

VALERIE JO



RAVEN
AND THE
GHOST

CURSES OF MIDNIGHT SPRINGS

RAVEN AND THE GHOST

CURSES OF MIDNIGHT SPRINGS

VALERIE JO

Raven and the Ghost: Curses of Midnight Springs

Copyright © 2023 Valerie Jo

All rights reserved

Cover Design by Mibllart.com

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America

eBook ASIN: B0BZ5PGYLD

Paperback ISBN: 9798393551902

Hardcover ISBN: 9798393552398

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to any persons, living or dead, is completely coincidental.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book via the Internet or via any other means without the permission of the publisher is illegal and punishable by law.

Please purchase only authorized electronic editions, and do not participate in or encourage electronic piracy of copyrighted materials. Your support of the author's rights is appreciated.

The publisher does not have any control over and does not assume any responsibility for third-party websites or their content.



i
m
a
g
e
-
p
l
a
c
e
h
o
l
d
e
r

BOOKS BY VALERIE JO

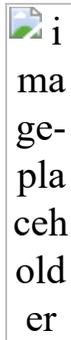
The Curses of Midnight Springs Series:

Brooke and the Wolf

Raven and the Ghost

Juliet and the Assassin

Holly and the Unseen



CONTENTS

Dedication Prayer

1. Raven

2. Nash

3. Raven

4. Nash

5. Raven

6. Nash

7. Raven

8. Nash

9. Raven

10. Nash

11. Raven

12. Nash

13. Raven

14. Nash
 15. Raven
 16. Nash
 17. Raven
 18. Nash
 19. Raven
 20. Nash
 21. Raven
 22. Nash
 23. Raven
 24. Nash
 25. Raven
 26. Nash
 27. Raven
 28. Nash
 29. Raven
 30. Nash
 31. Raven
 32. Nash
- Assassin



DISCLAIMERS

Cursing: “Bad” words will have **** and will not be spoken aloud in the audio version. “Bad” is, of course, subjective. What’s bad to me might not be bad to you, and vice versa.

Religion: I am a Christian and that influences everything I do. *However*, my characters may or may not be. All of my characters are faulty, and none are modeled after Jesus.

Instructional or Fiction? Totally *fiction*. If my character makes a stupid decision, it does *not* mean that I’m condoning it or suggesting you do it.

Are any aspects of the book true? No, they are not. When I write a paranormal romance novel, it’s because I had a crazy dream that I decided to spin into a story. If you’re looking for real life, read my memoir about my grandparents or my nonfiction books on business.

Romance: PG-13. Characters are going to kiss and “do stuff.” It’s going to be swoony, maybe steamy, but never spicy.

Intended Age Range: 15+. My main characters are usually between the ages of 18-23.





Lord,

I am so thankful for the opportunity to write this story and share it with others.

I pray that you extend peace and comfort over everyone reading this book.

In Jesus's name I pray,

Amen.



1

RAVEN

In the living room alone, I waited until 2:00 a.m. for my dad to come home before retiring to my bedroom. Though I had been expecting them for hours, the square headlights of his old car never flashed through the window.

I laid down in my bed wide awake until sleep finally conquered me at 4:00 a.m. There was still no sign of him—no rumble of a car engine, no jingle of his keys through the many deadbolts on the door, nothing.

My dad, the worrywart, the man who thrived on structure and control, didn't come home for the first time in my entire life.

I didn't have to be the genius I was to know something was very wrong.

“Can you give me a ride to school?” I asked Brooke on the phone the next morning as I stared at the empty space where my dad's car usually sat. It was unlike him to leave me home alone for a few hours. The fact that I had stayed overnight by myself was definitely not something he did on purpose.

“Are you serious?” she said through a mouthful of cereal. I could barely understand her. “Your dad would never let you get in a car with me. In fact,

I think you told me his exact words were ‘Absolutely not. Never. Don’t ask again.’ ”

“He isn’t here,” I said, hoping to conceal some of my fear from her. “I haven’t seen him since he dropped me off at home after school yesterday.”

She crunched on her cereal wordlessly for a while, mulling this over, then finally she said, “That’s weird. Do you . . . do you think he’s okay?”

“I don’t know,” I said honestly. I wasn’t honest often, but I tried to be with Brooke . . . as much as I could. It was hard to tell the truth when lying came so easily to me.

“I’ll be there as soon as I can. Michael and Millie are riding with me today, too,” she warned, knowing that would change the dynamics of everything.

Millie was Brooke’s ten-year-old sister. Both had been put in foster care at the beginning of the school year and lived with Michael and his parents.

I groaned as I hung up. If Michael and Millie were there, I wouldn’t be able to openly discuss anything with Brooke. Not my worries about my father, not about Brooke’s supernatural wolf-shifting boyfriend, none of it. I needed the freedom to talk to Brooke about all of these out-of-the-ordinary things. She had still yet to convince the logical side of my brain that the wolf-shifter was real, even though I knew without a doubt that every word out of her mouth was the truth.

It was weird getting ready for school without the warden there to check me. He always made sure my clothes were appropriate before leaving the house, as if I were the type of girl to hide a miniskirt in my closet and try to sneak to school in it. He bought every piece of clothing I owned. Everything in my closet was dull and sensical. If it was inappropriate, it wasn’t in this house in the first place.

I wore my nice but modest clothes, put my black hair in a tight bun, and cleaned my glasses before walking down the long driveway to meet my ride. I looked up at the clear blue sky, thankful it wasn't raining. The walk was long enough on a nice day like this.

I timed it perfectly. Brooke pulled up on the other side of the gate right as I got there to buzz myself through with my fingerprint. As I climbed in the back seat with Millie, some of the anxiety I had about my dad disappeared and was replaced by the absolute glee of getting to ride in a car with my best friend like a normal teenager. It would have been perfect if Michael wasn't there making everything super awkward.

I was at least grateful that Michael wouldn't tag along with us after we got to school. We were in most of the same classes at the Academy, but it was very obvious that he wasn't fond of Brooke. If he was riding to school with her, which I had never heard of him doing before, it was because he had no other option.

The ride to school would have been completely silent if it weren't for Millie. That girl knew how to diffuse any situation and could have a conversation with a tree.

"I want you to teach me how to play chess," she said, nudging my arm in the back seat. For some reason, Michael got to ride shotgun. He sat stoically with his blonde bangs hanging in his eyes, staring out the window like a brooding teenager. I didn't know what his problem was with Brooke, but it apparently extended to me too. He flat-out ignored me when I told him good morning.

"Raven can't teach you how to play chess. You know that she isn't allowed to go anywhere besides school, and you don't ever see her there," Brooke said as she wove her brown clunker through Midnight Springs. As

dirty and old as that car was, I was so freaking jealous of her that it hurt. I would have given anything to have a car I could call my own . . . and the freedom to drive it wherever I wanted . . . and a driver's license.

“Duh, that's why I haven't been able to ask her until now,” Millie argued. “But from what I've researched, chess seems very math heavy. I love math. I'm awesome at it, so I think I would be good at chess too . . . if you could teach me how to think of it like math, that is.”

I loved that girl and her confidence. Since they had been living with Michael, his parents discovered that she needed glasses, and she was rocking them even better than I did. They were bright red, while I always kept my frames black to avoid standing out. I hoped she kept her fierce attitude when she got to high school.

“It is a lot of math and calculating,” I admitted, “but it's more than that. You also need to know how to read people.”

I noticed Michael stiffen.

“Why? It's not poker,” Millie said with her nose scrunched up.

“No, it's not,” I agreed. I would love to play poker. Unfortunately, the school does not sanction having a “poker team,” and my dad put blockers on our internet.

“In chess, you need to be able to anticipate the kind of moves that your opponent makes,” I explained. “After all, both sides always start out with the same basic options. In the first few moves, you can make moves to see how they react, then adapt your game to beat their playing style.”

Millie's eyes widened. “See? That's why I need you as my coach! If I could learn how to beat you, I could beat anyone!”

“You couldn't beat me,” I said with a smile. “I know too much about you already.”

“Fine, don’t coach me,” Millie said, crossing her arms and leaning back against the seat. “I’ll work my butt off to learn how to beat you the first time I play you. We’ll see what you have to say then.”

I smiled. “I like your confidence, kid. Someday, you might be able to.”

I doubted it, but I could tell she was determined. I respected it. I didn’t doubt that she could beat anyone else on the planet . . . besides myself.

As we pulled into the parking lot, I caught a glimpse of a police car parked next to the sidewalk. It looked out of place next to all of the teenagers’ cars at the Academy.

“Why is Nash getting a ride from his dad today?” Brooke wondered aloud as she looked for an open space. “You never see the sheriff here on campus.”

“Let me out here,” I said. I quickly unbuckled and got out as soon as she put it in park and raced over to the sheriff’s car.

I knocked on the driver’s-side window, causing the sheriff to jump. His right hand went to his side for his gun, then relaxed when he saw it was me and rolled down his window. Apparently he could tell I wasn’t a threat as soon as he laid eyes on me. His face went from anxious to irritated in a nanosecond.

I hadn’t seen the sheriff on many occasions over the years, but I’d heard some pretty awful things about the man . . . some even from my own father.

“I’m sorry, sir. I didn’t mean to startle you, but I have a quick question,” I said, suddenly aware that my mouth was very dry. If I wasn’t so worried about my dad, I would have walked away and waited to ask someone who looked a little more helpful. His scowl made me want to run for the hills.

“Yes?” he asked. His voice was annoyed and clipped . . . and so were his eyes. He did not want to be a part of this conversation any more than I did.

“How do I report a missing person?” I asked, adjusting my glasses to give my hands something to do. It was finally beginning to cool down outside from the heat of summer, but my hands were still sweating.

“At the police station, not in the Academy parking lot,” he snapped. “How long has the person been missing?”

“Since around 4:00 p.m. yesterday,” I explained. “It’s my dad. He never came home last night.”

He groaned and rolled his eyes. “Seriously? You’re making a big deal out of this when he hasn’t even been missing for twenty-four hours yet? He’s a grown man. He doesn’t have to report home every single night.”

He put the car in gear, trying to end our conversation before I was done. I put my hand on the door like I could hold him back if he were to gun it across the parking lot.

“But this has never happened before,” I argued. “He always comes home —”

“If you report him now and he shows up within the next hour or so, you would have wasted the force’s time,” he said, interrupting me. “As you are doing right now. Come by the Sheriff’s Department if he still isn’t home when you get there after school.”

I removed my hand and stepped back right before he tore out of the parking lot. His tires squealed like there was a fire he needed to get to. Since he was the sheriff, there may have been a fire or something equally important that he had to go do . . . but he didn’t have to be such a jerk about it. My dad was missing. I was really worried, and he didn’t even care. He treated me like I was a door-to-door salesman trying to make him buy something, not a civilian with an issue.

Across the empty space where the car was moments before, Nash stood staring at me. His eyes apologized for the awkwardness of my encounter with his father, but he said nothing. He lowered his head, blonde mohawk pointing the way, and walked on. His absence left me standing alone like an idiot, speechless and confused.

A car honked at me to get out of the way, and I glanced up to see Elliott Mueller behind the wheel. I rushed to the sidewalk to clear the way, certain that he would run me over if he was in a bad enough mood. He would probably run anyone over. I'd heard he dealt drugs, and the person who said it wasn't lying about it . . . because I know when people are lying. If someone was willing to deal drugs, they were probably willing to mow someone over with their car if they got in their way. It seemed like a logical jump to me.

It was strange how school continued to go on like normal when everything in my life had turned upside down. I was so worried, yet I was expected to go about my day and do my homework like a good student. It was ridiculous.

I weaved through the crowd to my locker, hearing bits and pieces about the lives of my classmates and storing it away in my mind for later. Without much else to do in my downtime, I treated the students here like my own social experiment. I learned everything I could about them and observed how they reacted to different situations. I probably knew each of them better than they knew themselves. It occurred to me more than once that having a hobby like that would be pretty creepy if I had a motive. As it was, it was kind of strange and pathetic.

I shook my head, unable to even focus on the students' drama when I was so concerned about my dad. I felt like I should be out on foot searching for

him, but if the sheriff wasn't worried, did I need to be? Would he be in the parking lot to pick me up at three o'clock like he always was? Was this all some kind of fluke? Would everything go back to normal soon?

"I don't know if I have time to take you home and then to see Sheriff Williams after school," Brooke said as I filled her in before French class started. "I have to get Peter to the courthouse by four, and it's not like he can ride with anyone else. You're welcome to come with us, though. And I'll bring you by right after I drop him off? It's not like I have to go in with him."

"Don't worry about it. I'll figure it out," I said, though I didn't know how. I'd never had the freedom to *have* to figure out anything on my own before. "Is everything getting finalized today?"

She nodded. Her boyfriend Peter, the wolf-shifter, had inherited the entire estate of a mutual friend of theirs who had passed away. Peter had spent most of his life isolated in the woods and therefore didn't know how to drive, so he gave the old man's car to Brooke.

"That's good. I'm glad everything is finally coming together," I said. I knew it had been hard for them to prove that Peter was the one who was supposed to inherit everything. "Things still going okay at Michael's?"

She winced. "Can we not call it that? It's the Stevens's. And yes, Ryan and Amber are fantastic. My only complaint is that I wish I had fewer rules. I'm not used to someone telling me when to be home and what I can and can't do. It's especially hard now that I have a boyfriend."

I rolled my eyes. "Yeah, sounds rough. I'm sure you feel suffocated."

She kind of giggled as she no doubt remembered what a tight leash I was on. "You're right; it's not that bad. I can tell they are only doing it because

they really care about us. I trust them. I might be jumping the gun here, but I think I may even be able to leave Millie with them and go to college.”

My eyes widened as hope filled my chest. I had always wanted us to go to college together. “You trust them with Millie? That’s huge!”

She nodded. “It is. I really think they’re good people. The problem is that they have such a volatile relationship with Michael. It’s so disorienting. I don’t know what to do about him, and I don’t think they do either.”

Her voice had dropped to a whisper so no one could overhear us, even though Michael wasn’t in French class with us.

“What do you mean?” I whispered back. I was hungry for more information about Michael. He was new, so I hadn’t had the opportunity to study him like I had my other classmates . . . and he was very hard to read. He didn’t interact with anyone much . . . besides some of the guys on the basketball team.

She groaned, as if trying to find the words. “He’s very moody and emotional with them, and they don’t seem to take it well either. It’s more than average teenage moodiness. He’s very withdrawn and angry. Anytime they do something good to him, he acts out with anger and punishes them for it. If they make a mistake, he magnifies it by one hundred and rubs it in their face. I want to scream at him sometimes. He has no idea how good he has it with parents like his.”

“Do you think he’s upset about you and Millie living there?” I asked, trying to grasp reasons why he would be acting like that. I wanted to understand him and how his mind worked. “Or do you think he was acting like that with them before you were ever in the picture?”

She shrugged. “I’m not sure. He’s sweet to Millie, though. If she asks him a question, he always responds in the nicest way he can. But even she

tries her best to reign in her questions so she doesn't push it. I feel like we all avoid him as much as we can, and he feels the same way about us. I don't know if Millie and I are the problem or not. I'd like for you to ask him and see what he says," she said, knowing the uncanny ability I had for being able to tell if people were telling the truth . . . or not.

"You only like me because I'm a human lie-detector test," I joked. I knew it wasn't true, but she did value that about me. She hated that she couldn't lie to me, but she'd gotten pretty good at hiding the truth without lying. She'd done a lot of that this past summer.

She smiled. "That, and you're a pretty great friend. I'm lucky to have you, Raven."

I returned her smile, letting her know I also returned the sentiment. I knew Brooke would walk through fire to keep me from getting burned. Every girl in the world deserved a best friend as good as Brooke.

Mrs. Dubois came in, tapping a black pointer in the palm of her left hand. A hush fell over the class as we each held our breath and prayed that she wouldn't single us out.

"*Bonjour. Parlez vous français?*" she asked, slapping the pointer in front of Nash, who recoiled. We were all relieved but felt incredibly sorry for him at the same time.

"Um, no," Nash replied. He had a small, blonde goatee to match his mohawk. Actually, it had flecks of red in it. That was peculiar. There wasn't even a hint of red on his head.

"That's quite right, young man," she said with a satisfied frown. "Let's see what we can do about that, shall we?"

2

NASH

My face burned red as Mrs. Dubois went on to her next victim. I knew enough to know that she said, “Do you speak French?”

I did not, however, know enough French to reply confidently. I wish I knew how to say, “A little bit.” That probably would have gone over better than “um, no.”

I felt my phone vibrate in my pocket, hoping it wasn't my dad. I knew his run-in with Raven had made him even more upset, and I didn't want to deal with him any more than I already had this morning. Discreetly, I checked my phone under the table when Mrs. Dubois had her back turned to me across the room.

My body sagged with relief when I saw the text wasn't from my dad.

It read, “Car's done. \$325. I sent Josie to school with it, but she's running late. Send money home with her. Thanks.”

It was the best news I could have hoped for. I wouldn't have to spend another car ride with my dad. It looked like today was going to be a pretty unlucky one for me. But maybe it was turning around for the better?

“Do I need to give Josie a ride to your house after school?” I messaged back, wondering just how awkward that would be. I doubted she would even speak to me. I was pretty far beneath her.

“No. She said she would ride with her boyfriend. Thanks though,” he messaged back.

My mechanic, Will, was Josie’s older brother. Josie was a senior at the Academy, like me. I wasn’t thrilled about her driving my car, but I asked Will to get it back as soon as possible by whatever means necessary. If it meant I could drive myself home, then I didn’t care. I texted my dad to let him know I wouldn’t need him to pick me up after school. He didn’t respond, but I didn’t expect him to.

After my nightmare morning, it was nice to know there would not be a repeat on the ride home.

My dad had yelled at me for the entire drive to school. He spewed about how stupid and irresponsible I was by not taking better care of my car. I should have realized something was wrong with it before it got this bad. I should have listened to the engine instead of the radio. I should have anticipated it. I spent too much time working on computers and not enough time working on cars. If I knew cars as well as computers, we wouldn’t even have to pay for a mechanic. I spent too much time inside. I should have been outside working on my car instead of inside trying to “hack the internet.” My skin was too white because I didn’t get enough vitamin D from the sun.

There was more, but I tuned it out. Every time he yelled, I had to focus intently to make sure I didn’t miss any of it. My body had started to shut down and block him out automatically after so many years of it, which only caused more yelling when he realized I wasn’t paying attention. I tried my

best to zero in and listen to avoid this, but my body knew better. My mind was trying to protect me by shutting him out.

It didn't make any difference that the man knew nothing about computers *or* cars. That wasn't the point. The point was that I inconvenienced him and he didn't want to be in the car with me any more than I wanted to be with him.

When I saw Raven walking up to his side of the car in the parking lot, I wanted to scream for her to stop. She was walking in front of a runaway train. He was already too worked up to be helpful to anyone. I felt sorry for her.

Abort your mission, I tried to tell her with my eyes, but she didn't look at me to see my warning. I didn't know if she would have understood or trusted me anyway.

When he left her behind with no answers about what to do about her dad, I wanted to explain that he was mad at me, not her. But she wouldn't understand that either. From the way she seemed worried about her dad, the man wasn't a psychopath.

Everyone knew Dr. Haskins was incredibly weird, but we also knew he loved Raven—maybe a little too much by the way he smothered her. The girl had no life whatsoever due to his many rules.

Did my dad love me? Sure, as much as anyone loved a toaster that worked and provided you with a warm, crunchy breakfast. But when I wasn't performing to his standards, he loved me as much as anyone loved a toaster with a broken heating element. I was useless, irritating, and above all, disposable.

I looked for Destiny in the hallway after class. Seeing my girlfriend would definitely put me in a better mood and banish the bad feelings from

the morning car ride entirely.

However, a feeling of dread crept up in me when I saw her red-rimmed eyes. It was the same feeling I had in my stomach when I saw the squad car pulling into the driveway.

Something bad was coming.

“Are you okay?” I asked, bracing myself for the storm. She had been crying, and she wasn’t coming to me for support. She looked at me as if I were the reason.

She shook her head, making her long blonde hair sway from side to side dramatically. “No, I’m not okay. I’m going to ask you a question, and I need you to *promise* to tell me the truth, no matter how hard it is to say it out loud.”

My brain froze. I tried to come up with an exhaustive list of anything she could ask me so I could be as prepared as possible, but I had no idea what to expect. The endless possibilities were frying my clueless brain.

“Of course,” I managed to say. Had I ever lied to her before? Did I do anything that I would have thought I needed to hide from her? I didn’t think so . . . so telling the truth would be easy, right? I could guarantee that.

“First, I want to know if what everyone is saying about you is true, and second, I want to know how long it’s been going on,” she said, her voice trembling.

Her questions did not shed any light on my own confusion.

“I honestly don’t know what you’re talking about,” I told her. She seemed to take this as a lie. She closed her eyes tightly and balled up her fists in frustration.

“Just tell me how long, Nash,” she said through clenched teeth. I didn’t like how she said my name like I was the enemy here.

“How long—what?” I asked. My brain was spinning, trying to figure out what she could possibly be so upset about.

“How long have you been sleeping with Josie?” she said, gasping for breath at the end of her sentence. She looked like she was about to explode into tears again at any moment.

I was so surprised that I stepped backward. “*What?* I haven’t ever slept with Josie. That’s ridiculous. I haven’t even kissed her. What makes you think I did?”

It had to be a joke. It had to be, but her face didn’t look like she was kidding.

“Everyone is talking about it,” she managed to croak out through contained sobs. She glanced around at the people weaving around us as if they were speaking about it that very instant. “They said they saw her driving your car this morning. Did she spend the night at your house? Wouldn’t your parents be mad if they found out?”

She had no idea. I would never be stupid enough to sneak a girl into my room.

I closed my eyes and lowered my head, shaking it from side to side. “Destiny, *please*, come talk to me before you start listening to crap like that. Will Adams fixed my car and sent it to school with her so I can drive it home. If you ask around, you’ll also find out that I rode to school with my dad in the squad car. She did drive my car to school, but I haven’t seen her since school yesterday, and I didn’t even talk to her then! I swear. I couldn’t tell you the last time she even looked in my direction!”

Her attitude went from despair to anger in a moment. “I came and talked to you as soon as I could, Nash! I could hardly pull you out of class to ask you. And what a convenient excuse you have.”

This time, I clenched my fists. I hated being accused of making excuses every time I offered an explanation for something—especially one that was true.

My dad did that to me enough. I didn't need it from her, too.

“Josie’s boyfriend is driving her home,” I growled. “She delivered my car for me this morning. Nothing else. I have nothing to do with her, and I *never* have.”

“Then how do you know that?” she challenged me. “How do you have an answer for everything? How rehearsed is all of this?”

I pulled my phone out of my back pocket. “Will texted me and told me. Look, you can read our entire conversation. You can look through my entire phone for evidence that won't be there! I have nothing to hide from you. I've never cheated on you with *anyone*. I will be giving Josie the money and getting my keys back today. And in case people start spreading lies about that, the money is to pay Will for the car, not to pay her for sex.”

Josie appeared behind Destiny, dangling my keys, at precisely the wrong time.

“You couldn't afford me,” she said with a seductive wink. “Just drop the check into my locker sometime today.”

I tried not to look as she sauntered off and flipped her red hair over her shoulder, but she commanded the attention of everyone in sight, even Destiny.

I had never even considered a hookup between myself and Josie. She was way out of my league. We both knew it.

Unfortunately, Destiny felt the same way I did about Josie—that she was miles beneath her and could never compete with someone so charismatic

and sexy. Despite being so beautiful herself, her insecurity really worked against me in this scenario.

“I don’t know if I should believe you,” she said softly. “I want to, but I don’t want to be made a fool of.”

“Please, if you don’t believe me, ask her,” I begged. “Josie wants nothing to do with me, I assure you. She probably told me to drop that check in her locker so she didn’t have to talk to me again in front of other people.”

It was probably the truth, but I wasn’t bothered by it. It was the way of things. If you didn’t play basketball, you didn’t stand a chance with Josie Adams . . . and I was no athlete.

“We should take a break until this settles down,” she said, stepping away from me. “I need time to think about this. I don’t want to make an emotional decision.”

“What? Are you serious right now? We should take a break because someone who I don’t even talk to delivered my car to school?” I asked, anger and confusion leaking into every word. “That sounds like an emotional decision to me!”

She had to realize how stupid it all sounded. She had to reconsider. She had nothing concrete to stand on.

She sighed. “I know. If you’re telling the truth, then the whole situation is ridiculous. And if you’re not, then I’m the most gullible idiot in the world for believing such a ridiculous story.”

I fought the urge to punch the lockers closest to me. “So what does this mean? Are we together? Are we broken up?”

We had been together for nearly a year. I almost thought it would turn into an “after high school” kind of relationship. We had never had a conversation like this one, though.

“It’s just a break,” she said again, as if that were all the explanation I needed.

“I DON’T KNOW WHAT THAT MEANS,” I yelled, slamming the side of my fist against the metal locker. “Are we together or not?!”

She narrowed her beautiful brown eyes at me. “Not. And to make it even clearer, I will not be attending the dance with you on Friday. Are you happy now?”

I wasn’t. But I wasn’t about to beg for her back either. That would imply that I had done something wrong . . . and I hadn’t. I wouldn’t have cheated on her. That’s a line I would not cross. The fact that she didn’t believe that—it made me angrier than I had ever been at her.

Her twin sister Chloe came up behind her and touched her arm. Without speaking, the two rushed off to the bathroom before I could say another word. It was over. Destiny was my first real girlfriend, and I had lost her because of something as stupid as Josie driving my car to school. If I had let my dad drive me to Will’s house to pick it up later instead, none of this madness would have even happened.

I stood stunned as people rushed all around me. The warning bell went off to let us know that second period was imminent, but my feet didn’t move.

“If it helps, I know you were telling the truth,” a voice said from my right. I jumped in surprise as Raven stood there, adjusting her glasses. I didn’t have the emotional bandwidth to deal with another person.

“I don’t want to join the chess team,” I said as I stalked away. It was hard to imagine any other reason why she would be talking to me. It wasn’t like she needed test answers from me. She was smart enough on her own.

“I didn’t figure you did,” she replied calmly, as if I hadn’t been rude and dismissive. She kept up with me as I charged toward English class. Unfortunately, that’s where she was going too.

“I need to ask you for a favor,” she asked. “I heard through the grapevine that you got your car back, and I need a ride after school.”

I turned toward her, hoping to scare her with my cold stare. “To go see my dad? Are you serious?”

She couldn’t have picked a worse favor to ask me.

She wasn’t fazed. “Actually, home first . . . then the Sheriff’s Department if my dad still isn’t there so I can file a missing person report. I assume you overheard my conversation with your dad this morning? Lovely man, isn’t he?”

I shook my head. “No, Raven. I’m not going to willingly go anywhere my dad is. Sorry.”

She touched my arm to turn me back toward her. Even in my anger and defiance, she didn’t seem deterred in the least. Was she brave? Or did she have no sense of self-preservation?

Because if she had no self-preservation, then she needed to stay light-years away from my dad. He would destroy her.

“I’ll make a deal with you,” she said. “I don’t have any money, but I can help you with something else if you need me to.”

I looked around wildly. “Like what? My homework? I’m doing fine, thanks.”

She chuckled, no doubt knowing the elaborate scheme behind my good grades. Most people did. It was a wonder that the administration hadn’t caught on yet. “No, not that. I have a superpower when it comes to lying,” she explained. “No one can lie to me, but I can lie to anyone.”

“How will that help me?” I argued. “I don’t need to deceive anyone *or* interrogate them.”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. But I’ll bet you can come up with something. I’ll meet you at your car after school to find out what it is.”

With absolute confidence, she strode to her seat.

Apparently, I had become single *and* Raven’s new chauffeur in a matter of only ten minutes.

What remained unseen was how I would make the most out of our deal. Was there anything I wanted or needed where having a good liar in my corner would come in handy?

RAVEN

After the final bell rang, I made sure I was at Nash's car before he was. I knew he would leave without me if given the chance. It was obvious that I couldn't have asked him for something more inconvenient, but I didn't know who else to ask. He seemed like the best choice at the moment.

I stood by the passenger side and spun around, looking for my dad's car. He usually parked near the edge of the lot by the grass to pick me up from school each day, but like the night before, it was nowhere to be seen.

If Nash refused to take me, would I be able to ride the bus home? I'd never ridden the bus before. I didn't know if you had to register or something first . . . plus, if my dad still wasn't there, then I had no ride to get to the Sheriff's Department to file the report. I needed Nash. I hoped he needed me as badly.

"Raven, I heard you may not be at practice tomorrow?" Jacklyn said as she passed me. "You've never missed a practice before. What gives?"

I nodded sadly. "I know. I'm so sorry. I'm having some issues at home, so I asked Simon to lead the chess team for a while until I get things figured

out.”

Her eyes widened. “It’s not only tomorrow? You’re out indefinitely?”

“Hopefully it’s not for long,” I assured her. “I’ve got some personal stuff going on that I have to deal with first. I hope you guys understand.”

She smiled and patted my shoulder before walking away. To anyone else, it would have seemed like a nice gesture.

But I knew Jacklyn. I’d been playing her at chess for years. If I stepped away for even one practice, she would do her best to take the captain’s title away from me. That’s why I had asked Simon to be the interim leader instead of her . . . even though she was better than him.

Giving up my hard-earned position was almost impossible for me to do, but as important to me as chess was, my dad was more. He needed me. Something was wrong.

Nash’s shoulders slumped when he saw me as if he, too, had been thinking he might have been able to slip out before I got there.

“Sorry that I can’t be avoided,” I said in the most chipper tone I could muster. “Seriously, this is all new to me. My dad always drives me everywhere. This morning when I rode to school with Brooke was the first time I’ve ever been in a vehicle with someone else besides him.”

He made a face like he smelled something bad, and I felt my cheeks flush in embarrassment. I knew it would be incredibly evident on my porcelain face.

“That’s messed up,” he said, sliding into the front seat. I mimicked him and buckled in the passenger side. “Does he allow you to ride in the front? Or are we breaking more rules now?”

“Of course he does,” I said, rolling my eyes. I didn’t mention that he didn’t allow me to until I was fifteen . . . and I had to fight for it then.

“So why can’t Brooke be your personal driver?” he asked. “It looks like she’s getting into her car with Michael and her little sister now. Looks like there’s room for you too.”

His words were helpful. His tone was not.

I sighed. “Brooke has to drive her boyfriend to an appointment by four today. She’s going to have to rush as it is to get Michael and Millie home, pick him up, and get him to the courthouse.”

“The fish guy?” Nash asked as he put the car in drive.

“Yeah. You know him?” I asked, surprised.

He shrugged. “Not really. I’ve talked to him once. Seems like a weird dude.”

“Oh, he most definitely is,” I agreed. “But they’re in love, and I’ve never seen Brooke so happy.”

He didn’t have anything to say to this, and when I looked over, his face was that of someone in pain.

I probably shouldn’t have brought up someone being in love when he was dumped earlier. I chastised myself and made a mental note not to bring it up again.

As I looked around, I noticed that his car was cleaner than I expected. There wasn’t any trash in the floorboard or cup compartments like in Brooke’s that morning. I didn’t expect Nash to be tidier than Brooke—who dreamed of starting a cleaning business.

“What was wrong with your car?” I asked, hoping it wouldn’t explode on us before we could accomplish our mission. Plus, it seemed like a fairly safe subject.

He shrugged. “I don’t know. There was a weird noise, and Will fixed it. I don’t hear it right now, anyway . . . so I assume it’s fixed. I hope it is after

all of the trouble it's caused me on top of the huge check I wrote him."

It was clear this would not be a chatty drive, so I dropped it and sat silently as he made each intricate turn to my house without my prompting.

"You know where I live," I said. It was an observation, not a question, each word laced with suspicion.

"Everyone knows where you live," Nash said, bored. "When we were in junior high, we used to sneak out here by the gate and tell ghost stories to scare each other. Jake was the best at it."

I scoffed. "Why would you do that? It seems dumb."

He gestured to the large iron gates that guarded my home. "You don't think this is scary? It looks straight out of a horror movie."

I tried to look at them from an outsider's perspective. Did it seem like a looming fortress designed to keep something terrifying inside?

I couldn't see it though. The only thing those gates meant to keep inside was me. I hated them, but I didn't fear them. Nothing was frightening about my house . . . only oppressive.

"What's the code?" Nash asked as we pulled up to the keypad.

"I don't know," I admitted. "My dad always did it. But I have a fingerprint override."

I unbuckled and started to crawl across him to stick my hand out his window.

"What are you doing?" he asked, raising his hands in surprise.

I was bracing myself on the center console, hovering slightly over him. "Putting my thumb on the scanner, like I said. What's the problem?"

"Can't you just walk around?" Nash asked. Was he so worried about me touching him? It wasn't like being a hermit was an infectious disease.

“I wouldn’t be able to get back inside in time,” I explained. “You’ll have to start driving almost immediately to make it through before the gates shut again.”

He looked at me like I grew two heads. “Why?”

“So there isn’t enough time for someone to follow you inside,” I said simply. “Now, are you ready or not?”

“I suppose so,” he said. He sounded exasperated and overwhelmed. Was this situation really that odd?

I did my fingerprint override, and he gunned it, causing my body to slam back against my seat before I could get back in place.

“You didn’t have to be that crazy about it,” I said as we continued up the long driveway.

“I’m not the one who is crazy in this scenario,” he mumbled.

I looked around in all the places he could have parked, but Dad’s car was still nowhere to be seen.

“I’m going to check inside, don’t try to leave without me,” I said. “Not that you could.”

“What the he—”

“You have to have my fingerprint to leave, too,” I explained. “Don’t look at me like that. I didn’t make the rules, I’m just bound by them.”

I was fairly sure that my dad wasn’t home, but I had to check every place I could just in case. The only place I couldn’t check was his lab in the basement, which I did not have the clearance to enter. I knocked and yelled for him several times, just to be sure, but he wasn’t there. He wasn’t anywhere.

I went from being worried to frightened. I had to get to the police station and get help as fast as possible.

Nash was gripping the steering wheel with white knuckles when I got back. Did he truly think there were ghosts here? I glanced around at the stone walls with ivy growing up the side. It didn't look scary. It looked lonely and cold. I always thought I felt lonely, but it was ten times worse last night when I was truly alone.

I shook my head. "He's not here. Will you take me to the Sheriff's Department so I can file a missing person report, please?"

Wordlessly, he took off. When I did my fingerprint to release us, he drove through the gates at a normal pace.

I didn't say it out loud, because Nash already thought I was crazy enough, but I knew that every time I used my fingerprint to leave the house, my dad got an alert on his phone. I figured that out when I busted out once to go and check on Brooke. Wherever he was, he knew I was out of my cell past my regular yard hours at school.

If anything brought him home, it would be that.

Unless he couldn't.



"I'll wait here," Nash said as he put the car in park.

I looked at him, a question in my eyes, but I didn't voice it.

"I don't want to see my dad," he said, taking his phone out to entertain himself while I was gone.

"Why?" I asked, truly confused. His dad didn't seem awesome or anything. But was he bad enough that he needed to be avoided by his own son?

"You have your weird dad stuff; I have mine," he said, and that seemed like the end of it.

I honestly didn't want to see the man either. He was cold and apparently already annoyed with me.

It was also only 3:50 p.m. He could even accuse me of not waiting an entire twenty-four hours before bothering him again. I honestly considered sitting back down and waiting ten more minutes before I faced him.

"Talk to Deputy Kerry," Nash said, giving me the strength to keep going.

"I don't know who that is," I admitted. If someone in town hadn't been on campus before, then I hadn't met them. That was the only place I was allowed to go.

"Ask for him at the front desk, and he'll talk to you. He's young and still into actually helping people. If anyone will be in your corner, it's him," Nash stated.

His eyes were kind as he said this. He knew I needed to avoid his dad as well . . . and that I desperately wanted to find mine.

"Thank you," I said, trying to convey my gratitude through my tone. "And thank you for bringing me here. I'll be back as soon as I can, I promise."

I had never been in the Sheriff's Department before. I'd never had a reason to. But when I walked in, I loved the energy of it. I could imagine

myself being a detective one day, interrogating people and drawing the truth out of them. Officers darted around the room like men and women on a mission, and I wanted to jump right in there with them.

“May I speak to Officer Kerry, please?” I asked the officer at the front desk.

“Kerry!” he shouted to someone on my right. At the water cooler, a man turned around and smiled at me.

“Hi, how can I help you?” he asked, extending his hand to me.

I shook it as firmly as he did and gave him a polite smile. “I need to file a missing person report, and I was told you could help me.”

“Sure thing. Right this way,” he said, leading me to his office.

Once inside, we both got seated, and I sat silently until he found the form he was looking for. I wasn’t nearly as nervous as I had been in the parking lot with the sheriff. This guy seemed much kinder than Nash’s dad.

“Okay, here we go. What’s your name and age?” he asked, pen poised.

“Raven Haskins, eighteen years old,” I answered. “And I need to report that my father is missing.”

He looked up quickly. “Your father? Is that Dr. Haskins?”

“Yes, sir. He dropped me off at the house after school yesterday and immediately left. I haven’t seen him since.”

He nodded, writing all of this down. “I see. Where did he say he was going?”

“He didn’t. He didn’t tell me stuff like that,” I answered.

I kind of felt ashamed to admit it, but I thought this was a good time to be honest.

He scrunched his mouth up in thought. “Hmm . . . Would he have told anyone else? Could you give me the names and numbers of his friends and

family that are close to him? That might be a better place to start.”

I shook my head. “No, sir. My dad is kind of a hermit. He doesn’t have any friends and spends most of his time at home. And we don’t have any living extended family beyond the two of us.”

“I’ve heard of him before, though,” he reasoned. “The title ‘Doctor’ flashed in my mind as soon as you said the name Haskins.”

I shrugged. “People talk about him because he’s weird. But he would never confide in someone as a friend.”

I’d never realized that before. My dad didn’t have any friends. I fought him like crazy to have a life and go to school so I could hang out with Brooke, but my dad didn’t have a “Brooke.” Was he as lonely as I was?

“What about work?” he asked, grasping for straws. “Any co-workers that might know where we could look for him?”

“No, sir. He’s a scientist. He worked from home in his lab downstairs,” I explained. Not only did he not have friends, but he didn’t even have regular acquaintances.

His eyebrows raised. “Would he have left a note there? In the lab?”

“No. No one has clearance to that room besides him. I’ve already tried, and I can’t get in,” I said. Didn’t he realize that if there were obvious options, I would have already done them? I needed his help because I needed power beyond what I had to locate my dad.

Officer Kerry leaned back and stroked his short beard, deep in thought. “Did he often drop you off and leave?”

“No, sir,” I admitted. “He’s usually right by my side at all times. Annoyingly, to tell you the truth.”

His eyebrows furrowed. “Well, that’s not a lot to go on, dear. I assume he had a registered car?”

I nodded. "Yes, and that's what he left in. I haven't seen the car either."

"That's probably our best bet then. I'll run it in the system and put out a search for it in Midnight Springs and the surrounding areas. Are you sure there isn't anything else you can give me? Anywhere you think he may have gone? You don't have to be certain, but any tips could help in our search."

"No, sir," I said. "We even had our groceries delivered to the house. The only place he ever went was taking me to and from school."

He nodded, but his eyes were sad. "You feel a little overprotected, huh?"

"Not just a little," I said, but I would have traded my new freedom to have him back and know he was alright. "When do you think you'll know something?"

"I can't say. It's always different with every case," he said. "Let me get your number so I can call you with any updates. Here's mine if you think of anything else that might help us. We'll do everything we can to locate your father. For now, go to school and carry out your life like normal."

He was telling the truth. He would do everything he could to find my dad.

"Okay, sir. Thank you," I said, standing to leave.

"Are you going to be alright at home by yourself?" he asked. "You said you're eighteen but still in high school, correct?"

"Yes, sir. I'll be absolutely fine, but I'm worried about him. I want to know he's safe," I said. Being alone at the house wasn't scary. Not knowing why was terrifying.

He smiled. "Okay, then. You let me take care of that, and you take care of yourself, okay?"

I liked Officer Kerry. Nash was right—he seemed like someone who truly wanted to help me.

When I exited his office, I caught a glimpse of Sheriff Williams chewing out another officer in the hallway where everyone could see. I couldn't help but wince. The entire room seemed to quieten, but it wasn't because they wanted to hear him better. Nash could probably hear him outside. They were all nervous, just like me.

Suddenly, the idea of being a detective didn't sound so appealing . . . especially if the sheriff was still going to be around.

Shivering, I made my way out to Nash's car, wondering what he would want in return for me making him get so close to his dad when he didn't have to be. I couldn't imagine what it would be like if I had to live with the man.

NASH

“Will you go to the dance with me on Friday?” I asked as soon as I got out on the road. The whole time she was inside, I spent thinking about what my end of the deal would be, and I thought I had finally figured it out.

“Umm, no, thank you,” she said, looking out the window instead of at me.

I chuckled. “I wasn’t asking you like a date, Raven. I was asking you as part of our deal. Will you go to the dance with me in return for my chauffeur services?”

Her head snapped back in my direction, but her tight bun and glasses stayed in place. It was remarkable with them being thrown around at that speed. I had to put a ton of gel in my hair to get it to stay in place like that. “What? That’s crazy. I can’t do that.”

“Why not?” I asked. It wasn’t like I was asking her to rob a bank, but her reaction probably would have been similar if I had.

“I’m not allowed to go to dances,” she said, as if this were common knowledge. “Have you ever seen me at a dance before?”

It hadn't, but I hadn't been looking for her either.

"Is it like . . . against your religion?" I asked slowly, trying not to step on her toes.

She smiled. "No. Unless you consider my father's irrational need to control me a religion. He is certainly dedicated to it like it is."

"Okay then, what's the problem? You said you can lie, right? Lie your way to the dance with me," I reasoned. I didn't mention that her dad couldn't stop her from going if he wasn't around. Hopefully, she knew what was going on with him, and that part of her life would be back to normal by Friday.

She huffed. "Fine. I guess it's only fair. I should have expected to be inconvenienced in some way."

I smiled. "Glad to know you think it's an inconvenience to go to a dance with me. Who knows? You might even have fun."

She scoffed. She did that a lot. It was irritating. "I don't see why taking me isn't an inconvenience to *you* too. How do you benefit from this at all? It's not like I could improve your 'image' in any way."

I loved how self-aware she was about where she stood in the high-school hierarchy, but I was too. And, like her, I didn't care to change it.

"You heard Destiny this morning. I'm dateless, and there's no time to find a date the normal way. I can't show up alone after all of that crap. I don't care about what anyone else thinks; I only want to save face with her so I don't look pathetic," I explained.

