We'll be all right. We always figure it out. Plus, you did say the boutique is costing you more to run than what it's bringing in. Viola agreed to set up a sewing room to get the dresses done so you can temporarily close the shop until the Panic ends."

Close my boutique? I was in a daze, staring at the empty space where my dinner plate used to be. "Is this about money? Did they buy me out without my approval?" I didn't mean for my thoughts to be spoken out loud, but I couldn't help but wonder why Dad would say yes when I was the sole provider for the family.

"Oh, don't be ridiculous," Viola exclaimed. "The boutique is still in your name. No one is taking it away from you."

Dad's gaze steered across the table, then he lowered his voice. "Now is certainly not the time and place."

"It will be great," Camora agreed, lost in her own world and distant from the tension surrounding her. "Finally, a buffer in the house."

Viola leaned in. "I will not allow my daughter-in-law and the mother of my future grandchildren to stay at a *cottage* and risk her life in trying times. You will stay here," she leaned back and straightened her posture, "where I know you're safe."

I pinched the insides of my palms with my sharp nails. Such a selfish thing to say in a room with my family. "My grandfather built that *cottage* with his two bare hands. Please, don't insult the dead with your masked disrespect, and don't forget the family I would be leaving behind in such trying times."

"Adora," Dad warned.

"Ronan, it's okay." Viola's chin tipped upward when she looked at me. "I apologize. You're right. I didn't mean it to come across the way it did. I'm

sure this will be hard for you."

"*Hard*." I tsked, catching Cyrus's gaze with my own. "You've been quiet. What do you think about all this?"

The candlelight glowing between us reflected off Cyrus's black hair. As if he had all the time in the world to answer, he ran his fingertip around the base of his wine glass in deep thought.

His tired eyes lifted to mine, and he dropped his head to the side. "For over twenty years, I've known you as one of my best friends. I care about you, and we deserve this time together."

I sucked in a breath, feeling my chest rattle at realizing this was happening.

In minutes, I was moving out of my home and temporarily closing my boutique. I was slowly losing all that was mine in such a short amount of time. At least if I were going to be married to Kane, I would lose it all with purpose.

How could Cyrus not see that this marriage was only putting a wedge between my sister and me? At what point did he feel comfortable with this decision? It only made me wonder what he would gain from our arrangement.

"And who will be watching over me as I sleep?" I was reaching, trying to pull at any reason I could to buy more time. "It wouldn't be appropriate for us to sleep in the same room until the marriage is official."

"I will," Kaser interjected with a wicked smile.

The table collectively laughed.

I was alone with my anger.

"That's why we have Alice, dear. She'll be assigned to you. There are no *shifts* in this house, and you'll be perfectly safe and have a full night's rest each night. You'll need it with all the event planning," Viola assured, then her voice dropped in degree. "You will be safe here, Adora."

"Safe," I repeated. But instead, it left me feeling smothered.

MY FAMILY HAD LEFT.

It'd pained me to watch them leave.

They were only minutes away, I knew this, but it wasn't just them I was leaving. It was my family home, too. It was my boutique. And Mom. And I didn't have a chance to say goodbye.

The Gothic home was locked down as soon as the sun dropped from the

sky. The sound of locks and deadbolts clicking into place echoed throughout the manor. Then a single bell chime let everyone know that the night had started. No one could leave. No one could enter. Except for the Shadows.

Cyrus led me up the spiraling staircase to the top of the tower where the guest quarters were. Only an oil lamp lit the way and cast our shadows in the narrow hall that looked like spirits. Our steps echoed in this part of the manor I'd never been to, where it was colder with walls made of stone. At the top was a living space, a bedroom, and a massive bathroom.

"Here we are," Cyrus said, walking to the large, curved window that overlooked my beloved black sea. He placed the lamp on a desk beside the window, drew back the curtains, and crossed his arms over his chest, peering out into the melancholy night.

I walked around the four-post bed, clutching the mahogany spindle.

Atop the dresser was a bouquet of red roses beside a *Welcome Home* basket. Inside was a stack of the latest issues of Vogue tied up in lace, a jar of hazelnut peanut butter, a sleeve of malt crackers, and a bottle of Barbera wine that was labeled Wicked Affair.

It seemed to Cyrus and everyone else that these were all my favorite things. Did this basket sum up the woman he believed me to be? Did he ever wonder if there was anything more to Adora Oria Sullivan?

I pulled a rose out from the bouquet. The thorns were still intact, so I pressed the pad of my finger into it until blood drew. "Are you happy, Cyrus?"

He didn't answer right away, shoving his hands deep into his pockets. He gazed out the window, and I wished he were facing me so that I could see the color of his eyes.

"To tell you the truth, I'm relieved it's you." When he finally faced me, his eyes, though tired with dark circles carrying them, were the prettiest shade of blue. The ocean's shallow waters. "Think about it, Adora. We've always been there for each other, and when I think of you, every moment has been my favorite. Even in the worst times. Hell, you've seen me fucking cry. I skipped class to walk you home when you started your cycle—"

"Because I begged you."

Cyrus grinned. "Let's be honest with ourselves. You didn't have to try too hard. But that doesn't matter. What I'm trying to say is that you and I have always been close, and we've spent most of our lives never missing a day without seeing each other. You do realize this, don't you?" I stared at

him, not knowing what to say. “I know you better than anyone, and right now you’re having a hard time believing me.”

“The Welcome Home basket. There’s peanut butter.”

Cyrus nudged his head. “Look in the nightstand.”

I walked to the nightstand and sat on the bed before opening the top drawer. Inside was a large keepsake box. I took it out and set it on the bed.

Cyrus leaned his shoulder against the wall, watching me.

“My mother put the basket together,” he said as I lifted the lid. There was a letter sitting at the top, and the first line read, *I’m sorry about the peanut butter*. “Because I know it reminds you of that day you found out about Adeline,” he continued as I pulled each item out one by one. “A journal for the letters you write and toss into the ocean twice a month. Vintage Vogue issues because you scrunch your face when it’s any year after 1970. A bottle of apple pie moonshine ... and the most important people in your life. Your sisters, your mother, your dad ... a picture of you and me.” A single frame sat at the bottom. Inside was a picture of Adeline and I, holding seashells over our eyes.

I looked up at him.

Cyrus shrugged. “I *know* you. Never doubt that.”

My mind went numb, unsure of what to do or what to say.

There was so much he didn’t know. He didn’t know I planned to kill our friend, or about the man I was hiding on Bone Island.

“We won’t just be friends, Cyrus. We will be married. You will fuck me and only me for the rest of your life. We will eventually have children and raise them together.”

Cyrus’s jaw clenched. “Does this have anything to do with Kane?”

“Yes.” It had everything to do with Kane, but not in the way he would expect. The only card I had left was to lie, but Cyrus would be able to tell. So, I remained calm, pretending to believe my words were true. “It’s no secret that I’ve always loved Kane. If we both agree not to move forward with this, we may get out of it. We can tell them that you want to marry Ivy. We can find a way around this so that we can both get what we want.”

I dragged in a deeper breath once the last word left my lips. My lungs were thin, and my heart was racing, so I felt the pounding everywhere. I just hoped his hyper-sensory didn’t notice.

Cyrus just looked at me. Blue eyes hard, troubled waters.

Every second in his silence was torture.

If he didn’t speak soon, I was afraid of throwing my fist through the window to get his attention. Very unladylike, I thought, so I pressed against the splinter to calm my nerves, but the splinter was no longer there. I had nothing to allow me to take a breath, nothing aside from clenching my fists and breaking open my scabs.

“Ouch, Adora,” he finally said. It felt like forever, but it couldn’t have been more than a second that had passed. He glanced out the window again before staring back at me. “Let me try to understand what you’re saying ... you’d rather defy the Order than marry me?”

“Yes.” My response came out faster than I’d intended.

Cyrus looked at the ground, smiling in disbelief. “You’re lying to me.” He lifted his eyes until they hit mine. “You don’t love him. You never did. I don’t know why you’re lying to me. Maybe you’re scared, but the consequences of defying will be a hell of a lot scarier.” I closed my mouth, jaw grinding. “This marriage isn’t just about you and me. It’s about our families and our town. *Dammit*. If we defy, Augustine will remove us both completely.”

“Each day that passes makes this coven feel more like a cult.”

“Augustine does everything with a purpose. Defying him means we don’t trust him. It’s not *if* he removes us. It will be *when*. And because we’re from founding families, we won’t end up as flatlanders when he pushes us out. We will be witches without a coven. Lone wolves. And if he decides to detach us from our power, we’ll become the Forsaken.” His voice cut short.

It had been a long time since the mention of the Forsaken—the witches who passed on after losing control of their power.

“Forget you and me,” he continued. “My mother’s standing in the Order would be questioned. Your father will end up like Ben Grimaldi—rest his soul. It will be up to our brothers and sisters to redeem our family names. I refuse to put that pressure on Camora, Cillian, and Kaser. If we defy, there will be no protection. They’ll only use us as an example. Is that what you want?”

“I told you what I wanted, and this certainly isn’t it.”

Cyrus gripped the bridge of his nose. “Such a selfish thing to say for someone who doesn’t understand why we’re placed together in the first place.”

“Then tell me. And it better be for a reason other than a power trip.”

Cyrus’s hand fell from his face. “Adora, I’m offering to give you the

fairytale you've always wanted. I promise we will be happy. Far happier than you'll ever be with Kane—"

A clearing of a throat interrupted us, and I glanced across the room to see a rosy, stout woman standing in the doorway, her discomfort beaming from her cheeks. She wiggled her pert nose. "Excuse me, miss. I brought you fresh linens for the night. Where would you like me to put them?"

Cyrus nodded. "There is fine, Alice. Thank you." He turned to me and dragged in a breath. "We will talk about this later. In the meantime, Alice will stay with you while you sleep and accommodate your needs. And I want you to come get me if you need anything. At any time."

He stepped away, and my posture stiffened.

"I have things from home I'll need." My words came out meekly, tired, defeated.

"Alice," Cyrus said with a nod of farewell, ignoring me. When he reached the doorway, he paused, then turned back one last time. He tapped the door frame once, and before leaving, he said, "Just so you know, I never loved your sister."

CHAPTER 16

ADORA

Early morning of November 26, 2020
63 days until the Crimson Eclipse
66 days until the Cantini-Sullivan wedding

One pleasant thing about this room was the steadfast roll and crash of the sea from the open window. This and the creak of Alice's rocking chair became my lullaby. Though her unshakeable stare never left me, the sound of her rocking put me at ease, and I began to drift, drift, *drift*.

This was when the prickle came.

It started on my arm, and my eyes sprang to life.

My gaze darted to Alice, but an empty chair sat beside the open window.

A rhythmic rocking back and forth, *back and forth*, with no one there.

I gasped, trying to get up, but my arms were locked at my sides.

My legs were stiff and unmoving.

I was paralyzed on my back, and my eyes drifted to where the prickle started.

A black spider was crawling up the length of my arm.

It was bigger than any spider I'd seen before, and all I wanted to do was swipe the spider away. I begged my arm to move, but my body wouldn't let it. My every muscle was tense and tight, and I was forced to feel every ticking leg scamper across my skin.

Then the spider made a slow crawl toward my neck.

I tried to close my eyes but couldn’t.

Something had a hold on me.

I used everything within me to turn my head away from the spider, and my neck cracked when it stretched.

The spider’s legs ruffled a strand of my hair, and a whimper escaped me—a little noise that scratched my throat. *Stop, stop, stop, stop,* I chanted, but the words didn’t make it out of my head. They were stuck in my brain and bouncing around.

I held my breath, pinning my lips tightly so the disgusting thing wouldn’t crawl into my mouth. Instead, its legs crept across my collarbone and over my breast. Fear stretched my eyes wide open. Bulging. They were dry. The salty air from the open window burned my eyes, but I couldn’t shut them. Something more powerful than me wouldn’t let me close them. To even blink.

And then the spider dipped beneath my nightgown.

Every scratchy leg was a splinter in my skin, small nicks sinking deeper the farther it crawled down my body. I tried lifting my arm. Nothing worked. It was as if a heavy, invisible body was sitting on top of me, pressing me into the damp sheets from my cold sweat.

The covers slipped off me, and with frightened eyes, I peered down.

I could see the shape of the spider crawling beneath my nightgown, a bulge moving under the silk. I could feel its prickly legs inching down my belly.

I tried to scream, but nothing came.

I heard my scream echo in my skull. *Alice!*

Her name never made it outside of my head.

Panicked, I looked back at the chair.

It was still empty, but it rocked harder, *faster*.

That fateful night sixteen years ago splashed across my vision like a film. Women in black cloaks with hoods pulled low and over their eyes, Kane’s crafty, child-like spell, the lighthouse’s rotating beam slicing the room over and over. Each loud creak of the rocking chair on the floor felt like a wave crashing against my chest until I couldn’t breathe.

The spider found my panty line and slipped under it.

It crept along my pubic bone, and I jerked my head from side to side on the pillow. The long legs scraped my heated flesh as it changed form. Thicker legs. Softer legs.

At my sides, my hands turned into fists, grasping the sheets.

Though the touch was like ice, a warm buzz heated my skin. Melted me.

I peered down, and my vision clouded.

A head full of hair—the color of snow—waved between my legs.

Stone pressed a soft kiss on the inside of my thigh, then looked up at me.

A cunning smile appeared in his spider-black eyes.

Circe. Circe. Circe.

My shoulders were gripped by two hands, shaking me.

"Adora!"

My eyes sprang open. The chair stopped rocking. A complete standstill.

Alice was standing over me, frightened.

"Oh, Adora," she gasped, "you had me worried." She sighed, clutching a relic hanging around her neck and kissing it repeatedly. Stone wasn't in the room. Only Alice, rambling nervously and pacing. "What is this, Adora? What does it mean?" She was facing the fogged window, and her head tilted oddly.

The window was closed. Not open like in my dream state.

My chest heaved. My blood pounded, deprived and hot.

I slid out of bed and crept to the window. My legs wobbled, and my arms were heavy at my sides. My entire body was weighed down with longing and need and exhaustion.

It was dark, but the lighthouse beam rotated. Its light glossed over a single word that had been scribed into the fogged window like it had been done by a finger.

Wistor

Deep in my chest, I already knew, but I had to be sure.

Turning to her, I asked, "Who wrote this?"

Alice's chilling words haunted the space between us.

"You did, my dear."

Wistor. Wistor. Wistor. It was morning, and the single word became an incessant whisper that I couldn't escape. And the scrutiny inside the mansion was so thick it flexed its muscles each time I took a step closer to

the dining area. Alice trailed behind with shuffling feet and clothes hanging from her forearm.

“Miss Adora, you must change,” she said, out of breath.

Exhausted, I waved her away. There were more important matters to resolve. My sleepwalking, for one. I thought I had it under control. *Why is this happening now?*

The other was the man on Bone Island and the infuriating way he seemed to have used some sort of twisted magic to get inside my head and enter my dreams.

Unwelcome images of Stone emerged with each step, and the way his eyes hit me like obsidian.

Hard. Fast.

Unyielding.

Maddening!

Pathetic was what I felt as I marched down the hall.

He was entirely infuriating and a stubborn *humph!* left me while Alice continued to ramble. I couldn’t find the patience to bother with her. Anger had already eaten me up and spat me out. How did he do it? The only witches who had the power to control, trick, and influence the mind were the Pruitts.

For most of my life, Kane Pruitt had found pleasure in manipulating me until I began doing whatever he wanted so he didn’t have to use mind control. So he could trust me blindly. This was the price I continued to pay for what would come on the night of the Crimson Eclipse.

Was Stone a witch? A sea witch? *Impossible*.

But if he were, would I be able to tell? It wasn’t like we walked around with a badge of honor or magic flaming at our fingertips. Embodying power wasn’t something that could be seen. We didn’t have elf ears or enchanting wings. Not the kinds of things one would find in fantasy stories or fictional worlds. Even so, I refused to allow another man to have a key to get inside my head.

My steps quickened, angry footfalls echoing through the halls. I passed by the ancestors of the Cantinis trapped in gilded frames and wondered if they were aware of the dream I had in the night, the filthy thoughts of Stone that plagued me. No doubt, the ones he’d given me.

When I turned the corner to the dining room, all six members of the Cantini family sat around the breakfast table. They were discussing the monthly Town Hall meeting that would take place in a few hours.

At the end of the twelve-foot table sat Darnell Cantini in a wheelchair.

I froze at the sight of him.

Cold air slithered around my exposed arms and legs, despite Viola's heated gaze. The table remained quiet, but I focused on the pale, thin man with hollowed cheeks and twigs as fingers. The Sacred Sea jacket swallowed his scrawny frame. Only a pile of bones beneath it.

It had been so long since I'd seen Cyrus's father.

The years had only been cruel.

Viola cleared her throat and cut her eyes back to a breakfast plate, continuing to slice into her husband's ham. "Breakfast is at sunrise sharp. Tomorrow, you will join us on time, wearing proper attire."

The children also returned their attention to their breakfast plates, each wearing the black academy uniforms with the silver stitching my sisters and I had worn when we'd attended.

Cyrus's gaze lingered, glossing over my naked legs.

When his eyes met mine, a grin curved his lips.

Viola's sharp voice cut through the room. "Adora?"

I snapped my eyes back at her, not realizing she'd been speaking. Alice tugged on my wrist, and Viola looked at me as if I was ignoring her. "You have been dismissed. Alice will show you to the kitchen."

I pulled my hand away, straightened my posture, and headed to the kitchen.

Alice was never too far behind.

"These next two months will be long at the Cantini Manor," I muttered once Alice and I were surrounded by stainless steel appliances.

"Two months?" Alice questioned. "You mean the rest of your life since marriage is forever?"

My wide gaze swung to her when I realized my mistake. "Yes, of course."

"This isn't my place, but why didn't you say anything and speak up for yourself?"

I pulled a stool out from under the enormous silver island and sat. "It's her house, her rules. I have no say as long as I live here. But if she disrespects the ones I care about, I will speak up. Other than that, there are more important things to worry about. I must pick and choose my battles." Icing dripped down freshly baked cinnamon rolls in a nearby pan, and I leaned over to grab one. "I haven't interacted with her this much until now. Has she

always been like this?”

Alice took the cinnamon roll from my hand. She placed it on a plate and began to cut the roll into fours. “She’s very set in her—” Alice started to say, but I stopped her.

“You don’t have to do that.” My eyes nudged the plate between us. “I can cut my own food, Alice. I’m not helpless.” I’d gone from running a boutique, handling bills and taking care of Mom, to a maid cutting my food into bite-sized pieces as if that would be the reason I’d choke.

Alice’s nose twitched, wrinkles forming around her mouth. She set the knife down on the rim of the pan and looked up at me. “To them, you are incapable until your initiation.”

A smirk blossomed on my lips. “Good.” *Then none of them will see me coming*, I thought. *They’ll never suspect me if Kane winds up dead. For them to believe I’m incapable will be their mistake.*

Alice slid the plate in front of me. “Mrs. Cantini doesn’t want to spoil the engagement news, so you will not attend this impromptu meeting at Town Hall. Once it’s over, Gabriel will gather your belongings from the Sullivan Cottage. Is there anything special you need that you’d like him to grab while he’s there? I can let him know beforehand.”

Everyone would be attending the Town Hall meeting, and the realization pulled me into an upright position. It was the perfect distraction to slip away from the manor and sail to Bone Island to confront Stone and tell him that whatever he was doing must stop.

It was both a chance and an excuse to see him again.

The boat key was still safely tucked away in my satchel.

No one would find out.

The sudden thought of a quick escape sparked excitement in me.

Alice lifted her eyes to me, awaiting an answer.

I broke off a piece of sticky bread. “And what will you be doing during this time?”

“I need to sleep during the day to ensure I’m prepared to keep you safe through the night.”

“No, you can’t,” I quickly said, needing her awake to distract the family in case I wasn’t back in time. I had to think of something to keep her occupied. “There are a few things from home I’ll need.” I walked to the side of the refrigerator, snatched up a notepad and pen, then wrote down a list. “And when you return, I’ll need you to guard my door until the sun goes

down. If anyone asks, I didn’t sleep last night and plan to spend my day locked inside my new bedroom, getting acquainted with every square inch of my bed. I don’t want anyone coming in or bothering me.”

“But Miss Adora—” Alice hesitated.

“And if it’s true, and you do work for me, you won’t disclose the details about what happened last night.” I slipped the note into the pocket of her apron and left before she had a chance to protest or follow.

Adrenaline rushed through my veins, and I couldn’t get out of the kitchen and up the spiraling stairs fast enough.

CHAPTER 17

STONE

ON A SIDE TABLE, A LEATHER CASE HELD SKETCHPADS AND DRAWING utensils.

Initials AR were pressed into the flap enclosure.

Through the cold winter night, with only a lantern casting a buttery glow across the paper, drawing was all I could do because the infection was slowly stealing me.

The sketchpad was balanced on one knee as I tried to find answers to Circe with every stroke on the paper. With my head tilted and my eyes focused, the pencil curved around the shape of her lips and moved freely down her neckline. The clues to what she was hiding had to be in the drawing, but instead of finding her secrets, I lost myself in the pair of eyes I could never get right. And when frustration overcame me, I set the sketchpad down, staggered to the toilet room with my hand clutched to my side, and spent little time in front of the mirror.

Mother had to have succeeded because, finally, I could see my face.

But a stranger lived in the reflection of the mirror.

A ghost. A shadow. A face that didn't belong to me.

I touched my fingers to my cold cheek and ran them down the length of my jaw.

My expression was like one of my drawings, and I tried to feel what it was like to smile, to frown, to make the same faces I'd seen in my twenty-four years, but I was nothing more than a fraud whose life force was slowly slipping away.

Was it because of the infection or something else?

In Circe's eyes, smile, and emotions, she was entirely connected with

herself. She was so easy, honest, and certain of who she was. She was able to express herself in all the ways she desired. She could embrace herself rather than hide, and she could hide, too, if that was what she wanted. She had her whole life to draw whatever picture she wanted others to see and had done these things as if it had become second nature.

Without the grain sack covering my face, I was afraid to admit that I did not recognize the man staring back at me. I did not know who this stranger was.

My breath achingly held as I stumbled into the bedroom for a bedsheet to cover the mirror. But I didn't make it far.

A pale dash of movement appeared in the dark corner of the room.

I didn't turn my head to see what it could be. Not right away. I kept my head forward, believing it was an apparition created by my mind from restlessness, hunger, or infection. But then soft, desolate whispers slipped from the corner, filling my ears.

A white figure stepped out of the shadow-clad corner near the bedroom door.

It took the shape of a woman.

In a billowing white dress that hid her feet, and long blonde hair floating above her waist, she kept her head down so I couldn't see her face.

As I leaned my shoulder into the bathroom doorway, my heart pounded and my hand curled around the door frame. My lungs ached as though there was no air left in them, but cold air blew between my lips with every shudder, reminding me I was breathing.

Upon turning my head completely, I caught the tail end of her as she slipped past me, causing fear and grief to climb my spine. With it, a shiver swept up the nape of my neck. As though she had brushed her fingers across it.

The sad, eerie whisper slithered in her wake as she stopped at the spiral staircase.

She turned her head just enough for me to catch her profile.

Its transparent shape possessed intense and determined eyes as it stared at me. Ones that held me tightly, watching me, waiting for me to act. However, as the temperature in the room began to drop, I was frozen to the ground, encased in its grasp.

"Mother?"

She wasn't a memory but in this very room with me.

She wanted me to follow her.

I complied, and the floor was soft and unsteady beneath me as I climbed the lighthouse stairs. My movements were not my own, robotically following the cusps of white around every turn, every dash. My footfalls were hollow, an echo in the night, dancing with Mother's gentle whispers.

The last few minutes were stolen from me once I found myself standing at the top of the lighthouse, the pain from my wound seizing my breath, shooting to my limbs, crawling and squeezing around my bones like ivy would do. I stood in the watch room surrounded by glass windows that overlooked the Atlantic, my gaze spinning about for her.

The door slammed shut behind me.

There was a book on the windowsill, surrounded by candles melted down to the wick. The book was caked with dust, the pages swollen, preventing it from closing entirely. This was when the air hissed. A raspy, unsettling sound.

It wanted me to take it.

Mother brought me here to show me something.

But I couldn't move. The uncontrollable tremble in my muscles kept me stuck here. Every movement felt like it cost the little air left in my lungs, the pain taking half my breath away. My joints were stiff from the cold, and when I reached out to grab it, my fingertips shook when they grazed the leather corners.

When my hand curled around the book, I brought it to my chest and slid down the window until my bottom met the floor.

I swiped dust from the cover, revealing a delicate design imprinted into the leather—a tree emblem of sorts. The slight touch sent flashes of Mother spinning in my mind: *with the full moon shining behind her, Celia screamed out to Mother, her name echoing throughout the hollow staircase as she scribbled angrily into the journal beside the windowsill.* These flashes stuck in my mind, coming through like lightning would cut through the sky.

The spine cracked when I opened it, and the pages fanned out before me by some invisible force. I flinched, and the journal slipped from my fingers and fell onto my lap.

There was no stopping the pages that flipped rapidly.

Until the book stalled on a journal entry.

September 5, 2015, screamed across the yellow, brittle paper. A date that didn't align with what I thought it to be. If the date was accurate, then over

one hundred and fifty years had passed while I had endured slow and agonizing deaths.

September 5, 2015

The moonchild must die to break the Curse of the Hollow Heathens.

It is the only way.

Celia once told me an immoral tale about a girl who fell into an enchanting sleep. Like all impressionable works of art, it was inspiring and the beginning of an idea. One that would take over a century to complete.

Much like this tale, my idea of breaking the curse planted a seed, sprouted roots, and grew into something much bigger than Celia and I could fathom. Although Stone's story was a nightmare, his ending would be an unforgettable one, unlike other twisted tales with tragic ends. A monster no more and a man free from his wretched curse.

It is during this 151-year span that Stone continues to give me the precious gift of youth and time as my son lies in a coffin at the bottom of the sea, waiting for the day that the moonchild dies.

I have made a few mistakes across the decades, as you can see in the pages before, consumed by lust and power, but this is what's so magnificent about endless youth and the ability to defy time. Mistakes can be erased and forgotten.

But unlike Stone's powers, spells are not forever.

What rises falls. What starts always ends. And with spells comes a cost.

There is a timer on the spell we cast on Stone, and we are running out of time.

Celia and I will die if we do not bring Stone back soon.

It is safe to say Celia pulled me back from the deceiving path as she always does. Together, we regained control of the plan to break Stone's curse.

After failing many times to kill the Lone Wolf, she gave birth to a daughter, but their keeper whisked the child away just after she was born. This keeper was crafty, casting a spell to chain up the descendant's location. Breaking through wasn't easy, but we found her. Her name is Fallon, and she resides in Texas, of all places.

There were difficult challenges, such as killing her keeper with many miles separating us, but I succeeded. The next step is to hex her maternal grandfather with sickness to lure the moonchild to Weeping Hollow because Fallon must die here, where it all began. It could take a few more years, but once it's done, I'll need to send a letter informing the moonchild of her grandfather's illness. I've spent many lonely nights perfecting Benjamin Grimaldi's handwriting.

The truth is, something else is standing in my way that first needs my attention.

For years, I could control Javino Blackwell's shadow-blood from Bone Island, practicing killing from afar, but seven years ago, The Order executed him, leaving his son as my only option.

Julian Blackwell is stronger, which forces me to leave the island much sooner than I'd anticipated.

For the first time in over a hundred and seventy years, I will step foot onto the mainland of Weeping Hollow and insert myself into the townspeople's lives. Enough time has passed, and I am confident they've forgotten me. Once the new generations learn to accept and trust me, I will be close enough to Julian to control him like I once owned his father.

Making sure a Blackwell takes the life of the moonchild completes the circle and will keep

my hands clean to have a deserved life with my uncursed son. If all turns out well, my son will awaken from his deep sleep and will be able to take off his mask.

For the 151st time, this day marks my son's twenty-fifth birthday. For months, I've stared into the eyes of this circled date I've carved into my mind. It is the day people will meet me under the name of Carrie Driscoll with a false lover by my side.

All the horrible things I have done that have led me here do not haunt me. I have no regrets. It is for my son, and I would do it all again until my dying breath.

Should I not survive this, I will leave this journal behind so my true name will not be forgotten like the original tales we take and twist to omit the ugly things we hate so dearly. As well, I hope that the day Stone awakens, his life will not be as miserable as before but will become a beautiful after with the new ending I've created for us.

Forever yours,
Clarice Annabelle Woolf

"IT CAN'T BE." THE WHISPER HAD FALLEN FROM MY LIPS, BUT AS MUCH AS I detested it, I recognized Mother's eloquent penmanship stained on the pages. In her handwriting, the truth mocked me from the spine.

What she'd done to me was unnatural. What she had willfully taken from others was monstrous. All the lives lost were for breaking a curse I'd accepted and could live with, and I was disgusted with myself.

Although I had not killed them, it felt as though I had.

The corpses piled up as I pondered Mother's spree on my conscience.

Heavy. Entirely too heavy.

As I shook, bile curled inside my stomach and threatened to spill. I hadn't eaten anything, leaving tears clinging to the corners of my eyes as I dry heaved. Every empty hurl was the sharp point of a knife dragging and twisting through my insides.

"Tell me you didn't kill all these people," I said through clenched teeth. "Tell me it isn't true."

A menacing laugh reverberated in my skull from the other side of the veil.

At that moment, a gust of wind blew into my face, fanning the journal pages with an invisible rage-filled hand.

I watched the years descend before my eyes—the years Mother lived while I'd suffered the same repeated death for over a century. And if Mother had her way, perhaps an eternity.

She lived on, and she used me to do it.

The room spun when I tossed the journal to the side. She didn't do this for me. She did this for herself. No one else had to die because of me. Enough blood has already been spilled. It never had to be this way.

Mother's laugh turned manic. A celebratory howl in my ears.

The cold winds rushed past my face despite the sealed windows.

Anger unloaded inside me. "Why are you still here? What do you want?"

The journal opened again from a foot away, its pages flipping quickly.

It stopped on another journal entry.

I reached forward and slid the journal closer.

It was a spell to bring her back from the other side.

She'd lured me here so I could find her journal to bring her back.

"No," I shook my head. *Take a look at what it has already made you into.*

Then the room halted. A standstill.

But this thing hadn't left. I knew because there was a presence in the air.

I could still feel it in this very room.

The journal at my side only fed the raging fire inside me.

Once I gained the ounce of strength I could, I used the wall to help me to my feet and staggered for the exit. The floor bowed and bent beneath me. I entrusted the railing to carry me out of the watch room and down the spiraling staircase with the journal clutched to my side.

I loathed the journal. I wanted nothing to do with it any longer.

Upon entering the main living area, the room curtsied and waltzed before I could reach the fireplace. Then the floor dissolved, my steps falling into nothing, and I collapsed to the ground. The journal was no longer in my hand but had slid across the floor under the couch.

Mother released more laughter laced with insanity.

The brand of laughter that echoed, no matter the passing of time.

Fire erupted on the hearth, igniting the entire room before cold darkness swallowed the flames. A lightning bolt struck outside the window, and electric blue speared across the mirror resting on the mantle. Mother's silhouette appeared inside it.

With long blonde hair and a slim ghastly face, she looked as I remembered, but with grim outlining the shape of her eyes. She dragged her finger across the glass from the other side of the mirror with a chanted spell.

"Elb murcuoy yam traehre pap!"

The world became hazy until I was devoured by darkness.

SHIPWRECKED SOULS

ALEC & CIRCE

THE DAUGHTER OF THE SEA SUNBATHED IN THE OCEAN'S ARMS AT DAWN.

Surely, her home had come with a tub, but the young lady craved his eyes on her—the escape in his gaze. So, it was there, on Weeping Hollow's shore, where she bared herself to the sea. The fading night said its goodbye across her skin, and the warm rising sun shone down on her like Summerland's spotlight.

At the cliff's edge, Alec's eyes had fallen upon Circe once again.

A year had passed of inescapable grins and barely caught glances. Alec adored her from the shadows, and through the year, Alec had become intimate with her in all the ways he could. He knew that on Thursdays she preferred vanilla rose moon milk, and how she braided her hair back on the mornings it rained. He knew the cream-colored dress was her favorite because she walked differently in it, more at ease, and that she clutched her necklace when she was nervous. He knew more about her than most others, without ever knowing her name.

On this day, however, she had become more brazen.

While almost a hundred feet separated them, Circe met his eyes as her dress slipped off her body and collapsed on the sand.

My god, he thought the second his eyes hit her.

He leaned against the cliff, his shoulder hitting the rock, almost sinking at

the sight of her. He clutched his drawings in his shaking hand to hold himself back, his heart stampeding in his chest like a herd of wild horses. Alec memorized her edges, curves, and Circe's smile was tempting, teasing.

A fire rose in his cheeks.

Then she turned her back to him and stepped into the ocean until the water came up to her ankles.

Brisk morning winds brushed his skin from all directions, sending his golden-brown curls to blow into his line of sight.

He shook his hair from his face and leaned his forearm against the cliff, using it to prop up his sketchpad to draw her. With every airy light stroke, every black line of the silhouette of the girl that stood in the shallow, his chest thundered. Drawing her was, after all, the only way he could ever really touch her.

Circe's locks fell just above her waist and clung around her shoulders and back as she stood naked in the sea as if it were the only home she'd ever known, slathering every inch of her skin in stolen lavender oil. Her skin color was like a rich treasure as the sky illuminated, casting spotlights on parts of her, then drifting to others.

Alec watched with adoration as she smoothed the oil from her feet to her breasts, his breath coming out in a shudder. His arm fell to his side in awe. He could draw her every day for the rest of his life but no amount of talent could match her beauty. He was completely and utterly fixated.

Hypnotized, he turned, his spine meeting the cliff, and he dropped his head back, eyes falling all over her. Falling, sinking, going down. Why must she torture him before destroying him?

Bain Seldon, Cantini's most loyal guard, shouted in the distance from the other side of the cliff, his voice closing in on Circe. She quickly wrapped herself in a dove-colored cloth, left her unnecessary belongings behind, and ran in Alec's direction, unable to conceal her laughter.

Only Alec turned frigid as she passed, having never been this close to her.

Nearing, Circe turned her head just enough to meet his gaze, and she gestured for him to follow her.

Eager to be close to her, Alec tucked his drawing into his back pocket. This was mad. Insane.

If not now, then when? he asked himself.

So he chased her across the shoreline.

At first, Circe was hesitant to speak to him. She knew the musical sound

of her voice could make even the cruelest man with a callous heart fall in love with her. However, this was the first time she had the chance to be close to the islander—the one who made her heart do the most maddening things—without anyone seeing.

No more gazing, she thought, unable to resist him any longer. With the utmost longing, she clutched the sapphire lying upon her chest until it glowed in her palm, trapping all her magic inside so this would be true. He was worth it, she believed.

Dear heart, be easy.

Circe turned just in time, Alec only a breath away.

The two locked eyes, trying to calm their hearts, their breathing, their feet halted in the white sand that was still cold from the night.

"Tell me your name," she all but demanded, putting on a brave face. In truth, she was entirely nervous to stand this close and be enchanted by his details, his light eyes. "I have the right to know my admirer's name, the one who's been watching me from the shadows."

Alec's face transformed from anxious to amused by her remark.

But that wasn't all he was feeling. He stood tall and protective of this moment, daring the guard, who was not far behind, or anyone for that matter, to steal this from him. He was in awe of her, his masterpiece, longing for the chance to touch her for the first time. And if he were honest, he was afraid she'd change her mind and leave.

He was all these things, and it was equally nerve-wracking.

"Alec," he said, smiling, gripping his hip bones to inhale, exhale, to settle himself, to control his hands from taking her into his arms. "And I would have to disagree. It was hardly from the shadows. Have I not made myself obvious?" She stood stunned, so Alec took a careful step closer, raising a brow. "I have to know your name."

"It's been a year," she said, taking a step back.

"The longest year of my life. Both enslaving and intoxicating." Alec's mouth quirked at the end. "Now, please tell me your name."

"Twelve new moons, and you haven't spoken to me. You kept me waiting," she teased, her pulse pounding beneath her skin. "Do you even desire me at all?"

Every word coming from her mouth only made Alec fancy her more, how she was bold, playful, a little free. "I cross the ocean nearly every day just to catch a glimpse of you. I have no other business being here."

“So, why do you only watch?”

“Because,” he said simply. “You are capable of a terrifying thing no one has had the power to do before, which is rip my heart out. Now,” he took another step forward, “if you don’t tell me your name, I will call you *mine*.”

She took a step back. “Circe,” she said, amused and looking up at him through her dark lashes. “I’ve seen that look many times. You gaze at my body with desire in your eyes.”

This only drew him in more. “I’ve desired you long before I’ve seen your body, Circe.”

And she raised a brow, taking another step back with a gorgeous smile that made all the blood in his heart melt to other places. But then her back met the cliff, and she had no place left to go.

A wave hit the shore, causing a breeze to crash between them.

Her scent slammed into Alec. He closed his eyes to savor the aroma of essential oils. Perfume and a sapphire around her neck, he knew only a lady of fortune could acquire such valuables. He had these assumptions about her, but this never disturbed him.

Alec took his last step forward, exhausted from his frolic.

His breath stuttered when he lifted a hand to touch her cheek.

She flinched, and he cocked a brow at her reaction.

“I would never harm you,” he said, dropping his arm in surrender.

Patiently, he waited, breath stalled, heart on reserve, eyes on her.

Then he felt her fingers reach out and touch his.

He felt his heart beat again.

Circe took his hand in hers and brought it to her face until her cheek was in his palm. His thumb grazed her cheekbone, and she closed her eyes, and he freed a breath. He shifted in place, shifted closer, and tilted her head back to see her face. “If you must know,” he said with a shaky breath, “I desire something far more than your body.”

She looked at Alec with two seafoam eyes that sparkled like sea glass. He wasn’t only handsome. In truth, there was something disarming about him. And to be disarmed by a man to any degree was equally thrilling and terrifying. Circe had everything to lose, so why couldn’t she stop herself?

“Stay! Identify yourself,” Bain called out.

Circe slipped out of Alec’s grasp, took his hand, and pulled him around the corner, dipping into the cave. He looked from left to right before slipping into the shadows behind her. When he faced Circe again, she had her back

pinned against the wall, her chest heaving.

He came up on her and leaned in, resting his forearm on the cave wall above her head. “Tell me to stop, and I swear to you, I will stop.” She was so close he could taste her breath on his lips, but he kept his hands to himself, waiting, waiting, his gaze sliding into hers. “But I don’t want to stop—”

Circe pushed up on her toes and kissed him right on the lips.

Just once before pulling back to look at him.

Alec blinked, suddenly looking much younger with a boyish grin.

Circe’s heart raced and Alec lowered his head, dipping down, taking it.

His mouth crashed into hers before the rest of his body did. And after all this time, he was kissing her, and kissing her, and kissing her, opening his mouth, feeling her tongue slide across his. It made his head spin and his chest ache.

She lifted onto her toes, grasping at the back of his head, pulling him closer, crushing his body to hers. The cloth wrapping around her body slipped off her and Alec’s warm hand dragged up her spine, the other sliding down her soft skin at her side.

He was losing control, his erection pressing into her.

Her heart was already hungry, but at that moment, it was starved, threatening to gnaw on itself if she didn’t let him in.

Alec had to pry himself away from her, but he did with a moan. “Come back with me to Bone Island,” he said, his hand sliding up and down her back, still unable to peel away from her body. “I don’t want a mere moment. I want more.”

Circe shook her head and kissed him once more.

A kiss that left him unraveled as she slipped out of his arms.

Alec turned, watching her take off toward the ocean.

“Circe!”

Then he chased after her.

It seemed, as the story goes, he was always chasing after her.

Circe ran into the water with grace, yet Alec’s steps seemed the opposite.

“What are you doing to me?” he asked, reeling and afraid.

The waves were challenging, forcing him away from her.

She turned to face him with a daring smile and raised her arms to each side. “Prove to me,” she said above the sound of the sea just as another wave slammed into her from behind. “Prove to me there is more, Alec. That once we delve deeper, it will still feel like this.”

She closed her eyes, and Alec held his breath when she fell backward into the water. The same wave crashed into him, and saltwater burned his eyes. He pinched them tightly with two fingers then opened them again. But she had gone.

Alec dove into the sea, propelling himself forward against the tide. He

WAVED HIS ARMS IN ALL DIRECTIONS TO FIND HER. AS TIME PASSED, THE PANIC inside him stretched until it filled him. His head broke above the water, and he scanned the surface for a sign of Circe. He had no such luck.

Refusing to give up, he drew in as much air as his lungs would carry, dove back under, and added more distance between him and the shore.

But despite all efforts, she had disappeared.

CHAPTER 18

ADORA

STONE DIDN'T ANSWER WHEN I KNOCKED ON THE LIGHTHOUSE DOOR.

And suddenly, I felt stupid standing here, freezing on the doorstep, fighting forceful winds, ready to confront him about a dream I'd had.

Gray clouds crawled overhead, and the winds threatened to tear off my jacket. At any moment, snow would come down and blanket the island in frosty white.

Without another second to waste, I tried the door's handle.

It was unlocked.

Inside, the room was dark, cold, and void of life.

Dusty curtains hanging at the window's sides billowed and swelled as if they were a pair of dancing ghosts.

An intense feeling crawled over my skin.

Like something else was in the lighthouse. Something that wasn't human.

"Stone?" I could hardly see the rest of the lighthouse. Only a spear of grim daylight through a frosted window sliced into the muted room. "Stone, are you here?"

At that moment, there was movement in the corner near the bedroom.

I froze, standing stock-still in the middle of the living room, a hypnotizing drip, drip, *drop* into a bucket Stone must've had set down to catch a leak.

With my heart slamming, I nailed my gaze to the thing hiding in the shadows, waiting for it to do something. To come out and reveal itself.

The floorboards creaked as this thing shifted, and a chill spiraled up my spine. I gripped my bag tighter. My other hand turned into a fist at my side.

"Come out, this isn't funny—" I stopped mid-sentence when a hiss

coasting along the shell of my ear swallowed up my words. Then the feel of cold, clammy fingers wrapped around my wrist, squeezing.

My pulse knocked against my skin; my blood turned cold.

I tilted my head slightly, seeing a ghastly hand.

"Stone, let me go," I hissed through clenched teeth, afraid to turn fully to look him in the eye.

Across the room, another shift, another creak came from the corner.

My gaze darted back to it just as Stone stepped out of the shadows, the grayish light cutting across his face. His imposing height demanded for him to be seen, with eye sockets carved out and bruise-purple, embellishing the hollow in his eyes. Right then, my bones wanted to break through my flesh so my soul could flee this spot.

"It's not me," his chilling whisper rasped, making my breathing stop. "It's Mother."

I turned to bolt from the room, but before a scream could rip from my throat, something crashed into the side of my head.

Something hard, something painful.

LIGHTNING STRUCK FIRST.

Cyan blue flashed behind my eyelids.

Thunder came next.

My head was throbbing, and a bump swelled on my temple when I touched it. I cracked my eyes open, and my lids were heavy, unable to take in the entire room. It was cold and dark as if the lighthouse dared anything to speak. To even breathe. The moon and lightning were the only light, catching snowfall outside and filtering through the dirty glass window.

My stomach dropped. Nightfall had already begun.

It was too late to go back.

A dragging sound came softly at first, then grew closer. Flesh against floor.

I imagined half a body cut apart at the waist, legs ripped off, guts and blood pooling across the hardwood, using whatever was left of him to get to me. But as I looked at where the sound was coming from, Stone was standing in the shadows, his palm sliding down the door frame as if to hold himself back. The moon's beam cast light across his face as he watched me.

I looked into his boundless gaze.

It was like staring into a void. An emptiness.

It was the first time I felt true terror in Stone's presence. Even the wicked corners of my mind, where it was nothing more than black dire, couldn't shield me from his eyes when they paralyzed me.

Run, hide, shrink into nothing, my mind commanded.

But I was stuck staring at him as he was staring back at me.

But then he took a step toward me, allowing the moon to bathe him with its light. The horrifying sight of him tucked my gasp into my throat.

Stone was naked, stripped down to nothing. And slashed across his monstrous shaft were bulging saw-toothed scars, uneven rivers of white and pink flesh. The largest one split his skin and ran down the side of his shaft, then crossed the front before fading into a light thatch of blond hair. Along the insides of his thighs and around his pubic bone were white protruding scars. Dozens of them.

I would have taken a step back if I were standing and not paralyzed.

But I was lying on the floor, with a shiver skipping along my skin.

I finally lifted my back off the floor.

"Stone," I whispered, trying to control the tremor in my voice. "What happened to you?"

He didn't say anything. He only held my gaze with a demand in his eyes. Like his biggest secret had been revealed, and there was no use running from it. There was nowhere to hide.

Damp, white strands curved over his forehead and into his eyes. His skin was flushed, sweat slid down his jawline, and his ghoulish stitches had been ripped from his flesh. Blood gushed along the contours of his stomach and dripped from his gloved fingertips at his sides.

I crept back, using space to put a barrier between us. It was all I had left.

"You … you removed your stitches?" I tried to sound concerned and wanted to look away, to pretend that his disfigurement that looked pulled apart wasn't there, but it was impossible to ignore, and my gaze slung across his silhouette.

If he answered, I didn't hear him.

All I was consumed by were the scars staring back at me.

A moment of gratitude passed through me. Stone's ugly was on display when mine could never be seen. I could hide mine. Stow it away. Bury it. But mine had a mind of its own, growing heinous thoughts that scratched out from their corners whenever they wanted.

Stone’s scars were repulsive, and I hated myself for thinking it. So much so that I wished my ugliness were a tangible thing to ball up and pitch into the fire. I wondered if he thought the same about his ugliness.

I felt him in that moment. How fitting that the only people who could ever know and see the horrific parts of us were the ones we decidedly exposed ourselves to. Whether we bare ourselves on the outside or on the inside.

“Did—Did someone do that to you?”

Stone didn’t say anything. He just looked at me.

A dead expression. A cast-iron outline.

Silent and unpredictable in an unnerving way.

But in his eyes, I watched how he slowly dissected my words, the tone in my voice, the cringe I should’ve hidden but didn’t.

He picked it all apart and shook his head. “Like what?”

I didn’t know if he was annoyed I’d asked or if he didn’t know what I was talking about. His gaze seemed far away, and his attention was seesawing throughout the room. Had the infection seized him at last?

I nudged my head to his waist. “Like your dick has been torn apart by a pack of wolves.” I didn’t mean for it to come out the way it did. I was angry and scared and, as I’d said, my mind was no longer my property. It was owned by the thing I’d been damned with.

A hot and intense scowl burned his expression.

It was the second time his marble façade cracked and knelt before an emotion.

He took a step toward me. “Do you find me revolting?”

I inched back. “No.” The one word was strong and convincing. I shook my head for good measure, hoping it would ease his mind. “No, of course not.”

Stone took another step closer. “I want to believe you, but your face tells a different story.”

The dagger I’d brought was in my raincoat, but I was no longer wearing it. Although I did not recall ever taking off my coat, it was neatly hung on a hook beside the only exit in the room. There were shards of wood scattered below it. The throbbing in my head continued, as I remembered the hand gripping my wrist and Stone’s mention of this mother.

Is she still here? In this very room?

Either way, the knife I’d brought was too far, and I didn’t know if I could

get to it before he reached me. The door leading out of the lighthouse was closed and far from town. No one knew I'd be here.

"I should probably go," I calmly said, forcing myself to stare at his chest and not at the maimed cock that was blatantly pointing at me.

Stone took another step until he was towering over me. "You can't leave."

I tried to back away. "Please, you're not yourself right now."

He threw his head back. "Why must everyone lie to me?"

A lump lodged in my throat just as his head snapped to the side.

"Quiet!" he shouted, and I flinched in place.

"Stone, I didn't say anything," I whispered, trying to remain even-tempered, but he wasn't looking at me any longer.

Then I understood that his mother must have done something to him.

He must be hearing whispers at this very moment.

It was the only explanation.

I scooted back to get away from him without making it obvious, to escape whatever delusion that was consuming him. "It's your mother," I said gently this time, trying to talk some sense into him. "Your mother did something to you, didn't she?"

Stone growled, ripping me off the ground by my arm like I'd weighed nothing, and slammed me against the closest wall. Then his hand came around my jaw, forcing me to look into his eyes. I clenched my teeth in his strong hand, trying to tear myself away from his hold.

"Look at me," he ordered, squeezing my cheeks together.

I steeled my spine and tried to pull away from his grip, but Stone was stronger.

"Get off me," I snapped between his fingers.

"Tell me the truth. Do you find me revolting as she said?" The wind howled and shook the door. Stone's voice had shaken too. As if a hex had possessed him.

"Yes!" I shouted in his face, spit flying, my eyes wide and wild. I didn't know why I was screaming. It could have been because his sudden anger fueled mine or because I was trapped here with an animal who was helpless and gentle one second and a storm the next. "It's ugly! I couldn't imagine anyone who would want to be with you!"

I couldn't believe the words coming from my pretty lips. I didn't know if I meant them, but I never expected anyone to hear them.

Rage took over Stone's gaze, and he grabbed my hands into one of his, only to rip my dress down the center and tear it from my body.

The straps slipped down my arms, and cool air licked my skin.

Fear rolled inside me, and, at the same time, a bolt of lightning tore across the sky. Its iron light lit up his disturbed face, and I wanted to recoil from it.

Stone grabbed my hip, pinning me between him and the wall, smearing his blood across my skin. I tried to pry myself out of his grip. "Get off me!"

I freed one hand and pushed against his hard, solid chest, but Stone didn't budge. I then pounded into it, wishing I had strength greater than a man's. I wished I could have better control of this situation, take over, or be powerful enough to fight him off. It was a fearsome position to be in, knowing that no matter your talent, skill, intelligence, or strength, there was always someone stronger, better, and capable of possessing you, making you feel like nothing. I had never been stupid enough to let a situation like this happen until this moment. But it didn't make a difference. In the end, no matter how deep the darkness was lurking inside me or how pure my intentions were, none of it was enough to save me. In my panic over the possibility that he would rape or kill me, I beat him repeatedly and screamed from a raw throat.

Stone hissed through his teeth and snatched my waving wrist. Blue veins popped in the muscles of his arms when he nailed it to the wall, both of my wrists in one of his hands again.

"Stone, if you do this," I started to say through clenched teeth, using the wall to erect my spine, refusing to go down without a fight, "I *will* kill you."

He paused with his mouth parted, a bead of sweat pooling in the bow of his upper lip. His tortured gaze slid across my face, and he cocked his head. "I was hoping you'd say that."

After that, any hope left in me drained away.

I kicked my knee to jab his groin, but he reeled back and shoved it to the side. I pulled up my other knee, and he maneuvered my legs, dipped down, and buried his hips into my pelvis so I couldn't move them.

Blood gushed from his wound, and I felt it slide down between us and coat his erection that was piercing the space between my thighs. The sensation took him completely, making him come alive.

Though the room was freezing, sweat dripped down the sides of my hot face. But Stone was cold and heavy like a dead body pressed against me.

Just then, thick muddied vines adorned with black lilies poked and slipped through the cracks in the floorboards. They shot up, twisting and

curling like muscled claws, wrapping around my thighs, spiraling my torso, squeezing and crushing my lungs, circling my wrists. They pulled me tight, fastening me to the wall.

Petals fell from the vines and stuck to my dirty skin as my eyes bulged.

The earth helped him. He somehow controlled it.

A scream ripped out of me. “You’re a witch,” I half shouted, half croaked while the vines took full possession of me. Stone’s forehead fell to mine, and he looked into my eyes with forlorn hunger.

I recognized the starvation that lived within them. The hollow, too.

“And you’re perfect,” he said with a wince, removing his gloves. “You’re the most perfect thing I’ve ever seen in my miserable existence.” Sweat dripped off the tip of his nose when he collected blood on his fingers, then dragged them through my slit. I froze from the feeling arousing my every cell, watching the sensation break across his features, too. “You’re perfect, but not like this,” he rasped into my mouth, intensity dripping from his words. “Once I’m inside you, you’ll be as revolting as you think I am.”

I wanted to clench my thighs together from the friction, but I was trapped against the wall, my thighs spread, unable to move. My blood pumped hot and heavy, and I hated how I was equally disgusted and deprived.

An icy breath swept across my lips, and I closed my eyes.

“Not like this,” I sputtered through a shattered breath. I hated the clashing sensations, the finality of the now, the wrongfulness and indiscretion, and how badly I wanted him to just plunge inside me already.

“I can’t stop,” he almost forced out, his bare hands dragging across my skin. Like this feeling was too severe. Like he wanted to touch me everywhere. “Even if I wanted to.”

And Stone’s eyes were glistening, maddened when he dragged his tongue up my cheek to collect a bead of sweat. Like my ocean, always taking.

His mouth swept across my cheek, ear, and jaw like he already knew every part of me. Then the pad of his thumb stroked my bottom lip, and in an instant flash in my mind, I could see us days earlier: *a snowstorm raging outside, a dusty noir room inside, heart slamming just the same, breath on my lips, my hands shaking as we kissed—gentle, gentle.*

Stone’s eyes sobered, softened, his body thawed from a trance.

Something changed between us then, and his thumb wouldn’t let go, unearthing this memory that I could somehow see in the corner of my mind as though it were happening at the same time as this moment.

I remained still. Waiting, watching as realization dawned on his expression. At this, the vines and roots scratched my skin as they withered away and disappeared beneath the floorboards.

Stone's hand fell from my mouth, and the memory vanished with him.

He took a step back, his lungs letting go and heaving. The hideous thing wrapped in scars between his legs made my vision shake. I looked down between my legs where it had almost been. Blood coated me, black petals sticking to the insides of my thighs. I folded into myself, squeezing my legs closed with my sex pounding and … missing him.

And we stood there for a while, our breaths competing with silence.

I was confused and angry and somehow empty and cold without him even though all my scratches were on fire. His blood was soaked into my skin.

He hadn't fucked me, but I was still tattooed by him.

I looked at him standing in front of me.

He was still staring at me with utter shock in his tragic-black eyes.

On wobbly legs, I took a step closer, petals sticking to the soles of my feet.

And I struck him in the face.

Stone's head swung to the side—a nasty cut next to his left eye.

Blood slid down his cheek when he turned his head to look at me again.

"That's going to leave another ugly scar," I swore through my teeth, my cheeks flaming hot and my hands trembling. "Every time you look in the mirror, I want you to remember this moment. The one and only time I showed you mercy. There will not be another."

I stepped back and collapsed against the wall, trying to catch my breath.

Stone's hardened gaze never left me. Blood dripped from the cut, down his jawline, and across his neck. He wiped the side of his face, and blood smeared across his cheek.

"Circe," he finally said, numbing my thoughts.

"No." There was nothing he could say to dilute this moment.

Stone's face contorted at my response, and he drove his fist into the wall. The wall crumbled under his fist, and his knuckles pulled back bloody and battered.

"Look at what you've done!" he roared.

I flinched in place and wanted to look around the room, but I also didn't want to take my eyes off him. There was no telling how fast he could snap back into insanity.

He had been out of his mind. He had been something else entirely.

Stone flipped the couch off the floor, slamming it back into the wall. Beneath it lay a book, and he reached down and grabbed it. My gaze followed him to the fireplace.

The muscles in his back moved as he snatched a lantern from the mantle, his shoulder blades flexing like wings each time he tried to catch his breath. He turned on the lantern, igniting the gas flame, and pitched it into the fireplace.

A fire exploded, and he tossed the book into its flames.

I watched from behind his statue-like stance as the fire leaped up the chimney, growing teeth and scorching the curling pages before eating away at the charred leather.

A sound filled the room. It didn't make sense, but it was as if the book was laughing, and its laugh shriveled into a scream until it died away.

Whatever it was, was gone. We were alone at last.

Stone turned his head.

His side profile was a painting of ruby and snow. "You should go."

I should have gathered what was left of my dress from the ground.

I should have run.

I wasn't thinking. Not at all.

I was walking toward him on impulsive feet, my chest heaving. I didn't stop until I was standing behind him, an ache pumping under my skin, a craving rushing through my veins, my sex pulsing for relief, the gentle memory replaying even though it was over. I kissed his shoulder blade.

"Do you still want me, Stone?" I asked.

Because despite the lies wrapped around us, this secret was the most honest thing I'd ever had. I could see the despair in his eyes and hear the crying out for me in his touch. Stone's starvation called upon mine. So, I grabbed his hand and turned him until he was facing me.

I can do this, I thought. *Just once to know what it's like.*

"Now that it's over and she's gone, do you still want *me,* in the same way, right now, without a second to think?"

There was a tortured look in his eyes as they swung between mine.

There was also a shock.

"Yes," he exhaled, relief raining down his features. "I fear if not now, then nevermore."

Those words chained themselves to me. They tossed an anchor to the

bottom of my heart, and I wondered what it would have been like if things were different.

I kissed his mouth that was hung open, sliding my tongue across his just once. “Then take me,” I whispered, inching back.

And Stone leaned in, chasing my lips.

CHAPTER 19

ADORA

STONE'S TONGUE CURLED AROUND MINE WHEN THE TWO OF US COLLIDED WITH the stone wall.

In seconds, my legs wrapped around his hips, and my spine banged against stone masonry as Stone was grinding into me, drunk on misery. Equal parts forlorn and desperate, he was single-minded to overpower me while I was trapped inside his arms.

I wanted to ignore the scarred shaft stroking my soaked sex and the swollen head smashing between my thighs, pretending instead that it was normal and smooth and velvety. Pretty. Not scarred and ugly.

He hammered into me like a mad creature, trying to thrust inside with sweat beading his brow. It was unpleasant, a pounding without relief, without a fill. He was too big, the size of a tiny fist prodding my tight hole.

"It may not work." The bitter truth struggled to come out. They weren't words but thorns, making me ache. I wanted Stone just as much as he wanted me in fear of never having this chance again.

Desperate and breathing hard, he lifted me higher and slid his hands under my ass. His fingers grazed the rim of my opening, and his movements slowed and turned gentle as he circled my entrance, massaging it, stretching it.

I clung to his neck, my mouth falling open in a sigh.

Stone inched two fingers inside, then dragged them out. My gaze was drawn to his eyes as he peered up at me and rested his wet lips on the soft skin of my breast. He held my gaze, teasing my opening when a whimper rolled out of me.

I believe I would have been satisfied with just his mouth brushing lazily

across my erect nipples. I would have come undone from his fingers stroking me from inside as he looked up and into my eyes. I would have come from this alone.

A third finger entered, and I dug my teeth into my lip to suffocate my moans, rolling my hips, grinding on his fingers, my nipple scraping his teeth.

He watched me, mesmerized.

I watched him, consumed.

I would have fucking come.

But then he withdrew his fingers and grabbed his shaft, forcing his thick head inside me. And he lowered me until our foreheads connected, our eyes catching. He looked at me then, grabbed my ass with both hands. Just one squeeze, holding it, with fingers digging into my flesh.

A breath later, he edged his cock inside me, the deformed thing breaking through my hole, filling me with pressure, and plunging to the hilt.

My breath held as every ripple of skin sliced through me.

All his jolting ridges. Every painful imperfection.

His scarred cock in all its entirety was in me, pulsing, convulsing.

A lacerating burn shot up my spine, and a cry left my lips.

Stone's lids drooped, brows slanting upward in ecstasy, his entire body tense as an instant orgasm blasted through him. The scene was like a werewolf transforming under a full moon. Muscles tight as if shocked, jaw clenched, head thrown back.

He grabbed the back of my head and looked into my eyes again. He kept them on me as he slowly dragged his cock out, and I could feel warm semen sliding down my inner thighs. Then he pushed back in, every horrific inch, until our hips met, his pelvis colliding with my throbbing clit.

I clawed at his back, feeling him everywhere.

Stone's inside of me. Bound to me. Fucking me.

His imperfection was deep, rooted, and a part of me. Just like he wanted.

Stone didn't want me to escape him in the same way he couldn't escape himself.

Lightning struck, the wind howled, and snow pelted against the glass.

Weeping, weeping.

And I wept too, tears rushing down my face.

Weeping because it hurt. Between my thighs and in my chest.

I'd never had sex with someone and felt so cracked open that emotion slipped out. And yet, I was crying in front of a man for the very first time.

Stone’s hand came over my cheek and he wiped my tears with his thumb.

Our noses brushed. “We’re perfect,” he whispered.

I nodded and then he kissed me. This was the closest I’d been to another, and at this moment, Stone could break any valuable thing left in me.

My back hit the wall once more, every thrust making the lighthouse go quiet, daring the storm to speak, punishing time for passing.

We held our breaths. We forgot to breathe.

Until his cock slipped out.

For a second, he was gone.

For a second, I was empty, panting, mourning the loss of him.

For a second, he was panicked, gasping, a blue vein thumping in his neck.

He grabbed the base of his bloodied shaft and jammed the swollen head into my slit, trying to find the opening again. Cold sweat dripped down the sides of his face and off the tip of his nose, resting on his cupid’s bow. He darted out a tongue to collect it as he dragged his cock through my warm pink center.

A delicious moan sailed between his lips from the feel of it.

So innocent, honest, and guilt-free.

My chest heaved with anticipation.

A warm buzz dashed across my insides.

I wanted this. Terribly. I wanted to be destroyed by him.

The desperation, difficulty, and deprivation made my heart ache.

His long fingers wrapped around my hips, and he drove inside me. My head fell back against the wall, my toes curled, then sprang loose. He inched out, his lips dragging up my throat when he thrust inside me again.

My heart buckled, and I squeezed my hands into fists at my sides to fight the strange emotion. I squeezed until my palms bled.

“Don’t,” Stone murmured against my neck, sliding his hands down the length of my arms and splaying my fingers open. Then he placed both on his shoulders. “Use me,” he insisted, and when my nails bit into his flesh, his jaw clenched, and he pounded inside me that time.

It turned into a desperate beating, the base of my spine banging into the wall. A beautiful, nasty bruise would come in the morning should I survive him, but I forgot to care. At this moment, he was my entire world.

The ugly that possessed us floated away, and all that was left were two deprived souls who ached for closeness, who, within each other, found comfort. I felt every inch of his sawtooth scar, and, in a way, I gripped,

caressed, and hugged him back.

Stone let go of my hips, fell forward, and slapped his hand on the wall next to my head. Then he lowered onto his elbows, lean muscles knitted around his bones. With his lips a hair's breadth away, he crushed our hips together, nailing his cock inside me, grinding into me in a way that dared this night to end.

The feeling of us caused a moan to tumble out of him.

Goosebumps coated his skin, and his eyes rolled back in his head.

"You undo me," he confessed, capturing my gaze with hooded eyes.

Our mouths were open, our lips were sliding, and his breath was chilling, like drinking from the bottom of the ocean.

I pushed back his sweaty hair and cupped his jaw in my hand.

"I am your first," I said to him knowingly.

He nudged my lips with his. "You are my only," he corrected.

I grabbed the back of his head, taking a fistful of his thick hair until he pushed his tongue into my mouth. A long, body-seizing drag. He became a madman, fucking and kissing me with the same ache thrashing beneath our skin, our hearts slamming so hard we heard it in our ears.

When I kissed him deeper, his hand flew to the back of my head, keeping us here. His other hand held tightly to my side, grasping on to me with a fearsome power as if I were to soon sail away. *Never leave me again*, I imagined him thinking as his fingers threatened to puncture through my flesh, snap the bones of my ribcage, and leave black petals of himself beside my heart—just in case I did.

Stone's hand slid down my backside and under my ass, where we were connected. He curled his fingers into my skin, stretching me wider and burying his cock to the base until there was nothing between us. Not even air.

So, I pressed myself against him as he guided me in a sensual grind.

All of me against all of him.

The sensation made Stone weak.

My next breath was caught in my throat.

His fingers wrapped around my jaw as he swept his tongue into my mouth, crushing me against the wall.

Flames blazed in the fireplace at his back, and winter surged through broken glass, rushing past our skin. He held me, just like this, with his cock buried deep, grinding my pussy against him. As he moved inside me slowly. In awe of me. Just like this.

Just like this.

There was an ache inside me that had never been filled, pleasure from a man. An orgasm from a man. I wanted it so badly but was terrified of what would come after, so I tried to pull away without physically pulling away.

But Stone caught my lip between his, holding our kiss through another fierce grind. He swallowed my cry as I squeezed my eyes shut, a climax scraping my nerve-endings. A warning that felt like a heart attack.

Despite all efforts, my thighs trembled.

Another cruel grind and I was ripped apart by an orgasm so severe I thought I would die from it. One that made my mouth fall open, my body jerk, and my cells pulse, stripping air from my lungs. I could have sworn that, at that moment, my soul had left me.

I saw stars. All of them.

I saw planets and moons and constellations.

I saw another life, another world outside of my own.

Stone eased himself in and out of me, stroking my orgasm until he seized up monstrously strong for a heartbeat. Then a burst of semen exploded. It was supernatural degrees hotter than the rest of him. Like when the sand spent too many hours under a scorching sun. A warm, peaceful paradise.

I looked up until my eyes caught with his.

He was already looking at my face.

Both of us stared at each other, unblinking. Not breathing.

Kane had fucked me many times but never looked at my face.

Stone was fucking looking into my eyes, and my heart was screaming.

My body collapsed.

He was holding me, but my body collapsed, if that was possible.

I didn’t know how long we stayed like this.

Trapped in each other, holding each other.

Eventually, I slid down his torso until my feet met the ground.

Stone took many unstable steps back until he sat in a chair, his chest finally letting go and heaving.

I looked down between his legs. I shouldn’t have, but I did.

The thing was wrapped in crimson gore.

It made me feel so many different things.

And we both stared at each other, my thighs clenched, while I tried to decode how I felt. Physically, mentally, and emotionally.

I was confused and empty and freezing without him.

I was angry. Lost. Disheveled. I was all things and nothing.

Stone's voice cut through the silence first. "Are you all right?"

"No," I whispered. A sad sigh escaped me, and my fists clenched, my nails piercing my palm again. "After you, I don't think I'll ever be okay again."

He could have mistaken these words for anything other than what I'd actually meant. And for that, good.

"Please come here," Stone whispered, his lips swollen apple-red as he stared at me. Blood streaked across his torso and thighs. His face was stained too, but the cut under his eye from when I struck him was no longer bleeding.

I walked on wobbly feet to him, stopping between his spread thighs.

"I hurt you," he said, gazing up at me, brushing his knuckles across the back of my hand. I looked down, and that was when I felt fresh, warm blood sliding down the inside of my legs. When I looked back at Stone, his gaze raked my inner thigh, following the blood trail.

He grabbed the back of my thighs and pulled me to stand between his knees. There was no time to think. No time to react. His lips fell open, his head tilted back, his tongue darted out, sliding leisurely through my slit.

The instant shock caused me to jump back from his mouth.

My mind went numb. My eyes were wide, my hands trembling.

I studied his blank expression.

"No," Stone insisted. My heart slammed, insecurity spiraling out of control as he dragged me to stand closer, between his knees, trapping me in this spot.

Even though I'd never had anyone go down on me before, I didn't think this was what Stone's intentions were. I'd seen this side of him back when he'd withdrawn my splinter from my finger in such a raw, blunt way. Stone was part wild, animal-like, and all he wanted was to lick the bleeding.

I tried to breathe and remain calm, but then he grabbed behind my knee, lifted my leg, and planted my foot high on the arm of the chair. I fell forward, catching his shoulders for balance, and a cool draft coasted across my spread pussy that was close to his face.

The act was innocent for him but erotic and heady for me.

Every hair raised across my body. "Stone, it's okay. You don't have to," I whispered, but then he was smoothing one palm up the inside of my thigh, dragging his hot tongue across the inside of the other, licking the blood away.

I squeezed my eyes shut to find bravery. Then I opened them again,

feeling him grab underneath me, fingers squeezing my ass and his thumbs hooking around both sides of my pussy from behind. Then he sank his thumbs into my slit and spread my lips apart. The cold air hissed across my core while Stone stared, watching as his thumbs slid down the slick edges to my opening. He then stretched me open, drawing circles, watching me glisten as he gently massaged the hole my blood was coming from.

"Oh my god," I breathed, unable to believe this was happening.

His lips parted, his hooded eyes dilated as his gaze raped my bare pussy.

Then his eyes sailed up to my face.

He guided me closer, dropped his head back, and pressed his warm lips against my opening before grinding his tongue inside.

With a sigh soaked in bliss, I sank into his mouth, twirling my fingers through his white hair to keep me upright. Stone's thumbs held me, keeping me spread, dragging a tongue inside me and kissing the rim, soothing the sting.

"Oh my god," I cried again just when he moaned, a deep vibration buzzing through me. A warm whisper.

I dug my teeth into my lip and locked eyes with him.

He licked me deeply. From bottom to top. A slow drag across sore pink flesh until his tongue raked my clit. I threw my head back, digging my nails into his shoulders, an orgasm crying inside me.

Mercy, mercy, my heart screamed, going pale from all of the hot and heavy blood pooling to my core. And when Stone's tongue slid back down and curled into my opening, I almost died.

"Stone," I moaned, raking my nails up the nape of his neck and through his damp hair. His head fell back into my palm, and his mouth and nose dragged up and down through my slit. I whimpered from the softness that had become him. Wet, delicate strokes. Threads of gentle secrecy.

My legs shook, but he held me together in his hands as he watched me from below. The sensation was so intense that I tried to wiggle out of his grasp. But each time I moved, he gripped me harder and licked me deeper with his bared teeth scraping my clit.

The orgasm came faster, more fiercely than I expected. It washed over me. The kiss of a lightning bolt, electricity wrapping around my bones, my mouth falling open.

With his lips wrapped around my pussy, Stone's hooded gaze submerged itself in my broken expression. The wild stole his features, and he took my

pussy into his mouth, a moan leaving him as he swirled his tongue around my clit.

His moans became a shiver in my bloodstream. Half misery, half ecstasy.

The taste must have excited him because one of his hands left the inside of my thigh and flew to his erected cock. He swiped his thumb across the tip, collecting a bead of pre-cum on the pad, then inched back to watch as he dragged his thumb from my slick entrance to my clit and back down again.

I looked down, seeing that he had cleaned all the blood from my sex.

Then I threw my head back and closed my eyes, grinding against his thumb until it left me, and my pussy was rolling back into his mouth. When I opened my eyes again, he was fisting his cock, dragging his palm up and down the monstrous erection.

Stone aroused by just the taste of me was the sexiest thing I'd ever seen.

A moan vibrated through him, his cock twitching between his thighs. His hungry licks turned into long, feverish drags when he squeezed his erect shaft.

I bit my lip, admiring him stroking himself passionately until his cock jerked in his fist, semen spilling over his fingers.

Stone's hand left his cock, and he dragged his fingers through my sex, coating me with his semen. Then two soaked fingers sank inside me, and my orgasm clenched around them as he took my clit into his mouth.

"You are so sexy," I whispered in a shallow breath, fisting the back of his head, my whole-body trembling. "You're so sexy, and you have no idea."

He looked up at me, grazing the bud with his tongue, the feeling insane. No longer able to hold myself up, my legs buckled, and I was melting into his arms.

"Circe," he scraped out, dropping his head back into the chair and dragging my bottom closer. His cock was hot and heavy and twitching between my legs. I lay my head on his heaving chest, hearing his heart slam.

"Circe," he repeated, a sigh as if he were speechless, and I absolutely hated that name on his lips. Silence spread between us, and then— "I don't want to be alone."

I froze. I'd forgotten about Weeping Hollow.

I'd forgotten about Kane, Cyrus, and the Shadows.

I'd forgotten about Mom and Sacred Sea and my plan.

I was too lost in it all.

I got back to my feet, his hands falling from my hips.

I turned and snatched my torn dress from the floor.

I felt Stone's gaze follow me. "Wait."

I ignored him, and out of the corner of my eye, he got to his feet, too.

"You can't go out there. It's too dangerous."

I swiped my raincoat off the floor and glanced out the window and into the storm, unable to tell the sea apart from the sky.

I couldn't think. I couldn't form a single thought. How was I supposed to steer a boat, much less survive without a working brain?

"Stop and listen to me," he demanded, desperation in his tone.

Stone was angry. He didn't know why he was angry, didn't have the look on his face, but he was. I could hear it wrapped around his words.

"I can't." I slung my strap around my shoulder. "I wish I could, but I have to go."

I turned back one last time, seeing Stone standing with his jaw flexing. I spun toward the door, grabbed the handle, and pulled it open. But Stone came up behind, slapping a hand against it until the door slammed shut.

I could feel the heat of him pressing against my back.

"Circe, stay," he said, softly this time. "I don't understand what is so imperative that you must risk your life to leave, but I want you to stay despite it. I know you want to as well." It seemed he couldn't stand looking at the back of my head, so he grabbed my arm and spun me until we were facing each other. His pupils flared when they met mine. "I know what it's like to feel as if you're stuck in a glass bottle. I've experienced this feeling for what seems like over a century. I also know the only reason you saved me from the ocean is because I'm the most exciting thing that has ever happened to you, as you are to me. So stay, Circe. At least until the storm passes. Lest the next time I hold you is when I'm wrenching your body from the bottom of the sea."

I yanked myself out of his grasp.

But I was also speechless, with a stunned look stealing my expression.

"Stay," he repeated, taking another faulty step closer, looming over me and nudging his chin toward Weeping Hollow's cliff across the ocean. "You'll return anyway because the only reason you are here with me is because you cannot stand to be there."

"You don't know," I said through clenched teeth, my heart pounding fiercely. "You have no idea what you're talking about."

His eyes bounced between mine. "I know you're taking advantage of

me.”

“I’m not *taking advantage* of you,” I said, hating how the truth sounded coming from him.

“You mistake me for a fool, as though I were born the second you laid eyes on me. Begotten from fallen snow and morning tide.” He leaned in until my back was against the door, his gaze coasting across my mouth. “I wonder what would happen if you one day returned to this island, and I’m no longer here? What escape would you have then?”

A dark cloud smothered me.

Stone must’ve noticed because a pang of guilt moved across his face.

It drifted so subtly, not breaking his sculpted expression.

My eyes narrowed. “You won’t leave. You have no one else. Not anymore.” I pushed him away. “Your own mother tried to kill you. Not one soul has come looking for you.” What he’d said affected me. It made me so angry that the ugly spilled out of me as if he’d cracked some secret code to the other side. Stone did see me for what I was, and it was terrifying. “Look around, Stone. You have no place left to go. You’ve been abandoned, just like this island.” And I punctuated my words with a shove to his chest, a silent plea for him to never leave me.

Stone didn’t stumble. He stood solid like a statue.

There was a shift in his eyes, too. A mask sliding back on.

It was subtle. I didn’t even think he realized he’d done it.

And then, “You know how to cut me open.” He lifted his chin, eyes settling upon me. “It may not be with a knife, but you carve your initials inside me one way or the other, I see. It’s a miracle anything survives you.”

AN HOUR LATER, MY FEET WERE BALANCING ON THE TRELLIS OUTSIDE THE window of the Cantini manor.

I tapped the window lightly with my knuckle and peered inside.

Alice jumped to her feet and stared at me from the other side of the window with a ghastly expression. All the color had drained from her face.

She hurried to unlock the window and crank it open.

“Where have you been? I’ve been worried sick, thinking the absolute worst … and what was I supposed to tell Mrs. Cantini if she realized you weren’t here?” she continued to ramble as I hauled myself inside. “Adora! Is that … my gods, miss, you’re bleeding.”

“It’s not my blood.”

“What do you mean? What happened?”

Once back on solid ground, I sucked in a gulp of stale air and looked at her. “No questions. Please, Alice, not tonight.”

She noticed my hair and ripped dress, and her face fell into horror.

I grabbed the torn fabric in one hand and pinned the scraps to my chest to keep it in place.

“I’m okay,” I assured her. “I’m going to draw myself a bath. I just … I just need to be alone for a while.”

Minutes later, I was submerged in a clawfoot tub with one leg hanging over the rolled lip. Stone’s blood stained the water a pink hue—a virgin tongue licking my skin. I dunked my head below the water, pushed my hair back as I rose to the surface again, and inhaled a wet breath.

Black Persian lilies detached from my flesh and floated on the surface, reminding me of all I’d been through over the last few hours.

I had so many thoughts, starting with how he controlled the earth, the memory I could see, and ending with the look on his face before I left. But after a few moments wandering in my imagination, I was consumed by a sculpted face, heavily hooded lids embroidered with two drops of black ink, and the thick maimed cock that I missed thrusting inside me. My heart didn’t have rationality on its side, either. But it had a vicious throat and screamed to be close to him again.

CHAPTER 20

STONE

TWO DAYS HAD PASSED SINCE CIRCE LEFT THE LIGHTHOUSE. WITHOUT HER, the lighthouse felt numb and cold, robbed of its soul.

Perhaps she wished to regret me and had already decided not to return. And here I was, the fool abandoned on the other side of the ocean, worried about her after all the stories she'd told me about the town and its monsters.

Nevertheless, as time passed, my every thought belonged to her.

I was unable to rid myself of her sickly-sweet taste, her low sing-song hum, the rattle of her chest, and how her entire body embraced me. She'd taken full possession of me on a cold, snowy night, and I believe she'd never let me go.

Alas, the infection was gone. The journal was destroyed.

As soon as I'd tossed Mother's journal into the fire, she and the madness evaporated at once. It had all the answers to navigate this new world I'd been thrust into, but it wasn't worth keeping when all it brought was insanity.

Outside, the sky was silver and gray, with cold winds ripping past my face. I stood on the rocks, peering across the Atlantic to the border of Weeping Hollow, wondering what she could be doing at this moment. But the silence was deafening—nothing for miles.

Waves heaved under the waning moon, and daylight would soon slide away. Careful of the healing wound, I dragged more wood to shore, collecting shipwreck from around the rocks. It wouldn't be long before the fading cries would echo in the distance.

Plenty of wood was strewn across the rocks, and I'd spent the day rebuilding a boat. I yanked another plank from between two rocks. And just as I tossed it into the pile, a dark, chilling shadow slithered across my skin,

causing me to glance up.

At the top of the lighthouse, on the gallery deck, a tall, lean man stood on the ledge with curly bourbon hair, a linen shirt, and trousers. This was as much as I could make of him. So, I squinted, seeing what I thought to be his two bare feet teetering on the edge where the railing had broken.

And that was all he did. He just stood there, staring down at the rocks below with a solemn, wet face. I couldn't tell if his face was wet from the ocean's mist or if he'd been crying. He seemed sad, and I sensed something in him that I had in me. A silent despair.

But the island was supposed to be abandoned.

I'd been here a week and hadn't encountered a single living soul.

I waved, but he didn't wave back. He didn't do anything. He just stared with two hands reaching behind him and clutching the broken railing as if he were about to free fall into the sharp rocks below, the only option to escape the agony etched across his funereal expression.

This is it, I thought, his words passing through us concurrently.

But I couldn't let him do it.

I sprinted for the lighthouse, sand ripping apart at my soles.

The door slammed against the wall, and I raced up the spiral staircase.

My breath was a continuous crashing of waves in my ears, and my heart pounded with every step.

Halfway up, pain ripped across my stomach, and I clutched my side.

My shirt wasn't bleeding. I could stop here but ignoring what I'd seen wasn't in my nature. He was here. I was here. We were both here on this island for a reason. If I stopped him in time, he could have answers. He could know something about Mother or me.

Sweat slid down my brow, and a heartbeat later, I regained my strength and continued the long climb.

I was out of breath when I reached the gallery deck.

I pushed through the door, and a frosty breeze made of shattered glass ambushed me, pulling at my hair and grabbing at my clothes.

I forced my eyes open despite the burn, seeing him with his back to me.

"Don't," I shouted, the pain in my side stealing the edge in my plea. "Please, whatever you're thinking, don't do it."

He didn't look back at me. It was as though he hadn't heard me at all.

The man let go, and I launched forward, catching nothing in my hands. My abdomen slammed into the slick railing, and I watched him fade into

nothing before his body could hit the rock.

Just then, daylight vanished like a candle's flame that had simply been snuffed out into utter darkness.

I squeezed my eyes closed and opened them wide again, fully expecting to see the man's twisted limbs sprawled out across rocks at irregular angles by the moon's light.

I saw no such thing, only a giant wave rolling over rocks and breaking apart, foaming at the mouth. Another wind came, icicles slipping down my windpipe and freezing the walls of my throat. I leaned over the railing with my head in my folded arms, taking a deep breath. The tight wall of my chest beat against the steel.

Was I still going mad? Had I imagined the entire thing?

I looked upon the rocks once more, and the moon reflected off an object.

It was a few feet away from where his remains should have been.

The speck of reflective light drew me in.

Circe's father's trousers were loose around my waist as I descended the stairs. Slower this time. The bottom hem didn't quite reach my ankles, and that was where the cold grabbed me. I walked across the beach to the other side of the rocks where I'd seen the reflection.

I crouched down and sifted the beach.

What are you trying to tell me?

I desperately shoveled into the cold, wet sand.

The nose of a glass bottle protruded, and I yanked it out.

Inside was a curled note, its edges frayed.

A cork protected the message.

The moon's light above bounced off another glass wedged deep into the sand. I pushed sand out of the way. A *clink!*

Another turned up. Then another.

One by one, I unearthed bottle after bottle from their burial place, where time capsules had washed up on shore and seized this very spot. Much like memories had a way of leaving behind pieces of where we'd been, these bottles were smudges of history that refused to be forgotten.

With each bottle, the past rattled through me.

A hum of deranged and daffodil hair.

Insanity and olive eyes.

A collection of Circe.

There had to be at least a few dozen. Possibly more.

Another cry came and went. In a hurry, I gathered all the bottles in my arms and trudged through the sand back to the lighthouse, my boots leaving deep footprints behind me.

A strong, cold gust came. I entered the lighthouse just in time, the wind hurling itself against the other side of the door.

Stagnant air fell around me, and I fanned the bottles across the unbalanced table.

One bottle rolled off the edge and crashed on the floor.

I bent down, picked up the worn paper, and shook off the shards of broken glass.

It felt wrong, as though I was prying. These messages were meant for someone else. Certainly not for me.

I clutched the letter in my fist, walked to the window, and looked out into the distance. The wind slid along the broken window, singing and reminding me of Circe’s voice.

I closed my eyes and curled my fingers around the paper, squeezing and trying to extract her memory, desperate to feel her once more.

She blinked in and out. Dissolved, then returned again.

I felt her—the echo of her—standing on a shore.

A pale blue weathered cottage stood on stilts behind her while a stone fence bordered the property. A creaky gate swayed with every gust, her wild hair tossing in the wind. Amidst the chaos, her voice echoed like a silver bell, the moon ablaze with ominous light.

To my beloved black sea,

Early into the morning, I write until my wrist tires and a callus builds on my ring finger. The pages of my diary are beaten and bruised before they’re torn out, neglected words I should have said, inky swirls inside my head.

I like to believe that the more horrific confessions I write, the quicker my crazy will fade. But it usually only lasts for a short while. This is why they desire me but never love me. Because how could they?

There's a smile on my face, and they think I'm friendly, calm, and sweet, but it’s only because I'm imagining their deaths.

There's a light in my eyes, but it’s because of the thought of walking over their rotten bodies decaying on the floor. There are days I imagine myself gliding through Town Hall and seeing them at the monthly meeting. This is how far it has progressed. I'll step up the stairs, dragging a dead body from behind, leaving a trail of blood in my wake, and drop it next to the others. One is coughing up blood, but instead of helping him, I'll walk around the eight-

foot table and help myself to the Order's throne, stepping over limbs and hair and feet and fingers, ordering both covens to do whatever I please. Then, on my way out, a kick to a set of lungs while another lay there dead, leaving behind nothing but corpses.

There's more to me than this, I know, but there is no escape.

Trauma has a way of tying knots with our bones.

This is what happens when a woman has a mind she can't use, a loyalty she's forced to refuse. This is what happens when a woman is oppressed, silenced, ridden of purpose. This is what happens, I want to scream. My rage has turned into crazy. My secret is so heavy, the things that would happen to me if I ever said it aloud. I hate them for what they did to her. I hate them for what they're doing to me. But I hate myself more for this thing inside me, feeding me these thoughts I can't control.

I will tear this page out and give it to you.

My spite in the form of a love letter.

Surrender, my darling insanity.

Suffocate, my sweet emotions.

Pretend. Chin high. Be quiet.

Smile, my pretty lips.

Sink, my homicidal thoughts.

Until we meet again,

xx -

A

CHAPTER 21

ADORA

Beaver Moon
November 30, 2020
59 days until the Crimson Eclipse
62 days until the Cantini-Sullivan Wedding

"One, two, three…something's coming for me.
Four, five, six...the night is playing tricks.
Seven, eight...I better stay awake.
Nine...ten...I've lost my mind again..."

My mind was both mystic and madness.

My lips moved, and I couldn't stop them.

I heard myself singing the words over and over, and the voice surrounding me didn't sound like my own. The voice was strangled with numbers and vowels and syllables trying to be freed. But I couldn't let them go ...

I.

Couldn't.

Break.

Away.

A scream poked through my song, and I snapped my eyes open.

All around me, blinding light, stainless steel and a haunting knocking thumped in my temples. A spooky drum sound. A … *thud* … *thud* … *thud.*

I was standing in the Cantini kitchen.

"Mother!" Camora's razor-sharp voice ricocheted off the appliances. Tears streamed down her paling cheeks as she stared at me with terror in her eyes. The timbre of the one word, like a stone curlew screeching across the night, made my blood turn to ice. "Mother, come quick!"

The tile was cold under my bare feet.

Something else was cold in my fist.

I looked down. A butcher knife was in my hand.

It trembled at my side, but my fingers wouldn't let the sharp knife go.

The knocking never left. The *thud* … *thud* … *thud.*

Cyrus and Viola pushed through the kitchen door.

Viola halted behind the table. "What's the meaning of this?"

What's the meaning of this? my mind mocked, and a laugh rolled off my lips. It was something you'd hear from an old, privileged woman with means, stumbling upon a sight she disapproved of, like something you'd hear in a movie. *What's the meaning of this?*

"I was only coming down for a drink and heard singing. When I flipped the light on, she was just standing there holding a knife," Camora blubbered through fast tears. "She was just *standing* there."

"Adora," Cyrus said, holding his palms out in front of him.

My head snapped in his direction.

The three of them took a step back.

They were all scared of me. As they should be.

I was scared of me, too.

The full Beaver Moon was here, and I hadn't tossed another letter into the sea. I willed my arm to drop the knife but could not do so. I should have told Cyrus and Viola I didn't *want* to hurt Camora, that it was more of a need, but nothing would come out. I was paralyzed by this knocking sound that surrounded me. This *thud* … *thud* … *thud* … that mocked my heart for beating.

"Adora, drop the knife," Cyrus said carefully.

I can't. I want to, but I can't.

Sleep paralysis had taken me before—a period between consciousness and sleep. Where your entire body felt heavy, you couldn't move. You couldn't even speak. But this was not sleep paralysis.

For a split moment, I could see both life and death.

In the kitchen, the veil had dropped, and it wasn't just us.

Five shadows stood languidly to my left in front of Cyrus.

The others didn't see them, but I could.

No one in this room was sleeping, so I didn't know how that was possible.

Wait ... was I sleeping at this very moment?

Or could they show themselves to whom and when they wanted to?

I stared at the Shadows, and they didn't frighten me.

I didn't know how I knew this, but they weren't here to hurt me.

They didn't need to because they wanted something from me.

Cyrus took careful steps toward me, walking through the Shadows without knowing they were there. Viola warned him with cautious authority, and he looked over his shoulder. "Mother, I have it under control. Please leave. I will take care of this." His words hung in the air, as if he was even skeptical, saying something he wasn't quite sure he believed. His arctic-blue eyes grazed me again when he turned back around. I focused on them as the kitchen door swung closed, leaving Cyrus, me, and the Shadows alone together. "Give me the knife, Adora."

Cyrus was afraid.

So afraid. I could tell in his shade and how his voice tried not to shake.

"I kn-kn-kn don't know—" my voice tangled up in the words that were trying to come out, competing with the knocking banging in my head.

"I know," he nodded, "it's okay. Just give me the kni—" he didn't finish the sentence before he took a quick step toward me, knocking my wrist against the wall. The knife dropped from my hand and *clanked* against the tile.

Cyrus scooped me up into his arms.

His tall, strong body engulfed me, surrounding me.

