

The Shadow of the Langham Hotel



By Jonathan L. Ferrara

For Koda.

I started writing this book with you lying under my desk
at my feet, but I had to finish it without you there.

I miss you everyday.

The Shadow of the Langham Hotel © 2024 Jonathan L. Ferrara

All rights reserved. It is strictly forbidden to reproduce or copy any part of this work without the written consent of the author.

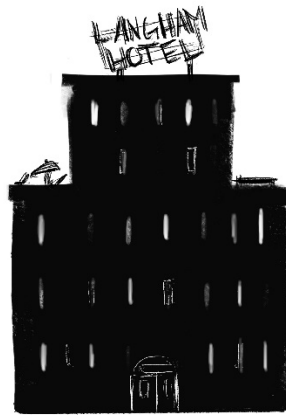
This is a work of fiction. Some names are real but in no means represent the characters portrayed in this work.

Cover design: Aaron Ferrara

This book contains subject matter that may be unsuitable for certain ages. Subjects and characters within this book contain information associated with Mental Health, and Sexual Abuse.

The situations in which these subjects are depicted and described are fictitious and are not intended to cause distress, discomfort or harm.

Some of the names, characters and words used in this book are taken from historical works and stories (available in public domain). They are used in the original definitions of the words and are used in the creation and to reference those words in their original form. The use of such words, names or characters are used without any intention of offending.



Contents

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

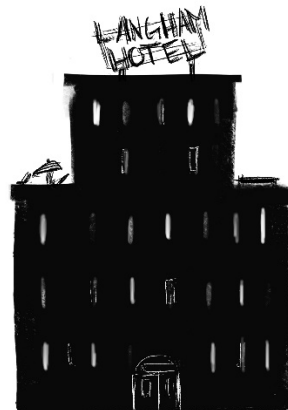
[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Prologue](#)



Chapter 1

There was something special about this city, something unique and almost magical. The buildings, so gigantically tall I felt like an ant under their huge foreboding shadows, towering above, covering almost every inch of the island, creating a modern day labyrinth. The jammed-packed streets weaved in and out of this entanglement of monstrous concrete titans, and the further the taxi drove me deeper into this spiraling city, the more I wondered if I would ever find my way out, or if I was becoming more and more suffocatingly trapped in this wondrous maze. I continued to peer out of the window, watching building after building, street after street, pass by before realizing I was already lost.

The taxi took an unexpected turn down a new avenue. I pressed my face against the window, mesmerized by this urban jungle. I then lifted the camera strapped around my neck and snapped a few photographs of the historical buildings we passed, hoping to capture them before they were gone. I adjusted the lens, gently turning it until the images before me were fixed and focused. Concentrating hard, I had one eye closed, the other steadied behind the camera, doing my best to keep still while the taxi continued to chaotically maneuver through this seemingly endless city.

The taxi was a few decades out of its prime. I could hear it wheezing beneath me like an 85 year old who had spent the majority of their life smoking no less than two packs of cigarettes a day. It had only two settings—extremely fast and screeching halt. It would repeat the two acts like a dance I wanted so badly to end: go, stop, go, stop, and then a cough that rumbled through the entire cab, the exhaust then belching the pressure out in thick black smog that trailed behind us as we carried on. If I were to have added a few silly animated characters, I would have found myself right smack in the middle of a cartoon.

“Hey, kid,” said Pasquale the taxi driver, whose name I only knew based on a copy of his license visibly displayed in the plastic sleeve slapped behind his seat. “First time in da city, I take it?”

I peeked out from behind my camera. “Am I that obvious?”

“No New Yorker I ever knows gonna waste time takin’ pictures of a buildin’. Nothin’ special ‘bout dem. Dey just buildins, and we got a whole lot of dem as yous already sees.” Pasquale was a typical, middle-aged Italian—hairy arms, thick New York accent, looks like a retired mobster and speaks like one too. “Yous got dat camera ‘round yous neck lookin’ like a real tourist, yous are.” He drove with one hand on the steering wheel while the other handled a half-eaten salami sandwich: lettuce, tomatoes, onions, the whole works, all wrapped in a crinkled and greasy paper jacket. He was also quite the accomplished multitasker, being able to eat, talk, drive, all while smoking a cigar that dangled from the corner of his mouth. All of this furthered my belief that I was stuck in some foolish animated feature.

Pasquale stole a sharp, last minute turn and if it had not been for my seatbelt, I would have smacked into the opposite window clear across the backseat. The taxi jostled about in a cramped alleyway, and for a quick moment, it lost control completely. It took out a garbage can, raining trash from the sky, but the driver managed to regain control of his metallic steed.

He went on, unfazed, “So...tell me, kid. Whatcha runnin’ from?”

“Running from?” I lowered my camera and caught eyes with the taxi driver in the rearview mirror. “What makes you think I’m running from something?”

“Ever since New York City was born, people lookin’ to come here to escape—different people, different reasons, from all over da world, too. No passenger ever step foot in dis cab dat ain’t runnin’ away from a monster in deir past. I take it yous no different.” He took a bite out of his salami sandwich and then finished, “So tell me, whatcha runnin’ from?”

I set my camera down on my lap, then I immediately felt myself withdrew. So many months had gone by since I had left home, and throughout that time I had forced the memories away, buried them deep and locked them away, but now they were all flooding back like a tidal wave I couldn’t escape. Castle. Monster. Adam. I closed my eyes and held them tightly shut, doing whatever I could for my mind to stop focusing on the boy whom I loved, but would never get the chance to see again. Despite my efforts, they surged on as a tear began to cascade down my cheek. Castle. Monster. Adam. *Gunshot!* I threw my face into my open palms. I then felt my fingers combing through my scruffy red locks until I was gripping my skull.

“Hey, kid,” Pasquale began with a sense of concern heavy in his voice, “I didn’t mean to upset yous. Just tryin to have conversation.”

I wiped the tear away as soon as I felt it trickling down my cheek. “I’m just here for school,” I said, talking merely for the sake of it. “I actually live in England right now, and go to the Art Institution in London. I’m majoring in Photography.” The images of my time spent at Chateau Du Coeur were all jumbled up in my head, making everything seem a bit fuzzy. I was finding it difficult to focus on more than one sentence at a time. “The headmaster picked me and four other students to study abroad for five weeks in New York City. It’s just a class trip.” I then noticed something coming up on the road ahead of us. “Pasquale, look out!”

The driver stomped on his breaks, right in the nick of time, nearly mowing over an elderly woman with a walker in the midst of crossing the boulevard.

He rolled down his window and shouted, “Come on, yous old hag! I got da meter runnin’!” The woman flipped him off and then took her time crossing the remainder of the street. Taking a great deal of pleasure doing so.

I was grateful to be alive, but more thankful that I didn’t just become an accomplice to the murder of a senior citizen!

“Yous know wat, kid?” Pasquale lowered his head back into the taxi, and then routinely exchanged a bite of his sandwich for a puff of his cigar. “I think yous runnin’ from somethin’, yous just not ready to admit it yet. And dat’s okay. But take it from an old man, yous can run all yous like, but sooner or later da past always has a way of catchin’ up wit yous.”

The woman’s walker reached the curb, and so Pasquale honked the horn and then had us accelerating forward—so fast I flew back into my seat. The buildings blurred across my window as Pasquale raced through the city, cutting corners, running streetlights, avoiding pedestrians, dodging hot dog and pretzel carts, all whilst maneuvering around cars and other taxis like he was some kind of pro race car driver. The way he avoided accidents, close hits and near misses, had me speculating whether or not in this city good taxi driving could be considered a professional sport.

I decided to take the opportunity to tug on my seatbelt to test its durability, but only found myself growing more fearful for my life after noticing layers of duct tape holding the strap together. I glanced around the backseat, finding more patches of the grey tape at every turn: the seats, the ceiling, and even my headrest. It seemed that the only things keeping this little cab going were tape and hope.

“...Pasquale,” I began nervously, “don’t take this the wrong way, but how long have you been a taxi driver?”

“Don’t yous worry, kid. Ain’t no cab in dis whole city more safe dan ‘Ol’ Bertha’.” He gave a few endearing taps on the dashboard. “She’s old, sure, but she a resilient lil’ fucker. Ha ha!” The mixture of laughter and smoke caused him to choke. He pounded a fist against his chest and then carried on, “She even survived a head-on collision wit a semi back in ’86. I promise yous, kid, Ol’ Bertha sure to take care of yous.”

The streetlight before us turned unexpectedly yellow. Seeing this, Pasquale stomped onto the gas pedal. Ol’ Bertha zipped right through the intersection, earning us several honks from nearby cars in the midst of crossing. I never liked rollercoasters. I always hated that swirling, butterfly-fluttering feeling in my stomach, but there wasn’t a rollercoaster I had been on more terrifying than my ride through the city with Pasquale and ‘Bertha’.

Pasquale looked back at me from over his shoulder, unsafely while in the midst of driving. “So, da Art Institution in London, huh? Sounds like a nice school. Real fancy-like, I’m sures. Yous must got some parents who love yous a whole lot. Best make dem proud. I better see yous name in one of dese museums dey gots over here one day.” He dropped his sandwich on the passenger seat beside him, then extended his hand back to me for a shake. “Wat was yous name, kid?”

“Collin.” I shook his hairy-knuckled hand. “Collin Winters.”

“Well Collin, welcome to New York.” Pasquale returned his eyes to the road, noticed the rapidly approaching cab in front of us, and then swiftly yanked the steering wheel. We missed the cab by mere inches. Ol’ Bertha came up onto the sidewalk, pedestrians fleeing out of her way, and then we went flying down a new street.

I looked ahead to the street lined with seemingly endless buildings. The colossal skyscrapers soon began to fall away like a theatre’s lush velvet curtain, revealing a vast park stretching many acres across the heart of the city. It was absolutely breathtaking, like an enchanted forest with stone bridges arched over sparkling ponds. The many fall trees, countless in numbers, were lush with foliages of light reds and deep oranges and were set ablaze by the sunset descending out in the distance. All of it surrounded by buildings and streets, shops and restaurants—two worlds existing harmoniously side by side.

“Is that Central Park?” I asked.

“Da one and da only,” he confirmed. “Now come on. Let’s get yous to your hotel.”

We made our way along the outskirts of the great enormous park, during which I found myself tightening my grip on my camera. I fought the urge to jump out of the taxi and take a stroll through the trees in hopes of finding a photograph worthy enough to add to my collection. By the time we made our way to the opposite side of Central Park, the sun had fully set, and in its place night had fallen. The sky was left without a star at all, just an endless sea of infinite black. Skyscrapers stood below in clusters all around us, each window lit magnificently as though to replace the stars that should have hung above us.

The taxi turned down yet another avenue, and then gave a sharp curve into a narrow alley; Ol’ Bertha was left to jostle about as she rolled forward on the rough, pothole-invested asphalt. I looked ahead, then leaned forward, so close to Pasquale that I could smell the salami lingering on his breath. There I saw the entrance to our destination. The taxi came to a stop at the end of the alley where its beaming headlights settled on an iron-cast gate, towering ten feet tall or higher. The gate’s metal bars were curved and twisted in a most whimsical way, almost

cartoonish, but dark, like the entrance to the lair of a classic villain. There was no security guard present. I couldn't see a callbox or even locate a single camera. Even still, the gate slowly groaned open, allowing us entrance onto the property.

Even Pasquale seemed unnerved. In fact, he was speechless for the first time since he had picked me up from the airport; and even more surprising was the way he drove slow and with caution through the parting gates, now mindfully directing his cab through a single road snaking off through a rich courtyard of freshly cut grass. I hadn't seen Pasquale so focused on the road as he was at that moment. He even set his sandwich down on the dashboard as, for the first time as well, he drove with both hands on the steering wheel. We went slowly up the twisted road, passing along some sort of garden zoo; there were countless shrubs of varying shapes and sizes speckled across the green landscape, all perfectly trimmed and groomed in the formation of exotic animals and ferocious beasts. I peeked out of my window as dank and dreary mist rolled in, but I couldn't tell how many were hidden there within the maze, but I gathered there was a whole lot of them. One in particular, the nearest in the bunch, was in the shape of a running rabbit.

The taxi followed the topiary up the driveway, curving with the asphalt, finally pulling up beside a single building along a roundabout driveway. Still strapped in my seat, I strained my neck, face pressed against the condensation forming upon the window. I looked up, dazed and dizzy, finding us parked right in the shadow of an old hotel. It was a tall yet slender building, smooth and sleek, styled with black stone and finished fashionably with gleaming gold trim. It reached high up to the swirling mist where the name of the hotel beamed through the fog, spelling out in large standalone letters of flashing neon red lights—*the Langham*.

"Well kid, looks like we made it," Pasquale revealed, also straining to look up at the building.

"I guess so," I said, forcing myself to snap out of my daze. I then handed him some money to cover the cost of the trip. "Thanks for the ride."

"Sure ting, kid." He reached back to shake my hand again. "Good meetin' yous, Collin. Yous take care of yourself. New York City, it ain't for da faintest of hearts. One moment it can seem magical, da next not so much—yous just never knows."

"I'll keep that in mind, thank you." I then grabbed my camera and my duffle bag, and then I popped open the back door and scooted out.

Pasquale then began to drive away in Ol' Bertha, her chipped yellow paint remarkably bright in the dark of night. She was a battered little thing, dented all over, with her name spelt out in her New York license plate which was comically screwed crookedly into her wide rump. Her engine wheezed, exhaust coughing, and soon the old cab left me standing there alone in a thick cloud of smolder.

I fanned the smog away. Just as it cleared enough to regain my vision, I found myself standing on the edge of a plush velvet carpet that led right up to the hotel's heavy glass doors. I just stood there for a moment, bag in hand, eyeing the building, and there I felt something in my bones that I couldn't exactly place. However, it was the moon that seemed the most curious, sitting above the roof of the hotel like a mischievous grin in the night sky.

I then heard my duffle bag hit the ground before I even realized I had dropped it. I took a step back, then knelt on one knee. There, in the best position I could get myself into, I aimed my camera up at the hotel and snapped a picture. I went at it again, and again, striving for the most perfect angle, but then an unexpected *meow* pulled me right out of my creative trance. I was surprised to find a cat curling between my thin legs.

“Hey there little guy.” I squatted further down to get a good look at him. He was a large Maine coon—gray with unique black stripes and dark, bleak eyes. “What are you doing out here all alone? ...Are you lost?” I gave him a gentle scratch under his chin, leaving his long tail whipping back and forth in delightful bliss. “Are you hungry?” I reached into my pocket and dug around for the biscuits I was given by the stewardess back on the airplane. “You want some?” I broke off a tiny sliver and offered it to the cat. “Go on. Have some.” He wasn’t as cautious as a common stray, but instead nibbled the crumbs right off my fingers. While he was distracted, I stole a peek at the collar strapped around his neck. It was just as black as the hotel, with a shiny gold tag that read: the Cheshire.

“Cool name.” I scratched his ear. The cat then plopped down onto his side, and so I continued with his underbelly. “What a good boy.”

“Mr. Winters, I presume?”

I jumped with a start, my camera flinging up and out of my hands. I played a game of ‘Hot Potato’ until I finally caught it. I then turned to find who it was that had startled me. An old gentleman stood before me, so long in years he made the Crypt Keeper look like a handsome Prom King. He had a long thin face, concave cheeks, and dark eyes sunken deep into his skull—almost like a withered corpse.

“Holy moly cannoli!” I exclaimed, body stiff, pulse racing. “You nearly scared me to death!”

“I do apologize for alarming you, young master.” His voice was deep but painfully slow. “Allow me to start over by properly introducing myself. My name is Mr. Hinkley, and I am the manager who runs this fine establishment.” He then gestured to the garden zoo behind him, the topiary cast in the shadows of all the tall skyscrapers in its backdrop. “I was out tending the gardens when I noticed your taxi pulling up onto the property.” He lifted up a bouquet of freshly cut red roses. “Every evening I make a habit of collecting fresh roses for the suites of our newly arriving patrons. These here are for a Mr. Winters. Do you happen to be him?”

It took me more than a moment to answer him. It wasn’t that I was trying to be rude, my mind was just foggy and caught in some sort of spiraling daze. The man stood there waiting for me to answer him, very still, very proper—legs together, feet side-by-side, his white-gloved hands curled around the stems of the bouquet of blood red roses. The way he was dressed had him looking from an entirely different era. He wore an open tailcoat with a gray vest underneath, white button down below that, assembled with a pair of black slacks so tight that they made my jeans look baggy (which, by the way, was suggesting an awful lot). His hair, white as snow, and not a whole lot of it either, was slicked back on his visibly age-spotted scalp. I take it back. Old was too kind. I tell you, this man was ancient.

“Well...” he repeated, “are you or are you not a Mr. Winters?”

I snapped to. “Yes,” I finally answered. “I’m your guy.”

“In that case, you’ve been expected.” He took a few steps past me, then glanced over his shoulder with subtle movement. “Right this way.”

“Oh...yeah—sure thing!”

I picked up my duffle bag and slung it over my shoulder. I began to trail Mr. Hinkley down the red carpet; several times tripping over the Maine coon as he trotted alongside me. The heavy glass doors opened up politely for me, and together, Cheshire and I swept into the lobby. I had to admit, it was quite the place. The floor was marble as shiny as glass, gleaming black with flakes of gold. The vintage furniture that was arranged throughout the lobby gave a classical feeling of the roaring 20s...1920s, when Hollywood glam was at its prime. To the right of me

was a sophisticated lounge beautifully adorned with sofas upholstered with scarlet felt. They surrounded a fireplace, currently set ablaze crackling and popping. Two gold rabbit statues stood on either side of the hearth, standing upright as sleek and as thin as an Oscar award. The lounge opened up, and beyond the sitting area, up a small flight of steps, was a raised platform where a grand piano rested under a shimmering chandelier. To the left of me was a dining room-like table, very long, very decorative, with red roses displayed wonderfully as the centerpiece.

I wandered further into the lobby. My eyes skipped to all four corners until finally I felt something creeping inside me urging me to look up; and so I did, I found a stunning display across the entirety of the vaulted ceiling. It was a fantastic hand-painted mural, consisting of lighthearted fables—beloved characters from different worlds and exotic tales found in all my favorite childhood stories. One in particular was of a mad tea party, a scene from a book that as a child I knew well.

Cheshire meowed, and that's when it dawned on me. "Huh." It was a rather fitting name for the cat that patrolled the hotel grounds. I turned to find the cat yearning for my attention back in the lounge, poised upright in a regal, high-backed chair. The sight of him had me chuckling silently. He just looked so amusing sitting there like a king on his throne. I took my camera from around my neck and then slowly advanced back into the lounge. There I took a few pictures of my new feline companion.

Mr. Hinkley approached the front desk where no one was checking-in and neither was there anyone checking-out. It was a tall counter in the shape of a half moon with a mail sorter installed into the wall behind it, displaying all the room numbers offered at the hotel.

"Now, Mr. Winters," began the fancy old gentleman as he went behind the front desk, retrieving a room key from one of the mail sorter slots, "as I already said, you have been expected. Your professor checked-in earlier this afternoon, and all four of your fellow classmates arrived separately throughout the last hour, leaving you, my dear boy, last to come along." He came back from around the front desk and met me in the middle of the lobby. Beneath my worn sneakers, engraved into the marble, were the initials of the hotel 'LH'. "Your professor also took the liberty of checking you in. We already have all the papers signed and sorted out. You won't have to fret over a single thing."

Once again, I found Cheshire slinking between my knobby knees. I bent down and scooped him up, feeling the rumble of his purr as I cradled him. "You guys are pretty on top of it around here, aren't you?"

"We pride ourselves in our service." Mr. Hinkley then turned on his heels. "Come, Mr. Winters. I'll show you to your room." He then proceeded through the lobby with a rather stiff and rigid gait.

As I followed him I began to notice how deafly quiet it was in the lobby—unsettlingly silent. I could only hear the manager's fancy shoes clicking against the cold stone floor as he walked along. Cheshire started squirming in my arms and so I was forced to set him down. The Maine coon then trotted alongside Mr. Hinkley. Together they came upon an elevator door coated in gleaming gold. Mr. Hinkley pressed a button, and the elevator was summoned with its doors pulling automatically apart. It was a tight fit, even with just the three of us, one being a cat, but we managed to cram comfortably enough inside. The floor numbers were listed vertically in rows beside the doors which were currently in the midst of closing. Once they were shut, Mr. Hinkley pushed the one marked '4' and instantly, the whole elevator car dropped about a foot. Following the sudden slump, I felt a burst of awful flutters unleash right into my belly, leaving

me to feel as though I were right back in Ol' Bertha. I then caught eyes with Cheshire who was looking up at me from the corner of the elevator. In that fraction of a second, I swore I saw the cat smiling at me.

The elevator then picked back up in a slow and steady pace, gradually passing floor after floor announced by a subtle *ding*. Soon enough we reached the fourth level, and to my relief, the elevator doors reopened.

It was then when Mr. Hinkley initiated conversation again. "I should warn you, Mr. Winters," he stepped out of the elevator and into a hallway nook, "our hotel is unfortunately under bankruptcy. The bank has plans of auctioning us off in the coming weeks, and because of it, we stopped accepting guests. We were obliged to accommodate you and the others in your party for the simple fact that your rooms were reserved far in advance. However, aside from the live-in staff, you and your classmates will be the only ones in the hotel for the duration of your stay."

10 floors and countless empty rooms. The thought was unnerving, to say the least. "Well, that's not creepy at all."

Mr. Hinkley ignored my remark. He took the lead and ushered me down a long dark hallway which twisted and turned and branched off to numerous directions, creating a complex maze that had already left me dizzy. Mr. Hinkley continued up ahead while I found myself slowing down. It was no surprise at all that I was behind my camera, observing my surroundings through the lens as I often did. The hallway was carpeted, flat, needle-felt, and not very attractive. I also noticed after looking ahead, that the floor was uneven, slightly slanted. This left it a challenge to walk in a direct line. Poor architectural design? I stopped and lowered my camera, fascinated by the wallpaper. I ran my hand along the surface. It was just like the mural in the lobby—illustrations of classic children's literature, scene after scene were beautifully sketched in black and white across the walls to tell a story without words. Again, Cheshire meowed as he rubbed his long body against the inner part of my leg. I went behind my camera, then knelt and snapped a few more photographs of him.

"Mr. Winters."

"Sorry. Coming!" I sprinted to catch up with the hotel manager. I was once again ushered through the hallway. "So, what's the deal with the cat? Is he like a hotel pet or something?"

"What *cat*?" asked Mr. Hinkley.

"The cat right over—" I spun around, but Cheshire was gone. "Where did he go?" I scratched my head. "I swear, he was right...*there*."

Mr. Hinkley responded rigidly, "Unfortunately, we have a very strict 'no pet policy' institutionalized here at the hotel. If you do have a furry companion, I would suggest the Brooklyn Shelter for Animal Rescues. It's the closest pound to the property."

"But the cat..." I rubbed my eyes and then took another glance down the hallway in the direction we had come. It was completely bare. Just lined with closed doors leading to empty suites. "He was here. I *saw* him."

"Mr. Winters, you've had quite the long journey, traveling all the way here from the United Kingdom. I would suggest a good night's sleep. It might sort out some of those demons you might have locked up in your head." Mr. Hinkley tapped his temple. "Now, we're nearly there."

He picked back up his lead as I trailed close behind. My mind was still stuck on Cheshire, that large Maine coon cat, and I was left wondering if my imagination really had gotten the best of me. Mr. Hinkley was right, I decided. I was tired. Actually, I was exhausted. I drew my

cellphone out of my pocket and took a look at the time. It was just past seven o'clock. It was no wonder why I was so tired and seeing things. I was still on London's time, and so for me, it felt a little after midnight. That would be a good enough reason for seeing things. *Wouldn't it?* I cleared my mind with a shake of my head, and then I picked back up my pace.

We passed by suite after suite, each one painted with a black door and gold room number—one right after the next. Between each door were framed portraits mounted over the illustrated walls. They were all very strange, each depicting different types of animals posed like humans, all properly dressed in puffy dresses or sophisticated suits. Suddenly, I came to a dead stop, and there I found myself transfixed with a particular portrait which depicted a walrus in a strapping wool vest, wearing a monocle, standing upright while smoking from a long pipe. I drew closer. Indeed, the portrait had many silly qualities about it, but at the same time there was something unsettling about it as well. There was something about it that just felt...*haunting*.

A sudden chill came over me. "Hey, Mr. Hinkley! Wait up!" I turned and ran up the hall until I was back with the manager. "What's with the portraits?" I asked while we passed another. This one was painted of a ginormous pig stuffed in a corset and dress. "They're kind of creepy-looking, aren't they?"

Mr. Hinkley explained, "The founder of this building had many unique fascinations and was interested in different sorts of oddities." He added quickly, "He was a very queer sort of man."

My eyebrows lifted. "You mean he was gay?"

"No, I mean he was odd," he corrected. "There were many things he did that were quite questionable, but none so more than the construction of this building."

Mr. Hinkley stopped in front of room '427', and with a single gold key—long and thin and uniquely designed, he opened the door and ushered me inside. The way he so dramatically opened the door, like the butler of a mansion or a doorman to one of those fancy New York City apartment buildings, had me assuming that the room would have been a most magnificent suite. Unfortunately it was quite contrary to that belief. It was a simple room. Very modest. There were two single-sized beds, a nightstand wedged between them, and a small television set on top of a dresser. That was it. There was nothing exceptional about it at all. I guess it's true what they say, 'you get what you pay for'. It wasn't like I was expecting the Hilton—I eyed the bed—but perhaps sheets that didn't look like they were around a hundred years old. My scrutiny then shifted over to the television set. *And was it too much to ask for a T.V. without an antenna?* I took another glance around, and then I realized that there wasn't even a restroom.

"Where's the bathroom?" I asked, surprised.

Mr. Hinkley answered promptly, "Most of our hotel suites are equipped with an attached powder room, however, all the rooms on the fourth floor were designed without in order to accommodate for a more...let us say, *modest* class."

"You mean *poor*." I peered back around, looking over what was to become my temporary home. "Why do I suddenly feel like I'm on the bottom floor of the Titanic?"

"You'll find a perfectly suitable powder room beyond the last door at the end of the hall." Mr. Hinkley went into the room and placed the bouquet of red roses into a vase on the nightstand. He then turned to me with his hands laced behind his back. "I'll let you settle in, but before I leave, I was asked by your professor to remind you upon your arrival that your presence is required promptly at 8am tomorrow morning in the lobby. Attendance is not optional."

I gave him a salute. "Aye, aye Captain!"

Mr. Hinkley wasn't amused in the slightest. "Mr. Winters, is there anything else you require of me before I retire for the evening?"

I mocked him in my best British accent, "No, Mr. Hinkley, that will be all, but do make sure I'm sent up a fresh cup of tea first thing tomorrow morning. I simply can't function without it."

"Do you have a preferred flavor?"

"No...I was just messing with you...having fun...*joking*." I nudged him with my elbow, hoping to get him to crack so much as a smile, but he was more stiff and more rigid than a guard at Buckingham Palace. "You know...Ha-ha."

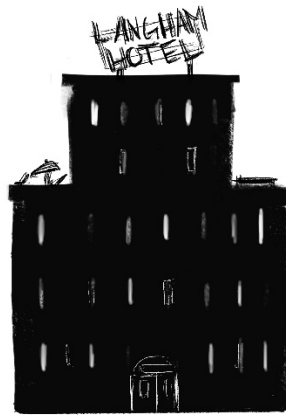
"Ha-ha," he repeated dry and without expression. He then opened the door behind him and stepped back out into the hall. He turned back around for a final time. "Welcome Mr. Winters, to the Langham." And then he closed the door behind him and was gone.

Now alone, I took another glance around the hotel room, far from convinced that I could actually withstand an entire month living here. But I guess it was too late. I really didn't have a choice. After all, this was what I signed up for. I lifted up the collar of my shirt and gave myself a sniff. I still smelled like airplane, old coffee spills, all mixed up with sweat. I lifted up my duffle bag and heaved it over to a round wobbly table in the back corner of the room. I then peeled off my shirt and made myself right at home by leaving it on the floor. I zipped open my bag and found a clean shirt. I was just about to fix it when I noticed my reflection in a cheval mirror standing tall in the far back of the room. I drew forward, eyes magnetically pulled to my bare torso.

All my emotions rushed instantly to my face. "Well Adam, looks like we finally made it." I lifted my hand and let my finger gently trace the scar-line down the center of my chest. "I told you I would show you the world. I promised you. First stop, New York City..." I felt an undeniable pinch in my heart, signaling a wave of crippling despair to course through my entire being. "...I miss you." My whole face tightened as I tried to keep the tears at bay. "Don't cry," I begged myself. "Please Collin, don't cry." The same images from earlier bombarded my mind. Castle. Monster. Adam. *Gunshot!* I gripped my skull with both my hands, then closed my eyes and screamed, "Stop!"

Meow.

My eyes shot open, and there in the mirror was the reflection of Cheshire. I whipped around in an explosion of nerves. There was no cat, but somehow the door to my hotel room was cracked open just a little.



Chapter 2

Stiff and out of breath, I mindlessly gazed at the opened door, trying to rationalize how it had unlatched itself. I was sure it was closed. I saw Mr. Hinkley shut it on his way out. *That cat.* It might have only been for a fraction of a second, but I couldn't deny that I saw him standing there between the open frame. *Didn't I?* I was sure of it, but the longer I stood there thinking it over, the more I started to second guess myself. *You're just tired,* I tried to convince myself. *That's all it is—exhaustion.*

I discarded it from my mind, threw on the clean shirt, and then I closed the door. This time I made sure to lock it shut. Once again, I took a look around my hotel room, foreign and unfamiliar, but the best way I know how to describe it would be...*uncomfortable*. It also smelled funny, old and musty like a grandparents' living room. I walked over to my bed, cringing as my eyes landed on the comforter which was flat, stained, and slightly dewy. There wasn't a chance in hell I was going to be caught sleeping with that thing.

I pinched the top corner of the comforter. "Ew. Ew. Ew." Then I began to drag it off the bed. "Gross. Gross. Gross." I kicked open the closet door, and just as I swooshed the quilt inside, I noticed my duffle bag lighting up and vibrating from the table. I dug around my bag until I felt my sleek paper-thin laptop buzzing beneath a dump of clothes I had poorly packed in there. I hopped into one of the two identical beds, flipped open the computer, and then noticed I was getting a video call from my parents. I could see my Dad's foolish profile picture clearly across the screen which was a poorly taken selfie at Disneyland, wearing a very large Goofy hat. I massaged my chin while I thought of what to do. Accept? Decline? The pendulum swung back and forth within my mind. Sure, I missed my parents, and I guess I wouldn't mind chatting with them for a bit, but I also knew how the conversation would go, and I was too exhausted for a lecture. I decided to answer it anyway. With a click, my parents appeared on the screen. They were dressed in their ridiculous, yet endearing matching red and black plaid nightwear, sipping hot cocoa while cozied up in the kitchen nook at Chateau Du Coeur.

Just as I had expected, my Dad launched right into scolding me. "Collin, finally you answer." He fumbled with his cellphone, handling it so amateur-like that I wasn't even sure he was aware that he had video called me. "Your plane landed *three* hours ago! Maureen and I have been calling you ever since. We've been up worried sick about you."

I laughed, "Dad, lift *up* your phone. I can only see your necks."

He readjusted his phone, giving me a much better view of their faces. Dad looked like the exact stereotype of a high school nerd, just grown into a middle-aged man. He had large black-rimmed glasses, salt and pepper hair, and a scrawny build seeming as though he had never fully grown out of his gawky teenage years. How he had managed to charm my stepmother was always a mystery to me. Maureen was beautiful, with long golden hair, soft skin, and she had natural blush hidden behind the frames of her glasses.

I hadn't seen them for a few months now so it was good to see their faces again. "Hi Dad. Hey Mom."

"How's it going, sweetheart?" I could see Maureen looking me over. "You look tired. Are you taking your anti-rejection medication?"

"Sure am." I reached into my duffle bag and retrieved three plastic prescription bottles, then rattled them to emphasize that I hadn't left home without them. "I take them every day with

breakfast. Never on an empty stomach. And I absolutely never miss a single day.” Her words, not mine. I had just heard Maureen’s instructions so many times by now that I could recite them word for word.

“Collin,” Dad still clung onto his argument, “We’re paying a lot of money for you to go to college, and even more for this class trip to New York. The very least you can do is answer your phone when we call you. We are still paying for your cellphone, and so long as we’re paying, the least you can do is answer when we call you. We’re not asking a whole lot. Just every once in a while, let us know you’re still alive.” Dad was an awkward man, a bit dorky as well, and so his lectures almost always came across as a source of laughter rather than a reprimanding. Maureen seemed to think so too. I noticed her constraining herself as her husband carried on. “Do you think we don’t worry about you? 18 years old, gallivanting across the world—it’s the start to any good horror film.”

I bowed my head, and then played along the only way I knew how—with sarcasm, “Yes Father.” I then made deep breathing sounds as an imitation of Darth Vader.

“Yes. Yes. Go ahead and tease me.” He was quite dramatic about it. “I’m the worst father there ever was.”

“Don’t you worry about him,” Maureen told me. “He’s just grumpy, is all. He thinks either your brother or sister are sneaking into the cupboard and eating all his Oreos. You know he’s worse than a child if he doesn’t get at least one Oreo before bed.”

“I’m not grumpy,” grumbled Dad. “I keep buying new boxes of them and they all mysteriously go missing.” He then determined, “It’s Charles. I know it is.”

Maureen countered, “William, he’s just a toddler. The cupboards are far too high for him to reach all on his own.”

He countered back, “He needs discipline or else he’ll walk all over us just like the other two do.”

This had the potential of going on all night, so I decided to redirect the conversation. “How’s everything going at Chateau Du Coeur?”

“Much better than we had ever hoped,” Maureen informed. “It seems that our little show last year at the Devil’s Ball really caught wind. Now everyone wants to experience a night’s stay at the most feared castle in all of Europe. We haven’t had an empty room since our grand opening. Believe it or not, we’re booked out for the rest of the year! Not to mention we’ve been contacted by several investors.”

Dad seemed suddenly annoyed. “I could do without the bachelor party down the hall. It’s nearly one in the morning our time and I can still hear their music blaring.”

“William, lighten up,” Maureen insisted with a nudge and a smile. “They’re only having fun.”

He turned to his wife. “If business stays this way we might want to consider hiring additional help.”

“It wouldn’t be the worst idea.” Maureen then brought her attention back over to me. “Collin, everyone’s fine. We all just miss you. You should see Charles. He’s talking so much now. And Clair, well, she’s pretty much exactly how she was when you left for college. Just a bit taller, I suppose. She still locks herself up in the library every chance she gets, studying away as she always does. She did land an internship at the hospital down in the village. Would you believe, she’s the youngest ever accepted into the program,” she gloated as the proud mother she was. “They’re both sleeping. They’ll be so disappointed to know they missed you.”

"I'll give them a call soon," I promise.

"Enough about us," said Dad. "How's New York City? We want to know all about it."

"I haven't seen much," I relayed. "I haven't even gotten a chance to leave my hotel room yet."

Maureen took a moment to fuss over me. "Collin, we're so very proud of you. It hasn't even been a full year yet and look at how very much you've already accomplished. You've completed your first semester at college, made honor roll, and now you're studying abroad in one of the greatest cities in the world. We hope you're as proud of yourself as we are of you. You deserve this. You've worked really hard."

"And the work doesn't stop now," Dad insisted with a sip of hot cocoa, unaware of the foamy milk mustache left above his upper lip. "Remember this isn't a vacation, but a great opportunity for you to think over what you would like to do with your life. There are many different avenues you can take with a photography major. Use this time to sort out which direction you would like to go."

Sometimes I felt like I could talk to my Dad about things, other times I felt I couldn't. In this instance, however, it was my cue to fake an exaggerated yawn. I just didn't have the energy to get into my untraditional major with him again. My birth mom was a photography major. My Dad saw how difficult it was for her to make a living off of it—hence, why he never missed an opportunity to remind me what I was getting myself into.

I lifted my arms up over my head, opened my mouth wide, and then inhaled deeply. "Sorry, Dad. I'm just really tired from the flight over here. I think I might be a little jet lagged."

"Alright, have a good night," he said.

"Sleep tight, sweetheart." Maureen concluded, "Don't forget to send us lots of pictures."

Dad poked the screen. "How do you even turn this thing off?"

"There's an 'end call' button right there," Maureen pointed out.

I rubbed my temple. "Good night!"

I closed my laptop, laughing to myself. My parents weren't even that old, but I swear, sometimes it felt like we lived in different centuries. I stowed my laptop back into my duffle bag, turned off the antique lamp on the nightstand, and then slipped under the sheets until I was snug beneath them. I then laid my head against a pillow. From there, I gave my hotel room a final look over. It was unsettling in the dark. At first, I assumed it was only because it was a strange place I had never been before. But the more I looked around the room, the more I noticed its peculiar little details: peeling wallpaper, old furniture drenched in shadows, moldy carpet with discolored patches, and how the floor somehow creaked even though there was no movement. Possibly the most unsettling of all was the portrait hanging above my bed. It was a painting of a white rabbit, and oddly enough it was sporting a fancy waistcoat. It had the strangest pair of pulsing red eyes that seemed to follow me wherever I was in the room, now peering down at me in bed. It looked at me, and I at it, and at that moment, I swear the rabbit blinked.

The wind groaned, leaving the tattered curtains at the open window to flurry wildly. Startled, I grabbed my sheet and threw it over my head. I cowered, frightened as a little boy hiding from a monster under his bed, and there I listened intently to my surroundings. The doorknob clicked, somehow unlocking on its own accord, and then the door itself squeaked slowly open. The floor then began to creak with slow, but heavy movement. I panted, mouth dry, breathing hard, eyes wide watching through the translucent sheet as the dark silhouette of a humanoid figure drifted toward my bed. I could see my own heavy breathing increasing with the rise and fall of the sheet

covering my face. My teeth rattled. The rest of me was frozen solid. The shadow lifted a hand, its thin black fingers stretching for me. It snatched a tuft of the linen, leaving me gasping. Then, in one theatrical unveil, it swept the sheet off of me.

“Boo!”

I closed my eyes and screamed, and while I squealed in a pitch much higher than any schoolgirl, I fell back and tumbled out of bed.

“Oh my gosh, are you okay?!”

“I’m fine,” I groaned in an awkwardly twisted position, having landed uncomfortably upside down. I untangled myself and then stumbled back onto my feet. I turned on the lamp. The room brightened, allowing me to have a good look at the stranger standing before me. He was a boy around the same age as myself, and so I gathered he must be one of the students from the Art Institution. “What are you doing creeping up on people like that?”

“I’m sorry,” he apologized. “I didn’t mean to scare you so badly.”

“You didn’t *mean* to scare me?!” I exclaimed, shocked by his choice of words. “Then why the heck would you say ‘boo’?”

He defended himself, “I didn’t know *boo* would be so scary to hear.”

“People only say ‘*boo*’ when they’re trying to *scare* someone.” I threw up my arms. “Why do you think ghosts say it so much? They’re trying to *scare* someone!”

He chuckled lightheartedly, “I don’t think ghost really say ‘boo’.”

I folded my arms across my chest. “You obviously haven’t watched many episodes of *Scooby-Doo*.” I then countered defensively, “And besides, you didn’t scare me.” I picked up the sheets and pillows that I had taken with me on my trip down to the floor, then tossed them back onto the bed.

I could see that the boy was having a difficult time holding back a chuckle. “Do you always scream when you’re not scared?”

“Sometimes,” I lied.

“Well, it was a pretty good scream for someone who claims that they weren’t scared.” He teased, “I think you just might have woken up every dog in New York City.”

“Ha-ha,” I scoffed. “I scream like a girl. It’s all very funny.”

How was it that I was already annoyed by this boy after only just meeting him? But...he *was* cute—I couldn’t deny that. And there was nothing more irritating than a smug cute boy. His hair was effortlessly perfect. I gathered he probably just woke up looking like that which made him all that more intolerable. His hair was a lovely shade of chestnut brown, shaven down on both sides and styled fashionably in the front in an exaggerated swoop. But it was his smile, and his childlike-dimpled cheeks, that made me forget why I was so upset with him. And then I remembered.

I started to remake my bed. “What are you doing in my hotel room anyways?”

“Actually, it’s *our* hotel room.” He gestured to the second unoccupied bed. It wasn’t until that moment that I noticed a duffle bag sitting there on the neatly made mattress. “Looks like we’ll be roommates for the next five weeks.”

“That has to be a mistake,” I mumbled mindlessly fast.

“Sorry to disappoint you.”

I corrected myself quickly, “You didn’t...I just didn’t expect a roommate.”

The boy crossed the room and went straight over to his bed. He began to unpack his luggage. He was looking somewhat sour, and so I thought I might have insulted him more than I had

initially thought which made me feel just awful. While he folded his pants into a drawer in the dresser, I picked my brain for a conversation starter that could potentially avoid this uncomfortable quietness that had fallen over us.

“So...” I began, “you go to the Art Institution as well?” *Stupid*. Was that really the best I could come up with? I turned around only to pop myself on the forehead with an open palm.

“Yeah. I’m a first year student,” he answered, now hanging up a few shirts in the closet.

I faced him again. “Me too.”

“I know.” He caught me by surprise. “I’ve seen you around campus.” He gestured to my camera resting on the nightstand between our beds. “You’re majoring in photography, right?”

“Yeah. That’s right.” I recognized the large black art portfolio that he retrieved from within his duffle bag. “You’re an art major?”

“Sure am.”

“Groovy.” Just as the word left my lips, I dropped my face into my hands to cover the humiliation burning in my cheeks. *Groovy!* Did I really just say...*Groovy?*! What was I, 80 years old? I could have puked right then and there.

The boy threw me a side smirk, one mixed with confusion and amusement. He carried on unpacking his art supplies: a sketchbook, a carton of charcoal, and a handful of pencils and erasers. He carried them over to the round wobbly table and set them all down neatly.

I drew a step closer to him. “By the way...I’m Collin.”

He spun around and met me between the beds. “Nice to meet you. I’m Aaron.” He shook my hand. “So, *you’re* Collin Winters.” He sat on the edge of his bed and then proceeded to kick off his shoes. “I’ve heard a lot about you.”

My forehead crinkled. “...you have?”

“Yeah, sure.” One by one he peeled off his socks. “Your parents own that famous castle in France...Chateau Du Coeur...the one about the Doctor and the monster he created.”

My face fell. “Yeah...that’s me.”

Aaron stripped down to his undies. He wasn’t modest. Not in the slightest. His thighs were thin, but shaped with tight muscle and so there was no need for him to be self-conscious. Unfortunately, the same could not be said about me.

Aaron then retrieved a pair of sweatpants and sort of hopped, danced, and then wiggled his way into them. “Don’t worry. Kids are cruel and stupid.”

“You know what they call me then?” I stopped him in the midst of crawling under his sheets. “Go on. I’m sure you want to ask me. Everyone else does.”

“Ask you what?”

“Whether or not I’m the monster from the story.” I sunk down onto the mattress, and there I gazed out into nothing in particular, and yet somehow I saw my entire time spent at Chateau Du Coeur flash before my eyes. “I hear what they say about me at school. They all think I’m the monster that finally escaped the castle, and that I have the scars to prove it.” I touched my chest and felt the cicatrix I was forever left with.

Aaron let his head dip into a pillow. “That’s ridiculous.”

“Why? You don’t believe in monsters?”

“It’s not that.” He then laughed, “I’ve just never met a monster who was scared of the word ‘boo’.”

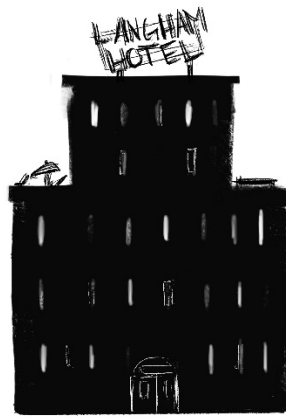
I felt my jaw clench. “I wasn’t scared of the word ‘boo’. I was scared of *you* jumping out at me in a dark hotel room.”

He perked up and smiled. “So, you were scared!”

He had a special way of irritating me. “The only thing that scares me is knowing that I have to be roommates with you for the next five weeks.” I grabbed the top corner of my sheet. I yanked it all the way down the mattress in one dramatic sweep. “Good night, Aaron.” I crawled into bed and made a point to sleep facing the opposite direction from him.

“Hey, Collin.” I turned around to find him reaching for the beaded string dangling from within the antique lamp. He then caught my eyes and smiled again. “*Boo.*” He clicked the lights off, casting the room into total darkness.

I rolled back over, annoyed as ever, and then I nestled my head into a pillow. I’ve been attacked by a monster, shot in the heart, and resurrected back to life, and yet somehow this conversation with another teenager seemed more challenging than anything I had experienced so far. I had little to no faith that I could survive a full month with Aaron as my roommate.



Chapter 3

I hadn’t realized how tired I was until I awoke that following morning. I had slept heavy, so heavy I woke up feeling groggy. I sat up in bed, rubbing my eyes awake. It slipped my mind that I wasn’t in my dorm room in London. My eyes opened to that surprise, and then it slowly sunk in. I wasn’t in London anymore, but across the pond in New York City, in a hotel room far, far from home.

The room didn’t look so frightening in the daytime. At least not with the morning sun bleeding through the curtains. It looked just like any ordinary hotel room with nothing special about it at all. It was just old, outdated, and in desperate need of new linens. Even the portrait of the white rabbit didn’t look so alarming to me anymore. Just silly. That’s odd...I thought the white rabbit had red eyes. Turns out they were actually blue. My eyes swept over to Aaron’s bed. It was empty and made up. I assumed he was getting ready for the new day, and I gathered I probably should too.

I threw my legs over the edge of the bed, lifted myself up onto my feet, and then cracked my back as I let out a yawn. Before I knew it I was rifling through my duffle bag for clean clothes, a toothbrush, and a fresh pair of briefs that I insisted on hiding under the rest of my clothes. Maureen had gotten me the undies before I had left for college. She was so excited to give them to me, and so I didn’t have the heart to tell her that I didn’t care for them. But honestly, they

were bright yellow and dotted with little red hearts with smiley faces. I gathered up what was left of my things and then headed out of the hotel room in search of the restroom.

