

**Shattered**

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Table of Contents

[**1** 4](#_Toc195627625)

[**2** 7](#_Toc195627626)

[**3** 10](#_Toc195627627)

[**4** 14](#_Toc195627628)

[**5** 17](#_Toc195627629)

[**6** 20](#_Toc195627630)

[**7** 24](#_Toc195627631)

[**8** 29](#_Toc195627632)

[**9** 34](#_Toc195627633)

[**10** 36](#_Toc195627634)

[**11** 43](#_Toc195627635)

[**12** 46](#_Toc195627636)

[**13** 53](#_Toc195627637)

[**14** 55](#_Toc195627638)

[**15** 61](#_Toc195627639)

[**16** 65](#_Toc195627640)

[**17** 72](#_Toc195627641)

[**18** 78](#_Toc195627642)

## **1**

 The closet is dark and smells like old apples and dust. I curl up on the blanket in the corner, my knees tucked tight under my chin. It’s the only place in this whole big house where the noises don’t hurt my ears.

 People are loud here. Loud feet. Loud voices. Even the lights are too loud.

 They said this place was safe. A “group home”. The lady with the clipboard said I’d make friends here. That I’d get to play and have snack time and go to school with the other kids.

 But I don’t want any of that. I just want my Mommy and Daddy.

 I squeeze my eyes shut and press my face into the blanket. I try not to cry, I already cried too much in front of the lady. She told me that the car was too broken. That they weren’t ever coming back. That there was no one else.

 I knew that already. I remember the sound, the glass raining from the sky and landing in my hair. Mommy’s hand going still in mine.

 I remember the quiet after.

 Now everything is too loud. I cover my ears and squeeze my eyes shut. I don’t want to cry any more. I don’t want anyone to find me and say that I have to play with the others. I don’t want to draw. Or sing. Or talk.

 I want to disappear.

 The door creaks open, spilling light inside – too bright and sharp. My eyes burn and I flinch and curl smaller.

 “Hey,” a voice says. A boy’s voice, soft and quiet. “You’re not supposed to be in here.”

 I pull the blanket over my head and hold my breath. Maybe if I’m very still he will go away.

 But he doesn’t.

 Instead, the door clicks shut, and I hear soft steps coming close. Slow. Careful.

 He sits down next to me, but not too near. Just close enough that I can feel the warmth of him. I peek at him through the blanket. He’s a couple years older than me. His hair is dark, and messy like he’s been outside in the wind, and there is a rip in one of his sleeves. His skin is pale, but there is a warmth to it, like summer sun baked into his bones. He’s not shivery-cold like some of the kids here. He feels alive. And his eyes – They’re not like any I’ve ever seen. Like the sky during a thunderstorm. Almost black, but with bright lightening strikes scattered in the darkness.

 He should be scary, but he’s not.

 “You’re hiding,” he says, like he understands. “That’s okay, I do too sometimes.”

 I stare blankly back, unsure what to say or do.

 “You don’t have to talk,” he says.

 I don’t answer, but I don’t look away either. He doesn’t seem to mind. “They brought you here yesterday, but you didn’t eat your dinner.”

 My tummy growls like it heard him. I squish it with my hands, embarrassed. He reaches into his pocket, pulls out a little box of raisins and gently pushes it across the floor towards me. “You can have them. I don’t like them much”.

 He doesn’t move, just waits. Humming something under his breath. I don’t know the song but it’s soft and comforting.

 I reach out and take the raisins. He smiles. Not a big smile. Just a small one. But it feels real, like he means it. I haven’t seen a real smile since before.

 We don’t talk, and that’s okay. I don’t like talking now anyway. I open the box slowly and eat one raisin. Then two. We sit that way for a long time. He doesn’t ask questions. Doesn’t make me come out. Just hums and makes shapes out of lint and lose threads. A star, a bird, a tree. Lining them up like they’re treasure.

 After a while I whisper into the silence, “Lily.”

 His head tilts, “Is that your name?”

 I nod.

 “I’m Raine.”

 We don’t say much after that. I eat every raisin, one by one. He makes more shapes. At some point I ask, “Do you live here?”

 He shrugs and says, “Kinda, I come and go. But I always come back.”

 “Do you have a mommy?” I ask, my voice barely louder than a mouse.

 He’s quiet for a little while then says, “Not anymore.”

 Me neither.

 We don’t cry. Not even a little. We just sit in the dark that doesn’t feel so dark anymore.

 I don’t know how long we’ve been in here. But it’s the first time since the crash that I don’t feel like I might break into pieces. He never asks me why I’m hiding or tries to make me come out. He just stays. And for the first time since I got here, I don’t feel alone.

## **2**

 There’s a squeaky floorboard in the hallway just outside the kitchen. It makes a funny sound like a mouse if you step on it, and I always listen for it before I go out. If I hear it, I wait. If I don’t, I run.

 Raine always hears it first though.

 “Wait,” he whispers now, grabbing my hand before I can dart from our hiding spot. “It’s Mrs. Bell. She’s making her weird soup again.”

 I wrinkle my nose. The soup smells like wet dog and old socks. It always does. Raine grins at me, like he thinks my face is funny and I giggle quietly, only for him.

 We wait until the sound fades down the hall, then tiptoe into the kitchen. He’s better at sneaking than me, but I’m getting braver. When I’m with him I feel like I can do anything. Evens steal apples from the bowl on the counter.

 He peaks into the fridge, finds a pack of cheese slices and hands me one. “Breakfast of champions.”

 I nod like I know what that means, and we sit on the floor behind the kitchen table, legs crossed, cheese in hand. I only ever eat when Raine is here. He makes it feel like a game, not a chore. He never stares or waits for me to finish. He just… eats with me.

 It’s better that way.

 “Wanna go outside?” he asks, mouth full of apple.

 I nod, “Yes.” I don’t talk much. Not unless it’s to him. The words get stuck around other people. They twist in my chest and make my hands shake. But with Raine, the words come easier. Sometimes I think he gives them to me.

 We sneak out the back, past the old swing set with one broken chain and the garden that is mostly weeds. The trees in the forest behind the group home are tall and creaky, but they don’t scare me anymore. Not when Raine is there.

 There’s a spot we always go, way at the back where nobody else wants to play. It’s a little hollow with soft moss and a crooked tree that looks like it’s bowing. We named it the Green Cave, even though it’s not really a cave. But it’s fun to pretend it is when we’re inside.

 I sit cross legged on the moss, the wrapper from my cheese slice now rolled into a little ball in between my fingers. Raine stretches out on his back, hands behind his head, looking up at the sky through the branches.

 “You had another nightmare,” he says after a while.

 I nod.

 “Wanna talk about it?”

 I shake my head.

 He doesn’t push. He never does.

 “I dreamed I could fly last night.” He says instead, voice light. “Not like a bird, more like a shadow. Just… lifting up into the air and going anywhere I wanted.”

 I blink at him. “Where’d you go?”

 He smiles, eyes still on the sky. “I came here. To you.”

 That makes my heart feel funny. Like something soft and heavy is sitting on it. “You always find me,” I whisper.

 “Of course I do.” He says it like it’s the most obvious thing in the world. Like it’s a rule of the universe.

 Sometimes the other kids call me weird. They say I’m creepy and talk to the wind. I don’t care. I have Raine. He’s the only thing in this whole place that has ever felt real.

 He always knows when I need to hide. He always finds me when I disappear. He holds my hand when I shake and doesn’t let go until I stop. And I give him my voice. The thing no one else gets.

 I crawl closer to where he’s lying and curl up beside him. He doesn’t move, just lets me settle in like always. I close my eyes and listen to the wind in the trees. It sounds like it’s whispering secrets.

 “Raine?” I whisper.

 “Yeah?”

 “Don’t ever go away.”

 His breath catches a little before he answers. “I won’t, not ever.”

## **3**

 The sun is warm on our backs as we lie in the grass behind the home, our legs stretched out and bare toes brushing the clover. Raine is telling me a story – something about a forest prince who couldn’t be touched by fire – and I pretend not to smile, though I always do when he talks like this. Like the world could still be full of magic.

 His voice made things softer. Safer.

 I trace shapes in the dirt with a stick, his words wrapping around me like a blanket, when the door to the back porch slams open.

 “Lily,” the house manager calls. Come inside, sweetheart. It’s time to get ready.”

 I freeze.

 Raine’s voice has stopped too. I feel him sit up beside me, “What does that mean?” I whisper to him.

 He jumps to his feet, his eyes narrow and sharp. “They didn’t say anything about this. I would have heard.”

 When I look up there’s a car pulling into the gravel lot. A woman steps out smiling. I don’t move.

 “Come on Lily,” the voice calls again. “Your new foster parents are here.”

 No.

 No, no, no.

 My heart slams against my rib. I grab Raine’s hand and clutch it like I can anchor myself to the earth. Anchor myself to him. His fingers are warm and strong, but they’re trembling.

 “They can’t just take you,” he says, his voice dark and low – too old for the boy he is, too raw. “They don’t get to just do that.”

 But the sad thing is they can. And we both know it.

 I don’t cry. Not at first. I just keep holding his hand. Keep staring at him, trying to memorize every detail in time. His messy hair. His storm dark eyes. The dirt under his nails from digging pretend burrows with me earlier this morning.

 The woman comes closer, her smile faltering when she sees me gripping onto Raine. “You’ll be alright Lily, it’s a good home.”

 I don’t care if it’s a castle, I don’t want to go.

 I finally speak. Just one word. “Raine.”

 He drops down fast, wraps his arms around me tight. Fierce. Pressing his forehead to mine he whispers, “I’ll find you again. I promise, I’ll find you.”

 My mouth shakes too hard to answer.

 They pull me from him. He fights, I hear him screaming. He doesn’t stop. Not until I’m in the car and his face is disappearing in the mirror, his mouth opens in a silent cry.

 I press my hand to the window. Raine runs after us, all the way to the gates. And then he’s gone.

The group home looks smaller than I remember. The paint still peeling on the porch rail, and the screen door creaks the same way when it opens. But it all feels duller now. Like the color drained out while I was gone.

 I clutch the handle of my small suitcase, the one with the crooked wheel. My foster mom, well ex-foster mom now, pats me on the back awkwardly. She doesn’t kneel to say goodbye. Doesn’t hug me. Just says, “I hope things work out for you, Lily,” like I’m someone she barely knows.

 I nod, not trusting myself to do anything else. There’s a baby in her belly now. A real one. A one that will cry and coo and take up all of the space, leaving none for me.

 She walks away before I even get to the steps.

 Inside smells the same, bleach and canned peaches, and a few kids look up when I come in. No one says anything. They don’t know me, not really. I don’t want them to.

 The clipboard lady is back. Her name’s Anna, but I don’t think of her like that. Just Clipboard. She greets me with a tight smile and gestures for me to follow.

 “Your old room is taken,” she says like it’s no big deal. “But we’ve got another one made up for you. You’ll have a roommate again. Some company will be nice, won’t it?”

 I don’t answer, I just follow her up the stairs. Every step feels heavier than the last.

 I miss the quiet house I left behind. The smell of baking. The soft music on Sunday mornings. The way my foster dad left notes in my lunchbox with little doodles and bad jokes. I couldn’t speak to them, not once in all these months, but I came to love them anyway.

And now they are gone. But if losing them means I get to be back with Raine, then that’s fine with me.

 “You’ll settle back in,” she says. “You kids always do.”

 The door clicks shut behind her, and I stand there, frozen. I want to cry, but I don’t. Instead, I sit on the bed, staring at the peeling wallpaper and wishing I could disappear. That’s when I feel it, like a breath across my skin. A warmth. A spark.

 I race out the door, feet pounding the stairs, heart leaping ahead of me. The back door creaks as I shove it open, and there he is. Standing just past the tree line, hands shoved in his pockets like he wasn’t just looking for me.

 “Raine.”

 My voice cracks on his name. it’s the first time I’ve said it in months. The only word I’ve spoken since I left. He looks up, his eyes meeting mine, flashing lightening. He doesn’t smile, but something in his face softens, “Hey, Lilypad.”

 I run.

 The door slams behind me as I fling myself at him, and he catches me like I knew he would. His arms wrap around me tight, warm and safe. I bury my face in his shoulder and breathe him in, like earth and sunlight and something wild I can’t name.

 “I missed you,” I whisper into his shirt, the words only barely there.

 “I know,” he says, his voice rough. “I missed you too.”

 We stay like that for a long time, not caring who sees. His hand rubs gentle circles on my back, and my fists stay clenched in the fabric of his jacket, like if I let go, he might vanish.

 He leans back a little, tilts my face up with one finger. “You okay?”

 I shake my head.

 His jaw tightens, but he doesn’t ask more. “They shouldn’t have sent you away.”

 “They’re having a baby,” I murmur. “They didn’t say it, but I know.”

 His eyes flash, dark with something sharp and angry. But he doesn’t say anything about them. He just holds me closer, like he can pull me back together by pure force of will.

 “I’m here now,” he says. “And I’m not going anywhere.”

 And for the first time in weeks, months even, the ache in my chest eases just a little.

## **4**

 Sometimes the older kids call me Ghost Girl.

 They whisper it in the hallways when the grown-ups aren’t listening. They say I don’t talk. That my eyes are too big. That I stare too long. One girl said I was cursed, that my parents died because of me.

 That was the first time I saw him snap. Not with fists, with words.

 He didn’t yell. He didn’t even raise his voice. He just stood in front of her, so calm it make the hallway feel icy. Despite being the same age, the girl was taller than him, but that didn’t seem to matter.

 “Do you think you’re clever?” he asked, “Saying things that make other people small? Is that how you feel big? Important? You should work on better material. This whole ‘you’re cursed’ thing is stupid and boring. Like you”.

 She blinked, stunned.