"It's okay, I got you," he repeated into my hair, holding me close to his chest. I closed my eyes, feeling safe in his arms. "Let me take you back to bed."

CYRUS STOOD IN FRONT OF ME AS I SAT ON THE EDGE OF THE BED. "ARE YOU sure you don't want me to stay?" He looked back at Alice, who had fallen asleep, then at me. "I can watch you. I don't mind."

“I’m fine,” I said for what seemed like the thirtieth time.

He rocked on his heel and fell back to approach Alice.

“If you so much as blink it will be the last thing you do on this earth,” he swore in a whisper. “Do not fail her again.”

From his pocket, he handed her a key that was attached to a string.

When Cyrus left the room, a lock slid into place from the other side.

The sound echoed, and I waited for his steps to descend before standing and walking to the window.

I gazed out into the black ocean, watching the dark waves endlessly churn like a cauldron. *He locked me in this room*, I thought, and conflicting emotions fought within me. Fear, anger, anxiety. *He’s my best friend*. *How could he?*

“Adora, you should rest,” Alice demanded with the key hanging around her neck beside her other necklace. Never mind her job, Cyrus had threatened her life, and her voice had taken on a disturbing tone. One that was less servant and more sinister. Alice had never signed up to keep an eye on the crazy fiancé.

This was all my fault. But I couldn’t sleep. Not after what had happened.

Eventually, Alice got quiet when I hadn’t budged from the window, and her chair rocked its song. A creak. A croak. The only light came from the lighthouse’s fleeting beam as it rotated through the racing clouds. It stood as tall and sturdy as I, but unlike the lighthouse, I was crumbling underneath the resilient façade.

As it was, my gaze settled on the place my secret was tucked safely.

And my chest soothed at the idea of Stone waiting for me on Bone Island.

THE FOLLOWING MORNING, A GENEROUS SMATTERING OF FRECKLES ADORNED the bridge of Fable’s nose and cheeks. She was sitting across from me, free of make-up, hair tossed atop her head, and wearing the vomit-inducing Voodoos hoodie. Her youth shone as we sipped piping-hot spiked cider at a small bistro table.

We were settled under an arbor right outside The Bean.

Dead roses climbed the trellis, their frosted thorns glinting off the lazy daylight and trying to slice through the thick morning fog. In the middle of Town Square, a shrine to the fallen surrounded the gazebo. Decaying flowers, faded photos, and candles melted down into piles of wax.

Sleepless townies moseyed in the grass with red eyes, bags beneath them weighed down by shadows.

I shifted my attention back to Fable.

A small, vulnerable moment passed where I wished to tell her about Stone and how he was unlike anyone I'd ever met. How he was gentle but also fierce. How things happened when we were together, and I couldn't explain them. How he was made up of two halves: silent and screaming. I hated how he consumed my thoughts, but at the same time loved it because it distracted me from the memory of killing Lena, my evil, my current life. I especially hated how desperate I was to see him again after what had happened between us.

If Fable knew all of this, what would she think about me?

My fingers scraped along the side of the chair and found an exposed screw.

Fable stared at me as if searching for clues, peeling me apart with hazel eyes. The pad of my finger pressed into the sharp point of the screw, urging me to keep my mouth shut.

When all was empty for Fable, her voice cut the space between us.

"If you missed me so much, all you had to do was say so. You didn't have to go and try to butcher the fam."

My gaze warped into a deadpan glare. "Let me guess. Cyrus?"

"He's worried about you."

"I can't believe he called and dragged my family into this. The three of you have enough on your plate to worry about my sleepwalking. I have it under control."

"Under control." Fable sighed, her smile fading. She set her drink down and leaned in, wanting me to believe the words she was saying. "Don't downplay it. This time you walked to the kitchen in the middle of the night and grabbed a knife, acting like you were about to murder someone." She blinked rapidly, surprised she'd ever say those words in the same sentence. "You're my sister, Adora. We'll always be worried about you."

"Worried I'll end up like Mom?"

Fable's head reared back. "I didn't say that."

"It is what you mean, though. Isn't it?" I turned my eyes away. Everything was a little dull: the platinum sky, the worn faces that had been pulled apart by stress, anxiety, and lack of sleep, and the creaking of the coffee shop's sign hanging from above. "There's no point tiptoeing around it.

It's clear, and we all know it. I'm the crazy one, and there's no way to fix it."

She pushed her glass-half-full smile at me.

"We will figure it out. We always do."

Fable's positivity was annoying when it was aimed at me.

I thought of the night before and released a thin laugh. "Cyrus locked me in the bedroom last night. Did he admit to that as well, or did he leave that part out?"

Her eyes looked skyward. "He was protecting you."

"He locked me in the bedroom," I repeated, louder, as if she hadn't heard the extent of it the first time. She acted like the same room he'd locked me in held James Dean, a milk chocolate fountain, and sheets of Egyptian cotton with twenty-four-karats woven into the hem. "He locked me up like I was one of the forsaken."

"Keep your voice down," she hissed. "It was only to keep you safe. When Cyrus called Dad in the middle of the night, he was beside himself."

"Dad or Cyrus was beside himself?"

"Cyrus," she said, and I tossed my gaze away. "He cares about you, and he will be there for you. We all will. Just like the coven gathered around Mom."

I never wanted them to know that my sleepwalking was worsening, but they did, and it surprised me that Ivy hadn't lost her senses over how Cyrus handled it.

The Ivy I knew wouldn't have been so calm with the news. Despite the Shadows, she would have bolted to the Cantini Manor that night with tunnel vision. And I closed my eyes, imagining Ivy beating on the ten-foot, dead-bolted door until the entire manor woke. In my mind, *Cyrus opens the door, and Ivy doesn't think twice before clocking him in the eye* because after all was said and done, Ivy always put her sisters above all else. At least she had before, and nothing had changed. Had it?

Sadness coiled in my chest.

It was then that I realized how much I missed my older sister.

And it surprised me how much I still needed her.

I needed the one who would get angry with me. The one with a throat full of knives like me. The one with a backbone, a mouth, and a savage mind like me. The one who would burn the house down for locking me away.

Why hadn't she come to check on me?

"Does Ivy know?" I asked Fable.

“No, Ivy’s ... we just need to give her some more time.” Fable sat back, crossed her legs, and lifted her cup to her lips. “Now tell me, did you and Cyrus do the dirty yet?” She wiggled her brows.

“Seriously?”

“What?” she shrugged. “I want to know who’s bigger. And who’s better. And before you look at me all judgey, it’s not for any other reason than one hundred percent curiosity.”

“Oh my god, Fable.”

“Oh, come on. You can tell me.” She sighed, eyes distant and face somber as though a vision had crossed her mind.

It was no secret that Fable had a severe crush that haunted her for years. She would never talk about it or confess who this man was, but the proof hid behind the light in her eyes when she thought no one was looking. It was in every silent sigh and between her every word when she thought no one could hear. I always wondered who it was.

She slid her attention back to me and quirked her lips.

When she saw my expression, she made a circular motion with her finger. “What’s that look for? What are you doing with your face?”

“Oh, this?” I pointed to my face. “This is my about-to-vomit face. You’re twisted, Fable. Nice segue on the *let’s-redirect-difficult-conversations-with-sex*. Very charming of you.”

Her smile widened. “You like that, huh?”

“I can’t take you seriously in that hideous hoodie. Plus, you’re drunk.”

She looked into her cup and shrugged, still processing my question and her answer all at once. “As a matter of fact, I think I am. And it’s not even afternoon. What does Pallis put into this stuff?”

I didn’t answer. I was still trapped inside thoughts of Stone combined with, thanks to my lovely sister, having to have sex with Cyrus.

“If you haven’t yet, it will happen eventually,” she sang, reading my mind.

I shook my head, not wanting to hear it.

Fable continued, “There are worse men in Weeping Hollow. Look on the bright side. It could have been Maverick or even Jacob, if the Shadows didn’t kill him, and you know I’m right. After what he said to you in the chambers last month? Let me just say, maybe he got what was coming to him.”

“Careful, Fable. You’re starting to sound like Ivy.”

Weeks before the Shadows killed Jacob, he’d made a perverted pass at

me when the two of us were alone. It wasn't anything I couldn't handle. But I should have told her to forget about Jacob, that I wanted to be engaged to Kane. *That I want to kill him for what he did, bring Mom back, and spend the rest of my life either alone or dead because after I chase these demons away, the only thing I'll have to look forward to is peace. And I was perfectly okay with it all. Wasn't I?*

But I was going to marry Cyrus, not Kane. Not even Jacob.

Not ever Stone.

"Come my wedding night, I'll be having sex with my best friend—the same man who took my sister's virginity. The only man Ivy's ever loved," I finally said aloud, and the lazy spark in Fable's eyes dulled. "Oh, you know. The Sullivan sisters. Cursed in love." I smiled. "It's okay. It's funny if you really think about it."

Fable's eyes cast downward. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean—"

"It won't be just one time either. Because I'll be married to Cyrus." A broken sigh left me. "In two months, I'll be married to the man my sister is in love with." As the words fell out of my mouth, the image of Ivy heart-stricken in the chamber stood in my mind, and it was suddenly hard to breathe. My palm dropped onto the bistro table, and cider spilled over the mug's rim. "If I could make this go away, I would do it in a heartbeat."

Fable pushed her chair back and knelt at my side.

"I know," she whispered, squeezing my hand. "I know, and I believe she understands this too. Just breathe."

My eyes burned from keeping all my tears hostage.

Something inside me wouldn't let me drown in them.

It was as if a part of me knew that once I started, I may never stop—

"It stopped!" Crazy Jasper shouted beside us, interrupting my thoughts. "The clock stopped!"

Fable and I darted a look in his direction, and a crowd gathered around him. "I knew it. I'm not crazy." He grabbed Gus Hobb's shoulder and spun him around. "How many times did I tell yah? Yah see that there? An entire minute went by. I counted. Sixty seconds, but the clock didn't move. Not a single tick. Time stopped. It's the end, folks. We've reached the end," he rambled on. A collective gasp erupted from my neighbors.

Then just as quickly, everyone fell silent.

So quiet you could hear snowflakes falling.

From the corner of my eye, Beck Parish emerged from the crowd.

One of the Hollow Heathens from Norse Woods Coven.

Unmasked and in Town Square, with an angry vein pulsing down the side of his neck. Sharp cheekbones and narrowed eyes that flared gas-flame blue. His hair was growing out, with chocolate sideburns squaring off at the ears.

The back of my chair collided with brick when I jumped to my feet.

I yanked Fable behind me.

"That's Beck Parish," she whispered over my shoulder.

"I know."

The crowd broke apart in fear of him, giving him a direct route to Milo Andrews, who was crossing the street from the other direction.

"They really did it. They broke the curse," she said with years worth of suppressed emotion in her words.

I looked back at her, and tears rimmed her eyes.

"Fable, why are you about to—"

Beck jumped the curb, stealing my words as he intersected Milo's path, cutting him off. He grabbed Milo by the shirt collar and slammed him against a storefront. Tattoos adorned his fingers and the tops of his hands, and they moved like living artwork when he tightened his fist.

"Just the man I wanted to see," Beck growled in his ear, pressing his forearm into Milo's neck. "Have I not made myself clear?"

If Fable and I weren't standing so close, we wouldn't have been able to hear what he'd said or the ferocity woven into his tone.

Beck's jaw flexed, and Milo couldn't look him in the eyes.

"Is this about money?" Milo said, voice low.

"Oh, you know exactly what this is about."

Milo tossed a glance around at the crowd. "Not here. Not now."

Beck whispered something else into his ear, then he let Milo go.

Milo shrugged off the sudden intrusion, and Beck retreated into the crowd. I stared at the back of his denim jacket until he evaporated. Here and gone. The first time a Heathen had been spotted since their curse broke.

"We're doomed!" Crazy Jasper shouted, stealing back our attention.

All eyes soared back to the clock in Time Square, waiting for it to start again.

The Daily Hollow

The Clock Tower
Article by Geneva King

Winter is upon us, among other things. While we fight to keep our eyes open at night, time appears to be shivering. The clock tower stopping in Town Square wasn't the first time, and it certainly won't be our last. I've spoken with the high priest of Norse Woods and the high priest of Sacred Sea. While they were both reluctant to talk with me, they both could agree that their main goal is first to protect the townspeople from the Shadows. Regarding the clock tower, the two have drastically different theories as to why time is shaking. "I believe it all comes back to the Shadows." This was said by Augustine Pruitt. While Clarence Goody firmly believes these are two separate issues: "Time has always been unstable here. It is imperative that the town focuses on staying safe during these desolate times." Desolate times mean refer to those who have fallen. In a span of one week, we have lost five more bodies at the hands of the Shadows.

CHAPTER 22

ADORA

THAT NIGHT, VIOLA SAT WITH HER LEGS CROSSED AND HER BODY SLANTED—seemingly both uncomfortable yet natural—on the opposite side of the room she referred to as her parlor.

The wingback couches and chairs were Victorian and made of walnut and ivory cloth. It was after dinner, and I ran my fingers along the edge and felt the scrolls carved into the body of a chaise.

"I bet it's Norse Woods Coven messing with time," she said in a disapproving tone, folding the newspaper and setting it down at her side. "Magic is not child's play. Whatever they're doing in those woods must stop. They need to leave it to us." She paused and looked at me with worry gathering on her face. "Do you not like your wine, Adora?"—Alice stepped into the room— "Alice, bring Adora something lighter. Perhaps a Riesling would do."

"This is fine," I assured her.

"You have yet to drink it."

"I said it's fine."

She returned her gaze to Alice. "Then bring a tray for Adora to set her drink on." She snapped her finger and cut her smile back to me. "What do you think of the seating arrangement? Gabriel finally moved the couches from the attic, and we're still debating their placement. Aren't these pieces lovely?"

I was sitting across from my future mother-in-law and fiancé days after having sex with a strangely handsome and wounded man I was hiding on Bone Island. Another week had passed since Lena's death, and she was not mentioned in the obituaries. On top of this, Shadows were hunting, people

were dying, and she was worried about furniture placement.

But I suppose I wasn't any better, considering my recent affair.

While I was drinking sherry wine in a parlor, the sleep deprivation was only getting worse in Weeping Hollow. Some were staring at clocks and seeing things, and some were throwing punches and busting jaws.

My stomach churned, suddenly ashamed of myself for escaping to Bone Island. What kind of a person did this make me?

"Adora?"

My attention snapped into place.

The furniture. "It's ... unique," I said, running my hand across the stiff fabric. It hadn't been broken into. Not enough love had seeped into the stitching. "And uncomfortable."

"It's Victorian," said Viola defensively. "Historic and shipped across the Atlantic. It was crafted in the seventeenth century by our ancestors."

She didn't want an honest answer. She only wanted me to agree with her.

"I didn't mean any disrespect."

"I'm sure, considering the way Ivy raised you." I bit my tongue to fight a caustic remark, and she continued, "Did you know they had once called the chair you're sitting on a fainting chair?"

My brow peaked. "For when men drink too much whiskey?"

Viola scoffed.

Cyrus's mouth quirked on its end.

Alice set a small table beside me.

"For women, Adora. Have you ever worn a corset?"

"I've never had a reason to, Mrs. Cantini."

"I will have none of that. You're family now. Please call me Viola." She rested her glass on the table and sat with pristine posture. "Corsets were meant to beautify women—a way to reshape their bodies into something more appealing. Sometimes as many as fifty laces pulled so tight it cut blood circulation, especially for the stubby ones. Tight enough that it feels like you can't breathe. A strong woman with proper genes could do many things in her corset, but the weak would faint by night's end. Hence the purpose of the fainting couch."

"This is one theory," Cyrus muttered into his glass with a chuckle.

I turned my eyes away, resisting the urge to show my annoyance with her.

It was an insult for her to believe a designer such as myself, who had created over a hundred dresses for the Founder's Day Ball in the last decade,

didn’t know a thing about corsets.

“It’s a shame to know it was a woman who introduced it,” I finally said.

Viola raised a brow. “Why is this a shame?”

“Women should embrace their curves. Not cut them off.”

“Well, that’s an ignorant thing to say, coming from someone like you.”

My mouth parted in disbelief. “Someone like me?”

“Mother,” Cyrus warned, eyes navy.

“What? Adora has a perfect figure to match her flawless face. She has nothing to be self-conscious about. She has no idea what it’s like to be a woman who doesn’t feel comfortable in her skin. Take your sister, for instance ...” And she was right as shame filled me.

Cyrus stiffened in his chair. “Let’s not speak of those who aren’t here to defend themselves.” He raised his glass to his mouth. “Besides, the last thing Camora would want to be seen in is a dress.”

“I’m only speaking the truth, Cyrus, and do not remind me.” Viola cleared her throat and fixed her sour expression before returning to me. “Every woman should own one, no matter what shape she is. I can purchase whatever fabrics, wires, and ribbons you’ll need to make one for the announcement.”

“I appreciate the offer, but I have to decline,” I said to her. “No matter my shape, I wear my dresses. I don’t let my dresses wear me.”

I also thought it to be the same for scars.

After all, there were only ever two options. We could either wear our scars with dignity to tell the world where we’d come from and that we survived, or let these heavy things wear us.

I thought of Stone then, and the look on his face before I’d left.

Why must he slip into everything?

“Speaking of, how is mine coming along? The ball is only four weeks away, and aside from completing all the dresses, there is still so much to do with planning for the event. Each time I try to visit, Alice says you’ve closed yourself off in the room to work, but I don’t hear the machine running. What on earth could you possibly be doing all day? The Founders Day Ball will be here before we know it, and then the wedding …”

My body stiffened. I was desperate to change the subject. “We have plenty of time for that. I think there are more important matters to discuss.”

Viola peaked a brow. “Such as?”

I narrowed my gaze. “What is the news with Lena? Freddy in the

Mourning is missing, and without his morning show, all we have to rely on is The Daily Hollow. I didn't see her name in the obituary, and I couldn't imagine the cruelty of keeping a young woman in a cell for almost two weeks."

Cyrus's eyes slid to her as well, curious.

Viola went quiet.

I continued, "Has anyone checked in on her? Her execution was supposed to happen a week ago, and there has been no mention of it. Unless something else has happened to her." Were they keeping her death a secret from the coven? What else could they be hiding?

"Lena's body has been offered to the balance," she said matter-of-factly.

Cyrus cocked a brow. "Without a ceremony?"

"When did this happen?" I didn't recall seeing smoke.

Viola smoothed her dress down her lap. "Augustine and I both agreed that this town has experienced too much death these past few weeks. So, he held a private ceremony."

"But what about her mother?" My gaze flew to Cyrus then back to Viola.

"While the situation is of no concern to you, Mrs. Murphy is aware."

I narrowed my eyes and gulped wine until my glass was empty.

"That's enough politics for one night," Cyrus stated, noticing my growing agitation. "Alice, would you mind refilling our glasses?" He sat back in his chair. "My mother will be retiring."

"I suppose it is getting late." Viola stood and left her empty glass behind. "I will see you in the morning for breakfast," she said, laying a hand on Cyrus's shoulder as she floated to the towering French doors. "And I expect you, as well, Adora."

Alice refilled Cyrus's glass and glared at me with a warning in her eyes as she filled mine—as if she couldn't believe my outburst. She walked across the room's threshold, closed the French doors, and left Cyrus and me alone.

It was quiet for a moment as we stared at each other from across the room. His eyes were a shade I'd never seen before. A steel blue.

"This other theory I've learned," Cyrus began, swirling amber liquid in his freshly poured glass, "as to why the fainting couch is indeed called the fainting couch, is for when women with female hysteria lose their minds." He took another gulp and set his glass down before standing. "Insomnia, sleepwalking, anxiety ... everything you've been experiencing lately." Cyrus crossed the room toward me, pressed slacks hanging off his hips, the top few

buttons on his black dress shirt undone, and sleeves rolled to the elbows. “This style was crafted to provide comfort for long periods while performing a pelvic massage. Or, in our case, thrusting my fingers inside you and pulling the crazy out like an orgasmic exorcism.”

My hand flew to my mouth when a laugh belted from my lips.

These were words I’d never heard Cyrus say—a side of him I’d never seen before. “Cyrus, I—” I said on a gasp, but the rest of my sentence stopped short when he laid his hands on my knees and crouched down, laying his gaze upon me.

“I’m not Kane, Adora. I can’t get inside your head and make you do anything. Even if I could, I would never do that to you. I would rather it come naturally.”

My gaze slid between his eyes. “Cyrus, your eyes are almost gray.”

“Because I want to fuck you.”

I blinked. And then I swallowed.

Cyrus’s hands coiled around my calves, and my pulse was racing.

“But there’s other things I want to do to you first,” he said, eyes on me as his heated palms inched up my calf beneath my dress.

“I-I-think you’re drunk,” I tried to get out.

He was so subtly shaking his head, waiting for me to stop him, and I was waiting for him to concede.

“You and I have been blind-drunk alone together many times,” he said. “I know when to control myself. And when to finally let go.”

He’d never touched me like this. He’d never talked to me like this.

Even so, in my mind I could see Ivy, and the crestfallen look on her face.

I could see Stone in the cave.

I could see Stone looking into my eyes.

I could see Stone in the lighthouse window, watching me.

Cyrus reached the sensitive skin of my thighs, and he ran his fingertips higher with a slanted grin. “You’re so stubborn, and you think I’m playing.” His fingers traced the outline of my panties across my skin. His other hand came over my lower back, and he pulled me closer to him, to the edge of the couch. My knees spread on their own as his crouched body came between them. “This is not a game, Adora,” he murmured, dipping a thumb under the hem. My breath cut short when the pad of it grazed me. “I want to take care of my fiancé. I’m afraid your hysteria will bleed into town, and I can’t have people thinking you’re crazy.”

My palms slapped on top of his to stop him.

“I’m not crazy!” My defense exploded out of me.

Standing, I hid my fingers, tucking them into my fists and springing them loose against my chest, unsure if even I believe it.

Cyrus hung his head, his elbow digging into a bent knee. “That came out entirely wrong.” He then looked up at me, lashes so dark it looked like black eyeliner permanently rimmed the cobalt oceans in his eyes. “I’m not the enemy here, Adora. You will be my wife,” he reiterated slowly. “I’m just trying to protect you.”

“By performing an idea introduced in the nineteenth century?” I shook my head in disbelief. “Do you know who I thought about the entire time you were touching me?” His eyes closed, and he exhaled a heavy breath. “Yeah, I thought of Ivy, and it made me sick to my stomach.”

Cyrus’s perfect mouth set in a hard line, eyes darkening by the second.

I didn’t give him a chance to respond before I retreated to my bedroom.

ONLY A HALF HOUR HAD PASSED WHEN THERE WAS A LIGHT KNOCK ON THE door.

Alice stood up from her rocking chair and disappeared from my peripheral vision as I stared out the open window.

The milky glow of the rotating beam sliced through darkness as if it were another world away. It called out to me, illuminating my beloved black sea and the icy island. The beam touched me when it circled. It cast ribbons of gray and white, snowflakes drifting and floating like what paper confetti would do when tossed up into the night.

I thought about Stone and what he could be doing at this hour. I suppose he could be sleeping soundly before a fire. But when I closed my eyes, all I saw was the portrait of him standing in front of the window, looking out across the midnight sea, thinking of me.

“I’m sorry,” Cyrus said low from behind. “You should know that the idea of you and me together makes sense to me.”

I turned slightly and felt the warmth of his body on my back.

At my side, his fingers gently brushed my hand.

“I miss you,” he said, and I could smell the sherry wine in his warm breath.

I kept my gaze fixed on the lighthouse.

“Do you want to know who I think about every day?” He paused to wait for a response, and when I said nothing, his finger tapped mine. “I used to not go a day without you, and now that we’re both under the same roof, I hardly see you at all. I’m the one going crazy, Adora. If you don’t want me as your lover, keep me as your friend. I’ll do whatever you want, but not this. I refuse to settle for nothing.”

After a few moments, he walked away.

Whispers drifted from the doorway to my ears.

Still, I refused to acknowledge them.

They thought I couldn’t hear them.

I always heard them, and I didn’t care.

“It’s every night,” Alice whispered back. “She just stands there at the window.”

Cyrus’s voice was low and careful. “She’s homesick.”

“It’s more than that, sir. She doesn’t work. She hardly sleeps. She doesn’t eat. All she does is stare out this window like something is out there. Something beyond the cliffs.”

CHAPTER 23

ADORA

December 1, 2020
58 days until the Crimson Eclipse
61 days until the Cantini-Sullivan Wedding

Alice hadn't laundered the dress I wore when Stone fucked me. She'd insisted, but I couldn't let her. I'd patched it up, sewn the tears, and fixed what was mine instead of replacing it, not bothering to get the stains out.

Four full days had passed since I'd seen him last. The memory of his cunning black eyes staring into mine as he licked me tumbled into another echo of us. His naked fingers trembled over my skin as he worshipped every part of me, destructive and pleasurable.

Stone hadn't fucked me politely where desire was trapped in a bottle. He stole me with dire desperation, yet still able to bind us with a delicate thread of secrecy. No room for anyone or anything else. Witnessing him vulnerable and exposed was both terrifying and thrilling. Even while he had been engrossed in a mad, delusional state, an entrenched part of him needed a part of me, too.

It was evident in his eyes. Beyond the spell, he'd wanted me to feel what he was feeling. He'd wanted to connect with me in a way no one else had. We'd become two desperate souls stripped of control with the cruel desire to tangle artfully together, sort of like a punishing kiss.

It didn’t take me long to realize I needed more. Though, in truth, I was afraid of the vines of him wrapping around us so tight that it would become impossible to pull away.

November was gone. This day marked a new month, and there were only three weeks remaining until Cyrus and I announced our engagement. Only eight weeks until the Crimson Eclipse. I should’ve joined my mother-in-law in planning my wedding. I should’ve joined my coven in finding ways to defeat the Shadows. I *should’ve* been making sure my plans to kill Kane still lined up, but all I wanted to do was waste away my last weeks with Stone.

A warmth simmered under my skin, and I dipped my anxious hands into my dress pockets to hide them.

My fingertips brushed silky petals of the black Persian lilies.

I looked down at the pile of bulbs in my palm.

“Cyrus is concerned,” Alice said, startling me from behind. “I know you weren’t at the Sullivan cottage the other night.”

I crushed flowers in my fist. “What are you implying?”

“I’m not implying, Miss Adora. I’m simply stating that you weren’t at the Sullivan cottage when you said you were. We both know this. And I know what you’re thinking. You’re looking at the window as if ready to jump out of it. If the sneaking happens again, you may not be as lucky next time. One day Cyrus or Mrs. Cantini will insist on coming into the room, and I can’t protect you if you don’t tell me where you run off to.”

I turned to face her and swiped clean clothes from a folded pile on the bed. “The less you know, the better,” I informed her, slipping out of my dress.

“You’re taking off *now*, aren’t you?” Alice couldn’t look me in the eyes as she folded the stack of clean clothes into a drawer. The wardrobe shook as she closed it, and her shoulders slumped when she looked at me again. “I’m tired. I can’t do it again. I stay awake all night to watch you, and then you expect me to stay awake all day to protect your door or run your errands. I need sleep. I can’t have a repeat of what happened the other night.”

“If you aren’t satisfied with your employment, talk to Mrs. Cantini. Now, shoo and close the door.” I only had five minutes to climb out the window before it was time for Mrs. Cantini to retreat to the dining room for breakfast.

Alice’s jaw slammed shut, dark circles adorning her eyes.

Guilt coiled in my chest. I was being inconsiderate and selfish. All for what? What exactly was I running off to? People were dying in the grips of

unkillable Shadows, and I wanted to spend a little more time with him.

I didn't usually have these thoughts. I didn't usually have these feelings flowing through me. Our indecency and indiscretion made everything an adventure. On Bone Island, there were no rules, no expectations. It was both freeing and terrifying, and these were all the reasons I couldn't give him up. I had little time until my life would change forever, if not by murder, then certainly by marriage, and I was taking advantage of every second until then.

I'd left Stone without a promise of returning, and the thought of the look on his face when he saw me again made my heart race.

"I'm not being fair," I finally said, walking to Alice and taking her strong hands into mine. I led her to the edge of the bed, where we both sat. "Just lock the door and sleep. It's not like the Shadows come during the day, anyway. If anyone asks, I walked to Town Square, and I promise to return on time." I offered a sweet smile. "Please do this for me."

"Okay, Adora." She patted the top of my hand and sucked in a breath. "And you can't tell me where you go?"

"Knowing could put you in a position you don't want to be in."

Alice stood, and my hands fell from hers. She grabbed her book from the armoire. "I suppose I'll get some shuteye."

Then she stepped out the door and closed it behind her.

I darted my gaze to the window before rushing toward it. I cranked the lever open, and under the cloud-dusted sky, the cold slipped under and bit my skin. My gaze landed on the lighthouse, and anticipation soared through me. It made me feel light on my toes.

I stepped away to collect my coat and bag, then returned, took one last look at the bedroom door, and threw a leg over.

The toe of my shoe settled into the lattice panel.

I gripped the edge of the sill and kicked another foot over.

After descending three stories, I bolted the between bushes with the keys to the jon boat jingling in my coat pocket.

The walk to the boat was two miles away and took me less than an hour. The sky was muted gray. The air was poisoned with the scent of salt and snow as I crossed the Atlantic. I felt my pulse with every wave that slipped under the boat on the way to the island. I felt it hit hard and fast. All the possibilities of how I would find him—or not find him—spiraled through my mind.

What if his mother returned and drove his mind to a place where there

was no coming back? What if he drowned in the ocean or fainted in the thick trees while searching for food? Or what if he wasn't there at all?

"I wonder what would happen if one day you return to this island and I'm no longer here," he'd said, and my heart shook as the boat neared the shore of Bone Island.

As soon as the bottom struck sand, my gaze latched on to the lighthouse. My heart jumped into my throat at the sight of it, bringing me back to that night.

When I reached the lighthouse, Stone opened the door before my fingers touched the knob. I was robbed by white hair, black eyes, a gray coat, mint, and mistletoe.

My eyes caught on to his face.

There was a scar below his left eye from when I had struck him.

It had taken the shape of a teardrop.

I branded him. Tattooed him. I did something that would stay with him for all eternity, and I thought myself sick for just thinking this. At the same time, I wanted to slide my thumb across the scar to wipe the tear away. As if it would. My gaze moved across his black eyes, his chiseled jawline.

"Are you a witch?" I asked him in haste. It was the only explanation for the vines and roots he had commanded to hold me still. "The flowers, the roots, the gloves you always wear but won't tell me why." I shook my head. "If you're a witch, you can tell me."

Stone looked at me for a long moment, standing on the other side of the threshold in a winter coat and boots, clutching a fishing pole in his gloved hand. He was tall, more than six feet, so I lifted my chin to look him in the eyes.

Then finally, "I don't know what I am." He looked past me, where it was overcast with a drizzle of snow. I knew because I felt the cool drops fall onto my lashes. "I fear what happened that night frightened you and has changed things between us." His gaze slammed into mine again, and his fist tightened around the fishing pole. "Never had a woman dare me to abandon all morals and logic and leave me with the desire to force my wretched cock inside her and tear her apart." A twitch in the corner of his lips. "You should know I thought to apologize for my actions should you return, but my apology wouldn't be sincere. In spite of it all, I still wanted you in a way I'd never wanted anyone."

My mouth turned dry.

“You *wanted* me ... or *want* me, as in still?” I asked.

Stone’s jaw flexed. His eyes dipped down my body, then back to my face.

“I *want* you,” he said slowly. “As in at all times, I’m afraid.”

Something fierce fluttered in my chest.

“There are things you don’t know about me,” I added.

His nostrils flared. “I know this sea is a despicable brute keeping us apart.”

At that, I smiled. “The sea is the least of our concerns. The people in Weeping Hollow don’t take kindly to strangers. They would burn you if they knew you were here.” I took a step closer. “So, I must warn you. If we both surrender, this tremor between us will only lead to carnage. And we’ll both end up dead.” Stone’s breath stalled, his eyes flicking between mine. I continued, “Then, in the years following our death, they’ll paint us as villains. They’ll tell stories about us in the middle of the night and call it a *cautionary tale*.”

A deadly silence.

He let his breath go, his chest caving. “A tragedy echoing into eternity.”

“One must not have an ounce of control to agree to such a thing.”

He shrugged. “Everyone dies, some more than once, but the true tragedy, I believe, is life being wasted on the afraid. People abuse time too often. Today, my darling, we are alive.” His eyes sailed between mine as he gripped the pole. “Give yourself to me as I give myself to you, never mind the rest.”

“Ourselves as in our bodies? Hearts are off the table?”

“We sinful villains don’t have hearts or happy endings.”

A beat of silence.

A beat of silence.

A beat of silence.

My breath turned shallow as nerves crawled over my skin.

Stone stepped closer, leaned in, and dropped his mouth close to my ear. I could feel his breath and eyes on me. A slight hesitation. “I’m still afraid,” he confessed in a whisper. A secret. “I think it’s okay to be scared. I’ve never met anyone like you, and I’ve never done anything like this before. I’m not even certain if I’m doing it right, but I know that this feels right.”

Stone looked at my mouth, his hand smoothing down the length of my neck as he took another step closer. His chest brushed up against mine, and he let go of a harsh exhale and licked his lips. “Let us take advantage of each other,” he said, daring me to make a move.

With my heart a drum in my chest, I slowly turned my head until my mouth was grazing his. Stone closed his eyes when I kissed his lips softly, gently. Then he let go of the fishing pole, letting it fall against the wall, and took my head into his hands, sweeping me up in a kiss that I sank into.

My blood rushed and my heart flipped, feeling the kiss spread throughout my body, down to the marrow.

"And so, our story begins," he whispered, afraid.

"So, it does," I replied, terrified.

STONE

I LIKED THE WAY HER SCENT SURROUNDED ME. VANILLA AND THE SEA. I LIKED the way she held herself together and how she broke into pieces in my arms.

I looked at her from across the boat I'd built.

She seemed so small in her fur coat, holding tightly to the fishing pole as the water moved beneath us. How could she be the same girl who wrote the letters in the bottles? Equally brutal and bewitching. Deadly and divine. This was her secret. There was a half of her she wanted no one to have—a slice of midnight.

And she was quiet here, looking at me from the other side of the boat with abandon in her eyes. It was the same look she had right before she crumbled into my arms. Not one that said she regretted spending the day fishing in the cold so I could eat, but a look that said she was happy she was here with me, no matter what we were doing.

"I can't believe you built this in such a short time," she said, running a palm down the edge of the boat. Her attention drifted to the ocean's horizon in the far distance as we bobbed between the mainland and the island. "It's been a while since I've gone fishing. I didn't realize until now how much I loved being out here."

I pushed the oars forward. "I can't imagine a woman like you dirtying her hands with this sort of thing."

Circe gasped, her hand against her chest and her hair falling enchantingly from its pin. "Excuse me, you're speaking to the daughter of a fisherman."

“This does not equate to anything.”

A sudden idea struck her.

I noticed when her brows jumped.

“We have two poles. Want to make a wager?” she asked.

“If you are a fisherman’s daughter, then you should know fishing is one-half chance, one-half patience. It hardly requires skill.” I gave her the side-eye. “Besides, what makes you think I’m interested in anything more than your body?”

Her lips parted, eyes wounded when she looked at me.

Then she bit into her lip, hurt consuming features.

I loathed saying that to her, but I had to know.

“So, we are the same,” I said. “Words cut us both open.”

Her mouth fell open, understanding passing through her. “I didn’t mean what I said when I saw you last. I was—”

“Angry?” I finished. It was astonishing how she could dismiss how I’d physically assaulted her as though what I’d done could be stomped away, but on the other hand, allow words to seep, settle, and sting. I shook my head. “I’ve never met anyone like you.”

Her brow raised. “How so?”

“You truly want to know?”

“Yes.”

I rested the oars at the bottom of the boat and looked at her.

“I’ve seen your rush, Circe. I saw it in your eyes when you struck my face and when I fucked you. That night you recognized something in me, too, that you have within yourself, and in truth, that is why you let me have you. That’s also why you returned to me. This rush can be both a thrill and a blinding rage. You’re ashamed of it, but you’re not afraid of it. So, when it comes, you’d rather pierce your skin so no one else sees you.”

Her chest was heaving as she sat quietly, my every word dropping like cannons, never sparing a moment for the dirt to settle.

“Then, with absolutely no hesitation, you tear me apart with your sharp tongue before I have the chance to hurt your feelings. I’ve never met anyone like you,” I repeated. “You guard your heart closer than your body. My sympathies to the bloodthirsty fool who one day breaks it.”

“I see,” her chest caved as she wore an inscrutable expression, “a few weeks, and you already know everything there is to know about me.”

“Oh, this is only the shallow, Circe, but I do know how you taste.”

A blush crawled up her neck. “And how do I taste?”

“I’ll let you find out for yourself next time.”

“You’re filthy,” she said, fighting a smile.

“I’ve been called much worse.” I picked up a loose rock from the bottom of the boat and tossed it into the water. “Better to be a filthy monster than a bloodthirsty fool.”

A laugh slipped out of her, and I watched from the corner of my eye. Her hair cascaded around her face and shoulders as the water rocked beneath us. Her smile was as bright and brief as the tail end of a falling star, and I watched her until the smile faded.

Circe sighed, her shoulders dropping. “For someone who didn’t speak a word to me for an entire week, you sure have a lot to say.”

I didn’t have to spare a second to consider why. “You give me permission to speak freely in a space where I feel comfortable. It’s a space I’ve never found before.” We looked at each other. If she only knew how many years I’d found comfort in every drawing of her.

“You trust me,” she said, knowing.

“Yes.” I exhaled, at ease. “I feel safe with you.”

She turned her attention to the Atlantic.

Out here, the ocean seemed to surround only us. She clutched her necklace and looked into the distance, where the ocean line met the sky. She looked at it with questions in her eyes, perhaps wondering if that was where the gods had stopped painting. I wanted to tell her that the horizon was endless. Not far from cosmic. But as I gazed upon her, all the right words were lost on me. “What are you thinking about?”

“My beloved black sea,” she said.

And with those four words, I was no longer an outsider to the thoughts inside her head.

As time passed, we caught two bass.

Heavy clouds moved overhead, letting us know we should head back soon.

“Stone,” Circe called, and I bid her a look. “What happened to you? Who hurt you like that?”

I thought of Bly and Chief Etu, of William and Chayton. I thought of the tribe, with pitchforks and torches in their eyes. Then I thought of the graveyard I’d left behind. “It makes no difference. They are gone.”

“It matters,” she said. “I want to know.”

I looked at her. “I am not as I was, Circe.”

“Please,” she whispered.

Nothing positive ever came from digging up old graves. Still, I’d rehearsed this moment many times since I’d last seen her. I had waited for her return for this question. Though, I hadn’t realized it would come in a moment like this, where it was quiet and peaceful. The cowardly words I was about to say had no place in such a chivalrous space.

“For most of my life, in the years I wasn’t raising myself, war-like tribes who worshipped the sun were my teachers,” I said, the words coming out easier than I’d expected. “In my culture the sun comes before all, so the nighttime is the only time for fucking. If one fucked in the light of day, it meant *I worship thee more than the light of the sun.”*

“Do you believe this as well?”

“Yes. No human or thing should come before a god.”

“What does that have anything to do with what happened to you?”

“It has everything to do with it, and if you want to know, I must start from the beginning.” She nodded, and I shifted on the wooden bench, creating a safe distance between us. “Things happen around me. Things I can’t explain, and because of this, from the moment I was born, I was rejected by every place I ever traveled. This forced Mother and I to live with those who believed in the unnatural.” I wasn’t telling her of my monstrous face and how many people I’d killed. The last thing I ever wanted was to scare her away. “At fourteen, I watched a man fuck a woman through a window. It was the first and only time I witnessed the act of a union, and the brutality of it was much like a hunt. The man was powerful, and the woman begged him to stop.”

She blinked numerous times, trying to piece this together while the two of us sat on opposite sides of the boat.

“This man caught me watching and dragged me to the center of the tribe, telling me it was time for my coming-of-age ritual.” Flashbacks from that night resurrected in my mind. The heat, the fire, the burn. “A circumcision was a test of manhood and bravery to become one of them, but this was not what happened. They instead hung me from a tree by my neck, tortured me, then forced me onto my knees. The rest of the tribe, including my mother, watched as it happened.”

“You were only fourteen,” she whispered.

“The pain was unimaginable, but I made sure not to show it.”

There was no emotion in my words—No tremor in my voice.

I was detached from what I was saying.

This was what the years had done to me. Impenetrable. Unbreakable.

“I was never a child—never had the chance to be one—but I was never a man to them, either. The people I so desperately wanted to be accepted by only saw me as a monster, and they wanted to make sure no woman would breed with a thing like me. Worst of all, Mother poisoned me because she believed the same.”

She looked at me with heaviness, and her gravity pressed on me.

She opened her mouth to speak, but only air came out.

“Over time, my scars became armor. I’ll never go back to the same as I was. I’ll never cower. I’ll never get on my knees. Not for the sun, a god, a tribe, for anyone or anything.”

I sat back with my eyes still on her. “There is your story, Circe. Every disgusting word of it.” Another bout of dead air lingered, and I grew agitated by her silence. “Well, I’ve told you all you wanted to hear, and you have yet to say a word about it. Speak your peace.”

“I’d rather not.”

At times, she could be infuriating. “Why?”

“Everything I have to say is something you already know.”

“This is true. Your thoughts were loud each time you winced at the sight of my cock.” I’d never sat so impossibly still as though there was nothing she could say that would erase all that had happened to me; no words could smooth out scars, no amount of time with her could reverse years. She had nothing to offer me but herself, using me to escape something more dreadful than a thing like me, but I was escaping in her all the same.

Perhaps that was why we held on to this so severely and were willing to risk our lives for it. No one could understand.

This story had no place for anyone outside of us.

But I looked to her, anyway. I looked to her, hopeful.

Circe peered into the horizon, squinting like she could see the end of the world. Seconds later, her eyes hit mine when she said, “When you say monster, I see their faces. When you say man, I see you.” She leaned in, wanting me to believe her. “Stone, I have never known anyone who is more gentle, noble, and braver than you.”

I couldn’t take my eyes off Circe, who made everything go quiet.

These words caused something to tug at my lips.

I hadn’t felt it at first, not until my lips fell into a grin.

I touched my fingers to my mouth.

It happened naturally and took me by surprise.

As I held on to her steadfast gaze, I noticed that she had a similar smile on her lips as well, which matched my own.

Then, all at once, her smile overcame me.

She is smiling because I’m smiling.

It brought an emotion upon me that skinned my flesh, sliced me open, and cracked me in two. Never had someone witnessed my smile before, felt it, let alone reacted to it.

Until this moment, I’d never been the reason to make someone smile.

I’d only caused the opposite effect.

Horror. Fear. Uncertainty. Eyes full of profanities.

This new emotion climbed inside me and rooted itself.

We were smiling, and all I wanted to do was explain this to her in a way that would make sense instead of scaring her away. How could I tell her that for twenty-four years, the grain sack I’d been imprisoned in refused to allow anyone to truly see me and not the abomination they presumed me to be?

Perhaps Circe recognized something in me that no other had noticed. Not even Mother.

And for a stolen second, I could pretend, if nothing else, that the very thing buried deep within her was the very thing buried deep within me.

Then a fat raindrop fell and splattered on her smile.

The next one came down hard and fast, hitting the side of her face and racing down her neck. We looked up, and lightning ripped across the angry sky.

“Quick, what comes first, thunder or lightning?” Circe rushed to say, her eyes bright and full of life.

“Lightning.” And the two of us waited to hear the boom shake the sky.

Two seconds later, thunder *clapped,* letting us know the storm was less than a mile away.

I grabbed the oars from the bottom of the boat as Circe pulled in the fishing lines.

Clouds broke in two, and rain pelted down on us as I rowed against the waves. Rain soaked my hair, curling it into my eyes, making it difficult to see. Circe laughed the entire way back to the lighthouse.

SAILING CIRCE'S ISLE

ALEC & CIRCE

THE ISLAND WAS THE ONLY HOME ALEC HAD EVER KNOWN. SINCE HIS FATHER and mother had passed, Alec has lived alone. It was only him and the sea surrounding him. And though he never minded the silence, no living soul could go on sanely without human connection. The lighthouse stood alone, a tower of history sealed with secrets. It had stood for fifty years and may endure a hundred more beyond Alec's lifetime. His only job was to keep Weeping Hollow's border safe from oncoming ships.

Each night, he lit the cluster of candles in front of the glass window at the top of the spiraling staircase, knowing he wasn't only protecting the town. Since laying eyes on Circe, as long as he was living, he was keeping her safe as well.

A bruised sun cowered behind grotesque skies, and wind iced Alec's face as he sat beside a boulder. He was sketching the golden sunset with a fishing rod plunged into the sand at his side. His art was only expressive when inspired. And with Circe haunting his every thought, drawing was all he could do.

When he lifted his gaze, a boat was coming toward him from Weeping Hollow.

He wasn't expecting anyone, especially not her.

Circe jumped from the boat once the shallow water was reached.

She wore a linen dress, and her beloved sapphire swayed on its necklace.

Her skirt clung to her golden legs as she almost floated over the waves to him, dragging her boat from behind. Once she was close enough, she tossed the anchor into the water with a splash without removing her ill-tempered glare. Then she stood over Alec, blocking the scarce daylight and casting shade to the side of his face.

Unable to speak from her sudden arrival, he only gazed up at her.

She continued to look at him with feral cat-like eyes, the green so intense and tantalizing. She was pretty in all ways, but there was something bewitching about her when she was mad.

What Alec didn't know was that Circe could not rid herself of the thoughts of him since their first encounter. She'd often wondered what life would have been like outside of Weeping Hollow. Since Alec, she fantasized about a secluded island with an artist who had kind eyes while living with a monster her coven had forced her to marry.

Noticing the war in Circe's eyes, Alec got to his feet and took her hands into his. "You came." A curious and playful mixture inflicted his tone, and a shade of pink crawled up her neck to her cheeks.

It happened so suddenly. Alec's first catch of the day yanked on the string.

An aggressive fish took the rod from the sand.

Circe pounced to snatch it just before it took off into the ocean, but her foot slipped upon a rock. When Alec rushed to catch Circe's fall, the two of them tumbled into the sea, where the ledge had fallen off. It was deep enough that Circe couldn't touch the bottom. Their heads and clothes were soaked. Foamy waves tumbled over themselves again and again, rocking the two with force and spraying their faces.

Alec circled his arms around her waist and pulled her to him to keep her head above the water. They looked at each other when laughter broke between them. Their laughter came easy, light, and Circe couldn't remember the last time she'd genuinely laughed.

And when the laughter died, Circe regarded him with naked curiosity.

She loved how mist splattered his cheeks and slid along his jawline.

She loved how the waves splashed against his chest.

She loved how the sea loved him.

So, she touched his face as the two floated, together swaying with the waves.

Alec plucked her hair from her cheek that clung like seaweed, then grazed his knuckles down the side of her jawline, where he noticed a bruise. It was a fresh bruise that couldn't have been more than twenty-four hours old.

Alec's heart caved, and a serious look stole his expression. "Did someone do this to you?"

Circe was sure that if she spoke of it, emotion would burst out of her.

Pain had attached itself to these horrible words. How could a person understand without living through it?

Helpless. Powerless. Spineless.

Why must anything *less* become her life?

Why not other *less* words?

Relentless, she thought.

This was her curse. No matter how fierce she was, she still allowed someone to take pleasure in making her believe otherwise. But no matter her trauma, she still found the good in living and believed in love. And this was her magic.

So that was when she kissed him.

It was a thirsty kiss, one that called upon her entire body.

Her legs encircled his waist and her fingers tangled in his wet hair.

She had been so starved for it since the last, and despite all efforts, she began to cry from the hardened ache shattering.

When she pulled away, heartbreak adorned her features. "Make love to me," she pleaded between kisses, her lips brushing across his.

Alec searched her eyes. Inside them, there was a longing that touched the deepest parts of him. That was when he knew this was what she truly needed. To be touched softly, to be kissed intensely, to be beloved deeply. Nothing else felt righter than this moment.

So Alec did just that. He kissed her slowly, passionately, pushing up her floating skirt and touching her in a way a woman should be touched.

"You are my sun, Circe," he whispered into her ear, soothing her. That was when he looked her in the eyes. "You are the center of my world."

He cradled the back of her head in one hand, using the other to untie his breeches. *Abandon despair onto romantic affair.*

And he held their kiss as he thrust himself inside her.

Circe's head fell back in his hand, and Alec's lips dragged down the length of her throat when he pumped into her again.

The two made love in the ocean that day.

The islander and his siren, with ice water in their veins.
Alec did not think of the consequences that would follow.
Circe did not think at all.

CHAPTER 24

ADORA

FLASHES OF LIGHTNING SPREAD THROUGH THE OPEN WINDOW OF THE lighthouse and touched particles dancing in the room. The rest of the space was drenched in cool dim. It made the lighthouse feel old-timey, like a filter had stamped this moment.

From the fireplace in the living area, the crackling of the flames drifted into the bathroom, where I was soaking in a clawfoot tub. The water was surprisingly warm and instantly eased the chattering of my teeth.

After eating, Stone sat in the bathroom with me, propped on a wooden chair next to two vanilla colas. He was drawing in his sketchpad, eyes locked and flicking up and over the golden coil at me every few seconds with a flex in his jaw. Each time, strands of snow curled over his forehead and tangled with his long black lashes. Though he was quiet, he professed his all on paper, his wrist moving gracefully despite being attached to an indignant hand. All emotion was not in his heart but at his fingertips.

A smile stretched my lips, and, unable to stand it, I leaned forward and rested my chin on my crossed arms, looking up at him. "*Oh*, the stern face."

Stone gave me a side eye, the corner of his mouth lifting. "You are distracting me."

"What are you drawing? Let me see."

He only considered for a second, gazing down at me with woeful black eyes. He was vulnerable. Like I'd cut him open days ago, and neither of us had stitched him closed. Then he closed the sketchpad and handed it to me, wanting me to see, wanting to share it with me.

I opened the sketchpad to discover a crushed black lily tucked into the spine.

He kept one, my heart sang.

I plucked it from between the pages and swept it across my lips as I read the script at the top of the page. *"She'll sting you one day, oh, ever so gently, so you hardly ever feel it. 'Till you fall dead."* Then under it, in fine penmanship, it read *Jacob Grimm.* I looked at him again.

Stone cleared his throat. "As you suggested, I watched a film on the projector. Those words were in Queen Bee, but I remembered them first written by Jacob Grimm."

"Did this passage remind you of me?" I asked from soft lips.

He leaned back, stretching out his legs, looking down at me from behind hooded eyes, silent, a knowing look. One that required no words. I looked back at the sketchpad and flipped through the pages.

Stone had drawn a collection of eyes, delicate mouths, and profiles in a way that someone in love would. Then I landed on the last picture. This was of me in the bathtub at this very moment.

"You were drawing me," I said, feeling a blush creep across my cheeks as I looked at the girl in the drawing. It was the first time I could look at myself and not see evil. I didn't know what that meant to him, but it meant a lot to me. "It's good. It's really good. Who taught you how to draw like this?"

"Art has no master."

I felt his eyes on me as I traced a dry finger around the curve of my sketched face, across my collarbone, and the crescent of my breast.

His style was also grieving, longing, and passion. His art provoked the heart, as one would be affected by music, a novel, or a scene in a movie. It was beautifully devastating.

I looked up at him. "I don't know a damn thing about love, but this screams you've once known what it felt like."

Stone was staring down at me, chewing on the end of his thick drawing pencil. "The only ones who know a damn thing about love, I believe, are the artists. And only during occasions they've completely lost themselves in their work. So, if I've ever felt love, I would have later mistaken it for obsession. And if I ever feel love, I'm afraid I won't know until it's too late."

Sadness crept inside me.

Sadness for both of us.

"Sounds like a slow death."

"We can survive a lifetime without love, as long as it doesn't touch us."

"Seems like an impossible task. What happens if it does?"

A beautiful smile ripped across his face.

“Then, my darling, we become mad fools.”

I closed the book, handed it to him, and sank back into the tub, wanting to say something. That maybe … I was the mad fool for wanting this thing called love.

Though attentive to my every moment, Stone’s audacious eyes followed me, as they always did. They observed me, bold and brazen, in such a way, it seemed, that he was either afraid I’d fade away or suffocate him.

But then those smoldering fucking eyes raked down my face and breasts, and the air in the room thickened.

The shared space was no longer light and playful but thick and intense.

Torturous seconds passed, and he laid his pencil and sketchpad on the counter behind him. With his eyes never leaving mine, he rolled his sleeve to the elbow, leaned in, and supported one hand on the tub’s rim behind my head.

Mouths inches apart, a gloved hand trailed across the inside of my leg, from my ankle bone to my knee, and I sucked in a breath.

“Stone,” I shuddered.

“Hm?” he hummed upon exhaling, his nose tracing my jawline. But I couldn’t speak. Amused, he cupped the back of my knee and lifted my leg out of the water, guiding it to hang from the edge of the tub. Bathwater slid down my sole and dripped from my heel.

“Stone,” a whisper, my head falling back on his hand.

Stone’s mouth floated up the length of my neck and behind my ear. My body shuddered under the warm leather when it came down on my thigh again, and I imagined what it would feel like without the glove again. With his bare hand touching me. Skin to skin. The things I’d see.

“Why do you wear gloves?” I asked in almost a plea.

“If I removed them, I’d see all your secrets,” he said. “Who touched you last, who you touched last, how you felt in those moments, the most poignant memories stamped into your skin. It’s all too intruding.”

This explained the memory I had seen of us. “Would I be able to see too?”

Stone shook his head. “That’s not how it works.”

He has no idea, I thought. And I wondered what it would be like to let him touch me, to let him in that deeply, and how would he think of me then? Would Stone change his mind about us, and would all of this end?

I took his hand into mine, unsure of where my bravery had come from. I pulled the glove from each finger one by one, my heart pounding, before tossing it to the side.

Stone froze with a defiant look in his eyes as if he would bolt from the bathroom or strangle me for putting him in such a position.

“Wasn’t that what we agreed upon?” I asked him, looking at the scar slashed across his palm from when he took the knife from me in the cave. “I give myself to you, as you give yourself to me.”

I brought his fingertips to my lips and kissed them.

Stone’s eyes closed briefly, and I watched his stoic expression melt as I released his hand, letting it fall between my breasts. Stone’s chair screeched when he almost fell forward into me.

“Why don’t you lose the chair and come closer?” I suggested.

“Have you not been listening?” His wandering palm was surprisingly warm when it smoothed down my throat to my collarbone. “I don’t get on my knees for anyone. Not even you.”

His words were like moonshine, sweet on his tongue and burned going down. But his touch distracted the sting, and I did my best to remain still as his warm fingertips brushed the soft side of my breast.

Stone no longer felt as if he’d been born from snowfall. Each day he was getting warmer, like the cells in his body were colliding with mine. Blood thrashing, the soil of his soul disheveled and yanked to the surface by my undoing. Perhaps all this time it was me who was slowly bringing him back to life.

My eyes found his. “What do you see when you touch me?”

“Us,” he said with relief. “I see us.”

I smiled. “Have you ever touched anyone without gloves?”

“Do I seem like the kind of monster who has ever touched a woman at all before you?” he asked with a gentle, grounded voice that always made my heart leap. His scarred palm smoothed down my heaving stomach, a warm buzz darting in my lower belly like embers. Then his fingernails scraped the crease inside my thigh where my panty line would be, should I be wearing any. “What about you, Circe? Who is touching you after you leave this island?”

I dropped my head to the side with a hardly-there smile. “See for yourself,” I challenged. “If your hand is talented as you say, you’ll be able to see the truth.” Though there was still a tightness in my throat at the thought

of this backfiring and him pulling away altogether.

He watched my face, eyes setting off a dubious flare as he grabbed the back of my thigh, kneading it in a slow massage. I could tell he was nervous about what he'd find, considering whether to move forward.

Then his hand moved to my other leg. I let it fall to the side when he smoothed his palm down my inner thigh. His fingertips grazed my pussy, and I sucked in a breath.

"I'm the one you think of when you touch yourself." His tone was not playful but drunk off this moment and held weight. He leaned closer, brushing his knuckles across my clit as he kissed my lips softly.

"It's only fair that I confess that you've done something to me no one has ever done," he whispered. "You make me feel wanted."

I lightly stroked my mouth across his. "If I'm honest, I wish we could have more than six hours a day together. Or stop time from passing and trap it inside a glass bottle."

"Time is not something we catch but something we create." His fingertips trembled when they brushed my clit again.

A sigh escaped me.

My following words came out shredded. "Like one of your drawings?"

"Yes," he said, looking deep into my eyes. "Like one of my drawings."

My fingers curled around the edges of the tub when a warm murmur crawled along my veins, my blood pumping hot. "Go slow, just like this," I struggled to get out. "As if we have all the time in the world."

And the small bathroom surrounded by fogged glass and a curved wall became inescapable. Stone traced me, sending ripples of pleasure throughout my entire body.

With his fingers, he drew along my pubic bone and through my every crease, touching every inch as if he were creating memories, erasing the old, storing away the new. And when his fingers gently parted my pussy lips, he traced along the inner slick edge. My body was an exposed nerve, and another sigh fell from my lips. Equal parts misery and bliss.

As much as my eyes wanted to roll back in my head from the slow-building pleasure, his gaze was deeply woven with mine, an uncompromising demand to keep them on him.

He drew heavy circles against my opening. Deep, ardent strokes.

A moan left me, and the sensations were almost too much to bear. He rested his forehead against mine, wanting to be a part of it, feel every sigh hit

his mouth, witness every sinking blink, every shake of my lips.

I wanted more, grinding against his fingers until he slipped one inside me.

My expression broke, and Stone's mouth fell open. "If only you could see yourself." He swallowed, pushing his finger in to the knuckle, holding my head in the palm of his other hand, my spine arching as he stroked my inner walls. "My darling, you've made an absolute fool of me."

I dissolved into the bathwater, grinding against him as his thumb stroked my clit.

He slid another finger inside, dragging them in slowly, then out. Each drawing made the room fuzzy, like static sizzling both around and inside us. It was almost impossible to keep my eyes open, so they latched onto his eyes as I was going under.

With our foreheads connected, Stone's lashes splayed across his cheekbones like ink on paper as he peered down the length of my withering body.

He wet his parted lips. "You should know," black eyes flicked up to mine, "the need to forsake the sun and fuck you this very second is insufferable."

My palm slapped the edge of the tub, and water slipped over my peaked nipples as he slowly pumped into me, grazing his mouth teasingly across my cheek. Vibrations built up inside me when his long fingers curled, the smooth pads applying pressure inside, the pad of his thumb scraping my clit.

My leg started to shake, the pleasure threatening to skin me raw. When I tried to slip my leg back into the water to clench my thighs, Stone trapped it between his knees, keeping me at his mercy.

I looked to him, panic taking me as an orgasm made a vicious climb.

I looked to him, a scream to free me because the pleasure was so fierce I was afraid the climax would simply rip me apart.

He looked up. Our eyes connected.

A miserable look stole his features.

That was when he pressed his cheek to mine, and his whisper was a soothing balm in my ear. "I need to tell you something." I felt his lips graze the shell, and his hand slowed, suspending me. "Are you listening?"

I nodded, my cells on the verge of bursting.

"What if I told you that in the beginning, we were lifetimes apart?" His breath sailed across my cheek when he exhaled. Like the question held weight. In both the words and the seriousness behind them, it held weight.

And he was letting it go.

I didn't understand, so I tried to turn my head to search his face, but he wouldn't let me. He kept his cheek pressed to mine so I couldn't look him in the eyes, and he continuously dragged his fingers in and out of me at a dangerously slow pace.

"Listen," he rasped with a voice on the edge of breaking. "What if I told you that centuries were supposed to separate us, that time was designed to stand in our way? What if I told you that every second together is measured by the impossible because the chance of you and me was never supposed to happen?" He paused. He breathed in. He breathed out. "We were never supposed to find each other, but we did. You found me, and then you *saw* me, and it seems you've somehow made these two words entirely different." I blinked, feeling a riptide splash beneath my lashes. "We were never supposed to happen, but here we are, nevertheless, at the hands of the unknown, against all odds, my darling siren. Because I believe something more rebellious had other plans for us." His lips brushed the shell of my ear. A whisper. A secret. "Perhaps the stars themselves."

He returned his eyes to me, his gaze swimming. "What if I told you that?"

The pad of his thumb pushed up against my clit and licked it, stealing me. As if he didn't want me to answer. As if he didn't want to know.

My leg started to shake, and I bit my lip to stifle a cry, but it was no use.

There was a tremor of my lips just as my orgasm erupted.

I wouldn't have noticed if my mouth wasn't just barely touching his.

My thighs tried to clench together from the feeling of being turned inside out. But Stone kept my leg between his knees, trapping it there as his thumb gently brushed my clit, his curled fingers leisurely stroking my orgasm.

Awe struck his features. Hooded eyes studied my face. Like what was happening to me was the most arresting thing he'd ever seen.

I found him more attractive at that moment. Carved jaw, sullen chin, lips too sensitive for a man. His features were hard, steadfast, but once the eternal trace of mourning broke through, what I thought to be, the unshakeable mask drawn onto his face, I felt him in the deepest parts of me.

Muscles tense, my body jerked in the palms of his eyes at the peak of the climax. Then my head fell back, the cool air rushing up my chest.

Stone was absolutely aroused, breathing hard, his brows slanted, teasing my orgasm as it died away. But before it left me completely, he withdrew his coated fingers and swiped my climax onto my tongue.

And, as he promised, I tasted myself.

I tasted myself.

Winter and copper. Earth and wild musk.

Stone grabbed my throat, sweeping his tongue into my mouth, and his moan quivered through me. He kissed me slowly, passionately. And I melted.

I melted.

At some point, he lifted me out of the tub and pulled me into his lap.

I straddled him, soaking his clothes and burrowing myself into his chest.

My nipples were hard and pierced his thin shirt with every heaving breath. The cold slipping into the bathroom wrapped around us, and my body trembled in the wake of it all. “Stone?”

“Hm?” he hummed, his mouth dragging up the length of my neck, ten fingertips slowly grazing the sides of my breasts. When my head fell back, he kissed my throat. Gentle, *gentle*. A warm breath on every exhale as he slid his fingers down my sides and back up again. “What is it, Circe?”

And when he said this name, I closed my eyes to keep guilt from hitting my heart. If I told him my true name after all this time, how would he believe anything else?

I lowered my chin to look him in the eyes.

“I would believe you,” I said to him. “If you told me that we were supposed to live centuries apart, I would believe you.”

A dark gaze darted between my eyes as his hands paused.

That was when Stone leaned in.

And he whispered another secret in my ear.

His lips moved against my cheek, telling me that he was not of this year but from 1864.

This quiet bomb had my heart racing, raising every hair on my body.

His confession didn’t stop. It went on in a whispered mess. A voice that shook, dispersed sentences, and broken breaths. Yet, he still spoke with unyielding truths, from the night his mother poisoned him, through a century of repeating death at the bottom of the sea, then waking up with me in the cave.

As he spoke, he believed in what he said with everything he had.

And for that, I believed him, too.

I kept my eyes outside the window as he held me, whispering his secrets, the snow slicing and slashing and slanting from the wind. There was snow both in my mind and falling around me. How were we possible?

When he pulled away, his face was like a marble Renaissance statue staring back at me, waiting for the truth to settle, for my heart to calm.

Then, we stayed just like that, with his fingers sliding down my spine as we lost ourselves in each other.

Stone

Circe stayed.

I never told her about the men I saw but instead replaced all memories on her skin with ones of us, confident she was mine now. I knew the truth about how she felt. Her heart didn't beat the same with them as it did with me.

She undressed for me that night, laid upon the bed, sultry eyes and a wicked smile. But when I undressed, the grimace on her face ripped my heart out. She still couldn't look past my cock, so she tried not to look at it at all.

How could I blame her when I could hardly look at myself?

"Stone," she whispered, the fire glowing on her skin, a call I couldn't resist.

I slipped back into my trousers and lay beside her. She was perfect, and we were quiet as I inhaled her, obsessed with all her details.

The way she smelled, the way she looked, the way she tasted.

I had time, hours, an opportunity, the entire night to fuck her, but I couldn't.

But I could please her forever and found pleasure in doing so.

Afterward, she read another chapter of Alec & Circe until we fell asleep, two semicolons curled before a fire, the feel of heat pumping at our backs.

In the early morning darkness, I awoke on my stomach to the sound of cruel winds whistling, a muffled knocking, and the cold feel of neglect.

Not neglect entirely, but the feeling of being forgotten.

"Circe?" I pulled myself onto my elbow and wiped the corners of my eyes.

In front of the window, Circe stood with her back to me, softly crying.

She was wearing my shirt, blonde hair tumbling over one shoulder, leaving me tempted to trace the length of her neck.

I got to my feet and tread carefully, unsure of where the knocking was coming from. As I stepped closer, I realized she was writing a word into the fogged glass.

“Circe?” I said again.

With a stop of her finger against the window, her head slowly turned in my direction. She looked straight through me, not even recognizing me. Green eyes glassy and looking past me.

It was as though she didn’t even see me standing there.

And there was never a fear so deep as the thought of being erased altogether. Never was there a terror so cruel as being forgotten by her. My chest felt like an angry tribe had stomped on it—*ashes to ashes, dust to dust.*

The knocking continued in the background, sounding a lifetime away. A beating heart. I sucked in a breath to gather myself. “Circe, what are you doing?”

Her bottom lip and chin trembled, but she didn’t say anything. She turned to the window again, facing the night and dragging her pointer finger along the fogged glass.

At that moment, I knew she had to have been sleepwalking.

Was this the first time? Had she done this before?

I reached out to turn her around, to guide her to lay back down, but a heart-fisting scream belted from her throat once my fingers touched her shoulders—one that could snap a soul in half.

Her hands shot forward like lead balls from a pistol, ripping apart my chest with her claws. The last thing I wanted to do was cause her any harm, but if she were anyone else, I could have easily cracked the bones in her wrists right then.

Her arms swung at my head, and I snatched them up and wrestled them under mine, holding her close to my burning chest.

Circe thrashed inside my arms, and when she popped her head up, it knocked against my chin, slamming my teeth together.

Blood pooled in my mouth, but I refused to let her go.

If I did, there was a chance she could harm herself.

I turned my head to the side, digging it into her shoulder so she couldn’t throw her head back. I dragged her away from the window and guided her into the bed, cradling her between my bent legs.

“Circe,” I called out to her in a soothing whisper, but she only cried, tears soaking her cheeks, hair sticking to her skin. And these cries weren’t soft or subtle but piercing and spilling with anguish. It was a cry that could break hearts. The fierce grief of losing a lover. Cutthroat mourning. The harshness of it all.

I rocked her, using my teeth to peel the glove from my hand, then smoothed her hair off her forehead before laying my palm against it. It was the only thing I could think of to do.

She was feverish beneath my palm, but at my touch, she stopped fighting me. All that was left were her cries as she melted between my legs.

I rested her head against my shoulder and stroked her chest, flicking through her memories until one surfaced: *little feet slapping wet sand on a shore, head turning, a giggle escaping; a woman chasing her with a smile and adoring eyes, laughing, sunlight bathing my skin.*

I squeezed my eyes shut. This had to be her and her mother. I didn’t know if I was strong enough to keep going, the memory too sensitive for a man who’d been betrayed by one.

Alas, I couldn’t help myself, and my palm sank between her breasts just as *I’m scooped up and swung around; I’m hugged, I’m loved, I’m adored; “My sunshine,” she sings. “I got you.”*

And it ripped open my chest, feeling how it should have felt to be loved by a mother. *Control yourself, don’t react, don’t cry, don’t cry, don’t cry,* I repeated with my chest burning, sadness crowning.

Despite all efforts, I turned my head, and a burst of emotion broke out of me, tears pooling in my eyes.

I threw my head back and swiped a palm down my face.

As much as I wanted to let go of the memory, I couldn’t. It was warm here, and I didn’t know why I was torturing myself like this. Even though the memory wasn’t mine, the way this woman looked at me made me believe, even for a moment, that I was treasured, too. And I finally knew what it should have felt like to be accepted by a mother.

Circe’s next breath came out caught up and broken.

She was still crying but could finally breathe.

Not the same crying as before but lighter tears.

Ones from bliss rather than misery.

My heart pounded. Could she see the memory too?

It had never been possible before, and I should’ve known better than to

hold on to hope. To think something I'd been cursed with could be helpful and ease her pain was foolish in the least.

It's not possible, I reminded myself. But when *her mother ran into the ocean with us in her arms,* a small smile tore across Circe's lips, and it felt like my heart burst through my bones.

The words "My god" escaped me as I dropped my head into the curve of her neck.

She can see it. It's possible.

I kissed her cheek and felt her salty tears slip down my lips.

"It's going to be all right," I said, hearing *childlike laughter swirling around us as we splashed in the shallow.* "We got you."

The muffled knocking sound continued, and I glanced behind me at the window where Circe had stood.

Wistoragic was written several times into the fogged glass.

Two very different scripts.

As though it were written by two very different people.

CHAPTER 25

ADORA

DECEMBER 2, 2020
57 DAYS UNTIL THE CRIMSON ECLIPSE
60 DAYS UNTIL THE CANTINI-SULLIVAN WEDDING

DAYLIGHT INVADED AND FILTERED THROUGH MY SHUT EYES.

An affectionate slow fire heated one side of me, and on the other side, my bare skin sipped on a chilly sea breeze.

Nostalgia hit me right then. I inhaled, breathing it in like a fine cigarette. Waking up here reminded me of when I was a little girl. I would sleepwalk right out of the house and make my way to the ocean in the middle of the night. By morning, I would awaken, curled up on my side, pressed palms against my cheek, sleepy eyes on the sea. It happened most during winter.

Awake but eyes still closed, I stretched my arms above my head, wanting to stay right here and make this last a little longer.

Then his voice penetrated my moment, woolly like a warm coat.

"You like it here."

A smile stole the corners of my lips.

I pulled the sheet over my head to hide it.

"I believe if you resist a smile, you'll forget how to do it," he said.

"I'm not resisting it; I'm just hiding it."

From under the white sheet, I could see the silhouette of him sitting by the fire. He shook his head. "Absolutely selfish. Half of that smile may be

yours, but the other half is mine.”

“Oh, is it?”

“It takes two, no?”

I sat up and tucked the sheet under my arms, my gaze falling on Stone.

He was only wearing linen trousers with a button fly and gloves. His hair was tousled, and he sat with his legs stretched out and a piping hot coffee resting on his knee, its steam curling into the air—eyes on me.

He had old-fashioned eyes and an eternal gaze. Hooded. Longing. Clutches of despair. The look was always there, but I’d never had a name for it until he told me the truth about him. *Old-fashioned eyes.*

I didn’t know much about literature or writers, but I knew enough about those who mattered. The ones who didn’t write for money or fame but simply because the story became them, living in their flesh, their blood, their bones, bloating until it burned up inside. And the only way to be free of it was to break themselves open to let it go, cut their veins to bleed themselves dry.

And at this moment, as I looked at Stone, I saw him centuries before, with walls falling around us, a world wrapped in sepia, taking a stroll through The Romantic Period and reading novels from such, where it was dark and forbidding and every love story ending in tragedy. How fitting for a haunted, lonely man to exist at the same time as Poe, who, much like Poe’s characters, was pitted against a dark, ominous fate.

If he could vanish from the past, what was keeping him from simply vanishing at this very moment?

“You’re looking at me differently,” he said suddenly.

“How?”

“Longer. Tighter,” he said. “You’re looking at me with arms that won’t let me go.”

I glanced away, pulling in my legs and hugging my knees, my yawn making my eyes water. I didn’t know what to say. Not because it wasn’t true but because I was afraid it was. “How long have you been awake?”

“Six hours.” He sat back in the chair. “I couldn’t sleep.”

I raised a brow. “Have you been watching me this entire time?”

“Watching isn’t the word I would use.” He squinted an eye. “More like keeping a wary eye on you.” A pause. A concerned look on his face. “What does *wistoragic* mean?”

Wistoragic? “I ... I don’t know?”

“Why are you sleepwalking?”

My heart bottomed out. “Sleepwalking?”

“Yes, sleepwalking; where one walks while asleep.” He leaned his elbow into the arm of the chair and dragged a palm down his face. When his gaze hit mine again, the look in his eyes sucked up all the lightness in the room. “I awoke to find you at the window as though you were stuck there. You were writing the word *wistoragic* into the fog repeatedly. And the way you looked at me …” Stone exhaled, not wanting to let go of the words. “Six hours ago, you had forgotten me, not recognizing me at all. Then as soon as I laid a finger on you, you attacked me. If I’m being honest, you scared me half to death.”

“Half to death?” Panic was slowly building inside me. I tried to mask it by covering it up with a smile. “And what happens when you’re scared half to death twice?”

Stone’s gaze settled on me. “At least she hasn’t forgotten her sense of humor.”

I wrapped the sheet around me. “My sister sings to me,” I told him, embarrassed he had to witness it. “I’m an adult, and my big sister still sings to me,” I laughed lightly, “but Ivy’s the only one who could really get me out of it safely. If not, I’d walk right out of the cottage and on to the beach.”

Stone laid his head back. “What about your mother?”

I clutched the sheet, suddenly feeling colder. “What about my mother?”

“Are you close to her?” He had an elbow resting against the arm of the chair, his chin resting between his thumb and forefinger. A casual posture for a heavy question.

“My mother hasn’t spoken to me in over ten years,” I said, knowing I didn’t have to tell him but wanted to. I kept my eyes on my two webbed toes as if they would give me the power to keep going. “When I was five, they said she started going crazy, and on my sixth birthday, she tried to escape town and take me with her.”

I looked up at him. “She was so determined, too. She thought she could swim across an entire ocean. And no one really knows how far the sea goes, but when we were swimming, she had this look in her eyes that made me believe we could make it.” My eyes slung to the right as I shook my head. “I sound crazy when I say it out loud.”

Stone opened his mouth, but nothing came out.

A swallow. A subtle shake of his head.

“You’re not,” he finally said. “Crazy, that is.”

“Yeah, well, people in town don’t like things that can’t be controlled, and I guess there came a point where no one could control the crazy woman who wanted to swim away. So, they put her in a catatonic state, and she’s been that way for almost ten years.” I dropped my head to the side. “Let’s just say the one who governs Weeping Hollow takes great pleasure in controlling everything inside. Me included.”

“This town is your glass bottle,” he said, resolved. “You speak of heathens you hate with passion because they murdered your friends ... shadows who take people in their sleep, and a leader who controls you. I don’t understand why you’re so eager to leave me and return to Weeping Hollow each night.”

“Because, Stone, I’m not any better,” I said, and the way he watched me scared me. “I’m a terrible person.”

I had nothing to lose by telling him.

How he thought of me did not impact my life back on the mainland.

Bone Island was an escape, but it had also become a place to share secrets, so we didn’t have to carry them alone.

“For years, I’ve been having homicidal thoughts—” Stone shifted in the chair, sitting up straighter, but I continued anyway. This would make parting easier when the time would come. “—Maybe you’re right, and I’ve been angry for so long it’s really starting to catch up to me. Sometimes I think I’m going crazy like my mother. And sometimes I’m afraid that maybe one day they’ll all find out.”

“I have never crossed paths with a soul who hasn’t experienced violent urges.” Stone leaned in, his voice low. “Even the purest of hearts are drawn to wicked things.”

“But what if I told you I’d killed before?” I added.

Stone became quiet, his eyes never leaving me.

Say something, I wanted to scream.

And then, “Well, have you?”

“Yes,” I said, and I looked up to the ceiling, exhaling, the pressure leaving me at finally telling someone the truth. “Her name was Lena Murphy, and she was in a prison cell awaiting execution. They were preparing to burn her for trying to save her husband.” When I dropped my head, my gaze fell upon him. “So, I visited her before nightfall and slit her wrists so she didn’t have to suffer.”

I waited for him to say something.

He said nothing.

“I’m also planning to kill again. I want to kill the man who did this to my mother,” I confessed because he was so quiet, and I couldn’t stop talking. These were my secrets, and it was time he knew about me. “He cursed her, and she’s been trapped in absolute torment. The only way to save her is to kill him.”

But he just stared, and I wanted to crawl into myself.

I couldn’t stand the silence. “Does this scare you?” I asked him.

“Circe, yes, this scares me,” he said from a held breath. “I know—” He paused with a distant look in his eyes. Like he was thinking but didn’t need to look away from me to do it.

He dropped his head, wet his lips, and looked back up at me. “My mother killed for what she believed was the right reason. Over time, it changed her into something I didn’t recognize, and in the end, I can only assume this was what got her killed. So, if you’re asking me if this scares me, the answer is yes,” he said. He was already looking at me, but I felt his gaze *fall* on me. “I care about what happens to you, and I’m afraid this will one day take you away from me.”

I didn’t expect him to say that.

And I suddenly needed to be in his arms.

Next I was sliding off the bed and walking to him.

Stone froze until I was standing between his spread thighs. He shifted his coffee to the side table and pulled me onto his lap, and my face buried in the curve of his neck. When he sank us into the chair, he removed his gloves and dragged his palm up back beneath the shirt.

“For a moment there, I thought you were coming over here to hit me again,” he said to me in a whisper. “Is this how it works? I say kind things, and my darling siren falls into my lap.”

“I just wanted you to hold me.”

His body was warm, and I could feel his heart pounding.

“Circe,” he said, fingers drawing patterns on my hip. “If I had a daughter, I would rather suffer than have her live with murder on her conscience.”

“You don’t understand. It’s not that easy.”

“It’s very simple. One cannot bear the weight of everyone’s pain. I believe two people who commit themselves to each other fight for each other. It’s why Lena fought for her husband, and she should have endured the consequences alone. It’s your father’s job to fight for your mom. Not yours.”

My leg crossed over his lap until I was straddling him and looking him in the eyes. “I believe everyone has a choice in who they wish to fight for.”

“You’re impossible,” he said, his hands coming over my hips.

I was only wearing his shirt, no panties, and I felt his cock instantly harden beneath me. Stone looked at me, studying my face, ten fingers curling into my flesh. I shifted, a slight grind. His lips parted, and he slowly shook his head.

I kissed the corner of his mouth. “I have to leave soon.”

And when I rolled my pussy against him that time, Stone squeezed my ass, lifting his hips into it as though he couldn’t help himself. My hands flew to the button of his trousers, and he stopped me.

“I can’t.” His jaw clenched, and his eyes flicked to the window. “The sun.”

“It’s okay.” I kissed the other corner of his mouth and resumed undoing his button. “We can do other things.”

He sat up, grabbed my wrists, and moved them behind my back.

He was breathing harder against my chest, and there was a pained look in his eyes. It was almost as if he were ... scared.

Insecurity crept in after all I’d confessed.

I dropped my head to his. “I thought you trusted me.”

In one moment, I was staring into his eyes, and in the next, he was lifting me up by my hips and placing my feet on the ground as he stood.

He grabbed his mug and walked out of the bedroom toward the kitchen.

I turned, confused. “Um ... what just happened?”

“The night was long.” He was already in front of the sink, and he turned the water on to wash the mug. But I didn’t believe him.

I walked into the kitchen, stepped between him and the sink, and turned off the water. “Just spit it out.”

Stone didn’t answer, swinging his gaze away from me, and I grabbed his jaw and forced him to look me in the eyes. “Tell me.”

Stone leaned over me and gripped the edge of the sink, caging me in.

“You either look at my cock with disgust or do your best to avoid looking at it altogether,” he whispered, the words punching me in the chest as his eyes dropped down to his erection between us. His stern gaze hit mine again. “I cannot bear it nor can I erase my scars.” That was when Stone’s attention turned to behind me. He snatched my hand from his face and walked out of the kitchen.

I whipped around. “What is it?”

“Someone’s out there,” he said with long strides to the window.

My heart took off. “There can’t be,” I said, following him.

He looked back at me, offended that I didn’t believe him. “I just saw them, Circe,” he said, pulling me behind him. “Does anyone know you’re here?”

“No,” he was too tall, blocking my view. When I peered around him again, I caught sight of another boat swaying in the water next to mine.

“There.” He tapped the window. “Someone came looking for you.”

And I knew exactly who it was.

CHAPTER 26

ADORA

Oh, no, oh, no, oh, no. The waves clipped the boat in time to the words in my head.

Alice steered a flat-bottom at least thirty feet in front of me, a clear shot to the harbor. I was already behind, so I had to throw on clothes. I revved the engine to full speed, needing to catch her before she got to Mrs. Cantini. Though, what would I tell her once I reached her? How could I convince her to keep my secret? What would happen to Stone if she refused to stay quiet?

It was still morning. Almost noon, perhaps. Though an ugly morning.

Above, the sun was a ghost behind spiritless clouds, and the wind was as harsh as my beating heart. The motor shook at its speed. Tears of my beloved black sea sprayed my eyes. I kept them open and fixed on Alice as I ate the distance between us.

Once her boat reached the dock, she jumped out with a rope tangled in her hand. She hurried to tie it to a wooden beam. My jon boat slowed until it clipped hers from behind.

"Alice, stop!"

She finished before I could and threw me a glance before taking off.

"Alice, listen to me," I begged, working faster to get my boat secured to the dock.

Then I charged after her, grabbing the back of her raincoat just before she reached the wooden stairs. I spun her around to face me.

Alice appeared much older under somber skies, her jowls shaking, her wrinkles deep and angry, and her button nose aflame. Most of all, her eyes narrowed into black beads.

"Why did you follow me?" I grabbed her jacket and pulled her closer.

“Why couldn’t you just leave it alone?”

Alice’s nose twitched with disgust, and she looked deep into my eyes. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I didn’t see anything,” she lied. Right to my face. She escaped my grip and straightened her back. “But if I were you, Miss Adora, I would spend the remainder of my day with my mother. That way, when the dutiful maid returns to the manor, and Mrs. Cantini asks if she found you, and where you’ve been, the maid won’t have to lie.”

My sore fingers dropped to my side.

She was willing to keep my secret. But why?

“That’s where I was,” I whispered, catching on. “I was with my mother.”

Her dire eyes nudged me. “Because you missed her.”

I did miss her. That wasn’t a lie.

A rain shower started. It was icy and soft and came down on us slowly. I looked up, and the silver clouds morphed into darker, ashen ones.

“I’ll be with my mother for the rest of the day.” I returned my gaze to her so she understood the seriousness on my face. “But we will talk about what you saw. Don’t bring this to Cyrus or Mrs. Cantini. To anyone.”

“I wouldn’t even know what to say.” Then she turned and trotted up the slick wooden stairs.

I didn’t know what to say either.

WHEN I STEPPED INTO THE COTTAGE, I EXPECTED LAUGHTER AND THE SCENT of pancakes, French toast, or crepes seeping and swirling. I didn’t expect silence and a chill.

Fable, Ivy, and Dad should have been up at this hour.

My heart thundered up the stairs, the most disastrous scenarios toppling over in my mind. But it all halted when I found my family asleep in the attic. They must have had one of those long nights. The silent, stirring hours that followed once emptiness crawled into a person. An unforgiving feeling when something was missing.

We had many long nights after Mom succumbed to catatonia and even longer nights since the Shadows came.

I gazed down at my sisters. Fable’s twisting brown locks laid across Ivy’s perfect skin. I hadn’t been away for long, but I remembered the most harrowing nights in this attic. We no longer had responsibilities to keep us busy. We only had silence and darkness—an abyss trapping us with our

dreadful thoughts.

I descended the stairs to Mom's bedroom.

She lay like Sleeping Beauty: hands folded, eyes closed. A dreamy beep in the bedroom was her heartbeat on the monitor at her side. Her appearance would make it impossible for anyone to believe that there was endless torture playing in her head.

Floorboards groaned under my feet when I took careful steps to her closet. Her lovely silk and chiffon gowns dangled like gem-colored spirits in her armoire. I fingered the blood-red one and let it slip between my fingers. It transported me back to when I was younger.

THE FABRIC TICKLES MY TOES WHEN I TWIRL, AND THE SKIRT LAPS ACROSS THE floorboards with a whoosh. Thin straps fall off my shoulders, but it still hugs me like I'm surrounded by water. I'm pretty—a mermaid who isn't ready, but a great big opening at the bottom for a tail to soar through a current for when I am. No one can see what I can do in a dress yet, oh, but one day they will. All I can think of—as I look into my reflection—is what I'll become when I'm older. One day, this dress will fit me in the same way it fits Momma.

Footsteps ascend, and my breath catches on a twirl.

The bedroom door swings open, and Momma stands behind me in the armoire's reflection. Her face falls, and for a moment, her eyes appear distant. Almost as if she yanked a memory from its roots.

"Adora, take it off," she demands.

Her voice is angry, and tears instantly bubble in the corners of my eyes. The skirt is balled into my fist as I try to keep it off the ground. "I don't want to."

Her face folds into a grimace. "You look ridiculous." She stalks deeper into the room and suddenly stands over me, yanking on the straps to pull them down. "It doesn't even look pretty on you. Take it off. Take it off, take it off, take it off!" she shouts in a way I have never heard from her before.

I try to stumble away and hug it tightly around my body. "No, Momma, stop!"

In the scuffle, the dress tears. The rip sounds like it's tearing open our chests.

Mom falls to her knees and clutches the broken strap dangling from the

hem.

“Look what you’ve done, Adora!”

I pile the skirt into my arms and run through the bedroom doorway and down the stairs. I run and run and run.

THE BEEP FROM THE MONITOR PULLED ME BACK TO THE PRESENT.

I was standing in front of the armoire mirror. Both of its doors were hanging open. The dress was clinging to my body, the shade of blood dripping from my silhouette.

In the mirror’s reflection, Mom was sitting upright behind me.

Straight black hair curtained her hollow cheeks.

Two big ocean eyes wide open and looking right at me.

A scream burned my throat.

I slammed the armoire door closed, and the mirror shattered to the floor.

Broken shards of glass rained down around my feet.

I turned on my heel. Mom was lying in bed with her eyes closed. The heartbeat on the monitor was slow, steady, and paralyzing. A chill penetrated my bones.

The bedroom door flung open and hit the wall when Ivy stumbled inside, out of breath. Her gaze swept the room. When her eyes met mine, her spine seemed to melt.

“Oh, it’s you,” she said with a sigh. Her black hair was flat on one side and matted on the other. It was the first time I’d seen her in Mom’s room, and she dropped her head and squeezed her temples with one hand. “I thought—I thought that was Mom.” She shook her head. “I thought that for a second, maybe she woke up.” Her voice was tired. Lifeless. “What happened in here? Why are you here, and why are you wearing that dress?”

Confused, I looked down, and it was Mom’s red dress that covered me.

I didn’t recall ever putting it on.

“I-I I don’t know.” My eyes snapped back to Mom. “She was looking right at me. In the mirror. She was sitting up and looking right at me in the mirror, Ivy.”

“You have the most colorful imagination.” Ivy glanced around at the broken glass scattered like glitter, and this was it. *This is the moment Ivy thinks I’m crazy, too.*

I grabbed Mom by the ankle and shook her leg.

“Get up!” I shouted, desperate to prove I didn’t imagine it or make it up. “I know you’re awake, and I know you can hear me. Now get up!”

Mom didn’t move. Of course, she didn’t move.

I dropped her ankle and faced Ivy.

“I’m not lying to you,” I whispered, defeated.

Ivy walked to the side of the bed and studied the monitor. “Everything’s fine. Maybe you saw what you wanted to see.” She looked at me with a shrug. “Wouldn’t be the first time.”

My fists clenched, but before they could pierce, I sprang them open. “I didn’t imagine it, Ivy. I know what I saw.”

She left the room with a shake of her head.

I stood shocked. My back was stiff, and my heart thrashed in its cage like live wire. It was impossible to escape the haunting image of Mom staring back at me. It was all I could see the entire way to the kitchen.

I sat down at the island, still wearing Mom’s dress. It fit me like a glove. The strap was still broken and dangling down my side, but the other fit perfectly around my shoulder.

Ivy flipped on the coffee maker. “So, you’re sleepwalking,” she said with her back to me. “You haven’t done that in a while. With Cyrus’s hyper-sensory abilities, he must be losing his mind over it.”

“I’m living in a different house, with different walls and different sounds. I’m adjusting, that’s all.” I pulled the skirt of the dress into my lap, desperate to change the subject. “Remember when I was a little girl, and I wore this dress, and Mom hated it?”