She hiked up one of those dark eyebrows. "I understand the logic, but it's not like Destiny would be jealous of me. If it weren't for my freak-show father drawing attention to me by being so odd, she wouldn't even know I exist. It'd make more of a point if you went with Josie," she stated.

I shook my head. “No, not Josie. That would only confirm her suspicions, which aren’t true. Besides, you’ve never had a boyfriend before, right?”

“Right,” she agreed with no shame. I kind of expected her to make up a story about some guy who was “kind of” her boyfriend in the past, but she didn’t. She didn’t care what I thought about it. I liked that.

“Destiny would be intrigued by that,” I said. “She would take notice and want to know more about it.”

“So you’re hoping it will make you more desirable in her eyes?” she asked. “Like you aren’t just sitting around pining over her?”

I didn’t like the clinical and blunt way she put it, but I nodded in agreement.

“So I may not have to go to the dance at all?” she pondered. “Especially if she gets super jealous before then and wants to go with you again?”

“The dance is in a couple of days, so I doubt it’ll work *that* quickly. But yes, if she wants to go with me again, you’re off the hook,” I assured her. “The point is that I don’t want to go to the dance alone and run into her there.”

“Deal,” she said, sticking out her hand across the center of the car before climbing over me again to open the gate to let us through.

“Deal,” I agreed, shaking it back. I figured I was getting the better end of the deal anyway.

After all, I didn’t even have to see my dad at the Sheriff’s Department. I didn’t even have to go inside. It wasn’t so bad after all.



Mom was already gone by the time I got home for her night shift at the diner. She had cooked a pot of soup and left it on the stove for us, so all I had to do was turn the burner on again.

The house smelled clean. She must have mopped again. I thought she did yesterday, but my dad made a nasty comment about her missing a spot this morning.

I hated how it took so long with Raven that I missed seeing her, but I knew she would understand. She didn't depend on me for her happiness, which I was grateful for. She easily could have. It wasn't like my dad was providing anything in that department.

Luckily, she had her work friends. I honestly didn't think we actually needed the money she made waitressing, but she did it anyway. My theory was that it kept her away when my dad was home without actually having to leave him. His schedules deviated between day and night, and hers seemed to as well—but oppositely and as if it were on purpose. It was clever, and he didn't seem to catch on to it . . . or he didn't care as long as

his house was being cared for and supper was cooked for him when he got home.

There was a high-pitched beep as my dad locked the squad car on his way inside. It made my stomach churn and my body tense. Nausea started to wash over me from that simple noise.

“Supper is ready. I’ve already done the dishes, swept the floors, and took out the trash,” I muttered to myself, going over a checklist in my head as I made my way to my room. I used to keep an actual paper checklist until he saw it. Then, I would get in trouble for not marking something off, even if it was completed in real life, so I threw it away. I didn’t need another reason to get yelled at.

Once inside, he slammed the door so loudly that the house shook. The bowl and spoon I had laid out for him for supper clanged with the movement, making me wince as I waited to hear a picture fall off the wall. Thankfully, this time none did.

I sighed and closed my eyes. It was going to be that kind of night. I wouldn’t get to go to bed without interacting with him.

I had already turned off my light, hoping he would think I went to bed early and leave me alone. After all, I had done all my chores, and he had everything he needed to be self-sufficient for the rest of the night.

I had no such luck.

He strode through my open door and barked, “Get up.” He turned back around and stalked back out, knowing I would follow.

I wasn’t allowed to shut my door, only to close it briefly while changing clothes. A shut door implied privacy and boundaries that I did not have.

I sighed and obeyed, following him into the kitchen.

I scanned the room, looking for whatever I could have done wrong. The dishes were done. The counters were wiped. The food scraps were thrown outside. The trash was taken out. What could possibly—

He reached for the freezer door and flung it open.

S***. The ice.

“Does something look wrong here to you?” he asked, his voice eerie and cruel. When I was younger, I thought his anger and malice came from drinking. Then, as he got on the force and climbed up to being sheriff, he stopped getting drunk—but the anger stayed. It may have even gotten worse because the slightly buzzed version of him was better than the sober one.

The hard-liquor drunk one was the worst. I was glad I didn’t see that guy anymore.

“I forgot,” I said. “I’ll do it now.”

I moved toward the freezer, but he slammed the door so hard that I heard something break. “Doesn’t do me a lot of good for you to do it now. It takes water time to freeze, idiot. I won’t be able to use any until tomorrow.”

He collapsed onto a dining room chair as if this were the worst thing he’d ever have to deal with. He was so freaking dramatic. Ignoring him, I walked to the freezer, got the ice trays out, and fixed the door the best I could. The hinges seemed okay, but an inside shelf had fallen out. I’d have to try to superglue it later.

Filling the ice trays, I silently put them in the freezer, angry at the empty ice bucket that stared back at me.

Even though I liked my drinks better cold, I had stopped using ice entirely in an attempt to have to fill the ice trays less. That had turned around and bit me in the a** because it also meant that I wasn’t noticing it getting low.

I dug in the junk drawer for superglue, aware that his eyes still bore into me. I avoided them. As soon as I looked at him, it would start again. He was baiting me—daring me to look at him, and I wouldn't give him the satisfaction.

I glanced at the clock. Mom still wouldn't be home for a few hours if she stayed to help close the diner. Maybe this storm could pass before she got here, and she wouldn't pull up in the middle of it. I hated it for her when that happened.

I'm sure she felt the same way about me.

"The ice will never freeze if you keep the door open," he gruffed as I held the shelf in place to give the glue time to work.

There was no way I could fix the shelf with the door closed. I couldn't win. I knew that, but it was still discouraging—every time.

After a few more seconds, I figured it was good enough and shut the door. I packed the frozen items the shelf used to hold in the main compartment, afraid that the shelf wouldn't hold them yet. It probably needed more time to set up than I had allowed.

Could superglue even hold things in such cold conditions? I wasn't sure, but it was the only thing I knew to try. I'd have to look it up later and see if there was a better alternative. I needed something that would hold up if he threw a fit and slammed the freezer door again . . . which was sure to happen before I could hightail it out of here in May when I graduated.

"I'm going to bed," I said, still avoiding his gaze and hoping there wasn't anything else he was waiting to drop on me. He was mad before he ever saw the ice, but hopefully that was because of one of his subordinates at work, not me.

“You aren’t even going to tell me you love me?” he asked angrily. I had to tell him every single night, even if he didn’t say it back—even if he was freezing me out with the silent treatment.

As a kid, it really bothered me when he wouldn’t talk to me for days on end, but I was still required to tell him that I loved him every single night before bed. Why wasn’t he required to say it back? It didn’t make any sense.

Now, I didn’t care. The words meant nothing. It was just one of the many rules of living here.

“Love you. Goodnight,” I said, my voice as neutral as I could make it.

I couldn’t possibly make it warm.

I remembered the first time that I told Destiny I loved her. We were at the movies, and she sat between me and her twin sister, Chloe. I had wanted to tell her for days but was too nervous. I remembered how strange that was. Why was it so terrifying to say I love you to her? Because she may not have said it back? I was used to that. I should have felt empowered and prepared. But I didn’t. I was scared to death.

I squeezed her hand and leaned toward her, whispering it in her ear. She turned to look at me, her eyes gleaming in the light from the movie, and mouthed, “I love you too.”

I thought that was the best day of my entire life. It didn’t matter that I would go home that night and get yelled at for not finishing raking the leaves before I left for my date. It didn’t matter that I would have to get up at 4:00 a.m. to finish cleaning up the yard as a punishment or that my car was taken away for a day (it was supposed to be two weeks until he realized that if I didn’t have a car, he had to take me places).

Destiny said she loved me, and if she did, none of the rest of my life and problems mattered.

But she didn't love me anymore, and all the pain of living here, that her presence in my life had numbed, was now hitting me in full force in her absence.

I had depended on her for my happiness, and it wasn't fair. She didn't even know what things were really like here. It wasn't her responsibility to take care of me. I knew that.

Still, I wished she would wake up tomorrow and realize how irrational she was being about Josie. I wished she would throw her arms around my neck and kiss me against my locker. I would take her apology and take her back in an instant.

I focused on her face as I drifted off to sleep, but her hair color changed from blonde to black, and dark glasses appeared on her face . . . and out of nowhere, Raven was in my dreams instead.

RAVEN

“Once upon a time, there was a girl named Raven,” I narrated as I descended the staircase, toolbox in hand. The officers had just left and were no closer to finding my dad than I was. Something drastic had to be done. I couldn’t sit around helplessly. “She wasn’t allowed to go into her father’s secret lab. Even though she had lived here her whole life, she had never seen the inside. She had long accepted that she never would, that it was impossible . . . until today.”

At the bottom of the staircase, I carefully removed the face from the keypad to reveal a mess of wires and a circuit board. It looked more intricate than I anticipated. The crazy old man knew how to keep people out. I should have expected that.

“If her father knew that she was trying to break into his lab, he would have had a stroke. In all of her lying and scheming, she had never committed such a deliberate offense against him. Everything she ever did was about gaining an inch more of freedom. It was never about invading his privacy and learning his many secrets.”

My knowledge from the internet videos I had watched wasn't enough to direct me on what I should do next, so I cut the wires to disable the lock and the alarms. Nothing happened. I kept hacking more wires until every one I could see was cut at least once . . . or even twice, as some black and red pieces fell to the floor. The door remained locked.

“But her father could be in trouble, so Raven decided to take matters into her own hands. The police were doing everything they could, but they needed more information. They needed her help. They needed some kind of lead.” I grunted as I looked at the huge mess I had created and tossed the wire cutters over my shoulder.

Unfortunately, screwing with the keypad only took away my one shot at getting in. Now, the door was locked with no way to unlock it—but the alarms were shut off. That was good, at least. Maybe.

I sat back on the staircase and thought about my options. The door was solid metal. Before, I had knocked on it many times to get my dad's attention. I didn't possess any kind of tool to cut through something like that. Even if I found out what kind of metal it was and what could cut through it, it could take me days to access a tool like that . . . and even then, I'd have to wield it myself. Surely if the police thought it was necessary to get in, they would have done it? They must have access to the necessary gadgets to break into places. Was I being too rash?

No. My father was missing, and something was wrong. He could be lying in a ditch somewhere. He could be lying in the middle of the woods with a broken ankle. He could be anywhere . . . and until I got clues about what direction he went when he left this house, I would have no idea where to look for him.

I had to get in, and I had to do it tonight.

The door was impossible to penetrate on my own, so I had to think beyond it. The basement had no windows, no fire-escape routes. He probably did that on purpose when he and Mom built the house before I was born to make sure no intruders could get in and see his work. How else could I get in? What vulnerabilities did the room possess that he couldn't work around?

If there was enough of a wall accessible around the door, I could have just beat through it and knocked down enough drywall to get through. Surely the beams wouldn't have been so close together that I would need a saw to cut the wood. But he must have thought about that, too, because hardly one inch was on either side of the door frame. There was no solid wall between me and the inside of the lab for me to even try to hack through.

Could I tear the entire door off? That seemed unlikely too. He probably drilled that thing into the concrete below. That would have been the smartest thing for him to do.

Were there any other options?

The air kicked on, like a sign from the heavens, blowing cool air all around me.

Groaning, I ascended the stairs again to watch videos on how central air units worked to see if it was feasible.

"Raven was not what anyone would consider a handyman," I said as I got a stool to reach the pulldown ladder to the attic. Flecks of dirt and grime danced down from the ceiling, littering the floor around me. The ladder probably hadn't been used in years. I hoped it was still in good enough condition to hold me.

The ladder was folded into three pieces by metal hinges that creaked loud enough to make me want to cover my ears, but it looked steady and felt like it could hold me as I tested the bottom rungs. I was glad I decided to put on tennis shoes. Who knows what kind of splinters I would have gotten if I had climbed it barefoot?

“And yet, she found herself climbing a ladder, wielding nothing but a hammer and some rope. She would most likely fall through the ceiling and die, but—”

I shook my head, trying to redirect my thoughts as I climbed through the hole to the attic. I didn't think I had ever been to the attic before. I'd never had a reason to.

“She didn't know what she was doing, but she was smart, and she would figure it out,” I finished. It was brighter than I expected it to be up there. Light was creeping in from the whirlybird overhead, but it wasn't enough to give me a good look at everything, so I pulled out my phone to use it as a flashlight.

It was hot in the attic, even though it had started to cool off outside. For Midnight Springs, Arkansas, the eighties of September felt significantly cooler than the hundreds of August, but the attic hadn't gotten the memo yet. I honestly didn't want to know the actual temperature of the stale air around me.

I expected to see boxes filled with our old things in the attic, but it was completely bare. There was a section with a “landing” on it where we could have put things, but nothing was on it. Otherwise, there were only rafters that I had to balance on to get to the air unit.

“This must have been why Raven's father never let her do anything. When left to her own devices, she made questionable decisions. He

assumed she needed someone else to control her life for her. Up to this point, he may have been the reason she was still alive. But now, he wasn't around to stop her. If he wanted to jump out and declare that this was all a test, now would have been a good time to do it."

I waited for a moment for the unlikely event of that happening, took a deep breath, and hopped from rafter to rafter.

Before I climbed into the attic, I had turned the entire unit off and let it finish running. I wasn't sure how sharp the blades of any fans would be, or if I would even come into contact with them, but I definitely didn't want to find out when they were spinning at top speed. I might have been reckless, but I was trying not to be completely stupid.

Using my phone, I could locate the ductwork sloping down the edge of the house. There were two vents, one larger than the other. Every other vent went straight to one of the rooms below me. I could tell based on where the vents were in the ceiling. These other two that I couldn't place had to be the ones that went to the basement. Heart thumping with adrenaline, I went for the larger of the two, unsure if it was the supply vent or the return vent. I supposed it didn't matter as long as it got me down there.

It was not big enough to fit a grown man. My father would never have been able to fit inside it, which is probably why he didn't see it as a threat. The bad guys in his head that he was so paranoid about were probably even bigger than he was. He wasn't thinking about someone as tiny and frail as me trying to find a way to break in . . . especially me, since he never left my side long enough for me to hatch a crazy plan like this one. I set my phone down to give me some light in the direction of the vent, creating spooky shadows around me.

“There is no such thing as ghosts, no matter what the boys at Raven’s school say,” I declared aloud as Nash’s words echoed in my mind. “Men can’t turn into wolves either. Raven’s friend might be telling the truth, but she is misguided. Raven has nothing to be afraid of.”

I took a deep breath and held the hammer with a firm grip.

“Father, forgive me,” I said before I swung the hammer as hard as I could against the vent to dislodge it. It took a couple of swings, but I opened it up from the top. The insulation that was covering it went everywhere, so I put my nose in my shirt to keep from breathing it in until it all settled.

I didn’t know if I was saying a prayer to God or my dad, but I’d take forgiveness from either. And if either wanted to show up and offer me a better solution, I’d be happy to take that too.

I peeked down the hole with my phone. The light didn’t go all the way to the bottom, but it looked like it went down farther than the floor below. It had to be the right one.

I found a beam and tied the end of my rope around it. I had watched many videos on how to do this, too, to make sure it was secure. After all, my life depended on it.

“It’s too bad Raven wasn’t allowed to be a Girl Scout, or she might already know how to do some of this crap,” I said, lacing the rope through the loops of my jeans. I hoped they would hold. If those loops gave way, I would be just as screwed as I would have been if my first knot failed. I tied a knot around the hammer to hold it for me so I could use both hands to descend.

“This better work,” I whispered as I dropped the excess rope down the vent and pulled on the tight end. I yanked it as hard as I could and pulled my weight against it. The rope held.

I pushed my phone deep into my back pocket and pulled my gardening gloves out of the other. All the prep work was complete. All that was left was for me to go through with it and climb down the vent.

I had envisioned myself rappelling down the ductwork with my feet on one wall, and my body tilted backward like people do from mountains. I thought I would feel like a super stealthy spy. The reality was not as pretty.

I barely had room to exist in the vent. It was impossible to lean my body backward. I felt like a bumbling idiot.

My arms tired quickly, but luckily my gloves kept my hands safe from the rope. As much as they were hurting, I couldn't imagine how torn up they would be if they weren't protected.

Every few feet, I expanded my body to take some weight off the rope and to give my arms a rest. It was so dark. I should have taken some more prep time to find a headlamp, but I was too anxious to get into the lab that I only gathered what I thought was absolutely necessary. The vent creaked under my weight, and I feared breaking out onto the main level of the house.

"If Raven wasn't so rash and stupid, she would've broken through the wall on the main level and started her climb closer to the basement," I mumbled as I scooted down the air shaft. "It probably would have been easier for her to break through drywall than it was to let her body weight down two stories."

I didn't have a lot of muscle, and my body was very aggravated at me for treating it as if I did.

Thank goodness I didn't have much fat either, or the entire feat would have been impossible.

How many stories deep was this vent? Was there a secret level beneath the basement? I felt like I had been letting myself down for close to an hour.

With all of my breaks, I might have been.

The walls were getting closer. Breathing became difficult. I was trembling, but I didn't know if it was from muscle exhaustion or fear. Could the duct get smaller the closer I got to the basement? Or was it all in my head?

Suddenly, my foot collided with something new and soft. I looked down, but I couldn't tell what it was. I kicked again, harder, and the sound of metal rang out on the other side of the soft padding.

I hastily scooted the last few feet down to the bottom of the shaft. I almost cried when my feet touched solid ground.

“YES!!!” I screamed, my voice echoing up around me. I did it. I leaned my body back and let victory wash through me. The grill to the return vent was on the other side of that soft, squishy filter and reached as high as my knees. The lab was on the other side of the wall in front of me.

“Now what?” I said aloud as I stood there with my arms over my head. My glasses started to slide down my nose from the sweat that covered my entire body, so I had to try to push them up with my trembling, sad excuse for biceps. Grunting from fatigue and being cramped beyond belief, I slowly maneuvered each hand down until I could untie the hammer. I had to do it one at a time, like I was trying to get out of a Christmas sweater two sizes too small.

There wasn't enough room to swing the hammer, so I held it sideways and used it like a battering ram. Once the side was loosened, I could make longer swings with more force behind them. I made no progress trying to kick out the metal grate with my feet, so I tried hurling my whole body against the side of the vent until it started to give, hoping there wasn't

drywall on the other side to make it more difficult . . . or even, heaven forbid, wood.

I would swing the hammer until I got tired of that, then throw my body until I got tired of that. My incremental progress kept me from standing still and weeping in defeat. The only drops falling from my face were the drops of sweat from giving it my all. No tears were allowed to spill.

“Raven would not give up,” I said, battering the side of the vent as hard as I could. “She knew her options were to break out or climb up. She would *not* climb up in defeat. She probably wouldn’t make it anyway.”

My self-motivational speeches were turning sour quickly. I had to break out. Otherwise, I would die here. No one would know to look for me. If they came to the property, they couldn’t even get past the gate without my dad’s code or my fingerprint.

What would Brooke think when she showed up at the gate tomorrow morning to pick me up for school? That my dad showed up and I didn’t need a ride anymore but I forgot to call her? Then would she get more suspicious when I wasn’t there for French class? Would she leave school to look for me or go to the Sheriff’s Department to file her own missing person report? Why didn’t I tell her what I was doing?

Oh yeah, because she would tell me it was stupid and not to do it, which would have been one hundred percent correct.

I took a break from my physical labor and maneuvered my arm around to dig my phone out of my back pocket. It had 23 percent battery. I closed all my apps and turned on the battery-saving mode before putting it back up. I promised myself that if it got down to 5 percent, I would call Brooke. Maybe she could find a way to climb over the perimeter wall? Or even call the police if things got really out of hand?

“Raven was only kidding herself. Things were already really out of hand,” I said as I put my phone back up. “And Raven had no time to waste if she wanted to get out of this without involving more people. She only had 18 percent of her phone’s battery life to spare.”

Finally, the wall of the duct gave enough that my hammer made it all the way through. Once the hole was made, it was easier for me to make it larger and larger. Sweat dripped down my back, but I ignored it. My adrenaline was going full blast. I was almost there. I had almost made it to safety. At last, I was able to squeeze my body through. I had no idea how scared I was about being stuck until I was free. I screamed as loud as I could in victory as I made it to the hidden lab.

A normal person might have grappled for the nearest light switch, but not me. I laid on my back on the rough concrete floor and stretched my arms out wide in the darkness. It was much cooler down here, and I desperately needed a break. Not even my intense curiosity could get me to stand up and start looking around until my body calmed and cooled down. If one hundred rats swarmed around me, I wouldn’t have noticed.

After my rejuvenating rest, I pulled my phone out of my back pocket to use my flashlight again.

The room looked empty and tidy with a large metal table in the middle. Did Dad store absolutely nothing? Where were all of our old things? Where were Mom’s belongings or my old baby stuff? Was my father so minimalist that he threw them all out years ago?

I made my way around the table, which looked similar to the ones we had in Chemistry, and turned on the light.

Clean. Organized. Pristine. Besides the broken air vent, nothing looked weird or secretive.

The large metal door had a handle on the inside. I turned it, and the door swung open toward the stairs. I propped it open with the toolbox I had laid on the ground when I was looking for the wire cutters. I honestly thought about looking for ways to take the door off entirely—anything to make sure I never had to be in that air vent again.

Labeled cabinets, some locked and some not, held various chemicals and whatnot. I didn't understand most of the words I read.

I opened random drawers, trying to find a log or diary of some sort. Surely he kept up with what he was working on. Scientists did that. They needed to document what they tried each time they experimented so they could change different variables and see what worked. I didn't know much about science, but that seemed to be pretty elementary. Dad was always jotting down notes on random pieces of paper, but I had never seen him with a specific notebook or journal.

I was looking around frantically for another set of drawers when I saw it off to the side—an old desktop computer with a stool in front of it.

“Of course,” I said, running over to it and turning it on. In true minimalist fashion, he would have kept everything digital. There was less physical clutter that way.

Unfortunately, it was locked by password or fingerprint. No amount of hammering or wire cutting would get me past that kind of ward. I could not physically force my way in.

I needed a hacker . . . and a dang good one, if I knew anything about my dad and how secretive he was.

Lucky for me, I was already becoming friends with one . . . and everyone said he was the best.

6

NASH

“**Y**ou know how I said I would go to the dance with you?” a feminine voice said from behind my locker door.

I jumped slightly when she spoke but tried to hide it. That girl could sneak up on anyone. It was unsettling. She was like a spy, or an assassin.

“You aren’t already quitting on me, are you?” I asked, trying to act calm, as if I was expecting her. Some part of me hoped that she wouldn’t. I couldn’t stand being rejected by someone else.

“Of course not,” she said, straightening her glasses. “I was actually thinking that it might be better if I’m your girlfriend.”

I crinkled my nose. “My girlfriend? The dance is on Friday. What difference does it make if you’re my girlfriend for a day or two beforehand?”

“That’s the good part,” she said, her voice getting higher in anticipation. “I will play the part of your girlfriend until you get what you want. Even if it takes a month or more for Destiny to want you back, I will stick around for it. That makes the deal much better than just a date to the dance.”

It sounded weird, but she seemed so excited. “Okay, but what if you want to date someone else before Destiny wants to get back with me? Then what do we do?”

She scoffed. “I’m not interested in anyone. I know when people are lying, Nash. I’m much too cynical to fall in love. The ‘lines’ guys use that they don’t really mean? They are useless on me. I see through them more clearly than I do my own glasses.”

I rolled my eyes. “Alright then what if the opposite happens? What if I never get my end of the deal?”

“Oh, you will,” Raven assured me with one dark eyebrow hiked up over the rim of her glasses. “I don’t know how long it will take me, but I will deliver. You can be sure of that.”

Her eyes were sparkling. There was more that she had yet to unveil.

“Fine. Let’s say I agree to this madness. What do you want in return?” I asked, bracing myself for the worst.

She giggled. “What makes you think I want something in return?”

I smiled at her childlike excitement. “I’m getting to know you, Raven. Everything you say is calculated. What do you want? Did they find your dad yet? Do you need a ride home again?”

She bit her lip, her smile fading. She was nervous to ask me, but I wasn’t sure why.

“Actually, no. A couple of officers came by last night to look around, but there wasn’t anything they could find. That’s why I need your help,” she said, her voice getting lower and not as confident as she had been.

I furrowed my eyebrows. “You need *me* to help? What could I do that the police couldn’t?”

“I need you to hack into my dad’s computer,” she whispered.

I could only stare at her. I might have blinked, but I'm not sure if I was even capable of any kind of human response.

"Nash, I need you to ha—"

"I heard you," I interrupted her. "You want to pretend to be my girlfriend, and in exchange, I'm supposed to break the law? On a computer that's part of an open investigation at the Sheriff's Department, where my *dad* is the *Sheriff*? Are you serious?"

She nodded. "It's not like I want to get in because I'm being nosy or trying to invade his privacy," she argued. "I want to know where he is. I'm looking for any clues that will help me find him. Don't you help other people for reasons that are much more selfish than that?"

I squinted at her. "Maybe. But if I do, they usually pay me well for it."

She threw her arms up in the air. "If I had access to any of my dad's money, I'd do that in a heartbeat! This is the next best thing, the *only* thing I have to offer."

"And when you do find him, are you going to throw me under the bus as the one who hacked the computer?" I asked, whispering harshly. The last thing I needed was to be on the wrong side of that lunatic.

"Of course not," she said adamantly. "He won't even know you were involved. I promise. I'm covering all of our tracks."

"What if there are cameras?" I asked. It was almost a joke.

"There most definitely are cameras," she said. "But I disabled all of them last night, okay? So there's nothing to worry about. There won't be any footage of you ever being inside the house."

My eyes widened. "You want me to go inside your house? Where you need fingerprint access to enter *and* leave?"

She nodded, trying to smile reassuringly. It didn't work.

“No, Raven. That’s crazy. It’s not a fair trade,” I said as I turned to walk away.

She grabbed my arm and spun me back around to face her.

“It is, too,” she demanded. “You have no idea how much power I have to get Destiny back for you.”

My eyes were seriously about to pop out of my head. “Power? You don’t even talk to anyone!” What happened to the girl that knew her social standing the day before? Was this not the same Raven that had never even had a boyfriend?

“Exactly,” she said, her voice calm and calculated—just like her. “I’ve been watching these people for years, Nash. I know how each one of them works. I know their motivations and their weaknesses. It’s like a life-size game of chess, and I know all of my opponent’s usual plays. I can manipulate their moves until they hand the win over to me on a silver platter. I’m not worried about my ability to deliver; I’m actually worried that it will be too easy.”

“You’re insane,” I stated. “And so is your father. With his drastic security measures around the perimeter of your house, what makes you think I would even be able to hack into his computer? What if it isn’t even possible?”

“Don’t go doubting yourself on me,” she said with a smile. “Everyone says you’re the best. Trust me. I’ve been watching and listening. I’ve always known that if I needed a hacker, you were the guy to go to.”

It was true. That was how I made so much money.

“Flattery isn’t going to sway me,” I said, walking toward the classroom.

“I know that,” she admitted. “But it will sweeten the deal.”

I sighed. “For real, though. What if I can’t?”

“As long as you try, that will be good enough for me,” she said. “I’ll still uphold my end of the deal. I promise. But you have to give it real effort.”

“You’re asking me to commit a crime right under the police’s nose,” I said again. “You realize how big of a deal this is? Most of the time, I’m just swiping information from school computers and covering my tracks. The law is never involved. My *dad* is never involved. You are asking for a lot.”

Her shoulders slumped, and she went from negotiating to begging mode.

“Nash, my dad has never been away from my side for longer than a school day, okay? And that is no exaggeration. He hasn’t been home for the past two nights. Something is seriously wrong, and I will do everything I can to help him. If I could do this myself, I would. I swear I would. I’m only asking you out of desperation.”

Her eyes were large and brown behind those dark-rimmed glasses. Up this close, I could see flecks of gold in them. They looked exactly like Destiny’s. Was that a sign?

“I’ll try,” I conceded. “Meet me at my car after school tomorrow. I’ll need a day to gather everything I need from home and come up with a plan.”

If she could play everyone else as easily as she played me, then I didn’t have anything to worry about.



She was standing by the passenger door, books in hand, when I got to the parking lot the next afternoon. With her black glasses perched on her nose and her matching midnight hair in a tight bun, she looked more like a librarian than a student.

Everything about her seemed “older,” like she was being forced to play the part of a senior in high school, and she seemed rather bored with it.

“I may not need you to pretend to date me after all,” I told her as we drove off. “Things are already looking up in the Destiny department.”

It was a miracle, but word around the halls had gotten significantly more positive about me. The sneers from yesterday had turned into kind smiles today, and all I did was walk with Raven between our classes.

She didn’t have a comment, which was unlike her. I could feel her staring at me while I drove, so I glanced back and forth between her and the road a few times. “What? Why are you looking at me like that?”

“What makes you think I didn’t have something to do with it?” she asked, her voice mischievous.

I turned my head slowly toward her, then remembered I was supposed to be driving and snapped my head back to face the road. “Raven . . . what did you do?”

“I confronted Josie,” she said, like it was no big deal.

“*You* confronted Josie? Raven, that’s a terrible idea. Josie is popular *and* vindictive. What were you thinking?” I demanded.

My partner in crime was a nutcase. This was all going to go up in smoke. I almost slammed my head against the steering wheel. If the car was parked, I would have.

“That she would be the most powerful puppet to have,” she stated. She was sitting still and poised, cleaning out her nails nonchalantly.

“Are you going to tell me what happened? Or will I have to drag it out of you line by line?” I asked, my curiosity peaking.

“I went to the cheerleading tryouts Josie was hosting after lunch,” she started. “And I ta—”

“*You* went to cheerleading tryouts?” I asked. I never knew what was going to come out of her mouth. She was a wild card. I would have never guessed that she was remotely interested in cheerleading.

“Yes, and it’s going to take me much longer to tell the story if you keep interrupting me,” she said in an exasperated tone. “Do you want to know what happened or not?”

“Fine. Sorry. Go ahead. You went to cheerleading tryouts, and?”

“And I talked to Josie before it started. I said something like, ‘Look. I know that you drove Nash’s car to school yesterday and that it was innocent. You were only being kind and helpful. It’s ridiculous that everyone jumps to such drastic conclusions about something so small.’ She agreed, and I gained her trust. Then I said, ‘I’ve liked Nash for a while now,

but he was with Destiny and would have never betrayed her. Nash is loyal. She broke up with him because of the rumors about you, so I decided to take my chance and ask him out. He's still pretty hung up on her, to tell you the truth, but he agreed.' She ate all of this up and was genuinely interested in our story. I think it made it all the more juicy because she was involved in it. Then I said, 'I think the part that bothers him the most is that he's being labeled as a cheater when that's so far from the truth. And going out with me makes it look even worse, even though it is innocent as well. I'm asking for your help.' She started to withdraw at that, so I had to turn up the flattery, and I said, 'You know that neither Nash or myself have the social standing to make sure the truth gets around. Could you? You don't have to go out of your way or anything, but if you hear someone say one of these hideous rumors about the two of you, could you set them straight?' "

I was getting chills. "And?"

"She agreed. She even thanked me for coming to her and said I made the right choice. She vowed to take care of it," she said. "So by the end of the day, most of the student body knew the story I had told her . . . and I hardly had to lift a finger."

"Why did it change the way people saw me?" I wondered aloud. This mental warfare was too above my head.

"You're no longer the villain in the story, Nash. You aren't the douchebag that cheated on his girlfriend; you're the misunderstood romantic who was screwed over in a moment of unjust jealousy. You were punished for a crime you didn't commit. You're still in love with Destiny but giving me a shot as a rebound because of *my* feelings for *you*."

"Doesn't the rebound thing hurt me?" I asked, trying to piece it all together.

“Not at all,” she explained. “It makes you seem desirable. You aren’t sitting around waiting for her to come to her senses. It gives her a sense of urgency to do something before you wake up and fall in love with me like I am with you.”

I didn’t know what to say. I looked at her a couple of times, and she was smiling from ear to ear.

“I like that you’re both impressed and afraid,” she said, her smile never slipping. That was the perfect way to describe what I was feeling. It was like she read my mind.

I chuckled nervously. “Oh yeah? Why?”

“I don’t get many opportunities to show off my skills,” she admitted. “Only Brooke and her sister know. This is just so exciting! I feel like I’ve been training for this my whole life!”

“By diabolically watching people to decipher their weaknesses?” I asked, my voice slow and cautious.

“Destiny, in particular,” she admitted, unaffected by my words or my tone. “My dad always warned me to stay away from her and her sister. He was weird anyway, you know that, but he was especially weird about that. So naturally, that only made my curiosity grow. I started watching them to figure out why he didn’t want me around them.”

She had reeled me in, and I was burning with curiosity. “And? What did you find?”

I saw her shrug in my periphery. “Not much at all. Nothing that seemed dangerous or like it concerned me, anyway.”

“Tell me what you know,” I prodded, wondering if she knew anything about Destiny that I didn’t. I didn’t *think* she would, but I didn’t want to get

into the business of underestimating Raven. She obviously had powers beyond the rest of us mere mortals.

“Destiny seems . . . frail. Unsure. Which is odd, considering she’s the more outgoing of the two. I don’t know what her weakness is, but it’s a big one, and it’s very well hidden. It’s like she’s sick, but I’ve never seen her take medicine or seen any evidence to support that.

“Chloe, on the other hand, is like her shadow. She seems to have no real personality. Besides hearing her directly called on in class, I’ve never witnessed her speak to anyone. Not even Destiny. From the outside, someone might assume that she’s mute. She has no friends besides her sister, and I’m not even sure if I would consider the two of them friends.

“They seem to hate each other more than normal siblings would, but they also seem to depend on each other more than even the normal twins would. It’s all very bizarre, to tell you the truth. I can’t make heads or tails of it.”

“Yeah,” I breathed. I agreed with everything she said, but I would have never been able to put it into words so succinctly. “But you still don’t know why your dad told you to avoid them?”

“Nope, it wasn’t only them though. Remember when Darcy enrolled last spring? He almost took me out of school because of it, and I’m still not sure why. And they don’t seem to be connected in any way whatsoever . . . except in his reaction to me being in class with both of them.”

“They aren’t,” I verified. “Destiny has never spoken to her, not that I know of, anyway. And we were dating when she arrived. And we can probably assume Chloe hasn’t either.”

“Did Chloe ever talk to you?” she asked.

I shook my head. “Not really. I’d sometimes ask her yes or no questions and get a nonverbal response. If I asked too complex of a question, she

would blink and look away. I never got the vibe that she didn't understand. It was more like she didn't want to talk about anything. Destiny talks *for* her a lot of the time. I think Chloe might actually be different if she weren't around Destiny every hour of the day. She's definitely strange."

I stopped the car and rolled down my window so Raven could reach over me and scan her fingerprint.

"Almost as strange as you," I said. It sounded like a joke, but it really wasn't. Raven constantly surprised me with her oddness.

She smiled, knowing this. "You're going to have to work harder at this relationship thing. I will need you to gaze longingly into my eyes at the dance while we sway back and forth to the music. You can't do that if you're this afraid of me. You need to remember that I'm on your side, so you don't have to be scared."

"You're not the only thing that scares me in this situation," I admitted as I passed through the gates at a normal speed to avoid giving her whiplash again.

"It's just a house," she said, annoyed and exasperated. "There's nothing out of the ordinary here."

"So you say," I said. "But the first time I see a ghost, I'm out of here."

7

RAVEN

Nash had his backpack on with the front clipped like he was about to climb a mountain. His face, however, looked like he was about to descend the steps to hell.

The open windows barely kept the heat at bay after my run-in with the air-conditioning system. The Midnight Springs meteorologist said today would be the last hot day before we started getting fall weather. I hoped he was right.

In the meantime, Nash would feel much better in the basement than he would have on the main floor. Even though there were no windows, it was cooler down there.

“A basement? Is it seriously in the basement?” he asked, a tinge of hope that I was only joking.

“Seriously,” I said over my shoulder as I descended. I had propped the metal door open with the toolbox. I didn’t know if it would lock again if closed, especially with the keypad cut to pieces, but I wasn’t taking any chances.

“Did you do this?” Nash asked, pointing to the wires that splayed around where the keypad had been.

“I did,” I admitted. “But it didn’t work. The door stayed locked, so I had to find another way in.”

He looked at me like I was a lunatic. “Of course it didn’t work, Raven. This keypad was what opened the door. You basically sawed off your handle while the door was still locked.”

I rolled my eyes. “I know that now. Are you always so condescending?”

“Only when I’m dealing with people who make dumb decisions,” he said, looking around the lab as if a ghost could be hiding anywhere. “Please tell me you haven’t tried to hack into the computer on your own, or it may be shut down beyond help.”

I shook my head. “No, I didn’t. I knew it wouldn’t help. The computer is over here.”

He started to follow me when something caught his eye. “Geez! What happened here?”

I hadn’t cleaned up my mess from last night, and it stood out in the tidy basement like a train wreck.

“We’re going to need to have an HVAC guy come fix it,” I said, trying to deflect. “I haven’t had time to call anyone with everything going on with my dad. So anyway, the computer?”

He gasped, pointing at the rope that still dangled from above. “You climbed down here through the air vent?! Are you freaking kidding me?!”

“That’s absurd and probably not even possible,” I said, speaking to him like he was a child. Why was he making a big deal out of it? It didn’t have anything to do with the computer.

“I agree! But you destroyed all chances of getting through the door, and there are no windows in here,” he reasoned. “How else did you get down here? The air vent was your only other option!”

“I’m not stupid enough to do something like that,” I argued. He wasn’t giving up.

His face got red. “You seem plenty stupid enough to do something like that. I see the rope, Raven.”

“Why do you even care?” I spat, swinging my arms out wide. “Why are we even fighting about it?”

“I DON’T WANT YOU TO LIE TO ME!” he yelled, surprising me. I must have flinched because he looked immediately remorseful.

“I’m sorry, Raven. I didn’t mean to yell. Just . . . please don’t lie to me, okay? I know you’re comfortable with it, that you lie to everyone, but I feel like we’re on the same team right now. While that is true, I want to be able to trust what you say. Can you at least give me that? Please?”

He looked hurt, betrayed even, that I would lie to him. His face portrayed that he felt that he was above that kind of thing with me.

“Okay,” I agreed. “I’ll do my best. For real.” I could do it. I tried not to lie to Brooke. I could lump him into that category with her and do my best to be honest.

“Starting now?” Nash asked, pointing to the wreckage again.

I sighed. “Yes, I climbed down the air vent.” My voice was soft, like it was an apology.

“What if you had gotten stuck?” he asked, his voice calm and soft to match mine.

I shrugged. I didn’t let him know that I almost did. That part, standing at the bottom unable to get out or go up, was definitely the scariest part.

He sighed. “Did anyone know you were doing it?”

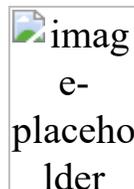
I shook my head.

“Raven, please call me before you do something stupid like that again. That way, I can at least know where to look for you when you don’t show up at school the next day.”

He held out his hand for my phone, so I unlocked it and passed it over.

He was right. I was exactly like my dad. If I hadn’t shown up at school, I would have been missing without clues on where to look for me. It was irresponsible. I wanted to yell at my dad for leaving us clueless, but I was being as reckless with my own life.

“There,” he said, handing it back. “Now, let’s see what I can do.”



It was a much longer process than I anticipated. I hoped he would start it up, type some random numbers in, and we’d be in within five minutes.

My expectations were shattered by the second hour.

“What are you doing now?” I asked as I pilfered through the cabinets. I’d already done it several times, but I had nothing else to do. Watching

someone try to hack into something is much more boring than movies lead you to believe.

“If I take the time to explain it to you, then it’s just going to take me longer,” Nash said, typing furiously on his own laptop.

“Fine, but can you at least let me know if you’re close?” I asked with a hopeful tone.

He shushed me, so I rolled my eyes and went back to my physical search.

The first time I went through everything, I looked up the meaning of some of the labels I didn’t understand. By the time I looked through the second time, I’d forgotten what they were. The third time, I put sticky notes with my own research on them so I wouldn’t have to keep searching the internet for the meaning of each item.

“I’m so freaking *bored!*” I said, plopping down on one of the metal stools. The sound it made when it screeched against the concrete floor made my body tense. I had already cleaned up my mess from the day before and tried to duct-tape the side of the vent down here the best I could. The attic was still a disaster, but that was a problem for future Raven.

“I’m not here to entertain you, Raven,” Nash said. I could tell he thought I was like an annoying child who kept asking, “Are we there yet?”

“I’m calling Brooke,” I said, whipping out my phone. He had no comment. He was probably doing his best to tune me out.

I groaned and tossed my phone on the table when she didn’t answer. It was probably for the best, anyway. I couldn’t talk about how Peter could change into a wolf if Nash was here, and I wasn’t sure how much I could tell her about Nash. Was it a secret that he was here with me now? Or were we hanging out because we were dating? Was I allowed to tell Brooke that it was all a ruse?

I had to find something to do to help, or I would go insane.

My dad was so secretive about his lab. I knew there had to be more in here besides a password-protected computer. There had to be something he didn't trust to keep in the rest of the house—something he didn't want me to stumble upon by accident, like a gun or old coins.

I checked the walls and floors of every cabinet to look for secret compartments. I felt none.

I checked the bottom of the metal table. It was clean and clear.

It would have been helpful if I knew the relative size of what I was looking for, but I had no idea.

I leaned back against the wall, my head clanging against the breaker box.

The breaker box?

“Nash, doesn't a home only have one breaker box?” I asked, daring to interrupt him again.

“I think so. Why?” His eyes never left the screen.

“Because ours is in my bedroom,” I whispered, turning around to open the one behind me.

As I suspected, it wasn't a breaker box at all. The panel was hiding a safe.

“Nash!” I yelled. “I found a safe!”

He hopped off the stool and ran to look at it more closely. “That's pretty sweet, hiding it in plain sight like that. Good job!”

I beamed. “Thanks! So, what do you think? Can you open a safe?”

He laughed, shaking his head and returning to the computer. “No, but even if I could, you'd have to up your side of the deal a little more. You can't just go asking for more and not offer anything else in return.”

“Would I, like, have to kiss you or something?” I asked, cringing playfully.

“I kind of thought that was already implied,” he said with a wink. “You are my girlfriend, after all.”

To my surprise, I blushed.

“But I . . . I . . . I don’t know how,” I admitted. All the teasing was gone, and I felt like I was walking into a test I hadn’t studied for. I was completely unprepared. “I’ve never kissed anyone before.”

He shrugged. “It’s not rocket science. If we ever did kiss, you don’t have to look like an expert. No one’s going to be studying you to rate your performance or anything. Just pretend like you want to, and it’ll be fine.”

He went back to his task, concentrating on my dad’s computer screen like he could stare it into submission.