 He leaned in, his voice dropping. “Talk about her like that again and I’ll make sure every secret you have come out in the middle of lunch. Including the one about the boy from the library.”

 She flushed crimson, eyes wide. “you’re bluffing.”

 He wasn’t. He never bluffed.

 She didn’t say another word.

 Later, I asked him how he knew her secrets. He just shrugged and said, *“People are loud when they think no one is listening.”*

 This time, it’s a boy. Bigger than both of us. Tall and mean in that slow, heavy way – like a rusted chain swinging low, waiting to hit something.

 He corners me inside of the dining hall. The other kids are eating mushy spaghetti and pretending to laugh.

 “Hey Ghost Girl,” he says, stepping in front of me. “You think you’re better than us? Too special to talk?”

 I shake my head, but my voice stays stuck.

 He knocks my tray from my hands, food splattering across the floor. I blink down, too frozen to move.

 “You gonna cry now?”

 Then Raine is there.

 He doesn’t speak right away. He just looks at the boy – calm, sharp, quiet. His presence is like a shadow slicing through the sunlight.

 “You always pick on kids smaller than you?” Raine says, voice flat.

 The boy scoffs. “She’s weird.”

 “Must make you feel strong. Scaring girls half your size.” He tilts his head. “But you know what it actually makes you?”

 The boy hesitates… “What?”

 “Pathetic.”

 The word hangs in the air, heavy and cutting.

 “You’ve got fists,” Raine adds. “But nothing behind them. No spine. No teeth. Just noise.”

 The boy flushes and mutters something, retreating without another word.

 Raine turns to me and crouches. “Are you okay?” he asks. His tone shifts, soft now – the voice only for me.

 I nod. Sort of.

 He picks up the tray, food ruined, and wrinkles his nose.

 “Come on. I’ve got something better.”

 We sneak out back, behind the laundry room, where the grass is wild, and the sky feels further away. It’s quiet there, the kind of quiet that doesn’t press too hard.

 Raine pulls a squashed pop tart from his pocket and hands it to me. I beamed up at him, “where did you get this?”

 Raine just softly smiles and replies, “I’ve been saving it for a rainy day.”

 I smile, just a little one now and fall into silence again.

 After finishing up the Pop Tart, I whisper, “Why do they hate me?”

 “They are afraid of things they don’t understand,” he says. “And you’re not like them.”

 “That’s not a good thing.”

 He turns to me, eyes steady. “Yes, it is.”

 We sit like that, not touching, just side by side. His presence anchors me, steady and sure. Even when the world tilts, he doesn’t.

 “One day,” he says, “we’ll be somewhere better. Just you and me. No more homes that aren’t homes. No more rules that don’t protect. I’ll get us out. We’ll be free.”

 I don’t ask him how. I just believe him.

 Because when he’s near, I don’t feel like a ghost anymore.

 Because Raine never makes promises he doesn’t keep.

## **5**

 The Holloways house looks nice from the outside. That’s the trick.

 The lawn is always trimmed. The driveway slick and clean – pressure washed just for show. There are wind chimes on the porch and matching flowerpots that sit like perfect little lies. If you drove by, you might think that this is what *safe* looks like.

 But inside – inside it’s cold. Not in temperature, but in a way that sinks into your skin. You could stand right in front of the fireplace and still feel like you’re freezing. I sleep in a room that smells like bleach and dust, on a bed too small for my legs now that I’m twelve. The wallpaper peels in the corners. There are no photos, no soft things, no color.

 Mrs. Holloway ignores me unless I make a mistake.

 Mr. Holloway doesn’t ignore me at all.

 The bruise on my ribs pulses every time I breathe. I lie curled on my side, trying not to cry too loud. I learned a long time ago that pain’s easier when you’re quiet. If you don’t make noise, maybe they’ll forget you exist. Maybe they’ll leave you alone.

 I stare at the ceiling until my eyes blur. Then I hear it – the familiar scrape of the window latch. My heart jumps and I sit up fast.

 He moves like a shadow – quiet, quick – and then he’s there, soaked through with rain, eyes darker than the storm raging outside.

 “Lily,” Raine says, his voice low, steady.

 I nearly throw myself into his arms. I don’t care that we’re not little kids anymore. I don’t care that I’ve tried to act strong. His warmth sinks right through my skin. I breathe him in and feel my shoulders sag.

 He holds me tighter than he used to. Like he’s afraid I’ll disappear.

 “What happened?” he murmurs against my hair.

 I try to lie, but the words won’t come. My fingers press against my ribs, and that’s answer enough. While I finally look up at him, his expression is made of ice.

 “Did he touch you?” he asks, deadly quiet.

 My throat closes.

 He pulls back slightly, lifting my shirt to scan the bruise – like he is memorizing it. Then he stands. Paces. Something trembles in the air around him – rage coiled so tightly it vibrates through the floorboards.

 “I’m going to kill him.”

 “Raine – “, I barely get out. It has been days since I’ve used my voice.

 “No. He *hurt* you.”

 I follow him across the room, “What are you doing?”

 “Getting you out of here.”

 He turns and grabs a backpack he’d brought with him, stuffing a few clothes inside with sharp, practiced movements. I don’t ask how he knew I’d need it. He always knows.

 Then he opens the bedroom door and walks into the hallway like he owns the place.

 I try to stop him – I really do. But Raine doesn’t slow.

 Mr. Holloway is coming out of his room, half-asleep, his mouth already twisting into something cruel.

 “The hell do you think – “

 Raine slams him back against the wall so hard a picture frame falls and shatters.

 “You touch her again,” he growls, low and cold, “and I’ll break more than your wrist.”

 Mr. Holloway tries to swing at him. Tries. Raine ducks and drives his first into the older man’s stomach. Another into his jaw.

 I gasp because it’s not clumsy, not like when the kids fight at the home. There is precision in it, controlled violence. Raine moves like someone trained. Dangerous. Older and stronger than his years.

 When Mr. Holloway slumps to the floor groaning, Raine doesn’t look at him again. Instead, he takes my hand, his skin warm despite the storm he arrived in.

 “We’re going,” he says, not waiting for an answer.

 Outside rain lashes the street like a punishment. I run beside him barefoot, soaked and breathless, our feet splashing through the puddles as we cut through trees and fences. We don’t speak, we just run.

 Back to the group homes, to where it all started.

 It’s past midnight when we crawl in through the cracked basement window, the one no one ever bothered to fix. We find the old blanket stash, the forgotten mattresses. Dust coats everything.

 I sit down hard and exhale like I haven’t breathed properly in days.

 Raine crouches beside me, his knuckles bloodied, his chest rising and falling too fast. His eyes meet mine.

 “I told you,” he says. “No one gets to hurt you.” He touches the edge of my shirt, pulling it down gently over the bruise.

 My voice is barely a whisper. “What if they take me again? What if they send you away? I don’t want to lose you.”

 “You won’t,” he says. “Not ever.”

 And when he says it, I believe him.

## **6**

 The stars feel closer tonight. Like if I reached high enough, I could brush their edges with my fingertips. I stretch one hand towards them, fingers trembling. The don’t flinch. They never do.

 We’re on the roof again – our place. The one Raine found when he was ten and I was eight, and the world felt like too much. It still does, but up here, it’s a little easier to breathe. Easier to forget the aching silence below and the way the world keeps trying to forget I exist.

 Raine lies beside me, one leg draped over the other, arms folded beneath his head. He’s so still it looks like he could be carved from stone, but there’s a tension in him tonight, like a violin string pulled too tight. The wind catches in his hair, sending inky strands across his forehead. His skin, always warm like sunlight trapped beneath the surface, glows faintly in the moonlight.

 I can’t stop looking at his mouth.

 I’ve been thinking about it all day. About last night. About the way his lips tasted like rain and wild things and desperation. The way his hands shook when he touched my face. The way I felt when he kissed me, like the world stopped spinning just long enough for me to breathe. For the first time in my life, I felt complete.

 I’m completely and utterly in love with him.

 I don’t know when it happened, if it was the moment he found me hiding from the thunder, or when he bandaged my bloody knee at twelve, or when he stole that threadbare blanket from the staff room and wrapped me in it like I was something worth keeping warm. Maybe it was always there, quietly blooming for years like a buried seed.

 But last night it cracked open. And now everything is growing too fast.

 “Tell me again,” I say, looking back to the stars, “About the Hunter.”

 He chuckles, low and rough and the sound slips under my skin like heat. “Orion. You know it by now.”

 “Humor me.”

 He points up, drawing invisible lines across the sky. “There. Three stars, his belt. Sword on the right. Always chasing something just out of reach.”

 “Like what?”

 He pauses. “Depends on the night.”

 I risk a glance at him. His eyes, almost black, catch mine for a second too long. There’s something in them that I can’t quite name. Something that makes my chest tighten and my throat ache. Something that burns. It curls in my chest, unfamiliar and aching and *real.* I look away first.

 The wind brushes my face, carrying with it the scent of earth and woodsmoke. And something else, something wrong. Metallic, cold and sharp, like the air before lightening splits the sky.

 Raine goes still.

 He sits up in a single motion, every muscle in his body drawn tight and alert. “Do you hear that?”

 I listen. Nothing, just the creak of the trees being battered by the wind. The hoot of a distant owl. “No,” I whisper.

 But he does, I can see it in the way his jaw tightens. The fear in his eyes, not for himself, for me.

 He’s already moving. Down from the roof, landing with silent grace that always makes me wonder if he’s more shadow than boy. I follow, scrambling after him, heart pounding. “Raine what is it?”

 “He found me.”

 His voice is barely audible. A breath. A death sentence. “Who?” My voice trembles.

 He doesn’t answer. His gaze is locked tight on the forest, staring into the dark like it’s staring back. And then I see them, figures moving between the trees, too quiet for the underbrush they pass through. Tall. Pale. Faces smooth and expressionless, like masks carved from moonlight. Their eyes glint, catching the faintest starlight, but there’s nothing behind them. No warmth. No life that I can name. No soul. Cold trickles down my spine, every instinct I have inside of me screaming at me to *run.*

 “Go inside,” Raine grinds out.

 “No,” I breathe.

 “*Lily, please.”*

 Moving closer, I grab his arm firmly, “I’m not leaving you.”

 He turns to me, jaw clenched, eyes blazing, not with anger, with desperation. More raw than I’ve ever seen. The wind stirs, circling Raine, making me shiver. “You have to. They’re not here for you.”

 And he’s right, they don’t even look at me. Their eyes are locked on him. Lone hunters sighting their prey.

 One of them steps forward, lips curled in a parody of a smile, making my stomach turn. “We’ve been looking for you a long time little prince.”

 Raine’s body tenses, as though the words cut him deeper than any weapon. “I am no prince,” he mutters, “and I’m not going there with you.”

 The figures smile widens, an unsettling thing. “Fortunately for me, you don’t have a choice. *Prince*.” The other one raises a hand and the air pulses. I stagger back as an invisible force shoves between us, slamming Raine into the ground. He grits his teeth, trying to rise, but the force crushes him down again and again.

 “*Stop it!”* I scream. “Leave him alone!” But they don’t even glance at me, I don’t exist to them…

 One of them pulls something from beneath his cloak, a silver ring. He places it against Raine’s temple, and it faintly glows. Raine cries out, body arching in pain, then goes still. Something inside me shatters.

 “NO!” I scream. “No, please –” They lift him like he weighs nothing, his head slumping forward, dark hair falling over his face.

 “*Don’t take him!”* My scream rips from somewhere deeper than I knew existed. “Please! *Please!”*

Still, they don’t look at me. Instead, they vanish into the air, the shadows swallowing them whole. They are gone. And so is Raine.

 Raine is *gone.*

 The world is too quiet. My hands shake as I fall to my knees, the grass cold and sharp under my fingers. I scream once, raw and wordless into the dark. But no one answers.

Raine is gone. And I might as well be too.

## **7**

 It’s been a year since they took him. A year since I last saw Raine. A year since my world split in two – the before and the after.

 And yet I wake up every morning, with his absence clawing at me, my heart still tangled in his memory. Every inch of my body screams that something is wrong, that he was real. That what they tell me isn’t true. But no one listens. No one believes.

 And that’s why I’m here again, sitting in the cold sterile chair across from Dr. Vance. It’s a routine now, one I can’t escape. It’s just another hour of my life spent trying to convince him, and myself, that I haven’t lost my mind.

 “You’ve been doing well, Lily,” Dr. Vance says, his voice placid, clinical. He leans back in his chair, folding his hands neatly on his desk. “You’re keeping a regular schedule, taking care of yourself, using your voice. I can see the improvement in you”.

 I don’t respond, just give a tight, polite smile. I don’t feel better. I don’t feel like I’m *improving.* I feel empty. Like a shell of the person I used to be.

 He continues, shifting slightly in is chair. “But I want to talk more about Raine today. You’ve mentioned him frequently in the past, but I think we need to address this head on.”

 I flinch, something in my chest tightening, Vance isn’t the first doctor, he’s just the most recent. This isn’t new to me, and the outcome is always the same.

 *Raine.* He’s been erased from everything, but he’s never really left me. Not in any real sense. He’s still here, alive in every single corner of my mind, every quiet second of the day.

 Vance leans forward, studying me with that same detached curiosity he always has. “Lily, I know it’s difficult, but Raine was never real, not in the physical sense. He wasn’t a living, breathing presence in your life. You’ve told me before that he was someone you imagined, someone you created to cope with your grief after losing your parents. To protect you when you felt vulnerable.”

 I feel my jaw tighten, the familiar heat of anger rising in my chest. He wasn’t real? No, I would never say that. *Raine was real.* I know it. I remember him, his warmth, his touch, the way he would hold me in the dark when the world got too loud.

 “No,” I say, my voice shaky but resolute. “He was real.”