“Yes,” she said, not laughing, but air blew through her nose. “You were obsessed.”

“I never understood why she kept the dress if she hated it so much.”

“Sometimes people keep things to remind them of where they’ve been. Emotional scars. It keeps them strong.” She turned, splaying her hands behind her on the countertop. “Kind of like how you keep all those knickknacks in the wall behind your dresser.”

I narrowed my eyes.

“What?” She lifted a shoulder. “I needed something to take the edge off, and that’s where you keep fuil and deòir.”

Mermaid blood and Heathen tears. Uppers and downers.

“Don’t change the subject. Tell me why this dress was so important to Mom.”

The coffee pot gurgled. Ivy grabbed two mugs from the cabinet and poured in rich caffeine. She passed me a mug and leaned over the island until she was resting on her elbows, cupping her mug between her palms. The heat from the mug swirled from our coffee and into the air.

"Did Dad ever tell you about the time he and Mom met?"

"No," I said, spooning sugar into my coffee and watching it dissolve.

"It happened at the Founder's Day Ball. 1994."

I brought the mug to my lips, not surprised. "Founder's Day Ball, just like everyone else in this town."

She took a sip, too. "Not exactly. Mom was dating Mr. Cantini."

I choked on my swallow.

She expected it and continued, "Mom wore that dress, and Dad couldn't take his eyes off her. But what happened that night wasn't a fairytale, and certainly not something you're going to repeat to Fable. She still has a light in her eyes, something we've lost. I don't know, maybe I'm selfish, but I want Fable to keep that light for as long as possible."

I understood what she meant. Fable was sunbeams in a bottle. Naïve, and maybe even a little too trustworthy. She saw the good in every person she met. "I won't say anything."

Ivy nodded. "Dad watched Mom the entire night. She was dancing with friends, sipping her drink slowly because she wasn't much of a drinker. He said he felt pathetic because he knew Darnell was watching her, too. Darnell and Mom had just gotten together and were only on their second or third date, but Dad couldn't help himself. He knew if he couldn't get her alone, even for just one dance, he'd regret it." She stopped there.

"So, did he?"

Why was I asking?

Of course, he did. We existed.

"When there was an hour left at the ball, Dad lost her in the crowd. He said he remembered getting anxious, watching that infamous clock tick away on the far back wall. You know which one I'm talking about?"

The story was fascinating me. "Yes."

"Dad climbed the steps to the left corridor. And there was Mom and Darnell, alone in the shadows inside a transparent dome. Which only meant one thing."

"Sex magic."

Sex produced magic. For it to work safely, the participants must all have

witch blood running in their veins, their magic must have ascended, and the sex must be pleasurable for all involved. A timely state of euphoria led to the rise of magic. There were gatherings to support it. Encourage it, even. Sex magic kept the witches of Sacred Sea powerful.

"Dad turned to get out of there, but then Mom screamed his name." She shook her head. "She screamed *Dad's* name, Adora. And when Darnell looked up and saw Dad, the dome disappeared. Dad saw her face, and that was when it hit him." She didn't have to say more. I already knew and felt my burning anger rising in my blood. My fingers squeezed around the mug, not wanting to hear the rest, but she continued anyway, "They weren't producing magic *together*. Darnell was trying to steal Mom's magic, and she was terrified and crying, and Dad *lost* it."

"I'll kill him," I said through my clenched teeth.

On the downside, magic could also be transferred through force. If not careful, the magic we were born with could be taken by another through sex. Though not all at once. It would happen gradually. Piece by piece until nothing remained but an empty vessel.

"And Dad forced me to marry into that family? After what Darnell did to Mom?"

"You know as well as I do that Cyrus is nothing like his father. And Viola? She did Sacred Sea a favor. She only agreed to marry Darnell to preserve the Cantini bloodline and have his children. Why do you think no one has seen Darnell in years? Viola took one for the team and weakened that monster so he could never fight back." She raised her mug to me. "She's a good woman. Difficult, but good. Without her, we wouldn't have Cyrus at all."

I hadn't realized until this moment how similar Viola and I were.

How she was willing to have a loveless marriage as I was.

Ivy let off the counter and leaned into her hip. "Anyway, that's the story. Cyrus has no idea about his father, and if I were you, I wouldn't tell him. Viola would lose it."

"It's not my place to tell him."

"You're his fiancé," she said, throwing it like a grenade.

"Right, but still not my place."

She sucked in a breath. She let it go. "It still doesn't feel real." She looked up at me. "I love Cyrus, and that's not going to go away just because of the order. While I wish you could understand how I feel, you've never

grown close to anyone the way Cyrus and I have. Not even Kane."

And I almost relapsed and told her about Stone. The words of how I could finally, somewhat, understand how she felt swirled inside my head. But these words never made it out.

She saved me by quickly saying, "Speaking of the witch, you should probably get back to him. Morning sex is his favorite."

My head fell back. "Dammit, Ivy. I'm not having sex with him."

"I'm not an idiot. You're glowing like you just got fucked less than twenty-four hours ago. And it can't be from Kane because you've never glowed like that with Kane."

"Ivy—"

"Just go."

I RUN, MY SOLES SLAPPING COLD SAND. I WON'T STOP UNTIL MY TOES SINK INTO the bitter sea. I collapse on the shore, wrapping my arms around my knees, hugging them tightly, and look out into my ocean.

The tide comes in, frothy hands grabbing at the dress, trying to rip it from my body. The scarlet silk sweeps into her waters, and it looks like the ocean is bleeding.

It looks like the sky is bleeding, too—cobalt veins ripped open and spilling crimson into the sunset.

I let go of my knees, my hands falling to my sides, my nails digging into golden grains, and I let my spine hold me. I don't cry, though. Mermaids don't cry.

I can feel Mom walking up behind me, but I don't turn to look at her.

She sits right next to me, and we're both quiet as we stare out past the border. Notes of sea salt and brine are sewn in every cruel wind, icy air striking our raw cheeks. The lighthouse beam spins, casting its light across my face.

I wish she would leave and not poison my sacred place.

A beat of tension passes, and then—"Have you ever seen a fish drown, Adora?"

Her voice is tranquil, soft. Almost a whisper.

"Fish can't drown, Momma."

I see her from the corner of my eye. She isn't looking at me but still looking at the ocean. "It's heartbreaking to watch. A fish belongs in the

water, but if the water doesn't move across the fish, it can't breathe. Panic sets in, and the fish darts here and there, eager for a breath, thinking, this is my home, this is what I'm supposed to do, I belong here, why can't I breathe? Gills flap slower, hope drifts from its eyes. The one place it's bound to squeezes around the fish tighter and tighter until finally, the fish gives up, lies on its side, and dies."

That's when I look at her. "Are you drowning, Momma?"

"Yes," she takes a deep breath, "and one day, you will, too."

CHAPTER 27

STONE

CIRCE RETURNED THE FOLLOWING DAY, SWATHED IN LAYERS—A FUR COAT, knitted scarf, and jeans so tight it could break the skin. She'd explained that the person who showed up was a maid named Alice. She'd insisted she wouldn't return.

While we searched for dry wood, the only sound was our footsteps in the snow. As I walked behind her, I wondered how small and delicate a person could be and yet still take up so much space in the forest, on the island, in my world.

She was the sun, who shone a light on me, making me question if she were gone, who would I be, and would I exist at all?

Without her, there would be no ears to hear me.

No fingers to touch me.

No lips to taste me.

No memories to mark me.

No smile. No smile at all.

I would become smoke. Dust.

And it was unsettling to think I'd come into her world unknown, and she was leaving her mark on me, shaping me in more ways than one.

Circe could not understand this. Before me, during me, and, no doubt, after me, she had and would always have a family, a lover, friends, memories, secrets.

So many secrets.

I'd read the letters addressed to her beloved black sea—the ones that I was sure were difficult to write—with thick ink blots staining the corners of the paper, and the ones where she got carried away, telling stories and

pretending to be someone different. I'd read how she was disgusted with the way her father worked himself to death, and how her imagination often tempted her to want the kind of sex she could feel deeper than flesh. She knew of her beauty but loathed being complimented for it and cherished the touch of silk on her skin. I'd read on as her years passed by, her confessions turning darker. How she refused to let anyone see her cry. And I'd read the letters of when she did cry because she was alone, tears smearing ink into permanent black puddles.

I didn't simply understand her rage. I felt it in the palms of my hands, seeping into my chest with every letter I'd touched. I would never tell her this, but I read them all and thought to bloody hell that I could know everything there was to know about her. I understood why she was running to me and away from Weeping Hollow each day, but I couldn't figure out why she was returning to that town each night.

I looked up, and Circe turned her head, looking over her shoulder at me.

Despite the letters tucked away in a box, despite the memories tattooed inside my palms, she was so much deeper than one could grasp. But I feared, like the envelope Ambrose had gifted, the only thing that was ever important to me, she'd one day slip through my fingers.

" ... the red dress was on me, and my sister didn't believe any of it," she continued. "I'd forgotten how much I loved that dress, too, but my mother hated seeing me in it. When I was little, I thought I'd turn into a mermaid if I never took it off." Her older self laughed, finding the idea preposterous. "I would wake up on shore in red, certain a prince would appear in the middle of the night, waving a flag with a skull and crossbones to take me away."

And I suddenly longed to see her wearing this dress. I wanted to know how it felt to be standing beside her in that dress in a room full of people as a man would, claiming her as mine. I wanted to get her alone in that dress and feel what it would be like with my hand between the fabric and her skin.

I closed my eyes to push these thoughts away, then opened them again. "Quite the love story until said disguised pirate takes advantage of the pretty lady in the red dress before selling her off to the highest bidder." I sighed. "Lucky for her, I'm wealthy in this story and never minded the color red."

She narrowed her glare. "Get out of my story, Stone."

"Never." I withdrew my hands from my pockets and crouched down, poking a stick into the snow until it hit earth to measure inches. "It's no use," I told her, then looked up to the sky, spotting the sun hiding behind gray-

smeared clouds. “We should return to the lighthouse.”

When I stood, Circe was no longer there, only naked trees draped in snow, spider webs between them like frozen lace.

“Circe?” I turned in place. Snow, stripped trees, and silence. “Circe?” I called out, waiting, listening for her. She had been only feet away moments ago and couldn’t have gone far.

I turned every which way, the trees spinning, making me dizzy until I could no longer tell north from south.

There was a rapid pulsing of blood inside me as the rest of my body went numb.

“Circe!” My boots sank into the snow with every fast step as I scanned the lonely woods.

Time slowed down when you were afraid. At least it made it feel like time had slowed. With my breath in my ears, the fog cleared as I pieced the short timeline together in order. I thought of what could have happened, where she could be, all the outcomes playing out in what felt like minutes but, in reality, not more than seconds.

This moment was when I realized how much I cared for her, and it frightened me. I knew when time slowed.

I cupped my hands over my mouth. “Circe!”

Something hit me from behind.

I turned just as another snowball flew past my face. I dodged it, seeing Circe slip behind a tree. “Circe, what are you doing?” I asked, circling the tree, but so did she, so I stopped until she was standing in front of me.

A fresh dusting of snow stuck to her hair, and the tip of her nose was pink.

She took a step forward, so I took a step back, and my spine bumped against the trunk. “In a playful mood, are we?” I asked her.

She took another step forward with temptation in her eyes. I glanced down, trying not to stare at her for too long, but I could still feel her warmth battling the cold to get to me. Like the sun, she was all around me.

Then she pressed her body into mine, her fingers coiling around my coat.

“This is not a game,” I whispered into her hair, catching on.

And I had no choice but to look at her. When my gaze moved from her hands to her face, her eyes were celestial in how they meandered for infinity. I swiped blonde tendrils off her cheekbones and captured her face. “My heart is beating far too fast,” I confessed. “You’re making me nervous. Please say

something.”

A slow smile possessed her lips, and her smile appeared gradually and was hardly there. My mouth watered at the sight of it. I lifted her, pulling her to me until I caught her lips with mine.

She sighed in my mouth. Her body sighed, too, when she sank into me.

The kiss was all of her, in my hands, *not* slipping through my fingers.

It was her soft heart and her hard head, her dignity and her abandon, her wild and her calm, her contentment and her hunger for freedom. I was holding all of her, and she was holding all of me, folding up my paper heart and cramming it next to hers.

“My darling siren, look at the mess you’ve made.”

But not a second passed before she crashed her lips into mine again as though she couldn’t stand the separation. Her mouth was warm and inviting compared to the cold. I wrapped my arms around her, deepening the kiss. I felt her everywhere. In my blood down to my soles.

And when Circe pulled away, she took my breath with her.

“Stone,” she said upon exhaling.

Her eyes were so green when she said my name.

I stood out of breath from the kiss, confused by her strange behavior, cupping her face and stroking her soft lip with my thumb. “Is everything all right?”

“Stone,” she said again, as though my name was the only thing left inside her. Mind too full, s, t, o, n, e seeping through the cracks in her skull.

Stone, Stone, Stone, I imagined her thinking.

My name was no longer mine, but a siren’s sword.

Then she placed her hands on my waist, keeping me still as she lifted onto her toes. She kissed along my jawline, seducing me—a man who had never been seduced before by a woman. I held the back of her head, feeling her mouth slide along my skin with naked lust.

Circe, Circe, Circe, I was thinking as her warm fingers slipped inside my coat and under my shirt, meeting my skin. When she kissed my neck, I dropped my head back and closed my eyes. It was all intoxicating.

Until she pushed me up against the tree.

The action stirred something within me.

Memories of the bark at my back.

The burn.

She kissed my neck, and it snatched me up, taking me back to *the twine of*

the grain sack cutting into my throat.

She kissed my neck, *my feet scraping the earth*.

I returned to that summer night, *hanging from the tree, desperate for the ground, with sweat sliding down my face*.

It was all too familiar. “We should be on our way.”

Her wet mouth slid across my throat, sending shivers through me as she dropped her hand to the front of my pants.

She latched on to the button, holding me hostage.

My mind screamed, and I dropped my hand to her tiny ones.

With my pulse racing, I paused her for a moment.

I curled my fingers, ready to throw her across the snow and into a tree.

But then her lips left my neck so she could look me in the eyes.

She pressed her forehead to mine.

We stood there in the cold, my hands clasped firmly to hers, my last link to control.

She knew I didn’t fuck under the sun.

She also knew what *they* had done to me.

She knew, but she was here, and I was here, and somehow I trusted her.

Then my hand slipped away.

The sound of my zipper descending struck a chord somewhere inside me.

My jaw flexed, and I swiped a palm down my face, collecting fear.

I’m still afraid, I once told her.

My pants were hanging off my waist.

One tug and they would fall.

The discomfort only increased. I didn’t think I could take much more.

She had once seen me. She found me revolting.

I wasn’t prepared for her to recoil at the sight of me again.

I wasn’t ready, but she dragged my pants down.

My erection stood straight despite the cold.

Hard, heavy, wanting, revolting.

I tried to banish my thoughts.

I wanted to turn away, refusing to watch her gaze upon the hideous thing.

But I needed to watch, to be aware of her every move.

Last time, I was sliced open.

I was mocked, humiliated, tortured.

It’s ugly! It’s ugly! It’s ugly! she had screamed.

Flashbacks of the night didn’t consume me. The flashbacks *raped* me.

The tree, the blood, the pain. *The pain.*

My body was hot, becoming the fuel, the furnace, the flames.

Suddenly, I couldn't breathe and wanted to leave. But I was stuck here, the ugly thing between us, wishing to be hidden behind a mask.

Stop. The word was on the tip of my tongue, but I couldn't get it out.

I had to stop this.

I *needed* to stop this.

"Circe," I finally said.

Then she dropped to her knees.

She dropped to her *knees*.

And a sudden rush of emotion crashed into me.

I pinched the bridge of my nose to fight it.

"Circe, get up," my voice cracked. "What are you doing?" She didn't move. She was on her knees as I once was, looking up at me. I reached for her arm. "Dammit, I can't do this."

Her fingers caught mine, tangling and weaving them together.

With my gut in my throat, we looked at each other.

My entire existence has been turned into dust. Just dust.

Circe wrapped her fingers around the heavy, rotten thing.

I held my breath, anticipating what she would do.

Would she slice it, cut it, burn it?

Then she kissed my bulging scars.

My heart was slaughtered. My breath sailed.

She licked my ugly shaft, a soft, warm tongue trailing along the side of it.

I cursed, blinking away the dizziness so that I could watch her.

So I would believe it.

I didn't know time could slow when you were taken, either.

Not taken by fear but taken by something else. Just taken altogether.

I didn't know. No one had told me.

Circe wrapped her lips around the head, absorbing it, adoring it.

Her other hand came over the back of my thigh, her nails pinching my skin as she slid the thing inside her hot, wet mouth.

My jaw fell open in a moan.

I grabbed the back of her head and sank against the tree again.

I looked down at her.

My vision was a fogged window. A teardrop hung from my lashes.

I let it fall.

I let it fall.

And though she could see, I didn’t hide it.

She dragged her tongue along the bottom, slicing across every sensitive inch before sinking my cock back into her mouth. A prickle crept up from every corner of my body. It felt like a waterfall of tingles surging down from above, causing my testicles to flex, my abs to flex, my entire body to flex from the sensation.

Circe’s throat closed up when I hit the back of her throat, and the pressure rattled my bones. Her mouth and hand fucked my cock, and it was the second time in my life that my legs felt weak. I had to pin my spine to the tree so I wouldn’t collapse.

The feeling was like being inside her all over again. I squeezed my eyes shut in an attempt to fight off my orgasm and prolong the pleasure, to hold back, to stay here. But when her pretty lips inched back, sucking on the ugly flesh, I lost it. My fingers curled at the back of her skull, and I moaned, grinding into her mouth. I was teetering on the edge. About to fall.

My hand moved to her throat, and I pressed my thumb into the center of it as I watched myself sink into my darling siren’s mouth again. My cock jumped from the pleasure, and when she looked up and her gaze collided with mine, I felt absolutely helpless. Mentally vacant.

Mind numb, I could not think.

An intense rush that was mentally paralyzing seized me, stealing me entirely, all my senses, all my feelings, my vibrations, the temperature, the pain … this orgasm took it all and surged to a single point of exit, shooting out of me and to the back of her throat.

I wanted it to stop, fearing the pleasure scraping through my limbs would kill me. At the same time, I also wanted to hold on to Circe and this pleasure forever. My orgasm was the same gunshot I’d felt from her before: startling and sudden, the surge of backfire, the trembling of steel.

She swallowed against my thumb, wringing me, my climax passing to her in a way that was voracious and mind-shattering.

After she pulled away, she trailed kisses down my shaft and looked up at me with tears clinging to the corners of her eyes.

I dissolved, sliding down the bark until my bottom met the ground.

One knee bent, the other stretched out at her side.

I sank with her, wrapping my arms around her, bringing her close to my chest.

I could breathe. I kissed her head. I could breathe.

WE TOOK THE LONG WAY BACK TO THE LIGHTHOUSE AFTER THAT.

We were quiet, loathing words. Circe took my hand and held it in hers.

She looked at me with a smile, but then her gaze drifted past me, and her steps died. I turned to see what had caught her attention.

There was a dead tree, its skeleton-like branches climbing like a swiveling staircase. In the midst of its roots, there was a lone gravestone covered in snow that bulged from the earth.

Circe dropped my hand and walked to it.

I followed her.

The wind charged the leaves around us. With every step closer to the gravestone, despair filled the cracks inside me.

There was no name no date on the headstone.

There was only a dash.

"What does it mean?" Circe asked.

I crouched before it, took off my glove, and ran my palm across the rough surface. My eyes blinked, witnessing a montage of heartbreak unfold before them. The image shook before it cleared. *A lush island, browning leaves, and the sun lowering over the ocean, leaving behind a sky that looks like war's aftermath. I'm on my knees, hands shaking as I carve a dash into the stone. Sadness consumes me, making me feel much older than my true age. This sadness presses down on my brows, making my chin tremble, provoking tears to chase one after the other.* And I felt his pain as if it were my own. I wished for the aching of my heart to stop. *Why are we so sad?* I wanted to ask him as I existed in the corner of our mind. *I could hardly breathe, striking the metal tool across the stone with angry and forsaken strokes. I did this again and again, feeling like each deep strike of metal against stone was instead cutting into me. After finishing the dash, I fell back with a guttural scream that caused me to clutch my chest and fist my shirt because the grief was so intense that it physically pained me everywhere. My reflection appeared in the steel tool,* and I recognized him.

It was the same man who'd jumped from the top of the lighthouse.

Then I was sucked out of it as one would be awakened.

Circe laid her hand on my shoulder. "What happened?"

I flinched, returning to the present day, the cold, the snow, but my chest

was in knots with phantom despair and a miserable urge to kiss her.

Decades have come and passed. The gravestone was no longer sharp-edged and ashes but weathered and smoke. I understood as my hand slipped from it.

I looked at Circe, my chest aching.

"He *loved* her," I said, spitting out *love* for the first time as though it were a vulgar thing. "He loved her, with no end and no beginning, with no birth or expiration. He loved, eternally, and it broke him."

I turned to look her in the eyes again.

"I want to show you something."

IT WAS ALMOST NIGHTFALL.

I took her hand and pulled her in front of me, hoping she wouldn't be angry with me for keeping her here longer than she could afford.

Daylight cast a soulless color across the sky. I pointed to the top of the lighthouse. It was difficult to see when the cold burned our eyes and snow fell lazily from above. "Watch. Just up there where the beam cuts through."

She shivered in my arms, eyes steering toward Weeping Hollow, then back up to where I told her to look. She was growing impatient.

"Any second now," I insisted.

Just as the words left me, the broken man appeared on the gallery deck at the top of the lighthouse. Flickering at first, then turning on at once.

Circe's gasp floated, and I held her close. "He appears every day at this time," I told her. "I don't know who he is or how it came to be this way. All I know is that he's trapped in a death echo." The two of us watched agony distort all his features as he struggled with himself at the edge of the deck. His bare feet teetered, ready to let go and fall to his death at any moment. And no matter how many nights I watched him, it didn't make it any easier.

I held her tighter, pulling her flush against me. "I've heard stories of it but have never seen anything like it before coming here."

"What's a death echo?"

"The ghost of him is caught in a loop, forced to reenact his death for eternity," my voice dropped at the end, memories forcing their way inside, reminding me of the coffin, the lack of air, the clawing up my throat, the burn of my lungs. Death had once trapped me, too.

At one point, he and I were the same.

“Why?” she asked, as desperate for answers as I was.

“I’m not sure, but I believe it has to do with why he took his life.”

“We can’t just stand here.” Her muscles were jumping under her skin, ready to pounce up the lighthouse stairs to stop him as I’d once done. “How do we help him?”

“We can’t. There’s nothing we can do about it.”

Then the ghost fell from the top of the lighthouse.

In an instant, the sun died with him at three in the afternoon.

All fell silent, and winter stirred around us.

“Kiss me before you go,” I whispered to her in the dark.

She turned in my arms, smiling. “You kiss me.”

And I dipped my head, my mouth catching hers before my hands found her face. Her breath was warm, and my fingers moved to the corners of her mouth, tracing our kiss, remembering it. Then my thumb pulled down her lower lip, and my tongue slipped in. And I was set ablaze.

The kiss made me dizzy when I pulled away.

And our hands slipped away as she walked toward the boat.

“And Circe,” I called.

She turned back around, and the lighthouse beam captured the snow between us.

“Don’t kill anybody today, darling.”

She laughed, and I wished I could see her entire face in the dark.

“Hey, Stone.”

“Yes?”

A beat of silence.

A shiver.

She wrapped her fur coat closer around her. “It kills me every time I see your scars because I’m disgusted by what those men did to you,” she said to me. “So, you should know it was never you I was cringing at, it was them. It just so happens, I fucking love your cock.”

It was too dark to see our smiles, but I could feel them.

My god, could I feel them.

CHAPTER 28

ADORA

DECEMBER 9, 2020
50 DAYS UNTIL THE CRIMSON ECLIPSE
53 DAYS UNTIL THE CANTINI-SULLIVAN WEDDING

DAYS PASSED BY.

I couldn’t stop it from happening.

But I spent every one of them with Stone.

He trusted me. Completely.

Sex was powerful in that way, equal parts lust and admiration, its awakening nothing less than emotional scars slashed across our hearts.

Stone and I spent days teasing our lust, watching movie reels from the sunken couch, using each other’s limbs as blankets, sipping vanilla cola from sweating glass bottles, and reading. A lot of reading. For six hours a day, our world became candlelight catching wandering gazes, candlelight painting my silhouette as he drew me, candlelight tilting around his face, and candlelight spilling on the floor as bare feet danced upon it. This candlelight cast our shadows on the wall as we fucked, and this candlelight peeked between a closing door as we tore ourselves away from each other.

Our every moment was fleeting. Here and gone.

But they were moments that existed outside the madness.

The only shadows on Bone Island belonged to us.

In the Cantini Castle, I tiptoed the halls and slipped from rooms, haunting

the house like a shackled ghost. I stayed quiet, reluctant to engage, only staying at dinner as long as required, and never showing up for get-togethers if I wasn't required to attend. I was *just* here, and it had continued on like this until they treated me like I was *just* here, too. After a while, conversations flowed right through me, and eyes stopped looking for me. It made sneaking away so much easier.

Though the Shadows hadn't killed anyone in over a week, the town still fought sleep.

On days I couldn't get to Stone, I strolled through Town Square, weaving between townies who dragged along sidewalks like zombies. Sleep deprivation led to fights between flatlanders on the grass, in alleys, and on the streets. I dodged bodies and flying fists, continuing onward, a smile adorning my face, caught in the web of his touch, the slight twitch in his smirk, and venom-black eyes that made a slow crawl inside me with just the thought of him.

Stone was tucked away in a lighthouse like a faded photograph tucked in a locket against my chest. He was my secret—a quiet relic kept close to my heart that I could think about and be with whenever I wanted.

And all the times I could slip away to be with him ...

There was a thrill in this secret that, if only for a short time, made me feel alive in a solemn town. There was something between us that, if nothing else, gave me the security and freedom to open up, be vulnerable, and fuck deeper than the shallow. Stone gave me permission to be wild in a world that had told me what I could and couldn't be, what I should and shouldn't become.

Stone gave, gave, gave when all I'd known was take, take, take.

And it felt good. I was not addicted, obsessed, or dependent. I could pull myself away at any time. But why on this day? Why on the next? I'd been loyal to a family, a coven, and a town, and look where loyalty had gotten me.

I believe there were many ways to go crazy. At least this way, when I would one day perish, whether by death or marriage, I'd once felt what it was like to be touched with more than half a heart.

"DANCE WITH ME," I BEGGED HIM.

The same song was playing in the early afternoon, and I would never get sick of it.

Stone looked up at me from behind Mom's opened book, chewing on the

end of the eraser. “There’s something hidden between the lines,” he said, his eyes scanning the sentences. “I can’t tell what it is yet, but something’s there.”

“My mother wasn’t in her right mind. I can promise you she wasn’t sane enough to hide messages.”

“I don’t believe that,” he continued, obsessed with the details. “The things we do and say in life should never be cryptic. A book, however, is entirely different. In writing, nothing is wasted, as the spaces between the words are the most significant,” he said. “Now, if I could just find the other meaning. I may have to go back to the beginning.”

“And what is the first meaning?”

“Well, the love story, of course,” he answered, distracted.

“Isn’t that enough?”

Stone’s eyes lifted to mine. “When has love ever been enough?”

I grabbed the book and pencil from Stone’s hands and set them both at his side. When I pulled him to his feet, he gazed coyly upon my face. I walked backward to the center of the living room, taking him with me.

At first, Stone froze from my forwardness. Statue-like. I held my laughter, raising my arms and wrapping them behind his head. I lifted onto my toes to kiss him softly. Just once to break his icy exterior.

Then his head lowered, his warm hands cupped my elbows, and he pulled me into him, grasping my bottom lip between his. Gentle and sighing. The kiss was sinless, merciful at the beginning. And Stone moved his hand to my lower back and pressed my entire body against him so that I could feel his cock hardening in his pants.

“Now you’re the one distracting me,” I told him. “Close your eyes.”

Stone did, and I rocked him softly, gently, two bodies rooted here.

Stone’s mouth brushed along my shoulder, neck, and jawline. He inhaled deeply, and his warm breath floated across my ear when he exhaled.

My heart stuttered.

I moved my head just enough so that his mouth grazed mine.

“You’re dancing with me,” I told him, forcing my smile back.

Stone blinked his eyes open until they landed on my face. Then a nervous chuckle fell from his mouth. My brows jumped, and he wet his lips, sliding his hands up the backs of my arms as he looked down at our feet. “We have not taken a step in either direction.”

I smiled and gripped his shoulders, guiding him one step to the right.

“Better?”

Then he laughed, a smile ripping across his face.

It was fucking beautiful.

“Stone.” I peered up at him, grinning so big, waiting for him to notice his laugh. “You don’t even realize what just happened.”

“What?”

“You laughed.”

Realization dawned on his face. “I laughed.” His eyes slid between mine. He exhaled, his chest caving. And he wrapped his long arms around my back and dropped his head into the curve of my neck.

Out the window, there was an overcast. Dead evergreens stood tall, pointing to a dull and dusty sky. My eyes followed their stretch of descent, seeing that night was soon approaching.

“We still have a few more hours together,” Stone reassured me as if reading my mind. “It is my due diligence to ensure you’re not late to wherever you need to be after your time with me.” Sarcasm seared the tips of each syllable.

I could tell him why I had to return each day. I could tell him I was engaged to another man and living with his family, but it would shift things between us. He’d look at me with pity or distaste or say perfectly curated words to try to wrench me away.

Stone looked down at me, moving hair off my forehead. “I apologize. Every time you leave, it drives me mad,” he said, his sarcasm not meaning to push me over the edge but only a tap to face our reality. But when I didn’t say anything, Stone held us still. “Circe, I want you to come with me.”

I froze. *I want you to come with me.*

And this was it. *This is the moment where everything changed*, I thought.

I pretended not to hear him, to buy time to think about what to say. “Weeping Hollow needs a sports team,” I blurted.

“Circe, I built a boat,” he said, reminding me as if I had forgotten.

“Football or soccer or basketball …”

“You don’t have to stay in Weeping Hollow.”

“The Mourners.”

“Circe, stop. I know what you’re doing, but I need you to stop running. I need you to face what I’m saying.” He held my shoulders back so he could look me in the eyes. “Will you leave Weeping Hollow and come with me?”

With me, my mind repeated, unsure of what he was asking of me exactly.

Come with me, be with me, belong to me. Fuck me because I desire you.

Oh, how easy it would be to tell him that there was a barrier I couldn't cross. Take advantage of the *it isn't you; it's me*. But even if it was possible, Weeping Hollow was my home, and I could never truly leave it.

"No."

His brows jumped. "No?"

"It's not possible."

Stone looked away with a hardened expression, his hands still on my shoulders. "You're a coward," he edged out, letting me go. "Just when things become real, you fold into yourself. You keep these fantasies of you and me together safe inside your head, and once you're face to face with the freedom you wish to sail away on, you can't break the glass."

I sucked in a brutal gulp of air.

I wanted to tell him that the glass bottle surrounding me already felt as if it had shattered. Because before him, my world was sealed and smooth. And now? Well, now my life was in jagged pieces, all the edges sharp.

I clutched my necklace. "Don't do this."

The pulse in his neck kicked, and from this angle, the scar below his left eye made it look like a tear was hanging from his bottom lashes.

One more piercing stare, and then, "Tell me, is it a something, or a someone keeping you from leaving?"

"Please, Stone. I'm begging you. Don't ruin this."

"And what is *this* exactly, Circe?" he asked with his hands up at his sides, and my jaw clenched. "Will you not come with me because you feel you don't deserve it? Is this a way to punish yourself because you killed her and you're angry and want to hurt more people?" he berated, and "Stop," I pleaded, but he didn't— "Or will you not come with me because we're only taking advantage of each other, and I'm something that's in your control in a world where you have none? Because I'm something you can live without, and this whole time you've felt nothing."

"You don't know anything about feelings."

"Yes, I do," he said, taking a step closer and taking both of my hands in his. "Yes, I do. Hurt, scared, miserable, lonely, that's all I've ever known. I was never allowed to express any of it .... Then I met you." He squeezed my hands, letting them hang between us as he looked at me. "Circe, you make me feel things. Good things. Feelings I've never experienced before. Not until I woke up on a beach in your arms. So, don't tell me I don't feel when

I’m standing here, a nervous wreck once again because you’re about to walk out that door.”

“But do you love me?” I asked him surprising myself and the space between us. I didn’t know it was what I needed until this moment. “Is it only desire, or do you love me?”

As if love were the thing that could fix my anger. Like a fairytale.

His brows were bunched together. “Love? Is this what you expect of me?” he asked with a look of hurt on his face. “Have I not made it clear how much I care for you? And yet you expect me to give you what’s left of my heart, bloody and bruised, just for you to crush it in your fist?”

I wished I could take it back. “No, I don’t expect anything from you.”

“Because the only thing you can ever love is your beloved sea, yes?”

My fists clenched at my sides. “The sea is what’s binding us together.”

“The sea is also what’s ripping us apart.”

“What are you saying?” I asked, terrified this was goodbye.

If either of us could reverse time, we’d take it all back and return to before he’d asked me to leave with him. We’d try this again, so things could stay the way they were. If we could, we’d stop time altogether. Create more.

Let me pretend until I don’t need you anymore.

Stone looked down at me with melancholy in his eyes. “What I’m saying is, my darling siren, I’m afraid of what I may do if I’m forced to be apart from you.”

CHAPTER 29

ADORA

New Moon
December 13, 2020
46 days until the Crimson Eclipse
49 days until the Cantini-Sullivan wedding

My beloved black sea,

You have no idea.

You are not the only one stuck between two worlds. I have one foot in Weeping Hollow and the other on Bone Island with him.

Half the time, I forget who I'm betraying and where my loyalties lie.

My mind is filled with an anthology of morbid and macabre thoughts, and these gruesome ill wishes that haunt me should not sit well beside the innocent and naïve of him.

However, around him, I am not the same single-minded woman the town has grown to know. I am also not the same, black-hearted woman who exists within. He brings out the woman I was always supposed to be. He makes me soft and gentle. He makes me feel loved. So, in the spaces between seconds, I become someone I'm not ashamed of. And we are nothing short of an adored song each time we lie beside each other.

He believes the only reason I gave him mercy was because he is the most exciting thing that has ever happened to me. Perhaps it's true, but he was also the first to fill me in all the ways I've craved.

While I've taken advantage of him to escape my reality, we've become attached to each other. And if I'm honest, it was easy.

He once said I'd made a mess of him, but this is not entirely true.

My beloved black sea, look at the mess we've made.

ALICE BARGED INTO THE BEDROOM, CAUSING MY FOUNTAIN PEN TO SLIDE across the paper.

My letter was ruined. I glared at her.

"My apologies, Miss Adora. I'm sure this small hiccup can be overlooked."

"No," I shook my head, "you don't understand. It has to be perfect."

It would happen soon, where only the silver outline of the new moon would be visible in the midnight sky. The ocean would be awaiting my letter, and there was still so much to write.

I crumpled the paper and tossed it into the waste bin.

"It has to be perfect," I repeated.

IT WAS STILL PITCH-BLACK WHEN THE LIGHTHOUSE BEAM SHONE THROUGH THE window, casting a tall shadow on the wall. It circled again, and the second time, it caught Cyrus, who was standing over me. He brushed his finger across my cheekbone.

"What are you doing in my room?" I glanced around for Alice, surprised to see him at this hour. She was taking clothes out of the dresser drawer and laying an outfit at the foot of the bed. "What time is it?"

"It's almost the witching hour," he said, and I couldn't believe I'd fallen asleep, almost missing the New Moon. "There's an urgent meeting in the Order's chambers. We have to be there."

I sat up. A yawn stretched across my face. "Now?"

"Yes. You have five minutes to change. I'll meet you in the foyer."

"What about—"

"Get dressed, Adora." Cyrus kissed my forehead and left.

"Nothing fancy," Alice muttered, laying a sweatshirt and jeans on the mattress. "I was told only a select few would be attending."

The floor was cold under my feet. Shadows from the oil lamp moved on the wall behind Alice. "Do you think it's about the Shadows? I wonder if the Order found a way ..." I wondered aloud, slipping out of my nightgown and into my jeans. I pulled the sweatshirt over my head and tied my hair back into a low bun with a chiffon bow. "This is so out of the blue. It doesn't make sense." Then a maelstrom of thoughts hit me at once—ones that involved Lena, my family, and then there was Stone. My gaze darted to Alice, and I halted my pace. "It could be anything."

And my heart went crazy, hopeful one second, frightened the next.

"You'll know soon," Alice said, rushing me out the door.

I met Cyrus at the bottom of the stairs and slipped into my jacket. "Where's your mother?"

"She's already in the chambers." He nudged his head to the left, grabbing my hand. "I already have the car heating up for you."

His 1964 Aston Martin Vantage Coupe was the love of Cyrus Cantini's life. In the summer, when we were sixteen, we'd taken the coupe on many joy rides going over seventy miles per hour down Archer Avenue until the town spun us around. We did this repeatedly, getting dizzy and laughing until we cried, making ourselves sick. In contrast to others, Cyrus didn't drift to sex or drugs. Cyrus only needed his best friend.

He opened the car door for me and let me in. Once he slid into the driver's seat, he sat back for a moment and let his hands fall from the steering wheel.

A grin stretched across his face. "Do you remember?"

"I think about that summer every time I see your car." It was the same autumn his father got sick, or so I'd assumed. The same autumn Darnell Cantini started losing weight and stopped attending meetings and events in town. I hadn't known he'd attempted to steal Mom's magic until Ivy had told me, and Viola had stripped the beast of his magic since.

Cyrus grabbed the shifter. "So much has changed since then."

Numerous tunnels wound beneath Weeping Hollow in the shape of a pentagram. The only way inside was through a trap door at one of the access points—the points of the star. The Pruitt Mansion, a cave in the cliff, the cemetery, Goody Farms, and the woods behind Town Hall. The Chamber of the Order was located beneath the gazebo, in the heart of Weeping Hollow. Sacred Sea and Norse Woods each had a chamber to handle matters separately, but the Chamber of the Order acted as the shared Town Hall for the covens. It was the only place we could safely gather together.

We drove down Seaside Street to the Pruitt Mansion, parking in their massive driveway. We wasted no time, entering the home through a side door, descending the stairs, and making the journey with only a gas lantern lighting our way. Water leaked from cracks and *drip-drip-drop* echoed off the walls.

As soon as we arrived, Cyrus gave me one last look before pushing the massive door open. I only took one step before stalling in the doorway.

Before the Order's table, four Heathens stood with their backs to me.

In all my life, except for Beck, I'd never seen the Heathens without their masks. No one had until their curse broke.

Julian Blackwell, Phoenix Wildes, Beck Parish, and Zephyr Goody.

Four founding descendants of Norse Woods Coven.

I looked at Cyrus with my heart racing.

He grabbed my hand. "They're waiting."

My eyes were glued to their backs as I walked, anticipating the first look with a thickness in my throat. *This is it*, I thought. They had been hiding on their side of town for weeks. What could possibly bring them out of the woods, let alone at this hour?

When we reached the front of the room, I stood beside Cyrus. I couldn't help my loitering gaze, when finally, Julian glanced at me with silver eyes that scratched up my spine.

I'd seen those eyes many times, but never the face it was attached to.

Julian stood straight with an intimidating posture. A man and no longer a hollow monstrosity, with sharp cheekbones, narrowed jawlines, and a metallic glimmer in his tired eyes. His magic contained the element of spirit, which held the ability to perform magic derived from any other element. Most recently, it was rumored he'd passed through the cell's bars. It was how he escaped and got to Fallon in time.

Phoenix, the descendant of fire, crossed his arms and glanced at me, carrying questions inside his golden eyes. Stubble shadowed his jaw and upper lip, dipping with his cupid's bow. He had a perfectly shaped nose with brows naturally slanted downward, giving off the impression that he was eternally moody. He always had eyes that were expressional, never able to hide the hot yet transparent flames that burned within them. And right now, he was wondering why I was here with the men of Sacred Sea.

Although Beck was the shortest of the four, he was far from short. He stood at least six feet tall with a knowing flaring across his face like he was anticipating this night. He was the witch of water, the youngest of the four, and the one Fable and I had seen in Town Square with Milo. There had been whispers about Beck being able to tell the future. Did he already see us all meeting here on this night?

My thoughts halted when Zephyr Goody, son of air, stepped forward, the tallest of them all. A mask still covered the Heathen's face. Everything else about him was the same: light brown hair combed back neatly and neon,

psychopathic green eyes shining. But *same* didn't sit well with me, considering he still wore the creepy *Phantom of the Opera* mask.

What did this mean?

"Cyrus," I whispered, my stomach in knots.

"I noticed." Cyrus's gaze flicked to Zephyr. "Let's not form assumptions yet."

Augustine banged the gavel, and my attention snapped to the front of the room, where the Order sat. Augustine Pruitt, Viola Cantini, Clarence Goody, and Agatha Blackwell.

Mina Mae, who looked after the flatlanders, sat off to the side to monitor, wearing a nightgown and slippers with her long braid tumbling off her shoulder.

Clarence Goody was the high priest of Norse Woods and Zephyr's father. Most importantly, he no longer had a mask covering his face. His nose was long and straight, his pale face thin. How was it that Zephyr still wore a mask to hide his cursed face, but his father didn't?

"Julian Blackwell," Augustine said, his voice tired. "Please let the room know what was so urgent that you had to drag us away from our families during a time like this."

Julian was standing too close for comfort. Only an empty aisle between us. Even with Cyrus beside me, disgust still swam through my bones. Julian paid the right side of the room no attention after the initial greeting glances.

"The Heathens request permission to explore the shores of Sacred Sea."

"That's not your jurisdiction," Kane raced to say.

Julian filled his chest with air, gripping the chair in front of him. "With all due respect, Augustine, people are dying. While Sacred Sea is busy planning a ball, our priority has always been to remove the Shadows."

"The Shadows haven't killed a soul in over two weeks," Viola said, most likely because the ball was mentioned.

"Whatever it is, is still among us. It's not finished," Beck countered.

Julian nodded. "It would be a mistake to believe otherwise, and we can't keep going on like this. We're all tired. We've searched the woods. We've read the books. We've done everything imaginable and exhausted all of our options. There must be something we're missing, and there's only one other place we haven't looked."

Julian was straight to the point. No fluff. And perhaps Fable was right, and the Heathens did care about the Shadows. From what he'd said, they'd

spent this time trying to find ways to end them. But the mistrustful part of me was determined to believe his request for permission to search the shore had nothing to do with the Shadows. There had to be an ulterior motive.

"Since when did the Heathens start caring?" I asked. Cyrus grabbed my hand, but I yanked it away. "No, the entire town may be too afraid to say something, but I'm not. For years we've lost countless lives because of the four of you. Not to mention those who disappeared. We're not stupid. River Harrison didn't just vanish into thin air. The least you could've done was act like men, own up to what you did, take ownership of the grief you piled on this town, and give the victim's loved ones some peace. But you haven't. Weeks have passed since the curse broke, and all four of you are still cowardly monsters hiding away in the dark. Are you telling me you've spent these weeks reading your family's journals while people were *dying*? Are you kidding me?"

The entire room became quiet.

I was breathing too hard.

The four of them just stared.

"And what have you done, Adora?" Beck asked with a slight lift in the corner of his mouth.

It was a simple question. A difficult question. A reasonable question.

He raised a brow with a smug smile, seeming to know the answer already.

And perhaps he did, but the question was rhetorical, and I was offended that he believed he could speak to me at all. "You have no right—" I started, but Cyrus stopped me. "I think she's trying to say that it's been a month since the curse broke and the Shadows came. More than enough time has passed for the Heathens to show their faces and right their wrongs for the community. Instead, they've shown nothing." And I hated how he spoke over me. I hated how he spoke for me. Was this the life of marriage?

Kane tsked. "Their curse broke, and now they think they can run free."

Phoenix dropped his head back. "Oh, don't sound so down, Pruitt," he said, rolling his head to the side to face him. "The bright side—you get to see this pretty face every Friday night."

"I've never wanted to punch anyone more in my life," Kane gritted out.

Phoenix blew him a kiss.

Julian held out his palm. "We broke the curse. Let's come to terms with this and figure out how to move on from here," Julian interrupted. "Starting with permission to search the shore."

“Broken?” Kane’s head cocked with a dumbfounded expression. “Then explain to me the tall ass problem in the room none of us are discussing.”

All eyes turned to Zephyr Goody. He kept his head forward. Silent.

“Zephyr will come with us,” Julian replied.

“Ha.” Kane smiled, wiping the corners of his mouth with his thumbs. “Mask or no mask, the four of you are a disease. Look what happened after the curse broke. Let’s just lay it out in the open. The Shadows are your fault. Every death is on your hands and your conscience.” He shook his head. “You manipulated that stupid girl into breaking your curse, and now you’re manipulating the Order. We should be locking all four of you in the cell.”

Julian looked at the floor with a grin. It wasn’t that Kane’s comment amused him but that it infuriated him, and he was trying to contain himself.

“Be careful with your choice of words,” Julian said, sending Kane a warning glare, his silver eyes moving to Cyrus, then back to Kane. “I didn’t come here disrespecting your family or women, so it would be a regrettable mistake to disrespect mine.”

“Always so grounded in front of an audience.” Kane appeared to get high from his words. A crazed look in his tired eyes. “I wonder who has to die for you to break, Julian. Certainly not your brother or father, so I wonder—”

“Do not tempt me—” Julian took one step out of line, and Phoenix snatched his arm, stopping him. The sleeve of Julian’s jacket sizzled under Phoenix’s grip, smoke rising between them. When Phoenix let him go, a burn in the shape of a hand hissed on Julian’s bicep, the fabric of the wool coat eaten away.

Kane focused on Zephyr, not sparing a second to allow anyone to speak. “Julian’s rise will be your fall, Zephyr. He’s more powerful than you—always has been, always will be—and was born with every quality you lack to make a great leader. It won’t be long before he takes back high priest from you. My best advice is to get your little bitch under control, *lest* you want to make a mockery of your family name.”

Zephyr lifted his chin, and an invisible hand snatched Kane’s throat and lifted him into the air, his toes scraping the floor. The area around Kane’s throat was turning colors. He couldn’t breathe.

Clarence Goody stood from his chair to try to talk sense into Zephyr.

“Augustine,” Agatha Blackwell insisted. “You must put a stop to this.”

Augustine sat back, for the first time, saying and doing absolutely nothing. After all, Kane had intended to get into their heads while he had the

chance. He wanted to reveal their weaknesses and pin them against one another. It was everything Augustine could ask for in a son.

“They came here behaving like boys, they’ll have to figure out how to control themselves like men,” Viola muttered.

“Zephyr, let him go,” Clarence demanded of his son, the boom in his voice shaking the room. And as much as I despised Zephyr, I found pleasure in seeing Kane hang by his throat in the air like a witch from a tree.

“Let him go, Zephyr!” Clarence repeated, his face turning red with anger.

Kane gasped, eyes pooling with fear as his face turned purple.

Augustine appeared bored, for he had done much worse to Kane.

Kane’s body twitched, and that’s when horror shuddered through me that no one was actually stopping it. No one *could* stop it.

Clarence bolted his arms forward, a ball of air shooting across the room at Zephyr, but Zephyr stopped it with a raise of his other hand and swung the forcefield into the wall.

The stone wall caved and crumbled to the ground, the transparent green ball of air leaving a massive dent behind.

Kane’s eyes were rolling to the back of his head.

“Zephyr!” Clarence barked. “Zephyr, release him!”

Then, “That’s enough,” Julian ordered, and Zephyr cut his eyes to Julian.

Kane tumbled to the ground and hunched over once he caught his bearings, gasping for air. The rest of the room had gone silent, all eyes on Julian and Zephyr.

Even Clarence stood frozen and speechless.

No one had to say it for it to be evident.

Kane was right, more right than I was sure he would have believed. The Heathens already looked to Julian as their High Priest, not Clarence Goody. Even the Heathens hadn’t realized it until this moment.

“Let’s get back to the topic at hand,” Augustine said calmly with a triumphant smile, and Clarence eased back into his chair with confusion written across his expression. “No more magic.”

Kane gripped his neck, relieving it. “He’s a psychopath,” he said from a scratchy throat. “Is this not proof enough? There’s nothing the Heathens can do on the east side that we can’t. There’s a hidden agenda here. Just because they don’t wear masks anymore doesn’t mean they’re different people or that we should trust them. The town is already scared. No need to let the dogs out and bring on more insanity.”

Julian squeezed his hand into a fist. “Augustine, if I may?”

Augustine nodded, giving him the floor.

“Our only goal is to find the answers to end the Shadows. If you’re concerned about what people will think and how they’ll react to us walking Eastside streets, there’s no need. Nothing will come of it. No one will ever know.”

“How?” Cyrus asked, intrigued. “How can you assure not one soul will see you? They will be standing at their windows, watching from behind their curtains. They’re scared, Julian. If they see the Heathens walking along the shore, they may mistake the Heathens for the Shadows, or, at the very least, believe the Heathens are in fact linked to the Shadows. It will cause panic and only make things worse for Norse Woods. Is that what you want?”

“I don’t think I’ve made myself clear,” Julian stated.

“We don’t want to search Weeping Hollow’s shoreline,” Zephyr said. “We want permission to search the shores of Bone Island.”

SACCHARINE SECRETS

ALEC & CIRCE

WINTER DAYS IN WEEPING HOLLOW WERE THE SHORTEST, AND WHILE ALEC was fond of the night, it was only during the light of the sun when Circe would come.

However, each time they were together, Alec lost track of time. She robbed him entirely, and he forgot there were tomorrows. She was a song, a dangerous femme fatale, wrapped in mystery in those dresses that clung to her body, and with lips that cut him open … and when she smiled, he couldn't think at all.

The fire beat against Circe's golden Skin as she stepped into the bedroom to find Alec. Instead, she was greeted by letters tucked into an envelope with her name scrolled in script across the top.

Inside was a treasure map. *Come find me, Circe,* it read.

This had become their favorite Pastime, after all. Writing love notes to one another, secret messages scattered throughout. If anyone should find their letters, their secret was safe. And each time they were apart, they could be Reminded of the love they shared when the distance was too much to bear.

Circe began the hunt, decoding the messages with a bright, excited smile. It hadn't taken her long. The mysteries between them kept their love afire even though she believed she knew all of Alec's tricks.

Then she happened upon an arrow made of seashells In the sand.

She followed the trail of shells, her heart racing inside her, around the bend where the rocks gathered. Just on the other side, Alec stood upon the deck of a sailboat beside the word *Wistoragic* carved into the wood across the hull.

“It means a lingering sadness and sense of Nostalgia following the last chapter of a Great love story.” Alec jumped down and swiped his palms together. “This is our happily ever after. And it’s all yours if you want it.”

By this time Alec had approached her, crossing his arms over her chest from behind, taking her into his arms.

“You haven’t said a word.” He laughed. “Do you like it?”

“Where are we to go?”

Alec smiled. “Everywhere.”

CHAPTER 30

ADORA

BETWEEN LOVE AND HATE, THERE WAS BONE ISLAND, AND ON BONE ISLAND, there was a man. A tremor existed in the space within. It wasn't love, but a tremor all the same. And the entire way back to Cantini Castle, this was where my mind was: Bone Island, the man, and the tremor between us.

As soon as we walked through the doors, I didn't bother to say a word to Cyrus. I walked graciously up the stairs to my bedroom as if I didn't intend to climb out of my window as soon as I entered.

"You sound like a crazy person," Alice said, following my every step around my room as I searched for my boots. "You can't possibly think of going to the lighthouse at this hour."

"They will find him," I reiterated, urgency dripping from my words. I thought there would be more time. Another few weeks, at least. I had to get to Stone before the Heathens did.

"Let him go and have the Heathens find him!" she whispered-shouted, and I spun with wide eyes to hush her. She lowered her voice. "Let it be a problem for Norse Woods. It's for the best."

My jaw snapped shut, my teeth grinding. "They will kill him, Alice." Gravity had seeped into my voice. Emotion. All the heavy things that didn't belong. "He can't be found. He can't."

"Why?" She gripped my shoulder to stop my frantic movements and forced me to look into her brown eyes. "What did you do that was so awful you'd risk your life?"

I bit my lip to keep my secret, but it was pointless. "I used magic to save him," I finally admitted out loud. "Alice, I *healed* him. And it was remarkable. I'm not supposed to ascend until my birthday, and I was able to

heal a man.” I walked to the window and peered out at the lighthouse. “And I may or may not have had sex with him. A lot. This stranger I hardly knew. If one doesn’t land me in the cell, the latter certainly will. You know what they do to those who commit treachery, let alone use magic without permission.”

“You foolish girl.” Alice scrunched her nose when she looked out the window at the lighthouse. “Then you must go, and for your sake, Miss Adora, you must kill him and leave nothing behind. As the ocean does, let it take his body and all traces of him. It is the only way to save yourself.”

I looked at her stunned, my stomach in knots. “I can’t do that. I can’t kill him.” How had murder crossed her mind at this moment and not mine?

She took my hands and straightened her spine, appearing taller. “Then you stay, and I will do it for you.”

I suddenly saw her differently. Deceitful. Cunning. Crazed. Was this how Stone saw me? “I never took you as a murderer.”

“I made Cyrus a promise and it’s my job to protect you at all costs, so either way, it must be done. Otherwise, he will follow you back to town if he cares about you. And if this stranger shows up in Weeping Hollow, he will get both of you killed.”

I sucked in a breath, nodding. If I disagreed, I had no doubt Alice would follow me to Bone Island to take his life or bring this information to Viola to protect herself. How deep did her loyalties lie, and to whom? “No, if he has to die, then the only person who should do it is me.”

Alice walked to the dresser and opened a drawer. When she returned, she was holding my sheathed dagger delicately with both hands as if it were an explosive. I withdrew the dagger, and my gaze trailed the intricate silver scrolls along the blade’s spine. Emeralds decorated the handle.

“Get it done, and don’t make any mistakes,” she said with finality.

There was no time to be careful. I escaped into the night, feeling the cold wind piercing my skin as I ran and ran under the pitch-black sky the entire way to the docks. There was no moonlight to give me a path, and every frosty breeze burned my eyes, the inside of my nose, and slipped into my mouth, skinning my throat. My breathing bellowed in my ears, the dagger’s sharp point stabbing my thigh with every stride. I clutched my bag’s strap around my shoulder. Inside it held a change of clothes should something happen and the letter for the new moon trapped inside a bottle.

When I reached the dock, the air in my lungs bottomed out.

The jon boat was missing.

Quickly, I turned on the flashlight.

The light flickered, and I hit the side of it until a steady stream cut through the fog and beamed across the water's surface.

Half of the jon boat was sunken and filled up with seawater. An earlier storm must've slammed it against the dock. The only thing keeping it up was the single rope tied to the back of my Finneuma. The rest of the rope securing it to the dock had come undone.

Panic sank inside me and spread.

I channeled it, determined to get to Stone in whichever way I could. I headed to the stern of the Finneuma and crouched down to untie the jon boat. With a held breath, I let the small boat go.

I stood, watching it sink into the black ocean.

With it, memories flooded my mind. Ones of Dad teaching me how to drive my first boat, my sisters and I drinking and laughing in the middle of the night, taking Stone to Bone Island and the way he watched me under the flapping hood, then myself sneaking away every day to see him. They were there, then gone. Until the boat hit the ocean floor.

I only allowed myself a second to grieve, then released the Finneuma's ropes from the dock's cleats, pulled in the bumpers, and dug into my pockets for the keys.

With frozen fingers, I turned on the ignition. It would be my first time driving the boat alone. I walked myself through Dad's steps as if it were a silent chant, hoping there would be enough gas to get me to Bone Island and back.

With the bow pointing toward the island, I steered the wooden pirate helm. It was dark, and the moon's light reflected off the top of each wave, making the ocean look like it was holding all the stars.

The ocean breathed too—my only adored song. And I was suddenly a girl who believed she really did belong in the water. I was suddenly a girl who believed she could one day swim away if she wanted to. If only for a moment.

Stone's silhouette appeared on the shore.

He must have heard the boat coming.

My heart shook when I switched the gear to neutral, lowered the anchor, and turned off the ignition. He watched me from afar with a fur blanket wrapped around his shoulders, but I couldn't see his features.

My feet wobbled on the boat's portside before I jumped into the water.

At first, shock from the icy temperatures instantly numbed me, but I fought through it and swam to Stone. The fur blanket fell from around his shoulders as he took defeated steps closer.

The distance between us was disappearing with every free-handed stroke.

As I drew closer, I noticed disappointment carved into his face.

“Stone,” I gasped, water coming up to my chest.

I trudged against the midnight tide that was pulling me back.

Stone walked into the freezing water, splitting the fog, meeting me where the waves slapped his knees. He kept a hardened gaze on my soaked face until he was clutching both sides of it. There wasn’t time to speak. He was pulling me into him, sweeping me up in an ardent kiss.

Stone’s tongue curled around mine, and I soared from it.

But I ached too. A painful shake as if my heart detested the idea of us ever parting. This was it for us.

“Stone,” I said upon an exhale.

“No,” he said, shaking his head as if he didn’t want to hear it. Knowing that these were our last moments, his actions were hopeless. So, he was forceful, stripping off my sopping pants and discarding my sweater before almost throwing me onto my back at the shoreline.

I should have known this was how he was going to react.

Stone only had two settings: desperate and quiet. And sex was his battle cry. We didn’t have time, but Stone was eager in the way he thought he could get me to stay. If this was the last time, then so be it.

It happened gravely and all at once. In the cold, in the night, my arms and legs shivered until he came down on his elbow. He hovered me, the heat from him blanketing me, despair soaking his eyes.

I undid his trousers until my fingers wrapped around his hot and heavy cock. Stone’s kiss turned deep and fervent, his monstrous thing grinding into my hand as he rolled his hips, desperate for me, for warmth, for connection.

I stroked him, and Stone’s expression dissolved.

“You’re killing me,” he said, restraint cracking in his voice.

A new wave came, wrapping its arms around us.

And after the tide pulled back, my legs were wrapped around his hips.

Then he plunged himself inside me. The sand felt like concrete at my back and a cry tore from my lips, my body jolting upward from the pressure.

Another wave came, another deep thrust, and I grabbed fistfuls of sand and skin.

Stone didn’t speak. He pressed our foreheads together, pushing his lips against mine with strangled emotions raining down his features.

His sand-covered hand slid down to the space between my thighs where we were connected. Then he grazed the skin around my opening that was hugging his cock as he fucked me. Feeling me, marking me, marking himself, memorizing us, this moment, and when he thrust into me again, his thickness in all its entirety shoved to the hilt.

The sensation tore a cry from my lips, and Stone swallowed it with a kiss.

I pressed myself closer to him, begging him never to stop touching me, never to have his warm naked fingers leave me.

And while we fucked, the ocean made love to us.

On the shore of Bone Island, he came quickly. Without warning.

I was filled with Stone, sand, and the sea all at once.

His body shuddered in my hands. I pulled his chest to mine, my nails sinking into his back with each jerking plunge inside me. Stone dropped his head into the curve of my neck when a moan tumbled out of him. His beautiful cock convulsed inside me, and I tangled my fingers in his hair, kissing his neck and tasting brine at his pulse as he came.

And when he lifted his head to look at me, he dropped to his side, taking me with him and swinging my leg over his hip. My head lay in the crook of his arm as he sucked my bottom lip, his cock sliding in and dragging out.

“You weren’t supposed to let me go,” he pushed into my ear, fingers curling into my flesh as he fucked me slowly, small waves crashing into us.

I thought the intensity of the moment to be unbearable, but neither one of us dared to pull away first because the thought of being without it was painful, too. What a war to be fought—a war neither of us wanted to win.

“I wish—” I started to say, finding myself in his eyes, then emotion robbed my words. I sighed, looking for something that could make this easier. “I wish I didn’t have to choose.”

“Spare me,” Stone muttered, pulling out and slipping out from under me.

He was standing by this time, yanking his wet trousers up until they hung from his hip bones. Then he walked to the dry part of the beach to snatch up the fur blanket.

When he returned, he dropped it around my shoulders.

I looked up into the black sky, trying to catch my breath with an orgasm on the edge that I wouldn’t allow myself to have.

Stone had become the balm to my twisted life, and I knew, without a

doubt, I'd surely go mad without him.

But the Heathens were coming, and there wasn't much time.

"The Heathens will be on this island by morning. If these monsters find you here, they will kill you. You have to get in your boat and leave, Stone. You can't stay here anymore."

Stone looked at me, his gaze hard, his expression resolved. "Monsters do not fear other monsters," he said with such defeat that I almost didn't recognize his voice. "Let them come."

"Don't say that."

He was standing over me, shirtless and trembling, with his fingers digging into his hip bones. "So, this is it then?"

"Wistoragic," I blurted, unable to stop shivering as Mom's book dawned on me. "Sadness following a great story. This is what it means, and maybe I've always known, and that's why I've been writing it in my sleep. This is the last chapter of our story, and it hurts because it's ending, and there is nothing we can do about it."

Stone looked at me with hollows in his eyes.

The rest of his face held sadness and despair.

His chest was rising and falling rapidly.

"It doesn't have to be the end," he said slowly, matter-of-factly. Like a last-ditch effort. "We can be together."

"No. It was never meant to last forever." The harsh truth hurt as it spilled from my lips. I hated this masterpiece I'd painted of us, created with brushes of pretty lies and these ugly truths.

"You're a puppet," he spat.

"Excuse me?"

"I've read your letters—the ones in the glass bottles."

"My letters?"

"They were scattered on this island as though they were waiting for me. I've read every single one, and they only reminded me how you're a servant to that town and a whore to your mind," he said with a voice like he was both walking away and standing right here, and I couldn't form words. "You were never mine, but you were never even yours. You will always belong to all the things that haunt you, and there was never space for someone like me, was there? Only a momentary escape." His expression was dead, but his black eyes were chilling. "But I still fucked you, Circe. For a forsaken month, I fucked you harder than both your head and that town has been fucking you,

and you cannot erase it or pretend it never happened." His chest caved, and he took a step closer, looming over me. "I *fucked* you, my darling siren, and there is no escaping that."

Anger climbed the stairs of my spine. The blanket fell when I jumped to my feet and slapped his cheek. "I hate you."

Undisturbed by it, he grinned. "No, you don't. You hate yourself."

I slapped him again, this time with enough force that his head swung to the side, and I instantly regretted it. In truth, I didn't want him to leave me, and I didn't know what else to do. It felt like I was going crazy.

His chest heaved when he looked at me again. "You are absolutely fierce." He touched his fingers to his cheek to find that he wasn't bleeding. "I wished you cared for me with that much passion."

"I'm sorry," I whispered, shaking my head.

"No, scratch me, beat my chest, scar my skin all you want, Circe. That was the deal, wasn't it? Me giving you my body to do as you please." He stepped forward, lowering his head to meet my gaze. "But no matter how much and how hard you hit me, this anger inside you will not go away. Pain doesn't take away pain." Hurt seeped into his voice. He paused to drop his head and clear it before facing me again. "But if you cannot control it, and it means you hurting me rather you hurting yourself, *please* use me," he said. "Take advantage of me, as always, and afterward, you will walk away, and I will leave this island, and we never have to see each other again. I've suffered far worse, so losing you will not break me." His words were catching in his chest, his eyes glassy and wild. "You cannot break me."

It burned behind my eyes. Refusing to cry in front of him, I held my head back to keep a tear from falling. When I looked at him again, I took his hand.

"I *can* break you, Stone," I said, pressing my thumb into the scar in his palm to remind ourselves of where our story began. "Maybe you won't feel it tomorrow, or even the day after that, but it will hit you when you least expect it. Because while you were spending those few forsaken weeks *fucking* me, I was loving you," I admitted, my chin trembling. "I was loving you, and that's something that breaks you from the inside out."

But as I said these words, I believed them to be true for me as well.

My letters had found Stone.

He'd been my Beloved Black Sea all along.

Stone

Everything became quiet except for the waves.

Like the entire ocean was waiting.

My eyes shifted between Circe's green ones, feeling as though she was slowly cutting out a piece of me.

I took a breath to tell her she had me completely, but the confession sank to the bottom of my throat. Like footprints in the snow, the words caved under too much pressure. Even though I never said them, these words were still too heavy. In my heart and in my head, they weighed me down.

So, we just stood there.

We stood there in the dark on a cold winter night with our secrets.

We stood there in the shallow waters staring at each other.

We stood there, feeling our book close and our story end.

Then Circe tore herself away from me and took off into the ocean, leaving her clothes behind. I was stunned still, my feet unable to move as I gazed upon her descending silhouette.

"Circe, wait." It was a whisper at first—a croak—as I tried to resist the urge to chase after her. It was no use. "Circe, wait," I shouted that time.

With every step she took away from me, it felt like my heart was tearing from my chest, as she had said. I took off in a sprint after her. This could not be the way our story ended. "Circe!"

The ocean felt like it was pushing me away from her. However, I pushed forward, determined to reach her and tell her I did not mean to say all the things I had said. Once the sea clapped against my waist, I dove in.

She was only a few feet ahead of me when I came up for air.

The saltwater burned my eyes and the walls of my throat.

"Circe, stop." I wrapped my arm around her waist, but a wave slammed into us, tossing me to the side and ripping us apart.

Seconds kept passing as I tumbled with the wave, my lungs burning.

My head slammed into the ocean floor, and then a current swept me away. It lasted like this for longer than my body could handle.

What if she were trapped in the current, too? What if she didn't make it? I fought to regain control to make it back to her and finally was able to catch

my footing.

My head broke through the surface, and I gasped for air.

But only for a moment.

There was no Circe.

I dove back under, sweeping my hands all around, hoping it would catch on to any part of her.

It's been too long, my thoughts cursed. She would be out of breath by this time. I was under for too long too, but the image of her dead body floating with the current propelled me forward until I caught a glimpse of blonde hair. Like a sun in the sea's night sky.

But another wave came and dragged me down deeper.

I remembered the view from down here as my body jerked for air.

When you died a thousand deaths, somehow the ache was just an ache.

I scraped the sand, searching for oxygen, and when my fingers raked the ocean floor, they hooked on to something unusual.

Then Circe surrounded me. Salt burned my eyes, so I couldn't see her. But I could feel her as time stretched and choked me. She grabbed my face and pressed her lips to mine, breathing into me. I closed my eyes until our heads broke free from the water.

We clutched on to each other, and I was full of breath, inhaling and exhaling. Water droplets clung to her lashes as the two of us bobbed in the ocean.

"You were under for too long," I said above the sound of the waves, stunned. I took another bitter breath as droplets fell from her features and slid down the bridge of her nose.

The sea sprayed my face. I wiped the mist away with my forearm as my body trembled and my teeth chattered.

"It had to have been at least five minutes, Circe," I said, and she narrowed her eyes as though I was discovering a secret she'd never shared with me. "How long can you hold your breath?"

She looked at me for what seemed like an eternity.

Then— "For as long as it takes," she said.

All I could do was look at her.

Circe pushed off of me. "Don't come after me, Stone."

She dove back underneath the water.

She didn't stop swimming or return for air until she reached the boat.

When she climbed aboard the *Finneuma*, the ocean slipped off her

flawless bare body like she'd been wearing it. She looked right at me one last time, and I was afraid this would be my last sight of her. So, my eyes never left her.

They followed her all the way to the other side.

It wasn't until after she was gone that I realized I was still clutching something in my fist. And when I looked down in my hand, it was a bracelet made of black pearls.

PART III

THE DEEP

CHAPTER 31

ADORA

December 21, 2020
38 days until the Crimson Eclipse
41 days until the Cantini-Sullivan wedding

Seven days ago, I returned to the mainland.

I haven't left my bedroom since.

My days and nights dragged on while the Cantinis celebrated Saturnalia. Through these tortuous hours, I worked like a madwoman and sewed all hours of the day and night until the dress orders were complete. I was afraid that if I stopped, even for a second, I would surely crumble, collapse, or go crazy. How was it that a hollow heart could weigh so much?

On this day, it was early morning.

In my bedroom, the curtains were drawn and the room was dark, as I preferred. I sat at the table under a hot lamp, stitching a tear in my dress for the ball.

I was determined to banish every insistent thought of him, passing the fabric faster under a hammering needle and driving my foot into the pedal. Echoes of the two of us together begged to take up space in my mind. And these memories were forceful, wrapping their fleeting moments around my throat and digging their nostalgic fingers into my skull. *Remember me, miss me, come back to me,* my past screamed.

I hadn't realized the needle punctured my finger until warm blood

pumped from it, slid down my skin, and wrapped around my wrist like a gory bracelet.

I turned my hand over, watching blood spill across my blue veins.

Alice grabbed my shoulder. “Adora!”

Her voice snatched me from the faraway place, and I pulled away from the sewing machine, blood spilling across my workstation.

“I’ll grab a towel,” she exclaimed.

Her return was instant. Or maybe it wasn’t, but it felt like it was. I didn’t know because my gaze was locked on my bleeding finger. It had brought me back to beating pulses, blood, and Bone Island.

She crouched down before me and took my hand in hers. “You’ve been working non-stop, hardly taking a moment to breathe.”

“It’s fine. It doesn’t hurt,” I insisted. “I didn’t even notice it happened.”

Alice’s shoulders fell when she let go of my hand, and her eyes filled with worry. “Miss, are you all right? You haven’t spoken a word about the stranger on the island since …” she leaned in, her voice dipping in degrees, “since that night. After you killed him.”

Alice believed he was dead because I’d told her I killed him, but she had no right to speak about it. “There’s nothing to talk about. He’s gone. The past belongs in the past.” And a shudder sailed through me as I said it.

She hadn’t moved from her stance. “But you know I’m here if you need to talk about it.”

I stood to my feet and cradled my wounded hand close to my chest. “I said I’m fine, Alice,” I grated out. “For mercy’s sake, I don’t want to hear any mention of that night or a word about him.”

Her eyes cast downward, and she patted her knees before standing. “As you wish.”

A light knock on the bedroom door came.

Cyrus’s knocks were hesitant, gentle. Camora’s were quick and excited. These were knocks from Viola—clipped with authority. I didn’t move to answer it and sat on the edge of my made-up bed, facing the window. I didn’t turn around when Alice answered it, either.

Viola’s voice filled the room when she called my name. “Get dressed. You have visitors downstairs waiting for you.”

I turned my head just enough for her to hear me. “Who?”

“You’ll have to leave this bedroom to find out.”

After she left, Alice wrapped my finger in a bandage to stop the bleeding.

We didn’t say another word to each other as I picked up an antique hand mirror and glanced at my reflection. My half-braided hair was pulled back into a low ponytail, wayward strands not obscuring my distant gaze.

Two dead eyes on a pretty face.

How long would it take for this feeling to fade?

THE STAIRS WERE COLD BENEATH MY BARE FEET. GARLAND WRAPPED AROUND the banister, and mistletoe dangled from the chandelier in the foyer. Wreaths made of greenery and berries hung on every door in the manor. And at the bottom of the stairs, Fable and Ivy were shrugging out of their coats.

They turned when they heard my hollowed steps, pushing hopeful smiles with sorrow curving the rims of their eyes—not sadness for me but sadness from being apart for too long. Living with them for twenty-two years made me know the difference.

Once my feet touched the bottom of the stairs, they threw their arms around me.

An aroma of *home* surrounded the three of us, causing me to burst into tears.

Almost three weeks had passed since I’d seen either one of them.

My emotions finally had a safe place to be.

When they realized my strange reaction, they squeezed me tighter.

Ivy stroked the back of my head. “Adora, what’s wrong?”

I shoved my head into the curve of her neck, shaking it. “I’m—” I sucked in a breath, a flare of him striking my chest. I greedily shoved him back down. “I’m just so happy to see you both.”

When the three of us finally broke apart, Fable and Ivy exchanged worried glances. Then Fable leaned in and looked deeply into my eyes with worry. “Are they treating you okay?”

Before I could answer her, Ivy grabbed my arm. “What happened to your hand?”

I blotted the corner of my eye with a convincing smile. “How embarrassing.” I tried to wave it off so they would stop worrying. “I just hurt myself on the sewing machine, is all. I promise they’re treating me just fine.”

Viola clapped her hands lightly, interrupting us. “When everyone is ready, I have tea and finger foods in the conservatory. It would be great if we could continue the conversation there.”

“Ooh, the conservatory,” Fable whispered with mocking eyes.

The conservatory was fashioned from Gothic exoticism with a Saturnalia touch. Wreaths adorned the grand arched paned windows that stretched from floor to ceiling. Black lanterns hung from above, flowerless vines wrapping around them. And a twelve-foot-long, weathered wooden table hosted tea and charcuterie on one side of it. On the other side of the table was a stack of binders, fabric samples, and everything one would need to paint an elegant wedding.

Viola had ambushed me and used my sisters to drag me out of the bedroom.

“Viola, it seems you’ve kept yourself busy,” I muttered after stepping further into the room. In the corner, Camora sat in a wingback chair with a full plate of cheese, crackers, and a plop of jam balancing on her lap.

Just outside the paned windows, Cyrus was standing in the garden, wearing a black blazer over his sweater; hair in midnight disarray and not fingered back in his usual formal style. I’d caught him admiring his stone sculpture in front of a naked bush. Or criticizing it. He had one hand in his pocket, and the other flicked ashes from his cigarette that hung lazily from his fingertips. When he heard the commotion coming from the conservatory, he glanced over at me until our gazes locked, then brought the cigarette to his lips, inhaling deeply.

He was my fiancé. My soon-to-be husband.

Maybe I could feel things for him if I tried.

Cyrus was everything one could want—handsome, respectable, artistic, and talented. It may have been possible for Cyrus and I to enjoy a fairytale life together if my sister wasn’t in love with him, if I didn’t plan to kill his best friend, if it wasn’t for Stone.

“Camora, small portions, remember? You have a dress to fit into,” Viola scolded in a whisper.

Camora shoved a cheese-filled cracker into her mouth and rolled her eyes.

“That’s the great thing about having me here,” I said to water down the tension in the room. “I can always make last-minute alterations if I need to —” Camora glared at me and slowly shook her head. “Though, maybe I shouldn’t make promises I can’t keep.” And Camora seemed relieved with my hurried save, then went back to finishing her plate.

We’d spent at least an hour catching up, snacking between subjects, and

listening to Viola ramble about color schemes, centerpieces, and dinner options. I needed this distraction. At one point, an entire minute had passed when I hadn't thought about *him* at all.

I realized there had to be something wrong with me.

A man has never consumed me.

When Viola left the room to handle another matter, the four of us exhaled in relief.

"She just loves to get on your case," Ivy said to Camora.

Camora nodded. "Always. And it's only getting worse. She expects me to be something or someone else. But right now, she's just excited about the wedding." Camora continued, "Cyrus is her *baby*; apparently, there's nothing more special than watching your firstborn marry. Plus, it's a distraction from what's happening in town."

I glanced at Ivy and wondered if she also thought of Mom at that moment and how Mom wasn't here to plan our weddings. If she wished Mom was here at all. I envisioned the old Mom. The one whose eyes lit up when Fable took her first steps. The one who'd baked a cake for Ivy when she finally learned to swim. The one who'd cried as we clung to each other on my first day at the academy. I'd never envisioned my wedding before, but at this moment, I was, and she was sitting in the front row with sea glass in her eyes.

Soon, my heart reminded me.

The date to bring her back was quickly approaching. Only a month away. As cold-hearted as it was, the only way to survive was to keep moving. Lingering was Mom's and Stone's mistake. Those who stopped to look over their shoulder were the ones who froze.

"Hopefully, after the wedding, your mom will come around," Fable chimed in.

Camora's deadpan glare fell over her. "Doubt it." She snuck a cracker from the platter and shoved it into her mouth. "But I want to know what's going on with you, Adora. Why did you lock yourself in the bedroom this entire week? My mother was losing her mind. You should have heard her at dinner last night."

Ivy's eyes grew wide, and her head swung toward me. "You have? Why?"

"I know that look. Don't give me that look." I perked in my chair so it seemed I had nothing to hide. "I was behind. I had to finish two more dresses."

Fable laid her hand gently on my arm. “If there is something going on, you can tell us.”

Was it written all over my face? “There’s nothing going on.”

Ivy sat back in her chair with a pointed chin. “Yeah, you keep saying that, but I just don’t believe you.”

“Tell me what’s going on in town.” Anything to steer the conversation away from me. “Any news about the Shadows?” *What I really meant was, did the Heathens return from Bone Island with a white-haired stranger? Has news spread about this traveler, and is he locked up in the cell? Did he tell everyone about a woman named Circe?*

Nothing was reported in the newspaper, and I’d locked myself in my room without a chance to find out.

Ivy’s brows were bunched together. She recognized my strange behavior no matter how hard I tried to act aloof.

“Nothing new,” she said with suspicion.

“Really?” I asked. Ivy scanned my face, and I cleared my throat. “What a shame.”

FABLE AND IVY LEFT AFTER DINNER.

A design idea had sparked during the day’s events. I wanted to go back to my bedroom to get started on it, but before my feet could climb the stairs, Cyrus called my name.

I fell back and turned to see him standing under the archway.

“The engagement will be announced in one week,” he said.

My spine softened. “I know.”

“I can’t help but think you’re avoiding me.” He touched his mouth, brushing his thumb over his bottom lip as he always did when he was nervous or in deep thought. “Adora, is there someone else?”

“No.” The lie fell out of me at the same time my fingers fell from the staircase railing. “It’s been hard.”

I hadn’t been fair to him, and I should feel guilty about it. The truth was, if it weren’t for the Heathens sailing to Bone Island, I would have kept seeing Stone.

Being without Stone was misery. There was no other name for it.

I could pretend all was okay, but no days had been colder than the ones spent without him. I could fill my soul with lies, but there was no aching so

deep as one felt after knowing it could never be again. My rage had grown thick enough to become armor once, but this time it was harder when the steel was made of something unstable. And I feared the shaky wall would fall away at any second, and this misery would spill out for all to see.

I couldn't let that happen.

I was desperate to conceal it, hide it, push it away, or fill it.

"Your heart is beating incredibly fast," Cyrus said, able to hear it as he walked closer, and nerves began to creep inside me. "You're hiding something. You've *been* hiding something, I can tell." My blood only pumped harder, faster. Could he see Stone in my mind, or could he only read my senses? "I always knew you were secretive, Adora, and I've respected that, but when it starts coming between us—" I captured his mouth in a frantic kiss, quieting him after meeting him at the end of the banister.

At first, Cyrus's brows jumped as he stood stunned.

For a handful of slow seconds, everything had gone quiet.

Then he raised his hands until they were cradling my head. He leaned forward, mouth opening, tongue meeting tongue, lips tasting lips, sucking on the bottom, and there was no escaping what I'd done.

He was kissing me, and I was kissing him back, sweeping my tongue across his, both soothing this ache and seeing how long it took for my heart to stop chastising me. And I was kissing him, *desperately*, almost *severely* in how *badly* I wanted to fill the hole Stone had left.

Cyrus must've tasted the despair on my lips because he turned, falling back against the banister, taking me with him. He grabbed my hip and nailed me to his pelvis. Between us, his stretched erection was stiff against my abdomen. Moaning, humming, he sank into my mouth again, and I was sinking further into his arms.

I turned him on. My best friend. My sister's ex-boyfriend.

He turned me on. My best friend. My sister's ex-boyfriend.

And if it weren't for Stone, this would have been the kiss that changed everything between us. This would have been the moment I fell in love with Cyrus Cantini. I just knew it. I just felt it in my bones.

An onslaught of anger, guilt, and deception came over me.

Angry with myself for allowing Stone and I to go as far as we did.

Angry with Stone for making me feel this way.

Guilty for escaping rather than facing.

Guilty for betraying both Stone and my home.

Deception for lying, lying, lying.

My eyes squeezed shut to fight off the beating waves.

There was no point in regretting this kiss, either. Stone was gone and Cyrus was going to be my husband. And I suppose, through the heartbreak and misery, the only person I'd want to sink into the arms of was Cyrus, as I'd always done in the past. Except this time, it was different.

Cyrus pulled away, pale blue eyes swimming across my face.

"Don't you dare feel guilty about this," he said, his voice low against my lips. "It's okay if it feels right. It's supposed to." My head was shaking, and he grabbed it. "Yes," he whispered with a nod. And his mouth brushed mine until it opened, and he was taking me all over again.

A fit of laughter came from around the corner. It was Cyrus's younger brothers, a giggle from one accompanied by *"Gross"* from the other.

I felt Cyrus's smile on my lips before he ripped away from our kiss.

He dropped his head back and looked at the ceiling with a stunned grin. "Five thousand square feet and no respect for privacy." I forced a laugh and stepped to the side, but Cyrus's hand at the base of my spine pulled me back. He pressed me firmly against his erection. "We just need to wait here for a second," he insisted, gazing down at me with steel-blue bedroom eyes. They moved between mine, then fell to my mouth. "But something tells me this won't help at all."

His dick twitched against my lower belly.

"It's making it worse." In every way possible.

Cyrus turned his head to the side with a chuckle. "You're right," he said, easing back, trying to create space between us without having to create space between us. His hands came down on the sides of my head, smoothing my hair back until I was looking up at him.

"Adora Oria, you're killing me," he said.

A burn jumped into my throat. I instantly was taken back to the shore with Stone hovering above me, the stars in the night sky surrounding his face as I looked up at him.

"You're killing me," Stone had said just before filling me with his cock for the last time. *You're killing me*, I wished I could tell him. And my heart.

Then Cyrus placed his hands on my neck, bringing me back. "I think it's time I show you something." His thumb stroked my jawline. "Something you should have seen a long time ago."

CHAPTER 32

ADORA

ABOVE THE ELEVATOR, THERE WAS AN ANTIQUE DIAL. THE MANOR HAD FOUR floors, and I watched the mechanical arm twitch to the second level. The cab creaked when it halted, and Cyrus opened the spring-loaded scissor gate to climb in. Two lanterns hung from inside the elevator cab, and he pressed 0 for the cellar. The elevator jolted before it descended.

"Fair warning, it's dark and cold," Cyrus said. "We have to keep it in the fifties, so the wine doesn't age too quickly. But not too cold where the corks could dry out and let air seep through."

"Why is it dark?"

"Over time, light causes labels to fade."

And I wondered if time would cause this ache to fade, too.

Once we reached ground level, Cyrus grabbed one of the lanterns from its hook.

The scissor gate opened to the wine cellar, and grand columns lined both sides of the room, creating magnificent archways leading to a labyrinth of tunnels.

Wine bottles slept on curved wooden shelves screwed into the stone, and barrels were stacked atop one another along the arched walls—an eerie, hidden vineyard.

We walked down the middle of the room side-by-side until Cyrus led me to a wooden door. He knocked softly with his knuckle at first before entering. I stayed close behind him, peeking around his shoulder.

In a small room, candles trapped in various sized lanterns flooded the floor. And there he lay, a sleeping Darnell Cantini with a wheelchair at his side.

I was transported back to my kitchen with Ivy when she'd told me the truth about him and Mom, and an aggrieved chill covered my skin. I rubbed my arms to hide it, unable to feel sorry for the dying man.

Cyrus's lips fell open with a sigh. "He doesn't have much time left."

He couldn't have known what his father had done.

If he had known, he wouldn't have brought me here.

He wouldn't torture me like this.

Maybe Viola wanted to protect her children, so they never had to question whether they were as cruel as their father. The same way I constantly questioned how deeply Mom's genes were rooted in me. So, I bit my tongue to trap barbed words.

"He should, at least, make it to the wedding," he added.

I kept my eyes on the dying man—sunken eye sockets, hollowed-out cheeks, and shadowy contours on his face. He once was a handsome man—Cyrus looked just like him—but he was withering away. I was just glad to be here to witness it. "Will he be there for the announcement?"

"Yes," Cyrus answered. "He'll be there."

A wicked smile tugged at my lips. "Good."

Cyrus closed the door. "But this is not why I brought you down here." He held up the lamp in front of him, lighting the way.

At the end of one of the chambers was a curved wooden door. Cyrus pulled out a set of keys from his pocket and inserted one into the lock. A groan echoed when he opened the door, and a stale breath of death slipped past us.

More than two dozen coffins were staring back at me in the low-ceiling room.

I was standing in the Cantini Crypt.

"Meet my ancestors," Cyrus said, running his palm along one of the coffins. "My family stays in the crypt so their spirits can protect—"

"The Crypt of Secrets," I finished, my gaze sailing about the Jacobean room, with walls made of stone and a hand-carved coffered ceiling.

Cyrus had once told me about the Crypt of Secrets, the room containing the secrets of Weeping Hollow. The Cantini family kept truths locked behind cloaks and daggers, only accessible to their bloodline and only revealed when necessary.

On this night, Cyrus entrusted me enough to lead me to where all the secrets were held.

The light from the lantern he was holding flickered.

I hoped only the air in the room rattled it and not something else.

We walked between a row of coffins to the other side of the room and stood before another door, adrenaline pumping through me.

On the other side was the Crypt of Secrets. I tucked my hair behind my ears, fidgety. Then we walked in, and only a round wooden table stood in the center of the circular room.

"Look up," Cyrus said, closing the door behind us. My head fell back, and there was an infinite tunnel hovering above, appearing as if night had fallen from the atmosphere. It looked like someone had punched out a circle from the star-dusted sky and hung it from the ceiling. A smear of gray clouds moved across the black like a living work of art. "It's the Portal of the Hereafter. It reflects the future. Like a mirror."

Cyrus set the lamp down on the round table, and the butter-glow of the flame cast a dim light into the round room, revealing embossed spines lining every inch of oak-stained shelves that swiveled around us, from the floor to stories above us that stretched on as far as I could see. Many library ladders of different heights were hooked on to rods at each shelf to move from one level to the next.

"There are as many books here as there are souls in Weeping Hollow," he said. "Many are long gone, while others are still forming in their mother's womb. Either way, these books represent all who belong to this town."

Cyrus didn't need a ladder. He lifted his hand, and with a quiet chant from his lips, a thick, gigantic book wiggled from one of the shelves above and floated into his outstretched palm. "They always say Weeping Hollow has a soul. Town Square for the heart and tunnels for the veins that run beneath the skin we walk on. How it inhales and exhales and holds us close. And, *oh*, how it bleeds." He set the book down on the weathered table, dragging his long fingers around the edges.

Book of Weeping Hollow was embossed into the leather.

The town had its own book.

Cyrus faced me. "Marriage doesn't give you access to the secrets. Decoding the messages inside requires Cantini blood. And these messages are constantly changing."

He paused, leaning over the book, palms on the table. The look on his face seemed like he was questioning himself—if he should keep going or stop. *But can I trust her,* I imagined him thinking. And I studied the flex of

his jaw, his locked elbows, eyes flicking across the leather, thinking and deciding.

"Nothing is going to be the same after this," he said, voice dropping, all confidence backing out of it. He curled his fingers and turned his head to look at me. "Things will only get harder."

I took a step forward. "Show me."

He sucked in a breath, steeled his spine, and slid a finger between the pages, cracking open the *Book of Weeping Hollow*.

And then, "*Visfutūrus*," he commanded.

A tunnel of light shot up from the pages and speared into the ceiling.

I followed the light, dropping my head back, where an image began to form in the Portal of the Hereafter. Blurry at first, then cleared as if an invisible hand had swiped across a fogged window.

It was Town Square, with the diner, Oh My Stars, and even The Strange & Unusual Bookstore on fire. Chaos erupted, and smoke billowed from burnt bodies that were blanketing the grounds around the gazebo. Cries echoed in the distance. The kind of cry that pierced my chest and made my stomach tighten in knots. "Cyrus, what's happening?!"

He grabbed my hand. "This is what will happen if we don't fix things."

This was my home. The Shadows wouldn't just bring it to its knees. The Shadows would burn it to the ground and destroy us all. Weeping Hollow would be nothing but dust.

A scent of decay drifted into the room, and a ghastly cord of anger wrapped around my spine. This anger, which I'd come to know well, was the guardian of my sorrows. The protector of my tears. It flexed its chest and punched through walls.

"This won't happen." I shook my head, gripping his hand tighter. "Cyrus, we can't let this happen."

"The only way to stop it is to either kill the Shadows or change our course, but it's impossible to figure out." The mirage vanished when his gaze fell on me. "I'm trying."

"Have you shared this with Sacred Sea? They need to know."