Nash *was* kind of cute. I didn’t think I would have to do much acting when it came to pretending like I wanted to kiss him. I was more worried that *he* wouldn’t want to kiss *me*.

When he said it didn’t matter if I knew how to kiss or not, he was telling the truth. He didn’t care that I was inexperienced.

“Should we, like, practice?” I asked, the words flying out before I could stop them.

NASH

I felt my eyes widen as I turned to face her. “What?”

“People need to think we’re together for real at the dance on Friday,” she said. “If I kiss you there, it doesn’t need to seem like an awkward first kiss—especially not a *first*, first kiss on my part. I would feel better if I were prepared and knew what to expect.”

Was this really happening? Did Raven actually want to kiss me?

“I see the logic,” I said, trying to keep my tone light. “If you want to, I would be fine with it.”

To my surprise, she strode over to me, and stood between my knees. I never knew what she would do next, and instead of unnerving me, it started to thrill me. Her face was the closest to mine that it had ever been, but her movement stopped there.

“What do I do?” she whispered. “How does it work?”

“Right now?” I asked. I swallowed hard, hoping she didn’t notice. I knew she would, though. She noticed everything.

Her eyes smiled as she nodded. “Now is as good of a time as any. Is it normal to be this nervous? I feel all fluttery in my stomach.”

“Yes,” I admitted. There was no sense in lying to her. “And you get nervous all over again each time you kiss someone new.”

She looked surprised. “You don’t gain confidence with each person?”

“Maybe a little,” I whispered. “But it’s still a thrilling new experience every time.”

“Even when you’re only pretending?” she asked. She wet her lips, making them look sweet and inviting.

I nodded. She was driving me crazy. Did she even know it?

“Are you sure you’ve never done this before?” I said, trying to hide how badly I wanted to kiss her.

“Certain,” she said. Her breath started to sound more labored. She wasn’t doing a good job of hiding that *she* wanted to kiss *me*. “What do I need to do with my hands?”

I looked down to see she was holding them in front of her chest, wringing them with nervous energy.

“Put them around my neck,” I whispered. “That’s probably how we’ll be dancing.”

She obeyed slowly, lacing her hands on the nape of my neck. She moved robotically and awkwardly until she rested her hands, then she melted into me. Her thumbs lightly played with my hair.

“I would probably be holding you like this,” I said, placing my hands gently on her hips and pulling her a little closer.

She gasped when I touched her, her right eyebrow raising slightly over the rims of her glasses.

I started to lean in, but she leaned back a little—still holding onto me.

“Wait, do I have to use my tongue?” she asked, a blush covering her cheeks. It was cute to see her so excited and nervous.

I shook my head slightly and smiled. “No, Raven, not if you don’t want to.”

She looked surprised by my answer and relaxed in my arms again.

“A kiss can be anything you want it to be,” I said, my lips less than an inch away from hers.

She kept her eyes open, so I did, too, as I leaned in. Her lips parted slightly right as I—

RING. RING. RIIIIING.

Raven jumped away from me to grab her phone as it scooted across the metal table from the vibration.

“It’s Brooke calling me back,” she said. She took a deep breath to calm herself before answering. “Hello?”

I stood there empty-handed, wondering what on earth had just happened.

The computer, Nash. Focus on the computer. Don’t stare at the girl while she talks to her friend, a voice inside my head said.

I didn’t listen to him. I kept my eyes locked on Raven’s as she talked, not hearing a word she was saying. The longing I saw in her eyes made it hard to breathe.

The longing in my own body made me want to cross the room and—

“Can I tell her?” Raven mouthed, covering the receiver end of the phone.

“What?” I mouthed back. That we almost kissed? That I wanted to take the phone and throw it across the room so it would break into a million pieces and I could kiss her without being interrupted?

“The deal,” she mouthed. “The truth.”

The truth. Right. The truth was that all of this was fake. Raven was a master manipulator. This was all a game to her. Wasn’t it?

I shook my head no.

“Actually, I’m not alone. Nash is here,” she said into the phone. “Yeah, those weren’t just rumors. We’re going out now. We’re going to the dance together, though I don’t know what to wear. It’s not like I have options in my closet that are nice enough to wear to a dance.”

I could hear Brooke’s voice chattering but couldn’t make out what she was saying.

“That sounds great!” Raven said, actually jumping up and down. “Do you think they’ll fit me?”

Raven was honestly excited about going to the dance. She started pacing, breaking eye contact with me and discussing what jewelry and shoes to wear.

It was cute. Actually, it was downright freaking adorable.

Raven might not have been my actual girlfriend, but she truly was my partner in crime. She was my friend, and I enjoyed being with her. As I got back to work, I decided that I was going to do everything I could to make her first dance as special for her as possible. She deserved it.

RAVEN

“I hate that you have to walk down your whole driveway when I pick you up,” Nash said as I hopped in his car the next morning before school.

“I had to do it when Brooke was driving me too,” I explained. I was starting to get used to it. Luckily, the weather had been nice all week. I didn’t know what I would do if it started raining. I’d probably have to pilfer through Dad’s closet for a rain jacket.

He shrugged. “I still don’t like it. It makes me feel bad that you have to walk so far all the time.”

“Unless you know how to make a copy of my thumbprint, it’s our only option,” I said.

“I could try to disable the perimeter security?” he said. “Of course, I’d probably have to get into the computer first. Do you think we have time tonight before the dance?”

“Probably not,” I admitted. “It’s a much more time intensive activity than I anticipated, to tell you the truth.”

“I have to figure out what kinds of safeguards he put up before I try to bypass them,” he explained. “If I try the wrong thing too many times, we’ll be locked out for good. I have to do the proper research first.”

I squinted at him, looking at him like he was crazy. He was focused on the road and couldn’t tell. “You haven’t even tried yet?”

“Of course not,” he said, as if I should have assumed that. It was weird how he assumed I was smarter than I was about some things, and dumber than I was about others. “What have you found out about the safe?”

I sighed. “It’s locked by a numerical keypad, but there is a keyhole that might override it. I think it makes more sense for me to try to find that key.”

“Your dad probably has it on his key ring,” he reasoned. “I wouldn’t waste your time on that.”

“Probably, but if whatever is in there is important enough, he would have a spare key somewhere, right?”

“Why? Even if he lost the key, he still has access through the keypad,” he explained. “The key was probably a backup for if something went wrong.”

I groaned. “Dang it, you’re right. I hate it when you crap on my ideas.”

Smiling, he glanced at me and winked. “I’m only trying to help out my partner in crime. You don’t pay me to sugarcoat things, right?”

“I guess not,” I confessed. “I’d notice and accuse you of lying if you did, anyway.”

“I figured as much,” he said as he parked the car. “Okay, I’d like to get some things straight before we walk in together today.”

I grimaced, bracing myself for the worst. “Okay, what?”

“Obviously we weren’t on the same page about assuming that we would be kissing at some point in our fake relationship,” he explained. “I want to be on the same page about everything else. I don’t want to try something

with you assuming that you're okay with it and make you feel uncomfortable.”

Relief washed over me. “Wow, Nash. That’s really cool of you.”

He chuckled. “Umm, thanks? So anyway, am I allowed to hold your hand?”

“Yes,” I assured him. I could fake holding anyone’s hand.

“Put my arm around you?”

“Sure.” It might be nice to walk down the hall with his arm around me.

“What about other kinds of intimate gestures, like stroking your hair out of your face?”

I pointed to my tight bun. “My hair doesn’t ever fall in my face.”

“Well, let’s say it did. Or you had a rogue eyelash or something. Can I remove it?” he asked. This whole conversation was getting much more granular than I expected it to.

I nodded and laughed. “Yes. This is so weird. Do you always have these consent conversations with your girlfriends?”

He closed his eyes and shook his head. “No, not so openly. It’s more of a gradual progression and trying to read if they want me to do certain things by their body language. Some things you come out and ask, and others just make it weird. Like it is now.”

I watched as his cheeks turned a shade of bright pink. He was embarrassed, and it was adorable.

“You can do anything you want that doesn’t involve my private parts,” I said, trying to jump to the end of the conversation and clear up all that I was worried about.

His eyes bugged out. “Your *private* parts? I wasn’t even thinking about that!”

“Don’t sound so disgusted,” I said. “I didn’t mean it in the dirty way it sounded. I mean the more publicly accepted ways of touching them.”

He looked like he was going to pass out. “Like what? What on earth could be publicly acceptable or even expected?”

“Don’t slap my butt,” I clarified. “No ‘accidental’ boob grazes. Don’t put your hand in my back pocket. Things like that.”

His face turned scarlet red, and he held his breath until he couldn’t hold back his laughter for a moment longer. He rested his head on the steering wheel and tried to reign it in. I could have sworn I saw tears in his eyes.

“You weren’t thinking about doing things like that, were you?” I asked, feeling dumb for bringing it up.

“No, Raven, I really wasn’t,” he said as he caught his breath. “But I’m glad to know where the line is. That’s all I really wanted from this conversation.”

I nodded and smiled. I really liked hanging out with him. It was new and exciting to be honest and to get honesty in return . . . especially with a guy.

We met in front of the car. He took my books from me and held out his hand for mine.

I took it with a genuine smile.



I rode home with Brooke the next afternoon to get ready for the dance. Nash smiled at me more than usual during the day, but it was hard to tell if it was for show or not. Honestly, it felt like we were truly becoming friends.

“Are you going to give me details or what?” Brooke finally asked, shutting her bedroom door.

I groaned. Millie wasn’t around. We weren’t at school. No one else could hear. I had run out of excuses.

“It’s new, okay? What all do I have to tell you? It’s not like you tell me everything about Peter,” I argued.

Her jaw dropped.

“Raven Haskins, don’t you dare say that to me! I told you that Peter can turn *into a wolf!*” she cried, although the last three words came out as a “scream whisper.”

I rolled my eyes. “Allegedly. I’m still not sure what to do with that information.”

“You know I’m not lying,” she argued. Hurt and anger flashed in her eyes like it did any other time I expressed doubt.

“I know you’re not, but it still doesn’t mean my mind can accept it,” I said. “It has nothing to do with how much I trust you. It’s an insane thing you’re asking me to believe. You have to understand that.”

“Fine,” she huffed. “But I still told you. So you owe me. Spill it.”

I shrugged. “What’s to tell?”

“It’s Nash, Raven. I’ve known him all my life, and so have you. Why now?” she asked. “What changed? I never even knew you thought of him like that.”

I shook my head, collapsing on her bed. “We’ve only known *of* him all of our lives. We don’t truly know that much about him. I’ve learned a lot over the past week.”

“Tell me something,” she said softly. “It’s what friends do. Let me in.”

What could I tell her? What was allowed?

“He knows I can tell when people are lying,” I admitted. “I told him. And he also knows that *I’m* a pathological liar, so I’m trying to be honest with him like I try to be honest with you.”

Her eyes widened. “Wow. That is huge. And he still trusts you?”

I shrugged. “Yeah, I guess he does. But he actually makes me *want* to tell the truth,” I added. Hearing *that* truth come out of my mouth was definitely unscripted.

Brooke squeezed my hand. “Thank you for telling me that. Now, let’s try on some dresses!”

She jumped up to drag out five ball gowns from her closet, each one rivaling the other for beauty.

“Which one do you want to wear?” I asked her first. I didn’t want to even consider one if she already thought it was her favorite.

“I think I want to wear this one,” she said, setting the green one aside. “It makes me think of the forest, so I think Peter will love it.”

“You should. He will,” I said as she spread the others out on Millie’s bed. “It’ll match his eyes too.”

Her eyes lit up as she smiled. “Yes! That’s what I thought too! So what about you? Which one of these do you like the best?”

White. Red. Yellow. Black. None of them matched Nash’s bright blue eyes.

“Why did Michael’s mom have all of these?” I asked, lightly touching the sequins on the yellow dress. I didn’t think nurses often dressed this fancy.

“I think she said they were from sorority formals? Who knows. The woman keeps everything. It seems excessive, but I’m pretty thankful for it right now,” she said.

It truly was a miracle, and Amber was our fairy godmother. There was no way either one of us would have been able to wear a dress this nice without her.

I picked up the yellow one and held it in front of me in the mirror. It made my pasty skin look even more translucent. Brooke would have been able to wear it flawlessly with her natural tan skin. I tossed it aside and went back to the other three.

The white was too much. It looked more like a wedding gown, and I wasn’t going for that kind of look. I was also kind of afraid that it *was* Amber’s wedding dress, and the last thing I needed was to accidentally spill punch on something that was sacred.

That left the red and black, and of the two, one demanded to be worn.

We did each other’s makeup and hair. Amber let us borrow some of her jewelry and took our picture together. It was magical and fun, just like you

see in the movies. I felt like royalty.

“This feels like I’m living someone else’s life,” I admitted as we watched out the window for the boys to arrive in the limo. “I never get to do fun things like this.”

As soon as I said it, guilt washed over me.

“What is it?” Brooke asked, putting her hand on mine.

“Is it okay for me to have fun?” I asked. “My dad is out there somewhere, and no one has any idea where he is. He may need my help, he could literally be laying in a ditch somewhere, and here I am getting all dolled up to go to a dance. It’s sickening. I’m the worst daughter in the world.”

“You’re doing everything you can,” she said, her voice mature beyond her years. “The police are looking for him. You can’t go out on foot and look for him every second of the day. He wouldn’t want you to, anyway. You know that.”

“I also know he wouldn’t want me to go to this dance,” I stated, looking down at my luxurious gown.

“He’s right sometimes; not all the time,” she said, squeezing my hand. “Take this moment for yourself. It’s okay to be happy and have fun.”



Michael didn't go to the dance. He stayed locked in his room while the four of us took pictures in the Stevens's yard. Brooke told him he could go with us as a group, but he grumbled something inaudible and slammed his door.

He was just lovely. I wasn't sure who I liked better, him or the sheriff.

"It's a corsage," Nash said as he slipped it over my wrist while Brooke and Peter posed in front of a rose bush. I loved how Amber and Ryan were oohing and aahing over her like she was theirs. She needed that.

"Wow, thank you," I said. It really was beautiful. "Was I supposed to get you a flower too? Or something else?"

He shook his head and smiled. "No, seeing you in that dress is all I need. You look beautiful."

I blushed. "Thank you, but you already told me that when you first got here."

"I may tell you again so you don't forget," he said with a wink.

I grinned as I touched the flower on my wrist. "How did you know to get black?"

“Maybe it’s your hair,” he said as he lifted some of it off of my shoulder. “But when I thought of you, I thought of the color black. And after seeing you in that dress, I always will.”

I lightly backhanded him across his chest. “You probably just wanted to pick something that wouldn’t clash with any color that I chose.”

“I did,” he agreed. “My initial thought was to get you white, then I thought of black and knew I’d found the winner.”

“Is it real?” I asked as I pinched a petal.

“No, it’s silk. I thought that would be better so you could keep it forever.” He must have seen the look of shock on my face because he immediately spit out, “You know, if you want to. You can throw it away if you want to too. Either is fine.”

I smiled and bit my lip. “No, you were right. I want to keep it forever. I always want to remember my first dance.”

We said goodbye and waved out the window of the limo to Ryan and Amber like celebrities as we left their house. As soon as we turned the corner, Peter and Brooke met each other’s smoldering gaze and locked in embrace right there for God, Nash, and me to see.

Brooke and Peter couldn’t keep their hands off each other for the whole ride to school. They were making out like their lives depended on each other’s breath.

It was safe to say that Peter liked the dress . . . or that he was so in love with the girl wearing it that it wouldn’t have mattered which dress she chose.

I sure hoped Nash didn’t expect me to come out of the gate kissing like that, especially in front of other people. It seemed too intricate and complicated with not enough structure for my taste. How were you

supposed to know when to turn your head? Or when to stop and breathe? It gave me anxiety watching it . . . and I was doing everything I could to ignore it. It felt so awkward sitting there by Nash while they attacked each other's faces.

"I wish there was a wall between us and them," I whispered to Nash, pointing to the wall that separated us from the driver.

"So do I," he whispered, lacing his fingers through mine.

I looked up at him in surprise. He was smiling sweetly down at me. He didn't seem to notice how awkward it was.

"Have I told you that you look beautiful?" he asked. He stared right into my eyes when he said it, and I knew he was telling the truth.

I nodded, blushing again. "Yes. Twice."

He looked good, too. He was wearing a white, long-sleeved button-up with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows. It was slightly tucked in one spot, but mostly not. He wore dark washed jeans that contrasted with the shirt beautifully.

"Don't forget," he said, squeezing my hand.

10

NASH

I didn't know what it meant to be a "vision in black," but that's the phrase that kept coming to mind when I saw Raven. She wasn't merely pretty—she was jaw-droppingly gorgeous. I expected her to be beautiful tonight, she was beautiful anyway, but she had blown every expectation I had out of the water. When I saw her, I was stunned.

Every person who looked at us did a double take as we walked in. I could almost read their minds as they thought, *"Who is that with Nash? What is he doing with a girl like that? Do I know that girl? Holy s***, that's Raven!"*

Forget about making one girl want me—Raven was making every guy want her. Her black dress and matching midnight hair made her look gorgeous, but also gave her an otherworldly quality that made you feel like you should fear her.

Both were true. She was a beautiful weapon, and she knew it.

"Do you want to dance?" I asked her, pointing to the dance floor.

Her eyes said no. She looked out at the crowd as their bodies bounced and moved erratically with fear and overwhelm.

“You can’t do it wrong,” I assured her. “No one out there knows what they’re doing. That’s why it looks so crazy. They’re just moving around however they want to.”

Her hesitant face melted into a grin, and she grabbed my hand to lead me right to the middle of the chaos.

She jumped and moved like she had been dancing her whole life—or maybe like she never had, and she had saved it all for tonight. If so, I was honored to be the one who got to see her debut.

Her hair was half up, revealing its true length. I had no idea it was that long. Her black curls bounced to the beat, sometimes getting stuck in her lip gloss.

Time after time, I swept it away for her. She would only smile and keep moving. It got to the point that I was excited to see her hair get caught so I would have an excuse to touch her face again and see her smile at me.

I had no idea what I was doing on the dance floor. In any other scenario, I would have completely avoided it. If I had come with Destiny like I planned, I would have been perched on the wall with all the other people who were too cool to try while she danced out with her friends.

But this was Raven’s first dance. It could very well be her only dance. She needed to experience every moment to the fullest. I was willing to do that for her.

A slow song came on, and I held my hand out for her. She went straight into the formation we had practiced the day before when I sat on the stool with her hands behind my neck.

I followed her lead and put my hands on her waist, but this time I held her even closer than I had the night before so our entire bodies pressed

together as we swayed. I rested my forehead on hers as we danced around in circles, shifting from foot to foot with no real idea what we were doing.

“This has been so magical, Nash,” she said, staring into my eyes. “I know we were doing this for you, but it ended up meaning so much to me. Thank you for all of this.”

I smiled and nodded. Why was this supposed to be for me?

The answer tapped me on the shoulder.

“Nash?” Destiny said as I faced her. “Could we talk?”

I looked to Raven for permission. She nodded and smiled, walking to the wall.

“Wait!” I yelled. “Jake, come here!”

My best friend sauntered over from the wall, confused.

“I need to talk to Destiny for a minute. Will you dance with Raven?” I asked.

He shrugged and held a hand out for her with a lazy smile. She grinned and accepted.

I wouldn't allow Raven to waste any time on the wall. She deserved to dance.

Jake needed to get his lazy butt off the wall too.

I followed Destiny out to the foyer, where the music wasn't as loud and there weren't as many bodies pressing in on us.

“I see you came with Raven,” she said, nodding toward the dance floor.

“I did. Not Josie, I might add,” I said, sarcasm dripping from my voice. I was still angry with her for not believing me, but I didn't realize how much until that moment.

She sighed and looked down at her shoes. It was the first time I noticed how beautiful her dress was.

It was white. Wedding white, which was ironic considering how many lines she had crossed with me. She looked like an innocent dove. Her blonde hair was up like a princess. She even had a tiny tiara atop her head. Had she won something and I missed it? Or was it for decoration?

The night-and-day difference between her and Raven was startling. That's exactly what it was—night and day. Destiny was the princess of the sun.

Raven was the queen of the night.

“This is going to sound like I'm being jealous, and maybe I am a little bit, but it's more than that, okay? I don't think you should get too close to Raven,” she warned.

I nodded. “You're right. It does sound like you're jealous. At least that jealousy is warranted this time.”

“I'm serious though, Nash. You don't know what kinds of things her father is into. He's not safe to be around,” she said, eyes shifting from side to side like she was afraid the doctor himself would jump out and accuse her of talking bad about him.

I thought of the weird man I had seen on occasion over the years, plus what crazy things I had learned in the past week. He seemed extremely odd, the furthest thing from normal that I could imagine, but he didn't seem dangerous.

He didn't remind me of my father at all.

“I'm not around him,” I argued. “He's missing.”

She actually looked concerned. “Missing? What do you mean?”

“She had to file a missing person report. No one knows where he is,” I said. As soon as the words left my lips, I felt like I was betraying some kind

of secret information. Was it a secret? Raven hadn't said so. But the way Destiny's eyes lit up, I had given her something. I didn't like it.

"I can handle myself," I said, trying to wrap up the conversation. "Thanks for the warning, though."

"Josie told me it wasn't true," she said when my back was turned. I stopped to listen, but she didn't go on.

"So did I, but you didn't believe me," I said, leaving her behind.

When I returned to the dance floor, the tempo had gone back to "dance party," and Raven was bouncing around with Brooke and Peter. Peter was doing the minimal amount of movement necessary to be considered dancing, but the girls were jumping and moving with crazy energy. Jake intercepted me before I made it over to join them.

"I don't do fast dances, man," he said, shaking his head. "But thanks for letting me dance with your girl. She's a vision in black."

"That's exactly what I was thinking," I said, clapping his shoulder and going to dance with my queen of the night.

As I moved with her to the music, I forgot every care I ever had. None of it existed. Each moment as I took in her childlike delight and womanly beauty was all that mattered.

Brooke and Peter took the limo to go flirt with whatever lines they were or weren't crossing, leaving me to take Raven home in my car.

"It was smart of you to leave your car here," she said as she stuffed the frills of her dress between us to avoid shutting them in the door. It filled her side of the car.

"I wanted the limo driver to pick me up here, not at my house," I reasoned. I didn't like depending on other people for transportation. My mind immediately went back to the years when my friends' parents would

bring me home later than my dad wanted and how he would scream and rage at me about it. I couldn't control what other people did, especially not other adults, but that didn't matter to him. Someone had to be blamed. In his eyes, it might as well have been me.

“Are you okay?” she asked, touching my arm lightly.

“Yeah,” I said, trying to smile. I could tell by her face that she knew I was lying, but I didn't want to elaborate. I didn't tell people about my dad. Everyone knew he wasn't a pleasant person to be around, anyway. Why would the details matter?

“What did Destiny want?” she asked, incorrectly guessing what was wrong with me. “Is she coming to her senses?”

I snapped out of my head and back to the present. “What? Oh, I don't know. She said the weirdest thing, actually. She warned me to stay away from you and your dad. She said he isn't safe.”

Her eyebrows furrowed enough to move her glasses. “What does *that* mean? Of course he's safe. He's a nutjob, but he's safe. He's *too* safe! That's the problem.”

I rested my right hand on her arm as I drove. “I wouldn't take it personally, but it made me wonder about your dad warning you away from Destiny and Chloe.”

Those same furrowed eyebrows shot up as if trying to reach her hairline. “They know something about each other.”

I nodded. “I think so too. There's some kind of secret there between her family and yours. She might be as in the dark about it as you, or she might know everything. It's hard to say. But this is the first time I've ever heard her talk about you or your dad; I promise you that.”

“That’s wild,” she said, relaxing in her seat. “I don’t know what to make of it. But there aren’t any clues about how Darcy is connected?”

“Not yet. I’m pretty sure Destiny and Darcy aren’t connected at all,” I admitted. “But we can keep looking into it.”

“Do you have time to try to hack the computer tonight?” she asked, motioning with her thumb to the back seat. “Do you have all of your stuff?”

My backpack was in the back seat, and it was 10:45. I didn’t have to be home until midnight on the weekends.

“I can give it a shot for a little while,” I said, reveling in her smile. “As long as you keep the dress on. I’d do anything to see you in it for a while longer.”

“Well I wasn’t planning on stripping,” she said with a wink and a blush.

She leaned over me to give us access to the property, her bare shoulder in my face as she braced her arm on the armrest of my car door.

I wanted to hold her. Bring her closer to me. That was okay, right? As long as I didn’t touch any private parts?

The words “private parts” and “stripping” bounced around my head, making me dizzy.

“You’ve gotta hurry,” she said, pointing to the gate.

I gunned it, causing both of our heads to whip against our headrests.

“We’re going to have to work on your timing,” she said with a laugh.

We were going to have to work on a lot of things. If I couldn’t concentrate, there was no way I’d be able to hack into her dad’s computer. I was doing good to remember to breathe like a normal person.

RAVEN

The way he looked at me was real. I wasn't projecting it. I could read his body like an open book. He truly thought I was beautiful, and it was distracting him.

"I really am going to take this dress off if you can't focus," I warned, crossing my arms so he would know I was serious and trying to discipline him into working.

He didn't take it that way. His eyebrows shot up, and his ears moved back on his head in surprise.

"Not like that!" I chastised him. "Geez! I mean I'll go upstairs and change into sweatpants!"

He shook his head as if trying to rid me from the front of his mind. "Okay, okay, I'm sorry. I'll get to work now."

"Is the dress really that much better than sweatpants?" I asked. I regretted it as soon as it came out. One of the problems of knowing when people lie is knowing when to keep my questions to myself.

Sometimes you don't really want the truth.

He scoffed. "Please. You would wield sweatpants just as well, but I don't know when I'll get another chance to see you in a dress like this. It's more rare, I guess . . . more special."

The truth didn't disappoint.

"Wield?" I asked with a smile, zeroing in on that word.

"Like a weapon," he said, typing away on his laptop. "That's exactly what that dress is. I know you, Raven. You chose the most alluring dress you could to draw attention to us. You used every feature of yours to manipulate every person there to stare at you in wonder."

Had I done that? I thought I simply wanted to be beautiful. Was I to the point that I was manipulating subconsciously?

"And?"

"And it worked," he stated, winking at me before returning his eyes to the screen.

I loved when he winked at me. I couldn't help but grin every time he did it.

In my heels, I clicked over to the safe to study it again. My feet were starting to hurt, but I felt if I removed them, the night would be officially over. I wasn't ready for that yet.

The keypad was just like a telephone, but I had no idea how long the combination was. The possibilities were endless. With my spare-key idea thwarted, I had no idea how to go about opening it. Even if I could remove the entire thing from the wall, how could I penetrate it?

"Is there something strong enough to cut through it?" I asked aloud, thinking about when I needed to get through the metal door.

"The safe? Maybe. Not something handy, though. You'd probably need some kind of expensive tool or chemical. It might be worth looking into,

but you would also risk damaging whatever is inside. You might not want to do something like that without knowing what's in there."

I huffed. "Darn my father and his overprotective nature! He's making this impossible!"

"Not entirely," Nash said. "Come here."

I turned to see the computer screen lit up with a picture of my mom.

"You did it," I breathed, rushing over in my dress and heels. I even forgot the pain in my feet as I flew toward him. "You really did it. We're in."

"I disabled it entirely, so you'll be able to start it up and look around any time you want," he explained.

Around my mother's face were folders upon folders organizing the chaos that was my father's mind. It wasn't minimal in the slightest. I had no idea where to start.

"Thank you," I said, hugging him fiercely. I had never seen that picture of my mom before. That alone was worth all it took to get into the basement and the computer.

"Can I ask what happened to her?" Nash whispered, pointing to the screen.

"I think she died in childbirth," I answered as I pulled back. "My dad refuses to talk about what happened. I never got to know her at all."

"I'm sorry," he said, touching my face gently and briefly.

"The grief I feel is weird. It's hard to explain. I miss her, but I'm mostly sad that I missed out on knowing her. Dad acts as if she hung the moon. Sometimes she's all he wants to talk about, and sometimes the pain is so great that he can't even think about her without falling apart."

The picture of her was so vibrant, so full of life. It almost made me angry that he had kept it from me. *Why* had he kept it from me?

Why did he feel like he needed to have so many secrets?

“Raven?”

He said my name quietly, hesitantly, almost like he was afraid.

I turned toward him, his apprehension the only thing that made me tear my eyes away from the screen. “Yeah?”

“This doesn’t mean that this is over, does it?” he asked.

“Do you want it to be?” I asked, my voice just as quiet and timid.

“No, I don’t,” he said, his eyes never leaving mine.

He was telling the truth. I smiled and shook my head.

“No, it isn’t over. I haven’t even delivered on my end yet,” I said, trying to save face in case that was the reason for his reluctance. After all, Destiny had spoken to him at the dance, so she might be closer to wanting to get back together with him.

“No, you haven’t,” he said, pulling me closer. His fingers traced the line where the sequins turned to tulle at my waist. “What were the terms again?”

“That I would pretend to be your girlfriend until Destiny wants you back,” I whispered.

He squinted. “No, I don’t think so. I think you said that you would pretend to be my girlfriend until I ‘get what I want.’ ”

“Is that how I worded it?” I asked. “I’ll have to check the fine print on the contract.”

His laugh was low and husky. “You shouldn’t have given me such a vague promise.”

“Why is that?” I whispered as he cupped my face with his hand.

“Because I might not ever let you out of it,” he said, leaning in closer.

RING. RING. RIIIIING!

“If that’s Brooke again . . .” he growled, his threat hanging in the air.

I giggled. "It's not my phone."

He looked confused and crossed the room to grab his.

"Hello? What do you mean? I'm not supposed to be home until midnight," he said, his voice going from sultry to defensive.

I glanced at the clock on the screen. It was 12:10.

When I looked back at Nash, he had the phone pulled away from his ear as if he were checking the time too.

"I'm sorry. I didn't realize. I'm on my way home now," he said quickly, his voice apologetic and . . . frightened?

He grabbed his bag and gestured for me to come so I could let him out of the gate.

I felt like Cinderella, racing up the stairs in my dress that took up the width of the steps and curling my toes to keep from losing my shoes as we ran as fast as we could out the door and to his car.

He had gotten distracted and missed curfew. From the look on his face, it was a big deal. My father had enough rules that I knew what it was like when one got broken. He would annoy me to no end until I regretted whatever it was I did because I couldn't stand to hear him drone on about how dumb it was.

Once we were in the car, I could hear the voice on the other end of the phone berating him. Nash didn't look like someone annoyed. He looked like someone who was genuinely terrified of what he would face when he got home. He looked embarrassed that I could hear what was being said, but he did not mention to his dad that I was there. He said short phrases like "Yes," "I know," "You're right," and "I'm sorry." I hoped those would stop the torture session, but they didn't even slow it down.

His father continued to yell at him as if he were a dog, calling him names and threatening him. The man was the sheriff, and I wanted to see him locked up.

I couldn't take it for another second. Right before we reached the gate, I grabbed the phone from his hand and put it to my ear.

"Sheriff?" I asked, sounding sweet and innocent as if I hadn't heard his tirade.

"Who is this?" he demanded.

"Raven Haskins, sir. I talked to you the other day about filing a missing person report? I'm so sorry Nash is late; it's completely my fault," I said, turning on every bit of charm I possessed.

Nash looked like a deer in headlights as I leaned out the window to scan my finger and let us out of the gate. I motioned for him to pull through while I was still in the car.

"What do you mean?" the sheriff asked, his voice still irritated, but he sounded curious.

"Someone spiked the punch at the dance tonight," I explained. "I didn't realize it until I already had too much. Nash came to my rescue and gave me a ride home so I wouldn't drive."

"That's not his responsibility. His responsibility is to obey curfew," he gruffed.

"Doing the right thing" wasn't going to work with this guy. People were so much harder to read over the phone.

"Absolutely, sir. That makes complete sense. He was honestly unsure if he should risk it or not, but he thought he could drop me off and get back home in time. He even talked to some people about it, and they assured him

that the sheriff would want him to think about the law first, then the house rules.”

“But he misjudged the distance to your house?” he asked suspiciously.

“No, sir. He would have gotten me home in plenty of time, but I had to stop and throw up twice. Or was it three times? No, just twice. It’s all a blur. What time did we leave the dance?”

“Ten thirty,” Nash said, letting the car idle outside the gate. His voice was unreadable, but I couldn’t focus on him and his dad at the same time.

“Right, ten thirty. You can check the sign-out sheet for verification. He did everything he could. It’s completely my fault. What can I do to make it up to you?”

I waited in silence and let my words sink in, hoping I had struck the right nerve.

“This can’t happen again,” he said. I could feel his condescension through the phone. “You may be eighteen, but the legal drinking age is twenty-one, young lady.”

“Of course, sir. It won’t. I’ve never drank anything before, and I wouldn’t do it on purpose. Ugh, I am so embarrassed,” I said, turning my acting up to one hundred percent.

“Give the phone back to Nash,” he ordered.

I obeyed, holding my breath as I waited to see if the yelling would start again.

“Yes, sir. She’s heading inside right now, and I’ve got my foot on the gas heading home,” he said.

I nodded and exited, letting myself back in the gate.

He tore away, and the walk home seemed longer than usual in my heels. I took them off before getting halfway there and walked barefoot on the

grass. The gravel hurt too badly.

Even without my keen observation skills, it would have been obvious that the sheriff wasn't a pleasant person. When I had seen him tearing into that officer at the Sheriff's Department, those suspicions were confirmed.

In the back of my mind, I thought that maybe the officer had deserved it. After all, I knew that the sheriff's job had to be one of high stress. It must be difficult for him to manage other people. If one of those people truly stepped out of line, it would be hard to blame him for losing his temper. What if the officer had stolen money or drugs from the evidence room? What if he had lied about the facts of a case to put the wrong person behind bars? What if he used the power of his badge maliciously? If so, he deserved to be berated publicly for crossing such a line, right?

But what if it wasn't something like that at all? What if the officer took the last cup of coffee? Or made another kind of honest accident, like Nash did tonight? After all, I deduced that the sheriff cared more about his image and control than he did anything else. If someone threatened that in any way, he was likely to come unglued exactly as he had on Nash.

Tears filled my eyes as I worried about what Nash's life must be like every day, trying to please someone who couldn't be pleased. Had he been speaking to Nash like that his whole life? Did Nash have memories of being five years old and hearing his father yell at him about how stupid he was?

I closed my eyes to try to shut the image out of my mind. Nash was my friend . . . maybe even more than that. I couldn't stand the thought of him being treated like that day in and day out for his entire life.

NASH

I called her three times as soon as my dad hung up. She didn't answer. I had to fight every urge in my body to turn around and go even faster back to her house to make sure she was okay. But if I did, he would be so mad that I could never go home. As it was, she seemed to have simmered him down.

I was almost home when she finally called me back.

"Raven? Are you alright?" I asked before saying hello.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Are you okay?" she asked. She sounded normal.

"Yeah. Why didn't you answer your phone?" I asked, my voice going from concerned to irritated.

"I left it in the basement," she said. "I still have my dress on, remember? It's not like I have pockets in this thing. I didn't see you called until just now when I got back."

I sighed in relief. I'd been so worried about her.

"Why'd you do it?" I asked. It's what I had been wanting to ask ever since she got out.

“We left in such a hurry I didn’t think about grabbing my phone. I didn’t mean to worry you,” she explained.

“No, not that. Why did you take my phone from me?” My voice sounded angry. Was I angry?

“It *was* my fault,” she argued. “I felt like I had to do something. Ugh, I’m sorry, Nash. I didn’t mean to overstep and get in your business, okay? But I felt responsible, and I wanted to make it right.”

“By telling the sheriff of our town that you were a sloppy, drunk mess at a high-school dance?” I asked, my tone lightening a little.

“Did it work?” she asked. I could tell from her voice that she was wincing.

Unbelievably, it did. “I have to do some extra chores tomorrow, but other than that, yes, it did. He said he was going to bed, which means he won’t be up waiting to yell at me again when I get there,” I said. I hoped he was true to his word. I didn’t have the energy to sit up for hours and listen to his monologue.

She sighed in relief. “Good.”

“He’ll destroy your reputation, Raven,” I warned her. “You shouldn’t have given him any ammunition against you, real or fake. He may even get you in trouble at school.”

“I’m not afraid of him,” she said, and it sounded like it was true. “I played him like a fiddle, and I’ll play whoever he sends after me.”

“I wish I had your confidence,” I admitted. “How did you do it? ‘Play’ him?”

“It would have been easier if I could have read his face while I was talking, but I was able to decipher that his image was the most important thing. That and being in control. I’m sure he’s more upset about how it

reflects on him that you're going to be late than he was about your well-being, so I did my best to make it look good for him."

I was stunned and speechless.

"Crap, Nash, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make it sound like he doesn't care about you," she said, her words coming out almost too fast to understand. "Sometimes, I say things too bluntly, and it's not what I really mean. Please forgive me."

"No, you were right on the nose," I said, astounded at how perceptive she was.

"This is where lying comes in handy," she said. "Sometimes people don't want to know your real opinions."

"I want to know yours," I assured her. "I've gotta go. I'm pulling in my driveway now."

"Will you be able to come over tomorrow?" she asked. "We could go through the computer together and see what we can find?"

"As soon as I get everything done," I assured her. "Goodnight."

"Nash?"

"Yeah?"

"We're okay? I mean, you aren't mad at me for interfering?" she asked. It was weird to hear her sound so unsure of herself, like she didn't know if it was better to make me mad by getting involved or leaving me to the wolves and keeping her distance.

I smiled, thankful that she seemed to care about me. "No, I'm not mad, Raven. We're still partners in crime. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Okay, good. Goodnight, Nash," she said. I had imagined it would be so different when I told her goodnight in that black dress. I thought for sure I wouldn't get through the evening without kissing her.

“Goodnight,” I said, hanging up and entering a dark house.

The queen of the night had saved *my* night at her own expense. I was wrong about her all along.

She wasn’t an evil genius . . . she was an antihero.



Dad huffed around all morning but didn’t say a word to me as I did my chores. It wasn’t his usual “punish you with silence” tactic. It felt more like angry shame. He was sorry for wrongly accusing me, but he would die before admitting it.

“I got everything finished,” I told him as I grabbed my backpack and keys.

“Be home by ten,” he said, his words stern and clipped.

“Ten? Why?” I asked, stopping in my tracks.

“Because maybe if I say ‘ten,’ you’ll actually be home before midnight,” he said, turning away from me.

I longed to stand up to him, but that would only prolong the torture for myself. It was better to let him have the last word and stalk off to make someone else feel small.

I wondered if the other policemen felt the same way I did. I wondered if they assumed that he treated me as bad or worse than he treated them.

It was misting outside, and Raven was waiting for me at the gate. She wore a huge raincoat that must have belonged to her father. It was bulky and threatened to swallow her whole. If it weren't for her skinny legs in sweatpants poking out from underneath it, I wouldn't have even been sure it *was* her.

I pulled through and parked so she could slide inside. She pulled the hood off and turned to smile at me.

Her face was clean of all the makeup from last night. Her hair was back in her usual bun. But somehow, she looked different. Something had changed.

"I'm the same old me again," she said with a smile, lifting up her wet sleeves. "You shouldn't have any trouble concentrating today."

But she was wrong. She was still the queen of the night.

My queen of the night.

I shifted in my seat to turn toward her, leaning across the console. She turned her body toward me too.

"Nash? Why are you looking at me like that?" she whispered.

I cupped her face with my left hand, drawing her closer to me. Her breath hitched. Her lips parted slightly.

"No interruptions," I said, my voice low and serious. "No distractions. I'm going to kiss you, Raven Haskins. And I'm going to take my time."

Her nod was so slight it was almost imperceptible, but it was all I needed to move forward.

"This isn't just practice," I said, my lips lightly brushing hers as I spoke, teasing her. "This is real."

She responded by pressing her lips to mine. I slid my hand from her face to the back of her neck, bringing her in closer.

I wanted to give in to my body and kiss her fiercely, but I saw how she reacted when she saw Brooke and Peter in the limo. I promised her it would be slow. She needed it to be slow.

After our first kiss, I backed away until my eyes could focus on hers better. She was coming undone as much as I was.

Slowly, I leaned in to kiss her again. And again. Never using my tongue, never crossing a line she clearly defined, no matter how much I wanted to.

When the urge to cross those lines became too great for me to bear, I let go of her neck and kissed her softly one last time before leaning back in my seat and putting the car in gear.

She didn't move. I could feel her gaze on me as I drove. I could hear her panting.

"You're driving me crazy," I admitted, looking straight ahead.

She chuckled softly. "What do you mean?"

I put the car in park and looked at her deep brown eyes, so full of desire. "You make me want to throw you in the back seat," I said. There was no filtering my thoughts with her. Knowing that she knew when I was lying made my truths come out at full throttle.

She swallowed hard. "You're telling the truth. You really do want to roll around in the back seat with me."

"I do. I won't, but I do. Let's go inside before the rain gets harder. The farther away we are from that back seat, the better," I said, gesturing behind me with my thumb.

"To be alone in my house?" she asked, eyes wary.

“You trust me, don’t you? I won’t cross any line you make. Even if you move it backward,” I assured her. “I promise you.”

“I know. I trust you completely,” she said. “It’s me I’m worried about.”

RAVEN

“**Y**ou? What do you mean?” he asked, raising one of those blonde eyebrows.

My heart was still racing from when we kissed. I couldn't let him know how much I wanted to get in the back seat, too, or it would break both of our resolve.

“I've never felt like this before,” I admitted. “I've never felt so disconnected from my brain. My thoughts are fuzzy. I couldn't win a chess match right now, even if I played you.”

He laughed and turned the car off. “I'm glad to know you think so little of my chess-playing skills.” He winked at me and got out to go inside. I put up my hood and followed him.

Once we were through the door, the house felt emptier than it had the other times we were there together.

No distractions. No interruptions. No parental supervision. We could silence our phones and pretend like we were the only two people on the planet that existed until it was time for his curfew.

“Have you found anything on the computer yet?” Nash asked as he took my jacket and hung it up. We were apparently trying to switch into business mode, but I didn’t know if I was ready to.

I shook my head and tried to focus on forming coherent sentences. “No, I don’t know what I’m looking for. I finally found a way to view his most recently opened documents, and I’m starting there and working backward.”

There were so many documents that it was overwhelming. Since I didn’t know what I was looking for, it was a wild-goose chase of random clicking and skimming.

“Good idea,” he said. “I’ll help.”

He led the way to the basement, not looking behind him to make sure I was coming. He didn’t seem to be afraid of the house anymore. I walked slowly behind him, knowing I wouldn’t be doing much research if he was here.

Could he feel it? Could he read me as easily as I could read him? Did he want to forget about the computer and simply enjoy being together today?