The hallway was empty, and there weren't any windows at all, just those creepy portraits of animals dressed like humans mounted on the illustrated walls between painted black hotel room doors. They were all very odd-looking. Some of them downright ridiculous. I stopped at one of the portraits and couldn't help but giggle. This one depicted a crocodile prancing about in tights and a fluffy tutu. It was so silly. So very strange. It was beautifully painted by a talented artist, but it was such a quirky idea for the subject of a painting. My smile remained as I continued down the hall, following the needle-felt carpet as it turned a corner, leading me into a new stretch of hallway that perfectly mirrored the one before.

The hallway had an eerie silence to it. A lifelessness. Every step I took came with a vocal creak that was noticeably loud beneath my feet. Just strolling the hallway came with an overwhelming feeling of complete loneliness, like I was stranded on an island far out at sea. I knew that every black door I passed was a barrier between me and an empty room. It was such a grand hotel. So many rooms on so many floors. And yet not a single occupant aside from me and my classmates. The realization of that made me feel rather small.

I was nearly around the second corner when an open door caught my attention. I approached the doorway and peeked inside. The suite was identical to my own. The only difference was that this room had a single queen mattress while mine had a pair of twin beds. A young maid was tidying up inside. She was very pretty. She had black hair, dark as a raven, fashioned in a short pixie-cut. Her lips were red and her skin was fair, with seductive curves that made the most out of the French maid uniform she wore. The maid reset the bed with fresh linens, the flowery fabric softener so potent I could smell it from clear across the room. She then proceeded to flatten out all the wrinkles in the sheets. I was instantly taken aback by her beauty, but more curious to learn what it was that made her look so awfully sad. While making the bed, she stared mindlessly at the illustrated wallpaper plastered before her, her vacant eyes fixed on the drawing of the Mad Hatter balancing a ridiculously tall stack of teacups. I took a slow step into the suite, my hand gripping the frame of the door like it was some sort of life preserve I might need to reel me back. I stared at the maid from behind her, watching now as a tear came streaking down her pale cheek.

I had a good idea where I was going, but I just wanted her to know that she wasn't alone. "Excuse me." She wrenched her gaze free from its spot on the wall and turned to me. I thought I might have startled her, but she wasn't surprised to see me. "Sorry to bother you, but I was wondering if you happened to know where the restroom was?" No words, just a pointed finger gesturing for me to continue down the hallway. She then proceeded to fluff the pillows. "Thank you." I pulled away from the painted black door. I took three steps down the hall when my feet suddenly stopped again. Maureen always told me I was an empath. She said it was what made me a good photographer. Maybe she was right. I could literally feel the maid's despair weighing heavy on my chest.

I spun back around and went right into the open suite again. "I'm sorry, but is everything alright—" the last word got caught in my throat. I couldn't believe it. The hotel room was empty. The bed wasn't even put together, and the maid...*gone*. It was like she was never there. I peered around the empty room with a trembling gaze. There wasn't anywhere she could be hiding. Except maybe for the closet. The accordion closet doors were left ajar, the two doors not quite meeting in the middle. It was so dark inside, so drenched in shadow that I couldn't even make out the empty hangers hanging on the clothing rod. I suddenly felt very vulnerable standing there

in the middle of the suite with my eyes fixated on the patch of darkness between the closet doors. My thoughts went whirling so fast that my mind had trouble keeping up. *I had no business being there. I shouldn't have been there at all. I needed to leave. I needed to leave now!* I squinted into the patch of inky black within the closet, and that's when I heard someone...*breathing*.

I jumped into a run, so fast I didn't even remember fleeing the hotel room. I was already down the hallway. I whipped around the corner so fast that I didn't even notice Aaron coming from around the corner. We collided and the two of us were knocked right off our feet.

"You again!" I accused, as though he were to blame for everything.

"*Me?*" He pointed to himself, freshly showered, hair styled without fault, smelling as soapy as a bubble bath. "You're the one who ran into me."

"Only because you were trying to scare me again!" I got on my hands and knees to gather up the clothes I had spilled. "Did you get the maid in on it too this time?"

"Huh?" Aaron gave me the strangest look. "What are you talking about?" He noticed my things on the floor and went to help me collect them. "I wasn't trying to scare you." He then cracked a smile. "I didn't say *boo*."

I was beginning to hate those dimples of his. "You made that strange breathing sound."

"No, I didn't," he countered, rising.

"Yes, you did," I insisted, joining him.

Aaron folded his arms across his chest. "*No—I didn't.*"

"Why are you so stubborn?!"

"Why are you so defensive?!"

We were so angry with each other that I was surprised hot steam wasn't blasting out from our ears as would a train's whistle. Our faces were red, our fists clenching, and our stances suggested we were ready to brawl.

Aaron took a deep breath and then exhaled. "You better hurry up and shower," he suggested with a newfound calmness in his voice. "You wouldn't want to miss the first day of class." He walked off, leaving me instantly feeling awful at how stupidly I had reacted. But then he spun back around and handed me my bright colored briefs. "By the way, *groovy* underwear."

I snatched them out of his hand, swung the restroom door open, and couldn't have gotten inside fast enough. I put my back to the wall and smacked my head a good few times against the tiles.

"Stupid. Stupid. Stupid."

I could have banged my head there for hours, but I knew Aaron was right. I didn't want to be late for the first day of class. I took a look around the restroom. It might have had all the necessities: toilet, shower, and sink, but it wasn't very attractive. The floor was checkered with black and white squares but scoffed and discolored from the heavy amount of foot traffic it had seen since the opening of the hotel. The faucet over at the sink had a constant brown dribble, and every second or so I could hear the drip becoming increasingly irritating the longer I stood there—like a tune I wanted so badly to forget. I went over to it, and just as I set my clean clothes down on the chipped-tile counter, I let out a yelp. A cockroach crawled out of the drain. I pulled back, flinching from a full-body jitter, before approaching the shower. It was exceptionally tiny, claustrophobically compact, with hardly enough space for me to comfortably move freely around inside (and this was coming from a scrawny little guy). I couldn't imagine how a normal-sized person could manage to maneuver around in this shower. I stripped down to nothing and then turned on the water, cringing as I noticed it ran brown for a good few seconds. It slowly began

to clear—not completely, but enough for me to deem it sanitary enough to hop inside. I toyed with the knob, testing the temperature with my hand before submerging myself all the way inside. It either ran scorching hot or icy cold, but nothing in between. *This should be a whole lot of fun*, I thought.

I jumped all the way in, letting myself become doused in the heavy fall, shivering in the freezing water. I wanted to get out nearly as soon as I got in, and so I went at it quickly, soaping up my arms and legs and scrubbing my face. All this I tried to do before my body decided it couldn't handle the cold any longer. Which wasn't long at all. I came out of the shower with a towel fastened around my waist, still shivering as I approached the mirror mounted on the wall above the sink. I was still tired, still waking up, and so my body felt like it was left on autopilot. It acted without much thought behind it. Routinely, I lathered on deodorant, sprayed myself with an earthy cologne, and then I combed in a glob of hair gel to somewhat tame my nearly unmanageable shaggy red locks. I then retrieved my toothbrush, and with a squirt of minty paste, I shoved it in my mouth and went at it hard and fast. I was still groggy, despite the freezing cold shower, and so it took me an extra second to realize—I might have been standing there brushing my teeth, but my reflection wasn't doing the same thing. Instead, it just stood there, no toothbrush in its hand and no expression on its face. In the quickest moment, my reflection's eyes turned red while its upper lip slowly curled into a bloodthirsty grin. I blinked, and when I opened my eyes again, my reflection was back to mirroring myself: same confused look, identical rattled stare, complete with a toothbrush dangling from both our mouths. I splashed my face with yet more cold water, and then immediately changed into my clothes; as quickly as I could.

Once fully clothed, I slipped back into the hallway, and while I worked my way back to my hotel room, my thoughts insisted on focusing on what I thought I might have seen in the restroom mirror. A chill came right over me. *Snap out of it, Collin*. I gave myself a soft slap on the cheek. I was just tired. I knew that there was only one cure to all the strange happenings I had been experiencing since last night when I checked-in to the Langham Hotel, and that was coffee.

I soon reached my hotel room but didn't waste much time in there. I just threw the pajamas I wore last night into a drawer, grabbed my schoolbooks from within my duffle bag, along with my camera on the nightstand, and then shoved them all into a backpack. There were three pill bottles buried deep in my duffle bag. I needed to take the pills with breakfast, so I transported them to my backpack's front pouch. I was off. I hurried down the hall, around a corner and into a nook. A pair of elevator doors stood flush against the wall, both coated in gleaming gold. I hopped inside, and instantly it began to descend. I didn't much care for the elevator. I felt uneasy riding in it. It was very confining, uncomfortably warm and there was no music playing to distract me from any of this. In fact, it was so quiet that I could actually hear the mechanisms of the operating elevator *clicking* and *clanking* followed by a constant electrical whine. All of this made me feel very uncomfortable, and knowing that I was several stories above ground only increased my anxiety. Eventually I was put at ease when the elevator doors opened back up again.

I stepped into the lobby, comforted by laughter and teenage chatter. All of my fellow classmates were sitting over in the waiting area, lounging on the sofas in front of the roaring fireplace, drinking coffee, eating breakfast, most of them chatting away. I thought I should introduce myself, and so I started through the lobby. While I went, my sneakers made an

obnoxious scoffing sound on the marble floor, and soon caught the attention of Mr. Hinkley who was currently attending the check-in counter.

“Ah, good morning, Mr. Winters,” the manager greeted me while looking me over without a smile. “I trust you slept well?”

I put on a show merely for the sake of entertaining myself. “It was *most* delightful, Mr. Hinkley. Really topnotch! I might even go as far as saying it was simply superb.” I was exaggerating, and being highly sarcastic, but the manager seemed unaware and unaccustomed to my artful take on lighthearted mockery.

“I’m happy to hear it.”

Happy, I thought. I wouldn’t have known by his facial expression which always seemed stone-chiseled in the same bored expression.

“Might I tempt you with a pastry, compliments from chef Mimsy Browne—all made fresh in our wonderful kitchen?” Mr. Hinkley’s white-gloved hand swept out toward a long ornamental table which had transformed into a magnificent breakfast buffet. Along the table was an arrangement of decorative plates piled with all sorts of freshly baked pastries straight out of the oven: cakes, danishes, croissants, and plenty of tarts. My eyes lit up like fireflies in the night. I felt my lips smacking, could taste my mouth watering, and then I heard my stomach make a loud rumble. I beelined straight over to the table ready to fill a plate up with one of everything, and then top it all off with a warm cup of roasted coffee to make me forget all about that cold shower I had just taken upstairs.

“Might I suggest one of the lemon doughnuts,” offered Mr. Hinkley. “I, myself, fancy a good doughnut every so often. I might even go as far as calling it a weakness of mine.”

I plucked one of the lemon doughnuts off the top of a three-tiered carousel plate, and then took a powdery bite out of it; an explosion of lemony cream left my eyes to roll to the back of my skull. “No kidding. They’re fantastic!” I licked each of my fingers clean after touching a sugary delight. “Thanks, Mr. Hinkley!”

“The pleasure is all mine.” He rummaged through a stack of paperwork on his way to his office which was located behind the counter in a closed-off section. He shut the office door behind him, rattling a sign hanging from it, reading: ‘Management Only’.

I headed over to the lounge and finally met up with the rest of my classmates, to attempt to make conversation. “Have you guys checked out that breakfast buffet? It’s amazing!”

“I couldn’t eat another bite,” moaned one of the girls with a hand placed firmly on the side of her belly.

“Speak for yourself!” A hefty boy with hardly any neck stuffed a whole croissant straight into his mouth. Shockingly enough, he swallowed it down without even chewing.

“Wow.” I blinked. “That was impressive.”

The boy shot me a wink. He then swiftly stole a tart from off my plate, tossed it up, and then caught it with his mouth.

“Ew, Billy—you’re being gross!” One of the students, a skinny ditzzy-looking girl with an abundance of blonde hair, darker at the roots, much lighter going down, threw the boy a cold glare from over her cellphone. “It’s called *manners*. You might consider trying them sometime.” She smacked on a wad of bubblegum. “I couldn’t even imagine what you would be like on a date.” She blew a bubble and then let it *pop*.

“Care to find out?” He scooted closer while slithering a beefy arm around her slender shoulders. And then he leaned in with puckering lips.

“Not in this lifetime.” She lifted his arm and dropped it into his lap, and then she shifted a seat over. The girl then picked back up her cellphone, and just when she snapped a pose in preparation for a photograph of herself, she noticed me awkwardly standing there enjoying a doughnut. “You must be Collin!” She sprung up onto her leather boots and then flung her hand out for a handshake, but to me it felt more like she was trying to show off her freshly done manicure. “I’m Charlotte Rose—actress, stylist, and social media influencer.” She snapped open her designer bag, which looked quite fashionable, and accessorized nicely with the rest of her expensive-looking ensemble: pencil skirt and satin lace-trimmed top. She produced a business card: pink, glittery, and very loud. “Go on. Take some.” She handed me nearly a whole stack of them. “I assure you, I have plenty.”

I dusted my hands off on my jeans, and then swallowed down a thick chunk of doughnut. “Cool, thanks...” I took her business cards and shoved them all into my back pocket, where I already forgot they were there.

“Come on. Let me introduce you to the whole gang.” Charlotte tucked her arm under mine and then spun me around to face the other students. First, she gestured to the hefty boy with a plump face and shocking blonde hair. “That over there is Billy. He’s an aspiring director, majoring in filmmaking.” She wasn’t discrete when she whispered in my ear, “Personally, I find him to be quite the nasty little tart.”

Billy flipped his blonde locks out of his eyes and then leaned back against the sofa with arms folded behind his head. “You’re just jealous because you can’t have me,” a sly smile crept across his enormous face, “but it would pain me to see you beg.”

“Please,” she clutched her chest, “I just ate breakfast and would rather not hurl it back up.” She then gestured to a girl curled up by the fireplace in a big cushiony armchair. She was reading a frail book with crinkled discolored pages, so hand-me-down that it was lacking a cover. She had loads of bracelets on, some made of metal, others of lace, and a few were strung with earthy stones. She seemed careless and cool, a natural and yet disguised beauty, far from the type of girl who bothered to doll herself up on a day to day basis. Most of this I assumed was due to the burly military jacket she wore in which was quite large on her, most likely intended for a broad-shouldered man three times her size. She also had a whole lot of black hair, but most of it was stuffed up inside an oversized beanie.

Charlotte continued on with the introductions, “That over there is Sam, editor and head journalist for our school’s newspaper—*Go London Knights!*—and she’s also a Creative Writing Major.” She leaned closer, and once again, was very loud when she whispered, “She’s probably reading one of those exotic vampire romance novels. I’ve personally heard from numerous reliable sources that she fancies men with fangs, but you didn’t hear that from me.”

Sam peered up from out of her book with a most irritated expression. “It’s Virginia Woolf, you Barbie.”

“My mistake.” Charlotte seemed to enjoy Sam’s ‘Barbie’ remark. She leaned closer and whispered, although still quite loudly, “Virginia Woolf...I reckon it’s werewolves, not vampires that she’s smitten with.”

Sam shook her head, mumbled the word ‘idiot’ under her breath, and then picked back up her book and returned to reading.

Lastly, Charlotte waved a tired hand over to a familiar face. “Then we have Aaron, our handsome struggling artist.” He kept to himself over in the corner of the sofa, face in a sketchbook where he put much of his focus and energy on a new illustration he had been working

on. "Isn't he dreamy?" She elbowed me playfully in the ribs. "And lucky for you he bats for your team."

"How did you—"

"Oh please," she cut me off. "I've had my heart broken by my fair share of gay gentlemen. Back in high school, I was the perfect test drive for all of my gay friends. One kiss from me and they all knew they were far more keen to the attraction of the same-sex persuasion." She noticed Billy opening his mouth, ready for an insult, but she beat him to the punch, "Not a word, Billy!"

I plopped down and got myself comfortable on one of the scarlet sofa chairs that were so close to the fireplace I could feel the warmth of the flames against my back. I then placed my plate of goodies and sweets down on my lap, set my coffee mug on a lamp-stand beside my chair, and then I took a look at the group of teenagers. The five of us were walking stereotypes. We had Aaron, the emotionally tortured artist, Sam the quiet down to Earth writer, Charlotte the loud and theatrical actress, Billy the arrogant director...I guess that left me, the shy photographer.

"It's good to meet everyone."

I reached down for my backpack and retrieved the three pill bottles from the front pouch. By now, it was such a routine for me that I didn't realize it was strange to everyone else around me. I guess most 18 year olds don't take three pills every morning with breakfast. Add any more bottles and I could open up my own pharmacy. I popped each bottle open, shook out a pill from each of them, and then tossed back a handful. I took a sip of coffee, and by the time I lowered the mug back down, I noticed that everyone but Aaron was leaning toward me with round interested eyes. "What is it?" The way they were all looking at me, you would have thought I had toilet paper stuck to my bum.

Charlotte began, "I was wondering...well, really we all were wondering...if perhaps you could enlighten us in regards to whether or not the rumors are true?"

Billy jumped right into it. "Its got to be. My best mate back in London used to play rugby with a guy who used to date a girl whose brother was supposedly your roommate during last summer session. He said it was all true. Said he saw them scars himself."

Even Sam seemed interested. So much so, that she put down her book to ask me, "I heard your parents inherited a castle that belonged to the real Victor Frankenstein, or at least the man who inspired the character Frankenstein, and that your family are direct descendants from the author of the book."

"Frankenstein?" Charlotte clutched her chest and playfully gasped in horror. "Like the *monster*?!"

Sam rolled her eyes. "Frankenstein wasn't the monster. He was the doctor who created the monster. Honestly, pick up a book sometime."

Charlotte fluffed out her hair extensions. "I prefer Vogue."

"Of course you do," mumbled Sam.

Billy leaned closer to me. "So...what do you say? Can we see it?"

"See what?" I asked.

"Your scar," he insisted. "Everyone's been talking about it. They say you got a scar on your chest from a heart transplant, and they all say it has something to do with the monster of Chateau Du Coeur." He could hardly contain his own excitement. "Come on. Let's see it!"

"Leave him alone, Billy," said Aaron, more focused on sketching and shading rather than holding any interest in the current conversation.

Billy had the attitude of an only child spoiled since birth. He didn't seem to like to be questioned or disagreed upon, and his round face turning red suggested he didn't enjoy when things didn't go exactly as he had planned. With that said, he didn't seem to care for Aaron's input, and he let that be known by snatching Aaron's sketchbook right out of his hands.

"What do we have here, Aaron?" he laughed crudely while rising to his feet. "Looks to me like you've drawn yourself a new boyfriend?"

Aaron sprung off the sofa. "Give it back!" He tried to grab it, but Billy was much taller and much wider than Aaron was, and so it was near impossible for him to do so. "I mean it!"

Billy gave Aaron a shove, seemingly with little effort and yet still forceful enough to knock Aaron back onto the couch. He then began to examine the drawing, handling it with the pose and elegance as would a gorilla when pouring himself a cup of tea. "Looks like quite the handsome young chap you've drawn here, Aaron. A real charmer. I didn't take you for the sophisticated type. "

Sam protested in Aaron's defense, "Billy, what are you—eight years old? Don't be a jerk! Give him back his sketchbook."

"Group photo!" Charlotte lifted up her cellphone and aimed it at the group, with herself dominating the scene front and center. She snapped a picture. Her thumbs immediately went firing away on her cellphone's keypad with the hopes of sending the photograph off to all her social media channels. "#NewYorkCityExtravaganza...@theLanghamHotel..." She looked up so utterly oblivious to everything going on around her. "Would you all like me to tag you?"

"No!" we all yelled.

She batted her fake eyelashes. "You don't have to shout. I can hear you all just fine."

Aaron leapt off the couch. "Give it back!" He jumped up at Billy, but Billy held it high and out of his reach.

I joined in, "What's your problem, Billy? Just give Aaron back his sketchbook."

Aaron jumped up, grabbed the sketchbook, leaving the two of them now in a deadlock. I was beginning to feel like I was at my first day in kindergarten class, not my first year at an esteemed university on a class trip with my fellow peers. The two of them continued, tugging back and forth, but soon Billy's strength overpowered Aaron's once again. He snatched the sketchbook, so fast it flew out of his hands. It then landed on the floor where it went sliding across the marble. I was closest to it and so I got myself up and went for it. Just as I bent down to reach for Aaron's sketchbook, I noticed the drawing faced up. It was the illustration of a boy. I picked up the notebook and then gave Aaron's drawing a closer look. The depiction of the boy was beautifully sketched to such perfection that it was hard to deny that this boy was based on anything other than a real person. The boy was timelessly handsome. His eyes were kind, his jawline was sharp, and his wavy locks were combed all the way to one side. He sat on a windowsill, gazing out of a window with eyes that suggested his imagination was whirling.

I uttered without thinking, "*Rupert?*"

The look on Aaron's face was one I had never seen on a person before. It was all these different emotions collected up into a single expression: surprise, joy, fear, but most of all, he had the look of heartbreak, and that was somehow due to my mention of Rupert's name.

"Collin..." Aaron began slowly, sounding different and very unlike himself, like his shaken tone was stricken with awful pain, "How do you know that name?"

I was confused, and the continuous flashes of this boy's face in my mind's eye only increased my perplexity. My eyes went from Aaron standing across from me, to Rupert drawn in front of me, and then back and back again.

"I don't know," I truthfully expressed.

Aaron ran over to me and surprised me when he forcefully grabbed me by the forearms. "Collin," he repeated, now very sternly, "how do you know that name?"

"I don't know."

I was becoming alarmed by Aaron's reaction which became frantic and almost aggressive, and his shift in characteristics seemed to take back Billy, Charlotte, and even Sam as well.

Sam took a step closer to us. "Aaron, are you all right?"

He ignored her. "Collin, tell me!" He snatched me by the collar of my shirt and shook me hard. "How do you know that name?!"

"Get off of me!" I shoved him in the chest, knocking him back.

Aaron clenched his fist, and before I even had the chance to see it coming, I felt a splitting ache in response to a direct punch to the eye. I didn't think. It was like one of those outer-body experiences I'd only ever heard about. Before I knew it, I rammed into Aaron like a charging bull and slammed him against one of the two gold rabbit statues framing the fireplace. I really didn't know what to do from there, seeing as how this was the first physical fight I had ever been in. Aaron, however, acted much faster. He kned me in the gut, and while I keeled over gasping, Aaron pounced at me, taking me to the floor. There we grappled, struggling for dominance, scuffling about like the world's worst wrestlers.

Billy jumped up onto a coffee table, fist pounding the air. "Fight! Fight! Fight!"

Charlotte squealed, "Here's my chance to go viral!" She slipped her cellphone out of her purse, and with a swipe, and only a few taps, she began recording Aaron and I rolling around the hotel's waiting lounge, kicking, punching, continuing exchanging blows.

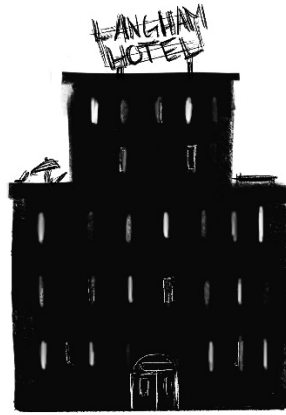
"You two are unbelievable!" Sam shouted at our fellow classmates, seeming more irritated with Billy's instigation and Charlotte's self-absorbed attitude than she even was with Aaron or myself. "Cut it out you two!" she now shouted at us, but only to be ignored.

I climbed on top of Aaron and jabbed him in the ribs. He then went to claw at my face, but I swiftly pulled back, barely escaping his reach. Instead he got a knot of my shirt, yanking back, creating a rip straight down my front. I kept on throwing punches, during which I felt overcome by a sense of relief. I hadn't realized it before, but in that moment of kicking and striking, it became all too abundantly clear. I was angry, and I had been angry for a very long time. Not at Aaron, but at losing Adam and never getting the chance to say goodbye. The only thing that made me feel even a morsel better was using my fists.

Aaron suddenly stopped fighting me back. He now only utilized his arms to block my attacks. I then realized everyone was acting differently, and a hushed silence had crashed over the entire group. They were all looking at me, shocked but sad like I was a little abandoned kitten that no one wanted to take home. I followed their gaze, looking down, and then I noticed why they were so surprised. Aaron had made a rip in my shirt, and that rip left my bare chest visible—the scar-line seared along the flesh, right above my heart. I got off of Aaron quickly, then straightened out my shredded shirt, positioning the torn fabric in a way that concealed my scar. They all looked at me, quiet as ever, and I could feel them all pitying me like I was some fragile thing that they didn't want to break. I hated that look, and I hated it only because there was truth to it.

Adam's death left all my emotions to live right on the surface, and now they so easily came out in tears.

I panted, face down, eyes averted from the group, all of whom continued to stare at me with sympathy that I so unwanted. Then we heard someone clearing their throat, "Ahem." We all turned and became aware of our professor standing there with arms folded across her chest.



Chapter 4

Professor Skeffington was a gorgeous woman. She was tall and graceful, with smooth flawless skin. Her eyes were strikingly dark, and shaped like almonds, and they had a way of leaving me feeling vulnerable by just being in her presence. With a look, and only a look, I felt as though all my secrets were left out for her to see. Her age was ambiguous. She could have been anywhere from her early thirties to her late fifties. I wouldn't have been surprised to learn that she was any age between. She also had a lot of black hair, and it was beautiful and naturally kinky, but most of it was tucked away in a headdress made of soft swirling silk. Professor Skeffington was a strong woman of Nigerian descent, so poised and regal that you would have thought she was entitled to royal lineage. With that said, she was looking quite unhappy with all of us in the group. In fact, she was intimidatingly upset, even with the dashiki she was wearing which was bright and colorful as well as formfitting with a twist of modern flare. Her arms were still positioned across her chest with thin gold bracelets jangling at her wrists.

"Sit down all of you." Her accent was difficult to place, seemingly British but a safer bet would have been South African. All of us classmates dropped immediately onto the sofa, heads dipping toward our laps. We all avoided eye-contact with our instructor while she traced her steps back and forth throughout the lounge. "That was unacceptable behavior from each and every one of you. I'm shocked, and quite frankly, appalled. Honestly, I really couldn't be more disappointed."

Billy begged to differ, "But Professor," he started with a more sweet than usual tone, "I wasn't the one throwing punches. I didn't do anything wrong and so I shouldn't be to blame."

"No, you're right. After all, you were only jumping up and down on the furniture like you were some kind of buffoon—instigating, cheering on the fight. I can assure you, I saw it all."

Charlotte smirked from behind a compact mirror. "He was acting buffoonish, wasn't he?" She powdered her nose. "I do believe a good punishment would serve Billy well."

Professor Skeffington snatched Charlotte's compact, clamped it shut, and then tossed it back into her purse. "Don't get me started with you. If you put half the energy into your craft that you do your self image, you could be one of the greatest starlets that ever lived." She then shifted her attention over to Sam who seemed to feel as though she were above all of this. Once again she was curled up into the crook of an armchair, lounging as uninterested as a fat lazy cat, and she was also back to reading her book. She was just about to turn a page when Professor Skeffington plucked the book straight out of her hands.

"What the hell did I do?" Sam was quick to defend herself. "I tried to stop them. Honestly!"

"You're rude, you're ignorant, and you isolate yourself from the others, only to speak up whenever it suits yourself and only to dish out an insult to a fellow classmate." She handed Sam back her frail novel. "You read the great Virginia Woolf, nose up in the air, thinking you're above it all—a true progressive feminist, and yet you're the first to tear down another woman who you find too different than yourself." She gave a subtle head tilt toward Charlotte, making it clear that she somehow heard Sam's previous remark about her being a 'Barbie'.

Professor Skeffington began to circle us from behind the sofa, all whilst projecting herself. "I so ignorantly thought that we could have begun orientation this morning, gotten it over with quickly, and spent the rest of our first day exploring the city, but my was I mistaken." Her voice rang through the lobby and up its tall vaulted ceiling, the same as it would in a Rome cathedral. "You see, *children*, and yes I would like to empathize on the word—I didn't anticipate I would have to go over behavioral issues, seeing as each of you here are 18 years of age. But how terribly naive I was." She continued, still strutting in circles around the group, "While on this trip, throughout the five weeks, each of you are representing the Art Institution in London, and therefore must remain constantly on your best behavior. You are all young adults, and so I expect you to conduct yourself as such. We are also guests at this hotel and must treat it with the respect it deserves," she eyed Aaron and myself while lifting a sharp brow, "which includes even each other." She then went on, holding everyone's undivided attention, "Any further foul play, including but not limited to *physical altercation*, will earn you the next flight back to London where the headmaster will determine an appropriate punishment that I can assure you will exceed to the likes of expulsion." She stopped and stood before us, her presence so strong it was hard to look away. "Have I made myself understood?"

"Yes, Professor," we all said one after the other.

"As for you two." She turned sharply over to Aaron and myself, cut lips, swollen eyes, bruising ribs, both of our hair disheveled. We sat together on a sofa, but the furthest apart we could manage. "I think the best form of punishment is to remain roommates. Hopefully, somewhere along the next five weeks, you'll find something likable about each other."

Doubtful, I thought, but didn't dare say it aloud. It was possibly the worst form of punishment she could have given us. For a whole month I would be stuck with Aaron, with nowhere to escape, and hardly any time for myself. All I could envision were countless nights and endless days. So far, it had been less than 24 hours, and already I wanted to go home.

Professor Skeffington went on to more important matters. "Now that that is all sorted out and settled with, let us finally begin orientation." She came to a halt before the fireplace. The two tall, sleek gold rabbit statues stood on either side of her, the flames from the fireplace crackling behind. "Some of you may know me, some of you may not, but for those of you who don't, my name is Professor Skeffington and I am the History of Art teacher back at the institution. As you probably have already guessed, I have been assigned as both your instructor

and chaperone for the duration of this trip. You've all been invited into this program, and let me remind you that the selection was very slim, seeing as how it was limited to only five of our first year students—one per major offered at the institution. Each of you was personally selected by the headmaster himself because you have all marked highest in your classes as well as shown the most promise in your specific academic field in the fine arts.” She then began to list out what we all could expect for the coming month, “Monday through Friday we will conduct class as usual, promptly at 8am, and we will carry on until 5pm. Each week we will focus on one of the five majors. We'll start this week off with art, a personal favorite as well as an expertise of mine. Between our sessions, we will be visiting some of the finest museums and acclaimed galleries that this world has to offer, but once 5pm hits, the nights are all yours. Now, with that all said and done, we'll be spending this afternoon in Central Park, working on the introduction to basic art.” Her gaze swept across the group. “Why don't you all head back up to your hotel rooms, grab charcoal and erasers, and meet me back here.” She added quickly, “Hopefully with some changes in attitudes and newfound respect for one another.” She then eyed my ripped t-shirt. “And Collin, perhaps you can change into a different shirt.”

We all agreed and headed off to the elevator where the five of us quietly rode the car up to the fourth floor. Not a word was exchanged. Not from any of us. Especially not between Aaron or myself. But you could tell by the looks on each of our faces that we all shared the same amount of guilt and shame; and this was only after just meeting each other. We still had five weeks ahead of us. At this point, it was difficult to determine how those weeks would end.

We all gathered back in the lobby within the next few minutes. Once we were all accounted for, Professor Skeffington led the way out of the hotel. We started through the yard, keeping to the asphalt driveway slithering off through the topiary. On our way, I decided to distract myself with a little game. I began counting off how many different types of shrubs I could find that were cut and trimmed in the formation of wild animals. First, I found a playful sea lion, then I located a stomping elephant, soon coming up on a roaring lion, and then I noticed a giraffe with a neck so tall I couldn't make out its face. There were quite a lot more exotic animals throughout the entire yard. A whole zoo of them, and they were all so beautifully and intricately shaped. While I kept myself entertained, I noticed Billy falling slowly behind, and eventually, he pulled aside. He took a quick moment, stopping beside a shrub in which was shaped into a round-belly hippopotamus, and there Billy stuffed his face with a handful of jelly bellies. He mustn't have realized it, but both the hippo and Billy were standing in an identical pose—a mirror image of each other. I giggled, thinking he looked ridiculous, but then I caught Aaron laughing too. We caught eyes, and once we did, our smiles swept away. We went right back to ignoring each other. The five of us trailed our professor, looking like little ducklings following their mother to a pond.

The driveway led us to the iron gate at the start of the property. I remembered that gate from when I first arrived in Ol' Bertha, and now I found myself back in its casting shadow, but it seemed far less spooky now that I was standing in the warmth of the morning's sunlight. On the side of the gate was an exit and/or entrance door, and Professor Skeffington led us through it and onto the back alley streets of New York City. I couldn't help but find the city charming, even while strolling through a filthy alleyway. There was no reasoning to me thinking it was. There were several trashcans along the curb that were knocked over, crumpled pieces of newspapers rolling through the street like tumbleweeds in a ghost town, and tacky graffiti splattered on the walls of the redbrick apartment buildings on either side of us. Even the sidewalk we followed had an odd stickiness to it, and yet I found beauty in all of it. I trailed back from

the group. I tried to be quick about it, so I swiftly took my camera out of my backpack and began taking shots of my surroundings. It was then that I noticed a homeless man resting against a dumpster, beneath a fire-escape, cuddled with a dirty pit bull who was lying loyal at his feet. The man had this look on his withered face, and even through the lens of my camera, I could see it as clear as day. It wasn't sadness. Not exactly. He just looked so very lost in his own mind like he had been ravaged by an illness that stripped him of all that he was. I snapped a photograph of him and then ambled over while reaching for my wallet tucked away inside my back pocket. I was drawn over to the stranger, I was so close I could see the cloud of flea infestation hopping around his scalp. Breathing became a challenge. I wasn't sure if that was the man's potent odor or the dumpster, or some awful combination of the two of them.

"I'm sorry," I apologized. "I don't have much on me, but hopefully it's enough to get you and your dog a warm meal." I handed him a five dollar bill along with a few ones. The man didn't take it, he just continued staring out in a mindless haze. He was filthy, and more thin than I would have thought humanly possible. His arms were like twigs and his skin stuck to all the bones in his face. His clothes were also soiled, ripped and tattered, reeking strongly of urine. He had bare blistered feet, leathery skin from being exposed to too much sun, and a bushy white beard that covered a great majority of his unwashed face. But he had the most gentle brown eyes I had ever seen.

"Go on," I said while putting the money into his lifeless hands. He just sat there, still, empty, not even blinking. I folded his dirty fingers until they enveloped the cash. I was just about to walk off when he snatched my wrist and yanked me back.

His fragile voice whispered into my ear, "Have you seen him?"

I gazed back into his dead droopy eyes. "Who?" I asked.

"*The shadow.*" His grip tightened, chafing my wrist. "Beware those with weakened minds." He licked his blistered lips like a thirsting lizard. "He's coming." He released his grip, slowly slumping back. "He's coming. He's coming." He flattened onto his back, reached for a crinkled newspaper, and then used it like a quilt.

I was rooted to the spot, frighteningly paralyzed. I felt a tingling sensation in the tips of my toes and the feeling began to course through my body until I felt it rattling in my skull. That all went away as soon as Professor Skeffington summoned me from all the way up the alley.

"Collin, hurry up! We're about to cross the street."

I determined that the homeless man was just confused, or perhaps even deranged, but I didn't have the time to think it over. I sprinted through the remainder of the alley. I caught up with the rest of my classmates, and together, we entered the hustle and bustle of the chaotic metropolis. I couldn't believe that something as simple as crossing the street during a pedestrian right away could be as daring as parachuting out of an airplane. We were nearly hit by a taxicab, cursed out by a mother with four bouncing brats in the backseat of her car, and a creepy man in a trench coat flashed us his collection of fake Rolex watches that hung from the innermost part of his coat. And this was all while crossing a single street. Once we hit the curb we left the dangers of New York traffic behind us and began through a lovely pebbled-stoned walkway that trailed off through Central Park. It was the most perfect time of year, a time when trees were the most colorful. Some had full foliages of rich evergreen, others as orange as the final part of a fading sunset, and some were a bushel of leaves so red they could have easily been mistaken for a lady's first blush. They even carpeted the trail, and blew in the crisp fall breeze, dazzling the park in nature's magic. There were squirrels everywhere, but they weren't like any squirrel I had ever

seen. They weren't cautious around the many tourists strolling through the park, but scurried along the tree trunks and branches, through the thick undergrowth, and some especially daring ones even came up onto the path.

We soon came upon a sparkling pond filled with little paddle-boats operated by happy parents and delightful children, as well as families from all over the globe. Amongst them were gliding rowboats that were each paired with starry-eyed lovers drawing closer and closer until meeting for a tender kiss. In front of the pond was an outdoor classroom arranged with five easels, each propped up with its own blank canvas.

Professor Skeffington went directly into the area and summoned us over. "Alright class. Each of you can pick an easel."

Everyone claimed a station quickly, leaving me the last one. Suddenly I felt right back in gym class. I had always been the scrawny 'gay boy' and so it wasn't unusual for me to be picked last for any sport-related activity. Or any activity for that matter. This wasn't the same, but it left me feeling no different. I went winding through the crowd, finding the only remaining easel was the one stationed next to Aaron's. It seemed that I just couldn't catch a break today. I took off my backpack and dropped it beside my easel, and then I went behind my canvas.

Once we were all settled, Professor Skeffington began her lesson. "As you know, we will be kicking this week off with the introduction to basic art." She started through our small group, bracelets jingling, dashiki rippling, all whilst she made her way around each of us. "Now, I want you all to think of art, as broad of a term as it may be, and think of what it means to you. I can assure you that I'm not looking for excellent lines or exceptional colors, nor will I be judging you based on skill. Art has always been much more than a pretty painting, but raw uninhibited expression translated onto a canvas. If done correctly, it should be able to *move*, and perhaps even *inspire*, those who come to set eyes on whatever it is that you've created." She projected her voice to empathize on her words, "Through their craft, a good artist should be able to have their admirer quite literally *feel* what they were feeling at the time of their artistic conception, whether it be joy or anger...fear or sorrow...love or hatred." She carried on strutting through the group, back straight, chin raised, hands laced behind her back. "I would like for each and every one of you to take a moment to look inside yourself, *deep* inside yourself, and find the darkest moment you've ever lived. Remember what you felt in that awful moment, but instead of running from it, I want you to embrace it. Then translate that feeling onto your canvas." All five of us students let out a little whine, Charlotte not surprisingly louder than the rest of us combined. Professor Skeffington made a point in speaking over our objections. "You better stop complaining and get on with it. You have two hours to complete it. The clock starts now!"

I bent down and reached into my backpack for a piece of charcoal, and then I stood back up, finding myself face to face with my blank canvas. I lost thought of what to draw, and thinking came to be quite difficult. *What the hell was I supposed to draw? The darkest moment I've ever lived?* Well, I had plenty to choose from. My birthmother died when I was four years old, and then the best friend I ever had died nearly a year ago. *Did I forget to mention that I loved him?* Well I did, but he died before I got the chance to tell him how I felt. My jaw clenched, and the longer and harder I held back the tears, the heavier my chin seemed to get. I then noticed everyone around me was already drawing with ease, Aaron further along than everyone else. The way he went at it, concentrating hard, brushing fallen hair out of his eyes, wrist flicking, charcoal flowing, I would have thought he was working on a masterpiece. Meanwhile, I continued to stand there staring at a blank sheet of white.

Professor Skeffington popped up from behind me. “Collin, you need to *feel*.”

I lifted the charcoal back up to the canvas and pressed it against the coarse texture, but then I pulled it back. “I’m sorry Professor, but I’m a photographer not an artist. I don’t know the first thing about drawing.”

“Nonsense,” she dismissed. “I’ve seen your work at the galleries back at school, and so I can assure you that I’m quite familiar with your photography. You might not have a degree as yet, but it doesn’t change the fact that you are a professional. While amateurs lift a camera and simply snap some ordinary photograph, you *feel* the moment, like you’re linking yourself to your subject, and then you find what makes them vulnerable. You embrace their darkness. You celebrate their woes. The only difference now Collin, is that what I’m asking you to do is to allow yourself to be open and vulnerable the same way you expect others to be when taking a photograph of them. I want you to feel the pain, the guilt, the sadness, whatever it is that may haunt you, and turn that emotion into a work of art.” She directed me back over to the blank canvass. “Now, I want you to try an exercise for me. All you have to do is close your eyes and follow my voice.” I closed my eyes, and immediately felt Professor Skeffington take my hand. She folded out my fingers and then let the tips of them gently graze the rough texture of the canvas. “Can you feel that?”

“Yes,” I said, feeling silly.

She placed the charcoal in my open hand, and then rolled it across my palm. “How about that?”

I nodded.

“Good. Focus on your senses.” She went on, “Keep your eyes closed, and the world is gone, and all you can hear is the sound of your heartbeat.” I could hear it, the beat steadied in my chest—*Ba boom. Ba boom. Ba boom.* “Now Collin, keep your focus on your heartbeat, but while you’re listening to its rhythmic beat, open up and allow yourself to finally be vulnerable.” I continued to listen—*Ba boom. Ba boom. Ba boom.* “Now take yourself back to the darkest moment you’ve ever lived. What do you *smell*? What have you *touched*? What do you *feel* in your heart?”

I could smell electricity burning in the air, could feel the cold stones beneath my bare feet, and in my chest I could feel the weight of a thousand cries. ‘What’s in the sheet, Mom? What’s in the sheet?!’ I could hear a voice, my voice, in echoing whispers all around me, breaking through the veil of time. ‘Where’s Adam?’ I cried. ‘Where’s Adam?!’

I opened my eyes, touched my cheek, and then I looked down and found a single teardrop left on my fingertip. The grin on Professor Skeffington’s face was telling. Without another word, she glided away to help inspire one of the other students nearby. Once she departed, I spun back around and faced my blank canvas again. I pressed the charcoal against the course texture, and then I went at it. I couldn’t stop drawing because I couldn’t stop feeling. I could still feel how I felt that morning in the underground laboratory, waking up to find that Adam was gone. I felt another tear streaking down my cheek. *I didn’t get the chance to tell him that I loved him.* I glided the charcoal roughly across the page. *I didn’t even get the chance to say goodbye.* I flicked my wrist up and down, darkening the canvas with fast scribbles. *All I wanted was to say goodbye!* I swept the charcoal back and forth and all around.

Two hours whisked by, so fast it felt like minutes, and before long Professor Skeffington ordered us all to stop. We all then followed our teacher’s instruction and took our canvas over to a glade of green shaded by a grove of red maples. We all sat in a circle, legs crossed, canvas

in our lap, most likely looking like we were back in grade school by all those walking the trails nearby.

Professor Skeffington stood over on the side. “Now, I would like each of you to share with us your drawing, express to us what you were feeling at the time the incident took place as well as while you were drawing it.” Her gaze swept across the horde of us. “Let’s start with you, Sam.”

Sam stood. She dusted dirt off her cut-up jeans, and then made her way over to the middle of our circle. I could tell she was nervous—who could blame her—but it was difficult to tell because she wore a thick mask (metaphorically speaking, of course). She had a tough outer shell, but behind her facade, I could see the glimpse of a gentle girl who seemed somewhat frightened.

She began timidly, “I was always an only child, but I had the most amazing parents who I loved more than anything in the world. My mom was so sweet.” She chuckled lightly, “Way more girly than I could ever be, and my dad was really funny. He always knew how to make me laugh and he always knew when I needed it most.” The more she spoke, the more I saw her mask breaking. “I was eight years old when they died in a house-fire.” She turned her canvas around, allowing everyone to see the picture she had drawn of a little girl with pigtails surrounded by dozens of people with no faces. “This picture I drew signifies me as a little girl, in the foster care system, being passed around from family to family, but never finding one I really belonged to.”

Charlotte pointed to the drawing where the young version of Sam was clutching a novel. “Is that the same book I catch you reading all the time? The exotic vampire romance novel?”

Sam snapped, “It’s *not* about vampires, you prissy—” she caught eyes with Professor Skeffington, and the look from our instructor had Sam choking on her insult. She picked her following words more carefully. “It’s a novel written by Virginia Woolf.” She got suddenly sad and droopy eyed. “The night my parents died, my dad gave me this book. I was probably way too young for it, but my dad wanted me to have it because he wanted me to know that I could grow up to be anything I wanted to be. I’ve never left home without it. For me, it has always been a constant reminder to be strong and to follow my dreams of being a writer.” She then went back to the outer rim of the circle and returned to her previous spot on the grass.

“That was very good, Sam,” Professor Skeffington acknowledged. “Billy, care to enlighten us?”

Billy stood up and began to share his own work. “I know it might be hard for you all to believe, but I wasn’t always so charming nor was I so good looking.” He ignored the several eye rolls from all of us. “I was a chunky little fella back in primary school and all my classmates were sure to let me know it every chance they got. In the locker room, they used to pinch my fat and smack my buttocks, and they all called me ‘Billy Flappy Tits’...it was humiliating, but I wasn’t nearly as humiliated as I was during my thirteenth birthday party.” He swiveled his canvas around and presented his sketch of a younger and much chubbier version of himself. He was sitting alone at a table with his chin on the table, and with a pointy birthday hat leaning off to the side of his blonde head. “You see, my mum bought me a delicious chocolate cake, moist layers with creamy frosting.” I could see him slipping away into that moment. “She lit the candles, everyone sang, and then I made my wish and blew all the candles out. She had me make the first cut, then she divided it out, and soon she passed a slice to all of my friends at the party. I thought she had saved me for last, and just when she approached me carrying the remainder of the cake, she stopped and looked at me with the most disgusted look I had ever seen. She said,

‘None for you, Billy. You’re much too fat for cake.’ And then she dumped the rest of the slices into the trash.” Billy then sat back down in the circle.

Charlotte clutched her chest, tears glistening in her doll-shaped eyes. “I was fat, too!” she cried, and then she jumped into Billy’s lap. “You poor sweet boy. What an awful woman your mum was.” And then she planted a kiss right smack on his lips.

Professor Skeffington massaged her temple. “Well, I can’t say she wasn’t moved.” She then straightened out her posture. “Go on, Charlotte. You’re up next. Tell us a little bit about your drawing.”

Charlotte got herself out of Billy’s lap, leaving him blushing and looking like he was seeing stars. She then claimed her canvas and went right over to the middle of the circle. “My mum left when I was really young. So young I can’t even remember what she looked like. It was just my dad and I, and we were very poor.” I could just barely make out the subtle crack in her voice. “My dad tried. Really, he did. But sometimes he just couldn’t keep up with the bills. I remember one winter, my dad told me we were going camping. Imagine...*me*—camping! Even back then I wasn’t sure about it, but I was excited to spend time with my dad.” She suddenly got sad. I could see it in her eyes and also in the change in her posture. “But we never did go camping. At least, not in a tent. Instead, we spent a few nights in our car only because we didn’t have a place to live. I remember being very cold because the heater was out, and my stomach felt painfully empty. I went to sleep that night feeling hungry and cold.” She revealed her canvas which was an illustration of a younger version of herself holding an empty stocking in the backseat of a car crammed with clothes and pieces of furniture. “I didn’t even know it was Christmas.”