"Adora," he said, leaning into me, brows slanting, his expression turning serious. "You can never share anything that happens in this room with anyone."

"They have a right to know."

He shook his head. "No one has a right to know their future. No one."

“Sacred Sea is our coven.”

Cyrus took a step back and looked away.

He rubbed the pads of his fingers across his bottom lip.

He was at war with himself.

What was he not telling me?

When he faced me again, the look in his eyes aged by ten years. “Adora, forget everything you thought you knew. Your loyalty isn’t the same as it was,” he said. “Once you’re my wife, you’ll see things you wish you didn’t. You’ll know things that will make you want to leave it all behind and end your life. But no matter what,” he said, a grave look in his eyes, “you must never intervene with the hereafter. Ever. Not unless it’s for the safety of you, me, and this town. My loyalty will be to you and Weeping Hollow, first and forever. Your loyalty will be to me and Weeping Hollow, first and forever. The coven will always come second.”

The room was so silent that I was sure my heartbeat was a blowhorn in his ears.

That he could feel the vibrations of my blood tapping in my veins.

That he could taste trepidation in my breath.

This stood against everything we’d been taught.

I raised a brow. “The coven isn’t first?”

“Do you remember when Fallon first arrived? Augustine wouldn’t allow the Heathens within twenty feet of her, and Kane was supposed to bring her in?”

“Yes, I remember. I thought it was her dad’s wishes.”

“Do you know why it was her dad’s wishes?” he asked, and I felt like I knew the answer but the way he was looking at me made me feel like I would be wrong. “The only way to break the Heathen curse was for either a moonchild and Blackwell to die together, or for him to bring her back to life. This answer was twisted over the centuries, false information planted in journals to make one believe only Fallon had to die. And if she died without a child, the Heathens would have been cursed for eternity.

“The fact is Julian had to love her more than the Heathens. He had to care more about her than breaking the curse. The Heathens had to be willing to sacrifice an element. Otherwise, that selfishness would have killed her and made this curse permanent. And I saw it with my own eyes, Adora. I watched Julian shift from saving her to killing her in the hereafter because of outside influences. The Heathen curse was always supposed to break, but in order for

that to happen, everything leading up to it had to play out in a sequence of fate's events. It was my mother's job to make sure nothing stood in the way of that, and the first step was to have Fallon be close to Sacred Sea."

"That's why Fallon was pushed to join."

"Augustine never knew how to break the curse. If he did, he'd abuse this knowledge." His smile was incredulous. "Think about it. Fallon is a Morgan, and she has a blood-right to take high priestess from Augustine if she wanted to. Do you honestly think Augustine would give that up for a second by letting her come into the coven?"

"No."

"No, but it was part of the plan for Fallon to get close to Sacred Sea, and my mother had to make sure it happened." He looked up to the Portal of the Hereafter, where it had shown the town burning only a minute before. "The same holds true for what's ahead. Something happened to change the fate of Weeping Hollow, and if we don't fix it, this will be our future."

I swallowed. "Cyrus, why are you telling me this, showing me this, and laying this on me *now*?" My voice shook, all the fear, the pressure, the responsibility. "What if I'm not ready to handle it?"

"I'm showing you this because when I get to the main reason I brought you here, you'll understand why it's me and *you* standing here this very moment," he said, closing the Book of Weeping Hollow and sending it back into its resting place on the shelf at the command of his hand.

"What are you talking about?"

Cyrus stood taller. *"Accerso liber Oria,"* he chanted, and a book ripped through the air by a ghastly hand.

Cyrus caught the book mid-air and set it on the table between us.

My name was embossed into the leather.

"Adora Oria Sullivan," he said in one tired breath, dragging his fingers along the spine as he looked down at the book that was screaming my name.

I couldn't tear my eyes away from it either.

My entire life was printed inside, pressed between swatches of leather.

Then the book opened on its own. Pages flipped rapidly by magic, ruffling my hair and swirling strands into my face. I tried to read eagerly, hungrily. All the answers were laid out before me, and I wanted to devour every word. But the quick flutter of pages didn't allow me to see a solid sentence.

"It's no use," Cyrus said, reading my mind. "It will only tell you what I

need you to know."

The magic reversed, flipping the pages back to the front again, and I felt a cool breeze on my skin. When the book stopped, two pages fell open slowly. A sigh.

Across the creamy paper, black letters appeared in a jumbled mess. A pile of words that didn't make sense, if they would be considered words at all. All the letters were upside down and turned around—a bag of Scrabble blocks dumped onto the pages.

Cyrus stole a look at me from the corner of his eye.

Almost as if it were the last time.

I stared back at him, hearing my exhale in my ears.

His eyes were arctic blue—scared. My heart began to pound.

"*Ver revelare*," he chanted, bringing the ink to life.

The chosen letters glowed in a silver, iridescent shimmer, and the light of it cast upon our faces. These letters rearranged themselves until they formed words, and then a single sentence appeared.

The unused letters fell away, the ink slipping back into the spine.

I leaned in to read what it said.

ADORA ORIA SULLIVAN, THE FINNEUMA OF CYRUS OLEN CANTINI

THE LONGER I STARED AT THE NAMES, THE MORE CONFUSED I BECAME, AND the faster my heart pounded.

It had never been Stone, I knew this.

It was never Stone, I knew this.

It would never be Stone, I knew this.

He was from 1864, I was from today, and we were never meant to find each other.

We both knew this, I wanted to scream, so why did it hurt so much?

Somewhere along the way, an inkling of belief had been buried deep. I didn't want it to be there, but it was, and it was not my fault. I'd never asked for hope to hide inside me. To deceive me. To make me want things I'd never cared for before. I didn't even know how much I cared until this very moment. I didn't know how badly I wanted it to be Stone until I realized it

wasn’t.

Cyrus grazed my arm with his knuckle, and I flinched.

“Adora, I’m yours, and you are mine.”

He said this softly, gently, as if the words were sharp and would cut me open.

They could. They very well could.

“You’re scared,” I think he said, but I couldn’t move my eyes to his mouth to be sure. To even blink.

Ten words had become handcuffs.

Ten words chained me here. Forever.

I felt Cyrus’s hand cover mine, and his thumb rubbed circles on my skin. “Adora, you’re shaking.” He leaned into me, his other hand on my back, stroking my spine. “I can’t read you. I’m—I’m thinking the worst right now. Please say something.”

“This is the reason for the arranged marriage,” I managed to say in a skittering breath, feeling disappointment scraping the walls of my chest. “Because we’re supposed to be together. And you brought me here so I could see for myself.”

His chest caved. “Would you have believed me otherwise?”

How could Ivy survive knowing this? Marriage meant nothing in the eyes of the gods if hearts weren’t bleeding. It was supposed to be for politics and the sake of the coven. Cyrus and I could have carried on, bound by paper, not love. Marriage was forgivable under these circumstances. Ivy could have forgiven me. But Cyrus was my perfect match, and this made everything so much worse. I could lose my sister forever.

“How long have you known?” I lifted my head to look him in the eyes. “How long did you know it was me?”

He tore himself away. His eyes, his hand, his head, he tore it all away. Maybe because he didn’t want me to see, and the truth in his eyes was deadly.

Fear crawled in next.

“Answer me, dammit.”

“Adora,” he said, full of regret. “I’ve known my whole life.”

I saw red. “You son of a bitch,” I shouted, shoving him in the chest.

Cyrus grabbed my elbows to keep us steady.

“Adora,” he begged in my ear, locking my arms in his hands to keep me from hurting him. “Calm down and just give me a second. I only need a

fucking second."

"Do you have any idea what you've done?" I howled, almost not recognizing my voice. "You knew this entire time, and you had sex with my sister for years. You let her fall *in love* with you, Cyrus. Oh my *god*." I keeled over, trying to catch a breath, but he was too close, and there was no air. I shoved him away, and his back hit the shelves. "She is my sister!"

"Don't you think I know that?!" he shouted, stomach heaving, water rimming his crushed-blue eyes. "Fuck!"

"You know how much my sisters mean to me. You know I would lay down my life for them. How could you do this to me?" If it had been Cyrus and me in the beginning, Ivy wouldn't have fallen in love, and I wouldn't have known Stone at all because my heart would have been too full to care. And I wouldn't be heartbroken. I could have been too happy to be angry. I could have been different. Maybe everything would have been different. *And now there's Stone,* I thought again, but in truth, there wasn't. Not anymore. Stone was gone, too. And I couldn't think straight. "You could have prevented all of this, Cyrus," I spat. "You are the love of her life!"

"And you are mine."

My stomach flipped.

For ten years, my sister longed to hear these words.

But he was saying them to me, not to her. And I hated myself for it.

Cyrus walked closer, and I backed away until my spine met the door. When he leaned down, he had both hands on my shoulders. I turned my eyes away from him. "Look at me because I want you to understand."

I looked him in the eyes, trying to take a steady breath.

He wet his lips. "It's you, and it scared the fuck out of me because I knew if I ever allowed myself to love you in that way, I would love you more than anything. And if I ever lost you, it would *ruin* me," he cracked, eyes bouncing between mine. "Do you know how hard it is *not* to fall in love with you, Adora? Do you have any fucking idea?" I looked down, but he lifted my chin. "I kept you close because I couldn't live without you, and I put your sister between us, so I'd never become weak. As simple and immoral as it sounds, that's the truth."

"So why are you marrying me now? What's changed?"

"Because our union changes the fate of the town. Because you and I were always supposed to be together, and now this town may burn down simply because I was selfish and scared. This marriage will set things back to how

it’s supposed to be. If we’re wrong, and it doesn’t, the whole town goes up in smoke, and everyone dies. Either way, I get to spend whatever time I have left with you, the only person I’ve ever cared about. And I don’t want to waste these days resenting each other or avoiding each other.

“How would you rather waste them, Cyrus?”

Cyrus dropped his head and bit his lip. “Do you really want me to answer that?”

“No,” I said, my eyes looking skyward as I stepped away from him.

His hand shot out, grabbed my waist, and pinned me back against the door. Suddenly he was caging me in, his palms flat on both sides of me.

“I want to wake up every morning with you and fuck you, and I want to fuck you and fall asleep with you every night. I want you laughing, you happy, you naked, you with me, whatever we’re doing, and I want to kiss you all the goddamn time. And I want to fuck you *and* make love to you because I’ve never had that before, and I want that with you, and only you, for the rest of my life. For fuck’s sake, Adora, the things I would *fucking* do,” he said all in one go, knees bent as he leaned back with a hand against his chest.

I was breathless. Dizzy.

And it felt like ninety-nine degrees hotter in the crypt.

Here was Cyrus, willing to make love to me during the day and under the light of the sun if I asked him. Here was Cyrus, willing to fall to his knees for me if I asked him. And here was Cyrus, ready to confess his love for me if I let him. But all I could think about was Stone, who wouldn’t do any of these things. A man who wasn’t even here.

My brows were raised, and I didn’t know for how long they were stuck like that, but I couldn’t drop them. “Cyrus,” I said, shaking my head, and then nothing more came out of me. But then I could drop my brows, which was a positive. “How do you know?”

Cyrus looked at me, wounded. “Do you have any idea how difficult this is for me? I’ve been holding on to this for years while you’ve been fucking my best friend, and *how do you know*, she asks me ...” He shook his head.

“Do you think you feel this way *because* it’s written in the book?”

“Careful,” he said, falling back a step. “You’re questioning our convictions.”

“I’m questioning your feelings,” I corrected. “Just because we are a perfect match doesn’t mean we’re required to be with each other. Cyrus, you’ve known this secret your whole life. Maybe that book influenced your

feelings over the years.”

“I can’t believe I’m hearing this right now.”

“Cyrus, just think about it—”

“Please, let’s not go there ...” He pulled in a breath. “We’re tired. We went through every emotion known to witch, and my brain feels like it’s about to explode. Let’s call it a night.”

I nodded, agreeing, wanting nothing more than to escape this room.

“But there’s one more thing you should know before we leave,” he said.

Before I could get respond, he turned toward the table.

“Acceri liber extraneus.” And another book flew off the shelf.

Cyrus caught it and tossed it onto the table, not as careful as he was with the other two books. I stepped up beside him and noticed nothing embossed on the front or spine.

“This book appeared after the Heathens’ curse broke,” he said, tapping his finger next to the spine. “There’s no name, so I can’t tell who it’s for, but it’s not the Shadows because they were always here, locked inside the Heathens. The strange part is, this book won’t open.”

“So, what does this mean?”

“Someone else or something else is walking among us.”

CHAPTER 33

ADORA

December 28, 2020
31 days until the Crimson Eclipse
34 days until the Cantini-Sullivan Wedding

It was Founder's Day.

I lifted my chin and looked at the woman in the mirror.

Her smileless lips were plump and painted scarlet red, her cheekbones took on a dusty pink hue, and black adorned her lids like wings of the night. Braids twisted in her spiraling hair, pieces held back by a clip with a ruby setting.

This was the story of the siren who held her breath long enough to outlast love, she thought. And she wondered if this was how mermaids drowned.

Quiet, slow, stubborn.

In the background, a clock echoed throughout the manor. By the time it reached my room at the top of the tower, it was nothing but a faint chime. I skipped the lighting of the fire in Town Square, and there were only three hours remaining until the engagement would be announced at the ball.

My eyes fluttered closed as an image of Stone walking toward me sketched across the backs of my lids. There, heavily hooded eyes gaze upon me the same way I'd gazed upon my own in the mirror. Hard and forlorn and without a smile. In my mind, my hand sinks into his just as our song floats into the ballroom. He pulls me close until we're bound together, not a final

breath between us. His warm fingers drift along my exposed spine, and his sensitive lips brush my temple. He inhales me, then exhales a warm breath sailing about my cheek. The ballroom walls fall away, and we're back at the lighthouse, hardly swaying. But this time is different. We're rooted together, never wanting to be apart. The secret and his siren, together again on Bone Island at last.

When my eyes opened again, water lined the rims. I threw my head back to keep my tears from falling so I wouldn't ruin my makeup.

A rap echoed in my bedroom. I sniffled, pulling myself together and standing from the vanity chair. When I opened the door, Camora stood on the other side in an unzipped dress. The straps were hanging off her shoulders, and tears stained her pinched cheeks.

I quickly dabbed the corners of my eyes. "Camora, what's wrong?"

She pushed my door open further, walked past me, and threw herself onto my bed. "I can't take it anymore. I look ridiculous."

"You don't look ridiculous," I said, closing the door behind her. "I think the problem is that you *feel* ridiculous in it." Her narrowed eyes stabbed me, and I took her hand to pull her up from the bed. "Listen, I spent this past week working on a new design, and I'm curious to see what you think of it."

I left her to retrieve the garment bag hanging from the clothes rack. I unzipped it, the elegant jumpsuit rolling over my arm like a presentation.

"I think the black train in contrast to the white gives it Cruella Deville vibes." I looked up at Camora, who stood speechless. "It's different, I know. It's my first time attempting a lady's pantsuit, so you have to tell me what you think. And tell me honestly."

Camora shook her head in disbelief. "It's beautiful. I've never seen anything like it."

"Do you want to try it on?" I asked, hoping she'd agree. I'd sewn it using her measurements, but if the jumpsuit wasn't her taste or style, I didn't want her feeling pressured into liking it, and I also didn't want to overstep my boundaries. But I'd been dying to see her wear it all week.

Camora hadn't taken her eyes off the jumpsuit. "Really?"

"Yeah. Otherwise, it will just end up at Oh My Stars collecting dust, waiting for the right person."

"I'm going to try it on," she said, taking the hanger from me.

Four minutes later, I was pacing the bedroom, waiting for Camora to come out of the bathroom.

“Camora,” I called. “Could you take any longer? I’m dying out here.”

“Adora,” she exclaimed, enunciating every syllable.

For the first time in weeks, a smile beamed between my cheeks. “What? What is it?”

“*Adora*,” she repeated.

“Camora, if you don’t come out here in three sec—”

Camora emerged from the bathroom, and my jaw fell open.

I slapped my palms on my mouth.

“It fits me perfectly.” Camora turned in place, straight black hair fanning across her shoulders, and I couldn’t stop smiling.

“You look incredible,” I finally said. “How do you feel?”

“I feel like … me.” She looked up. “Adora, did you make this for me?”

“No, of course not,” I lied with a grin I couldn’t hide. “Though when you complained about having to wear a dress for weeks, it inspired me to create something formal that wasn’t a dress ... And the wide legs give off the illusion—”

Camora threw her arms around me, cutting off my air supply. “I’m so happy you’re going to be my sister.”

My chest pained with guilt.

THE MUSIC HAD STARTED DOWNSTAIRS.

I waited another half hour before slipping into my dress.

A week had passed since I discovered that Cyrus was my soulmate. The Crypt of Secrets confirmed it. I’d seen it in writing with my own eyes. Though with every step down the stairs, nothing filled me as it should, in the way we’d been told our entire lives.

At this moment, I was a woman held hostage in a Victorian manor under mournful nightfall on the coast of a spell-bound town who was going out of her mind. And if the manor could be taken for a haunted castle, then I was its ghost. Shackled, restless, and roaming the narrow halls with a mind that couldn’t quite touch the ground.

I had not known true torment until I was forced to exist with his face in memories alone with no hope of creating new ones.

And I had not known a hollow, either.

A spirit I’ve become, indeed.

At the bottom of the stairs, I placed my hand on my abdomen, drew in a

breath, and slid on my best face.

Pretend. Chin high.

Smile, my pretty lips.

Sink, my slaughtered heart.

Then the world fell around me.

Chatter fought with music, and it all twisted in the air into sickening beats that made my stomach coil. Many faces passed me, most of which I'd seen my entire life, but as I walked through the hall and into the ballroom, I was not the same. Stone had changed me.

When I entered the ballroom, three vaulted stained-glass windows, each in the shape of an arch that came to a point at the top, lined the wall to my left. Cyrus's chiseled statues stood in the spaces between them. But it was the enormous chandelier hanging from a domed ceiling that summoned the eyes of every newcomer who stepped into this room. Inside the dome was gold leaf detailing and an oil-painted landscape, telling a sad tale. *Feel me*, this painting screamed. *Feel my pain.*

And at the other end of the rich hardwood floors, my soon-to-be family awaited.

I walked toward them, seeing most of Weeping Hollow in this room.

Two Heathens, Julian and Beck, were posted near the windows, where the westside congregated. They wore matching black suits, crisp white shirts, and cufflinks adorning their wrists. Meanwhile, the right side of the room tossed their scornful gazes.

Fallon looked beautiful in a forest green dress that complimented Julian's tie. Even though she faced away from him in, what looked to be, a pleasant conversation with Monday, I couldn't ignore the way Julian's hand still stroked her spine as he slid a watchful gaze around the room. This subtle touch threatened my heart. I once had that, I thought.

The Heathens would now seem like ordinary people to any stranger who happened upon this town. But to the town, we could not forget the grief they'd put us through and the lives their curse had taken.

Fallon looked at me and flashed me a small smile.

I smiled back, but I hadn't come to celebrate with friends or dance the night away. The man I wore this dress for was waiting for me at the other end of the room.

I approached with vengeance coiling my soul.

It was all I had left.

The man in the wheelchair beside Viola was nothing more than a skeleton. And when Darnell Cantini lifted his gaze to the girl standing before him in the red dress, his eyes took on an ominous shape.

He recognized it. He knew.

I leaned over him to whisper in his ear. “I know what you’re thinking. But no, Darnell, it’s not déjà vu.” My voice scattered, and I paused to collect it. “It’s no secret you’re dying, but there are far worse things than dying.” Darnell groaned and tried to reach for Viola, but I gripped his hand and pinned it to the arm of his wheelchair. “Each day I’m here, you will spend the remainder of yours trapped underwater to this anchor you call a wheelchair, looking over your shoulder and begging for the Shadows to take you. Because it’s not them you should fear. It is me.” I squeezed his hand, feeling the bones in his fingers crush. “We will have so much fun together, you and I.”

I felt a hand on my shoulder, so I let him go and pulled back with a crafty smile. “Viola, everything looks beautiful,” I said as she took me in. “You did amazing.”

“I’ve seen this dress before,” she insisted as Camora approached.

Camora grabbed the handles of Darnell’s wheelchair and guided him to the dance floor. She smiled as she slowly spun the wheelchair in a full circle, dancing with him.

Although I didn’t realize how close the two were, I set it aside and returned my attention to Viola. “It was my mom’s. I thought, what better occasion to wear this dress than a Founder’s Day Ball at the Cantini house to announce my engagement? The last time this dress floated down these halls was—”

“1994,” she said with displeasure.

I smiled, pleased. “Oh, you remember.”

She smiled, aware. “How could I forget?”

Cyrus approached to take my hand.

“You’re beautiful,” he said, eyes sweeping down my body. “Are you ready?”

DARKNESS STRETCHED ABOVE THE EMPTY TOWN.

The full Cold Moon was only a night away.

In town, where it seemed only spirits remained, I was greeted by gas-flamed streetlamps forging weary halos along cobblestone paths. I walked with my hands shoved into my pockets, ice crunching beneath my boots, teeth chattering, and white clouds breaking apart in front of me with every shivering breath. Snow flurries twirled and leapt like drunken flakes, and I kept my head down to block cold, biting winds from freezing layers off my face.

Each time a chilling breeze swept through buildings it stirred piles of broken signs that had littered the icy grounds. Words such as *Heathens*, *Shadows*, and *Death* swirled around at my feet and clung to the sides of abandoned storefronts. My gaze sailed about, taking it all in.

I'd finally entered the town of Weeping Hollow.

But where were the people?

Where was Circe?

I clutched the pearls inside my pocket, squeezing them hard enough to make indentions in my palm. In case I soon had nothing left to hold onto, I was desperate for them to become a part of me.

"There are people in Weeping Hollow who don't take kindly to strangers. They would burn you if they knew you were here," she'd once told me, but I hadn't told her that I was tired of hiding. I'd been on the run, from village to town to city, for most of my waking life. I was tired of running, and I didn't want to be alone anymore. Most of all, I'd already lost the only gift I cared about. I wasn't about to lose the only person I ever truly cared about, too.

A distant sound came.

Music, violins, and bellies full of laughter.

It swelled in every wintry breeze brushing past me.

About half a mile later, I stood before a castle-like home with steep roof pitches and arched windows. A few men in long jackets, pressed pants, and leather shoes were huddled together under a breezeway, passing a lit cigar between one another and taking long drags. Motor vehicles lined the curved driveway, something I had only seen in films with Circe.

I slid my scarred palm across the side of one of the vehicles, feeling the smooth, cold metal beneath my hand. I closed my eyes, imagining it to be a horse and remembering its warm fur and the sound of hooves beating the earth.

One of the men broke away from the group and coughed into his hand.

He didn't say anything and only observed me.

I shoved my hands back into my pockets and kept my head down, taking the steps up to where music and commotion penetrated the seams of the home.

The tall, arched doors opened to a swarm of people, laughter, and muddled conversations. Mostly in black, it was a sea of elegant dresses, tuxedos, and hands chained to silver chalices.

The home was an orchestra of soles and an abundance of souls. Footfalls bounced off the tiles below while candles hung in wrought iron fixtures from the coffered ceilings above.

Stragglers sprinkled the steps of the grand staircase, their sockets bruised as they stared out into nothing. Bodies posted against the wall in the narrow hallway, some nodding off while standing, others having conversations with the wallpaper.

I caught my reflection in the foyer.

A fool in a wool coat stood in the gilded frame—a person who didn't belong in this home.

What am I doing here? I asked myself, the space suddenly feeling warm from all the people, the laughter, the music, the time shock. Then I felt smooth pearls slide between my fingers. I took a deep breath, combed back my hair with my fingers, and fixed my shirt.

Curious eyes glanced up at me. They turned their heads and dropped their smiles, and I felt the heat of their stare at my back as I walked by.

I looked for her in every face, spinning in circles and seeing nothing but strangers all around me. I squeezed into the next room, where a young couple was kissing in the archway. The sight trampled across my chest, but I kept moving until I was standing in a ballroom.

As soon as I broke through a crowd of skirts and skin, my steps ceased.

She was all I could see.

And she was breathtaking, blonde hair rippling down and clinging to that red dress she'd once talked about. I never thought I'd get the chance to see her wear it, and suddenly coming here was all worth it.

I fell back, admiring her, my fingers itching to feel close to her again.

It took half a second longer to notice the man dancing with her.

They weren't dancing in the way we had danced. Their movements seemed choreographed, not sensual. They were everywhere, not still. But she

was still dancing with *him*, and I was standing among strangers, with more than twenty feet between us—far less than an ocean but far more than I desired.

At this moment, I was the outsider, unable to tear my eyes away from her.

I was someone who could never have a woman like that.

I could hear my pulse echo in my ears with every step she took.

The man had a hand on her waist, where I used to hold her.

My muscles ached in my arms and legs from self-restraint.

If not, I'd leap across the room and decapitate him.

Then dismember his body.

But I held myself back, wondering why she couldn't feel me standing here.

People walked past me, shoulders bumping into mine and trying to make me stumble, but I stood solid with my muscles tensing and my heart slowly crushing.

I'm right here, I wanted to shout at her. *Turn your head and look at me.*

She didn't, and the music died when the lights came on.

I felt out in the open and exposed to prying eyes.

Circe's back turned to me, so I thought this would be the perfect opportunity to slip away, but I couldn't unbolt my feet.

A woman's voice swallowed up all the chatter in the room. I heard it coming from different angles, but when I followed the eyes of the people around me, I realized it was coming from a tall, thin woman in a black lace dress on the opposite side of the room.

"Cyrus, Adora, please," she insisted, motioning for these people to step forward.

Hand in hand, Circe and the man walked to the edge of the ballroom.

Confusion took hold of me.

"Thank you all of Weeping Hollow for coming into my home this Founder's Day, despite the terrors we face during these horrific hours," this woman began to say, standing beside Circe and the man. "In times like these, we hold on to hope and look forward to a celebration that will take us into the new year—because there will come a new year in Weeping Hollow. So, without further ado, it's my pleasure to announce the engagement of my son, Cyrus Olen Cantini, and Adora Oria Sullivan, daughter of Ronan and Marcelline Sullivan. The first engagement from a founding family of Sacred Sea of this generation, with many more to follow. Let's raise our glass to

Cyrus and Adora!”

The dark-haired man called Cyrus grabbed Circe by the waist.

It was all happening entirely too fast. I knew what was coming, and *wait!* my mind shouted, but there was nothing I could do to stop them. Because she couldn’t see me standing here.

And he kissed her.

I closed my eyes on impact, unable to watch.

I tried to scrape a breath from my lungs, but it clogged my chest. My heart was ramming against my ribcage so hard I thought it may break through and abandon me.

In a room full of people, no one noticed how despair rooted inside me, growing an angry trunk and sad branches, twisting its confused boughs around my spine, crushing my bones. The bloody and raw organ inside, which had been pumping with saccharine for weeks, stalled.

I opened my eyes and slewed my gaze around the room at all the faces who had witnessed their courting while she was supposedly making love to me.

But a pair of silver, supernatural eyes stared back, making me pause.

They were attached to a man holding a girl with white hair close to his side. All I could see of her was her profile, but something about her was familiar. Perhaps it was her white hair and that it reminded me of mine.

The man straightened his spine and narrowed his eyes at me. As though he knew I didn’t fit in this room with these people. And he especially didn’t like how I gazed at the lady under his arm.

I glanced back at Circe as she pulled away from the kiss.

She raised her chin and looked about the room.

And her gaze slammed into mine.

Famous poets and writers have written about this moment of two people locking eyes from across the room. For some, it was a slow song of nostalgic poetry—an awakening from a long slumber. For me, it was an attack of evocative prose.

CHAPTER 34

ADORA

MY HAND SLIPPED OUT OF CYRUS'S PALM.

Stone was here, right in front of me, stealing the last breath from the bottom of my lungs. He was a lighthouse in a wool coat, looking right at me with a miserable look in his black eyes. He had a face kissed by melancholy, the grace of a statue, both as motionless and moving as one of his drawings. His face had gone pale as if all blood had rushed from his head to his heart. And his expression was wounded, chilling; it punished smiles, laughter, and music for swaying around us.

The image of this moment, of him standing within reaching distance, close enough to touch, had crossed my mind many times. For two weeks, I'd imagined it, dreamt of it, wished for it though I was forbidden to have it, and he was here. And I wanted to go to him.

I'd never felt more out of place than in this moment, standing beside the wrong man.

I glanced around the room to see if anyone noticed the strange man standing among them. I wondered if they could feel the tremor that had become a quake whenever we were in the same room together.

Julian noticed, with vulturous eyes narrowing on Stone, the look that gave the impression he would swoop in at any moment.

Stone seemed oblivious to him, or he just didn't care.

I took a step forward.

Stone shook his head.

Cyrus laid a hand on my arm. "Adora?"

Then my eyes were on Cyrus's confused expression. "I just need ..." I didn't remember what else I'd said to Cyrus because the words fell away

from me, and I was glancing back at Stone, who already had his back turned and was walking away.

My fingers trembled when I pulled them to my lips, and then my feet were moving.

I followed after Stone, trying to seem at ease and nonchalant with my steps.

I glanced back at Julian. He was whispering into Fallon's ear, removing his arm from around her waist.

He was chasing after Stone, too.

I hurried my pace to try and catch Stone before Julian did.

Ivy tried to speak with me, Monday complimented my dress, and Kane's fingers brushed my arm as I passed.

"Excuse me," I chanted, weaving between bodies with my sights set on Stone's back.

With each step, I was reminded of how it felt to have his naked fingers linger on my skin, our feverish breathing, and his helpless, glazed eyes. I began to feel light-headed and winded as my heart tried to claw its way out of its cage. *We don't like it here,* I felt my heart cry. *We don't like it here at all.*

Stone turned the corner into the foyer, and my hurried steps turned into a run with my heels slapping against the dark-chocolate floors until they muted upon the rug.

Just before Stone's hand touched the doorknob, I slipped between him and the door, using my back to nail the door shut so he couldn't escape. With my breathing labored, I caught a glimpse of the depth of his eyes.

"Please, don't walk out this door," I whispered, words scattered, wanting nothing more than to wrap my arms around him and shove my face into his chest to hide from the rest of the world.

A cold, hurt gaze was fixed on me.

"We've been here so many times before," he said, almost like he grabbed my wrists from around his waist and peeled me off him. "This time, it is you who will know what it feels like to be staring at my back."

My chin trembled, and I sniffled back the emotion with my spine and palms pressing against the door. I couldn't step to the side.

We stared stubbornly at one another.

"Let me go," he said to me.

I subtly shook my head to keep a tear from falling . "No."

To the left, Julian was battling the crowd, heading straight for us.

“Stone, please,” I begged in a whisper.

He had every right to be angry with me, but he was here, and it somehow changed everything, even when it didn’t. I looked back at Julian. Thankfully, he was speaking confidentially to Jonah, the funeral home owner, both their eyes pointing in this direction.

I should have let Stone go, just let him walk out this door before Julian got to him, but I couldn’t. “If you don’t come with me, a Heathen will knock you out seconds from now and rip you from this house before either one of us can blink an eye.” I swallowed, eyes darting from Julian to Stone. “Anyone who’s taken by a Heathen is taken forever.”

Stone shifted, bothered. “Is this another one of your stories?”

I no longer gave him a choice. I grabbed his wrist and pulled him into the parlor, past the sliding doors, and into a hall. Stone didn’t resist and followed me around the corner, staying close behind.

When we reached the maid’s chambers, where they kept their supplies, I closed the door behind us and turned to face him.

The room was small. A pantry.

Stone’s chest heaved. He was breathing hard as if it was all he could do.

Not because he was out of breath but because he couldn’t breathe steadily.

It seemed like the two were the same, but they weren’t.

I placed my hand on his chest to soothe him.

He took a step back, and my hand slipped away.

“It’s an arranged marriage. They ordered it two days before I found you.”

Stone didn’t speak.

He stood incredibly still, staring at me with a look of injury.

I imagined myself telling him that I was a witch, Cyrus was my *finneuma*, and my coven ordered this arranged marriage to save my home. Then I imagined the disbelief on his face afterward because he could never understand. *Another story,* he’d think.

Trying to ease the nausea, I held my stomach. “He’s my best friend and was my sister’s boyfriend. He’s a good man, Stone, but I never intended to marry him. I just don’t have a choice in the matter.”

Stone gazed down at me solemnly, his eyes hollowing out.

Like all life inside them was slowly backing away.

“Say something,” I shouted, tears bubbling in my eyes.

Stone didn’t wince. But his lips parted, a shallow breath breaking through

them. “How did you manage to break something I never gave you?”

“Stone.” I tried reaching for him, and he stepped back again.

“I don’t even know who you are,” he said. “And clearly, neither do you.”

My spine melted. “You were supposed to leave,” I whispered. “I was okay until you came here.” And I didn’t know whether it was a lie, but I could’ve pretended to be okay long enough until I believed it. “You weren’t supposed to come here and make this harder for me.”

At that, Stone did wince. “Then I’ll make it easy for you,” he said. “You need to choose. Do you want to stay here with him, or will you come with me?”

“It’s more complicated than that.”

“No, it’s not. It’s very simple.” He shoved his hands into his pockets—a way to keep himself from touching me, it seemed. I felt sickness climbing into my chest, and Stone stood tall. “Have you been fucking him too?”

“God, Stone. No.” But this didn’t seem to ease the worry in his eyes.

“Does he know you’ve been fucking me for weeks?”

“No one knows a thing about you,” I said. “And it has to stay that way.”

“Circ—” Stone closed his eyes and let out a breath. “Adora, this isn’t right."

Adora, he said, and the ache in my chest became a burn. I took a step closer and smoothed my palms across the sides of his abdomen inside his open coat. His warmth settled inside me, and I kept my head down, rolling my forehead against his chest, doing my best not to lose it completely. “I’ve been craving to hear you say my name for so long.”

When I lifted my head, he was looking down at me, his jaw muscles twitching.

He grabbed my wrist and held them between us, rubbing his thumb against my pulse. I went to kiss him, to make the most of this moment with him in case it was my last.

Stone’s breath shuddered across my lips, and he closed his eyes. But just before our mouths touched, he turned away from me. He took a deep breath and a step back. “You’ve made your choice, and it’s not me. At the very least, keep your word, stand by your choice by being loyal to him, and—*for once*—be honest with him, Adora. It’s what I would have wanted from you.” Stone’s jaw clenched, and an immeasurable amount of strength dripped off him when he leaned in, pressing his mouth close to my ear to whisper his next words. “So, after I leave this tiny room you dragged me into, do us all a

favor. Return to your dashing fiancé and ask him how my cock tastes."

I winced when he inched back, and our eyes collided.

I could feel his warm exhale flutter my lashes.

"We're not over, and you know it," I whispered, stiff and aching from holding myself together. "I *will* see you again."

"My darling siren," he said, shaking his head. "Don't hold your breath."

I didn't get a chance to stop him before he turned and opened the closet door.

Light flooded in. Julian Blackwell stood on the other side, awaiting him.

Julian's brows jumped. "Well, hello, you mysterious motherfucker."

I held my breath as the two locked eyes.

Stone didn't say a word. He took a step around Julian, but Phoenix and Beck appeared. And the three surrounded Stone, blocking him.

Phoenix and Stone were the same height, and when Phoenix stepped up to him, he sized Stone up. "I see you slipped into Weeping Hollow and fell into some pussy." Phoenix adjusted Stone's coat lapels. "Does Adora's closet bitch have a name?"

Stone looked him in the eyes, unwilling to answer.

My eyes bounced between them, wishing Stone would say *something*.

"I don't have time for this." Phoenix grabbed Stone by the collar and slammed him against a wall. "Who the fuck are you?"

"Tell them you were just on your way," I insisted.

Stone lifted his chin as he stared down at him.

The silence only provoked Phoenix's nerves, and he clenched his teeth, released Stone's collar, and threw his fist into Stone's cheekbone with a *thwack!*

Stone didn't stumble. He stood taller, breathing deeply through his nose, brash-black eyes on Phoenix.

I tried to fight my way between them. "Just let him leave," I rushed out. "Please, if you let him go, you will never have to see him again."

Julian lifted his hand, and a wind-like force took me off my feet and threw me back into the closet. My back hit a shelf of cleaning supplies, and they toppled over me as I fell to the floor. I glanced up to see Stone shove Phoenix to the side, grab Julian by the shirt, and ram him into the opposite wall just before the closet door magically slammed shut.

I pulled myself off the floor and onto my feet, my slick heels sliding across the tile. My dress was tight around my thighs, and I fell forward into

the door, trying the handle, but it wouldn’t open. The knob wouldn’t even turn.

I banged my fist against the door. “Stop!” I screamed.

No sounds came from the other side. I shouted again, throwing my fist and palm against the door until someone finally opened it from the other side.

I stumbled forward into Alice, almost knocking her to the ground.

The hallway was empty. There was only Alice and I.

Stone and the Heathens were gone.

I clutched my lungs, as if it would help me breathe, and felt something hard against my side. I blinked tears from my eyes and looked down at my hand.

Wrapped around my wrist was a bracelet made of black pearls.

SHATTERED WHISPERS

ALEC & CIRCE

THE MORE ALEC AND CIRCE WERE TOGETHER, THE MORE THEY LOOKED forward to each other's company. Each morning, Alec looked out the lighthouse window, thinking of her, and it was always her boat he wished to see. More often than not, he found himself disappointed. Though each time Circe arrived, it became more and more difficult for her to leave him.

Weeks had passed without a glimpse of Circe. Alec had spent this time fishing for black-lipped oysters. His reading informed him that these kinds of oysters didn't exist in these parts of the ocean, which made him even more eager. Alec busied himself, cracking them open and collecting the rare black pearls forming inside.

The rare pearls belonged to Circe as much as he did, and he had to show her in the only way he could think of for a man who'd come from nothing.

On the fourth week without her, he sailed to the mainland.

He anchored his father's fishing boat and took the rowboat the rest of the way. As soon as he reached the shore, he dragged the wooden boat out of the water and sat it atop the sand.

It was a two-mile walk to the market. Notes from violins and cellos yanked him closer, and when he turned the corner, melodies flowed down the cobblestone streets. Every note was a portal into the places inside of him only Circe had touched, and the thrill of seeing her multiplied with every person

he passed.

Tents lined the curved road, where townspeople sold saltwater fish, pastries, freshly baked pies, herbs and oils, and loaves of bread, to name a few. *Adorn a Living Soul* read across a banner as he passed handmade jewelry, bracelets and necklaces much fancier than my black pearls.

Though people swarmed the square, none of them were Circe. Defeat filled the hole she'd left in his chest.

A young boy with dirt-smudged cheeks and a fiddler's cap covering his stringy hair had his mouth cupped when he shouted into the crowd. "Bread's baked every mornin'. Come get it before it's gone!"

Alec crouched down until the two were face to face.

"Did you make this all by yourself?" he asked.

"No, but Mama Mae does." The boy hooked his thumb to behind him. On the other side of the table, the young boy's mother sat, wearing a flour-caked apron, rosy cheeks, and a proud grin for her boy. There was no customers in front of the table stocked with bread. Alec didn't know that the town had shunned the young boy and his mother since their arrival in Weeping Hollow. "You can't get bread fresher than Momma's, I swear to yah."

Heartbreak consumed Alec, and he flashed a smile for the boy's sake. "How much?"

"A fiver and nothing less."

"A fiver, yeah? You're a tough one." Alec dropped a silver dollar into his small, outstretched palm. It was the last of Alec's savings. With no sight of Circe, there seemed to be no use for it any longer. "For you and your mama."

"Wow! Thank yah, sir!" As Alec walked away, he ripped off a piece of bread and popped it into his mouth. "Momma, look! Can you believe it? A big silver coin! Have yah ever seen anything like it? Sir, why don't yah come back tomorrow mornin' and try Momma's hotcakes?! I promise yah, you won't be disappointed!"

With a mouthful of bread, Alec turned on his heel to wave his farewells.

Then his arm fell to his side when his eyes caught on to Circe's face.

The sight of her made his chest ache with a sea of tangled emotion.

He'd often read stories about falling in love, but love was an ambiguous thing. Love wasn't something he fell into, but something that had become him.

She was wearing a bright smile and talking to an older woman who seemed to be in her mid-forties. It took all of him to resist rushing to her and

scoop her into his arms. Instead, he hid behind a tent and watched from afar.

A man approached Circe and gripped her bicep with enough force to cause a bruise. Circe's smile died on her lips, and she turned her head slightly so that this other woman would not notice her discomfort.

"My wife does not parade around a market where Heathens are present. Furthermore, this is certainly not the place to discuss it. I'll be expecting you hours well before sundown," the man whispered into her ear, though Alec could not hear from the distance between them. But Alec noticed how he was dressed, his long black coat, pressed pants, and shiny shoes. And Alec especially took notice of the way this man touched Circe. It took otherworldly strength to remain still as he fixed his wrinkled shirt and adjusted his linen sleeves.

Leaving Circe's side, the man scrunched his face and wasted no time in the square.

Stricken by sudden anger, Circe picked up her skirt. "Lacie, I'll need some fresh air," she said, and when Lacie, her maid, began to follow, Circe raised her palm. "Alone."

When Circe stepped away, Alec knew this was his chance.

He followed her along the dirt pathway. She had her hands clasped behind her back when she walked, and Alec thought she walked with grace after what the man had done to her.

When she turned the corner, Alec reached for her hand and slipped the bracelet he'd made onto her dainty wrist. He squeezed her fingers and whispered, "My Circe," into her ear.

The sound of Alec's voice made Circe's heart stumble as if it were to trip from between the bones of her ribcage and roll right out of her chest. But she also did her best to remain unaffected so that no one would notice. Oh, how it was hardest to stand in his presence and not melt.

When the two turned the corner, she scanned her surroundings in one sweep to find they were alone. Then she grabbed Alec's hand, pulled him between the apothecary and market, where only the sun could see them, and spun into his arms.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, examining Alec's face as he plucked a stray hair from her cheek and tucked it behind her ear.

Alec took her hand, interlaced his fingers with hers, and pinned their togetherness to his chest. "I had to see you."

Circe couldn't speak, and her breathing turned shallow, so Alec spun a

black pearl from the string wrapped around her wrist. “Each pearl was a day spent thinking of you while without you.” He sighed. “Circe, I am going mad. Please don’t force me to make a necklace next.”

“You found these yourself?” Tears formed and clung to the corners of her eyes. No man had ever made something for her. When she shook her head, one of her tears fell and splashed upon her heaving breasts. “Alec, I—”

“Who was that man? Is he the one bruising your body?”

Circe’s jaw snapped shut. She cast her eyes downward and he watched as she took a full breath. “My husband.”

Alec raised his brows.

His stomach twisted into knots.

“You’re married to him,” he said. “How could you be married to him?”

Circe shook her head. “It doesn’t matter.”

Alec looked away.

“Alec, look at me,” she said, grabbing his face until his eyes set on hers. “Even if you could understand, it does not matter. I’m strong, Alec. And I may spend my nights with him, but you are my only thought in those dark hours. I swear to you, I only think of you.” She pulled him to her until her spine met brick, and he melted into her. “I’m yours,” she whispered against his lips. “I’m eternally yours.”

It seemed as though the world was falling away around them. It was only Circe and Alec under the sun, the only thing that had witnessed their love story, quivering and wrought in lust while harmonies from violins stroked the delicate things inside their chests.

Alec cupped her face and slipped his tongue into her mouth.

Circe’s legs weakened from the jolting sensation, and Alec fisted her skirt. “Leave him,” he pleaded. “We can sail away and never look back.”

Circe didn’t need a moment to think. For all she knew, punishment would always be awaiting each time she returned to a life she loathed. She desperately wanted to leave Weeping Hollow, escape the madman she called her husband, and be with Alec.

“Missus Cantini!” gasped Lacie.

In an instant, Circe and Alec parted from each other.

“Lacie,” Circe acknowledged, fixing her skirt. She laid a palm against her chest and gripped her sapphire to hide her panicked breath. “You shouldn’t sneak up on people. It isn’t polite.”

Lacie glanced at the strange man she found kissing Missus Cantini

seconds before. She could only imagine what could have transpired between the two if she hadn't stopped it. "I was worried about you. Please introduce me to your ... friend?"

"There's no time," Circe replied. "He was just on his way."

Circe turned to Alec and whispered, "There's something I must do first. Do you remember where we first met?"

Alec's gaze sailed to Lacie, who was strumming her fingers along her crossed arms, then she twitched her nose up at him. "I remember," he said through a tense jaw.

"Tonight, meet me at the witching hour."

Alec's gaze slammed into Circe. "Not a moment later, or I will come for you."

"I will be there. I promise."

CHAPTER 35

STONE

MY BLOOD SPRAYED THE BARN SIDING.

I stared at the splatter, connecting crimson constellations as blood filled my mouth. The metallic taste was warm when it pooled on my gums but instantly cooled when it dribbled down my chin. I only had a second to admire the macabre painting before his knuckles struck my stomach.

A jolt of pain surged into my gut. When my body was slung to the side, the chains around my wrists and ankles yanked me back into place. I pulled myself up, my boots finding the concrete floor covered in dead leaves and blood stains.

My coat had been ripped away, and my shirt was shredded, exposing my chest and stomach to the brutal winter. My joints were stiff and my muscles ached from trying not to shiver.

Four pairs of chains hung from the rafters, and steel plates were bolted to the floor—four more opportunities to restrain four other people inside this barn.

A single light hung from the center of the barn ceiling. It swung slightly overhead. If I craned my neck just enough, I was sure to see the night's black canvas through a crack.

Though Adora warned me, I still couldn't understand why I was here or what they wanted from me.

I'd learned that asking questions was useless. People lie. Whether to protect themselves or to protect someone else, they lie. Like how Adora lied to me for six weeks. However, I had to believe it was either to protect everyone from me or to protect me from everyone else.

I was glad she wasn't here to witness another slash across my stomach

and another blow to my back. The man they called Phoenix wasn't tiring like the white-tailed deer I'd hunted in the mornings when I was younger. Both his eyes and fists were hammered brass.

Each person, I believe, was born into this world with both kindness and wickedness inside them. There was a choice, which to nurture and which to murder. For over a hundred years, I'd coddled the cold. This was how I knew the auric eyes I was looking into weren't monstrous. Not really. They were deprived and filled with hatred. Whether this man hated himself or the world was still up for debate. Still, his attack on me had become a form of rotten pleasure to hide whatever he didn't want people to see.

It fed him for the time being.

So he could keep going. But so could I.

It was freezing in the barn, but I kept my eyes open.

I kept them distant and indifferent.

It was agony to breathe, but I didn't show it.

Though I missed her already, I didn't let it affect my heart.

I remained solid—stone, not paper.

The three of them wore coats and slacks. They'd loosened the collars of their stark-white shirts, but my blood had stained Phoenix's sleeves.

They'd demanded my name.

Though I'd refused to give it, I'd learned theirs.

Beck was the younger one. As he blew heat into his cupped hands, he could not watch the torture as he leaned against the barn wall wearing a hat that looked like a head sock.

And then there was Julian—the one I first noticed watching me at the manor from where they had taken me. He hadn't spoken and hung back with his arms crossed and his knuckles propped under his chin.

Phoenix grabbed my jaw.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" he asked me with spit splashing across my face.

I didn't react, holding on to the image of Adora in my mind, where we were back at the lighthouse together, and I was watching her undress: her skirts sweeping across the old floors, where dust skipped and settled. She wore a smile, and I wondered if she ever felt freer than the moments she spent with me.

Julian dropped his stance. "Look into his eyes," he said, taking a step closer. "He's not human. He's not even animal." His attention slid to Beck.

“Go find Zeph.”

Beck kicked off the wall. “I don’t know, Jules. His powers would’ve come out by now.”

Phoenix shoved my face to the side. “Or maybe he’s just better at controlling it.”

I DIDN’T KNOW HOW MUCH TIME HAD PASSED AFTER MY SWOLLEN EYES cracked open.

My gaze couldn’t land on a solid figure, but I knew night was fading. It was sometime between midnight and sunrise. Closer to sunrise. But everything was blurred and out of shape.

My temples throbbed, and there was an ache from the sides of my head all the way to the back.

I was still chained to this spot. Every tear, gash, and cut burned when an early morning chill swept across my bare chest. It forced my eyes open wider, focusing on the shadows until my vision balanced out and my surroundings took shape.

Three men stood before me. One I hadn’t seen before.

“It’s colder than *fuck-you* outside,” Beck said, entering the barn.

And then there were four.

Go find Zeph, I remembered Julian saying.

So, this must be Zeph, I thought. He stood across from me with dark blond hair and a mask. And looking at him was as if I was looking at the reflection of my old self. A monster. A wendigo. The version of me everyone ridiculed, but no one saw. Not even myself until Adora.

From inside the mask, a pair of lime-green eyes stared back at me.

Two viridescent globes.

“Did you have a nice nap?” he asked in a shield-like voice. Calm, collected.

I was curious about him and tried to stand straight.

He tilted his head with a disgusted glare and studied me. “Where did you come from?”

They would never let me go. Not at this point. They believed I was a threat to their town. At some point, they would have to decide which one of them would have to kill me. Beck could not stomach it. If I had to guess, my prediction would be the one standing before me.

My jaw clenched as I gritted my teeth. I refused to give them what they wanted. Not out of spite but because I didn't owe them anything.

But then Zeph flicked his wrist.

Suddenly, the air in the room thinned, and it was more difficult to breathe.

At once, it felt like two concrete fists were squeezing my lungs.

I gasped for a solid breath, my eyes darting around, unsure of what was happening. I didn't understand why the air was slipping away faster than I could take a single breath.

"Zephyr," Beck warned.

"He's got this," Phoenix snapped.

And my lungs gnawed at my insides, a painful burn, trying to find oxygen.

Zephyr turned his wrist clockwise, and my throat swelled.

Somehow, someway, the man in the mask was exhuming all the air from inside me.

In the books I'd read, death happened loud, fast, and violently. Steel clashed, men cursed, and both boots and hearts collapsed to earth until it all stopped with absolution. But at this moment, my dying was hushed and unhurried. A slow dance. It seemed that when you drowned, whether it be in water or air, it happened slowly. The absence of air was the only weapon, and it stole any curse right out of the thickness of a desperate throat.

Zephyr's green eyes stared into mine as he slowly killed me, almost like he was romanticizing it.

"He's turning fucking blue, man," Beck shouted, mindlessly counting his fingertips. "You're going to kill him."

"Let his magic be his hero," Zephyr said, his eyes narrowing. "If he has any."

The room was fading. Dimming. Spinning.

Darkness was within reach.

Just before I succumbed to Death's embrace, Zephyr unclenched his fists, and a fistful of air slipped into my lungs. I lurched forward to drink it in, my chest heaving to collect a handful of silky breaths. My lungs filled, and a hoarse and rugged cough scratched my throat.

"He can't help us. He's no one." Zephyr's eyes were callous when he looked upon me one last time. "He's nothing."

First, I was a monster. Then I was hers. Now I was nothing.

ADORA

To my beloved black sea,

It's why we read romance, to deprive our heart until it becomes utterly helpless, then fill it to the brink with warmth, only to freeze and shatter it all over again; to make sure it still works. I'm certain those who endure persistent heartbreak is either a lonely, sadistic creature or one who has a heart wrapped in thorns with the longing for a novel to struggle past and touch what remains inside, broken flesh, blood, and all.

I've always thought of myself as the lonely, sadistic creature that no one could truly love, but since you, I've realized this hasn't been the case.

Oh, how I wish you could unwrite a story that has already been told. Erase it, press delete until the words vanish, and all that remains is a new brilliant white page to scar.

A new beginning.

THERE WAS SOMETHING ABOUT BEING SURROUNDED BY BOOKS JUST BEFORE daybreak when fingers made of light probed paned windows and touched embossed spines—a sight of literary seduction.

However, there was no time for belletristic beauty.

Across from me in the library, Alice sat, glasses hanging off her turned-up nose as she indulged in *A Long and Fatal Love Chase*. As for me, I'd been drifting from the same written sentence for the last half hour because my mind wasn't with the letter but with Stone.

I despised just sitting here all night, waiting in the quiet with thoughts of him. For hours, I'd spun the pearl bracelet around my wrist.

The last chapter of Alec & Circe had stunned me.

Mom had inserted the black pearls I'd stolen as a girl into the book, but how had she known about it, and how had her story matched up with Mrs. Madder's story all those years ago?

Stone had found them, and each time they slid across my wrist, visions of him back at the lighthouse, flipping through the pages, immersing himself in the story to find connections collapsed in my mind. Perhaps he was right, and there was a purpose to the story. But for me, these pearls would only whisper

empty promises Stone and I may never have the chance to make.

For all I knew, the Heathens could have killed him already.

If this were the case, it should make my life easier. Because if he were dead, I would no longer sink into fantasies or drown in a world where we could be together. If he were dead, I could return to the girl I'd been all along.

But the thought brought on an ache. Inside my chest lived an ice-sculpted heart with sharp, jagged edges that carved his name into the bones of my ribcage. These cuts were severe and brutal, reminding me that this thing we shared was too deep to escape.

When it came to Stone, I didn't have a choice.

My eyes flicked back and forth from the clock to the window, waiting for daylight to wash over the town in totality so I could go to the west side, where the Heathens lived.

As soon as a baleful sunrise broke as if it cut open a vein, a fresh crimson glow bleeding across the ocean, I shot to my feet, dust threading into the light. "I can't stand to stay in this manor a second longer."

Alice set her book down and bounced to her feet after me. "Where will you go?"

I grabbed my cloak that was lying across the couch.

"I just need to take a walk," I said. "Alone."

I'm Adora Sullivan, the daughter of a founding family. If the Heathens hurt me in any way, it will wreak a coven war in Weeping hollow. At least, this was the thought I held on to as I left the Cantini Manor.

TOWN SQUARE WAS EMPTY EXCEPT FOR THE BEAN, WHERE TOWNSPEOPLE gathered outside its doors, looking for caffeine to stay awake. I walked the two miles, dipping between buildings and crossing desolate streets.

There were only two places I imagined the Heathens would keep Stone: Julian's cabin in Norse Woods or Goody Farms.

Rumors slipped between curious lips about what the Heathens did at Goody Farms. Especially in the barn. Years ago, before the Shadows, when the Heathens were only children, it was their cries echoing throughout Weeping Hollow. No one knew why, but this was the place they had to be.

Trees created a tunnel along a pathway to the estate. It took about an hour, with my cloak pulled over my head and the December morning biting

and flaying my skin the entire way.

It had been years since I'd visited this side of town and even longer since I'd stepped on to the Goody property.

As a little girl, I adored sunrises. So much that Ivy, Fable, and I had snuck through the woods behind Town Square to get to Goody Estate. We'd watched the sun wake over a sea of golden fields crowning the acreage and not my usual beloved black ocean because it was something different. When you stare out at the same view day after day, you forget to treasure it, and I also believed the same to be true in love as well. Whether it be for a boy or a home, it was true.

But as the trees opened up, snow draped over wilting stalks and weighed them down like dead carcasses. The once reflecting gold specks were no more. Life had gone. Broken, dried out, and deserted.

When I reached the barn, I crept along the back wall, crouched so no one could see me, and peered through a crack in the wooden planks.

The Heathens weren't inside.

But there was a body. Head down, and arms stretched like a crucifix.

My hand flew to my mouth to suffocate my cry, trapping it inside my chest.

I didn't know if it was Stone or someone else.

I didn't know if this person was dead or alive.

Legs shaking, I peered across the grounds as I made my way around the barn. No one was coming, so I slipped inside, careful not to make a sound.

The moment I closed the barn door and faced what was inside, I burst into tears.

I believed there were two ways a person could go weak in the knees, all strength gone with the threat of collapsing to the floor. One way was from being swept by love ... because we entrusted the other person with catching us. The other was from being ripped apart by heartbreak ... because they were gone, and we no longer cared what we'd hit on the way down. We were already broken.

And it was Stone, and I couldn't fucking breathe.

His wrists were shackled and chained to the ceiling. The toes of his boots were scraping the ground. Though his head hung, I could see bruises and blood covering his busted and swollen face. His hair was no longer brilliant white but matted and clumped together by dried blood. His shirt had been ripped from his body. It hung around his shoulders in tattered pieces,

exposing his wounded chest to winter.

"Stone," I whispered in a croak, stumbling to him with tears burning in my throat. *Please be alive*, I begged to whatever gods would listen, not stopping until I was cupping his face, lifting his head, and looking into his eyes. Stone could barely open them, but when he did, *"Circe,"* he whispered, and the name broke me.

"I'm so sorry, this is all my fault." I ran the pad of my thumb across his teardrop scar. "I'm going to get you out of here."

In the palms of my hands, Stone shook his head.

It was subtle, barely there.

"You have to stop coming to my rescue," he struggled to say, the words broken. "You make me feel incompetent."

I groaned. "Why did they do this to you? What did they want?"

A shallow breath broke apart when it left his lips. "My name."

"Your name? Why didn't you tell them anything?"

His gaze dragged across my face. "I promised you that I wouldn't."

I was taken back to five weeks ago on the day we'd left for Bone Island. We were standing on the dock about to step onto the boat. I'd made him promise never to answer questions from people in town if he were ever found.

Even after the way I had used him, he still kept his stupid promise to me.

I grabbed the chain, trying to figure out how to undo it. "They're monsters. I'm so sorry. I'm going to get you out of here," I insisted, my hands flying from one lock to the next, trying to see if it was a key I needed or a code or—

"Stop." Stone shook his head. "Don't. They'll know."

"You're crazy if you think I'm going to leave you here!"

"Shhh," Stone quieted me, calm, looking down at me with blood sticking to all his features. Some dried, some still weeping. "It's not as bad as it looks," he said, though his lips were trembling. "I've been through much worse, and I'll survive this too—" Something painful cut him short, and he sucked in a breath. "It would be a shame to end the story here, isn't that what you said?"

"Those were stupid words, Stone," I whispered, shaking my head. "I just said whatever was in my mind to make you feel better. No more pretending, no more telling stories. This is real, and they *will* kill you if I don't get you out of here. I'm not about to let you lay your life on the line because of a few

ridiculous words!”

Voices came from outside, and Stone’s eyes widened, and he yanked against the chains.

“Please go,” he choked out with rippling black eyes. I didn’t know what to do. My feet wouldn’t move to leave him. He jerked forward, but the chains yanked him back. “Adora, leave. If they decide you’re involved, this will all be for nothing.”

I turned to glance back at the barn door, then faced Stone again.

I shook my head because I didn’t want to leave him.

“Go,” Stone pleaded.

Tears burned behind my eyes when I shook my head again. “No.”

“Adora,” he said, catching my gaze. “I lied, all right? I lied to you. This isn’t the end. I promise.”

A breath tumbled out of me, and I stood on my toes, my lips catching his. A soft kiss. In case it was our last.

Stone closed his eyes and leaned into it, keeping me with him for a second longer than we could afford.

I tasted his blood on my lips and found myself swept by love.

Weak, doomed, a part of me no longer my own.

I was *taken* by it, the way one was taken by a curse.

CHAPTER 36

STONE

TIME MOVED DIFFERENTLY.

Before, it had been measured by my darling's subtle touch, her soft steps about the lighthouse, and her musical laugh. It was measured by notes cascading from the record player, dust captured by the daylight hours, my satisfying moans, and her carnal whispers. But at this moment, each second was moved by suffering, chains clashing, painful heaving, footsteps prodding on dead earth just outside the barn, and, at times, silence.

She'd come and gone just before the men returned.

I missed her already.

Beck approached first and wouldn't look me in the eyes.

"You have to prove yourself," he whispered as he unlocked the chain around my wrist. "Let it out, talk, do *something*. Now is the time, and you're only making it more difficult than it should be." There was something about the way he spoke. He kept his voice low, his words vague. It made me believe he didn't want the others to hear. Julian, Zeph, and Phoenix were standing off to the side, watching intently and speaking quietly to one another. They had to be too far to hear what Beck was saying, but Beck still spoke as though at least one of them could.

The chain broke free and my arm collapsed to my side.

"Last chance," Beck said, walking to the other side to free my other wrist.

His blue gaze dashed to mine for a response.

I stared back, giving him nothing.

Beck nodded. "Very well."

The lock broke and I tumbled to the ground, my chest slamming into a concrete slab.

Every bone ached, and my elbows shook as I tried to lift myself up.

Just as my arms locked straight, a boot stomped into the center of my back, crushing and pinning me to the barn floor.

The concrete slab was cool against my cheek when Beck forced my arms behind my back and bound my wrists together. Then one of them grabbed my shoulders and snatched me off the ground. My legs buckled and my knee scraped concrete. A groan rumbled in my chest, and I squeezed my eyes closed and lifted myself back onto my feet.

I looked Phoenix in the eyes. They were both savage and sad. Equally scorching and empty. An unloaded chamber, smoke still rising from the last fire. I was beaten, battered, and bruised, but I still felt sorry for him, confident that the only thing he craved was the very thing he could never possess. Was this what was awaiting me after my time with Adora? Would the same ache steal my eyes, too?

Zephyr shoved both palms into my back. “Walk.”

It was a struggle to move one foot in front of the other. Every step felt like my organs were tearing from my body, but I managed to move forward without letting anyone know I was struggling.

Once we stepped outside the barn, a fresh, cold morning breeze slapped my bare chest. The sky was a subdued gray, and I dropped my head back to feel the little light on my face, inhaling the fresh air.

One of them pushed me from behind again, and my gaze fell on the snow sticking to the ground. “Try to keep up,” one of them said.

I didn’t know which one because they were surrounding me.

We continued walking through the snow, which muffled our footfalls.

Half a mile later, we entered a different part of the woods. And these trees spoke a foreign language I somehow understood. All around, light threaded between trunks, and wind slipped over branches like a lover’s caress, not a whistle but a moan; leaves a rustled murmur and twigs a snapping whimper. In my bones, these woods ached for me, for my blood, *a welcome home*.

To my left, I felt the chill of Julian’s gaze as he studied me.

As though he sensed it, too.

When we reached an iron gate, the four of them stepped away.

“He crossed the border into Weeping Hollow once already. If the town lets him out, we can’t prevent him from returning,” Beck warned the others, no longer caring that I could hear every confusing word they were saying. “Even if we form a wall against him using the carnival, the grounds aren’t

strong enough to hold him for long, especially when we can't all be here to hold it up. Forty-eight hours max. If he's eager to get back in, he can."

By this time, my strength had gradually returned, but I didn't show it, wanting them to believe they had an advantage over me. I looked past them to the other side of the gate. Hovering over a deserted village with torn tents was a large circular structure with swaying carts.

It was a sight I hadn't seen before in the middle of a forest, and only the unknown awaited me beyond the deserted grounds. What would happen to me if they forced me to the other side?

There was a reason they no longer cared if I heard their every word.

Death was expecting me.

I'd never been able to control the earth on demand. The earth had always just reacted, feeding off my emotions. If I were hungry, angry, grief-stricken, aroused, depending on the extent, it had done what I'd always needed it to do.

A full breath filled my lungs, and I closed my eyes, manifesting this thing inside me, calling upon it, feeling the cool rich soil wrapping its arms around me. I imagined the way roots felt sliding between my fingers and over my skin as leaves quietly murmured in my ears, letting me know we were connected. I shifted in place, sketching the rope in my mind, feeling it untether, unravel, and slide across my wrist before it slithered away.

They weren't paying attention to me. They believed I was too weak to escape, and they especially didn't think I would take off at any second. They believed I was a nobody.

Zephyr seemed to be the strongest of the four.

Not strong by muscle but strong by power.

I waited for him to turn his back.

As soon as he did, I sprinted between two trees.

I ran through the cold, my shoes pounding frozen earth, dead leaves, and ruts. Dry winds clawed down my throat and burned my lungs. I fought through it, inhaling through my nose and exhaling through my mouth. I didn't know where I was headed. The sea, I suppose. Back to my boat, if I could make it that far in one sprint before collapsing. I looked behind me.

Julian was on my tail, sprinting as if he were nothing more than mist.

A shadow. My shadow.

I underestimated him.

He launched at me, tackling me and taking us both into the air.

We landed with *thunder* and the ground vibrated. We quickly recovered

amid snow, mud, and leaves. Our boots slipped on snow as we got back to our feet, then rushed at each other. Julian threw a powerful right hook, me an uppercut with my left fist.

My fist was faster, crashing into his jaw with a *crack.*

Julian's head flew back, and he stumbled on his feet but was quick to right himself. He looked at me with a snarl in his silver glare as he spat a mouthful of blood. I fought for a breath, unable to take much more. The trees spun around me, and the earth bent and bowed. I was dizzy, blinking until the trees took shape, but it was too late. Julian had my throat in his fist, squeezing as he took me off my feet and slammed my back into the ground.

"One: do you honestly believe you're faster than me?" he screamed with his fingers tightening around my neck, nailing my spine to the forest floor. "Two: calm the fuck down."

Blood dripped from his lip onto my face and his black hair hung over his eyes. I tried prying from his grip, swinging my head to the side. It was at this point that I met eyes with what appeared to be a small man emerging from behind a tree. I blinked, but he was still there, coming up behind Julian.

This man reached into a velvet pouch and tossed a fistful of something powder-like into the air, and a scent of rotten meat caught on the breeze and smacked into me.

Julian toppled over, and my stomach churned, my chest afire.

I couldn't open my eyes. I couldn't breathe.

It felt like a scorched dagger was searing every exposed part of me, my eyes, my mouth, my tongue, my cuts, my wounds, my ears.

Beside me, Julian's gasp was sandpaper.

He couldn't breathe either.

I tried to pry my eyes open to see where the strange man had gone, but my eyes were tearing up, and all was blurry. The poisonous, rotten dust engulfed me as I flipped over. I clutched my lungs and pressed my face into the ground to avoid it, but someone kicked my side until I rolled on to my back again.

The small man with tiny eyes and a full beard stood over me.

He was the last thing I saw until everything fell dark.

The Next Morning

IT WAS WARM HERE. THIS WAS THE FIRST THING I NOTICED.

I was no longer cold or shivering but comforted by a fire pounding out heat. A woody scent of sandalwood wafted all around, and distant chatter strung in the air until it focused and swarmed closer. I cracked an eye open, finding myself lying on my stomach in a small, quaint room.

An older woman with a shaved head wrung a towel into a nearby bucket. “There, there, Heathen,” she whispered with gentleness. Her bracelets jingled when she applied a warm compress to my bare back. “You’re safe.”

I was in a small wooden cabin. It was cluttered, with plants hanging from every corner and photographs in mismatched frames clumped together on the wall to my left. They were surrounded by shelves containing books, apothecary jars, and herbs. In the kitchen, two more women spoke in hushed whispers. A young lady with spiral black curls stood in front of a stove, stirring something in a pot. Large wooden spoons and scratched pots hung above her. The middle-aged woman stood beside her with a derisive gaze aimed at me.

A graying, scraggly beard appeared, with a face attached to it. My only sight was him, advancing closer and closer. I couldn’t move as he leaned over, studying me with his tiny eyes.

“I’ve been waiting my entire life for you,” he said in a brittle voice. “My name is Ocean.”

I flinched, wishing to escape this mad house, but there was no energy or strength to move. My limbs felt as though they were not my own, dead and detached, and I could feel a bead of sweat sliding down the edge of my face.

“There’s nothing to fear, Heathen,” he assured. “I’m your keeper.”

I thought the man insane, or I was experiencing another delusion. But there was nothing I could do because then my eyes fluttered closed, and all the lights dimmed into nothing.

THE FOLLOWING DAY

“HOW MUCH DID YOU GIVE HIM?” IT WASN’T THE OLDER WOMAN OR THE younger one. The voice came from the mistrustful, middle-aged woman who

wore a cloth wrapped around her head.

“He’s been to hell and back, Winta. The Nightshade was only supposed to take him out for a couple of hours, not days.” Ocean’s eyes slid back to me. “He will be fine.”

Nightshade.

The young lady with black curls framing her face approached me. “I’m Kioni, and this here is my mother, Winta, and my grandmother, Eleanor,” she said with an accent and copper-colored eyes. “Drink this. It will help.” She lifted my head and put a hammered cup to my mouth, and before I could resist, a warm liquid doused my lips.

I turned, spat it out, and sat up fully, wiping my mouth with the back of my hand.

“Why, aren’t we dramatic?” She laughed. “It’s only water and a few drops of jewelweed.” She shook her head and pulled back, wiping the edge of the cup with a towel.

I sat frozen on the couch, watching these strangers move comfortably about the small cabin with me sitting here. How did they not realize that I didn’t fit into this equation? Why were they keeping me here, and what did they want from me? It seemed odd, strange even, to bring a thing such as myself into their *home* and not think to chain it up. They truly believed I would not harm them.

Home, I thought again, and sorrow crept into my chest, a nostalgic longing for something unknown to me. It was an unfamiliar ache that was new to me. I’d never been homesick before, but I imagined that if I ever had a home, this was what it would feel like to be without one.

Adora flashed in my mind, and the ache in my chest only intensified. I used the heel of my palm to soothe it, wishing I was back with her at the lighthouse and not in a small cabin with four strangers who could be holding me against my will. Or, as Adora had once said, *skin my flesh and roast me over a fire like a pig on a spit.*

Was there truth in all her stories? Was I even still in Weeping Hollow?

“Yes, you are in Weeping Hollow,” Eleanor, the eldest, said from the other side of the room with a thicker accent than Kioni, almost as though she’d heard my thoughts. “But you are safe here in my home. I placed a protection spell on this property.”

“You can trust me,” Ocean said. “You can trust all four of us.”

“I am a stranger to you.” My throat was raw and scratchy, having not

spoken a word in days. “You shouldn’t trust me, and my trust isn’t given freely. It’s earned.”

“*Oh*, I know who you are, Danvers.” Ocean leaned in with two squinted eyes. “The question is, do you?”

CHAPTER 37

STONE

DECEMBER 31, 2020
NEW YEAR'S EVE

I WAS BACK IN THE COFFIN AT THE BOTTOM OF THE ATLANTIC.

At least it felt like I was—dead or sleeping or dreaming.

Perhaps none of it ever happened. It was possible I'd dreamt up Adora and the cave, the lighthouse, the island, and, *dammit*, the best six weeks of my life. Perhaps I'd journeyed to the afterlife with the girl from my drawings, bonded with her, touched her, kissed her, made love to her. But each time I blinked, I was still here without her, walking along the fence line surrounding a cottage with Ocean as he told me all about the Shadows.

I had believed they were another one of Adora's made-up stories.

Ocean had to have been in his fifties or sixties, five-foot-five, a cane fixed at his side—*only for his stiff knee that acted up in the cold*, he'd said—and eyes that disappeared when he smiled, which was a rarity in the brief time I'd come to know him. His clothes were well-worn and stained, and he had a round belly that entered a room before the rest of him. As he had mentioned, he was without a home, but the town took care of him.

I straightened my back and rested my hands on the fence, gazing past the cottage as the nightly winds chaffed my face. Flurries drifted and draped over rotten corn that poked from the snow like desperate fingers as though the stalks were being buried alive. A fresh scent of brittle leaves, rich soil, and

melting snow permeated the air. I breathed it in.

About a quarter of a mile away was the barn where the Heathens had tortured me.

I scanned the horizon for a sign of them.

“Don’t worry. For anyone to hurt you, they first must see you, and Eleanor took care of that.” He grinned, his eyes disappearing. “Magic only exists if you believe in it, my boy.” Beyond the barn, in the distance, there was a plantation-style home with a landscape of perfect white that seemed to extend north for miles. “Goody Estate,” Ocean sighed, staring at the same house in the distance. “Kioni’s mother, Winta, resides on the property. Both her and Kioni work for them.”

“Eleanor, too?”

“No. Eleanor owns a psychic shop in Town Square.”

“Psychic.” I nodded. “Suits her well,” I said with a slight grin, recalling how Eleanor always seemed to know what I was thinking. Could she also see Adora in my mind, too?

“Tell me more,” I continued. “What do the Heathens want from me, and why do they believe I can help stop the Shadows?”

“Because you’re a Heathen,” Ocean dropped like a grenade. “They’re your brothers.”

I looked at him, surely dumbfounded. “You’re speaking of those men who tortured me in that barn?” I nodded to the wooden structure standing in front of us, where I’d been brutally beaten. Everything I’d known and read about brothers was that they did not harm one another but protected one another. And from what Adora had told me, these men were murderers. “Those Heathens are not my brothers.”

Ocean narrowed his eyes, seemingly offended. “By bond and oath.”

“Absurd lies. I could never be one of them.”

“Beck Parish, a descendant of Norse Woods’ five founding families. The element of water. *Your* brother.”

I peered down at the small man, shaking my head and breathing deeply to calm myself, but he continued, adamant. “Phoenix Wildes, a descendant of Norse Woods’ five founding families. The element of fire. *Your* brother.”

“You mean the heavy fist that molested my face?” I seethed through a clenched jaw.

“Zephyr Goody,” he continued without a hitch, “a descendant of Norse Woods’ five founding families. The element of air. *Your* brother.”

I felt my face get hot.

"Julian Blackwell, a descendant of Norse Woods' five founding families. The element of spirit. *Your* brother."

"I've heard enough of this." I turned, wanting to find Adora and leave this town once and for all.

"Then there's you," he said, stopping me. "Danvers, the descendant of Norse Woods' five founding families. The element of earth. *Their* brother." An ache swam inside me, and he continued, "And the lost Heathen who's been missed and grieved dearly by your coven for over a century." I looked at him, a drum beating in my chest. All I'd ever wanted was to belong somewhere and be a part of something. And I did. There was an entire *coven*, and they missed me. Why had my mother taken me away? "Tell me, Danvers. What did your mother call you?"

My jaw was locked tight.

My eyes were nailed to Ocean's face.

My chest was heaving.

"Stone." A whisper.

I was doing all I could to hold myself together.

"Stone Danvers," he repeated as though he wanted to test it out and see if it felt the same leaving his mouth as he'd always imagined. "The last known Danvers, which I'm assuming was your father, was Forest Danvers. Your mother, Clarice Danvers."

He was mistaken. "No, my mother was Clarice Woolf."

"Smart woman. After she fled, she took her maiden name," he said, eyes gazing at the dead cornfield. "Either way, you're Heathen blood, through and through."

"And if I refuse?" *If I instead leave this town to avoid getting attached, only to be disappointed all over again, what then?* I thought, unsure if I could endure much more.

Ocean stroked his scraggly peppered beard. "Up until about six or seven weeks ago, you had a cursed face, yes?"

How could he have known? I hadn't told a soul. Not even Adora.

"Your brothers agonized through the same," he said, and I felt my throat close up with emotion. "Despite your differences, you five share a suffering no one can understand. You're in pain, they're in pain. The Heathens are lost without one another. You can't refuse what's in your blood. It's why you've always felt as though something was missing before you arrived here in

Weeping Hollow. They've felt the same hollow their entire lives." Ocean glanced back at the Goody Estate in the distance. "Desperation never looked good on anyone, but you will find forgiveness for what they did. You won't be able to deny it. And once that time comes, you will understand the power that comes with the brotherhood of the Heathens."

I tried to speak, but there was nothing.

A mouthful of empty rooms.

I didn't want to trust him, but a profound thing moving about my blood compelled me to do so. An unearthly bond thicker than my stubbornness to a tiny, bearded man who was burying me in an avalanche of information.

Unlike Adora, who'd never wanted to be seen, heard, or understood by me until I deserved it, Ocean jumped at the opportunity to tell me everything as though he'd waited his entire life for this. He was a library of knowledge Mother had deprived me of, and the intelligent thing to do was exhume all I could while I had the chance.

I shoved my hands into my pockets, keeping myself balanced and unaffected.

"You know a healthy amount of information about me because you're my keeper," I said, stepping forward. "What is a keeper?"

We continued our walk along the gate surrounding the cottage, Ocean to my right. "A keeper is a guardian who protects a bloodline. Every Heathen has one. Eleanor's bloodline is the keepers of the moonchildren. An entirely different breed. My family ..." he trailed off, either finding the right words or hesitating. "My family stuck around for as long as they could, waiting for the day a Danvers would return. If only my father could see you standing here." He looked up at me with sadness curving his eyes. "If I ever thought this day would come, I would have given marriage and children a second thought, made something of myself. For that, I'm sorry. I failed you."

Failed me? "Hardly, though all is forgiven," I said, trying to ease his guilt even though I had no clue of the severity of his responsibilities. "Why must someone like me need a keeper?"

"Earth is a revolving door, but for you, this door has been torn right off its hinges," he explained. "It's why you can hear the trees speaking to you this very moment."

It was then that the wind swept up my chest and caressed my face.

I thought back to all the times I'd hunted. Branches swayed in a single direction to guide me. The earth vibrated beneath my soles to motivate me.

Leaves tumbled and breezed past my ears to console me. The earth had always loved me as a mother should love a son.

“You have the power to see the past and manipulate the future by bringing back the dead,” he said, interrupting my thoughts. “Your bloodline must go on, and I’m here to ensure that.”

I stalled at all the words he’d said so easily. How could he declare all the secret and horrible things about me in only a few breaths and be able to say them passively without a stutter? Mother had manipulated me into being ashamed of it all, and he was speaking as if they were gifts.

“You know of my ... oddities?”

“Of course. I am your keeper.”

“Yes, you keep saying this.” There was one thing, however, about which he was utterly wrong. Adora once filled the void inside me, leaving me needing nothing more. With her, I’d found contentment. Happiness, even. But as of this moment, the void was a gaping hole, and I was confident nothing else could fill the grave she’d left behind. I missed her enough that she haunted my every thought, and I was desperate to know how she fit into this world he’d said I belonged to.

Then music bellowed in the distance, fading as it reached us like a song swaddled in a blanket. My attention turned to the direction in which it came. “Do you hear the music?”

“It’s New Year’s Eve, my boy. The whole town is celebrating in Town Square.”

If the whole town were there, that would mean Adora as well.

I had to send a message to her to let her know that I was still alive.

I jumped over the fence barrier, hearing Ocean run up from behind and stop at the fence line. “Dammit, Heathen, it’s not time yet,” he yelled, shaking his cane. “You can’t show your face in town.”

I turned with a cunning grin. “Oh, but my heroic keeper, if only looks could kill,” I jested, running backward with my arms up at my sides.

“He’s funny. Imagine that. The boy is funny.”

I turned again and sprinted into the woods as music arose. Not too deep, just enough to reach a clearing with trees surrounding me. I looked up, watching ashen clouds move past the night sky.

Ice-cold winds combed my hair and raked my scalp as it passed, taking all my lightheartedness with it. I crouched down and shoveled snow to the side until there was nothing but earth.

My palm pressed against the frozen dirt, and I shut out everything else in my mind, doors slamming shut until she was the only thing standing there.

The thought of her made my throat tighten and my vision blur.

My darling siren stood in the middle of a dark room, wearing her red dress and black lilies in her hair—a spotlight shone on only her. Perhaps the lighthouse beam.

My fingers curled into the soil, taking her hand.

“I’m so angry with you,” I finally said in a whisper, sniffling back the emotion and wiping my numb nose. “You hurt me more than anyone, and I hate you for it, but I’m still calling out to you to let you know I’m all right.” The tremor stirred, sliding under my skin and wrapping its arms around my ribs. I squeezed the dirt in my fist. “I’m pathetic for you, Adora. You’re in his arms right now, and I still want you. So, if you can hold on to anything, hold on to Bone Island,” I whispered into the air, letting the dirt slip between my fingers. “Remember Bone Island.”

Because if I had the chance to see her again, nothing would be the same between us.

I was always a Heathen, the monster she despised the most.

CHAPTER 38

ADORA

TEN MINUTES UNTIL THE NEW YEAR!" KANE SHOUTED INTO HIS CUPPED hands. He was standing atop the clock's concrete foundation with an arm hooked around the pole, swaying back and forth. Flatlanders huddled together below him, but it did nothing to ease the cold as we all waited for midnight to strike in Town Square.

Storefront lights were out and the string lights draping from the eaves to the gazebo hadn't dazzled above in weeks. Aside from the gas lamps lining the cobblestone walkways, night swallowed us.

Beyond the crowd, bodies spilled onto the streets and scattered in the grass. Shop owners stood on their stoops, watching the entertainment or preparing for mischief. Some townies were zoned out, staring at nothing, their expressions blank. Others were delusional, seeing things that weren't there. Shoulder to shoulder, our bones shook in our thick coats, but we were awake.

The Shadows hadn't taken a life in weeks. Safety could be on the horizon, but no one was willing to take the risk and sleep for longer than minutes at a time. If there was an opportunity to keep us awake and moving, we took it. This time it was New Year's Eve.

Kane jumped down from the clock platform and landed ten feet from Cyrus and me. A grotesque grin stretched across his face, likely influenced by mermaid blood and caffeine as if he'd been injecting both straight into his veins for several weeks.

I couldn't find the will to fake a smile, even for the boys' sake.

Two days had passed since I'd last seen Stone. The image of him chained up inside the barn was a scar in my mind—a deep, brutal scratch from a

poisonous claw. I spun the pearl bracelet around my wrist, pretending to be all together and not falling apart. It was a difficult task as the thought of Stone kept me unfocused, unfazed, unraveling, un-everything. And the last thing I wanted was to celebrate a new year he may never enter.

The thought alone ripped through my chest, and I looked at the ground to fix my face again. *Only a few more weeks and Kane will be dead, and Mom will be awake,* I reminded myself. *It's what you've always wanted. For it, you fought. For it, you sacrificed.* So why, with every passing memory of Stone pressing into me from all sides, did it feel like all of it no longer mattered, and there was a chance I'd explode into a rage at any moment?

I stood with my heart heavy and lying at the bottom of my ribcage, casting a shadow across my bones. People were pushing and shoving into each other, some delirious, some dejected, some delusional, and I wished to trade places with any of them. Anything was better than *wistoragic* crawling inside me.

I suddenly felt closer to this word, clutching my chest as *wistoragic* wrapped around my heart, sounding more like a lethal virus trapped in a planetarium than a feeling. I suppose this was what love could feel like should I have fallen into it—a sickness born from stardust. It sounded magical, but it wasn't. Not at all.

Just then, in the cobblestone cracks between my feet, a pale green vine sprouted through melted snow—the first alive thing I'd seen in weeks. I looked to my left and right with my heart slamming against my palm, unsure if what I'd seen was real.

When I looked back at the root, a beautiful black lily sprouted from it and brushed my ankle. I bent down and quickly plucked it from the street before anyone noticed.

The petals were silk between my fingers, and I closed my eyes, imagining Stone.

He's okay, my heart screamed. I held the lily close to my chest. Somehow, he let me know he was okay, and a smile ghosted across my chapped face.

There was a sense of someone watching, and when I looked to my right, Julian's little sister was staring at me. She was wearing an oversized black sweater, a tiny black skirt, tights, and knee-high boots, her only layers to combat the cold. She had a lot of hair falling around her, the color of crushed black velvet with a sheen. It slapped her cheeks and hid her profile when she

quickly averted her attention.

From the corner of my eye, Cyrus gazed down at me with a smile, and I shoved the flower into my coat pocket. He stepped behind me, laid his hands on my shoulders, his thumbs stroking my neck.

He dropped his mouth to my ear. “I get it,” he said over the crowd. “You miss your sisters. But you know Ivy would never agree to come out here, let alone allow Fable out of the house in the middle of the night. Try to enjoy yourself.” He moved my hair off my shoulder. “We don’t get many nights like these anymore.”

Jolie glanced back over, her face young, naïve, watching Cyrus with smoky, caramel eyes embellished with black liner, as if I wasn’t standing in his arms.

“Your stalker’s here,” I said, pushing Cyrus’s attention off me.

He cocked his head just enough to catch sight of her—the girl who’s been obsessed with him since she was nine. Cyrus then dropped his head back, looking up at the night sky for a second, either gathering or releasing something. And when he came back to earth, he drummed his fingers on my shoulder. “Don’t pay her any attention. She’s harmless.”

“I don’t know, Cyrus, I’m your fiancé now ... A crowded room, everyone distracted ... she may just slip past me and stab me in a lung.”

Cyrus *tsked*. “I would be more inclined to believe you would do something like that rather than her.”

Each Valentine’s Day, Cyrus received a letter from a secret admirer.

He’d never let us read these letters, fearing we’d taunt the girl, but we all knew it was Jolie. I didn’t know why the poor girl couldn’t drool over someone from her own coven, and someone her own age. She set up her heart to break from day one.

I looked up at Cyrus, but he was already looking at her.

My head fell back against his chest, and I studied how she was looking at him, wondering what she was feeling. *Does it hurt, Jolie? Does your hurt, hurt more than mine?*

I sighed. “I bet her tender heart is crushed after finding out the man of her dreams is getting married.”

“The Heathens aren’t here.” He was distracted.

“So?”

Cyrus scanned the crowd and all of Town Square. Then he looked back at Jolie. “Julian would lose his mind if he knew she was here alone.”

Then a tear slid down her cheek. I hadn't known for sure until she caught it with her finger. "She's crying."

I shook my head with a slight smile. She *could* cry so freely in a crowd in front of Cyrus without the worry of anyone believing she was crazy or weak, and I had to swallow mine. Suddenly, I was jealous of a fifteen-year-old. I thought her to be brave, like the snow, letting herself go and not apologizing for it.

"Give her a break," he said, wrapping his arms around my chest from behind, still watching her from the corner of his eye. "Don't you remember what it was like at that age?"

At fifteen, I had no time to dote or dream. There were dresses to be designed and a mother to take care of. I swapped the thought of boys with the thought of blood, love for murder, and sipped Heathen tears to send myself off to Euphoria whenever I was alone. "Hormones were all the rage."

Kane pushed through the crowd and joined us. The top three buttons of his dress shirt beneath his coat were opened, and I couldn't tear my eyes away from his throat, imagining silver and red—steel and blood.

"Aren't you two just adorable," he said, pulling a tiny vile from his front pocket. He dabbed a crimson drop onto the pad of his thumb and sucked it off. "So, Cyrus," he had the nerve to swipe my bottom lip with the same thumb without warning. "How are we going to do this sharing thing with Adora? Do you prefer lunch or dinner?"

I didn't have a chance to react, and it only took half a second for Cyrus to leap around me and shove Kane in the shoulder. "What's the matter with you, man?"

Kane's palms flew up in the air in front of him. "Calm down, calm down, it's my bad, all right?" he shrugged, his smile glistening. "I forgot you're a brunch guy."

Cyrus fisted Kane's shirt at the chest, snatching him up on his toes.

The drugs left Kane's eyes crazed, the color of *no-sleep* surrounded them. He was positively going mad.

"You don't want to do this right now," Cyrus said through his gritted teeth. "You're high and worn out. Go home and sleep before you get yourself killed."

Kane laughed. "Always has to be the bigger guy. Always has to be the beloved. Always has to be the first." But then his laughter faded, and his gaze turned serious, hazel eyes sliding across Cyrus's face. "What if I told you I

took her virginity in *your* bed?”

Cyrus’s jaw tensed, his teeth grinding. I watched as if it happened in slow motion, the muscles in his neck straining, the blue veins popping. Kane smiled, seeing it too.

“You won’t hit me,” Kane said, eyes narrowing and sizing him up. “You have never hit anyone a day in your life. You care too much about what people think. You—”

Cyrus’s decorated knuckles cut the air in half and smashed into Kane’s jaw.

Blood sprayed as Kane’s head popped backward.

He stumbled, swayed, but surprisingly avoided crashing into the street.

He looked at Cyrus with gaping eyes.

“You just fucking punched me,” he said, then a grin stretched across his face. “Oh, man, I fucking *love* when you stoop to my level.”

“Go home, Kane,” Cyrus said, looking down to check his rings with his fingers stretched straight.

To our right, one flatlander shoved another in the chest, and he fell back into a group of girls. To our left, a teenager was yanking the purse off a woman’s arm as she screamed for someone to stop him.

Around us, the crowd was closing in, pushing and shoving from all sides. They were getting paranoid and rowdy from the excitement. Cyrus turned his back on Kane and scanned the crowd as he searched his front pocket.

He looked at me, grabbing my hand and dropping his car keys inside. “I have a feeling. Something bad is about to happen, and I need you to wait for me in the car.”

He had a feeling, and he was *leaving* me? “Come with me,” I insisted.

“There’s something I have to do. Just go to the car,” he said. “Five minutes, Adora.”

THE CLOCK ON THE DASH FLIPPED TO THREE PAST TWELVE.

Midnight had passed.

The earth had danced entirely around the sun, and this new year had arrived without him. A new year Stone and I hadn’t existed in together. I held my breath to keep myself from exploding, refusing to let it go until my lungs forced me. The only thing left to hold on to was this black lily.