He immediately went for the computer stool, but I backed up to the metal table and hoisted myself onto it, sitting to face him.

He looked at me with wide, wild eyes and cautiously approached me.

“What are you doing?” he asked, his stride slow as he got closer and closer to me.

“I don’t know,” I admitted with a smile. “I only know that I want to kiss you again.”

“I may have to stop again to get a hold of myself,” he warned as he closed the distance between us. Sitting on the table put me at eye level with him. “I promise not to cross lines, but I want to. You have no idea how badly I want to. So if I have to stop, that’s why.”

I nodded. He stood between my legs, so I wrapped them around him to draw him in closer.

He groaned, and I smiled.

“Maybe you are an evil genius,” he whispered, his nose touching mine. “Everything else was a diversion. I bet this was your master plan all along.”

“What was?” I asked, a giggle escaping my mouth like a lovestruck teenage girl.

“To pretend to date me until I fell for you, and you had me right here where you wanted me,” he said, brushing his lips against mine. “And it worked.”

If only that were true. If I had been smart enough, I might have done exactly that . . . and I wouldn’t have waited until now to do it.

When we kissed again, I left my mouth slightly open, cautiously licking his lips.

He pulled back and looked into my eyes. “Are you sure? It’s not your body taking the reins up there?” he asked, glancing toward my brain as if he could see it in all its muddled glory.

I smiled. “The only reason I didn’t want to do it before was because I was afraid I would do it wrong. You make me feel comfortable, Nash. You make me want to try new things, like dance, and kiss . . .”

I kissed him again, and this time he opened his mouth a little too.

A jolt of electricity went through me when his tongue touched mine. A whimper came up through my throat, causing him to kiss me deeper.

We weren’t moving as fast as Brooke and Peter were in the limo, but my body felt just as crazed as their movements. Without even meaning to, I picked up the pace of the kiss, trying to find an outlet for the surge of emotions going through me. I almost didn’t recognize myself. Who was this

girl that was making out with Nash Williams so brazenly? What was this weird sensation of heat and urgency coursing through her body? Why was *she* the one who jumped up on the table to continue the kissing instead of getting to work? I didn't know her, but I let her take the reins.

Nash kept up with me step for step, pulling back suddenly to "get a hold of himself." My legs didn't let him go far, though. His eyes were blazing as he stared at me, his breathing as labored and ragged as my own.

No one had ever looked at me like that before. No one had ever wanted to crawl in the back seat with me. Seeing his dilated eyes set my body on fire. I was about ready to lay back on the metal table so he could lay on top of me right then and there. My lines hadn't moved, but I still wanted to get as close to them as possible.

He bit his lip like he could read my thoughts, trying to decide whether it was a good idea. After all, it could be dangerous to get too close to a line.

"Raven?" a voice called from upstairs.

Nash jumped out of my grasp, breaking free of my legs. We both held our breath as we listened again. Was it real? Was it really him? I hadn't even heard the door open.

"Raven?" the voice asked again.

"Dad?!" I yelled, jumping off the table. I took the stairs two at a time with Nash on my heels.

"Dad?!" I yelled again when I reached the top, running from room to room. He wasn't in the living room, the kitchen, the bathroom, or either of our bedrooms . . .

"Raven!" he yelled again. He still sounded distant. I couldn't tell where his voice was coming from.

“I’m here, Dad! Where are you?!” I yelled. Was he in the backyard? I hadn’t checked there yet.

“He’s in here,” Nash said, his voice different from anything I had ever heard come out of his mouth.

When I came back down the hallway, the first thing I saw was Nash’s face. It was as white as a sheet.

He wasn’t afraid. He was terrified.

“Nash, what’s going on? Are you alright? Where is he?” I asked, getting concerned.

He nodded toward the top of the stairs, where we had just come from.

My father’s translucent face stared sadly back at me. His body, just as transparent, floated with no regard for gravity.

I screamed in horror, running to Nash for comfort and protection.

“Please don’t be afraid, pumpkin,” he said, reaching out for me. His entire body was see-through, from head to toe. He was wearing his normal clothes, right down to his no-nonsense black shoes—shoes that weren’t touching the floor like they should have been.

“What’s going on? What’s happening?” I asked, hiding behind Nash. Nash was as frightened as I was but stood stoically between the two of us.

His eyes looked down in utter sadness. “I have a lot to tell you, Raven. For starters, I was murdered this morning.”

I let go of Nash and started to move around him. He blocked me the first time, then let me go when I persisted.

I went from scared to sad in the span of a breath. “What? What do you mean? What is this?”

“I was kidnapped a few days ago by someone trying to force me to do something I didn’t want to do,” he said as vaguely as he could put it.

“They’ll come after you next, Raven. They’ll come after the book. So I wished I could warn you and help keep you safe, and here I am.”

My head pounded. It was far too much. There were too many questions. None of it made any sense.

“You’re dead?” was all I managed to ask, tears welling up in my eyes. It couldn’t be true. I couldn’t be an orphan. He couldn’t be gone forever.

He nodded. “Yes, but I can still be here with you like this. I can still protect you.”

I sighed and threw my hands up in the air. “Protect me from what? The person who killed you? Why would they come after me? Who was it?”

“I can’t tell you that,” he said. “You’re just going to have to trust me and do everything I say, and I promise to take care of you, pumpkin.”

“No,” I said, planting my feet squarely on the ground before him. “We’re not doing things your way. Not this time.”

NASH

I tried to shut Raven up with my stare, but she didn't even notice I was looking at her.

“What do you mean *no*? I'm still your father, young lady!” he yelled, rising higher in the air.

The ghost was getting angry, which was the exact opposite of what I wanted. I had no idea what he was capable of or if he would hurt us. Did she truly not have any sense of self-preservation?

“Raven, stop,” I whispered, trying to put all my fear and warning into those two words.

“Who is this?” he asked, pointing to me angrily and making me regret speaking up. “Why is he in my house?”

“If you're really dead, then this is *my* house,” Raven said, tears of anger and grief spilling down her cheeks. “His name is Nash, and I invited him here. He's my boyfriend.”

Rage poured from her father's eyes as he squinted at me. “You have a secret boyfriend?”

“It’s new,” I said, trying to defend us both. “We didn’t start hanging out until after you went missing. We never hid anything from you. Sir.”

He was staring at me with the deep hatred of an overprotective father. I stared back in absolute horror. He brought to reality all of the nightmares of my youth.

Neither of us noticed right away when Raven started breaking down, but I saw it first. I broke our staring contest and held her in my arms as she sobbed.

We hadn’t been fast enough. If this truly was a ghost floating in front of us, we were too late.

Dr. Haskins was dead.

He floated nearby silently, letting her weep. I thought he was crying, too, but it was hard to tell for sure.

When she looked up at me again, the sadness in her eyes was gone. Fire replaced it, and it wasn’t the fire of desire I had seen in the basement.

She turned to face him, and he actually recoiled from her.

“I love you,” she said, her voice full of anything but love. “But we aren’t playing your game anymore. I will have the truth, and if you won’t tell me, I’ll find it myself.”

She skirted around him as she went to descend the stairs. I wondered if she could have walked through him.

“You can’t get in without my password,” he called after her. “And I’ll never give it to you.”

I winced, and he caught a glimpse of my face. Fear seized him.

“Raven!” he called out, frantically fighting in his new form to get down to the lab as quickly as he could. “What have you done?!”

I ran after him, careful to leave space between us. If he wasn't already dead, he probably would have died from shock when he saw her sitting at his computer, clicking the mouse with the same fury one would use to kill a spider in their house.

It was all too much for him. He saw the unlocked computer, the mutilated air vent, the breaker-box door ajar . . .

"What have you done?" he repeated, floating forward to physically stop her from searching his computer.

She waved her arms around as if bees were chasing her, shaking her head violently. Her bun started to come loose.

"Get away from her!" I yelled, trying to intervene. I stood as close to her as I could, fighting air.

I couldn't feel him at all. My arms went right through him like he was merely a projection, except the air he filled had a damp coldness. It made me feel like I was going to be sick, but I stayed by her side.

He looked defeated as he backed away from us, gazing at his useless hands in front of his face.

"You might not help us," Raven said. "But you can't stop us."

My queen of the night was also a brave warrior. No one, alive or dead, could stand in her way. He had to see it as clearly as I did.

"Fine, Raven. I was kidnapped by Donovan Glory," he said, hanging his head. "They've been holding me hostage in their house for days. I went there to make a deal with him, but it went sour."

"Donovan? Is that Darcy's dad?" Raven asked. Her anger was turning into curiosity. I could see the gears moving as things started to click in her mind.

He nodded. “I don’t know how to tell you everything, Raven. As your father, I don’t feel like I can. Part of my job is to shield you from truths that are too heavy for you to bear—that you shouldn’t have to bear.”

“You’ve lied to me all of my life,” she said, rising from the stool to stand shoulder to shoulder with me. “I know when you lie, Dad. I can read it as easily as if it were a billboard on your face. I never pushed it; I always gave you the benefit of the doubt because I knew you were telling the truth when you said you loved me. I knew your lies came from a good place. But . . . your lies have gotten you killed now. The weight of all of your dealings *is* mine to bear, and you’re the one that left it to me. I can either face it naively or armed with knowledge.”

The master manipulator had struck again. He began to weaken his defenses, looking even more helpless than he did before.

“Remember when I said I used to be a fireman?” he asked. “Well, there was one fire that we had to look at extensively because we couldn’t find the remains of a small child. We never did. But when we were searching, I found two items that survived the fire—this ring and a spellbook.”

He held up his right hand to show us the ring. The light did not catch it as it should have. A watch was also strapped around his right wrist. Its colors were so muted that it was hard to tell if it was gold or silver.

“The family in the fire came from a long line of witches. I knew there was something secret and important about what I found, so I didn’t tell anyone. I brought them home to study them. I read the book cover to cover, but never out loud unless I was practicing something. I found a way to mix science and magic to accomplish things that people only dream of. It was incredible, but also terrifying.

“Because of my background in genetics, I started attracting people who would come asking for outrageous cures. Before the book, I could only research and experiment in vain. With the book in hand, I could make their wildest dreams come true. They paid me handsomely for it, enabling me to stay home with you and work in the lab full-time.

“The Glory family asked me for a cure for something I did not want to give. I had done it for them once before and saw just how terrible the outcome was. They held me hostage for days, trying to convince me to bend to their will, but I couldn’t do it again, Raven. I couldn’t.

“Now that I’m dead, I fear they will come after the book themselves. And you’ve already made it easier for them by giving them access to the lab. You’ve even revealed the safe.”

We both looked at the locked safe that allegedly held a spellbook with a secret so dangerous that the man was willing to die to keep it away from Donovan Glory.

Throwing any sense of my own self-preservation out the window, I turned my back to Dr. Haskins and faced Raven.

“Is he telling the truth?” I asked. If he was, Raven truly was in danger.

“Yes,” she whispered. “At least, the truth as he believes it.”

RAVEN

“I need to get out of here,” I said, looking Nash in the eye.

He grabbed my hand without further questions, leading me up the stairs as fast as our legs could take us. I only thought that we had flown up the stairs the night before. Today, we bumped it up to another gear entirely.

“Where are you going?” Dad yelled. I didn’t look back to see if he followed.

When I made it to the passenger seat, I looked up to see him staring at us through the living room window. I didn’t know if he couldn’t leave the house or if he chose to stand there and stop pursuing us.

As much as I wanted to get away from him, I hoped he was still there when I returned. I hoped it really wasn’t goodbye forever, but I needed time and space to think.

“We can’t go to the police with this,” Nash said as soon as the car started moving. “You know how they treat people in this town that come to them about supernatural crap like this. I don’t want them treating you like that. They’ll never believe us.”

My brain was spinning so fast that it was making my head hurt. What if they were telling the truth? What if all of the paranormal stories about Midnight Springs . . . were true?

“I’m glad I was there with you to actually see him for myself,” Nash said, laying his hand on top of mine. “I don’t know if I would have believed you if I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes. I wouldn’t have made fun of you or anything, but I definitely would have thought you were seeing things or making it up.”

I sighed and looked out the window in shame. I had treated Brooke exactly like that. I refused to believe that Peter could turn into a wolf without seeing it for myself.

“Where are we going?” Nash asked as soon as we cleared the gate.

When I thought about Brooke and Peter, Dad’s words about the fire and his weird reaction in the cafeteria when Brooke and I asked him about it started to click into place.

“The farmers’ market,” I said, hoping the rain wasn’t bad enough that he had packed up already. “Peter should be there, and I think he may be able to help us.”



At least five vendors with tents stuck around through the mist. One was selling candles and even had one lit, which attracted much more attention under the overcast sky than it would have on a sunny day. There weren't many patrons, but the ones there had hoods and umbrellas.

Peter didn't have a tent, but he also didn't look like he realized it was raining. There would probably have to be a monsoon before Peter would be inconvenienced by it . . . or at least enough rain that no customers or other vendors showed up.

He smiled when he saw me and nodded a greeting to Nash.

I smiled back, unsure how to approach a real conversation with him, especially without Brooke.

"Where's your tent?" I asked as we stood at his booth.

He shrugged. "I don't need one. It's just another thing to tow here, and I don't mind getting wet."

I looked at the people huddled up under the other tents. "Right, but the customers might? They would be more attracted to your booth if they could

relax and take their hoods off.” I kind of wished he had one since I didn’t have a hood or umbrella myself.

“Hmm,” he said, stroking his beard. “I’d never thought of that.”

I smiled, hoping we were off to a good start.

“So are you here to give me business advice, or do you need some fish?” he asked, pointing to his coolers. “They’re ten dollars, and I can skin and filet them for an extra five if you want me to.”

I bit my lip, unsure how this was going to go. I hadn’t prepped Nash for any of it. I had a hard enough time prepping myself on the ride over to get the courage to talk to Peter about it.

“Umm, actually I had some questions to ask you about the Murphy family,” I said, trying to keep my tone light.

His entire demeanor changed. The rain started to fall a little harder, tapping on the top of his coolers. He looked from side to side in the paranoid way my dad did.

“Okay, what?” Peter said, his voice gruff and kind of scary. His dark, scruffy face made him seem even more threatening.

But while I feared Peter and knew he didn’t want to discuss this with me, I trusted that he wouldn’t hurt me. I knew his respect for Brooke extended to me as well, as long as he didn’t turn into a wolf and rip my face off.

“My dad helped investigate that fire,” I said. “He said that the Murphy family came from a long line of witches?”

“Witches? I don’t know anything about that,” he said. It was true.

“He said he found a spellbook in the wreckage,” I said, trying to lead him to give me more information.

“Never seen or heard about a spellbook,” he stated. Another truth. None of this was helping at all. Was I asking the wrong questions?

“There was also a ring,” Nash said, making his presence known and saving the day.

Peter’s jaw twitched.

“You know about the ring,” I prodded. “What do you know about it?”

He looked like he wanted to lie to me. He was a heartbeat away from it.

“Did Brooke tell you about my superpower?” I threatened him. His face told me that she had. Lying would be futile. He would never get away with it.

“The wearer of the ring gets one wish,” he whispered reluctantly. “That’s all I know, I swear. I thought it burned in the fire.”

“Like a genie kind of wish? Whatever you want?” I asked, feeling closer to the truth.

He shook his head. “I don’t know the rules of it. All I know about it is that someone wished for protection for me. You know how that turned out.”

I stepped backward, grabbing Nash’s forearm to stabilize myself.

“He said he wished to warn me,” I said to Nash. “That’s why he showed up like that at the house and why the ring was important to the story.”

Nash nodded, but his eyes were still filled with confusion.

“Thank you, Peter,” I said, trying to sound sincere through my excitement. “If you see Brooke before I do, tell her I’m sorry and that I believe her now.”

He dipped his head, and we raced back to the car through the rain.

“Are you going to fill me in?” Nash asked as he turned over the engine. “What was all of that back there?”

“You won’t believe me,” I warned. After all, I hadn’t believed Brooke, and I knew for a fact that she was telling the truth. Plus, I was supposed to be her best friend. I should have believed her anyway.

He scoffed. “Now you sound like your dad.”

My head snapped toward him. “Excuse me?”

One look at my face made his annoyance transform into remorse. “Crap, Raven . . . I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you. I only said that because I feel like I’m running in the dark here. You said you wouldn’t lie to me, and I trust you, okay? You can tell me.”

My anger dissipated. “It’s not that. It’s that I’ll be telling you things without the verification they are actually true. But just like my dad, the people I heard them from believe them wholeheartedly.”

He nodded. “Okay, try me.”

“Okay, once upon a time, there was a girl named Raven whose best friend fell in love with a homeless guy in the woods . . .” I began.

His eyes bugged out at various parts of my story, but he never interrupted me. I told him everything that I had been told—that Peter was really Thomas Murphy, the boy whose remains were never found, and that someone in his family had to have used the ring to wish for protection for him. That manifested by turning him into a wolf when he was in danger.

“What does this have to do with your dad?” Nash wondered aloud when I was finished.

“It’s Dad’s origin story,” I explained. “It’s how he got caught up in the mess he found himself in. Now we need to find out what Donovan Glory wanted from him.”

“Okay, but how do we do that?”

“We go to Darcy’s house and spy on them, of course,” I stated, wincing as the blood drained from his face.

“I’m sorry, maybe I heard you wrong. I thought you said you wanted us to go spy on the people who held your dad hostage and murdered him,” he

said, his tone sarcastic.

I bit my lip. “Okay, you’re right. It’s crazy.”

He sighed. “Thank you. Sometimes, I don’t know what to do with you, Raven.”

“You don’t have to go,” I assured him.

He slammed his head on the steering wheel as if it would knock sense into me. “I’m not letting you go there alone!”

“You warned me about this from the get-go,” I said. “You told me at the beginning of our deal that the first time you saw a ghost, you were out of here. And you can be.”

“A lot of stuff has changed since the beginning of our deal,” he growled. It would have been sweet if he wasn’t so exasperated with me.

“I’m finding out the truth,” I told him in no uncertain terms. “You can either be there with me or not, but you can’t stop me from going.”

He looked at me and squinted his eyes. “Stop saying that. You know I’m going too.”

I didn’t know for sure, but I was glad to have it validated.

“Then step on it,” I said. “We’re wasting daylight.”

He did not, in fact, step on it. He drove like a snail.

“The speed limit through town is twenty-five,” I said like I was talking to a tourist and not the sheriff’s kid.

“I know that,” he stated. He did not accelerate.

“Alright then, why are you only going fifteen?”

A man behind us honked, but he still crawled down Main Street.

“I’m giving you every last second I can for you to change your mind,” he said. “I don’t think I’ve ever said this before in my entire life, but we could ask my dad for help. We could tell him we suspect the Glorys.”

I shook my head. “I’m not asking your dad for anything. You said it yourself—he probably wouldn’t believe us, and even if he did, our best bet would be that he storms up in there to interrogate them. Even if they admitted to killing him, which would be far-fetched, they would never admit why. It’s too weird, and no one would believe them anyway. We need to see what they say when they think no one is listening.”

“How do you expect to do that?” he asked, obviously afraid to hear my answer.

“I’m not sure yet,” I admitted. “Park here, and we’ll walk the rest of the way using the trees as cover. I need to get a good look at the house.”

He didn’t listen right away. Instead, he kept going a little farther, pulled off on a side road, then drove down away from the main road before pulling over. He must have seen the confused look on my face.

“I don’t want my dad to know that we were ever out here,” he said as he unbuckled and turned off the engine. “If my car is on the side of the highway and any of the deputies saw it, they would call it in and ask him about it.”

I nodded. I wanted to keep his dad out of this as much as possible. “Okay. I’ll look up her house on my phone so we can use the GPS to make sure we’re walking in the right direction.”

“You don’t need to,” he said as he got his backpack from the back seat. He never went anywhere without that thing. “I know the way there through these woods.”

“Why are you bringing that thing? Do you have some kind of weapon in there?” I asked, pointing to the backpack.

“I wish I had a weapon,” he mumbled. “A gun would come in handy right about now.”

He held out his hand for mine. Fingers laced tightly, he led me through the thick woods.

We didn't speak. I was honestly afraid that our steps alone were making too much noise, but then I would hear an animal scamper by and realize that the woods are not supposed to be completely silent.

His stride got slower, and he pointed wordlessly ahead of us. When I squinted my eyes, I could see we were finally coming upon the clearing of Darcy's house.

The house was two-story brick and absolutely enormous. It looked much more foreboding than mine.

"Ever tell ghost stories in this yard?" I asked him as a joke.

"We actually went in," he said, his face that same stark white as it was when he saw my dad.

"What?" I said, wincing at how loud I said it. I lowered my voice to whisper. "You've been inside before?"

"It had been abandoned for years before Darcy's family bought it. No one from around here wanted to buy it because they thought it was haunted," he explained. "We were dumb kids, breaking windows and damaging crap for fun."

"But you know the layout?" I prodded, feeling hopeful.

He groaned. "I wasn't casing the place, Raven. And it was at night. I don't remember much of it."

"Tell me what you remember," I said. "Draw it in the dirt the best you can."

He rolled his eyes, took a deep breath, and knelt down.

"You're a can of gasoline, and I'm beginning to feel like I'm the match," he said as he recounted everything he could remember.

The more he said and drew, the more came back to him.

“It’s brick, Raven. And all of those windows we broke were replaced. Who knows what all they did to the inside to update it when they moved in? We don’t know which room belongs to which family member or even how many of them there are. I’ve overheard people say that Darcy has older siblings. They may live here, and they may not. Too much is unpredictable,” he said, begging me to agree with him with his bright blue eyes.

“You’re right. It seems impenetrable,” I said, but my tone was still hopeful. He looked at me, confused and helpless.

“If we were hoping to break in to steal something and run away before they could catch us, that would be one thing. But the goal of this is to eavesdrop as if we were never here. I don’t think we can pull that off.”

The plan, previously a pile of unmolded clay, began to take shape in my mind.

NASH

The more I tried to discourage her, the more hopeful her face grew. She was even starting to smile.

“Raven, are you even listening to me? We can’t go in that house!” I whisper yelled. I should have never brought her this far, but I couldn’t live with myself if I let her do something this dangerous alone.

“I know,” she said. “You’re absolutely right.”

Most guys would have loved hearing someone say that, but I knew more was coming. Her tone did not make me feel like I had won.

“We’re going to have to do it from out here,” she finished with a nonchalant shrug.

“How on earth are we going to listen to their conversations—”

Her eyebrow raised slightly as she nodded toward me. Relief and terror washed over me as I realized I was the key to her master plan.

“You want me to spy on them with my computer?” I asked, already knowing the answer.

She nodded. “Hack into their texts, their emails, their phone calls . . . whatever you can.”

“I think you overestimate my abilities,” I said with wide eyes. Did she think I could do anything I wanted with a computer?

“I think you underestimate them,” she countered, taking a seat on the ground beside me. “What are you waiting for? Whip it out and see what you can do.”

“You’re a bad influence on me,” I mumbled as I obeyed. Part of me wished I had no idea how to do what she was asking me to so I could walk away from this, but another part of me was grateful for a plan that didn’t involve her being caught by the hands that killed her father. I was glad to try anything that kept her out of that house.

“What are you thinking about?” she asked. “Do you have any ideas?”

“Yes, I do,” I admitted. “And I was thinking about how I wish I could lie to you and say I didn’t so we could leave.”

She smiled. “Lying *is* much more convenient sometimes. Sorry I’m taking that option away from you.”

I shook my head and smiled too. This girl was going to be the death of me.

Using my hotspot, I found a way to hack into their phones via Bluetooth. One of the phones inside had Bluetooth actively on. All I had to do was piggyback off that with my headphones, turn off my microphone, and wait for them to make a call.

Raven and I sat side by side, each with one of my earbuds, listening to the classical music they were playing with Bluetooth inside. I held her hand tightly but said nothing. She was lost in her thoughts and had a right to be. Her life had been completely turned upside down today.

We both jumped when the music stopped suddenly and was replaced by a ringing sound.

“What’s happening?” she whispered. “Why are we hearing it ring?”

“The person we’re listening to is calling someone else,” I explained, my heart thumping wildly.

“We’re sorry. The voice mailbox of the person you are trying to reach is full. Goodbye.”

We both slumped as the classical music started up again.

We waited for another hour, leaning against each other quietly. My head was spinning, too, but I didn’t dare focus on any thoughts for too long.

If I thought about how Raven kissed me in the basement, I might lay her back on the leaves and start it up again, compromising our mission.

If I tried to comprehend that I saw a ghost earlier that day, I knew I would unravel.

If I even entertained the idea of werewolves and witches . . . my body started to sweat.

I couldn’t handle it. Not right now. Raven needed me. I had to be here for her. I could wallow in desire, overwhelm, and fear at home later on my own time.

I checked my phone. It was seven thirty. The sun was almost completely gone, and the bugs were getting thicker in the air around us. We killed mosquito after mosquito that landed on our arms and legs.

“What is that?” she whispered as she pointed to a large black object flying around. “Some kind of bird?”

“It’s a bat,” I told her, and her grip on my hand tightened. “Don’t worry. It’s a good thing. It will eat a lot of these bugs.”

“But it won’t bite us?” she asked, staring it down to try to scare it away with her will.

“No, Raven, it won’t bite us. It probably won’t even come near us,” I explained.

Her body relaxed, but she didn’t take her eyes off the bat until it flew too far away for her to monitor it.

“I can’t take you back home tonight,” I told her, my tone an apology in itself.

“What do you mean? Why?” she whispered, her face scrunched up in confusion.

“I have to be home by ten thirty today,” I explained. “And I won’t be able to sleep a wink if I know you’re in that house alone with a ghost.”

“It’s my dad,” she argued. “He’s not going to hurt me. From what we saw earlier, he can’t even physically touch anything.”

“I’m not worried about that. I’m worried about him upsetting you. I’m worried about you being alone and me not being there to help you. I know you want to go back home and look through that computer, Raven, but please don’t do it without me. I’ll come over tomorrow and find a way to stay the night there without my parents knowing so I can keep you safe. For tonight, though, let me take you to Brooke.”

I was only asking out of respect for her. She couldn’t make me leave her there alone. She could make me do a lot of things, but I didn’t mind being the bad guy when it came to protecting her.

“Okay,” she agreed. She hardly ever agreed with me, and I almost kept arguing out of habit.

The music stopped abruptly.

“Don, why haven’t you answered your phone! I’ve been calling and texting you all day!” a woman yelled, her voice full of panic.

“You know I had back-to-back lectures today. I told you I wouldn’t be able to answer my phone. Why? What’s going on? What happened?”

The woman began to cry. “Please don’t be mad at me, Don. I swear I didn’t mean for it to happen.”

I winced, wondering if we would get a front seat to a woman admitting that she had cheated on her husband.

“Mad at you? Why would I be mad?” he asked. His tone didn’t sound like he was mad . . . or like he suspected infidelity.

“The doctor . . .” her sobbing continued, making her inaudible. Raven grabbed my forearm and held on tightly as her dad was brought up. This was it. We were actually going to figure something out.

“What? The doctor what? Did he hurt you? Or the kids?”

“No, Don. The doctor is dead.”

Silence.

I looked at Raven, who was as bewildered as I was.

“How is he dead?” Donovan asked, his voice trembling. He was angry. Very angry. “How could you let this happen? He was our only hope! You *know* that!”

“I didn’t *let* it happen,” she yelled. “He was fine at breakfast. I brought him food myself. He was obstinate as always, but alive and well. Nothing seemed wrong with him at all. And I brought him enough to last all day since I knew I would have to leave at noon for my hair appointment.”

“Was he wearing his watch? You know he has to wear it at all times.”

“Yes, Don. It was still on him when Dawson found him.”

“Then what happened? How did he die? Did he kill himself?”

“No, it didn’t seem like it, anyway. Dawson went to give him supper, and he was already dead. I’m not sure for how long.”

“Did you at least freeze him?” he asked. I winced and looked over at Raven, who was making an odd face herself. This conversation was getting weirder and weirder by the second.

“Of course I did. Dawson had to help me move him, though.”

“Did you find out anything else about the book before all this happened? Anything at all?” he asked.

“Nothing. You know how he was. He wouldn’t cave at all,” she said sadly. “What are we going to do, Don?”

Donovan growled like a caged animal.

“We’ll have to use the girl to get it,” he said. It sounded like his teeth were gritted.

“No, Don. I don’t want to bring a child into this,” she demanded. “There has to be another way.”

“I’m not going to hurt her or threaten her. I’ll ask for the book in a peaceful, kind manner. I’ll say it’s for my research or something. According to Haskins, she doesn’t know anything about any of this. She may not even suspect anything,” he reasoned.

“She lost her father, Don. And it’s our fault.”

I grabbed Raven’s hand and held on tight. She was shaking.

“It’s not our fault, Danielle. And it’s not your fault. I’m sorry I got so angry. I just miss her, and I feel so helpless.”

“I miss her too,” Danielle said, sobbing hysterically.

“We’ll figure this out,” he promised. “I’m almost home. We’ll get her back one way or another.”

“I never thought we would have to deal with this again,” she said.

“Neither did I. I thought I had found a way to save you from this pain forever. I love you.”

“I love you too.”

There was silence on the line. No music played. I disconnected my computer from the phone and started packing up, pulling Raven to her feet. She followed me like a zombie to my car. Even when I heard Donovan’s car pull up in the distance, neither her face nor her grip changed in any way whatsoever. She was walking on autopilot, trying to make sense of everything that had transpired that day.

“They didn’t kill him on purpose,” she finally said as I drove to Brooke’s. “They were depending on him. They didn’t want him dead. It doesn’t make any sense. He was so sure they killed him.”

I thought of the doctor’s body inside that monster of a house, apparently frozen to delay decomposition. My stomach turned.

“Who do you think killed him, then?” I asked, turning my air vents directly on my face to help keep me from throwing up.

“Dawson, maybe? Whoever that is? But they said they didn’t know what happened. That means it wasn’t obvious, like a bullet wound or stabbing. And we know he didn’t kill himself.”

“What was the deal with the watch?” I asked. “They said he had to wear it at all times?”

“He has a heart disease. *Genopraecordiasis*. That’s why he became a geneticist. He used to have to take around ten shots a day to keep it under control. He invented a watch to take the place of those medicines. The material of the watch itself is part of the treatment, but it will also give him an emergency shot if needed,” she explained. “He told me he sold his invention, and that’s where our money came from. I knew he was lying, but I had no idea why. That’s the missing piece to this puzzle. I have to determine how bad the truth actually is.”

“You don’t think there could have been a malfunction with it?” I asked.

“No,” she said with absolute confidence. “He wouldn’t make a mistake like that. That can’t be the answer.”

The way she could calculate to avoid her emotions was frightening.

“How do you feel?” I asked her, trying to tap into the real Raven.

She shook her head. “I can’t right now. I can’t feel.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’ll fall apart,” she said, her eyes filling with tears. She blinked rapidly to keep them from spilling over.

“Can I kiss you goodnight?” I asked when I parked the car at Michael’s house for her to stay the night with Brooke.

She smiled her small, sweet smile and nodded.

I held her face with both of my hands and gave her one long, strong, soft kiss.

“I’m here for you,” I said when I pulled away. “I will go through all of this craziness with you. I’m your partner in crime. Always.”

“I know,” she said, her face turning red. “I could feel it when you kissed me.”

RAVEN

Brooke was the perfect person to be with after the day I had.

Thankfully, Michael's parents didn't care about me showing up unannounced without a bag or a toothbrush. They warmed me up some leftover spaghetti they had for dinner and gave me an unopened bag of toiletries they had bought for their foster child before Millie and Brooke showed up with their own stuff. I had seen the coach around school, but he seemed different here in his house—more relaxed. Amber was a freaking dream. After Brooke's nightmare of a mother, I'm sure she was beyond grateful to be taken care of by a sweet nurse like her. I definitely wished I had grown up with a mom like that.

Michael was exactly like Brooke described. He was watching TV in the living room when I arrived but didn't say hello when I greeted him. He stared straight through me like he could see the television if he focused hard enough. When they offered me food and started being nice and hospitable, he got up and went to his room, slamming the door dramatically.

"Sorry about that," Amber said with a sigh. "Would you like some pie? There's some apple and some pecan left."

I was completely stuffed when we went to bed that night. Brooke and I tried to talk about normal things until we were sure Millie was sleeping in her bed. On the other side of the room, I was lying on a cot on the floor next to Brooke's bed.

"Nothing's like we thought it was," she whispered after I filled her in on everything. "Our lives have been thrust into the wild fantasy world of Midnight Springs."

"I feel crazy," I admitted. "I always thought that the people who believed in things like this were crazy, so that must be the only solution, right?"

"No, the solution is that they weren't crazy. When we judged them before, we were wrong," she explained.

I didn't like the feeling of that either. I didn't want to accept that there could be other new and exciting ways, that the world didn't follow the rules I thought it did.

"I want it all to go away," I said. "I want to wake up like I did this morning—a teenage girl who went to the dance with her boyfriend and had the time of her life. I don't want to know my dad is dead. I don't want to see him as a ghost. I don't want to accept that Peter is a wolf or that his family had a spellbook that's hidden in my basement that I don't know how to access. I don't want to walk around looking over my shoulder all the time, waiting for Donovan Glory to show up and try to get the book from me."

"Why don't you give it to him?" she asked.

"For one, I can't access it," I admitted. "If I could, I might be able to judge better whether my dad was right to keep it away from him or not. Who knows if he was being irrational or if he is absolutely right to make sure Donovan never gets his hands on it? Right now, I want that book as

bad as he does. I definitely wouldn't give it up without going through it myself first."

"That makes sense. And I understand about wishing your life was normal. I wish it would all go away sometimes too," she whispered. It sounded like she was making a huge confession.

"You do?" I asked. "What about Peter, though?"

"Yeah. I love Peter, but I hate that the wolf plagues him. I hate that he walks around in fear of turning and hurting me. I hate that he almost did. I'd take it away from him if I could," she explained. "I don't wish that Peter wasn't in my life . . . but I do wish that his own life was better and more stable."

"I'm so sorry I didn't believe you," I told her. "That's the first thing I thought when I saw my dad. I was ashamed that I didn't believe you because I knew I could tell you and you would believe me right away."

"It's okay," she said, smiling at me in the dark. "I would have been fine with it if you always half-believed me if it meant you didn't have to go through this chaos yourself. Honestly."

"I'm excited and terrified to see him again tomorrow," I explained. "It will be different walking in there knowing he could be floating around anywhere."

"Do you want me to come stay the night with you?" she offered. "I'm sure Amber and Ryan would be fine with it."

"No, that's okay. Nash is," I assured her.

"I know Nash is spending the day with you, but I can take the night shift," she explained.

"No, I mean he's staying the whole night."

“The whole night?! You just started dating!” she whispered harshly. “I know you’re upset right now, but what are you thinking?”

“It’s not like that,” I said. “Actually, it got pretty intense right before my dad showed up. But with my dad there, I’ll be lucky to get a moment alone with Nash. I’m sure ghosts don’t sleep and can walk through walls. He can watch over us every moment to make sure nothing funny happens. It’s an overprotective parent’s dream.”

I sighed, thinking of all the times I called my dad “the warden” and “his majesty.” “Is it weird to talk bad about my dad now that he’s dead?”

“No,” she assured me. “I talk bad about my mom all of the time. You know that. She made bad decisions. Your dad has made some bad choices too. We don’t do them or ourselves any favors by pretending they were saints, but we also shouldn’t only focus on them as villains. Your dad loves you, Raven. You can be mad at him, but always recognize that you’re mad at him for loving you too much.”

She was right. Most everything my dad said was a lie. I knew that much. That didn’t matter, though, when he was unwilling to tell the truth and there was no one else to ask.

However, in all those lies he fed me over the years, “I love you” was never one of them. He meant that wholeheartedly.

“I’m an orphan,” I said, feeling the weight of it as it left my mouth. “Will Social Services come and make me go to a foster home like you?”

“Maybe not. You are eighteen,” she explained.

“So are you,” I argued.

“I don’t have to be here, Raven. I’m here for Millie. I wasn’t letting her get thrown into the system without me. I’m here to make sure she’s safe before I move on to adulthood. I’m not taking anyone’s word for it whether

a foster parent is good to her or not. I have to be here and experience it for myself while I can,” she said. Her fierceness in protecting Millie was contagious. It made me want to do everything I could to protect her too.

“What if she gets transferred after you go to college?” I asked, sensing holes in the plan.

“Then I’ll need to borrow your superpower,” she said, kicking my knee from above. “You’ll have to interrogate Millie to make sure she’s telling the truth when she says she’s okay. I might even employ you to interrogate the parents.”

I looked across the dark room at Millie, who was snoring softly. Even with all she had weathered, she still retained her childlike innocence.

“Wouldn’t you rather be living with Peter?” I asked, thinking of her other options.

“I will the moment he marries me,” she stated as if she’d spent many hours thinking about this scenario.

“*Marries* you?” I asked, doing my best to keep my voice low.

“After high school, of course. Right now, he won’t even consider it. We have to see what it’s like for him to live inside for the winter. He’s still adjusting to sleeping in Charles’s old house. I think he even stays outside on some nights for the familiarity of it.

“For now, I’m happy to be here with Millie. I’m happy to be a child for once. This is the most I’ve felt like a kid in a long time, Raven. I don’t have to worry about the next time Millie gets food or whether or not people will find out how screwed up our lives are. I hardly have any worries at all. I get to go to dances with my boyfriend and my best friend and not worry about whether Millie is safe at home or with a friend.

“My grades are already improving, too. I have so much less to worry about. Instead of focusing on surviving from day to day, I can look toward my future. And I love it. I really do.”

The passion in her voice made my heart swell. “I’m happy for you, Brooke. I’m glad you’ve finally found peace.”

“Now we need to find it for you,” she said, turning toward me. “It may be with a foster family, but it may not be. Since you’re the majority age, if you have a place to live and food to eat, they won’t make you leave it. Your dad left you a house and tons of money. You’ll be fine on your own.

“*But* the foster system isn’t as bad as I thought it was. There might be another family in Midnight Springs as caring and considerate as the Stevenses if you decide to give it a shot for your final year of high school.”

“Is there a chance I could stay here with you?” I asked hopefully. I’d do that in a heartbeat and sleep right there on the floor if I had to.

“I wish, but there isn’t. They barely have enough room per child between the three of us. The state wouldn’t allow them to take a fourth,” she said. “I’m sorry. Maybe Michael would be willing to give up his room for you? It’s obvious he doesn’t want to be here,” she joked, trying to make light of the stressful living situation with her foster brother.

I thought about Michael in the next room. “Is he their biological son?”

“I think so,” she said. “I’m almost certain, but it’s not the kind of thing I can come out and ask. I mean, he looks like them, doesn’t he? Like I said, their relationship is weird. Michael is weird.”

The wheels in my head were spinning.

“What would you do if you wanted to leave?” I asked. “Could the Stevenses make you stay here if they didn’t want you to go?”

“Not legally, especially if I could prove I was going to another stable environment. Why?” she asked.

“I’m trying to figure out how all of it works,” I said.

She finally drifted off to sleep, unaware that I wasn’t asking those questions for myself . . . or for her.

NASH

“I don’t appreciate you waltzing in here at 10:23 when your curfew is 10:30,” my dad said as he ate his breakfast with his mouth open. A couple of Cheerios escaped his mouth and landed on the table, but he either didn’t notice or knew someone else would take care of it. “That’s cutting it kind of close, don’t you think?”

Mom went to church, but I didn’t think her faith was sincere. She just needed another escape. Her waitress friends had started bringing her a couple of years ago, and it really lifted her spirits to belong to something. She begged me to join a team at school or come to the youth group, but I couldn’t bring myself to do it—even when I knew Destiny would be there.

I couldn’t go to church and pretend. My life was already at capacity with my acting abilities around my dad, trying to placate him and feign respect. I couldn’t put on another face for the public and pretend like our family was whole. Normal. Healthy. I’d go insane if I had to wear too many masks.

I stayed quiet and ate my cereal with my mouth closed, letting him get all his anger out. He had to release it—one way or another.

The “cutting it kind of close” argument made my blood boil. In ninth grade, I got my first B in English on my interim report card. I busted my butt and was able to raise it to a ninety-one by the end of the semester, but my hard work wasn’t met with praise or even indifference.

I got yelled at because a ninety-one was “cutting it too close.”

The effort I put into school wasn’t worth the “rewards” I was getting. I had to find an easier way to get straight As . . . so I learned how to hack into my teacher’s computers for test answers in order to memorize them. Then I learned how to change my grades in the system when needed. Then I learned how to share my knowledge with other struggling students for money.

I had built a tiny empire at my school underneath the nose of the sheriff, and that was worth any trouble I would get into if I was caught. I also had tons of safety measures to ensure I had alibis if someone ratted on me. I was careful, calculated, and determined.

And then Raven came along, turning every scheming quality of mine up to eleven because she lived at fifty-five.

I smiled when I thought of her. I admired her, and I feared her. She was too brilliant for her own good—or mine.

“Do you think I’m joking?”

I blinked to see my dad looming over me, his face red with anger. “No, sir. I’m sorry.”

He nodded in acceptance of this apology and my well-timed use of the word “sir.” I liked to save that card for when I really needed it.

“Can I go fishing with Jake tonight?” I asked, shooting my shot.

“You like to fish?” he asked, genuinely confused. “Do you even have a fishing license?”

“Yes, sir. I do.” I’d had one for years. He knew absolutely nothing about me.

“Don’t go to the woods,” he warned. “That wolf could still be out there. He’s probably hiding out on old-man Atkins’s land right now even though he isn’t still alive to defend the mongrel. I’ll have to figure out who the new owner is and strike a deal with him so we can hunt for it there again.”

I felt my chest tighten in sadness as I realized that my dad was the one who led the hunt after the wolf—after Peter. He even sent me to ask Peter to *join* the hunt . . . and Peter had to sit in a limo with me and act like none of that ever happened.

I was wondering if the silence Peter gave me was his usual wariness toward others or if he hated me for my dad and his agenda.

“We won’t. Jake has creek access on the back of their land. We aren’t going to the river,” I explained. All of this was true. We had fished there before . . . many times.

“Be back by ten thirty,” he said, “And this time, give it a little more cushion.”

I was so close.

“Actually, I was hoping to stay the night,” I said, continuing the conversation and opening it up to conflict. Both went against my instincts.

“It’s a school night,” he said, as if that alone were an answer of yes or no. I was supposed to take it as such and move on, but I didn’t. I had to get to Raven.

“Yes, sir. But I’ve already done everything I’m supposed to do on the weekends,” I explained.

He looked around as if trying to find something that was inadequate. Every dish was cleaned and put away—so was the laundry. The floors were

swept or vacuumed. He even opened the freezer door to check the ice. The bucket was full, and more were freezing. Although not many leaves had fallen yet, and I'd have to do it again soon, I even raked the yard. I got up before dawn to accomplish all this while he snored loudly down the hall, working through the checklist in my mind.