 Dr. Vance’s expression softens, a small frown forming as he leans in closer, his tone more patient now, like he’s talking to a small child. “Lily, your parents died in a tragic accident. You were alone. You were – are – still processing that trauma. Raine, the version of him you remember, is your mind’s way of helping you cope. He may feel real to you, but he isn’t.”

 I grip the arms of my chair so tightly that my knuckles turn white. “No,” I bite out, my voice growing harder and more forceful. “You’re wrong. He was real, He was always there for me. He protected me. And I didn’t do anything to save him.”

 “You’re holding on to a fantasy,” Vance persists. “A product of your mind. This attachment to Raine is keeping you from moving forward, from healing. You need to let go of him. Accept that he was part of your imagination, a crutch you used to cope. He’s not coming back; he was never really here.”

 I can feel the walls pressing in, the room growing smaller, tighter. I’m suffocating under the weight of his words. “You’re not listening,” I snap, my voice tight with frustrations. “He. Was. Real. I remember *everything.*”

 I stand suddenly, too fast, the chair scraping back noisily against the floor. My hands are shaking at my sides, so I ball them into fists, willing myself to be calm. “You know what?” I say, my voice harsh now, cracking under the strain. “I’m so *fucking tired* of you telling me I’m crazy. He was real, and important, and I won’t just forget about him because it’s convenient for you.”

 Dr. Vance doesn’t flinch, but a see a hint of discomfort flicker across his face. “Lily, I’m not saying you’re crazy. I’m just trying to help you see what is and move on. You are only seventeen, you have your whole life ahead of you. And you can’t spend the rest of it living in the past if you have any hope of moving forwards.”

 “But I don’t want to move forward without him,” I whisper, the words escaping my lips before I can stop them. I don’t wait for him to respond; I turn and walk out of the office. I feel empty, but not in the way he wants me to be. The truth is, I’m exhausted. Every conversation, every session, every single day that passes without Raine makes me feel like I’m losing something more, one piece at a time. Losing myself.

 The receptionist calls after me. “Dr. Vance wrote a refill on your prescription, Lily. Just pick it up on the way out.”

 I nod, barely hearing her, my mind already miles away. I know the drill. Medication to calm me down, to stop my head from spiraling into a mess of shadows and memories. But I will not take it. I can’t. Because as soon as I do, the fragments of Raine – his warmth, his voice, his very presence – may start to fade. And I refuse to lose my memories of him, I’ve already lost enough.

 I grab the prescription, tuck it into my bag and leave without a second thought. I could throw it away on the way home or leave it to gather dust on my desk. It doesn’t matter, not really.

 As I barge into the hall, I bump into someone. My heart skips a beat at the intrusive contact until I recognize the familiar face of my social worker, Anna. She smiles when she sees me, but there’s a weariness in her eyes. Something that mirrors the exhaustion I feel inside of me.

 “Hey Lily,” she says gently, her voice soft. “How did it go?”

 I shrug forcing a half-smile. “Same as always.”

 She doesn’t push further, just gives a nod of understanding. “Well, I’m glad you’re doing okay. I just wanted to let you know that your new family are here, they are waiting for you outside.”

 My chest tightens at the mention of a new *family.* The last few years have been a blur of them, different homes, different places where I never really belonged. Places where I never stayed long enough to matter. But something about Anna’s tone, the way she says it – *your new family –* it feels significant. She doesn’t sound like she’s just checking off another box, she actually believes this one will be different.

 “Okay,” I mutter, unable to will myself to say any more than that. Not right now. Suffice to say though, I do not share her hope.

 Anna leads me through the back hallways of the clinic, away from the waiting room, and out into the parking lot. There’s a car idling with a couple waiting by it. A man and a woman, their faces warm, open. They’re mid-forties, I guess – not young or old, and there is something kind about their eyes. After cycling through people as often as I have, it’s easy to read intentions through eyes, but theirs just seem *good.*

 *“*Lily, this is Rebecca and Samuel,” Anna introduces them. “They’ve been approved to foster you, and they’re excited to meet you.”

 The woman, Rebecca, smiles softly and steps forward, holding out her hand. “It’s really nice to meet you, Lily. We’ve heard so many good things about you.”

 Samuel, standing next to her, nods. “We’re happy you’re here,” he adds. “We just want to make sure you feel comfortable and at home with us.”

 I force my face into a smile, but it doesn’t reach my eyes. I can’t bring myself to even contemplate something as silly as *hope.* Still, I let them guide me to the car, bundling my meagre belongings I’d been instructed to bring with me today into the trunk. The drive is quiet, but oddly not awkward. I can’t remember the last time I was driven to a new place in such calm.

 As we pull into their home, a small two-story house on the edge of town, I feel an unfamiliar tug in my chest. It feels like… possibility. Like this could be the place that I finally don’t need to run from. But as I step out of the car, the familiar emptiness fills me once again. Raine’s absence a gaping black hole in my chest. It’s not just the silence that drapes over this place, but the knowledge that this is the first time he won’t come for me. He can’t come for me.

 I can’t remember the last time I didn’tlook over my shoulder, half expecting him to be there, watching, protecting. And now – this place – these people, *he won’t be coming.* He won’t break into this house to slip me away to safety in the darkness. Not like he always did. Not like I always wanted him to.

 I stare at the house in front of me, trying to push the thoughts of Raine down, trying to focus on the new beginning Rebecca and Samuel are offering. But it feels like a betrayal. I never wanted a new future with anyone, only ever him.

 But maybe this is what normal looks like. Or at least what it’s supposed to look like. I swallow the tightness in my throat down, taking a deep breath and trying to force my mind away from Raine. From all I’ve lost. But it’s impossible, I think it always will be.

## **8**

 The new house smells like lemon polish and fresh bread. Sunlight pools across the hardwood floors, warm and honey-gold, and the walls are covered in cheerful prints of flowers and birds that I never stop to really look at. It’s too bright here, too normal. The kind of place that shouldn’t be haunted by a girl who saw monsters drag her heart into the dark.

 I have my own room here. It’s been redecorated, soft green walls, a window that looks out into the garden with tall hedges and rosebushes, a bookshelf stacked with stories I don’t have the energy to read. There’s even a dreamcatcher above the bed, woven with beads and feathers. Rebecca said it would help me sleep.

 It doesn’t.

 They don’t talk about Raine. No one does. Not after the psychiatrist gave me a formal diagnosis – schizoaffective disorder, depressive type and said the hallucinations and delusions were likely trauma induced. Not after they started me on olanzapine to stabilize my mood and manage the supposed “breaks from reality.” Not after the CBT counselor sat me down and told me it was okay to let go of things that weren’t real.

 I pretend to tale the pills. I smile during check-ins. I say all the right things, that I understand now, that Raine wasn’t real, that it was my mind protecting itself. I sell the lie.

 But he was real.

 His kiss still lingers on my mouth some nights, desperate, wild, final. His warmth like fire under skin, refuses to fade. The way he looked at me in the moonlight before they came, like I was the only thing in the world that mattered to him.

 He’s not gone. Not really. I feel it in my bones. In the places where the shadows stretch too long. In the dreams that leave my fingers tingling, my heart racing.

 He’s still out there. And I’m going to find him.

 When my foster parents think I’m doing homework, I’m really searching. Ancient legends. Cryptic blogs. Obscure library books on folklore and the “beings in-between.” It’s all half mad and contradictory, but I’m getting better at telling which parts ring true. I read until my eyes burn, until the symbols start to mean something. Until I start to see patterns.

 I remember the way the air bent around Raine when the pale ones arrived. The hum in the ground. The way they never saw me, not even when I screamed. Like I was invisible. I think I was.

 There’s a passage I found last night, tucked inside a crumbling book from the library’s back corner. It talks about veils between worlds. Glamours. Magic so old it doesn’t leave marks. Magic that hides. I think… I think somehow Raine protected me. Cast something on me in those final few minutes. It’s the only explanation.

 My new mom knocks before entering. Always knocks. She’s careful with me, like I’m made of something fragile. Porcelain or ash. Tonight she brings tea, chamomile with honey. She sets it by the bed and doesn’t mention the stack of papers I’d tried to hide beneath my math book.

 “We’re making pancakes tomorrow,” she says softly, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear. “You should come help.”

 I nod because I don’t know how to explain that I’m not in this world the way she is. Not fully. Half of me is still in the yard behind the home, kneeling in cold grass as stars looked down and monsters took the only person I’ve ever loved.

 She smiles, gives my shoulder a gentle squeeze, and leaves me to my ghosts. I return to my desk, flipping through the pages again, searching for answers between the lines. I trace the shape of runes with my finger, sounding them out softly like a prayer.

 He’s out there. Somewhere. And I won’t stop until I bring him back to me.

 The next morning, I go through the motions. I come downstairs when Rebecca calls and sit at the counter while she flips pancakes on the stove. She hums softly, something from the radio probably, and the scent of vanilla and cinnamon fills the room. It smells like safety.

 I wonder if this is what it would have felt like if Raine and I had grown up together in a real home. If there had me no shadows. If no one had come for him.

 “Do you want chocolate chips in yours?” Rebecca asks, glancing over her shoulder.

 I nod, too tired to fake a smile.

 She puts a few on my plate, arranges the rest into the shape of a smiley face, and pretends not to notice when I only eat half. I think she wants to ask me things. I think sometimes she almost does. I catch the questions behind her eyes, about my quiet. About the books. About the way I sometimes flinch at shadows that move wrong. But she never pushes.

 After breakfast, I wander outside. The garden’s still wet with morning dew, the roses curling open like they’re waking from sleep. I press my hand to the bark of a tree, trying to feel something, anything, that might tether me to this world. It doesn’t work. The bark is just bark. The wind is just wind.

 But sometimes when I’m alone long enough, I swear I hear Raine’s voice in the rustling leaves. Not words. Just the feeling of it. That low, warm timbre. The weight of his presence.

 There’s a place beneath the hedge where the bushes grow thick and twisted. A natural archway, hidden unless you know it’s there. I duck through it, crawling on hands and knees, and find a hollowed-out pocket of space where sunlight filters in golden-green. It’s small and quiet. Mine.

 I’ve started hiding things here—notes, symbols, pages I’ve torn from the books when I couldn’t risk checking them out. I keep them in a tin box buried under a patch of moss. My own little archive of the strange and the unreal.

 Today I pull out a torn piece of paper with a rune scrawled on it in black ink. I found it in a book of Scottish fairy legends—mostly nonsense, but this part caught my eye. The rune means “anchor.” Or at least, that’s what the translation suggested. Something to hold onto, or something that holds something back. It reminded me of Raine. Of the way he always held me together.

 I trace it again with my finger. A breeze stirs the leaves above me. The shadows shift.

 “Raine,” I whisper, tasting his name like it’s sacred. “Where are you?”

 The wind answers, cool and quiet, pressing against my skin like breath.

 I spend an hour there before I go back inside, hiding the box again, brushing leaves from my clothes. Rebecca is in the living room reading, and she gives me that look again when I walk past—worried, gentle, a little bit helpless.

 I know she wants to fix me.

 But I don’t want to be fixed. I want to be whole again, and that means finding the other half of me.

 That night, I dream of the forest.

 It’s not the home’s yard, not exactly. But it feels the same. Trees stretching endlessly. Stars burning too bright. And Raine is there, just beyond reach, his eyes lit with something both familiar and not. He looks older in the dream. Not just by age—by weight. Like he’s been carrying something through a storm.

 He reaches for me, and I run to him.

 But just before I touch his hand, the ground gives way. I fall.

 The light shatters. I wake up gasping.

 My pillow is damp with tears I don’t remember crying. My heart pounds like I’ve been running. I sit up, clutching the edge of the sheets, and whisper his name again.

 “Raine.”

 I don’t sleep again.

 Instead, I go back to the pages.

 Back to the runes and half-lost names. The secrets that hide in plain sight.

 Because I know, deep in my bones, that he wouldn’t choose to leave me, that if he could get to me, he’d already be here. He’s trapped.

 But if there’s a way into that place—whatever it is—then there must be a way back out.

 I’ll find it.

 Even if I have to tear through every veil and shadow to reach him.

 He is mine.

 And I will not let the dark keep him.

## **9**

**Raine**

 The iron cuts deeper when it’s hot.

 They know that.

 The chains that bite into my wrists sizzle against my skin. My knees hit the stone floor again and again until I stop feeling them. My hands are cracked raw. My chest rises and falls in shallow, shaky gasps.

 “Still too soft,” the King says.

 His voice is cold. Always cold.

 “I gave you life,” he says. “I gave you power. I gave you blood. But still you cling to that mortal filth.” He means kindness. Mercy. Fear. The things I’m not supposed to feel anymore.

 He doesn’t know the truth. He doesn’t know I’m still human because I *choose* to be.

 Because of her.

 Because Lily’s face still lives in the back of my mind, behind every scream and shadow. Her laugh. Her quiet. Her eyes the last time I saw her – shocked, breaking.

 He doesn’t know that I dream of her when I pass out from the pain.

 He doesn’t know her name.

 And he can’t ever.

 “Again.” The King barks out.

 The guards obey, they always do.

 Magic rips through me like lightening, twisting my veins. I bite down on my tongue hard enough to taste blood. I don’t scream. I won’t scream.

 The King circles me slowly, like a wolf with wounded prey. “You’ll forget that life,” he says. “You’ll forget that name they gave you. That skin. That word. You’ll forget who you were. You will be all that you were meant to be.”

 I let my head hang. I don’t speak. Because if I open my mouth, I might say her name. And I won’t let him have it.

 He can break my bones. He can burn my blood. But Lily is mine. And I’ll die before I ever let him know she exists.

## **10**

 The day begins the same way it always does – quietly, almost apologetically, as if unsure whether I am ready to face it.