Charlotte returned to her seat between both Sam and Billy, each of them consoling her. Sam rubbed her back and Billy gave her a kind smile. I knew that I had only just met them, but somehow, after they shared their deepest darkest moments, I felt like I knew them on an entirely different level. It was like I understood them. This made me realize what an amazing teacher Professor Skeffington was. She was no fool, and so I believed she knew exactly what she was doing. She knew that before today the five of us were perfect strangers, and this morning’s fight confirmed that none of us liked each other very much, but Professor Skeffington’s project had us all looking at each other now with much kinder eyes.

“Collin,” I felt my stomach drop right after she announced my name, “you’re up next.”

I reluctantly stood, and was even more hesitant when I stepped into the circle, surrounded by all my peers. *Breathe*, I told myself. I let out a shaky breath, and then I began. “Last year, a few months before I started at the Art Institution, I met *someone*...someone who was really special to me. He was my friend.” My whole face got really hot and really heavy. “I don’t know, maybe we were something more.” I took an extra breath and then continued, each following sentence having more cracks, more emotion escaping free. “He died. And his *heart*,” my voice broke off, “his heart saved my life.” I turned my canvas around to reveal an illustration of myself, bare chest, complete with a gruesome scar right down the middle. “He’s dead...but I’m alive...and now I get to spend the rest of my life with his heart... just not the way I had wanted to.” I kept my eyes to the grass while I returned back to my place in the circle. Once there, I hung my head and began plucking strings of grass from out of the soil. I noticed Aaron looking over at me, ready to say something, but couldn’t get himself to do it all the way.

“I think your scar is pretty cool, mate,” said Billy.

“Very rugged,” added Charlotte.

“It has a really amazing story,” finished Sam.

“Thanks.” And then I turned to Aaron, but once again, he stopped himself from saying a word.

“Aaron,” Professor Skeffington now called on him, “could you finish us off please?”

Aaron got himself up and headed to the center of the circle until he was standing between all of us. Once again he was about to speak, but then he looked down at his canvas and all of a sudden it was as though he had forgotten his words. I could see his eyes, dark and as beautiful as they were, trembling with grief. His shoulders collapsed forward, and then his whole body folded into itself.

“This is stupid!” He threw down the canvas, snatched up his backpack, and then stormed off through the park.

“Where does he think he’s going?” Charlotte complained while all of us watched Aaron head down a trail, soon disappearing off under the arch of a bridge made of stone and brick.

Sam protested, “Professor, how is that even fair?”

Billy agreed, “We all had to share, so how come he gets away without doing it?”

Professor Skeffington explained while looking out in the direction Aaron had gone off to, “Today you all faced your inner demons by returning to the darkest moment you’ve ever lived. It seems that Aaron isn’t quite ready to face that just yet, but when he does, I do believe he will become one of the greatest artists of our time. Let’s hope, for his sake, he’ll come around soon.” Her gaze shifted back over to the four of us. “Let’s cut class short today. Go have fun and enjoy the city. I’ll see you all first thing tomorrow morning.”

We all went back to our easels and gathered up our belongings. I swung my backpack over my shoulder and then met up with the rest of the group who were all about ready to head over to the street.

I stepped out of my comfort and asked everyone, “Did you guys maybe want to grab something to eat...together?”

“Normally I would love to,” began Charlotte, “but I don’t eat solid foods on weekdays. I already slipped up with breakfast. Also, I’ve been dying to go shopping in Time Square ever since we got here. Perhaps a raincheck?”

“Yeah, sure.” I turned to Sam. “How about you?”

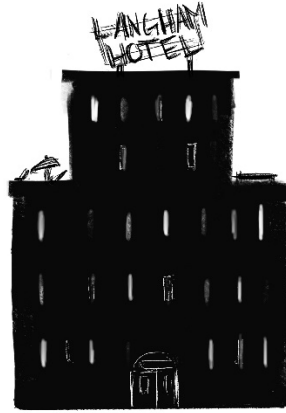
“Well, I definitely eat solid foods, but I was just going to grab a slice of pizza on the way to this really cool bookshop I read about online.” She threw on her military jacket, then tucked a runaway strain of black curl back up into her beanie. “Raincheck?”

“Yup.” I spun around to Billy.

“Sorry laddie, but I’ve got a fake I.D. burning in my pocket. I’ve been itching to check out some of these American bars.” He elbowed me gently in the ribs. “Raincheck?”

I gave him the thumbs up. The three of them left me standing there alone in the paddock, under the green, yellow, and red trees of Central Park. From there, I watched Charlotte wave down a taxicab, Sam headed off to the underground metro, and Billy vanishing straight into a sport’s bar on the corner of the avenue. And here I was all alone.

I touched my chest, “Well Adam, I guess it’s just you and me.”



Chapter 5

While I worked my way out of Central Park, I mulled over some ideas of what to do. After all, I still had the great majority of the day still left ahead of me. I spent the whole day roaming New York City. First, I took a bunch of pictures of historical monuments that were on my list to see, then danced foolishly on a piano mat in a glorious toyshop, after taking an elevator car up to the highest point of the Empire State Building. I hoped to end the night with an authentic New York street hotdog. There were many hotdog stands to choose from. I must have passed nearly a hundred of them throughout the day. But I found a perfect little cart only a few blocks away from the Langham Hotel.

“Excuse me.” I approached the cart while digging through my wallet. “Could I please get a hotdog?” I thumbed through a few crisp bills that I had recently gotten out of an ATM. “And also a bag of chips.”

“Sure thin’, kid.” The cart owner flipped a burger with a greasy spatula, and then he switched the spatula out for a pair of metal tongs. He utilized it to poke around at the hotdogs and sausage links frying on the griller. “Yous want sauerkraut wit dat? If yous ask me, dere ain’t no sausage wort eatin’ if it ain’t got no sauerkraut.”

“No, thank you.” There was something familiar about that voice. I peered up from my wallet and noticed a short fat Italian man working behind the cart. I recognized his light hazel eyes, his olive complexion, and that full head of black curls smooshed down by a worn baseball cap with the Yankee’s logo embroidered to the front. “Pasquale?”

“Hey kid, long time know sees.” He used the tongs to peel off a hotdog from the grill, and then he stuffed it between a warm bun. “Hows school treatin’ yous? Yous be liken it so far?”

He handed me the hotdog in a paper sleeve. “It’s alright, I guess.”

“Make any new friends yet?” He took my cash and then ran it through the register. “A guy like yous, I’m sure yous got loads of friends.”

“Not really.” I thought over the entire day I had just spent alone. “I don’t really have any friends,” Adam flashed behind my eyes, “...at least, not anymore.” I wasn’t sure what it was that got me to open up and share so much. All I knew was that I felt unexpectedly vulnerable. “But that’s okay.” I brightened up with a forced grin. “I should be focusing on my photography anyways.” I brought my hotdog over to a dressing station where I fixed it up with a generous squirt of mustard, not stopping until it was completely drenched. “Friends come and go. They

never stick around.” The way I rambled on, you would have thought I were trying to convince myself. “They’re here one day, then gone the next. Why invest in a friendship if you know it’ll never last? I think I would rather put all my focus on photography instead.” I then mumbled so low that I barely heard it myself, “At least I know photography will never leave me.”

“Wit dat attitude, I’m sure I’ll sees some of yous pictures up on dese billboards.” He used his tongs to point up at the several advertisements towering above us.

“Ha! Maybe in my dreams.” I took a bite out of the hotdog, so busy chatting with Pasquale that it took an extra second before my tastebuds kicked in. “Oh my God, that’s the best thing I’ve ever tasted in my entire life.” I took another bite, chewing slowly so that I could longer relish in the savory of the meat, the sweetness of the mustard, and the softness of the doughy bun all swirled up in my mouth together.

“I gots da best hotdogs in all of New York City.” Pasquale’s round belly bounced as he threw a few more hotdogs onto the grill. “I might not know much ‘bout dem yelper folk on da computers, but folks be tellin’ me dey really be likin’ my hotdogs on dere. Got a five star ratin’ and all. I gets people from all over da tristate area tawkin’ ‘bout my little cart over on da corner of Park Avenue and E 78th street. Can’t beat dem. Ain’t no point tryin’ to either. Hands down, best hotdogs yous ever find.” He grabbed one of the cooked sausages from off the grill, blew on it, and then devoured it in two bites.

It suddenly dawned on me. “Pasquale, what are you doing here? What happened to Ol’ Bertha?”

“She’s doin’ just fine. Just restin’, is all. Got her parked right over dere.” He took off his baseball cap, mopped his sweat-soaked face with his furry arm, and then used his hat to gesture to the broken down taxi parked at the meter across the street. “She only runs on da weekend. Anymore den dat and her engine blows.”

Ol’ Bertha was looking rather down on her luck on this particular late afternoon. For one, her yellow coat was faded and a few shades lighter than all the other taxicabs passing her by on the street. She also had quite the long crack on her windshield, visible rust infested down in her undercarriage, a bumper falling so low it was near scraping the street, and with too many dents to count. To top it all off, she had a whole lot of parking citations all tucked under her windshield whippers. The way Pasquale spoke about her, you would have thought Ol’ Bertha was a prize winning steed, but truly she looked about ready to be put out of her misery.

Pasquale rang up another customer and then handed them a hotdog. “So kid, how yous likin’ da city so far? Yous gots all dis time alone—no friends, just like yous like, huh? Yous must be havin’ da time of your life?”

“Yeah...sort of...I guess...” I thought over everything I had done that day, every second alone, with no one to enjoy this strange, yet magical city with. “I took a ferry to the Statue of Liberty. That was pretty cool.” I suddenly remembered standing alone at the railing of the boat, looking out into the cluster of buildings reaching high up into the smoggy sky, later reaching the very top of Lady Liberty only to bask in her marvelous view of the entire city, once again, *alone*. I thought about it some more. “The toyshop was a lot of fun!” I cheered up. “I bought my little brother a sock puppet and got myself some candy.” But then my smile wilted as I thought over how I foolishly danced on the piano mat...*alone*. I shook it off. “Its been a lot of fun,” I highly exaggerated.

“Den tell me, kid,” Pasquale leaned his entire weight against the cart, and because he was such a heavyset man, the whole cart sagged while trembling beneath him, “if yous havin’ so much fun, how come yous lookin’ real sad?”

I took another bite out of my hotdog, and then cleaned the mustard off my face with the back of my hand. “I’m not sad.”

“Yous sure could have fooled me.” He took off his baseball cap again, and gave his black curls a good hard scratch. “Yous got dat lost little puppy dog look on your face.” He mimicked me while listing out my faults, “Shoulders slumped, head down, eyes always lookin’ real wet.”

“That’s not true.” I quickly straightened out my back, pulled back my shoulders, and then raised my chin up high.

“Looks to me like yous could use a friend.”

My body deflated like a balloon as I let out a deep sigh, “Trust me. That’s the last thing I need.” I drifted over to the curb and sat there amongst the afternoon rush of New Yorkers, and there I mindlessly fiddled with my last bite of hotdog that I suddenly lost interest in.

“Listen, kid,” Pasquale joined me down on the curb, “da world is a dark and lonely place. Dere’s too much bullshit, yous know? When yous young like youself, yous think yous got all da time in da world, like da world just on pause waitin’ for yous. Yous gots all dese dreams, so many big dreams, but den da world starts turnin’ faster, and yous start strugglin’ to catch up wit it, and den soon yous realize all dose dreams yous had are all gettin’ farther and farther away from yous, until finally yous forget how to dream at all.” He then began rambling off while speaking animatedly with his hands, “Yous get married. Yeah, cause yous love her, and it’s da right thin’ to do. Yous know it’ll make her real happy, too. But den she wants a house. A real nice house. Five bedrooms. Good-lookin’ kitchen. Even wants one wit a yard for da dog. We don’t even gots a dog, I tells her, but she wants a damn yard for da dog dat we don’t even gots!” He slipped further away, and soon there was no stopping him. “Den she gets pregnant, and yous become a papa. Now yous got two girls in yous life, and yous thinkin’ yous da luckiest man dat dere ever was. But dat dream of openin’ up yous own restaurant gets farther and farther away from yous. But yous saved up some money yous got under da table from a construction job yous did back in Queens. But den da basement floods, and second baby is born. Den da dishwasher goes, den da third baby is born. And now da car engine blows, den da fourth baby is born. And by da time your sixth baby comes along, yous got bills up to yours knees, two girls off to college, one plannin’ a weddin’, another one who wants a car. Whadda dey think yous are, huh, made of money?! Now all yous left wit in some chump change barely enough to buy youself a hotdog cart!” His whole face went as red as a ripe tomato. He then turned to me, and right away he seemed to forget how he had managed to get himself so worked up. “What da hell were we even tawkin’ ‘bout?”

I laughed, “I honestly have no idea.”

He gave his black curls another hard scratch. “I might have gotten a little off track, but da point of da story is—I gots six daughters and a drop dead gorgeous wife, and I wouldn’t give dem up for anythin’ in da world.” He gave me a firm grip on the shoulder. “Dream kid, always keep dreamin’, but don’t yous dare forget to live while yous dreamin’ so big.”

“Excuse me? Excuse me? Hello?!” There was a tiny man with a mousey voice standing over at the cart, trying to get Pasquale’s attention. “Are you still open?”

“Ahrite already!” Pasquale shouted with his meaty hands flailing about as they so often did. “Can’t yous see I’m tawkin’ to da boy over here, huh? Tryin’ to cheer him up. Wat—yous got no heart?”

“I just wanted a hotdog,” squeaked the customer.

“Oh, yous want a hotdog? In dat case, why didn’t yous say so?” Pasquale lifted up off the curb, struggling to get all his weight up onto his knees. “It’s a hotdog stand...*no shit* yous wants a hotdog!” He wrapped around his cart and slapped a sizzling sausage between a bun, and while he dressed it up with all the fixings, he grumbled in Italian what couldn’t be denied as anything but profanity. After assisting his customer, Pasquale returned back over to me with a greasy hand digging through a bag of potato chips. “So yous see, kid, yous think not havin’ friends might make yous tough, like yous tryin’ real hard to protect yous heart, but ain’t no heart wort beatin’ if it ain’t gots nothin’ to love. Yous understand?”

“Not even a little.” But then my face softened with a smile. “But thanks for the ‘tawk’.” I winked.

“Hey, fawget ‘bout it.” And then he threw back a handful of chips.

I took a look at Pasquale, this short fat middle-aged Italian man, and though his words were quite encouraging, I still found it hard to take him completely seriously only because he looked so very animated (especially when his round belly would bounce every time he was shouting—which, by the way, he did an awful lot of the time). But there was something very sweet about Pasquale, something endearing and almost fatherlike, and speaking to him left me missing my own dad just a little bit less.

Meow.

I was out of my head in an instant. I looked up, and there I spotted a familiar gray Maine coon with unique black stripes perched on the branch of a young London planetree. It was Cheshire, lying across the branch with a swishing tail. I noticed his collar tightened around his neck with the shiny gold tag that tinkled with his slightest movement. The cat pounced down from off the branch, landed gracefully on the dirty sidewalk, and then he immediately bolted into the street.

“Sorry Pasquale, but I got to go!”

I jumped to my feet and ran after the cat, mindlessly right into the middle of a busy street jammed-packed with automobiles, all of whom were stopped bumper-to-bumper. I worked my way around the cars, following the cat slipping away. Cars honked at me, drivers screamed at me, and some went as far as swearing, but I kept on hurrying after the cat. I found Cheshire diving under a cab, and then he went scurrying under another, and then another, making his way all the way to the opposite side of the street. I tried to maneuver around the cars, but some of them were making it nearly impossible seeing as how they were parked so close together. And so I hopped onto the hood of a BMW’s engine, then jumped onto the trunk of a Lamborghini, thereafter leaping up onto a cab’s roof where the ‘TAXI’ sign lit up between my legs. There I used my momentum to propel myself over to the sidewalk where I was just in time to catch Cheshire darting through a teeming crowd of shoppers, tourists, and the daily New Yorker heading back home after a busy day at the office.

I ran after him. “Excuse me.” I nearly knocked into a man in a suit. “Pardon me, ma’am.” I swiftly avoided an elderly woman struggling with a bag of groceries. “Sorry, girl.” I leapt over a prissy poodle being walked by her owner. “Watch it, dude!” I dodged a teen skateboarder, then

spotted the cat turning into a slender alley. “Cheshire, come back!” I was out of breath, but that didn’t stop me from pursuing the cat.

I chased him through the alley which had become dark and shadowed since the sun had set. There were a lot more homeless people around at this hour, some pitching up tents, others scavenging through dumpsters, and a few were starting a new fire in a metal trashcan, adding crumpled pieces of the New York Times to increase the intensity of the whipping flame. Cheshire went through the alley in a graceful trot, but then he stopped at an iron gate which led to the private property of the Langham Hotel. The cat glanced back, found me coming up after him, and then slipped between the bars and continued on racing through the courtyard. If I hadn’t known any better, I would have thought this cat was trying to lead me somewhere. Or better yet, *back* to somewhere. *But that’s crazy!*

My feet were already sore and I had an awful twinge pinching at my side, but my curiosity combined with my stubbornness refused to allow me to quit. So I went through the door beside the gate, then sprinted through the courtyard. Up in the distance, I could see the hotel’s gleaming glass doors being opened up just in time by Mr. Hinkley (who looked to be heading out to the rose garden amidst the topiary). Cheshire came up from behind him and slipped inside just as the door was closing. I caught up to the door, swung it back open, then threw myself inside.

I went flying into the lobby, my sneakers screeching against the marble as I skidded to a sudden halt. Engraved beneath me were the initials of the hotel. I glanced into the waiting lounge. The fireplace was blazing, but no one was there. I peeked around a pillar, my gaze sweeping from the gleaming elevator doors, to the perfectly organized front desk, to the freshly polished dining room table where a new bouquet of red roses was on display. No one. That is, no one but a young bellhop posted at the front door. He had been standing so still and so quiet that I’d mistaken him for a statue.

“Oh, hello.” I backtracked to him, and though his eyes met with mine, he oddly didn’t seem to be looking at me, but rather *through* me. “Sorry to bother you, but by any chance have you seen a cat come by here?” I listed out his traits, “Fluffy, gray, got a lot of black stripes.”

The bellhop only stared. He was young, a new teenager by the looks of it. His black hair was well styled, all combed to one side, and his smooth complexion was the color of wheat. He looked to be of Indian nationality. His bellhop uniform reminded me a lot of the one I had to wear back home at Chateau Du Coeur when helping my parents run the family business, but he had more of an old time traditional look to it: black slacks, maroon top with matching brimless cap, complete with gold buttons and trim.

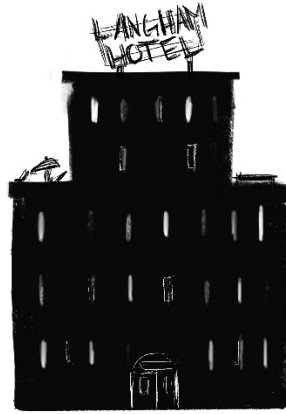
“Hello?” I waved an open hand across his face. “Is everything all right?” Something had to be wrong with him, I just didn’t know what it could be. The bellhop was emotionless. His eyes were open, but it was like the lights in his head were out. “Have you seen a cat?”

Just then, I heard the low-pitch note of a piano key. I whipped around, catching Cheshire slinking across the black and white keys of the grand piano. He stopped. The cat looked at me, and me to him, and then he leapt to the floor and bolted across the lobby.

“Not again!”

I took off running through the lobby. I then jumped into a slide, gliding past the elevators where I regained my footing and rounded a corner. I charged up a staircase. I reached the second floor, then passed through a hallway nook where there was nothing but a broom closet, soon sprinting up another staircase—this time skipping two steps at a time. I kept climbing the hotel floors, only passing more broom closets. There was one between each floor. I only stopped to

look up and find Cheshire several floors higher. My side was aching, but I didn't care. I kept running. I didn't stop until I reached the rooftop. It was a large platform taken over by a long sparkling pool. The pool was lengthy, but shallow. It stretched from one end of the rooftop to the complete opposite side. It was surrounded by lounge chairs and round patio tables all propped with umbrellas. Because of the time of night, all of the umbrellas were folded down. I felt a cold breeze brush my cheek. Following the breeze I twisted in the opposite direction. Behind me, above a rectangular room marked as the 'Clubhouse', was the 20ft tall sign in standalone letters 'the Langham', lit up with bright neon red bulbs. In the night it glowed bright and majestic against a backdrop of black. I continued to scope the area. Cheshire was nowhere to be found. But I did find someone else.



Chapter 6

Aaron stood over by the ledge of the rooftop with glorious skyscrapers at his every turn. He sat on a stool, an easel supporting his canvas. Upon the canvas was a detailed illustration of all that laid before him, captured to perfection. It was exquisite, so elaborate I could have mistaken it for real-life. Aaron was so focused that he hadn't yet noticed that he was no longer alone on the roof. He had headphones on, and he was bobbing along to the beat of the music he was listening to, all while focusing on his lines. Watching him so free, so at one with himself, left me with a smile.

I ambled over to him, edging the sparkling pool as I went. I came up from behind him and tapped him on the shoulder. "Boo!"

"Aaah!" Aaron jumped off the stool and backed into a railing that lined the perimeter. His fearful eyes settled on me. He found me with a smirk, a smirk I tried to hide by digging my teeth into my bottom lip. Aaron went from fearful to furious at the drop of a hat. He snatched off his headphones to yell at me. "What did you do that for?!"

"Sorry." I shrugged innocently. "I didn't mean to scare you." He gave me a funny look that made me giggle.

"Very funny, but now we're even."

He crouched to his knees to stuff his headphones into his open backpack, and then gathered his art supplies to stow them away as well.

I looked at the scenery. There wasn't anything quite like it. Most of the surrounding buildings were much taller than the Langham was, and so we stood there on the rooftop cast in the shadows

of the skyscrapers around us. They were concrete giants, and the windows reflected like the glistening eyes of some sort of mythical beast.

I looked over to Aaron, finding him hunched over while packing up his things. “What are you doing up here?”

“Professor Skeffington found me after class. She offered me a chance to make up some credit for leaving class early. She requested a landscape drawing of the city, and suggested the hotel’s rooftop had a great view.” He zipped his backpack closed, standing while forcing his arms through the straps.

I crept closer to the canvas, mesmerized by his art piece. There was no denying Aaron’s talent. The sketch was perfectly accurate, just as lifelike as any one of my photographs. “It’s really good, Aaron.”

“...thanks.”

I pulled away from the portrait and drifted over to the railing, hands gripping the cold metal bar. The view was stunning. It was a whole sea of buildings, old and new, short and tall, built of either stone, metal, or glass. They circled us from every angle, stretching out for what appeared to be miles upon miles; each of the buildings brightening the dark sky like brilliant stars. Up there on the rooftop, I felt the coldness of the night, I could see the dazzling building lights, and could hear the sound of distant traffic that was far, far down in the bustling streets below me. Between the skyscrapers, I could just barely make out Central Park sprawling out in the middle of the glorious city. Aaron’s drawing didn’t just capture all these little details, but somehow was able to capture the magic of it all. It was the true essence of a feeling, more than just a picture.

Aaron came up from behind me. “It’s pretty great, huh?”

“It’s beautiful.”

Inspired, I pulled off my backpack and got my camera out. It wasn’t long before I was behind the lens, whirling it around while snapping pictures of the scenery.

Aaron leaned against the railing. He then gazed out into the vast metropolis aglow with the surrounding building’s many bright lights. “I’ve been drawing up here for most of the day. I love it up here. It’s noisy, but also really quiet...it’s peaceful. It’s the perfect place to think.”

I was so focused behind my camera, aiming for the buildings, the streets, and the people wandering far below, that it took me an extra moment before I noticed how sorrowful Aaron had become. I lowered my camera and found him still leaning against the railing while gazing out into the world with eyes on the verge of tears. He looked vulnerable, like his walls had crumbled. At that moment, I swear, I caught a glimpse of his soul. I wanted to take his picture. I certainly would have had he been anyone else, but I didn’t want to upset him; and so I fought the urge to do so.

“What’s wrong?” I asked him.

He perked up. “What do you mean?”

“I don’t know...you just look...*sad*.”

“Well, I’m not!” His voice turned as sharp as broken glass.

“Geez, I was just trying to be nice. You don’t have to bite my head off.”

Aaron pulled from the railing, then walked away shaking his head.

“Where are you going now?!”

He shouted over his shoulder, “Away!”

I snatched up my backpack and then went racing after him along the edge of the pool. “What’s your problem, Aaron? Why do you hate me so much?”

"I don't hate you," he countered.

"It sure seems that way to me."

"How can I hate you? I hardly even know you."

"Exactly," I said. "So what's with the attitude?"

"Attitude?" Aaron continued to work his way along the pool. "Are you always this annoying?"

I shot back, "Are you?!"

Aaron smirked, "Good comeback."

He sure did know how to make my blood boil. I grabbed his arm and yanked him back. "Will you stop walking away from me for two seconds?"

"Let me go." Aaron grabbed my wrist and tried to yank himself free, but I held my grip strong. "I mean it, Collin. Let—me—GO!" He yanked his arm free, so fast it smacked me in the face. I cupped my nose, stumbling back until I felt the back of my sneakers edge the pool. I lost my balance. I reached out while falling back, grabbed Aaron's arm, and without realizing what I had done, took him with me into the pool. We landed with a great enormous splash that conjured up a wave to slop over all sides of the pool. We both shot out of the water, the swoop in Aaron's perfectly groomed hair now sticking to his angry face.

"Now look what you've done!" he shouted.

I was also upset, but the look on Aaron's face was so priceless that I couldn't hold back from giggling. He looked as mad and as shocked as would a distressed cat after falling into water.

He yelled, "It's not funny!"

"It totally is," I laughed.

He splashed me in the face, and then I splashed him back, and before either of us knew it, we were in a full-blown water fight. A security guard appeared from around the towering Langham sign, a man of Japanese descent. He was dressed in a crisp blue uniform and matching cap, and with a well manicured mustache. He wielded a flashlight and directed the light over against the rippling pool.

His flashlight shined right in my eyes. "Sorry," I squinted, an arm raised to block the brightness. "We were...we were..." I got distracted by the security guard's lifeless eyes. They were just as black and just as empty as were the bellhop's before him, and the maid before him.

Aaron finished for me, "We were just having some fun."

The security guard clicked his flashlight, and the beam of light instantly vanished. Without a word, he walked around the clubhouse and was gone.

I felt a knot in my stomach. "That was—"

"—creepy," Aaron concluded.

"It was, wasn't it?"

Aaron agreed with a nod. He then shook it off by swimming to the edge of the pool where he hoisted himself out. I followed right behind. Cold and dripping wet, I spotted a maid's cart over by the elevator, shelved with fresh towels all rolled up like individual cinnamon rolls packed into a to-go box. I went over and claimed two, one for Aaron and another for myself. I went back over to Aaron, set my towel on a round glass table, and then I unfolded the other. I surprised him, and even myself, when I threw the towel over his shoulders and wrapped him up. We didn't talk, but while I bundled him up, we glanced at each other with small awkward smiles, neither aware if we were still arguing or not. Over Aaron's shoulder, I noticed our backpacks still bobbing around in the pool. I pulled away from him, my sneakers squishing as I headed back

over to the edge of the pool. I dropped to my knees and fished out Aaron's backpack, passing it over to him. I got mine out next. Aaron unzipped his bag and pulled out his sketchbook, finding it completely saturated.

"Is it a goner?" I asked.

"Completely destroyed," he answered, disappointedly. "How's your camera?"

With reluctance, I reached into my backpack and pulled it out. I then opened up the camera and water came gushing out. "The films all ruined." I pouted. "This sucks! I took so many great pictures today..." my voice faltered, "now they're all gone."

"I'm sorry."

His apology surprised me and had me turning to look at him, and in his expression I could see his sincerity. "Yeah. Me too."

We emptied our backpacks and then spread our things across a lounge chair to help them all dry. The sun had long been gone by now, and so I was sure it would take some time before everything dried. I kicked off my sneakers, then peeled off each of my soaking wet socks with a challenge, and then I returned back over to the pool. I sat on the edge and dipped my feet into the cold water. Aaron joined me on the edge of the pool, his legs fully submerged near up to his knees. For a long while we just sat there, side by side, feet kicking in the water.

Aaron decided to break the silence. "I lost someone too, you know."

I was caught off guard. I turned to him, and there I saw the vulnerable side of him just as I had seen a few minutes before. I wanted to say something...something sweet...something clever, anything really at this point, but I had wasted so much time thinking over what could be the perfect thing to say, that too much time had passed to deem it appropriate to say anything at all. And so I said nothing.

Aaron gazed into the pool, eyes trained on the name of the hotel spelt out in tiles across the bottom. "About a year ago my parents forced me to move to England. I didn't want to, but I really didn't have a choice. I thought my life was over, when really it was just about to begin...I met someone...someone who I loved a whole lot." Tears sparkled in his dark eyes. "But he's gone now."

I asked in the most gentle voice I could, "Rupert?"

He nodded, his clenching jaw heavy from the emotion that was building. It was as though he were lost in some dark moment in time that only he could see. "I loved him, and I lost him, and now I'm stuck here...*always alone*." A single tear came streaking down his already wet cheek. He pulled his gaze from the pool and back to me. I could see new tears in his eyes. "Death was the most painful thing I had ever gone through. Not because I died, but because I *lived*."

His words struck me deeply because it was a feeling that I, myself, had felt before. I've felt it ever since Adam's death, but Aaron was able to articulate those feelings into words. I wiggled my toes in the water while I mulled this over.

Aaron continued, "There isn't a day that goes by that I don't think about Rupert. Sometimes I wonder what he would be doing if he were still alive...what we would be doing together." He cracked a sad smile. "He would probably be on this class trip."

I gave him a smile to help cheer him up. "Maybe he is."

"Yeah, maybe." Aaron leaned back until his spine was flat with the wet cement. "Ugh," he sighed. "Life sucks!"

I gazed back into the pool, the name of the hotel rippling beneath the watery depths. "My birthmother died when I was young, and when you're really little, and you see someone every

day, and then they're gone forever, it's the worst kind of pain there is." I felt a sudden pressure building in my eyes. "I thought I knew pain, but when Adam died I felt, and still feel, this constant weight against my chest. It's so heavy..." I choked. "Sometimes I find it hard to breathe." My eyes glistened. "I loved my mom, and I loved Adam, but they left me. And I'm sad." My face pinched. "And I'm *angry*." It then loosened. "And then I feel guilty for feeling angry." I seemed to have opened a door I couldn't close. "Everyone leaves." My bottom lip trembled slightly. "They keep leaving me. And I still love them, but then I *hate* them, but it doesn't change anything because every day I'm still alone."

Aaron lifted back up. "Collin, it's okay to be sad, and it's okay to be angry, but just don't forget to let it out every once in a while. If you don't, it'll eat you up alive."

"How do you let it out?" I asked.

"I scream."

"You...*scream*?"

"Yeah. Come on. I'll show you." He got himself up and then lent me a hand to help hoist me up with him. Over in the back of the rooftop was the clubhouse which was currently closed off with all its windows boarded up by slaps of wood. Along the side of one of its four brick walls was a mounted steel ladder that led up to the top of its roof. It was on that part of the roof where the Langham sign stood—looking just as majestic as the Hollywood sign. I followed Aaron over to the ladder, and together, one after the other, we climbed. From that rooftop, I had a much better view of the city, the surrounding buildings. We were so high up now that I could hardly hear the traffic anymore. I could feel the heat of the bulbs of the Langham sign beating against my back, finally drying my clothes from my tumble into the pool.

I turned to Aaron. "What are we doing up here?"

"We're screaming." He must have noticed the skeptical look on my face. "Go on. Try it."

I took a step toward the edge, and regretted looking down immediately. I felt my insides twisting while my vision went blurry. The cars and taxicabs, pedestrians and streetlights, buildings and churches started to bleed into one big blurry image. It was all making me queasy.

I leapt back. "I can't do this."

Aaron encouraged, "All you have to do is scream. Trust me, it'll make you feel loads better."

I looked back out into the world, opened my mouth, and then screamed in the tiniest voice I could muster up, "Ah."

"Come on. That was lame. Try it again."

I rolled back my shoulders and then tried again, "Ah."

Aaron instructed, "Think of Adam. Think of those moments you spent together. How happy you felt like nothing in the world mattered to you anymore."

I closed my eyes and saw him—*Adam, sitting there in the darkness of my mind. I looked into his crystal blue eyes and could feel his kindness, could sense his gentle spirit. We were under a bed, on top of each other, our legs intertwined and our heartbeats in sync. He leaned in and kissed me softly on the lips, and then just like that Adam was gone forever.*

Aaron continued to provoke all these different emotions I didn't know were slumbering inside of me. "You want to see him. You'd do anything to see him. But there isn't anything you can do to see him again." With each word he spoke, I could feel my body trembling with anger, with sorrow, with too much grief to bear. It left me flushed with frustration. "Adam is gone," Aaron stressed. "Rupert is gone," he confessed. "We're both stuck here alone forever."

The pressure had built up to the point of overflowing. I turned back to the world again, and then let all my emotions free. “AHHH!” I screamed again, throwing my whole body into it, “AHHH!” I gripped my skull, tugging at a tuft of red hair, and then I let out another cry, “AHHH!” The anger was gone, and it left me weak to the point that my legs couldn’t support my weight anymore. I collapsed to my knees, head hanging, and there I watched the tears dropping from my eyes and splashing against the concrete.

And then I heard Aaron, “AHHH!” he belched out into the night. “AHHH!” he screamed as loud as his lungs would allow. “AHHH!” He let it all out, the hurt, the pain, every ounce of grief he felt.

Moments later, after our throats were good and sore, we sat on the ledge of the rooftop, beneath the glorious Langham sign, with our legs dangling off. It was late, so late we’d seemed to have lost track of the night. We sat there, mostly silent, just gazing out at the smiling moon hanging above us.

After some time of internal reflection, I looked over at Aaron. “You were right. That did make me feel loads better.”

“Told you,” he smiled.

“How often do you scream?” I found myself asking him.

Aaron thought this over. “In the beginning, shortly after Rupert died, I would scream a lot.” He licked his lips and then picked at them. “Almost every night.”

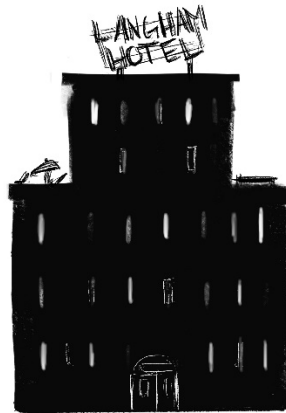
“Every night?” I echoed.

“Every night,” he confirmed with a nod. “Sometimes into a pillow. Sometimes when I’m all alone. Sometimes to a perfect stranger. It doesn’t get better, just easier, and when it becomes easier it can sometimes become even harder, because if mourning someone becomes easier, then you start hating yourself even more—it feels like you might not have loved that person as much as you thought you had.”

“You know what?” I nudged Aaron with my shoulder. “I think it might not be so bad being your roommate after all.”

He threw me a side smirk. “I wish I could say the same.”

I pushed him, and he pushed me playfully back, and then we laughed. Boy, did it feel good to finally laugh.



Chapter 7

It had been quite the day, to say the least. I couldn't have expected it. Aaron and I started the morning off with a fight, and throughout the day any exchange of words we had with one another had us both sounding more like bickering old men rather than the young adults we actually are. But now it seemed that we had a newfound respect for each other, and a shared understanding of one another. Dare I say, perhaps it was the start of a new friendship—one that we both seemed to need. Who knows. I guess time would tell.

It was well past 10pm when we decided it was time to head back to our hotel room. We climbed down the clubhouse rooftop, the ladder's bars especially cold this time of night. We then crossed the hotel's rooftop, the swimming pool aglow by the Langham sign gleaming above it. We claimed our backpacks lying on the lounge chairs. They weren't soaked anymore, but still a bit damp. While on the way back to our room, the conversation had gotten off the topic of our loss, through to our favorite video games and now on to our hopes and dreams. I learned that Aaron not only wanted to be an artist, but wanted to specialize in animation with an interest in storyboarding. I pushed the button to summon the elevator. While we waited for it to arrive, I shared with Aaron how I wanted to travel the world, experience new cultures, explore exotic landscapes, and take pictures of people from all these strange and wonderful places. Of course I wanted my photographs to be published in magazines, maybe run my own studio, and work on a film—maybe two, but there was still so much to do, and so very much to see before I could even think of that future that still seemed so far away. *Ding*. The gleaming gold doors pulled apart right when the elevator arrived.

"That's a cool dream," said Aaron as he followed me into the lift. "Imagine all the pictures you will take, and all the people you would meet, and all the places you'll visit." He pushed the number '4', and the doors closed again. "It would be such an adventure."

I fantasized, so lost in a daydream that I hardly noticed the lightheaded sensation that came when descending so many floors. "Maybe I'll meet an old hag lurking deep in a forest in Germany." I hunched over, and with an imaginary cane, I hobbled around the elevator car.

Aaron added with delight, "Or maybe a mermaid living off the shore of Denmark."

I straightened up and then put some thought into it. My eyes brightened when it came to me. "Or maybe a talking kangaroo in the outback of central Australia."

Aaron's face twisted. "A *talking* kangaroo? What would a talking kangaroo even say?"

I rubbed my chin while I turned the question over in my mind. "What's hop?"

"Oh geez, that was awful."

Aaron was right. My joke was awful. Honestly, it sounded more like a joke my dad might have said to his fifth grade class to break the ice on the first day of school, back when he was still a teacher, or one he might have shared with the family at the dinner table after we all had become distracted with our phones, tablets, or other devices. It was a lame joke, but Aaron and I both laughed as we continued to descend the building.

We had nearly reached the fourth floor when the elevator screeched to an unexpected halt. The whole car shook, aggressive enough for Aaron and I to both lose our balance. We both leaned against the mirrored walls to stop ourselves from falling over. The lights then flickered on and off.

Aaron reclaimed his balance. "What was that?"

"I'm not sure." I pulled from the wall and ambled over to the list of vertical buttons containing all 10 floors of the building. We were stopped somewhere between floors 5 and 6. I

determined we were stuck, and the realization was joined by a tightening in my chest. “What do we do?”

Aaron must have noticed my nervousness. “Don’t worry. It’ll be all right.” He drew his cellphone out from his back pocket. “I’ll just call the front desk. I’m sure someone there will help us out.”

The lights flickered again. One moment it was bright, the next we were cast in complete and utter darkness. On and on it went for about a full minute. The elevator car shook again, and then it unexpectedly plummeted a few feet. Aaron and I lunged into each others’ arms screaming like teenage girls watching a horror flick. Then the lights steadied back on, and the car was rising back up through the building. *Ding. Ding. Ding.* The elevator rose higher and higher, passing floor after floor, seemingly much faster than I’d ever seen it move before.

I panicked in Aaron’s arms, “Why is it taking us back up again?”

“I’m not sure.” He then gave a guess, “Maybe it’s just glitching or something.”

“Glitching!” I screeched. I looked at the floor we were now passing. “We’re eight floors above the ground, riding in an elevator you think is *glitching*!” I then realized I was in Aaron’s arms, and he in mine. We jumped apart the moment it registered.

Aaron gripped my shoulder. “We’re going to be fine.”

It was only seconds later, but it felt much longer than that. The elevator came to a screeching stop on the 10th floor. There wasn’t a button marked ‘10’. There was instead a ‘PH’. I wasn’t sure what it stood for. The doors pulled apart, welcoming us to a perfectly square room. The two of us were as reluctant as ever to step off the lift, but it was better than staying onboard the faulty old elevator. The square room was lined with the same needle-felt carpet that lined all the hallways throughout the hotel, and the walls were coated with the same illustrations of ‘*Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*’. To the right of us was a single door framed by gold coated light fixtures identically shaped like dodo birds. The door was painted black just as every door to every suite. Nothing odd about that. There wasn’t a room number though. Instead a word was spelt out across the door in shiny gold letters.

Aaron read aloud, “Penthouse?”

The word had a strange weight to it. I could feel it in my body, fogging my mind, heavy on my chest; it weighed me down the same as would the feeling of indigestion. I stood in the middle of the square room facing the door. I just kept staring at it, as though it were the eyes of a familiar face that I just couldn’t quite recognize. *Ding.* We were long out of the elevator, but still I could hear the sound it made when passing floors. *Ding.* I kept my focus on the gold letters mounted on the black door, but my vision started to blur, and the letters began to jumble. *Ding.* A sharp sting then pulsed between my eyes. I pinched the bridge of my nose, winching. I tried to suppress the pain by clamping my eyes tightly shut. *Ding. Ding. Ding.* The sting persisted, sharper than ever. I dove myself so deeply into my mind that I became lost somewhere in the depths of my own unconsciousness. There I found something...a piece from my childhood that I had long forgotten. Suddenly, I was a child again.

* * *

Ding.

I was a little boy, no older than four years old by the looks of it. The elevator rose through the building, passing floor after floor. I was with my birthmother, at a time back when she was still alive. I looked a lot like her. We both had red hair, green eyes, and freckles speckling our

faces. While my hair was always a shaggy mess, hers was long and lush. She had a fuller figure than I had. I must have gotten my awkward gangly build from my dad's side of the family. She wore a tight leather jacket. I remember that jacket. She used to wear it all the time. I looked up at my mom. I knew she was nervous. She only ever nibbled on her thumbnail when she was.

The elevator stopped at the top floor, its doors slowly opening to allow us through. My mom and I rolled our luggage out of the elevator, across the square room, right up to the penthouse's front door. She reached into her leather jacket, feeling around until she retrieved a sleek gold key. She went to unlock the door when I noticed her hands were shaking.

I looked up at her and asked, "Mommy, are you okay?"

"I'm just a little afraid, Collin." She then dropped and crouched so that we could be face to face. She mustn't have been sleeping well. She had heavy bags under her eyes. They were so dark. So sunken in. This was the work of not only one rough night of sleep, but that of many. Her pupils had trouble focusing. They were quivering. "Do you remember?" She grabbed my forearms forcefully. "Collin, do you remember what I told you on the airplane over here?"

Her grip was so strong that it left me wincing. "...that we were going on an adventure together?"

"Yes sweetheart, but not that part." She clarified, "I mean the part about me having a mommy the same as you do...your grandmother."

Her grip tightened. "Mommy, you're hurting me."

She didn't loosen her hold, but insisted instead. "Collin, answer me. Do you remember?"

"I remember."

"Well, I haven't seen my mother in a very long time and so I'm nervous."

This was very confusing for me to wrap my mind around. "But won't she be happy to see you?"

"You don't know my mother." She finally released me, then cupped my hands and kissed my little fingers. "You'll protect me, won't you, Collin?" She clung to my hands like she was clinging to the last lifejacket on a sinking ship. "Collin," her quivering eyes worked overtime to hold with mine, "you'll protect me, won't you?"

"I'll always protect you, Mommy." I puffed out my chest and declared, "Just like a Power Ranger!"

"Yes, just like a Power Ranger." She hugged me, squeezing so hard it nearly hurt.

* * *

"Collin," I felt Aaron's firm grip on my shoulder again, pulling me back to the present, "Collin, are you feeling okay?"

I slowly opened my eyes. I was back staring at the penthouse door. "Yeah..." I blinked a few extra times until my childhood memory faded completely. "I'm okay." But I wasn't. Not really. I was feeling lightheaded and a little nauseous. I continued to stare at the door, bits and pieces of the memory pulsating against my skull. That couldn't have been real. Could it? *No way*, I thought. I wasn't from New York City. In fact, I was born clear across the country! I grew up in the suburbs of Los Angeles, California. Nowhere near here. I'd never even left the state until I was 17 years old when my parents moved me and my siblings to France. I'd never stepped foot in New York City. Especially not the Langham Hotel. *Right?*

"This is creepy."

I freed myself from out of my thoughts, then whirled around to find Aaron examining a painted portrait mounted on the wall directly across from the penthouse door. He was right. The portrait was creepy. It was just as strange as all the portraits throughout the whole hotel. This one depicted the back of a raven seated at a writing desk, vigorously typing away on an old typewriter. That wasn't even the creepy part that Aaron was referring to. What was unsettling about the portrait mostly was that the raven's head was twisted back to face us with eyes gouged out.

I felt a nervous shiver. "I don't like it."

"Yeah, me neither," agreed Aaron, his voice just as shaken as mine. "Should we head back to our room now?"

I pulled my eyes away from the creepy portrait. "Yes, please."

We assembled back into the elevator, and just when the gold doors were pulling closed, I heard a faint '*Meow*.' I shot my arm between the closing doors, and they automatically pulled back open again.

Aaron was left surprised. "Why did you do that?"

"Didn't you hear it?"

"Hear what?" he asked.

"...hear what? Are you kidding? It was clearly a meow."

His forehead crinkled. "*A meow?*"

I stepped off the elevator and right back into the square room, left standing between the penthouse and the raven portrait.

"I keep seeing this cat," I began, hoping I wasn't sounding too crazy. "His name's 'Cheshire'. He's always coming and going. One moment he's there, the next he's gone. I feel like he's trying to tell me something. Or warn me...I don't know."

Aaron spoke just as gently as might a nurse when speaking to an ill patient, "And do you see this cat now?" he worried.

"You think I'm crazy?"

"All the best people are," he said, catching a piece of wallpaper illustrated of the Mad Hatter balancing a tall, unsteady stack of tea cups. For a brief moment, it was as though Aaron had fallen right into Wonderland, and then he appeared to quickly shake off the feeling. "If the hotel has a cat living here, who cares? Some buildings in New York City have stray cats living in them, and no one cares to do anything about it because they get rid of mice."

"Mice!" I squealed.

"It's cheaper than hiring an exterminator."

"So they hire cats to do it instead?" I really didn't like the sound of that.

Aaron shrugged it off. "Come on. I'm getting sleepy." He looked at his cellphone screen. "It's close to midnight now. Let's get to bed. We'll regret it tomorrow if we don't."

We turned for the elevator. Just as Aaron hit the button to open the doors, I heard the 'meow' again. This time Aaron couldn't deny hearing it. The two of us slowly twisted back around. That's when we found the penthouse door had been cracked open.