Stone was out there somewhere, holding on too.

Eventually Cyrus showed up, slid into the driver's seat, and white knuckled the steering wheel. His voice was thick inside the heated cabin of the car when he said, "Did you really fuck Kane in my bed?"

No explanation for where he'd been, No *Happy New Year*.

Yes. "No." *Lies, lies, lies.*

Cyrus looked at me without really looking at me.

I didn't know if he believed me or not, but he put the car in reverse and looked back, holding on to the back of my seat as he reversed out of the parking space. That was the last thing he said.

The rest of the ride was in silence.

When we pulled into the Cantini driveway, Viola barreled out of the front door and stumbled upon the steps.

Cyrus slammed on his brakes, dropped the car into neutral, and jumped out of it.

I followed him, and when I reached Viola, Cyrus already had his mother cradled in his arms.

"What happened?" Cyrus demanded. And I'd never seen Viola hysterical and distraught. She usually held herself together stronger than a steel pole, but at this moment, her knees shook and her hands trembled. She was nothing more than a pile of black lace and tears in Cyrus's arms.

"Th-th-the Shadows are here," her voice wobbled as she gripped Cyrus's arm tightly, her knuckles turning white. Cyrus's horrified gaze sprinted to me, and we exchanged glances. And then I sprinted into the house.

My only thought was of Camora and the boys.

"Adora, stop!" Cyrus shouted from behind. "Mother, let me go!" But I was already sprinting up the stairs and heading for Cillian and Kaser's bedrooms.

One after the other, I pushed open their doors.

The maids had each of the boys awaken in their arms in a comforting embrace as they cried, terrified. I dashed across the hall to Camora's bedroom.

"Camora!" I shouted, my hand reaching for the door handle.

I flung the door open, and it slammed against the wall.

Only a maid with a stricken face stared back at me from the other side.

Camora wasn't there.

I clutched the maid's shoulders. "Where is she? Where did she go?"

"I don't know, miss," the maid stuttered in a cry. "She was here one

second then disappeared."

Her father. Camora must have run straight for her father to protect him.

I flew down a flight of stairs when Cyrus grabbed me. "Adora, please stay here," he said, desperately. "Let me handle it."

I faced him with rage crawling in my blood. "No, I can't just stand here. This is your family!"

"And you're the other half of me!" Cyrus shouted with a panicked look in his eyes. Then he calmed. "Please, Adora," he said, quieter this time.

I broke free from his grasp. "I can't."

I skipped the elevator and hurtled down another flight of stairs to the cellar, where Darnell's bedroom was. It felt as if my heart was in my throat, blocking my airways. I couldn't breathe, thinking of Camora and the absolute worst, that maybe I never would have made it in time because she was already dead. The vision of her body lying on the cold ground with a frozen shock in her pupils propelled me forward. Faster, longer strides.

I ran through the wine cellar until I was pushing against Darnell's bedroom door.

It flew open, and a gasp of sea salt and brine breathed on my face.

I froze, was paralyzed, hearing the knocking in my ears.

The *thump … thump … thump* ..

Five slithering black shadows had Camora cornered against the wall.

I couldn't move. Only my eyes were able to slide across the room.

Darnell's thin and bony body draped halfway off the bed, eyes shut and mouth ajar as if he'd died mid-yawn. My gaze was anchored to his face, and I tried to tear away from it, but it was difficult. The sight of him and Camora's cries were whizzing away from me, sinking to the end of a long black tunnel. Stars exploded in my peripheral vision.

"ADORA!" Camora's voice pounded into the room again.

My eyes darted to her.

Suddenly her terror was in my ears, and the room came back into focus.

"Adora, he's dead," she cried, the Shadows still surrounding her.

She must not be able to see them.

Because she was awake.

But how could I see them?

I bounded forward, breaking the black mist apart, and stood between them and Camora. When I faced them, they were slowly piecing back together, the knocking shouting in my ears as if it were their heartbeats.

“No!” I screamed. And my scream spilled with great power. It allowed me to erect my spine and narrow my eyes at the five filthy things.

The Shadows stood straight and, like a snap of a finger, lost all their horrific vibrations. They’d heard me. They were listening to me.

“Leave,” I hissed through my teeth, keeping Camora behind my outstretched arms.

The Shadows seemed to bend their form, and all five ripples of smoke rocketed through the air.

I turned to Camora and took her into my arms. “Are you okay? Are you hurt?” My fingers combed her black hair as I searched her face for clues.

Camora couldn’t speak, an ocean of tears leaving her eyes.

THE FOLLOWING DAY, CYRUS, CILLIAN, AND KASER LOOKED HANDSOME IN their deadly-black suits.

Camora, despite her mother, wore the same one-piece I’d designed to Darnell’s funeral. The same pantsuit she’d worn when she’d last danced with her father in his wheelchair at the Founder’s Day Ball only four days prior.

I stood next to Cyrus on the shoreline, the wind sweeping around my skirt. His eyes remained on his father’s coffin, mine on Bone Island in the distance.

As Cyrus had explained, Crescent Beach wouldn’t be where Darnell would rest in peace, unlike the rest of Sacred Sea. We were only here so Sacred Sea could say their goodbyes. Later, the Cantini family would perform a ritual in the Crypt of Secrets, where Darnell would rest alongside the ancestors of his bloodline.

As much as I wanted to be present for Cyrus, my mind was elsewhere throughout the ceremony. I hadn’t realized it had ended until Ivy wrapped her arms around me in an embrace. I looked around as everyone was walking down the shoreline with their backs to me.

“It could have been you,” she said into my neck in a strangled whisper.

I pulled her close, hugging her back. “But it wasn’t. I’m safe.”

The events of what happened the night before played in my mind. From running through the manor, finding Camora cornered by the Shadows, to them leaving because I commanded it. Had they listened to me, or was it something else entirely? Would Ivy think of me as insane for telling her this?

She pulled me to the side, where no one else could hear. “I can’t help but

think this isn’t all a coincidence.”

She had my full attention. “What do you mean?”

“Think about it, Adora. You had an altercation with all of the Shadow’s victims. First, with Mrs. Edwin at Oh My Stars. When you accused her daughter of stealing.”

“Yeah, but that happened before the Shadows got here.”

“Just listen to me for a second.” She lowered her voice to a whisper. “Then Jacob Taylor because he grabbed your ass and you tore him to pieces, remember? Viola’s handyman looked up Fable’s skirt, and it wasn’t that long ago I told you about Darnell. And look what happened.”

“It doesn’t explain the others … and it definitely doesn’t explain Mrs. Madder. She loved me like a daughter. She even helped me open Oh My Stars. She always believed in me and never wronged our family. Not in any way.”

“Did you say something to her? Were you angry with her for any reason?”

I tried to think back.

There was the night just before she died when I was incredibly rude to her. But I had just found out I was going to be married to Cyrus, and my entire world had flipped upside down. I didn’t mean the words I said. I hadn’t meant the thoughts in my head. I had only taken it out on her. Was Ivy right? Had the Shadows sensed this and viewed Mrs. Madder as a threat?

“Just be careful,” Ivy said when I didn’t answer. “I don’t want anything to happen to you.”

CHAPTER 39

ADORA

JANUARY 5, 2021
23 DAYS UNTIL THE CRIMSON ECLIPSE
26 DAYS UNTIL THE CANTINI-SULLIVAN WEDDING

IF ANOTHER DAY PASSED BY WITHOUT STONE, IT WOULD BE THE LONGEST stretch of time we'd been apart. Thoughts of Kane's ripped flesh and rich blood and vacant eyes were the only reprieves to avoid drowning by Love's hand. Because ... love was an infliction, bloodthirsty and bound together by obsession and death—a disease you wound up fighting off in fear it scarfed you down its throat. Because in the end, love always spilled blood.

It was past curfew. Darkness hugged us. Not a single star lit up the black sky.

Cyrus drove down Seaside, streetlights on both sides burned out at last. Only two dim headlights from the Aston Martin lit our way, reflecting off depressed snowflakes before the windshield collected them. We passed Town Hall, where clumps of filthy snow napped in piles on every step, and alleyways were soaked in the darkest shade of black. Keep out was spray painted in black on wooden planks nailed to abandoned buildings in Town Square, the doors, the windows. Business owners could no longer afford to keep the lights on.

Weeping Hollow's soul had abandoned its children, taking every color with it.

I began dreaming of times before the Shadows when Town Square had a friendly personality, and the steps leading up to the massive doors of Town Hall were decorated in amber, gold, and green like fall ornaments.

Julian's Garage appeared next, garage doors dingy and closed, ailing cars tucked inside for the frightening season, giving a new meaning to carsick. Above it, the Heathen's name in script dashed across the washed-up brick, reminding those who crossed this point was no longer on the east side. *Will satisfy from the inside out* scrolled across the garage door, and I rolled my eyes as we passed.

Despite my distaste for anything to the left of Town Square, Voodoos Bar was the only place we could escape the elders and kids without being bothered. Four walls and loudspeakers to chain-smoke shots, twirl on bar tops, make poor decisions, and be twenty-two. Never mind the Heathens, who would always huddle around the pool table. Once the liquor burned, the hell in our hearts was forgotten.

But the Shadows were stalking the other side of the veil, watching, waiting.

Cyrus and I should have remained at the Cantini Manor in case they returned. Not on our way to a midnight party.

My gaze bounced to my left and traced Cyrus's handsome profile.

Until this night, I hadn't seen him since his father died. A joint bachelor party was the distraction he needed, and the celebration I wanted.

Anything to keep my mind off Stone.

Cyrus pulled into the empty lot and crawled into a parking space. The old-fashioned, three-story building staggered high, icicles hanging from every point. People no longer loitered in the parking lot. The neon sign poking from the brick no longer flickered. Paned windows along the front of the building no longer muffled music. The brick exterior seemed to sag, broken hearted and left for dead.

Cyrus's voice filled the cab. "Pretend to be surprised. For their sake."

I faced him, and the lights from the dashboard reflected in his eyes. They were a faded blue tonight—the color of cozy denim jeans. Here, with Cyrus, I was safe from myself. Outside of this car, I was glass.

I looked back at the bar, uneasiness creeping inside me. "I don't know. Maybe this isn't such a good idea."

Cyrus put the car in neutral and looked at me, grinning. "Adora," he said, and I wished it affected me the same as when Stone said it. "We only get to

do this once."

"Are the Heathens here?"

"Only Phoenix." He turned off the ignition and leaned back in his seat. "It's his bar, his home. It was unavoidable. But we have an understanding. The others won't show." He turned to me again and reached for my thigh but stopped and clutched the shifter between us. "This is our night. After everything, we deserve this."

It has been awkward between Cyrus and me. Since our kiss, I have avoided any chance of it happening again at all costs. It wasn't only because of Stone, but Ivy, too. Each time Cyrus happened to brush me, whether it be fingers or a knee or a shoulder, I missed Stone's warm hands on my skin. Each time the shade of his irises changed, I could see Ivy crying. It seemed impossible to harden again after melting.

When Cyrus opened the passenger side door, the cold instantly clawed at every exposed slice of me. I wrapped my coat closer to my body and followed him to the entrance, imagining our friends inside, hiding under tables and behind the bar, waiting for Cyrus and me to arrive.

Cyrus reached for the door handle, finding it unlocked. *"That's them,"* I imagined Monday saying, and *"Shhh,"* they would all hush her in unison. In my mind, Phoenix stood behind the bar, drying a glass and peering down at the crouched bodies, annoyed. *Why the fuck did I sign up for this?* he would be thinking.

The door creaked when it opened.

I stayed close behind Cyrus, looking back to make sure there weren't five shadows stalking the abandoned street behind us. When the door closed behind me, I reached out to feel for Cyrus's coat.

"Get the lights," I whispered, seeing absolutely nothing.

Cyrus flipped the switch, and buttery light spilled into the deserted room.

Then a crowd of familiar faces popped up from every angle.

"Surprise!" they all shouted.

I jumped back with a palm against my chest, throwing on a fake smile laced with shock. Cyrus threw an arm around my shoulder, pulling me to his side as bodies flooded us, filling our empty hands with shots.

"Thank you," he whispered from the corner of his mouth.

Phoenix, who towered above the rest, nudged his head at Cyrus, and Cyrus left my side, pulling a wad of cash from his pocket. He slapped it into Phoenix's hand just before I was ripped away.

A swarm of red hair appeared, and Monday threw her arms around me. “I haven’t seen you since Founder’s Day. I didn’t even get a chance to congratulate you! You’re getting married! To Cyrus...” her voice dropped, excited but confused. “How did that even happen?”

Monday Mitchell. Dark, quirky with a vibe that screamed Gothic-hippie. She always wore eccentric clothes and was headstrong about joining Sacred Sea from the second we entered our first year at the Academy.

After hugging her, I held her at arm’s length. “Thank you,” was all I could say, then I changed the subject. “I’m sorry the Shadows stopped your initiation.” I squeezed her hand. “After they’re gone, it will pick right back up.”

“Maybe now that it’s getting closer to your twenty-third birthday, we could initiate together like we’ve always planned. The bright side, right?” Her smile faded. “If only Adeline were here, then it would have been perfect.”

I nodded and turned, trying not to dull the night. I was already on the verge of a breakdown, and there was no need to push myself over the edge.

Not far from me, I spotted Kane approaching Cyrus.

Kane was already drunk and slurring an apology to him.

Cyrus gripped Kane’s shoulder, leaned in, and whispered something I couldn’t make out.

Kane edged back with a scowl, then stalked off to the bar.

Someone pinched my sides, and I jumped in place before spinning into Fable’s arms.

A shriek pounced out of me, and I threw my arms around her, holding on for dear life. “You’re here,” I gasped, unable to believe it. “Is Ivy here, too?”

Maroon painted her beaming smile, and her curled hair floated above her waist as we pulled away from each other. She looked flawless, wearing leather pants and a forest-green crop top under a fur vest, her heart-shaped belly button punctuating her midsection.

“Monday, hey.” Fable gave her a quick hug, too. “No, Ivy is home with Dad. I can’t believe she was okay with me being here, though.” But it didn’t surprise me. Ivy believed I was linked to the Shadows. If she were right, Fable would be safest with me.

The bar was already crowded, so the girls dragged me to a table instead.

Seconds later, grave yet fierce vocals pumped from the speakers crowning the stage. A song about how much it hurt pounded into my ears as

it flooded the room, tempting to stick its fingers through me and poke my raw heart.

I downed another shot that was dropped in front of me.

"—How Cyrus could snag Voodoos without the Heathens coming is beyond me. I will say I do miss Fallon. If she's not working, she's too busy with Julian or whatever they're doing in Norse Woods." A groan. "Love blows."

I knew it was Monday talking, but I was lost in the song as they got lost in small talk.

"The Heathens aren't here?" Fable asked. "But this is Phoenix's bar."

"Oh, Phoenix is at the bar, but not the others. I still haven't seen Phoenix or Zephyr, though. Have you seen them yet?"

Fable shook her head. "Only Julian, Beck, and like the back of Phoenix's head just as he was leaving the ball. Apparently, *no one* has seen Zephyr."

"I wonder what Phoenix looks like," Monday said, turning in her chair to peek at the bar, but Fable's arm shot out to stop her. "What?" Monday smiled. "Is someone scared?"

"Did Cyrus mention anything about Zephyr to you? Is he still cursed?"

Then, "Earth to Adora."

At that, I came to. "Hmm?"

"What's going on with you?" Fable asked, concern curving around her features. "You've been a different person. Are you still upset about the engagement? You two looked happy together."

Monday leaned in so no one would hear but still spoke over the music so we could. "What? You're upset about the engagement? Is it because of Kane?"

Poor Monday, so clueless about everything around her.

As far as she understood it, just like everyone else, I'd been in love with Kane for as long as I could remember. No one knew of my hatred toward him. I was alone with it all.

I rolled my head back, and the words slipped out without a second thought. "I think I'm falling into something else. And not with my fiancé."

Fable wore a knowing grin.

I disliked this knowing grin very much.

"As cold-hearted as you may act, I knew this day would one day come." Fable sighed like she'd won a game. I hadn't heard her sigh, but I saw it leave her face as she sat back. "Does he feel the same for you?"

“Excuse me.” Monday lifted a finger. “Adora in love?”

I ignored Monday and looked at my sister. “No, I don’t think he does. When he found out about Cyrus and me, he was ...” I shook my head, remembering Stone that night at the Founder’s Day Ball. “He was hurt. I was hurt. It *hurts*. But that’s how it’s been with us. We rip each other apart as punishment for feeling things because it’s easier than facing them. Or we punish each other for feeling things because it’s ripping us apart. And it hurts.”

Fable dropped her head to the side. “Why am I getting the feeling this isn’t about Kane anymore?”

Because it isn’t, I wanted to say. I’d had enough alcohol to deny my sinful words later should she resurrect them, but I was not drunk enough to know Monday was here, still sober. But most of all, I was afraid that if I said *Stone,* I wouldn’t be able to stop.

Fable sensed my apprehension. “Has anyone told you lately how stubborn you are?” she asked with a shake of her head. “I’m afraid since we’re not there to remind you, you’ll forget. Here’s a little hint.” She leaned in and snatched a shot glass from my hand. “The more you pretend it’s not there, the louder it screams,” she insisted, and threw her head back, swallowing the liquor in one gulp. When she finished, she turned the glass over and dropped it onto the table.

“Then why do you pretend?” I asked.

Fable’s smile died on her lips.

Another shot appeared in front of me, and I drained it to smother the burn with fire, hoping the two would cancel each other out.

If Cyrus kept delivering shots, I could possibly make it through the night.

“Phoenix! You know the drill, man,” Cyrus shouted across the bar, over the music and commotion. “Another shot for Adora and keep them coming.”

“Oof, someone’s trying to get laid,” Monday muttered under her breath.

I glanced behind Fable just as she turned at the sound of Phoenix’s name.

Phoenix’s attention shifted to our table, and the two of them locked eyes.

Utter confusion held me, a firm grasp around my lungs.

For years the two bickered back and forth like a sex-deprived married couple, and we always made fun of her for it. But why was Phoenix looking at her as if it was the first time with abandon in his eyes? The same way Stone had once looked at me.

My breath continued to hold as I watched my little sister’s face.

Then back to Phoenix, who stood with nerves dripping off him.

Then back to Fable again, her expression turning from dread to ... *anguish* distorting all her details.

Phoenix took a step forward, but the bar wedged between them blocked his advance.

“Wildes, are you deaf?” Kane snapped. “A drink.”

Phoenix didn’t move.

He was paralyzed, staring at Fable like he was waiting for her to do something.

The tension between them was undeniable.

Why hadn’t I noticed it before?

I touched her arm to get her attention, and she withdrew from me. “I need to use the restroom.” A mumble, and she walked off.

I looked back at Phoenix, who was still watching her as she crossed the room.

Kane slammed a fist on the bar top. “He didn’t pay you five grand to just stand there like an idiot.” Cyrus pulled back on Kane’s shoulder to get him to calm down, but Kane shrugged him off. “No, man, I’m sick of these...”

Phoenix was lost in Fable as one would be lost in a thrilling tale.

Nothing fazed him. Not Kane, not the stares, not the insults.

Except Fable was disappearing into the crowd, and panic flashed across Phoenix’s face.

He jumped over the bar to chase after her.

It felt like my heart had left me. What did he want to do to her? Hurt her? Wrap his hand around her throat? Grab her and toss her out of the bar? I didn’t know, but my only thought was that I couldn’t let him.

I sprung from my chair, and it tipped backward, crashing to the floor.

Before I could reach Fable, Phoenix reached around people, and snatched her arm, yanking her out of the crowd like plucking a wildflower from a bed full of weeds. Then he grabbed her face, dipped down, and crushed his mouth against hers.

I froze mid-stride, watching Fable’s hands move up the length of his neck, his hand move down to her hip, his tongue slipping into her mouth.

The Heathen was kissing my little sister. Right in front of me.

Right in front of everyone.

I looked around the room, unsure if what I was seeing was really happening.

Everyone’s expressions had left them.

What was worse, Fable wasn’t fighting him at all.

“Get away from her,” I shouted, but the guitar solo strumming in the room crashed into my ears and drowned out my words. I didn’t know if anyone could hear me. It was as if the song was shredding my words as fast as they were leaving my mouth.

Phoenix’s hand moved to her back, fingers splayed on bare skin, and he pressed her flush against him, deepening the kiss. Knots tightened in my stomach, and I shook my head to push the sight away. *No, no, no, no,* my mind repeated as nausea twisted inside me.

When they broke apart, my sister didn’t tear herself away.

“I’ve been saving that for you,” Phoenix said to her, and I almost didn’t hear it over the sound of my hammering heart. As if the rest of us weren’t here at all, Phoenix started to say something else, but he didn’t get the chance.

“You have some fucking nerve!” Kane shouted.

At the corner of my eye, Kane picked up a pool stick, flexed his fingers around the butt of it, and swung like a baseball bat, striking Phoenix in the back of the head with a loud *crack!*

The pool stick broke into two and crashed to the ground.

Phoenix hadn’t seen it coming and fell into Fable, pushing her to the side on the way into a brick wall. Before he could right himself, Kane grabbed Phoenix’s shirt and slammed him back into the pool table, his spine folded over the edge.

“KANE!” Cyrus shouted, screaming everywhere. But Kane swiped the eight ball from the pool table, held it in a tight fist, and slammed it into the side of Phoenix’s skull.

The bone-crunching sound made the room recoil, and Phoenix went limp, his glazed and golden eyes fixed on Fable.

Fable let out a heart-shattering scream. One that made my heart collapse.

I grabbed her arm and pulled her away as fear shocked the entire room.

And Kane never stopped. He repeatedly beat the ball into Phoenix’s head, painting the room in the Heathen’s blood. It sprayed Kane’s face, the brick walls, and the pool table, where the Heathens had played every Friday night since they were kids. Blood slid down the wooden scrolls carved around the green felt and dripped onto the floor.

“NO! STOP! PLEASE STOP!” she cried, collapsing against my chest and

clawing at my arms as I held her back. Her screams were so full of anguish they made my chest burn, made me feel sick, as she begged him to stop, begging someone to do something.

But no one with magic was brave enough to use it.

No one with magic could move at all.

Phoenix's arms and legs lay limp, only a twitch of his finger with every blow. But Kane never stopped. Mania consumed him with no intention of stopping until Phoenix's skull was caved in, brain bashed and bones in bits.

Fable slipped out of my heavy arms and threw herself on Kane's back. I couldn't do anything. I was stunned and shaken, with eyes locked on blood. It seemed to go on forever.

The blood. The blows.

My sister tried prying Kane from Phoenix.

Cyrus wrapped his arms around Fable and snatched her away. The only sounds were wet blood, snapping bones, and Susan Tedeschi singing through the speakers about how *"it hurts, it hurts, it hurts so bad."*

Fable was shoved into my chest, and I stumbled back a step.

Cyrus hooked Kane's arm behind his back, taking him backward and snapping him out of his blind rage.

Kane stood in shock, with the front of his shirt drenched in blood. His sleeves were rolled to his elbows, blood painted his forearms and hands, and the eight ball was still inside his fist.

Phoenix's body hung off the pool table, head bashed in, a crimson face, eyes open. There was no fire left inside them. They were black. Hollow. No glow, just gone.

Fable's cries echoed in my head, sounding far away, but I couldn't break away from Phoenix's eyes and how they looked like Stone's. Not until Cyrus grabbed my hand.

"You have to get out of here. Grab your sister, take my car, and go home." I shook my head in a daze. Cyrus grabbed my face. "Adora!" he shouted. I didn't know I was facing him until I blinked, and he was suddenly in front of me. "Grab Fable," he said, his cheeks red and sweaty as he pushed a set of keys against my chest. "Take my car and leave right now before the Heathens get here."

I looked at Fable.

She was screaming, beating her fists into Kane, who just stood there like I was just standing there. The bloody eight-ball slipped from Kane's fist and

rolled across the bar floor. It was then I gazed around the room.

Bodies had fled, bloody footprints smeared across the hardwood.

My sister was in love with a Heathen, and her heartbreak was screaming all around us.

Because he was dead.

Phoenix Wildes was dead.

In the end, love always spilled blood.

CHAPTER 40

ADORA

THAT NIGHT, THE PEARLY-WHITE MOON WAS CUT IN HALF, LEAVING A VINTAGE glow on the Cantini Manor. With a white-lipped smile and two stars as dimples, a dazzling grin taunted us from above as I held my sister's hair back.

We never made it to Cyrus's porch steps.

Fable's shoulders lurched forward as she hurled in the rose bushes surrounding the home. Winter had stripped them of their flowers, only snow clinging to the thorned stalks, and each time she dry-heaved, I feared the power of it would rip her from my hands and toss her into the barbed corpse.

When Fable was three, a broken shell sliced open her foot. I carried her home, singing the whole way, blood dripping from her heel and onto my dress. It was a struggle, as I was not much bigger than her, but by the time we reached the steps to the cottage, her crying had sent her to sleep in my arms. I stopped to rest on the steps and fell asleep, too. *"Your dress is ruined,"* Mama said that night. Surprisingly, at the time, I didn't care.

When Fable was fifteen, she experimented with drugs. It wasn't like her, and I never knew why she took them, but that night, I carried her from Monday's all the way home. To avoid Dad finding out, we never stepped inside the cottage. I slept beside her on the lawn 'til morning.

But this I didn't know how to handle. I could barely hold on myself.

Fable had a secret, too. One neither Ivy nor I knew a thing about.

She was in love. *With a Heathen*, my mind cursed.

She was the lover, the bright side, the beaming heart that squeezed and pulled apart like a plaything. And he was a Heathen, the opposite of Fable Sullivan in every way.

Our hearts were broken for two very different men we could never be with. How did both of us end up here at the same time?

Fable steadied herself, bracing palms on wobbly knees, fawn hair tangled, lips shaking. She cried out, mumbling incoherently, looking up at me with bloodshot, miserable eyes the color of two worthless pennies. It was a look I'd never seen on her before. This look wore its own set of lungs and bellowed pain.

I imagined her years from now with a cold heart shaped like mine ... hopeless ... and shallow, and I would remember the night Phoenix's death stole the light from her eyes. If this was what happened to a good person, what would losing Stone do to a murderer like me?

"Fable, please. It's freezing. Let's go inside," I insisted.

Fable shoved me in the chest. "*WHY DIDN'T YOU DO ANYTHING*?!" she screamed, her lips trembling with a wet face. I stood shocked and benumbed. I didn't know what to do. "I love him, Adora. I'm in love with him," her voice was hoarse and raw, heartbreak outspoken. The force behind it took her to her hands and knees until she was lying in the snow on her side.

If my misery outweighed my anger, I was certain this would be me: screaming, crying, and throwing up until all suffering drained onto Seaside Street. The sight looked to be entirely freeing. Perhaps this was why people let their tears run wild, no matter who was watching. To expel it. To not hurt anymore.

Shivering, I pulled the hood over my head and knelt down, then tucked my legs inside my coat before lying next to her.

Under and around me, the snow slowly melted, soaking anything not shielded. Even so, I endured it and held her close.

When Fable was twenty-one, I thought, *she watched him die ... I carried her up the drive, and as before, we never made it inside. Grief held her in the cold, so she curled up in the snow. And I slept beside her so she would not be alone.*

I looked at the night sky, counting stars with my teeth chattering.

The cold was a low murmur in my ears, and Fable's cries dimmed into a hum.

Snowflakes drifted down from above, flicking from side to side like paper-white wings against a black canvas. Stone's hair, Stone's eyes. I watched the night, thinking of him. Always thinking of him.

I HADN'T REALIZED I'D FALLEN ASLEEP UNTIL MY EYES OPENED AGAIN.

A mountain of blankets was piled high and wrapped around me.

It was dark, and the wind softly howled each time it blew past.

Cyrus was sitting on the porch steps against the side of the house, huddled in a thick winter jacket and staring at me with penetrating eyes. I couldn't tell what color his eyes were on this night because everything was dark, but I knew they were intense because I felt them. He had an arm thrown over a knee, a rigid expression, his jaw flexing. The cherry from his cigarette glowed when he inhaled, and a cloud of smoke slipped between his lips.

Fable shifted in my arms when a fifth hand squeezed mine.

I lifted my head, finding Ivy sleeping on the other side of Fable.

I looked back at Cyrus, and his face softened.

We didn't say anything to each other.

Sometimes words were too much.

And sometimes words would never be enough.

CHAPTER 41

STONE

A STABBING PAIN SHOT THROUGH MY BRAIN, WAKING ME.

It worsened instantly from a throbbing migraine into what felt like scorched nails driving through my temples. I threw my head back into the pillow, my fingers curling into fists, every muscle stiff to fight it off. But the searing sensation coiled around every bone in my skull.

I pressed my hands against my head as an animalistic scream belted from my throat. It didn't sound like mine, but rather like the sound a screeching buck would make as a wild mountain lion gnawed on its spine.

Another burn—like a torch held up to exposed nerve endings—and my eyes squeezed shut as I sank my fingers into my scalp, pulling my hair and keeling over, wishing to flee from the searing pain.

Gravity pulled me off the couch, and my ribs slammed into the floor.

When the lights came on, they blinded me. The blurry room pulsed, and I couldn't focus on a solid thing.

Someone shrieked. "What's happening?"

Ocean grabbed my elbow and helped me onto my feet.

"My head is on fire," I seethed, stumbling to the side to search for support. When my hand touched the wall, I braced my spine against it, folding my body in half to keep away from the light. "Make it stop!"

"Everyone, give him some space," Ocean commanded.

When nothing worked, I slammed my head against the wall, denting the wood. "Ocean!" and then another jarring burn scratched my brain. I stumbled toward the door, sweat sliding off me as if the fire had started in my head and was pumping heat from the inside out. "Ocean, what's happening to me?" I shouted through the agony.

I wanted the snow. I wanted to be cold. I wanted to feel numb again.

“What’s happening to him?” Kioni asked, demanding an answer. Her voice was panicked as she held her fingers close to her mouth. “Someone do something!”

“It’s the Heathens,” Eleanor whispered. Squinting to see her, another wave of torture swept over me as a horrid expression appeared on her face. “Go, Stone! Run!”

My shoulders slammed into the walls as I stumbled out of the cottage.

Once the door was flung open, frigid winds crashed into my heated flesh and took my breath. It was still night with the quarter moon fastened high in the starless sky. I sucked in a breath, braving the pain, and staggered down the pathway to the gate.

I didn’t know where I was heading. All I knew to do was run.

I bolted barefoot into the woods until the canopies swallowed up the moonlight, and a blanket of snow hid every feature in the Norse Woods. Only a few yards later, overgrown roots and ruts tore apart my feet with their teeth. I could hardly feel it because I was numb up to my ankles, but I saw the trail of blood in my wake like crimson crumbs. Agony flashed through me again, and I grabbed my head as though I could take the pain into my hands and throw it into the sky.

Shrewd winds ripped past me, carrying a flock of defiant *ca-caws* screaming out of sync. I looked up, squinting through the dark. There were ravens. Hundreds of them painted the white birch trees black, crowing with their wings flapping with a fierceness as though their heads were being smashed by rock, too.

From behind, a cluster of bats cut through the air, swooping low and charging at the back of my head. I ducked to avoid them, and my ankle gave out, my foot catching on a root.

In my effort to catch my fall, I flew forward and collided with a tree, its trunk somber white, its bark scarred black. My heartbeat was in my ears, and cotton was in my throat. Each time I took a breath, it wasn’t full but filtered. I looked up, catching the bats rising into the canopy and disappearing into darkness.

I rested my forehead against the tree to take a stable breath, and a handful of ghostly white moths sprang from the bark and flitted into my face.

Their wings spun me around as I jumped backward, swiping them away. They then took off in the same direction as the bats.

They were guiding.

The creatures of the night wanted me to follow them.

Another hammering throb beat against my temples, and I suffered through it, squeezing my eyes closed and grinding my jaw before taking off into another run. My head was pounding, making the woods seem to be shrinking into a tunnel. Below, snakes slithered across the snow, leaving behind drag marks. On both sides of me, spiders skittered from tree to tree, their webs like frozen lace draping in between.

I didn't stop until my feet touched pavement.

Tires screeched in the distance, and to my left, two beams from a moving vehicle lit up a brick building as it reversed. Then two red taillights as the car drove off.

I pressed against my side, imploring my lungs to calm as I walked toward the building.

With each step closer, the fire in my temples slowly faded.

As my vision blurred, I squinted until the next thing I knew, I was standing in an empty parking lot and staring at a sign reading Voodoos Bar.

Both doors were thrown open, and music spilled out into the night. Drums, guitars, and a sad, lonely voice. Each time an icy wind swept through the lot, it muffled the song's cries and swung the doors slightly from side to side.

All the lights inside were out. Except for one.

I inched toward the opened doors, dread pooling in my gut. A pendant light barely swayed above the bar. Its light was the color of vintage yellow and bounced off broken glass. With misery trapped in every reflection, the room was smashed sorrow.

Chairs had been knocked over, tables flipped on their sides, and a stench of alcohol and death loomed in the air. I walked around them, squinting through my migraine, expecting a horrific scene on the other side of the bar.

The music pumped behind my fear as I took another step.

And then another.

Glass sliced into my feet, and something wet and warm slipped between my toes. Knowing it was blood, I refused to look down and braced myself against the bar's edge to keep the nausea down.

When the pendant swung right, it cast fleeting light on a pair of legs hanging off a table. One foot was twisted at the ankle, and the other rested on the wooden floor as though he were simply sitting on the edge.

I walked closer, the pendant swaying, shining on a pair of jeans and a leather jacket splayed across green felt. Then I saw the pool of blood and flesh, hair clumped and spread across his rearranged face.

Phoenix's skull was smashed in, head turned, eyes wide open, pupils dilated, empty, and staring right at me. His arm hung lazily off the edge of the table, almost as though he was reaching out for someone to help. But no one did. He was left like this.

Dizziness consumed me.

I turned and folded myself over the bar, covering my head with my arms. This feeling was heavy and weighed me down until I felt sick.

Glass cut into my heel when I stepped back and faced the floor as I vomited, eyes watering and fire scratching the walls of my throat.

The song looped again.

A tear hung from my trembling lips.

I wiped my mouth and looked back at him.

Tears were desperate to burst out of me, and I pushed my sweaty hair back off my forehead, trying to contain myself.

For over twenty years, Phoenix couldn't show his face. And the monster who killed him ensured the same was true in death, as well.

I couldn't leave him like this and found myself stumbling toward him, grabbing his arms and folding his body over my shoulder. My hands were soaked in blood, and they slipped across the jean jacket as I tried to find a grip.

"I have you, brother." *Brother*, my chest tightened. Another piece of glass sliced my foot, another hammer against my temple. With his weight on my shoulder, I took many harsh breaths. Another step. "I've got you."

We stepped out of the stale, ghastly room and into winter.

Both cruel winds and tears coated my vision. I squeezed my eyes closed and then squinted, seeing three Heathens come out of the dark woods and halt on the other side of the parking lot.

From there, it all happened in slow motion.

Grief, heartbreak, and curses distorted their faces.

Anguish flooded Beck. Julian collapsed to his knees. Zephyr froze in his mask, absolutely numb, the lime green in his eyes glowing. Then a scream filled with despair pierced the night. It was Julian, and it shredded my head and heart.

My knee buckled, and I leaned forward, laying Phoenix on the concrete

just before Zephyr charged at me with a crippling crazed look in his eyes. I raised my palms, and the ground quaked before it jutted, forming a small moving hill. And it raced toward Zephyr, barreling across the parking lot, taking him off his feet, and tossing him into the street.

The other two Heathens sprinted toward me, shouting words I couldn't understand, but a storm formed between us, stopping them in their tracks. It was sudden and fierce, and I didn't know who was causing it. Winds thrashed violently, swallowing up their words as the storm rose into the sky above us.

Julian and I locked eyes just as an electric-blue lightning bolt ripped between us and touched the ground. The force snatched them both up, throwing them onto their backs.

I looked down at Phoenix, running out of time.

It had to be now.

I crouched down, ripped open Phoenix's shirt, and pressed my palms against his deathly cold skin. "Please," I shouted, desperation clutching my voice. I locked my elbows and pumped into his chest, feeling the vibrations of his ribs breaking under my palms.

I pumped, crushing his sternum, sweat sliding down the sides of my face.

I pumped. "*Nos omnes connexae,*" I shouted, pleading to feel his heart under my hands.

Then.

It.

Hit.

A single beat of his heart.

And I was sucked into a string of swirling memories.

They came in passionately and vividly one after another. Suddenly *I'm standing on the highest point in Weeping Hollow, my face heavy and behind a mask, calm winds brushing my neck—"Nix, look up," the boy standing in front of me shouts; colors burst into the night sky above the tree-line. His smile is white, his face beaming, he's much smaller than me, no more than nine or ten, and pointing at the colors. But I'm distracted by the cottage on my right. A young girl stands in the window; a lantern turned on in her dark room, glowing buttery light on her young face. I freeze up in case she screams to alert her family. But she doesn't. She looks down at me, then gives me a small wave. I wave back, the lights from the fireworks reflecting off the window.* The memory flipped into another night. *They have white plastic masks on their faces, too. And from the laughing, I know we must be smiling,*

chasing one another between trees. Next, *teaching Julian how to hold a pool stick.* I can't see that it's Julian because I can't see his face, but I know it's him, and a swirl of nights around this pool table collided; *back slapping, hand shaking, drinks clashing, eyes expressive, around and around the pool table* until it stalled. *Her whispers are soothing in my ears, and I'm crammed in the backseat of a car, my knee digging into the console, vents coughing up heat as she shivers in my lap, brown hair splayed across young skin; I'm trying to focus on the Voodoos sign reflecting off the windshield as the full moon casts light across her rosy lips and faded freckles; because I have her where I want her, but my pulse is hammering in my ears, and I'm nervous because I want to do right by her. "Please, Phoenix," she begs, but the mask is too heavy. It's always too heavy. "One day, I promise," I say, my voice not my own, a rough voice shaking in my chest. "It's yours, but not yet." And so she kisses my neck, and it makes me feel things.* Then the memories raced, and *I'm pitching a black, heavy ball across the bar; a brutal weapon slashes across my chest, screaming, and, "If it bleeds, it suffers," I hear us say. And I'm back in the woods around a fire, driving a knife into my palm, and blood fills the memory* until it transformed into a crowd of people; *then there's Adora,* and my breath hitched; *she's in the background, but I see her,* and my heart thundered—not Phoenix's heart, mine, and the difference shook the memory, trying to pull it apart, but not before *I feel a stutter in my chest as I jump over the bar and stalk toward a girl. I grab her arm until she's suddenly in mine; then we're kissing, and I'm tasting her lips as I feel her everywhere; my first kiss, I think. It's yours.*

Phoenix gasped, and I was pulled through a black hole until I felt his chest moving and heart slamming against my palms. He lay unconscious but alive as his head slowly repaired, bones snapping back into place, flesh welding back together, the side of his head ballooning into shape. I became lightheaded, faint, my limbs heavy, and I sagged to my side. My elbow scraped concrete, catching me.

For a moment, I was dizzy, the earth see-sawing, dimensions crossing, seeing silver, blue, and green. But as soon as the world settled back on its axis, I rose to my feet with the image of Adora stained in my mind.

Phoenix's memories made me raw, vulnerable, shaken up. All I wanted was to crawl back home, to the lighthouse, into her arms.

But another cold wind came, and I was suddenly staring into green eyes and a mask. Zephyr was only an arm's length away. Julian stood, rising from

Phoenix's side. He laid a hand on Beck's shoulder, who was still kneeling at our feet beside Phoenix, holding his head, relief raining down on him.

The three of them had surrounded me, watched me.

I steeled my spine despite my heaving chest.

We were all together again.

"Who are you?" Julian asked, emotion tearing apart his voice.

Beck stood and joined Julian and Zephyr, eyes watery and pale blue and intense. My posture softened with an exhale.

Ocean was right. I was a part of them as much as they were a part of me.

I looked them in the eyes, acceptance washing over me.

"I'm the lost Heathen."

CHAPTER 42

ADORA

January 6, 2021
22 Days until the Crimson Eclipse
25 Days until the Cantini-Sullivan Wedding

Daylight crowned the cliff's edge in the distance. Cyrus was kneeling beside me on one knee, his hand on my shoulder.

"I requested a meeting," he said, guilt in all his features. "My mother left for the chamber, but we still have half an hour." His gaze drifted over the Sullivan sisters' tangled bodies. "She believes we've all gone mad."

Fable moved under my arm, and the night before came rushing back.

I sat up, and the wool blankets gathered against my chest. "What did you do with the body?" The words came out empty. Drained. Almost uncaring. But as I'd said it, a sickness stole me. Despite not caring, the words tasted terrible as they left my lips. Bitter. Awful. Poisoned with heart.

Even though he was a Heathen, he was also a man.

The one Fable was in love with.

Cyrus's mouth set in a hardline, his face grim from witnessing death. But no matter how indifferent he appeared to be, he leaned in closer as though he didn't want the universe or Fable to hear his words. "I left him there."

I slapped his shoulder. "You *what*?"

A vision of Phoenix across the pool table emerged in my mind.

Skull crushed. Wide empty eyes. Lying there. Bloody and dead.

“Listen to me. If I moved him, there’s no telling what actually happened or how the story could twist around. This is Kane we’re talking about. The high priest’s only son. Do you honestly believe Augustine’s not willing to do everything he can to keep Kane out of the Wicker Man?”

Cyrus had a plan, and this was perhaps the wisest choice.

“You’re going to tell them *everything*?” I didn’t know why this surprised me. Cyrus was an honest man who obeyed the laws of the Order, but it wasn’t just anyone who killed Phoenix. It was Kane, and Cyrus always had a soft spot for him.

Cyrus looked at me quizzically. “I’ve always done the right thing. Why would this be any different?”

“Because he’s your best friend.” And two fears hit me right then.

Cyrus Cantini, the one who the crypt declared was my perfect mate, would hand me over, too, if he ever found out I’d killed someone. The second fear, and the most detrimental, was that if Kane was sentenced to death, I would never be able to use him to save Mom.

“What do you think will happen to the next person who pisses off Kane? What if it’s you?” Cyrus asked, his voice rising. “There’s no covering this up, Adora. Not this time. We can’t take a chance.”

“Does Kane know what’s about to happen?”

Cyrus swiped the pad of his thumb across his lip as he thought about what to say next. “Kane was so out of it. I don’t think he knows what he did.” A sigh, and then, “Sometimes I’m terrified it’s not the monsters that will one day burn down Weeping Hollow. It’s us, and the monsters we fear are only our shadows.”

VIOLA, AUGUSTINE, CLARENCE, AND AGATHA SAT IN THIS SEQUENCE BEHIND the expansive table on the raised platform. Mina Mae wasn’t here, and Fable had only come because she wanted to make sure the Order knew the truth about what had happened to Phoenix Wildes. Despite all efforts, she’d refused to shower or change her clothes. The rest of the chamber was empty, save for Kane sitting in the second row.

He looked up when we entered the chamber, dark bags under a horrified gaze. He’d changed into khaki pants and an ivory sweater, the color making him appear saintly, as beloved as Cyrus. No evidence of murder stained his skin, but his expression was shredded by confusion and exhaustion. As if the

Shadows had left the streets and lurked under his eyes, twenty years were thrown on him overnight.

Small chatter died among the Order, and all four pairs of eyes turned to us as we took our seats. It was happening. Kane could be yanked from my grasp, and the need to stop this meeting from happening bubbled inside me. I shifted in my seat, wishing the words would not escape Cyrus's mouth. *"What is the purpose of this meeting?"* Augustine would ask, and in my mind, *Cyrus stands and looks sideways as he gnaws on his lip, as he tends to do, to find the nerve.*

"Kane killed—" he starts to say, and "I object!" I stop him, even though he doesn't finish. Even though the Order hasn't yet sentenced him to anything. "Kane Pruitt's blood belongs to me!" I say, rather villainously.

My imagination evaporated when Augustine addressed the room.

Cyrus stood, fixing his belt, his pants hanging low on his waist. Then he lowered his head and looked sideways at me, biting his bottom lip with his teeth. My gaze went skyward before meeting his.

The silence in the room was haunting and demanded an answer.

The shake of my head was subtle, hoping only he understood the thoughts I was trying to push into his ears.

"Don't do this," I wanted to whisper, but I didn't. He was my other half. If he was undeniably in love with me, and we were fated for each other, he should know me and what I was thinking. Right?

"Last night, there was an altercation at Voodoos," it all but fell out of him.

I closed my eyes on impact.

An altercation, I thought.

I would hardly call it an altercation.

An altercation involved more than one person in a disagreement.

This was an execution.

"Come out with it, Cyrus," Augustine urged.

"Last night, Phoenix—"

The door to the chamber *creaked*, stealing our attention.

Julian Blackwell walked in, in his black coat, expression sharp and making eye contact with each of us as he strolled across the front of the room.

He looked right at Kane.

My pulse soared, nerves stirring in my blood.

If this were a film, this moment would be slowed, catching the flutter of sable lashes with every blink as his gaze moved from one person to the next. And the next. Ominous music playing in the background.

My eyes flew to Cyrus. “Did you invite the Heathens?”

“No,” he whispered loudly, his ice-blue eyes darting from me to the Heathen.

I took Fable’s hand in mine, preparing for the inevitable. A member of Sacred Sea murdered a Heathen, and they would make us pay. And this was the perfect place to do it, too. We were cornered in a chamber with only one exit, the same exit the Heathens were entering through.

Zephyr appeared next, a murderous gaze floating across the room, meeting mine as he followed Julian. His mask was ghostly white, his hair undone and darker without the sun. Zephyr squinted his eyes as he passed, a cold front, a draft, and I knew he was smiling. A contemptuous grin. It was not seen on the hidden lips but felt within the sardonic, deep-set eyes.

Kane stood, bouncing a questionable glare at Cyrus.

Beck walked in, and for a monster who wore his emotions, he crossed the room stripped of them. I looked at Fable, squeezing her hand. A wordless promise that I would rip off their skin with my bare teeth if it meant keeping her safe.

“Jesus fucking Christ.” Then a *screech* as Kane caught himself on the back of a chair for support.

My eyes darted to the doorway.

Phoenix was walking into the chamber.

And from there, time sped up.

Fable let out a cry, tearing her hand from mine, flying down the aisle, not stopping until she collided with the wall of Phoenix’s chest.

I was preparing to kill one second, then I was looking at a ghost the next.

Cyrus, Kane, and I exchanged horrified glances.

His head was bashed in.

He was *more* than dead.

He was *dead* dead.

He was deader.

Deadest.

Fable wrapped her arms around his waist.

He was flesh and blood.

Phoenix stood pitiless, muscles tensing under his skin, as Fable clung to

him. Her cries of relief filled the chamber.

Phoenix wouldn't hold her. Phoenix wouldn't even look at her.

Phoenix's eyes were cold and set on Kane, a threat braiding his gaze.

Despite the threatening stare, Kane ripped away from it and swung a look at Cyrus. Kane's shoulders fell, a sigh of relief escaping his chest.

Phoenix unwrapped Fable from around his waist and moved her aside as if she were nothing. I wanted to go to her and pull her into my arms. *It's over*, I wanted to tell her. Whatever it was, was done. Love, if it were this at all, could not withstand anger. I knew this all too well. I was once seduced by anger, then adored by it. And at this moment, Phoenix was, too. But at least he was alive.

Fable's hand suffocated her cries as she left the room, breezing past a fifth and final man who'd arrived. One none of us were expecting. Most of all, me.

I froze, and my eyes were trapped at his waist from ten feet away, in denial. I didn't have to see his face to know it was him; this feeling was one I recognized. As I knew his every expelled breath, how the earth held him, how the sea missed him, how the world wrapped around him, no matter the setting, the clothes, the year. My soul grazed his, and time became a useless thing. A contradiction. The way it expired. The way it was forgotten. The way it carried on.

Stone, my soul whispered. A held breath. A sigh.

And when I looked at his face, he was already staring back at me. My chest was snatched up by his eyes, heart pounding out steps as if it had legs and feet that wanted to bolt across the chamber and into his arms.

But I couldn't move. Not before, and not as it began to dawn on me.

Stone was here, in a sacred chamber, with the Heathens as if he was their friend. Hurt buckled inside me. Betrayal.

"I don't think we've met," Augustine said, eyes on my secret. "A new visitor in Weeping Hollow. At a time like this. I loathe surprises, Blackwell."

"You can speak to me directly," Stone insisted, his black eyes holding me with no intention of pulling away. "My name is Stone Danvers. The lost descendant of the Danvers bloodline."

"The fifth Heathen to complete Norse Woods," Julian confirmed.

It took longer than it should have to process it.

Painfully slow. Deathly slow. Tragically slow.

Like drowning.

The. Fifth. Heathen, my mind echoed, hesitant.

I shook my head, teeth grinding, trying to turn these words into dust.

Why are you doing this to me? my heart screamed, devastated.

Augustine threw a sharp look at Clarence. “Is this true?”

I held my breath, waiting for something more to be revealed.

That this was all a mistake. Stone couldn’t be a Heathen.

“It is,” Clarence confirmed with a celebratory smirk.

I curled my hands into fists, my nails piercing my palms.

“Adora,” Stone said, just standing there, gauging my reaction with dread flashing across his face, and something else ... A knowing, like he was waiting for me to do something. Insult him. Scream at him. Attack him. Shake the room and explode, even. He was ready for me, seconds counting down. *Tick, tick, boom.*

And a hot tear slid down my cheek.

Then another.

And another.

I wasn’t shouting or cursing or hitting him this time.

I was defeated and crying. In front of everyone.

And I couldn’t get the tears to stop.

This hurt was different.

“Adora,” he said again, softer that time. And my heart went insane every time he said my name. I hated that it did. Because he was a Heathen. And I was weak for him.

I could feel Cyrus’s worried eyes on me. “Adora, what’s going on?”

But he already felt the truth, I was sure. But I didn’t care because paralysis swept through me, despite my heart pounding hard enough to feel.

There was only one other time I felt like this. Dad had hazelnut peanut butter sandwiches waiting on the counter when I got home from the academy. Mouthful of bread and peanut butter, I’d heard *Adeline died*, and *the Heathens killed her*, and then the sickness devoured all his next words. Time had just trapped me there. A frozen picture of me crouched on the tile, my cries muted, as though that was all that happened for hours, stuck in suffering, unable to stand. There was so much more to it, I was sure, but I forgot the rest.

I suppose that’s what death felt like.

Suffering and sickness and peanut butter sandwiches.

It felt like Stone had died.

Time. Such a selfish, immortal thing, moving whenever it wanted.

How it stopped. How it passed.

Cyrus lifted his hand to grab mine. “Adora?”

I pushed him aside to escape the room.

“Adora!” Cyrus called again, but I felt weak and sick, and I was afraid that if I stopped, I’d crumble to the ground again, and time would trap me here without ever escaping.

As I passed Stone, he grabbed my wrist and pulled me into his arms.

“Adora, I didn’t know,” he pushed out in a whisper. “I’m the same man.”

“You’re not a man,” I spat through a tight throat. “Not anymore.”

Stone’s face turned grave. All hope had forsaken him.

Julian came up behind him and grabbed his bicep.

“Let her go,” he said under his breath, silver eyes like slits as they crawled to me. “She cared for the man on Bone Island. Not the Heathen in Weeping Hollow.”

I yanked myself free from his fists. “Never lay your hands on me.”

The only thing more devastating than losing him was losing him all over again.

CHAPTER 43

STONE

PHOENIX COLLAPSED IN THE TUNNELS AS SOON AS WE LEFT THE CHAMBERS with a trapped laugh rolling out of his mouth.

The drugs Clarence had given him for the pain, and to keep him from killing Kane, turned him into an incapable sot. However, it helped him maintain his composure for as long as he could in front of the Order and Sacred Sea, sure that any weakness he displayed was a vulnerability. As far as the people in the chamber understood it, Phoenix had not succumbed to what they did to him, nor did they see he was on drugs to hide it.

“Did you see Kane’s face?” Beck muttered, swinging a look at Julian.

“Yeah, he looked like he was about to piss his pants.” Julian tossed Phoenix’s arm over his shoulder to support him. “For those ten minutes, you had me fooled, Nix.”

“For a second, you almost broke like Danvers,” Zephyr countered from a distance.

Phoenix winced, a throbbing wracking his head as he let out a painful groan.

A moment later, Zephyr turned and pressed his hand on Phoenix’s shoulder, trying to regain his attention by squeezing it. Phoenix’s spine stiffened, and he raised his chin to look Zephyr in the eyes.

“I hope this pain lingers,” Zephyr said. “I hope it stays to remind you of the death you escaped. This way, the next time you see her, you’ll think twice and not act upon impulse. Unless you’re willing to die twice for a girl who would rather watch your skull collapse than betray her coven.”

Weeping Hollow was decades of dust. Each second here uncovered more in another corner. The covens in this town had a centuries-old feud dating

back to my ancestors, mainly over what caused most bloodshed: power, control, money. The feud had little to do with the curse. While Sacred Sea had not cursed us, they had been using it as a weapon to maintain fear of the Heathens in the town ever since.

I'd learned Adora's family were founders of Sacred Sea. She was a girl who never seemed to care about power or money, but the Heathens had stolen a life from her, and that was enough for anyone.

It would be unbearable to live here and not desire to be next to her, to hear her name and pretend to feel nothing, to see her with him and not start a war. I'd much rather lie at the bottom of the sea. At least there, it was peaceful.

"Give your heart, in its entirety, to your coven," Zephyr reminded him. "If your heart should be full of something, let it be full of what's worthy. Leave it empty, and there's room for sinister things to grow, fester, and break you."

"What if the heart is capable of neither? What if it's damaged beyond repair?" I asked.

"It's not," Zephyr replied. "One cannot live without a heart; but without a soul, most certainly."

I looked around at the four of them. "This is who we choose to become?" I asked in disbelief. "We are as barbaric as they, only protecting ourselves and not giving a speck of shit for our humanity. No wonder we've been cast aside as monsters."

Zephyr was looking at me. "It seems there is a misunderstanding." Silence bloated in the tunnel as his voice called the attention of all. There was an air about it that pulled you in, his words demanding to be heard without ever raising or changing his tone.

"We were not cast aside as monsters," he corrected. "They never decided what we were, and neither did we. We were born a cursed thing with a beating heart and no right to use it. We were born Heathens without a right to put ourselves or distractions such as love first. Your life and your body does not belong to you. It belongs to a coven. And at this moment, Danvers, the fate of the entire coven you were born to protect, yet one you can never get close to, is in danger. Let that sink in."

My eyes narrowed. "Apologies, I was under the impression it was the fate of an entire town depending on us, lest you prefer to die as self-serving monsters, too."

We stared at one another for a few challenging seconds.

Then the darkness edging his gaze fell away.

He stepped closer and grabbed the back of my neck. “Stop calling yourself a monster. You are not a monster. I’ve seen *monster*, as you have last night,” he said low, laying his palm against my chest. “It is inside us, here in our hearts, where monsters are born. Should this evil arise, you can choose to protect it, make excuses for it, justify it, or you can choose to banish it. Either way, what you feed is what stays, and those whom you allow to surround you is what you become.” He nodded. “All right?”

Zephyr had boxed out the others around us to speak directly to me.

He touched me with compassion. He looked into my eyes.

It was the second time in my life that another man had spoken to me with empathy as though I was human, respected, cared for. The first was Ambrose when I was ten, and I didn’t think Zephyr realized how much that meant to me.

He patted my chest before letting me go.

The others exchanged glances.

Then we began our walk again.

When we reached Norse Woods and exited the tunnel, daylight inhaled us in one breath. Phoenix was moving slower with his hand permanently clutching his head and his jaw clenching.

His ankle buckled, and Julian lifted him upright.

“Give me a minute,” he seethed between his teeth. “I just need ... a break.”

Upon collapsing to the ground, Phoenix rested against a tree. The others gazed quietly to the east, where a neighborhood pressed up against Norse Woods.

Under the dull sky, lights glowed from their windows. My mind wandered to what it must have been like to have been raised here, among a coven and the Heathens. I wondered what my life would have been like.

The silence was broken when Phoenix began to laugh.

His shoulders shook as he dropped his head against the tree, his laughter swelling.

“He’s so high,” Beck said with a laugh to Julian.

Zephyr faced Phoenix, irritated. “And why are you laughing?”

Phoenix tried to contain himself. “Nothing, I was just thinking.”

“Well, spit it out,” Zephyr insisted.

Phoenix erupted in laughter again, and the rest of the Heathens couldn't help but find it amusing.

"I was just thinking about how I just fucking died, man, and now I'm sitting here, high as a kite and chilling with a walking, talking mummy who brought me back to life." He raised his palm to me, eyes watering. "Welcome to Weeping fucking Hollow."

A smile broke on their faces, all seriousness evaporating.

Phoenix's laughter died. "So, Stone. Tell me, did this love affair with Adora start on Bone Island?"

He said *Adora*, and my bones jumped under my skin.

Just the sound of her name leaving another man's mouth made me want to shatter his teeth. I, however, did not respond, not wanting to use us to fill silence.

Zephyr was spinning the point of a knife into a tree, watching me. "How did you get to Weeping Hollow, anyway?"

Phoenix nudged his head. "Did you hitch a ride on Noah's Ark?"

I looked at Julian. "Are all Heathens this ignorant, or just the one?"

Phoenix chuckled. "So, let me get this straight," he continued. "You were basically dead for a hundred years and still able to suck face with Adora Sullivan."

I narrowed my eyes, heat rising in my blood. "Clearly you fancy being beaten to a pulp."

"Here we go," Zephyr said, bored. "I'm sure Stone's trysts are no more surprising than the thought of the youngest Sullivan lusting over your insignificant ass."

Phoenix hung an arm off his bent knee. "No, Zeph, I honestly want to know the secret. A century old ... talks like a nineteenth-century poet." Phoenix's eyes snapped to me. "You fucking Shakespeare-d her, didn't you?" I shook my head, and Phoenix slapped a palm against his chest. "You did!" He laughed. "O vagina, wherefore art thou vagina?!"

The laughs sputtered at first—a collection of air escaping pressed lips. Then three of them burst in unison, and I didn't know whether to laugh or drive my fist into his jaw.

Julian smiled amusedly at me. "Ignore them. They wouldn't know what to do with a vagina if it sat on their face."

Phoenix coughed, laughter dying as he struggled to stand. "Just do us a favor and stay away from her window, Romeo."

And after a short walk, we reached a cabin.

A girl with long hair as white as mine stepped out. She slowly descended the porch steps, her attention never leaving me. She was light skinned, almost as white as my hair, and as she stepped closer, the color of pale blue flooded her eyes.

This wasn't the first time I had seen them and felt my chest on fire from frostbite. It wasn't even the second.

I'd been reacquainted with her the moment I stepped into the ballroom on the first night I arrived in town, but at this moment, her eyes were hitting mine, rushing ice-cold water into my lungs, stealing all air from a desperate soul.

I'm alive again, but it won't last long.

I can't recall how many times I've died. It all blends together. But as I lay here, at the bottom, the sun threads a beam of light into the ocean above.

I haven't felt its warmth on my face, seen the aurora lights, or tasted a kiss.

I haven't really lived at all.

These are my thoughts as death sneaks up on me again.

I'm running out of air, holding my drawing close in my mind.

Death ridicules my heart for trying, but it beats anyway until it can't anymore. Just as my lungs continue to inhale even though there is no air. I have given up, but no one can tell their heart to stop beating, no one can tell their lungs to stop working.

At last, the burn squeezes me.

When light comes again, I'm back in her room, shivering, cold, alone.

I'm angry and sad and defeated, but I'm angry, and angry means I feel something other than the pain, and emotion means there's hope.

Something inside me is still holding on to hope.

When Fallon comes into the room, she sees me, then closes the door.

She's bothered, I can tell from her face. But she isn't crying today.

We don't have enough time. We never do.

I scream to let her know what I see. An ocean. I'm in an ocean.

But it's not a scream that comes out.

"Hi," she says to me, casually as though we're friends, while I'm in absolute torment. "School sucked."

"Find me," I chant over and over through chattering teeth.

And then life steals me.

I'm back in the ocean, dying all over again.

JULIAN APPEARED AT HER SIDE. "THIS IS—"

"Fallon," I finished.

I never understood why it was her my soul was anchored to until this moment. Fallon was the moonchild in Mother's journal. Her bloodline was the cause of my curse, and she was the same girl Mother set out to kill to break it. This was what had left me trapped in misery for over a hundred years.

From the corner of my eye, Julian gaze hit mine.

"My fiancé," he claimed. "But I suppose the two of you have already met?"

"Once upon a time," Fallon said quietly with tears in her eyes.

She walked closer and looked up at me nervously.

Almost as though she wanted to make sure I was real.

I couldn't stand the burn in my chest, so I looked away.

Her fingers brushed my hand, and relief consumed her. A faint smile blossomed on her lips for a fraction of a second before I pulled away.

I took a step back. "Don't touch me."

Hurt consumed her features. "You're mad at me?"

"I'm indifferent toward you," I corrected her through a clenched jaw. "And honestly, I want nothing to do with you."

"Hey," Julian reached out a hand, stepping closer to her, protective.

"I thought you were already dead," she explained, coming from around Julian. "I thought there was no hope because I couldn't help you."

"You're the ghost that haunted Fallon," Julian gathered.

"But you never died," she concluded, confused.

"I did die," I told her. "I've died again and again for over a hundred years." I fell back a step. "You were too selfish, wrapped up in your own sorrow to hear what I was saying. And then you gave up on me."

THE FIVE OF US SAT AROUND A FIRE BEHIND JULIAN'S CABIN.

We were only staying for a short while. Soon, we had to leave for Goody Estate, where Zephyr's father had opened his doors to all of Norse Woods to keep one another safe through the night. There was a reason the Heathens brought me here. There was something they wanted to do before I met the rest of the coven.

I gazed into the embers, the fire heating my face as winter iced the nape of my neck. Across from me, Zephyr sat, and I watched him through the flames.

“Why does he still wear a mask?” I asked Julian to my right.

“He’s still cursed,” he said, steering his attention to Zephyr, who was hovering his palm over the flames. “And before you ask, no, we don’t know why, nor do we have time to figure it out at the moment. Our priority is getting rid of the Shadows.” Julian leaned back and drummed his fingers against his thigh. “Zephyr isn’t thrilled about it.”

“This explains him being an inconceivable shit-sack at times.”

Julian chuckled. “No, he’s still an asshole, but for some reason, it’s not as terrible with you.” He raised his drink and pointed his pinky in Beck’s direction. “Baby Beck is the youngest—a heart of gold, quiet. If you ever need emotional support or a listening ear, he’s your man.

“Phoenix has been the life of the four-man show and is down for just about anything. He’ll also be the first one to tell you how it is—all the things you don’t want to hear—and nine times out of ten, he’s right. But he never takes his own advice. An honest hypocrite.”

He nudged his chin to Zephyr. “Zeph Goody, the egocentric shit-sack, as you say, has to be the smartest man in every room.” He laughed. “The only thing he loves is the sound of his own voice and comes across as not giving a damn about anything, but he will be the first to show up if you need him. Because he hates being alone,” he said. “But if he ever lets you in, you’ll find he actually is the smartest guy in the room.” Julian shrugged. “There’s something inside him. He just doesn’t want anyone to see it.”

“What about you?” I asked.

“Me?” Julian grinned. “I’m the handsome one.”

Beck, who was walking behind us, hit the back of Julian’s head. “Don’t let him fool you. Julian is the brooding hero.”

Julian raised a brow. “Brooding?”

“Brooding,” Beck confirmed.

“I’m not brooding. Romeo here is brooding,” Julian said, slapping the side of my thigh with the back of his hand. “Just look at him. Eternal RBF.”

The two chuckled. It was strange to be sitting here surrounded by them.

They accepted me, but vile things had accepted me as well. A murderous tribe. A coffin. A curse. Accepted didn’t mean family.

“But I want to know about you,” Julian continued. “How long have you known you could resurrect the dead?”

“A long time. If I’m honest, sometimes I wish I couldn’t,” I admitted. “Each time I’ve done it, it felt as though I’ve pulled darkness from

somewhere, and when it's over, not all of it truly leaves me. Something tells me it cannot be good."

"There's always a consequence. A balance," Julian said upon a breath, looking up at the graying sky. "Look, we don't have much time left, but before we do this, you need to know something," Julian said, seeming on edge, and uneasiness crept between us. "I'm the one who killed your mother."

My jaw tightened as I studied him.

I thought back to Mother's plan written in the journal I'd found at the lighthouse. It made sense why Julian was the one to do it. "Because she would've hurt Fallon."

Julian's brow jumped. "She would have *killed* Fallon," he corrected. "How did you know?"

"That's not important." I leaned in to catch his silvery eyes. "But my question is, how long did you know I was frozen somewhere in a box before you decided to come search for me?"

Julian's mouth parted, not expecting it.

He adjusted in his chair, watching his hands rub together as he thought. "A few weeks," he finally said, his silver eyes meeting mine again. "I didn't tell the others because, unlike them, I'm loyal to Fallon. If I brought you back and you thought you knew how to break the curse, it would have put her life at risk." He shook his head. "I would rather have lived in this curse and taken my secret to the grave if it meant keeping her alive." He grabbed my shoulder. "As soon as the curse broke, I wanted to come for you, but the Shadows took us all by surprise. We didn't know what we were up against."

"You realize that if you and Fallon didn't break the curse, you would have eventually died, *taking your secret to the grave*, and I would have been trapped in the Atlantic for eternity."

"Let's just be grateful it never had to come to that," he said, squeezing my shoulder upon standing. "Now, c'mon. Let's get this over with."

The five of us stood around the fire, and Phoenix blew against it, the flames lurching up into the air and towering over us.

We looked around the circle, seeing no empty spaces.

I couldn't see it, but I felt misery melting from the Heathens. Like fighting against something for a lifetime, then finally being granted peace.

Julian stepped forward and walked around the fire. "Twelve years ago, after Johnny died, the four of us stood here in this spot, scarred our palms,

and made a pact, swearing to one another and ourselves that we would do whatever it took to break the curse. Then we sealed it with our blood." He looked inside his hand. "Today we stand here, curse broken—"

Zephyr cleared his throat. "A half-ass job, if I do say so myself."

Julian side-eyed him, then stopped in front of Phoenix, taking his palm.

The two looked at each other before Julian sliced down the center of it. Phoenix did not make a face of agony, and blood pooled in his palm and dripped from his wrist.

"Today, we make a new pact," Julian said, moving on to Zephyr. "Most people in this town will hold on to the bad we and our ancestors have caused, and not be so quick to forgive because pain and grief are all they know. If it bleeds, it suffers, we have to remind ourselves. We are human. And like them, we are not perfect. Like them, we make mistakes, and no matter how hard we try, we won't always get it right. As long as we continue moving forward with compassion and good intentions, these mistakes cannot define us, as they do not define them.

"So, we will not only forgive them for the retribution that will surely come upon us, but we must also forgive ourselves." Julian stopped in front of me, holding the bloody knife between us. His silver eyes challenged me. "Nos omnes connexae."

"We are all connected," I whispered with an exhale, settling into place.

Julian grinned. "That's right. It seems the Heathen spirit found you after all."

"May I?" I asked, nudging my head toward the knife as I removed my glove, preferring to do it myself.

Julian handed it over. "Welcome home, Danvers."

I pushed my coat's sleeve up to my elbow, and when I looked down, a white scar was already slashed across my palm.

My breath halted as I was taken back to the day in the cave.

I wish I'd known then, when she was holding a knife to my throat, lying naked with me to keep me warm, and telling me stories about pirates and sirens, that we were writing the beginning of our own.

"What's that?" Julian asked, looking at my palm.

I smiled. "It appears my loyalty lies elsewhere as well."

Fallon emerged from the back door, flying down the steps, a cloud of white moving across the clearing, tears raining down.

"Julian!" she cried.

Julian turned and instantly rushed to her. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

Fallon could hardly get a word out, could barely catch a breath.

“It’s Winta,” she said, her voice shattered. “She’s dead.”

Julian’s gaze darted to us, then back to Fallon. “The Shadows?”

She shook her head, her tears falling, her cries gentle.

It took me back to when she was a little girl again.

“No, she wasn’t even sleeping. It was something else,” she said, breathy. Julian rubbed her back, trying to get her to breathe steadily enough to tell us what had happened. “Kioni said not long after Stone left, her mom just dropped dead. No explanation at all.”

Julian’s gaze swept toward me with horror in his eyes.

My heart pounded, not wanting to believe it.

“No,” I thought I’d said, unsure if it was in my mind or in the air.

Could I have taken her life as a result of bringing Phoenix back?

Julian exhaled though his spine had become stiff. “A consequence. A balance.”

CHAPTER 44

ADORA

New Moon
January 12, 2021
16 Days until the Crimson Eclipse
19 Days until the Cantini-Sullivan Wedding

Tragically, I had become a girl who could not stop thinking about a boy.

Through the night and unto the morning, thoughts of a Heathen had kept me awake, and how dare he take up any space in my mind. I hadn't seen him in a week, and I wished to just see him to smack him and tell him about himself.

And I wished to just see him to smack him.

And I wished to just see him.

I sat at the desk, still in my nightgown, in front of a blank page, watching the dusk yawn its colors across the horizon. After the witching hour, my last new moon would appear. The Crimson Eclipse would arrive in a little over two weeks, and while there was a flood of emotions rising within me to drain onto the paper, I feared it would only send the Shadows to take Stone's life, should my sister be right.

Even in rage, I wanted him safe.

Which made me want to take my pen and stab myself in the eye.

My chair creaked when I swung my legs to the side to face Alice.

She was sitting in her rocking chair, almost finished reading her novel.

"What's the cure for heartbreak?" I asked.

She looked up at me as she turned the page.

"Poetry," she replied. "And books. A lot of books."

Sometimes I've wondered if the sad poets before me sat at their desks in the corner of a dreary room, wishing that their sorrow would one day inspire. And it was possible, I could imagine, the writers had known all along, willing to bear and bleed for the sake of future generations of the broken-hearted, their poetry the only remedy. *Yes*, I thought, but it was neither here nor there. No one would believe me if I said books and poetry have saved us time and time again.

"What are your plans today, Miss Adora?" Alice asked as I stood to change out of my nightgown. "With the wedding less than three weeks away, I can only imagine all the last-minute arrangements and decisions that need to be made."

"You're absolutely right." I'd wasted weeks sulking, and there was one more thing I needed to do before the eclipse arrived to make sure Kane's sacrifice carried on smoothly. "I'll be heading into town."

And after bundling up, I wished her restful sleep before slipping out the door.

After stepping into the brisk January cold, I began my two-mile walk to Blackwell Apothecary. I took Seaside Street to Town Square, passing Oh My Stars—a dream I'd once lived in that disappeared one morning. Maybe if no one would catch me in Kane's murder, and maybe if the Shadows were gone, then I could open its doors again. So many *maybes* with a future up in the air. Maybe I should have appreciated what I had when I had it. Who knew that once your dream comes true, even this could be taken away, too. Nothing ever really belonged to us. Not love. Not talent. Not a man.

I turned the corner, colliding with a crowd of people on the street circling The Bean.

They were cursing and hurling threats into the air.

I tried to peer over heads and peek between shoulders.

A slice of Julian's face appeared between two bodies.

I stepped back, pulse racing, throat tightening, tears already forming, unsure if I could handle the sight of Stone just yet. If he was with Julian, one of two things could very well happen. Either I was to barrel through the crowd, swipe the Heathen's steaming hot coffee, and toss the contents into

his face, or I could pretend I felt nothing. As much as I wanted to hurt him as much as I was hurt, it only proved I was hurting at all. The one who cared least always won.

The apothecary was only three blocks away.

And I took a step in the wiser direction.

Suffocate, my sweet emotions.

I took another step.

Pretend.

And then another.

Chin low.

Something inside me turned my head—my stupid heart, perhaps—and there he was.

My chest ached, catching glimpses of him between shoulders and arms and heads. He was hunched over, head down, elbows resting on his knees, and hiding behind his coffee clutched between two fingerless gloves. He was hiding behind a cigarette, wearing a gray wool coat and jeans, no longer an antique piece but finding a place in this modern world.

It was the first time the Heathens, except for Zephyr, had been spotted together in Town Square during the day since the curse broke. Tired flatlanders stared at them from the sidelines, leaving a ten-foot radius between them and the defenseless monsters.

Cruel insults spilled onto the streets, empty to-go coffee cups and rocks hitting them. Most flatlanders were no longer scared. The ones who were hid behind their husbands, parents, or neighbors, watching to make sure it was safe to come out. The Heathens did their best to ignore them, indulged in conversation, far too busy to mind the likes of scorned gazes and disapproving comments.

They were making a statement. They had to be.

They carried on as if they belonged here. As if they weren’t killers but ordinary people enjoying coffee on a dreadfully cold morning without remorse in a town where they’d stolen lives. Almost every resident of Weeping Hollow had lost someone they loved because of them. On any other day, I would have taken their bold disrespect to Augustine and demanded something to be done. But after knowing all the torment and isolation Stone had been through, I was torn. I wanted to kill him for being one of them and murder my neighbors for hurting him.

“There’s another one!”

“Where’s Goody’s son?”

“They’re nothing but boys.”

“We don’t want you in our town anymore.”

“Do to them as they’ve done to us.”

“Yeah, hang them from the Weeping Hollow sign.”

Stone lifted his head, his eyes instantly finding mine.

He once was a man who hardly smiled, hardly frowned, hardly showed any expression at all, but seeing me standing here physically affected him. It pulled him to his feet, the chair screeching back, his cigarette-holding hand dropping to his side, almost slipping from his fingertips.

What we shared was written all over his face.

I know, I wanted to tell him. *I feel it too.*

This time, a cup crashed into his chest, coffee splashing into his face, but Stone never broke his gaze. Julian looked up at him, then followed what had caught his eye, seeing me standing in the middle of the street.

Beck and Phoenix’s attention followed as well.

Do something, my heart begged, but what a selfish thing to beg for. I was engaged. He was a Heathen. I was a Sacred Sea witch. Everything was different. If he walked in my direction, shoved flatlanders aside, swooped me up into his arms, and kissed the heck out of me, I’d only slap him and push him away. It could never revert back to the way it used to be.

Julian leaned back in his chair, eyes sliding between us, waiting to see what Stone would do, too. Then Phoenix slapped Stone’s leg with the back of his hand to get his attention.

“You good?” Phoenix could have asked Stone. I couldn’t hear him, but I’d seen Phoenix’s lips move, and I imagined this was what he’d say. Stone tore his gaze away and scanned the crowd before retaking his seat. He brought the coffee to his lips, watching me again, people moving between our locked gazes.

Even after I walked away, I felt his eyes penetrating my back and fisting my spine.

I felt him all the way to Blackwell Apothecary.

WHEN I PUSHED OPEN THE DOOR, THE LITTLE BELL HANGING ABOVE RANG, and the rubber sweep below caught on to the rug. I used the toe of my shoe to flip the corner of the rug back into place as licorice and nutmeg musk drifted

around my face.

I closed the door gently, making sure not to rattle the shelves, relieved to find Cyrus's stalker and not Agatha behind the counter singing. As soon as Jolie saw me, she gasped, swiping headphones from her ears. "Adora."

Feelings stored in my eyes like leftovers, and I didn't want her to see them. I turned and began walking down the back of the store, following the wall of walnut shelving stacked from floor to ceiling, blinking the feelings away. Amber jars lined the shelves, their labels faded, some with ink smeared from the printer.

"Is there something I can help you with?" she asked behind me.

I rounded the wheeled ladder attached to the shelves. "Yes, I'm looking for something in particular," I said, taking a bottle from the shelf and reading the label. "Witherbane. Ever heard of it?"

"Uh, yes." She looked at me quizzically. "My mother calls it Nethermind because it's almost lethal-like to humans."

"Almost lethal-like?" I laughed, placing the jar back on the shelf.

Silence swelled in the room.

I turned to make sure she was still there.

Behind the counter, she was biting her lip and leaning into her hip, staring at me.

A dark cloud seemed to hover over her features when she said, "Nethermind feels like you're already dead, but your soul forgot to leave. Almost lethal. Like unrequited love."

Jolie was a beautiful girl. Youthful skin, a long neck, thick brows, smoky upturned eyes, and heart-shaped lips any girl would kill for. Today, her black hair was bundled on top of her head, and a thick black choker wrapped around her neck.

"Sounds dramatic," I whispered, caught in her gloom.

"It happens in stages. First, your tongue swells, then your words start to stutter and slur before your throat closes up. Then your arms and legs feel like they're being pulled down into the underworld. Next thing you know, you're paralyzed. All you see is him, and you have no control over anything."

Were we still talking about witherbane? "Him?"

Her eyes grew wide. She shook her head. "You know what I mean."

I squinted, walking toward her. "How do you know what witherbane feels like?"

"I was six when I ingested it in my mother's night garden. I've never seen

her so scared." She let off her hip and settled back into place. "What's it for? Did you get a rash?"

"A rash?"

"Sorry." Her face scrunched up. "Since it can help with most skin conditions and breakouts, I assumed this was why you needed it."

"Yes!" *What an excellent excuse and boldface lie*. "Alice mentioned it. I'm getting these splotchy bumps on my hip, and I wanted to get them cleared up before the wedding."

"The wedding. Right." Then Jolie slid a set of keys off the counter. "I'll be right back."

She pushed through the swinging door into the back room.

I stood on my tiptoes, looking through the small window in the door. A glass case the size of a sideways fridge stretched across a wall. It looked like a fish tank, but a night forest was growing under black light instead of water.

Jolie unlocked the tank and removed a vial before locking it up again.

When she started to come back my way, I landed on my feet and fixed my eyes in front of me. "Got time?" she asked, pinching a tiny apothecary jar-like vial between her fingers. "I'll need a few minutes to mix it for topical use. I only have it pure in liquid form."

"Oh, that isn't necessary," I rushed to say, reaching for the vial.

Jolie clutched the vial and pulled her arm back. "This stuff can be dangerous."

I dropped my head to the side. "I'll be careful."

"Remember, do not ingest this. Even by accident. My mother would kill me."

"Jolie," I said sweetly, maybe for the first time ever. "I know what I'm doing."

She hesitated, then handed it over. "If for any reason you ingest it, try to relax and just let it pass without panicking. If you panic, it will only make it worse. Kind of like getting trapped in a current."

"Okay," I said, pushing bills across the counter, ready to get out of there.

Jolie snapped her finger. "Pistachio nuts," she blurted.

I didn't get to take a single step. "Excuse me?"

"Pistachio nuts," she repeated, dropping and disappearing behind the counter. "I have a pouch. Eat a few a day; it's heavy on iron and will counteract the side effects, worst case scenario." She popped up again. "You can never be too careful."

She slid a velvet drawstring pouch to me, and her hand accidently knocked into her purse that was lying on the counter. An amber vial rolled out of a pocket and rested on the counter between us. Her eyes opened wide, and she rushed to grab it, but I snatched it out from under her hand.

"It's not what you think it is," she immediately said.

I read the label. "*Desiderium*." I turned the amber bottle over, seeing crimson liquid inside. "What is this?"

"It's nothing," she said, and I lowered my eyes with a glare. She sighed. "It's an experiment, really. Kind of like love venom, a love potion, but I doubt it even works."

"Love venom. *Hmm*." I narrowed my eyes. "Were you planning to use this on my fiancé?"

Jolie's jaw dropped, and a surprised laugh tumbled out. "No, of course not."

"How does it work?" I opened the cork and sniffed it.

It had no scent, so I dabbed a drop onto my fingertip.

Jolie studied me, her black fingernails nervously drumming on the counter, ready to pounce and swipe it back from me. "They'd have to drink the whole bottle. And then you'd have to ... kiss them for them to fall in love with you. But like I said, I'm sure it doesn't work."

I licked my finger and let the thick drop dissolve on my tongue.

"It tastes a lot like love," I said.

"And what do you suppose love tastes like?"

"Arsenic."

Jolie tilted her head with a smirk. "Arsenic has no taste or smell."

"Precisely." I pushed the cork back on and trapped the vial in my fist. "I'm taking this with me unless you plan to use it on someone special?"

Disappointment settled on her teenage face. "No, I wouldn't do that."

"Good, because if your brother discovered his fifteen-year-old sister was walking around with *love potion* in her purse, I'm sure he wouldn't be happy, considering how everyone in Weeping Hollow knows how you feel about a certain Sacred Sea boy. If only you had given it to him before the wedding. Could you imagine? *Oh*, the wicked scandal of Weeping Hollow." I collected my things into my bag and offered a smile. "Have a good day, Jolie."

CHAPTER 45

ADORA

COME WHAT MAY, THE LIGHTHOUSE'S BEAM CIRCLED WEEPING HOLLOW again that night.

I stood at the window, waiting for the witching hour with the clock's *tick-tock* a daunting echo in the room. The lantern spread a lemon glow on the window, and I could see the reflection of my face in the glass.

Stone is a Heathen, I thought.

And my stomach twisted into knots each time it crossed my mind.

Stone was a Heathen, and this was why he could manipulate the earth.

As much as it hurt, it answered everything.

I wondered if he'd ever hurt anyone before. If he'd killed as the Heathens had killed. Had he taken loved ones from the world as well? Was this the reason his mother poisoned him and trapped him in a coffin?

"You should sleep," Alice said with a yawn. She was sitting in her chair, coming down from the yawn, eyes watering, and I could tell tonight would be a struggle for her.

"There's a new moon coming." The bottle screamed at me from the desk's shelf, my message floating inside and patiently waiting for the tide. "Like all other new and full moons, I will be off to the shore tonight. You should retire to one of the boys' bedrooms. Let another maid watch over you so you can get some rest."

"Are you sure?" she asked, her eyes hopeful.

I nodded, and it didn't take long before she scurried out.

I followed her to the door and closed it just as there was a tapping sound.

I glanced around the bedroom.

The room was dim, with only the lantern in the window, and the

lighthouse beam circling, cascading light into the room every seven seconds.

Another *tap* and I walked to the window and peered down.

"Adora," Stone called from below, his voice consumed by agony, arms up at his sides with hands full of pebbles. "Come down, my darling Adora. I need to see you." He threw another pebble, and it clanked off the glass. "Lest you prefer me to climb the trellis and break the wretched window."

My eyes bulged out of their sockets. My heart raced.

I hurried to crank open the window with my gut jumping into my throat.

Stone stood in the middle of the snow-covered garden, dressed in all black. He looked like ink splattered in the snow.

"Ah, there she is," he said, letting the pebbles slip from his closed fists. "How befitting your window was the first one I called out to. Truth be told, I thought it would have been challenging. I must have felt you."

"Evidently, you want to die, otherwise you would not be standing here," I whisper-shouted.

Then all his broodiness had gone. "Come down, princess. We need to have a little chat."

I gripped the sill, my knuckles surely white. "Stop using my heart like an Ouija board!"

He narrowed his eyes, his brows pressed together. "On behalf of 1864, I can assure you we don't know what the blasted hell that is!" he shouted, and I blindly grabbed something from the desk and tossed it at him. He dodged the paperweight and looked up at me. "Excellent. Now, would you mind throwing yourself at me next?"

"I told you I never want to see you again—"

But Stone didn't allow me to finish before he was ripping off his gloves and stripping off his coat, tossing each into the snow, and stalking toward the exterior wall. When he grabbed the trellis to start the climb, I jumped back.

He's really coming up, I thought, starting to pace the room with my nails between my teeth. My feet were wearing out the hardwood, and my heart was doing somersaults in my chest.

Minutes later, he was swinging his long legs through my window.

And then he was simply standing in my room, staring at me.

I dug my teeth into my lip to hold my breath.

To try and hold me together. To not cry.

"This town is absolutely mad," he said, breathing heavily. "People are having disagreements with inanimate objects. The smallest man in Weeping

Hollow named *Ocean* claims to be my protector, ironically after being stuck in one for a century. And what's with that man, Jasper, who sits on the damned street and stares up at the clock all hours of the day?" He exhaled and wiped his forehead. "I think it's time for us to go home, Adora, before this town becomes you."

Silence filled the room as we stared at one another.

His nostrils flared, his chest heaving.

He was trying to hold himself together, too.

"You haven't hit me yet," he continued, more gentler, perhaps to fill the silence. "This is normally the part where you hit me, and my body desperately misses your hands." He lifted a shoulder. "Whether they're hurting me or pleasing me, they belong on me."

My jaw clenched, and I heard my teeth grinding in my ears.

Then my chin shook as the first burn for air hit my lungs.

"Your stubbornness is stupidity, my darling," Stone whispered, repeating the exact words I'd once told him. "Just take a breath."

He was here, and I had done all I could to stay away and fight it and pretend I didn't care. *But he was here*, not giving me or my grief a place to hide.

So, I couldn't anymore.

My chest buckled, my lungs opened up, and heartache burst from me.

Tears rained down my cheeks, snot bubbled from my nose, and my chest heaved through each breath-aching cry. My vision went blurry, but I could make out Stone just standing there—body stiff and staring at me.

Then his bottom lip trembled, his muscles seeming to jump under his skin. Like he wasn't sure whether to run to me or stay back and control himself because looking at me was tearing him apart, too. He wet his lip to hide it, then turned his back to me, hanging his head and folding his fingers behind his neck.

"How dare you come here and make jokes when I can barely hold it together," I shouted, not caring if it pierced through the walls. "After everything, how are you okay right now?!"

Stone swung around and stalked in my direction.

His eyes were bloodshot and miserable as he closed in on me.

"Do I look *okay* to you, Adora?" he asked, stopping inches from my face, stabbing his chest with his finger. "Look at me. I'm a rotten mess!"

And then his scent surrounded me.

Just like hearth smoke, winter air, and mistletoe.

I needed to get away. So it didn't hurt anymore.

So he couldn't see what he was doing to me.

I stepped to my right, and Stone grabbed my elbows.

"Adora, stop," he said, walking me backward until my spine hit the wall. He pinned me there with his hips so I couldn't move.

But I can't stop. I can't breathe.

I tried to escape before I broke, but it was useless. Another wave of sobs broke through me, and I covered my face to stow away all the things I didn't want him to see. The same truth I'd tried so hard to bury.

Stone grabbed my wrists and pried my hands from my face.

He clutched them tightly in his hands, his dark gaze tracing a path across my features until his eyes landed on mine.

And at this moment, he could see that I was not only the angry daughter motivated by vengeance, or the mermaid who refused to drown in her tears, or the tough woman who put on a brave face each time her heart was raped by injury, or the seamstress who did her best to hold her family together, or the villain who hid her hurt with pain, or the girl who lived in a fairytale because it was easier to tell stories on occasions when reality proved to be too difficult. At this moment, he could see the truth. I was a girl in love with a Heathen.

And my stomach twisted into knots, utterly repulsed with myself.

Why must my heart be a sadistic nutcase.

Here, Stone, it screamed from my chest. *Here's the one thing to completely destroy me.*

"How did this happen to us?" he asked, his voice crestfallen as he lowered himself, holding my gaze. He swiped hair from my wet cheeks and smoothed it down and behind my ears. He then took my head into his hands, propping his thumbs under my jaw, so I had no choice but to look at him. "I never imagined being another thing you wanted to escape from."

With my fists clenched at my sides, I froze—fighting my feelings, resisting them. I squeezed them so hard that my nails sank into my palms, breaking open the scabs.

"Adora," he said as he cleaned mascara from under my eyes with his thumbs. *Gentle, gentle.* "I have spent my entire life convincing myself that I am not a monster. Please, do not make me have to convince you, too."

Warm blood slipped inside my closed fist, and my lips trembled. "You

are a monster."

His brows pulled together. "You don't mean that."

"I want you to leave!"

He shook his head. "I'm not leaving."

I pushed his shoulders and slapped his chest, smearing my blood from my palms across his shirt, forearms, and neck. Stone didn't move. He closed his eyes, claiming the spot with his arms hanging at his sides. When nothing else worked, I screamed.

Then he grabbed me, yanked me to his chest, and slapped his hand over my mouth, breaking my scream in half. He smashed his forehead into mine.

"Stop," he gritted through his clenched teeth, hurt wrapped around his voice. He flexed his jaw, pressing his palm flat against my lips, his eyes sliding between mine. "You're being pathetic right now. I would never hurt you."

I wriggled from his hand and drove my palms into his chest.

Stone fell back a step. And I struck his cheek.