 I wake before the alarm has the chance to chime, tangled in too many blankets, the air in the room cold and still. The sky beyond the window is barely touched by light – just the faintest pale blue spreading through the grey. Shadows linger in the corners, soft and harmless, but I watch them for a moment longer than I should.

 The wind outside has teeth this morning. It claws gently at the windows, not loud enough to startle, but persistent, like it wants to be let in. I stretch beneath the blankets, reluctant to leave their warmth, and try not to dwell on the remnants of whatever I was dreaming – something slipping through the trees, something watching, something that might’ve once had a name I could say out loud.

 I move through the motions because they’re familiar. Coffee. Shower. Clothes. Hair. Each step its own kind of armor, pulled tight around the more fragile parts of me. Routine is a language that I’ve learned to speak fluently, and it asks nothing of me except repetition.

 By eight, I’m walking into town, the cold morning air biting at my cheeks. The streets are quiet, the kind of stillness that feels deliberate, like the town itself is holding its breath to see what I’ll do. Windgrove always feels like its keeping secrets. But maybe that’s just me projecting.

 Fox & Fern sits like a hidden gem between a florist that smells of roses and sap, and an antique shop that has had the same window display for at least a decade. The bookstore is small, cramped in the best way, with warped floorboards and a door that chimes when you open it. The scent of old paper and cinnamon tea wrapping around me as I step inside, and for a moment I soften.

 Margot is behind the counter, wrapped in a cardigan two sizes too big for her, reading a paperback with the corners folded like wings. She looks up as I enter, offering a smile that’s gentle but doesn’t demand one in return.

 “Morning, Lily,” she says, her voice still hoarse from sleep. “Get any rest?”

 I nod. It’s easier than explaining the truth – that I slept in fragments, that I woke up with a name in my mouth and a ghost pressed into my skull.

 “Same,” she says with a wry smile, lifting her mug – *World’s Okayest Boss* in fading black letters. She doesn’t press further, she never does. That’s one of the reasons I stay. Well, that and aren’t many jobs in this town I’m actually qualified to do with a major in Folklore Studies. Weird.

 The day moves slowly, and I let it. A few customers trickle in, mostly tourists passing through, faces I’ll never see again. I help a teenager find a fantasy novel about cursed forests and bloodline magic. I ring up an older man who buys two identical gardening books, so he and his wife can read them at the same time.

 The rest of the day I shelve books in the horror section, alphabetizing names I know too well. Some of the titles feel closer to non-fiction that I’d like. It’s quiet work, predictable. And in its own way, a sanctuary.

 By the time my shift ends, the sun has begun to dip, painting the sky with that warm, golden hue that makes even the worn out brick and uneven sidewalks feels a little romantic. I walk home with my hands buried deep in the pockets of my coat, head down, scarf pulled tight. The air smells of pine needles and wet earth. The forest that borders my little cottage looms in the distance – tall, ancient trees that whisper when the wind moves just right.

 Sometimes I think they remember more than people do.

 Sometimes I wonder if they remember *him.*

 The walk home is quiet, save for the sound of gravel under my boots. My cottage sits just beyond the last bend in the road, small and red roofed, half tucked into the edge of the woods like it’s trying desperately not to be seen.

 As I cross the little footbridge over the creek, my phone buzzes in my coat pocket. I fish it out with half-numb fingers.

 **Mom.**

 I hesitate, thumb hovering over the screen for a beat too long, before answering. “Hey,” I say, voice quiet against the cold.

 “Lily,” she breathes, the syllables carrying all the warmth of irrefutable love, “I didn’t wake you, did I?”

 “It’s barely past five,” I murmur, a smile ghosting across my lips. “You’re safe.”

 She chuckles, and I can hear the rattle of a kettle behind her, the familiar cadence of their old house – every creak and clatter etched somewhere into my memory.

 “Well your father’s attempting another truce with the porch light,” she says lightly. “Which means I’ll be hearing inventive swearing in about ten minutes.”

 “I’m sure he’ll triumph. Eventually,” I laugh out.

 “By sheer stubbornness, if nothing else.” She pauses, then lowers her voice a little. “We were just thinking of you. That’s all.”

 The weight behind that all isn’t lost on me. It’s the kind of careful love she’s always offered – softened at the edges, never wanting to press too hard, to make me run.

 “I’m okay,” I lie gently.

 “You always say that.”

 “And you always let me.”

 Silence, then another smile I can feel, even down the phone. “We were wondering if you might come visit this weekend. We could do that thing – you know the cake you like. Or your father could burn dinner and blame the oven again.

 “I’ll think about it.”

 “I know you will. That’s enough.”

 Another pause. Deeper this time, “It’s just… the days are shorter now. And I know how the shadows unsettle. Especially for you.”

 My throat tightens, but I swallow back. “I miss you.”

 And I do. Even if I still don’t know how to be fully reachable.

 “We love you, Lily. No pressure – just a light tap on the door.”

 I nod into the silence. “I’ll call you tomorrow.”

 “You better,” she says, but her voice is warm. “Sleep well, sweetheart”.

 When the call ends, I’m left standing in the middle of the road, dusk curling around my boots, and for a moment I let the quiet return. Not oppressive this time – just present.

 By the time I step into the cottage, the light has thinned to a soft, dusty blue, the kind of twilight that makes everything feel older than it is. I flick on a lamp in the living room, it’s golden glow spilling across the floor like a memory half remembered.

 The house is still. Familiar. A little too clean, like I’m always preparing for someone who never comes.

 Dinner is mechanical – boiling water, stirring sauce, plating spaghetti I’ll only eat half of. I try not to think about Raine pretending the noodles were worms, chasing me around the dining hall with a fork in hand and a devilish grin in place. But memory is a cruel thing. It doesn’t ask permission, it simply arrives.

 I leave the dishes in the sink and drift into the living room. The wind has picked up again, whispering against the windows like it’s carrying something with it – stories, warnings, names.

 Without thinking, I open the hallway closet and reach for a photo album buried at the back of the top shelf. It’s heavier than I remember. Heavier than it should be.

 I sit curled in an oversized sweater on the living room rug, knees drawn to my chest, the worn album beside me. The heater hums softly in the background but I still feel cold.

 It’s an old album. The kind social workers give you when you’ve been in too many homes. Stickers on the front, peeling at the edges. Inside, half-hearted smiles and stiff poses. Me with a birthday cake I didn’t want. Me holding a dog that wasn’t mine. Me between two adults whose names I no longer remember.

 But not him.

 Not Raine.

 Never Raine.

 I flip the pages slowly, as if maybe this time he’ll be there, peeking out between a Halloween photo and a school play. But the spaces where he should be remain blank, the silence in the photos as loud as the one in the room.

 Page after page of careful curation. Foster families. School trips. Blank smiles and brittle poses. The girl in the photographs is always slightly turned inwards, like she’s bracing for something no one else can see.

 But Raine is nowhere.

 And yet he is in *everything.*

 In the way my shoulders tighten when I sleep. In the way I count footsteps without realizing. In the way I still hesitate at the edge of the woods, waiting for a voice I haven’t heard in years.

 The psychologists always said he wasn’t real. That I invented him to cope, survive. That Raine was a child’s fantasy, a ghost created by a frighted young girl, desperate for some kindness in a cruel world. Sometimes, in my darkest moments, I wonder if they’re right.

 But I remember him. In ways that feel too sharp to be imagined. The warmth of his hand curled around mine in the dark. The scratch of his voice when he laughed. The soft, solemn way he used to say my name – like it mattered to him more than the world itself.

 I remember the way he always gave me the bigger half of the sandwich. Even when he was hungry. The way he always brought out two hoodies and end up giving me them both.

 I remember the day I turned fourteen.

 *We didn’t have cake or candles or anything that looked like a real birthday. Just the two of us, sitting on the roof in our spot, watching the sun slip behind the trees. He handed me a little bundle wrapped in cloth and twine, his fingers fidgeting like he was nervous.*

 *“It was my mothers,” he said quietly.*

 *He’d never talked about her before. Never talked about the before at all. Most of us didn’t. We all came from broken places. The details didn’t change the weight of it.*

 *But for him to mention her, to give me something of hers, meant something. More than I could have ever understood at the time.*

 *“She left it for me, said I’d know when to pass it on.”*

 *I untied the cloth and found a ring nestled inside. It was iron, dark but not crude. Finely wrought filagree curled into delicate patterns – twining vines and thorns looping like a sigil or spell. And in the center, held in a cradle of curling metal was a gemstone unlike anything I’d ever seen.*

 *It wasn’t any color and every color all at once, like a drop of oil in water, or the shimmer of dragonfly wings. It shifted with the light, sometimes green, sometimes violet, sometimes silver so pale it was almost white. It looked alive, breathing, watching.*

 *I reached out slowly, half afraid it would vanish if I touched it. “It’s beautiful,” I whispered.*

 *Raine didn’t say anything, just watched me put it on my finger. It slipped on with ease and felt like it had always belonged there.*

 I look down at the ring, still resting on the same finger, the iron unaged and unbroken. The gemstone is just as strange as the day he gave it to me. I spin it once, twice. A nervous habit now, older than most of my scars. I’ve never taken it off. Not since that day. It’s the only thing I have left of him. When everything else disappeared, it remained.

 On the hard days, the days where the doubt creeps in, I feel the iron warm against my skin, and I know he was real. That I didn’t imagine him. That someone took him and didn’t want anyone to know. But I remember, and I know I haven’t spent the last decade mourning a fantasy.

 “He’s real,” I whisper it out loud, to solidify the thought. The room doesn’t answer, but the ache in my chest does – deep and echoing and unrelenting.

## **11**

**Raine**

 She sleeps with the light on.

 A single lamp by the bed – low, amber, soft. It offers no real protection, but she leaves it burning brightly anyway. Like it may hold back more than the darkness.

 The light spills across the floorboards, warm and flickering, brushing gently against her skin. Her cheek catches the glow, pale as porcelain, smooth as still water. That skin, nearly untouched by sun, almost seems to drink in the light, like it was made for softer worlds.

 Her hair tumbles across the pillow in waves of pale gold, the color of moonlight made tangible. It shimmers faintly, even in sleep, not just in hue but in presence - as if something resides within it, ancient and gentle.

 She lies curled on the left side of the bed, just as she always did. Always making space for something. For someone. The habit never left her. The ache never leaves me.

 She is so small, delicate boned and fine limbed. A fragile, perfect thing. But she’s no child, not anymore. The years have carved softness into her, have given her curves shaped by time. The swell of her breast, the dip of her waist, the subtle flare of her hips – all of it woman now. Yet she still resembles the girl she used to be, bared in the sorrow etched deep into every feature.

 Her lips, full and pink, part in sleep like she’s whispering on the wind. Her eyebrows pull together just slightly, even in rest, that permanent trace of fear carved into her expression like a scar no one else can see.

 And her eyes, though they are closed now, Gods her eyes. Eyes like a glacial fire. Blue too deep to be real, too bright to ever forget. I will her to open them, just so I can see them once more, but she sleeps deeply.

 She is beauty shaped by ruin. Softness made sharp enough to cut. A hymn of survival dressed in silk and bone.

 I watch from the trees, cloaked in shadow. The wind bends around me, silently. It knows what I am.

 She has no idea I’m here. She never does.

 And that’s the only reason she’s still breathing.

 If the King knew, if anyone in the court caught even a whisper of this, she’d be dead before sunrise. No hesitation, no mercy. Just another pawn on a board I was never supposed to walk away from.

 So, I keep my distance, it’s the only thing I’ve ever done right.

 She stirs. Turns toward the window and my chest goes still. For a second, I think she *sees* me. But her eyes stay closed.

 I breathe again.

 They trained the humanity out of me. Beat it down until it stopped screaming. What’s left is sharper. Colder. Built to serve.

 But not even the King could kill what she gave me.

 I come here more than I should. It’s reckless. Idiotic. Dangerous.

 I’ve watched her grow into a life I was never meant to touch – seen her smile at strangers, cry when she thought no one was watching, rebuild herself again and again like a cathedral rising from ruin.

 She doesn’t know I’m still here.

 She doesn’t know what I’ve become.

 My reflection doesn’t cast right anymore. My hands remember too much. My name, what’s left of it, carries weight in places no map will name.

 But here, in the quiet between her breaths, I remember who I was. Who she thought I could be.

 I come to see her. To *know* she’s still real. Because when I’m back in that world of masks and knives and smiling liars, I start to wonder if I made her up.

 She shifts in the sheets again. Her lips move, just barely. My name maybe. Or nothing.

I turn before I find out.

Every second I remain puts her in more danger. And I’ve already failed her once. Despite this I turn to look at her again. And I hate it.

 I hate how much of me still bends toward her like a prayer I no longer deserve to say.

 A branch creaks above me. The wind shifts. She stirs again, brows furrowing faintly. As if some part of her knows.

 I vanish before she opens her eyes.

## **12**

 The decision comes quietly.

 No lightening strike, no dramatic moment. Just a slow exhale over a cup of lukewarm tea, sunlight spilling across the table, and a strange sense of stillness in my chest.

 I need to move on.

 Not from everything. Not all at once. But from the way I’ve been holding my life at arm’s length. Like I’m afraid to step into it fully because he might still be there. Somewhere in the shadows, watching, waiting.

 But I can’t live like that anymore. I *won’t.*

 I scrub the dishes. Open the windows. Change the sheets. I make the bed like it matters. And when I look at myself in the mirror before work, I actually meet my own eyes.

 It’s a start.

 Fox & Fern is quiet when I arrive. The door chimes, and the scent of old paper wraps around me like a worn sweater. Margot’s humming something tuneless behind the counter. She lifts her head and offers me that same knowing smile.

 “Morning love,” she says. “You look… bright today.”

 “Do I?”

 “Mm. Brighter than usual.”

 I shrug and head to the back, cheeks a little warm.