"How are your grades?" he asked as he glanced outside to see the clean yard.

"Straight As," I said proudly, and I was proud. It wasn't a usual accomplishment of intellect like he wanted, but it definitely spoke to my hacking skills.

I kind of wished I had waited for Mom to come home before I brought it up, but I didn't want to waste any time. I had to get to Raven as soon as possible. I knew her. If I didn't get there early enough, she would find a way to go there on her own. She might already be on her way.

He had no reason to say no, other than my missed curfew on Friday. He knew this too.

"I still haven't had the chance to talk to your teachers about when you left the dance to see if you were lying. I'll check it out now, and if your story pans out, I'll let you stay with Jake," he said. He seemed pretty sure I *was* lying and that my butt would be staying home today.

I nodded, trying to conceal my nervousness. Who would he call? What would he ask? Was I totally screwed? Would I have to sneak out for the first time ever to get to Raven?

"Hello? Yes, this is Sheriff Williams. How are you today?"

He was chipper, kind, and hid his psychotic attitude beautifully. Everyone who met him loved him . . . until they really got to know him.

“My boy says he left the dance at a certain time and checked out on a sign-out sheet. Could you verify that for me? He came home late.”

He spoke as if I were the problem out of the two of us.

As the conversation went on, he didn't look up at me in victory. He would have if he found out something that contradicted my story.

“Go,” he said, nodding his head as he hung up.

I had left the dance on time. He had nothing on me, so I was a free man. I grabbed my bag and got out of there before he could change his mind.

Once I was in my car, I called Jake.

“Dude, what's wrong?” Jake asked as soon as he answered.

“Nothing. Why?” I asked, wondering why someone would answer the phone like that.

“You never call me,” he said. “So something must be up.”

“I need to ask you something without a paper trail,” I explained. “Can I park my car at your house tonight and use your four-wheeler? I'll bring it back in the morning before school and give you money for gas.”

“Ummm . . . sure? Why?”

What was the edited version of the truth that I could tell him?

“It's about a girl,” I said, hoping that would be enough. It was.

“Say no more. It's yours,” he said.

“You're a lifesaver. Thanks, man.”

“No problem. I suppose your alibi is that you crashed here?”

“Yes. Is that okay? I hate to ask you to lie,” I said. After being around Raven, telling the truth seemed more important to me than it ever had.

“It's fine. I'm hoping you'll offer me some future test answers for free in return,” he said as if it were already a done deal and he had a credit on his account with me.

I exploded in laughter. “You’ve got it.”



Jake shook Raven’s hand like a gentleman. She smiled at him politely, but it wasn’t the same smile she reserved for me.

“I’ve never ridden a four-wheeler before,” she said as she stared at it like it was a wild beast.

“You don’t have to do anything besides hang on,” I assured her, mounting it and offering her my hand.

“Where’s my helmet?” she asked, peeking around to try to find it.

“This is the country, Raven. Have you ever seen someone ride a four-wheeler with a helmet on?” It wasn’t like we would be racing or anything.

She grunted and put her hands on her hips. “I’ve never seen anyone ride a four-wheeler, period. I’d like a helmet, please.”

Even though she said “please,” it wasn’t an actual question, and I knew it.

“I’ll see if Jake can find one around here,” I mumbled, stalking toward the garage.

When I returned, she was sitting on the seat, acting like she was driving. Her body was leaned forward, intense, and ready for any imaginary curve or hill coming her way.

She caught me watching her, but she didn't act embarrassed. She was getting comfortable with me, which I loved. She smiled and scooted back so I could sit in front of her.

"See if this fits," I said, tossing her the helmet that belonged to Jake's sister, Jazmyn, from when she was in junior high. It was pink camouflage—the most anti-Raven thing it could have been.

She tried it on, barely able to adjust the straps enough for it to fit, but she made it work. She had to let her hair down to get the helmet on, the blackness shooting out from under the pink camouflage and resting on her shoulders.

"You look cute," I said as I kissed her nose. She grinned and moved her head around like she was showing it off.

"I'll go slow," I assured her as I climbed on.

"I'm not afraid," she said. "I want to go fast. That's why I wanted the helmet."

When the engine roared to life, she wrapped her arms around me tightly. I took off fast so she would hold on even tighter, and we made our way down the backroads to her house.

She screamed with exhilaration, whooping and laughing like a child.

I wanted to experience everything with her. I wanted to be there for each element of fun she had missed out on just to witness her reaction of pure joy.

If I had gone to the dance without her, it would have been like any other dance. I knew I wouldn't have been able to remember it if someone asked

me about it ten years from now. But going with Raven? Seeing her light up as she spun around in circles, dressed like the queen she is for the first time in her life? I'd never forget it.

How many times had I ridden a four-wheeler and taken it for granted? It was only a mode of transportation for me now. It had stopped being "fun" years ago. But with Raven? I was having the time of my life. I was smiling so big that my face was hurting, and I loved every minute of it.

However, when we made it to the gate, she let us in wordlessly. A solemn feeling washed over me, so I drove slower. Walking into her house the first time when ghosts seemed like a crazy bedtime story was hard enough. It was nearly impossible to make myself go back when I knew I was likely to see one . . . and that he hated me for dating his little girl.

The hairs on my arms and the back of my neck stood up as we crossed the threshold into her house, but it wasn't because of her father's presence—it was his absence.

"Dad?" Raven asked, but she didn't yell it. After glancing in every room on the main floor, we tiptoed to the basement.

It didn't seem like he was there, but we had no idea what to make of it. Was he gone forever? Did he only get that one day? Would he jump out at any moment? Was he still here, only completely invisible now? It didn't feel right to talk about him when I didn't know if he could hear me.

"Nothing looks moved from when we left yesterday," I observed. "Even the breaker box is still ajar. I feel like he would have closed that if he could have."

She nodded in agreement. "Let's see what we can find out while it's just us."

We worked all day. While I wanted to kiss her, the last thing I wanted to do was to be interrupted by her dad again. One of us would spend a couple of hours on my computer researching ways to get into the safe while the other would go through her dad's files, working backward like she said. All the while, my eyes darted around the room. My muscles began to hurt from being tense from head to toe all day.

She went upstairs to fix us something quick for lunch and supper—sandwiches and a frozen pizza, and I could hardly concentrate while she was gone. She refused to have me escort her, but I was terrified to let her out of my sight here.

After bringing our supper dishes upstairs, she returned with some old blankets, a sleeping bag, and some pillows.

“I figured we'd crash here when we got too tired to keep going,” she explained, setting up a sleeping area on the concrete floor.

“Why here?” I asked. The main floor felt like a safer bet and was probably more comfortable. It wasn't like I was expecting to sleep in the bed with her, but I didn't want to stay in another room either. I assumed I'd camp out in her doorway or something.

“So we don't have to go far,” she explained. The sleeping area was big enough for two. My face must have given away my surprise because she jumped right on chastising me.

“Don't get any ideas in that teenage boy head of yours, Nash. My lines have not moved,” she said, wagging her finger playfully.

I held my hands up, forgetting for a moment that her dad could be listening. “I'm surprised we aren't on separate sides of the room, that's all! Honest!”

She squinted her eyes. “You are being honest. Let me ask you this—do you want to cross lines with me?”

“Of course I do,” I said. Was that not obvious? Why did she even have to ask?

Her eyebrows raised as they did when she was surprised by whatever truth came out of my mouth.

“But you won’t?” she verified. She knew the answer, but I’d say it as many times as she needed me to.

“I will not,” I assured her. “I know you don’t want to, and I completely respect that.”

“Have you before?” She looked scared to ask but did it anyway because she didn’t shy away from something because it scared her.

This time, though, I hesitated . . . because I was the one who was afraid.

“Nash Williams? Have you gone all the way before?” Raven asked, raising her voice. It was a lose-lose situation, and I honestly would have rather had this conversation with my own mother than with her.

I winced, unable to hide my discomfort. “Do you really want to know?”

“That means you have. How many times?” Her voice was demanding and already too jealous for me to want to continue this disastrous conversation. I wondered how convincingly I could fake an illness before I realized I couldn’t fake anything around Raven.

“I don’t know, like ten?” I guessed. Why did that matter?

Her jaw dropped. “Ten different girls! Are you kidding me? How did you even find the time?”

“No, no, not ten different girls; it was only one girl. You asked how many times. I thought you meant how many different occasions,” I said. Was it

getting hot down here? I was having trouble breathing. Forget faking; I was probably about to pass out for real.

She grimaced. “Oh. Sorry. Just Destiny, then?”

“Just Destiny,” I verified. “I never really had a girlfriend before her.”

Other girls from school had the “title” of being my girlfriend over the years, but none felt real until Destiny.

“That’s why she’s so important to you?” She didn’t sound jealous then; she sounded like the same old Raven dissecting a situation to learn more about it.

I honestly hadn’t thought of it that way. Did I only like her because she was all I’d ever known? She wasn’t nearly as interesting as Raven was. Even though they looked really similar apart from their hair and Raven’s glasses, Raven was more beautiful. She held herself differently. I couldn’t put my finger on it, but she had already become more important to me than Destiny ever was. We were real with each other—all truth, all the time. It made us closer than I ever thought I could be with someone. I trusted her completely.

Raven mistook my silence as daydreams about Destiny, not herself. I saw how her face fell as she looked toward the blankets, straightening them up even though nothing was wrong with them.

“She’s not as important to me anymore,” I told her. “She gets less important every single day. Look at me. See for yourself that I’m telling the truth.”

She didn’t.

“I’m not ready to go all the way,” she whispered. “I don’t want to. Not yet.”

“That’s fine, Raven,” I said, running to turn her face to mine. “That’s not what’s important. What’s important is that you know I would choose you. If she walked up to me this very moment and wanted to get back together, I would say no and I would choose you.”

Tears filled her eyes. “You mean it, don’t you?”

“I do,” I said, kissing her gently.

“It was fake, Nash. All of this. It was all supposed to be a game,” she said, pointing wildly between the two of us.

I smiled. “You played it too good.”

She kissed me again and grabbed my laptop. “I’ll keep looking for ways to cut that safe open down here.”

She snuggled up in the covers and fell asleep with her glasses still on and one hand on the keyboard a few hours later. I watched her for a while, unable to fathom how strong and brave she was. It didn’t seem like she was afraid of anything, and I was always filled with anxiety. I wanted to spend every moment I could with her so that maybe I could soak up some of her courage.

I couldn’t go to sleep, though. Not yet. I had to keep going until I found something. I had to make progress. Then, I could snuggle next to her under those covers and have the best rest of my life.

Most of the notes didn’t make sense. He could have been talking about anything right under my nose, but I couldn’t understand it. My eyes started crossing from staring at the screen for so long.

I noted the last date I looked at chronologically and abandoned the strategic approach. I started clicking wildly, hoping fate would bring me to something that gave away the crazy doctor’s secrets. I was angry at him for

trying to hide so much from Raven . . . but he had to realize how futile it was. Raven wouldn't give up until she found the truth.

The air around me got colder when I hovered over certain folders. My gut instinct was to avoid those at all costs, but then I realized that's what *he* wanted me to do. Those were folders he *didn't* want me to click on. I sought out the feeling instead and let it lead me further down the rabbit hole.

My teeth began to chatter when I opened the file titled Experiment 277. Raven slept peacefully on the floor with her arms out from under the covers. She didn't seem to feel the chill at all, but I was so cold that I breathed on my trembling fingers to warm them back up while I scanned the screen for the reason behind his dramatic response.

The geneticist language was too hard for me to understand, but I searched for context clues. This was the one. I knew it. Something on this page was important, and I had to figure out what it was.

"You can't tell her," her dad said as his face appeared beside the screen. "Please don't tell her. I'll do anything. Please don't tell her."

I wanted to run across the room to get away from him, but I held my ground and kept reading. The sweat rings around the bottom of my glass frosted over. He was terrified of what this file held, and he already thought I knew something. I had to play that to my advantage.

"Why did you do it?" I asked coldly. I hoped he was upset enough that he wouldn't call my bluff.

He was.

"My wife had died," he explained, his eyes sad next to the glow of the computer screen. He looked lost and broken, like it had happened only yesterday. "She had cancer. I had lost the only family I had. We were never able to have children, and my parents had already passed as well. I was

alone, and when I figured out how to do it, I couldn't help myself. I didn't want to be alone anymore."

"Couldn't help yourself?" I goaded him, continuing to try to read even though he was distracting me. What on earth was the crazy man talking about?

"You're young. You don't know what it's like to feel old and without purpose. I wanted a family. I did it for a good reason. I used that book to do a lot of terrible things for money, but this wasn't one of them. You can't tell anyone. Not a soul. I don't know what they'll do to her. I don't know what she'll do to herself. It will be too much for her to mentally digest," he said. I couldn't figure out what on earth was going on, but I couldn't give away my ignorance.

The words "DNA," "black hair," and "compromised vision" bounced back at me. They were the only few words on the page that I understood.

He was a geneticist that messed around with magic. We knew that much . . . But what did this have to do with Raven? What was the big "secret" here?

"Raven said her mom died in childbirth," I said, her comments ringing in my brain, contradicting the story he had told.

"That's just her theory about what happened. I couldn't tell her the truth. How could I explain that she died before Raven was ever alive?" he yelled. He was so afraid and distraught.

I jumped off the stool to get closer to the computer, even though it meant getting closer to the ghost of my girlfriend's father.

It couldn't be.

"It's Raven," I breathed. "Experiment 277 . . . is Raven."

“Shhhh!!!” he yelled, looking around as if we were surrounded by spies. Raven slept soundly on the floor, unaware of the drama unfolding all around her.

“Raven wasn’t born,” I said, collapsing on the stool behind me. It creaked against the concrete floor, but she still lay peacefully under those covers . . . waiting for me, as if everything hadn’t just changed. “She was made—here in this lab. You created her.”

RAVEN

When I opened my eyes, Nash lay beside me, wide awake. He was propped on his elbow, staring down at me with an odd expression on his blurry face.

I smiled at him, but something was weird about the smile he returned. I expected him to be filled with as much happiness as I was about getting to stay the night together. I felt so close to him just by sleeping next to him. We hadn't even kissed, but the intimacy I felt toward him was incredible. But even though I couldn't see him clearly, I could tell he wasn't thinking about any of that at all. Something was wrong.

"Hey, is everything okay?" I asked. He handed me my glasses. I didn't remember taking them off, so he must have done it while I was asleep. It would have been sweet if I wasn't so suspicious.

"Yeah," he said. It was a lie, but I concealed my knowledge of that. Inside, I bristled at knowing he was lying to me. I thought we were beyond that. I thought he knew he couldn't get away with it.

What was so terrible that he was even trying? He had told me the truth about sleeping with Destiny, for crying out loud. What could be harder for

me to hear than that?

“Did you sleep alright?” I asked, keeping my tone neutral while I fished for more clues.

“Yeah,” he said. Another lie. Something was *really* wrong, and he wasn’t going to come out and tell me what it was. I was going to have to pry it out of him.

“Oh. I didn’t. I should have gotten more layers of bedding because I’m so sore from this floor,” I said, stretching and trying to seem nonchalant. That was no lie. It was stupid to think we could sleep on concrete and be comfortable, but I didn’t want to move things to my room. It was too weird . . . especially with the idea that my dad could show up at any moment.

After stretching, I glanced over to see the troubled look on his face. He was really upset, and I couldn’t figure out why. Did he see my dad last night? Did he scare him? Was he unable to sleep because he was so worried about a ghost being in the house?

He took a deep breath, which stopped me from launching into more questions. “I need to tell you something.”

Here it was—the reason for his dishonesty. He was going to come clean. Internally, I sighed in relief. I needed things to go back to normal with us.

“Okay, what is it?” I asked, trying not to sound too eager.

“I was able to get into the safe last night,” he said. For some reason, he didn’t seem as excited about it as I would have expected him to be. This wasn’t the big secret. There was more.

“What was in it?” I asked, sitting straight up. “Was the book there? Was it empty?”

He shook his head. “I don’t know. I didn’t look. As soon as I got the combination correct, I wrote it down and closed it back. It was hard to keep

myself from looking inside, but it didn't feel like my place to be the one who opened it."

That, at least, was the truth.

I threw the covers off and sprinted across the room. "Where is it? The paper you wrote it down on?"

He stood slowly and pointed to a scrap of paper beside the computer. It irritated me how he moved at a sloth's pace. He didn't seem half as eager to open it as I was.

The paper read, "72836277."

"That's an eight-digit code," I observed. "How on earth did you guess it?"

"I didn't guess it. I hacked it," he said, which was a lie. He probably thought he could lie about hacking things since I didn't understand it.

Did he think I was some normal person he could say anything to and I would eat it up? It was infuriating.

I typed the numbers in. When the lock clicked open, I released a breath I didn't know I was holding. Nash came to peer inside, too, suddenly acting interested.

All that lay inside was an old, tattered book. It looked like the spine had been stitched together by hand.

"The spellbook," I whispered. I was almost afraid to touch it. How powerful could this inanimate object be? Could I be cursed just by opening it?

"You must keep it away from everyone," Dad said, appearing to my left. I jumped back, but I was thankful to see him again.

I gave him a small smile but shifted into business mode. I wasn't about to let him push me around when he had no power over me.

“Okay, but why? Why is it so bad if Donovan Glory gets a hold of this?” I asked, trying to goad him into giving me more information.

Why were the men in my life holding out on me? Didn't they know how ruthlessly I sought out the truth?

“He wants to do something unnatural with it,” he said, being honest but vague.

Honest but vague was his usual mode of communication. It angered me to no end.

“They didn't kill you, Dad,” I explained. “Nash and I went there yesterday. It was clear that they didn't do it.”

“You did what?!” He looked angrily at Nash like he should have been responsible enough to stop me.

As if he could have stopped me.

“We overheard Donovan and his wife talking,” I continued. Nash didn't seem as scared of my dad as he had before. Seeing him wasn't what was making him act weird. “She seemed devastated that you were dead, and so did he. They aren't the ones that did it. They needed you alive to get this book.”

He wasn't listening to me. “It had to be them. I was a hostage in their home, Raven. It's not like someone else could have infiltrated it to get to me. It doesn't take a genius to put two and two together here.”

“What about Dawson?” Nash asked. He showed no fear toward Dad at all as he spoke. “They said something about him being the one that found you dead. Could he have been the one that actually did it?”

“No, he wouldn't do that. He's only a kid, maybe a year or so older than you guys. He doesn't seem like the type to do something like that,” he said.

He seemed certain, but that wasn't enough for me to mark him off my suspect list.

"They wanted you alive," I argued. "They wanted you to do something for them. They considered you their only chance. And they had *no idea* how you died. It wasn't like you were shot or stabbed."

"Do you actually remember how you died?" Nash asked. "Do you remember *anything* about it?"

Dad shook his head. "No. I only remember making the wish. I remember *knowing* I was going to die, and without even thinking, I wished to be able to protect and warn Raven. If I had known I was using my only wish, I would have been smarter and wished to live through whatever it was, but I was too emotional. I had been thinking for days about how I should use my wish to escape. I didn't want to waste it. I wanted to be smart about it because you're right—I didn't feel like I was in any danger. But in the moment when I knew I was going to die, all logic disappeared, and I reacted out of pure emotion."

"Dad, what if you had a heart attack or something?" I asked, trying to stick to the facts instead of getting all mushy about him wishing to protect me. "What if the watch failed?"

He looked at me in shock, like he couldn't believe I would say something so offensive.

"Raven Cordella Haskins, I would *not* make a watch that *failed!* Do you know who you are talking to?"

I sighed. "I'm sorry, Dad. I know. I'm just trying to look at this from all angles, okay? What if it *was* an accident of some kind?"

"There are no accidents," he said. "Only unforeseen consequences."

It seemed like the same thing to me, but we were going in circles.

I picked up the book and sat it on the metal table, opening it slowly.

“Do not read the spells aloud,” he warned me. “I mean it, Raven—not even a word. I know you’re curious and I can’t stop you, but please do not even dip your *toe* into this world by using *any* of those spells.”

“I wasn’t planning on it,” I said, and I meant it. “All I want is to understand what’s going on, Dad. You could make this a lot easier if you were more forthcoming.”

I stared straight at him, daring him to come out and tell me everything. If he would, I truly wouldn’t read the spellbook. I only wanted information. I didn’t want to mess around with something ancient and dangerous.

But if he wouldn’t come clean, then I didn’t mind getting my hands dirty to find out what was going on.

“I can’t,” he said. When he said it, he was looking at Nash, not me. Nash looked away.

“Donovan’s going to ask me for the book,” I said. “He said so himself on the phone call we eavesdropped on. What do I need to do? How do I keep it safe?”

Dad sighed. “It doesn’t look like you can. I couldn’t even keep it safe from you, and you aren’t nearly as dangerous or desperate as that man, believe me.”

“So what do we do?” Nash asked, stepping closer to me. “How do we keep Raven safe?”

He bit his lip like the truth hurt him. “You have to get rid of it. Destroy the book.”

“I can’t destroy it. If I do, Donovan will come after me with a vengeance. That’s the opposite of what we want,” I explained. “That’s a terrible idea.”

“It’ll have to look like an accident,” Nash said, the wheels turning underneath that lying mohawk. “Like it wasn’t your fault, and you weren’t doing it to keep it away from him.”

“Nash, we can’t destroy it. It could hold all the answers we need,” I said, pleading with him. He wouldn’t look me in the eye. “What about all of the good that could come from it?”

Dad put his hand on mine. I couldn’t feel his touch, but it was like I had put my hand in a freezer. “No good can come from this, honey. I never should have used this book in the first place. Mixing magic and science is dangerous. I have so many regrets. I don’t want you to know about them because I don’t want you to carry their weight . . . and I don’t want you to use this book to generate your own regrets.”

“Why don’t you trust me?” I asked him. It was a burning question I had wanted to ask for years.

“I do trust you, Raven. I trust you completely,” he said. It wasn’t a lie.

“Then why did you lock me away? Why did I have to beg and plead and threaten to call Social Services if you didn’t send me to school? Why is that the only place I’m ever allowed to go? Why did you rob me of my childhood by trapping me behind these gates?”

His eyes closed. “I did it to protect you.” Truth.

“But you don’t even trust me enough to tell me what you’re protecting me from!” I yelled. “You don’t think I can handle it!”

“I don’t want you to have to try,” he argued. “Parents have to hide things from their children, Raven. Knowledge is both power and pain. We tell you not to talk to strangers, but we don’t tell you the gory details about how children get kidnapped and sold into sexual slavery. We give you an edited

version to protect you until you're old enough to handle the truth. That's all I'm trying to do here."

"But I'm not a child anymore, Dad! I'm eighteen, and I'm even living on my own now. I've been thrust into adulthood by this mess, and you need to start treating me like it," I said, my voice soft and pleading with him to see me differently.

I saw in his eyes that he couldn't, though. He would always think of me as fragile and incompetent.

"Let's get rid of it, Raven," Nash said, butting in. "I'll take it and destroy it myself. You won't even have to know how I did it. I'll take the blame for any fallout with Donovan."

He was telling the truth, but lies lay beyond it. He wasn't acting the same. He was nervous, and I couldn't figure out why.

Not yet, anyway. I needed more time and clues.

I pulled the stool out from under the metal table, slowly, so it screeched across the concrete and made my point clearer. "I'm going to start reading this book now. You're both welcome to stand and hover over me like the helicopter parents you are to make sure I don't so much as whisper the words out loud, but I will read it all before we do anything—cover to freaking cover."

20

NASH

“Thank you,” Dr. Haskins said as he appeared beside me in the kitchen.

It was 6:05. I had gotten exactly forty minutes of sleep the night before. I was so exhausted—too exhausted to deal with him and too exhausted to think clearly about what I should do. It didn’t matter that I’d spent all night weighing the pros and cons. I was no closer to a solution than I had been when I gazed upon her sleeping face while I held the weight of her father’s secret.

“Don’t thank me yet,” I warned him. “I don’t know if I’m going to tell her or not.”

“You’ll realize you shouldn’t,” he said. “You’ll realize that it would only hurt her and that it’s better for her to think she had a normal birth and childhood. That’s what is keeping you from spilling the truth to her now. You know how badly it would hurt her.”

I looked at the ghost square in his transparent eyes. I wasn’t afraid of him anymore. I was angry at him for putting me in this situation with Raven. He should have told her the truth years ago. “Do *not* tell me what I think or

believe. I will do my best to determine what is best for Raven, and that's what I will do. Not what's best for *you*, but for Raven."

"That's exactly what I did, boy," he said, narrowing those dead eyes at me. "Don't ever imply that it wasn't again."

We stared each other down in anger but tried to look nonchalant when we heard Raven climb the staircase. She entered the kitchen with the book in hand, oblivious to the emotions surging through her father and me.

"You're bringing it?" I questioned. I should have guessed as much. She had even locked it in the bathroom with her so I couldn't destroy it while she was in the shower.

She didn't trust me, not like she did the day before. She knew something was up. She had to.

"Of course I am. I'm not parting with it," she said, stuffing it in her backpack with a roughness that made her dad cringe.

He loved the book, and he hated it. I was still working to figure it out.

But after my revelation the night before, my curiosity was no longer burning. I didn't want to know any more of his secrets. I honestly didn't care to learn how bad things would get the further we traveled down this road. For me, ignorance would have been bliss . . . and *that* was why I hadn't told Raven yet.

"How are you getting to school?" her dad asked. "Have you been able to get there on your own? How have you been doing without me here?"

"Just dandy," she said with a hint of sarcasm. "I've been bumming rides off my friends and boyfriend because I don't have a vehicle and wouldn't know how to drive it if I did. I even went to the back-to-school dance. If you ask the right people, they'll even tell you I got hammered."

His eyes threatened to pop out of his head as he balled up his fists. I had no idea why she was always pushing his buttons without fear of his reaction. Was it because he was a ghost and couldn't really do anything to her? Or was it because she had finally snapped and had enough?

"She's been alright," I said, trying to reassure him. "Brooke and I are making sure she gets everywhere she needs to. And she didn't drink at the dance."

Her dad didn't seem comforted by my words. "Anything else *funny* happen at this dance?"

"Funny?" I asked when I realized his question was directed at me. "What do you mean?"

Raven sighed and rolled her eyes. "He wants to know if we had sex in the middle of the dance floor. Which we did, as soon as the chaperones turned their heads, that is. It was so hard to time it right."

"RAVEN!" her dad and I yelled.

"What? If he's going to ask ridiculous questions, then I'm going to give ridiculous answers," she said. She was so unaffected by our reactions that it would have been comical if I wasn't so frustrated and embarrassed.

I looked her father in the eye again. "I kissed her for the first time the morning after the dance."

The memory of that kiss softened me. The moment was so perfect. I thought of nothing else on the drive over. I wasn't going to let another minute go by being in her presence without kissing her. It was unbelievable that I got to spend the whole night by her side. I wanted to punch her father in the face for ruining that for us. Those moments of closeness should have been just as perfect and just as special. Instead, they were tainted by my guilt and fear.

He looked between Raven and I like he didn't know who to believe but decided to believe me because my story was easier to swallow. "Why are you leaving so early?"

"Nash's car is at a friend's house," she said. "We have to ride the four-wheeler there to get it."

"A *four-wheeler*? You can't ride one of those! Those are death traps!" His creepy voice echoed in the empty house as he yelled.

"Says the ghost," she said, swinging her backpack over her shoulder and fixing her bun. "Dad, I miss you, okay? I wish you were really here. I wish I could hug you and you could tell me that all of this was an elaborate nightmare. But I'm mad at you. I'm mad at you for treating me like a five-year-old. I'm mad at you for leaving me this mess and not arming me with the knowledge to navigate it. So if this is the last time I see you, I want you to know how mad at you that I am . . . and how much I love you anyway."

Her dad floated over to her and put his hand on her cheek. I knew she couldn't feel it, but her eyes still glistened with tears at his sweet gesture.

"I'm sorry," he said hoarsely. "If this is the last time I get to see you, I want you to know that I love you and that I'm sorry."

She nodded and looked at me. "You ready?"

"Ready," I said.

I expected her to interrogate me as soon as we got out of earshot, but she didn't. Maybe she wasn't as good at detecting lies as she thought she was?

At the gate, a fancy car waited on the other side. I felt her flinch and hold me tighter, causing my own anxiety to quieten as I emotionally stepped up to protect her.

"Don't open it yet," I told her as I killed the engine.

A man stepped out of his car and smiled at us. “Good morning. You must be Raven. And you are?”

“Nash,” I said, not offering my last name. I didn’t like people to associate me with my dad if they didn’t have to, though some people knew from my first name alone. It wasn’t like it was incredibly common.

“Hello, I’m Donovan Glory. I’m here to speak with Dr. Haskins. I’m a professor at Midnight Springs University, and I’m doing a study on genetics. He said he would let me borrow some books from his library to help with my research. Is now a good time to meet with him?”

The man wasted no time.

He was smart to act like the book was owed to him anyway—and like he thought the doctor was home.

“He isn’t home, sir,” Raven said. Her voice was calm and showed no evidence that she knew anything was amiss—like the fact that he was dead. “I’m sorry, what was your name again? I’ll be sure to tell him you stopped by.”

“Donovan Glory,” he said, his smile faltering a little since his first attempt didn’t work. “I don’t mind coming to look for it myself?”

“Donovan Glory,” she repeated, as if this were the first time she’d heard his name and she was committing it to memory. “I wouldn’t put you through that, sir. My dad is organized, but he’s the only one that understands his organizational system. You’d be going on a wild-goose chase. Plus, I’m on my way to school now.”

“Oh well. I’ll come back another time then,” he said. He was trying to sound cheerful, but it had the undertones of a threat.

“Sounds good! I’m sorry we couldn’t be more helpful,” were the words that came out of Raven’s mouth. What she was really saying was “Bring it.

I dare you.”

We watched him get in his car and leave before she opened the gate to let us out.

“Go as slowly as you can to let us through,” she said in my ear. “Make sure the gate won’t be open long enough for him to sneak in behind us.”

I obeyed and got us to my car safely. The ride was not as fun as it was the day before. I was so tired and so guilty. I thought staying up to guess the code would take away some of my anxiety, but it didn’t. I thought doing something good for her would negate the bad, but it only opened the door to more problems.

We were running late after our setback with Donovan, so I left the key in the four-wheeler and Jazmyn’s helmet on the seat. I doubted she needed it anymore, but we certainly didn’t need it either.

“What if he breaks in?” I asked as I drove her to school in my car. “You just told him the house will be empty.”

“He won’t find the book,” she said, nudging her backpack in the floorboard with her foot. “That’s all that matters, right? There isn’t much else he can steal from me. Plus, I kind of hope he does. I hope my dad scares him to death. I hope he realizes our house is haunted and never comes back.”

“I thought you were sure he’s innocent,” I said.

“I’m not sure of anything,” she admitted, staring intensely at me. “But I’m going to find it all out as soon as I can.”

She knew. She had to know I was hiding something.

I tried my best to look innocent. “So what’s our next move?”

She bit her lip. I could see it in my periphery. “I need to read this book. Maybe it will give me clues about what I’m looking for on the computer.”

“Sounds good. What do you need me to do?” I said, trying to sound as normal as I could. Was I trying too hard?

I put the car in park and stared ahead, too nervous to look at her.

“I need you to kiss me,” she said, leaning toward me across the console.

My smile was genuine as I turned to face her. “That, I can most certainly do.”

I tried to kiss her with the same passion we had kissed in the past, but it didn’t come out that way. Instead of an “I want more” kiss, this kiss was filled with desperation. Regret. Guilt. Shame.

I could feel her skepticism and anger in her kiss, but she smiled at me sweetly when we broke apart.

There was no way I could keep this up forever. I couldn’t live in constant dishonesty with her like her dad did. If I didn’t tell her the truth, then she would leave me for keeping a secret—even if she didn’t know what the secret was. Things were too weird with us. They wouldn’t ever be good again until I came clean about what I knew.

But what if he was right? The man obviously had years to weigh the pros and cons of telling her the truth. Would she be devastated? Was it better to risk her leaving me to save her sanity?

How on earth was I supposed to make a call like this?

To heap coals upon my burning head, Destiny was waiting for me at my locker after third period. I glanced around for Raven, but she wasn’t in sight.

Was I allowed to talk to Destiny now that things were real between us? I wasn’t sure where the lines were anymore.

I needed clear lines. I needed straightforward instructions. I had no problem following the rules when I knew what they were.

That's why I hated my dad so much. The rules were always changing with him, rigging the game so I could never win.

"Why wouldn't you come out to talk to me last night?" Destiny asked. Anger and hurt radiated off of her. "You flat-out rejected me, and all I wanted to do was talk."

"I wasn't home," I told her. I broke eye contact and looked around for Raven again. Where was she? Was she okay? Had Donovan gotten to her?

Was she avoiding me because of my deception?

Destiny scoffed. "I know that. Your dad said you were at Jake's, so I went there to talk to you. You wouldn't answer my calls."

I had blocked her number, so I didn't even know she called . . . but it didn't seem like the right time to bring that up.

"Jake said you didn't feel like talking, and he wouldn't let me in," she said. "What's going on, Nash? I know you're with Raven now, but doesn't our connection—our past—mean anything to you? Can we not even be friends?"

I tried to make my voice kind as I dodged her questions. "What did you want to talk to me about?"

"I wanted to tell you that I'm sorry," she began. "I wanted to tell you that I love you and that I was wrong. I've been hanging out with Josie a lot now doing cheerleading, and I'm seeing things so much more clearly."

"You're a cheerleader now?" I asked, surprised.

She winced. "I just told you I love you, and all you heard is that I'm a cheerleader?"

"Sorry," I said, unsure of how to respond.

"Do you love me?" she asked, taking a step closer. I leaned back a little.

“I did,” I admitted. “I don’t know if I still do. A lot has changed. I’ve changed.”

It was the absolute truth with no filters. Raven made me want to communicate like that all the time. I didn’t see Destiny the way I used to.

“Why, Nash? What can I do to make you remember?” she stroked my upper arm with her dainty, porcelain hand.

Raven’s skin was just as white, but something about her seemed stronger than Destiny. Destiny seemed breakable. Raven was indestructible. I couldn’t imagine anything breaking her . . . except the secret that I held so close to my chest.

“You don’t know *why* things have changed? You want to know what you can do? First, you could have trusted me when I told you nothing was going on with Josie,” I snapped. “That whole thing was absolutely ridiculous. Second, you can stop touching me and flirting with me because I *am* with Raven now, and I am *not* a cheater, contrary to your belief.”

She jerked her hand back, becoming angry and defensive. “I told you that I know you were telling the truth now!”

“Because someone else verified it!” I said, matching her anger. “I told you the truth, and you treated me as if I was a liar and a cheat all along. Saying you believe me *now* doesn’t carry any weight at all! I never lied to you about any of it!”

Raven appeared at my side and linked her arm through mine. Destiny looked scared, but not nearly as scared as she should have been.

“Hello, Destiny,” she said, smiling at her like a kitten with a mouse.

“We have a history,” Destiny said, directing her anger at Raven. “You don’t get to swoop in here and derail that when you’ve been dating for a matter of hours.”

“We have a future,” Raven shot back. Her voice was still kind. She still wore that sweet smile of hers. It was chilling. “And you don’t get to swoop in here and claim something you tossed aside.”

Destiny huffed and turned away with tears in her eyes. If I knew her, and I liked to think I did, she was going to the bathroom to cry where no one could see her.

Chloe, who might have been standing there unnoticed the whole time, followed her.

“Sorry about that,” Raven said, squeezing my bicep as she unlinked from me. “I didn’t know anything was happening over here until it already got out of hand.”

“You aren’t mad at me?” I asked.

“Do I need to be?” Her eyes were suspicious as they darted around my face, looking for clues the way she did.

“I didn’t know if I was allowed to talk to her,” I admitted. “I didn’t want to hurt your feelings or make you feel like I betrayed you.”

“You can talk to whoever you want to, Nash,” she said. “Tell anyone else whatever lies or truths that come to your mind. I don’t care. Just tell me the truth, and we’ll be fine.”

It was a dare, and I didn’t know how to play it. I stared down at my shoes, avoiding her gaze like the guilty criminal I was.

“Nash, what happened last night?” She was done playing games. “Did it have to do with Destiny?”

“No, it didn’t,” I said, thankful that at least that was true.

She accepted this. “Okay, then what was it? Why are you hiding something from me?”

“I’m not hiding it forever,” I said, hoping that came out as the truth. “I don’t know how to talk about it yet. I will, though. I’m just trying to find the right words.”

I couldn’t tell if she thought this was true or not. “But we are still okay? This is still real?”

“Yes,” I said, kissing her lightly in the hall for whoever to see. “This is real. It probably always was, and I was too stupid to see it.”

She smiled her real smile and kissed me again.

“I’ve gotta find Jake,” I said, looking around as the hall was thinning out. “Destiny said she showed up there to talk to me, but he wouldn’t let her in. I need to make sure my dad didn’t call or anything.”

“I don’t think Jake’s here today,” she said. “I haven’t seen him yet, anyway.”

My stomach dropped as I realized I hadn’t seen him yet, either. I should have taken the time to go inside and talk to him when I dropped off the four-wheeler and got in my car. I had a sinking feeling that Destiny screwed up my alibi, and I had no way to verify if she had before walking through the door to my house.

RAVEN

“Nash Williams, please report to the principal’s office,” the secretary said over the intercom.

We were too old for our classmates to say “ooooo” but not old enough to mind our own business. Everyone stared at him in silence as he made his way out of the room.

His eyes met mine for a brief moment, but there was only surprise on his face. This didn’t have anything to do with whatever he was hiding from me.

I waited an appropriate amount of time before following him.

“I need to see the nurse,” I whispered to Mr. Bernard.

He glanced up at me, scanned my face, and went back to grading papers. “You don’t look sick. Go sit down and finish your work. If you still feel bad, you can see the nurse between classes.”

“It’s imminent, sir. It cannot wait,” I argued, trying to sound panicked.

“What cannot wait?” he asked without looking up. His tone implied that there wasn’t anything I could say to sway him. “What cannot wait another thirty minutes until you have a break between classes?”

I feigned embarrassment. “Um, I don’t want to say it out loud.”

“What, Haskins? What’s so wrong that you feel like you need to leave my class at this exact moment?” Mr. Bernard asked, finally looking up at me again with irritation written all over his face.

I leaned closer and whispered, “I need a tampon.” I stuffed every syllable with the discomfort I would have felt if it were true.

His face turned deep red as he stared at me with wide eyes. “Go.”

I nodded and did my best to convey “embarrassed gratitude.” I wished I had a jacket to tie around my waist to sell it even better, but the weather wasn’t quite cool enough yet.

Nash was already in the office with Jake and the principal when I got there. The three of them sat in chairs while their dads stood in their police uniforms by the door, which was shut. The walls were clear but kind of blurry, making it so I couldn’t read lips or expressions.

I couldn’t hear a word they were saying, and the secretary stood between me and them.

“Can I help you?” she asked, putting her hand on the receiver as someone prattled in her ear.

“Is Mrs. Cumberland available?” I asked as I looked at her empty office.

“No, she’s out today. Do you want to leave a note for her?” She pointed to a notepad on her desk.

“No, thank you,” I said, waving goodbye as I walked out. “I’ll try again tomorrow. It’s not urgent.”

I had to come up with a better plan. If I had Nash with me, we could have hacked into the speakerphone and listened to the whole conversation. If I had attic access, I could have listened from above. If windows weren’t see-through, I could have come around from outside and lifted it up enough to listen. If I was invisible, I could join them and eavesdrop unseen.

Nothing seemed feasible. My mind was spinning and coming up with a blank page.

Jake and his dad exited the offices first, so I hid around the corner.

“Don’t make me come up here again,” Jake’s dad said, his voice full of weary and sadness. “Things are hard enough at work without having to hear about how my kid is corrupting the sheriff’s son, okay?”

“I know, Dad. I’m sorry. I was just helping out a friend,” he said. “You know what he deals with.”

“Yeah, I know,” he said. “Believe me, I know.”

They parted ways without any further comment. Jake turned the corner and almost jumped when he saw me.

“Shhh,” I said, pointing to the office doors.

“You don’t want to be here,” he whispered. “Come on. I’ll walk you back to class.”

I shook my head. “I want to know what’s going on. Why were you all in there?”

“I’ll tell you on the way,” he said, motioning for me to leave the scene.

He was lying, and he wanted me to go too badly. I couldn’t do it.

The doors opened again, and Jake hid beside me.

“Please, Raven. He wouldn’t want you here, and you need to respect that,” he demanded, angry and desperate to get me to leave.

“I don’t care what the sheriff wants,” I whispered back angrily. The sheriff was a jerk, and he didn’t deserve my respect.

“I meant Nash,” he said sadly.

And he was telling the truth.

“What the hell did you think you were doing?” the sheriff asked. His voice was low, angry, and frightening. He thought they were alone in the

quiet hallway.

“I wasn’t doing anything,” Nash said. His voice was also low, but much calmer than his father’s. He wasn’t trying to egg anything on like I did with my dad. There was no attitude dripping from his words.

“You d*** sure weren’t thinking either,” he said. “Now I’m going to ask you for the last time—where did you go last night?”

“What does it matter? I’m here at school. I wasn’t doing anything wrong or illegal. I was helping someone. I was doing something good,” he argued, his voice still calm and calculated.

“You’re a dirty rotten liar,” his dad said, seething. “You lied to my face. Your mother bawled her eyes out when I told her. You wouldn’t have lied if it wasn’t to cover up something illegal and stupid.”

I moved to go defend him, but Jake held both of my arms firmly from behind.

“No,” he said gently in my ear. “You’ll make it worse.”

But he was wrong. Wasn’t he? I had diffused the situation the night of the dance. Didn’t I?

Didn’t I? Or did I only make it worse, and Nash hid it from me?

“I didn’t mean anything bad by it,” Nash said. “I really didn’t do anything wrong.”

“You don’t think disrespecting me is wrong? You better hope Tim and Jake aren’t lying about not knowing what you were up to. If I find out Tim went behind my back like that, I’d have his badge faster than you could spit out your next lie,” he threatened. “I may do it anyway because I don’t believe them. *That* ought to teach the three of you a lesson about trying to pull something over on me.”

“You can’t be serious,” Nash said, attitude sneaking in for the first time. “You wouldn’t actually do something like that.”

I felt Jake tense behind me, a foreboding sign of what was to come.

“I am dead f***** serious,” he said, his voice still a harsh whisper. “I will ruin your life and everyone else’s who dares to disobey me. Say goodbye to your car, by the way. I’m going to show you just how much you don’t want to cross me, you stupid kid.”