For a second, the room stopped spinning.

Twelve inches separated us as we stared at one another.

Chests heaving, teeth grinding, breathing labored.

We were two enemies desperate for something.

Change. To turn back and start over. A different story.

My vision was blurred, my self-control swayed.

His eyes were hooded, his tenacity bruised.

"You're a Heathen!" I spat in disgust.

His sin-shaped lips set in a harsh line.

His head shook. "And the irony is that I wasn't accursed until I met you."

"Stone," I cried, my voice losing substance. "You're a fucking Heathen."

"No, Adora," he scraped out, gutted, squinting an eye and pointing at me. "No, I'm fucking yours."

Another tear fell from the corner of my eye and raced down my cheek.

He stepped aside, gesturing at the door. "You have two seconds to wake your bore of a fiancé and bring him here to kill me," he said, his voice rising with a blue vein popping in his neck. "If those two seconds pass, and you're still standing there looking like you're mine, I will throw you against *his* wall, rip off your clothes, and claim you in ways your deprived little mind, body, and soul could not even imagine." His chest was heaving, and my eyes were darting from him to the door. "The only restraints I have right now are

respect and decorum, Adora, and both are two seconds from being abandoned."

My mind was utter fog. "You wouldn't dare."

Another second passed.

Stone dropped his arm. "Time's up."

Then he grabbed me by the hips and threw me back against the wall.

His body chased me, crashing into mine.

His hands came down on my face, and his lips came down on my mouth, painfully and punishingly. I tried to fight him off, but he was smashed against me, as if he wished to bind us together and never part.

I pushed my mouth into his, hard, until my teeth cut into his lip, and he inched his head back.

When I opened my eyes, his were drenched in despair and longing. He looked at me like I was a girl who'd stepped off a page in his sketchbook, and he wasn't about to let me go. He looked at me like I was a girl who belonged only to him. He looked at me like he loved me.

I grabbed the back of his neck and stood on my toes, no longer pushing him away but pulling him closer. My lips parted, our tongues collided. We moaned, we melted.

Tingling and dizzy, I sank against the wall and grabbed his waist, hauling him closer until the heat of him surrounded me like a warm blanket. Until there was nothing between us. Not space. Not air. Not sea. Not a covenant. Not a given name.

I felt his heartbeat slam against my breasts.

I felt his cock through his jeans press between my hips.

Stone pushed his fingers through my hair, the tips dragging across my scalp as he deepened the kiss. The kiss that required everything of him. The kiss that took my breath away. And this kiss crawled into my blood, raked my heart, and whispered sweet nothings between the bones of my ribcage. At last, the glass had broken, and we were French kissing in the dangerous pile of it—cut open and bleeding.

"You've hurt me repeatedly," he confessed, his words spilling onto my lips as he pinned my wrists behind my back in one of his hands. "You've hurt me, you've lied to me, and you've let me go, and it's pathetic how I spend every waking moment thinking of you." With the other, he wasted not a second more and lifted my hips off the wall, popped the button on my jeans, unzipped the fly of my jeans, and slid his palm inside my panties, down the

front of my jeans.

Stone's tongue dragged along mine when his long fingers stroked my soaked slit. We both moaned at the feel of it, and I couldn't get close enough, whimpering and climbing to my toes to inhale his lips. Stone lowered, kissing me deeply, fingertips teasing my clit and slick opening.

Neither of us took a breath. No chance to decline or stop or escape this.

My hands flew to the button of his jeans, and Stone fell forward, palm flat against the wall beside my head, caging me in, breathing heavily into my mouth.

I fumbled with his button and fly, shaking and desperate to feel him inside me. I missed him. I missed this. I missed us. The difficulty. The drunkenness. The desperation of it all.

Then his fully erected cock was heavy and pulsing in my hand.

When I wrapped my fingers around it, his palm slid down the wall, brows slanted upward, mouth falling open, euphoria carved into his face. By my touch, he was weak, and I loved how it stole him. How he didn't hide it—couldn't hide it. How the disguise slid off, and he'd become utterly helpless.

I make him feel like this, my heart sang.

Then I was swooped off the ground.

"I've been craving you, Adora, and I intend to kiss you everywhere." Stone cleared off the desk by the opened window, my fountain pen flew, ink spilled, and the clock was bumped off and crashed to the hardwood. He dropped me on the edge and peeled off my jeans as if he were thirsty, aching, and dying.

Winter was slipping into the room, and I started to shiver.

He grabbed my ankles, spread my legs apart, and set my feet flat, my toes curling around the edge of the desk.

My heart was a wild, thrashing beast, and I was at his mercy with a cold draft blowing across my flesh. Then his warm hands came over my thighs, and he lowered, dragging a soft mouth and a greedy tongue up through my soaked slit—deeply, slowly. A fierce, spine-melting crawl that threw my head back.

"Stone," I panted, my breath catching as he took my clit into his mouth.

He trailed soft lips and sucked on my trembling pink flesh and kissed the insides of my thighs. He then stood between my legs, holding my jaw, slipping his tongue into my mouth. And ...

I.

Was.

Set.

Aflame.

“I’ve missed you,” he whispered into my ear. His hips sank between my knees, a sultry safe place, the thick head of his cock nudging my entrance. Like our parts just suddenly found each other and demanded to be connected again.

Stone leaned over me, sliding his hands under my ass, grabbing me, and hauling my spread pussy flush against his warm cock. I sucked in a breath, the sensations insane, maddening, my nerve-endings skinned and exposed.

“This is going to kill me,” I cried in a whisper, my nails sinking into his skin. “I can’t keep doing this and wake up tomorrow and not think of you. I can’t keep doing this then go on without you.”

“Then don’t.” His thumbs slid down my pussy’s edges to my opening, and he kneaded, drawing heavy circles to get me ready as his cock slid over my clit. I knew what was to come, and I was suddenly sucking on his bottom lip, fisting his shirt, yanking him closer, and grinding into his hands as he worked my pussy until my body was spasming with a climbing orgasm.

“Take a breath, Adora,” Stone whispered knowingly into my mouth. He kept my thighs back with his hips as his cock slid through my slit, the bottom of it scraping my bud. His thumb teasingly dipped inside me and circled the rim, and I shook my head with my legs shaking.

I didn’t want to let go. I wanted to hold on forever.

As Stone grinned against my lips, he moved his hooked fingers only an inch inside me. He stroked my flesh, triggering the orgasm himself.

In one fierce breath, the orgasm hit me, seizing my entire being, paralyzing me, liquifying me into a quivering mess in his palm. One of his hands moved up to cradle the back of my head while the other flirted with my orgasm like a tuning fork. My back arched, feeling his lips trace my jawline, my throat, then he kissed my collarbone, where the skin was thin.

He removed his flirtatious fingers and dragged his cock across my warm center, using my climax to coat himself. All my blood had rushed between my legs. My body hadn’t come down, still locked in an orgasm, trapped in a cage of utter bliss as he prodded my opening.

I could feel his warm breath move across my skin to my lips. I grabbed his jaw and kissed him just as he lined himself up. Then his palm smoothed down the back of my thigh, and there he squeezed the flesh and thrust inside

me.

Inch by stretched inch, he filled me to the base.

Stone cursed at the feel of us, and his lips slid lazily down my throat.

At any second, Alice or Cyrus could barge into the room and see a Heathen with his jeans halfway down his ass as he stood between my spread legs. In my imagination, it's Cyrus, and he walks in, but we can't hear him, lost in our fantasy world of utter pleasure. "Adora, what are you doing?" Cyrus asks, sounding from a world away, outside this five-foot radius of perfection Stone and I have created. "You are literally my other half. Why are you fucking a Heathen?" But I'm incredibly selfish and consumed by Stone. All I hear is the slamming of Stone's heart. All I feel is the way we're bound to each other, as we should always be. All I see are cosmic black eyes. All I smell is crisp winter air. And all I taste are his soft, swollen lips. "Adora! ... Adora! ... Adora!" Cyrus screams, but *Stone, Stone, Stone,* my heart echoes. Besides, hearts should never have to apologize for feeling the same as the night should never have to apologize for breathing.

The thought made me tear away from Stone's mouth and gasp for air.

"We shouldn't do this." I had to pry the words out of me. "He's my Finneuma," I confessed, not wanting to say another man's name at a time like this. "I'm fated to be with him. He's my soulmate, Stone."

Stone paused mid-grind.

He looked at me, benumbed, sweat sliding down his hairline.

"Soulmate?" he asked, surprised.

I couldn't handle the look in his hooded eyes, so I cast mine away.

"Soulmate," Stone repeated, steering my chin with his thumb until our gazes locked again. His lips were apple-red and swollen when he looked at me. He shook his head, grabbed the back of mine, and pressed our heads together. "Haven't I ever told you?"—he thrust inside me—"Soulmates are overrated." His hand turned into a fist at my scalp as he nailed his cock to the hilt, grinding inside me, keeping us bound together in every way he could so I was forced to feel him everywhere.

We kissed hungrily and desperately, teeth scraping flesh, skin slick with sweat. Hands were ripping off shirts until my breast was in his palm, the pad of his thumb grazing my erect nipple. My jaw fell open, and he sank his tongue back into my mouth until I was a trembling ocean in his arms.

Another orgasm was climbing, attacking my insides. Stone stood straight, his hands flying to my clit. I wriggled against his hold, the feeling already too

intense.

“Stone,” I screamed, scratching the oak wood.

But his eyes were raping my pink center, consumed by the sight of the pad of his thumb stroking my clit, the sight of his scarred cock inching inside me, dragging out, then pushing back in. He smashed my clit against his mound, and utter pleasure had a hold on me, my whole body charged. I bit the inside of my cheek to supress a cry.

Stone’s eyes sailed up to mine before he came down on me, anchoring us together. “Our souls know no boundaries,” he whispered, burying his cock inside me and grinding. “If he was truly your soulmate, why am I here right now and not him? Why am I the one who makes you feel like this?”

I shook my head, an intense cry falling from my mouth as the desk banged against the wall, another climax racing to the brink. The bottle I was supposed to throw into the sea wobbled on the shelf the same way a string of lights wrapped around my bones, bundling inside of me, a tangled mess, every bulb on and shining bright, tripping me toward the edge of the cliff.

I watched the message in my bottle go down as my body free-fell, heading straight for the climax. Blood floating, heart pounding, mind weak, we were all falling.

Then we crashed to the floor, my message and me, a blown fuse, shattering and scattering. A spine-tingling mess and a pile of broken glass. At once, the bell chimed throughout the castle, indicating it was the witching hour.

Stone reached under my ass, squeezing the flesh with a delicious grind that kept me trapped in the never-ending land of ecstasy.

My orgasm convulsed, and it caught Stone’s breath.

He kissed me slowly, passionately until the orgasm was stealing him, too.

Then his forehead fell onto mine as he hungrily rolled his hips until his cock pulsed inside me, and a curse tumbled off his tongue.

He tensed up, his body stiff. Then when the orgasm released him, goosebumps covered his skin and black eyes fell on me. We didn’t want to let go, sweaty foreheads connected, staring at each other as we heaved for a breath.

“You didn’t answer, darling,” he panted.

“I don’t know the answer,” I whispered.

“What do you know then?”

I turned my head away, wishing I was brave enough to say it.

I knew I loved the feel of silk on my legs after shaving them. I knew I loved it when a dress fit perfectly on a woman's body. I knew I loved old films, vintage pieces, and one-of-a-kind things. And I knew I loved how he touched me, whether it be his fingers, his tongue, his lips. Surely, I could even admit it all out loud. But I could never confess that I knew I was deeply, madly and passionately in love with him.

In the end, it wouldn't do either one of us any good.

"After knowing the truth, I thought you would hate me forever," I said.

"I do hate you." His words were hot steam on my lips as he guided my hand to the nape of his neck for me to hold as he fucked me slowly. His mouth moved like depressed clouds over my lips, my cheek, my ear. "And I hate the nauseating scent you left behind at the lighthouse and the scars you left behind on me. I hate your eyes, your smile, and how awful you taste. And these hideous lips of yours." He brushed his thumb across my bottom lip. "They're repulsive, and I have not stopped thinking about them."

He smiled, his arm snaking around my back, and he picked me up off the desk, my legs instantly wrapping around his waist. His hand slid from my scalp down my spine before squeezing my ass, both palms spreading my cheeks wide as he rocked me, my pussy hungrily stroking his scarred shaft. My lips trailed down his throat in a satisfactory moan, and I clung on to his neck, crushing my breasts to his chest, tasting earth and salt on his skin.

From the corner of my eye, the letter lay on the floor in a pile of broken glass.

To my beloved black sea,

You're mine, you're mine, you're mine, you're mine, you're mine, you're mine, you're mine, you're mine, you're mine, you're mine, you're mine ... and I think I might love you ...

xx, a

I FACED HIM AGAIN. "STONE?"

"Hmm?" he murmured.

"There's an empty chamber in the tunnel close to where it leads out to the cave. Tomorrow night, meet me at the witching hour."

“How do I find it?”

I grinned. “You’re the element of Earth, Heathen. I’m sure you can figure it out.”

His eyes were hooded and heavy when he kissed me. And our mouths moved lazily together—lips sleepy, drunk, unable to part.

Outside, the lighthouse beam rotated, penetrating the dirty paned window. It shone its light on us, two bodies tangled together, unable to part.

So, we clung to each other until we were forced to let go.

The Heathen and his siren, with rebellion in our veins.

SIREN & THE SAPPHIRE

ALEC & CIRCE

ALEC'S BOAT BOBBED IN THE DISTANCE AS HE WAITED ON THE DESOLATE shore outside the cave. The ghastly moon peeked through bars of crawling gray clouds as the lighthouse beam slid across his chest every seven seconds.

It was a cold night—perhaps the coldest night of the season—yet Alec endured the cold as he would bear any other challenge standing in his way.

I'm only a lighthouse keeper, Alec thought, never expecting a purpose beyond this. He never thought to love. He never thought of one day having a family. He never thought it was possible to live the rest of his days having more than being alone.

Of course, he had hoped. *Oh*, had he hoped for a poor keeper such as himself to fill the austere lighthouse with love and laughter. However, with hope came disappointment, and Alec had known never to open his heart for it to be torn to pieces. Until Circe. He may not have a suitable house for her to call home, rich bed linens for her to lay her head, or money to purchase all she desired. But he had an island, a boat, his entire heart, and a lifetime of adventure.

The witching hour had passed. Alec was growing anxious, retracing his steps in the sand, when down the shoreline, three bodies were pacing toward him along the cliff. They had hoods pulled over their heads so he could not see their faces.

Alec dipped into the cave, peeking around the bend to catch glimpses of the intruders' features. The position brought memories of when Circe and him first kissed.

Then the moon's light reflected off the sapphire.

"Circe," Alec whispered.

Relief filled him, and he sprinted toward his love, feet sliding and sand spraying the air. And at the sight of Alec, Circe dropped her things on the cold beach and ran to him.

The two crashed into each other like it was a monumental thing, like two stars crashing into each other. Alec pulled off her hood as her hair cascaded down and around her. He grabbed her face and kissed her, and when the two broke away, Alec inched back to grab her belongings. "A second more, and I would wake the entire town to find you."

That was when he remembered the two other bodies.

One was the maid, Lacie.

The other was a child.

Alec froze, a surprised grin stealing his face. "Who's this?" His eyes darted back to Circe as complete shock distorted his features. "Why is a child with you?"

Circe laid a hand on the child's shoulder and pulled her close to her side. "This is my daughter, Hedera Sotiras Cantini," she said. "Hedera, wipe off the sour face and say hi."

Alec's gaze bounced between Hedera and Circe as he crouched down.

It all became apparent why she'd left for days, sometimes weeks at a time. It was why she was so hesitant to live with him on the island, and why she endured abuse from the inside of a man's hand. She had a daughter. She was responsible for a beautiful little girl.

In an instant, Circe's entire world had become his.

Alec held out his hand to the child with midnight hair and two blue moons in her eyes. "Miss, my name is Alec." But Hedera just stared, not taking the stranger's hand. Alec hooked a thumb toward his boat, amused by her stubbornness, which he thought had been passed down from her mother. "Have you ever been on a boat before?"

Hedera remained silent, studying the man's face, deciding whether he was kind.

Alec's voice lowered to a whisper. Like he was to tell her the biggest secret of all. "When you're swaying in the middle of the Atlantic, it looks

like the stars have fallen right out of the sky to sleep on top of the ocean. It's a beautiful sight, watching the stars tucked inside the waves and rocked by the sea. And if it were up to me, I would have it always be nighttime just to admire it for hours while the whole world sleeps."

Hedera's brows squished together. "But there're monsters in the nighttime."

Alec grinned, shaking his head. "That's what the monsters want you to believe," he said. "But these monsters you speak of can only come out when you're deep into slumber. It's what they call nightmares."

"Alec!" Circe said, slapping him on the shoulder with her bag. "Quite an imagination you have. Not two seconds, and you're already frightening her."

Alec chuckled, fixing himself upright. "It's okay, I have a secret weapon."

"A secret weapon?" Hedera asked, eyes wide, brows touching the sky.

"You see the lighthouse beam?" Alec turned to his right just as the lighthouse beam circled again. "I keep it on so when your mother's here with you, she knows I'm thinking about her, and so she can always find her way back to me. And now the same holds true for you." Alec grabbed her hands and guided her closer to him. He pointed at the lighthouse, their faces side-by-side. "It's magic and powerful enough to see from the other side of Weeping Hollow, and in your nightmares—"

"But what if I don't make it in time?"

Despite the dark cloud that loomed in his chest, Alec smiled. "Even if you don't make it, and your soul leaves this body, the beam will still be on for you until the three of us are together again."

Hedera crossed her arms. "Oh, but what if it takes a hundred years?"

Alec's smile reached his soul. "Why, then this beam must shine for a hundred years."

"You promise?"

Alec looked into the little girl's eyes, loathing the idea of swearing an oath he wasn't certain he had the power to keep.

"I promise to do everything I can," he said.

A man shouted in the distance. All four gazes followed the direction it had come from. At the other end of the beach, beneath the Cantini castle, flames from lanterns and torches glowed like fireflies in the night.

"It's too late. They're coming," Lacie said. "There isn't enough time. We must go back."

“Follow me.” Alec swiped up bags from the sand and clutched Hedera’s little hand. The four of them sprinted across the beach until they reached the cave, and once they were tucked safely inside, their breaths echoed off its walls. Alec turned to Circe. “Go to the boat and wait for me on Bone Island. I will take care of this and meet you there.”

“That’s maddening,” Circe cried. “There are too many of them and only one of you. They will kill you, Alec. And they won’t stop there. They will surely spot the boat and come for us next. I cannot let them take Hedera from me.”

“And let you both return to a monster? How do you expect that of me, then assume I would just wait on an island for you, knowing both of your lives are in danger?”

Circe stared up at him. “We have no other choice.”

He took her head into his hands, his heart pounding. He kissed her cheek, her lips, and pushed his mouth into her ear so Hedera and the maid wouldn’t hear. “I love you, Circe,” he said passionately, almost angrily. “That’s why I have to demand that you take Hedera, get in the boat, and be on your way to Bone Island so I can rip Cantini’s heart out of his bloody chest.”

Circe leaned back, their gazes falling together.

“No one’s ever fought for me,” she said, her voice shattered.

He cupped her face, pushing his forehead to hers. “I would burn down the castle for you, and if I must, I would burn down the entire town.” He swiped her hair back from her face. “I’ve spent almost four hundred days falling in love with you from a distance. I finally have you in my arms, and we’re so close to forever. Circe, we’re so close,” he said in a harsh, suffocating breath. “This is the only option for me because I cannot breathe without you. If anything happens to you—” Alec’s emotion stole his words.

A sea of tears slid down Circe’s cheeks.

There was only one thing she could do.

She ripped the sapphire from its setting and grabbed Alec’s palm.

“What are you doing?” he asked, confused, panicked.

She used the jagged corner of the stone to slice open his palm, then did the same to her own as Alec froze in shock. Blood oozed out, spilling down the edge of their palms and dripping from their wrists.

“Mother!” Hedera cried, horror appearing in her youthful eyes.

Lacie held her close to her chest, stroking her hair. “*Shh,* child.”

“Circe, why are you doing this?” Alec held the back of Circe’s neck,

trying to catch her gaze. “Answer me.”

“The beam is your weapon, but this stone is mine,” Circe said, taking his hand and cupping the stone between their cut-open palms. Circe’s eyes lifted to his. “You will return to the lighthouse without me, Alec.” A tear chased one after another. “I will ensure that you live a happy and fulfilling life. You will not know pain. You will not know sorrow. You *will* breathe easy. As will I.”

“No.” Panic washed over Alec. “Circe, please don’t do this!”

“I won’t risk your life. I can’t lose you either. And I can’t walk away from you, knowing we’ll both live in misery while apart.” Circe cried. “You deserve peace and happiness.” She fell back on her heel and shrugged. “You are the man I love, Alec. I’m eternally yours, no matter how long it takes until we’re together again.”

Emotion flooded Alec, and his throat tightened, tears gathering in his eyes. He opened his mouth to speak, but nothing would come out. So, he cupped the nape of her neck and pulled her close, pressing his mouth to the shell of her ear, squeezing his eyes closed. A single tear fell from the corner of his eye.

“And I’m eternally yours, my darling siren,” he whispered on an exhale. A breath. Like a secret. But it was no secret at all because his gentle confession beamed loud inside them.

They held on to each other for a moment longer, then Circe closed her eyes and whispered a spell to link their souls together, the sapphire their bond.

The sapphire glowed between their hands, lighting the cave in an underwater-world shade of blue. Kaleidoscopic spotlights bounced off the

WALLS LIKE STARS, AND HEDERA AND LACIE MARVELED AT THE SIGHT.

Circe’s musical whispers filled the cave, a siren’s call. This bewitched Alec in ways he’d never thought possible and in ways Circe never thought to use on the man she loved. “Conspirare. Perspirare. Inspirare,” she sang, transferring all her magic into the stone. “Breathe together, breathe through, breathe into you.” To be together in spirit while apart was the only way until they could meet again. So they felt agony nevermore. So they felt misery nevermore. “Ontil thy finneuma.”

This was the last time Alec heard the sound of Circe’s voice.

When the sapphire swallowed up the light and all was dim again, it took a moment for him to catch his bearings. His eyes adjusted, his legs strengthened, and he reached out and held Circe's face in his wounded hand.

Then Circe kissed him hard, deeply, as though to leave a phantom stamp in their hearts. And Alec kissed her slowly, passionately. She was his past, his present, his future.

"Mother!" Hedera cried, and her daughter's voice pulled her away from Alec.

"We must go now!" Lacie insisted, watching as Circe placed the sapphire back into the setting. "This way through the secret passage in the tunnel."

Circe turned back to Alec and looked into his eyes, wishing she never had to let go.

"I'll wait for you," Alec said, fingers intertwined, never wanting to part. "I'll wait at the top of the tower with your beam on for an eternity if that's what it takes." A promise. An oath. A vow. "Every night when you see the light, think of me."

And these were the last words Alec had spoken to Circe.

In fact, these were the last words Alec had spoken at all.

CHAPTER 46

STONE

JANUARY 20, 2021
11 DAYS UNTIL THE CANTINI-SULLIVAN WEDDING

THE SLUMBERING TOWN OF WEEPING HOLLOW WAS FROZEN IN FEAR.

In the middle of Town Square, snow covered the gazebo like a fur coat. No longer was it a structure where people could rest, read, or do as they pleased. In the midst of a cruel winter, the gazebo had become a creature on four legs, stalking with white, milky eyes, bared teeth, and fur made of snow, the wind's howl its growl. It had forced flatlanders indoors, under eaves, and on stoops, where they were bundled together in piles, the cold muting their whispers and robbing heat from their every breath. This snow blanketed winding cobbled streets, and draped every gas lamp post, which had long been forsaken by the lamplighter.

The four of us strolled deeper into the square, bracing balletic snowflakes that leapt and twirled and performed pirouettes in our faces before they, almost affectionately, brushed our blue lips and lay to rest on our shoulders. We were quiet as we walked, the cold forcing my mind to drift to forbidden places.

As I thought of her, my gaze wandered to my left, past the storefronts, on the eastside horizon, among a slew of smoke-heaving chimneys puffing into gray cloudy skies, to where the Cantini Manor formidably cast its shadow.

For almost a week, my days had been spent helping Zephyr manage

Goody Estate, care for the coven, and search for anything the others could have missed about the Shadows in the founders' journals.

My nights had been spent with Adora in the tunnels, folding ourselves together beside a fire and reading chapters of Alec & Circe, pretending she wasn't to be married, and I wasn't a Heathen from an opposing coven.

I resented how fast the night passed. Each time morning arrived, I awoke in bed at the Goody property, her missing from my arms as though the night I'd spent with her had never happened. The wedding was fast approaching, and everything between us was about to change.

I ripped my eyes away from Cantini Manor and slipped inside Mina Mae's Diner, following Julian, Phoenix, and Beck to a table in the back corner. Down parkas, cashmere scarves, and matching earmuffs occupied nearly every other table. Chapped faces thawed over a steaming cup of coffee, contemptuous gazes watching us as I slid into the booth beside Julian.

"We're definitely not in Kansas anymore," Beck muttered across from me in the corner, blowing hot air into his ragged cotton gloves that hardly kept his hands warm, then rubbing them together close to his face.

Mina Mae was granted a generator for the purpose of opening her doors to raise money for the less fortunate.

Julian had insisted it would be an opportunity for us to show our support for Mina and the town. However, by the nerves in their expressions, I could see that perhaps it wasn't such a wise idea after all.

A girl approached the table. She was small, no taller than five feet high and sucking on a pen. Boy-like jeans thrice the size too big hung from her hips, dark hair hit at her chest under a baseball cap, and *Cleo* was printed in the enamel pinned to her shirt on her breast.

"You're new," she said, staring at me with brown eyes that were much kinder than her tone. She took the pen out of her mouth. "What do you want?"

Julian nudged his chin. "Just four coffees will do."

Beck gave him a stern, disapproving look. "What? No hotcakes?"

"No hotcakes," Julian confirmed, his eyes scouring the restaurant. "I doubt we'll be staying long enough to eat them."

Then Cleo walked off, holes in her jeans running down the length of her legs.

"Hey, Romeo," Phoenix barked across from me, throwing a sugar packet in my face. "Mina will have your ass if she catches you looking at her like

that.”

“I was not ogling,” I explained, throwing the packet back at him. “Is she Mina’s daughter?”

“No.” Julian leaned back, crossed his arms over his chest, and hid his mouth behind his fingers. Beck and Phoenix exchanged glances, and Julian continued, “Mina took her in when she was six after both of her parents died twelve years ago.”

I scanned their ominous expressions. “What happened to her parents?”

Julian laid his hand on the table, looking down at his fingers.

“I killed them,” he said, tapping his thumb.

“She doesn’t know,” Beck rushed to say. “No one knows. Cleo’s just always been a grumpy pain in the ass. According to Cleo, Mina, and everyone else, her parents skipped town and left her behind.”

“Like how everyone else skipped town or disappeared,” I said, disapproval in every space between.

Julian leaned in. “I was thirteen. It was not long after my father’s execution. I didn’t want to kill them. I’ve never wanted to kill anyone. There’s a lot you don’t know, and a lot you weren’t here for.”

I raked my hair back. “I’m assuming these are secrets that stay between the five of us.”

Julian’s seriousness crowded his features. “If the town knew the truth of the things we’ve done, we would all burn for them.”

“I’m tired of sugar coating the truth, alright?” Phoenix leaned in with agitation stirring inside him. “Your mother did this,” he said in absolution. “She found a way to control Julian’s shadow-blood and used him to kill these people. That’s the truth, Romeo.” He fell back into the booth.

I’d read this in the journal, and I’d forgotten the lengths she’d gone to break the curse. “She visited me when I arrived on Bone Island. She wanted me to find a way to bring her back.”

Julian chuckled. “Not resting in peace in the afterlife, is she?”

Their voices faded as coffee arrived.

In town, their demeanor transformed. Relaxed to uncomfortable.

In town, they’d never let anyone look at their faces for long. I couldn’t decide if it was a habit or an insecurity about the way they looked or how others saw them. They often hid under hoods, behind coat collars, and if nothing else, behind their hands or fingers. They were forced to pretend to be hardy, resolute Heathens whose strength and confidence far outweighed their

feelings in front of the Order and Sacred Sea. Then, in public, it seemed, they still wore masks, even when they no longer needed to.

However, when the five of us were alone at the Goody Estate, they felt at ease, as though they could breathe. Like the way Adora made me feel.

Phoenix set his black coffee on the table, his gold eyes amused. “So, Romeo. Are we going to talk about where you always sneak off to in the middle of the night?”

I wiped my bottom lip with the pad of my thumb. “My indiscretions do not concern you in the slightest.”

Julian raised a brow. “Isn’t she living with Cyrus now?”

“The more one says you can’t have it, the more you crave it.”

He shook a sugar packet, an appalled grin stretching across his face. “You must have a death wish.”

“Yes, I’ve been told this once before.”

Beck lifted his chin. “Are you in love with her or something?”

All three pairs of eyes were on me.

“Or something,” I replied. “She’s all I can think about. When I’m not with her, it feels like a hammer is constantly crushing the bones in my chest.” I scanned the table, seeing all their faces twisted with amusement. “What?”

“Yeah, you’re fucked.” Phoenix laughed. “You’ve fallen in love, and you don’t even know it. And with a Sullivan?” he added, pressing a palm to his chest. “Talk about the brutality of self-inflicted pain.”

“It’s not love. It’s obsession,” I corrected him.

Phoenix shrugged, bringing the coffee to his mouth. “I call it love. You call it obsession. It’s all the same.”

I leaned over, tapping a finger on the table to get his attention. “I’ve spent twenty-four years alone with my head hot in a sack and my cock cold in my trousers, close to zero human interaction. She’s the only girl who’s shown me an ounce of attention. It’s obsession, not love,” I repeated, falling back into the booth. “I could never love someone who wouldn’t choose me.”

Phoenix nodded. “Good, don’t see her again,” he said, all humor leaving the table. Like they’d been testing me this entire time. “You saw what happened to me. There are plenty of girls in Norse Woods at your disposal. You want Cleo or another flatlander? Fine, but not Sacred Sea, man. It’s not worth getting your skull crushed in or burned to ash over.”

“All right, moving on,” Julian interrupted. “Last night, while Romeo here was fraternizing with the enemy”—I closed my eyes and shook my head

—“Zeph and I were brainstorming, and I think we may have a way we can communicate with the Shadows.”

“Speak of the devil,” Beck muttered, looking toward the front entrance.

My attention followed until it slammed into Adora.

She was standing by the door, tiny braids in her long blonde hair, wrapped in a fur coat, and the fool’s arm disappearing beneath it. He was standing close, too close, his mouth pressed against her ear. And she was smiling.

“Dammit,” Julian whispered, and I could feel him watching me from the corner of his eye. But then the insignificant fool leaned down and kissed the corner of her perfect mouth.

Suddenly, I felt sick.

Suddenly, something was burning under my skin.

Suddenly, my fingers were stretching and closing into fists.

“Don’t do anything stupid,” Phoenix hissed. “There are too many people here.”

My blood boiled, and their voices fell behind the sound of my pulse beating in my ears. *“Romeo.” “Danvers.” “Stone.”* Then my mind was provoking me, making me see things that couldn’t be real. *The room spins in a swirl of amused faces caught in a frenzy of sordid eyes and sardonic laughter. And their laughter doesn’t stop. Their laughter only grows louder and louder, fingers pointing down at my table—the one I’m sitting at. I look down to where they’re pointing, seeing my slaughtered heart lay, dismembered and crying and bleeding before me. “Looks like someone forgot to take their heart off the table,” Adora says with an artful smile, sliding into the booth across from me. Then she withdraws her dagger and stabs my heart, blood squirting across my cheek. “Let’s eat.”*

And then air was sucked from the room.

I snatched up my coat just as Phoenix leaned over and snatched me up by my shirt at my chest. “Use your fucking brain,” he said through clenched teeth.

I ripped myself from his grasp and stalked toward the door, my vision in a fog. I didn’t stop until I blew past the charming couple and my palms hit the exit, shoving the door open. Cold air rushed into my face, and I threw my hands on top of my head, trying to find oxygen. I walked to the side of the diner and pinned my back against the brick.

“I thought for sure you were going to lay into him,” Julian said, the three

of them coming up beside me. Not Adora. Never Adora.

“If I stayed a second longer, I would have.” I turned to look Phoenix in the eye. “She’s been mine for over two bloody months and she was mine last night. The last thing I want to see is another man’s hands on her. It’s poison and brings on a vile imagination.” I blew out a breath and dropped my head back against the brick. “I’ll have to leave Weeping Hollow. I won’t be able to survive.”

Phoenix laid a hand on my shoulder. “You don’t have a choice.”

I looked at him, irritated, dumbfounded. “What are you talking about?”

“The chance of you ever seeing the world again was taken away the second your frozen ass crossed the border back into Weeping Hollow over a hundred years ago. If you’re a descendant of the founders, you can’t leave once you return. I can’t leave. Julian, Beck, Zeph can’t leave. Fuck, Adora can’t leave ... We’re all stuck here.”

Julian rested his shoulder against the brick beside me. “I’m sorry, Stone, but it’s true.”

“If this is true, how could my mother leave?”

“Because,” Beck said, “your mother isn’t a descendant of a founding family, so she was able to leave, and she left before you were born. Now that you’re where you belong, the town will keep you.”

It felt as though an entire ocean had poured down my throat, drowning my head, my chest, and my lungs. I turned, laying my palms on the brick, grinding my jaw, muscles spasming under my flesh as this anger brewed inside me.

For an earth man, being trapped was a hell. Not only could I never see the rest of the world, the land, the mountain landscape again, I was forced to live among Adora and her dashing fiancé.

Rage in its entirety overcame me at the thought, and I curled my hands into fists, my nails scraping down the brick as a wild groan left my throat.

Then my fist pulled back and plunged into the brick wall, clay crumbling beneath it.

CHAPTER 47

STONE

SINCE GOODY ESTATE HAD ENOUGH SPACE AND ROOMS FOR AN ENTIRE COVEN, this was where I'd been staying, and mostly like where I would be staying until I could find a permanent solution. While Eleanor had been gracious enough to open her doors to Ocean and me, it was never meant to last. And I especially couldn't see Eleanor and Kioni each day, look in their eyes, knowing I was the one responsible for taking Winta's life.

One night, Clarence had drunk too much whiskey and stolen my ear to indulge in the history of Goody Estate, his most prized possession. The Greek Revival and Italianate style mansion had a white exterior, black shutters, black iron railings, multi-level wrap-around porches, and massive white square columns surrounding the fifty-something-thousand square foot home. And I'd only ventured into less than five percent of it, spending most of my time in the library.

Outside, an assortment of trees draped lawns, gardens, and a lake with a footbridge, and I imagined the array of color during the fall season to be artwork.

Julian, Beck, and Phoenix left me in the entry hall, advising me to do my best to keep blood off the original hardwood. Under the brass chandelier, I cradled my hand, flexing my fingers, my skin ripped open on every knuckle.

Zephyr's sister, Winnifred, appeared, walking toward me, carrying a handkerchief and gauze. She was taller than Adora by an inch or two. Julian had warned me about her, referring to her as a promiscuous creature with a sexual appetite and many personalities. The others mentioned finding a distraction, but my only thought, my only fantasy, my only desire was Adora. It seemed the obsession had left my cock and traveled to my brain.

Winnifred took my hand into hers and dabbed my knuckles.

“What happened?” she asked with a sensual drawl.

“A girl.”

She smiled. “It’s always a girl.”

“So the story goes.”

She finished wrapping my bandage, then draped my arm around her waist, laying my palm on her hip as she pressed her breasts up against my chest. Her other bold hand pressed up against my cock, and her eyes opened wide, her mouth falling open. “Monstrous,” she purred, massaging the front of my pants. “My room is next to yours. I can make you feel better, take care of you. Whenever you want, whatever you need.”

I grabbed her wrist and turned until her body moved with her. “You’re not a fraction of the woman I want, nor could you satisfy or handle what I need,” I said into her ear, squeezing her wrist tightly. “Touch me again, and I’ll accept your offer, use this cock to break your jaw and rearrange your stomach, then drop you off at the morgue so Fallon can put you back together again.” I released her and adjusted myself. Winnifred looked at me stunned, so I held my wounded hand in the air. “Ah yes, and my deepest gratitude for the bandage.”

“You’re an asshole,” she said as I stalked off.

Nearly every door in the mansion was eleven feet tall. The heavy oak door at the back of the house, where the other Heathens were waiting, was no exception.

When we entered, the sweet and smoky aroma of tobacco, vintage leather, and cedar noir comforted me as the others sat in regal Gothic thrones around a circular table. Clarence was already present with his back turned to us, admiring a library of wooden cigar boxes made of Spanish cedar tucked into slots on the back wall. Not an inch was wasted.

“Your father was the last to sit in that chair, Danvers,” Clarence said, closing a box and sliding it back into its resting place. “Go on, take your seat, son.”

There were two empty chairs almost identical, apart from a few features.

They were both medieval-like with deep ornate hand-carvings into the mahogany, the cushioned seat and back upholstered in tufted ebony leather. But one of the chairs was flanked by sculptural spider arm rests, with the Earth symbol carved into the wooden back above the leather. An upside triangle slashed by a horizontal line. The other chair was intended for the

high priest.

I took a seat, sliding my palms down the cool wood of the armrests as energy buzzed through me. I lifted my head and looked around the circle.

All four of them were staring at me, Beck with tears in his eyes, Phoenix trying to conceal his, Julian a relieved grin, Zephyr an approving nod.

We all felt at ease. The end of a long, tiring battle we'd all fought in our own ways. Neither of us could hide it, deny it, or push it away.

"For our entire lives, we've been staring at an empty chair," Beck choked, then pinched the corners of his eyes. Julian leaned over and grabbed his shoulder. "Seeing you sitting there ... *fuck*." He wiped a palm down his face. "None of us ever thought it was possible, but we couldn't let go. And I don't know what we were holding on to. Hope. The hollow. Hell, I don't know, but we couldn't let go."

"*Aww*, baby Beck," Zephyr cooed. "You sentimental softy."

"Beck's right," Julian stated. "This is a big moment for us at a time we needed you the most. With Stone completing the circle, we now have the ability to access magic we've never been able to access before."

Clarence took his seat, his straight white hair curtaining his face. "Go on."

Julian nudged his chin toward Zephyr. "Zeph, your idea. You're up."

Zephyr had his ankle crossed on his knee, elbows resting above each side of a moth's wing, fingertips pressed together near his visible mouth. "What we do know is that the Shadows are five ripples of smoke that are killing people in their sleep. I have a theory that they are accessing their dreams because it's easier when a person isn't conscious. Which means they're weak. Either way, we can't kill them in the shadow state. We tried. With Stone, the earth element, the revolving door, I think there may be a way we can access a dimension we've never accessed before.

"You want to access people's dreams? Get into their heads?" Clarence leaned back, amused. "Yes, this certainly sounds like an idea you would come up with."

"We can cross from one dream dimension to another in search of the Shadows. In this state, they could take on different forms. Something whole, tangible. Something to wrap my bloody hands around," Zephyr clarified. "I know it's possible. I've seen it before in one of the books. The Heathen Athenaeum should have what we need."

157 years ago, I would have thought the idea to be absurd, but if there

was a way to protect Adora from these Shadows the town was so afraid of, I'd do anything. "With everyone refusing to sleep, we can use this to our advantage. The fewer minds we have access to, the better."

"Stone's right," Zephyr agreed. "This narrows it down."

Clarence stood. "There's only one way to find out if it's possible."

The others walked with him to the cigar wall.

I followed, and the room fell quiet.

Clarence reached for a box, slipped a fingertip into a crevice, and slowly pulled until there was a *click*. "Pull too hard, you'll sound the alarm."

The center of the cigar wall pushed back on its own, then slid to the left, revealing a hidden passage.

Clarence walked through first, and I walked through last, the six of us in a single file line through the passage and down a spiraling staircase.

Phoenix whipped his head around, a mischievous grin growing. "Welcome to the Heathen Athenaeum."

I marveled at the two-story room hidden underground just as Phoenix sparked flames in the massive masonry fireplace on the opposite wall.

Dark, aged brick with wood detailing surrounded it and stretched from one side of the wall to the other. Melted candlesticks and lanterns stacked on the hearth.

On the other side, from where we were descending, were two levels of bookshelves packed tightly from the ceiling to the floor. Bordering it was an iron railing with scroll detail along the upper level, and the same design descended down the matching spiral staircases on each side.

In the middle of the room, on the lower level, were two sunken-in leather couches facing one another and five mahogany desks surrounding them, papers and scrolls strewn across.

When we reached the lower level, an apothecary was tucked into the wall on the right. Dozens of bottles glowed inside with labels dated and worn from the passing years. To my left, a wall of portraits in antique frames.

The wall of portraits drew me in, and on this wall, all but five men had their faces covered. One portrait in particular stood out to me. This man was wearing a mask, his eyes the color of the night sky. Under his portrait was a plaque with the name Foster Danvers, and then 1836.

"That's your father," Zephyr said, appearing at my side. "And this here without a mask is your grandfather. One of the five men who started it all here in Weeping Hollow."

“I always wondered what my father looked like,” I confessed. “I thought perhaps if I knew what he looked like, I’d know what I looked like.” I bowed my head and adjusted my stance to try and contain myself, then looked back up at the man who gave me life. “I never thought him to be cursed, too. It seems we looked the same after all.” I turned to Zephyr. “Do you know what happened to him?”

Grasping his hip bones, Zephyr swung his eyes to me. “We were told from an ancestor that your mother was desperate to break the curse.” He looked back at the portrait of my father. “When she found out she was pregnant with you, she abandoned Foster. I suppose he couldn’t go on without her.” He sighed. “From what I know about him, he was a good man.”

Behind us, the volume in Julian’s voice multiplied.

“You stole all this magic?” he demanded to know.

Zephyr and I exchanged glances before falling back to find out what he was talking about.

“I have not stolen magic,” Clarence countered, locking the case and dropping a key into his pocket. “It’s magic I’ve been saving, and magic you’ve always had full access to. Do not question my intentions, Blackwell.”

Julian gestured toward the other Heathens. “It was magic *extracted* out of the four of us through torture. And for what?”

Clarence’s eyes narrowed. “You have to trust me. I am on your side.”

“And I’m on theirs,” Julian said, his voice calming as he tried to control his emotions. “While the coven treats us as objects, it is my job to remind the Heathens of their humanity. Please, do not patronize me, the one you torture —tearing the flesh off his bones—and tell me you’re on my side.” He raked his fingers through his hair, shaking his head. “It is true, you put the coven first, as my father would have wanted, but it is my job to put the Heathens first.”

Silence swelled in the room.

I’d come to know the dynamics of the coven. Though Clarence was the high priest and the ultimate decision maker for the coven, Julian was the voice of the Heathens. Each day, he was the one to check in on Beck, Zephyr, Phoenix, and me. He was the strength the others looked to when theirs had faltered. He was the rock. He was the soul.

Beck was the heart. Despite how equally intimidating each of them seemed to others, and how often they’d fought and disagreed among themselves, all three of them had a weak spot for Beck, the youngest. Since

living with them, I have not witnessed any of them raise their voice to Beck, mock him, or humiliate him. It was as if they knew Beck would be affected by it much differently.

Zephyr, the mind, was always the calm, reasonable one when everything got too loud and chaotic. Out of all the Heathens, I surprisingly felt the most at ease with him. Perhaps it was the mask he wore that brought me comfort. Perhaps it was the way he spoke and the subjects we discussed. At times, we often were the only ones in the room who understood what the other was saying.

And Phoenix was the spirit. He brought life, truth, and motivation.

It was fascinating to watch the way they moved about, none of them realizing their roles. But as I looked upon the four of them, my only thought was where did I fit in?

Julian took a breath. “It is our right to know, Clarence. What is it you’re not telling us?”

Clarence looked at Beck. “Go on, Parish. It’s time to tell him.”

Julian’s brows were bunched, confusion obscuring his expression.

In the Heathen Athenaeum, only the crackling fire and the clock cared not to wait. The rest of us were counting the seconds to hear from Beck.

Beck reluctantly turned to Julian. “Over the last few years, I’ve had premonitions.”

Julian lifted his chin. “What kind of premonitions?”

“War,” Beck said in an ominous tone. “I don’t know when, and I’m not exactly sure why, but a war is coming. And now that the curse is broken, I can only assume it will be a war for power.” Julian stood frozen, as did the other Heathens as well. Beck continued, “One decision can cause a domino effect, setting this process in motion, Julian. If that happens, we can’t stop it. And I fear this domino effect will begin with the Shadows.”

Julian turned to Phoenix and Zephyr. “Did you two know about this?”

They both shook their heads, and the energy in the room shifted when Julian faced Beck again. “Why haven’t you told me?” Julian seemed hurt, bruised. But then a knowing dawned on his face, and he threw his head back and looked at the ceiling. “You couldn’t tell me because someone I care about is dying,” he gathered, then looked at Beck again. “Am I right?” Fear slowly stole Julian’s face, his silver eyes turning lethal. “Who’s dying, Beck? Fallon? Agatha? Jolie?”

Beck shook his head. “Don’t do this.”

Julian flexed his jaw and raised his brow. “Is it Fallon?”

“We made a deal, man.”

“Is it Fallon?” Julian badgered, his voice growing more urgent.

Beck raised his palms in the air. “Calm down, all right?”

“Julian,” Clarence called, feeling Julian’s buzz raise the energy in the room.

“Tell me!” he ordered, but Beck shook his head. “You know I can’t.”

Julian grabbed Beck by the throat and walked him backward until he was pinned against the fireplace wall. His silver eyes watered. Metallic tears. It was the first time I’d seen him snap since I’d met him.

Zephyr stepped up, laid a hand on Julian’s shoulder, and whispered in his ear. Phoenix stood waiting, knowing, as though Zeph had the power to dissolve just about any situation.

As soon as Zephyr took a step back, Julian dropped Beck and wiped a palm down his face. He gripped his sides. “Just say it,” he whispered, a plea. “Fuck the moral code. You have to tell me, brother.”

“It’s not Fallon, all right?” Beck said, words tight in his throat. “It’s you.”

CHAPTER 48

STONE

NIGHT DEVOURED THE NORSE WOODS, CLOAKING IT IN UTTER DARKNESS, while the canopies above kept out the quarter moon's light. All we had to navigate the woods was sheer memory and determination.

The snow smothered the sound of our footsteps, leaving only the whispers of nocturnal ghosts moving through the trees.

Julian hadn't spoken to us since we'd left Goody Estate. Though I could hardly see his face, I could feel the anxiousness stir in his chest, drain from his soles, and vibrate under my feet. How does one handle the details of their own death? Though, if he were anything like me, Julian Blackwell was agonizing over the thought of Fallon knowing. How he should tell her, if he should tell her, how to leave this world behind when he'd just promised her forever.

"Don't tell her," I answered even though he'd never asked, my voice low, careful not to disturb the spirits. "If it were me, I would not tell her."

Julian's silver eyes found mine in the dark.

"The time of your death is still unknown, Julian, as it is for the rest of us. I could die tomorrow, or Fallon the day after that. We should spend each and every day as though there won't be another because it seems foolish, doesn't it? Wasting our time counting down the time?" I ducked under a branch. "I know Fallon. I've known her since she was a little girl. She's never cared for anyone the way she cares for you. She will spend the rest of your days trying to find ways to save you."

"Stone," Julian said, grabbing my arm to stop me. The others kept walking, and Julian waited until they were out of hearing distance. "I want you to promise me that once I'm gone, you will not bring me back." He

turned to look at the guys, their backs descending farther. “No matter what they threaten you with, no matter if Fallon is on her fucking knees, do not bring me back. I refuse to exchange my life for someone else’s. I would never be able to forgive myself. Do you understand?”

Julian laid a hand on my shoulder and squeezed it. “And if you do bring me back, you have better found a way out of Weeping Hollow because I will come for you, Danvers. I will come for you, sever your hands, and hang them from the gazebo in Town Square. That way you’ll never be able to use them again. Not to play Russian roulette with lives. Not to touch Adora. And not to beat your fucking meat after she marries that prick.”

I grabbed Julian’s shoulder as he had grabbed mine. “Self-centered, are we?” My gaze slid between his as I squeezed his shoulder. “The thought of bringing you back has never crossed my mind, not even if the Heathens threaten me, not even if Fallon is on her fucking knees because it’s not you who must live with the choices that I make, Julian. I’m the one who must live with them, as I am living with Winta’s death on my conscience at this very moment.”

“What’s with all the negativity, guys?” Beck asked, appearing beside us. “Can we get on with it? We’re wasting our time out here freezing our asses off, when there are lives to save and Shadows to kill.”

Julian and I let each other go and joined the others, who were waiting outside an iron gate closed by a lock and chain. On the other side was what Beck had once called a carnival. I’d been here once before, when the Heathens had dragged me from the barn and through the woods, which seemed so long ago.

Zephyr pushed open the gate. It creaked as it swung out, the wind taking it the rest of the way, and the woods opened up to a village-like area that had long since died.

As we began the walk down the path, rotting stalls lined the way on each side like a graveyard. Every winter gust snatched up ripped tarps, and they billowed and slapped whatever they could—a hiss and a howl.

We had walked upon a clearing and stopped in the middle of it. Gloom hovered here like an ominous haze, a tell that we weren’t here alone. History had pressed itself into these grounds, these surroundings, compelling its ghouls and ghosts to sleep until they were called upon.

I dropped my head back, my gaze following the large circular object towering above that had to be at least two hundred feet tall. A sight I’d never

seen before.

“It’s a Ferris Wheel,” Julian explained.

“Welcome to the carnival, Stone.” Phoenix raised his arms at his sides. “Where all the magic happens.”

“To call it a carnival would be deceiving,” Zephyr chided. “The gods know these grounds haven’t witnessed amusement in almost a hundred years.”

“The grounds witnessed your white ass fuck in that booth three months ago,” Phoenix reminded him. “I would say that would be enough amusement to last a century.”

Zephyr’s glowing eyes flicked skyward. “Yes, because meaningless sex brings us all great joy.”

Phoenix cocked his head. “I can’t imagine Zephyr Goody indulging in any other kind of sex.” He turned to Julian. “Julian, Beck, can you?”

Grinning, Julian shook his head.

“Meaningful … Ze-ze-zeph ...” Beck coughed. “My apologies. I suppose even the two words refuse to share the same breath.”

Zephyr exhaled. “Not that I have to justify myself to you three nitwits, but I do believe any man who doesn’t have a cock for a brain would prefer to choose their holes.” Zephyr gripped his hip bones, staring off as though he were remembering that night. “Not to mention fucking Francesca was torture. I had to imagine a sundae to reach climax. Chocolate ice cream, hot fudge, nuts, and all.”

Phoenix laughed, his palms dropping to his knees. “Are you telling me your fucking sweet tooth saved that night?”

“I’m confused.” I chuckled. “You had to think of ice cream?”

Zephyr shrugged. “Turns out freshly baked cookies weren’t fit for the occasion.”

Laughter echoed throughout the grounds as five Heathens stood in a circle in the middle of the night. As I looked around at the smiles on their faces, I thought, *this*. This was what I had always wanted. If only my younger self could have seen this to know that it would get better.

“All right, all right,” Julian interrupted. “Can we get back to the Shadows please?” His gaze steered around the circle, and the laughter faded as Beck drew a pentagram inside the circle with his finger, each point ending where each of us stood. “Thankfully we don’t need pleasure or pain ...”

The directions weren’t complicated. Chant a spell, then drink the vial

we'd taken from the Heathen Athenaeum. Each vial contained magic with a strand of hair soaking inside. It didn't matter who's hair it was, so long as the person it belonged to was currently sleeping. Once we climbed into the other dimension, we could move from one person's dream to the next.

Phoenix hovered his palm above the pentagram and whispered a spell.

The whisper surrounded us, the words strung together and coming out like a snake's hiss. A flame ignited at the point of the pentagram at his feet. It then slithered, following the lines Beck had drawn until the fire touched each point and the entire star was on fire.

We all exchanged glances, clutching the vials in our fists. It was time.

"Aperi ianuam.

Liceat mihi intus.

Ad subconscietiam.

Ego sum apud te."

We repeated these verses five times, the flames growing higher each time we finished. On the last round, we gulped down the vial.

When I opened my eyes again, the rest of them still had their eyes closed.

"How long did the book say it would take before it started working?" I asked, but neither of them answered. "Zephyr?" I called, and then, "Stone," I heard behind me.

My chest instantly recognized the voice, and my heart galloped.

Suddenly, I could hear the waves, smell the brine, and taste the ocean. I spun around, and behind me, Adora was running toward the lighthouse.

"Stone, what are you doing just standing there?" she asked, waving her hand, and *god, she's beautiful*. One glimpse of her on this island, and I was taken back to a time when she was only mine. "Come here."

The sun was out, beaming high above us, and I had to throw my hand over my eyes and squint to see her better.

Adora was barefoot in the sand, her hair down, wearing the red dress.

I looked back at the Heathens. They were still frozen with their eyes closed, standing in the middle of the grounds, the pentagram still on fire. And as I faced them, it was nighttime, as it should have been, but when I looked —"Stone!" Adora laughed, and the sound of it spread bliss throughout my body as I turned back to face her, where it was day—bright and warm. "If you don't get over here in—"

I didn't give her a chance to finish. I broke away from the pentagram point and charged after her, sand flying up from the bottom of my feet. "Out

of all the places in the world you've dreamed of visiting, Bone Island is where you choose to be?" I asked, grinning and scooping her up into my arms. "Why, Adora?"

She ran her thumb across my bottom lip. "Because it's where you are."

Then she was sliding her fingers through my hair, giving me the look.

The look that told me she was about to kiss me.

A scream echoed in the background.

I turned back to where I'd entered from, expecting to see my brothers waiting for me at the grounds, but only a dark tunnel remained.

Brothers, my mind repeated. I saw them as my brothers.

A slow grin fell on my lips.

But it didn't last long.

Another scream echoed, and it was coming from the tunnel.

"What was that?" Adora asked.

I faced her, seeing her brows bunched together.

I lowered her until both of her feet were safely back on the sand. "I have to go," I explained, my thumb grazing her cheekbone. "Why are you sleeping? You are supposed to meet me soon."

She shook her head with a smile. "What are you talking about?"

Perhaps here, in her dream, we didn't have to sneak around.

I leaned in and tucked her hair behind her ear.

"Wake up, my darling," I whispered, brushing my knuckles across her cheek. I swallowed, remembering what it felt like to see her with another man, and the ache hit me in the chest all over again. "I have to see you, so I need you to wake up."

And then she was fading in my arms, taking the entire island with her until I was standing in utter darkness.

The scream came again. The tunnel began to shrink, closing up.

I sprinted to it, every step feeling like I was trudging through deep sand.

Just before the tunnel closed up, I dove inside, rolled across a floor, and crashed into a hard surface.

My eyes opened to a dimly lit room. I lifted myself up off a scratchy maroon rug—the thing that had softened the blow.

The walls were wood paneling, and atop the rug sat a single lantern, the only other thing in the room. I stepped closer, watching as the flame flickered inside. It moved in such an odd way. While the light should have lit the room almost evenly, it didn't. Light only shone in one direction. Like a lighthouse

beam.

My gaze followed the light until it landed on a wooden door.

On the other side, another scream bellowed.

I wasted no time barging through the door, running up the flight of stairs, and down a hall, following the sound. Until I halted in front of another door.

I inhaled, curling my fingers around the knob, then twisted the handle, opening the door. There was a woman standing in the corner of the room, hands clenched at her sides, brown hair under a baseball cap. Though I couldn't see her face, I recognized the holes in the jeans. "Chloe?" I stepped closer. "No, it's Cleo, yes?"

"Wake up, wake up, wake up, wake up," she chanted in a low murmur, pressing her entire body into the corner of the room as though it would wrap its arms around her.

I walked toward her. "Cleo," I repeated, laying my hand on her shoulder and turning her around.

Cleo's eyes were big and glossy under the lid of her hat. She clawed at my arms, yanking me closer and pressing her spine into the corner, her body shaking. Her fingers clutched on to me so tightly that her nails broke my skin. I'd never seen anyone this terrified.

I pulled her close. "What are you so afraid of?"

"She's trying to kill me," she whispered. "And now that you're here, she'll kill you, too."

I turned, seeing the room empty.

Not a bed or a window.

Not even our own shadows.

I held Cleo back at arm's length, bending down to meet her gaze. "Cleo, I don't see anything," I said, frustrated and squeezing her shoulders. She seemed so small in my hands, and I felt as though I may break her. "There's nothing there."

Cleo froze up, her eyes wide. "Sh-sh-she's right behind you."

I turned back again, this time catching someone standing in an open doorway that wasn't there before. Their back was to me, but I could tell it was a woman. Her hair was dark blonde, sopping wet and clinging to her skin. She wore a dress torn around her thighs, and water dripped from every edge into a puddle at her feet. She was shaking, but I couldn't tell if it was because she was angry or cold.

Then she turned, ever so slightly, to look over her shoulder.

Her eyes were so haunting, they made me feel things.

Her face was so familiar, it made me feel things.

Every feature carved into her face made me feel things.

And then I was trying to breathe, trying to find my voice. “Adora?”

It wasn’t Adora. I knew it as soon as the name left my lips.

It took a second longer to fight the initial heart-fisting reaction to know Adora’s eyes were a different shade, more feline. Adora’s lips were fuller, rounder. They shared the same nose, and though anyone else could have mistaken her for Adora, I knew that it wasn’t.

I touched every inch of Adora.

My lips had tasted every inch of Adora.

I’ve been drawing Adora my entire life.

That was how I knew this woman was not her.

However, she was someone who looked just like her, and she was wearing the same chain around her neck as Adora.

Cleo clutched my arm, almost screaming in my ear but it sounded as though it were a million miles away. “I don’t understand,” I whispered, shaking my head. “If you’re not her, then who are you?”

Her lips moved, but nothing came out. It was as if her voice had been stolen from her. So, I tried reading her lips, but then she stepped over the threshold, vanishing.

Cleo was now standing in front of me. “What did you see?”

But I pushed her to the side and sprinted after the woman.

As soon as my foot stepped outside the threshold, the walls dissolved and the floor disappeared right out from under me, gravity yanking me down into a black hole. Falling, falling, my stomach churned and my arms and legs moved frantically for something to cling to, fearing what would happen once the fall stopped.

I could see the end drawing nearer.

I thought I would have more time.

But time was running out.

And just before I hit the bottom, my eyes opened.

A plethora of oxygen rushed down my throat, and I turned over, coughing so hard it felt as though it were ripping my lungs apart, my throat on fire.

“Breathe, Stone,” I heard, not knowing who’d said it. I felt a hand push up my spine as I braced myself onto my palms, then dropped to my elbows, curling to open my airways. The cough turned into a wheeze, and my heart

was beating a hundred times a second. “Take a deep breath.”

It was Zephyr, and his fingers pushed up my spine again, circulating my blood, commanding things to move as they should inside me. I felt it, and I inhaled a deep breath, then exhaled, feeling everything fall back into rhythm again.

I turned over and lay on my back.

My eyes were watering, and I pressed the heel of my palms into them.

“What happened?” I croaked, then blinked a few times, seeing Zephyr and Beck surrounding me.

“You were out for three hours,” Zephyr said, handing me bottled water.

I sat up, swiped a palm down my face, and unscrewed the cap. “Three hours? What about the four of you?”

“I drank my own fucking hair,” Phoenix grumbled from feet away. “So, yeah, talk about a weird experience.”

I looked at Zephyr, and— “I got caught up in a dream,” he said. “Couldn’t find my way to the next. But we’ve already done the sharing thing. What did you see?”

If three hours had passed, then ... “It’s the witching hour?”

Julian looked down at his watch. “Nine minutes ‘til.”

Adora. “I have to go.” I shot to my feet, but Phoenix jumped in front of me and shoved my shoulder. “Hey, man. Not so fast. Time to spill.”

The men surrounded me, expecting an answer.

“It’s hard for me to be certain of what I saw. And I want to be certain,” I confessed, not wanting to lie to them, but also not wanting to tell them everything. “You have to trust me.”

Phoenix shoved my shoulder again. “Trust you?”

“Don’t provoke me,” I warned. “I don’t want to hurt you, so don’t give me a reason to.”

“Let him leave, Nix,” Julian called out, and Phoenix stepped to the side. “Let him take care of whatever it is he needs to take care of. If Stone is one of us, he’ll do the right thing when he returns.”

A grin tugged at my lips. “Do the right thing like how you did the right thing?”

Julian shook his head in response, and I began to sprint, hearing their laughter fade behind me.

CHAPTER 49

ADORA

THE OCEAN HAD A HEARTBEAT.

As I stood outside the cave, with the ice-cold winds, I felt the ocean's heartbeats, the gentle vibrations, stir inside my own chest. Our song played low from the stereo buried in the sand and the fire crackled as I waited for Stone, sipping vanilla cola and keeping my gaze fixed on the Atlantic toward Bone Island. The night inhaled my breath and exhaled the chill. Snow flurries drifted, delicate and dreamy, and I wished to stay here forever and not return to the Cantini Castle.

At least here, I had an enchanting view of the lighthouse.

At least here, I could feel my beloved black sea.

At least here, the beam could touch me.

And I wondered if Mom knew all along, as they say mothers should, that her daughters would be cursed in love.

"And one day, you will drown, too," she'd said, and my jaw clenched. This great love story she'd written wasn't just a haunting thing that had consumed her before the catatonia did. It was an escape hatch for the drowning. In a town of greed, fear, and hate, this book was a reminder that I *could* leave Weeping Hollow whenever I desired. A wardrobe to Narnia. A rabbit hole to Wonderland. A portal to Bone Island.

But I didn't believe she'd ever expected Stone to happen.

Stone washed up on shore at the most inconvenient point in my life after years of sleepwalking to the ocean, waking up in the sand, standing in her waters, sharing my secrets, and admiring her. After all, this was how the greatest stories were born. Unexpected. Sudden. Cosmic.

But that was all we would ever be, wouldn't it?

A story. A memory. Dust in the lighthouse.

The Crimson Eclipse was coming upon us in seven days.

The wedding was in ten days.

I only had ten days left with Stone.

Somehow, I truly believed I wouldn't be able to survive.

I could feel him behind me then. The hum along my skin, the shake in my chest, his warmth a simmer on the back of my neck.

He came, my heart sang. He came.

He didn't say anything. He only drew closer until I could feel his breath hitting the top of my head, his chest pressing against my back, his abs moving against my spine, his hips resting against my bottom. He just stood there until I was leaning backward, falling into him.

I laid my head on his shoulder.

Stone removed his hands from his pockets and wrapped them around me, anchoring me to him as we looked past the ocean to Bone Island.

We were quiet for a long time, content.

The sea breeze, the ocean's waves, the punching of his heart at my back.

At that moment, I knew he could feel the clock ticking, too.

"Ten days," I whispered.

And then he was turning me in his arms.

Stone was wearing borrowed clothes, black jeans, a Heathen's boots, with ice from Norse Woods still in the grooves, and his face void. Like he purposely wiped it so I wouldn't know what he was thinking.

He slipped the cola from my hand, took a few gulps, and bent down to leave it in the sand. On his way back up, he kissed my collarbone, my throat, the places where our secrets were kept, and my jaw. Then he caught my lips in a sweeping kiss, his tongue tasting like vanilla cola.

His hands found my hips, and he dragged me inside the cave where it was warm. Where the cave held us together in its palms. Where the heat from the fire licked our skin. Where the song played on repeat, the lyrics mocking us.

He fell back onto the pile of blankets, taking me on top of him, messy, desperate hands sliding down my body, yanking down my jeans, my red panties with them, like two teenagers in a beat-up car, not bothering to remove shirts or shoes or his jeans all the way. There was no time for that.

Once I was naked from the waist down, he sat up and eagerly pulled me into his lap, and wrapped my legs around his waist. He moved my hair off my shoulder and kissed my neck. When I grabbed his length, his lips dragged

lazily across my cheek, and once I sank him inside me, he moaned in my ear.

He took my face and kissed me longer and deeper than usual.

He kissed me with a heart squeezing me tightly.

This time felt different.

This time felt like goodbye.

For good this time.

I tried to look at his face, to look into his eyes, but he wouldn't let me.

Frustrated with my attempts, he wrapped his arm around my waist and swung us around until I was lying on my back. He locked our fingers together behind his neck, caging my head between his elbows, kissing me and pushing inside me, and I was already thinking about tomorrow without him, and the next day, and the day after that. My chest was burning and my throat was closing up because even though I couldn't see his face or look into his eyes, I could fucking *feel* him in his kiss, his thrusts, the way he was holding on. I could feel the misery because he was thinking about life without me too and it was tearing us apart.

I didn't know why he was doing this to me, why he was holding me under him like this, why he was ending us like this on this night, but it was breaking my fucking heart, and I couldn't breathe. His movements were passionate, a slow grind, and I found myself crying. And then he was wiping my tears and kissing me and making love to me, and I couldn't handle it anymore.

I clawed at his shirt and shoved my face into his neck.

Stone dropped his head into the curve of my shoulder, wrapping his arms around me, his thrusts slowing until he came to a stop. And we just stayed like that, clinging to each other.

Neither of us came that night.

But I don't think that ever really mattered.

And the song was playing, and all I could think of was how this song would always be *that* song. The one that would haunt me for the rest of my life. The one that was the background to our love story, from the moment we first arrived at the lighthouse, and he was watching me from the dusty floor as I swayed, until the moment we said goodbye.

I didn't know how much time had passed. Eventually he pulled himself away from me, zipped up his jeans, and stood with his back pinned to the wall of the cave.

I stood and yanked my jeans up over my hips, feeling empty as I watched him reach into his pocket and grab a box of crushed cigarettes. Then he lit

one, inhaled, his breath shaking.

"And to think this is where our story picked up," he whispered on exhale, the sounds of the waves crashing onto shore and the wind crying all around us. "I'd say *started*, but we both know this isn't true."

It was a goodbye.

It was a fucking goodbye.

I felt sick at that moment. Like that feeling when walking up a flight of stairs, and you arrive at the top before you thought, and you step up onto the last step that was never there. This was the feeling living inside me.

"I feel like you and me are ashes," I whispered, and Stone's eyes were bloodshot when they swung to mine. I'd never seen them bloodshot before. Ink and blood. "We're ashes," I repeated. "We hold our shape until someone pokes at us. We last hundreds of years. We don't dissolve or float; we sink, and *oh*, do we sink. But at the end of the day, we're still ashes. Simply born with tragedy in our bones."

It was quiet again, aside from the stupid song.

Another drag. Another exhale.

And then, "Adora, I cannot keep going on like this." And just from the way he said *Adora*, I could already feel my heart breaking all over again. "I can't see you with him. I can't exist in the background while he's touching you and kissing you. It's killing me, and I can't bear it any longer," he said. "You are my obsession, and if neither of us lets go, there will come a day where you'll suffer the consequences of my actions."

I cannot keep going on like this, my mind repeated, slowly, as though it couldn't make sense of it.

"Please don't do this to me," I whispered, anxious, feeling something that took up so much space inside me slowly slipping away. "I have ten more days with you. Hang on for ten more days. *Give me ten more days*. Then you can hate me. Then you can never want to see me again."

Stone looked up at me, dumbfounded. "You're absolutely helpless." He flicked his cigarette into the fire and stalked toward me, taking my head into his hands. "Before I go, just tell me one thing," he said, eyes sliding between mine. "Right here, right now. Nothing less than honesty. If you had the choice to leave, would you have come with me that day I asked you in the lighthouse?" He shook his head. "Would you leave with me right now if we could go?"

"It doesn't matter," I said. "Neither one of us has that option."

“It does matter!” His eyes never looked as dark as they did then—a slice of the night sky. He lowered his voice, more gentle. “It matters to me.”

“Why?”

“Because it will be what *you* want. Not what the town wants, or your coven, or your fiancé, or your father. If you had the power to choose for yourself, would you ever choose me? Even if it’s a three-letter fairytale?”

His eyes bounced between mine.

If he knew me at all, he would already know the answer.

My sisters were here. I couldn’t not be here to ensure safety and fairness while Augustine was high priest. I couldn’t not be there to hold Fable when she would cry herself to sleep again. Or witness all her special moments, should she have any, like a wedding, her ascending ceremony. There was then Ivy, who I had already disappointed so many times. I couldn’t leave her alone. Not after all we’d been through together. At least if I were here, Ivy and I could be broken-hearted and alone together.

I would sacrifice it all for them, so how dare he ask me to choose.

I’d prepared for a life without love.

I’d never prepared for a life without my sisters.

“No,” I finally said.

Stone ripped his eyes away and blew out a breath. “And to think I was coming here to finally get somewhere with you before time ran out.” He clenched his jaw and dropped back a step. “You pretend to be many things, Adora, but I didn’t think you were pretending with me. You’re one hell of an actress.”

“I wasn’t pretending.”

“Then you’re afraid.”

“You’re scared too!”

“No, Adora,” he said, a grin. “I’m not afraid to admit what I want.”

“What do you want then?”

“Only you, and nothing more.”

“Then tell me you love me,” I said in a whisper, desperate. In two weeks, I’d either die or be trapped in a loveless marriage. This could possibly be the last time, and how could I go on never knowing how it feels to hear him say it? “Even if it’s just a three-word fairytale.”

His body turned rigid, his expression stunned. “You are incredibly selfish. You’re giving another man a lifetime, only to leave me here to rot,” he said, frustration screwing in his throat. “In less than two weeks, you’ll have his last

name, he'll have you in ways that'll make me sick, and I'll be another cursed Heathen who will forever desire a girl who will never be mine."

"So, fight for me!"

"Fight for you?" He blinked, his eyes wide. "Fight for *me*! For once, choose me!" He breathed in, pain etched into his voice. "Adora, I set foot in this town for you. I trespassed onto another man's property, climbed three stories to a window, entered unwelcomed, and shoved my cock inside his fiancé. I deserted the Heathens to be here tonight. I've betrayed every moral code I stand by for you, a girl who refuses to choose me and hurts me every chance she has. I've been fighting for you, only to watch him kiss these lips six hours after they were on mine. But my torment isn't enough. Now you want the gods to know you own my heart too, is that it? What's next, my spine? My soul? You want me on my fucking knees to rip me apart and watch me bleed like I've been once before?" His eyes were angry and bouncing between mine. "Well, look who's the monster now."

My head was shaking, my throat was tight, and everything was blurry.

Stone's eyes narrowed when he grabbed the back of my neck and lowered his head to meet my eyes. "My lungs would have to be ripped out, last breath stolen, before that ever happens again."

He let me go, his chest heaving.

"You're broken," I whispered. "You're angry and broken."

Stone dropped his head back and exhaled.

"Broken infers there is something inside me to be fixed. I'm not broken, Adora. It's that I'm not whole without you." His eyes swung to me. "There's a difference."

"It doesn't matter," I said, unable to hear the song play again. I turned it off and started packing up the vanilla colas, the blankets, the date I stupidly created for us. "None of it matters. I still have to marry him for the well-being of this town."

"No, you don't have to do anything," he said. "You're the author. I'm just the blank pages you whisper your secrets to, then the thing you crumble and toss to the side. I'm the book in the palm of your hands. In the end, this story is yours. You can write it whichever way you want."

I shook my head. "If I could change things I would because I'm scared of living without you."

Stone kicked off the wall, leaving. "You looked happy today. It should be easy for you to pretend you're not miserable tomorrow." Then I saw his back

as he walked toward the secret passageway to the tunnel. My heart was screaming at me. My blood was trying to leave me and run to him.

This was it. This was the end. And I couldn't stop it.

I refused to let those words be our last.

"Hey, Stone," I rushed to say, exhausted, defeated, but he had to know.

He turned back around, and I took him in. All his details.

His hooded eyes, his long black lashes, his mouth too sensitive for a man.

"I'll always want *only* you," I finally said out loud, not a whisper. Not a whisper at all. "It will always be *only* you for me. And that will never change."

I turned first, scared, shoving the blanket into the bag, my fingers shaking, unable to bear the sight of his back again.

"Hey, Adora," he called.

I couldn't help it. I straightened my spine and turned to catch his eyes again.

"I'll always choose you. In every story," he said out loud, not a whisper.

Not a whisper at all.

"That will never change."

CHAPTER 50

STONE

JANUARY 26, 2021
5 DAYS UNTIL THE CANTINI-SULLIVAN WEDDING

SOME OF THE GREATEST WORKS OF ART TO EVER BESTOW UPON US HAPPENED to be nothing more than an artist's need to be felt or heard.

I refuse to believe it was chance that those who were not able to express themselves in a way society approved possessed otherworldly talent. For centuries, books have served as portals and road maps and diaries, as hearts with black blood, paper chambers, and leather-bound bones to encourage a reader to think and dream beyond the breadth of limits. How incredible for something to have the ability to bind two people together, allowing one to feel and hear another when miles, and sometimes lifetimes, apart. How *incredible*.

They said that it was the eyes that were a window to the soul.

I believed it to be art, and the eyes were a window to the heart.

And the way Adora looked at me five nights before told me she loved me. She'd looked at me with haunting eyes begging to be heard.

Since then, I have lay in bed, unable to sleep through the night, loved and alone.

Well, because ... love, sadly, just wasn't enough.

In five days, she'd forever belong to someone else.

A tragedy indeed, to finally be loved by someone, and having no choice

but to walk away from it. In the end, she was fated to belong to another, and I was doomed to watch from a distance.

Once daylight flooded the bedroom, I dressed into warmer clothes, then descended the stairs as the coffee's aroma lingered on the first floor of Goody Estate. The other Heathens were already awake and gathered on the back porch, so I made a cup as well when Ocean joined me from the living room.

"Good news," he said with a smile. "Clarence owns a property on the Westside, and since the previous tenant was killed by the Shadows, he's letting me move in."

I leaned against the counter. "Is that right?"

"I haven't had a home in ... I can't remember how long. He said he'd get me a job in town, too. I was thinking maybe you can move in with me after all this is over. Who knows," he grinned, "maybe I'll get lucky, and I'll find a lady in town. Then I can carry on the legacy of the keeper."

"I have faith in you, keeper," I told him. "But you'll have to shape up your beard first. You don't want a pretty face getting lost in there."

Ocean laughed as I stepped away to join the Heathens outside.

"You look like hell," Phoenix greeted as I closed the French doors behind me. He was sitting on a porch step, a mug cradled between his knees, and looking out into the dead garden that surrounded the frozen lake. "How's our future Mrs. Cantini? Did she bring Cyrus along with her for a three-some last night?"

He didn't know that I hadn't seen her in five days.

He didn't know how much I missed her.

"Is this supposed to be funny?" I said into my coffee, looking at him from over the mug. "Feel free to swallow those words back down and choke on them."

Phoenix grinned. "Wow, she really did a number on you."

Zephyr chuckled from the rocking chair. He was already dressed in his usual dapper style, which, in this decade, could be seen as vintage, I suppose. Oxford shirt, sweater, tweed trousers, and leather boots. The colors he wore were always muted, calming, unlike Julian, who mainly wore black.

Beck, however, didn't own a pair of denim that wasn't stained with dirt, and under his denim jacket, he always wore what they call a hoodie.

Phoenix sported jeans and a leather jacket over sleeveless shirts. Even in winter, as though his body was a furnace. Their styles were so different for a group that was so tightly knitted. The only thing in common were the silver

pendants hanging around their necks. And since joining the Heathens, my style has become a mixture of all four of them.

I dropped my shoulder against a column and peered out into the snow-drenched horizon. “She mentioned she’s Cantini’s finneuma—his soulmate.” I tucked my un-gloved hand into my pocket. “Considering the way she behaves around me, it is difficult to believe she belongs to anyone else.” Why was I talking about Adora with them, and why couldn’t I stop?

Julian and the rest of the Heathens exchanged glances, then looked down at their coffee mugs.

I loathed being a novice. “What is it now?”

“Nothing,” Zephyr said. “It’s just that Cyrus is her *match*, but she still betrayed him for you. We’re surprised, truly. You must really have a hold on her.” His green eyes lifted to mine. “Sacred Sea does not play games when it comes to matches, I can assure you.”

Julian leaned back, his knee bent and his boot flat against the exterior wall. “If what you say is true, and she’s his match, then in five nights, you’ll see for yourself. At their bedding ceremony, a bright light shoots up into the sky. You can see it no matter where you are in Weeping Hollow. It’s a pretty big event for their coven.”

“Bedding ceremony?”

Beck was standing across from me against the other column. “It’s not that strange if we were to take their other rituals into account. But, yeah, the founding families are part of it. Because Adora and Cyrus are a match, magic will just pour right out of them, and the coven will soak it up.”

“I think I’m going to be sick.” Not only would another man be fucking her, but everyone would be watching, seeing her naked, her breasts, her orgasmic expressions that I once gave her, taking everything that was once only hers and mine.

Phoenix stopped his gentle rocking. “If you want, we can make sure you’re ... *distracted*, have a girl or two sent to your room that night.”

“Though I appreciate your offer for a futile fuck, I must decline,” I said. “Relying on ordinary alternatives is not my style. Nor is asking for favors.” Having given my whole self to Adora, I could not imagine feeling secure and comfortable enough to open up to anyone else. Besides, no one could be as perfect as her—my peerless siren. I’d much rather go without.

I needed to change this topic. “Is there anything I should know about Norse Woods that I haven’t been told yet?”

The men exchanged glances. “Well ...” Beck started, but Julian cut him off. “We will worry about it when the time comes because right now, I’m growing impatient. It’s been five days. We’ve given you plenty of time, and we can’t risk another. What happened during the dreamscape?”

“Zephyr was right. She was in Cleo’s dream. In a different form,” I finally told them after spending the last five days doing as much research as I could.

Julian arched a brow. “She? She who?”

“The Shadows. It took on the form of a person.” I set my mug on the porch railing. “At the time, I hesitated to speak up because the woman in Cleo’s dream looked very similar to Adora.” I held out my hand to stop their thoughts. “It was not Adora, but perhaps this woman was an ancestor or close relative of hers. It appeared that she wore a chain similar to Adora’s around her neck. The same chain I’ve also seen in a book Adora’s mother wrote.” I remembered this woman’s lips moving, as it was a repeating vision in my mind. *Circe*, she’d tried to say.

Beck drew Julian’s attention. “Marcelline Sullivan,” he said with a snap of his fingers. “She’s been in a coma-like state since the girls were little. What if she has something to do with the Shadows?”

If this were the case, it would devastate Adora. “According to Adora, her mother was in a coma because she tried to escape from Weeping Hollow.”

“Sounds like Adora’s in denial,” Phoenix said. “Marcelline was drowning Adora that day in the ocean. She swam as far as Bone Island before they finally caught up to her, and the only way to keep Adora safe was for the coven to turn her into a vegetable.” He pointed at Julian. “I bet somewhere locked up inside that head of Marcelline’s, she’s pissed and killing off Weeping Hollow out of spite.”

“The reason she is only able to access dreams,” Zephyr added.

“You mentioned a book,” Julian said. “We need that book, Danvers.”

The conversation was changing so quickly that I had not recovered from the initial shock of Phoenix mentioning Adora’s mother trying to drown her. Putting the pieces together, for this to make sense, was like getting hit by a tidal wave one after another. “Why would her mother try to drown her? She has two other daughters, yes? So, why Adora specifically?”

The porch fell silent.

A few seconds later, and “I really don’t know,” Julian said. “Whatever the reason, it doesn’t matter. We still need the book.”

“The book is likely to be at the Cantini Manor, but we do not need another Heathen turning rogue because of a girl like last time.” Zephyr nipped his chin in the direction of Julian. “And by Heathen, I mean Julian Blackwell.”

Julian’s head fell back for a split second. “I broke the curse, didn’t I?”

Phoenix rubbed his hands together. “Do I smell another book-stealing mission baking?”

“There’s no need for a mission,” I said, and four pairs of eyes crawled to me. “I stole it from her five nights ago.”

I’d spent most of my days and nights reading the book to the end, then re-reading and decoding the messages hidden inside. Before, I was unsure whether Alec and Circe were fictional, made up by Adora’s mother’s imagination, or if their story was true, and this book had manifested itself into her mother’s head. However, as soon as I laid eyes on Circe in Cleo’s dream, I knew it had to be real.

An hour later, we were huddled around the round table.

Julian was leaning back in his raven chair, fingering through the book as I retold the rest of the Heathens the story of Alec and Circe.

“You will not believe what Marcelline wrote in here,” Julian muttered, turning the book to face Beck. “This is the entire story of the Curse of the Forbidden Girl.”

“What’s the Curse of the Forbidden Girl?”

“A cautionary tale,” Julian muttered, tucking his nose inside the book’s spine. “To prevent treachery, really. She was a sea witch who was married to another witch but fell in love with a mortal. She was using the tunnels to sneak back and forth to see her lover but was caught. Let’s just say it didn’t end well.” He closed the book and dropped it into his lap, tapping on the cover. “And there are clues in here?”

I nodded. “The Shadows aren’t five entities. I believe it is one. That it’s Circe, and somehow her soul was split into five. The clues are leading us to the sapphire and the spring, so if I had to guess I would say the sapphire is waiting for us at the bottom of the spring in the Forbidden Caverns.”

CHAPTER 51

ADORA

JANUARY 27, 2021
THE DAY BEFORE THE CRIMSON ECLIPSE
4 DAYS UNTIL THE CANTINI-SULLIVAN WEDDING

FABLE GROANED.

I'd never heard Fable groan before, but it was a somber, sugary sound. Even Fable's groan could not dampen optimistic heart and positive nature. She was hiding behind large sunglasses and inside her oversized Voodoos hoodie. But covering the V, a D was written in thick sharpie on a swatch of masking tape.

"Ughh," she groaned again.

And *"Arggh,"* Ivy grumbled in response, eyes on Cyrus, who was sitting at a different table. Her pale face was curtained by hair so black it seemed to have blue undertones as she hid behind coffee, her full-moon eyes droopy.

The Crimson Eclipse would occur the following night.

No longer years. No longer months. No longer weeks.

After all this time, Kane's death was less than forty-eight hours away.

Good, I thought. This ache made me want to kill someone.

I'd battled the cold for a week, hoping to see Stone in Town Square. In case the plan took a wrong turn, I wanted to make sure he knew how I felt about him, even if he didn't feel the same in return. The most frustrating part of it all was that I believed he already knew, and I was the bloodthirsty fool

who would come up with any excuse to see him again. To talk to him. Like confessing my feelings.

I looked out the frosty paned window and into Town Square.

As before, every passing person was not Stone.

"Aggh," rolled out of me as my coffee cooled in my hands.

My nails were bitten down to the nail beds.

I hadn't blinked in over sixty-three seconds.

And there the Sullivan sisters sat after love had bitten them, turning three strong, courageous women into miserable, undecipherable zombies. I no longer had the will to hide my pain from myself or others. Strong did not mean cold. Courageous did not mean fearless. Emotions did not mean weak. I could still be all these things and be broken-hearted.

I couldn't escape from it either. I'd lost the book of Alec and Circe.

My escape hatch was missing.

"Is that Cyrus's hoodie and sweatpants you're wearing?" Ivy mumbled.

The first time words had been spoken in half an hour.

I bid her a sullen glare. *"Mmm."*

"Ughh." She dropped her forehead to the table.

Across from us, Cyrus and Kane stood to leave.

Cyrus slipped into his black coat, his face, arms, hands, and the little sliver of carved abs peeking out like one of his chiseled sculptures. He shoved a hand into a front pocket, pulled out his wallet, and tossed a few bills on the table. On his way out, he gave me a look that said, *I don't know what's going on and I'm not even bothering to ask.*

Kane swept through the diner like a fall season and threw his empty cup into the trash. *Enjoy your last days*, I thought, bringing the cold coffee to my lips. I then shifted my gaze back out the window in hopes of catching a glimpse of Stone again.

A cane appeared on the other side of the fogged glass, stabbing the cobblestone walkway. My gaze followed it to the hand it was attached to, then the face of the tiny homeless man, Ocean, who was hobbling past the window toward Norse Woods.

My heart jumped, and I leapt out of the booth and ran after him.

The Bean's bell rang as I rushed out of the coffee shop and into the cold. White clouds spilled from my warm lungs as I sprinted to him, flatlanders paying me awkward glances. I ignored them, not stopping until I was blocking Ocean's way, my chest heaving.

“Where’s Stone?” I panted. But the man just stared at me through beady eyes, his long beard slanting in the wind. “Well, is he okay?”

Ocean’s face fell. “I have nothing to say to you.”

He stepped around me, but I slid back in front of him and grabbed his arm. “Does it seem like I’m here to see how you’re doing? Where is Stone?”

“That’s none of your concern, sea witch,” he grumbled.

I grabbed on to him fiercer than I should’ve, feeling my face contort and twist into someone I didn’t recognize. “Tell me where he is or I’ll—”

“You’ll what?” His laughter echoed in my head, only making the rage simmer and boil under my skin. “Take a hint. Stone doesn’t want to be anywhere near you, but seeing your misery gives me great pleasure.”

I no longer had control of my body after that.

One second I was staring into his small eyes, and the next, the homeless man was sliding down the brick wall, his cane clattering on the cobblestone.

“Hey! Stop!”

I turned to the sound, my vision swaying until it straightened.

In the midst of the white clouds puffing from my parted lips, Cyrus and Kane were running toward me. It all happened slowly and all at once. Then I felt Cyrus’s coat brush my cheek. He held my head close to his chest. I could hear and feel the vibrations of his soothing, warm voice as he shouted at the flatlanders, who were gathering around. My nose was numb, but I could still smell his cologne. Sea, rose, oak.

And then I was looking into Cyrus’s two oceans, cerulean blue waters forming waves in his eyes. “Cyrus, I-I didn’t mean—I don’t know—” *what came over me, the rage, the anger ...*

“Don’t say anything,” he directed, pulling my hood up over my head. I turned back to the homeless man, but Cyrus grabbed my chin. “Hey, look at me.” My eyes snapped back to him. “We’re leaving.” Cyrus tucked me under his arm and guided me down the sidewalk. “Everything’s fine,” he told onlookers, but I was in a daze, his voice sounding as if it were underwater. “Get back to doing whatever you were doing.”

CHAPTER 52

ADORA

January 28, 2021
The day of the Crimson Eclipse
3 days until the Cantini-Sullivan Wedding

It was a Thursday.

I'd pushed my desk closer to the window to watch daylight open its eyes. For hours, in the pre-morning dark, I'd written a letter to my beloved black sea. This time, a tide would not grab it with foamy fingers. An ocean would not drink my secrets. Instead, I planned to hand deliver my letter to Fallon Grimaldi, the only acquaintance who had access to Stone, in hopes of it reaching him.

I'd read over the letter, at the very least, nine times.

This letter didn't appear to come from the girl I knew. These words were vinyl, sentimental scratchy things composed by an incorrigible romantic. Never mind the ink blots or stains along my fingertips, as these words had no care to be pretty. Only honest. Perhaps it was why I'd protected myself from love for so long. It was all ugly. It all hurt.

This time, I didn't roll the letter and plop it into an empty liquor bottle. This time, I folded it into thirds, slipped it into an envelope, and tucked the envelope into my coat pocket.

My mind exhaled, disappointed.

My fingers trembled, scared.

My heart ached, drowning.

But tonight was the night, and there was not another day left.

I walked to Town Square at first light, hoping to catch Fallon right after The Bean opened. The wind howled like a horror flick, violently tossing my hair into my face, ghostly fingers made of ice trying to cover my eyes.

Every step down the desolate street was accompanied by an ominous thing lurking behind every barred tree, every battered home, every thorny bush. Moping ghosts or brooding shadows, it could be anything.

In a whirlwind of white hair, Fallon emerged from The Bean across the street when I rounded the corner into Town Square. From her beanie to her snow boots, she was a walking shadow in all black.

"Fallon!" But it was like screaming into a void, so I lowered my head and jogged across Main Street. On my way, crumbled newspapers tumbled and skittered across like spiders, painting the white streets in ink; phrases like *Where's Freddy in the Mourning? Three Months without Freddy. New Heathen on the Block. When Will The Shadows Strike Again?*

Coming up next to her, I called again, "Fallon."

She turned, plucking hair from her mouth, her pale blue eyes meeting mine.

"This is going to sound crazy," I shouted into the wind.