 The morning passes in a soft, familiar rhythm – dusting, shelving, restocking the staff picks table. By noon, I’m behind the register, flipping through a poetry collection I’ll never buy, when the door chimes again.

 A man stops at the counter. “Hey,” he says, easy. Casual.

 I look up. He’s tall, broad shouldered but not imposing, with tousled blonde hair that falls just slightly into his eyes. They’re pale, maybe gray or blue, hard to tell in the soft light, but they catch and hold mine for a moment longer than I expect. His face is an open book, pages filled with warmth and an unassuming handsomeness, the kind that whispers of boyhood innocence and simple dreams.

 “I don’t mean to interrupt,” he adds, lifting a battered paperback. “Just wondering if you’ve got more from this author?”

 I take the book from his hand – travel essays. Dog-eared, underlined. “Let me check in the back.”

 When I return, I hand him two others. His grin widens, genuine and a little sheepish. “You just saved my afternoon.”

 I nod, already turning to scan the titles. But he hesitates, like there’s something on his mind. Then he says, “I’m Noah, by the way.”

 “Lily,” I offer.

 “Nice to meet you, Lily.” Another pause. But it’s entirely comfortable, not strained and filled with the need to be filled.

 “I know this is kind of out of nowhere,” he says, voice lower now, careful, “but would you maybe want to grab coffee sometimes? No pressure. You just seem like someone I’d like to talk to.”

 I blink, momentarily disarmed by the simplicity of his request. No grand gestures. No insistence. This isn't the sort of thing that usually happens to me. I'm aware I'm not unattractive, but the aura I usually project into the world typically repels such conversations. Perhaps it's me. Perhaps I’m different today. Since I’ve decided to move forward, into a life without Raine.

*Raine.* My heart tugs and pulls, his name landing hard and uninvited. *Stop.* That part of your life is done. This could be something else. Something clean and light and simple.

 Decision made, I school my voice hiding the racing thoughts. “Sure, that sounds nice.”

 His smile softens, like he didn’t quite expect me to say yes. “You have your phone?”

 I hesitate, just for a second, before sliding it across the counter. He types his number in and sets it down gently between us. “There. No pressure. Just text if you feel like it.”

 “Okay.”

 No promises, just a door left open. He lifts the books, setting some cash down and gives a small wave, walking out without looking back.

 I feel lighter after he’s gone. Aired through. Like someone opened a window in me that’s been stuck shut for years.

 Margot leans into the doorway from the back. “Was that blushing I saw?”

 I roll my eyes. “Don’t.”

 She just grins and disappears again.

 And still, I’m smiling when I turn back to the register. It feels strange. Not wrong, just unfamiliar.

 But maybe that’s a good thing.

 It’s early evening when I stand outside the café, clutching my coat closed even though the wind is gentle, and the light is warm. There’s music coming from inside, soft and uneven, someone tuning a guitar. The place is cozy, with a low ceiling and string lights, the scent of bread and cinnamon spilling into the street. I’ve passed by more than a few times over the years, but have never felt the need to go inside, it seemed like a place to enjoy with others. And that’s something I’ve rarely done in years.

 My fingers twitch at my sides. I almost turned around twice on the way here. Not because of Noah exactly. But because this feels like something that could lead somewhere. Something that could actually be real and tangible. And that thought is terrifying.

 For years, I’ve lived inside a version of myself, stitched together with silence. Observing the world but never partaking. I’ve trained my heart to beat slowly, my voice to stay quiet, my footsteps to never echo too loudly. I’ve never wanted to be pulled into life, happier to stay on the sidelines with my ghosts.

 And yet here I am, standing on the edge of something I don’t know how to name. I take a breath and open the door, forcing myself over the threshold.

 Noah spots me before I find him. He’s seated near the back, already nursing a mug of something hot, pale hair tousled, cheeks a little pink. He lifts his hand in an awkward wave. It’s neither smooth nor suave, but totally and completely real.

 I smile. It’s a strange thing, smiling because you want to, not because someone expects it. I’m not sure I’ve done that in a long time.

 He stands as I reach the table. “Hey.”

 “Hey,” I echo, slipping into the seat across from him.

 “Thanks for coming,” he says, settling back in. “I wasn’t sure if you’d, you know… Actually show.”

 “Neither was I.”

 He laughs softly, a nervous kind of sound, and pushes a menu towards me. “They’ve got decent teas, questionable cookies – but I can vouch for the lemon bars.”

 I glance at the menu, musing over the options. I like Noah. He’s easy, simple, no complications or darkness.

 *But he’s not Raine.*

 The thought arrives quick and cruel. And I hate it. Hate the way Noah’s face momentarily overlaps with another in my mind. The way I almost search his voice for a tone that isn’t there. Dark velvet. Cold thunder.

 *No. No.*

 I’ve closed the book on that chapter of my life. The boy with ink-dark eyes and a voice like night isn’t part of your world anymore. Whatever remains of him, if anything, is buried away. Unreachable.

 I have to believe that.

 Because if I don’t, if I keep holding on to someone who hasn’t been real in almost a decade, then I’ll never belong anywhere again. And I want to. I want to belong. Even though I haven’t quite worked out how to do that yet. The important thing is to try.

 Noah’s voice pulls me back. “There’s an open mic thing tonight. Locals mostly. You okay with that?”

 “Sure, it’s… charming,” I say, lips twitching.

 He grins, and I see it again – that openness. There’s no edge to him. No weight behind his smile. No guard in his expression. He holds nothing back and that in itself is startling.

 We talk as the performers start, a girl with a haunting voice sings a lullaby that makes the room hush. A college student reads a poem about missing his grandmother. Someone attempts a folk song with a ukulele at which everyone claps louder than deserved when he’s finally finished.

 The chaos of it all is beautiful. The imperfection makes it human. And somehow, I don’t feel like I’m drowning in the middle of it.

 Noah tells me about growing up nearby. About his old golden retriever, Baxter, who still thinks he’s a puppy despite the gray around his snout. He talks about his grandfather’s cabin almost poetically, describing the smell of sawdust and pine and the feeling of the wild. I realize I’m leaning in, listening closely, hanging on to each word.

 I tell him I work at the bookstore, which of course he already knows, but this turns into a conversation about first favorite books and how we both used to pretend we could talk to animals. He tells me about his mom, how she still has a box of his old drawings in the attic that she won’t let him clear out.

 I don’t say anything about my childhood. I’m not ready. Not yet. He never asks.

 The hours slip by, and then we’re outside again. He walks beside me for a while, his hands in his pockets, quiet now but not awkward. Just… comfortable.

 At my gate he hesitates. “I’m glad you decided to come,” he says, voice softer now, like he knows this meant something.

 “Me too.”

 There’s a moment where we are both still. Just standing there in the quiet, as if the night is holding its breath to see what will happen next. Then he takes a small step. And so do I.

 His hand lifts, brushing a strand of hair behind my ear. It’s barely a touch, but I feel it everywhere. He’s close now – closer than anyone has been to me in a very long time.

 “Can I -?” he asks, a breath away.

 My mind screams *No*, but I ignore it and nod.

 His lips are soft. Gentle. He kisses me like he’s afraid I’ll vanish. And for a second, just a second, I do. But not the way he expects.

 Because the moment his mouth touches mine, I’m gone – ripped backwards into the past. To a dirt path behind the home. Dandelions. Summer air. And him.

 Raine, sixteen years old and eyes far older than his age, hands shaking softly as he cups my face, his mouth warm and clumsy against mine. I remember thinking this is what safety feels like. The kiss wasn’t practiced. It wasn’t sweet. It was desperate. He kissed me like it was the first and final time.

 Because it was. He was gone the next day.

 I come back to myself too fast, heart pounding, throat tight. Noah leans back slightly, searching my face. “Was that okay?”

 I force the smile, and it takes everything in me. “Yeah, it was nice.” And it was nice. But nice feels hollow. Nice is not what I remember. Still, I take a breath, hold the warmth of it in my chest and tell myself this is a beginning. That maybe not every part of me is still buried in the past.

 “Text me some time,” he says again, more quietly this time.

 “I will.”

 And with that he turns and disappears down the lane. I stand at my gate, the taste of my memory still on my lips, unsure if I just took a step forward – or fell backwards.

## **13**

**Raine**

 He’s breaking.

 Not with a scream, no that came earlier, but with silence. The deep kind, the kind that settles behind the eyes and hollows everything out.

 He’s on his knees now, slumped forward, breath stuttering like a dying animal. His mind is unravelling, just the way I intended it to. No blade. No fire. Just pressure. A slow turn of invisible hands, until thought splinters into ruin.

 I don’t touch him.

 There’s no need to.

 I step back, the sound of my boots sharp against the crumbling stone. We’re in the remains of something old, lost between the realms, hidden behind a glamour only I can manipulate. The air here tastes of salt and rot. The forest pressing in on the ruins that don’t belong in the human world. Nothing here does. Not anymore.

 He begins to sob. I let him. It means he still has pieces left.

 I turn to go, already pulling the glamour back around the space, wrapping it in shadow. The task is complete. He will either die today, or he won’t. Either outcome will serve the Kings purpose. And mine.

 But then –

 I stop.

 It’s nothing, at first. Just a pause. A strange breath caught between one step and the next. And then I feel it.

 A flicker, low in my chest. Foreign. Intrusive. Like a string tightening that I didn’t notice was still attached. I go still. This isn’t pain. It isn’t magic. It’s *her.* Not in body. Not in voice. But something in her has shifted.

 A reaching. A loosening. The faint tremor of someone closing a door they swore they would always leave open. It tugs at the oldest parts of me, the one thing I haven’t allowed myself to sever. That thread –

 Lily.

 I exhale slowly, controlled. My hand goes to my side, fingers splayed over the leather just above my ribs. The ache is light. Barely there. And yet it cuts through me cleaner than any blade ever could.

 She’s letting someone close.

 She doesn’t know I can feel it. Or maybe she does, and she’s doing it anyway.

 My jaw tightens, a small movement, too precise to betray the heat behind it. I do not allow the emotion to spread. It cannot. There’s no room left in me for what she awakens.

 I chose to burn that out of myself. Didn’t I?

 Behind me, the spy groans, barely conscious now. A broken, fragile thing.

 I don’t look back.

 The air shifts around me as I summon the fold, step through the veil and vanish into the night.

 The ruins collapse in silence, lost once more to shadow.

## **14**

 The woods are quieter than I expected.

 I follow Noah up the winding trail, the earth soft beneath my sneakers, the path twisting upward through the trees. Everything is green. Lush and rich with life. The leaves above us sway gently, rustling as though whispering secrets to one another. Sunlight breaks through the canopy in scattered patches, the golden beams dappling the ground beneath us. I let my hand skim over the moss-covered stones beside the trail, my fingers brushing lightly across their rough texture. The smell of pine is thick in the air, mixed with the fresh, earthy scent of the forest floor. It feels ancient here. Timeless. I can almost feel the forest’s heartbeat, slow and steady beneath my feet, reminding me that some things—no matter how much we try to ignore them—have always been here.

 Noah’s just ahead, his backpack slung over one shoulder, his pace steady but not rushed. He glances back every so often, checking to make sure I’m still following. I don’t mind the silence. It’s not the awkward kind—it’s the kind that lets me breathe deeper. It’s the kind of quiet that’s filled with the sounds of life around us—the distant rustling of leaves, the calls of birds high in the trees. It’s the kind of quiet I crave, the one that doesn’t press in on me but instead lets me be present, just for a little while.

 I’m used to silences—more than I should be, really. I’ve spent most of my life living in them, in a world that never quite felt like mine. My own mind has been a place I’ve learned to hide in. A place I could get lost in for hours, and sometimes days. But with Noah, it’s different. There’s an ease between us. A peacefulness. And right now, there’s no pressure to fill the spaces between us with meaningless words. The kind of space I always thought I was too broken to share with anyone.

 We don’t speak much on the climb.

 He points out the occasional bird or cluster of wildflowers, the blue of his eyes catching the sunlight as he gestures to things I would have missed on my own. I smile at the small gestures, at how effortlessly he shares his world with me, how he seems to know exactly when to fill the silence and when to let it be. The way he talks about the smallest things with such wonder—like the way the light catches on the leaves or the sound of the wind in the trees—makes the world feel bigger. Richer. More alive.

 It’s not that I can’t speak—I could. I could share things with him, tell him everything that’s been running through my head, but there’s something about the quiet that’s so much easier to live in. It’s comfortable. It’s not loud. It lets me breathe, lets me think. And I need that right now. I don’t want to shatter this fragile moment with the mess of words I’m constantly carrying around.

 It takes about an hour to reach the overlook. The path opens up into a flat clearing where the trees part just enough to reveal the lake below, its surface still, reflecting the sky like a giant mirror. The water looks like polished glass, gleaming in the late afternoon light, the only movement being the occasional ripple as a breeze stirs the surface. It’s stunning—perfectly serene.

 Noah stops just short of the clearing, dropping his bag onto the ground with a soft thud. “This is it,” he says, his voice in awe, like he’s showing me something precious.

 I drop onto the blanket he spreads out, brushing away the twigs and leaves that have gathered on my jeans as I sit down. The blanket is soft against my skin, a comforting contrast to the roughness of the forest floor. I stretch my legs out in front of me and look around. The sun casts long shadows across the clearing, stretching out beneath the trees and over the sparkling lake. “This is… beautiful,” I say, my voice quiet, but sincere.

 “You should see it in fall,” Noah says, pulling out a thermos and a few mismatched containers. “The whole place turns gold. It’s like a different world.”

 I glance up at him, the hint of a smile tugging at my lips. “I bet. But this is still pretty amazing.” My gaze drifts back to the lake, to the way the sunlight dances across the water. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything like it.”