“You’re insane,” Nash said, his voice at a normal decibel. It sounded like he was yelling after all the whispering. I flinched in Jake’s arms.

“You keep your voice down, boy,” he warned. “Or I’ll make things a lot worse for you than I was planning to.”

“Why?” Nash said, getting louder. “So no one knows how you really are? So I don’t draw too much attention to your dysfunctional mood swings and *narcissistic* personality?!”

I heard scuffling and lunged toward them, only to be held back by Jake again. His fingers were digging into my arms enough to bruise me, but only because I was fighting so hard.

“Pack your locker up, boy,” the sheriff said once things got quiet again. “You won’t be back.”

Adrenaline raged through my body as I pulled against Jake. It did nothing.

After a few quiet moments, I faked resignation to get him to let go. The second he did, I dashed around the corner to find an empty hallway.

“Why did you do that?” I demanded as I turned around to face him. “How could you stand here and let him get treated like that? What’s wrong with you? I thought you were his friend!”

“You would have made it worse for him, Raven,” he said, his eyes kind and sad. “You don’t realize how complicated the situation is.”

“Does he hit him?” I asked. My voice cracked, but I didn’t know if it was from anger or sadness.

“I don’t know,” Jake said, and he was telling the truth. “I’ve always suspected that, too, but Nash said no when I asked him. I think Nash would tell me the truth.”

I thought Nash would tell me the truth too . . . but there was something he was hiding from me—something he wanted to tell me, but he didn’t feel like he could yet. Maybe it was something like this.

“I don’t understand,” I admitted. “How can we help him? What can we do? Who can we go to?”

“He has to ride it out for the rest of this year,” Jake said. “Then he’ll be a free man, and I doubt he’ll ever come back to Midnight Springs and see his dad again.”

That wasn’t good enough for me. May was too far away. I wasn’t even sure I’d be fine with Jake saying he only had to stay in that house for two more weeks.

“Will he really pull him out of school?” I asked. Was that even legal? I’d have to check on it. I’d love nothing more than to catch the sheriff breaking the law.

“I’m not sure. Nash has never been caught stepping out of line like this before, and he’s certainly never resisted his dad as much as he did then,” he said. He sounded truly surprised.

“You call that resisting?” I demanded. “He barely fought at all!”

Jake shook his head. “Any time someone gets angry back at the sheriff, it’s like adding lighter fluid to a fire instead of water. People are afraid of

him, Raven. And they should be. He's a lunatic with power and a gun."

"What are you saying?" I asked, trying to read his face. It was so hard because he didn't know if he thought his worst fears were possible or not. It made it impossible to tell if he was telling the truth or to know how much danger Nash was really in.

"I'm saying that no one knows what happens when you push him too far, and Nash is smart enough that he doesn't want to be the one that finds out," Jake explained. "He knows how to handle this. He's been doing it his whole life. Let him handle it, Raven. Don't intervene."

"No. There has to be a way to end this," I said. "I can't sit by and do nothing. There has to be something we can do or someone we can tell."

Jake threw his hands out wide and said, "Who? The police? You heard him. He might fire my dad for helping Nash last night and hiding it from him even though my dad truly knows nothing about it. He meant it too. He would have to frame him for something worthy of being fired over to cover it up, but he might get rid of him because he *suspects* he crossed him like that. What do you think he would do to someone who stood against him in court?"

"You're giving him too much credit," I argued. "He's just one man."

He shrugged. "Maybe you're right. But are you willing to risk Nash's safety to make a point? What if he does beat him? What if he lied to me?"

My mind wanted a solution—an easy one that meant Nash was free and protected.

"I'll find a way," I vowed. "I'll find a way to end this and keep him safe. We are not waiting until May."

"We have to, Raven," he said, his face full of defeat.

“You knew he was with me,” I said as it dawned on me. “You knew, but you didn’t tell anyone? Not even your dad?”

“Of course not. Nash is my best friend. I’d like to think I wouldn’t even admit it under torture,” he said with a smile. “I’m not selling you guys out. Nash would want me to protect you, so I will.”

I touched his arm gently before I turned to leave. “You’re a good friend, Jake. I’m sorry I implied otherwise.”

“Where are you going?” he asked, most likely worried that I would chase down Nash and his dad like I wanted to.

“To the nurse,” I said. “I lied about needing a tampon to get out of class. I need to go get one from her to cover my tracks.”

NASH

I rode home in the back of my dad's police car like a criminal. In his eyes, I was.

His anger burned against me. It radiated from his silence in the front seat. When he finally exploded, it was going to be bad . . . an unprecedented kind of bad.

We left my car at school. I hoped Brooke was able to take Raven home since I couldn't.

Who was I kidding? Raven would find a way. She was smart and resourceful. The girl would hitchhike with a murderer if it got her what she wanted—and he'd be the one begging for mercy.

I went straight to my room when we got home. He slammed every door he touched—the front door, the refrigerator door, the kitchen cabinets. Nothing was safe from his wrath. I felt sorry for Mom, who would be coming home to a hurricane without even knowing it was coming. All she knew was that I lied about where I was last night. She had no idea the storm had been upgraded to a Category 5.

Without my phone, I couldn't even warn her.

I felt truly helpless—truly disconnected. If I had my computer, I would have been able to do almost anything.

I had nothing. No phone, no laptop, no car . . . no way to explain my absence to Raven.

I hoped Jake would fill her in . . . but not too much.

Hours passed in that same silence. Was he waiting for Mom before he exploded? Was he actually putting thought behind his malice?

A tiny tap came from my window, and I looked over to see a dark bun poking over the windowsill.

I walked over slowly, glancing over my shoulder to make sure my dad wasn't standing right behind me, waiting to catch me in the act of disobedience again.

I shook my head at her, trying to get her to leave.

She pointed to the door.

“I can't shut it,” I mouthed.

She looked confused and mouthed back, “Why?”

“I'm not allowed,” I explained. In the eerie silence, my dad would hear me open the window and come to see what was wrong. I couldn't bear to think about what would happen if he caught Raven here. I wouldn't be able to stomach listening to him belittle her . . . or even for her to listen as he yelled at me.

“I'm coming back,” she mouthed. “After dark.”

The thought thrilled and frightened me.

I shook my head no again, but she ignored me like I knew she would.

“Please,” I mouthed, begging her not to get involved.

“Leave the window open,” she mouthed, pointing to the window lock. She made a quick kissy face and disappeared before I could keep arguing.

I spun around quickly, expecting to see my dad standing in the doorway with daggers in his eyes. No one was there. I tried to take steady breaths to calm my body. I was fine, Raven was fine. There was no real danger.

Not yet, anyway.

Usually, when I heard Mom's car pull in, it gave me a sense of relief. Today, it gave me the same feeling as the beep of the squad car locking.

"Where's Nash?" she asked as soon as she walked through the door. She sounded a little panicked, like she worried that I was hurt or kidnapped.

I couldn't see them, but I could imagine his glowering face as he stared at her. I'd seen it enough that it was etched in my memory.

"I can't read your mind, Pierce. Where is he? Have you heard anything?" she demanded. I'd never heard her sound so brave, and it was because she was worried about me.

"In his room," he gruffed.

"What?!" Her footsteps raced back to my room to check on me. "Nash! Honey, are you okay?"

She touched my face and arms as if looking for wounds. Her eyes darted all over my body for clues about what was going on.

I nodded. "Yes, Mom. I'm fine."

She gave me a small smile but didn't relax all the way. "I don't understand. If you're here, where's your car?"

"He no longer has a car," my dad said, joining us in my room with his wrath. Her smile disappeared.

"Did you wreck it? Are you alright?" Mom asked, still worried about me like the saint she was.

"Stop coddling him. He's fine. The car was taken away as a punishment," my dad said, staring at me even though he was speaking to her.

She finally tore her eyes away from me to stare him down. “I don’t like playing these games. Tell me what happened.”

“Ask your son,” he said, his body visibly shaking. He was about to explode.

“I lied when I said I went to Jake’s last night,” I told her, hoping she could see how sorry I was. I wasn’t sorry that I lied, but I was incredibly sorry for the trouble it was causing her. I never wanted to hurt her. “Instead I went somewhere else to help someone.”

“Don’t rewrite the story to make you sound like you’re some kind of f***** martyr,” he growled, his hands in fists at his sides.

“Is everything alright? Where did you go?” Mom asked, concerned for whoever I was helping.

“HE WON’T TELL US!” he yelled, the volcano finally erupting. “And it doesn’t matter anyway. He lied about where he was, so he’s lying about why he was there too. He was probably drinking or doing drugs!”

“Test me, then!” I demanded, shoving my forearms out to prove that I hadn’t used a needle. “I haven’t done anything like that, not last night or ever!”

“Then you were off getting some poor girl pregnant!” he countered. “I’ll expect some sad teenager on my doorstep in a month or two begging for our help! Which, by the way, will *not* be given. I’m not responsible for your mistakes.”

“I wasn’t having sex either,” I said, my own fists clenched. If I ever became a father, he’d be lucky to ever know about it. “And if I did, I would be smart enough to use protection.”

“I’m not going to assume you’re ‘smart enough’ to do anything,” he spat. “You’ve proven how much of an idiot you actually are. I have no idea how

you get such good grades at school and act like this at home. I don't know how the teachers put up with you and keep you in line."

"Then what were you doing, honey?" Mom asked, putting her arm on my shoulder and ignoring his comments. "What really happened? Why can't you tell us?"

I could have told her. I could have told her every crazy aspect of why I was at Raven's last night, but not with him there. Not with him in her life.

I wanted to look the man right in the eye and say, "Because I don't trust you."

But I didn't. I stayed silent because silence was safer.

"This isn't over," my dad vowed through clenched teeth. "I'm pulling him out of school. You'll have to come with me to pick up his car. It's still there."

He spun on his heels as if that's what they were going to do that very instant. Mom closed her eyes and breathed deeply as if she had to prepare herself for the time they would spend in his car together.

"I'm sorry," I whispered to her. "I really am."

"Me too," she said with tears in her eyes.

When they were gone, and with the initial shock of the earthquake over, I finally got some sleep.



Against my better judgment, I sat up, waiting for Raven to come. Mom and my dad fought for a long time before going to bed, but they finally got quiet. I could hear his snoring, so I knew, for the moment, I was safe.

Raven appeared outside with a tiny knock again. I lifted the window and let her in as stealthily as we could manage.

Once inside, she raced to my bed and got under the covers. In any other circumstance, I would consider that a win. Today, it only filled me with anxiety.

I got under the covers beside her, between her and the open door. I hoped that if someone glanced in, they would only see my body lumped under the covers . . . but it felt dangerous to turn my back on the entryway.

She had taken off her glasses and laid them on my nightstand. The words “impaired vision” flashed through my mind about Experiment 277.

Why would he give her impaired vision on purpose?

“Are you okay?” Raven whispered. Her body was as close to mine as it could be, her lips touching my ear so she could whisper as quietly as possible.

“Yes,” I said, but I knew she knew it was a lie, so I amended my response. I didn’t want to lie to her. “No.”

She kissed me, her lips soft and quiet against my own. I had to get her out of there as quickly as possible, but I wanted to keep her forever.

“Does he hit you?” Raven asked, her eyes searching for truth on my face.

“No,” I said. “He never has. But you aren’t the first person who has ever asked me that. If he did, I don’t think anyone would be surprised. I wouldn’t be.”

She frowned. “What about your mom? Does he hit her?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “I’ve never seen him do it, and I’ve never seen her physically hurt, so I don’t think so. But I wouldn’t be surprised about that either.”

“Leave, Nash,” she begged. “Come with me.”

I felt the deep wrinkles forming on my forehead. “And make all of this even worse when I’m caught? No way.”

“Not just for tonight,” she whispered. “Leave forever. Move out.”

She was talking even crazier than normal. “I can’t move out, Raven. He would come get me and drag me home.”

She shook her head. “He couldn’t. You’re eighteen—legally an adult. He can’t make you come back here, not legally. And the sheriff couldn’t do something so blatantly illegal if you fought him on it.”

It was a recurring daydream—running away. It had been for years. I had been counting down each year of my life until I could graduate and leave.

But there wasn’t a way to fast-forward time. There wasn’t a way out of this sentence. It was what it was, and there was no way she could understand.

“Your dad loves you, Raven,” I said. “You have no idea what it’s like to be here.”

“No, I don’t,” she admitted. “But I want you to be safe. I want you to be okay. I want you out of here. Don’t you want that too? Don’t you want to leave?”

“And leave my mom on her own?” I demanded, my whispers getting harsher.

She looked confused. “Weren’t you going to move out in May anyway? What’s the difference if you do it now?”

“I can’t just leave her here to the wolves,” I argued. “Not without a heads-up. Not without saying goodbye.”

She touched my face. “I know you care about her, but the truth is that she can leave whenever she wants to. For the past eighteen years of your life, you haven’t had a choice. She has, and she still will after you’re gone too. It’s not your fault if she doesn’t take it.”

“But it is my fault if I do,” I countered. I didn’t even know why we were having such a ridiculous argument. It wasn’t even possible. I couldn’t leave.

She kissed me again. “Nash, I can’t stand to see you like this. I don’t know what it’s like to have a dad like yours, but I do know what it’s like for someone to lock you up and throw away the key, okay? You know that. You have shown me what freedom is like. I want to show you the way out, too, because I’m falling in love with you.”

My entire body relaxed, and her eyes widened in shock.

“I don’t mean that I, like, love you right now. I just mean that I could, you know, soon,” she amended. I wished it was brighter in the room to see the blush I knew was on her beautiful face.

I kissed her forehead, then her nose, then her lips.

“I could soon too,” I said, kissing her again. I hope she knew the truth in my words.

“How long can I stay?” Raven whispered against my lips.

I glanced at my clock. “He usually gets up at four, so you can safely leave at three thirty.”

“That’s four hours from now,” she said mischievously. I kissed the grin off her face. She moaned quietly, and I laughed as I shushed her. Only an hour earlier, I couldn’t imagine ever being happy or relaxed enough to laugh again.

“You’d think the Queen of the Night would know how to be quieter,” I teased.

“Queen of the Night? What is that?” Raven asked, giggling silently.

“That’s what I decided to call you ever since I saw you in that dress,” I explained, wrapping my arms around her, pulling her bun loose so her hair was wild and free. I laced my fingers through it and pulled her even closer to me, kissing her with silent desperation. I had been within arm's reach of the greatest treasure of my whole life for *years*, and I didn't even know it.

Now that I knew, I was determined to never let her go.

“I’m yours,” I whispered in her ear as she ran her hands under my shirt and all over my back. “I could kick myself for not realizing it sooner, but I’m going to spend the next four hours making up for every day I haven’t been kissing you since I met you. I promise you that, Raven Haskins. But you’re going to have to be quiet. Can you do that?”

“Yes,” she whispered, the mere word causing my body to react. “But it’ll be hard. The sneaking around is making it even more exciting.”

She wasn’t lying. I wanted her more than I ever had. Knowing she felt the same way and knowing that she was falling in love with me turned

everything up to one hundred.

My mind was made up. I was going to tell her. She meant too much to me for me to keep something like that from her. It was my responsibility to tell her as her partner in crime. I had to, but not now. She deserved to find out in a safe place where she could let out all of her feelings and be herself, not somewhere she was hiding in fear of making things worse for me.

Under the stealth of night, I kissed her like my life depended on it. I held her close and whispered all the things I dreamed about doing with her, letting her know how badly she was wanted and what she did to me. We kissed for hours and never grew tired of it. We didn't get tired at all. There was an unspoken agreement between us that we wouldn't waste a moment of our time together sleeping. There were more important things to be done. She was more important than anything rest could offer me.

All the while, the sound of my dad's snores kept time like the clicking of a bomb that would explode and ruin our perfect bliss.

RAVEN

Nash hadn't lied when he said his dad didn't hit him.

Maybe I should have been more specific, especially after the scuffling I overheard in the hallway. I should have asked if he "hurt" him. I couldn't help but wonder if he had beaten my lie-detector skills on a technicality.

"You sure you're gonna be okay here alone?" Brooke asked for the millionth time as I got out of her car at the gate to my house.

"Yes, it's my dad," I argued. "You know he won't hurt me unless he smothers me to death with his relentless overprotection."

"What about school?" Millie asked. "Won't they get upset if you miss?"

"It's only one day," I said. "I didn't sleep well last night. I need some rest."

The Stevens had no idea I didn't spend the whole night at their house. Brooke and Millie covered for me.

"I hope you feel better after a nap," Brooke said. "Text me if you need anything."

As they pulled away, I looked at the perimeter for any signs of a break-in. It didn't seem like Mr. Glory had forced his way inside unless he scaled the perimeter wall, which seemed unlikely at his age.

It was too bad that I disabled all of the security cameras, or I might have been able to check for sure. At the very least, maybe the useless cameras pointing at him deterred him from trespassing.

“Dad?” I yelled when I entered. He didn't answer. I wasn't sure what the rules were—why he was here sometimes and why he wasn't.

I feared the day I would never see him again.

I collapsed on the couch and let sleep take me, thankful for every minute I had with Nash the night before.

Things felt so much better with him. His dad had to be behind whatever weirdness he was hiding before. Maybe he wanted to tell me more about it, but he wasn't ready yet. I could respect that, and I wouldn't push him . . . but I would push him to get out of there so I knew he was safe.

I was falling in love with him. I was so close I could taste it.

As I drifted off, I could still feel his lips on mine. I imagined his body still wrapped around mine, and I knew that whatever dreams I had, they would be sweet because they would be about him.



When I awoke, the house was still silent. I called for my dad a time or two while I made some soup for myself, thankful he already had a recurring grocery delivery that I wouldn't have to worry about.

I needed a car, though. I would have to figure out how to access his money to buy myself one. Stealing his car back from the Glory House seemed like a terrible idea.

My nose scrunched up as I realized that I never actually saw his car there—but it had to be there somewhere. Didn't it? Otherwise, would the police have found it?

The thought prompted me to check in with Officer Kerry.

"Officer Chase Kerry," he said as he answered.

"Hello, Officer Kerry. This is Raven Haskins. I was wondering if you had any leads on my dad?"

"Raven, hello. No, I'm sorry to say that we haven't. How are you doing? Are you okay on your own? Did you think of anything that could help us?"

"Yes, I'm fine. Dad was pretty scattered, so he had to keep everything automatic and recurring to make sure it got done. All the bills are

autodrafted, and our groceries are delivered on a schedule. Everything is taken care of,” I assured him.

“What about the other part? Anything new we need to know?”

I hesitated.

“Raven, you can trust me. Anything you tell me will be in confidence,” he assured me.

“I don’t have any proof,” I admitted. “It’s just speculation.”

“You don’t need proof. It’s not your job to prove what happened—that’s our job. But if you can give us any leads, that would be a huge help.”

“I think Donovan Glory and his family are involved,” I said, and I immediately regretted it. If the man didn’t have a hit order on my head before, I most certainly sealed the deal by giving his name to the police.

“Can I ask why?”

“He and my dad had a business deal, and I think it fell through. I think he had cause to be angry at my dad,” I explained. “I wish I had something concrete to show you, but I don’t.”

All I had was the word of a ghost and a tapped phone call that we didn’t record.

Why didn’t we record it?

“Okay, we’ll look into it. Thank you,” he said. We said our goodbyes and hung up.

The house did seem scarier without Nash there, but it wasn’t because of my dad. It was because I was making enemies—enemies whose weaknesses I didn’t know.

In the basement, I turned the computer on and got out the burner phone Peter had bought Nash for me the day before. I promised to pay him back

when I got access to some money, but I wasn't sure he would take it when I did.

It was an old gas station flip phone with one thousand minutes of talk time and text. It wasn't glamorous, but it would help us keep in contact while he was locked away. I had to be able to communicate with him and make sure he was okay.

It didn't take long to get it up and running. I typed my phone number and clicked Add to Contacts.

When I did, I typed my name on the keypad. I didn't realize how hard it was to get to each letter and how you had to press each number so many times to get the letter you wanted.

My name wasn't terribly hard, being as short as it was. I only needed numbers 7, 2, 8, 3, and 6.

72836. That sounded familiar. Why did that sound familiar?

My eyes drifted to the open, empty safe. The combination was still sitting on the table—72836277.

The first five digits spelled my name.

Looking frantically at the new phone, I looked to see what the other numbers could stand for. 277 could be a myriad of different things: ATT, ATU, ATV, AUU, AUT, AUV, AVV, AVU, AVT.

I pulled out a notebook and started writing out all the possible combinations. None of them meant anything to me.

On the computer, I went to Files and searched for each combination. It took almost thirty minutes, and nothing of value came up. It didn't make any sense.

“What else could 277 mean?” I thought aloud. “Especially since the rest was clearly using a phone keypad to spell something?”

I had to close my eyes and imagine the problem like a chessboard. Why would dad have chosen those numbers? Did they mean something to him? Did something important happen in February of 1977?

My soup was gone, but I was thinking so hard I didn't remember eating it. What was I missing? There had to be a reason, and it had to be important for him to use it as the combination code to his most valued object.

Maybe I was overthinking it. I typed 277 in the search bar. A file came up called Experiment 277. It was last opened two days ago.

As soon as I opened it, I knew I was viewing it for the first time. It was dated years ago—back when I was around five years old. I hadn't gotten that far back yet, so it must have been Nash.

My stomach dropped. Is this how Nash found out the code? He *had* lied about hacking it. Why didn't he tell me? What was hiding in this experiment?

As I scanned the document, I wished my dad was there so he could explain it to me. So much of it was gibberish to my nongeneticist mind.

He probably wouldn't have helped me, though. Especially if it was something he wanted to keep private.

My heart beat faster as I realized what was going on. My dad had used his knowledge of science and mixed it with the book's power to create a person—a real-life child. But how was that possible? Why would he do it?

It was a girl. She had dark hair and impaired vision. Goosebumps began to form on my arms. Was she evil? Was she robotic? How did it work? Was she another enemy that I needed to be on the lookout for?

“How deep does this rabbit hole go?” I whispered, wondering if I even knew my father. What kinds of messed up things had he gotten himself

into? Who was he doing this for? Did the Glory family want him to do something like this for them? Or something even worse?

The weirdest thing was that when the experiment was done, the child wasn't a baby. She was five years old.

I shrieked, rereading the document to try to prove myself wrong. I had to be wrong. It couldn't be.

“WHERE ARE YOU?!” I yelled, twirling around in the basement like a mad woman. “DON'T YOU DARE HIDE FROM ME NOW! WHERE ARE YOU?!”

Slowly, the ghost of my dad took shape in front of me. “Raven! What's wrong?”

I pointed to the screen, unable to say the words out loud. He hovered over to see what I was talking about. If he had color in his face, it all would have drained. If he wasn't defying gravity, he would have passed out.

“Raven, honey, it's not what you think,” he said, his voice shaking. “Please don't be angry.”

“I'm not real!” I screamed, clutching my body as if it would disappear like he could. “I'm one of your experiments. You're not even my father! I don't have a father!”

“Please, calm down,” he begged. “I am your father. I raised you. You are mine. I love you with everything in me. You know that. Please focus on that. You are mine.”

“I am not!” I yelled, pacing around the basement like a caged dog. “I am a product of madness, not of love!”

“That's not true,” he demanded. “The only reason I did it was because I wanted to have a family so badly. Your mom and I always did, but she couldn't have children. When she died, she left me all alone.”

“She died before you ever made me?” I squeaked. “I thought she died in childbirth. I’ve spent my whole life thinking it was my fault!”

His eyes widened. “No, Raven, no. I never meant for you to think that. She had cancer.”

“What kind of cancer?” I asked. “Is it genetic?”

The words barely escaped my mouth before I started laughing like a maniac.

“Oh yeah, it doesn’t matter because I’m not actually related to her!”

I was losing my mind.

“Raven, please. Try to think of it like you were adopted,” he suggested, as if we could tie a pretty bow on the whole situation to make it better.

“I wasn’t adopted,” I said through gritted teeth. “I was created by a mad scientist in a lab. I knew something was wrong with me. I’m not normal. I’m not real.”

The words kept repeating over and over in my head. *I’m not real. I’m not real. I’m not real.*

“Why did you lock me away?” I demanded. “Did you want me so badly that you didn’t want to share me? Did you think that since you created me that you *owned* me and didn’t have to treat me like a real person? Like a real kid?”

“NO, Raven!” he insisted. “I didn’t want anyone to find out! If anyone else knew, I don’t know what they would do to you. Imagine if this kind of power got in the wrong hands. Someone evil could build their own personal army. You cannot tell anyone. Not even Brooke.”

“Oh, I will most certainly tell Brooke,” I assured him. “I can’t believe this. I bleed like a normal person. I have to sleep and eat. I know I have my

own thoughts and free will, mostly because they don't match yours. How did you do it? How did you make me seem so human?"

"You are a human, Raven," he explained gently. "You aren't a robot. You are a real person—a real human. You weren't grown in the belly of a woman, but that doesn't mean you are different from anyone else you know. You are still you. Nothing has changed."

I collapsed on the floor and wept. My wails echoed in the basement as I clutched my body, surprised to feel a heartbeat . . . to need to gasp for air . . . to have working tear ducts . . .

I'm not real. I'm not real.

"Why didn't you tell me?" I sobbed.

He didn't answer, but the cold air of his ghostly form wrapped around me. It made me long for the warmth of Nash.

Nash.

Nash opened the document on Experiment 277. He had read it while I slept on the floor that night.

Nash knew the truth, and he hid it from me.

NASH

Mom left for work at three thirty. My dad didn't get off until five thirty, which left me without adult supervision for a little over two hours. You would think I was an infant the way my dad freaked out about it, but neither parent was willing to budge on their work schedules to babysit me.

Mom was obviously hurt that I wouldn't tell her the truth, especially after my dad left for work that morning. I wanted to, but I didn't want her to have to lie for me. I knew she would. She wouldn't dream of throwing me under the bus, but I didn't want to compromise her relationship with him any more than it already was. My dad had already told me I was responsible for over fifty percent of their fights.

Instead of coming clean, I slept all day to make up for the little sleep I had gotten the past few nights.

There was a sudden, fierce knock on the door. I glanced out the living room window as I passed it, but there were no cars.

I opened up the door to see Raven staring back at me. I ushered her inside quickly, hoping my dad didn't have the neighbors spying on me.

He probably did, though.

“You have perfect timing,” I told her. “My mom just left for work.”

“I know. I’ve been watching and waiting for her to leave for a few hours,” she stated.

“Hours? What about school?” I asked.

“I didn’t go,” she stated.

I raised my eyebrows. “Oh. Well, how did you get here?”

“I caught a ride with a stranger,” she said, as if she did that all the time.

I winced, but I knew she could take care of herself. If someone gave her murder vibes, she would find a way to get away. She was smart and resourceful.

I leaned in to kiss her, but she turned her head. I kissed her cheek instead.

“Are you okay?” I asked, lightly touching her elbow. She bristled. “Raven?”

Without answering, she strode toward my bedroom. It was odd having her there in the light of day.

The night before, only hours before really, we had been locked in a tight embrace. The heat from our bodies made staying under the covers uncomfortable, but we had to for stealth purposes. The sneaking around even heightened the emotions that were running rampant from admitting that we were falling in love with each other.

The fluorescent light mixed with the sunlight streaming from the window did not illuminate the face of a girl falling in love. She was cold, distant, unreadable.

“Once upon a time, there was a girl named Raven,” she began, her voice still calm and calculated. I had no idea where this was going. I felt like a

bomb was about to go off, and I knew that feeling all too well. Whatever this story's ending was, it wouldn't be good.

“She made a deal with a boy. She would pretend to be his girlfriend, and in return, he would help her hack a computer.”

I didn't like this story. She stared at me like a tiger stares at his victim, hidden from sight in the tall grass—except I knew she was coming.

“In the midst of this deceit, the two of them thought that they began to feel real feelings for each other.”

“Thought?” I interrupted.

She pretended she didn't hear me and continued, “They were wrong. It was all a game, and they were simply confused because of their hormones. Raven didn't truly care for the boy, and the boy didn't care about her either.”

“How can you say that!” I demanded. “This is real for me! I *do* care about you, Raven!”

“How did Raven know this to be true? She knew because the boy found something on her dad's computer and kept it from her.” Angry tears filled her eyes.

The breath was knocked out of me. She knew.

“He may have thought he was doing the right thing by keeping it from her, but he most assuredly was not. He could have come to her immediately, and none of her pain would have been his fault. Instead, he concealed what he found from her, leaving her to find it when she was all alone. He wasn't even there to help her when the walls of her illusion came crumbling down.”

“Raven, I didn't know how to tell you. I *wanted* to tell you! I was *going* to, but I didn't know how to do it yet, or when,” I explained.

“If the boy truly cared about her, he wouldn’t have done that. He would have come to her first. He would have trusted her with the truth.”

“Raven, please just talk to me,” I begged. “I *never* meant to hurt you. I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t know what the right thing was. I didn’t know what was best for you.”

“His act of deception made everything clear to Raven. He didn’t care about her, and she was fooling herself by thinking she cared about him too.”

I couldn’t remember the last time I cried, but tears were in my eyes. “Raven, please. Don’t say that. I’m so sorry. If I could take it back, I would. I know you’re hurt, but that doesn’t negate what’s happening here between us.”

“Nothing is happening between us,” she stated. “Goodbye, Nash.”

I blocked the doorframe so she couldn’t leave. “Please talk to me. Please stay.”

“No. I am finished. We have both upheld our part of the deal. You got in the computer, and Destiny wants you back. It was a pleasure doing business with you. Goodbye.”

Her voice was so cold. Her speech was so rehearsed. She wasn’t entertaining a single word I was saying.

“NO! The deal was that you would be my girlfriend until I get what I want. What I want is YOU, Raven!” I demanded. I couldn’t lose her. If she walked out the door now, there was a chance I wouldn’t ever see her again.

She never seemed like the kind of person who could be easily persuaded, and she wasn’t.

She shrugged. “You can still call me your girlfriend if you want—if you want to have a girlfriend that doesn’t speak to you.”

My shoulders sagged in defeat. “What about last night? You said you were falling in love with me?”

“I was mistaken,” she said, as if she were a meteorologist who made a faulty prediction.

“I told *you* that I’m falling in love with *you* too. You looked in my eyes and knew I was telling the truth. Doesn’t that mean anything?”

“No, it doesn’t,” she said. “I can only see the truth as the person believes it. You may believe you love me, but you can also be wrong. Just like I was.”

She pushed me aside and made her way to the front door. Stunned and broken, I fell aside like a house of cards.

“Please don’t go,” I begged one last time.

She turned and looked back at me with tears in her eyes. Her glasses made them look even bigger. They spilled over her cheeks, and I wanted more than anything to be the one that wiped them away for her.

“I’m not real, Nash,” she whispered. “I’m not a real person. I’m an experiment. You knew, and you hid it from me. I had to face it alone. I had to—”

She stopped herself and shook her head, then left me behind. She didn’t slam the door in anger. There was no drama in her escape from my life. If I had access to a phone, she probably would have texted it to me to avoid seeing me entirely.

Once upon a time, there was a girl named Raven. She wasn’t like anyone else, but it wasn’t because of her peculiar origin story. She was unlike any other girl in the world because she was the one for me.

I looked around at the walls that held me in, wondering what I could do to make things better while I was on house arrest. There weren’t many

options. I couldn't even remember her cell number to call her on our landline. I wouldn't have the proximity of school anymore—Mom had ordered homeschooling materials the night before. I was still banned from electronics. My dad had unplugged the Wi-Fi and taken the router to work with him, along with every computer and cell phone we owned as a family.

I might as well have been stuck on an island, millions of miles away from Raven—but I had to find a way back to her.

I had to show her how sorry I was.

RAVEN

Dad was either silently brooding that his lifelong deception failed or was giving me my space. I didn't really care either way. At the moment, I didn't have anything to say to him.

My anger needed an outlet. My dad, sorry, my "creator," had betrayed me. I didn't even have a dad. It was such an elaborate lie that it had me questioning every single thing that had ever happened. I thought I didn't have memories before age five because I was just too small. I had created a fake history where I imagined that my dad taught me how to walk . . . that he bottle-fed me in depression after his wife died . . . that he changed my diapers. None of those things happened. There weren't pictures of me as a baby because I never was one . . . and all of this time, I thought it was because he was wallowing in grief. It was madness. All of it was too much.

The worst part, though, was that I couldn't even turn to Nash.

The mere thought of his name made my blood boil. How could I have been so fooled? Me! I saw every sign that he was lying, but I didn't push it. I made excuses for him and stayed the night in his room anyway. I missed

him too badly to want to fight . . . and he had been through so much. I gave him the benefit of the doubt and dropped it.

He had held me and kissed me and told me he was falling in love with me, all while willingly hiding the biggest secret of my life.

I stomped down the stairs to the lab, opened the flip phone meant for Nash, and tossed it on the metal table. Then, I grabbed the hammer I had used to break out of the vent, swung it over my head, and smashed the phone as hard as I could. Plastic cracked, and some part inside of me felt a little bit better, so I swung again . . . over and over, screaming like a warrior in battle. Hot tears started streaming down my face as I beat the phone, making it harder to see my target. Every few swings, I would hit the table instead, causing one small dent after another, but my dad never showed up to scold me or console me. I was all alone.

When my energy was spent, I collapsed on the concrete floor and wept, barely able to catch my breath through my sobs. I knew I should have called Brooke and asked for support, but I didn't have the energy to. Part of me wanted to wallow in this pain for a while. I didn't need anyone telling me that it would be okay.

"Once upon a time . . ." I began, but I didn't even have the desire to finish my narration about how I had a spellbook to read and needed to get out of that lab to get my mind off all of the lies. I simply picked myself up and did it, moving to the couch to try to distance myself from all the pain going downstairs had brought me.

Reading the spellbook was harder than I thought it would be. It was handwritten. Some words were smudged, and pages were stained. Most of it was cursive, making it all the more difficult to read. I dared not let my tears

spill on the pages. Containing them proved useless, so I wiped them away with the bottom of my shirt. Over and over.

From what I gathered, Peter had an ancestor named Amara, who was a witch. This book was both a spellbook and her personal diary. Amara's mother had been a witch, and she didn't have access to her mother's spellbook anymore, so she and her sister did their best to replicate the spells and document them for future use.

Amara had an odd life. It didn't seem like the people around her knew she was a witch. She helped them with her spells but didn't take credit for it. Then she started taking credit and chalked up her remedies to an extensive knowledge of nature—even if she was just having people drink clover-soaked water as a placebo while she cast the spell over them.

She was smart. It was refreshing to feel like she used her magic for good.

Why was my dad so worried about this stupid book if she was good?

It seemed like she was living an idyllic life, with the community around her thriving due to her presence. Crops were bountiful, and diseases were cured or avoided. Everything seemed beautiful and picturesque.

I sat up as the entries started to take a weird turn. She was no longer happy and bragging in her diary like it was a social media post. She thought she was being hunted. To be honest, she sounded like my dad. She was paranoid and anxious.

The next page was the most blurred I had seen so far. Something had spilled on it during its long journey through time. Without dates on the pages, I had no idea how old the book actually was.

I leafed through the next couple of pages, hoping the rest of the book wasn't as damaged. It didn't seem to be. I was surprised that I only had about one quarter of the book left to read.

“What does this say? ‘Julia is trapped in tine’? No, ‘Juliet is trapped in time,’ ” I read aloud. “That’s weird. She’s never mentioned anything about time before. Could the witch control time too? And who is Juliet?”

Amara’s sister’s name was Mary, and no other girls have been mentioned by name so far.

The lines were so hard to read. “ ‘Only to awoken when’ . . .”

I squinted my eyes and pushed my glasses up my nose.

“Why couldn’t my dad at least give me good eyesight,” I grumbled. “He specifically created me to struggle with something. How cruel is that?”

I took a deep breath and tried to read it again. “ ‘Only to be awoken when released willingly. Suvgit, Juliet.’ No, that’s not right, that’s an R, not a V. ‘Surgit, Juliet.’ ”

An explosion filled my living room, throwing me hard against the back of the couch. Black smoke filled the air, but there was no heat, no debris, and no fire. I coughed and put my shirt over my face to breathe through it.

“Raven! Raven, are you okay?” Dad yelled. I couldn’t see him through the smoke.

“Yes, I’m fine! What did you do?” I asked, still coughing.

“Me? I didn’t do anything! I *can’t* do anything!”

The smoke was beginning to thin. I expected to see a large man waiting to kidnap and experiment on me.

Instead, the room cleared to show a naked girl huddled in the corner and my father angrily staring down at me from an unnatural, antigravity height.

“What did *you* do, Raven?” He growled at me, then looked down at the book. “You swore you wouldn’t do any of the spells.”

“I didn’t!” I argued. “I’ve been reading all of it in my head! I—”

Crap. I hadn’t.

“Well, I had been, but this page was hard to read, so I was trying to sound things out . . .” I explained guiltily.

“Raven Cordella Haskins, I *told* you not to read that book out loud!!!” He floated over to me faster than I had ever seen him move. “Go to the kitchen and get a knife. Now!”

I looked at the girl, afraid and shivering in the corner. “Can’t I at least get her a blanket first?”

He snarled at me, and I obeyed. I rolled my eyes, but I obeyed.

When I returned, his head was in his hands.

“Amara froze this girl in time hundreds of years ago. You woke her up,” he grumbled.

She looked at the knife with absolute fear and tried to sink farther into the corner.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” I assured her. “I only have this because my dad is afraid you’re going to hurt me. What’s your name?”

“I do not know,” she said, trembling. “I do not remember.”

“It’s Juliet,” Dad said. He sounded annoyed. “Does the name Amara mean anything to you?”

She shook her head no.

“She’s lying,” Dad deduced, dismissing her.

“No, she’s not,” I argued. “I know when people are lying, Dad. She’s not.”

“You’ve just met her!” he argued.

“So have you!” I protested. “I don’t have to know someone to know if they’re lying, Dad. It’s a gift I have. I figured you programmed it into me or something.”

He flinched at my sudden attack but returned his attention to Juliet.
“Where are you from?”

“I do not know,” she said, tears filling her wide eyes.

“Stop interrogating her like she’s a criminal,” I said, tossing the knife to the side.

His eyes widened in fear. “RAVEN! Pick that back up now!”

“Hi, I’m Raven,” I said, handing her a blanket from the couch. “It looks like your name is Juliet. I seem to have woken you up by accident. Do you know where you were before you appeared here?”

She shook her head, pulling the covers up to her chin. “No, I do not. I remember only black.”

“What about before that?” I asked, sitting on the couch to try to appear less intimidating.

“Nothing.”

“You can speak well,” Dad said with a bit of sass. I feared my attitude was rubbing off on him.

She nodded, most likely unsure if this was a compliment or an insult. I got that nod a lot from people.

“Call the shelter,” Dad ordered me. “They’ll be able to get her clothes and food and put a roof over her head.”

“Great idea!” I said. “You are one smart scientist man. You know that?”

“Raven, don’t start. Just do as I ask for once in your life.” He looked weary. It must have been hard floating there and being unable to control me like a puppet any longer.

“I would, Dad, I really would, but I actually have a better idea. How about *we* give her food and clothes and shelter since this is one hundred

percent my fault, *and* we don't want her going around telling people that the *only* thing she knows is that there is a ghost in this house?"

Dad growled. It was the best he could do to accept defeat.

"Come on," I said, extending my hand to Juliet to help her up. "You can wrap the blanket around you—yeah, like that! I'll see about getting you some clothes and some food."

She was a little taller than me, but I thought I could make it work. She seemed unsteady, like a fawn walking for the first time. I reached out to catch her at least five times before she could sit on my bed.

"Raven, this is a terrible idea," Dad said, floating in through my closed door.

"DAD! Give the girl some privacy, geez," I said, waving him away.

He rolled his eyes and floated back out into the hallway where he couldn't see us. "I'm only saying that we don't know much about her. We need to know *why* Amara froze her. What if she was bad?"

"What if Amara was bad?" I countered. She got dressed and did her best to act like we didn't exist even though we were talking about her.

"She *was* bad. Haven't you read the whole book yet?"

"No, Dad. I've been too busy sneaking around with my boyfriend, trying to solve your murder, and having an identity crisis," I yelled.

"There *better* not have been a pause between 'sneaking around with my boyfriend' and 'trying to solve your murder.' "

I almost laughed before Nash's face flashed in my mind. I could feel his lips on mine . . . his hands on my face . . . his legs tangled with mine under the covers . . . and it made the pain that much more intense.

Juliet was dressed and smiled at me. "Thank you, Raven."

The shorts she wore looked a little too short, but otherwise, my clothes fit her fine.

“What kinds of food do you like?” I asked, leading her to the kitchen. She looked at me helplessly and shook her head.

“Okay, well, how about we start with something simple and bland? Have you ever heard of mashed potatoes?” I asked. It felt so good to take care of someone else. I needed that to get me out of my self-pity.

“I reread the whole entry from that day about Juliet. All I can tell is that Amara was paranoid about her,” Dad said, floating into the kitchen. “Will you come turn the page for me so I can make sure there isn’t any more after that?”

I rolled my eyes and started to go to the living room to turn the page for him. “This is ridiculous. Don’t you have the whole thing memorized?”

“Don’t turn your back on her!” Dad yelled.

I threw my hands in the air and backed into the living room. I wished I could moonwalk to make my point about how stupid this was.

“Amara could have feared her for a reason,” he said, not appreciating my lack of respect for the situation.

“What if she was good, so she was a threat to Amara?” I challenged him. “You don’t know her, Dad.”

“Yeah, neither do you,” he argued. “Be careful. *And* be so much more careful than you have been with the book from now on, young lady.”

“I will, Dad.” He had me there. I turned the page and left to fix her mashed potatoes. “Oh, and I’m going to need access to your money,” I added.

His eyes widened. “And why is that?”

“Juliet is going to need winter clothes, too, and my jeans will all look like capris on her. Plus, I need my own car.”

“YOU DON’T KNOW HOW TO DRIVE!” he yelled. “What good is a car going to do you?”

I shrugged. “I’ll learn. I have to practice if I’m going to take the driver’s test.”

His transparent jaw dropped. “And in the meantime, you’ll drive around without a license?”

“I’ll figure it out, old man,” I assured him with a wink. “You cough over those numbers, and I’ll take care of the rest.”

He shook his head. “Why me? Most people don’t have to deal with their children’s dumb decisions after they die. But oh no. It keeps coming for me, and I’m getting a front-row seat.”

NASH

My heart was pounding when I heard my dad pull up. I had to focus on breathing to keep my body calm, but it was impossible. Anxiety filled every inch of me as I whipped my head around to look at the clock. It was five o'clock, so he must have taken off early to make sure I wasn't doing anything I shouldn't have been.

I had taken too long to make my decision. I wasn't going to be able to slip out of the door and just leave a note. I wasn't going anywhere without a fight.