"What?" she shouted back, the rising snowstorm stealing our voices and tossing them into nothingness. I grabbed her arm and pulled her into the alleyway to hide from the howl.

"Have you met Stone Danvers yet?" I asked her, nerves stepping up the staircase of my spine.

"Yes." She looked at me quizzically. "What's going on, Adora?"

A strange feeling came over me. It started in my stomach, ropes tying into knots at the thought of no longer being the only person in Stone's life. He'd made friends. He would meet other women. He would eventually kiss someone like the way he used to kiss me. He would get someone alone and fuck them like the way he used to fuck me. Women would fall in love with him because he was *Stone*.

That will never change, we'd said. But everything would change.

In spite of my stomach flipping, I stood numb.

"Are you all right?" Fallon asked, trying to grab my attention.

I shook my head in a daze.

The ominous feeling came over me again. One of impending doom.

Fallon laid a hand on my arm, trying to grab my attention.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

I shook my head in a daze.

Then a sense of déjà vu washed over me.

Fallon could feel it, too.

"I need you to give him something," I whispered, dread looming over the nape of my neck. I cleared my clogged throat to speak louder. So she could hear. "It's important he gets this tonight," I pulled the very last letter from my pocket, almost reluctant to part with it. "Will you see him?"

Fallon took the envelope and looked it over. "Yeah—"

A scream interrupted us, loud enough to pierce the howling wind.

Our eyes widened, and we took off through the alleyway and came to a sudden halt on the street. Townspeople flocked to the clock tower. "HE'S DEAD!" someone screamed. Fallon and I exchanged worried glances.

"Oh my god," she breathed. The wind was whipping and thrashing in our faces, so I didn't hear it, but I watched her mouth move. And then she took off in a sprint, and I followed her.

Fallon was shorter than me, but she was determined. She pushed through the crowd, shoving people aside as I clung to the back of her jacket so as not to lose her. Once the two of us broke through the sea of people, she'd ripped herself from my grip and collapsed to the ground at the man's side.

I shook my head, horror consuming me as Fallon started giving him chest compressions. "Adora!" she screamed, but I was locked up, frozen, hearing my shallow breath, my inhale, my exhale. "ADORA!" "Someone, anyone get Dr. Morley!"

I was shoved to the side.

Then the knocking came. The *thump … thump … thump.*

It started low at first, then built into a sepulchral pounding in my ears.

My body locked up, paralyzed.

My gaze moved from Fallon, who continued CPR, to the clock, where the big hand trembled on the three, to Town Hall.

There, in the light of a stormy gray day, five dreadful shadows stalked the steps leading up the building as though they'd been watching me. And they were sending me a message of their own. *Love casts shadows.*

The Shadows shivered away, my eyes falling to Fallon.

"It's too late," she sputtered, tears staining her cheeks. "Ocean is dead."

THAT NIGHT, TOWN HALL WAS OVERFLOWED WITH PEOPLE, EVERY INCH AND corner blanketed with skin and heads and hair. Augustine ordered an all-nighter lockdown, Flatlanders on one side of Town Hall and Sacred Sea on the other.

The idea was to keep the people safe. If we were all together, we could all look out for one another, so he made the town believe. The truth, however, held more selfish intentions. Anyone could look around and see not a Norse Woods member in sight. Nor a single Heathen. Augustine played the role of the caring father of Weeping Hollow to the people who had the loudest voices. He wanted people to remember the night he stepped up, opened his doors, catered, soothed, and fought.

Fable and Ivy stayed at the cottage with Dad. Because of Mom's condition, I was sure Augustine had pardoned them, and for that, I was thankful. The last few hours were spent helping others get situated, bring in dinner, and move furniture to make more room. I'd kept my backpack close, never parting with it. Inside was the spell book, candles, my dagger, and the witherbane. Cyrus had asked numerous times to take it off my shoulders and that he'd keep it safe, and each time I'd refused.

This was not how I imagined the night of the eclipse would be.

The clock on the far wall had lost its power, both hands frozen at twelve, but I knew it was close to the witching hour. Outside the window, the super blue moon lit a haze in the sky, an eclipse on the brink.

My only goal since news of the lockdown was trying to find a way to get Kane alone, and then coerce him into drinking the witherbane. Prying eyes surrounded me, including an attentive fiancé, who hadn't left my side since I'd blacked out. My only hope was outside in the dark. All of Town Square would be empty.

Kane was in the corner of the room with Cyrus.

The two were smiling, amusement on their faces, trapped in a conversation that made their eyes light up. Cyrus had an authentic smile. One that was handsome, contagious, and made him look even more beautiful than he was already. Kane's smile was cunning, sexy, and brought the deepest shade of green to his eyes.

That dreadful night came rushing back, and anger rose from the dead. It was always there, a shadow inside me. And after what I'd done to Ocean, it was clear the rage was only getting more intense. Each time I doubted if I was doing the right thing, images of my mother's daily torment while she lay

there thrashed in my mind to remind me.

My fingers wrapped around the strap of my bag as Stone's voice haunted me. *"I'm scared that this will one day take you away from me."*

But Stone wouldn't know anything about family, and Stone and I could never be together, so what was the point of doing nothing? All that I had to lose I'd already lost.

And then my feet were moving in Cyrus's direction.

He looked up at me when I approached. "Everything all right?"

I shook my head, and he popped up from his chair, laid his fingers under my elbow and stepped us off to the side. He scanned my face, waiting for an explanation.

"I need to go back to the manor. There's a lady matter I need to take care of." I didn't start my period for another week, but I knew Cyrus would say—

"No, you stay here, I'll go." He was looking down at me, whispering as though it were something I was ashamed of. "I should check on the house anyway; make sure everything's locked up. Just tell me what you need."

Always a gentleman.

After I told him, Cyrus stepped off, only to spin back around. "But we're getting married in two days."

I shrugged, unsure of where he was heading.

"We will have an audience. I don't care if you're on your cycle, but I don't want you to feel embarrassed with people watching during the bedding ceremony." Words were tangled up in my throat. I'd forgotten. He sighed. "We'll talk later. I'll be back soon." He pointed at Kane. "Look after her."

Kane's knee bounced. He was struggling with withdrawals.

I watched Cyrus leave before sliding into a chair beside him.

"You okay?" I asked as I looked around the room. Everyone was busy settling in.

Kane let off his knees and fell back into his chair, wiping his palms down the front of his slacks as he stretched out his legs. "Just tired."

"Right." I laughed lightly. "I may have something that'll wake you up."

Adora, what are you doing? You don't have anything that will wake him up.

Kane raised a perfectly shaped brown brow. "Now?" He looked around. "If you're talking about what I'm thinking, I must be passed out right now. You wouldn't touch MB even if it came gift wrapped in crocodile leather."

But I'd touch it if it meant luring him away. "Why do you think I got

Cyrus out of here?" I said in a whisper, and the corner of Kane's mouth twitched into a big dumb grin. "We could go to the gazebo."

He darted a glare at his father, who was talking to other members of the Order. "You want us to freeze to death?"

"Oh, you big baby, I'll keep you warm," I shoved his knee. "Besides, when have you ever turned down a good time?"

"Are you trying to go all out before you dick down with Cantini or something?" I blinked in disbelief, but Kane outstared me. "I'm not judging, Sullivan, but I'm letting you know right now, I can't do that to Cyrus. So if that's what this is about—"

"Oh, let the air out of your head. Everyone knows that once you ride in an Aston Martin you can't go back to a Honda."

"Ouch," he said with a wince, then glanced away, scratching his chest. "Hit me where it hurts, why don't you."

I nudged his thigh. "So, is that a yes or no?"

"You really got mermaid blood?"

"Yeah." *No, I don't even know where to get it.*

He leaned in, throwing a glance at Augustine. "I'll slip out the side. Wait a few minutes, then meet me at the gazebo."

As soon as Kane disappeared through the door, my gaze scoured the room for someone who could possibly be carrying the drug. In the corner of the room, Geneva and her friends were grouped together. The next graduating class of the Academy. Half of them were children of Sacred Sea members outside the founding families. The other half were flatlanders.

My soon-to-be mother-in-law watched me from the sidelines as Augustine filled her ear. To my right, Monday was breaking away from her boss and heading toward me. I left my spot and approached Geneva before Monday could catch up with me.

"Geneva," I called, and when her head lifted, her face flushed, her eyes blinking rapidly with a dimpled smile.

"Hold that thought, Adora Sullivan needs me," she chanted as she stepped over her friends. "I'll be right back."

I took us a few feet away, and she looked up at me with an adoring gaze.

"Do you have MB?" I asked her as her eyes seemed to follow every word, her head nodding religiously as I spoke. It wasn't a ridiculous question since members of the founding families never purchased drugs directly. "Of course it's not for me, but my—"

She tilted her head. “Oh, is it for Kane Pruitt?”

I was instantly taken aback. “Actually, yes—”

She held up her finger. And then she disappeared, returning in less than ten seconds with her purse. “I don’t usually keep this stuff on me, and no one’s supposed to know this, but Kane Pruitt and I have been seeing each other,” she rambled with a blushing grin, digging into her purse. “He told me not to tell anyone, and I figured since you’re marrying Cyrus Cantini”—*why must she use our last names?*—“he said you two were done and I thought there was no harm in telling you ...”

“Telling me what?”

“I didn’t think I was going to be able to find anymore, and I was planning to give it to him tonight.” She handed me the bottle. “Will you tell him it’s from me?”

“Wait,” I said, amusement wrapping around my surprised smile. “Is he having sex with you?”

“Oh, gosh, no. He said he respects me and wants to wait,” she explained. “Hopefully soon we can tell everyone. He just wants to wait until the Shadows are gone.”

I laid a hand on her shoulder, my eyes sliding between hers. “Geneva, I hate to be the one to tell you this, but Kane’s using you for MB.”

She bristled. “He’s not using me.” But I could see her mind working through her young bright eyes. “But ... I ...”

“I just don’t want to see you get hurt.” And I hoped she believed me. “Thank you, though. I’ll be sure to let him know.”

When I stepped outside, I hid around the side of the building and set the backpack down. Crouching, I scanned the sidewalk, seeing not a soul in sight, and poured witherbane into the mermaid blood. It separated inside the vial instantly, lavender atop crimson. I tried shaking it up, but it separated again. My only hope was that he wouldn’t notice.

At the gazebo, Kane was pacing the wooden planks and blowing hot air into his hands. “It’s about time,” he stuttered, waving me over. “C’mere.”

I set the backpack down on the bench, and Kane wrapped his arms around me, pulling me into his chest and trying to exhume the warmth of our closeness. Winter held us in its hands as though we were a warm cup of coffee.

Aside from lights streaming from Town Hall in the distance, there was total darkness. We could only see what was right in front of us, and the white

flakes blowing into the gazebo.

“It’s so quiet out here,” Kane whispered. “I don’t think I’ve ever heard Weeping Hollow this quiet before.” He held me closer, and I could feel the slight tremble of his cheek against my hair. “It feels like we’re the last two people on earth.”

I kept my eyes on the moon, watching it slowly bleed as it grew closer to the peak of the eclipse, keeping my strength in check.

“Do you remember when we were kids, and the seven of us used to lay right there every full moon?” He turned us to the lawn in front of the gazebo. “All night we camped out, backs on the grass, staring up into the sky and soaking up the moon because we thought it’d make us stronger.”

“Yeah.” I chuckled, imagining the pile of us. “That seems so long ago.”

Kane’s arms fell from around my shoulders. “Check this out,” he said walking across the gazebo. His gloved finger brushed over a carving in the wood where it was marked K+A. He turned back, his regretful eyes hitting mine. “To be honest with you, I think about her all the time.”

Why was he doing this to me? Why must he bring up Adeline?

Kane laughed, grabbing my arm and reeling me back into his arms. “In all seriousness, I always thought she’d be the one I’d marry. She was my match. I just know it.” He stopped and sucked in a breath. “Not that I’m trying to justify my actions, but I only treated you like shit because I missed her.”

I held on to his wool coat, my eyes widening. “It’s fine,” I assured him, not wanting to hear anything that could kill the mood. Before I killed him. That was not how my vengeful murder was supposed to unfold. “We were stupid, sad, and horny.”

“It’s more than that. My life’s hell, and I took it out on you because you always came back. You never warned me or threatened me. You never tried to change me or get on to me or give me bullshit speeches about being an example and a better man like Cyrus always does. It’s like you always saw me for what I was, and just accepted it.” His chest caved. “Guess the gods knew I never deserved anything good. Not Addy, not you.”

“Oh, Kane. You’ve always been the villain of your own story.”

He chuckled, but I could tell it was to ease the tension. “Let’s just say I was doomed from the second I was born. There was never any hope being a Pruitt.”

I felt my chest tighten, so I squeezed him to let it go. “What’s going on? Why are you acting like this out of nowhere?”

We were rooted in this spot with our arms wrapped around each other for warmth and his head pressed against the top of mine. “I killed a Heathen, Adora. I was done for. My father wouldn’t have been able to save my ass, and that would’ve been it for me. I thought I didn’t care—anything to get out from under Augustine, even if death was what it took. But do you know what I was thinking during those hours after I killed him?”

I closed my eyes, then opened them again. “What?”

“I don’t want to die.”

It came out so innocently. Childlike.

And my heart was beating so hard.

He sighed in an attempt to block all emotion.

“I want to live.” He rocked me. “Just wanted to tell you I’m sorry for not appreciating you like I should’ve. But I’ve never seen Cyrus as happy as he is now, even with everything going on. He’s always treated you better than I ever did.”

“Yeah.” Because I didn’t think I could say anything more.

“I do care about you, though. I think that’s how it’ll always be. We’ll always care about each other. We’ll always look out for each other. No matter what. So, if Cyrus passes and I’m still single, it’s you and me, A.” He squeezed me, then let me go. “So, where’s the mermaid blood?”

I reached into my pocket, then paused.

He was looking at me, and I was looking at him, unmoving.

Behind him, the dark eclipse glowed crimson.

My mother was eternally drowning in an ocean, and this was it. This was the moment to save her, and I couldn’t move.

I began to feel weak. Dizzy. My eyes watered, and I looked away to hide it.

Kane’s grin was lopsided, and he drew closer, his hands finding my hips. “You didn’t bring me all the way out here just to have a heart-to-heart.” With a slight of the hand inside my pocket, he swiped the vial and held it up between us. “Don’t be a pussy.”

My heart jumped into my throat, and my stomach dropped.

“Kane, no,” I said, trying to reach for the bottle.

He raised it high out of reach with a huge grin spread across his face as if this were a game. Then he uncorked the vial and poured the contents into his mouth.

As soon as the mermaid blood hit his tongue, Kane’s fingers became stiff,

locking up, and the vial slipped from his curled hand.

His gaze moved to me, and he fell back against the wooden pole where the initials were carved. His brows contorted. “Witherbane?” he whispered from a hoarse throat, his features sallow and confused, blue veins popping in his neck. “You wanted to poison me?” I’d never seen so much hurt in his eyes before, and it broke me. And then he couldn’t talk, and a single tear slid down his cheek as he locked up.

I shivered, a tear frozen on my cheekbone. “I’m so sorry.”

His legs gave out, and he collapsed onto the bench, knocking my backpack to the gazebo floor.

The contents clambered out, the book, the candles, the dagger.

I glanced back at Kane. He was lying on his shoulder with his legs dangling off the bench, his eyes unblinking and staring ahead at all the items I had always planned to use to kill him.

“Relax and focus on breathing or you’ll only make it worse,” I cried as I dropped to the floor and hurried to shove the book and the candles back into the backpack. “It’s like being stuck in a current,” I continued in a stutter, reaching for the dagger.

It was snatched up from under my hand.

Before I could turn to see who it was, I was yanked off the ground by my neck and my spine was crushed against a hard chest.

“You were trying to kill me?” Kane scraped out, devastation wrapping each word. I heard the unsheathing of the dagger, steel against leather. His fingers tightened around my throat, and I felt his warm breath in my ear.

I pinched my eyes closed, my throat feathery and constricted.

I couldn’t speak. Clawing at his hand, eyes gaping and fixed on the eclipse.

“Out of everyone,” he whispered in a croak. “Why, Adora? I thought you cared about me.” I wanted to explain, but I couldn’t speak. Kane continued, his face wet against my cheek. “And you could have fucking killed me if you didn’t mix witherbane with its antidote.”

Pistachio nuts. It’s heavy on iron and will counteract the side effects, Jolie had said.

“Witherbane and blood.” Kane wiped his nose with the back of his dagger-holding hand. Then the edge of the dagger slid across my cheek.

I should have killed him, I thought. But Stone made me soft.

The day I decided to kill Kane Pruitt was the day I forced myself to

believe anything with a heart, whether it be warm and wild or cold and callous, whether we desired to or not, would one day get lost in these thorny nuisances if love had its way. I feared that if I let it, love would sink its teeth into me until I became. And become it I did.

I'd fallen in love, and Kane would argue how love was a lie.

I'd fallen in love, and Cyrus would argue how love made us weak.

I'd fallen in love, and my old self would argue how love was a fairytale.

I'd fallen in love, and Stone would probably call it art.

"Please, Kane," I cried in a croak.

Kane pressed his cheek against my head. "I really am alone in this world," he whispered in torment.

CHAPTER 53

STONE

IN ALL THE BOOKS I'D READ, THIRTEEN WAS THE NUMBER OF WITCHES IN A coven.

Heathens, while witches, didn't take part in the total number of Norse Woods. The Heathens personified Norse Woods, soul, heart, mind, and magic. Without the Heathens, Norse Woods would not exist.

The number taking up space in Zephyr's home was not thirteen.

There were dozens of bodies on floors, in front of the fire, on couches. Coven members and their families, and their family's family. The elderly, who were too frail and weak to defend themselves, and children, who were too small and scared, and the sick, who struggled, their breaths coming in rugged and out coarse. And, finally, the Heathens, who opened their arms to let them all in, so they didn't have to be alone and unprotected. Some flatlanders, even, who'd cast scornful eyes and scathing brows for years at them.

Inside, chandeliers were dimmed low, curtains drawn closed, and a full, eclipsing moon crept through the cracks with everything it had.

Husbands gathered before the fire, unable to sleep, drinking brandy in hopes to stow away their fears, making room for bravery so wives could lean on them. Mothers whispered to their children. Things like, "*Shh* ... quiet ... settle down."

Beck stood beside Phoenix, who was sipping brandy with the husbands and keeping the fire tamed and full, bringing heat to pump into the large room.

Clarence spoke to curious young men about Norse Woods' history.

Kioni, Winta's daughter, tended to Mr. Barlow, a ninety-three-year-old

artifact with a mouthful of stories to tell, pages and spines tucked between his teeth. Kioni didn't mind. Anything to distract her from her grief because this was what her mother would have wanted her to do.

Zephyr sat in front of the piano, his fingers floating effortlessly along the keys, a soothing yet despairing cadence drifting and swelling into the large room.

Just on the other side of the wall behind Zephyr, Julian stood in the foyer with Jonah St. Christopher. The two spoke low, just under the seams of the melody, facing the window and peering out into a barren stretch of trees, waiting for Fallon's return. It was almost the witching hour, and she refused to leave Ocean at the morgue until she found answers.

And I was sitting alone, a Heathen without his keeper.

A man without his woman.

Ocean's death served as a reminder that I did care for these people in Weeping Hollow. Having been sidetracked, destroying the Shadows had become my sole goal since I was struck with the realization that Adora could be the next victim. The thought trailed a braid of worry and anxiety across my flesh.

She was a part of me. If not half my soul, then in my blood.

A tangible thing you could see, feel, taste, hold.

Something concrete. Something to believe in.

I wondered if she felt it as well, if *Adora* was the name for all the times I felt something was missing. Not Heathen.

I looked up from my sketchpad as Beck walked across the grand room, stepping over Jolie and Josephine, who happened to be his next keeper after her mother died. Turns out his keeper was the Shadows' first victim, and now the responsibilities fell on a fifteen-year-old girl in mourning. Beck approached Jonah and Julian in the entryway.

"She'll make it," Julian insisted, more for himself.

Not seconds later, Julian was at the door, unlocking it and standing in the doorway, cold winds barging inside.

Fallon, who was bundled up in a winter jacket and a scarf, entered the room with a white cat in tow, her cheeks pinched from the cold.

"It's so cold out there," she murmured, then, once Julian closed the door behind her, they greeted each other with a chaste kiss. A quick one that ended as soon as it started as the couple never gave way to a public display of affection for long. The two kept their love behind closed doors, discreet, only

theirs and theirs alone, with no desire to share it with anyone else.

Adora and I never had this level of control. There was a thirst between us that one would abandon themselves to. It didn't matter whether we wanted to strangle, please, or hold each other, as long as we were touching each other. A desperate hunger indifferent to our numbered days, borrowed hours, and stolen seconds. Our passion never had time on its side, but we didn't need it. We had punctual lips, mindless hearts, and an island without clocks.

As Fallon pulled back from Julian, she found me in the foyer.

I quickly looked away, returning to my sketchpad and stared into the same feline eyes that I'd felt slip over me whenever she was near. With each passing second, I longed to see her, but I knew I would give in and could not resist the urge to take her into my arms. My actions would only harm her.

Then an envelope was slipped across my drawing and over Adora's lips.

Fallon was standing over me. "I was told to give this to you."

There was no name on the envelope but as soon as my fingers touched it, the memory imprinted into the paper let me know it was from Adora.

Julian, Beck, and Zephyr glared at me.

I ignored them and broke the flap enclosure's seal.

To my beloved black sea,

It was full dark when I snuck out of the castle to meet you.

You wore those ripped black jeans and your new friend's boots, with the sleet from the forest still in the grooves. You moved awkwardly in your new clothes because you were still creating yourself, like one of your drawings.

We drank vanilla cola from glass bottles and listened to a song about how fast the night changes, over and over. Two adults frolicking as youths, French kissing in secret to hide from winter and distract ourselves from the town crumbling around us. The way we touched each other was equally punishing and artful, painting a world where we could be together on each other's skin.

For a while, we pretended.

For a while, I was the kind of woman you could give your heart to, and you weren't the lost, forbidden Heathen. I suppose it never really mattered, anyway.

Still, slowly, and suddenly, I fell in love with you.

I didn't realize how far I had fallen until I came up for air, and you weren't there. But you made it so easy to love you, Stone Danvers.

You were right, though. I'm the writer of my own tragedy.

I wrote the story of how the siren fell in love with the heathen, but love was never enough for them to have their three-word fairytale. Consequences would always stand in our way, and in the end, love would always spill blood.

Now, it's been days since I've seen you. I decided long ago, and this is my last letter.

Everything I've worked so hard for—before you came along—will carry on as if our time together never happened.

Don't bother stopping me.

As I once said, the tremor between us will only lead to carnage.

But as I plunge a knife into the chest of the man I once desired to marry, I'll think of all those foolish nights when we pretended, our time on Bone Island, the vanilla colas, our stupid song, and you.

Yes, my beloved black sea.

I'll think of you.

xx a

MY HEART FELT AS THOUGH IT WAS BEING PUNCHED BY A HAMMER.

Staring at the words, I could not move.

My mind was spinning, trying to decode her message, putting the pieces together because I refused for those six underlined words to sink in. How dare she write this to me, knowing we could never be together.

Then a black spider moved across my hand and froze on top of the letter.

My sight narrowed, tunneling, hypnotized by eight reflective black eyes. Inside them, a gloomy and wintry picture of Town Square arose. Night was bleak and dreary. Snow, steel gray and lifeless.

I sprang to my feet. The sketchpad and all crashed to the floor, and I rushed to the window.

Outside, a blood eclipse would soon weep in the night sky.

It had been over 150 years since a full blue blood moon eclipsed. The flood of memories of that hot summer night benumbed me as they returned. If Adora hadn't killed him yet, she may when the eclipse reached its peak.

My pulse was in my ears. Julian appeared next to me. "What's wrong?"

My shoulder slammed into his when I sprinted for the door. I threw it open and bolted down the stairs and across the fields. Snow came up to my calf with every sprint toward the woods, soaking my pants. There had been no time to bother with a coat, but the cold seemed to bother me none. I was numbed by worry and fear. So, I ran harder, leaping over trunks and weaving between trees.

Despite my pulse and breath muting my surroundings, I knew the Heathens were running after me. I could feel their presence, an invisible force of nature, closing in with every step.

My speed increased once I reached the pavement. The feeling in my legs was gone. My mind was not working to tell me to stop, as the mind often did. *You can't, you won't, you shouldn't, you couldn't,* it would say, but not on this night. My heart carried me to the place it wanted to go.

A crowd circled the gazebo. They were shouting and crying, and everything seemed to be covered in fog, as if their heads were being held underwater.

My sprint slowed to a walk as I approached the crowd. I pushed between bodies until people stepped aside, opening up for me just as a soul-wrenching cry pierced the night, chilling me to the bone.

Adora's eyes were clenched tight, her teeth bared. Her face was wet as she held on to the wooden pole of the gazebo at the top of the stairs. Her cheek was smashed against it as Kane dragged a knife into her back. Another traumatic cry shattered like shards of glass, piercing the air and cutting me open.

I raced to Adora, but Kane snatched her off the pole and held her close to his chest, bringing the dagger to her throat.

I froze, feeling all the color drain from my face as I looked into her terrified green eyes. Tears flew down her cheeks and her lips trembled.

"Get back," Kane growled, pressing the sharp edge against her skin.

Everything broke inside me, but anger rushed in, holding me together.

My muscles were jumping under my skin and the crowd had gone silent.

All I heard were her cries. All I saw were her eyes staring back at me.

"Get the fuck back," Kane shouted.

My head shook because nothing else would move.

"No," I gritted out through a clenched jaw. "I'm not backing off. I'm staying right here." Adora was shaking in his arms, blood sliding down her chin from biting her lip raw. "I'm here," I said again. To her this time. Adora looked at me frightened. We were both shaking now. "It's not ending here, or ever."

She took a steadier breath, and I looked up at the sky to find mine.

I'd been here once before, under an eclipse with my lungs feeling as though they were being ripped out of my chest. Last time, it was the dead of summer, and this time the freezing winds were fisting my bones. Before, the tribe had sliced me open and ripped off the sack—my heart, the organ I couldn't survive without. This time, Kane was slicing her open just before he pulled the knife to her throat—my heart, the one I couldn't survive without.

And it felt like I couldn’t breathe.

I felt a hand on my shoulder.

I looked back to see the Heathens surrounding me.

They were here, and I tried to take a deep breath.

“Look, Adora, the Heathens are here.” Kane laughed. “Out of anyone in this fucking town to come to your rescue, the Heathens did not make that list.” He looked around, as did I.

Cyrus was to my right, trying to talk Kane down.

I could hear the Heathens whispering behind me.

Augustine stood confused and was whispering in a woman’s ear.

“What the fuck are you even doing here?” Kane asked me. “This is Sacred Sea business.”

Then Zephyr stepped up behind me and leaned into my ear.

“Magic’s not working,” he whispered, and I looked back to Augustine, then up to the eclipse. “Time reversed a few seconds earlier today. We can’t use magic, brother. Not until time fixes itself.”

My hands curled into fists, and my eyes slammed closed.

Desperate, I reached for anything, called out to anything.

The gods. The ground. The earth.

There was nothing but silence.

My body was shaking, my teeth chattering from fear, worry, the cold.

I stepped closer. “Take a look at her,” I said. “She’s terrified. This is not what she deserves. If you’re eager to slit someone’s throat tonight, allow me to take her place. All I ask is that you please let her go.”

I felt eyes dart to me. The entire crowd. Cyrus, Phoenix, Augustine, even.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Phoenix hissed from my left.

From my right, Cyrus stood shocked. “You’d trade your life for hers?”

He bounced his gaze between Adora and me.

I chanced another step closer. “Let me come up there.”

Kane shook his head. “You’re crazy.”

“I prefer passionate.”

Something disturbing moved across his features. Something sinister filled the look in his eyes. His grip tightened around the dagger, and he broke the thin skin of her throat as a warning. Adora hissed, slamming her eyes shut as blood streamed down her neck.

“Hurting her will be your biggest regret,” I scraped out, my hands shaking.

Kane's gaze moved across the crowd, gazing at his father, Cyrus, Adora, and back at me. "Do you know what she did?"

"I don't care. Whatever it is will not be resolved by harming her."

A crafty grin stretched across his face. "I'd like to hold my own town meeting."

Kane tightened his hold, pinning her to his chest. He dug the tip of the dagger into her temple. "You should all know that Adora Sullivan is a whore," he shouted, eyes red and cheeks shaking. "Do you have any idea what it feels like to be used? For nine years, she pretended to be family." His eyes filled with tears. "For nine years, she pretended to care about me. For nine fucking years, this bitch fucked me!" He was screaming now, his hand shaking. "All this time, she admitted she got close just to kill me. For something I didn't even do."

"You know Adora," Cyrus countered. "You know about her mom and what her mom tried to do. Adora didn't mean to, man. She can't help herself, just like you and I can't help who our parents are. She *needs* us to be there for her."

"Be there for her?" Kane wiped his nose. "She tried to kill me tonight."

"Darling, I told you not to do that," I said, keeping my eyes on the dagger, preparing to fly up the stairs. And, "I couldn't—" she started to say, but my palm bolted out in front of me. "Don't say a word."

"No, no, no." He tightened his grip around the dagger. "Let the cunt have her last words."

At that, my gaze snapped back to Kane, another wave of rage spewing from my pores. "Kill her, and I will be there before you finish, reach down your throat, and pull out your intestines." The anger clenched my teeth, not the cold any longer. "Are you willing to die for a girl who would take pleasure in scraping your guts from the bottom of her shoe?"

"If you had one day in my shoes, you'd slit your own throat." Kane pressed his mouth to her ear. "She was supposed to be the one who gave a damn about me. She was the one who accepted me. I guess I have no one."

Adora's face contorted and her body shrunk in his arms.

"I'm sorry," she cried. It was the first time I'd heard her say anything, and her terrified voice slashed my heart.

Kane adjusted her, bringing the knife back to her throat. "You think I'm willing to spend the rest of my life watching my back because I let you live?"

The scene of how I found Phoenix flashed before my eyes. Kane was

capable of not only killing her, but he was capable of shredding her into pieces in front of an audience. This fear inside me only increased with each passing second.

A sudden movement caught my attention.

Cyrus was bolting toward Kane.

Time moved slow as I watched Kane's eyes snap to the side, seeing Cyrus coming. Kane then drove the point of the blade into Adora's collarbone, a wail escaping her. Before Cyrus could reach the stairs, I grabbed the back of his coat and threw him into the pavement.

"Nobody moves!" I shouted, seeing Kane stop. I put my palms in the air. "You have a death wish? Fine, but you have two options, and you'll be happy to know you're dying either way. The question is, would you rather die as the witch who killed a woman, or as the witch who killed a Heathen?" I spread out my arms. "Let her go, and I will not fight you. You can drive that dagger right through my heart."

"Whoa-ha-ho," Kane sang. "Now, why would I want to do that? You see, I have a feeling, and correct me if I'm wrong—"

I lifted my chin. "What?"

"A slit of her throat would kill you both."

My jaw snapped shut. I scanned the crowd.

They were all staring at me with torches in their eyes under the crimson eclipse. Augustine furrowed his brows, wearing an angry scowl. Cyrus looked defeated as though he already knew.

My gaze fell upon Adora. And there went my heart.

It beat so violently every time she looked at me.

She was my only and all.

She was the very last breath at the bottom of my lungs.

I held her here, with my gaze, under a myriad of stars, as though we were alone. "Kill me?" I shook my head, my teeth chattering. "Losing you would sever my soul."

A tear slipped from her eye, and a relieved exhale left me.

As though all the weight was lifted from my shoulders.

I turned to Cyrus, Augustine, and the Order, raising my arms up at my sides. "You'd have to kill me because I'm not leaving here tonight without her." Everyone looked at me dumbfounded. "Now," I said, facing Kane again, pointing at him. "I'm going to allow you five seconds to let her go before I rip out that sharp tongue of yours, use it to gut you like a fish, and

wage a war against this entire town."

"Sharp tongue? Like how sharp?" Kane asked, bringing the knife to the back of her shoulder. "This sharp?"—and Adora clenched her fists, blood pooling around her feet, with a scream that cracked me open again.

There was a heaviness in my chest, my muscles spasming under my flesh, ready to rip her from him at any moment.

Kane pointed the dagger at me, her blood dripping from the edge. "I'll allow you five seconds to get on your fucking knees, Heathen, or I'll cut this pretty little thing's neck in half."

Tears were draining out of Adora while the cold stole her cries.

She couldn't face the crowd anymore, hanging her head.

Hot tears welled in my eyes as I was completely powerless.

"Three seconds!" Kane screamed.

I clenched my jaw. Staring at her with a tight throat, like I was struggling to swallow a still-beating heart. A tear slid down my cheek. And then another. The strangers surrounding me were watching me, cursing me with their eyes as if I were the one harming her.

The blood eclipse spilled above, a dark, crimson glow.

Fear paralyzed me as visions from that night replayed in my mind.

Summer heat, pain, and profound weakness.

Their thirst for power, and my defenseless body kneeling before it.

"Two seconds!"

Upon catching Adora's gaze, tears splashed the rims of her green eyes.

Then he began to cut into her, and her eyes slammed shut.

"Stop! Okay," I shouted.

A blur filled my sights. I couldn't catch my breath.

I felt everyone's eyes on me. My heart was pounding.

And I fell to my knees.

"Now let her go." Defeat filled my words and all the spaces between them. "Please just give her to me."

Kane's brows raised, and a chuckle fell out of him. "Now the rest of you."

But all the sounds were muffled. All these voices were in a fog because my breath was in my ears, and I couldn't take my eyes off Adora, who stood with blood spilling from everywhere. Her palms, chest, collarbone, neck, lips. I was certain her back, even. Behind me, the Heathens were cursing Kane, and Kane's face turned red as he screamed back.

“Julian,” I pleaded, knowing if he did this, the rest would follow.

Then everything had gone silent.

Around me, the crowd froze in shock. Not a soul moved a muscle.

Only nighttime swirled, a cold winter howl circling us.

I glanced back to my left and right.

The rest of them had surrendered.

All five Heathens were on their knees for Adora.

Then the earth trembled. It was subtle, but I felt it.

The crowd gasped, and the wooden beams vibrated.

Snow that had piled atop the gazebo floated and drifted to the ground.

Then people moved out of the way, revealing Fallon, who was walking up, eyes wide and milky white, irises rolled to the back of her head.

A series of vowels and consonants rolled off her tongue, whispering a chain of words that didn’t make sense. She raised her arms, her palms setting off an iridescent white light in front of her.

With the dagger still pressed to Adora’s throat, Kane narrowed his eyes at Fallon, unsure what was happening. And when Fallon twisted her wrists, the blade’s sharp steel froze, turning to ice, from silver to white, cracking then shattering to pieces.

Kane dropped the bladeless handle.

I sprang to my feet and rushed up the stairs.

Although I was unable to feel my limbs, I knew that she was in my arms. She was shaking and clinging to me and pressing her face against my chest as though to bury herself and never come back out.

“It’s over,” I said and instantly checked her injuries. When I peeled her shirt from her skin to look where Kane had cut into her back, another wave of rage overcame me. My gaze lifted, and Kane was stepping back toward the bench. He sat in surrender, dropping his head into his hands.

I tore myself from Adora, not stopping until I had his throat in my fist and my fist in his face. Repeatedly, I punched, my knuckles connecting to Kane’s face, splitting the skin over his cheekbone whilst blood sprayed my cheek. I was outside myself, unable to pull away.

“Stop! He’s going to kill him!” someone screamed, but I didn’t.

I was then wrenched off him. It took all four Heathens.

Angry tears fell from my eyes as I pointed at Kane, whose face was busted open. “I want to rip your throat apart,” I roared through a clenched jaw. “But death gives you more peace than you deserve.”

I shoved Julian off me and turned to Adora.

She was sitting on the step.

I pushed a palm down my face and swiped up her bag, her jacket.

Adora looked up at me, teeth chattering.

Then she slowly rose to her feet, wincing in pain as she stood.

I lowered my head, pushing my mouth into her ear. “I refuse to carry you. You will walk away from this.” I snaked my arm around her waist to whisper the rest. “You’re going to walk away on your own two feet with dignity and your spine still intact.” She nodded, and I kissed the side of her head.

The crowd parted as we passed.

I glanced back at Cyrus.

He didn’t move a muscle.

He didn’t say a word.

He only stood there.

He only stood there.

I would never have just stood there.

I faced forward again, looking down Main Street and tucking her close to my side.

“You got on your knees,” she whispered.

“I did. No need to make a spectacle of it.”

Adora’s small laugh was light and broken.

I kissed her temple. “It felt like my lungs were being ripped from my chest.” I tried to stop the chattering of my teeth by clenching my jaw. “I would give you my final breath, Adora Danvers.”

“Sullivan.”

“For now.”

I looked back. The Heathens and Fallon weren’t far behind.

“Stone.” She shivered. “What’s wrong with my back?”

“I’ll fix it,” I told her. “All that matters is that you’re alive.”

“Stone,” she said again, sterner this time. “What’s wrong with my back?”

In the distance, Norse Woods stretched under a fading eclipse.

I fixed my gaze on it, tightening my hold on her bag.

“He carved his name.”

CHAPTER 54

ADORA

January 29, 2021
The day after the Crimson Eclipse
2 days until the Cantini-Sullivan Wedding

In the afternoon, an emergency meeting was held in Town Hall. The room had already been cleaned up from lockdown, no evidence of a harrowing night.

I sat between my sisters, Fable to my right, and Ivy to my left.

Ivy was anxious on the edge of her chair with her knee bouncing and her eyes narrowing at the front of the room. Every time the door opened, I peered back, hoping to see Stone, with only emptiness filling my heart. I sat back, twirling my ring around my finger, anxiety creeping inside me.

Earlier, I'd met my sisters at The Bean and spent the last few hours telling them everything that had happened during the eclipse. Rather than hearing it from the Order or anyone else, I preferred them to hear it directly from me. Finding out that I'd planned to murder Kane disappointed Fable. She hasn't spoken to me since. As for Ivy, she was blinded by fury after what Kane had done.

He was sitting far behind the podium in a folding chair, his elbows resting on his knees and his head down. Perhaps some may even believe that he should have killed me at that moment. That I'd deserved it. And perhaps they were right. But it still didn't help that he was alive, and Mom was being

tormented at this very moment, and for the rest of her life. Anything I could have done to save her had passed. I had to move to plan C. I had to put her out of her misery. A mercy kill. Like I'd done for Lena.

The thought of it instantly made pain prickle down my arms and behind my eyes. An emotional pain that I didn't think I'd have to face.

It was the right thing to do for her. It was the only thing left to do for her.

I looked around the room, wondering if anyone else could see the horrifying act unfolding in my head. The townspeople's worried and nervous voices carried, echoing and multiplying. They were watching my every move, too, with gazes like weighted blankets.

Irene and Augustine were having a dispute at the front near the podium.

Jasper Abbott was holding his own meeting in the back corner with *AnonCon*, a conspiracy group he gathered to discuss time disruption, politics, and all other nonsense Jasper could come up with in that unordinary brain of his.

Cyrus stood against the wall with Viola, the two visibly upset.

The doors groaned again when they opened.

A lump formed in my throat as I turned back.

The five Hollow Heathens of Norse Woods walked in with the rest of their coven following behind. The sight of Stone left me breathless.

He wore different clothes. Dark-washed jeans held up around his hips by a black belt, a steel gray shirt under his gray coat, and leather gloves. Under the fluorescent lights, his thick hair was so white there were silver undertones.

He was here, and I tried relaxing in my chair.

Clarence walked to the front of the room to join Augustine, and the rest of Norse Woods took their seats. The Heathens, however, never sitting in meetings, stood near the left wall.

As the crowd settled, Stone scanned the room for me.

And then I was hit by sable eyes.

His shoulders softened, and he leaned against the wall.

Hi, he mouthed.

Just like that, a smile warmed my face. *Hi.*

And a lazy, boyish grin slanted on his lips.

EIGHT HOURS EARLIER

“IT’S A GOOD THING YOU BROUGHT HER HERE RIGHT AWAY,” AGATHA Blackwell muttered under her breath, her eyes scouring my back. “The wounds are fresh and open, so there’s still a chance.” She looked at Stone as though I wasn’t here. “Bring her to your room before anyone makes a fuss.”

Questionable Norse Woods gazes darted in my direction. I turned away, stepping up the grand staircase when a pain screamed up my back as though my skin was being ripped apart. The searing heat of it took my breath away, and I paused, my nails sinking into my palms to fight for my breath back.

Stone stepped up behind me and took my hand. “I have you.”

Once we reached the second floor, I wanted to pass out from the pain.

Stone led me down a hall until we were stopped at the first door on the right. “Here.” He gestured, pushing open the massive door that looked to be five feet taller than him. I took in the room as he guided me to the bed.

In the dark bedroom, the curtains were drawn open. The balcony doors looked like paned windows that stretched from floor to ceiling, allowing the full moon’s light to shine through. Wainscoting decorated the white walls, and a picturesque fireplace greeted me on the left. A cold draft played upon my skin and made me shiver. The bed was deep, rich wood and faced the fireplace. A mirror stood in the corner of the room. A candelabra rested on top of the nightstand next to a few books.

The room was bare, minimal, tidy, yet still felt more comforting than the one I was currently staying in. Maybe because this was where Stone laid his head.

“Zephyr says I can trust her,” he said quietly so no one who happened to come in behind us would hear.

“You can.”

“She’s from Norse Woods. Are you not bothered by this?”

“I’m not bothered,” I reassured him. “I’ve known her my whole life.” I looked back at him and attempted a smile, but it was weak. “I don’t hate Norse Woods, Stone. I’ve only ever had a problem with the Heathens.”

“Oh, good. I’m relieved,” he said, amused as he helped me onto the bed.

“But I don’t want to get blood on your bedsheets.”

“It’s all right.” He took my elbow and helped me lay on my stomach.

Agatha came into the room with Julian.

“I flipped through the book,” she said. “Herbs and oils would be

beneficial, but they would not be as effective as magic in this situation, both in terms of healing and leaving a trace."

Her gaze crawled across my back as Stone peeled my shirt over my head. The cotton felt like it was ripping off another layer of skin, and I squeezed my eyes shut and took quick breaths.

Agatha's face scrunched. "If you want his name off her, you need magic."

Julian crossed his arms against his chest, facing his mother. "We can't practice or exhume our magic. It's ... disabled."

She ripped her eyes from me and looked at him. "Disabled?"

He nodded. "Time flicked backwards today."

She looked at me worried. "It's been months since that happened."

"There is pure magic stored away," Stone interrupted.

Julian held his fingers to his mouth, silver eyes drifting to Stone as he shook his head, protesting. "It's stored for a certain... purpose." His eyes flicked to me. He was being cryptic because he didn't trust me and needed to watch what he was saying. "I can't approve. Especially for a Sacred Sea girl."

Beside me, Stone's eyes flared with black agitation as he looked at Julian.

"The hatred in this town is nothing if not consistent," he said, his thumb grazing my arm. "I'm not asking for permission."

Julian cocked a questionable brow. "You're not asking for permission?"

"There's magic. She needs it. Why must you decide who is worthy?"

"She's not Norse Woods."

Stone's agitation sprouted roots.

I could feel it in the way he was grazing my arm. Deeper, longer strokes.

"I could stand here and argue with you," Stone said. "But it's time we're wasting. Let me know now. Is this a Heathen vote, a *Julian-decides-all-for-everyone-at-all-times*, or a situation where I have to steal magic from my own brothers?"

An exasperated expression stole Julian. "What is your problem with me?"

Stone's hand on my arm paused. "My god, get over yourself," he fumed. "Adora is lying here with her back cut to shreds. Do you really believe I care about your feelings at this moment?"

"I'm sick and tired of your mouth."

Stone shook his head. "You're sick and tired of anyone who contests you."

At once, Julian's face transformed from annoyed to enraged, and he grabbed Stone's arm, flinging him away from me, then pushed him against

the wall. “Just say what you want to say,” Julian seethed.

Stone’s eyes went wild. The unnerving look caused Julian to let him go, and Stone looked down at him. “One way or another, that magic will leave the Athenaeum after Clarence sees what I do to you if you ever drag me away from her again.” Stone stepped forward. “You want to know what I think of you? Fine.”

Julian’s chest was heaving, and my gaze was bouncing between the two.

“You are this noble man, but you have no qualms about doing the wrong thing if it means benefiting you and Fallon. Other times, I find you self-centered and hypocritical, if not a liar. In one breath you say your loyalty is to Fallon, the next it’s to the Heathens. So, which is it?”

Julian didn’t say a word.

He only stood there.

“Every decision you’ve made since murdering my mother has been entirely selfish. You had the nerve to tell me that if it weren’t for breaking the curse, you’d leave me to drown for the rest of my life because of a *possibility* I’d come to harm Fallon. You never were willing to give me a chance. Truth be told, you jumped off the cliff not intending to break the curse. However, it is held over the Heathens as though you should be praised for it. As though you did them all a favor. If only they knew how quick you would turn on them.” Julian clenched his jaw, and Stone took another step forward. “Then I see you and Fallon together every day, the happy couple, with no worries of a tomorrow, when I cannot even hold Adora’s hand, never mind knowing if I’ll ever see her again each time I say goodbye, and I loathe you for it. I am sickened by the fact that you obtained this happiness by betraying others. So, yes, I have a problem with you, but I allow none of it to affect her. Whether I loathe you or like you, I will take magic from you.”

Julian grabbed his shirt and threw him against the wall.

“You ungrateful bastard,” he growled. “All of us got on our knees for the two of you tonight. Never has a Heathen fallen to his knees for Sacred Sea, much less a girl who’d rather bathe in my blood.” His forearm pushed into Stone’s chest. “Yes, I’m selfish, and I’m a hypocrite, and I’m a liar because I put Fallon above the Heathens. Judge me all you want for it, but I get to have a life with Fallon because I fought like hell to be with her, and I never stop,” he spat. “You’re a Heathen, Danvers. You’re given nothing. You are owed nothing. If you want something, you have to fight for it, no matter who you have to cross to get it. So, wipe your fucking tears. Start fighting for the life

you want, and never stop. No matter what I, a Heathen, or anyone else says."

Stone shoved Julian off him. "A virtuous leader, this one, willing to cross his brothers for another." Stone shook his head. "A true leader would never need to choose who to betray. And a true woman would not allow him to choose her in the midst of betrayal." His eyes hit Agatha. "You should be proud."

Stone stalked out of the room, and Julian followed.

Silence replaced them. Agatha and I exchanged glances.

And then, "Oh, the Heathens. Never a dull moment." She chuckled.

"I've seen Stone like this, but never Julian." I smiled because Stone only acted like this when he cared, and this meant Stone had found his place here.

"The four know how to hide themselves, and they hide themselves well. So, when you see them like this, it can only be because of love. No one would think the four monsters of Weeping Hollow both endure the most pain and have the biggest hearts. I see Stone fits right in." Her voice faded, and Agatha smoothed her palm down my shoulder. "I'm sorry Kane did this to you."

I let out a breath, trying not to move.

"I deserved it," I said, looking away from her. "I'm not a good person." After hearing how much Kane truly cared about me, and how this devastated him, I felt disgusted with myself for almost killing him out of hatred and desperation. But it wasn't over. My mother would suffer for years to come if I chose not to end her life for good. And what I had to do made me nauseous.

Agatha's motherly voice floated on my thoughts. "We are humans who sometimes do bad and sometimes do good. Whether it is good or bad is not for you to decide." She looked at me. "One day you will come to realize that even the purest of hearts will choose darkness for intentions they deem moral, if in fact they have a choice at all."

My gaze crawled to her as Adeline appeared in my mind. "Is this what you've told your husband and son to make them feel good about themselves after they've murdered innocent people?"

Agatha's mouth shut.

It stayed quiet for what seemed like an eternity, the room uncomfortable.

Not long after, Stone returned with vials in his fists. Julian was not far behind, and Agatha bounced from her chair as soon as the two walked into the room.

Julian bid his mother a glare. "Everything okay?"

“She needs to drink a vial,” she said, not looking him in the eye. “One of you can fill the bathtub with ice, water, and at least an ounce of the other vial of magic. The temperature needs to be at freezing point. And she will have to sit in the tub until the water seals the magic and the wound closes. No longer than half an hour.” The four of us had suddenly become silent. “You better get a move on it if you want Kane’s name off her back.”

“I’ll go get the ice,” Julian muttered under his breath.

Stone sat beside me. “Agatha seems upset.”

“Does she?”

“You are the only one who can piss someone off in such a manner,” he said, helping me in a sitting position. My skin split again, and I tried to contain the pain from showing on my face as he handed me a vial. “If I had a choice, I’d have only my magic inside you. Not four other men.”

“Is someone jealous?” I threw back the magic like a shot of liquor, and it tasted sugary and smooth, like toasted vanilla.

“I was just told that as long as Heathen magic is stirring inside you, you will gain a desire for them. My hope is to keep you away from every single one of them for as long as I can.”

I took his hand, weaving my fingers between his. “I’m too caught up in your web, Stone Danvers, and I have no desire to be freed.”

We stared at one another, and a small, content smile possessed his lips.

Julian appeared in the doorway, interrupting us. “It’s ready.” He tossed the thermometer to Stone. “I’ll start a fire for when she gets out. Come get me if you need anything.”

Stone scooped me up with carefulness and brought me into the dimly lit bathroom, closing the door behind him.

“Someone is sucking up,” I whispered.

Stone grinned. “We now have an understanding.”

He set me down at the edge of the tub and crouched to take off my shoes and socks, then my jeans. He tossed them one by one to the side in a pile, only leaving on my bra and panties.

I turned and as soon as my toes touched the freezing water, a dreadful chill rushed through me. I tried not to think about it and slowly descended into the tub. My skin felt like it was burning from the cold water, and I sucked air through my teeth.

“How long did she say?” My voice was scattered, and I was trying to stay calm but I felt panic start to rise inside me. My body was resisting me,

refusing to fully submerge. The shock jarred every muscle in my body, and I had to force myself to sink from my knees to my bottom.

Misery consumed Stone as he watched me. Then, not able to handle it any longer, he unlaced his boots and kicked them off. In the next moment, he was stripping off his shirt and pants.

“What ... are ... you doing?” I asked through chattering teeth with a shortness of breath. My muscles were twitching. Like I couldn’t control them.

He stepped into the tub and paused, taking a moment to catch his breath before sitting behind me. I couldn’t see his face but knew from the way he stopped, switching from fast to slow that it was just as paralyzing for him.

He guided me to lay on my side between his legs, with my head resting on his upper thigh. “You’re experiencing cold shock. You have to control your breathing,” he said, gathering my hair and keeping it out of the ice-cold water. “You have to keep your heartbeat steady.”

I said thank you in my head. It was too cold to leave my mouth.

Time passed like that, with me shivering in his arms. I clutched his thigh, wondering what he was thinking or if he was too cold to think at all. It had only been about ten minutes, and I could no longer feel my fingers and toes.

“Adora,” he whispered, his breath coming out much smoother than my own. “I am yours ... and you are mine ... and only mine. You cannot be fated for him ... I don’t believe it ... not when ... each day that passes by without you, it feels like you are missing from me.”

Stone began to tremble, and he smoothed his palm down my arm to create any amount of heat between us.

“I’ve tried to stop thinking about you. And I can’t,” he continued, voice torn, chest rising full and falling hard. “I’m terrified of how far I would go to keep you ... and the things I would do for just another second alone with you ... and that I’ll never be able to stop myself when it comes to you.”

Town Hall Meeting

THE *BANG* OF AUGUSTINE’S GAVEL STOLE ME AWAY FROM STONE.

“Last night was disappointing for us all,” Augustine announced.

Ivy stood, taking her hand from mine. “Disappointing?” she asked, her tone on edge. “My sister was almost killed by your son. That’s not disappointing, Augustine. That’s downright evil.”

A few agreed with her, and Augustine bristled at the response.

“You were not there last night,” he countered. “You mustn’t have all the information on what happened or otherwise you’d sit down and not talk out of turn.” Augustine was particularly frustrated on this day. Most likely because it was his only son we were discussing. “In any case, Kane was not in his right state of mind.”

What would he think if he witnessed what his son had done to Phoenix?

“That is no excuse. None of us are in our right minds,” Ivy said. “We’re all delirious from the Shadows, but this does not justify attempted murder. And if you for one second accuse my sister of Kane’s actions, you should know that a case of *he-said-she-sai*d never was enough in the eyes of the Order. The facts are based on what was witnessed by the people last night.”

I blinked up at my sister, surprised. Not surprised because she’d fought for me but surprised she’d stood up to our high priest for me.

Around me, the people’s agreements got louder, more full.

Augustine looked back at Kane, fingers curling over the podium.

Kane’s face was swollen from when Stone attacked him.

“Kane will not be speaking today,” Augustine announced. “We will return to this matter once the Shadows are removed. In the meantime, we will gather evidence of what happened during the eclipse.”

My spine turned rigid, but no sooner did Ivy’s voice fill the room. “You want to postpone the attempted murder?” She was shocked, confused by the decision. “And what about my sister’s safety during this time while Kane is recovering from his *traumatic* night?”

I wasn’t afraid of Kane Pruitt, but I was afraid of Augustine. Even though I’d changed my mind at the last second, it didn’t make a difference. I’d lured Kane to the gazebo. I’d brought the dagger. I’d bought the witherbane. I could very well be punished for it all.

When Augustine didn’t answer right away, another question swooped in. “Will the Sullivan-Cantini wedding still go on? It is in two days, but after last night, we’re all confused.”

My gaze darted to Stone.

He stared back at me from across the room.

Surely they wouldn't embarrass Cyrus in Town Hall after I'd left with another man in front of half the town less than ten hours earlier.

"The wedding will go on," Viola confirmed, and Stone shook his head so subtly, his sharp jaw flexing. "Nothing—*and I mean nothing*—will have the power to rip hope and a future from Sacred Sea or Weeping Hollow."

My pulse raced in my ears as she answered.

A *thump da-thump da-thump*. Like banging on a door. Like a *let me out.*

Julian reached past Phoenix to lay a hand on Stone's shoulder.

When Stone didn't turn to acknowledge him, Julian leaned over to whisper into his ear.

Stone didn't react to whatever Julian had said.

He just stood there with eyes never leaving mine.

Six Hours Earlier

THE HEAT FROM THE FIRE WARMED MY FACE AS I DEFROSTED INSIDE STONE'S arms.

We were on the floor at the foot of the bed, wrapped in blankets, sweat dewing the edges of our bodies. It was the crackling and the warmth that made us quiet for a while.

The magic had worked, and I was no longer bleeding or wounded or in any pain. I was at ease, relaxed, content. Until, "You're supposed to be married in two days," Stone said. His fingertips skipped along my arms nervously, and I could feel the pounding of his heart against my back. "Is what you said in your letter truly how you feel?"

My heart jumped into my throat. "Which part?"

"All of it." He exhaled. His breath hit my neck. "Do you love me, Adora?"

It fell quiet again as I stared into the flames, unblinking and scared out of my mind. All of my feelings and emotions were much easier to express by paper and ink. Paper could not cut me open with a voice. Ink could not poison me with scrutiny. Alone I could write, never feeling ashamed of how I felt. Alone he could read, never feeling ashamed of how the words made him

feel. It was perfect, really. No room for pressure, fear, or rejection.

"No one's ever loved me before, so I need to hear you say it," he continued, his fingertips trembling as they gently stroked my arm. He was so nervous; I was so scared. "I want you to turn around, look me in the eyes, and tell me how you feel about me."

Slowly, I turned between his legs, and he dragged me closer until I was straddling his lap. We were face to face. Nowhere to hide. He swallowed down a lump in his throat, dropping his head against the footboard of the bed, watching me closely through heavy lashes.

He could be so detached and cold to the rest of the world, but he was so gentle and vulnerable with me. I touched his face, tracing his details with my finger, brushing his lips, stroking his cheekbones, his jawline. Stone cupped my hand and rested his face in my palm, needing to be touched by me, letting me hold him like this.

"I'm in love with you," I drawled out in a whisper, my voice shaking. "I love you, and only you." I held his gaze, watching his eyes water, so I shrugged to fight the nerves. I had to say it, and he needed to hear it, whether he would ever say it in return. "And I love who I am when I'm with you. I believe that matters. The other half of falling in love is to fall in love with yourself, too."

His eyes were so black when one tear slashed his cheek. "Then marry me."

"What?" My gaze jumped across his face. He was serious.

"Marry me, Adora," he repeated, eyes sailing between mine. "I don't have a home, or money, I know this, but I'll do everything I can to make a life for us—"

"Stone—"

"No, please, let me say this," he said, bringing my hand to his chest. "I just need to say it, and for you to listen."

I nodded, his heart slamming against my palm. "Okay."

The apple in his throat bobbed. "I cannot give you a fairytale, but life isn't meant to be a fairytale. Life isn't supposed to be about being happy all the time. Life is supposed to be full of experience, and I can give that to you. We will learn and grow and push each other beyond what we thought capable of us. And we will become better people because of it. There will be all kinds of suffering, but we will feel pleasure with the same intensity, if not deeper. *A lot of pleasure,* darling. Sometimes we'll hurt each other, make mistakes, and

drive each other mad. Then there will be times when we can't pull away from each other, nurse each other, and be whatever the other needs, and that is life. It's not designed to be perfect. It's designed for us to live and experience it all and leave this world better than how we found it."

It was only when he was wiping tears from under my eyes that I realized I was crying. He grinned with an exhale. "Could you imagine? We can have a life together, you and me. An adventure."

My heart ached for this. My heart starved for this. I wanted this. Desperately. And it was right here. "But ... if we marry, the town will burn to the ground, and we will all die. How do you expect me to be selfish like that? I'll never be able to forgive myself."

"Who said this to you? Him?" He nudged his eyes to the east. "Adora, listen to yourself. Your decisions are being dictated by predictions of an event that hasn't happened."

"This isn't from a boot-leg version of a psychic. I saw the future with my own eyes. I could smell the burning skin and hear the screams."

"All right," he said, combing my hair back. "Perhaps the town will burn. Perhaps there will be a war, and if so, it won't be the last." His eyes sailed between mine. "Battles and challenges will come, Adora, this world is not lacking in hatred, but we can fight together, on the same team, side by side, you and I."

My nerves vibrated beneath my skin. He would never understand what the town would do to him. He was never raised here. He had never witnessed what would happen if one rebelled against an order. "Sacred Sea and the town will not let us happen. If we marry, they will kill both of us for rebelling. This wedding with Cyrus will take place. They won't let anything stop it, Stone."

His jaw flexed. "Then marry me in secrecy."

My eyes widened. "In secrecy?"

"Yes, if I cannot stop this wedding, and the moment comes where you are standing before him, I want you to stand there as my wife. If they force your hand and you must fuck him, I want you to have my name and fuck him as a Danvers. And if there comes a day I must leave this world, I want to die as your husband." His fingers wrapped around my neck, and he pulled me to him. "I will wait for as long as it takes, Adora. All I need is us, bound together. Us, and nothing more."

My hands were shaking. My eyes were fogging up.

“But the wedding is the day after tomorrow.”

“I’m asking you to marry me tonight. Under the gods, soul binding and in spirit, so no matter what comes tomorrow or the day after, no one can ever take this from us. This way, only our vows and marriage to each other will be valid and true. All others that may come after will be null and void,” he said, and my heart was beating so fast. “Adora, no one has to know. But if you are being true, we only have tonight.” He kissed me, and I tasted salt on my lips. “We can be together for eternity, whether it be in Weeping Hollow, the afterlife, or on this earth again.”

“Oh my god,” poured out of me in a broken whisper.

Stone tucked my hair behind my ears, continuing, “Over a hundred years were thrown between us, and I still found you, and I’ll keep finding you. I will *always* find you.”

“Stone,” I said, my head shaking because I didn’t know what to say.

“Defy them, darling.” His whisper spilled inside me, and he snaked an arm around my back and pulled me flush against him. “You’ve only cried when you were sad. I need you to tell me these aren’t sad tears.”

I sniffled, trying to find words. “But only a high priest can marry us.”

“And I have every intention of marrying you the right way, so I need to know if this is your version of a yes.” He held my face back, his hooded eyes falling upon mine. “What do you choose?”

I didn’t have to think. “You. I choose you. Always.”

A blend of relief and intense emotion moved across his face like an eclipse as he looked at me, his chest rising and falling. And then he was kissing me. And *kissing me*. Deeply, eternally.

Not ten minutes later, it was only Stone and I standing before Clarence in a room surrounded by books as the blue moon threaded through the window between us.

I was wearing someone else’s sweatpants and sweatshirt.

Stone was wearing a white tee and sweatpants.

My hair was a mess, and I had no make-up on.

Our fingers were woven together as Clarence tied a blue ribbon around our wrists, eyes deeply rooted to each other, crazy in love. “Hence, the first binding is made with dark blue, symbolic of water, that your love may fill you to the depths ...” Clarence’s voice faded into the background when Stone’s gaze turned eternal, his hand turning over in mine so that my fingertips were grazing the scar in his palm.

Suddenly, a vision appeared in my mind.

It surprised me, causing me to flinch, and Stone held my wrist, guiding me to keep my fingers in his palm. I glanced quickly at Clarence, and he was still reading from the book. When I looked back at Stone, a small grin played on his lips. He raised his palm, prompting me to continue, so I did.

I drew circles over his palm, and the vision came again.

It was Stone's memory, so I was looking at myself, like a film on a projector in the corner of my sight. This vision was a series of pictures in a linear sequence motion that brought this collection of stills to life. A flip book of us in the cave.

This is Stone's memory, my mind repeated, and it was why I was feeling everything he felt in that moment I'd held a knife to his throat. *And my heart is beating so fast, and I'm afraid. Not afraid of dying but afraid of not being able to hold myself together, to remain calm, because ... She's looking at me, and I could simply fall apart.*

"Are you watching?" he whispered, and I nodded.

Stone wet his lips, giving Clarence a side eye to see that he was still reading. "In this second binding, the green color represents Earth, indicating that your love will be wise and nurturing, and your happiness will be plentiful..." Then Stone discretely reached for my free hand.

He took one, slow step forward, bringing my hand under his shirt and against his warm skin on his side, where glass was once stuck inside him. Clarence didn't notice what we were doing in secret.

Once Stone's hand came over mine, and he pressed my palm against his skin, another vision came. And it was our first kiss in the lighthouse, *and I'm him again, feeling gentle hands, soft lips, and broken breaths; my heart is aching for this, nerves making my pulse shake because I fear I'll do something for this moment to stop, and I don't want it to stop; please, do not stop.* I looked into Stone's unmasked eyes, and he looked into mine. He stood nervous, exposed, vulnerability in his eyes as he let me in. And in the corners of our minds, we're watching our first kiss *as a tongue slips into my mouth, and I taste us. An explosion of emotion consumes me, warmth spreads throughout my body. A mania. Half abandon, half claim.*

Unable to take anymore, Stone removed my hand from his side and brought my fingers to his face. He stepped closer, no longer caring for the distance between us. He guided my thumb to graze his cheekbone. The teardrop scar.

Around our bound wrists, Clarence wrapped a red ribbon. “A third binding is made with red, symbolic of fire, in order to symbolize deeply passionate love...”

Stone and I looked into each other’s eyes, watching me strike his cheek with my palm, *and it hurts in my heart, not on my face. It hurts,* but this wasn’t what he wanted me to see or feel. It was what came next, *and our eyes catch, skin against skin, blonde wisps of hair in my face, flares of starved, green eyes, waves of warmth crashing into me one after the other, pure bliss, so light it could take me to my knees, so heavy it could take me to my grave; the feel of her bound to me, the taste of her on my lips, the smell of her surrounding me, the sound of her breathing, the way she’s holding me, all of me, this is deeper than mere pleasure as it feels like something good inside her is slowly rushing through where we’re connected and making its way into me; my blood is pulsing, I’m on the edge, crumbling like sand; she’s stealing me slowly, and it feels like my heart is beating out of my chest, because this is the moment, and there’s nothing I can do to stop myself, and I’m terrified; stone not paper, I scream, but it’s already too late; I keep falling apart; again and again, I fall apart.*

“The fourth binding is therefore made in light blue, the color of the sky, to symbolize the limitlessness and spirit of your love,” Clarence finished, bringing us back.

My hand slipped from his face, but the memory didn’t vanish as I expected. It broke into thousands of pieces and fell to the floor of my mind.

Stone moved his fingers up to my wrists on both arms, feeling my pulse race as he faced Clarence. As if he couldn’t look at me anymore, like he was embarrassed. I studied the side of his face as he kept his eyes on Clarence, unable to come down from his emotions. I just stood there, my eyes tracing his profile that gave nothing away, feeling raw. Like there was no skin on my heart, so everything was intense.

This was how he felt while fucking me that first time, and my heart couldn’t calm. My chest was rising and falling more rapidly. And how could he just stand there and feel like this?

“Do you have rings?” Clarence asked.

I shook my head, trying to keep my tears back as Stone said, “Yes.”

My eyes darted to him when his hand left mine.

He reached into his pocket, still not looking at me.

Inside his palm were two wooden rings with intricate carvings.

I picked the smaller one from his palm and spun it around, seeing a lighthouse, the beam, Stone's name, a spider, a flower, it was all there. A tiny mural of our love story carved into the wood. The other had the same designs, except with my name.

Clarence continued with the ceremony.

I tugged on Stone's hand, begging him to look at me.

Then he took a breath and lifted his eyes to mine.

As soon as he did, he fought through it, clenching his jaw, his eyes watering.

I wanted to tell him I loved him even more for what he'd shown me, but Clarence was talking. So, I held his gaze, rubbed circles in his palm, and gave him a small smile. All at once, he released a breath, a tear, and a smile.

When Stone slipped on my ring, he pulled me into his chest and dropped his mouth to my ear. Our fingers were tightly woven between us.

"What I feel for you knows no time or place," he whispered, his warm words ruffling my hair. "My love for you awakened without warning, slowly and in an instant, in one throbbing heartbeat, in a single flashing moment ... and I'm in love with you *always*, my darling ... Do you hear me?"

This was what I'd longed to hear from him, and it caused me to unravel at the seams until I burst into tears. I held him tighter, nodding against his neck.

Stone's hand came around me and held the back of my head, pulling me closer. He kissed my temple and rocked me in place. "I. Love. You ... and these words are perishable, gone as soon as they leave my lips, but Adora, I hope you feel how deeply rooted you are in me. There is only one way you should be loved, and that is with my whole heart and last breath. So, you have me completely." He kissed the side of my head. And we clung to each other, whispering our vows, too overwhelmed to be bothered by our surroundings. Because this was us.

Eventually, Stone stepped back. My face must've looked like a sobbing mess, but I didn't care. He'd just shown me and told me he loved me, and what came first thunder or lightning? Because at this moment I was both shaken and struck.

From the corner of my eye, Clarence looked up at us.

I could feel Stone's heart pound when Clarence said, "Stone and Adora Danvers, you are now bound together, husband and wife, two souls, two lives, into one."

Town Hall Meeting

I twisted my ring around my finger again, a smile playing on my lips.

"You speak of fairness and equality. This is true for all the people of Weeping Hollow. Including your son, correct?" Ivy asked.

"Kane will be punished accordingly," Augustine seethed.

"And until Kane's punishment is stated, Adora is not marrying Cyrus," Ivy demanded. My gaze darted to her, shocked she'd said this but hope filling me. I moved to the edge of my seat, wishing this would stand in the way of the wedding. "There will be no celebration until justice is served." Ivy looked around the room, a vein popping in her forehead. "Everyone in favor say *'aye.'*"

The room collectively said *'aye.'*

Augustine's angry gaze landed on me, and anxiety crept up my spine.

This was not a gaze of comfort. This was a threat.

"Kane Pruitt will spend six months in the cell," he ordered, as though with a mouth full of bitterness. Kane's head popped up from his hands, and a mixture of fear and dread consumed his entire face. "May the gods be with him."

Like a ripple effect, the crowd gasped.

My gaze flew back to Stone.

I could hear my heavy breathing in my ears.

And then his heavy breathing.

And the memory of our panting came back to me.

Five Hours Earlier

We were nothing more than passion and despair thrown against the wall.

Stone's heavy breathing was in my ears as he came down on an elbow,

dipping a hand under my shirt, dragging it across my ribcage, tracing my silhouette. Then he slipped his hand inside my sweatpants and fisted my ass, grinding his erection into me as his warm, breathy moan hit my neck. My blood pumped hot, a vicious tingling sensation raining down on me. And I … was … done … for …

I shoved my palms into his chest, and his hands came over mine as I guided him backward until he was sitting on the edge of the bed, a beautiful smile ripping across his face. “Oh, are you going to fuck me, Adora? Is that what this is?”

He reached for my waist to pull me between his knees, but I stepped back, letting his hands fall away.

I bit my lip to trap my smile. “Is that what you want?”

Stone wet his lips, a flare in his wicked gaze. “You, those eyes, that smile, and I’m fucking undone.” He leaned in, unable to scrape away his grin, brows up, gesturing with two fingers “Now, come here.”

I didn’t. I stripped out of my shirt, dropping it to the floor—nothing underneath. Next, my sweatpants were sliding down my thighs into a pile at my feet. Stone’s gaze dragged down my body, his expression melting.

“Adora,” tore out of him, breathy, in need.

As I drew nearer, I caught his hands before they touched my waist.

I pushed them away.

“Not yet,” I whispered, appreciating the outline of his stretched cock against his sweatpants. By this time, my thighs were sore from clenching so tightly together, my chest was aching from my heart racing, my pussy soaked and warm and ready. But I wanted to savor every look … taste … feel … word from his lips. I wanted to make him feel the same way he made me feel.

I took another step closer, dragging a hand up the length of his thigh, the other raking the back of his scalp. Chills moved across his skin, goosebumps rising, his eyes dark. He shifted at the edge of the mattress, fisting bedsheets to hold himself back. “Adora,” he warned.

Smiling, I pressed kisses against the pulse at his neck. Then my lips trailed up his throat, and Stone moaned, leaning back onto his hands, his head falling into my palm.

“You make me so goddamn horny,” he dragged out, his breath quickening. “God, please, let me fuck you.”

A shiver attacked my bloodstream as I kissed along his jawline.

As though he couldn’t stand it, he sat up straight, turning his head slowly,

facing me, and I could feel his warm breath sweep across my cheek. Our eyes slammed together, and his were hooded, drenched. They fell to my mouth then back up into my eyes with his chest heaving.

"You're dangerous when you're quiet like this," he whispered.

I scraped my nails down his scalp again, and my smile grazed his mouth.

For a moment, we hovered there with our lips barely touching, breathing deeply into each other's mouths. We stayed like this until one of us couldn't take it anymore. And then Stone broke first, diving forward, but I inched back before he caught me.

He smiled and licked his lips, his forehead connecting to mine.

"What are you waiting for?" he asked, heavy eyes staring into mine through black lashes. He nudged his mouth against my lips. "Take me. I'm yours."

His words intensified this hot buzz inside me, and my heart sailed. I gripped his hair, tipping his head back and taking his mouth. Stone's fingers dug into the flesh at my hip, and his tongue slipped between my lips. Then I sank, feeling his hands slide over my body.

With his other hand, he reached up and gently slid his middle finger over my pussy lips. My head fell back, and his mouth trailed down my throat. "And this is mine," he said as his fingertip slipped between my slit, capturing my wetness. He parted me with two fingers and found my clit, stroking it and drawing small circles. My mouth returned to his, and I was gone.

We were a bundle of flayed open nerves and lit matches.

Every inch of my body was sensitive to his every touch, lighting everywhere his fingers landed. I clawed at his shirt, desperate to feel my skin against his, and Stone pulled away from our kiss, reached behind him, and ripped it off his back. My breasts collided with his chest, and I stole his jaw, kissing his warm mouth, a delicious moan humming between us.

His hands were everywhere, grabbing my thighs, hauling me onto his lap. I straddled him and reached between us, dipping my hand into his sweats and taking out his cock. Stone's kiss drowned as I began to grind my soaked pussy against the length of it.

I grabbed his hair and pulled him back to see his lips swollen, his eyes intoxicated. "Are you watching?" I asked him teasingly, my palm resting on his knee as I leaned back and rolled my hips.

Stone caught my back for support, watching my pussy slide up and down his shaft, stroking it. He cursed through a heavy breath, his other hand

dragging across my heaving stomach, my ribcage, taking my breast into his palm, starving for it.

"You're the devil," he breathed out. "It's taking everything I have not to explode all over you right now."

I continued to roll my hips, this time more desperately, feeling all his ridges glide across my sex. My clit was a heartbeat, begging for more friction, so I was grinding more intensely. A feather-like moan left my lips.

His eyes fell hazy. His breath cut short. His fingers sank into my flesh as he came. His climax spilled out, seeping down his cock and over my pussy. I didn't stop and continued to grind against him as he twitched and pulsed. Stone watched me slide up and down his cum-soaked cock, chest heaving, muscles straining, abs flexing, mouth falling apart until he was completely emptied.

Eyes hungry, he grabbed the nape of my neck and kissed me once.

Twice.

Three times.

"We're perfect," he whispered into my mouth, and it suddenly made me tear up. I didn't know if it was what he'd said or how he'd said it. I didn't know, but all I could think about were our scars. His that were on the outside, mine on the inside.

But he referred to himself as perfect, my heart screamed.

This was the moment, I believe, Stone fell in love with himself, too.

His arm snaked around me, and he turned, throwing me on my back.

He yanked me to the edge of the mattress, staring up at me with dilated eyes as he lowered to one knee. My leg was lifted and wrapped around his shoulder, and as soon as I felt his lips on the inside of my thigh, my head dropped back. He kissed both sides of me, then spread my lips apart with two fingers and dragged his tongue up my soaked flesh.

My body shivered, my mouth fell open. Half moan, half sigh.

I lifted up on my elbows just when he licked me again.

"Oh my god, Stone," came out in a ragged breath.

His eyes sailed up to mine, and he smiled against my pussy.

It made me melt, and I was on my back again, his tongue sliding over my clit, slowly, repeatedly, again and again, over and over. A climax was climbing, and he took me into his mouth. "Stone, please," I cried, fisting his hair.

"Please, what?" he asked, looking up at me.

“I want you inside me.”

Stone flashed a cunning smile. “Don’t worry, darling, I’m going to fuck you.” Then his tongue pressed into my flesh, dragged up the length of me, and then he wrapped his perfect fucking lips around my clit. His fingertip sailed down to my opening, and he teased it at the same time his tongue was scraping my clit. He did this until an orgasm stole me and owned me.

Stone’s mouth turned gentle, and he licked me softly as I came down from the orgasm, pressing kisses onto the insides of my thighs.

He lifted me off the mattress until he was sitting on the edge of it and I was straddling him. I kissed him and tasted myself on his lips as I grabbed his cock. When I lifted myself up on one knee to align us, Stone leaned back on his hands, his chest heaving in anticipation. Our eyes locked.

Then slowly, so that I could feel everything, I slid his thick head inside me, sensations and chills tearing through my body. His gaze lowered, his expression falling, brows slanted, mouth parting as he watched my wet pussy sink over his cock until he was deep inside me and stretching me fully.

When his eyes met mine again, they were wild.

Hating the distance, he sat up until my breasts collided with his chest and wrapped my legs around his waist. He grabbed my hands next, warpping them around his neck. He held my head while his other hand slithered down my spine until he was fisting my ass, guiding me to grind over his cock. “We feel so good,” he whispered, pressing his forehead to mine.

“And how does it feel to be here with me, right now, at this very moment, married?” I asked him, squeezing his cock with a slow, sensual roll of my hips. My clit scraped along his pelvis, and an explosion of warm tingles flared. I whimpered, his hand on my ass guiding me to keep grinding.

“My god, Adora,” he said upon a moan, moving my hair to one side so he could watch what I was doing. My pace picked up, all the blood rushing to my clit, and my legs started to shake from the pleasure. Stone looked up at me. “I am unable to think...” He breathed heavily. “What was the question?”

I laughed. “I said ... how does it feel to be here with me, right now, at this very moment, you and me, married?”

He slid his palm up my side, another breathy moan leaving him. “It feels like ...” A dark gaze drifted between my eyes. “It feels like I’m in the right place ... at the right time ... for the second time in my life.”

I raised a brow, slamming my pussy down on him. “When was the first?”

Stone grinned and grabbed my jaw.

His lips nudged mine. “Two months ago, in a cave, in your arms.”

Seconds later, he leaned to the side and swiped up his white shirt.

He pulled the shirt down, my head popping through the neckline.

I pushed my arms through the sleeves, confused. “What are you doing?”

“I don’t want anyone to see you,” he said, standing with me in his arms.

“Where are we going?”

Stone stayed silent with a wicked grin.

He unlocked the back door, and when he opened it, a rush of winter blew into us, cooling our heated skin. Stone stepped out onto the balcony. We both looked up, and the navy night sky looked to be bleeding from the red moon.

My spine hit the thick square column, and he nailed me there, thrusting inside me. “Do you believe our love to be immortal?” he panted, a blue vein popping in his neck as he plunged inside with deep, ardent thrusts.

“Yes,” I said on a moan, clawing at his scalp, the pleasure almost too much to bear. Stone smiled at my response and curled his fingers into my hips as he pinned himself deep. Every grind was a fight to get closer, as if he could get any closer, as if he could crawl inside me.

He cursed, dropping his head into the curve of my neck, and I clung to him, an orgasm building. In an instant, a gray dawn bled across the horizon as night turned to day. And this daylight moved across us as the sun came up behind Norse Woods.

“Stone, the sun,” I gasped, hitting his shoulder.

He lifted his head and looked at me; a man in love.

Then he held the side of my face and swept me up in a kiss.

Stone bound himself to me under the light of the sun for the first time.

The Heathen and the siren, immortal love in their veins.

Town Hall Meeting

“Adora.”

Stone was staring back at me from across the room, and I was locked up in his tragic-black gaze. The memory of his heavy breathing in my ear was nothing more than my heart pounding now. *Stone ... Stone ... Stone ...*

“Adora?”

I tore my eyes from him, seeing Kane being taken away.

“I’m worried about you,” Ivy said.

When I looked back at Stone, he was taking a step toward me, but Julian grabbed him, stepping in front of him. Stone scanned the room, laying his hands on Julian’s shoulders to move past him, but Julian kept him back, speaking low in his ear. Stone paused and looked at the front of the room, where Augustine stood. Then his eyes swept back to me.

Julian had to have told him that it wasn’t safe yet to be public in town. People would lose their minds.

Especially Sacred Sea.

“Adora, did you hear me?” Ivy asked. “Maybe you should come back home for a few hours.”

“Yeah,” I said, nausea flipping inside me, knowing there was one last thing I needed to do for Mom. “Yes, that’s probably a good idea.”

CHAPTER 55

ADORA

WHERE DID DAD AND FABLE GO?”

We had just stepped into the cottage.

Coming home after being gone for even just a few weeks was like coming back to a garden that had been left untended for some time—lifeless, colorless, dreadful.

“Groceries,” Ivy said, tossing her house keys into the dish by the door. “I’ll whip us up some vanilla rose moon milk.” While she walked down the hall to the kitchen, I watched from the foyer rug until she disappeared behind the kitchen’s swinging door. Then my attention turned to Mom’s door.

If I was going to take Mom’s life, it had to be at this very moment.

Three steps, and my fingers touched the brass door knob for the last time.

Upon entering the bedroom, I closed my eyes, seeing myself standing over Mom’s bed in my mind. *I’m wearing the red dress, but the strap is broken again and dangling down my side. This Adora looks just like me, with braids mixed into blonde hair that had been brushed out by salty air. Except she doesn’t look to be in love, or happy, or sad, or anything.*

She’s just standing there, empty, looking down at Mom as the room dims.

My eyes fall on Mom, too.

She looks like a once upon a time.

In the shadow of the other me, Mom’s fingers are clasped together against her chest as the covers are pulled up to her waist. After not seeing the sun for well over a decade, she has turned pale, though her lips remain pink. Despite her preserved perfection, the darkness that envelopes her mind is like a hidden room where only vicious things sleep.

The other me lays her hand against Mom’s cheek, and then I’m in the

water with her, sucked back into the ocean, saltwater clogging my throat, filling my lungs. This time I'm under the surface with Mom, staring into scared blue eyes, and I haven't seen them in so long that they instantly make me cry. They take me to six years old again. And even though she's scared, she still holds me in her arms, threading her fingers into my hair like I'm her little girl. For a split-second, while we're lost in her mind, a panic and inescapable burn in our lungs and chest taking full possession of us. I grab her hand because it's the only thing I can do. Hold on, *I want to scream, but only bubbles come out.* It's almost over, just hold on. *There's a pounding in the ocean, as though it has a pulse, a heartbeat. A knocking.* A thump … thump … thump. *It's a beating in my ears. It's dark down here, it's cold, so cold, and we're running out of air.*

She's going weak, and I can't breathe.

Not until the other me pulls her hand away.

A rush of clean air slithers down my throat just as I burst into tears.

My fingers are shaking, my legs are unsteady though my feet are nailed to this spot. All I can do is watch as I slide the pillow out from under Mom's head. My movements are robotic. My face is vacant.

I don't pause. Not even for a second.

So, I scream at myself to stop, wait, let me say goodbye. *This is so much harder than I imagined, and I don't know if I can let go. But it doesn't matter because the other me isn't stopping. The other me is pressing the pillow against her face, and she swears she can feel her breathing into the cotton.*

There are two of me in the room.

One is numb, a blank expression, a murderer.

The other is screaming, tears soaking her face.

If only I could unbolt my feet from the floor ...

Then I was snatched up and thrown against a wall.

Bright blue-moon eyes were staring back at me. It took me a second to realize that it was Ivy and not Mom standing there, pinning me against the wall. "You could have killed her!" she shouted. I didn't hear her but watched her lips move as she said it. And as the seconds passed, the fog cleared and I could hear her, an ombre voice rising.

"Adora!" she shouted, squeezing my arms. "Why would you do that?!"

The heartbeat on the monitor filled the room like the pounding in the ocean. She was still alive.

I wrestled out of Ivy's arms. "She's suffering!" I cried, trying to pry her

fingers from me. “We can’t leave her like this. She doesn’t deserve this.”

TWENTY MINUTES LATER, IVY AND I WERE STANDING IN THE KITCHEN.

Neither of us had spoken for at least ten minutes.

Ice frosted the kitchen window, making everything on the other side of it blurry, like a fun mirror.

Ivy slid a cup of vanilla rose moon milk across the island in front of me. “First Kane, now Mom...” she leaned against the counter. “Why are you so hell-bent on throwing your life away?”

“If only you could see what I see.” My voice was monotone, and I didn’t look at her when I said it.

“I believe you, but you will not be the one,” she stressed, anchoring her full attention to me. It was heavy, forcing me to look at her. “Promise me, Adora. Promise me you will never do anything like that again.”

“Promise.” I said it too easily, not even believing myself.

When she sighed, her breath fluttered her black hair laying over cheek. “Geez, murder, Adora?” Her expression hardened, disappointment in her eyes. “If you had just talked to me.”

I stepped closer to her. “I tried,” I said, then stopped and listened for Dad or Fable in the house. I lowered my voice to a whisper. “Something is seriously wrong with me, and I’m scared, okay? I’m sleepwalking, being mean, callous, nasty thoughts inside my head. I want it to stop. It’s like there’s all this hate inside me, and I don’t know where it's coming from. So, yeah if anyone knows what Mom went through, it’s me. She doesn’t deserve this.”

“Maybe we should go to the coven.”

And I wished I could trust my coven. However, as long as Augustine Pruitt ran Sacred Sea, I could never be proud of it. Leaving the coven wasn’t an option either. Sacred Sea was my family, and the only way to make sure things would get better was to stay.

“Look at what they did to Mom. What do you think they’re going to do to me if they find out? Especially after Augustine just sentenced Kane in the cell for six months. If he finds out it was my fault, my punishment will be worse.”

“Cyrus would never let anything happen to you.”

“Even in murder? Do you think Cyrus, the most honorable man in Weeping Hollow, would protect me then?” I asked, and she didn’t answer.

“Ivy, last night, he could have fought harder for me, but he didn’t. Not that I need him to fight my battles, but it would have been nice to know he would have done anything. But he didn’t. It’s like he froze up.”

Ivy’s brows scrunched together. “That’s not like Cyrus.”

“I know.”

“Could it have anything to do with the Heathen who showed up and got on his knees for you? The one who was looking at you at the meeting like he was about to launch across the room at any second.”

“A Heathen?”

“Don’t be coy, you know exactly who I’m talking about.” She set her mug down, her eyes burning a hole in me. “The same Heathen I had to hear about from Cyrus, and how you left with him. The same one you failed to mention this morning.”

I hid my mouth behind my moon milk. “Oh, you mean my husband.”

She glanced up at the ceiling, a dubious smile sailing across her lips. “That’s not funny.” But then it got quiet. When she realized this, she looked back at me. “Adora?”

The room turned serious. “Clarence performed the ceremony last night.”

Her gaze dropped to the ring on my finger, and she swiped my hand from the counter. “Oh, god. What did you do?” She spun it, seeing Stone’s name engraved into the ring. Her voice and fingers began to shake, and the vein popped in her forehead, terrified tears flooding her eyes. “Adora,” she cried. “Please, this is not funny. Tell me you’re joking.”

“I can’t,” I whispered, unable to look her in the eyes any longer. “I found Stone on the beach half-dead and we spent almost two months together before either one of us knew he was a Heathen. But it was already too late, Ivy. I was already in love with him.”

Her palm struck my cheek, stunning me.

It caused me to step back.

I cupped my face, and my gaze darted back to her.

She’d never hit me before.

It stung as water welled in my eyes.

Tears were raining down her face.

And we just stared at each other.

She cupped her mouth. “What have you done?” she cried, shaking her head. “You married a Heathen, Adora. Why would you do that?”

“Because I’ve felt nothing but anger and hate inside me, and for the first

time ever in my life, I imagined a future, a marriage, children, a life. And I only see it with him ... because he makes me so happy," I cried. "And I want that, Ivy. I want that so badly with him."

The doorbell rang.

Neither of us moved to answer it.

And then there were three pounding raps at the door.

"Whoever it is isn't leaving," Ivy sniffled, hurrying to wipe her tears. "Don't go anywhere." And then she left the kitchen.

I clutched my mug tightly between my hands, my fingers turning white, wondering if I'd just made a terrible mistake by telling Ivy. And when the kitchen door swung open again, Ivy quickly closed it to a standstill, then turned toward me with wide eyes.

"Viola and Augustine are here," she whispered. "They're looking for you."

"What?" My heart started to slam inside my chest. "Ivy?"

"They said they need to talk to you about what happened last night. They promised they just wanted to talk." Ivy took my hand. "You cannot tell them about Stone or the marriage, okay? Just pretend it didn't happen."

Pretend it didn't happen? "What if Norse Woods can protect me?"

"Dammit, listen to me," she whisper-shouted. "You were ordered to marry Cyrus. Now keep your mouth shut and give me your ring."

SEAWORTHY DEATH

ALEC & CIRCE

CIRCE SAT AT THE EDGE OF HEDERA'S BED, COMBING HER DAUGHTER'S SILKY black hair back as she sang with the music box sitting in her lap.

The three girls had made it back to the castle without anyone noticing. Though Circe didn't want to, she had to pretend the night of her near escape hadn't happened. The Only way to survive was to abandon her heart, she thought as she sang a song into the music box for Hedera Sotiras.

"But Mama, what about the adventure?" Hedera asked.

Circe dotted her tear so her daughter wouldn't see. "I suppose the gods don't believe it's the right time. At least, Not this time."

Noticing her mother crying, Hedera sat up and crawled closer to her mother. "Don't cry, Mama. Daddy can take you on Every adventure. He has a boat."

This caused Circe to look away as another tear Fell. Hedera didn't know about the cruelty of her father. In fact, anyone who didn't look hard enough didn't know about the cruelty of Circe's husband. To Hedera, this man was her knight In shining armor and would Never hurt her. To Circe, this man was the Anchor weighing her down at the bottom of the sea. Often times, she looked outside herself, hating herself.

"Circe, a word," a man said in the doorway of her daughter's room.

Circe's heart thundered, and she looked at her daughter. "Hedera, it's

time to sleep. Hurry, hurry, under the covers, nice and snug," she said, forcing a smile, wrapping Hedera up inside the quilt. She placed the music box on her nightstand, and turned the knob, hearing her own voice pour inside the room.