 Noah sets the thermos down beside me, then reaches into his bag for a container of homemade pasta salad that somehow didn’t spill despite its rough journey. There’s fresh fruit—sliced apples and strawberries—and a small jar of pickles. I can’t help but laugh at how carefully everything’s been packed. “You feed all your dates?” I ask, teasing, though there’s something in the way he’s organized everything that makes me feel like I’ve just stepped into something important. Something I’m meant to be a part of.

 He grins, unfazed. “Only the ones I really want to impress.” He nudges a sandwich toward me. “Hope you’re not too picky.”

 “I’m easy,” I assure him. “As long as it’s not anchovies or something.”

 We eat slowly, savoring the quiet, our knees almost touching on the blanket. The conversation drifts in a way that feels natural, like the breeze moving through the trees. Noah tells me a story about the time he tried to cook when he was twelve and somehow managed to set the oven mitt on fire. I laugh—actually laugh—and the sound feels good. I realize how much I’ve missed laughing like this, without worry, without hesitation. The way Noah’s face lights up when he tells a story is so genuine, so full of warmth. It’s easy to get lost in it.

 I turn my face up to the sky, breathing in the cool, fresh air, feeling the weight of the world slowly lift off my shoulders. The quiet is a balm for the restlessness I feel inside, the endless buzzing of thoughts that never seem to stop. Here, with Noah, it’s like time slows down. There’s no rush. No sense of urgency. Just… peace.

 At one point, Noah lies back on the blanket, his arms stretched out behind his head, his face turned up to the sky. The sun hits him at just the right angle, lighting up his profile like he’s been carved from the same stone as the mountain itself. He looks content in a way I haven’t seen anyone be in a long time—like he’s exactly where he’s meant to be. I envy that peace in him. That stillness.

 “Do you ever feel like you’ve lived two lives?” he asks suddenly, his voice breaking the quiet, but not in a way that feels intrusive. “Like there was a ‘before,’ and then something happened, and now you’re someone else entirely?”

 His question catches me off guard. It slices through the peaceful moment like a shard of glass, sharp and jagged. I’m not ready to answer. Not sure how. I’ve been running from the ‘before’ for so long. I don’t know how to look back and see anything other than the wreckage. But I nod, because it’s true. Because I do feel like I’m two different people sometimes. There’s the girl I used to be, and then there’s the person I’ve tried to become. But it’s hard to reconcile those two halves.

 I lie down beside him, feeling the cool grass against my skin, and stare at the sky. The clouds drift lazily above, white and fluffy against the blue canvas, and I wonder how they can just float there, without a care in the world. “All the time,” I say, my voice quiet, and I almost don’t want to say more, don’t want to let the words spill out of me. But I can’t stop them. “It’s like I’ve lived my whole life waiting for something to change, waiting for someone to come back. But it never happened. And now I don’t know who I am anymore. I don’t know who I am without that.”

 I feel Noah turn his head toward me, his gaze settling on me with something like understanding in his eyes. But he doesn’t push. He doesn’t ask me to explain. He just lets the silence fill the space between us again, like it’s enough to just be here, in this moment.

 The sun is sinking lower now, the sky shifting from blue to pink and orange as the day begins to give way to evening. The breeze picks up, rustling the leaves overhead, and the air smells richer now—more earthy, more alive. And for just a moment, I close my eyes and let myself believe that this is real. That maybe, just maybe, I don’t need to run anymore.

 But Raine’s name is still carved somewhere in my bones. Always there, like an echo I can’t shake, no matter how hard I try. I smile at Noah, even though the weight of the past presses against me, even though I know I’ll never truly escape it. And for just a moment, I let myself imagine what it might feel like to choose this. To choose him. To fall forward into something steady. Something I could hold on to.

 Noah’s hand brushes against mine then, his fingers warm and light against my skin. I look down, surprised by the gentle touch, and he grins. It’s not a big thing.  Not a grand gesture. But in this moment, it feels like a promise. Like an unspoken understanding that he’s here, right now, and that’s enough.

 I turn my hand, just a little, so our fingers can intertwine. The contact is small but electric, sending a warmth spreading through me, not from the touch itself, but from the safety it offers. Noah’s gaze flickers to our hands, and I catch the soft smile that curls at his lips. He doesn’t say anything, doesn’t rush or push. But I feel something shift between us, something unspoken but tangible.

 In the distance, the sound of a bird call echoes through the trees, and I close my eyes, letting myself linger in the moment, wishing I could hold on to this peace for just a little longer. The world feels distant right now. The troubles and memories that follow me, that cling to me like shadows, feel far away. Here, with Noah, everything is lighter. Easier.

 But even as I sit there, my hand in his, my mind can’t help but drift back to Raine. To the memories of his face, the way his eyes burned with something I couldn’t fully understand. The pull I still feel deep inside me. It’s always there, a part of me that no amount of time or distance can erase.

 I shake my head, trying to push the thoughts away, focusing on the present instead. On Noah’s hand in mine. On the peace of the moment. I can’t afford to get lost in what was. Not when I’m trying to move forward.

 Noah tilts his head slightly, his eyes studying me with that quiet understanding, like he knows there’s more inside me than I’m saying, but he doesn’t press. It’s one of the things I admire about him—how he lets me be. How he respects the parts of me that aren’t ready to come out. I can feel the weight of everything unsaid between us, but it’s not uncomfortable. It’s just… real.

 “You okay?” he asks quietly, his voice so soft, I almost miss it.

 I nod, squeezing his hand a little tighter, feeling the steady pulse of life in his touch. “Yeah. Just… thinking.”

 Noah doesn’t ask what about. He doesn’t need to. I appreciate that, more than I can say. For now, that’s enough. And in this quiet, perfect moment, I let myself believe it might be.

 The sky continues to darken, the first stars starting to appear above us, small pinpricks of light in the growing darkness. We lie there for a long while, our hands still joined, our bodies close enough to feel the warmth from each other, the soft rhythm of our breathing matching the quiet of the night.

 For a while, it’s just the two of us. And it’s almost enough.

## **15**

 It’s been three days since our hike. Three days since I watched Noah pick me wildflowers and talk to me like I’m not made of sharp edges and ghosts.

 And maybe something shifted that day. Just a little. Nothing dramatic, no grand epiphanies, but when he texted me this morning and asked if I wanted to come over and bake, I didn’t overthink it.

 I just said yes.

 Me. Baking.

 Which is how I’ve ended up in Noah’s kitchen with flour on my face, in my hair, and somehow on the back of my neck. The dough is too wet. The shapes are lopsided, uneven blobs that look like they’ve been through something. Noah’s pretending not to be horrified.

 “Is it weird I feel bad for them?” he says, eyeing the tray like it might grow teeth.

 I poke one – it deflates sadly in the middle. “They’re abstract. Like Picasso meets Pillsbury.”

 “Picasso, huh?”

 “Sure. Surrealist cookies. You just don’t have the vision.”

 He grins. It’s the kind of grin that makes me forget how to breathe properly. “This one looks like a sad potato.”

 “That’s offensive. That’s a *heart.* A slightly lumpy, structurally compromised heart.”

 He laughs, really laughs, and I feel it like a warm hand pressed against my ribs, holding me together.

 I smile back. Not the kind I fake in mirrors or force in grocery store conversations. A real one, with teeth, with eyes. With a flicker of something that might be joy, if I don’t poke too hard at it. For a moment, I almost feel normal.

 And then, because of course, guilt elbows it’s way in. It always does. Because there was another boy. Once who didn’t bring me wildflowers but would have torn down the sky to gift me the stars. One who kissed me like the world was ending. One who disappeared in a mess of shadows and silver light, taking half of me with him.

 I turn back to the dough and focus too hard. My hands move on autopilot. Knead. Shape. Pretend. Don’t fall.

 Noah is humming something off key, a song I don’t recognize, and it fills the silence. It covers the cracks. He doesn’t know the weight of what I carry within me. Would he even understand if I told him?

 I pull on the mask I’ve worn for most of my life and offer him a crooked smirk. “I give it ten minutes before these catch fire. If they do, you owe me a rematch in Mario Kart.”.

 He raises an eyebrow. “Low blow. I’m still emotionally recovering from the last time you blue-shelled me into oblivion.”

 “I’m sure you’ll manage,” I laugh out, “Not my fault you can’t manage a kids game.”

 “Okay fine, but let’s up the stakes,” he says, “Mario Kart rematch if they catch fire and if they don’t,” he hesitates, almost unsure of himself, “then I get a kiss,”

 The room goes quiet, except for the low hum of the oven. My heart does this weird flutter, stumble, sinking in my chest. But I don’t look away. “Bold of you” I say lightly, “Fine. Kiss or combust, let’s see what the cookie gods decide.”

 He laughs, and it sounds good. Familiar. Safe.

 We slide the tray into the oven, and for a while the only heat is the kind between us – playful, harmless, a low simmer. He deals cards for a quick round of something vaguely competitive while I pretend I’m not overthinking. Noah glances at the timer smiling, “Those cookies are smelling great Lils, hope you’re ready to pay up.”

 Before I can answer, something in the air shifts. The kitchen lights flicker.

 Noah looks up at the ceiling, “Power surge?”

 I nod like I agree, but my skin prickles. The pressure in the room feels off, like it’s holding its breath.

 A crack, loud and violent splits the silence. I barely register the sound before fire bursts from the oven like it’s alive. Real flames, high and fast and *wrong,* curling upward in jagged tendrils that shouldn’t move like that.

 “What the – shit,” Noah scrambles for the extinguisher, nearly tripping over the stool. I don’t move. I just stare.

 Because in the fire, for a breath of a moment, I see something. Twisting shapes. Shadows that flicker like they know me. Fingers. And then, gone. Like it never happened. The fire alarm is silent now, the tray of cookies are burned black. But not smoking. Not warm. Just incinerated.

 “What the hell was that? I’ve never seen a fire just – vanish,*”* he says, voice still breathless.

 I swallow. “Maybe your oven is haunted.” I try to sound flippant, it doesn’t quite land.

 Noah’s already moving, brushing soot from the counter and muttering about calling the landlord. I let him. I let the silence stretch and settle over my shoulders like a weight I know too well.

 Later, when we’re curled on his couch under a blanket that smells like dryer sheets, he hands me a mug of tea. I wrap my fingers around it, letting the warmth sink in, like maybe it can fill all the empty spaces inside of me.

 It could have been a freak accident. Some weird gas thing. Maybe the dough dripped and caught fire. But that doesn’t explain what I saw, how the flames moved and then vanished. And worse, what I *felt*. Like something inside of me recognized it. But that’s not possible. He’s gone. Has been gone for years, and whatever I felt, it wasn’t real. Just a memory surfacing. A trick of heat and adrenaline. I tell myself that over and over, as I sip the tea and try to shake the fear that something ancient cracked open in that fire.

 “You okay?” Noah asks, voice quiet.

 I force a small smile. “We almost burned your house down with cursed cookies. I think I’m allowed to be a little weird.”

 He chuckles, nudging my knee with his. “Fair point. Next time, we make brownies.”

 Next time.

 I nod and sip the tea, trying to hold onto the comfort of that phrase. But the truth sits heavy on my chest. Noah leans into me gently, his warmth grounding. I want this. Or I want to want it. I want to be normal. But in the back of my mind, something whispers. Not a voice. Not words. Just the faintest pulse of something too familiar. Pounding against a door in my mind.

 And for the first time, I don’t know if I’m hoping it opens or praying it stays shut.

## **16**

 I’ve felt off all day. Like I’m standing at the edge off a cliff, with a shadow waiting to push me over the precipice.

 Even now, sitting on my back porch staring out into the dark night, I can feel it. Like I’m being watched. The presence has been near constant these past few days. Ever since the fire of flames and shadows.

 I absently turn my ring around my finger. It’s warm, as always. Too warm for iron. Staring into the colorless stone, I don’t know what to do with it anymore. It’s become a constant reminder of how everything slipped away. Of how I’m still standing in the wreckage of a life I don’t know how to fix.

 Maybe I did imagine him. Maybe I made him up and found this ring in the forest. What if everything I remember was just some twisted version of the truth? A coping mechanism for everything I’ve lost?

 The anger rises thick and hot. I can feel the tension in my jaw as I grip the ring tighter, as though it can somehow take the weight of my thoughts. Of my grief.

 *Why can’t I just move on?*

 I close my eyes, slipping the ring off my finger and squeezing it until my hand hurts. I don’t even think about it. Don’t even hesitate. I just throw.

 The ring flies from my fingers and disappears into the night, into the dark creek that wraps behind the house, swallowed by rushing water. Instant regret slams into me like a punch to the chest.

What did I just *do*?

 Cold panic rises. My heart pounds in my chest. The ringing in my ears drowns out everything else. I scramble to my feet, shoving my boots on roughly and rushing down to the creek. The water is freezing, and the current is strong, but I don’t care. I need to get it back.

 I wade in, the cold numbing me almost instantly. My hands tremble as I dip them into the water, fingers splayed out, searching.

 But it’s gone. The ring is gone.

 I continue to search, frantic, my breath coming too fast.

 *No, no, no…*

 I dive deeper, pushing the water aside, my heart hammering in my throat, my body turning to ice from the freezing current. The ring is nowhere to be found. I’m caught in the torrent, pulled under so I can’t reach the surface, can’t quite gasp a breath. I struggle beneath the water, freezing, choking, and all I want is my ring back on my finger where it belongs.

 It’s subtle at first, like a whisper in the back of my mind. But then it becomes warmer, and suddenly I can feel it everywhere – his presence.

 Raine.

 I freeze in the water, every inch of my skin prickling with the heat of it. I know it’s him, even though I can’t see him, even though I know I’m alone.

 *Is this the end?*

 A strange calm washes over me, like it’s all going to be okay now. Like this – this is where I’m supposed to be. Maybe… Maybe I’m dead.