"Nash!" he yelled as he entered and slammed the door as hard as he could. Glass shattered as a picture fell off the wall in the hallway. I couldn't have picked a worse time to defy my dad.

I couldn't breathe. My clothes and travel toiletries were packed, my "business" savings were stuffed in my wallet, and my backpack and shoes were on. I was ready to go, but now that he was here, I didn't know if I could go through with it. I didn't know if I could summon the bravery to do what needed to be done.

I wanted to walk out and make a dramatic exit, but my feet wouldn't move. My body betrayed me.

My dad had never hit me. So many people had asked me if he did over the years—teachers, friends, anyone close enough to see the real him. I swore up and down that he didn't, but I could tell from their faces that they didn't believe me. They didn't realize how someone could be so cruel and not cross that line. Based on the level of fear and anxiety I felt around him, it was as if, deep down, I believed that too. He had never left a mark on my body, but I still didn't feel like I would make it out of this alive. The fear ran that deep.

“NASH!” he yelled again, boots stomping as he turned the corner to my room. I wasn't allowed to wear my shoes in the house, but he could. If I tracked dirt all over the floor I cleaned, it meant I was the stupidest, most useless person on the planet. I got to hear about it at unnervingly high decibels for hours. But if he did it? No one batted an eye.

There he stood between me and freedom like he always had. He thought he had me under his thumb until May, and so did I . . . before Raven showed me another way out. His control over me was so thorough that I had never considered it. Even as she said it, it sounded insane.

But it wasn't. It was normal and legal and what was best for me . . . even if she never spoke to me again.

He looked even more menacing in his uniform. It was too much power for someone like him. It made every bad quality of his worse. He didn't seem as intimidating when he walked around the house in nothing but his boxers. He seemed like a normal man. But with the badge on? He felt like he was much more. He projected that loudly.

I was such an idiot. I should have waited to sneak out at night.

He took in the scene—my packed bag, my tied shoes, my scared face. A vicious snarl formed on his reddening face. I felt my own face get hot and reminded myself to breathe again.

“What do you think you’re doing?” His voice was low. Threatening. Frightening.

“Leaving,” I said. It was all I could say. I was surprised my voice didn’t sound as afraid as I was . . . I was even proud of myself.

“The hell you are,” he said, slamming his hand against the door frame. I heard a crack somewhere. My body tensed like it feared the next crack would be in my head. “You are forbidden to leave this house. At the rate you’re going, I don’t know when you’re going to see the sun again.”

“I’m moving out,” I said simply, but my feet still did not move. Why didn’t they move? It wasn’t like I wanted to stay and discuss this any longer than I had to.

“Yeah, right. You don’t have a job. You have no place to go and no idea what it’s like to be an adult,” he argued. He didn’t think it was possible. He thought I would slump my shoulders and admit defeat and my dependence upon him like a young child who threw a tantrum and packed a bag to move out.

“I know how to support myself,” I said. “And I’m going to do that. On my own.”

“You cannot leave this house,” my dad said, his anger hitting new heights. I had never seen him so upset. His body couldn’t contain it, and mine had no idea how to react. This was unprecedented, and I didn’t like it at all. I need absolutes. I needed expectations, and all of those had gone flying out the window.

I tried to stand straighter, faking bravery. “I am leaving. I’m eighteen years old, and I’m moving out of this house to live on my own. You can’t make me stay.”

It was the wrong thing to say.

He screamed and put both hands on the door frame, eyes bulging widely. If I didn’t know better, I would have thought he was on drugs. “Let’s see about that, boy. Let’s see what you’ve got.”

My loud heart stopped. The house felt quiet as I waited for him to say something else, but he didn’t. He was serious. He wanted me to physically try and make it past him.

“I’m not going to fight you,” I said, trying to de-escalate the situation. “We don’t have to fight or even be mad at each other. It doesn’t have to be a big dramatic thing. I’m simply leaving. It’s time for me to leave.”

He narrowed his eyes. “You are not leaving. Not until I say you can leave. This is *my* house.”

I couldn’t fight him. If I did, he was sure to win. He was trained in bringing down criminals. I’d never done more than wrestle with my friends for fun. I’d never hit someone in anger before.

I wasn’t stronger than him . . . so my only other option was to try and be smarter.

I lunged toward him to try to fake him out, then darted for my window. I pulled it open and started to climb.

As soon as my last foot left the floor, I was pulled backward by my backpack and slung onto my bedroom floor.

I stared in horror as my dad stood over me, pistol pointed right at me.

“Take off your shoes and backpack,” he said. I assumed it was the same voice he used when he told someone to put down their weapon. The “or I’m

going to shoot you” part was implied.

He was bluffing. He had to be bluffing. He wouldn't really shoot me. I hadn't done anything to deserve to be shot. He had to realize that. It was his automatic reaction from being in law enforcement. The gun might not have even been loaded. It was a scare tactic. It had to be.

The fog lifted from my head as the excuses I was making for him melted away. It didn't matter what his motivation was. What mattered was that he was standing over his son and pointing a gun at him.

He had never hit me before. He still hadn't. And yet, he was about to kill me—and no one who really knew him would be that surprised. All of those people who had asked me if I was being abused would shake their heads sadly and say, “I knew it. I only wish Nash would have told me the truth.”

I stood to face him. He kept the gun trained on me as I moved, staring me square in the eyes without a hint of remorse.

“Goodbye, Dad,” I said. It felt weird to call him Dad. I hardly ever addressed him at all.

“You're not leaving, boy,” he threatened again, gun unwavering. His finger was on the trigger, but I didn't know enough about guns to know whether the safety was on.

I spoke with a voice that was not my own. “I am. I'm either walking out of the front door, or you're going to kill me. One way or another, I am no longer living here.”

How could I? If I stayed now, he would know that all he had to do was threaten me with his pistol to get me to do whatever he wanted. I never wanted to stare down the barrel of a gun again.

I turned away and walked slowly out of my bedroom door and across the living room, avoiding the broken glass on the floor. The picture that had

fallen was from my kindergarten graduation. That five-year-old boy didn't realize how messed up his life was. He thought that everyone's dads screamed at them for no reason and used them as a verbal punching bag. He thought it was normal . . . and I felt sorry for him.

I didn't know if the gun was still on me as I walked out, but I imagined it was. I imagined him debating in his head whether or not he was going to shoot me. I imagined him weighing the pros and cons of killing his son versus having his son move out before he graduated. Neither would be good for his image. But which would be worse?

I could never imagine thinking in such a way about whether to shoot another person or not, but I knew how his mind worked. I knew something was fundamentally wrong with the way he thought.

Still, I walked. I didn't run. I didn't zigzag to avoid getting hit. My legs shook, but they kept moving. One foot in front of the other, I made it to the front door.

I couldn't hear him behind me. I didn't know if he had followed me or if he stayed in my room. The roaring in my ears was too great.

My body screamed at me to turn around and beg for forgiveness. It yelled and berated me for my lack of self-preservation. When that didn't work, my mind threw me into a guilt trip about leaving my mother with a man who had the audacity to use his weapon against his son. What if he pulled a gun on her? The thought almost made me stay, but then I remembered Raven's words. My mom could leave whenever she wanted. If I left, it might even empower her to do the same. Staying in hell with her wasn't going to make her any safer.

I opened the door and felt the wind hit me. All that lay between me and a new life was a threshold. A tiny door frame. A basic piece of wood.

Across that wood, I could have a life of peace. I hadn't seen it before, but I knew it existed. I knew there had to be people out there who lived their lives without the constant fear of someone else's irrational reaction. There had to be people who went to bed and felt safe. There had to be people who looked forward to coming home.

In order to join them, all I had to do was cross the threshold . . .
. . . and live to tell the tale.

RAVEN

“How much of my money did you blow?” Dad asked when we walked through the door and saw the bags we were holding. We could barely carry them all between the two of us. “Did you find out that a dealership isn’t going to sell you a car without a license?”

“I sure did,” I said, but my tone was not one of someone admitting defeat. I was resourceful, after all. Defeat wasn’t in my vocabulary. “So I bought one directly from an old farmer instead.”

He floated to the window to see the old junker parked in our driveway. I was glad it was finally cool enough outside to close the windows. Since we could use the gas heat in the winter, I wouldn’t have to worry about bringing someone over to fix the air vents until spring. At the moment, with the ghosts and reincarnated people walking around here, I needed as few strangers as possible in my life.

“That’s a death trap. It’s probably more unsafe than that four-wheeler was. Did *you* drive it here?” He looked horrified, like *he* was the one looking at a ghost. He couldn’t stand the thought of not being able to wrap me in Bubble Wrap and hide me away in my room anymore.

I smiled. “Of course I did. Do you think Juliet knows how to drive? There probably weren’t even cars yet when she was alive!”

“No, Raven. I know Juliet doesn’t know how to drive, but you don’t know how to drive either!” Dad argued. He floated around from side to side. It took me a minute to realize that he was pacing. “You’ve never done it before!”

I scoffed. “No, but I’ve been watching you drive my whole life. And I mean watching. I’ve studied you. And Brooke and Nash now too. I know what to do. I understand how it all works. I knew I would need to drive one day, and I prepared myself the only way I could.”

“What about all the other things that go with owning a car, huh? Car insurance? Registering it? Did you think about all of that?” Dad demanded, assuming that I hadn’t. When you’re young, adults think you have no idea what it means to be responsible.

I had been craving the responsibility that comes with freedom my whole life . . . of course I had thought about all of that.

“Brooke says I can get help with that at the resource center on campus,” I said. “It’s free for all students at the Academy. They’ll get me set up.” Her Gran took care of all her initial license stuff when she was sixteen, but the resource center helped her register Charles’s old car and get car insurance for it. They would help me fill everything out and get the best rates.

“May I sit?” Juliet asked, motioning toward the couch with her bags.

I nodded, smiling to make her feel welcome. “Of course! We walked a lot today. You’re probably exhausted.”

She smiled back and sank onto the couch, removing her new shoes and rubbing her feet. Our bags were piled high beside her. We got Juliet a full wardrobe and new sheets and quilts for the bed so she could move into

Dad's old room. I got some new things for myself, too, hoping that it would lift my spirits a little bit. It didn't.

In all honesty, she probably needed a rest from the car ride as much as she was from all the walking. I had to stop so she could throw up twice. I picked her up some pills for motion sickness at the gas station for future car rides.

"You think you've got everything under control," Dad said, bringing my attention back to him. His see-through body looked even weirder with the light from the window passing through it. "Well let me tell you something, Raven. Life throws curveballs—"

Glass shattered as a brick was thrown through the window. It passed right through my dad's translucent body. Juliet and I screamed. She jumped to hide behind the arm of the couch. I ran to the kitchen to get a knife.

When I returned, Donovan Glory was climbing through the broken window. My dad and Juliet were nowhere to be seen.

My phone was in my back pocket. I reached to dial 911 with my left hand while wielding my measly weapon with my right.

"I'm not here to hurt you, Raven. I don't want to hurt you. But your dad owes me a book, and I am here to collect," he said. His voice was calm but left no room for negotiation . . . and he was telling the truth as he believed it.

"My dad owes you nothing," I said. "Nothing in this house belongs to you. Get out before I call the cops."

But I couldn't dial. The stupid thing needed my password first. Then I had to click on the phone icon. It brought up a list of my most recent calls, so I had to find the way back to the keypad.

Donovan swiped the phone out of my hand and grabbed my other wrist with his cold, hard hand. He wrestled the knife from me, all the while looking like he didn't want to hurt me.

I cried out in defeat. I didn't dare look toward the couch and Juliet. I hoped he hadn't seen her.

"You can't stop me," he said unapologetically. "I'm going to get that book. You have no idea how badly I need it. If you try to fight me, I will defend myself and do my best not to hurt you in the process. I will not attack you unprovoked."

The rules of this scenario were wild, but he was telling the truth.

"Why did you kidnap my dad?" I asked, wondering how honest he was willing to be.

He looked surprised that I knew. "What do you mean? Why would you think that?"

"I know you held my dad hostage for days before he died," I explained. "Whatever you wanted him to do, he wouldn't do it. He believed in keeping that book from you so strongly that he died for it."

"You don't know the whole story," he said, shaking his head as if I were jumping to ludicrous conclusions.

"He died locked up in your house," I cried. "You may as well have murdered him!"

"NO!" He demanded, anger creeping into his previously composed disposition. "I never wanted him dead. No one in my family did! We needed his help! Without him, we'd have to figure out the book all on our own! Even with the book, I don't know if we'll be able to do it without him! We would have never shot ourselves in the foot like that. His death has

been ruinous for us! It may be for selfish reasons, but we have *grieved* him!”

“Then why is he dead?” I demanded. None of it was making any sense.

“I don’t know!” Donovan admitted, and he was telling the truth. “But if you give me that book, it won’t matter! I can figure out how to bring him back!”

My spinning thoughts zeroed in on the truth he just spoke. As crazy as that was, he really believed it was possible.

“What are you saying?” I asked, wondering how wicked things were really getting.

“Ahhhhhh!!!!” my dad yelled, appearing between Donovan and myself.

Donovan jumped backward, knocking over a lamp. It shattered on the floor, sending colorful shards into the mix with the clear ones that littered the living room floor. He still had my knife in his hand.

“How are you here?” Donovan asked. “What did you do? What kind of magic is this?”

“Leave my daughter alone,” he said in the creepiest voice he could muster. I was almost frightened myself. “I would never allow her to access the book. I wouldn’t be stupid enough to store it at my own home. Your quest here is useless.”

He stood, shaking his knife toward my dad. I didn’t know how he thought a knife would help him fight a ghost, but it seemed to help him feel a little better about the situation.

“I won’t help you,” I told him. “Whatever you’re doing, you’ll have to find the book on your own. When you do, and after you’re done with it of course, I would like to retain access to it. It does belong to my dad.”

I was doing my best to play him. If he thought I wanted it, too, maybe he would accept my lie about not having it.

“He found it,” Donovan argued. “It doesn’t belong to him. If I find it, the book is my family’s and ours alone.”

I furrowed my eyebrows. “You would deny me the belongings of my dead father when you are so directly connected to his death?”

My dad moaned and growled at him, causing him to jump backward again.

“You have everything else that actually belongs to him, girl. You’ll be fine. I need this book. I will do whatever it takes to get it,” he vowed. He was telling the truth there, too. There was nothing he wouldn’t do. He was truly a man of desperation.

“I can’t stop you from finding the book, Donovan. And I won’t. But if you come anywhere near my house again, I will haunt you and your family for eternity. And you know I mean that,” my dad threatened.

He bristled. “If the book isn’t here, why are you guarding this house so fiercely?”

“My daughter is here, Don. She means more to me than any book. Surely you can relate to that,” my dad said, his voice tender and sweet. He was telling the truth.

I thought this would calm the man further, but it only enraged him.

“How dare you say that to me when you wouldn’t help me! Maybe you ought to feel *my* pain!” Donovan yelled as his eyes moved from my dad to me. All the rules from before went out the window. The man had a knife and was moving toward me, arm stretched over his head.

My dad screamed but couldn’t stop him. Donovan moved through him like the wind he was. He didn’t even seem to notice how cold the air was

that my dad occupied. He was a man on a mission, and I was the target.

I didn't try to run. I didn't scream. I'm not sure why I didn't. Maybe I didn't have time? Maybe I was too shocked? Maybe I was too stupid?

I saw his arm come down. I saw the knife catch a glimpse of the sunlight streaming through the broken window and my dad's floating body.

The poor man had lost the love of his life. He had lived alone until he found a way to make a daughter for himself, and she had grown up resenting him for his overprotection. Now, he was going to have to watch her die.

I saw the sadness and pain in his eyes. If dying hurt half as much as the pain his face portrayed, I was in big trouble.

But the pain never came.

Out of my periphery, a barefooted warrior in jean shorts appeared to avenge me. She disarmed him and wrestled him to the ground. Before I could blink, she had her body wrapped around his from behind, the knife at his throat.

Fruitlessly, he struggled against her. She held him tightly, the knife pushing in deeper. He had no chance of escape. Gone was the scared fawn from before. Juliet was a weapon.

"Leave this place and never come back," she whispered in his ear. "If you so much as hurt one hair on Raven's head, I will finish this and remove your head from your body. And I will extend your punishment to everyone you love."

I shivered. It was no bluff. She meant every word.

"What are you?" Donovan asked. He looked like he was still trying to struggle, but she held him firm. He couldn't move. She was stronger than him.

“Apparently, my name is Juliet,” she said. “And you are number one on my list right now. Leave now before I mark you off of it entirely.”

She let him go and launched herself into a fighting stance before he could even stand up.

“I don’t know what you’re doing here, Haskins, but I will find that book,” he vowed as he backed out of the door. He was smart not to turn his back on Juliet. Dad was right about that part for sure.

“I don’t care about the book, Don. I only care about Raven,” Dad said. “I want her safe more than anything.”

My icy, betrayed heart melted as I saw the truth in his words again. Donovan left, but neither Juliet nor I moved. I stood in shock and horror. She stood ready for him to return, knife poised to attack. Dad floated to the window to watch him leave. We waited for his cue of safety. He finally nodded.

I exhaled as I looked at the couch, where our shopping bags hid the book. It was within his reach, and he didn’t even know it.

“I have to destroy it. Don’t I?” I whispered. “I have to make sure he never gets it.”

My dad nodded, but he didn’t take his eyes off Juliet.

“So, you’re a fighter?” Dad asked as he floated closer to her.

She winced, looking down at the knife in surprise . . . as if it appeared there out of thin air like she had. “I guess so.”

She carefully pulled each foot off the ground to look at the damage. Each was covered in blood with tiny shards of glass poking out of them.

“Do you vow to use your abilities to protect Raven and never harm her?” Dad asked, hovering closer to her. He looked at her with tenderness. She

had saved my life, and he knew it. If I hadn't woken her up, I would be dead . . . and the book would be in Donovan's hands.

"I do," she said, bowing to him like he was her king before sitting to take the pressure off her feet.

He looked to me for confirmation, which meant so much to me that tears filled my eyes.

"She's telling the truth, Dad," I assured him through my sobs before getting the first aid kit for my savior.

NASH

I had no plan—no diabolical queen of the night to tell me what the smartest move was. I needed her by my side. I had no knowledge of the inner workings of the layout of the house besides the random escapades I had years before being stupid with Jake and the other guys.

Still, I made my way to the Glory House alone.

I remembered how mad I was when Raven climbed down that air vent without telling anyone. She could have gotten stuck, and no one would have known where to look for her. She could have died. Even before I fell in love with her, I wanted to keep her safe. I gave her my phone number and demanded that she call me if she ever had the wild hair to do something that stupid again.

Now, I felt like a hypocrite . . . but it wasn't like I could have called her or anyone else. I hadn't stopped to buy a new cell phone yet. I didn't remember her number, anyway.

I hid my backpack in the brush once the house was in sight, hoping I could find it later. I kept my money on me just in case I lost the backpack.

There was nothing irreplaceable in it, yet it was all I owned in the whole world.

I didn't have tools to break in. I had nothing to conceal my face if there were security cameras and no gloves to hide my fingerprints. I wasn't prepared in the least.

It would have been smarter to leave and come back another day with an elaborate scheme, but I didn't have another day. The adrenaline and bravery coursing through my veins would run out. I had stared down the barrel of my father's pistol and lived. I had declared I was moving out and walked out the front door. Once my brain caught up with my body, I would be too terrified to risk my life ever again. I felt invincible. It was now or never.

No cars were in the driveway, but that didn't mean the house was empty. I snuck up as fast as I could and stood with my back to the house—right next to the back door. My breath came quicker, but I tried to keep it shallow so I could listen more intently to the inside of the house. As far as I could tell, there weren't any sounds from within.

I tried the back door. It was locked, but the top half was made of glass. I knew I could break it and turn the handle if I had no other option.

The inside of the house was dark with no obvious movement, so I thought I would try my luck and see if the front door was also locked.

Creeping around the edge of the house, I made my way to the front. As far as I could tell, there were no security cameras. If I had my laptop with me, I might have been able to do a more exhaustive check and disable any alarms, but I didn't have a laptop anymore. I'd have to buy a new one of those too.

Thank goodness I put up all those safeguards so my dad could never find out about my illegal business.

I held my breath and turned the knob on the front door. It was locked too.

In a moment of Raven-inspired genius, I knocked on the door loudly and hid in the bushes. No one came to answer. It was the best I could do to prove the house was vacant. It was time to force my way in.

I ran around to the back of the house again, legs pumping as fast as my heart. My dad had called me an idiot so many times, and I was using my first moments of freedom to prove him right.

I grabbed a rock and threw it through the bottom corner of the door window so I could reach through to unlock it. After the initial breaking, I hid again, waiting for someone to come investigate. No one did, so I turned the lock and let myself in.

The house seemed normal to me. It wasn't nearly as terrifying as when I came at night with my friends. It was warm and homey, clean and decorated. I almost stopped to clean up the glass so it could go from "pretty" back to "perfect." Nothing made me think this was the home of a murderer.

I shook my head, knowing looks could be deceiving. There was a dead body in a freezer somewhere in the house. And the worst part was that I wasn't in the business of avoiding it—I was trying to find it.

The house had three levels if you counted the basement. It didn't seem likely that someone would go to the effort to move a freezer up or down a flight of stairs if they didn't have to, so I checked the whole main floor first. The only freezer was the freezer-refrigerator combo in the kitchen. I winced as I opened it, hoping not to see cut-up body parts, but there was only ice cream. There was no meat, fruits, or vegetables of any kind—only ice cream.

I checked the upstairs next. I didn't have a logical reason for doing so besides not wanting to go into the basement. It was unfruitful as well. There were no freezers upstairs, only bedrooms and bathrooms.

Every room looked normal. There were five bedrooms in all, and each was decorated uniquely. One even had a crib and a rocking chair for a baby. Nothing seemed creepy or out of place.

I wanted to go through their things and learn more about everyone that lived in the Glory House, but I didn't have the time to do so. I had to hurry. I had to focus. I had to go to the dark basement where the doctor's body most assuredly was.

Running down the first flight of stairs to the main floor was easy. The main floor was safe. It was my only way out.

When I got to the second flight of stairs to the basement, I did not run. I took each step with caution and great intentionality. I didn't want to find what I was looking for . . . and I knew I was headed right for it.

I turned on the light when I descended, illuminating piles of boxes and junk. I expected to see another secret lab like the doctor's, but this was merely a storage place. They must not have completely unpacked from their move yet. When did Darcy get here? In the spring sometime? I couldn't remember. She was never that important to me.

Raven would know. Raven paid attention to things like that. She paid attention to everything. The stupidest thing I ever did was not breaking into this house; it was hiding something from her and thinking I could get away with it.

My stomach dropped when I saw the long freezer against the back wall. Its humming sound caused the hair on the back of my neck to stand up straight. There he was. I found him.

For a minute, I stood on the bottom step and stared at the freezer. My feet were frozen as if they, too, were on ice. The door to the top of the stairs was just as far from me as the freezer. I could leave. I could get out now and run for the hills. No one would know I failed because no one would know I tried.

“I can’t do this,” I breathed, taking a step backward. “I don’t know what I was thinking. I can’t do this. Raven—”

Her name centered me. For her, I could conquer my fear. For her, I could open that freezer. I could do anything.

With lead feet, I made my way across the basement. In the corner of my eye, I saw the chains that they must have locked the doctor up with. I could imagine those shackles around my wrists and ankles. If I screwed this up, they probably would be.

At least they had made a pallet for him on the floor with old blankets. Darcy's mom had even mentioned feeding him. Maybe in my worst-case scenario, it wouldn't be too bad—until I turned up mysteriously dead, of course.

I slid my fingers underneath the freezer lid, took a deep breath, and hoisted it open.

There was indeed a black body bag lying inside amidst packs of ice. I gagged as I realized that wasn't the most disturbing thing I saw . . .

. . . because heaven help me, there were two body bags.

I looked away and tried to catch my breath. My face felt too hot, even with the cold air wafting up to it. Air filled with death and—

I heaved again. I tried to breathe slowly and focus on my task at hand. I had to hurry before they returned. I couldn't end up in a body bag beside them.

My hands shook as I unzipped the top of the first bag, but it wasn't from the cold. I only thought I had been afraid when I stood up to my dad. This kind of fear was next-level. I was about to see a dead body.

A dead body shouldn't have been scarier than a narcissistic man with a gun, but it was. Part of me wanted to close my eyes so I wouldn't see it, and part of me wanted to hold my eyes open and avoid blinking to make sure it didn't jump out at me and catch me unaware.

I had seen a ghost before. I knew that things weren't always as they seemed.

I pulled the top down slightly to reveal dark curly hair. I didn't look at the face, but neither Raven nor her father had curly hair. That's all I needed to know. I zipped it back up and felt the tiniest bit safer.

That meant the other body had to be the doctor. If it wasn't . . . Well, I didn't even want to think about that option.

Using the same tactic I had the first time, I pulled the top down enough to see his hair. It was short and gray. That was enough for me. It had to be him.

I put the top back up and kept unzipping down the side without opening the bag up. I didn't want to see his face or any part of him that I didn't have to. I couldn't handle it. I knew I would throw up and never be able to calm myself. I'd have nightmares for the rest of my life. I was probably going to anyway.

"Please be on the right, please be on the right . . ." I begged the God my mother tried to believe in. "Please."

He must have been there because he heard and answered me. The doctor's right hand had the ring on it—as well as the watch. I touched his cold hand and gagged again. The retching sounds I made would have given

me away if someone had been home. I imagined pulling the ring right off, but his body seemed to have bloated around it. I had to scoot it off of his frozen finger one millimeter at a time.

When it was finally free of his cold, dead hand, I put it on my finger and quickly started to zip the bag back up. I hated to leave him there, but I knew I wasn't strong enough to carry a frozen body. I didn't even have a getaway car. I'd have to carry him for miles. It was impossible. I'd be lucky to get out of this by myself.

A scream of pure anger echoed from the main floor, making my blood run colder than the dead bodies in front of me. He must have seen the broken glass. I closed the freezer door as quietly as I could and pushed down to make sure it was sealed well.

I hoped he would check the rest of the house and save the basement for last like I did, but that didn't prove true. His feet stomped toward the basement door, flinging it open wide enough that the doorknob crashed into the wall of the kitchen. The light was still on, giving away the fact that this was where the intruder went. While there were boxes and piles of crap surrounding me, it was not enough to conceal me . . . especially when he was going to be looking for me.

"I wish I could give this ring to Raven without being seen," I whispered as I saw his shoes start to rapidly descend the old staircase.

A flash of light filled my vision. This was it. This was death. I wasn't going to escape it twice today.

The light disappeared as the full form of Donovan Glory stood before me.

He didn't look at me, though. He threw boxes aside as if they were empty, but I heard clanging in them when they landed. He checked every

place I could have hidden, but he never looked right at me as I stood frozen by the freezer.

He looked all around in an angry paranoia before growling again and giving up. He kicked a box, making it fly across the room and land on its side. The dishes packed inside spilled out onto the concrete floor and cracked, but he didn't seem to care.

Wordlessly, he reached the freezer in three long strides. I backed away slowly and tried to keep my feet quiet. He acted as if I didn't exist.

He couldn't see me.

He threw the lid open and grabbed the doctor's bag. He didn't look much stronger than me, but he threw the bag over his shoulder, slammed the lid, and scaled the stairs with the doctor as if he were as heavy as a pillow.

I used the sound of his footsteps to mask mine and climbed the stairs behind him, hoping he wouldn't slam the door in my face.

It was hard for him to maneuver the doctor through the door frame. He was grunting and getting even angrier when a woman appeared in front of him.

"What's going on?" she asked, wide eyed. She must have been the wife we heard on the phone.

"Look at the floor in the dining room," he grunted as he finally got the bag through. He nodded in that direction, which gave me enough time to sneak through the doorway before he shut it with his foot.

The woman ran toward the back door, gasped, and ran back again. "Someone was here, Don! What do you think they were looking for?"

"They were in the basement," Donovan said. "So I bet they found it."

Her face turned white. "Did they? Is she?"

“She’s fine, Danielle,” he assured her, taking a hand off the bag on his shoulder to put his arm around her and comfort her.

“Was it the daughter?” Danielle asked. “Did she come here looking for her dad?”

“No, it couldn’t have been her. I just saw her at her house,” he explained.

I did my best not to gasp. He went back to Raven’s? This lunatic holding a body bag?

Was she okay?

“I went straight there and came straight back. She had no time to come here,” he finished. “I don’t know who it was, but it wasn’t Raven.”

I was relieved that he didn’t suspect her but still unsure if she was safe.

Danielle looked like she finally saw the body bag he had draped over his shoulder. “What are you doing?”

“I’m getting rid of the doctor,” he stated, bitterness dripping from every word. It was almost like getting rid of his body was an act of revenge. I didn’t know why the man had kept it in the first place . . . or why he had another one downstairs.

“What about the spellbook? What about bringing him—”

“After all of the grief he’s caused us? No way. I’m not helping him with anything. The police are searching and even came by the university to question me. We can’t be found with this body, Danielle,” he argued.

“What if someone already saw the bodies?” she asked, her face horrified. “You said they went down to the basement? Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure. The light was on down there,” he stated.

She gasped and put her hand over her mouth. “What do we do, Don?”

“We get rid of the doctor and move her to a safer location,” he said, touching her cheek. “Try to come up with a plan for her while I’m gone. I’ll

be thinking too. We'll act quickly, and everything will be fine."

She nodded. "Where are you going to take him?"

"I'm not sure yet," he admitted. "I didn't have enough time to think about this. But we don't have time anymore. We have to act now."

"You didn't get the book?" she whispered. Her tone implied she already knew the answer.

He shook his head. "Raven swears they don't have it. I can't tell if I should believe her or not. She has a bodyguard there who attacked me. I'll go back to that house if I have to, but we need to look for it in other places first. That needs to be a last resort because that bodyguard was no joke. I couldn't fight them."

She looked surprised at the man who was still carrying a frozen body. "*You* couldn't fight him? How big was he?"

Donovan shook his head and carried the doctor out to his car. His wife followed him out the front door. I wanted to know more about this guy staying with Raven, but I could get that information from her—not the madman going to dump a body. I snuck to the back door, grimacing each time my foot crunched on the glass, even though they couldn't hear me from the front yard.

Darcy, however, could hear me. She had to have arrived with Danielle, but I didn't realize it.

She turned the corner and looked straight through me. I stared back at her and tried to study her face the way I saw Raven doing it. Did she know how corrupt her family was? Did she know there was a frozen body in her basement?

"Mom!" she said, running to yell out the front door. "Dad! I think someone is still here."

I gave up stealth and threw open the back door, running for my life into the woods surrounding their property. I crashed through the leaves and stopped to glance back. Donovan, hands now empty, ran toward the tree line with all his might.

I knew he couldn't see me, but he could still hear me.

Even though he charged in my direction like a bull, I remained completely still. He blazed past me, scanning the woods in all directions.

My heartbeat was so loud that I feared it would give me away. It was pounding in my ears like a war drum. How could he not hear it?

He finally shook his head and ran back to his house.

"What do we do, Don?" his wife asked again.

"Do as I said. We make the guy's story false so the police find nothing. Call Dawson to come help. Have him move her now so I can get rid of the doctor and we don't waste any time."

"What about W—"

"You know he won't come," Donovan said sadly. "Just call Dawson."

I wasn't brave enough to move either foot for a long time. Moving only my upper body, I looked around for where I stashed my backpack, thankful that Donovan hadn't seen it. When I was ninety percent sure I knew where it was, I finally walked slowly toward it.

I carried it by my side, close to the ground instead of slinging it on my back. I had no idea if it was invisible as well or if it looked like it was floating. Closer to the ground seemed the most covert way to carry it.

I couldn't get Raven's father back, but I got his magic ring for her. I hoped it would be enough. I could give her one wish. Even if she wished never to see me again, I'd be fine if that's what made her happy.

I chuckled. She might not be able to ever see me again, anyway. I had no idea if or when my invisibility would wear off.

RAVEN

I feared leaving Juliet alone at the house, but after seeing her beat the crap out of Donovan Glory, I was more scared for myself without her by my side.

I opened the book in the library, pleased with my binding abilities. The night before, Juliet and I dissected an old book of my dad's with a similar thickness and put that hardcover on the spellbook to conceal it. The only one big enough was *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*. It had a beautiful and intricate cover. The designs reminded me of the back of a deck of cards. Instead of a king, however, Shakespeare's face appeared on the front.

My dad cringed as I ruined one of his collector-edition books but still supported us in explaining the best binding agent to use. It looked perfect when we were done.

"Why are you doing this?" he had pleaded. "Can't you burn it now? Please?"

"I haven't finished reading it," I said as it sat drying underneath another pile of books. The weight was supposed to help it stick better. "I'm not

destroying it until after I understand it.”

He rolled his ghost eyes. “Then why don’t you read it now instead of wasting time trying to disguise it?”

“So if I’m interrupted or intercepted again, it will be concealed,” I explained. “Plus, I’m going to try reading it at school. Darcy might see it. I have to look like I’m reading something else.”

“Oh, *that’s* a good idea,” my dad said, sarcasm dripping from his voice. “A man tries to kill you, and you lie about possessing something he wants, so the next day you plan on parading said thing right under his daughter’s nose.”

I was most definitely rubbing off on him. It made me smile.

“What? What is so funny about this, Raven?” he demanded. He tried to stomp his foot, but it wasn’t as effective without the sound.

“I like being able to talk to you for real,” I said, smiling warmly at him. “No secrets, no falseness—just you and me being honest with each other. I wish we would’ve had that when you were alive.”

His anger melted, and he smiled back at me. “Me too. I’m sorry that I didn’t know how.”

I hoped he and Juliet were getting along okay at the house. She seemed to have won him over by defending me, but he was still wary of the silent power she possessed. She didn’t know how to harness it again. After I tended to her feet, we tried to get her instincts to kick back in as she lay resting on the couch. They didn’t. Dad finally made me stop because he feared she would hurt me if I pushed her too far and woke up whatever dwelled inside her.

She remembered how to read, so I gave her a pile of my favorite books and propped up her injured feet before I left. I hoped she remembered how

to use the microwave to warm up her mashed potatoes for lunch.

I cringed. I hadn't told her not to put silverware in there. Hopefully she didn't. I made a mental note to teach her that when I got home.

"Nash still hasn't been here all day?" Brooke asked, sitting across from me in the library during our study hall at the end of the day.

I shook my head and looked up from the book to face her. "Who?"

Brooke scowled at me. "I know you're mad, but it wasn't really his fault."

I sat up straight in my chair. "Excuse me? What gives you the audacity —"

"I'm your best friend," she said, interrupting me. "And I love you. But I don't think you're being fair to Nash. You've forgiven your father, and he's the one who committed the offense against you, not Nash."

"I haven't forgiven him. Not really," I said. I was still mad and hurt, but she was right . . . I was still talking to the man, and I still loved him. Why was I being so much harder on Nash?

"Your dad put Nash in a terrible situation," Brooke said, putting her hand on top of mine. "Imagine what you would feel if the situation were reversed."

I shook my head, refusing to go there. "No. Nash and I promised each other honesty. You know how hard it is for me to be honest. I either lie or I'm so blunt that people think I'm being rude. I was real with him, Brooke. I was honest, and he didn't reciprocate."

She looked at me with tears in her eyes. "But aren't you scared that his dad . . ."

"Of course I'm scared!" I yelled, receiving glares from my classmates across the room. I had tried to sit as far away from everyone else as I could,

but Brooke sought me out.

“I’m driving myself crazy over here,” I admitted quietly. “If he kept such a monumental secret from me, I’m wondering what else he was hiding. Not knowing if he’s safe or not is making me lose my mind. That’s why I’m trying to read this book. I have to do something that engages my whole brain and makes me stop thinking about him.”

I tried to blink back the tears, but one escaped. I wiped it away quickly and looked back down at the book.

“Okay,” Brooke said, squeezing my hand and standing up. “I’ll give you your space. Come over there if you need me.”

I nodded, and she pushed her chair in and left. I sniffled and dove back into Amara’s spellbook.

Dad was right about Amara. She did turn bad. The townspeople killed her sister, and you could feel her anger radiate from the page. She was plotting revenge, and it was going to be gruesome.

The chair across from me scooted out. I thought that Brooke had come back, and I was just about to look up and apologize for being so snappy earlier, but there wasn’t anyone there. It was as if the chair moved on its own. I looked around it and underneath the table, wondering who was close enough to me to do it. No one else in the library seemed to notice.

“I’m sorry, Raven,” I heard Nash say.

My head spun around even crazier, searching for him. Had his dad let him come back to school? Where was he? Was he okay?

“I should have told you,” he continued. “I should have told you the truth as soon as you woke up. No, I should have woken *you* up as soon as I learned the truth.”

It sounded like he was right beside me, but no one was even close.

“Where are you,” I demanded, trying to stay calm so I didn’t attract attention.

“Meet me in the back of the library,” he said. “The very back corner in the stacks.”

“How can I trust you if I can’t see you?” I demanded. I didn’t know if I would trust him if I could read his face, but it was much more difficult when I couldn’t.

“You can trust me,” he said. “I would never hurt you on purpose. Please believe that. Even though I hurt you, it was never a trick or malicious scheme. I made a bad call, and I’m so sorry. But I have something for you. Please come to the back of the library so I can give it to you. Then, if you want me to leave you alone, I will.”

I bit my lip but made my way to the back of the library. I felt like I was walking into a trap. When I got to the corner, I turned around to look for him. He still wasn’t there.

“I broke into the Glory House,” he said. His sudden voice made me jump.

“Where are you?” I asked, waving my hands around. They collided with something solid in the air.

“I’m right here,” he said. As if the air had fingers, I felt them wrap around my hand and place my palm on the solid chest I knew so well. I felt his heartbeat.

“What? Nash?”

I stepped closer to him, running my hands over his invisible body. I felt his spiky mohawk, his long nose, his goatee . . . his lips. His breath was warm on my fingertips.

“Yes. It’s me,” he said, stroking my face.

“What happened? What’s going on? Are you okay?” I demanded. My hands continued to roam all over him, feeling arms, shoulders, and face. I couldn’t believe it was real. I was thankful he called me to the back of the library for this because I had to have looked like an idiot groping the air the way I was.

“I broke into the Glory House to get your dad’s ring back for you,” he said, leading my fingers to his hand. I could feel a ring on his finger.

I caught my breath. “You saw his body?”

“I did,” he said. I wished I could see his face so I could read him better. “I’m sorry I couldn’t get him out, Raven. I would have brought him to you if I could have. Donovan came home and caught me and—”

I slammed my hand against his chest. “Donovan *caught* you? What were you thinking?! You could have been killed!”

“I know,” he said plainly. “But I had to try. I had to show you how sorry I am.”

His words broke my heart. “I never wanted you to put yourself in danger for me, Nash. I didn’t need the ring that bad. I never even asked you for it.”

“I know that,” he said, stroking my cheek. “But I’ve been wanting to get that ring for you ever since your dad told us about it.”

I closed my eyes and shook my head. “Did Donovan do this to you?”

“No, the ring did,” he explained. “I wished to get away without being seen, so the ring made me invisible. Apparently, I still am.”

I felt my eyes widen. I looked up as if trying to find his eyes in the empty air in front of me.

“It really works? It will give you anything you wish for?” I asked.

He didn’t answer.

“Nash?”

“Oh, sorry,” he said with a chuckle. “I was nodding my head. I forgot you can’t see me.”

I chuckled, too, and rested my head on his chest.

“Please forgive me, Raven,” he begged, stroking my back. “Please let me be your partner again.”

“I forgive you,” I said. “I’m still mad about it, but I forgive you. I think I even forgive my dad too. Everyone was doing their best with what they had.”

He tilted my head up and kissed me. It felt so strange to kiss someone invisible.

“Thank you, Raven,” he said, his voice hoarse. “Think about how handy this invisibility will be when I’m sneaking into places for you in the future.”

I laughed but shook my head. “It would have been, but don’t get used to it.”

“What? Why?” he asked.

“I’m going to use my wish to get you back,” I said, slipping the ring off.

“No, Raven! You can’t waste it—what?” he asked, looking at me like I was crazy.

I stared in wonder as I could see Nash’s face again. I hadn’t realized how much I missed him.

“What is it?” he demanded, furrowing those blonde eyebrows.

“I can see you,” I said, grabbing his face between my hands and kissing him.

“You can? Put the ring back on me and see what happens.”

I did, and nothing changed. He still stood in front of me.

“Well?”

“I still see you,” I said, smiling as I looked him in the eye.

“Really? How many fingers am I holding up?”

I laughed. “You aren’t holding up any fingers!”

He frowned. “Is it bad that I’m a little disappointed? I lost my superpower.”

I shook my head and took the ring back from him, sliding it into my pocket instead of putting it on.

“I’m glad you did. I missed this face,” I said, kissing his cheek over and over.

“Do I need to write you two up?” Mrs. Cravens asked, turning the corner on us.

I blushed, but Nash only smiled.

“Sorry, Mrs. Cravens. I actually need to go to the office anyway. I’ve got to make sure my enrollment is still good.”

He squeezed my hand and winked at me as he left. Mrs. Cravens stared him down with a threatening look as he walked by her, but when he was gone, I saw her sigh.

“I’m glad he’s back,” she said to me. “I was afraid when his dad pulled him out that he would drop out instead of homeschooling and not finish his education.”

I nodded in agreement. Had he convinced his dad to let him come back?

I looked around for the book, but it wasn’t on any of the shelves beside me.

“What is it?” Mrs. Cravens asked. “Is there a problem?”

“My book,” I said, my voice raising. “I’ve lost it. It’s the *Complete Works of Shakespeare*. Have you seen it?”

“No, dear, I don’t even know if we have that here—”

I raced back to the table where I was sitting when Nash came over. My backpack was to the side, but the table was empty.

Tearing open my backpack, I looked through it to see if I had put it inside before I followed him. I knew I hadn't, but it was my only choice.

I had lost it. The book was gone.

Darcy sat across the room with a laptop, typing away furiously like a reporter who had to get all the facts down before forgetting them. She didn't look guilty in the least. There were no books around her. She didn't even have a bag she could have concealed one in.

"Did you find it?" Mrs. Cravens asked when she caught up to me.

"No," I said, rushing back to the stacks. It had to be back there somewhere.

If I didn't find it, Dad was going to kill me.

30

NASH

“**Y**ou have a ride now?” I asked as I opened the rusty passenger door. “Sweet! It’s nice!”

It wasn’t really nice, but I could tell from the look on her face when she pointed it out to me that she was proud of it.

She beamed. “Sure do! Now I only need to pass my driver’s test.”

That didn’t sound promising. To make matters worse, there was no buckle for my seat.