"But I can't sleep. That man said there are monsters in nightmares."

"You will not have nightmares. You will dream of adventure." Circe kissed her daughter on the forehead. She held her kiss a little longer this time, inhaling her daughter's scent, wishing it would soak into her skin. "I Love you, my Sotiras."

"I love you, Mama." Hedera stroked her mother's arm. "Don't be sad, all right?"

"Circe," the man demanded.

"Get some sleep," Circe whispered once more, then stood and pushed the Bag she'd packed deeper under the bed so that it wouldn't be seen. "Lacie," she said to her maid who sat in the corner of the room. "Join me."

Circe and Lacie followed the man down the stairs and through the house until they Reached the tunnel entrance, and fear consumed her. "What are we doing here?"

"He's waiting for you in the chamber," the man said.

The two women Exchanged glances, and Lacie took her hand. "Everything will be all right, Circe. I will be with you every step of the way."

A flame lit their path through the tunnel, and after so long, they reached the Forbidden Cavern. Circe watched her husband walk along the edge of the Forbidden Spring, its brilliant cerulean blue sending spotlights across the cave wall.

Fear held her hostage, and she stepped forward, holding her breath. A dark, terrifying gaze drifted over her. Each time she looked upon his face, she wondered how he could sleep soundly every night. She wondered how he would feel if she made him wish he would die.

"You embarrassed me," he said, walking around the iridescent blue spring. "How long?"

"I don't understand."

The guards descended, leaving the three of us Alone.

"Tell me the Truth!" he shouted, and Circe stepped back from it. "I would have brought something of his to show proof of his death, but the man has nothing."

"What are you talking about?"

“My men killed him.”

Absolute rage consumed Circe in that moment, and she attacked her husband, her fists flying into his chest, beating him as heart-fisting pain spilled out of her. “Please, no. Tell me you didn’t!”

He snatched her up by her throat. “You see, I have the truth now.” He walked her backward toward the spring. “You committed adultery and treason, and you tried to escape with my daughter!”

Mr. Cantini dropped Circe onto the ground, and her spine slammed against rock. “How dare you whore around in my name,” he spat, saliva spraying across her face. “I will see to it that your daughter will not remember you. That your existence will be wiped from this town. That *your* name will be forgotten.”

Circe clawed at his hand, then pushed her chin down until she found skin and bit him. Her husband pulled back, taking her necklace with him. The chain ripped from her neck, and he threw it against the stone wall.

The sapphire broke into pieces, sinking into the spring.

Devastation stole her entire being.

“You cannot erase me,” she cried. “My love for Hedera and Alec is far more fierce than your evil. Our love casts shadows, demanding to be seen. Even if you look away, these shadows will grow cold until you have no choice but to feel it. Bereave my blood with my blood in your hands, no one can escape it.”

With a snarl, her husband grabbed her throat again and dragged her across rock, the roughness of it scraping against her spine, until half of her was suspended in air, Hovering the spring.

Circe’s eyes went wide, and she reached for Lacie, wishing she’d do anything but stand there. But Lacie did nothing but watch as Mr. Cantini squeezed her throat and plunged Circe’s head under water, holding it there.

Circe screamed under the water, bubbles floating around her, the spring rushing into her mouth, swimming down her throat. She screamed, hatred for him filling her chest. This hatred sank its claws inside her, latched on, buried. Though, so did love for her little girl and Alec, a peaceful warmth sliding through her.

Their happily ever after was so close, she thought.

They were so close.

Once the pieces of the broken sapphire hit the floor of the spring, everything went still.

Circe stopped struggling.
Her arms lay limp at her sides.
Her hair floated with the gentle rocking of the spring.

CHAPTER 56

STONE

ONE FINAL BREATH.

Conspirare. Perspirare. Inspirare.

Breathe together, breathe through, breathe into you.

Ontil thy finneuma.

These words bled in my mind, ink splashing across my white skull, dripping behind my lids, as we traveled through the tunnels, hollow bones beneath the town. Inside, the stagnant air fell sticky and lush.

The Heathens walked with a stride between a march and a glide. Heavy steps on light feet, an echo, a tell that they weren't slowing down. A shaky flame from a kerosene lamp lit our way, all eyes pointing to what was ahead. Except for Beck.

He walked with his head down, his hands in his pockets. The wings of bats tattooed on his neck flexed each time he tightened his jaw, his mind disturbed waters. Among the five of us, Beck was the only one who could hold his breath long enough to retrieve the sapphire from the bottom of the spring in the Forbidden Caverns.

Once the sapphire was pieced back together, there was only one thing left to do.

The book of Alec & Circe remained close to my hip. The chapters were not only facets of their love story, but pieces of a deadly mystery conjured from intense grief, heart-searing pain, and throats full of rage that had been passed down from generation to generation. At last, I'd solved the clues scattered throughout. If we could defeat the Shadows, we would not only save the town but also save Adora's soul from the horrors that had befallen the women before her.

One final breath, my mind repeated, and the same damp coldness in the tunnels was what slithered inside me. As tragic love would have it, a final breath had broken the enchanted sapphire all those decades ago, and a final breath was what was needed to seal it once again to release the souls.

Upon reaching the Forbidden Cavern, a breeze of wet sulfur rushed past while we stepped out of the tunnel and broke apart in all directions. Golden and silver dripstones hung from the walls like chandeliers as the cavern opened up into a dreary ballroom, where soft ghostly cries were the music to which the nightly hauntings waltzed.

Julian studied Beck from a few feet away. “Are you sure you’re up for this?”

Beck rubbed his jaw with a grin, examining the spring. “Am I up for this?” he repeated incredulously, bending down to unlace and remove his boots. “Does anyone know how far down it goes?” A collection of *‘Nos’* and head shakes rippled. Beck continued to remove his jacket, shirt, and jeans until he was standing in his drawers, rubbing his palms together.

In the story of Alec & Circe, the author described the water as being a clear, iridescent blue which sparkled as the water moved, light hitting it from all angles. The spring in the middle of the cavern, however, was black, cloudy—a midnight sky.

Beck pointed at me. “If this sapphire is at the bottom, you’re a fucking genius.”

I sat upon a rock and rested the book against my knee. “Remember, it is broken. If I had to guess, I would say into five pieces, so scour the floor.”

“One soul, five shadows,” Julian murmured, leaning back against the cave wall. “Circe was one pissed off witch.”

“If I were locked inside your face for over a century, I would go on a killing spree, too,” scoffed Zephyr, peering up and studying the dripstones hanging from the cave ceiling.

Beck stretched his arms and shook out his hands. “Well, here goes nothing.”

A splash later, Beck had disappeared into the black water.

I zoned out, staring into nothing, Adora’s smile in my mind. “Do you think the rest of the Cantinis are capable of what Circe’s husband did to her?”

“The rest of the Cantinis? It would not surprise me. But not Cyrus,” Zephyr said, sitting beside me, his spine curving to meet my eyes. “Cyrus does not have an evil bone in his body. There are flowers more cruel than

him.”

Phoenix chuckled at that from a few feet away. He was admiring the dripstones, too, with his hands in his pockets.

Julian’s attention swung to him. “You’ve been quiet all day.”

“Yeah, well ...” Phoenix turned to us, fidgety, scratching the stubble on his face, then pushing his long hair back. It fell back into place, the ends cutting his jawline. “Any time someone tries to save the world, someone dies in the end.”

“Yeah,” Julian exhaled, “chances are someone will probably die.”

Phoenix pointed at Julian, then Zephyr and me. “Not it, motherfuckers. I already died once this month, and that hurt like a bitch. It’s someone else’s turn.”

“Stone,” Julian called. “What’s next? How is this plan going to work?”

I’d been waiting for him to ask me. “You’re not going to like it.”

Julian and Phoenix moved in closer until we were all huddled together.

“Look,” I said, opening the book. “At first glance, when you start reading the story, you don’t notice anything. It’s just a love story. But then you learn about Circe and find out there’s a method to her madness. Because she demands you prove yourself, you must want it as well as listen carefully to what she is saying. You have to care,” I reiterated, Circe reminding me a lot of Adora, and all the trials we’d been through thus far. “Obtaining the *what* and *where* was easy once I realized there were clues. The clue to the sapphire was in this first chapter here, then in another chapter, it tells us where to find the sapphire, which is what brought us here.”

“Right, we already went over all this,” Julian said from behind his fingers.

“Now,” I said, flipping to the chapter. “Bone Island. It’s in this chapter twice. Here and here,” I said, pointing to the anagram, then running my finger down the page. “The ingredients are all here, but I couldn’t figure out the *how*. Until I looked at the story as a whole. Circe cast a spell using the sapphire so that in the event of death, her and Alec’s souls would be bound together for eternity.”

“How romantic,” Zephyr said under his breath.

I smiled, shaking my head, continuing, “When Cantini murdered Circe, the stone was ripped from her neck and broke into five pieces before sinking to the bottom of the spring.”

Julian gestured toward me. “The five Shadows.”

“So, when Circe died, because the thing that had bound her soul to Alec was broken, her spirit didn’t know where to go. All of this is made even more bizarre by the fact that the Curse of the Hollow Heathens happened that very night, causing our curse to absorb her spirit.”

“That’s why the Shadows, Circe’s spirit, whatever, didn’t show up until after the curse broke, angry as hell,” Phoenix gathered. “And because she still had no place to go, she just sought out revenge in the shape of shadows.”

“Right, and when Alec jumped off the lighthouse the next day, his spirit had no place to go, either. Due to the broken sapphire, he was trapped in an echo, which re-enacted his death over and over again. The only way to stop it all is to piece that stone back together, take it to Bone Island, and repeat the same spell Circe cast. It will send their souls to the afterlife. I’m certain of it.”

Phoenix whistled before he grinned. “You are such a nerd, Romeo.”

Julian lifted his chin. “So, what’s the catch?”

“This spell was supposed to last until their final breath, and it broke before it could. If we look at this in reverse, it’s going to cost a final breath to restart it,” I explained, closing the book.

Julian cocked a brow. “And you’re willing to risk a life on a theory?”

I looked him in the eyes. “I’ve been living and breathing their story for months. I can recite this story. I know every detail, every clue.” Even the ones I hadn’t told them. Ones I wouldn’t share unless it proved to be useful. “I know Circe and Alec as I know myself. This is what it takes. I am not wrong. The message of Seaworthy Death is *one final breath*. One of us must die.”

“What do you mean one of us must die?”

All our heads turned to Beck, who was pulling himself out of the spring.

“Did you get it?” Julian asked.

I stood and gazed down at his hands with hope.

When Beck had both feet planted on the ground, water rained from his drawers, and he brushed droplets from his short hair with his palms, mist flying about. “No, the pieces were like glued to the bottom or something. Maybe magic,” he dragged in breaths, almost drinking them. “And it’s broken into four pieces, not five.”

Julian’s silver eyes hit me. “Is there a message for that, too, Einstein?”

“No, it’s five,” I said, confused. “Maybe you missed one.”

“I don’t miss,” he said, looking up at me through his wet lashes. “There are four, and I don’t think I’m the one who’s supposed to pick them up.”

Phoenix’s brows jumped, his gaze drifting to me. “What does that mean?”

I closed my eyes, inhaling, wishing the message I’d purposely didn’t tell them didn’t have to be true. That she wouldn’t have to be a part of the plan. “It means there’s only one person who can take them from the spring.”

CHAPTER 57

ADORA

THIS IS A TALE OF THE FALLING OF TWO LONELY, DESPERATE SOULS WHO CRASHED into each other at the wrong place, right time in a cruel, hidden town that was crumbling from within. And as fate would have it, every time the Heathen and the Siren collide, their pieces shatter and scatter. They become dust, swept into the corners of the universe, waiting for something else to believe that these two belong together. Belief in their hearts alone was not enough.

My thoughts spiraled as I pressed my forehead against the cool car window, watching Weeping Hollow pass on the other side of the glass. Not even ten minutes had passed by, and I hated how empty my finger felt without my ring.

When we pulled into the driveway of the Pruitt mansion, my fists sprang loose and my fingers stretched out. The drive wasn't completely wasted. Aside from coming up with the synopsis of Stone and my love story in my mind, I also thought of all the lies I'd soon spill.

In no time at all, I was walking through the Pruitt's massive entryway and was escorted into Augustine's office, where Cyrus was waiting. He stood upon my arrival, and I looked back to see Viola walking in and closing the door behind her.

"Adora, please sit down," Cyrus insisted. He grabbed the back of a chair, pulling it out—one of two in front of Augustine's mahogany desk.

Just like the rest of the furniture in the mansion, the desk took on a Chippendale style, with cabriole legs and ball-and-claw feet. A traditional rug with navy blue accents quieted my steps, and the warm, earthy tones and wooded details surrounding me felt like a hug. The back wall was lined with books, no space spared. And in the corner stood a large, sixteenth century

floor globe.

I sat in the chair beside Cyrus, and Viola sat behind us in the corner of the room. It bothered me that I couldn't see her whenever I wanted.

"Last night was ... eventful," Augustine replied, keeping his tie back as he sat in his chair.

Uneasiness crept in, but I sat taller to hide it, tucking my hair behind my ear. "Shouldn't Ivy or ... I don't know ... my father be here?"

Augustine adjusted his tie and smoothed down his shirt, settling into his chair. "Your fiancé is sitting right next to you," he said. "Why would we need anyone else?"

"It seems I'm outmatched." Not a lie. "Whatever this is about, do any of you honestly have my best interest at heart?"

"Yes." Cyrus leaned an elbow on his knee, reaching out to grab my thigh. I faced him, and his eyes were cerulean blue. Strong, empowered. "Trust me, Adora."

"Trust you?" I scoffed. "Why didn't you fight harder for me?"

"You left with the Heathens last night," Augustine threw into the air.

My gaze darted to him. "Yeah, I did leave with the Heathens," I admitted openly. "Surprisingly, it's because of the Heathens and Fallon as to why I'm sitting here. How could I trust any of you after seeing you just stand there while my back was being carved?" I looked at Cyrus. "Augustine may not know, but you saw what Kane did to Phoenix. You know what Kane is capable of. I could have died, and none of you did anything."

Augustine leaned closer, planting his elbows on his desk, intimidation seeping from his cold eyes. "The question is why would the Heathens get on their knees for you?"

I leaned forward, gripping the arms of the chair. "I. Don't. Know."

Because Stone loves me, my heart screamed, like it was the only person in class who knew the answer.

Augustine leaned back, smoothing out his tie again. "Kane is convinced you tried to kill him, and he was acting in self-defense."

I laughed under my breath. "Self-defense? I'm sorry but did it look like I was the one holding a dagger to Kane's throat last night?"

The wrinkles between Augustine's brows deepened. He was getting agitated. "It was *your* dagger, though, wasn't it?" he asked, making sure the room was aware. "Do you have an explanation for how it got there?"

I looked down at my lap, plucking lint off me with a smile. "I always

have my dagger on me.” I looked up at him. “I never know when I may need it.”

“You have an answer to everything,” he said.

“Lie not and you’ll forget nothing,” I replied.

“I wanted to give you the chance to be honest, but it seems you will hold on to these lies by the skin of your teeth. Last night, you embarrassed us. For that, you’ve left us with no choice but to expedite the wedding to prevent any more surprises. I refuse to put the town in jeopardy because of your actions, and it seems waiting even one more day is a risk. One I’m not willing to take. You are marrying Cyrus at this very moment. In this room.”

“No,” was all I said, my head shaking, trying to find words that would convince him. “How can we be so sure this wedding is what saves the town? What if it’s something else, like the Shadows? Why are we not focused on them?”

“Cyrus is your match. The magic you two will summon and spill back into the coven will give us strength to vanquish the Shadows.” Augustine’s face took on a victorious expression. Like he’d won a game that I never wanted to play. “There will either be a marriage today or an execution. These are your only choices.”

“Execution?” My eyes found Cyrus. He looked just as scared. “For what?!”

“Attempted murder, trespassing, treachery ... infidelity. Pick one.”

“Whoa...” Cyrus held up a palm. “Wait a second.”

“I did none of these things!” Another lie, another shocked laugh. “You won’t execute me. You believe the only way to save this town is to marry Cyrus. Why order this then threaten me with my death?”

Augustine grinned.

I could have smacked it off his face.

“Not you,” he said. “Stone Danvers.”

And there went my heart.

And my breath.

And my voice.

My strength.

Just ashes.

Tears pooled in my eyes, but the anger inside me held them back.

“He saved my life last night, and you want to threaten his because of it?” I turned my burning gaze to Cyrus, then back to Augustine, fingers curled

around the arm of the chair. “You and I both know these charges are ridiculous and cannot be proven, and yet you’ll still burn an innocent man out of spite?”

There was a knock.

Augustine lifted his chin. “Perfect timing.” And then, “Why don’t you come in,” he called out.

The door opened.

I turned in my chair.

Alice stood in the doorway.

“Please have a seat. We were just going over Adora’s indiscretions.”

I looked down, trying to breathe, but I couldn’t. My chest was heaving. I was backed into a corner. I had no cards left to play. What was I to do? Call Alice a liar? Say everyone was lying?

“Adora, you were saying?”

There was an island in my mind.

On it was a lighthouse, tall and strong.

Inside the lighthouse were my husband, and me, and our children holding my hands. We all had smiles on our faces. We were all happy, surrounded by family portraits, a warm fire, stories we’d read a hundred times, games we’d played, blankets we’d snuggled under, and there was a spider in the corner of the room none of us could part with.

But then the spider faded away. Like it was never there.

So did the blankets, the board games, the books.

One by one, everything in the lighthouse was dissolving into thin air.

Next my hands turned cold. There was no one there. My children were gone. And in my mind, I’m looking into Stone’s eyes as he disappears.

My mouth parted to speak, but emotion threatened to escape. So, I closed my mouth again and took a deep breath, waiting for this weakness to pass.

“I will only marry Cyrus if you free Stone of all charges, in writing, in the books.” I sucked in another breath, my voice shaking. “If you do not free him, I will burn alongside him. Those are your options.”

THE ONLY PEOPLE IN THE ROOM WERE THE FOUR OF US. I STOOD IN THE middle of Augustine’s office with Cyrus to my left. It seemed like forever ago when Augustine first ordered our arranged marriage.

Cyrus wore denim-blue eyes on this day as he held my hands.

He didn’t want it to happen like this, and I wished I could have held back the blank expression on my face, but I couldn’t. It was either all my overwrought emotions or none. So, I was absent-minded throughout the entire ceremony.

It slipped by like a blur, and the ring felt cold and heavy on my finger when it was over. Augustine said husband and wife, but my brain couldn’t register. My heart couldn’t accept it.

Viola stood beside Cyrus, with disappointment in her eyes.

This was how her first-born child was getting married after weeks of planning.

I wanted to tell her that my mom is suffering right now. That it could be worse for her. And to get over it.

Cyrus leaned in to kiss me, and I turned my head to the side. He paused, dropping his chin to his chest for a moment, then decided to kiss my cheek.

“We need to talk,” he said quietly before pulling away.

I nodded.

TWENTY MINUTES LATER, THE TWO OF US WERE IN THE LIBRARY.

“Adora, what did I do to you that was so terrible?” he asked, exasperated, loosening his tie and unbuttoning his collar. Like he’d been holding himself together and it all burst out of him. “Why was a Heathen on his fucking knees for you, and why did you go with him? Is this because I had sex with Ivy for all those years? Is this a rebellion or a taste of revenge?” I’d never seen Cyrus so hurt, pacing the library, raking his hand through his hair, pushing up his sleeves. “Say something!”

“No, this has nothing to do with you.”

He paused, cocking a questionable brow. “Then what is it?” he asked, his gaze bouncing around my face. Seconds passed, and the color of his eyes spiraled into darkness as it dawned on his expression.

Then utter ruin flashed across his face. “Oh god, you’re in love with him.”

His eyes slammed closed and he pinched the bridge of his nose.

“You fucking love him,” he repeated.

He was trying to calm himself, but he was breathing harder, his jaw grinding.

Then he turned and flipped up the table behind him, throwing it back

against the bookcase. I flinched when he turned around. “How could you be in love with him? You’re fated to be with me, Adora! To even fall for anyone else is not possible.”

“Please calm down,” I whispered.

Cyrus sat on the couch, dropping his head into his hands. “You’re in love with another man.” He looked up at me, water rimming his jet-black lashes. “What am I supposed to do with this?”

I took a deep, shaky breath. “Cyrus, I have to tell you something.”

“What?” His eyes flicked between mine. “What is it, Adora?”

I had to tell him. He had the right to know. It was the right thing to do.

Out of all the lies I’d told, I couldn’t hide this from Cyrus.

“I’m married to him. Clarence bound us last night.”

“You’re his wife?” he asked, and I bit my lip, nodding, afraid of how he was going to respond. Would he grab me by the nape of my neck and force me to face Augustine to confess what I’d done? Would he drag me to the Wicker Man himself? Would he betray me to honor the Order and the coven?

“So let me get this straight,” he said, his hand shaking as he pointed at me. “The only person in this entire world who is meant for me, who is my everything, is not only married to another man, but she has put me in a position where I have to have sex with another man’s wife.” He shook his head, a bright blue tear slipping from his black-rimmed eye. “Adora, you not only took away my chance of ever becoming a husband to someone, to be rightfully bound to someone, you also just destroyed the respectable man I’ve tried so hard to become.”

“Cyrus, I—”

“No, I want to know something. While you were busy fucking him, and falling in love with him, and marrying him, and I was busy building a life for us, did it ever occur to you how selfish this was? Did you ever once think about what this would do to me?”

I couldn’t speak. I didn’t know what to say. Because I didn’t regret what I’d done. I couldn’t be sorry for something I would do again and again. But in the end, it still hurt in my chest to see him like this.

My love for Stone was causing Cyrus so much pain.

“Did he know about me?” he asked.

“Not until the announcement,” I said, and he was shaking his head, like he regretted asking and didn’t want to know the answer. “Cyrus, we were already in too deep by then.”

“How am I supposed to fuck you in two hours when I can’t even stand the sight of you right now?” Cyrus stood up, swiping his arm across a side table, a lamp crashing to the floor. “Fuck!”

My eyes slammed closed.

Cyrus threw his head back. “I’m such a fool,” he scraped out through emotion. “I’ve been eating out of the palm of your hand, and this whole time you were with another man.” He swiped a palm down his face and looked at me. “You should go back to the manor and take a shower; clean yourself up and get ready.”

“ARE YOU NERVOUS?” FABLE ASKED ME.

Ivy, understandably, didn’t want to come.

“I mean, we’re talking about sex here. You’ve had sex plenty of times. But in a few minutes, everyone will be watching and I just can’t—”

“You are not helping,” I groaned, head down, twisting the satin tie of my robe around my finger. I hadn’t been able to look at myself in the mirror. “The only thing I’m nervous about is the light. Not just from the sex magic, but the finneuma light. The one that touches the sky. If it appears, it means what the book says is true.” That Cyrus was truly my match.

Fable’s brows snapped together. “So, we don’t want the light.”

“No, we don’t want the light.”

“Light, bad. Got it,” she said, confused.

There was a knock at the door, then Viola appeared. Her black hair was pinned back tightly. She was wearing a black gown, the neckline reaching her throat, with lace trim and an A-line skirt. She’d dressed for the occasion. To watch me have sex with her son. My stomach bottomed out.

“We’re ready for you,” she said.

The booming inside me was fuming and petrified. And I felt like I was going to be sick. “Can I have a moment by myself for a second?”

Her cynical eyes flickered with impatience.

“I’m not going to jump out the window, Viola. Please, I just need a minute.”

She huffed with a scowl. “One minute.”

Fable kissed my cheek. “I will be there, rooting for darkness,” she whispered with a supportive smile. Then her smile faded. “There are words I never thought I’d say.”

Then she was gone.

I waited five seconds, six, seven ... finding the strength to look at myself in the mirror. Then my chin lifted.

These were all decisions that brought me here. This was a mess of my own doing. I ... *loved* and in every direction love led me in, it hurt and it was wrong. Because I loved Mom, I'd manipulated Kane all these years by having sex with him, and it made me disgusted with myself. Because I loved Lena, I'd helped end her life, and I was the one who must bear the look in her eyes each time she died in my mind. Because I loved Cyrus, it hurt to love Stone, and because I loved Stone, I was sitting in this chair so no one would hurt him. Maybe I loved wrong all along.

"I thought I'd be strong enough to go through this life without you," I whispered as though Stone was in the room with me. "But look," my whisper cracked, and I shrugged. "It hasn't even been twenty-four hours and I'm falling apart. How am I supposed to last another sixty years?" I looked down at my hand. "You'll think I'm weak. You'll think I took the easy way out, and I am. This is me holding my breath. I just hope you'll forgive me one day for this." I took off the cap, tipped my head back, and gulped down the love potion. The vial I'd taken from Jolie.

"They'd have to drink the whole bottle. And then you'd have to kiss them for them to fall in love with you," she had said. And since I'd drank it, all I would need to do was kiss Cyrus to fall in love with him.

The potion was thick like blood but tasted like nothing.

I pressed the back of my hand to my mouth to hold back my cry.

Afterward, Viola led me to a door. "You will not be able to see us," she said. "The walls look like mirrors and are all one sided, but magic can penetrate through to your coven." I nodded. "Your father and Ivy will not be there."

I nodded again. "I know."

She said some last words, but I didn't catch them, in a daze, but I knew they were worthless words. Ones to make me feel better about what I was about to do.

I opened the door.

The room was diamond-shaped, mirrors circling me. A canopy bed took up the center of the room, sheets scalloping the frame at the top and cascading down, curtains all around.

Cyrus was leaning against the bed frame, wearing a white cotton shirt and

white linen shorts, his fingertips drumming against his bottom lip. He'd straightened his posture when I entered the room, and I closed the door behind me.

"I don't know if they can hear us," he rushed out, stalking toward me. "Stay right there, I need to talk to you."

I backed up against the door, scanning the room again.

Cyrus stood close, caging me between his elbows. He dipped his mouth to my ear as if trying to hide both our voices and our lips so no one could read them. "For one hour," he whispered, "can we just pretend that nothing else exists outside this room? I know that's a lot to ask, but Adora, I'd rather fucking burn in the Wicker Man than feel like I'm raping you."

I nodded, just wishing to kiss him already to finish the last step and stop this sickness in my stomach. I just wanted to get through this night and the rest of my life. So, I stood onto my toes, grabbed the back of his head, and kissed him.

When I pulled away, Cyrus seemed relieved. His hands slipped over my sides, and his forehead fell to mine. "Thank you."

The rest happened in a blur.

Cyrus took my hand and brought me to the bed. We avoided looking at the mirrors. Then all I saw was arctic blue when I wished to see black. Cyrus stripped his shirt off his back.

Then he was coming down on me.

A kiss here. A kiss there.

Neither one of us looked down.

But I felt skin to skin, his shorts gone.

And I felt his palm slide down my inner thigh.

My chest was cracking open, and it hurt to breathe.

It didn't work, it didn't work, it didn't work, I wanted to scream.

He aligned himself, and I didn't want to look at his face anymore.

He thrust inside me. My head fell to the side.

And a warm tear slid down my cheek.

WINTER SMELLED LIKE WOOD SMOKE AND SNOW, AND THE TEMPERATURE HAD dropped from refreshing to freezing. As we filed out of the tunnel onto the Goody property, we expected to see a velvet midnight, but the night sky was monochrome shades of storm gray.

Zephyr elbowed my arm, pointing above our heads. “Look.”

Eyes upward, a meteor shower cut across the sky, streaks of light.

The five of us huddled close, watching the wonder above.

The beauty of it compelled us quiet as the winter *whooshed* in our ears.

“Make a wish,” Phoenix said quietly. “Like not dying.”

As I closed my eyes, I did exactly that.

And when I opened my eyes again, snowflakes fell upon my content smile.

Whenever Adora wasn’t with me, it was this view that kept me sane. Nothing was the same as it was a hundred years ago. Looking up at the galaxy was like meeting an old friend.

Phoenix turned, facing east. “What is that?”

“Wait, is that coming from the Cantinis?”

Then heavy gazes fell upon me, eyes filled with pity.

It happened slowly from that point forward.

I turned, following their gazes. Beaming from the east was a bright white light hurtling up into the night. My gaze snapped back to the Heathens. *“If what you say is true, and she’s his match ... a bright light will shoot up into the sky.”* Julian’s words were an echo in my mind. And each time my heart slammed, it seemed to go on forever. Julian was shaking his head, reaching out for me.

“Whatever you’re thinking, stop,” one of them said. “They’ll kill you.”

But they were growing farther because I was backing away.

Not only were they soulmates, she was fucking him this very second.

Dizzy, I turned, lurching forward, vomiting, my eyes watering.

This sickness inside me stole me, causing my lips to tremble.

Then I crumbled, falling to a knee, the snow soaking through my pants.

I cursed, standing on weak legs again, grabbing a fistful of my hair.

Then someone snatched the back of my coat and forced me to look. “She belongs to someone else. That beam doesn’t lie.” It was Julian. “She’s his soulmate. And she’s fucking him right now.”

I turned, shoving his chest, then my fist swung, my knuckles connecting to his face. It was not my intention to strike him. All I wanted was for him to

stop and leave me alone so that I could breathe.

Once again, I was wrenched backwards. “You have to calm down.”

“But I love her,” I scraped out through the emotion clogging my throat, looking at the four of them, their sympathetic faces blurring.

CHAPTER 58

ADORA

THAT NIGHT, THE HALLOWED WIND WOKE ME.

I opened my eyes to a cracked balcony door and a slow creaking, but I remembered never leaving the door open.

The cold swirled inside Cyrus's room, rushing across my skin. This breeze attempted to clear the cobwebs already gathering inside my brittle chest, reminding me that life kept moving forward even though this pain felt like death.

Cyrus's room faced the lighthouse. The beam cut through the fogged glass of the door, reaching for the bed like a motherly hand wishing to rock me back to sleep to a place where it didn't hurt anymore.

Only hours before, Cyrus and I confirmed our marriage in the eyes of Sacred Sea, while also proving to the coven we were each other's match. Each time the events from the night flashed through my mind, Stone's face appeared at the heart of it like the lighthouse beam.

I want Stone, my cold heart cried. *I want my husband.*

Right now. Right now. Right now.

And a cry escaped me. I shoved my face into the pillow to suffocate it until it softened, faded, and died away. Behind me, Cyrus slept soundly on his stomach, facing the other way. My feet touched the floor, and I walked toward the back door to close it. But where was Cyrus's watcher?

I turned slowly, colliding with wide, fearful eyes from the opposite side of the room. Cyrus's watcher was tied to his chair, a gag around his mouth, dark figures standing around him. I ran to Cyrus, but arms wrapped around me, yanking me backward and pinning me to a chest.

A hand came over my mouth.

“Hi, darling.” A whisper in my ear.

My eyes closed, relief breaking through me. Instead of pushing him away, I was hugging his arms against my chest.

“Are you going to be quiet?” Stone asked. I nodded against his hand.

He turned me until I was looking into black eyes. I’ve never felt so whole than in these moments when I was looking into his black eyes.

His hands instantly came over my face. “Are you all right?”

I shook my head, my every breath shallow, and his face fell.

“Do you want to come with me?”

“She doesn’t have a choice. Grab her and lets go,” a figured whispered from the corner of the room.

Stone grabbed my jaw, forcing me to face him again. “Do you want to come with me?”

“Yes,” I whispered, clinging to his coat and nodding.

“All right, one more thing before we leave...” Stone’s words drifted as he ripped himself from my grasp. I spun in place, watching his back as he stalked around the bed and to the other side. Then he snatched Cyrus from his sleep and pinned him to the wall by his throat like a picture frame. Like Cyrus weighed absolutely nothing even though they were the same size.

“Wake up,” Stone said, veins popping and muscles flexing in his arm. Cyrus’s eyes were already wide open, his hands gripping Stone’s at his throat.

He looked at me, then back at Stone again.

“Do you know who I am?” Stone asked.

Cyrus nodded.

“Good.” And Stone released his throat and swung a right hook into the side of Cyrus’s jaw, sending him to the floor.

“Aw, fuck. I told him not to do that,” Beck groaned.

My hand flew to my mouth.

Cyrus lifted himself up, pinning his back to the wall and looking up at me, his lip bleeding. He didn’t say anything. He just stared at me, shirtless and in a pair of athletic shorts. He watched as Stone wrapped me in his coat, took my hand, and guided me out onto the balcony, where a bag was already waiting.

Once we were outside and back on solid ground, Stone was quiet with one hand shoved deep into his pocket, the other carrying the bag. He led me off the property until we were farther down the street.

The rest of the Heathens walked ahead of us, but Stone stopped, dropped the bag on the street and unzipped it.

“Stone, what’s happening?” I asked, having not heard a word from him since we left Cyrus’s bedroom.

He still didn’t answer, handing me shoes, a sweatshirt, sweatpants, a jacket. I was trying to slip them on over my pajamas as fast as he was handing them to me. His silence was scaring me.

“Talk to me,” I pleaded.

He bounced to his feet and came inches from my face. “I can’t!” he seethed in a whisper. “I’m so sick over it, I’m afraid to speak, Adora. I’m afraid I’ll hurt you. I’m afraid I’ll lose you. I’m afraid to bloody blink because if so, everything may come crashing down inside me and explode around me, and I’m afraid that if that happens, it’ll scare you away for good.” He looked away as he tried to calm his breathing. Seconds passed, and then, “We know how to defeat the Shadows, and we need your help, so let’s get on with it.”

“That’s not fair. We both knew this could happen.”

He looked at me in disbelief. “It is quite simple, darling. The pain between what *could* happen and what *did* happen is much larger than one imagines. I *could* lose a finger tomorrow. I *could* die. I *could* fuck ...” He let it die, either unable to finish or knowing it was wrong. “You can prepare as much as you’d like, but the way I feel at this moment is not from an event that *could’ve* happened.”

We stared at each other until our breathing became steady.

Then he turned his eyes away.

“They threatened me,” I told him in a whisper. “They know how I feel about you, and they’re using it against me because ... you are my weakness.” Stone was facing the opposite direction, gripping his hip bones and hanging his head, but I knew he was listening. “Stone, I told Cyrus about us before the bedding ceremony. He knows. I told him everything, and that you are my husband. He respected that as much as he could through it and he will continue to do so because he is a good man.”

Stone turned, his gaze swinging to me. Surprised. “You told him?”

“Yeah.”

He exhaled, relief crossing his features as his arm dropped to his side.

“Thank you,” he said.

This mattered to him.

It wasn't that he wanted Cyrus to know who I belonged to. Stone wanted me to be honest, to be better, to do things right this time.

His posture relaxed a little. "Are you warm now?"

"Yes. Thank you."

Stone snatched up the bag, and we resumed walking in silence.

HALF AN HOUR LATER, WE WERE STARING AT THE UNDERGROUND SPRING IN the Forbidden Cavern. It was surprisingly warmer in the cave, and the spring was black and depressing. Light from the gas lamp reflected off the spikes hanging from the ceiling, and water droplets dripped from their ends. A *plop ... ... plop*.

"What are we doing here?"

Beck began to shrug out of his jacket, sparing a glance at Stone, who was standing behind me. "There's a broken sapphire at the bottom of the spring. Romeo here thinks you're the only person who can get it."

I turned to face Stone. "Why would Romeo here think that?"

"Because," Stone scratched the back of his head, "it says so in your mother's book."

My mouth fell open. "You stole my mother's book?"

"Let's discuss my thievery another time, shall we?"

I was just glad I hadn't lost it. At least I had a chance to have the book in my hands again. "And then what do we do once we get this broken sapphire?"

Stone's eyes darted to Zephyr. I turned to Zephyr, too.

Zephyr was looking past me at Stone, then his bright neon green gaze jumped to me. "After Phoenix melts it back together, we will set it in your chain, and return it to where it belongs on Bone Island."

A disbelieving smile graced my face. "It can't be that simple."

Stone's hand came over my shoulder. "Do you want to help your town or not?" he asked me, and *of course, I want to help the town.*

I glanced over at the spring. "How far down is it?"

Beck shrugged. "About ten to fifteen minutes down, another ten back."

Panic started to pile inside me. "I've never held my breath that long. Maybe thirteen minutes at most," I said, shaking my head. Then I turned to Stone, my voice turning into a whisper. "I can't do this."

He dropped his chin to his chest. "That's ridiculous. Of course, you can."

Mom’s nightmare flashed in my mind. I remembered how it felt to drown, for your lungs to fill up with water, and the fear of never being able to take another breath. “Stone...”

His gaze circled around at the Heathens. “Listen to me,” he said, taking me and stepping us off to the side. “You can do this, all right? You were born to do this.” His hands came over my head, and he smoothed my hair down, eyes drifting over my face. “Do you honestly believe I would let you go on the slightest chance something could happen to you?”

“You have too much faith in me.”

“And here I thought you could hold on for as long as it takes.” Stone grinned, taking off my jacket with a lift in his brow. “You disappoint me, Adora Danvers.”

“Just swim straight down,” Beck interrupted. “You won’t be able to see anything, so just swim straight, arms out in front of you until you reach the floor so you don’t hit your head. If you enter by that rock right there by the wall, that’s where the broken sapphire is scattered.”

Within seconds, I was removing my shoes, my sweatshirt, sweatpants, leaving on the pajamas I had been wearing underneath. The other Heathens just stood on the sidelines, watching, bored. How were they bored when I was freaking out? “And what do I do once I reach the pieces?”

Beck turned to me, his expression blank. “You pick them up.”

I dropped my head to the side. “That’s it?”

“Then you bring ‘em to the top,” he answered, a sardonic smile.

I stood on the rock, looking down at the black waters that didn’t hold my reflection. As all other times beside the spring, my chest began to ache with grief that wasn’t my own. It stirred inside me, and I found myself sad and longing for something I couldn’t quite put my finger on.

Stone came up behind me. “I’ll be here waiting for you. Very impatiently.” Dazing off, I nodded. “Adora,” he said, turning me around. The other Heathens were staring at the two of us with scrutinizing gazes. “Ignore them and look at me,” he demanded. I blinked back at him. “I’m not the only one who has faith in you. Your mother believed you could do this, too. I found the message in the book. You’re the only one, darling, and if anything happens, I’m coming down there to get you.”

“You? You would drown.”

“Fine, I’ll send Beck.”

“Are you going to kiss me?”

“No,” he said. “You need something to fight for to get back to me.”

And I made sure Stone’s smile was the last thing I saw before diving into the spring.

The water was surprisingly warm and so black that it didn’t matter if I had my eyes opened or closed. As Beck had said, I kept my hands out in front of me, descending deeper and deeper.

And the deeper I delved, the more Circe consumed me.

I felt how scared she was, seeing her husband hold her under in the spring. A man she was supposed to trust not to ever hurt her. A man who was supposed to protect her. *This was how she died*, my heart cried. He drowned her in this very spring.

It didn’t take long before these black waters morphed from her struggling against her husband’s tight grip, fighting for a breath, into the moment Circe was running down the shore under the moon during the witching hour, Hedera’s hand in hers. Only her and Hedera, how it was always supposed to be. And then I was feeling what she was feeling. I was standing as her, seeing Alec across from me, and feeling the warm, hopeful smile stretching across my face.

And this smile is too soon and shouldn’t be there, not yet, because anything could happen. It all could be taken away, but I can’t stop smiling because he’s smiling, and we’re almost there.

I swam deeper, trying to keep up with Alec, trying to hold on to this moment. *And we’re running, my heartbeat like a clock in my ear, teasing me, rushing me. Until I’m crashing into his arms.*

“Oh, Circe,” he whispers, holding me close, his mouth coming over mine. And I taste him and his warmth spreads through my body. He pulls away only to scoop Hedera into his arms. He spins until he’s facing me, then grabs my hand and walks backward with a smile that melts my heart. “Are you ready for an adventure?” he asks. And this isn’t how it happened, but this is how it should have happened. And before I know it, we’re climbing into the Wistoragic, the stars reflecting off the ocean waves, on our way to Bone Island.

This wasn’t their love story.

This was the ending Circe imagined as she was dying, an imprint in these waters. Their happily ever after. This is what she thought of, and I was watching it until she fell unconscious and my fingers touched the bottom.

My fingers scraped the bottom until it pushed against a small rock. I

picked it up easily from the floor. Then the next, collecting all the pieces I could find, sweeping back and forth to not leave any behind. My feet lay flat on the floor, and I pushed off, propelling myself back to the top.

It was more difficult with only one free hand to move me up through the water. About halfway up, my lungs began to burn for oxygen, and my pace had slowed. My heart began to race, panicking, as I choked on a bout of nothingness. Trying not to drop the sapphire pieces, I swam faster.

The spring became a coffin, six feet under and suffocating, inky waters as dirt.

I didn't know how much time had already passed, and all I could see was black. All I could feel was this burn, this pressure squeezing my insides.

Stone's smile crossed my mind.

"You are absolutely fierce," he whispered.

I kicked faster. Harder. And just before the black abyss took me, two hands hooked under my arms, and pulled me right out of the water, laying me on a rock. Water spilled out of my mouth, and I coughed, squinting my eyes as he moved hair from my face.

"I told you, didn't I?"

And then I was up, wrapping my arms around Stone's neck, pulling him to me, my chest caving and rising uncontrollably. Circe didn't get her happily ever after, but maybe, just maybe, there was still hope for us.

Stone kissed my cheek, then my lips. He dropped his forehead to mine, stroking my wet hair. "I'm so proud of you," he said with a smile. *Oh*, that smile.

"There were four pieces." I dropped them into his palm.

Phoenix approached, and Stone handed them off.

"I told you, man," Beck said. "I don't think there's a fifth."

While Phoenix moved them around in his palm, we all watched with anticipation as I wrung water from my hair.

"No, one's fucking missing," Phoenix whispered, disappointment curving around every word. He lifted his golden eyes. "There's a fifth somewhere."

Julian turned in place, scanning the cave. "Spread out and start looking. It has to be here."

Shivering, I wrung the water from my clothes as much as possible before slipping the sweatshirt over my head, the sweatpants over my pajama shorts. We all spread out, and as I started to help look for the fifth piece, a figure emerged from the shadows near the bend.

It took me a second to understand who it was. “Alice?” And then I remembered how she’d betrayed me, and the hot breath of anger blew under my skin like a simmer. “You have a lot of nerve following me.”

“I know you’re angry with me, but it was for your own good,” Alice said, taking another step closer. I looked around, and the Heathens surrounded, watching carefully, caution and confusion passing over their faces. “I couldn’t have you leave with Stone,” she continued. “I couldn’t let you go to Norse Woods. I needed you to stay close to me, Adora. Only you were able to gather the broken pieces from the spring.”

I looked for Stone. He was staring at her, furious, as he paced toward me.

He didn’t stop until he was at my side, a hand wrapped around my arm.

“I’m only trying to help you,” she said. “That stone is very special. It can save your mother.” My jaw snapped shut, and my eyes darted like bullets between hers, finding a hole in her sentence. If it were true or not. “Yes, Adora. That sapphire, once pieced together, can bring your mother back. But I need you to trust me, and I need you to hand me the broken pieces.”

I took another step back, closer to Stone. “I don’t have the broken pieces.”

“Sullivan, who’s this?” Julian asked with a cock of his head.

“My maid. Alice.”

“I know who you are,” Stone whispered, as though he was still thinking. “I should have seen it.”

“Seen what?” Phoenix asked. “Stone, what the fuck?”

“Your name isn’t Alice, is it?” Stone said, his spine stiff with anger. “You were once Celia. This is why you wanted to come here all along—for this sapphire. And you know of this sapphire because your name isn’t Celia, either.” He pulled me closer to his side, his grip tightening around my arm as if someone were about to snatch me from him. “Now, how long has it been since you’ve been called your true name, Lacie? Certainly much longer than I’ve been alive. Or dead. Whichever way you want to put it.”

The woman smiled, and horror consumed me.

I stood frozen, staring at her, unable to comprehend that she was the same woman from the story of Alec & Circe. After all these years ...

Stone’s expression closed up, hardened. “Lacie. Celia. Alice. Very clever. Were you the one who taught Circe anagrams?”

Her mouth twitched. “Look at you, Stone. You’re a completely different person.”

“And you found the nerve to speak to me. Afraid of a grain sack, are we?”

“What is happening ...” Phoenix whispered under his breath.

The woman extended her hand. “Adora, get your pieces so we can be on our way.”

Stone’s hand slipped down into mine, and he turned to face me. “I know you want to save your mother. I know how important she is to you, but think about all the people who’ve died, and all the people who could die if we don’t finish this.”

“This is your last hope,” Alice countered.

“One is missing. We can’t save her without the last piece,” I challenged.

“I have the last piece.” She held up the necklace hanging around her neck, the pendant attached to it. “We have everything we need.”

Julian laughed. “What exactly is stopping five Heathens from ripping that stone from your neck and just walking away?” he asked. “You do realize you’re not only outnumbered, but you’re out muscled, too. You are out … everything.”

“Are you so sure about that?” Alice clutched her necklace. “If I remember correctly, your source of magic has halted, but mine can end your life slowly and painfully one by one.”

Zephyr looked at Julian. “Can one fifth of the sapphire do that?”

“Yes,” Stone confirmed. “Yes, that sapphire can absolutely do that.”

Oh, I could kill her, I thought. “If you harm any of them, I will kill you myself.”

“I am immortal, child,” Alice said, beginning to rub the pendant, whispering an incantation.

We all exchanged glances, worry written on all of our faces.

Then a guttural hiss escaped from Beck as he fell to the side, clutching his stomach. His palm caught the cave wall, and he used it to support his weight as he groaned in agony.

“Stop!” Julian barked as he and Phoenix rushed to him, and Zephyr moved in on Alice just as Beck collapsed to a knee, waves of anguish moving across his face as he cried out. His big blue eyes went wide in their sockets, blood vessels popping inside them.

“Alice, please!” I cried.

Beck’s screams, the Heathens’ cursing, it all seemed to go on and on. And just when I thought Beck was about to be taken away from the world,

the moment dissipated, like fog on a cold, fall night.

Five shadows had appeared and surrounded Alice.

They rippled, moving like waves, closing in on her.

“No,” Alice chanted, stepping back, trying to get away from them.

Stone took us back a step, away from the Shadows, too.

Then Alice’s expression was ripped away, all the color draining from her. Her eyes were stretched open, her mouth agape, like the skin of her face was hung. Instead of a scream, all that came out was a gurgling sound.

Not a second later, she collapsed to the floor.

In that moment, I could have sworn the Shadows turned back to look at me. In their transparent shades of blackness, I saw Circe. She was in all five, like a shattered mirror, her movements delayed.

And then the Shadows floated away.

Behind me, Julian and Phoenix helped Beck back to his feet.

I blinked, looking up at Stone. “The Shadows ... They didn’t want her to stop us. They wanted us to finish this.”

And Stone planted a foot on her chest and ripped the chain from her neck.

SLAUGHTERED HEARTS

ALEC & CIRCE

ALEC SAT ON THE SHORE THAT NIGHT, WAITING FOR CIRCE AND HEDERA. HE hadn't expected her arrival, but he had hoped. And as he waited, pain slowly taunted him. At first, it was like an itch. Then it deepened until worry consumed him and his chest ached with a longing he couldn't understand. But Circe cast a spell, and he shouldn't be hurting like this, he thought.

Then lights from a small boat in the distance traveled his way.

He stood, squinting and peering into the night, his heart in his throat.

But then the boat stopped close enough to see, far enough to avoid the sandbar.

Circe's husband stood inside it, staring back at Alec.

A shiver stole him, and he waited, his breath stuck in his lungs.

Circe's husband approached the side of the boat and turned a bag upside down over the water, spilling its contents out into the ocean. Alec's breath stalled. Next, Circe's husband tossed the black pearls as far as he could. Alec's heart punched through his chest. Then Circe's husband slid a large trunk to the edge of the boat. And he pushed it over. The heavy thing splashed and sank instantly. "This is your fault," her husband called out.

Alec's mind became numb as he watched him slip behind the wheel and turn toward Weeping Hollow again.

This is your fault, this is your fault, this is your fault …

Fear ransacked Alec, and he sprinted into the water until he couldn't touch the ocean floor. He then dove in, swimming as hard as he could, as deep as he could. The pressure of the descent pushed against his head, and his ears popped. Nevertheless, he fought, the saltwater burning his eyes, and swam lower just under where the boat had been, until he found the trunk.

He grabbed the handle and tried to lift it off the sand, but it was too heavy. He counted to three, and tried again, using everything he had, but it wasn't enough.

Then there was a knocking.

A thump … thump … thump …

It was coming from within the trunk, echoing through the ocean.

Circe was inside. Alive.

Alec panicked, digging his heels into the sand and using everything he had for it to only move an inch. Clouds of stirred sand exploded around him when it dropped to the floor again. The ocean swallowed up his tears as he cried, clinging to the trunk, not wanting to leave her.

And he stayed by her side until the pounding stopped.

At the same time Circe took her last breath, two miles away, a moongirl cast a spell in the Norse Woods. Since the sapphire was broken into five pieces, Circe's soul had nowhere left to go. As a result, her soul was swept up and trapped inside the monstrous faces of five men called the Hollow Heathens. There, her soul would remain until the Heathens were free of their curse.

The following morning, Alec awoke on the shore, washed up, the sun shining down, probing him to open his eyes. He rolled over, a heart-aching cry breaking through him, not wanting to be alive.

He spent the day getting his affairs in order, believing this was why the gods had given him one more day.

He made her a gravestone beside a tree, carved a dash.

He wrote a letter, stuffed it into an envelope, and left it on his desk. Once a month, Mr. Ambrose came by to deliver goods. The next time he came, he would check the lighthouse and find the envelope.

Then that evening, even though he knew in his heart the love of his life was gone, he still lit the candles at the top of the lighthouse so the beam would shine for Circe and Hedera, as promised.

Then he walked to the watch tower and looked out into the horizon of Weeping Hollow as the sun descended, wishing the entire town would feel as

cold and dark as the hole in his chest. These were his thoughts as he gripped on to the railing, hanging over the rocks, watching his last sunset with tears in his eyes.

He wasn’t scared.

And then he let go and fell to his death.

However, the sapphire was broken. So, there his soul was trapped in an echo until the day the sapphire could be pieced together again.

Over the decades, Bone Island, which was once a warm, comforting home, full of love, smiles, and laughter, became a dreadful place. Alec and Circe’s boat, the Wistoragic, remained for decades, slamming against the sharp rocks until it was shredded to pieces, becoming shipwreck. Trees lost all life, and the lighthouse’s paint faded. But the beam rotated every night as if by magic.

Over a century would pass until life would swirl the dust in the lighthouse, whispers would be heard inside the walls, and Bone Island would be made into a home again. The Wistoragic would not be forgotten, its shipwreck later becoming the bands wrapping around undying lovers’ ring fingers, their adventure carved into the wood. Warmth, smiles, tears, and laughter, the story repeating, hoping for a different end.

CHAPTER 59

STONE

ADORA!” IVY CALLED, RUNNING TOWARD US AS WE BOARDED HER FATHER’S boat.

Adora’s face lit up, her green eyes sparkling, when she looked back at me. Grabbing her hips, I hoisted her out of the boat, and she took off, sprinting down the dock to meet her sister. On the starboard side of the boat, I stepped up onto a cleat, holding a pole while the engine rumbled beneath me. I did not wish to lose sight of her.

After the two embraced each other, Ivy handed her something, and they walked back this way.

“Ivy’s coming with us,” Adora announced, grabbing the pole and climbing back onto the boat. “And you can drive,” she told her sister. Then, under the light of a silver moon, the Finneuma sailed to Bone Island.

At the bow of the boat, Adora sat in my arms as the cold pricked our faces like the ends of pins. She had sunk against my chest, hiding inside my coat as I twisted her wedding band that Ivy had returned around her finger where it belonged. After all these years, the sapphire was melted and placed back in its proper setting, dangerously tucked away inside Adora’s coat pocket.

Phoenix and Zephyr sat across from us. The nightly waves, and what was to come, kept us quiet. Above, the vast, marble night sky meandered for eternity, and all around us, snowflakes tumbled and darted. The lighthouse beam rotated, its light sliding across our somber yet contented faces. And every wind sent Adora’s vanilla scented hair tousling about my face, and I wanted to soak this moment into the palms of my hands.

“In this boat we were in the habit of going on some of the maddest freaks

in the world," I said, sliding a gaze to Zephyr with a grin.

"Eddy P.," Zephyr echoed.

At the stern of the boat, Julian, Fallon, and Beck gathered. Ivy sat in the captain's chair. Fallon was here for a reason, one that I had not yet told Adora about. I was not entirely certain if Julian had been truthful with Fallon, either.

"Stone," Ivy called.

I turned, and she jerked her head in the dark, the small console lights from the boat hitting her face, indicating that I should join her.

"I'll be back." I left Adora my coat and joined Ivy in the cockpit.

Standing beside her, I grasped the frame, shivering and squinting my eyes against the wind.

"You really do love my sister," Ivy said. Bold and blatant.

"I do," I replied, looking down at Adora, who was facing the lighthouse. I gripped the back of my neck, tilting my head slightly to face her, grinning nervously. "I don't know what will happen, if she'll be with him for the rest of her life or if by some miracle we can be together. I don't know, but regardless, I promise, so as long as I'm walking this earth, I will do everything I can to make sure nothing harms her."

"I believe you," she said, smiling, bidding me a look. "You know Adora designs dresses, right?" I nodded, unsure of where her question was leading. "First, it starts in her notebook, and she draws out a design. Then comes the obsessive part when she gathers all the fabric and locks herself up for hours. She won't eat. She won't sleep. She will sew and sew until her fingers bleed and the design is done." She held up a finger. "But it's not until that dress is on a body, and Adora experiences the first look. When that happens, for a split second, you can see the child in her. Like she's five again, and there's no pain, or worry, or the weight of the world on her shoulders. She's not angry, or sad. For one second, there is pure happiness in her eyes." I was looking at the side of Ivy's face as she stared straight ahead, a tear rolling down her cheek. "She had that look when she told me about you." She wiped her face.

Despite the cold, my chest warmed by her words. I chuckled nervously, blinking the water from my eyes, holding my palm to my chest. I wanted to say something, but words were knotted in my throat.

Ivy quietly laughed at me, shaking her head.

"I've never had a father, and not much of a mother," I told her. "But I wonder what I would be like if I had someone like you in my life." I leaned

forward on the console to catch myself on a breaking wave. “She looks to you for guidance and stability and love, and you’ve given this to her. What I’m saying is thank you because she’s a remarkable woman because of you.”

Ivy’s face fell when she looked at me. “Why are you saying this?”

“You should know, and I have the feeling you’re not reminded enough.”

Her eyes narrowed. “These sound like last words.”

I wet my lips, stealing a glance at Adora sitting under the star-filled sky in the middle of the Atlantic, wrapped up in my coat. “When we get to the shore, the Heathens are drawing straws,” I said, knowing the wind and sea were drowning out my words so Adora couldn’t hear them. “Someone needs to wear that necklace and chant the spell Circe cast all those years ago. Unfortunately, it requires a last breath, so one of us has to go.”

“Why does it have to be a Heathen?”

The lighthouse beam rotated again, and an exhale blew from my nose. “Look around, Ivy. Do you see anyone else here?” It didn’t matter. I’d be here regardless. Saving Circe’s soul meant saving Adora’s soul. If I could set Circe free, Adora would no longer have to suffer the madness she’s been battling. She could be set free, too.

“She’s going to freak out.”

I sucked in a breath. “I know.”

“Fallon must not know either.”

Behind us, Julian was nuzzling her neck like a puppy, while Fallon stroked his head. She must have felt my stare because her pale eyes found me. A peculiar gaze. “She must not,” I whispered.

“If it’s Phoenix, Fable will never have had a chance to say goodbye,” Ivy said, thinking out loud.

My attention moved to Phoenix, and I remembered his memories of Fable, and how important Fable was to him. “Julian gave him an opportunity. Phoenix is hurt and stubborn, willing to take his broken heart with him to his grave.”

“So, I guess we’re hoping it’s Beck or Zephyr.”

“Zephyr would be the obvious choice,” I slid with grin. “Since he’s cursed and all.”

Zephyr bid me a wicked glare, and I wiggled my fingers at him.

On my return to the bow of the boat, I slapped Zephyr’s leg before retaking my seat beside Adora. “I like your sister.”

“That’s weird,” she replied. “No one likes my sister.”

When we reached the shores of Bone Island, I was swept up in opposing waves. Memories, anxiety, fear. They hit me one after the other. Sadness from leaving a place I once called home, anxiety from the unknown, fear of the future. Bone Island was like opening our book, and forcing myself to re-read the chapters we'd already written, then leaving our book unfinished.

As I stood, scared, a smile spread across Adora's face.

"We're home," she said, her eyes gleaming as she looked at me.

Home, I thought, pulling her close and kissing the top of her head as the night held us close together. I felt Julian's gaze on me as he and Fallon exited the boat.

It was time.

The eight of us stood on the shore under the lighthouse.

I surveyed the island, recounting all the places I'd made Adora moan. I'd recounted the times we'd spent together on this beach, in those woods, in the lighthouse, whether we were whispering or shouting or kissing or crying.

"Stone," Julian called, nudging his eyes in the direction of Adora.

I turned to her. "All right, Adora, I need the sapphire."

Adora looked so small bundled up in layers. She glanced up at me nervously as she withdrew the chain from her pocket and placed it into my gloved palm.

I passed the sapphire to Julian.

Julian stole a glance at Fallon, then passed the sapphire to Phoenix.

Phoenix shoved the sapphire into his leather jacket pocket.

The five Heathens gathered in a circle as icy winds blew into us from all directions. I felt my nerves splitting at the ends as we exchanged glances. I could sense Adora behind me, and it felt like it was hailing in my chest, ice pelting against my ribcage, the icy winds rushing across my bones.

"Hey." Adora tugged on my shirt. "What's happening?"

Beck reached into his coat and pulled out the straws.

He kept them locked in his fist, extending them to the middle of the circle.

"Wait a second," Adora said, confused. "I don't know what's happening."

The Heathens remained quiet, and Beck looked at Phoenix first.

"Stone, what's happening?" Adora begged behind me, clutching my sides. The winter howl drowned out her voice, but I could still hear her every word, and it was tearing me apart.

"It's okay," I told her, throwing an arm behind me to comfort her as

Phoenix shook out his hand and blew out air between his cheeks.

"Okay," he said, shifting in place.

Then he drew the first straw.

He was safe.

His chest caved as he let out a long exhale.

That was when Adora understood what was happening.

She shoved her hands into my back. I jerked forward but didn't stumble. Keeping my back to her, I bit the inside of my cheek to control myself and keep still as she continued to slap my arms and shove her palms into my shoulders, my back, my arms. "Stop!" she cried, hitting me over and over again. "Please, Stone. Stop!"

Zephyr was next.

To my right, his green orbs found mine as he drew a straw. Like he needed me for strength. Our gazes left each other and crawled to the straw in his hand. He was safe.

Beck shifted his fist in my direction.

It was my turn, and Adora gripped my arm, yanking on me, trying to turn me around. She was cursing and crying, and I was trying so hard to keep it together. *Stone not paper*, I chanted, balling my fist, finding the will to get through this.

I lifted my eyes to Julian who was standing across from me.

I was praying to the gods that it would be him.

He was praying to the gods that it would be me.

We were both thinking the same thing.

Behind him, Fallon stood, only half of her face visible. But she stood silent, and from what I could see of her face, I saw no worry. Julian had to have told her whatever she needed to hear to make her this calm, confident. He could have promised it wouldn't be him, and perhaps he even had a way to make sure this was true.

I reached out, my hand hovering over the white straws in the darkness as each one of Adora's cries was a blow to my chest. And when I pinched a straw, Julian blinked. A quick intake of breath.

I moved to another, watching his expression.

His eyes were like two daggers cutting into my mind.

My eyes closed, and I drew a straw from Beck's fist.

Seconds suspended there.

Adora's cry shattered me into a million pieces before I found the nerve to

open my eyes. From her reaction, I already knew, and I hung my head. *What have you done?* I asked myself, feeling Zephyr's hand come over my shoulder.

When I opened my eyes again, the night was blurry.

Julian was already turned away from me and hugging Fallon, smiles on their faces. And again, he had it all. He would have a lifetime with her, and I fucking hated him.

Dropping my head back, I looked up into the night sky, bringing in my tears, trying to muster the strength to face Adora. I was not afraid of death, for I had died thousands of times. Death had never cared for me, so why give Death the pleasure of my fear? If I had to die, I would die with fortitude.

Adora, however, would be the one to suffer.

And she would suffer in the mess I'd left behind.

Zephyr grabbed the back of my head and pulled me close. "No one will hurt her. You have my word," he promised in my ear. I nodded, unable to stop a tear from escaping. It landed on his mask. "Don't let them see you cry." I nodded again. "Be strong for her." I dragged in a scattered breath, nodding.

After a short time, we broke apart, unable to look each other in the eyes. It was too difficult.

And Adora was hysterical behind me.

I could feel her pain like fists against my back.

I turned slowly, catching her eyes so bright and green.

The tip of her nose and her cheekbones were pink, and tears stained her face, track marks down her cheeks. Her lips were wet and trembling as she walked backward, holding her hand out in front of her to block me.

"No!" She cried, stepping back, her voice broken. "This is not happening." Then she pointed a shaking finger at me. "You don't deserve this! Why not Julian?!" she screamed, looking past me with eyes focused on Julian. Behind me, the Heathens just stared at her, saying nothing. Julian looked away, turning toward Fallon. This only made Adora more angry. "If anyone should fucking die it's you, not Stone!" She charged at Julian, and I intercepted, grabbing her.

She beat my chest with her small fists.

Every blow sliced my heart.

"Adora, please." I tried calming her down, but she struggled as though I wouldn't die if she never said goodbye. "I'm begging you not to use this time

to hit me or curse me." Her body became weak, and she collapsed into my arms. The waves were soothing. Her cries were agony. The cold slashed across my face. It all made me shiver. "It feels right," I said to her, rocking her against my chest. "It started with me, it ends with me."

She shook her head, my shirt soaking up her tears.

"Let's be honest with ourselves. if I told you the plan, you wouldn't have let me come here today." I sighed. "*God*, and I love you for it."

"There has to be another way," she cried. "I can't do this without—"

"Yes, you can." I leaned back to look her in the eyes. "Yes, you can. Life passes by like this," I said, snapping my finger. "Time moves too quickly, Adora. Therefore, you will make the most of it." I pushed her hair back. "My promise to you is that this anger possessing you will leave you. You will not have to bear the burden of it any longer." I wiped my face. "You once told me you'd break me." I chuckled through my emotion. "Do you remember that? That I wouldn't feel it today, or tomorrow, that it would come when I least expected it?"

Adora nodded, and I smiled. "I believe it to be true for happiness, too. That perhaps you won't feel it today, or tomorrow, or even the day after that, but it will hit you when you least expect it. And when it comes, I don't want you to feel guilty about it. I want you to let it happen. Because the more good moments, happy memories, and smiles you have, the easier it will be for pain to fade. Then one morning you'll wake up, and you'll think of me, and it won't hurt anymore. You'll think of me and smile, not cry.

"You also have to have children," I continued. "This time, I don't want to be forgotten. So, I want you to have children so you can tell them about us, and how we fell in love, all right? A cautionary tale that echoes into eternity."

I exhaled, blowing out my cheeks. This time, I was dying as a hero, so perhaps I would be reborn into one instead of a monster.

"And you're going to have a funeral for me," my words caught in my throat. "I never had a funeral, and you're my wife, so you must. You're going to celebrate what we have, and you're going to wear that red dress, all right?"

Her eyes were so green as I wiped the tears from under them.

"I'm *so* going to find you, Adora Danvers," I whispered, everything blurry. I wiped my face to see her better, then held hers again, keeping her flush against me. "When the time comes, I don't care what year it is or who your soulmate is, I'm coming for you."

Adora wrapped her arms around my neck and kissed me on our shore.

She tasted like my final breath, and I drowned in the kiss, pulling her closer—our faces wet, our hearts aching, our lips desperate.

When I found the courage to pull back, Adora's eyes veered first, drifting behind me. I watched horror slowly consume her face, and then she was ripping herself from my arms.

I turned, and Adora was sprinting down the beach, illuminated by the moon, screaming for Ivy, who was standing at the shoreline near the rocks.

The sapphire was hanging from Ivy's neck.

It all happened as though I was watching a film from the corner of the island. As though it were all a story and there was nothing I could do to stop it.

The sapphire glowed bright blue, and an aurora surrounded her in the night. This light showed shadows snaking around her body. They spiraled from her feet to her head, coiling as if to exhume her soul. Then one by one, these shadows slid into the sapphire, disappearing inside.

I broke from my paralyzed stance and ran after Adora as the sand tore in my wake.

"Adora!" I screamed, not hearing it but feeling the scream claw my throat.

But it was too late.

Ivy Sullivan took her last breath, then collapsed upon the rocks.

Adora fell to her knees at her side, her cries piercing through us all.

I halted, my hands flying to the top of my head, my mind numb.

"Someone help me!" Adora cried out on her knees in an agonizing scream, fisting Ivy's coat, her face wet under the moonlight. "Stone! Help me!"

Suddenly, Circe appeared in the shallows. She looked just as I remembered from the dream, long, wet hair clinging around her shoulders, water raining from her sopping wet dress.

At last, Alec had broken free from his death echo and was standing at her side, looking down at her. Then he took her hand. I watched, frozen, unable to tear my eyes away, hearing Adora's cries as though she and I were in the background behind Alec & Circe's love story.

From where Ivy lay, a small girl emerged and joined them.

"Hedera," I whispered just as Alec turned toward me.

Across the waterline between us, the lighthouse beam reflected off something that had washed up on shore.

I walked closer and picked it up from the sand.

It was the cigar tin that held the envelope Ambrose had given me all those years ago. I looked back at Alec with the tin in my fist. His gaze moved, peering up at the lighthouse beam. And the three vanished into the night just as the lighthouse beam stopped rotating, and the light flickered off.

Dawn spread across the Atlantic, and at last, the sun came out.

"Good morning, Weeping Hollow. It's Monday, February 1st, the start of a new month, with some breaking news. The Shadows have been defeated, and my sources say a mysterious group of heroes sailed back early this morning at sunrise from Bone Island, where, for the first time in over a century, the lighthouse beam finally went out. That's all we know for now, but I think this one calls for Wake Me Up by Avicii. This is Freddy in the Mournin' with your Hollow Headlines. Remember, no one is safe after 3am. *Owwweeeeee*."

CHAPTER 60

ADORA

ENDINGS ARE INESCAPABLE.

As if they were a curse, no one talks about them, and we're afraid to face them and unwilling to accept them each time they come. All we love, and the simple pleasures we find comfort in, will never last forever.

Not the hug of a big sister, bringing you home each time her arms wrap around you. Not the moments in a dusty lighthouse with the boy you love, collecting gazes, whispers, and moans. Not the hope in your heart as you care for your sick mother.

Coffee has a last sip. A song has a final note. A great story has a last page. Nothing can stop it. The sun sets, people die, you read the final chapter, you say goodbye. You move on. But, if loud enough, if felt deeply enough, if this moment or person was so significant and changed your life, they became a part of you. You feel them floating on a melody, sewn into a breeze, laced in a scent, or brought to life by words on a page. No one needs magic to remember them or feel them. They've already imprinted themselves. The nostalgic stamps that keep us grounded. Our lighthouse beams to keep us moving forward.

Love is eternal, after all.

STONE CARRIED MY SISTER'S BODY TO THE FINNEUMA, AND I REMEMBERED IT being quiet the entire way back to Weeping Hollow as I'd brought her home. All I'd heard were the waves and my own cries as I stared out at the cliffs with my sister lying peacefully at the bow of the boat.

I would never understand for certain why she'd done it. Ivy was selfless, yes, but only when it came to Fable and me.

How could I go on with the possibility that she'd sacrificed herself for a man she didn't even know, all because I couldn't live without him?

That same morning, while we were on Bone Island, Mom took her last breath. No one could have prepared me for the death of a sister and a mother on the same day. I was no longer angry or consumed by rage. All of my hate had left me on the shores of Bone Island that morning. And I'd come to realize this hate was never my own. It was Circe's. So, at times, I missed the rage dearly because it was so much easier to be angry than filled with grief.

Two weeks had passed since Ivy and Mom were laid to rest.

The snow had melted, the sun shone, life returned, a golden, fiery autumn.

I spent these weeks with Fable and Dad.

During the days, we cleaned out empty rooms, searched through old boxes filled with memories, cried and laughed and told stories about Ivy and Mom. There were times when the three of us were in the same room, and there was one less body. We only had two people left to turn to, and we all felt it, the incompleteness, and it just kept hurting.

My nights were spent alone on the balcony, gazing out into the dark horizon toward Bone Island, where the lighthouse stood even though I couldn't see it like I used to. The beam no longer cast its light on Weeping Hollow. Whatever magic that had possessed the island and the lighthouse had vanished with the Shadows. Along with my rage. Along with the cold. Along with the long bouts of darkness ... Along with Ivy.

Only the moon and the stars lit up the sky. And each night, I whispered a prayer to the moon for a world where a Heathen and a Siren could walk hand in hand.

Stone and the Heathens had attended Ivy and Mom's funeral. During the ceremony, Stone, my husband, wasn't able to stand by my side, as the Heathens were cast atop the cliff, forced to watch from afar. But Stone was still there during a time I'd desperately needed him, and I'd felt him as though he were beside me. This was the last time I saw him.

He'd left with Norse Woods, and I'd left with Sacred Sea.

Neither of us had a choice.

We'd always known this was how it was going to end for us. We would spend the rest of our lives living on barely caught glances, but I was so

grateful for these glances. Just seeing him would be enough until we could be together.

Villains we've become, after all. Villains of our own hearts.

After eating dinner with Fable and Dad, I squeezed them tight while Cyrus carried my bags to his car.

I'd been gone from the Cantini Manor for two weeks, and it was time to return to Cyrus and the rest of the Cantini family. When my eyes opened in the morning, it would be the start of a fake married life with Cyrus. Two best friends, who hopefully would never grow to resent each other.

He slid into the driver's seat. "Ready?"

I clutched Mom's book close to my chest the entire way to the manor and spun Stone's ring around my ring finger, where it would stay. Once we arrived, Camora, Viola, and the boys greeted me in the foyer. Cyrus lugged the bags straight to his room, and I moved like a ghost, following him mindlessly.

I thought of Circe in that moment. It could be worse. I was to have a life with my best friend, and Circe spent hers alongside a monster. I suppose this made me lucky.

As soon as I stepped into Cyrus's room, I opened the curtains, then the balcony door, needing to breathe in the air, needing to see the ocean.

Cyrus stepped up beside me. "I'm happy you're back. It wasn't the same."

I didn't say anything. In fact, I haven't spoken a word since he picked me up.

I wondered if he had noticed.

Cyrus pulled an envelope from his back pocket.

From the corner of my eye, he held this envelope in both hands, staring at the flap enclosure. "This was delivered yesterday." By this time, he had my full attention. "To be honest, I've debated whether to give it to you." He shrugged. "But I don't want to start out like this. I don't want to keep things from you, Adora."

He handed me the letter, and it felt so heavy in my hands.

My heart was racing in my chest. I could hear it in my ears.

Even my breath turned shallow. As if I already knew.

Then, a bright light slid across my chest.

I glanced up, taking a step forward.

The lighthouse beam shone brighter than ever, cutting through the

melting sun on the horizon. My fingers trembled as I stared down at the letter again. Then I eagerly broke open the flap.

To my darling siren,

It was a crisp, wintry dawn when you first held me in your arms.

You stripped out of your clothes to keep me warm, with a fire melting away all of our cold, hard pieces.

How fitting to have held you before ever opening my eyes. To have felt your heart beating before ever hearing your voice. I could have let you know then that I was awake, but it seems, since day one, I've always been afraid of you letting me go.

You read me the book you could never read alone, which happened to be my hundredth, and I watched you dance to a song about having no regrets, over and over. Two strangers frolicking as lovers, whispering secrets, telling stories, coalescing in the night, rooting to each other in all ways to escape the cruel realities surrounding us. You gave me my smile and laugh, and I gave you all I had left. And the way you touched me was equally passionate and gentle, writing a story on my skin where a scarred monster like me could be adored by a woman like you.

For a while, we pretended. For a while, I was the kind of man you could have chosen in the end, and you weren't the angry, forbidden girl. We clung to merciful lies to hide from harsh truths. We unleashed our dark sides, screamed our pain, and skinned ourselves raw to let the other in. Then it was frightening because we were falling even though we said we weren't, and we hurt anyone standing in our way, even each other. We resisted all belief, seduced fate, and sinned in the name of love. Our hearts were never on the table, my darling, because we'd thrown them at each other—you, angrily, and me, desperately.

All this time, we kept rewriting our tragic story, desperate to change our bitter end. And what has saved us? Our hearts were so tangled it was hard to know who was holding who too tight.

We have a love that outlasts love.

Fate was never on our side, but we didn't need it.

Time stood in our way, so we created our own.

Nothing could ever dissever my soul from your soul, as Poe would say.

You are my love, my life, my wife.

But now it's been weeks since I've seen you, and there's something you should know. At the age of ten, a man approached me on the street in Maryland. He gave me an envelope but told me that I couldn't open it until I'd read my hundredth book. This man and his challenge, I believe, saved me through the hardest years.

After it had gone missing, this envelope found its way back to me.

My darling Adora, the story of Alec & Circe was my hundredth book, and I opened the envelope. Inside was the deed to Bone Island, and since you are the next living descendent of Circe, the lighthouse, Bone Island, and everything on it are yours. It seems Alec gave his all to Hedera in death.

By the time you receive this letter, I'll already be waiting at the lighthouse for you. The beam will be on until we're together again. For an eternity if that's what it takes.

If you choose to stay there for the time being, I want you to do something for me. I want

you to hold on to the memory of Bone Island. And every night when you see the light, think of me.

But also know that I need you to come home.
I need you in my arms again, as you are my reason to breathe.
So, please don't take too long.
Not having you is killing me.

Eternally yours,
Stone

MY EYES WERE BLURRY WHEN I LOOKED AT CYRUS.

He stood there, gazing out at the lighthouse beam, watching it rotate.

"I love you, Adora," Cyrus finally said for the first time, glancing down at his feet as he shifted in place. He glanced back up at the beam. "I've always loved you, I will always love you, and that's why I have to give you the choice."

A tear slipped from my cheek. "I-I—"

"Did you not hear me? I'm giving you a choice," he said, his eyes denim glistening as he turned to me. "I'll always be here for you whenever you need me because that's what soulmates are for, right? We look out for each other. So, I will figure out the rest because I know he is what makes you happy," he said, emotions on the verge of breaking. "And you deserve to be happy, Adora. So, please go."

"Cyrus," I cried.

His chin tipped upward. "Go."

I didn't waste another second.

I sprinted through the room, down the stairs, and out the front door, not stopping. My heart was pounding so loud that I could hardly tell if I was breathing. And then my feet touched the sand. It felt like moving through molasses as I sprinted toward the docks, my purse with the boat keys and the book of Alec & Circe inside.

The sun was slowly descending, its colors smearing across the sky.

By the time I reached the boat, my legs felt wobbly.

I jumped inside the Finneuma.

My fingers were frozen as I started the ignition, then reversed.

The bow pointed to the dusk sky, and I steered the wooden pirate helm

until I was facing Bone Island. The day was dimming, and the moon's light reflected off the top of each wave, making the ocean look like it was holding all the stars.

Stone's silhouette appeared on the shore.

He must have been waiting for me.

My heart shook when I switched the gear to neutral, lowered the anchor, and turned off the ignition. He drew closer, but I couldn't see his features.

My feet wobbled on the boat's portside before I jumped into the water.

The distance between us dwindled with every free-handed stroke.

As I drew closer, I noticed relief carved into his features.

A smile was beaming across his face.

"Stone," I cried, water coming up to my chest.

I trudged against the nightly tide that was pulling me back.

Stone walked into the water, splitting the fog, meeting me where the waves slapped his knees. He kept a desperate gaze on my soaked face until he was clutching both sides of it. There wasn't time to speak.

He already had me in his hands, but then he had me *in his hands*, lips falling, crashing together.

He kissed me *deeply*, soul touching soul.

He kissed me with the kind of kiss you'd sacrifice your final breath for.

And then his kiss became an embrace as he wrapped his arms around me, holding me close, my face in the curve of his neck.

Stone laughed, spinning me before he set me back on the ground.

He took my hands. "Come, darling, there's a fire already burning, and I want to tell you a story."

Smiling, I squinted an eye. "What kind of story?"

"A love story. An adventure." A grin slanted on his lips as he walked backward toward the lighthouse, the beam circling above our heads. "The story of us."

WISTORAGIC

STONE & ADORA

AT THE WITCHING HOUR ON A COOL WINTER NIGHT IN NOVEMBER OF 2013, Adora Sullivan slipped out of her bed under a full Frost Moon. Outside her window, brisk ocean winds hissed and howled across the deserted shoreline. This breeze took the weathered gate, a *creak* and a *clunk* as it swayed, opening and slamming closed against the lock. But this wasn't what had woken her. More often than not, an intense sense of longing happened to consume her at this hour. Whether during awake or sleepwalked, she always found herself aching to be beside the ocean.

She coveted her sea as much as she needed to breathe.

At the same time Adora's eyes had opened, miles away, across the Atlantic, beneath an isle called Bone Island, Stone Danvers took another monotonous breath. From a sepulchral tomb at the bottom of the sea, he could do nothing but stare up at the full moon threading through midnight waters, waiting for *Death* to take him once again.

The sand was ice cold beneath Adora's feet as she slipped out into the night. Each step to the rhythm of Stone's helpless, beating heart, the two bound together by nocturnal torment with an ocean between them.

Adora closed her eyes, remembering when she was a six-year-old child. She tried to make it to Bone Island, but it had become a struggle to keep her head above water. Adora's mother had swum after her, trying to get to her in

time. *“Adora!”* her mother had screamed, and at the time, Adora didn’t know why she was determined to swim all that way. But every time she closed her eyes, she remembered how the saltwater tasted sliding down her throat and the burn in her eyes each time she splashed for something to hold on to.

And at the same time, Stone closed his eyes, remembering the drawings in his sketchpad as the burn in his lungs returned. He’d died more than a hundred times,—an ache now was just an ache. But each time, he still remembered what it felt like with the drawing tool between his fingers. He could feel his palm sliding across the paper, sketching comforting eyes to give him something to hold on to.

The night was quiet, the waves a gentle woosh as Adora walked across the shore, the beam from the lighthouse drifting across her silk nightgown every seven seconds. Once she reached the cave, she lay on the sand on her side at the waterline. Every slight breeze chilled her skin as she pressed her ear against the earth. She believed that if one listened closely, the almost-muted sound coming from the ocean was like a soft heartbeat.

It wasn’t but a slow beat, ebbing and flowing, fading and returning.

The desperate sound bore a hole in her soul, and she reached out, laying her palm against the sand, splaying her fingers.

The tide crawled up the shore, taking her hand.

And this time, inside the coffin at the bottom of the sea, a single tear slid down Stone’s cheek, feeling peace in death. Then once again, he took his final breath.

Annabel Lee
By Edgar Allan Poe

It was many and many a year ago,
In a kingdom by the sea,
That a maiden there lived whom you may know
By the name of Annabel Lee;—
And this maiden she lived with no other thought
Than to love and be loved by me.

She was a child and I was a child,
In this kingdom by the sea,
But we loved with a love that was more than love —
I and my Annabel Lee—
With a love that the winged seraphs of Heaven
Coveted her and me.

And this was the reason that, long ago,
In this kingdom by the sea,
A wind blew out a cloud by night
Chilling my Annabel Lee;
So that her high-born kinsmen came
And bore her away from me,
To shut her up in a sepulchre
In this kingdom by the sea.

The angels, not half so happy in Heaven,
Went envying her and me:—
Yes! that was the reason (as all men know,
In this kingdom by the sea)
That the wind came out of the cloud, chilling
And killing my Annabel Lee.

But our love it was stronger by far than the love
Of those who were older than we—
Of many far wiser than we—
And neither the angels in Heaven above
Nor the demons down under the sea
Can ever dissever my soul from the soul
Of the beautiful Annabel Lee:—

For the moon never beams without bringing me dreams
Of the beautiful Annabel Lee;
And the stars never rise but I see the bright eyes

Of the beautiful Annabel Lee;
And so, all the night-tide, I lie down by the side
Of my darling, my darling, my life and my bride
In her sepulchre there by the sea—
In her tomb by the side of the sea.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Do you want to know a secret?

I’m scared as hell right now.

The book will be out in less than two weeks, and I'm terrified.

But like Stone said, I think it’s okay to be scared. I think being scared means that I did something that’s a little risky, a little personal, a little true. I think it means that I poured myself into this book, gave it all that I had, and maybe I'm afraid people will hate it because it has a piece of me, which means maybe I did something right.

It’s 1:35am right now, I just got done reading “Slaughtered Hearts” probably for the last time (for a while), Grey’s Anatomy is on in the background (because Liza James crying on Facebook totally sold me) and I can’t sleep. Because I’m scared. The following phrases are ones I’ve repeated while writing this one: *"What am I doing?" "They’re going to think I’ve lost my mind.” “This book’s too long.” “I can’t do this.” “What is happening?” “This is too hard.” “What is wrong with me?” "This is too fucking hard."*

Someone once asked me what I’m most excited for with Bone Island. I told them I was most excited for this book to be read. I'm excited for this book to be on shelves and nightstands and beds and on kindles and lit up on screens. For this book to be highlighted and bookmarked and dog-eared and tabbed and underlined and abused and loved. For this book to be devoured in the middle of the night, in between classes, between stolen minutes, waiting for the clothes to dry, dinner to finish in the oven, after the significant other falls asleep, in all your *me* time. For this book to be left unfinished and picked apart and hated with opinions and judgments because either way it was read at some point by you. For this book to be your escape hatch, next adventure, or your rock to sleep; for it to provide you comfort, or wring out all your emotions like it did for me these past two years.

And now that we're at the end, I hope I've done this for you.

Thank you for not only giving this story a home, but for giving it a chance, especially the NF Gang who always has trust in me, who adores

Weeping Hollow and these characters, and for being kind, not just to me but to those around you. I have to say, like Stone said, that maybe I'm a brain in this community, but the NF Gang is the heart and soul.

With every acknowledgments, I always think back to the people who had a hand in the making of the book. With this one, I have *a lot* of people to be grateful for.

First and foremost, thank you, Michael, for taking care of the NF Shop and all our gangster reader's orders and making sure they're more than happy. You care about the NF Gang readers and love them as much as I do, and it means everything to me. Thank you for taking care of foreign deals with my lovely agent and merchants and all the hard stuff and admin stuff while I focus on the book. Thank you for all the help with the book box and reorganizing the entire garage to make sure everything fits. Thank you for cooking dinner every night, stocking the fridge with Red Bull, delivering Starbucks, and reminding me to eat and shower. Thank you for taking care of me during my surgeries, and being the brave one when I was scared. But most of all, thank you for enduring the blunt of all my emotions while I wrote this book, and never giving up and never letting go. I love you *'til death*.

Thank you to my beautiful Street Team. For two years, you have been talking about Stay with Me and Hollow Heathens while waiting on this book. Thank you for believing in me and never giving up on me and loving these characters as much as I do. Thank you for all the kind messages and motivational speeches to keep me going, reminding me (also) to take care of myself. You guys are more than a Street Team. You guys are my family too, and I love all of you like crazy. So here we go (and not in any particular order): Amy Silbernagel | Christina Lane | Brianna Wickham | Kilyn Payne | Megan Eppinger | Sabina Domenicano | Liz Buchanan | Alisha Proctor | Fabienne Martens | Edel Walsh | Muskan Ali | Amanda Kussin | Dinithi Amunugama | Jordan Ausilio | Savanna Gongloff | Samantha McCallum | Kalisa Boyd | Samah Laasri | Kay Ramjohn | Amber Brennan | Ljubica StamenKovska | Gabby Vivas | Michele O'Neal | Gracienne Standen | Claudia Navarro | Ashley Tapia | Thalia Homrich | Mercedes Velez | Stephanie Meyers | Anna Mendoz | Nicole Kapbardhi | Alyssa Brigiotta | Abby

Herrington | Aubrey Erskine | Remi Svedberg | Klaudia Drozdzalska | Gia Mendes | Julia Ponce | Janae Snook (I basically only exist to load up her coffin with books she wants to be buried with) | Karen Hendy | Nicki Sabella xx

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Liza James, what got us talking was completely unconventional, and it was all thanks to you. I'm so glad you reached out to me that one night while you were drinking (sorry for calling you out) while you were eating a bowl of cereal three years ago. I've never met someone who is as understanding, caring, and sincere as you. The way your brain and heart work simultaneously amazes me because you see everyone and everything equally, as well as see every situation from all angles. I'm saying this because you are not only talented as hell, but you're also *that* incredible of a person that you always find the good intentions in even the cruel. You see humanity while others are blind, which is a rarity all in its own. I am so lucky to have you in my life and call you a friend. Thank you for being there for me.

Thank you Cat with TRC Designs for not only making bomb ass covers, but also being a breath of fresh air. Thank you for always being patient with me, and I CANNOT wait to see what you do for the Bone Island special edition

cover!

Thank you Bethany Weaver, my agent, for everything. There is something to be said about an agent who is a true fan of your client's work, and because you adore these stories and believe in me, the trust I have in you is undoubtedly immense. Thank you for bringing the town of Weeping Hollow to people around the world.

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Winston, my Great Dane. Your last years were during the writing of this book. I will miss the small moments you put your head in my lap while I'm at my desk, and even the times you wake me in the middle of the night just because you want me to move your bed closer to me so we can be in the same room. Thank you for bearing through until I was done. You can sleep easy now, Winnie. R.I.P.

Thank you, Mom for giving birth to me with the heart and ability to write this story, and thank you, Stacey for loving her. You both believe in me and support me, and it's always enough.

Thank you.

ALSO BY NICOLE FIORINA

Stay with Me Trilogy

This trilogy is for the *poetry lovers*, dreamers, and those who love emotional rollercoasters and suspense. Mia and Ollie's love story is known to be a tear-jerker, with dark, broken, and beautiful themes (#passthetissues). All three books are complete and available for free on Amazon's KindleUnlimited and in audiobook on Audible! Check out the reading order below:

Stay with Me

Even When I'm Gone

Now Open Your Eyes

Tales of Weeping Hollow

A collection of standalones in the town of Weeping Hollow for the reader who adores centuries-old curses, midnight tales, & magic. Inspired by classic horror novels, gothic romance, & the supernatural. Timeless, forbidden, & haunting. Available on Amazon's KindleUnlimited and audiobook on Audible!

Hollow Heathens

Bone Island

(next book coming soon!)

The Hendrix Brothers

Linc & Lo

A rockstar at rock bottom, a notorious party girl,

and a Chevy C10. What happens when two stars collide?

This rockstar romance set in Los Angeles is for the reader who adores guitar players with a lip ring, a kick-ass heroine, and tacos. Going Going Gone is passionate whirlwind novelette and prequel to City of

Angeles with a *happy for now*. Check out the reading order below:

Going Going Gone: A Novelette

City of Angels: a full length novel coming soon!

TY & KATE

The Rap God and his SoHo Daydream.

For the reader who loves tortured musicians, steam, and characters with an empire state of mind. A nostalgic piece of New York City. Meet Rap God, Ty Hendrix, and his SoHo daydream in What If, a 12-hour soul-searching journey wrapped in a romantic and emotional novelette. What If can be read as a standalone, with the full length novel coming soon. Check out the reading order below:

What If: A Novelette

In Too Deep: a full length novel coming soon!

FIND YOUR NEXT READ AT:

nfgang.com or nicolefiorina.com

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nicole Fiorina is the #1 Best Selling Author in Poetry for her debut trilogy, Stay with Me, and Amazon's #1 Best Selling Author in Gothic Romance for Hollow Heathens. She has five published full-length titles, all translated into multiple languages.

Her writing style and stories are known to evoke imagery and emotion, varying across all sub-genres, settings, and time periods due to her ambition to live a thousand lives. She's a rule breaker who cannot be confined in a box, except when she's in the writing cave. In this case, she will lose track of time and will have to be dragged away. When she's not writing, she's busy being inspired, traveling, or planning her next book—with one hand on her laptop and the other balancing a latte.

Follow Along on my Journey

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