 I can’t breathe. My lungs burn as the water crashes into them. I don’t think I’d hurt if I was dead. Dying then. That’s ok. It’s all okay now. I can be with him. Where I belong.

 I close my eyes, feeling the warmth wrap around me like a soft blanket. Raine’s presence pulls me, covers me, keeps me safe. Whole.

 This is heaven. This is where I was always meant to be. I don’t need to fight it anymore.

 But the water crashes harder against me, and the cold sharpness cuts through the warmth. I start to slip, my hands searching for anything to hold onto. My vision blurs, the darkness creeping in as my body goes limp.

*Finally.*

 I wake up groggy and disoriented. The soft glow of morning light filters through the curtains, and the warmth of the bed feels wrong somehow, too comforting. My chest tightens as I try to recall last night, everything is blurry.

 The only thing I can grasp is the overwhelming sense that something is not right. I sit up too quickly, and the room spins for a moment. I breathe deeply, trying to steady myself, to slow my beating heart.

 I’m in bed, in my house. But I don’t remember getting into it. Everything looks the same, but I feel different. My heart thuds in my chest, and I feel uneasy. Rubbing my face with my hands I try desperately to claw at the fog surrounding my mind.

 I was on the porch. I remember that. And then… the ring. *The ring.* The memory of it hits me sharp. I was in the creek. I was drowning, I look down expecting to see a blank finger, but no. It’s there, dazzling like it always has, nestled safely and radiating warmth.

 I stare at the ceiling, the clock ticking in the background as my mind runs in circles. Was I dreaming? Maybe it was a dream. Maybe the drowning was my subconscious mind telling me that I can’t handle the weight of everything I’ve been through. There was something else though. I remember the cold water, and the darkness swallowing me. But I also remember the moment I felt Raine’s presence surround me, warm and familiar. It felt real. It felt like it was happening.

 I sit up, suddenly feeling nauseous. I should have known. I should have realized it sooner. Of course it was a dream. It was just a dream. A very, very vivid dream. A way to escape the aching loneliness, to feel like I haven’t been utterly abandoned. That it was Raine, that he was somehow still with me, that he hadn’t really been taken from me.

 But that thought terrifies me more than anything. If that felt so real, if I couldn’t tell the difference from reality and a dream, then what about *Raine*? What about the years I’ve spent holding onto his memory, his presence, all while convincing myself it wasn’t imagined. What if they were all right, what if he was just a product of my mind? What if none of it was real?

 My stomach churns as I step out of bed. I need to ground myself in something, anything. I need to feel something real. I make a cup of chamomile tea in a veiled attempt to calm myself down. The mug is hot in my hands, the steam rising, but my mind is still racing, spiraling deeper into the terrifying realization that maybe I’ve just been fooling myself.

 I’m so scared.

 I glance down at my hand again, at the ring that *shouldn’t be there.* It’s the only piece of Raine I had left, how cruel for it to be the thing that erases it all.

 I’ve always been so sure. But now, I just don’t know. I don’t know what is real and what isn’t. I wrap my hands around the mug, trying to steady myself. I have to calm down. I have to find my footing. The shadows in the corner move, and my memory sparks again – Raine’s warmth, his presence in the creek, him wrapped all around me. But that’s all it was, wasn’t it? A fleeting sensation. Just a dream. A nightmare wrapped in the sweetness of longing.

 I set the mug down on the counter, my thoughts whirling, each one running into the next. I need to stop. I need to stop thinking, to stop spiraling out of control. The door to my mind is wide open, and everything is spilling out. The weight of it all is too much.

 I blink, feeling like I’m still drowning in that darkness. I feel like I’m on the edge of something, but it’s slipping through my fingers. I need to pull myself together. Maybe… maybe the olanzapine will help. Maybe my refusal to take it is what has gotten me here. Maybe I could have been better years ago. But where did I stash it? Rushing into the living room, something catches my eye, stopping me dead in my tracks. A flash of something by the door.

 Boots.

 My boots. The ones I had on last night. They’re just inside the doorway, soaked through, sitting in a puddle that is growing from the steady drips falling from the leather.

 *How are they wet?*

 I cross the room slowly, every step heavy like I’m moving through a dream. I kneel down beside them, staring at the soaked soles. I swallow hard, my throat tight.

 This doesn’t make any sense. How are they wet? How did they get here. How-

 I don’t finish the thought. The weight of it hits me. I can’t explain it. I can’t even begin to make sense of how they got here, how they’re wet. How that’s the case when I’m standing in my house with a ring on my finger that shouldn’t be there.

 And then I grasp it. All at once the realization floods in. And with it my emotions rage. Anger. Fear. Confusion. Relief. I grip the doorframe for support, my mind catching up with what my body has already figured out.

 Raine.

 Somehow, he’s still with me. Somehow, he was here. He saved me.

 But how? How can that be possible. And what does it mean? What does it mean that he *left?*

 I want to scream, but the sound is stuck in my throat. I reach for the boots again, trembling now as I pick them up, my fingers brushing the wet leather. This… this is real. I wasn’t dreaming. The cold from the boots seeps into my skin, but it doesn’t matter. My heart is pounding too hard for me to care.

 I don’t know how. I don’t know why. But I do know this, whatever happened last night, it wasn’t my mind breaking. But Raine being here, and then just *leaving*, that has now broken something deep within me. Something I’d thought untouchable and unending. How could he do this to me? I’ve tried everything to get to him, waited and waited for him, and he can come and go as he pleases. And being with me clearly does not please him.

 The betrayal settles deep in my bones. Wind rushes in my ears and my vision blackens. I look around, not sure how I ended up here. The air is sharp, biting the thin fabric of my pajamas, but I don’t care. I couldn’t be any colder than how I feel inside.

 I stand in the middle of the woods, surrounded by trees that know more than I ever will. The quiet presses in on me, suffocating, until my chest is tight with the things I’ve held in for so long.

 The questions. The anger. It all hits me at once.

 “Raine!” I shout into the empty space between the trunks. My voice cracks in the cold air, but I don’t care. “I know you’re here. I can feel you. Don’t you dare hide from me. Not anymore!”

 I pause, trying to breathe through the ache. The ache in my chest. The ache that has never really gone away. “I’ve spent years waiting. Years *mourning.* Years thinking you were gone. And you could’ve come. You could’ve-“

 My voice waivers, but I push through. “You could have come back. You could have told me you were okay. Told me you weren’t leaving me here to wonder if I was crazy. To wonder if I’d imagined everything. If it was just some sick fucking delusion. I’ve spent every damn day thinking about you, worrying if you were alright, wishing I could have done something, Searching, always searching. And you-“ I swallow, my throat burning, my fists clenched at my sides. “You never came back. And now I’m supposed to believe that you’ve just been standing there watching me from the shadows?”

 The words feel like poison, bitter and sharp, but they keep coming. “Well fuck that. I’m done. I’m done waiting. If you’re really there, you better show yourself. Now.”

I take a deep breath, my hands trembling. “I can’t do this anymore. I won’t. If you won’t come back, if you won’t come back to me now, then I’m done. I won’t waste another second thinking about you. You took everything from me. And now you’re just nothing. And so am I.”

 The forest is silent, but I can feel it. Feel him. Watching. Shadows pool and dance across the sky erratically. I turn, my heart thudding in my chest, and I know with absolute certainty, he’s here.

 I wait. Nothing.

 I can feel the pressure building behind my eyes, like the tears want to come but they can’t. They won’t. Not anymore. I’ve spent too long falling apart over him. I won’t do it anymore.

 I’m shaking now, not from the cold but from the realization that nothing will ever bring him back. I thought I’d feel different. Stronger, maybe. At peace in the knowledge that I’ve let him go. But it doesn’t feel like any form of freedom. It feels like losing him all over again.

 “*Raine!”* I scream again, my voice echoing through the empty trees.

 Before I can think of anything else to say, I hear a voice behind me. But it’s wrong, it’s not the voice I was expecting. Not the voice I was demanding. It’s Noah. “Lily? Are you okay?” He asks, soft but solid.

 I turn around, my shoulders tense, but when I see him standing there, I want to crumble. It’s not that I don’t care about him, it’s just that the hole inside me feels bigger with every passing second. He’s wearing beat up jeans and a baseball cap, with a golden retriever leashed at his side. The normality in the midst of all this chaos brings me into the present.

 “I’m fine,” I say, my voice rough, barely above a whisper. “Just needed to… scream.”

 He doesn’t push, he just walks towards me, taking my hand gently. I blink, the shadows surrounding the trees have dissipated. As if they never were.

 “I know,” he says quietly. But you’re not alone. You don’t have to do this alone, okay?”

 I nod, my eyes closing for a second. But even as he holds my hand, even as he stands there in front of me, I can’t help but feel the pull of someone else.

 And I don’t know what to do about it.

## **17**

 It’s been three days since the incident at the creek. Since I threw my ring away like some half-mad girl in a fever dream. Since I blacked out in the cold water and woke up dry and alone.

 I haven’t told Noah. Haven’t told anyone. I couldn’t put the insanity into words, even if I wanted to. But I must have sounded off when Ally called yesterday, because she’s here now, standing in my doorway with a suitcase in hand and the kind of chaotic energy only she can carry.

 “Okay, pack a bag. I’m stealing you,” she says, pushing past me into the living room before I can argue. “Your cabin is creepy as hell, you know that? Like full on ‘a witch lives here and feeds on the dreams of sad men’ vibes. I love it.”

 For the first time in days I laugh, something in my chest cracking open. “Hi, Ally.”

 She drops her suitcase with a dramatic huff and throws her arms around me. Her perfume is wildflowers and something faintly citrusy, and it instantly burrows into my senses. I cling to her tighter than I should.

 Ally pulls back and looks me over with those sharp, curious eyes. Her hair today is a riotous shade of fuchsia, cut short and spikes like candy-colored flames. The color someone makes her emerald eyes even greener. She’s wearing a black mesh top under a purple velvet dress with silver moons embroidered on the hem, heavy boots and a choker with tiny bones sewn into the band. Someone, she’s pulling it off, despite looking like a rebellious fairy queen who has raided a thrift store.

 “You look like you haven’t slept in a century,” she says lightly, her hands resting on her hips. “Which is exactly what you sounded like on the phone yesterday babe. Hence–” She kicks her suitcase. “Surprise intervention. Now go get packed, we’ve got cocktails and hot tubs waiting on us. We’re going to do irresponsible things and pretend we’re twenty again.”

 I want to deny it, but she’s right. I haven’t stopped thinking about the forest, about screaming into the shadows, only to be met with silence. About what that means. About what I mean to Raine. I’d always thought we were in this together, our feelings matched and mutual. Not once in all these years have I doubted that. Now all I have are doubts, running through my mind like rodents. Instead of voicing this though, I deflect. “We’re only twenty-five.”

 “Exactly”, she says, beaming, “Prime time for bad decisions. Now come on, I’ll make us some tea while you shove some things into a backpack and pretend you know how to socialize.”

 I blink, “I didn’t say yes.”

 “You didn’t say no, either. Now move it, spooky. And don’t forget the tarot cards!”

 I obey, because I really have missed her. It has been too long. But I should have known after hanging up from our call yesterday that she’d sense something. That she’d come to pull me into the light once more.

 Ally’s the kind of person who makes you feel like the world is just slightly more manageable, even when it isn’t. I used to wonder why she stuck around, why she liked me when I kept so much of myself locked away. But she never asked the wrong questions. She just stayed.

 We met our first year of Penn, in a seminar on Myth, Magic and Ritual. She had come in late wearing a cloak, an actual full length black cloak, sat next to me with a grin and whispered, “Wanna summon something later?” From then on, she started passing me notes written in a loopy hand. Half were about the class; the other half were about her latest dating disasters. I didn’t respond to most of them at first. But I kept the notes.

 Penn was a place of brick and ivy, stone halls that smelled like paper and age. We’d sit on the benches outside of the library, the red sandstone building standing like a cathedral to strange old stories. I used to imagine that if I looked long enough, I’d find something, some myth, some spell, some fragment of truth that would lead me back to Raine.

 Of course, I never did.

 I tried. I read everything I could. I stayed up late in the library and chased footnotes like lifelines, but every path dead ended in a metaphor and dust. Raine was gone, and I couldn’t get him back. Not that it matters now.

 But Ally was there. Always with coffee and too loud music in her earbuds. Always pretending not to notice when I cried in the library stacks.

 By the time I come back downstairs with a bag of clothes, Ally is already steeping a bag of green leaves she had brought with her. “I hope that’s just tea, lady.”

 “Don’t worry, all above board. This time,” Ally’s expression softens when she looks at me. “I know I said this place was creepy, and it totally is by the way, but it’s also kind of perfect for you. Like if you were a house, this would be you. Brooding and slightly feral.”

 I snort, “Thanks I guess?”

 She smiles and nudges a mug towards me. “You ready to leave or do you need some time to say goodbye to your ghosts?”

 That lands sharper than she means. I grip the tea tighter. “They’re not all ghosts.”

 Her brow lifts but she doesn’t push. Instead, her gaze darts, eyes flicking to the springs of dried rowan, knocked in with iron nails above the doorway. They’ve been there since I moved in, I assumed the previous owners left them, but never felt the need to take them down. There’s something in her eyes though, a flicker of awareness. It makes me think they are more than decorative.

 Eventually, after an hour’s drive filled with music and gummy worms, we pull into the lot of a cozy mountain inn. The air is clean and smells of water and pine. There’s a pool, a small spa, and a view of the lake. Ally picked well.

 We collapse onto a plush bed with a bad of cheese puffs between us, limbs tangled like teenagers. She’s buzzing from being in motion. I’m trying not to think too hard.

 “So,” Ally says, balancing a puff on her nose. “Tell me about this boy.”

 I freeze. “What boy?”