“Raven . . . you do know how to drive, right?” I asked, trying to sound kind and not condescending.

“Of course,” she said, putting it in gear. “I’ve been watching people do it for years.”

That’s what I was afraid of.

“Watching isn’t the same as practicing,” I explained. “It’s harder to do than it looks.”

She shrugged. “This is me practicing. Hold on.”

I took her suggestion literally and found something to grab with each hand, braced for takeoff, thankful that the car was at least an automatic.

She actually wasn't a bad driver in the grand scheme of things. I was slung forward with each brake and backward with each acceleration, but she seemed to know what she was doing. She just needed to learn how to do it more fluidly.

I smiled as I watched her drive. She didn't lack an ounce of confidence. I admired that about her. If someone asked if she knew how to do something, her answer would never be no. It would simply be "not yet."

"Want me to drop you off at home?" she asked as we neared a stoplight. Left would take us to her house. Right would take us to mine.

"No," I said. "I don't think I would get a very warm welcome. I don't live there anymore."

I was thrown forward again as she hit the brakes hard. My hand slammed against the dash to catch myself.

I'd have to remember not to drop major information when she was behind the wheel.

"What do you mean?" she asked. The car behind us honked.

I motioned for her to get into the turning lane. "I told him I was moving out."

"How did he take it?" Raven asked, trying to look at me and drive at the same time. It was unnerving, but she was still doing alright as she turned left to take us to her house.

"Not well. He threatened me with his gun," I said. I tried to sound nonchalant about it, but it came out pretty bitter.

Rage burned in her brown eyes. "He did *what*?"

"Do not make an elaborate revenge plan," I warned. "He didn't shoot me, and I'm out of there. That's all that matters."

“That is so *not* all that matters,” Raven demanded. “He should lose his badge! They should lock him up! What about justice?”

“I don’t want justice,” I said. “I want freedom, and I have it now.”

My honesty surprised her. “Well, what if I want justice? What if I use my wish to punish him?”

“And waste your wish on someone you hate? No, don’t do that,” I said, resting my hand on her knee.

She softened. “What are you going to do now? Do you need somewhere to stay?”

I nodded. “I do. I was kind of hoping you knew of a place? I wouldn’t even mind living with a ghost.”

She smiled and laced her fingers through mine. Her control of the wheel went down drastically, so I pulled my hand back.

“Also, I do have a question for you. It’s going to come out as super jealous, but I can’t help it . . . is there already a guy staying with you?” I asked. I couldn’t stop myself from wincing as I said it. It wasn’t like we were together, and I knew her well enough to know she wouldn’t have crossed any of her lines with him, but I hated the idea of someone else being with her.

She laughed. “Besides my dad? Yeah right.”

“I’m serious, Raven. If someone stayed there with you, you can tell me,” I assured her, trying to sound supportive and not as sad as I really was. “If someone was keeping you safe, that’s all that matters.”

Her face scrunched up, and I could tell she was racking her brain to figure out what I was talking about. “No, Nash. Honestly. No man has been in my house besides you and my dad . . . except for when Donovan came over, and he was most assuredly not there to keep me safe.”

“That’s what I’m talking about,” I explained. “I overheard when Donovan said he tried to get the book and your bodyguard stopped him. He said the guy was too strong for him to fight. Who is this bodyguard?”

Raven’s jaw dropped, and she shrieked with laughter. “You’ve *got* to be kidding me! Donovan said that? For real?”

“Yes, he said the guy was unbeatable, and that he didn’t want to go back to your house to look for the book unless he had no other options. He scared the crap out of him. Was it Peter?”

That was the only thought that kept me sane since I heard it. Raven didn’t have a new boyfriend, but if Brooke and Peter were there, Peter would protect her for Brooke. If Peter had turned into a wolf, he could have overpowered the man. The story made sense.

“No, it wasn’t Peter,” she said, scanning us in. Laughter still danced in her eyes.

“Well then who was it?” I said. It came out more jealous than I intended, so I cleared my throat and tried again. “Who was the bodyguard he was talking about?”

She bit her lip, smiling from ear to ear. “I can’t wait for you to meet them.”

“He’s here now?” I asked, swinging my head to the door.

She nodded. “Mhmm. Come see for yourself.”

I beat her to the door, anxious to see what was so funny to her about this situation. I tried to keep my face cool, but I knew she could read my jealousy. I couldn’t hide anything from her. Why didn’t she tell me? The suspense was driving me insane.

She unlocked the door and pointed to the couch where a tall, brown-haired girl lay with bandaged feet propped on pillows reading a book.

“Juliet, this is Nash,” Raven said. The girl nodded as if she already knew tons about me. “Nash, this is Juliet. My bodyguard.”

RAVEN

The look on his face made me burst into laughter again.

“What is it?” Juliet asked, trying to sit up.

“No, lay down and rest,” I said, trying to catch my breath. “Nash overheard Donovan telling the story of what happened here. Apparently he made it sound like you were a huge man.”

“This girl fought Donovan?” Nash asked. I could tell he didn’t believe us. She didn’t look particularly threatening.

“The girl *defeated* Donovan,” Dad said as he appeared in the living room with us. “She had him crawling out of here with his tail between his legs.”

“How? Who is she?” Nash asked. “How do you guys know her?”

“Oh, Raven didn’t tell you? She used the spellbook to wake up someone that Amara froze in time hundreds of years ago. If she hadn’t proven to be such an asset, I would still be fuming about it,” Dad said, that newfound attitude dripping from every word.

“You are still fuming about it,” I pointed out. “And everything has turned out fine, by the way. It wasn’t like I made a huge mistake that ruined our lives.”

Nash looked at me like I was juggling fire. “Are you insane? You used one of the spells? You swore you wouldn’t!”

“I didn’t do it on purpose!” I said in my defense. “Let’s all just focus on the rest of what Dad said, okay? If she wasn’t here to protect me, I would be dead right now.”

The color drained from Nash’s face. “Dead? What do you mean?”

“He came at her with a knife,” Dad said, his voice more haunting than his form. “He did it to get revenge against me. I tried to stop him and scare him into leaving, but he blazed right through me. There wasn’t anything I could do.”

Dad’s voice broke. I reached out to touch him to comfort him, then remembered I couldn’t.

“Juliet was hiding the whole time,” he continued. “He didn’t even know she was here. She leapt out and disarmed him. Before he knew it, she had the knife to his throat.”

Nash stared at Juliet with new respect. “You saved her? You could have stayed hidden and waited for him to leave. But you saved her?”

“She is my friend,” Juliet said, giving me a small grin. “She gave me clothes and potatoes mashed. She set me free. I promised to protect her, and I will.”

To my surprise, Nash teared up and crossed the room to take her hand in his.

“Thank you,” he said, looking her in the eye. “I owe you my life.”

“So do I,” Dad chimed in. “But that doesn’t erase the fact that Raven needs to destroy the book before she ‘accidentally’ does something even worse.”

“I already did,” I assured him. “I finished it today and burned it. It's gone.”

His body floated slightly down with his sigh. “Thank goodness. No more harm can come from it. I've hated the thought of you being wrapped up in all of this mess.”

I pulled out the ring, and my dad screamed.

“Where did you get that! Raven Cordella Haskins, did you go into that house? Did you see my body? Oh my goodness, I can't believe you—”

“I didn't do it, Dad,” I interrupted him. “Nash did.”

His face turned toward Nash. “Why did you do it? How did you do it?”

“I wanted to get it for Raven,” he explained, smiling at me. “I had to find a way to show her how much I love her.”

The breath whooshed from my lungs. “You love me?”

He winked. “I do.”

And he was telling the truth.

“Ahem,” Dad said, ruining the moment the best he could. “How did you pull it off, lover boy?”

“No one was home when I broke in. I found the ring right as they returned. I wished to get out of there unseen, so the ring made me invisible,” Nash explained.

Dad scoffed. “Dumb kid. You're lucky we can see you now. You're lucky to be alive.”

“I know I am,” Nash said, not taking his eyes off me.

“Okay, Raven. You traded one powerful object for another. This is dangerous too. If that ring is on your finger, it will give you whatever you wish for—whether you meant it sarcastically or not. Lock it up until you're sure about what you want to use it on. Practice taking the word ‘wish’ out

of your vocabulary so you don't slip up when it counts. You only get one wish, and you don't want to wish a curse upon yourself."

"I already know what I'm going to wish for," I said, holding the ring in my palm. I looked up to see all three of them staring at me in concern.

"Don't you dare make some stupid wish fueled by your teenage love," Dad warned.

"No, Raven. Don't wish for revenge. Wish for something good," Nash pleaded.

"My feet still hurt. Please do not wish for something I have to fight," Juliet said.

I smiled at all of them. They were my family.

"I'm so thankful for all of you," I said. "You all hold my heart in some form or another. If Brooke were standing here, then all of the people I love would be in one room."

They all held their breath as I stared down at the ring. "I'm beginning to learn about what it means to love someone."

"Raven," Dad said, "Don't do it. Look at this boy. He was stupid enough to break into that house for you. You don't have to make any wishes about him. He'd probably be dumb enough to marry you tomorrow if you asked him to."

I smiled with tears in my eyes. "What I've learned is that you should never be separated from the person you love—especially not for eternity."

He floated toward me and tried to take my face in his hands as the tears spilled down. My cheeks grew cold. I felt frost appear on the trails of tears on my face.

"Raven, please be smart. Save the wish. You never know when you might need it," he warned.

“You love me so much,” I said, sobbing. “Don’t you?”

“Yes, Raven, I do. Please. I’ll do anything. Don’t use your wish now. Take time to think about it and be sure. Please,” he begged.

“I am sure,” I told him. “Because I know how much I love you.”

His bushy eyebrows furrowed. “What do you mean?”

“I love you, Dad. You’re a weirdo and you smothered me, and you aggravate me more than any person on this planet probably ever will, but I love you.”

He smiled. “So you’ll wait?”

“I forgive you for everything you did—the things I know about and the things I’ve yet to uncover. I am yours, and you are mine. I love you, and I’m going to miss you so much.”

I saw realization start to creep across his face. “Raven, what are you doing?”

“I’ll see you again someday,” I said. “And I’ll tell you all about the stupid things I did that you didn’t have to stick around to witness.” I put the ring on my finger and looked at him one last time.

“Raven, don’t. I love you. I want to stay with you,” he said, his voice breaking.

“You can’t protect me anymore. Watching my life unfold will only bring you pain because you can’t be a part of it. You miss her, Dad. You always have.”

“I do, but there has to be another way,” he pleaded. “There has to be a way I can have you both.”

I smiled. “You will, one day. Just enjoy your time together until then.”

He started crying. “I love you, Raven. I can’t wait to tell her all about you. I’m so sorry you two never got to know each other. She would have

been a fantastic mother.”

I couldn't catch my breath through my cries. I felt my face get cold again, so I opened my eyes to see him smiling down at me.

“She would be so proud of you. I know I am,” he said. Those were his last words for me, and they were perfect.

I took a deep breath and smiled at him. “I wish that my dad, Warren Haskins, would move on from this earth and find peace in heaven with his wife, Clara.”

NASH

With a flash of brilliant light, the doctor was gone. Raven fell to her knees.

I rushed to her side and held her tight. Her body moved violently with her sobs, each jerk tearing deeper into my heart.

Her dad was truly gone now. His death was real to her. Even though she hadn't seen him in weeks, his absence was now permanent.

Juliet was crying silently on the couch, her heart breaking for her new friend. I didn't know how we were going to put her back together . . . but I knew we couldn't do it alone. I grabbed Raven's phone from the table and called her best friend.



Brooke and Peter burst through the door an hour later. They were both sweating and panting from scaling the wall. I knew I wouldn't be able to get Raven to the gate to let them in.

I still held Raven in the same position on the floor. No one had said anything since I hung up the phone with Brooke. I would meet Juliet's eyes every once in a while, and a certain sense of empathy would pass between us. Neither of us had any idea what to do to make it better. I held her tightly, but I couldn't do anything else.

Brooke approached us slowly and knelt down, touching Raven's arm gently.

I didn't know loss, but Brooke did. I didn't know how to walk through grief, but Brooke did. Raven crawled from my arms to Brooke's, still choking on her sobs. With her head, Brooke motioned for me to leave.

I didn't want to, but if she thought it was best, I had to trust her. Peter tilted his head toward the yard, and I followed him outside. Apparently girls were still allowed because Juliet stayed on the couch.

“Is she going to be okay?” I asked Peter as soon as I closed the door behind us.

He nodded. I needed him to use more words. I needed clear directions.

“What can I do? How can I be there for her?”

He waited a while before responding. “Know when to be there and when to leave.”

I rolled my eyes. “Okay, so now that you talk, you talk in riddles?”

He chuckled and scratched his face through his beard. “I meant that there are times she’s going to need you to be right beside her to help her feel better, and there are times she’s going to need her space so she can wallow and feel all of her feelings. She needs support, and she needs to learn how to stand on her own. There needs to be a balance of both.”

“Why?” I asked. Shouldn’t I always be there with her? Shouldn’t I try to keep her from being sad?

“Because you don’t want to get stuck in grief, but you don’t want to bury it either,” he said, looking out toward the trees. It was strange to think that the guy had spent most of his life living in the woods as a wolf. I wondered if he ever wanted to go back when things out here got too hard.

“For being so weird, you’re pretty smart,” I said.

He smiled and nodded his thanks.

“I’ve got another question for you,” I said ominously. I wasn’t honestly sure if he would go for it or not.

His eyes widened. “And what’s that?”



It took me the whole weekend to get everything set up for Juliet to live in our world. Brooke and I took turns with Raven, whether that was sitting with her while she cried, making sure she ate something, or watching her sleep. It was almost twenty-four hours before she started talking again . . . to any of us.

Peter cleaned and rebandaged Juliet's feet. Apparently Raven had done a lackluster job the first time, but he made us swear not to tell her.

We had given Juliet the last name Meadows. It was a fight to get her to decide on one.

"I want to be Juliet Capulet," she said, holding *The Complete Works of Shakespeare* up. It was coverless and ragged. It seemed pretty pointless that the girls spent so much time putting the cover on the spellbook for her to go and burn it the next day. Nevertheless, I was glad to be rid of it. It was one less thing for us to be worried about.

"No," I said. "It's too on the nose. People will suspect that it's a fake identity."

"How about Williams?" Peter asked. "Like William Shakespeare's?"

I rolled my eyes. “That’s *my* last name.”

He scrunched his nose like he smelled something bad. “Oh yeah. Sheriff Williams. Got it.”

I looked up a random name generator online. “Blake?”

“No,” she said. “I want it to sound pretty.”

“Benson?”

Juliet and Peter both said no in unison, like it was obviously a terrible name. I didn’t see anything wrong with it.

I threw my hands in the air. “Why does it matter? It’s a fake name! Just pick one!”

“It matters,” Peter said, whose real name was actually Thomas Murphy. I guess he knew more about it than I did.

“Valentine?” I suggested as I returned to the list and tried to offer up the ‘pretty’ names.

She shook her head.

“Meadows?”

Her eyes lit up, and she looked at Peter for confirmation. He nodded.

“Yes,” she said. “I am Juliet Meadows.”

“And how do you know Raven, Juliet?” I asked, quizzing her.

“I am her older cousin. I moved here from Kansas to help her because her dad was missing. We have not seen each other in a long time, and I am so thankful to get to know her better now.”

“Don’t put so much emphasis on the last *s* in Kansas,” I critiqued. “Otherwise, it’s perfect.”

“Kansas?” she tried again. I shook my head, and she winced.

“Just change it,” Peter suggested.

“I’ve already put Kansas on her driver’s license and looked up how to replicate it!” I demanded. “I’d have to start over!”

Peter shrugged. “So start over.”

It was hard to keep my patience with him. I didn’t know how to survive in the wild, but Peter didn’t know how to work a computer. He had no idea how many hours I had spent on that license.

“No, I will do better,” Juliet promised. “I only need to practice. Kans-ss.”

“You’re just dropping the *a* now. Say it like you’re saying the word ‘can’ and the word ‘us,’ ” I suggested.

She wrinkled her brow. “Canus?”

I smiled. “Now put an *s* at the end of ‘can.’ ”

“Cans-us?” she tried.

Peter and I both whooped and hollered. She beamed.

“Cans-us! Cans-us!” she yelled. “I am from Cans-us!”

“What are you guys doing?” Raven asked, appearing in the doorway.

Our excitement faded when we saw the pain on her face.

“I’m making Juliet a fake identity in case she needs it. She’s Juliet Meadows, your older cousin from Kansas who’s come to stay with you,” I explained.

“Cool,” she said, “But don’t you mean that she’s come to stay with us?”

If it were possible, the room got even quieter.

“What?” she asked, looking from face to face. “What is it?”

I crossed the room to hold her hand. “Raven, I’m going to move in with Peter.”

She looked back and forth between us. “What do you mean? No, you’re not. You live here—with me.”

I smiled, so thankful that she wanted me around. “Raven, I will be here whenever you need me to be. But I also need to be able to give you space when you need it. I need to have a place of my own.”

“But why?” she demanded.

I didn’t want to give my speech in front of Peter and Juliet, but it didn’t look like I had a choice.

“I want to respect every boundary you’ve set, Raven,” I tried to explain. “But if I live here with you, that’s going to be difficult or impossible. It would be torture staying here with you night after night and wanting to go further with no one here to interrupt us.”

I meant her dad, but I didn’t know if it was okay to bring him up yet. I expected never to get close to doing anything inappropriate while I lived here because I thought he would be there watching day and night. That wasn’t the case anymore.

She pointed to Juliet. “Juliet will be here! She can hose us down if she needs to!”

I laughed. “I’m sure she could, but I also don’t want to push you. I don’t want you to compromise what you want because I’m here pressuring you day and night.”

“You don’t pressure me,” she assured me. “And I reserved the right to change my mind if I want to.”

“And that’s fine,” I said. “But not in the heat of the moment. Change your mind because it’s what you think the right thing is, not because I’m such an amazing kisser.”

I winked at her, trying to lighten the mood. She smiled, but her shoulders sagged.

“I’ll miss you,” she said. I’d never heard her sound so vulnerable about wanting to be with me. It almost made me give in and stay.

“You won’t have a chance to miss me,” I assured her. “Peter and I will be over here with Brooke all the time. With the book gone and Donovan scared to death of Juliet, we can take that gate down so no one has to scale the wall anymore.”

Her eyes widened.

“Or not,” I said, trying to guess why she reacted like that. “Maybe I can reprogram it to work by code and give the code to them instead? That would be better anyway.”

“It’s not that,” she said. “I have something to tell you, Nash.”

“What?” Immediately, I did not like where this was going. She looked down toward her bare feet, wringing her hands together nervously. Her hair, not in its usual bun, fell down to conceal her face.

“I lied,” she whispered. I could barely hear her. Peter and Juliet were silent as they, too, leaned in to hear what was going on.

“What?” I asked, lifting her chin up to face me. Strands of hair stayed in her face, but I could see her terrified eyes as she looked at me. “You lied about what?”

“I wanted my dad to think he could leave me and I would be okay,” she said. “So I lied to him.”

I tried to recall their conversation in the living room. “About what, Raven?”

“I didn’t destroy the book,” she admitted. “I lost it.”

ASSASSIN

“Hey! The chief wants to see you,” John yelled. I strode by him with confidence. He looked like he wanted to spit on me, but I knew he would not dare because I outranked him. It was a good feeling.

“If you put half as much effort into your job as you do your smirk, you would be the boss around here by now,” I said, patting him on the head for good measure since I knew he hated it.

“Chief,” I said, bowing my head slightly. He was the only one I bowed to. The smell of his tea filled the room. He drank it constantly. I would never be able to smell that tea without thinking of him.

“I have a mission for you,” he said, his mustache wet from sipping his hot mug. “We found the one we have been looking for, and I want you to take care of her. I want another one of those names marked off my list, and you are the best person for the job.”

My eyes widened. “You found her? That is great news! Where is she?”

“Midnight Springs,” he explained, handing me a map.

I unrolled it in haste. “Across the ocean? In the United States?”

“Yes,” he verified, pointing to the map. “In Arkansas. It is in the Southeast, right about there. Are you up for it?”

“I have always wanted to go,” I admitted. “But why me? Why not send one of the men on a mission so far away?”

“She will be expecting a man to come after her. *You* will be able to get closer before you attack. People underestimating you is your greatest strength. Do not *ever* forget that,” he said, pride filling his face. I loved when he was proud of me. That made every kill even sweeter.

I nodded. “When do I leave?”

“Immediately,” he said. “And when you return, we will have a banquet in your honor.”

“Yes, sir,” I said. “What exactly is my objective?”

“Kill the girl and anyone else involved with magic. You will not know just how intricate the problem is until you get there. Take some time to observe and see how deep this goes. Question her before you kill her if you need to. We need to eradicate this evil. You know that better than anyone.”

I did. I did not need to be reminded. He knew that. He was there that night when they found me. He wrapped a blanket around me and took me under his wing. From that moment on, I was forever in his debt.

“How will I find her once I get to Midnight Springs?” I asked, hoping that we had her exact address. By the look on his face, we did not.

“Unfortunately, all I have is this sketch of her. Take it with you,” he said. “I am not worried in the least about you being able to find her. She is going to stand out. It will be obvious she does not belong there. You know how they are.”

“Am I going alone?” I asked, glancing at the sketch before folding it gently and placing it in my bag. I had been on very few missions by myself.

John usually shadowed me, watching closely to report if I ever slipped up. I never did. That was probably why he was so cranky all the time.

“Yes. I have full confidence you can accomplish this without a team. You can blend in easier that way as you travel. I know you can do it. Make us proud,” he said, that paternal smile covering his face. The men hated it when he smiled at me like that. It was clear that I was his favorite, and I may have been even if I was not the most ruthless of all of us. Still, I worked hard to retroactively earn that favoritism. They could be mad, but their anger would not be justified. I was the best, and they all knew it.

“I will, sir,” I assured him as I bowed once more. I had to contain my girlish excitement as I passed John and the others. I was going to go to Midnight Springs, all the way in the United States, and bring down one of the biggest targets on our list by myself.

The girl had no idea what was coming for her. The countdown to the end of her life had begun, and she had put a bullseye on the head of every person who surrounded her too.

URGENT PLEA FOR HELP

Thank you so much for reading this book! You are a rock star, and don't ever let anyone tell you any different!

Please take two minutes now to leave me a helpful review on Amazon letting me know what you thought of the book.

Reviews help authors like me get more exposure *and* learn more about what our readers are looking for.

Thank you so much! I look forward to hearing from you and using your feedback to make my books better!

Happy Reviewing!

Valerie Jo

READY TO READ BOOK THREE: JULIET AND THE ASSASSIN?



FOLLOW THIS LINK TO GET IT ON AMAZON!



imag
e-
placeho
lder

JULIET AND THE ASSASSIN



Sneak Peek

of

CURSES OF MIDNIGHT SPRINGS, BOOK THREE



imag
e-
placeho
lder

MICHAEL

I spent most of my sober hours resenting that I had an addiction. I hated feeling like a slave to anything. It made me feel weak, angry, and hopeless.

Today, however, I was thankful to have an escape. I was looking forward to forgetting.

“You’re seriously going to leave? Tonight?” I demanded as Mom rushed around her bedroom, throwing things in a bag.

She sighed but didn’t stop packing to look at me. She hardly ever looked at me these days. “You know how much I want to be an APRN, Michael. Between being your mother, a foster mother, and a nurse at the hospital, I’ve been falling behind in my schoolwork. I may not pass one of my classes, and my professor offered me extra credit if I go to the symposium tomorrow.”

She was unbelievable. She didn’t have to be a foster mother *or* an APRN . . . but one would expect her to be *my* mother and take care of me when I needed her. But no, she was abandoning me on the worst day of the year.

“And you realize what tomorrow is, right?” I asked. Perhaps she had forgotten. I’d be pissed if that were true, but it would be better for her to have forgotten about it entirely than her weighing the pros and cons of spending the day with me and deciding to go to the symposium instead.

Her whole body slumped. She knew.

She looked at the ceiling, as if that would keep her tears in. “Yes, Michael. I know. But we have to move on. We can’t keep living in the past. Brooke and Millie need us here, now. You know that. They’ve been through so much.”

I need you here, now! I screamed at her with my eyes, but she didn’t hear me. All she cared about now were the girls.

“So have we!” I demanded. “Why do we have to hide what’s going on with us? Why is their pain more important than ours?”

“It’s not, Michael. But. . .”

But it was.

Ever since they moved in, the honesty and openness in our family went from scarce to extinct. I could see Mom’s worried face, fearing they would overhear our conversation. It made me want to yell even louder.

I shouldn’t have to hide my most vulnerable feelings in my own house. Of all places to put on a happy face and pretend like everything is okay, my home shouldn’t be one of them. I should be free to yell and cry and scream as loudly as I wanted to in the comfort and safety of my parents’ presence . . . but because of Brooke and Millie, I had to stay silent.

As a result, I slipped into a state of hating Brooke. She was my age, and I hated how my parents coddled her when they refused to be there for me. She hadn’t “been through” more than anyone else in this house. She had done nothing to deserve being treated so delicately.

Millie, however, was impossible to hate. She was ten years old and had a sweet, outgoing personality. I could fake anything to shield her from any more pain, and I would. Millie needed someone to take care of her. I could step into that position gladly.

But Brooke? Why would I need to? Why weren't we on the same level?

"Just this year, they lost their grandma, their mom, and their previous caretaker. They were forced into the foster system, not knowing where they would end up. I want to give them stability, dear," Mom said, as if I were being unreasonable by asking for honesty.

I had heard the extensive list of Brooke's losses rambled off to me many times. It didn't change the way I felt about it all in the slightest.

I rolled my eyes. "And your solution is to hide our own dysfunction and tie our family in a pretty perfect bow for them? Aren't you afraid they will see through your little facade?"

She huffed. "Dad and I are leaving in twenty minutes. There is a frozen lasagna in the freezer or money for pizza by the phone. There are coupons, too; don't forget those. Make sure the girls stay safe and call me if there are any problems. We'll be back on Sunday afternoon. No parties."

I had never thrown a party before. She watched too much television.

"I guess this discussion is over," I said, slamming her door as I left her room. How dare she leave me alone tomorrow? What kind of mother was she?

I rounded the corner to see Brooke and Millie working on homework at the dining room table. I could feel the stress radiating off each of them as Brooke tried to help her.

"That doesn't make any sense," Millie argued to whatever Brooke had said before. "You don't know what you're talking about."

“Well neither do you, or you wouldn’t be asking me for help!” Brooke countered. “I’m doing the best I can here! English is hard for me too!”

I grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge and started off to my room, where I hid most of the time from the fake perfection that plagued my household. I did a terrible job at hiding my anger as it was. I couldn’t possibly do it *and* be around Brooke constantly.

“Michael, are you any good at English?” Millie asked, stopping me in my tracks and dragging me into their world.

If Brooke had spoken to me, I would have ignored her. I had many times before. We were now to the point that she didn’t speak to me at all, and I preferred it that way.

I wouldn’t ignore Millie, though. I looked at her and nodded. It was my best subject. It might have been the only one I liked besides basketball.

Her eyes lit up. “Seriously? What about poetry? Are you any good at understanding that crap?”

I chuckled and sat across from her at the table. “Yes, I am good at understanding that crap.”

She threw her hands up in praise like a lost man in the desert who had just found an oasis. “Thank goodness!!! I’m saved!!!”

Brooke rolled her eyes. “You are so dramatic, Millie.”

She smiled at me, but I couldn’t smile back. Not at her.

“I hate poetry,” Millie said in her defense. “Math is easy. Poetry is a nightmare.”

I laughed at that. “No, Millie, you’ve got it backward. Poetry is freedom. Math has too many rules!”

“Exactly!” she said. “Rules I can live with. Absolutes are comforting. Anyone can interpret a poem any way they want to. How am I supposed to

know what the writer was thinking when he wrote this? Why didn't he include a little description with why he wrote it in the first place to make this easier for people like me?"

"The poem is the description," I explained. "Which poem are you reading now?"

"*The Female of the Species* by Rudyard Kipling. He wrote it ages ago. The dude's dead now, so it's not like we can ask him," she said. She sounded so inconvenienced by it, like she would call him up and demand an explanation if he were alive.

"That's a great poem," I said. "I know it well."

"You do? So you know what it means?" she asked. Her small body bounced in her chair in excitement.

"Of course," I said. "Have you read it yet? What do you think it's about?"

Millie nodded. "At least five times, but I still don't get it. Is the guy making fun of women? Is he saying that we're too much and we can't be trusted?"

"Not at all!" I said, pulling her textbook closer to me. "Look, see here—Kipling is talking about women being powerful. He published it in the early nineteenth hundreds when women were still thought of as property. They were generally considered weak. He is saying that women are much more powerful than men."

She squinted, looking back at the poem. "Are you sure? Where are you seeing that?"

"Look, he calls man 'the coward' here. He says that men will negotiate and participate in 'abstract justice,' but that women don't understand it. If

you threaten her spouse or her children, she will tear you apart limb from limb like a mama bear,” I explained.

It was a phenomenal poem. . . but the poet probably assumed that the mother actually cared about her children and didn’t decide to take care of other people’s *instead of* her own.

“But at the end, it says that men don’t leave a place on the council for the women,” Millie said, pointing farther down the page. “It sounds like he’s trying to keep women oppressed. He’s saying we shouldn’t have a vote.”

I shook my head. “I don’t think so. It doesn’t seem to me like *he* wants to keep women off the council; he’s calling out the men who keep them out. He’s saying they only do it because they’re afraid of the women. They know that women are stronger and more deadly than they are. They know women will strike first and ask questions later. The men can’t handle that kind of power on the council.”

Millie thought about this for a moment. “So you think he’s saying that men need council positions to have power, but women are more powerful than them even without the council?”

I smiled proudly. “I think so, yes. He’s not talking down to women, I think he’s in awe of them. When he’s talking about the other species, like the bear and cobra, he shows that there are no councils in nature and women are the strongest. The ‘council’ for the human man is his effort to contain her, but he can’t.”

“Wow,” Brooke said. “I didn’t get that at all.”

“What did you think it meant?” I asked, surprising myself by continuing a conversation with her. I’d gotten so involved with the poem that I forgot she was even there.

She winced, and Millie answered for her. “She thought it was about how we should respect the animals like the Hurons and Choctaws did.”

I looked at her, bewildered. “But there’s only one line about the Hurons and Choctaws in the whole poem? Why’d you get stuck on that?”

She shrugged and blushed. “Poetry is hard for me, too, okay?”

I chuckled and shook my head as I got up to leave.

“What are you doing tomorrow?” Brooke asked. I stopped cold and didn’t turn to look at her.

I had planned on taking pills and playing video games, then meeting Elliott in the afternoon to buy more.

“Why?” I asked, not divulging any of that. Was this punishment for talking to her? Did she think it was safe to talk to me whenever she wanted to now?

“Since your Mom and Dad are leaving, I’m going to bring Millie over to Raven’s with me for the day. Would you like to come?” Brooke asked. She didn’t sound sure of it, though. It might have gone over better when she invited me if she sounded positive about *wanting* me to come.

I turned around and kind of winced. “Me? Why?”

Brooke looked flustered and had no idea how to communicate with me. I’m sure I didn’t make it any easier on her. It very well could have been the longest conversation we had ever had.

“We’re going to play board games,” Millie said, jumping in to save Brooke from talking to me anymore. “Raven’s a genius and I’m determined to beat her. We’ll probably order pizza and stuff. It’ll be fun. You should come.” She actually sounded like she wanted me to be there. I couldn’t believe that I was actually considering it.

If Millie wasn't going, I definitely would have said no. Spending the day with Brooke and her friends did not sound like my idea of a good time.

But in the deepest, most vulnerable part of me, I didn't want to be alone tomorrow. I was afraid even the high wouldn't be enough to mask the pain.

JULIET

“So let me get this straight . . . you expect me to continue to sit here day after day, without even my memories to keep me company, while you and Raven go to school to look for the book?” I demanded. I had never been so harsh with Nash before, but Raven’s attitude started rubbing off on me.

“Yes,” Nash said, ignoring my sass. He already listened to Raven all day, so it wasn’t like listening to a girl with attitude was new for him. “It would be too complicated to try to enroll you with us. Schools look at academic records, shot records . . . they even require Social Security numbers and proof of address. It would be a nightmare.”

“I do not know what those are, which you are very well aware,” I argued. I hated when he used fancy words to talk down to me. He got on my nerves more than anyone I had ever remembered meeting . . . and he was always around because Raven was in love with him. Always.

“Exactly! You don’t have any idea how complicated it would be to enroll you. Just stay here, and Raven will be home every afternoon,” he said, trying to dismiss my plea for a normal life.

“She’s not a dog, Nash,” Raven said, intervening on my behalf. “You can’t order her to stay home while we go live our lives. It isn’t fair.”

“I can’t fake enough documents to enroll her in school,” he said, turning his argument to Raven instead of me. “You know how complex all of that is.”

“Sure, I do,” she said, agreeing with him. “But I also know just how good you are.”

I grinned. Maybe flattery would win him over. Raven was pretty good at getting what she wanted, and she knew Nash better than anyone else in the world. If she could not win this battle for me, no one could.

“It’s too risky,” he said. “If we draw too much attention to her and people find out it’s all fake, who knows what kind of fallout we’ll experience? It’s better for her to lay low.”

“For how long?” I asked. “For the rest of my life?”

Nash sighed. He and Raven exchanged a knowing glance. Both of them knew exactly what it was like to be put under lock and key. The last thing either of them wanted was to turn out like their fathers and do the same thing to me.

“I’ll see what I can do,” Nash said. “Both of you stop smiling at me like that. It may take a few days for me to figure it out, and even then, I may not be able to swing it, but I’ll do my best.”

Raven kissed his cheek, then came over to the couch and hugged me. My feet were practically healed, but she demanded I elevate them whenever she saw me. She was such a mother hen.

“He’s telling the truth,” Raven whispered while we hugged. “He’s going to do everything he can to get you in school with us.”

Raven's verification of Nash's intentions was reassuring. I would have assumed he was just lying to buy some more time, but he could not do that. Not around Raven.

It was probably hard having a girlfriend who always knew whether you were telling the truth or not.

"Are you driving?" Nash asked, holding out the keys in an open palm. The man was brave. I would give him that. I hated riding in the car with Raven—or at all. I had to take Dramamine to keep from throwing up every time. It was hard to comprehend how people did it all the time. I wondered if my stomach would get more used to it if I had to ride in a car every day to go to school.

I also did not realize, at the time, that my first time riding in a car was only Raven's second time driving one. It was not a good mixture. While she did not run us off the road or anything, she certainly jerked the car around more than Nash did. It was obvious he had years more practice than she had.

"I hope we find it today," Raven said. "I'm not sure what we'll do if someone else has already found it. Especially if it's Darcy."

Darcy's father, Donovan, and Raven's father, Dr. Haskins, had a bad falling out. From what I had gathered, Dr. Haskins had a spellbook that Donovan wanted to use to do something evil. Dr. Haskins refused to give it over and was murdered. Donovan swears his family did not kill him, but we have yet to discover any other person that would have had a motive.

Raven uncovered the book at her house, and Donovan came to steal it. He was about to stab Raven with a knife when something inside me clicked into place.

I had no conscious thoughts as I leapt across the room to stop him. Every movement I made to disarm and restrain him was second nature. The knife he was wielding moments before wound up in my hand, pressed against his throat.

He was strong, but I was stronger. He tried to break out of my hold but failed. My arms and legs would not even budge.

Part of me wanted to kill him, and I knew exactly how easy it would have been to do so. Instead, I threatened him with a voice that was not my own, and he left. He was still searching for the book but had not dared return.

Once he was gone and the disaster was past, the knife felt heavy in my hands. My feet started screaming in pain, and I realized I had run across broken glass to attack him. I was lucky that we had not landed in any when I wrestled him to the ground.

I paused. Was it luck? Or did I deliberately make us fall into a safe zone?

That night, after Raven tended to my wounded feet, she and I disguised the spellbook to look like a normal book by William Shakespeare. Her father, who had hated me the moment Raven accidentally used the spellbook to awaken me, warmed to me. My mindless act of protection had won all of their trust. For that, I was thankful. They were all I had. It was not as if I would have stayed hidden behind the couch and watched Raven die, even if I had no mystical fighting prowess. I would have jumped out and died with her.

I could not grasp a solid memory before I appeared in Raven's living room. I did not know how old I was or if I had a family. I did not know how I knew the fighting maneuvers I unleashed upon Darcy's dad. When no one was around during the day, I would punch the air and try to kick imaginary foes, but it was with the same awkwardness that I did everything else.

Day after day, Raven came home to report that the book was still missing. According to Raven, there were not many places that the book could be. She last had it in the library. It was likely that the book had been taken, but no one wanted to accept that. No one was ready to give up.

Every school day, Raven, Nash, and Brooke searched for the book. The three had one hour in the library every day to look for it but were unsuccessful. I was left alone to pace the floors of the empty house and wait for the daily report, reading to pass the time.

Brooke's boyfriend, who was apparently a fisherman, did not attend school. He was too old and had no interest. I liked him a lot better than Nash. He went by the name Peter and, like me, did not exist in the eyes of the government. He was an outsider, just like me. While the other three talked and laughed together, he and I would catch each other's eye and a look of understanding would pass between us. We were in the same boat. We were fish out of water. He did his best to ease me into their lives while the others tried to throw me in because they did not realize that everything around me was new and confusing.

What I liked the most about Peter was that he never made a judgment on whether or not I could do something. He simply asked and helped if I needed it. He taught me things I did not know without being condescending.

When the group warned me that Peter could turn into a wolf, my lack of reaction surprised them. They must have thought I was super brave or unimpressed with things that were out of the ordinary . . . which would have made sense since I was apparently a woman who had been frozen in time.

"Do you know what a wolf is?" Peter asked, his tone soft and kind.

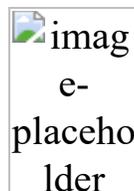
The trio laughed as if he made a joke, but Peter did not even smile. He was sincere.

I shook my head, and they fell silent. Raven looked one up on her phone and showed its picture to me.

I looked from the phone to Peter, amazed that such a transformation could take place. Since that moment, Peter was more attuned to my uniqueness than the others. We were kindred spirits.

But unlike me, Peter did have a childhood he remembered up to the age of about eight. He had experiences at school and knew how to do basic things, like use a microwave. I did not. I had to learn it just like I had to learn how to do everything else around me.

I did not know what I was thinking. I could not go to school with them. I would have no idea what to do. School in itself was such a foreign concept, and I would have to pretend like I was used to it. And for what? Three people was enough to read every spine in the library. They did not really need my help.



“I figured it out!” Nash said, beaming. “We’ll say you’ve been homeschooled in the country by your parents. You were born at home in the middle of nowhere. You’ve never been to a hospital or had any type of formal identification.”

“How does that help us?” I asked. It was pretty elaborate and nothing like the actual truth.

“It means we only have to tell one lie,” Raven explained. “And don’t let Nash fool you; it was my idea, not his.”

“It was fifty-fifty,” Nash said, winking at her. “Raven said we needed something better than a fake fix for you. You need a long-term plan to help you for the rest of your life. We can work with Mrs. Cumberland at the Academy to get you *actual* government documents! Then you never have to lie again because you’ll be an actual documented citizen!”

“What if the plan fails?” I asked. “What if they find out we are lying?”

Raven shrugged. “A lie is irrelevant if the truth can’t be proven. No one will be able to figure out that you were actually alive hundreds of years ago. The cops can even fingerprint you, and it won’t match anyone’s.”

I looked away to hide the fact that I did not know what she meant. “You think it is worth the risk?”

“I do,” she said. “We can get you a true clean start. Just trust us.”

“I do,” I said, but it was only because I had no other options.

ABOUT VALERIE JO

Once upon a time, there was a girl named Valerie. At a very young age, she experienced the heartbreak of her parents' divorce and her mother's remarriage. At the time, that little girl was confused and distraught. She had no idea it was the best thing that would ever happen to her.

You see, the new grandparents she received from her mother's remarriage would leave a lasting imprint on her life. They brought her to church every Sunday, where she learned about Jesus, but they were truly remarkable because they showed her what Jesus looked like in real life. They took her in and loved her unconditionally, even when they didn't have to. They treated her with the same love and kindness they would have if she were biologically related to them.

Valerie believed because they made it real to her. When she made mistakes, they hugged her and assured her she was still loved, just like Jesus would have. They were always there for her, and she had to do nothing to earn that love.

Millions of people don't believe in Jesus for various reasons, but they could not persuade Valerie to agree with them because she's seen Him in the faces of her grandparents.

To write a book and not mention her Granny and Papa would be absolutely inconceivable. They pointed the way to Jesus for her, and Valerie will be forever grateful. Jesus has saved her life in so many ways.

Valerie wished there was a way she could connect each of her readers with her grandparents, but time had stolen them from her in one way or another. She knew that if they only spent a few minutes with them, they would want to learn more about "Jesus" and "eternal life in heaven" because her grandparents would definitely be the type of people that they would want to hang out with for eternity.

Valerie realized that hadn't been the case for many of her readers. Sadly, she was sure that a multitude of them had stories that are the exact opposite. Theirs would read, "Once upon a time, I met someone who claimed to be a Christian . . . and they were one of the most terrible human beings that I ever had the misfortune of crossing paths with." She had met some of those lovely folks as well. It was as infuriating as it was disheartening to encounter someone like that. To her eternal shame, and based on her personal history, there may be some people out there who think that about Valerie herself.

But what she hoped her readers would get from her story is that Jesus isn't like that. His people are terrible sometimes, but He is always good. Her Granny and Papa showed her that, okay? Her readers may not be able to trust her, or anyone else, but they can trust them.

She prayed that her readers would meet someone like them in their lives, because whether or not they come to believe in Jesus, everyone deserves to

feel safe, secure, and loved like that by someone here on earth.



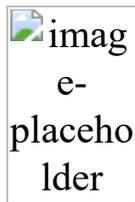
i
m
a
g
e
-
p
l
a
c
e
h
o
l
d
e
r

Newsletter Updates

Be the first to know about prereleases, audiobook releases, and giveaways!

Go to valeriejo.com/newsletter





Lord,

Thank you for every person who brought this book to fruition. Thank you for every coach, mentor, advance reader, and editor that looked over my words and gave the feedback to make it what it is today.

Thank you for giving me the freedom and time to write. I wouldn't want to fill my days with anything else.

Above all, thank you for my Babes, Junebug, and Buddy. I do not deserve the family you have blessed me with, and I am eternally grateful.

Thank you for leading me to someone who shows me what it feels like to be loved. I wouldn't be able to write it convincingly if I didn't have such incredible firsthand experience.

In Jesus's name I pray,

Amen.