Aaron's throat got suddenly very dry. He swallowed, then asked, "Was that door always open?"

"I honestly don't remember."

Meow. It was coming from inside the penthouse. I was sure of it now. I didn't know why I cared so much about finding this cat, but I did. I seized the gold knob, swung the door open, and then went right inside—straight through a wall of darkness.

"Collin," Aaron whispered aggressively within the doorframe, calling for me through the dark, "we're not supposed to be in here. If Mr. Hinkley catches us snooping around rooms we don't belong in, he might just kick us out of the hotel. Then where will we go—the Hilton?!" He glanced over his shoulder. There he found the raven's gouged out eyes looking back at him. He then mumbled under his breath, "What am I thinking. The Hilton sounds perfect."

I felt around the walls, finding dust and dampness before I found a switch. Once I did, I turned it on, and the whole penthouse brightened to life by dusty old lightbulbs that hadn't been used in years. The penthouse wasn't just a suite, but a whole apartment. It was long. The front door opened up to the living room, and the living room opened to the dining room, and the kitchen followed after. It was three different rooms combined in one, separated only by regal furniture. The furniture was all stunning, so well made that they appeared works of art in their own right, but the apartment itself was cluttered with many tacky trinkets. There were little sculptures displayed throughout, but they were all cheap-looking. They seemed secondhand, like garage sale finds or thrift store purchases. And there were a lot of them. A whole lot of them.

I passed through the living room, stopping at an end table where I got the creeps from a porcelain clown statue. The clown was holding a colorful assortment of balloons with a chipped red nose. I continued into the conjoining room where I found a fruit basket as the centerpiece of the dining room table. It was a beautiful glass-blown basin sitting on the back of a very tacky ceramic monkey; the monkey's lips were painted so red I'd thought it was wearing lipstick. I kept moving through the apartment, then stopped at a planter propped up at the entrance of the kitchen. It was a cheetah made of glass, with a bouquet of flowers made of polyester fabric flourishing out of its mouth. I then noticed a dark hallway lined with a few doors. I gathered there were at least two bedrooms.

"Who's this woman?"

I whirled back around. Aaron had decided to join me after all. He was inside the penthouse, standing at a wall scattered with a collage of photographs. The pictures were all sealed in cheap plastic frames, black and flimsy. Each of the many photographs depicted the same woman throughout many years, a whole lifetime spread throughout the walls.

Aaron determined, "Whoever she was, she must have lived here. Just look." His gaze swept across the wall, down the length of the apartment. Every space of wall was covered in more photographs. "She's everywhere."

I went to the wall, observing the photographs like I was strolling through a gallery in a museum. Some of the photographs were small, others large; a few were so grand that they were near floor to ceiling. In her youth, the photographs were taken in black and white, but as the pictures went on, the years followed in color. The ones taken in color showed a distinguished woman, eyes aged with wisdom but with the same spirit she had in her younger years. She was very pretty. She had long thin legs, curvy hips, and short platinum-blond hair styled in large, exaggerated curls. In every photograph the woman was performing. There were several of her dancing, one of her dressed comically as Charlie Chaplin, another of her seductively modeling a sparkling dress on a sandy beach, singing into a microphone, bowing on a stage with roses sprinkled at her feet. She belonged on a red carpet, a starlet, an icon—my eyes swept across the apartment, not a space of wall left without her face—a bit of a narcissist as well. She was a

chameleon. She was sometimes a singer, other times a dancer, an actor, a comedian, she did it all and she seemed to do it well. There was one particular photograph that drew me in. It was the largest in the bunch. Once again the woman was on stage, singing into an old fashioned microphone. She wore a flapper dress, matching black gloves, adorned with lavish jewelry, and finished off with a feather boa wrapped around her slender shoulders. There was something about the photograph, the woman, her eyes...I couldn't place it. But I swear, she had me under her spell.

"These are cool."

I snapped out of my thoughts. My attention was brought to Aaron now rummaging through a cardboard box filled up with old vinyl records. Each one of the large black disks had a small piece of ripped tape stuck to them, and written in sharpie was the name of the song. Aaron flicked through the records, stopping only to announce the artist and title of the song before moving on to the next. "'Diamonds Are A Girl's Best Friend', by Marilyn Monroe, 'California Girls' by the Beach Boys, 'Billie Jean' by Michael Jackson." And then he noticed in a smaller print on each record, "Performed by 'Ruby Hart'. They're all covers," he realized, looking up and finding himself face to face with a portrait of the woman singing on a stage. "They're all covers sung by her."

I took a step closer to a portrait, this one taken of her tap dancing. "Ruby Hart," I repeated, a lightheaded sensation following suit. I pressed my palm against my forehead, moaning from the sudden discomfort. I continued to hold my gaze on the portrait. "Why does that name sound so familiar?"

Aaron freed a record from the cardboard box. He blew a layer of dust off it and was then able to read the title. "'I Can't Help Falling In Love With You' by Elvis Presley." He smiled. "I had to learn to waltz to this song back when I was in dance class."

Aaron's statement was shocking enough to end my lightheadedness. I faced him with a smile. "You were in dance class?"

"My mom made me take it back when I was twelve years old." He smirked with a little laugh. "She thought it would be good for me to learn how to dance so that I could impress the ladies when I got to high school. Boy did she miss the mark on that one." He utilized the bottom seam of his shirt to whip clean the rest of the record, cleansing it from years of dust. "I did meet my best friend Kaeli in dance class, which probably confused my mom even more." He giggled, "I think she might have thought we were dating." He threw me a side smirk. "I bet you didn't think I had moves."

I shook my head with a smile. "I can't picture it."

"You want to see?"

"You dancing? Absolutely!"

Aaron was annoyingly handsome. He didn't even have to try. He had perfect skin, a tight build, and dimpled cheeks. To top it off he had perfect hair; chestnut brown which was always styled to perfection. He was 18 years old. The same as me, but there was a difference. Not his age, nor his boyish good looks were the factor. It was something else. Something deeper. He radiated child-like youth. There was something about him that wouldn't allow him to grow up. Not entirely, at least. Aaron was gifted with eternal youth, and so the thought of him foolishly dancing seemed to fill me with joy.

“Alright, but only under one condition,” Aaron placed the vinyl record on an old record player, securing the large black disk upon the player’s platter. He then moved the stylus onto the record, and then the melody began to drift free, “I need a partner.”

“A partner?” All my joy suddenly evaporated from my being. “No way!”

“I can’t do the waltz without a partner.” The smile on his face was telling. I knew he found as much joy in the thought of me dancing as I to him. Possibly more so. “Come on,” he insisted. “It’ll be fun.”

I pouted. “I think you and I have very different opinions on the meaning of the word ‘fun’.”

The vinyl was left spinning on the record, and the song continued through the still air. The song was ‘I Can’t Help Falling in Love With You’ by Elvis Presley, but it was a cover sung by the former occupant of the penthouse—the mysterious Ruby Hart. The words were the same, but the song was different. It was still beautiful, but sung with an eerie, haunting undertone.

Aaron approached me. He took my left hand and placed it over his shoulder. He then placed his right hand on my upper back, pulling me close enough to feel his warm breath. He took my right hand with his left, our fingers folding into each other until we were linked. Our eyes met, so close we were nearly hugging. All of a sudden, I felt just as frightened as I was back when we were in the elevator when it dropped.

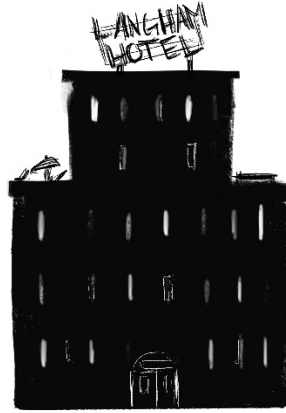
Aaron smiled. “You look terrified.”

“I am.”

“Don’t be,” he assured me. “Just follow my lead.”

The music was playing, the songstress’s words clouding my mind as it drifted through the air that was pollinated with dust we’d stirred from only just standing there. Aaron stole a step, and then so did I; I was constantly looking to his feet so that I knew how to follow. 1-2-3. 1-2-3. We waltzed. Our feet shuffled. Our bodies glided. Together we were synchronized in perfect motion. At first I felt silly. Perhaps even embarrassed. But then I lost myself in the moment; the words of the song so haunting I felt like I was swept away in some forgotten time. I finally looked up and met eyes with Aaron. We continued in a circle, trusting him completely not to bump us into any of the many gaudy trinkets that adorned the place. We went on parading around the living room. Our breaths were steady. Our heartbeats were in sync. It was as though our souls had begun to vibrate at the same frequency. The song then began to drift faster, and Aaron’s pace quickened to match the beat. We were circled by the many photographs of Ruby Hart, her haunting song coming to a climax. Faster and faster our feet glided to the beat. 1-2-3. 1-2-3. The faster we went, the more the room began to spin. The many photographs, the assortment of gaudy trinkets—Ruby’s voice drowning out my thoughts like I had one too many drinks. It all began to bleed together.

I’m not sure what happened next. All I know is that everything went dark.



Chapter 8

One moment I'm waltzing with Aaron in the penthouse, moving to the eerie melody of Ruby Hart's rendition of Elvis Presley's 'I Can't Help Falling In Love With You', the next I'm four years old again. The memory picked up exactly where the last one ended.

Mommy was crouched on her knees examining me carefully for faults. She fixed my hair, tucking a long red curl back behind my ear. My ears were awkward. They looked to have grown faster than the rest of me. She then licked her thumb. She tried to scrape away the bit of dried cream caked on my cheek from the cannoli we had gotten from Ferrara's Bakery down in Little Italian.

"Don't slouch." She straightened my shoulders. "My mother hates that." She then swatted my hand away from my face. "Don't pick your nose either."

"Sorry."

She gave me one final look over. "The last thing I need is that woman criticizing my parenting."

Mommy rose back up. She stood there for a moment just staring at the black door. In her left hand she gripped her suitcase handle, in her right hand she enveloped the gold key; she held the key so tightly that her palm had begun to turn a deep shade of red.

"Relax," she mumbled to herself. "Relax, Lacie." She stole another breath. "Dr. Stein warned you that this wouldn't be easy. Remember, you're not a child anymore. Her words are only words. They're nothing more than just that." She stressed to herself, "They can only hurt you if you allow them to."

I vaguely remember the name Dr. Stein. The name was only ever brought up in heated arguments between Mommy and Daddy. I'd never met him, but I knew he was a therapist.

"Be strong, Lacie. Be strong."

Mommy was done stalling. She unlocked the door and nudged it open. She then rolled her suitcase into the penthouse. She forgot about me, and so I followed her and rolled my little suitcase in after her. The penthouse looked exactly as it did in the present: stunning furniture, tacky trinkets, with many framed photographs of Ruby Hart covering the walls. It just smelt worse. It was some awful combination of alcohol, cigarettes, and cheap perfume so thick it must have lived on the walls and all of the furniture.

“Mr. Hinkley, is that you?” came a hoarse voice from the bedroom down the hall. “If it is, have maintenance check on my water pressure again. I swear, it’s hardly a dribble. And please, send someone to pick up the *Times* first thing tomorrow morning. I spotted a few critics in the audience during tonight’s performance. I expect rave reviews. I had the crowd roaring!”

I gave a tug on the seam of Mommy’s leather jacket. “Mommy, who’s that?”

She ignored me. She came back, after parking our luggage by the sofa, and crouched down to check my face one last time. She licked her thumb again, and then took another go at the cannoli cream smeared on my cheek. “God dammit, Collin!” She gritted her teeth, her forehead lines ridden with worry. “Can’t you eat like a normal person?” She went so hard at my cheek it was starting to chafe me.

I teared up. “I’m sorry.”

“I don’t want to hear it from her. I really don’t.” I wasn’t sure who she was mumbling to, whether it was me, herself, or some voice in her head. She straightened up, then threw me a warning. “Whatever you do, don’t mention her age.”

“Mr. Hinkley, are you listening? I asked—”

“It’s not Mr. Hinkley.” Mommy took a deep breath, and then exhaled slowly. “It’s me, mother.”

There was a moment of silence, so quiet I could hear the electrical whine of old wires in the walls.

“Lacie?” asked the hoarse voice from behind the bedroom door. “Lacie, is that really you?” The door swung open, and there stood the woman from all the photographs on the wall. She was middle-aged, but the years of abuse of both liquor and cigarettes had her appearing that she was creeping closer to her early sixties. She tried to conceal age as best she could with a painted face, perfected curls, and her choice of garments. She wore a tight flapper dress that clung flawlessly to the curves of her lean body. “Oh darling, it is you!” She strutted into the living room with open arms.

Mommy hugged her, more guarded than affectionate. “Hello, mother.”

“Let me have a look at you.” She pulled back, peered Mommy up and down, and then gritted her teeth. “You’ve gotten heavier.” She estimated, “Ten, maybe fifteen pounds.” She gave her daughter another look over. “You aren’t eating junk food, are you? You know it’ll kill you.”

“Honestly, mother. You haven’t seen me in seven years and my weight is the first thing that comes out of your mouth?”

“Oh, don’t be so sensitive.” She sat on the couch while reaching for the coffee table. She claimed a cigarette out of a dispenser box made of fake, cheap-looking crystal. “Has it really been seven years?” She tapped the cigarette onto the glass table, and then fastened it to the end of a long, bejeweled holder. She swiped a match and then lit the cigarette. “So many years...not a visit, not even a damn phone call.” She took a puff and then blew the smoke from the corner of her mouth.

“Mother!” Mommy dropped to clamp her hands over my ears, but it was already too late. I had already heard the word that I wasn’t supposed to hear.

The Flapper took another puff, then peered at me through the haze of smoke. “Is that a...*child*?”

Mommy retorted, “Of course he’s a child. What does he look like?”

“Well, what are you doing with a child?” The Flapper cringed, making me feel as gross as a mouse rummaging through a kitchen pantry. “Where are his parents?”

“I am his parent!”

She took another hit, held it in, and then relaxed herself with another exhale. “Since when have you had a child?”

“Since he was born, mother.” Mommy turned away, massaging her forehead while mumbling angrily under her breath, “She’s unbelievable. I don’t know why I expected anything different. Dr. Stein told you, ‘you must accept her for who she is.’ She’ll never change.” She bumped into an end table, knocking over the porcelain clown statue. “She’s got me all flustered now.” Mommy propped the clown back up. She didn’t seem to notice that its round red nose had chipped in its fall to the floor.

The old Flapper crossed her bare legs, then leaned forward to ash her cigarette in a tacky, glass bowl. “Why are you getting yourself so worked up? How should I know you had a child?” She returned the tip of the cigarette holder back against her painted red lips. “For crying out loud, Lacie, you haven’t bothered to pick up a phone in seven years.”

She shot back, “My phone number has never changed. I don’t recall any missed calls from you, either.”

The old Flapper held her bejeweled, cigarette holder loosely between her fingers adorned with various rings, looking just as comically devious as would a cartoon villain. “Why would I have called you? Don’t you recall? You’re the one who left. Storming out of the apartment after calling me a ‘narcissist’, a ‘bitch’—”

“Mother, please!” Mommy dropped to cover my ears again.

“What?” she chuckled through a mouthful of smoke. “You’re afraid the boy is going to hear the word ‘bitch’, and what—turn into an axe murderer? Come off it, dear. Don’t tell me you’ve become another one of those overbearing mothers. It doesn’t suit you. The boy is going to hear the word plenty of times in his life. If you’re lucky, he won’t call you one the same as you did to me.”

I looked up at Mommy and asked, “What’s a bitch?”

“A female dog,” she answered flatly.

I didn’t understand why Mommy would get so worked up over a female dog. “We have a bitch back at home,” I said, leaving the Flapper choking on a mixture of smoke and giggles.

“Great! Just great.” Mommy combed her hair back behind her ears. “Thank’s a lot, mother.”

“What? It was funny. The boy is actually funny.” She leaned toward me through a cloud of smoke. “Your mother’s never had a sense of humor. Not ever.”

Mommy was so angry that her face was red. “We’ve been here for less than five minutes and already you’ve insulted me and taught my four year old son how to curse.”

“Well, perhaps now he won’t get teased on the playground.” She threw me a judgmental look, one filled with ridicule. “Not likely though. Just look at him. Scrawny little thing, isn’t he?”

“This was a mistake,” Mommy realized out loud. “I shouldn’t have come. Dr. Stein warned me how this would go and he was absolutely right.”

“Who the hell is Dr. Stein?” The Flapper then pressed her hand against her temple. “If he’s your therapist, God help him.”

Mommy’s fingers curled into fists. “I’ll have you know that Dr. Stein so happens to be not only a skilled therapist, but a brilliant psychiatrist.”

The Flapper seemed to find more interest in her cigarette than even her daughter. “Darling, I’m just happy you’ve finally decided to seek professional help. He’s got you on meds, hasn’t he?”

“Actually no,” she relayed as though she were saying ‘ha-ha’. “Dr. Stein is against Western medicine. He so brilliantly believes that medication is only a band-aid to cover the problem. A temporary fix. This past year, he’s been working with me on cleansing my body so that we could get to the root of my trauma.”

The Flapper rolled her eyes. “And that’s why you’re here, is it? I’m the boogie-man. The shadow of your past.” She tossed up her nose. “Ungrateful. You have no idea the opportunities I gave up to be your mother.”

The more frustrated Mommy’s mother made her, the more red her face became. “What was I thinking coming back here? Seven years and still you haven’t changed a bit. Collin!” I was so enamored by the flapper woman, dressed in gleaming sparkles and shining sequins, smoking from a long, bejeweled cigarette holder, that I didn’t even realize Mommy was shouting at me. “Collin, get your suitcase. We’re leaving!”

“But we just got here.”

“Now!” she insisted.

Mommy rolled her suitcase back over to the front door when something suddenly dawned on her. “I need to call us a taxi.” She reached into her leather jacket for her cellphone just to discover that the battery was dead. “Shit! I mean shoot!” She shoved it back into her pocket. “I need a phone.” Mommy went through the apartment, combing her hands through her tangled hair as she went. She wiped her face and then she nibbled on her thumbnail. She was spacey and flustered, seeming not all together. In fact, she looked just about ready to burst from the seams and become unhinged. Mommy located a telephone on top of a stand near the fireplace. It was an old wired phone with a rotary dial bedazzled with glittering rhinestones. Mommy picked up the phone and started to spin the dial.

The Flapper rolled her eyes again. “Lacie, I’m the actress, not you, so save the theatrics for me.” She gestured to the sofa with a wave of her cigarette. “Sit. Let’s chat. What’s going on, darling? Why are you really here?”

Mommy slowly lowered the phone from her ear. “We’re in trouble, mom.” She placed the phone back down, and that’s when I noticed the fear in her eyes. “We need somewhere to stay for a couple of weeks. At least, until I can figure things out.”

* * *

“Collin.” I felt someone shaking me. “Collin, wake up.”

I moaned awake, eyes slowly peeling open to find Aaron knelt down hovered over me. “What’s going on? What happened?”

“You don’t remember?”

“Remember what?” I then realized I was lying on the floor. I got as far as my knees before the dizziness hit me. There I remained, gazing around at my surroundings. We were still in the penthouse. “What happened?” The two versions of the penthouse, the one from the past and the one in the present were blurring together.

Aaron’s voice and expression revealed his worry for me. “I was teaching you how to waltz,” he reminded me in a soft and gentle tone. “We were dancing, and then all of a sudden, you passed out.”

I didn't remember passing out. "I did?"

"Yeah." The worry in Aaron's voice thickened. "Collin, is it your heart?"

"No. I mean...I don't think so." Aaron helped me to my feet. I stumbled, but he caught me before I fell. "I think I might not have eaten enough today. If I don't eat enough, the anti-rejection medication can sometimes make me a little dizzy."

Aaron glanced down at his wristwatch. "It's midnight. I don't know what restaurants would be open this late."

"That's all right. I have some snacks back at our room." I glanced around the penthouse. My head was throbbing, but I didn't want Aaron to worry so I played it off as though I wasn't really in pain. "Can we go?"

"Yeah. For sure."

Aaron was being attentive to me on our journey back to our hotel room. He kept watching me, like he was scared I was going to pass out again. I think I might have scared him more than I'd first realized. To be honest, I kind of scared myself. The piece of childhood memory left me with a lot of questions, but I couldn't dwell on it with Aaron watching me so closely. I shelved those questions in the back of my mind, and tried to forget it for now. Aaron and I changed into our pajamas right when we got back to our room. I had just slipped on a pair of comfortable cotton sweats and a plain electric-blue shirt when my stomach made an awful grumbling sound. The hotdog from Pasquale's cart seemed ages ago. I claimed my backpack and then got myself comfortable in bed. I had purchased some candy at the toyshop earlier that day, and so I dug into the open mouth of my backpack and ripped open a package of Skittles. I poured out a handful, a rainbow of colors, and then I popped them into my mouth one after the next.

I noticed Aaron sitting on the edge of his bed, texting on his cellphone, also dressed now in sweats and a plain shirt. "Would you like some?" I offered.

"Yeah—sure." He finished typing and then left his cellphone to charge on the nightstand between our beds. "I just had to check in with my mom and dad. My mom texted me about a hundred times today." I poured a quarter of the bag out into his open hand. "I'm an only child and so being off at college has been pretty tough on them. Especially my mom."

"Where do they live?"

He popped a blue Skittle into his mouth. "Los Angeles." He chewed, his face sour, but then he swallowed it down and his cheeks relaxed.

"That's where I'm originally from, too," I said, thinking that was quite the coincidence seeing how we both now attend the same university, not just out of the country, but one that was clear across the world. If that wasn't strange enough, we discovered that the homes we grew up in were only a ten minute drive from each other, our high schools were rivals, and our parents used to shop at the same grocery store. And yet, somehow it took us this long to finally meet.

"Do you ever miss home?" Aaron asked.

"What—LA? No, at least not anymore." I thought it over. "I was so mad when my parents first moved us to France. LA was the only home I ever knew. All my friends were there. My cousin too. He's my best friend..." The memory of my birthmother unveiled itself in my mind. "My mom's grave is there." I shook the memory away. "I thought my dad and stepmom were crazy for moving us all to an old abandoned castle in a foreign country. But that castle became our home. It changed my life." I then realized, "It changed all our lives. Honestly, I think it helped make us a family." I popped another Skittle into my mouth. This one was red. "What about you? Do you ever miss home?"

Something changed in Aaron that moment, but I wasn't entirely sure why. I wondered if he had heard me. It was like he might have forgotten that I was in the room with him. He just sat there staring out at nothing. He had a look on his face that suggested he was in deep thought, thinking of something...thinking of *someone*.

"Aaron?"

"Huh?" He snapped out of it. "Oh—um...sure, I'll have some more." He reached out for my bag of Skittles even though that wasn't the question I'd asked him.

I flipped the bag upside down. It was empty. "I think they're all gone," I said, disappointing myself and I wanted more. I then ventured back into my backpack and drew out a colorful box of what looked like jelly bellies, but weren't exactly what they seemed to be. "You want to try some?" I asked with a nervous smile.

He craned for a better look. "What are they?"

"They're Harry Potter candy—Bertie Bott's Beans. They have every flavor you could think of, just like in the books." I flipped the box over and looked at the printed label with all the flavors listed. "Some of them actually sound pretty good. They got blueberry, watermelon, green apple. But they also got some really nasty ones mixed up in there to trick you. Like earthworm, dirt, soap—I think I would puke if I got an earwax flavor."

Aaron made a twisted face. "Why would you buy that? They sound terrible."

"It might be fun." I ripped into the plastic jacket and then yanked off the lid like a Christmas present I couldn't wait to open. All the flavors were mixed up together making a colorful display. I held the box out for Aaron. "Would you care to do the honors?"

"Together." He closed his eyes and reached in, then plucked one bean out of the box. "And no peeking."

I also claimed a single bean without looking at the color which would have determined which flavor it was. "On the count of three," I instructed.

We locked eyes and then counted off together, "One...two...THREE!" We threw them into our mouths, equally terrified by what was to come. It took a second for my tastebuds to kick in, mainly because my nerves were overpowering all my other senses. But then the sugary sweetness puffed out my cheeks.

"Yum! I think I got cherry." I glanced over at Aaron and could see the exact moment when his tastebuds went into gear. His eyes went round and watery, and his whole face puckered up.

"Black pepper," he choked. He snatched a water bottle from off the nightstand, screwed off the lid, and then took a great big gulp. He gargled, then swooshed the water around in his mouth like a washing machine. The awful facial expression he was making had me assuming that the taste of black pepper still lingered.

"I think I should probably stop while I'm ahead." I stowed the box of candy back into my backpack.

Aaron quickly rejected, "No Way! We aren't stopping until you get a bad flavor too. It's only fair."

"I don't think I like this game anymore." I brought the box back out and set it on top of my lap. Again, I shut my eyes and picked a bean, thereafter hiding it within a fist so that I wouldn't be tempted to look at the flavor. Aaron also selected another. Blindly, of course. "Ready?" I asked, giggling at Aaron shaking his head rather than nodding. "One...two...THREE!"

We tossed them back like two cowboys with shots of whiskey. I braced myself while I chewed, tapping the floor, gripping my knees, getting ready to swallow it down quickly if it so

happened to be a disgusting flavor like Aaron's was. But it wasn't. A pleasant lemony tang washed over my tongue.

"Mmhm....that's so good!" I opened my eyes to find Aaron. "What did you get?"

He wrapped an arm around his middle while his face turned as green as the bean he had swallowed. "Booger flavor," he groaned, still struggling to swallow.

Just thinking about it got my gag reflexes going, but the look on Aaron's face had me choking on a laugh.

"Alright, best out of three." Aaron plucked another bean out of the box.

I got one as well. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

"I'm not sleeping until I see you grossed out."

I started, "One..."

He continued, "Two..."

We shouted, "THREE!"

My luck continued. I got a cinnamon bean, candy-floss flavor, marshmallow, and again cherry. Aaron, however, got stuck with grass, sausage, banana—which I didn't think was so awful, but then Aaron explained how he absolutely hated anything with banana flavoring, and so to him, it was yet another horrible fail. He then ended his last turn with rotten egg. Aaron was looking pasty and sick, and his stomach was rightfully upset with him, so we both agreed we were better off stopping for the night. We then slipped under the covers in our respective beds.

"Collin," Aaron began, "I had fun tonight."

"Yeah—me too," I said, though I was feeling a terrible knot forming in the pit of my gut.

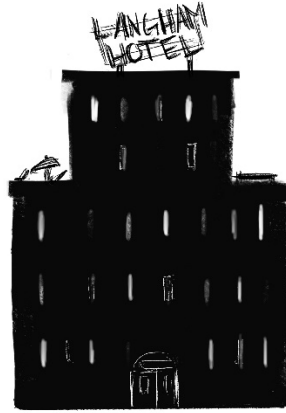
"Maybe tomorrow after class we could explore the city together. There's some cool statues I wanted to check out in Central Park, and a pizzeria I heard is amazing, and maybe even see what's so special about Time Square. What do you say?"

The knot grew bigger and heavier. "Sounds great."

Aaron reached over and shut off the antique lamp between us. "Goodnight, Collin."

I yawned. "Goodnight, Aaron."

I rolled over in bed with all the tastes of different flavor Bertie Bott's Beans swirling around in my mouth, and there I thought over the night. I had fun. Really, I did. I should think I'd be happy, but happy wasn't a feeling that I felt at all. Rather I felt guilty, like I was undeserving of joy and all things associated with it. At that moment, I realized something. *I was supposed to be dead.* But I was alive because Adam gave up his life to save mine. He should be the one to be traveling the world, to be eating Bertie Bott's...to be living. And yet it was me. How could I laugh, or smile, or be happy at all when the boy who I loved was gone forever? I couldn't. I tried to force myself to fall asleep, but I tossed and turned for a good majority of the night. Aaron drifted off with far more ease than I was having. I could hear him already snoring, and could see his face buried in one of his deflated-looking pillows. I snatched one of my pillows out from under my head, then turned over and snuggled the pillow like a teddy bear. That's when I let my childhood memory slip back to the surface of my mind. I was left with a thought as I finally drifted off—*have I stayed at this hotel before?*



Chapter 9

The alarm clock on my cellphone went off promptly at seven o'clock that next morning, but I let it ring until it buzzed off the nightstand. I was still exhausted, so much so that the simple task of fetching my cellphone from off the floor to stop the ongoing blaring alarm came to be such a chore. I laid in bed for a while after, collecting energy and gathering my thoughts. It was then I noticed Cheshire curled up in a ball down at the foot of my bed, snoozing and purring all at the same time.

"There you are." I scooted over to run my hand through Cheshire's grey fur. "I was looking everywhere for you." His purr deepened into a rumble as he rubbed his fluffy head against my palm. "Who's a good kitty?" I mumbled in my best baby voice while scratching under his chin.

I sat there for a few minutes playing with Cheshire while trying to fully wake up. I tugged the long string out from the waistband in my sweats and used it to interrogate him. We made a game out of it. Cheshire kept trying to catch it with his meaty little paws. It was then that I realized Aaron's bed was empty. Just like yesterday morning, it was freshly made before I even got the chance to wake up. I let Cheshire catch the string, and then I left him to play with it. The fluffy Maine Coon went fumbling around in the hotel sheets, fidgeting with the string as though it were a mouse he was toying with until its death. With Cheshire now distracted, I got myself out of bed. I went straight into my duffle bag and got out a fresh pair of clothes for the day. It was on that quest that I found another embarrassing underwear Maureen had gotten me. They were a pair of tighty-whities, minus the white, but spotted with characters from an animated series I used to watch as a child: *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*. Maureen had gotten them for me as one of my Christmas presents last year. She must have thought they were funny. They weren't.

I had just gathered up all my clothes and toiletries when I came to an abrupt halt. Cheshire was gone. The string from my sweats was left in the sheets. I spun around the room, searching all four corners, but I couldn't spot the Maine Coon anywhere. It was unexplainable. First the cat was there, and then he wasn't, like he had disappeared straight into thin air. I had just gotten down on hands and knees, lifting up my quilt while stealing a peek underneath my bed, when the bedroom door opened and Aaron came sweeping in. He was showered, clothed, and his hair was annoyingly flawless as ever. I wondered how he managed to keep it so immaculate all the time without so much as a strand out of place.

“How long have you been up?” I asked, rising.

“Almost an hour.”

“An hour!” I exasperated. “How come you wake up so early?”

“You think I wake up looking like this?” He pointed up to his gorgeous locks. “This hair doesn’t just happen, you know. There’s a whole lot that goes into it.” He laid all of his hair supplies across his bed as he listed them out, “It takes a hairdryer, straightener, hair-paste, comb, and the most important of all, lots and lots of hairspray. The real tough kind, too.”

My eyes bulged when seeing all the different products. “Are you doing your hair or a science project?”

Aaron smirked, “That’s pretty funny coming from a guy with Ninja Turtles underwear.”

I quickly hid them behind my back with the rest of my clothes. “I didn’t buy them. My mom did.”—which sounded far worse after saying it out loud. “Whatever. I don’t care what you think. Ninja Turtles are cool!”

Aaron pulled out the top drawer in the dresser, fishing out a clean pair of *Power Rangers* socks. “Don’t worry. I have an embarrassing mom, too.” He folded them back into the drawer and then shoved it closed. “I’m starving. I’m going to head downstairs and check out breakfast before Billy steals all the good stuff. I’ll see you down there.” He hummed the theme song to *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* on his way out of the hotel room.

I was pretty hungry myself. My belly had nothing in it but candy. A warm meal sounded great, and so I quickly got myself ready for the day. I showered, changed, threw my backpack over my shoulder, and before I knew it, the elevator doors were opening up to the lobby. The breakfast table was lined this morning with chafers food warmers with stainless steel rolling tops. It wasn’t until I opened them up that I knew what was inside. Mr. Hinkley had set up a waffle station. The chafers had freshly baked waffles in them. Crisp and fluffy. Another chafers had maple sausages, another with many strips of crispy bacon, and the last one contained a kind of warm berry sauce to drizzle over the waffle. I was so hungry that I plucked a sausage, tucked it onto a waffle, then folded the sides into a taco that I finished on my walk through the lobby.

I joined my fellow peers over in the waiting lounge, everyone but myself immersed in a conversation—Charlotte was unsurprisingly the loudest and most talkative in the bunch. I kept quietly to myself in an armchair, sipping on the roasted coffee Aaron had poured for me. I tried to be discreet when taking my heart medication. Luckily, I hadn’t brought any attention my way. I popped the pills in my mouth. I claimed the mug, and the moment the coffee slushed against my lips, I was reminded of my childhood memory. I had forgotten all about it, and then it struck me like a ton of bricks. I tried to comprehend it, to make any sense of it, but couldn’t. I don’t remember ever having stayed at this hotel before. Especially not with my birthmother....my mom. I was four years old when she died. In the memory I was four as well. I came to the chilling realization that my mom must have died shortly after that memory occurred.

“Hey Collin, what’s up? You okay?”

I snapped out of my thoughts. I pulled the mug from my lips to find Sam leaning towards me. The rest of the students rambled on about a new hit television series. “Yeah, why?”

She put down her book and scooted closer from across the sofa. “You look...I don’t know, like you’re lost in your head.”

I knew I must have looked weird for Sam of all people to have noticed. She was always so busy reading a book and keeping to herself to notice anyone else.

"I'm fine." I took an actual sip of coffee when Sam's jingling bracelets caught my attention. There were a few of them that had earthy stones attached to stringy bands—some were different colors, others were different textures, one of them being just a clear jagged crystal.

"Sam," I pulled her away from her book again, "can I ask you something?"

She closed the novel. "Sure. What's up?"

"Those stones you're wearing...that's like a witch thing, right?"

"Spiritual, but you're on the right track," she answered in an almost condescending tone. "And the proper term is Wicca, not 'witch thing', and I'm sure plenty of people who practice Wicca use these stones."

"Sorry." She had a way of making me feel like a fool without even trying. "What are they for?"

"There's lots of stones and crystals and each of them has a different meaning and purpose. There are some that are said to calm the mind, absorb energy, enhance creativity, attract love, heal auras, balance chakras, repel negative energy, protect against evil spirits, and the list goes on."

I stopped her. "Evil spirits? Like ghosts and stuff?"

"I don't think all ghosts are evil spirits." She thought about it for a moment. "I'm sure they can be, just like living people can be, but I feel like most of them are just lost."

"So...you believe in that kind of stuff, right?" Even I didn't know what I was getting at with this interrogation.

"What kind of stuff?"

"Like...you know...*weird* stuff."

She was losing interest in the conversation at a rapid speed. "Are you calling me weird?"

"No! Not at all. I was just asking."

"Asking me what?" she pressed, my tongue too knotted to respond. "Collin, what exactly are you asking me?"

"I don't know," I answered truthfully.

"Good talk." She reopened her book and then leaned back into the sofa.

I must have really annoyed her, but it was difficult to tell because Sam typically and so easily was annoyed. I really didn't want to get on her bad side, mainly because I was pretty sure she could beat me up if she wanted to, and to be perfectly honest, I wasn't even sure myself what I was trying to ask her.

I had barely touched my coffee by the time Professor Skeffington showed up for class. She was looking particularly colorful this morning donned in her bright, new dashiki. She, like the rest of us, was freshly showered, smelling as tropical as a basket of freshly cut pineapples. Unlike yesterday her hair was out and breathing. She had big hair. It was thick and kinky—an afro that was naturally gorgeous.

She swept into the waiting lounge. "Good morning, class. I have quite the treat in store for us." She was giddy when she explained, "We will be spending the day at a local animation studio based here in New York City. The studio was founded by a dear friend of mine who also at your age attended the Art Institution in London. He has graciously offered to be our tour guide for the day. We will be learning the process of animation and what goes into the production of an animated feature including concept, design, and even storyboarding." She caught eyes with Aaron. "Aaron, I do believe that this is a hopeful career path of yours and so I would urge you to pay close attention. Please ask as many questions as you would like. This will be a great

opportunity for you. Make connections with the animators. Come graduation, you'll be grateful you had made them." Her gaze swept across the lot of us. "As for the rest of you. Each of you can learn something today. Animation, silly a concept as it may seem, combines all your individual talents. Billy," her dark eyes narrowed at Billy stuffing a whole waffle into his mouth, "today you can learn filmmaking from a different perspective than strictly live-action. Charlotte," Professor Skeffington pulled Charlotte's attention away from her cellphone, "Voice acting." She continued over to Sam. "Samantha, you can learn a thing or two about scriptwriting." She then ended with me, "And Collin, you might be interested in learning a bit about still photography." She summoned us all up onto our feet. "We should get going now if we hope to wrap the day up by five."

Mr. Hinkley appeared in the lounge with a stack of umbrellas. "I took the liberty of calling you all a cab. I expect it to arrive any minute now." He handed the umbrellas out to each of us. "I should forewarn you that the weather has been quite poor this morning and will most certainly carry on throughout the duration of the day, and well into the night. Please take one. Compliments of the Langham Hotel."

We all took an umbrella when Charlotte demanded the room's attention. "Voice acting...I can't believe I hadn't considered it before. I do reckon I would be rather good at it." She rubbed her throat while fantasizing about it. "People *have* told me that I have a soothing voice."

Sam mumbled, "A soothing voice that won't ever shut up."

"I think your voice is lovely." Billy threw his arm over Charlotte's shoulder and forced her against him. "Your voice is like a song, your eyes like the moon, and your succulent lips just waiting for my kiss."

"Was that poetry?" I laughed.

"That was definitely not poetry," Sam was quick to input.

Charlotte spun herself into Billy's beefy arms. "Do you really think my eyes are like the moon?"

"Baby, they're the brightest moon I've ever seen."

Sam's face twisted. "Aaaand I'm going to be sick."

"Not before me," added Aaron.

The mute bellhop opened the front door for us and then bowed us out of the lobby. There was a taxi van parked outside the hotel, engine rumbling in the roundabout driveway. We all climbed inside, buckled up, and then the van made its way through the labyrinth of a city. It was a gloomy day with lots of dark, swirling clouds hovering above the cluster of buildings. The rain was constant all day long. Even from inside the studio we could hear the fall of heavy raindrops drumming on the ceiling. I knew Aaron was grateful to Mr. Hinkley for supplying us all with umbrellas. Had it not been for the hotel manager, Aaron's hair would have resembled a style much closer to mine, which was always looking like a hairy, wet dog.

The day went on, and the storm persisted. After lunch at the studio cafeteria, we got a tour of a recording room where one of the voice actresses from the studio's latest project was reading scripted dialogue into a microphone. Aaron was very interested in what one of the animators was doing on a computer (syncing the actor's voice to the animated character). Sam was more interested in the movie script, and Charlotte was fascinated by how the actor was able to adjust her voice from high to low all whilst infusing different emotions into the pitch. Billy, on the other hand, was engrossed by the entire process from start to finish. Meanwhile, I strolled off from the group and wandered around, soon finding myself in a gallery filled with pictures of all

the studio's former projects. It was a big empty room filled with lots of framed stills all mounted in sequential order. I was surprised to find that some of the pictures were stills from an animated adaptation of the children's book, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. There were many beautiful pictures of silly animated characters, but I found myself transfixed with a particular photograph of a large gray cat with black stripes and bleak eyes—a cat, by the way, who wore a mischievous grin.

“Boo!”

I jumped and screamed, shivering from a tremor rippling through me. I whipped around, finding Aaron hunched over with his hands on his knees, chuckling away at my expense.

I gave him a shove. “What did you do that for?”

“I’m sorry.” He was laughing so hard that his eyes were watering. “I couldn’t help myself. I saw you standing there alone and couldn’t let the opportunity pass. I had to scare you.”

“You didn’t scare me.” It was an obvious lie, but I wasn’t about to give him the satisfaction. However, this only made him laugh harder and louder than before. While Aaron continued to chortle, I peered through the glass wall behind him and into the recording room. The whole class was gone. “Where did everyone go?”

“Professor Skeffington dismissed us,” Aaron answered. “Sam said something about going to a crystal shop and Billy and Charlotte went to grab dinner together which, by the way, sounded an awful lot like a date to me.” Aaron shrugged. “Anyways, I know we had plans to hangout tonight, but could we maybe reschedule for tomorrow night instead? Professor Skeffington wants to take me out to dinner with her animator friend so I can pick his brain on some career paths.”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Cool. I’ll see you tonight back at the hotel.”

Aaron left with Professor Skeffington and her animator friend, leaving me to another night all by myself. I was beginning to feel really lonely. I would have to walk the city again without a friend, and eat dinner at a table for one. I was missing Adam more than usual. Honestly, I missed him every day. Some days were really awful, others a bit easier than the day before, but today I was finding it to be one of those really tough ones. The rain wasn’t helping either. I stepped outside and popped open my umbrella. I made my way through the city, head hanging, not even bothering to avoid the many puddles scattered here and there along the filthy street. There really wasn’t much I could explore today with the weather being so poor. I had planned to go straight back to the hotel after grabbing some dinner, and I was on my way back with a full belly of fast food when I noticed Sam coming out of a little shabby crystal shop that was located in a sketchy part of the outskirts of the city. She had a small brown bag with her. She stood in front of the shop’s display window with her umbrella sprouted above her. She went into her bag and took another look at her recent purchase. It was a hefty crystal. Even from clear across the street I could see how sparkly it was, glinting in the day’s rarity of sunlight peeking through the gloomy grey clouds. Sam stuffed the crystal back into the bag, and then rounded the street corner. She descended a staircase and vanished into a subway station.

I rubbed my chin like a detective with a hunch. “Curiouser and curiouser.”

I bounded across the street between zooming cars and honking taxicabs, and then I swung open the door to the crystal shop. I entered, a bell dinging somewhere in the far depths inside. The store was dimly-lit with a sickly green glow that cast across shelves stocked with old musty books of spirituality, ranging from angels, to phantoms, to fairies living in the other realms.

Intrigued, I went ferreting through the titles. There was a book about cats that caught my eye. I read through the book's synopsis. Apparently, cats were inter-dimensional beings. Not only could they see other inter-dimensional beings, but could lower their frequency enough to slip themselves into different dimensions. I didn't even know what any of that meant! I continued through the shop. There was a display of tarot card decks, corked bottles of different sorts of herbs, sticks of sage, vials of oils, and many, many different types of candles. The shop smelled like an explosion of all these different things: herbs and incense, old books and melting wax. I strolled through the shop, wandering down an aisle so narrow I had to slide my way through. There I lingered over by a tray of little stones and crystals. There were so many of them, different colors, different textures, all labeled with a card written with its name and unique capabilities. There was a tiny purple piece of stone called Amethyst, and the card explained that it was associated with the opening of the third eye (whatever that meant). Then there was a black marble one called Onyx and it was noted to be used in the aid of heightening confidence. I noticed an orangey-brown one called Tiger's Eye and it was the stone of good fortune. I felt a peculiar prickling in my fingertips, washing away once I picked up a little black pebble. It was called Hematite, and it was supposedly known as the stone of protection.

"Interesting you should pick that stone," said a sandy skinned Persian woman. She flitted around in the back of her shop burning a stick of sage, walking clockwise around the shop while she smudged. "The Hematite rock is a powerful stone that can absorb negative energy. It can as well cast a shield of protection to ward off dark entities who wish to harm you." She waved her hand to help drift the smoke to higher, unreachable areas in the shop, like the ceiling's top corners or the crammed spaces behind fixtures. "You were drawn to that stone for a reason," she said in an enticing sort of way. "It seems that your spirit longs for protection against something or *someone*."

That sounded an awful lot like a sale's pitch to me. I remained skeptical while I watched the shopkeeper smudging, filling the area up with smoke and a burnt woodsy scent. I wasn't sure why people smudged, but the way she frolicked around her shop while mumbling under her breath had me assuming that it was some kind of a ritual.

"To tell you the truth, I'm not sure I buy into all of this hocus pocus," I said kindly, but also truthfully.

The woman didn't look all that right in the head, but a bit mental, and her gibberish about stones and evil spirits was just a tad over the top. It seemed like the performance of a good salesperson rather than a genuine conversation. I wasn't even sure what I was doing there or what brought me into the shop to begin with. I turned and headed for the door, and just as I pushed it open, the woman stopped me.

"Who's *Adam*?"

In the doorframe, I turned around ever so slowly. "What did you say?" I breathed with a shaky voice.

She stuffed the sage stick out like a cigarette and left it on the counter beside the register. "I see a castle...a castle lost in a dark forest...a dark forest cast in snow."

For a second she almost had me, but then I realized that she could have easily read about my family in the newspaper, or from an article online, or even watched the news when my whole family was being interviewed about the opening of Chateau Du Coeur on BBC. Nope—she was nothing more than a con-artist. I turned for the door when I stopped again. *But how could she have known about Adam?* I whirled back around to face her again.

She was looking at me, but at the same time I could tell that she wasn't really looking at me at all. "There was a secret..." she continued, "a secret that stretched far back in time...and then a murder...several murders..." She was now really looking at me. She pointed at my chest. "You weren't born with that heart....it was given to you...it was given to you by the boy named Adam."

"How could you possibly—"

"—have known that?" She stepped out of the way, revealing the counter, and upon that counter was a sign sealed in plexiglass:

Madame Sheva Wasem

Remember your past and learn your future by opening the door to the Other Side.

Palm Readings: \$10 per hand

Tarot Card Reading: \$25

Psychic readings: \$45 for 30 minute session, \$75 for 1-hour

Medium Connection: \$75

Past Life Regression: \$150

There's the sale's pitch. I didn't need to be a psychic to see that one coming. But it did sound somewhat fun and so I debated it. I knew a psychic reading was probably something that I shouldn't waste my money on, but there was so much she knew already and so I knew that she had to be the real deal. Was there such a thing as a legit psychic? I wasn't sure, but I did think it was worth a shot.

"I guess I'll do 30 minutes." I reached into my wallet and handed the shop owner a crisp 50 dollar bill. She handed me the change, and then led me over to the back of the shop, behind a plum-colored curtain with hanging gold tassels. Beyond the curtain was a room just barely larger than a broom closet. It could fit the small round table in the room and its two cushioned chairs, but nothing more. I half expected there to be a crystal ball on the table, but there wasn't, just a few stones and a deck of tarot cards sitting on top of a velvet tablecloth. We each took a seat, me instantly uncomfortable, but Madame Sheva Wasem looked calm and composed in her natural habitat—which, I gather she was in.

"Before we begin, I'll need to hold something significant of yours...something that would house a great deal of your energy. Do you have anything like that?"