 She squints at me. “The boy! The one who gave you wildflowers. The one you called “annoyingly decent” and ruined his cookies.”

 I groan and hide my face in a pillow. “Noah.”

 “Noah,” she repeats, grinning. “Tell me more.”

 I peek up. “He’s kind. Steady. He makes me laugh. We’ve gone hiking and played Mario Kart and eaten a fair bit of baked goods together.”

 Ally makes a little hum and throws a pillow at me. “You like him.”

 “I do no–”

 She cuts me off, voice low. “But there’s someone else?”

 I stare at the ceiling, “There was.”

 “Well of course I knew that, babe. But you still think about him?”

 “I never stopped.”

 Ally rolls onto her side, head propped on her palm, “Tell me about him.”

 There’s a long beat of silence. Then I say, “He was… my everything. He saved me. Over and over again. And then one day, he was just gone. Taken. And I never got him back.”

 Ally nods slowly. “Does this have anything to do with the weird magic junk all over your house?”

 I sit up blinking, “What weird magic junk?”

 “The charms. The protective runes scratched into your doorframe. The iron ring on every windowsill. Even the herbs in your garden are planted in ritual patterns. Girl, your whole house is Fae proofed. Like you’re warding off an entire army of them.”

 I blink again, slower this time. “That all came with the cottage. I didn’t put any of it there.”

 Ally pauses, “Wait, seriously? None of it?”

 “No, I just thought it was some eccentric old lady’s idea of decor.” My mind whirls. Fae proofed. Why? How?

 Her expression shifts. “It’s not just some superstitious trinkets either, Lil. That’s serious warding. My house back in Philly? It’s got the same setup. Wards, sigils, little protection tokens tucked into corners like breadcrumbs. My grandmother was deep into the old ways. Druidic rites, fae countermeasures, the whole nine yards. So I grew up with this stuff.

 I look down at my mug, embarrassed to have missed all this. In my own homes. It’s like I’m so deep into my own head that I’m walking around with my eyes closed. “I thought it was aesthetic.”

 Ally shakes her head. “While I appreciate the vibe it’s definitely not aesthetic, its intentional. Could someone have put them there for you? To protect you? It’s not the sort of thing that you do casually.”

 The words sit heavy in my chest. Not mine. Not sweet little Mavis who had the place before me, then whose?

 She watches me closely. “I’m sorry I brought it up this way, I honestly thought that was all you. Does it scare you that someone else has done it?”

 “No,” I answer honestly. “It should I suppose, but it doesn’t.”

 “Well maybe that’s your answer then. It’s someone who’s still watching out for you.”

 A pulse stutters behind my ribs. My mind flashes to the creek, the feeling of warm hands wrapping around me. Saving me. The ring that was back on my finger like it had never left.

 Ally doesn’t press. She just sits beside me, legs tucked under her like a cat. The silence stretches comfortably until I finally speak again. “What would you do?” I ask. “If you had someone stable in your life, in the here and now… but your heart belonged to someone else, someone who maybe doesn’t even exist anymore?”

 Ally’s face softens. “You already know there’s no right answer for that. But maybe, the question isn’t who you should choose. Maybe it’s who makes you feel like you.”

 I look at her. “What if neither of them really know me.”

 “Then pick the one who *wants* to.”

 My throat tightens. “What if I can’t let go of the one who’s already gone?”

 Ally smiles gently. “Then don’t. But don’t get so wrapped up in the ghost that you forget you’re still breathing.”

 I close my eyes, nodding.

 “And whoever you end up with,” she adds, nudging me with her shoulder, “they better make your pulse race and your ovaries riot. Otherwise, what’s the damn point?”

 I laugh, sharp and surprised. “God, you’re such a menace.”

 “A stylish, insightful menace,” she grins. “Now let’s drink wine, talk shit about our undergrad professors, and plan how to seduce woodland spirits with cheese plates.”

## **18**

 The evening sun glints through the trees in pale slants, warming the kitchen floor as I pad barefoot across the tile. The house feels different without Ally. Quieter. Still. The kind of silence that makes you aware of every creak in the floorboards, every whisper of the wind. She left this morning, her laughter and energy trailing behind her like the scent of her perfume.

 We’d stayed up late last night, wrapped in blankets and drinking red wine. Talking about everything and nothing. She made me laugh until my ribs hurt, like she always does. But it wasn’t all light. She caught the shadows behind my smiles and wrapped her warmth around me like a balm. She always understands, with explanation needed.

 I spent the day trying to fill the space she left, tidying up, flipping through books, even tackling some ironing. But nothing supplies the distraction I’m searching for to ease my restless mind. Nothing sticks.

 Her voice keeps echoing in my head, despite her departure.

 *Whoever you choose should make your pulse race and your ovaries riot.*

She said it with a grin, light and teasing, like she was joking. But it stuck, like all her best advice. Sugar-dusted truths that slice deep if you let them.

 Noah is good. Steady. Gentle. He makes me feel safe, and I’m grateful for that. I even like the way his fingers lace with mine.

 But I don’t *burn* for him.

 When I close my eyes, it’s not Noah’s voice I hear. Not his hands I crave. Even after all these years. After everything. His name still thrums beneath my skin. It’s his heat I long for. That searing, infinite look in his eyes, like I was the center of his universe, and the chaos could consume everything but me.

 As night falls, the air grows heavier, charged with anticipation. I find myself drawn to the window, peering into the darkness, imaging stormy eyes peering back.

 I’ve tried to bury it. To want what I’m supposed to want. Maybe it’s due to the last of the wine I finished earlier. Maybe I’m just tired of pushing myself in a direction my heart doesn’t want to follow. But just for tonight, I want to stop pretending. To allow myself to really *feel.*

 The house is still. The silence breathes. Shadows stretch long across the walls, restless and alive. I lock the bedroom door, not for safety, but for surrender.

 Getting into bed, the cool sheets whisper over my blazing skin. Ally’s words ringing in my mind, I try, briefly to summon Noah’s face. But it’s like lighting a candle in a storm. Nothing catches. Nothing ignites.

 I close my eyes and think of Raine, letting the memory of him wash over me, the sound of his voice, the way he looked at me like I was the only thing that mattered. My pulse quickens, warmth pooling. My fingers wander low, trailing across myself in a tentative exploration that becomes more insistent with each passing stroke.

 Shadows build, flaring and writhing with a life of their own. They dance along the walls, a silent audience to my growing need. I close my eyes once more, surrendering to the sensations, the memory, the longing.

 My climax is close. His name escapes my lips, a breathless plea, “Raine*.”*

The room responds.

 A crack echoes through the air, sharp and sudden. The shadows converge, coalescing into a form that is both familiar and ethereal.

*“Say it again,”* a voice rasps from the dark. I jolt upright, breath trapped in my throat. He’s here.

 Framed in moonlight, as if conjured by my longing alone. Taller than memory. Older. Hardened. Wrapped in silver and shadow, eyes fathomless black flames burning.

 Beautiful.

 Terrible.

 Raine.

 “Why now?” The thought slips out beyond my teeth, unsure on whether I want to hear the answer. I’m half expecting him to disappear. To recess back into my mind and become shadow once more.

 “You called for me. Like you *needed* me” His voice is hoarse. Starved. But under the hunger, there’s something else. Something reverent. Something final.

I scramble back on the bed, heart slamming against my ribs. I don’t know if I’m afraid or delirious. Both, maybe.

 “I’ve done that before. Why this time?” I whisper.

 He doesn’t answer right away. His chest rising like he’s choking on the truth. “I thought maybe… maybe you didn’t need me anymore. Maybe you’d find peace with someone else. A future. I wanted to give you the chance to be with someone good. Someone whole.”

 My heart stutters in my chest as he continues, “I thought I’d lost you. Thought you’d moved on. Thought I could bare it. But then the creek, the forest, your voice tonight–”

 He shakes his head like it physically hurts. His eyes burn, “But it’s still my name on your lips. Still me you want.”

 He moves closer, a breath, a tremor. “You were mine before the world broke. And I am always yours, even though I don’t deserve to be.”

 “You’re not real,” I whisper.

 “I am,” he says, stepping forward. His movements unhurried, lethal in their grace. “And I can’t bear to live without you. It’s like the world keeps turning, but I’m perpetually stuck in the moment I lost you.”

 He crosses the room in two strides, hands trembling as they rise to cup my face, like he’s not sure I won’t vanish. His thumb traces my jaw, and his mouth claims mine.

 It’s not gentle. Not polite. It’s grief and fire and years of silence breaking.

 When he pulls away, his forehead rests against mine. “You’re sacred,” he murmurs. “Do you understand that? You’re the only pure thing I’ve ever touched.”

 Tears well behind my lashes. I’ve wait so long. For this. For him. “You’ve been watching me,” I breathe.

 “Every second I could,” he says, voice frayed at the edges. “You were the only light left in the dark I was drowning in. My anchor. My madness. But I’d have shattered if you’d looked at me. And I couldn’t have you tainted by I’d become.”

 “Why?”

 His jaw clenches. “Because I’m not who I was. Not the boy you loved. I’ve been made into something else. Something darker.

 I reach for him anyway. “You’re still mine.”

 That undoes him. He lowers me to the mattress like I’m something breakable. And maybe I am because the way he touches me feel like devotion. His kiss turns tender, hungry still, but aching.

 “Are you sure?” he whispers, brushing hair from my face. “Because one I have you Lilypad, I won’t ever let you go. You’ll belong to me. As I’ve always belonged to you.”

 A breathless laugh escapes me, shaky and soft. “You say that like it’s new.”

 His groan rips from somewhere deep, guttural and possessive. His mouth finds mine again, deeper, slower, a promise in every brush of skin. A vow wrapped in heat, aching with all the years we lost. A promise made with lips and breath and fire.

 He kisses down my neck, lips trembling. “I dreamed of this. Of you. Every night. Not just your body, your laugh, your voice. The way you used to look at me like I was *good.”*

 “You are,” I whisper, fingers buried in his hair. He makes a sound, half broken, and hides his face against my throat.

 “I’ll ruin you,” he breathes. “But I’ll worship you while I do.” His hands chart every inch of me like he’s discovering holy ground. When he undresses me, it’s with pure devotion, not haste. Each piece of clothing peeled away like a prayer answered.

 And when he finally touches me, really touches me, it isn’t to take. It’s to offer.

 “You’re everything” he murmurs, his mouth ghosting over the inside of my thigh. You always were.”

 I gasp his name, my whole body alight. “Say it again,” he begs, voice barely a thread.

 “Raine,” I whisper. “I need you. *Please*.”

 And then there’s no space left between us. He doesn’t rush, licking and sucking like each breath might be his last. When I fall apart beneath his mouth, I sob his name into the dark.

 He rises over me again, his whole body taught and trembling with restraint. “Tell me to leave,” he chokes out, voice raw. Tell me to walk away before I forget myself again. Before I forget what mercy is.”

Reach for him, hand curled at the nape of his neck, pulling him flush against me. “I’ve already waited a lifetime.” I whisper, “There’s never been anyone else. You were always meant to be my first. My last. My only.”

 A sound breaks from deep in his chest, half plea, half surrender. Like something ancient unraveling within. His mouth finds mine again, and this time it’s wildfire. Devastation and devotion wrapped into one. A kiss that says, *if we burn, we burn together.,*

 He watches me, eyes wild and shining, like I’m something he’s only ever dreamed of touching. He lines himself up which aching precision, rubbing against me in slow worshipful strokes, marking himself with me. Like he’s not real unless he’s drenched in my heat.

 I gasp, hips lifting in silent plea, desperate to feel all of him. And then *finally* he begins to push in.

 Slow. Careful., Devout.

 Each inch an oath.

 Each breath a thread sewing our bodies tighter, our souls closer.

 I cry out, overwhelmed by the stretch, by the fullness of him – so hard and deep, like he’s trying to etch himself into me.

He stills at the hilt, trembling. His forehead rests against mine, eyes squeezed shut.

 “You feel like…” he breathes, voice broken, “home.”

 I brush my fingers along his cheek, soft and sure. “Then stay.”

 And he moves. Not to conquer, but claim, to remember, to rewrite the history of us. Breathing life into what was never truly lost.

 Each thrust is a vow, a litany of love sung through skin and motion. A psalm carved into the very marrow of me. He cradles my face like a relic, something divine, something precious, and his mouth finds mine, whispering into my breath.

 “You’re my ruin.”

 “You’re my resurrection.”

 “You’re *mine.*”

 He lowers me to the bed like I’m made of glass and draws circles over my clit with aching focus, each motion a tether, a breath, a confession. His body rocks into mine, slow and unrelenting. Bonding us, binding us, healing.

 His kiss softens, no less hungry but steeped in ache. He trails lower, mouthing at my breasts, licking, nipping, whispering heat into my skin.

 His voice trembles, low and breaking. “You saved me. That day in the forest when you shattered. I cracked too. But something inside me woke. Something I thought was gone forever.”

 Forehead to mine, his voice frayed, and soul bared. “I’ve been in hell, Lily. And even there… I loved you.”

 When I say it back – when I look him in the eyes and let him see all the truths I buried, he breaks. His rhythm stutters, then speeds. Harder, faster, more desperate, His breath catches, and we fall together. Burning. Dying. Reborn.

 After, he stays inside of me, still and breathless, like if he lets go, I’ll vanish.

 “No more hiding,” I whisper.

 “No more hiding,” he echoes, but something dark flickers in his gaze. Not doubt. Fear. Ancient and hollow.

 His arms tighten like a shield around me. “But I have to be careful. If the King finds out–”

 The King? The word lands like a curse between us. I want to ask what he means. The questions claw at my throat, but I see the fear in his eyes, and I’d do anything to banish it. I swallow my questions and shake my head. “We’ll figure it out. Together.”

 His jaw clenches, a storm behind his eyes. Already calculating, already bracing for war.