I opened my backpack and handed her my camera. "Will this work?"

Right when she touched my camera it was like she had touched something unexpectedly warm or perhaps even sticky. "This will do perfectly." She held the camera with both of her hands, concentrated on the object, and then her eyes fell closed. "You're a photographer."

No shit, I thought. Did I really just waste \$45 for this stranger to tell me I was a photographer after I gave her my camera to hold? "Yes..." I played along even though I was already over it.

"This camera wasn't always yours...it belonged to someone else..."

Vague, but she was right. "Yea," I confirmed. "That's true."

"It once belonged to a young woman with flowing red hair...your mother..."

"Yeah..." I was stunned and blinking. "How could you know that?"

She popped one eye open. "This will work a whole lot faster without your interruptions."

"Sorry." I sunk back into my chair.

Her eyes fell closed again, and then she sat there in silence, focused, concentrating on what I could only assume was something she could see in the darkness of her mind. I sat there quietly, trying hard not to fidget. Sitting there so still and silently left my skin crawling.

“Are you staying at a hotel?” she asked me with her eyes still closed.

“Yes.”

“You’ve been there before...”

My eyes grew, and my heart sunk right into the pit of my fast food-filled belly. For a second, I forgot how to breathe.

The psychic fidgeted with my camera while her pupils shifted chaotically behind her lids. “You were just a boy...a little boy...something happened there.” Her face screwed and her forehead crinkled. “Something terrible happened there...” She started screaming in a different voice—my voice, but when I was younger. “*Mommy! Mommy, please!*” Her voice returned to its natural tone. “You were so scared...so *very* scared...there’s something in that hotel...something that’s always been there...that’s *still* in there...a Shadow Man.” Her face dropped, suddenly weakened, and then it lifted again with a new burst of energy. “A Shadow Man resides in that hotel...lurking in the dark...” Her eyes shot open, her pupils trembling.

“*Why is a raven like a writing desk?*”

“Huh?” A light trickle of blood seeped out of the psychic’s nose, and I felt my insides turn to ice at the sight of it. “Madame Wasem,” I reached for my nose, “you’re bleeding.”

She wiped the blood off on her forearm, then looked down at the smear of red. She trembled, “He knows we’re talking about him.”

“Who?” I asked.

She continued to stare at the blood on her arm. “He’s hungry.” She then looked up and met my eyes. “He thirsts for those with weakened minds.” Her face went so white that she looked ill. “You need to leave that hotel immediately.”

I could feel my heart vibrating. “You’re scaring me.”

“You should be.” She handed me back my camera. “That hotel you’re staying at vibrates with energy—*dark* energy. It’s not what it appears to be. The longer you stay there, the harder it’ll be to leave.” Her voice faltered, “In fact, some have never found their way out.” She claimed a stone from off the table and handed it to me. “Take this Hematite. It’ll protect you against dark entities. Hopefully it’s strong enough against what lurks in the shadows of that building.”

I opened my hand and peered at the rock. It looked like the tiny chip of an astroid tied to a string. It was black and jagged with lots of crevices. “Thank you, but I really shouldn’t take this. I don’t know what I believe.”

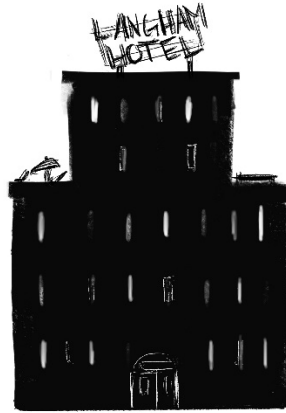
I offered the stone back to her, but she pushed my hand away. “You believe,” she insisted, “you’re just scared to learn what it means to accept that.”

“Well...thanks again.” I secured the necklace loosely around my neck, then swung my backpack over my shoulder. And just as I swooshed the plum-colored curtain out of my way, Madame Wasem stopped me again.

“Be mindful of your thoughts.” I turned and faced her, and instantly we locked eyes. “The best defense is being in the right state of mind.” She then picked up the deck of tarot and began to shuffle through them.

On that note, I raced back through the cluttered shop, knocked into a fixture, and stubbed my toe on a bucket of bargain books, before finally making it out in one piece. It was raining hard,

but I didn't even bother to open up my umbrella. I just headed for the subway and hopped onto the first train bound for the Langham Hotel.



Chapter 10

I was soaking wet by the time I came bursting through the hotel's lobby. I hunched over with my hands on my knees, out of breath. Not long after, I was standing in a new puddle, and that puddle caught the immediate attention of Mr. Hinkley. I saw his fancy buckled shoes before anything else. My gaze slowly traveled up his smooth black trousers, sharp tailcoat, perfectly knotted tie, and that old dispassionate face that was always chiseled with the same expression (which wasn't an expression at all).

"Mr. Winters, you're getting water all over my floor." He eyed my umbrella which was still folded closed with its question mark handle hanging off my wrist. He promptly took it from me. "I'm glad to see the umbrella I lent you came of use." He looked me over. "Why don't you go warm up by the fire." His white-gloved hand swung wide and outward, gesturing to the waiting lounge which was looking rather cozy with its crackling fireplace. "In the meantime, I'll go and fetch you a cup of tea from the kitchen."

"Thanks, Mr. Hinkley." I headed off for the lounge when I felt Mr. Hinkley's cold stare stop me dead. I whirled around slowly, then followed his gaze down to the floor. Trailing me was a track of mud. "Sorry about that." I lifted up a sneaker and took a peek underneath, finding it caked in mud. "I can clean that up."

"That won't be necessary." He might have kept himself calm, cool and collected without a facial expression whatsoever, but I had a hard time believing that he wasn't upset with me. "Archie," he summoned the bellhop who was wheeling an empty luggage cart out of the elevator, "would you be so kind and clean up this mess?"

Archie responded with action rather than any words. He abandoned his cart and went over with a mop and bucket he retrieved from a nearby broom closet. Mr. Hinkley then went off toward the hotel's kitchen. Archie dunked the mop into a soapy bucket, and then swished it across the marble floor.

"Sorry, Archie. That was my fault." I offered, "Let me help you out with that."

He might as well have been deaf. He ignored me, and continued the chore uninterrupted. He splashed the mop back into the bucket, rung it out, then swished and swashed until the marble floor glistened again.

I felt pretty awful for making a mess, but what was done was done. I went over to the waiting lounge to find Billy and Charlotte cuddling on the sofa, backs against a fire blazing in the tall hearth. Billy was eating leftovers, slices of sizzled steak that he was digging out of a tinfoil swan. Charlotte lay across the sofa with her head nestled in Billy's lap. She held up her cellphone, snapped a photograph of the two of them (Charlotte struck a pose with pinched cheeks and plump duck-shaped lips while Billy made a silly face that had him looking like a cartoon character).

"This ones adorable!" Charlotte celebrated. "Would you just look at how cute we are." She held up her cellphone for Billy to see. "Don't you think we look cute?"

He answered while working on a tough piece of steak, "The cutest, my sexy little Pudding-Pop."

I cringed—*Pudding-Pop*?

"You know what, I think I just might make this my new profile picture. What do you think of that, Billy?" She lifted up her head to ask him, "Do you think I should do it?"

He shrugged. "Sure."

"So you agree." She nestled her head back down in his lap. Charlotte was back on her cellphone filtering the photograph to enhance the image and to perfect the overall quality when she noticed me standing there. "Collin, there you are. We haven't seen you since class." She looked down at my muddy sneakers and the new puddle of water I had brought into the lounge. "Why are you all wet?"

"It's raining," I answered.

"Didn't you have an umbrella?" she asked.

"Yes, but I didn't use it."

"Why not?"

"Not sure."

She tucked a fist under her chin. "You're a very funny character, you know that, Collin?" I wasn't sure how to respond to that. "Would you care to join us?"

"Sure." I dropped into an armchair facing them. "Where's Aaron and Sam?"

Charlotte was back on her cellphone trying to post her new picture. "Well, Billy and I arrived back at the hotel the same time Sam had, but she didn't stay very long before she said we were making her sick with all our canoodling." She lifted back up and faced Billy still scrounging around in his tinfoil swan. "I just had an outlandish idea, Billy. When we return to the institution, we should set Sam up with your roommate."

"Can't," he answered while tearing into a slap of meat.

"And why not?"

"He's gay."

"The good ones always are, aren't they?" She tapped her teeth while thinking it over. "What about your best mate? The one you're always playing rugby with?"

"Can't."

"Why not now?"

"He's an idiot. Sam would have my head if I set her up with an idiot."

I stretched my icy hands out toward the fire, the heat leaving me with a pleasant sensation that made me feel like I had just dipped myself into a warm bath. "What makes you think Sam wants you to set her up anyways?" And then I heard something in the fireplace, chatter and laughter, and even soft distant music. But then Charlotte pulled my attention back to her.

“You’re right. She probably doesn’t.” She grew slightly worried. “Poor thing is going to wind up becoming one of those old women who owns a whole lot of cats, isn’t she?” She thought about it. “It would be nice to have a ‘couple’ friend that we could go on double dates with. I know!” she cheered. “Collin, you and Aaron would make such a handsome couple.”

I made sure to stress my words, “Don’t. Even. Think about it.” Mr. Hinkley appeared with a fresh cup of tea that he handed me. Hot steam rose off the boiled water. “Thank you so much, Mr. Hinkley.”

“But of course, young master.” He tucked his arms behind his back and then leaned slightly forward. “Could I fetch you three anything else?” We all politely declined. “In that case, I will be retiring a bit earlier this evening and would suggest you three to do the same.”

“Why’s that?” asked Billy.

“We’ll be in for a wicked storm this evening,” he noted, and it wasn’t until Mr. Hinkley mentioned it had I noticed that the lobby was loud with the drumming of constant rainfall pounding against all the walls and windows of the hotel. “The Langham, although resilient in mostly all her ways, has often problems with electricity on stormy nights such as this one. If you find any trouble this evening, any power outage at all, you’ll find candlesticks in the nightstand drawer in each of your hotel rooms. Might I also suggest avoiding the elevators. At least until the storm has passed.” He gave a slight bow of his head. “You three have a good evening.”

Somewhat suspicious, I watched Mr. Hinkley make his way through the lobby, along the freshly washed floor. He passed the elevator, and then made his way up the flight of steps that ran up for many a floor until reaching the rooftop. I guess Mr. Hinkley not only worked for the Langham, but lived here as well.

“Did you hear that?” Billy pulled my gaze from the elevator. “Sounds to me like the electricity might go out tonight.”

“Sounds absolutely dreadful.” Charlotte pulled on a string of curly hair. “How will I ever get my curling iron to work without electricity?”

Billy was surprised. “And here I thought you would have been more distressed about not being able to charge your cellphone.”

Charlotte gasped when she realized this.

I took a sip of tea, the warmth washing through me and making me feel oh so cozy inside. It had been a couple of days since I had last spoken with my parents, and seeing as how there was a chance they might not be able to reach me tonight had me thinking that I should probably give them a call and check in. I didn’t want them to be left worrying about me. I had planned on doing it later on this evening, but then Billy and Charlotte nearly gave me no other choice but to go upstairs and do it now when they started back up with the pet names.

Billy gave Charlotte a bear of a squeeze. “Don’t you fret, my lil’ Snuggle-Bug. I promise to protect you from the stormy night.”

Charlotte melted in his arms. “Oh, Cuddly-Wuddly-Buggly-Bear. What a dashing hero you are.”

And then they started to smooch on the couch, completely forgetting that I was sitting on the armchair across from them. I barely got down half my tea, but couldn’t stomach another sip. I gathered this was what Sam dealt with before I got there. It was enough to make anyone sick. I didn’t even bother saying goodnight to either of them (not that they would have even noticed). I just got up and slipped away.

Mr. Hinkley's warning about the elevator had me deciding it was safer to take the stairs. I already felt uncomfortable riding in it, and so there wasn't a chance in hell that I was going to risk getting stuck on that old rickety thing on a night when there was the possibility of a power outage. No way! The stairs weren't so bad. My hotel room wasn't a far trek being as it was located on the fourth floor, but I was a tad out of breath by the time I reached my room. The window was open and so the storm was loud. I shook off my backpack and pulled off my camera strap, dropping it all on my bed. I then went straight for the window. It was one of those really old windows that you had to use a great deal of force in order to push it all the way down to shut. After, I lingered there for a bit, just staring out into the stormy night. The topiary bushes in the courtyard were swaying in the wind, some of them looking near ready to rip right out of the soil. The rain doused the rose garden, the grass rippled in the wind, and tough pebble-sized droplets constantly pounded against the windowpane, making the city beyond the courtyard nothing more than a blurry image. In the last hour the storm had worsened a great deal, and it seemed to be increasing in that direction. I hoped Aaron would get back to the hotel before it did.

I pulled myself from the window and drifted over to the wobbly round table stationed beside it. I pulled out a chair and then sat while opening up my laptop. I called my parents. *Ring. Ring. Ring.* No answer. I was just about to close down my computer when I was suddenly struck with an idea. I bit my lip while redirecting my mousepad to the internet. I arrived at a search engine, and then started to type into the search box, *Shadow Man*. Pages upon pages began to manifest across the screen. I scrolled down, selecting a link titled: '*Ghosts, Phantoms, & Others Forgotten*' written by Elijah Dart. The rain drummed loudly as I read,

Have you ever wondered what happens after death? Of course you have! How else would you have stumbled onto this article? Most of you are probably home right now contemplating it at this very second. You thought you would surf the web and see what's out there. Who knows, maybe there are other likeminded people out there who are wondering the very same thing? I'm here to tell you that you're not alone. In fact, you never were. My name is Elijah Dart, and I am a paranormal investigator who has studied the field throughout the last decade with a solid team consisting of two clairvoyants, one medium, and an asthmatic camera-guy named Ron. Our team has made appearances on several similar YouTube channels, from 'Shadow Hunters', to 'Skull & Bones', to 'Our Haunted Honeymoon', and was even picked up by Netflix to film our ghostly adventures in a documentary-like style called, 'Unveiling the Veil with Elijah Dart'—premiering July 28th, 2017. My team and I have years of experience, journeying across the world, exploring hauntings, investigating paranormal activity, filming and documenting throughout it all. I've gathered a decade of research and summed it all up in this article. My hope is that what you discover here will shed light on the world beyond the grave.

Let's start off with a bang! There is no such thing as Hell. I know it might be difficult for some to believe, but what a relief, eh? There's no Hell. No fiery pit. No horned red man with a pitchfork. It's all nonsense. I'll spare you the details and not dive too deep, but if you would like to read up on it more you can purchase a copy of my New York Time's best selling novel, 'Fibs & Myths, An Inferno of Lies'—see link at the bottom of the article for purchasing details. In short, there was some misinterpretation of the word 'Hell' around three thousand years ago. Now back to it. In the cases of most people, when their vessel dies, the soul is released. Matilda Hackles, one of my talented clairvoyants, who specializes in hypnosis, found in her research that a mystical door appears to the spirit of the newly departed. For some it's a tunnel, but for most it's a door. That door opens to the Other Side—another word for Heaven, where paradise awaits

until we decide when to return to another life in the never-ending cycle called reincarnation. If you would like to learn more about reincarnation see another one of my New York Time's Best selling novels, 'No Beginning, No End, A Circle of Life'—see link at the bottom of the article for purchasing details. Although most people leave their body and drift immediately through their door into the Other Side, there are some who stay in the physical realm without a physical body. This is the birth of the phenomenon known as ghosts.

Ghosts are the spirit of the dead who have no door, but are fastened to the psychical realm due to an unfinished business. This unfilled task can be many different things. In my line of work, I've come to discover that the most common among them is, 'saying goodbye to a loved one they left behind'. Ghosts are typically bound to the quarters where they died or where their bones are buried, which makes it difficult for a ghost to resolve their unfinished business. But when they do, their door will appear and they will be granted entrance into the Other Side. Now, I'm sure you recall me mentioning that there is no such thing as Hell. So, I'm sure you're wondering what happens to bad people? Murderers, rapists, to name a few—what becomes of their soul if there is no Hell to torture them for all eternity? No need for a horned devil to do it for them. They're perfectly capable of doing it to themselves. They become ghosts, but with a twist. They become what is known as a shadow. To commit an atrocious act such as murder, darkens the soul, and turns the soul into what we paranormal enthusiasts call 'shadow people', or 'shadow man', or more simply, a 'shadow'.

Thunder clashed, so mighty it rattled the window. I jumped, my screams drowned in the deafening booms and electrical crackles. My hands were shaking. The more the article taught me, the more fearful I became. I couldn't help myself. No matter how frightened I was, I needed to learn more. I continued on, this time from the somewhat comfort of the bed.

All shadow men typically look the same. They appear as humanoid figures with no neck and with blood red eyes. Pictures of such specters have appeared in many photographs. They're easily overlooked, or even dismissed, but typically found in the background of places where evil acts were committed. A famous photograph was taken by a couple when visiting the Paris Catacombs, another in Alcatraz Federal Penitentiary when a mother was taking a photograph of her two young children in a prison cell while on a tour. There was a photograph taken in 1941 that recently went viral. It was taken of a little girl in a Nazi camp during the Holocaust. These three photographs, along with a plethora of many more, feature a shadow lurking in the background with no neck and red eyes. These entities are the souls of evil people.

"Boo!" The bedroom door swung open, ripping me right out of my head. Aaron dramatically stumbled into the room, fumbling with his soaking wet sweatshirt. "Can't. Get. This. Damn. Thing. Off of me!" He was in the middle of removing his sweater when he got his head caught in the sleeve. "Hey! Who turned out the lights?"

"Are you drunk?!" I half laughed, half scolded.

"Collin? Is that you?" He spun around like a dog chasing after his own tail. "Where are you?" He staggered forward and knocked into my bedpost, thereafter flipping over and crashing to the floor.

I got out of bed and then sunk down to the floor, and there I helped to free his head from inside his sweater. It was a struggle, somewhat like a game of tug-a-war, but eventually his head popped out—finally making a mess of his hair.

"Thanks. That was a close one," he said, leaving my eyes watering from his breath which reeked of hard liquor.

I fanned his breath away. “You *are* drunk.”

“No—you are!” He hiccuped with a dumb goofy grin.

“No.” I pinched my nose. “I’m pretty sure that’s still you.” I helped him back up. He swayed in place while putting a remarkable amount of concentration on keeping himself up. “How did you even get alcohol?” Then I realized, “Did Billy give you a fake ID?”

“Billy has a fake ID?!” He blundered over to his duffle bag, making a mess while he dug around for a bag of cheesy potato chips. “He better be careful. He wouldn’t want to get in trouble for that.” He ripped the bag open with his teeth, and then scarfed down a handful.

I gritted my teeth. “Aaron, you’re the one who’s going to get into trouble!” I warned, “If Professor Skeffington finds out that you went underage drinking she’ll be sure to have you expelled. We’re already on her bad list because of the fight we had yesterday morning. She warned us, that if we so much—”

He tapped my cheek with an open palm, leaving behind greasy and cheesy fingerprints. “You know what, Collin, sometimes you can be a real stick in the mud. Some might say,” he hiccuped again, “a little goody two-shoes.”

“A *goody two-shoes!*” I exclaimed, outraged. “I’ll have you know that I’ve never been more insulted in all my life. *Believe me*—I can be bad.”

Aaron laughed.

“What’s so funny?!”

He tossed a chip into his mouth and then chomped it in my face. “Prove it.”

“How?”

He plopped onto the edge of his bed. “Go on. Do something bad.”

“Aaron, I mean it,” I stressed. “What were you thinking? What if Professor Skeffington finds out that you got drunk under her watch?”

“It was *her friend* who got me drunk!”

My face scrunched up. “The animator?”

“That’s the one!” He shot out a finger and nearly tumbled backwards off the bed. “The three of us went out for dinner, and then Professor Skeffington had to leave us for a conference call. Next thing I know, her animator friend is talking to me about a new film he’s working on while buying us a round of shots at the bar.” He went to press a finger against his lips, but missed and got his chin instead. “Collin, shhh. Don’t tell anyone, but I don’t think he knew I was underage. *But,*” he shot back up with a renewed burst of energy, “in all fairness, if we were back in London, the drinking age is eighteen, so technically,” he both empathized and slurred his words, “*technically*—I didn’t underage drink.”

“Well, welcome to America!”

Aaron put a hand over his heart and began to recite the Pledge of Allegiance, but he started off in the middle, and he mixed up a few of the words, and then he lost his place and so he started back over from the beginning.

I shook my head. “You’re not drunk...you’re *wasted*.”

There came a knock on our bedroom door, and then it pushed open. “Heeeeey, it’s Billyyyy!” Aaron cheered, swaying, stuffing his face with more chips. “I *love* Billy!”

“Hey, laddies,” Billy came in waving a fresh bottle of gin, “Look what I found.”

Aaron quickly warned, “Billy, no! Don’t show Collin! He’s a goody two-shoes!”

“I’m right here,” I spat. “And I’m *not* a goody two-shoes!”

“Goody two-shoes or not, you’re drinking.” Billy passed us each a fancy glass, no measuring cup needed, just eyeballing his overly generous pour. He scooted a chair out from the wobbly table and then placed it between the beds. He raised his glass. “To boy’s night.”

“To boys’ night,” Aaron and I echoed, cheered, then threw back the shot.

I nearly coughed the gin right back up, but kept it down mainly to stop the rumors that Aaron was starting about me. The liquor was warm and I felt its burn deep in my throat, and my chest, making its way all the way down until it warmed my belly. I never did understand why people enjoyed drinking so much. It tasted awful and was rather nauseating as well.

“I need advice,” Billy poured us each a second shot, “and I need advice from gay fellas such as yourselves.”

Aaron and I exchanged an uncomfortable glance.

Billy downed his gin, his throat tightening from the burn, and then he went right into it. “I like Charlotte, and I like her a whole lot. I want to do something special for her—something no other chap would ever think of. You know, something real romantic-like. I want to sweep her off her feet.”

Aaron leaned into me and whispered, “They’re dating?”

I whispered back, “I think for a whole fifteen minutes.”

“I mean it, lads,” Billy worried, “I don’t know the first thing about being romantic.”

I gave him a suggestion, “You could buy her chocolate.”

“Ooo, I like chocolate!” Aaron agreed. He then put some thought into it which, as tipsy as he was, came to be quite the challenge. “Central Park is just outside. You could take her on a horse-drawn carriage ride.”

“Or ice skating,” I added.

Aaron tapped me on the shoulder. “Good thinking. I like that one!”

“Those are all really lame,” said a voice in the doorway, and the three of us whipped around to find Sam entering the room, sporting her burly military jacket and beanie as usual. “These two might be gay,” She snatched my glass from me, “but at the end of the day, they’re just dudes.” She then grabbed the bottle of gin from Billy and poured herself a hefty helping. “Sure they smell nicer than most boys, but they don’t know the first thing about getting into a woman’s heart.” And then she downed her drink.

“She’s right,” I admitted.

“She sure is,” Aaron agreed.

Sam joined the circle. She then enlightened us all while Billy poured us all another helping. “It’s not chocolate we want. Going to a fancy restaurant or strolling through a park isn’t what’s going to sweep us off our feet. It’s more of the little things we find special. Like when we fall asleep on the couch and our significant other drapes a blanket over us so we don’t get cold. Or when they know it has been a really tough day and so they have our favorite meal waiting for us when we get home. Being friends, and being there when we need them the most that, my boys, is romance.” Sam took the shot and then wiped her mouth clean with the back of her hand. “It’s the things that don’t cost you any money that always matter most.”

Billy complained, “Bloody hell, Sam. That all sounds fine and dandy, but how the heck am I supposed to do all that?”

Sam gave up so easily. “Whatever. Do what you want. Buy her flowers for all I care.”

I was starting to feel the alcohol. My skin tingled with warmth and I couldn’t help from smiling even when there was nothing to smile about. And every minute or so I would laugh for

no reason at all. Billy was in the middle of pouring us yet another shot, when the door opened for the third time.

“And what do we have here?” Charlotte stopped at the open door, arms crossed and foot tapping like an anxious rabbit. “Are the four of you having a party without me? How outrageous! Why I never—not ever in all my life—have I ever been more—” there was a sudden clash of thunder that rang through the entire hotel, shaking the walls, rattling the windows, causing Charlotte to jump and scream. By the time the thunder ended, Charlotte had lost all her anger. “Do you happen to have room for one more?”

“Come on in,” I said, and then the five of us got comfortable on the floor.

Charlotte found a clean glass and lifted it over to Billy. “Just a smidge to calm my nerves.” He gave her a tiny splash. “A little more.” He poured a tad extra. “For crying out loud, Billy. Are you worried you’re going to waste the bottle? Give it here!” She snatched the bottle and then poured herself nearly an entire glass-full.

Aaron suggested, “Should we play a game?”

“I do enjoy Charades!” Charlotte noted.

“What about Monopoly?” Billy offered.

Aaron went into our closet. He lifted up onto his tiptoes, giving himself a slightly better view of the shelf above the rack of clothes. The shelf was filled with old board games covered in thick layers of dust.

“I don’t think there’s a Monopoly board here,” Aaron relayed as he gave the games a look over. “These games are so old...I haven’t even heard of most of them.”

Charlotte went through her cellphone. “There’s got to be an app that we all can enjoy together.”

Billy also went through his cellphone. “What about a drinking game?”

While the three of them debated on what game to play, I kept to myself, sitting quietly, doing what I could to keep the alcohol from taking full control of me. I started to fidget with my new stone necklace, and that got me thinking about the psychic session I had with Madame Sheva Wasam. This caught Sam’s attention.

“Collin, where did you get that?”

“Huh?” I spluttered.

“Your necklace.” She pointed at the black tear-shaped rock. “I hadn’t seen you wearing it before.”

“I got it from a shop,” I answered.

“What shop?” she investigated.

“I don’t know. Just a shop.”

She pressed on, “You know what that stone is used for, right?”

“It’s to void off dark entities,” I answered. “What does it matter to you?”

“It doesn’t. I just didn’t take you for believing in that sort of thing.”

I grew curious. “Sam, do you believe in it?”

It was then that lightning clashed with flashes of bright, spurting light. All the lightbulbs began to pulse, brighten then dim, brighten then dim, and then they all simultaneously went out, casting the room into total darkness just as Mr. Hinkley had foretold.

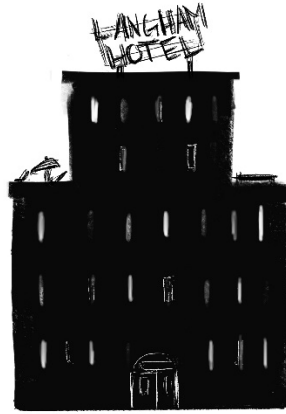
There was a scream, and then fumbling. Someone stepped on my foot and another person knocked me back. But then Aaron turned on his cellphone, creating a dim sphere of illumination

to cast around us. There, we found Charlotte up in Billy's lap, squeezing him like he were the world's most cuddliest teddy bear.

Sam shot Charlotte a nasty look. "Dear God, please get a grip on yourself." She stuck a finger into her ear and wiggled it around. I assumed from Charlotte's scream still ringing in her ear.

I reached back and opened the drawer in the nightstand, taking out three white candles along with a tiny matchbox. Sam arranged the candles in the middle of our circle while Aaron lit a match and started the flame, thereafter passing the ember to each of the wicks. The room was then cast with ghostly-lights and dancing shadows.

"Forget the games." Billy grinned mischievously. "I say we continue the night with a scary story."



Chapter 11

"What sort of scary story?" Charlotte seemed skeptical about Billy's suggestion, judging from the mischievous grin planted on his face.

"*The Hunchback*?" I wondered.

"*Dracula*?" Aaron chimed in.

"*The Shining*?" Sam guessed.

"No," Billy dismissed all of our suggestions, "The story I'm talking about is far more terrifying than any of those."

"Scarier than *the Shining*?" Sam had a difficult time believing that. "Dude, it was written by Stephen King. I couldn't sleep for weeks after I read it."

"Of course it's scarier! That story is made up. This one's *real*." Billy snatched a candle and hovered it just below his chin so that shadows and candlelight flickered across his round face. "My story is about the Langham Hotel."

My skull felt hot and heavy all at the same time, but I wasn't sure if it was the alcohol finally catching up with me or Billy's mention of the hotel. I was just about to ask him more about it when Aaron beat me to the punch.

"What's so scary about this hotel?"

He revealed, "It's because it's haunted."

Charlotte glanced over her shoulder and then back at the group. "Are you really telling us that all along we've been staying at a haunted hotel?"

“Come on, you guys,” Sam laughed. “Don’t tell me you’re buying into this crap? Don’t be so gullible. Billy’s just trying to freak us all out.”

“Well, it’s working.” Charlotte hugged Sam’s arm.

“Don’t touch me.” And that’s all it took for Charlotte to unhinge her grip.

Billy stuck to his guns. “I’m being serious. Honestly! I thought you all knew.” He *was* looking serious, and if he wasn’t, he was putting on one heck of a performance. “I thought everyone knew the story about the Langham Hotel.”

Aaron wasn’t nearly as convinced as I was. “And what, Billy? You just so happen to remember that the hotel was haunted on a stormy night right after a power outage?”

He defended himself, “I’m not lying, and if you don’t believe me you’re free to look it up online yourselves. Like I said, I thought everyone knew the story about the Langham Hotel.”

“Yeah right.” Sam rose to her feet. “I’m not falling for it.”

“I want to know,” I said, catching the room by surprise.

“Attaboy.” Billy waited for everyone to get back into position in the circle, and once we were, he began. “It all started back in the year 1865, when the doors to this building opened for the first time—not as a hotel, but as the Langham Hospital for the Mentally Impaired.”

“I’m sorry!” Charlotte pumped the brakes so fast that I nearly got whiplash. “Are you suggesting that this building was a mental institution before it was a hotel...for like—*mad people*?”

“That’s right,” Billy nodded.

Aaron and I shared a look, and then a nervous gulp that got caught in each of our throats. We scooted closer to one another, all while Sam excitedly leaned forward to catch Billy’s words.

“Back in the 1800s, hospital wards were overcrowded with the mentally ill, and so insane asylums started popping up all along the eastern coast of the United States. There was even a private institution across the park from here, in the Morning Heights region of Manhattan, called the Bloomingdale Insane Asylum—now better known as Columbia University. Amongst the physicians working there was a German doctor by the name of Dr. Edgar John Jabberwocker.”

I was pulled so fast into the story, so engrossed in the picture Billy was painting with his storytelling skills, that I didn’t even realize I was reaching into my duffle bag for the box of Bertie Bott’s Beans. I took off the lid, plucked out a bean, then passed it around the group. Aaron finally got a good flavor and so did Billy, but neither Sam, nor Charlotte, or even myself were so lucky. Charlotte gagged, Sam rinsed her mouth out with another swig of gin, and I spat mine out into a waste basket. While Billy continued, I was left with no choice but to endure the taste of soap in my mouth.

“Dr. Jabberwocker was a brilliant yet disturbed individual who, quite frankly, should have been a patient himself rather than a physician. He was cunning and clever, and his work in the medical field was groundbreaking. He was an eccentric man, with high highs and low lows who, like many of his patients, was prone to manic and depressive episodes. His early research into the functions of the brain set the precedent for cognitive psychology studied in the field even today. He was renowned, and so his insanity was overlooked. But not for long.” Billy’s story then took a drastic turn. “Nurses and other physicians who worked at the hospital started to notice that many patients were mysteriously vanishing or unexplainably dying, all of whom shared the same doctor. Dr. Jabberwocker was brought to the hospital’s Board of Directors. They questioned him with no evidence, but ultimately decided to part ways with him due to the controversy surrounding his achievements in the realm of the brain’s anatomy. Although

innovative at the time, it was brought into question how he was able to have learned so much from the brain's functions without human trial—many suggesting he was experimenting on his own patients. Dr. Jabberwocker was outraged. He wanted to make a fool of his previous employer, and so he purchased a plot of land just across Central Park, starting construction on a new hospital that he would call 'the Langham Hospital for the Mentally Impaired', a nod to his mother who suffered from bipolar disorder who's maiden name was Langham."

"How exactly is this story scary?" Sam objected.

"Don't worry. I'm getting there." Billy picked back up the story exactly where he had left it off. "The new hospital was completed at the end of November in 1865, coinciding with the publication release of the classic children's story, '*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*', to which is the reason why the building was designed with themes of the beloved story."

"The mural in the lobby," Aaron realized, catching everyone's attention. "Didn't you all notice the mural on the ceiling? It's a giant illustration of Alice and her friends."

Charlotte recalled, "And the portraits throughout the hallways and above our beds, they're all of animals dressed in human clothing—just like in the book and the animated features."

I added, "And the bushes outside. They all look like characters from the story. The wallpaper," I pointed at the wall directly in front of me, "it's the original illustrations from the book."

Sam joined in with her own revelation, "The mirror above the fireplace in the lobby is just like the one from the sequel, '*Through the Looking-Glass*'."

It came around the circle, back to Billy. "It was all part of the 'Moral Treatment' movement, a European ideology brought to the United States in the 1800s." He explained in further detail, "Before the movement, mentally ill patients were treated like common criminals, beaten, ridiculed, starved, barbarically left to rot in gruesome living conditions—just to name a few. The Moral Treatment was a principle encouraging the humane treatment of the mentally insane, and part of that developed into the patients' living environment. Dr. Jabberwocker thought that designing the hospital with themes from a children's story could be aesthetically pleasing to his patients, and as well, aid in calming their troubled minds. It also doubled as a front. Who would ever expect the doctor of medical malpractice with a facility adorned with themes of an innocent children's story?"

"Malpractice?" I chirped nervously. "What exactly did he do?"

"He went mad," Billy shared.

"You mean he was upset?" Aaron asked.

"What on Earth would he have been so troubled about?" Charlotte worried.

Sam barked at us, "I think he means the Doctor went crazy!"

"Completely bonkers, he did." Billy continued, my eyes growing wider the more the plot thickened, "History would call him the Mad Doctor, because Jabberwocker performed unethical experiments on patients with psychiatric disorders who were admitted to his care at the hospital. Some of his experiments included: lobotomy, trephination, ice and restraint, inducing seizures, all in the hopes of finding a cure to mental madness. In his care, many patients were tortured, but most didn't survive. To hide his failures, Dr. Jabberwocker buried the dead in the courtyard and planted a topiary garden above their graves."

"No!" Charlotte gasped, leaning back while clutching her chest. "Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure! It's how the story goes." Billy defended his skill as a storyteller, and then pressed on, "For nearly half a century, Dr. Jabberwocker performed cruel and immoral

procedures, and it wasn't until April 13 1913, that people outside of the hospital discovered what he was doing. One of Dr. Jabberwocker's nurses, Goldie Mahoney, went to authorities and told them about the cruelty that was happening at the Langham Hospital for the Mentally Impaired. When police raided the building, they found that Dr. Jabberwocker had committed suicide. He hung himself up on the rooftop from the 'Langham' sign."

Charlotte looked as though she had a bad taste in her mouth, worse than any disgusting jelly bean could give her. "Good riddance."

"All the patients at the hospital were immediately discharged," continued Billy. "The hospital stood vacant for many years after, and many New Yorkers soon forgot of all the atrocities that had once taken place in their city." He switched gears, "By the year 1921, during the hype of silent motion pictures, the building was sold, then renovated into a hotel called 'The Langham'. The building was in a prime location, some suites even charmed with a park view, and so investors pumped loads of money into the place. But no amount of money would change a thing. The building was cursed."

"Cursed?" asked Aaron.

"Yeah, that's what I said—*cursed*." Billy pressed on, "Dr. Jabberwocker's suicide was the first, sure, but not the only. At least once a decade since, there has been someone who has taken their own life within these very walls."

Charlotte gasped, and Aaron and I shared another terrified look, all while Sam choked on her liquor, laughing. She apparently didn't believe a word of it.

I swallowed the lump in my throat, then asked, "How many people have actually died in this hotel?"

"Oh please, don't answer that. I couldn't bear it." Charlotte snatched a pillow off my bed and folded it over her head.

Billy answered, "I gather there have been more suicides here than there are marshmallows in a box of Lucky Charms!" He wrapped up the story, "Since Dr. Jabberwocker's suicide, the Langham has been sold and resold by millionaires hoping to turn the hotel into something special, just to give up and pass her off to the next poor sap willing enough to give it a shot. It never mattered. Turning the hospital into a hotel didn't change a bloody thing. Honestly, it's a miracle it survived at all. Especially when considering the rise of the Great Depression. Ever since she was first sold in 1921, she's been passed around from owner to owner more times than a whore on a busy—"

"Billy!" Charlotte outraged.

"Sorry," he apologized, seeming to have finally been hit by the heavy amount of liquor he'd consumed. "Even to this day, people say the place is haunted by the spirit of Dr. Jabberwocker, wandering around, lost and confused—no doubt about that. They say he lurks in the hotel's shadows, searching for new victims." Billy's droopy drunk eyes swept across the lot of us, settling on me. "*He thirsts for those with weakened minds.*"

Aaron grabbed my shoulders and shook me. "Boo!"

My nerves exploded, rattling through every inch of me. I snatched the pillow from Charlotte and then smacked Aaron upside the head with it. He still couldn't stop laughing.

Sam got herself up and off the floor. "That was probably the lamest story I've ever heard. No way does it hold a candle to *the Shining*." She drew her cellphone out from the deep pocket of her military jacket, and then tapped on a flashlight app. A bright white beam instantly ignited from the back of her cellphone. "I'm heading to bed. I'll see you ladies in the morning."

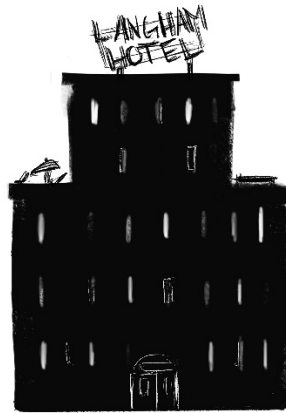
“Wait for me!” Charlotte sprung to her heels at once. “You’re not leaving me to walk back to our room alone in the dark.” She wrapped her arm around Sam’s and held on for dear life.

“We talked about this.” Sam peeled her off, finger by finger. “No. Touching. Me.”

The ladies left us boys back alone in the room. Billy poured himself another helping of gin. Aaron finished what was left of his bag of cheesy potato chips. I was left wondering if there really was a Dr. Jabberwocker, and if he really did torment people with mental illnesses, and if he was continuing his cruel work from beyond the grave. I didn’t enjoy thinking about it. It left me sick to my stomach. I just couldn’t understand how anyone could ever be so cruel.

Billy raised his arms, stretched and exploded into a bearish yawn. “Alright, laddies. It’s high time I call it in for the night.” He had double, if not triple the amount of gin than anyone else had, and so it was surprising to see him get to his feet without any trouble. “I’ll see you boys in the morning.” He swept the nearly empty bottle of gin off the floor, took one last swig for the road to come, then bounded off for his hotel room.

There were a great many things to think about that night as I lay my heavy head down on my pillow, and they all sat horribly up in my mind. Most frightening of all—*the spirit of Dr. Jabberwocker*. Was there really a dark entity roaming the halls of this hotel, searching for more victims to continue his work? I wasn’t sure. All I knew was that I was in for a rough night of sleep.



Chapter 12

Billy’s story kept me up longer than I cared for. I lay there, buried in the sheets, covers drawn over my head. The electricity was still out, and so the hotel was left in complete darkness. The wind blew hard and the building swayed. I was stuck awake listening to eerie creaks, ghostly moans, and all sorts of other terrible sounds. I looked over at Aaron through the translucent sheet. He was out. The liquor he’d consumed must have put him into a deep slumbering spell. I doubt even a scream would wake him up. I rolled over, my sleepy eyes settling on the camera left propped on the nightstand. The wind groaned. The floor squeaked. During this I felt sleepier and sleepier. My consciousness began to collapse. I held my gaze on my camera until finally I drifted off into a deep sleep. There a memory began to unfold.

* * *

Four year old me woke up to the sound of shattering glass. I was startled. I could feel my little heart thumping fast within my chest. I woke up in a strange bed, in a strange place; the sound of screams and shouts muffled through the walls. I was in Mommy's old bedroom. It didn't smell like her, but rather like the rest of the penthouse apartment: cigarette smoke, hard liquor, with a subtle hint of cheap perfume. It was an awful combination that nearly made my nose bleed. I was rubbing my eyes when a loud thump left me jumping back with surprise. Something was thrown at the wall from the other side. Possibly a shoe by the sound of it. Shouting then pursued.

I scooted to the edge of the bed and let my bare feet fall to the flat carpeted floor. I followed the yelling over to the bedroom door. Reluctant as I was, I managed to open the door and took a peek out into the hallway. Mommy was in the living room. It was early morning, much too early for even the sun, but Mommy hadn't gone to bed yet. She had a strange look in her wild eyes. It was a combination of different things: crying, anger, most definitely lack of sleep.

She paced around amongst the elegant furniture and many gaudy trinkets, looking as anxious as ever. "No! No! No! No!" she screamed into her cellphone. "You don't get to tell me what to do anymore. I'm my own goddamn person. I speak for myself! I do as *I* please!" Her blotchy face flushed red. "No! I already told you. I'm not telling you where we are, William."

"Daddy," I murmured.

"Kidnap?" She went on a laughing spree, starting with a tickle in her throat that worked itself into a full mad cackle. "Have you lost your mind? He's *my* son! I can't kidnap my own son. No I can't! He's my son too, William. I'll do with him as I please!" She fidgeted with the cellphone. She couldn't just hold it. She had to toy with it. "Of course he's safe with me. I'm his mother. I birthed him. He came from me." She paced in circles, so fast I thought she might trip over her own feet. "Collin is fine." She got herself so worked up that her chin began to tremble, her bottom lip joining with a slight quiver, all while fresh tears glistened in her tired eyes. "What kind of a husband are you, huh? For one moment could you stop worrying about our son and start worrying about me—*me*, William. Me!" She hit her chest like an angry ape. "You think I'm stupid, like I don't know what's happening behind my back in my own home?! How long?" she cried. "How long have you been sleeping with her?!" She shrieked into the cellphone, "Stop saying that! I'm not crazy! I know you've been sleeping with her! Well I hope you're happy now! I'm out of the picture. Take the house! Take the cars! But I'll be damned if you take my son!"

Across the hall a bedroom door opened. Ruby was donned in a provocative negligee. Her thin legs were exposed as well as much of her voluptuous chest. She was clearly unaccustomed to overnight guests who were as young as me. She had been woken up, and obviously left her bed to investigate what all the ruckus was about.

Ruby peeked around the corner and found Mommy pacing the living room, screaming on her cellphone. "Who's she yelling at?" she asked me.

"Daddy," I answered.

Ruby got caught up in the gossip. "Who's your father?"

"Daddy," I repeated.

That clearly annoyed her. "Yes, but what's his name?"

"William."

"William...." She thought about it, and then it came to her. "William Winters from Central Park East High School? That's who she ran off to California with?" She massaged her chin while

thinking back. “I remember him. He was a geek.” Her face twisted into a distasteful look, like she was forced to taste something she didn’t care for. “I never could see what Lacie saw in him. He was always wasting his time playing with ‘*magic cards*’. I recall he was employed at the comic bookshop just around the corner from here.” She looked down at me like I were a bug she contemplated stepping on. “William Winters is your father?”

I nodded.

“Well no wonder you’re so scrawny.”

The two of us peeked around the corner and back into the living room. Mommy was still screaming. “I already told you. I’m not telling you where we are! We’re not coming back until you confess.”

Ruby looked down at me again. “Confess what?”

I shrugged.

She must have remembered she was the only adult in the room. “I should probably get you back to bed.”

I looked into the living room again, tears streaking down Mommy’s rosy cheeks. “But Mommy’s crying,” I worried. “She needs me. I have to protect her. I’m her Power Ranger.”

“Power Ranger? What the hell is a *Power Ranger*?” I opened my mouth to explain, but Ruby stopped me with a raised palm. “Spare me the headache, I beg of you.” She glanced at her daughter pacing the living room, and then back at me again. “No point in us all losing a good night’s sleep. Come on.” She shooed me back into Mommy’s old bedroom. “Get to bed.”

Ruby watched me climb back into bed, Mommy’s shouts now muffled again by the wall. She turned to leave once I was tucked in the sheets.

“Wait,” I said, Ruby turning back around in the doorway. “Can you read me a story?”

“A *story*?” She cringed by merely the thought of it. “What do you think this is—Sesame Street? Go read yourself to sleep.”

She turned back for the door when I tried again, “Please? I’m scared of the dark.”

Ruby stopped in the doorway, her daughter’s muffled screams continuing on in the background. “One story.” She swept over to a bookcase packed with many romance novels, the covers all near identical. They all depicted a strapping man with a bulging chest embracing a gorgeous half-naked woman. “I’m not sure you’ll be interested in any of these.” She skimmed through the spines of many novels, finding one she recognized. “This one here got me through a lot of lonely nights.” She tended to stumble the line between what was appropriate and inappropriate for a four year old to hear. “Oh well. I’m an actress. I’ll improvise.”

And that she did.

Ruby sat on the edge of the bed and read me a romance novel until I fell asleep. She had to improvise a lot, changing provocative words to more age appropriate. The story didn’t make much sense. She changed the male lead protagonist to a silly wisecracking grizzly bear, and then altered the female lead protagonist to a talented and well-dressed bunny rabbit. Ruby altered the story the best she could, modifying what was clearly intended to be a lovemaking scene to a hunt for buried treasure. The story was nonsense, but the sound of her voice was soothing enough to drown out all the yelling that was happening on the opposite side of the wall.

* * *

I was a little disorientated when I woke up the following morning. It was an odd feeling. I remember falling asleep as a four year old, just to wake up 18 years old again. I sat up with my

back flush against the headboard. I was trying to reel back the memory before it was gone. Just when I got to the part of the memory when my parents were arguing with each other over the phone, I noticed my own cellphone flashing the time. It was 8:56 am. Class was going to start in four minutes.

“We’re late.” I sprung out of bed. “Aaron, we’re late!”

Aaron rolled over and moaned himself awake. “What?” He was all flustered. “What are you talking about? My alarm didn’t go off yet.”

I ripped off my pajama shirt and flung it across the hotel room. “That’s probably because you forgot to set an alarm.” I shimmied out of my sweatpants, moving so fast that it didn’t even dawn on me that I was standing there in nothing but my *Ninja Turtles* underwear. “I knew we shouldn’t have drank all that alcohol. Now we’re going to be late.”

“Shit!” Aaron threw off his sheet. “Professor Skeffington is going to kill us!”

I dug through my duffle bag, yanking clothes out one by one until I finally found a fresh pair of blue jeans. I immediately went to slip them on. They were tight and so it came as a bit of a challenge. I was killing myself for ever shopping in the girl section in the clothing store. I managed to finally force one leg through, then hopped around the room on one foot as I worked to get the second pant leg up. That’s when I noticed Aaron standing over at the dresser, hunting for a new outfit for the day. He, like myself, was mostly exposed. He wore briefs, but only that, and it left me with a warm feeling that flushed my cheeks. I always knew Aaron was attractive, but his perfectly shaped physique was so tight and defined that it left me feeling insecure over my own build. His skin was without imperfections, and it clung to every muscle in his lean torso, his shapely arms, all the way down to his slender thighs. Aaron found a shirt, and just when he began to fight it over his head, he caught me looking at him. I quickly went back hopping around until I finally managed to haul the pant leg up my thigh. While finishing up the job, I made certain to keep my eyes on the floor. I then found the closest shirt I could find. I pulled it over my head, then tugged it down to hide my scar. But more especially, to hide my flat chest that was nowhere near as shapely as Aaron’s was.

“You ready?”

I turned and found Aaron already in the frame of the open door. Not only was he naturally good-looking, but he had style as well. He wore a white-fitted shirt, black jeans that were intentionally ripped in just the right places, and finished off with a pair of white sneakers so pristine he couldn’t possibly have worn them before. He also sported a black fashionable cap. My guess was because he didn’t have the extra time this morning to get his hair just the way he liked it. He didn’t wear his hat with the bill straight on or backwards, but slightly to the side. He looked unintentionally stylish, simply and carelessly cool like a Hollywood star off set. I then slowly peered down at my own ensemble, and criticized my choices. My shirt was a size too big, my jeans had old stains on them, and my sneakers were ripped and caked with dirt. Heck, I was hardly even matching.

Aaron pressed again, “Well...are you ready?”

“I guess so,” I replied as I followed him out of the hotel room.

We arrived in the lobby shortly after. Aaron went straight for the buffet table, piling his plate with delicious heaps. He had a little bit of everything: scrambled eggs coated in melted cheese, sizzling links of maple sausages, and puffy pancakes gushing with blueberries. Meanwhile, I poured myself a hot cup of roasted coffee with a single piece of toast—extra burnt. I wasn’t very hungry, but I knew I needed something in my belly before I took my heart medication. We

carried our breakfast over to the lounge where our classmates all sat waiting. It wasn't until we got ourselves comfortable on the scarlet sofa that I realized we'd walked right into the middle of a conversation.

"I just don't understand it," said Charlotte. "Why would Dr. Jabberwocker build a hospital to treat the mentally disturbed if he was only going to torture them?"

Billy replied with a mouthful of pancake, "For crying out loud, Charlotte, the bloody bloke was mad!" He chewed then swallowed. "What more of a reason does he need to have?"

"It just doesn't make any sense to me."

I realized quickly what they were going on about. "Are you guys still talking about Dr. Jabberwocker?"

"The girls are," Billy answered. "I, however, am far more interested in my pancakes." And then he scarfed down another hefty helping.

Aaron asked Billy while enjoying his own breakfast. "Did you try the blueberry pancakes yet?"

"Do you take me for an amateur? Of course I've had the blueberry pancakes!" He used his fork to cut into the puffy pancakes dripping with maple syrup. "I'm working on the chocolate chip ones now."

"There's chocolate chip pancakes?!" Aaron's delighted eyes skipped back to the buffet table.

Charlotte looked miserable taking a sip of her protein shake. "I absolutely despise that you boys get to eat all those goodies and still keep your figure. Just smelling pancakes gains me an extra pound." She gazed dispiritedly into her milky beverage. "It's just so unfair."

"I found it!" Sam cheered, skimming through a website on her cellphone. "There's a whole article written about the Langham Hospital of the Mentally Impaired."

Charlotte inquired, "Well, go on. What's it say?"

"Billy was right," she confirmed. "Edgar John Jabberwocker was actually a real person, and people did refer to him as the Mad Doctor." She scrolled through the article, only stopping on paragraphs she deemed worthy enough to share. "Billy was also correct that Dr. Jabberwocker built the Langham Hospital in 1865 following the investigation of his former employer at the Bloomingdale Insane Asylum, for suspicions of medical malpractice which ultimately led to his resignation."

"What did I tell you lads?" Billy placed his now empty dish over on an ornate end table, and then took a sip of coffee. "The man was mad. Not to mention a murderer! Hid the bodies nice and good, he did." He then spotted the burnt piece of toast on my armrest still sitting there untouched. "You gonna eat that or just let it sit?"

I passed him my piece of toast, and then I asked Sam for more. "What else does it say?"

"Well...", she scrolled through several more paragraphs, "Dr. Jabberwocker was a really bad dude. He took in too many patients, crowded the hospital, abused, tortured, neglected—you name it!"

Charlotte mumbled into her protein drink, "I don't like the sound of that."

Sam continued, "It says here that, in forty-eight years of operation as a hospital, 73 patients had died by the hands of Dr. Jabberwocker."

Charlotte mumbled again, "I *really* don't like the sound of that."

Sam had a habit of ignoring her roommate. "Many patients attempted to escape, but no one was ever fortunate enough to have made it out alive."

"I'm afraid that article is incorrect." Mr. Hinkley appeared unexpectedly behind us, giving us all a nasty scare.

"Dear God!" Billy's face went a shade purple after choking on a piece of my toast. "You nearly scared the bejabbers out of me! You might consider warning someone the next time you decide to go sneaking up on them. Nearly gave me a heart attack, you did."

"Apologizes extended," offered the manager with a bow of his head.

Aaron was finished with his breakfast, and was already curled up in the crook of the couch with his sketchbook in his lap. He was working on his lining, but still following along. "Mr. Hinkley," he put down his pencil to ask, "what part of the article is incorrect?"

He answered in the same monotone he so typically spoke with, "There was, in fact, one patient of the Langham Hospital of the Mentally Impaired who did manage to escape the building."

This got my attention. "There was?"

"The story of the Langham is one with many twists and turns." Mr. Hinkley began to enlighten us, "It was originally erected to be a hospital to help cure madness, and yet it managed to inspire it instead." He wrapped around the sofa and worked his way over to the fireplace mantle. "Dr. Jabberwocker had grand plans for his building." He spotted dust on the mantle. He reached into his coat pocket and wiped out a handkerchief, thereafter sweeping the dust away. "Although it might now be difficult to see, good intentions were the blueprint, the very foundation that was the Langham Hospital." He went on to polish one of the two tall and sleek rabbit statues framing the fireplace. "Edgar John Jabberwocker had a troubled childhood. His father was a professor at Oxford University, an alcoholic, a scoundrel, and a sociopath disguised as a proper English gentleman. He cheated on his wife with anyone who would have him. He wasn't often home, and so Edgar was left to be raised by his mentally disturbed mother. The poor woman suffered from paranoia, schizophrenia, and chronic depression, and her son suffered from her neglect. At quite the young age, Edgar witnessed the troubled mind and it fascinated him." He finished up polishing the statue, then turned to us; the mirror mounted on the wall above the fireplace mantle behind Mr. Hinkley, showed the reflections of all us classmates listening intently to his story. "Edgar was inspired to become a doctor, one who specialized in the mentally impaired. And so he left home at 18 years old, earned his medical license in New York City, and built this building in an effort to cure madness. He even named the building after his mother, the Langham, which was her maiden name. Like I said, good intentions were the blueprint of his building."

I stole a bite of toast before Billy finished it off, then downed my medication with a sip of coffee. "What happened next?"

Mr. Hinkley pressed on, "Like I said, Dr. Jabberwocker originally set out to cure madness. He opened this facility in the hopes of achieving just that." He stopped only to claim the fresh cup of tea Archie had brought for him. The young bellhop, mute as he always was, then turned on his heels. He ambled across the lobby, and disappeared off into a hallway without a word. Mr. Hinkley continued, "Yes, Dr. Jabberwocker committed great acts of atrocity. The surgical procedures he performed on some of his patients were barbaric and cruel, but he had the best intentions. He hoped to cure them."

Charlotte realized something, "How does one even know if they've been cured of madness?"

"How indeed," agreed Mr. Hinkley. "Dr. Jabberwocker knew this as well. He sought to cure his patients of their mental impairment, but he wanted proof that his work was successful, that

he had achieved what others thought impossible—that he had cured his patients of madness. And so he devised a riddle.”

Aaron and I both blurted out, “A riddle?”

“Precisely.” Mr. Hinkley reaffirmed, “Dr. Jabberwocker constructed a riddle posted for all his patients to see.” He then deepened his explanation, “You see children, there was no way out of the building. There was the front door, yes, but it was always bolted shut and heavily mandated. The reason there are no windows on the first few floors, or in any of the hallways upstairs, was Dr. Jabberwockers doing. It was strategic. He wanted to prevent his patients from ever escaping. There wasn’t any means of doing so. Well, that is, only one. The patients of the hospital had to solve a riddle before he would consider discharging them.” Mr. Hinkley went on, the five of us classmates hanging onto his every word. “Dr. Jabberwocker, in the original design of his building, created a secret way out—a hidden passage. Quirky as he was, he created a riddle that, if solved, would lead to this passage, thereafter granting freedom to those who sought it.” Mr. Hinkley swiveled a silver spoon around in his tea. “He spoke publicly about it during the grand opening of the hospital. He said, *‘Only those clever enough to solve my riddle will find themselves cured of their impairment. Solving it is the only way out’*.” He then took a sip.

Sam realized, “And one patient did find their way out?”

“Yes,” said Mr. Hinkley, looking directly into her eyes. “One patient, and only one patient, ever did solve Dr. Jabberwocker’s riddle. Her name was Ruby Hart.”

I choked on my coffee. “What did you say?” My recent memories came flooding back, the old Flapper flashing behind my eyes.

Mr. Hinkley continued after another sip of tea, “Between the years 1901-1903, Ruby Hart had been a patient of the Langham Hospital for the Mentally Impaired. She was committed by her father on account of ‘psychopathic personality disorder’.

Sam huffed, “Of course they labeled a *woman* with ‘psychopathic personality disorder’. What did she do for them to slap her with that label, I wonder? Did her father catch her reading a book? Maybe he overheard her fantasizing about going to college. How dare she ever think she could become a doctor herself? Damn the male hierarchy! We’re more than just a reproductive oven.”

“Here, here!” agreed Charlotte with enthusiasm.

Mr. Hinkley clarified, “Ruby Hart was labeled with the disorder due to her attraction to the same gender.”

Billy became instantly bright-eyed. “She was a lesbian?”

“Yes,” agreed Mr. Hinkley. “Things were different back then. Attraction to the same gender was looked upon as a mental disorder. Truth be told, there was nothing mentally wrong with Ruby. She was a brilliant young woman who survived the Langham above all odds. During her time here, Ruby survived a plethora of awful treatments—ice baths, electroshock therapy, straitjacketed, and drug forced, just to name a few. Even still, she managed to solve Dr. Jabberwocker’s riddle, and escape the Langham forever.”

Charlotte leaned into the sofa as she thought about it. “If I was unfortunate enough to have been a patient here, I wonder if I could have solved the riddle and escaped.”

“Ha!” Sam belched out a crude laugh. “The other night, you couldn’t even solve the crossword puzzle on the back of your teen pop magazine.”

Charlotte retorted with a sour puss. “I’ll have you know, it was a lot more difficult than it looked.”

Billy brushed toast crumbs off his shirt. "I could have solved it. No doubt about that. I was a chess whiz back in secondary school. Got an award for it and everything."

Sam strained herself while struggling to keep herself from rolling her eyes. "What does chess have anything to do with solving a riddle?"

He tapped his noggin. "It's all about your smarts. Ouch!" He accidentally whacked himself in the eye.

Sam pressed, "You really think *you* out of all people could have solved Dr. Jabberwocker's riddle?"

Billy rubbed his sore. "Of course I do."

"Doubtful," smirked Aaron from behind his sketchbook.

Billy rose off the scarlet sofa. "And what the bloody hell does that mean?"

"It means you got the intellect of a goldfish," shot Aaron, unbothered.

"I love gold fish."

Aaron slapped himself in the face. "Not the cracker, the fish!"

Billy found the closest face he could find in the crowd. Which so happened to be mine. "What's wrong with gold fish? Are they not smart or something?"

I gestured with my hands. "Sit down, Billy. You're not helping your case."

Billy sunk back to the sofa where he was met with a hug from Charlotte. She consoled him, "Don't you listen to them. I think you're the smartest."

He kissed her cheek. "Thank you, my feisty lil' kitty cat."

"Not this shit again." Sam dropped her face in her open hands.

"The five of you are in luck."

We all perked up to find Mr. Hinkley standing over by the fireplace. We all seemed to have forgotten he was even there. "Although much of this building was renovated back in 1921 as investors hoped to wash away the Langham's cruel beginnings, a few things did remain the same. One being Dr. Jabberwocker's riddle." He took a proper sip of tea, then explained, "Before bankruptcy, back when the Langham was still open to the public, many who had come to stay here came for the sole purpose of solving Dr. Jabberwocker's riddle. The walls of this hotel are thin, and the gossip here is strong. I can tell you, that no one but Ruby Hart was ever successful in solving it. But feel at liberty to attempt to do so yourselves."

"Wait a second," I said. "Mr. Hinkley, are you telling us that Dr. Jabberwocker's riddle, the one he created for the patients at his hospital, is still around after all this time?"

"I most certainly am." He tilted his head, and we all followed his gesture across the lobby. "You'll find it posted between the elevator doors."

All five of us jumped off the sofa at once. We darted across the lobby, knocking into each other, stumbling over one another, and making quite the ruckus as we stampeded to the elevators. There were two elevators, and they were stationed side by side. Between them was a framed plaque, recently polished and gleaming gold. The plaque was inscribed with Dr. Jabberwocker's riddle.

The five of us bumped heads. We pushed and shoved, and while we childishly grappled, Sam slipped away in our distraction and approached the plaque. She then read the riddle loud enough for us all to hear.

*I show the truth, but sometimes lies,
Look at me and you'll see your eyes.*

*I can be tall, I can be wide, I can be sizes of many kind,
I show the best or the worst of all of humankind!
I can do many things, but best of all reflecting is what I do,
Now listen carefully as I reveal to you your clue...
I'm hidden well, I'm hidden deep,
I was nevar meant to be found, I was never meant for you to keep.
But should you dare to seek me out,
Warn you I must to be cautious of all your self-doubt.
For if it is through the mirror that you wish to pass,
Things aren't always what they may seem to be within the looking-glass.*

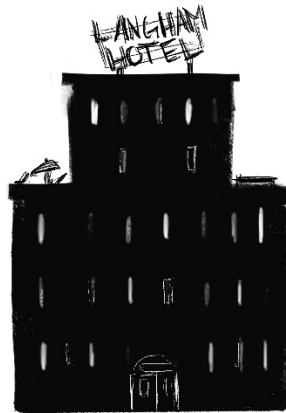
Charlotte complained, "What sort of gibberish was that? I can't make any sense of it at all."
Sam interjected, "It's a riddle. You won't be able to make sense of it after only just reading it once." She read the last few sentences over again. "It doesn't seem much like an ending. It's like something's...*missing*."

Billy scratched his blondish locks. "Did anyone see a clue in there? I didn't catch a thing."

"The clue isn't supposed to be easy to find," Aaron interjected.

I took a step away from the group, and then I spun back around to the waiting lounge. "Mr. Hinkley, has anyone ever—"

The hotel manager was gone, and his empty tea cup was left abandoned on the fireplace mantle.



Chapter 13

There we all were in the hotel lobby, standing at the plaque installed into the wall between the elevator doors. Each of us took a turn reading back the riddle, then a second, a third, and eventually, even for a fourth time. We had read it so many times by now that our brains grew tired and our eyes felt sore. On top of that, the more we read it, the less it made any sense to us. It seemed as though Dr. Jabberwocker hadn't left a clue at all, just witty words and puzzle-like phrases that had us each feeling like our minds were racing around in circles. Even still, we were determined to solve it.

The elevator doors suddenly opened, and there was Professor Skeffington standing amidst the parting doors. "Sorry I'm late." She swept into the lobby, looking as beautiful as ever in her

long-sleeve belted dress. “I got caught up on the mobile this morning.” The five of us must have looked odd standing there huddled around a plaque, but it didn’t seem to cross our instructor’s mind. She was too excited to share, “The headmaster called to inform me that he managed to pull some strings and got us all tickets to,” she braced herself, looking about ready to burst with excitement, “the Met!”

“What’s she going on about?” Billy whispered to the group from behind his hand.

Sam answered, “She’s talking about the Metropolitan Museum of Art.”

He crinkled his forehead. “Well, why didn’t she just say so?”

“She did,” Sam insisted through gritted teeth. “It’s called *the Met*.”

Charlotte interjected, equally as perplexed as her new significant other was, “But you just said it was called the Metropolitan Museum of Art.”

“Oh my God.” Sam crushed down her beanie as she squeezed her skull. “You both are such morons.”

Professor Skeffington glanced down at her wristwatch which accessorized splendidly with her sleek dress. “We’ll have to leave now if we hope to make it in time for the tour. Luckily, it’s only a few blocks away.” And then she began through the lobby, heels clicking against the marble floor as she strutted off for the exit.

Archie opened the front door. He bowed his head, keeping his eyes on the floor as we all exited, one by one. There was something about the bellhop that was off. He was like a statue in the background...a robot being controlled by someone else...a presence without consciousness. I’ve never before looked into someone’s eyes and saw...well, nothing.

I went through the open door. “Have a good day,” I told him, hoping for a response. Nothing. Not even a subtle change in his blank expression.

I was at the tail end of the train of students exiting the hotel, all of us gathering in the roundabout driveway, when I realized Aaron wasn’t among us classmates. I popped my head back into the hotel. Aaron remained at the plaque, massaging his chin as he continued to try to work out Dr. Jabberwocker’s riddle.

I called for him, my voice ringing through the lobby, “Aaron, we’re heading out.”

“Coming.”

It wasn’t a long trek to the museum. In fact, we arrived shortly after. The museum, and all its wonderful galleries and exhibitions, were just as remarkable as the brochure described them to be. There was so much history within these walls. From beautifully drawn pieces of art, to sculptures so intricately shaped; each item told the story of a long, forgotten past. We were in an exhibit of lost dynasties of Ancient China, strolling casually amongst displays of warrior blades, musical instruments, and clay pottery, when I stopped at a cloudy mirror sealed in a tarnished frame. I was immediately drawn to it.

Our tour guide came up from behind me after noticing me looking at myself in the ancient mirror. “I see you’ve taken a liking to the museum’s newest contribution.” Our tour guide was an adorable nerd who seemed more interested in ancient artifacts than most people would ever be. He wore glasses that were too big for his face, overly tight suspenders, and the cutest bowtie I’d ever seen. “This bronze mirror,” he went on to educate, “dates back to the Han Dynasty. It’s over 2,000 years old and, as you can see, can still reflect after two millennia.” I continued to hold my gaze with my reflection, lost in my own eyes. “Remarkable, isn’t it?”

“Yeah...sure...real remarkable...”

The tour guide went off to lead the group. He ushered the mass of visitors around other displays, all while sharing its fascinating history. Amongst a horde of mostly strangers was Professor Skeffington. She stood up in the front row, standing nearest to our tour guide while hanging on to his every word. Sam was there as well. She found the museum interesting at times, but less during others. She was currently intrigued by a poem written in Chinese on a rolling scroll dating back over a thousand years. Aaron, however, spent most of the tour trailing off from the group. He had his nose practically pressed against his cellphone's screen: texting, playing a new trending app, surfing social media—who knows what he was doing on there. Then there was Billy and Charlotte who had no interest in the tour at all. They strolled off together holding hands. Billy spent his time whispering sweet nothings into Charlotte's ear, leaving her blushing and childishly giddy. I even caught them sneaking off to smooch behind a display of Hanfu clothing—beautiful styles of women's garments all showcased behind a bulletproof layer of glass. The outfits were kind of like robes, but also like dresses, and they were all very bright and colorful, each of them enhanced with brilliant prints of flower patterns. Billy and Charlotte continued to canoodle, loud and obnoxiously. I hate to admit it, but I was feeling a bit envious. They reminded me of Adam. More especially, they reminded me of how much I missed him. I sometimes missed him so bad it hurt. I wanted to be alone. And so I trailed off from the group.

I slipped out of the exhibit unnoticed, and then I went drifting down a crowded corridor that branched off to several other exhibits. I felt anxious. It was like I couldn't catch my breath fast enough. The walls felt a little too close. And then closer. And then closer. There was too many people around, coming in and out of exhibit rooms, shoving past me in the corridor, standing in line for the restroom. It was too much. I picked up my pace and hurried around a corner. I wanted to get away from the crowd so badly that I hardly noticed I'd entered a closed off exhibition, 'The Hall of Mirrors', clearly marked that it was closed for renovations.

The moment I stepped foot into the showroom I knew I shouldn't have been there. I just didn't want to be around anyone. The crowds of people...the tight spaces...the lack of oxygen—I needed to get away. I felt lightheaded. It was a ginormous showroom. Everything was a mirror. The floor. The ceiling. The walls were covered with an array of mirrors, each one a different shape, different size. Standalone mirrors scattered the floor, creating a maze I was already lost in. My reflection was everywhere, at every turn. I wandered deeper into the showroom, my reflections following me in more mirrors as I went. Soon lightheadedness developed into dizziness, and dizziness then manifested into a throbbing migraine; the migraine was so extreme that it left me feeling queasy. I was lost in the labyrinth of mirrors. Panicked, I tried to find my way back, but at every turn I was met with another one of my reflections looking back at me. I was starting to get confused. And then I lost my sense of direction completely. I wasn't sure which way was left from which way was right. I didn't even know from which direction I'd come from. I was completely lost.

My head started to spin. I felt like I was stumbling around through a funhouse with a constant revolving floor. All the many reflections of myself, they were all screaming at me, 'Run', 'Run', 'Run!'. And so I did. I hurried through the showroom, my reflections following me, laughing at me. My thoughts began to twist and turn. *The Langham Hotel*...new memories were flooding back to me...*My mom—my mom...we were here in this city...we stayed at the same hotel...but why did we come here? The yelling. There was so much yelling.* I pressed a hand against my forehead, thinking I was running but I was only stumbling around. *My mom*, I continued to dwell. *My mom*...I ran my fingers through my scruffy red locks and massaged my skull while I worked

to recall moments I seemed to have suppressed. *We were here in New York City...we checked-in to the Langham Hotel...we stayed with my grandmother.* All these mirrors, all these reflections...so many eyes following me as I tried to find my way out of the exhibit. *Something happened at the Langham Hotel...something terrible happened. She died right after we left the hotel...* I could hear the crying, the screaming...why couldn't I remember? And then it hit me. It hit me so hard it knocked me to the floor and right into a moment I must have forgotten.

* * *

"You can't just leave him here!" Ruby chased Mommy through the penthouse apartment, her flapper dress sparkling from the hallway's bright overhead lights. She argued with Mommy as she pursued her into the guest bedroom. "He's your son. He's your responsibility. You can't just dump him on the side of the road like some ugly stray you don't want anymore."

"Mother, you're unbelievable!"

I waded through a pile of women's shoes then parted a rack of hanging frock sequence dresses, all so that I could steal a peek out of the guest bedroom closet that I was hiding in. Mommy grabbed her suitcase and heaved it up onto the bed. She clicked it open and then rummaged through it. "I'm not dumping my son on the side of the road. I'm leaving him with his grandmother."

Ruby cringed, triggered by the word as though it were some nasty insult. "Lacie, we've talked about that, haven't we? *Grandmother*," the name sat in her mouth the same as would spoiled milk, "no, dear. It's such a grotesque word. Not to mention I'm far too young to be called," she cringed again, "'*grandmother*.'"

"Not really," said Mommy as she dug her camera out of the suitcase.

"Don't be cruel, dear." Ruby lit a fresh cigarette, and then she began to smoke it out of her long bejeweled cigarette holder. "For Gods sake, just look at me. How many grandmothers do you know with the body of a thirty year old pilates instructor? Not many, I can promise you that."

Mommy opened her camera and switched the old film cartridge out for a new one, then snapped the camera back shut. "I'll be gone for only a few hours."

Ruby refused, "Like hell you are! I can't babysit your child. I'm on the books to perform tonight." She waved around her cigarette stick ever so dramatically when she spoke. "You know, just as well as I do, that I'm under a legally binding contract. I get to live in the penthouse rent free only under the condition I perform five nights a week up in the rooftop clubhouse. I've already missed two nights this week due to your unprompted visit. If I miss another night, I'll be kicked to the streets. And darling," she ashed her cigarette out in a cheap glass ashtray made of fake diamonds, "I wasn't built to live anywhere other than the top of a building."

Mommy worked her head through her camera strap. "Must you always be so dramatic?"

"Of course. It's in my blood. It's who I am." She popped her shoulders followed by an animated hand gesture. "I'm a performer, darling. An actress. A singer. Dancer. I'm a goddamn triple threat!" She took a hit, and then blew the thick white cloud right into Mommy's face. "And don't you ever forget it."

Mommy fanned the smoke away. "Like you would ever let me." She then claimed her leather jacket off a coat rack and then went right for the bedroom door.

Ruby stopped her. "Where do you think you're going, Lacie? I already told you, I can't watch Callum."

Mommy's long red hair got stuck in her jacket. She flipped it out. "His name is Collin."

"*Collin?*" Her face twisted into a sour expression. "Oh please change it, darling. The name 'Collin' is so boring. It's dull, really. You wouldn't want the poor boy to become an accountant, now would you? Creativity is in our family's blood. He's bound to find his place in the field. Now Callum, that's the name of a true artist. It has a nice ring to it, don't you think?" She waved out her bejeweled cigarette holder as she listed, "It's more expressive. More imaginative. More—"

"It doesn't matter, Mother. It's not his name. It's Collin. His name is Collin. We named him after William's father."

"But it's so...*Americanized.*"

Mommy swung the bedroom door open. "I'll be back in a couple of hours."

"Lacie, what am I suppose to—"

"You'll figure it out."

On that note, Mommy was gone.

I made rustling when crawling out of the closet. Ruby whipped around and found me standing there in her sparkling high heels. At first she looked positively angry, but then, all of a sudden, her anger washed away.

She criticized, "You have good taste, I'll give you that, but that's a terrible choice. Those shoes don't go well with that outfit. They clash terribly. And besides, you'll want my green Jimmy Choos. They'll do well to bring out your eyes. Come," she turned on her heels, "The closet in the master bedroom is far superior to the one in here." * * *

I shot back to the present, so fast I was afraid I might have left my soul back in time. I couldn't catch my breath. I lifted off the floor and stumbled through the maze of mirrors and toward the exit, which was now much easier to find. I felt warm and sweaty—before long, my pulse was racing and my breathing labored. I was having a difficult time seeing straight. Everything was becoming blurry. I felt a tightening in my chest joined by a heaviness pressing down. I wasn't sure what was happening to me. I fled out of the showroom and through the corridor, shouldering through the crowd that seemed to have doubled over the last few minutes. Luckily, I bumped right into my professor.

"Collin, there you are. We were looking everywhere for you. We're just about to," Professor Skeffington noticed the bead of sweat on my forehead, my blotchy red cheeks, could hear my heavy breathing, "Collin," she worried, "is everything all right?"

"Professor," I wheezed, heart racing, my skin feeling like it was itching from the inside, "Professor," I couldn't catch my breath fast enough, "I'm not feeling well. Would you mind if I head back to the hotel?"

"I hate to see you miss out on the tour," she placed the back of her hand on different parts of my face, "but if you're feeling under the weather, I should think it best for you to get some rest." She searched for the other students hidden amongst the crowd of tourists. "I'll escort you back. I just need to tell the others."

"That's alright, Professor." Aaron approached us. "I don't mind taking Collin back to the hotel."

"Are you sure?" she pressed.

"Yeah. It's totally fine. I'm happy to help."

Professor Skeffington accepted Aaron's request. "In that case, you two be careful getting back. Stay together, and if you need anything at all just give me a ring."

"I'll take good care of him." Aaron threw his arm over my shoulder and then pulled me against himself. "You can count on that."

I hardly paid attention to their exchange. Instead, I started to panic more and more. I couldn't breathe. Not well enough, at least. The anxiety of that left me feeling anxious. Aaron took charge and guided me back through the maze of different exhibits, making our way to the exit. Once we got outside, at the very top of an enormous stone staircase, Aaron brought me around the building and helped lower me down onto a metal-bar bench.

Breathing was so difficult at this point that it brought tears to my eyes. "I can't. I can't." I tugged down the collar of my shirt. "Aaron, I can't—"

"It's okay." He rubbed my back, the gentleness of his touch comforting me. "Collin, you're going to be okay."

I choked, "W-what's h-happening?"

"I think you're having a panic-attack." Aaron took his cellphone out of his jacket pocket. He tapped on an app icon. He had me look at the screen in which the face of a person was depicted, breathing in and then slowly out. "It's a breathing exercise. Do what the person is doing on the screen." I was scared, more frightened than I remember being in a very long time. "It's all right. I'll do it with you."

Aaron locked eyes with mine, and held his gaze strong. He took a deep breath, and then I repeated it ever so slowly. He exhaled, keeping to a steady rhythm, and I continued to follow his every move. During which I looked into his eyes, such dark and beautiful eyes, so reassured that I wasn't alone. He took another deep breath, and then so did I, and on and on we went until my breathing steadied and no longer labored.

"You're doing great," he reassured me with a dimpled smile that pulled me in. "Now one more time." We inhaled together, and then we slowly let the cool air pour back out of our lungs. He noticed I was more relaxed, and my breathing now steadied. "I told you that you would be okay." He threw me a sly smirk. "You really need to start trusting me."

I couldn't believe it—my breathing normalized, but still my lungs felt awfully sore. Although I hardly felt it. I was so taken back by how Aaron was able to calm me back down again. "How did you know what to do?"

He stowed his cellphone back into his jacket. "I used to get panic-attacks too," he confessed, so ashamed of himself that he could hardly keep his eyes on me. He opened up slowly, "They started about a year ago...a little after we moved back home to the States. They happened randomly...out of nowhere. They were sometimes triggered by big crowds...other times when I was completely alone."

I pried, but careful with how far I pressed, "You said you moved back to the States?"

He nodded slowly, like the simple action took more effort than usual. "I grew up in California, but we moved to England a year ago. We were only there for a couple of months. My dad...he's a playwright and one of his scripts made it big, so we moved back home to Los Angeles. There's been talks about a movie deal. They're still in negotiations. Regardless, my parents thought that moving back home to California would be better for him," he got lost in his own spiraling thoughts, *"for me."*

Even I could tell that there was a large chunk of Aaron's story that was missing. He was holding back. He wanted to share, but would only allow himself to go so far. The honking, the

sirens, the crowds of pedestrians walking the sidewalk, all the city's loud noises drowned. Time was gone. It didn't exist. It was only the two of us.

"England changed me..." Aaron stared out into space, still lost in his head. "That *house* changed me..." His eyes glistened. He pinched them closed before tears could leak away. "It was a long time ago." He opened his eyes and then dried the tears off on his shoulder. "I came back to the States with panic-attacks and anxiety. You're embarrassed to take medication for your heart, but it beats taking these." He reached into his jacket pocket and surprised me when he showed me an orange pill bottle. The shame in his voice thickened when he confessed, "They're for depression. My therapist prescribed them to me after...well, after my family left England."

I never saw Aaron so vulnerable. He was so handsome, so perfect in every conventional way. I would never have thought that someone who seemed so together on the outside could be so unraveled on the inside...that he could suffer from the darkness that was depression. Then again, it started to make a little more sense to me the more I thought about it. Aaron had high highs and low lows. He often secluded himself, but sometimes he was the center of attention. Depression was like a wave. Sometimes it was a ripple. Sometimes it was a tsunami.

Aaron fidgeted with the pill bottle. "These pills...these depression medication...well, I take them because they help me live with the darkest moment I've ever lived." He admitted, "I'm not like you, Collin. I'm not brave."

"Brave?" I echoed, confused. "What makes you think I'm brave?"

"The other day in Central Park, when Professor Skeffington asked us to draw the darkest moment we've ever lived...I couldn't do it. I take these pills so I don't have to face it. I take them so I can numb the darkest moment I've ever lived. I don't want to feel sad anymore. I take these pills so they numb the pain of what I lost...*who* I lost."

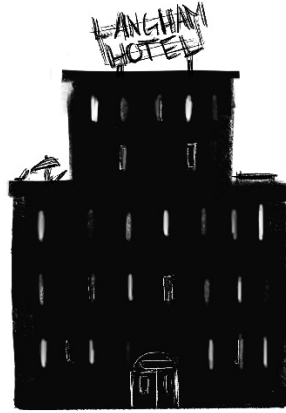
We sat there together embraced in the quiet, the stillness of no spoken words. It was comforting. We didn't have to say anything. Just being there together was enough. I'm not sure what Aaron had gone through, but I knew what I had. It seemed we both suffered loss. It seemed that right now, what we needed most was a friend.

Aaron finally broke the quiet. "What do you say we go do something fun?"

I was overly cautious. "Now that I'm feeling better, shouldn't we go back to class?"

Aaron broke the awkwardness of our previous talk with a bright smile. "And here I thought you weren't a goodie two-shoes anymore." He sprung up to his feet and took my hand, yanking me up with him. "Come on. We're ditching."

We came back from around the building, skipped down an enormous stone staircase, and then hurried to the street. There, Aaron hailed down a taxicab. We didn't even look back at the museum. We just drove off into the city. For the rest of the day, we just wanted to be lost.



Chapter 14

“The map says it’s this way.” I looked up from a brochure of Central Park attractions, then turned in the opposite direction. “Or is it that way?” I spun around, squinting down a new trail lined with maples and speckled with fallen leaves. “Or maybe over there.” I scratched my head while bringing my attention back down to the booklet.

“I think you got us lost again.” Aaron made his way over to a still-watered pond. “Come to think of it, I don’t think I’ve ever met anyone as horrible with directions as you are. And that’s saying a lot. My mom’s just terrible.” He found a pebble, wound up his wrist, and then sent it skipping across the calm water. “One time, when we were driving back home from my gymnastics class, she took a wrong turn. Before either of us knew it, we were lost in downtown, Los Angeles, right smack in the middle of Skid Row.” He tossed another pebble. “Honestly, I’m surprised we made it out alive.”

I peeked out from behind my map. “You were in gymnastics?”

“No!” His pupils went over to the left of his eyeballs, and then over to the far right of his eyeballs, all while seemingly thinking of a way to correct his word vomit. “Karate,” he decided. “Yup. That’s right. I was in karate.”

I couldn’t help myself. “Did you also wear a pretty pink tutu in karate class?”

“No, but I did have a black belt with purple polka dots!” He sprang, jumped-kicked, all while screaming out, “Hi-YAH!”

I laughed, “Way to go, young padawan.”

Aaron stopped kicking the air. “That’s not karate. That’s from *Star Wars*.”

I shrugged. “Sorry. I don’t know anything about sports.”

“It’s not a sport. It’s martial arts.” He second guessed himself, “Well, maybe it can be considered a sport. I really don’t know.”

“This is honestly the most I’ve ever talked about sports in my entire life, and I’m not even sure we *are* talking about sports.”

“I was on a baseball team back when I was ten, but I never did score a basket.” The silly look on Aaron’s face suggested he had made an amusing remark, I just didn’t know what the joke was nor how it could be considered funny. He seemed to notice this. “Get it...because you can’t make a basket in baseball...that’s *basket*-ball...an entirely different sport...” His

bewilderment grew to new heights. “You know your lack of sports knowledge is actually quite impressive.”

“There it is!” I finally spotted our destination on the map, more grateful for a way out of this conversation than I was for anything else. “Come on!” I seized Aaron by the hand and then I pulled him along with me. Together we raced along a bridlepath snaking off through Central Park. Then we found it, the statue we had been searching for. It was a glorious monument made of burly bronze, standing ten feet tall or possibly just a smidge higher. It was a dedication to one of the world’s most beloved children’s stories, one that I had been thinking an awful lot about lately—*‘Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland’*. Alice sat perched on top of an enormous mushroom with all her silly friends surrounding her.

“Wow! That’s pretty cool.” Aaron utilized his hand to shield his eyes from the warm mid-afternoon sun. “It’s so much bigger than I’d imagined it would be.”

I freed one of my shoulders out from behind my backpack strap, and then swung it around to my front. I zipped it open, withdrew my camera buried at the very bottom of all my schoolbooks, and then got down onto my knees. It was a perfect time to take pictures. The sun was positioned ideally so the lighting would work in my favor. I went behind my camera. I closed my left eye, then squinted my right one, taking shot after shot of this most magnificent statue. I was getting into another position when I noticed Aaron standing over to the side of me while watching me in my natural element. The way the sun hit him...how the light kissed his face...the sparkle in his dark eyes...left me inspired.

“Aaron,” I tilted my head, gesturing to the monument, “get up onto the statue.”

He pointed at himself. “You want me to climb it?”

“Yeah. I want to take your picture.”

He hesitated, but then he decided to go for it anyway. “You better be buying dinner after this.” He climbed up onto the smallest mushroom. “And I think I’m in the mood for Italian.” He hopped up onto a slightly larger mushroom. “Maybe spaghetti.” He leapt up onto the main mushroom, the largest one in the very center. “Or lasagna.” He threw an arm over Alice’s metallic shoulders. “Scratch that. Both—I want both for this.”

“You’re standing too stiff.” I advised, “Loosen up.”

He spluttered, “Loosen up? How am I supposed to loosen up while I’m standing on a giant mushroom?”

I threw out some instructions, one right after the next.

“Wiggle your arms.”

And so he did.

“Shake out your legs.”

He put my words into action.

I laughed, “Now do the Hokey Pokey.”

Aaron stopped acting like a fool. “Collin!”

“Alright. Alright. I’ll stop.” I went back behind my camera, advancing slowly toward him. I had Aaron strike pose, after pose, after pose, each position sillier than the one before. I snapped a photograph of him up on the shoulders of the Mad Hatter, another one of him looking worriedly at the pocket watch belonging to the White Rabbit, as well as a few of him laying down in Alice’s lap, enjoying imaginary tea. I continued taking pictures of him until there wasn’t any more film left to work with.

“Looks like I’m all out of film.”

“It’s about time.” Aaron jumped down from on top of the giant mushroom, landing on his feet directly in front of me. “I’m starving.”

“Same.” My stomach grumbled at just the mere thought of food. “I’ve hardly eaten anything today,” I realized. “I also forgot to take my heart medication. I’ll need to take it with food or else I’ll get a nasty tummy ache.”

“This sounds like a medical emergency.” Aaron suggested with a smile, “We really should get to a restaurant before it’s too late.”

He had a way of making me laugh. “I’m not sure a tummy ache qualifies as a medical emergency.”

“I beg to differ.”

We headed for the street which wasn’t far off from the Alice statue, but just beyond a grove of maple trees. We crossed at the streetlight, every driver stopped at the red-light looking dreadfully impatient with us. We reached the curb and then strolled off down the avenue. The gigantically tall buildings that lined the street all had cozy restaurants and little retail shops at their bottom floor with apartments on every other level. The sidewalk was packed with so many people: some were tourists, others the daily New Yorker all dressed up for work, but most were couples making way for a night’s stroll through Central Park. I was bumped and shoved so many times I lost count, and the immense amount of people was starting to make me feel a tad claustrophobic. I could feel the anxiety returning just as it had that morning at the museum, but because I now knew the signs I realized quickly what was happening. My breathing hastened, and my pulse started racing. Aaron seemed to notice before I had the chance to react to it. He took my hand, and squeezed it until all my attention focused on his tight, reassuring grip.

Aaron halted in the middle of the sidewalk which sent the people walking behind us to fan out. “Let’s try that place.” He faced a little Italian bistro with a red and white striped marquee hanging over the entrance. He stepped into the doorway to review a sign posted in plexiglass reading: *Sal’s Lil’ Cucina*, and underneath it in a much smaller font: *Est. 1937*. Aaron studied the displayed menu, smacking his lips with such hunger in his eyes. “Everything sounds so good.”

The hostess appeared from within the restaurant, with red lips and olive complexion, donned in a sleek dress that clung to her shapely figure. “Table for two?”

“Yes, please!” Aaron exasperated, so eager to finally start eating.

“Right this way.”

We followed the hostess into the restaurant, so charming and yet so petite. There were a few round tables with red and white checkered tablecloths, bordered by private booths with intimate settings. All the tables were stocked with tiny tea candles, the walls were covered with murals of Italian art, and the musicians sang sweet romantic melodies. It was the perfect setting for a date that many, if not all of the other patrons, apart from us were on. I swear, you could even smell the sweetness of love in the air. Aaron was too hungry, and much too caught up with deciding on which of the many dishes he would choose from, that he didn’t seem to realize that we had walked right into a romance novel. I, however, did. And it made me unsure of how to act.

The hostess brought us over to a booth with dim lighting, candles burning, and ivy walls that separated us from all of the other guests. Aaron hopped into the booth and then scooted over to make room for me. I got in, and once I was situated, I swiped a menu off the table and then buried my face into it. I felt warm—uncomfortably warm, and my palms were sweaty and sticky.

I didn't know where to look, or where to put my hands, or how I should even sit. This felt like a date, but it wasn't a date. Aaron and I were just friends enjoying dinner together....enjoying dinner in a romantic restaurant...after spending the whole day together...*was this a date?*

No way!

The hostess handed each of us our silverware, which was individually wrapped in fancy, cloth napkins. "Your waiter will be with you shortly. In the meantime, if you need anything at all, feel free to come get me. My name is Carmella." And then she strutted off, hips swaying all the way back to her podium stationed over at the front door.

I kept fussing over my awkwardness, still uncertain how to act. Meanwhile, Aaron scanned over the menu without a care in the world. "They have lobster ravioli!" He dropped the menu to look me straight in the eyes. "Collin—Lobster—Ravioli. They have it!"

"Sounds yummy," I said, still caught up in my own thoughts.

He must have noticed how uncomfortable I had gotten. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing!"

He seemed taken back. "Then why did you just yell at me?"

"I didn't." I was much more aware of the volume of my voice. I directed the blame over to him in hopes of not looking so suspicious. "What's wrong with *you*?"

"Nothing." He brought his attention back to his menu. "How could anything be wrong? They have lobster ravioli."

He made me laugh.

"What?" He shied with a little rosy in his dimpled cheeks. "I like food."

Once Aaron decided on his dish, he drew his cellphone out and started to obsess over it just as he had done back at the museum. I really didn't know what he was doing on there, but he appeared very interested in whatever it was on his screen. He chewed on his thumbnail while staring at his phone, and became very quiet while doing so.

I didn't want to pry, but I also couldn't help myself. "What are you looking at?"

"Nothing." He closed his cellphone and slid it quickly away into his pocket. It was quite suspicious, and it left me theorizing what it could be that he was hiding from me. "I'm going to run to the restroom. If the waiter swings by, you know what to order me."

"Broccoli lasagna?" I teased.

His face pinched. "Broccoli lasagna? No way!" He spoke with his hands like a true Italian fighting with his words. "I told you, lobster ravioli!" And then he scooted out of the booth and disappeared off into the restroom.

I sunk back into the booth. I was looking over the menu again, trying to find a dish to order, not realizing that I was all alone smiling. I must have looked crazy. I swept the grin off my face as soon as I realized I was doing it. I wasn't even sure why I had been smiling. I felt my cheeks. They felt a little warm. *What's going on with me? Why am I acting weird?* There wasn't anything funny. There was no reason to smile. *Quit it!* I told myself. *Aaron and I are just two friends hanging out.*

"Wat do we gots here? Why, if it isn't my lil' friend Collin."

I folded my menu and placed it down, eyes then drifting up to a familiar face. "Pasquale?"

"Da one and da only." He situated a meaty grip on the booth's headrest, then leaned his entire weight against it, conjuring the sound of splitting wood. "How yous doin', kid?"

"I'm...I'm good." I glanced around the restaurant, noticing that Pasquale was dressed in the same uniform that all the other staff members were dressed in: black slacks, matching button

down, complete with the same maroon-colored tie cascading down his ginormous belly. “Now you’re a waiter?”

“Just for da day,” he answered. “Been helpin’ out my cousin Sal. He short staffed so he called me in. Just in time too, I thinks. I was just brinin’ Ol’ Bertha out of da shop wen he gave me a rin’.” He noticed me sitting alone. “Wat happened to dat kid yous come in wit?”

“Aaron?” I spluttered, “He just ran to the restroom real quick. He’ll be back soon.”

“Good-lookin’ guy, huh?” He smiled, then knelt down to nudge me with his enormous elbow. The impact knocked me back an inch.

I was pretty sure at his insinuation. “He’s just one of my classmates. That’s all.”

“Eh, who knows, a place like tis,” he gestured to the restaurant, speaking in regards to the romantic atmosphere, “sparks could fly, I thinks.”

“...I’m really not looking for a relationship,” I insisted, feeling more uncomfortable and more awkward than I previously was.

“Listen, kid,” he scooted into the booth, pushing me a seat back, “I gots six daughters, as yous already knows. All beautiful women, too. Got all dey looks from my wife Gina, God bless dem.” He elbowed me playfully again, this time in my ribs. “All my daughters gots dey own lives now. All happily married. Most of dem wit kids. But back wen dey were yous age, dey nearly gave me no sleep wit all dem boys dey be datin’. I never let dem go on a date wit anyone witout meetin’ me first. All dose boys scared of me, too.” He slapped the table and chortled bearishly. “One of dem nearly pissed his pants wen I threaten to hunt him down if he ever so much lay a finger on my daughter Enrica.” He calmed himself down after the burst of laughter. “I see all dem boys come and go, but I always knew wen da right one came along. It’s somethin’ in da eyes.” He claimed a breadstick out of a basket and then took a bite out of it. “I can always tell by just lookin’ into teir eyes. Dat boy you brought here,” he poured olive oil and vinegar onto a tiny saucer, then mixed it around with his breadstick, “he don’t know it himself yet, but I can sees da way he looks at yous.” He took another bite and then spoke with a mouthful, “He be likin’ yous a whole lot.”

“Who? Aaron?” I laughed it off. “No way, Pasquale. You’re crazy!”

“I tell yous wats crazy, and dat’s havin’ someone who cares ‘bout yous sittin’ right in front of yous face and yous bein’ too blind to see it.”

I picked back up my menu. I had settled on spaghetti and meatballs, but pretended to be looking through it even still. “I just don’t like Aaron that way.” I got lost in my head as I thought over all of Aaron’s attributes, some charming, others not so much. “Sure he can be nice, but he can also be really obnoxious too. I mean...he really knows how to drive me crazy, and sometimes he makes me want to pull out my own hair. But he’s also kind, and he does make me laugh—especially when I really don’t want to laugh. But I don’t like him that way.” I insisted strict and sternly, “At least, not like a boyfriend.”

Pasquale leaned into me with one raised bushy brow. “Who yous tryin’ to prove, me or yourself?”

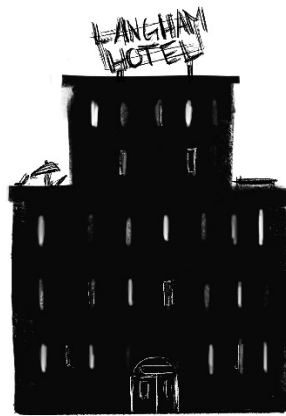
I rambled off, spewing feelings I hadn’t even realized I felt. “This isn’t even my heart, Pasquale.” I grabbed my chest. “It’s someone else’s. And so I don’t know what feelings are mine, and what feelings are his, and it’s confusing. This heart belongs to the person I love...or *loved*, but he’s gone. He left me alone. And now I’m stuck constantly wondering how I feel about anything and everything.” I opened a door that I couldn’t close. The tears began to surge, and there was no stopping them from leaking down my face.

“Come here, kid.” Pasquale took me by the shoulder and pulled me into his massive arms. “Yous so young, and yous got so much life still left to live. Dere’s no point focusin’ so much on wat yous lost. Yous were given a second chance, so yous gots to keep on livin’. Let dat heart,” he poked me firmly in the chest, “let it be open enough to love again. I tinks, it be more of a tragedy to let it go to waste, no?”

“I’m sorry.” My cheeks reddened with humiliation. “I’m so embarrassed.” I unraveled my silverware and then used the cloth napkin to dry my eyes off with. “I hardly know you and I just cried on your shoulder. You must think I’m some sort of a crazy person.”

“A real whack-job, yous are.” He gave me a gentle tap on the cheek with his fist. He then scooted back out of the booth, making the whole thing quiver. “Now, wat we orderin’?”

I gave Pasquale our orders, spaghetti and meatballs for me and lobster ravioli for Aaron. And just when he wobbled off to the kitchen to put our orders in with the chef, Aaron came back out of the restroom and returned to the table. I didn’t know what Pasquale was thinking, but it didn’t matter because he was wrong. Aaron didn’t like me. He wasn’t even looking at me! The whole time we waited for our food to arrive, Aaron’s focus remained, not on me, but strictly on his cellphone. If this was a date, it was shaping out to be a poor excuse for one. Still, I couldn’t help myself from wondering what on Earth it was that Aaron was looking at.



Chapter 15

Aaron and I were both nice and full by the time we were back on route to the Langham Hotel. The spaghetti and meatballs I enjoyed back at *Sal’s Lil’ Cucina* was delicious and so very satisfying. I could still taste the basil and tomato sauce along with fresh garlic all tingling on the surface of my tongue. It was a perfect dinner, even with me crying on Pasquale’s shoulder. That part I could have lived without. I was grateful that we were assigned a new waiter. Not that I didn’t enjoy chatting with the jolly Italian man, but I was still embarrassed for crying in front of him the way I had. To be honest, I wasn’t even sure where that came from. My parents hardly ever saw me cry, and there I was weeping on the shoulder of a complete and utter stranger.

We were coming up the hotel’s roundabout driveway when I noticed the smiling moon above the Langham sign; the grin was just a smidge fuller than it was on the night before. We were heading for the entrance when my attention was brought over to Aaron who was back on his cellphone just as he had been for a great majority of our dinner. He didn’t stop. Not when we

reached our hotel room. Not when we got into our pajamas. Not even after we were tucked in bed for the night. It was starting to drive me crazy.

I yanked my blanket off of me. "Okay, what gives?!"

Aaron dropped his phone on his face. "What?"

"Why do you keep going on your cellphone?"

"I'm not." He indiscreetly slipped his phone under his sheets to hide it. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Aaron, you've been on your phone all day," I persisted. "What gives? Am I boring you or something?"

It seemed to me that he couldn't come up with a lie fast enough, and so he had no choice but to come out with it already. "Okay, but you can't judge me."

I got a sudden knot in my stomach. "Why, are you on a dating app or something?" I wasn't sure why the thought of that made my belly hurt.

"No," he laughed it off and then he got suddenly very serious. "You remember the riddle?"

It took me an extra second to remember. "You mean...Dr. Jabberwocker's riddle?"

"How many riddles could I possibly be talking about?"

He did have a point. "Well, what about it?"

"I took a picture of it." He revealed it on his cellphone, the sole reason why he had been so distracted. "I've been trying to figure it out all day. I'm obsessing over it."

"Why are you trying to figure it out?"

"I don't know," he shrugged. "It's just interesting, I guess." He recanted the story, "This Doctor builds an insane asylum in the middle of New York City, performs unethical procedures on his patients in order to better understand how their mentally disturbed minds work, all in hopes he can cure them. Then, to prove they had been cured, he creates a riddle for them to solve. That's crazy!"

"What did you expect? He was a lunatic."

Aaron pressed, "Think about it, Collin. We're gay. We're attracted to the same sex. Back in 1856 when the Langham was first built, if we were alive during that time, society would have locked us up in a building just like this one. They would have been happy to throw away the key without thinking twice about it. Not to mention I suffer from depression and you panic-attacks. Back then, people were locked up in insane asylums for a heck of a lot less."

"What are you getting at?"

Aaron swept up his cellphone and stared at the picture of the riddle plastered across the screen. "I guess I just want to know that if I was locked up here, I could solve the riddle and escape."

"Why?" I asked.

"Call it boredom. I don't know."

He did have a point. There wasn't much to do in the Langham Hotel. The televisions didn't work. I learned that the first night I checked-in. I was woken up in the middle of the night to tinkle. I had trouble getting back to sleep so I tried turning on the television. Just static. The WiFi was spotty. Too spotty to stream anything on Netflix. There were apps to play on our cellphones, but I'd been overplaying games on my cellphone since the flight from London to New York. We could do homework, but that was pretty much it.

I played along. "Well," I asked Aaron, "did you find out anything from the riddle yet?"

“Nope,” he pouted. “I took the picture too fast this morning, right when Professor Skeffington came downstairs and all of you guys were distracted. The picture’s blurry. I’ve spent the whole day trying to enhance the quality, but nothing I’ve done has fixed the words from being too fuzzy.”

“Let me have a look.” He passed his cellphone over to me. He was right. The image was blurry. “This is a terrible picture.”

“Sorry, I didn’t have a professional photographer to help me out.” He was quite skilled at being playful and snarky all at the same time.

I shrugged my shoulders with an airy attitude. “You didn’t ask.”

“True.” Aaron took back his cellphone and then hooked it up to a charger. “How are we going to solve the riddle if we can’t even read the darn thing?”

I glanced over at a wall clock. “It’s nearly midnight. We could go downstairs and look at the original. Everyone should be asleep by now.”

“Then what are we waiting for?!”

We jumped simultaneously out of bed, and without even changing out of our pajamas, we snuck out of our suite and began down the subdued hallway. The hotel was unusually quiet at this hour, and the hallway was very dark. I was grateful to have Aaron with me on our new quest to solve the riddle of the Langham Hotel. We rode the elevator down to the first floor. The lobby was quite dreary at this time of night. Its main source of light typically came from the crystal chandelier, but it was out, and so were all the scattered lamps. The fireplace, which more often than not roared with crackling embers, was now reduced to cinder and thin wisps of smoke. In fact, the only illumination came from rays of moonlight pouring in from the glass front door. It was as quiet as a tomb down on the hotel’s main floor, but then the elevator doors opened, and Aaron and I came barreling out, all while arguing over which of our favorite *Power Rangers* were better than the others.

Aaron stood firmly to his ground. “Hands down it’s the Red Ranger. He’s the original leader. Of course he’s the best!”

I begged to differ, “If he was so great, why did they bring in the Green Ranger?”

“The writers just needed a new plot twist.”

“And then he became the most beloved character in the entire franchise,” I pointed out.

Aaron screwed his face. “The Green Ranger isn’t even part of the original Megazord.”

“Who cares!” I combatted, my voice ringing up to the lobby’s vaulted ceiling where the Alice mural was painted. “He has the Dragonzord!”

Aaron bit his tongue. “We’ll discuss this later.” He swiveled around and faced the plaque to study the words written by Dr. Jabberwocker. “The riddle is clearly talking about a mirror.” He dissected the first beginning phrases. “You see, right there, *‘I show the truth, but sometimes lies, Look at me and you’ll see your eyes.’* He’s talking about a reflection.”

“But he’s warning us.” I pointed out, “Right here, *‘For if it is through the mirror that you wish to pass, things aren’t always what they may seem to be within the looking-glass.’* That doesn’t sound good to me.” I speculated, “It sounds to me like we’ll be putting ourselves in a whole lot of danger if we don’t stop snooping around trying to solve a hundred year old riddle.” That was more than enough of a reason for me to decide against pursuing this mystery any further. I went over to push the button to open the elevator doors when Aaron stopped me.

“Come on, Collin. We can’t let this scare us off.” He tried to persuade me, “Do you think the Green Ranger would quit that easily? Hell no!”

My gut was telling me otherwise. “This isn’t a kid’s television show, Aaron. It’s real life. I’m getting a bad feeling about this whole riddle nonsense. It doesn’t feel right.”

Aaron pouted, “The Red Ranger wouldn’t have been scared off.”

I was just about to fight back, when Billy’s head popped out from behind the sofa in the waiting lounge. “The Red Ranger and the Green Ranger are absolute shit!” He got himself up, his blonde hair disheveled and his face all blotchy and red. “Personally I always fancied the Black Ranger far more than the others. Poor chap. He was terribly underrated.”

Charlotte then lifted up while adjusting her blouse. “I used to pretend I was the Pink Ranger. I went so far with it that I actually had everyone call me Kimberly.”

I was surprised to see them. “What were your guys doing over there in the dark?”

“Really?” Aaron shot me a look. “Are you that blind?” The look on my face must have suggested I was. “Isn’t it obvious? They were fooling around.”

“Ooooh!” It all clicked, and then it really got the chance to sink in. “Oh...” I faced Billy and Charlotte coming up from around the sofa, Billy’s red face, Charlotte’s unbuttoned blouse, and then it became all too abundantly clear. “Sorry to interrupt.”

“No more than I am, I’m sure,” Billy noted.

“Billy, don’t be cheeky,” Charlotte reprimanded.

By the time they met up with us at the elevators, Billy’s suspicions grew. “And what were you lads doing wandering about so late at night?”

“They were probably smooching around the same as we were,” Charlotte guessed.

“Smooching?” I glanced over at Aaron, and then he at me, each of us wearing the same uncomfortable expression. “No. No. No. That’s not what we were doing.”

“No way!” Aaron exclaimed, and then he realized how that might have sounded. “Not that you would be bad at smooching, it’s just not what we were doing.” His words got all knotted up in his mouth. “It’s not that I think you would be a bad kisser, Collin.”

“Oh, I can’t watch. It’s too humiliating.” Billy placed a hand over his eyes, but couldn’t help himself from sneaking a peek out from between his fingers. “Charlotte, tell me when it’s over.”

Aaron continued trying to clarify his response, but he only made it more uncomfortable for all of us. “Collin, I’m sure you kiss just fine,” he attempted to reassure me, but only left my cheeks burning red. “I’ve just never kissed you, so I wouldn’t know how well you do kiss. Not that I want to, or *not* want to, its just never happened...”

I clamped my hand firmly over his mouth and backed him against the gold elevator doors. “Please—stop—talking.”

“That’s a good idea, mate,” Billy added, finally lowering his hands now that Aaron had stopped rambling off.

Charlotte leaned into Billy. “It’s fun watching him squirm, isn’t it?”

Billy tried to lift my spirits but, like Aaron, only contributed to the awkwardness in the room. “Collin, if it makes you feel any better, I’m sure you kiss just lovely. Any guy would be lucky enough to have you.”

“Can we please stop talking about how well I kiss?” I pleaded with them all.

“Nothing would make me happier.” Sam appeared from around the corner, walking skillfully with her laptop propped open in her extended forearms. “Are the four of you done making out?”

“We weren’t making out!” I exhorted.

Charlotte complained disappointedly, “Unfortunately it was Billy and my make-out session that was the one to have gotten interrupted. Aaron and Collin, however, never got the chance to begin.”

I slapped myself on the forehead. “We weren’t going to make out to begin with.”

Charlotte went on to investigate, gazing over at Sam with a curious look in her doll-shaped eyes. “And where have you been all evening? I didn’t even see you return to our room after class.”

“I’ve been trying to decipher Dr. Jabberwocker’s riddle all night.” Sam then explained while balancing her laptop, “I started off researching the history of the building, but all I could find were more articles written about the hotel, and before that, the hospital. I found nothing about a riddle.” She was coming up to her point, and the lead up had us all inching closer to her. “I stopped researching the hotel, and instead began looking for information regarding Ruby Hart.”

“The lesbian who escaped?” blurted Charlotte.

“The ‘patient’ who escaped,” corrected Aaron. “You can’t just go around calling people a lesbian.”

This went right over Charlotte’s head. “But she was, wasn’t she?”

Aaron clarified, “Yes, but that doesn’t mean you call her that. We don’t go around calling you ‘our straight friend’.”

“*Straight*,” echoed Charlotte. “I’ll have you know I dated a woman throughout my last year of high school. We would still be together if not for the gap year she took to backpack across Asia to study Eastern medicine and spiritual healing from the monks in Tibet. Honestly, Aaron. It’s 2017. Sexuality can be fluid. It isn’t always so black and white, you caveman. Do try to be a bit more enlightened.”

“Wha—” he spluttered. “I am enlightened.”

Billy then asked Sam, “So...did you learn anything about the lesbian?”

Aaron smacked himself in the face.

Sam shared all she knew, “Ruby Hart escaped the hospital back in 1903. She then went straight to the authorities to inform them about all the horrors that were occurring at the Langham, but the police wouldn’t believe a woman, let alone one attracted to other women. So Ruby Hart fled New York City and moved upstate where she met her life partner Jessica Wyman. The two of them were happy together. They raised a child and died months apart at a ripe old age.”

“Sounds sweet,” Billy noted.

“But not the ending of the story.” Sam continued, “In 1921, the Langham was renovated into a hotel. The building was cursed. Like Billy said the other night, it was passed from owner to owner at least once every decade. That is, until the 80s when the great granddaughter of Ruby Hart was hired on as a performer of the now Langham Hotel. Her birth name was Mary Sullivan. Mary, to honor her great grandmother, gave herself the stage name ‘Ruby Hart’. For three decades, Mary Sullivan, as Ruby Hart, performed every night in the Langham Hotel.”

My grandma, I realized. That was my grandma—Ruby Hart. Which means these memories I was suddenly remembering were *real*. It was true. My grandma was a performer here at the hotel. My family could be traced several generations to this building, all the way to Ruby Hart who solved Dr. Jabberwocker’s riddle and escaped the hospital. Which means, *I’ve stayed at this hotel before*. I almost came out and shared with the others, but then I decided against it. My past was mine. I wanted to keep it that way.

Billy realized, "What does that have anything to do with the riddle?"

"It doesn't." Sam slapped her laptop closed. "That's my point. There's nothing online about Dr. Jabberwocker's riddle. Nothing at all."

"I don't understand why the four of you are so caught up on that riddle." Charlotte leaned against the grand piano, in the shadow of the crystal chandelier that was turned off. She had her compact mirror out, and with it she carefully examined her reflection. "Honestly, I wouldn't take it too seriously." She didn't seem to care for the dark bags under her eyes appearing in the hour after not having slept yet, so she reached into her purse and began to apply makeup to mask the areas she deemed were faults. "For heaven's sake," she dabbed then smeared the flesh-colored cream beneath her eyes, "Dr. Jabberwocker didn't even spell all the words correctly."

We all whipped around to face her.

"What's misspelled?" I asked.

She finished applying her makeup, and then she made her way over to us at the plaque. "Right there," she pointed out. "*'I'm hidden well, I'm hidden deep, I was nevar meant to be found, I was never meant for you to keep'*". He uses the word 'never' twice in that sentence, but one of them is misspelt. He honestly should have proofread his little riddle before engraving it onto a plaque. It was just so very irresponsible for him to not have."

"He wouldn't have," Sam realized. "That has to mean something!"

"What could that possibly mean?" Aaron asked, now a smidge more awake than he was just a second ago.

Sam popped back open her laptop. "I remember this. We learned all about it in Children's Literature class back at the Art Institution. It's a mandated course that every first year student has to take if they're majoring in Creative Writing."

Billy leaned into me. "What's she rambling on about?"

I shrugged. "I have no idea."

Billy now asked Sam, "Are you all right, mate?"

"It's *'Alice's Adventures in Wonderland'*," Sam said with thrill thick in her heightened voice. "Don't you guys see? Look around." We took a moment to revisit all of the details of the beloved children's story charmed throughout the building. "Edgar John Jabberwocker was obsessed with the children's book. It's one gigantic dedication to the novel. He even wrote a riddle. The book is packed with riddles. Of course he was inspired by the book!"

Aaron now asked, "Sam, are you sure you're all right?"

"Never better." Sam went diving back into her laptop, hitting away at the keys like the professional writer she wished she would one day become.

Billy glanced over her shoulder. "What are you going on about now?"

She explained, "There's a website I've used in Creative Writing class that rearranges letters in words in order to come up with an entirely different word and meaning." She typed out the word 'never' but spelt it the same incorrect way that Dr. Jabberwocker had done in his riddle. She clicked on the 'search' icon. The screen refreshed. A list of alternate words was produced by using the same letters of the original word, but rearranging them just as Sam had explained it would. One particular word left Sam's eyes round, her eyebrows lifting so high up her forehead that they were swallowed up in her beanie.

"Well?" I pressed.

She answered, "Nevar spelt backwards is raven."

"Raven?" we all questioned.

“What the bloody hell is that supposed to mean?” Billy asked in utmost frustration.

“How should I know?” Sam defended herself.

“Well, you got us this far. Keep going,” he insisted.

“I don’t have anything else to go off of,” she combatted. “And besides, Charlotte’s the one who figured it out.” She mumbled under her breath, “Shock of the century, if you ask me.”

Charlotte clasped her hands on her hips. “I’ll have you know I heard that.”

Aaron paced in circles. “Okay. This is good. At least we now have a clue to go off of.”

“I assure you this is hardly a clue,” Charlotte countered, pessimistic about the whole damn thing.

Aaron remained hopeful still none the less. “Well, it’s something.”

Raven, I thought. *What was so special about a raven?* I was then reminded of my psychic session with Madame Wasem, and the words she left me with. I muttered them aloud, “Why is a raven like a writing desk?”

“Oh no,” Billy shook his round face, cheeks flapping like an old English Bulldog, “Looks like our dear friend Collin has gone bonkers. Poor thing needs a good rest. If we know what’s best for us, we’ll all head up to bed now for a proper night’s sleep and start this whole thing back up tomorrow after class.”

Sam’s eyes suddenly brightened. “No. He’s on to something. ‘Why is a raven like a writing desk?’ That’s a riddle in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland!*” She was back on her laptop in a flash, minimizing articles, pulling up new websites, and searching until she found something of use. “When the novel was first published back in 1865 readers went crazy trying to decipher one of the author’s many riddles. More specifically, the riddle regarding the raven and the writing desk.” She rambled off, fueled by a new rush of enthusiasm, “The riddle was nonsense. There wasn’t even an answer to it. Lewis Carroll even said so himself. Years later, because people were so intrigued by it, Carroll gave an answer to the riddle that had driven people so mad.” She pulled up the website and then showcased it for us all to see. “This is the author’s answer to the infamous riddle: *‘Because it can produce a few notes, tho they are very flat; and it is never put with the wrong end in front!’*”

Aaron massaged his skull. “How does that make any sense?”

Sam continued, “In the original publication of his answer, Carroll spelt ‘never’ incorrectly. He spelt it ‘nevar’ which, as we all know, is raven spelt backwards.”

Aaron slapped his thighs together. “How does that help us at all?!”

“I’m afraid it doesn’t, mate.” Billy patted Aaron on the back. “Not even in the slightest.”

The four of them continued to bicker back and forth like an endless game of pingpong. During which, I became engrossed by something else going on. In the corner of my eye I noticed the curling smoke in the fireplace, rising up through the dark and sticking to the broad mirror mounted above it; the mirror was sealed in a whimsical gold frame. The glass face became cloudy, so clouded by smoke that the reflection of the five of us vanished from view.

Charlotte walked off, gripping her head. “This is all so terribly frustrating.” And then she whined, “And I’m so very tired!”

Sam rolled her eyes. “Go to bed then. No one’s keeping you here.”

“I’m sure you would like that very much, wouldn’t you, Samantha?!” Charlotte outraged.

Sam abandoned her laptop at the check-in counter. “That’s *not* my name.”

Charlotte’s lack of sleep seemed to finally catch up with her. “You think I’m just some brainless bimbo, don’t you? Like I’m too stupid to figure out the riddle. Well the jokes on you,

Samantha.” She poked herself in the chest. “I figured it out. Not you. Just little ol’ stupid Charlotte!”

Sam smirked, “I guess everyone deserves a chance at dumb luck, don’t they?”

“*Sam,*” Aaron gritted his teeth, “that wasn’t very nice.”

“Yeah!” Billy had found a chocolate bar deep in his pocket. He retaliated with a mouthful, “Don’t talk about my lady that way!”

“Oh my God.” Aaron faced Billy, and then unleashed his exhaustion over to him, “We get it! You and Charlotte are dating. Congradu-freakin-lations!”

They continued at it, but I kept my gaze directed at the foggy mirror. Letters began to appear upon the glass, one right after the other, B. E. W. It was like a child tracing on a frosty window. A. R. E.—Beware. I pulled closer, slowly drifting through the lobby and into the waiting lounge where I could make out the letters much clearer. The tracing continued, more words appearing upon the glass.

Billy puffed out his chest. “And what’s that supposed to mean, mate?”

“It means you won’t ever shut up about it,” Aaron exclaimed. “You know, some of us here have lost someone they loved. You think we want to see you and Charlotte skipping around the hotel making out every two seconds?”

“How the hell am I supposed to know that someone you loved died?” Billy argued. “In fact, how are any of us supposed to know anything about you? You hardly speak to any of us...like you’re too good for us or something. You’re always too busy doodling away in that little sketchbook of yours to bother yourself with us.”

“That’s not true,” he retorted, sourly.

Charlotte chimed in, “It absolutely is, Aaron. Why, you haven’t had a full conversation with me since the moment we stepped foot inside this God forsaken hotel. You haven’t even once complimented me on one of my outfits.” She seemed quite bothered by that. “That hurts, Aaron. It really hurts.”

He shot back, “Why don’t you have your *stupid* boyfriend compliment you on your outfits?!”

Billy exclaimed, “Who are you calling stupid?!”

Aaron smirked. “Why, was that too big of a word for you to understand?”

“Oh come off it, mate!” Billy’s face swelled up like a balloon about ready to pop. “You’re just a spoiled little rich boy.”

“*Rich?*” Aaron echoed, sounding somewhat insulted by that.

“You think I haven’t heard of your dad the playwright? Got a whole movie deal out of it, didn’t he? Now your whole family is just rolling in the dough. I hear you got a nice house in Hollywood, another one outside of London just sitting there rotting.” He threw Aaron a nasty look. “Just a spoiled brat now, aren’t you?”

“Shut up, Billy,” Aaron spat.

He rolled up his sleeves. “Don’t think I won’t deck you just because you happen to be a gay fella.”

Aaron rolled up his sleeves as well. “Don’t think I won’t deck you back because *I am a gay fella!*”

Throughout the arguing going on behind me, my focus remained on the mirror. The writing now on the second word. T. H. O. S. E. It continued slowly, W. I. T. H.

“You guys...” I whispered in a shaky breath.

Billy had Aaron hunched over and squeezed in a tight headlock, but Aaron took a bite out of his thick beefy arm, leaving him yelping like a dog who might have just gotten its tail stepped on.

“Cheap shot, Aaron!”

“If you think that’s cheap, then you’re really going to hate this.” Aaron kned him in the groin, leaving Billy howling in a voice several octaves higher.

“No,” he squeaked while cupping his crotch, “Not my tallywacker!”

“You guys...” I whispered again only to be ignored.

“The two of you are acting like Neanderthals!” Charlotte reprimanded.

“That’s enough!” Sam wedged herself between Aaron and Billy, and then pushed them apart from each other. “We get it, the testosterone level is high. But can you please bring it down a notch before one of you ends up in the hospital?”

“Don’t worry about me, Sam. I won’t be the one in the hospital.” Aaron said with a sly smirk, “Billy punches like a girl.”

Billy exclaimed with a heated face, “This girl’s going to kick your arse!”

“You guys!” I spat through clenched teeth.

The four of them spun around to shout into the waiting lounge, “What?!”

“Look,” I tilted my head, gesturing over to the mirror.

They all gathered around me in the lobby, the initials of the hotel engraved on the marble beneath our feet. We all took a look at what was written on the mirror. It was a message. A message written by someone unseen. It read, *Beware Those With Weakened Minds*.

Charlotte ambled across the lobby, her heels loud in the quiet that had befallen us. She approached the mirror. The words written in the condensation had started to drip away. “Beware those with weakened minds...” she twisted around to face each of our petrified faces. “Who wrote this?” She spotted me in the crowd. “Collin, was it *you*?”

“Me?” I spluttered. “Of course not!”

Charlotte stuck to her accusation. “That’s not funny, Collin.”

“I didn’t write it!”

Sam looked at me with a tight questioning glare. “What do you mean by ‘beware those with weakened minds’?”

I was becoming more frustrated by the second. “Like I said, I didn’t write it.”

Aaron came to my defense. “It wasn’t Collin. We would have seen him sneaking off to write it. We were all standing right here.”

Sam reminded, “I was too busy stopping you and Billy from tearing each others heads off to notice Collin writing that on the mirror.”

I was boiling now. “I already told you, Sam, I didn’t write it!”

“Then who?” Billy interjected, “The ghost of Dr. Jabberwocker? Come off it, mate. It’s getting too late for this shit. We’re all tired. Come out with the truth already.”

“I’m telling you the truth!”

Charlotte turned back toward the fireplace. She was standing perfectly in the frame of the gold rabbit statues, the two statues towering over her from either side. The words across the mirror were now only dripping water. “Well it’s gone now,” she informed. “It was probably nothing. Our eyes must have played a trick on us.”

Sam refused to believe that. “You think our eyes played the same trick on all of us? That doesn’t make any sense.”

Charlotte whined, “We’re all tired. Let’s just get to bed and worry about it come morning.” Billy continued to stare at the mirror with a rattled gaze. “I can’t very well sleep after that. Unlike you blokes, I don’t have a roommate to keep me company at night.”

Sam offered, “You’re more than welcome to take mine.”

Charlotte snapped, “Samantha! I’ll have you know I’m a lady. I don’t bunk with boyfriends. At least not this fresh in the relationship.”

Sam had to stop herself from laughing. “Isn’t that rich coming from the girl with her blouse still unbuttoned.” She got frustrated again. “And will you quit calling me ‘Samantha’. It’s Sam! I go by Sam!”

“I mean it,” Billy insisted, “I can’t sleep alone tonight.”

Charlotte offered, “You’ll sleep on our floor then.”

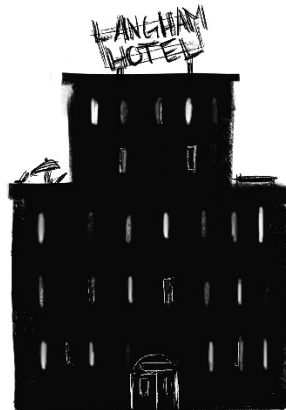
“Like hell he will!” Sam combatted.

“It’ll just be for one night.” Charlotte then yawned. “Let’s get to bed.” She approached the elevator and pushed the call button. “We aren’t likely to solve Dr. Jabberwocker’s riddle at this ungodly hour. Let’s all get a proper night’s rest. We’ll work it out tomorrow after class.” The lift opened, and the five of us filed in.

“You guys,” I said, turning their attention over to me in the corner of the elevator car, “honestly, I didn’t write that message on the mirror. You have to believe me.”

Sam tried to remain rational while the elevator worked its climb up to the fourth floor. “It’s probably some kind of a trick mirror. I’ve seen things like that before. The smoke might have activated a message that was previously written on the mirror. There’s a logical explanation, I’m sure.”

It wasn’t much to go off of, but it was enough to not lose sleep over. Sam was right. There had to be a proper explanation for the message on the mirror. It wasn’t a ghost, but some sort of deception; it was nothing more than a magician’s trick. Yes, that’s right. A magician’s trick. It was explainable. There was nothing supernatural about it. I assured myself this while walking with Aaron through the slanted hallway to our hotel room, then reassured myself again when crawling into bed, and then once more before drifting off to sleep. I did manage to fall asleep with the help of a comforting purr. Cheshire spent the night curled up in a ball at my feet.



Chapter 16

A good night's sleep washed away the events of the night. I was so focused on getting ready for the day that it completely slipped my mind that my classmates and I were up late trying to solve Dr. Jabberwocker's riddle, and the mysterious message written on the mirror, and even that Cheshire had slept with me through the night. The Maine coon left before I even woke up. Where he went, I never knew. But he was gone.

This morning's breakfast in the waiting lounge was a quiet one. The five of us were gathered on the sofa. Charlotte lounged across a chaise like she were royalty modeling for a painting. She picked at her spinach and egg whites, in between taking selfies and posting them on her social media platforms. She muttered something about a sponsorship with some kind of clothing company I'd never heard of, and was taking a picture of her wearing a fake fur echo-friendly jacket from the brand's new line of winter wear. I don't know. Something like that. I wasn't paying too close attention to what she was going on about. I was more attentive to my French toast drizzled with maple syrup and powdered with sugar. I scarfed it down so that I could take my heart medication. As well, Billy and Sam were also too distracted with their breakfast to listen to Charlotte going on about her sponsorship, how much she was paid for just posting a picture and the free clothing she received to model them. Instead, Billy and Sam enjoyed a breakfast burrito: bacon, sausage, eggs, and crispy golden hash browns. They only managed to get halfway through it, and were pushing through the food coma to finish it off. Meanwhile, Aaron doodled away in his sketchbook while nibbling on his bacon and egg sandwich. He took a bite, and then was very discreet when downing his antidepressants. He was so quick about it that I nearly missed him taking it. After breakfast, Professor Skeffington swept into the lobby and went over the day's agenda. We were headed for the High Line. Billy finished scarfing down what was left of my French toast, and then we were off.

We spent an enjoyable day up on the High Line. It was a historical freight rail line that ran above the streets of New York City, twisting and turning and winding through a cluster of skyscrapers. It was a modernization of the old world, adjusted to fit comfortably in the 21st century. It was a beautiful walking trail. Visitors could stroll paths upon embedded railroad tracks, along gardens and beneath magnolia trees, all while peeking into glass-walled office buildings, luxurious apartments, and others so old that they seemed to have come from a world now forgotten. Once a month, the High Line would transform itself into a local artist street fair called 'Artists on the Rise'. We were in for a special treat. Professor Skeffington had it all planned out. We spent the first few hours with a local artist. Her name was Chenoa Reed. She was a talented sculptor. She was indigenous and taught us how to mold lumps of clay the way her tribe did. She even had a station ready for us. The five of us got fitted for aprons and then we got right into it. Sculpture wasn't Aaron's medium of choice, but he still managed to make a mug for his mom back home. I wasn't sure what Sam had made. I guessed an ashtray, but it turns out it was a soap dish. Charlotte made a bowl out of her lump of clay, but it kept losing its form. It now looked closer to a plate. Billy was surprisingly not bad at molding clay. He crafted a beautiful vase. He picked a bushel of *Cercis Canadensis*. Also known as 'Ace of Hearts'. He placed them in the vase and then gifted them to Charlotte. She had me immediately take a picture of it with my good camera so that she could post it later on her social media accounts. Meanwhile, I crafted a paperweight. It just looked like a rock. After our session with the sculptor, Professor Skeffington gave us free rein. We got the chance to explore the rest of the street fair. Lining the railroad track were many booths all assembled by local artists. Their booths displayed

their mediums, from paintings, to photographs, to handmade jewelry, and much more. The artists sold to the many admirers passing through the High Line.

The five of us started together, strolling through the booths, but then we started to break off. Sam got distracted by a palm reader. She sat at the booth while the palm reader traced the many different lines imprinted on her palm. We then lost Charlotte to a booth that sold unique purses, and then Billy to a booth where a talented baker contrived a variety of different delicious-looking pastries into different animals and characters. He was stuck debating between a creampuff that looked like a pig and a cupcake that looked like a lion. Before I knew it, Aaron was gone too. He got caught up chatting with an artist over the illustrations they were selling. I was left to meander alone.

I passed a few booths. First a hippie selling eclectic paintings of different animals wearing colorful glasses, then a young kid with baggy pants and a white tank top, sporting a backwards hat who sold his graffiti art on different recycled material he'd found in dumpsters like sheet metal, trash can lids, and old damaged road signs. There was an eccentric young blonde haired woman in a poncho, blasting 80s classic music from her boombox. She was making bracelets and necklaces, stringing beads together while bobbing to the beat of Michael Jackson's classic song 'Beat It', the name of her booth labeled appropriately along a banner above the dancing blonde, 'Bead It!'. It was difficult to pry my gaze away, but I wanted to. I thought eye contact with the artist would have invited unwanted conversation, and I wasn't so much in the mood for that; and so I looked away and continued down the High Line. I went wandering through the booths, so mindlessly that I didn't even realize I was toying with the Hematite stone around my neck.

"Nice stone."

I stopped in my tracks, and then turned to my right. There I spotted Madame Wasam shuffling through a deck of tarot cards at her booth. Her booth had a plum colored table cloth with stones and crystals scattered for sale. Her silk hijab was just a lighter shade of purple.

"Hi," I said, caught by surprise. "What are you doing here?"

"Perhaps I've been waiting for you."

I giggled. "Really? Me? You woke up this morning, came to the High Line, set up a booth, all because you were expecting to find me?"

She said in her typical cryptic tone, "You have much to learn about how the universe works."

I took a step closer. "And I suppose you're here to teach me?" I gestured to a printed sign propped up on the corner of her booth, reading her services and compensation. "The universe wants to teach me how it works for twenty bucks?"

Madame Wasam continued to shuffle through her tarot cards. "You're a skeptic. You're too closed off. You won't be able to see the way the universe works until you first allow yourself to be open enough to receive the messages it offers you."

Intrigued, I stole another step closer. "What sort of message would the universe have for me?"

She placed the tarot on the table, upon the plum colored table cloth, then spread the deck out in an arch. "Pick a card."

I raised an eyebrow.

"On the house," she smiled.

Her words were like a fishing line, baiting me and I was her catch she was reeling in. I took another step closer, now standing on the lump of excess tablecloth piled on the floor. I bit my

bottom lip as I searched the deck. I snatched one up, then twisted it around slowly until I was looking at the face of the card. A crescent moon was depicted.

Madame Wasam took the card and then placed it on the table between her stones. “This card represents the mind...your thoughts...be mindful of your thoughts.”

“Why?”

“The cards are up for interpretation. They don’t speak the same for everyone, but specifically and uniquely to the individual.” She gestured to the spread of tarot cards. “Choose another.”

And so I did. The illustration was beautifully drawn. It was whimsical. This card depicted a King seated comfortably on his throne with a bejeweled scepter in his grip.

“The Emperor.” She explained, “This card represents a protector—your protector. Those who pull this card can be assured that their spirit guide is near. Call upon them to help you. You’ll feel their presence when you do.”

I found myself intrigued. “What’s a spirit guide?”

“A spirit on the Other Side who watches over you. They can be a deceased friend, family, lover or, as far as this life is concerned, a complete stranger. Every person is assigned at least one spirit guide per lifetime, but they can be assigned as many as three. Pick two more cards.”

I wiggled my fingers, my teeth tugging at my bottom lip as I searched for a card to select. And then I went at it quick and swiftly, snatching two cards up like a shark lunging for its prey. One card bore the illustration of a couple embraced in each others’ arms, the other—I *gulped*—the grim reaper.

“You’ve selected the Death card and the Lovers.”

“The Death card?” I dropped it like it was a hot pot of tea about to burn my hands, letting it fall to the table. “Great! That can’t be good.”

“It’s not always what it seems.” Madame Wasam reassured me, “The Death card doesn’t necessarily represent the death of the individual who drew it, but the death of a part of that person. Much like the phoenix, the Death card can represent rebirth. You must let go of a part of you in order to accept the last card—the Lover.”

I looked at the single card left in my hand, two souls embraced in each others’ arms. At that moment I felt something very strange in my body. It was like a vibration. My soul was screaming at me to pay attention. But to what exactly?

“There is a part of you that you still cling to.” Madame Wasam guided me back with her voice. “The moment you release it, you allow room for the gift...the gift the universe has in store for you. The Lover could represent a new career, spouse, or child. Ultimately, it represents a new beginning.” She scooped up the tarot deck, and then went right back shuffling them again. “Like I said, the cards are left for you to discern.”

I noticed Aaron walking toward me through a crowd of tourists. He had a few illustrations he’d purchased tucked under his arm.

Madame Wasam offered the tarot card reading for free, but I still wanted to tip her. I slid my wallet out of my back pocket and rifled through a few bills. “Thanks for the session. I’m not sure what it all means, but I really appreciate it.” I found a five dollar bill and stuffed it into a tip jar left on her booth. A sticky note was taped to the jar reading, ‘Tip for good karma.’ Along with a smiley face doodle.

“Have you seen him?” Madame Wasam’s voice suddenly changed. It was different. It had altered so dramatically that it was as though the words spoken from her mouth came from an entirely different person. “Have you seen him yet?”

I looked into her eyes, startled. “Who?”

She croaked, “The Shadow Man...he’s there...he’s always there watching you when you’re alone in the dark...”

Our eyes were locked. It was like she was trying to tell me something telepathically, but couldn’t get the message across; and in the blink of an eye Madame Wasam noticed an interested customer and changed persona again. She offered them a card and then went right into her pitch. Meanwhile bemused, I resumed fidgeting with the stone around my neck.

“Boo!”

I was too scared to scream. I jumped around, and there was Aaron chortling over the amusement he found in my ghostly-white face.

I popped him on the shoulder. “I hate when you do that!”

He laughed, “I know. That’s why I do it.”

My heart was still rattling. I tried to calm down by inquiring about the illustrations tucked under his arm. “What did you buy?”

“I bought some cool sketches from a local artist. You should check out his work. He’s really good.”

Aaron pulled the illustrations out from under his arm. They were all of different characters. No background. Just illustrations of the same character sketched a few times on the same drawing paper. Each depiction of the character showcased a new expression, a new emotion. This brought the character more to life by showing their range. Although Aaron and I had different mediums, we had similar focuses. Our attention was on the individual rather than the background. We focused on the emotion. I could see why he liked the artist’s work.

“Pretty cool, huh?”

“Yeah,” I said. “They’re great.”

Aaron tucked the illustrations back under his arm. “Professor Skeffington dismissed us. Did you want to catch a bite to eat and maybe take it back to the hotel? I was thinking we could go swimming up in the rooftop pool. What do you think?”

“Sounds fun.” I then realized, “But I didn’t pack a bathing suit.”

“So...we’ll skinny dip.” He broke out laughing when he saw my petrified face. “Collin, I’m obviously joking.” He took me by the shoulder. “Come on. We’ll take the subway back to the hotel.”

The hotel wasn’t far away, but it took a while to get back because of rush hour. Everyone was trying to get home from work. The subway was crowded. Aaron and I were pushed and shoved so many times that we were eventually separated by all the commotion. It was around the third stop when the subway car doubled its passengers. There weren’t any seats left. Most of us were forced to stand. We held to poles or overhead railings to keep from knocking into each other. I was squeezed between a businessman in a suit shouting a deal into his cellphone, and a delusional elderly woman with a small scruffy shih tzu thrown over her shoulder. The dog reeked. The woman mustn’t have bathed it in months. The dog stared at me throughout the whole ride. She had gook in her eyes, crust on her snout, with the fur below her eyes stained brown from leaking. The subway sped underground, curving through the tunnel. It jerked unexpectedly. I stumbled into the businessman shouting in my ear, then into the dog who was now barking wildly at me. I peered through the crowd and caught Aaron on the complete opposite end of the car, holding onto the railing while laughing. He seemed to have found enjoyment watching the

real life sitcom that had become my life. I was finally put to ease when the subway came to a screeching halt at our stop.

We swung by a local hole in the wall restaurant where we ordered Chinese food. It was yummy. I got chow mein while Aaron got beef and broccoli, and the two of us decided to split an order of vegetable egg rolls. I was regretting the meal by the time we got upstairs to the hotel's rooftop. I felt bloated, and utterly insecure when Aaron peeled off his shirt. He tossed it onto a lounge chair. He then shimmied out of his jeans and down to his underwear. I was reluctant to strip, but managed.

"Here goes nothing." Aaron backed away over to the edge of the roof, and then, with a running start, he cannonballed into the pool; a ripple of waves was sent splashing over the concrete on either side. He shot back up, like a mermaid in a lagoon longing for a peek upon the shore, and then he drifted over to the middle of the pool. "Collin, come on! The water feels great."

"It does?" I was surprised. I expected the pool to be freezing now that the sun had set. Perhaps Mr. Hinkley kept the pool heated this time of year?

Aaron dunked his head under the water and then shot back out again. "Get in before I splash you," he threatened me with an adorable wet smirk.

I stood there, stripped all the way down to my tight briefs. My arms were crossed. I was hugging myself. It was so cold outside, but that wasn't my excuse. I was really only trying to hide my scar. I felt incredibly exposed standing there beneath the enormous Langham sign, the standalone letters towering 20ft above me with its neon red bulbs brightening me up greater than any spotlight could achieve. Getting into the pool would do the trick. And so I jumped in quickly. It wasn't just cold. It was freezing! I felt the chill down to my bones. It was a shock to the nerves. I shot out of the water, looking miserable as ever.

"You l-ied. It's s-so c-cold!"

Aaron's dimples caved. "I knew you wouldn't have gotten in if I had told you the truth."

I splashed him, and then he splashed me back. We laughed. The water was still freezing. I needed to get my blood moving again so I did a quick lap across the length of the pool. Before I knew it, my body had adjusted to the cold. Aaron and I played in the pool for a good solid hour. We raced each other, then played a few rounds of 'Fish Out Of Water'. Aaron was terrible at it. Even with my eyes closed I could always tell where he was. He couldn't stop giggling. I realized in that moment that Aaron liked to laugh a lot. It came naturally to him. He found humor in everything. Depression didn't look the way I thought it did. I imagined someone who suffered from depression would be far more introverted than Aaron was—more of a wallflower type. Someone who typically liked to keep to themselves, locked up in their bedroom with the drapes drawn, curled up in the sheets with a blanket over their head. I guess I was wrong. It wasn't always so easy to see. I guess that's what they mean by having low lows and high highs. Depression was like a rollercoaster. Sometimes we were speeding through life with thrill and excitement. Other times we were at a dead stop. I was stuck in my head thinking about it. I didn't even realize that Aaron and I had drifted toward each other, nearly face to face. I could feel his feet kicking between mine, the subtle graze of his slender thighs; our legs flailing with our feet above the pool's floor. We floated there, heads bobbing just barely above the gentle ripples, and then our eyes pulled each other even closer.

"Collin?"

"Yeah..."

Aaron hesitated, "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure. What is it?"

"...Does it hurt?"

"Does what hurt?" I asked.

He drifted even closer, then gently ran his finger down my scar.

"Oh, that," my voice trembled from the touch of his hand. "No..." I shuttered, "It doesn't hurt..."

"What's it feel like to have a heart...a heart that's different than the one...than the one you were born with?"

I thought about it. "It feels...well, it feels like I never really lost the person that gave it to me. It feels like they're always with me." I felt so comfortable in the moment that I started to open up more. "My birthmother died fourteen years ago. Even though my dad tells me she's always with me, it doesn't really feel that way. But Adam," I touched my scar, "it feels like he's here. I don't know. It's different. A good different."

We caught eyes, and then Aaron lifted my spirits with a smile. "That's really sweet," he said.

"Some other things changed too."

"Like what?"

"Well, after the transplant, I realized I couldn't eat fish anymore. Salmon, especially."

"Why, was it bad for your heart?"

"No, I just hated the taste of it."

We shared a laugh.

I continued, "It was weird because I used to love salmon. It was my favorite kind of sushi." I thought about it some more. "I also realized I love chocolate. Like *really* love chocolate. Especially the dark kind. Not even ones with loads of sugar in it either. The purer the chocolate the better."

Aaron speculated, "Maybe your donor loved chocolate."

"He did," I remembered. "Also," I swooped back a tuft of red hair and revealed a patch of black previously hidden beneath all the scruff. "I've always had red hair, but after the transplant, this patch turned jet black."

Aaron smiled. "Weird."

I flattened my hair back down. "I think I also feel my emotions more deeply now. It's like they live closer to the surface, you know?"

Aaron pondered this over. "It's like your donor merged with you...like he didn't die...at least, not all the way. A part of him gets to live *through* you."

"I like to think that." I slipped into my head. I was thinking about Adam and it left my belly aching. Breathing was becoming painful, and so I asked, "Do you think we can head back to our room now?"

Aaron must have noticed the shift in my voice. "Yeah, of course." He lifted his hands out of the water and noticed his fingers had all shriveled up like a prune. "I should get out anyway. My hands look like I'm about 86 years old."

We swam over to the edge of the pool and hoisted ourselves out. We then dried off with the complementary towels Mr. Hinkley had provided us, the initials of the hotel embroidered on each of the fluffy white towels. We changed back into our clothes and then headed to the elevator. I'm not sure what it was. Whether it was the lack of oxygen in the elevator, or the loud

ding it made every time we passed a floor. Whichever it was, it triggered something in my mind. Before I knew it, a memory was pulling me back in time.

* * *

I was back in the penthouse, playing with my Power Ranger action figures on the floor of the living room while my grandma rummaged through the hallway closet deciding which of her many boas she wanted to wear during her performance that evening. She settled on an especially feathery one. She draped it over her bare shoulders and then struck a pose in front of a mounted mirror. Ruby appeared as though she belonged in a different era. She not only looked amazing in her flapper dress, but it was obvious that she felt just as good in it as she looked. This evening, she had styled her platinum blonde hair in full gorgeous curls, and she had applied her makeup perfectly, exaggerating her strengths and hiding her faults. I was in awe of her. To me, Ruby looked like she belonged in Hollywood. She was a star. She had that 'It' factor that even the best of celebrities could only yearn for. There was something special...something unique...something magical about Ruby that she radiated without even trying. She fitted a new cigarette into her cigarette holder then lit it with a match. She took a hit, and then found me through the cloud of white smoke pouring off her lips. There I was, little four year old Collin, looking up at her in awe.

"I can't believe your mother did this to me." She took another puff and then blew the smoke away. "I'll need you on your best behavior. You hear me? I won't be able to watch you while I'm performing and so you'll have to fend for yourself."

I nodded.

"Well then come on already." She pulled me from my toys and helped me up on my feet. She then looked me up and down. Her upper lip tugged and quivered out of the disgust she felt over my ensemble. "What's that?"

I tugged on the character on my shirt. "The Green Ranger."

"The what?" she sounded perturbed.

"He's a Power Ranger."

"Change. You look uncivilized." She peeled the Power Ranger shirt off me and then fitted me with the only collared shirt I had, which she found tucked away in my unpacked suitcase. I'd only worn it once before. Last Easter. I'd already grown since then and so the collared shirt was a little too snug on me now. "At least your outfit matches now." She gave me another scrutiny. "And tie your damn shoes. This isn't the barnyard."

"I don't know how," I confessed.

"For Christ sake." It was difficult for her to bend down in her flapper dress and heels, but she managed with only a few muttered curse words that left me wide-eyed. "You'll want to make bunny ears like so. Give it a good pinch, then knot them together. You see?"

I nodded.

She rose back to her heels where she took another hit of her cigarette. "Come. I can't very well be late for my own show."

Ruby opened the front door and then led me out into the hall. She pushed the call button for the elevator. She lectured me while we waited for it to arrive. "You'll have to be backstage during my performance. Don't touch anything. Don't talk to anyone. Just stand there. You got that?"

I wasn't paying attention. I had gotten distracted by a portrait on the wall of a raven typing on a writing desk, head twisted back with its eyes gouged out.

"Hello?!" She clapped her hands. "Callum, are you even listening to me?"

"Yes, sorry."

The elevator doors opened, and we shuffled inside. The doors then shut closed.

Ruby pressed on, "No running around, either. The theater is no playground. You must respect the arts. Understood?"

"You look very pretty." I caught her by surprise.

Her expression softened. "I do?" She then glanced over at her reflection in the mirrored walls. She smirked, then tossed up her chin. "Well of course I do, darling. It's who I am." And then her face softened again. She looked down at me and asked, "You don't think my makeup is too heavy, do you?"

I shook my head. "I like your lipstick. It's very bright."

"It's Chanel. Rouge Coco, I believe."

Ding.

* * *

"Collin?"

I snapped out of my head. "Huh?"

Aaron leaned against the mirrored wall, looking at me with a lifted brow. "I asked you if you wanted to find a vending machine..."

"Yeah. Sure. We can find a—"

Ding. Ding. Ding.

I gasped, "Oh my God..."

"What is it?" Aaron asked.

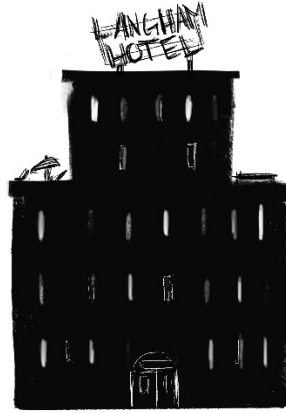
It struck me like lightning. "The raven and the writing desk."

Aaron's face scrunched up. "Huh?"

"The other night!" I recalled, "Aaron, the other night in the penthouse...in the hallway outside of the apartment was a portrait."

It then clicked for Aaron. "A portrait of a raven and a writing desk—the riddle!"

The elevator was going down. We were passing the 5th floor when Aaron and I simultaneously pushed the button marked 'PH'. We were rerouted. The elevator climbed back up. It felt slower than usual. Much slower. Aaron and I stood there eagerly waiting, Aaron tapping his foot while I nibbled on my thumbnail. Then the elevator stopped at the penthouse floor, and the doors opened up into the square room. We shot out of the lift and went right to the portrait. Somehow we knew exactly what to do. We took hold of the portrait's frame, and then together, we pulled it back. The portrait swung open like a door, revealing a vault hidden behind it.



Chapter 17

“A vault?” Charlotte reiterated after nearly choking on a sip of her protein shake. “You found a vault behind a portrait?”

“Yes,” I confirmed yet again. “Upstairs. On the penthouse floor. Behind a portrait hanging in the hallway.”

It was Friday morning, only a few hours later, and all five of us were back downstairs situated around the scarlet sofas in the lobby, waiting for Professor Skeffington to arrive so that class could begin. While we waited, Aaron and I recounted last night’s events. Billy had a tough time following along. He kept dozing off, all to be woken right back up again by Charlotte nudging him hard against his ribs. He was so exhausted that he hardly touched his breakfast. Before long, his bowl of Cheerios was soggy after absorbing all the milk.

Sam sunk back into the sofa and wondered out loud, “What would Dr. Jabberwocker have put inside the vault?”

“I don’t know,” Aaron said, looking just as curious as she was, “but Dr. Jabberwocker’s riddle led us to it so it has to be an important piece of the puzzle.”

“How do you suppose we open it?” Charlotte inquired.

“There’s a password,” I relayed while visualizing the vault door. I described to the group that it looked heavy and appeared just as indestructible as one that might be found in a highly secured bank. I also explained that there wasn’t a doorknob, but a spin-dial with eight vertical rows of the alphabet listed out A through Z.

Sam took an educated guess, “Maybe the password is an eight-letter word we can find in the riddle.”

Aaron shot it down quickly, “We already tried that out this morning.” Unlike myself, Aaron wasn’t a coffee drinker. Food was his fuel of choice and he filled himself up with energy provided to him by a delicious-looking egg muffin sandwich. He took a bite out of it, a squirt of hot sauce left dribbling down his chin. “We only got two hours of sleep. Collin and I were up late trying out every eight-letter word we could think of, but nothing worked.”

“You obviously didn’t try everything or you would have unlocked it.” Sam was oblivious to how harsh her words could come across, as well as how disgruntled Aaron had gotten over her remark.

“Two hours of sleep, Sam—*two hours*.”

Billy jolted awake, so fast and with such alarm that he spilled a portion of his cereal all over his lap. “Did I miss it? What was inside the vault?” he spluttered while blinking incessantly.

“We couldn’t open it,” I repeated, easily losing patience due to my lack of sleep. I decided to take another sip of coffee in the hopes of heightening my tolerance level.

Sam massaged her chin while she thought over all the possible eight-letter words Dr. Jabberwocker might have used as the password to his secret vault. “Doctor...? No, that’s five letters. Alice is five as well. Jabberwocker is twelve and way too obvious even if it was eight-letters long...” She stuck a strip of bacon into her mouth and then ripped off a nibble. “Why can’t I think of one eight-letter word?”

Charlotte had lost interest with the password, and now focused on something else. “I had the darndest dream last night. A nightmare, really. Billy was there. The three of you as well. The four of you had me committed into the Langham Hospital for the Mentally Impaired.” She became emotional. “Told me we were going to a show on Broadway. I was playing the lead. She was a schizophrenic housewife from the 80s who witnessed a murder by accident after dropping her son off at daycare. I was method acting, but I guess I might have gotten a bit carried away. And so the four of you had me committed to the Langham Hospital where Dr. Jabberwocker terrorized me. He was cruel. I was trying to escape the hospital, but I couldn’t. There was a shadow...” she recalled. “A dark shadow...he was chasing after me. It was terrible.”

“You got all that from a dream?” Billy interrupted.

Recalling the details of the dream was leaving Charlotte trembling. “Do you think the ghost of Dr. Jabberwocker entered my dream to scare me from looking any further into his riddle?”

“He wasn’t trying to scare you.” Aaron threw me a warm friendly smile. “After all, he didn’t say ‘boo’.”

I smiled back, “And ghosts always say ‘boo’ when they’re trying to scare someone.”

Sam interjected with irritation thick in her voice, “Why are we still talking about Charlotte’s stupid dream? We need to be focusing on the eight-letter combination to Dr. Jabberwocker’s vault.” She shot up and then began to pace the lounge, tapping her chin as she went. “Now what can it be?” Her eyes brightened. “Hospital?” She counted the letters off on her fingers. “That’s eight letters long.”

Aaron dismissed it, “Nope. It wasn’t it. Collin and I tried it last night.”

“Dammit!” Sam scratched her hair through her beanie. “Wonderland—no, too many letters.”

I heard a *ding*, and then I became aware of the opening elevator doors across the lobby. “Here comes Professor Skeffington now,” I said, noticing our teacher leaving the elevator and approaching us fast. I then looked over at all my classmates and whispered, “Whatever the password is, it’ll have to wait until after class.”

We all straightened up when our instructor arrived, each of us putting forward our best inconspicuous face, and yet all failing to do so. “Good morning everyone.” Professor Skeffington was the only one amongst us all who gave the impression of someone well rested. She was all showered and fixed up, smelling tropical, and her exposed skin glistened from whatever lotion she had applied on herself earlier that morning. Her sense of fashion never ceased to amaze me. Today she sported a colorful gypsy skirt that was topped with a long-sleeve, off the shoulder shirt, finished off with tasteful jewelry arranged throughout. Her hair was also braided this morning, looking like a cinnamon bun by the way it was swirled up into a knot on the top of her head. “We won’t be headed far today. Actually, we won’t even be leaving the hotel. Mr. Hinkley was kind enough to allow us to rent out the rooftop clubhouse for today’s

lesson. It's a good one too." She had a devious look in her eyes, but the reason for the dark twinkle was yet to be clear. "Why don't we all head upstairs now and I'll show you what I have in store for us."

Billy had dozed off again, but he came back around after being woken up by his own loud snort. "Is class finished already?"

I passed Billy the rest of my coffee. "Have some more, Billy. The second cup did the trick for me."

"Thanks, mate."

He took the mug, and while he guzzled it down like it was water on a hot summer day, I turned towards the fireplace. I thought I had heard voices, distant chatter and the faintest hint of laughter, even the ding of a bell, and it all sounded like it had come from the fireplace. I squinted into the flames rising and falling from within the tall hearth, almost as though I was half expecting someone to come emerging out from within the crackling embers. I shook it off, then found Professor Skeffington about to stroll off to the elevator when she noticed Mr. Hinkley leaving his office. "Oh Mr. Hinkley, I'm glad we found you. Do you happen to have the key to the clubhouse?"

"I just located the spare, ma'am." Mr. Hinkley approached us all in the waiting lounge. He handed Professor Skeffington the key, along with a cup of tea so hot that steam was still drifting off of it. "I hope you don't mind, but I also went ahead and fetched you your usual morning cup of tea: turmeric, ginger, and with just a hint of pepper, just the way you like it."

"Oh Mr. Hinkley, how you spoil me so." None of my classmates were paying close enough attention, but the same could not be said for me. I noticed our instructor reach into her purse and retrieve a prescription bottle from out within its depths. "If you're not careful," she screwed off the lid and then selected a half-white, half-red pill, and then reached back into her purse and located a second bottle, "you might have on your hands a permanent guest." Thereafter, she repeated the same act with yet another prescription drug. She popped three pills into her mouth, and then made it easier on herself to swallow them all down with a sip of her tea. She then whirled back around and faced us students in the waiting lounge. "We've fallen a tad behind. We better get class started now if we hope to still end on time." She faced the hotel manager and gave him a handshake. "Thank you, Mr. Hinkley for all your service."

"No need for that. I'm happy to do so," he assured. "I understand that all of you will be spending the day up in the clubhouse. I did go ahead and put in a request with our in-house chef. Lunch will be served and brought up to you by noon."

"Splendid. Thank you again, Mr. Hinkley." Professor Skeffington summoned us up onto our feet, and then she began to usher us over to the elevator. On our way, I couldn't help but wonder what our teacher's reasonings were for taking medication so early in the day. I wondered if they were vitamins, or perhaps something to ease her allergies—that is, if she even had allergies. The thought left me the moment we all filed into the elevator car. The doors closed, but not before I caught Cheshire lunge up onto the fireplace mantle, and mischievously slink around trinkets that adorned the mantle. We then began our ascend to the rooftop.

I had been up on the rooftop a few times by now, but I had yet to explore the closed-off room alongside the pool. Each time I was up there the door was locked, and all the windows were boarded up by long planks of wood. I didn't know what to expect when Professor Skeffington withdrew the key and opened up the clubhouse door. But I really wasn't focusing on it either.

Instead, my mind returned back to the eight-lettered password and all the potential outcomes it could be. Unfortunately though, none were worth mentioning.

We all entered the clubhouse in a single-file line, sweeping in one after the next. It was darker than a starless night, but then Professor Skeffington hit a light-switch. Three crystal chandeliers riddled with spiderwebs brightened simultaneously to life, allowing us all to view our surroundings. All the tables and chairs were pushed to the walls, leaving a pearly dance floor layered in black marble with flakes of gold infused throughout. The encircling wallpaper was covered in intricate illustrations of scenes from the book: *Alice's Adventure's in Wonderland*, just like it was throughout all of the hotel. I noticed Alice tumbling down a rabbit-hole, then turned to find a cat smiling from up a tree, then I spun around to find a great, big caterpillar smoking from a hookah pipe from atop of a ginormous mushroom. I drew forward, and soon I found myself grazing my hand along the wallpaper, feeling the smooth texture. This illustration consisted of a tea party, and at the head of the table, looking wildly mad, was a man in a top hat. I then became distracted by the strong scent of liquor. I heard Billy before I even got the chance to follow my nose.

"They got a bar up here!" he exclaimed.

He was correct. There was a bar up there in the clubhouse, and it was stationed over by an empty stage where I assumed many performers once showcased their talents—my grandmother, Ruby Hart, included. There were several metal stools with cushion tops all facing the bar's marble counter, and with a rack of fancy glasses of every shape and size hanging above and upside down. The shelves behind the bar housed what seemed like every type of alcoholic beverage known to man. The bottles were all dusty. It would seem that no one had been inside the clubhouse for quite some time. Especially, not housekeeping.

Billy took a seat at the bar, then swiveled around like a child at an ice cream parlor. "Professor, I do believe a drink is in order. We haven't even celebrated once since we arrived in New York City. All five of us here did mark highest in our majors which is why we were chosen to partake in this class trip to begin with. That's worthy enough for a celebration, I should say."

Professor Skeffington shot him down quickly. "Billy, it's 8:30 in the morning."

"Which means it's coming up 5pm in London," he rebutted.

"Idiot," Sam mumbled under her breath. "It's coming up 2pm."

Archie entered the clubhouse at that moment, lugging in a cart of five easels, five canvases, and cartons of charcoal enough for everyone, leading me to believe that whatever today's lesson was would likely include actual drawing. The last time we all were forced to draw we had to sketch the darkest moment we had ever lived. And so I couldn't even begin to imagine what today's assignment could be. Whatever it was, I wasn't looking forward to it. Not even a little. The bellhop caught my attention as he situated the easels in a circle in the very center of the empty dance floor, beneath the crystal chandelier in the middle of the ceiling. He looked the same as he always did: bellhop attire stiff and tailored, but with an expressionless face. I had never seen Mr. Hinkley with an expression on his face either, but the bellhop, the maid, the security guard, they were different. There was something about them that was just...lifeless.

"Archie," I caught him in the middle of propping a canvas up on each of the easels. I thought of something to say that would likely earn a response, "do you know of any good pizza spots around the hotel? I've been craving pizza since we landed in New York. My dad and stepmom flew to the city for their honeymoon. They said the pizza here is the best in the world."

Nothing. The bellhop ignored me. He instead finished situating the canvases on the easels. Archie then left the clubhouse and went about his day.

Aaron noticed the interaction. Or, lack of interaction. “That was rude.”

“Weird, huh?”

Aaron nodded with a strange look in his eyes.

Charlotte had been eavesdropping nearby. “The service here is terrible.” She was a skilled text messenger. She could hold a conversation through text messaging all while having a completely different conversation in person. “Just yesterday I ran into one of the maids on my way to the loo. I inquired about the housekeeping. We haven’t had our sheets changed once since we arrived. And the laundry. I was told laundry service was provided.”

Aaron pressed, “What she say?”

“Nothing!” Charlotte outraged. “I’ll tell you, it was the strangest thing. The maid looked at me. Right in the eyes, she did. Then she pushed her cart and wandered down the hallway. It was unbelievable. We’re the only guests in the hotel. The least she could do is tend to our needs throughout our stay. It’s not like I was expecting a mint chocolate left on my pillow, but for crying out loud, provide laundry service for guests of the hotel staying five weeks. Even with three suitcases, I don’t have enough to get me through the days. Luckily, Sam and I found a laundry room down in the basement. It takes quarters. Lots of quarters. It reminded me of when I was a kid when Daddy was between jobs.” Charlotte finished texting. She then dropped her cellphone into her purse. “Apart from Mr. Hinkley, the staff here is rude and unhelpful. Believe me, I plan to leave a review of the staff on the website once we return to London.”

Professor Skeffington interrupted, “Places please.” She gestured us over to the easels, and we all went over to select our own. “Now class,” she began once our attention was on her, “to wrap up art week, we will be discussing today a type of art style called ‘Life Drawing’. It is a focus on the human anatomy, one of the most advanced forms of art there is. Humans are very complex beings,” she went on, strolling into our circle so that she was front and center, “and the human anatomy is very difficult to sketch.” She raised her hand, showcasing the subtle way her fingers fell. “Take a look at my hand. Notice how some of my fingers curl, each one slightly different from the other. The lines in my hands. The texture of my flesh. The way my wrist folds and creates these subtle lines. Now imagine how difficult it would be to draw.” She lowered her limb and left it back down at her side. “Now on to facial expressions. There are 27 known human emotions, each one distinct from the other. Imagine how difficult it could be to capture a feeling. How do you convey sadness? How do you capture joy? How may you translate a person’s anger into a drawing?” She took a moment to look at each of our blank expressions. “That, my students, is what our lesson will be in regards to today.”

Just then two young people appeared in the frame of the open door. The biggest surprise was not that they seemed to have materialized straight out of thin air, but how the two of them were dressed in only their underwear.

Professor Skeffington noticed them. “Perfect timing. Please do come in and join us.”

There was no doubt about it. The five of us were absolutely baffled, and each of us darted glances back at one another, until ultimately shifting our attention back over to the newcomers entering the clubhouse dressed in practically nothing. Neither of them could have been more than a year or two older than any of us, but they were gorgeous beyond perfection—like living, breathing works of art. The first one I noticed was a beautiful Iranian girl with darker skin and long black hair cascading down to her lower back. The other was a handsome Russian boy with

wavy blonde hair that tumbled down to his athletic shoulders. These strangers weren't just attractive. They were perfect, like they were hand-chiseled by Greek Gods and then miraculously brought to life by the same celestial beings who sculptured them. The two of them entered the circle with all eyes on them.

"I would like for each of you to be mindful of our guests." Professor Skeffington instructed us, "Let us be courteous and respectful, and as well, appreciative to our models for taking the time out of their day in the celebration of art. You have until lunch break to complete your drawing of the human form." She glanced down at her wristwatch and then tapped it to set an alarm. "Off you go!"

And then it happened. Both models peeled off their underwear, dropped them, and then struck a pose. My eyes darted away instantly. My face got hot and heavy and my stomach was left filled with aching flutters. I clamped a hand over my mouth to hide my smile, my laugh, and my rosy cheeks which made it all too abundantly clear that I was uncomfortable. I then glanced around to see how my fellow classmates were handling it. Right away I spotted Charlotte covering Billy's eyes.

"Billy, stop looking at her!" she urged in a hushed tone.

"How am I supposed to draw her if I can't very well look at her?" he retorted.

"Why don't you try using your imagination!" she snapped back.

"Why would I use my imagination when she's standing right in front of me?"

"In that case, I'll draw the handsome fella." Charlotte claimed a piece of charcoal and then began to sketch the charming male model with striking features.

"Stop that!" Billy insisted.

"You stop it first!" Charlotte retaliated.

I then noticed Sam. She was hidden behind her canvas, but not well enough to hide her cheeks which were glowing red the same as mine. I could easily tell that she was nervous. Her hands kept shaking, and every so often she would drop her charcoal. Never before had Sam struck me as the clumsy type. Only someone who would become annoyed by being in the presence of someone who was the clumsy type. I gather her newfound awkwardness came from how embarrassed she was drawing models in the nude. Then there was Aaron. Unlike the rest of us, he was very professional about the whole assignment. He didn't laugh, or blush, and I couldn't even detect a hint of a smile. He kept his focus strong and uninterrupted, constantly glancing from his canvas and then back at the models, ensuring to capture their every detail. Meanwhile, my face was still hot, and my palms were now soaked with sweat, and I felt like a dozen butterflies were fluttering around inside my belly. I tried to ignore it the best I could. I pressed the charcoal against the canvas, slowly peeked around it, and then I began to sketch. The boy's body, I could feel my heart racing to it: his jawline was sharp, his arms were shapely, and his skin stuck to the subtle hints of muscles poking out from his tightly defined stomach. That's as far as my eyes traveled downward before my face beat with the heat of humiliation. My drifting gaze shot right back up again, and there I found the boy model looking back at me. He was obviously a skilled model, so adept at playing the part, but he broke character with a smile that he directed solely for me. Before it felt like there were a dozen butterflies unleashed in my belly, but now it felt closer to a thousand of them, and they all went flitting about. I felt about ready to puke.

By the time lunch was served, my sketch of the models was completed. I had to say, my drawing wasn't half bad. Their hands were by far the most tricky, and I had a tough time getting

them proportionate, but I do believe the finished project did capture both of the model's beauty. During the break, I sat alone on the stage, legs hanging over the ledge, and there I enjoyed a turkey, cheese, and tomato sandwich all while looking over my canvas. During this Billy and Charlotte were still arguing over how Billy was ogling over the girl model. Sam, however, ate her sandwich while surfing through her cellphone, undoubtedly on the hunt for an eight-letter word that would have the potential to be the passcode to Dr. Jabberwocker's hidden vault. Professor Skeffington, on the other hand, ate lunch with Aaron all while admiring his completed work. It was no surprise to anyone that his drawing was by far the best out of all five of us. His sketch was amazing, and just as life-like as any one of the photographs I had ever taken. It wasn't just the perfection and close detail of the human anatomy Aaron had captured, but the conveying of emotion registered on the models' faces. And the eyes...there was always something about the way Aaron drew his subject's eyes that just felt like you were looking straight into their soul.

I took a bite out of my sandwich, playfully kicking my feet off the ledge of the stage while studying my sketch and searching for areas I could work on. It was then that I noticed the boy model approaching me carrying his sandwich on a plate. I gulped. The model wore only a tiny towel wrapped around his waist.

"Hey," he said. "Do you mind if I sit with you?"

Just when I thought I had gotten rid of all the butterflies, they came rushing back with vengeance. "No." I swallowed, my mouth dry. "Not at all," I then croaked.

"Thanks." He hopped up onto the stage, then crouched down into a sitting position. Thereafter he let his legs hang off the ledge next to mine. I could feel his thigh grazing against mine and it sent a nervous ripple throughout my body, leaving my flesh feeling as though it were prickling.

The model ripped open a bag of potato chips, then poured them all out in a pile on his plate beside his sandwich. "By the way, I'm Jason." He reached over and shook my hand.

His grip was strong, his touch alone leaving me all warm and tingling inside. "Winters—I mean Collin! My name's Collin. Winters is my last name." I couldn't untangle my tongue fast enough. "So Collin...Winters. That's my name."

He laughed, "It's nice to meet you, Collin Winters." He pulled back his hand, reached for a chip, then tossed it into his mouth. "So, your teacher told me that you guys are on a class trip, and that you're all from an art school in London?"

"Yeah. That's right."

"I always wanted to go to London," Jason daydreamed. "I've heard it's really fun."

"I've been there for a couple of months now, but I haven't done much. I've been too busy with school."

He seemed genuinely interested in me. "What are you studying?"

"Photography," I answered.

"That's great! What's your medium?"

"I do some architectural photography, but I really specialize mostly in lifestyle which captures people in real-life situations."

"Well, now you know a model," he winked, and even his wink was charming as ever, "just in case you find yourself ever needing one."

I took another bite out of my sandwich, most likely looking like a fool with mustard smeared across my lips. I tried to be polite and keep the conversation going. "How long have you been modeling?"

“For two years now,” he replied while enjoying his own meal. “I’ve been doing it ever since I turned 18. My parents hate it, but the money’s good and it’s been helping me pay my way through college.”

“Where do you go to school?” I found myself wondering.

“I’ve been attending New York University and majoring in fashion.”

“How cool. Who knows, maybe we’ll get to work together someday.”

He locked eyes with me and smiled. “I think I would like that a lot.”

“Jason,” the other model approached us. Unlike her companion, she was fully dressed. “You better put some clothes on. Our ride should be pulling up any minute now.”

Jason finished the last bite of his sandwich. He then reached into his duffle bag where all his clothes were piled inside. “I heard you guys are staying in the city for a few more weeks.” He located a pen and a notepad, then scribbled his telephone number on the corner piece of scratch paper. “If you find yourself with some free time, give me a call. Maybe we can grab dinner or something.” He ripped off his number and then handed it to me.

“Sounds good,” I said, though I really wasn’t all too sure about it.

Jason hopped off the stage. He turned to me, his charming smile leaving me nervous. “See you around, Collin Winters.” He slung his duffle bag over his shoulder and then bounded after the other model. It was on their way to the exit, just when Jason was passing Aaron standing at his canvas and working on his shading, that Jason unexpectedly tripped over Aaron’s foot. He crashed to the floor face first.

Aaron went to assist him up. “I’m sorry. I didn’t see you there.” There was something most insincere about the tone of his voice.

Jason got himself up, threw me an awkward look, and then followed his friend out of the clubhouse. I swear, if I hadn’t known any better, I would have thought Aaron had tripped Jason intentionally. But that was ridiculous! Aaron wouldn’t have tripped him. Why would he have? Aaron returned to his canvas and continued shading. I glanced back down at Jason’s telephone number. I thought about it. It did cross my mind. But ultimately I decided against it. I crinkled the phone number up in my fist then left it on my plate where my sandwich crust remained unwanted. Jason was nice enough, sure. Not to mention that he was incredibly handsome. But I wasn’t ready. I pressed my hand against my scar through my shirt. In fact, I’m not sure I would ever be.

It was such a long school day. At least, it felt as much. The whole day just dragged on and on. Billy and Charlotte kept up their argument for a great portion of the day, both equally jealous and both equally upset. Any free time Sam had was bestowed to her cellphone in which she continued hunting for an eight-lettered word worthy enough for Dr. Jabberwocker’s password. She was relentless. Then there was Aaron. He kept his focus on our next assignment, which was sketching a basket of fruit. He hardly spoke to me. He spent a great majority of the day without so much as even glancing at me. There was one instance when Aaron asked me to hand him a new piece of charcoal after his had been reduced to a tiny stubble. I fetched him a new one from out of a carton next to my easel. That was it. I wasn’t sure if he was upset with me. He was suddenly acting so distant. Maybe he just woke up on the wrong side of the bed, or the only two hours of sleep he had gotten finally caught up with him. Who knows. I just thought it best to give him some space.

I was in the middle of drawing an apple, but it unfortunately didn’t look much like an apple. It actually resembled a pear, and not even an appetizing one. My shading was off and left my

banana looking more like it was left out to rot. I was having a tough time with it. And just when I was about to scribble out the whole fruit basket I'd drawn, something shiny sparkled in my eye. I peeked around the canvas. There was a tiny gold plaque cemented to the stage. I drew forward, like a string tied around my waist was pulling me towards it. I approached the plaque and then I read what was engraved upon it: *'This stage was built in dedication to the performer Ruby Hart.'*

Ding. I could hear the elevator all the way through time. It was loud and resounding. Before I knew it, I was back in my head where a memory played as though on the silver screen.

* * *

The elevator doors opened to the rooftop. I followed Ruby across the roof and over to the clubhouse. I was intrigued by the pool. It was packed. Even at night. I could hear laughing and see splashing from all the guests having fun in the pool. There were a few of the hotel staff up there as well, all donned in black suits and fitted gold ties—the same colors as the building's exterior. One was rolling in a cart with fresh towels, another folding down the umbrellas at the tables now that the sun had fully set, and the last one went meandering through the lounge chairs with silver trays topped with fancy cocktails: martinis, gimlets, mojitos, and Bloody Marys, to name a few.

Ruby headed straight for the entrance of the clubhouse where a flamboyant fella stood. He was taking tickets at the door, then gesturing patrons to their seats. He was glamorous and over the top, wearing an outfit loud enough to match his personality. His suit was fabulous. It was a waist-coat studded with rhinestones and spikes, tailored to utmost perfection. It fit him like a glove.

The gentleman made a rip in a ticket and then handed it back to the well-dressed couple at the door. He then gestured them to their seats. "Ruby," he spotted us coming up to the door in a hurry, "why aren't you backstage?" He drew a silver watch out of his waist-coat pocket, "You're late."

"Sergey, darling, I need to request a favor."

"Of course. What—" He looked down and saw me coming up from behind Ruby. He snarled out of sheer disgust, "What's *that*?"

"A child."

"Ew!" he gasped. "Ruby, what could have possibly possessed you to bring *a child* to your show?"

"I'm afraid I wasn't given a choice." She threw her boa dramatically over her slender shoulders. "You wouldn't believe my life as of late. My eldest daughter shows up at my door after seven years, spends the night, then leaves me with her toddler."

"I'm four," I said, only to be ignored by the two adults.

Ruby snatched a cocktail off the tray from a waiter heading for the sparkling pool. "Now I'm stuck babysitting while my daughter goes off to God knows where." She took a great big gulp, then muttered under her breath, "The audacity of it all."

Sergey cringed, "Lacie got herself knocked up, eh? Poor thing. Next thing you know she'll be in line for welfare with another brat bouncing on her hip." He peered down and gave me another nasty glare. "He probably has Lyme disease or something of the sort."

Ruby downed what was left of her cocktail. "For God sake, Sergey, he's not a monkey in the Amazon."

“I’d rather take my chances with the monkey over a...” his face twisted again, “*a child.*”

Ruby spotted another waiter, this one heading inside the clubhouse with a silver tray topped with more fresh cocktails. She switched out her empty glass with a new one. “Sergey, darling, I need to ask you for a teensy favor.”

He stopped her fast. “Don’t even think about it.”

“I beg of you, please.” She looked desperately into his eyes. “How else am I going to perform my song? I’ve been practicing all week and finally got it down.” She took another sip, the alcohol already loosening her up. “I’m singing Elvis Presley’s, *I Can’t Help Falling In Love With You*. It’s sure to be a hit!”

“I’m not qualified to watch a baby,” Sergey refused.

“I’m four!” I said again, still ignored.

He got all fussy. “Can’t you just throw him in a playpen or something?”

“You think I have a bloody playpen to throw him in?” Ruby countered.

He insisted, “Improvise. Stack books around him so he can’t crawl away.”

Ruby laughed, “He isn’t a dog, Sergey.”

Sergey took another glance at his pocket-watch. “You’re about to go on.” He stomped the ground like a child with a tantrum. He then gave in. “Take him backstage. I’ll check on him, but that’s the best I can do.”

Ruby planted a red kiss on his cheek. “Thank you, Sergey. What would I do without you?” She strutted off into the clubhouse, whirling around only to catch Sergey smearing lipstick off his cheek with a grotesque look on his face. “You’re the best damn MC this hotel has seen in years.”

“And you, Ruby, are the star of the show.”

She finished off what was left of her cocktail and then threw her arms up in the air. “And don’t you ever forget it, darling!” she shouted over the roaring audience, then strutted off in the parting path the crowd had made for her; the spotlight following her up onto the stage.

I was enamored. The bright lights. The flashing cameras. The audience cheering for Ruby Hart. I was transfixed by the spell my grandmother cast, watching in sheer amazement how she so effortlessly worked the crowd. She had them already laughing with a joke, and then continued their chortling with an amusing bit. But then Sergey snapped his fingers in my face, pointing down a nearby aisle where a velvet curtain stood at the end.

He instructed me, “You can watch the show backstage.” He then waved his hand. “Go on. Shoo.”

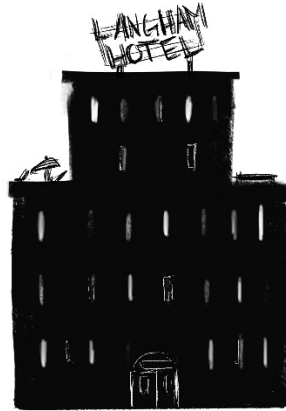
I did as he asked. The whole walk down the aisle I watched my grandmother. She was now dancing, frolicking about on the stage with an audience still cheering. By the time I got backstage, she was in the middle of a song. I pulled back the velvet curtain and stole a peek at the stage. Ruby held the microphone close to her painted lips, soulfully singing into it. Her voice was haunting and yet incredibly beautiful. As were the audience, I was captivated by her spell.

* * *

I snapped back to the present, my eyes still fixed on the plaque mounted to the stage. I could still hear the audience roaring. Their cheers and laughter slowly fading away into the abyss of time. *Ruby Hart*, I thought. That was my grandmother. My mom’s mom. I wondered whatever happened to her? My dad never really talked about my family on my maternal side. At least, he’d never mentioned my grandmother. I stood there in the clubhouse thinking it all over. I had

a grandmother, and she was spectacular! Mary Sullivan was her name, but she went by her stage name Ruby Hart. My thoughts went spiraling deeper and deeper. She named herself after her great grandmother who was wrongfully committed in 1901 to the Langham Hospital of the Mentally Impaired. She was the only one to have ever solved Dr. Jabberwocker's riddle. It was her. *Ruby Hart*, I realized.

That was eight-letters long.



Chapter 18

“You guys...” the words trembled off my lips. I couldn't pry my eyes away from the plaque, but more specifically, my grandmother's name. “You guys...” While Professor Skeffington was distracted on the phone with the headmaster of our school, all my classmates pulled from their canvases and made their way toward me, one by one. “You guys aren't going to believe this.”

“What's all the fuss about?” Billy popped his head over my shoulder to see what it was that I was looking at.

Sam readjusted her beanie. “Collin, what are you looking at?”

Aaron took a guess, “It's a commemorative plaque, I think?”

“What's so great about a commemorative plaque?” asked Charlotte.

Billy shrugged. “I couldn't tell you.”

“Look,” I pointed at the name in dedication, “Ruby Hart.”

Billy realized, “Isn't that the same bint who escaped the hospital?”

I clarified, “It is, but this commemorative plaque is in dedication to her great granddaughter—the performer of the Langham Hotel, not the patient who solved Dr. Jabberwocker's riddle.”

Billy didn't catch the correlation. “Well, good for her.”

“Don't you see?” I pressed, “Ruby Hart was the only person who ever solved Dr. Jabberwocker's riddle. He probably wanted to honor her.”

Sam was becoming noticeably annoyed. “Collin, what are you getting at?”

I twisted around to face them all. “Ruby Hart is eight-letters long.”

They all gasped.

“Class is dismissed for the day.” Professor Skeffington ended her phone call with the headmaster, and now came sweeping towards us. “Congratulations are in order. You all have completed art week. We'll pick up on Monday with an emphasis on the dramatic arts, mainly

theater and acting. But until then, your time is yours. Enjoy the weekend.” Overjoyed, my classmates fanned out to gather their belongings in order to jump start their first free weekend in New York City. Professor Skeffington stopped me in my tracks. “Collin.”

I whirled back around slowly. “Yes, Professor?”

“Your drawing of the fruit basket.” She gestured to the canvas. It was atrocious. It might as well have been drawn by the same four year old Collin I’d recently been remembering. “I don’t mean to be unkind, but this really isn’t your best work. Your shading doesn’t make much sense. You want to capture the fruits’ shadows, and where you have it positioned is quite off from where the light would hit it. You also went a bit too heavy as far as the shading is concerned. Not to mention the fruits are all disproportionate. I can’t in good conscious pass you this week until you fix it. Take some time this weekend to perfect it.”

“Professor, I’m just not very good at drawing.”

“Well, lucky for you, you have a roommate who is quite skilled at drawing. Might I suggest you ask for help.”

I huffed, “I’ll have it done by Monday morning.”

“Thank you.”

I didn’t want to look at my drawing anymore. It was hideous and embarrassing. Especially when compared to my fellow classmates. I plucked the canvas off the easel and tucked it under my arm. While Professor Skeffington cleaned up the mess we all had made in the clubhouse, the five of us classmates gathered outside on the rooftop.

Sam pulled us aside. “Should we try the password?”

“Might as well,” said Billy. “If it’s another dud, we can at least rule it out.”

“Then what are we waiting for? Let’s go!” Aaron pushed open the emergency exit door beside the elevator, and we all followed him down a cold and musty stairwell that reeked heavily of rat feces. It smelled terrible. We were all grateful that the penthouse floor was only one level down from the rooftop.

The five of us gathered outside of the penthouse’s front door, all of us surrounding the eerie portrait of the raven and writing desk. Aaron grabbed the frame and swung it open, revealing the vault. He revolved the spin dial to every letter of Ruby Hart’s name, each letter locked perfectly into place. Aaron then seized hold of the metal latch attached to the vault’s heavy door. It took force and much effort to twist it around. Following was a loud mechanical *click*. Aaron released the latch and then stole a step back, leaving the door to slowly open forward.

Sam exclaimed in growing awe, “Collin, you did it. You figured it out!”

The vault door swung fully open, and we all gathered head to head around the opened safe. The shared excitement we all felt, one might have thought we were expecting to find a bounty of lost treasure. But it wasn’t anything of the sort. There was only one thing inside. It was a book, so old that it appeared to have been decaying for many years. The cover was worn, and all the pages had a yellowish tint to them. I reached into the vault and carefully took the novel into my hands. It was then when I read the cover, *‘Alice’s Adventure’s in Wonderland’*.

Billy scratched his blonde head. “That looks like a book.”

Sam snapped, “It *is* a book, you moron!”

I studied the cover, so frail I feared it might just wilt away in my hands if I held it for any longer. “Why would Dr. Jabberwocker put a children’s book in his safe? Was he that obsessed with the story?”

“It’s got to be another clue,” Aaron insisted.

I delicately leafed through the crisp pages, quickly noticing that it was a rare first edition with extra illustrations. I flipped through the novel chapter by chapter until finally reaching the very end. Nothing seemed unusual about it except the possibility of the illustrations. It was just a book—a children’s book, no less. I could feel myself growing frustrated, my whole body itching with the feeling of defeat.

“Well, onto more important matters.” Billy went right up to the gleaming gold elevator doors and pushed the button to call it. “Like, what should we have for dinner?”

“Dinner?” Charlotte screeched. “How on Earth can you think of food at a time like this?”

“I could go for some pizza,” Sam suggested.

Charlotte whirled around to her. “You’re just as bad as he is.”

She retorted, “We’re obviously not going to figure this out by just standing around here. We might as well eat something. We can’t just starve ourselves.”

Charlotte donned a most confused expression. “I starve myself every time I’m up for a new role.”

Aaron caught me studying the book with a strong unwavering focus. “They’re right, Collin. Let’s go get dinner. We’ll be able to think better on a full stomach.”

Aaron’s voice was distant. The whole conversation around me was nothing more than a low murmur fading quieter and quieter. I held the book in my hands, my grasp tightening. There was an awful buzzing in my ear, and then my mother’s voice breaking through the veil of time, ‘*Wake up, Collin. Wake up, my little Power Ranger.*’

Suddenly, I was back to being a little boy again.

* * *

I was sound asleep, nestled in bed in the penthouse guest room. Someone was rocking me awake.

“Wake up, Collin. Wake up, my little Power Ranger.”

I blinked open my weary eyes. Mommy was knelt over me, nose to nose. “Mommy,” I was groggy from sleep, but I tried to make sense of what was happening, “is it morning time?”

“Not quite, sweetheart.”

I looked over her shoulder. The curtains at the window were open. It was dark out, and the crescent moon glistened in the starless night. I then drifted my sleepy gaze over to a wall clock. It was 2:37am.

I realized, “You never came home last night.”

“I know, baby. Mommy was busy.” She was fidgeting an awful lot. She ran her hands through her hair and picked at her lips while speaking to me. “I had to get out of this place. This place,” she glanced around the guest room with a wild, unsteady gaze, “This hotel. Oh this God forsaken hotel. It’s so loud...” She clamped her hands over her ears like earmuffs, “It’s so *damn* loud.” She pressed down harder, squeezed, and then released the pressure. Her shifty eyes met with mine again. “It’s dark, baby...it’s so dark in here...” I could see the fear in her unsteady pupils. “There’s something here, Collin,” She glanced around the room again, her gaze settling in the closet where lay a patch of darkness, “Can you feel it? Can you feel it, baby?”

She was scaring me. “Feel what, Mommy?”

Her eyes remained on the patch of inky black. “*The shadow*,” she gasped. “I feel him,” she trembled. “I always feel him.” Her hand slowly worked up to her quivering lips where she cupped her mouth. “He’s watching me...Collin, he’s *always* watching me...”

I tugged on my blanket. “You’re scaring me, Mommy.”

She snatched my forearms and yanked me closer. “Don’t be scared. That’s what he wants. That’s what he’s trying to do. You have to be strong, baby. You have to protect me—*me*,” she begged. “You’re my Power Ranger.” She pulled me harder, her fingers digging into my reddening arms like a drowning man clinging to the last life preserver. “Remember, Collin? Don’t you remember? You’re my Power Ranger. You promised me you would protect me.”

My eyes began to tear up.

She peeked over my shoulder as her eyes drew back to the darkness within the open closet. I saw it in her face, the prominent white around her pupils, the sweat beaded across her brow, the quiver in her lips. She was more frightened than I’d ever seen her before. “Come on, baby. Let’s go. Let’s get out of here.”

Mommy helped me out of bed. She threw a jacket over my pajamas, scooped me up, and then carried me out of the penthouse.

* * *

I shot back to the present with a gasp. I couldn’t breathe. My lungs had collapsed along with a horrible pressure against my chest. I dropped the book. The first edition copy of *‘Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland’* hit the carpeted floor with a thud so loud it felt like thunder crashing in my ear. I hunched over, grasping my chest while the panic-attack assaulted me.

Sam noticed me crouching and wheezing. “Collin, are you okay?”

Billy worried, “Yeah, mate. You don’t look too well.”

Charlotte suggested, “We should get him water. Poor thing is probably dehydrated.”

“He’ll be fine,” Aaron reassured them, knowing exactly what was wrong with me. “You guys go order pizza. We’ll meet up with you three back in Sam and Charlotte’s hotel room.”

I was so blinded by the discomfort, my heart racing so fast I could barely make out their conversation. My breathing lost its pattern. It was now more sporadic and heavy, and suddenly my whole body felt weak. The others left Aaron and me alone. And once we were, he guided me over to the wall, my back pressed against the portrait of the raven and the writing desk. I sunk down, my spine slowly working down the wall until I collapsed in a heap.

Aaron sat down on the floor beside me. “It’s okay.” His voice, though calm and soothing sounded miles away from me. “Collin, it’s okay.” He gripped my shoulder and tightened his hold. “I’m right here.” He dropped his hand and then enveloped his fingers around my own. “You’re not alone,” he reassured me in a gentle whisper. “Breathe with me.” He took a deep breath, and then so did I, and then we exhaled together. “Good. You got this.” We repeated it, inhaling slowly, then breathing back out again. “One more time. You’re doing great.” And then we did it once again, but that last breath of air I exhaled was unleashed with a cry.

I didn’t even realize that my face was soaked with streaks of tears. “What’s wrong with me?” I coughed on my own cry. “Why am I so broken?”

“You’re not broken.” Aaron grabbed me and then pulled me forward until I collapsed into his arms. “Collin, you’re okay. You’re just going through something...something dark...but something temporary.”

I wept in his arms, “There’s something I haven’t told you guys...something I’m not entirely sure of...I’m confused, but...I don’t know how to say this without sounding crazy...”

He stopped me from rambling any further. “Collin, what are you talking about?”

I looked into his eyes. “Aaron, I think I’ve stayed at this hotel before.”

I could tell by his confused expression that those were the last words he expected to come out of my mouth. “*What?*” He strove to work it all out in his mind like it were some tangled sentence he had to unknot before he could understand its meaning. “You think you stayed at the Langham Hotel...when?”

“When I was a kid.”

“A kid?” Aaron echoed, his forehead crinkling while he still struggled to understand.

I nodded. “I started to remember things ever since we checked-in. I was four years old,” I remembered. “I was with my mom. It was around the time she...died.”

Aaron’s face screwed. “Collin, are you sure...? Maybe you just stayed at a hotel that looked like this one.”

“I think it’s safe to say this hotel is one of a kind.”

Aaron agreed, “You have a point.”

“My grandma,” I continued, “Aaron, my grandma was Ruby Hart. The performer. The one who lived in the penthouse.”

Aaron looked back at the penthouse front door and then back at me. “Your grandma was Ruby Hart?”

“Aaron,” my eyes were just as shaky as my voice, “I think something bad happened here. I don’t know what exactly, but something happened. I can *feel* it.”

“It’s alright,” he reassured me, “Collin, it’s alright. We’ll figure it out together.”

My neck gave out. My gaze drifted downward where I watched my tears soak into the carpet.

“Come on,” I felt Aaron nudge me, “Let’s go cheer you up with some pepperoni pizza.”

I got up off the floor with the copy of *‘Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland’* in my hands, and then I followed Aaron into the elevator. I’m not sure what happened here at the Langham Hotel, or what events could have transpired, but I had a feeling that I’d suppressed these memories for a reason. I knew they were bound to resurface eventually. I just wasn’t sure if I was prepared to learn the truth of what it was.

Charlotte and Sam’s hotel room appeared as a mirror image of mine and Aaron’s. There were two identical beds, a dresser, a full-length mirror, and a round table in the far back corner pushed up near close to the window that overlooked a cluster of buildings all lit up bright in the night. It resembled our room so much that, at first glance, it was difficult to determine that we were in a different room. In fact, the only thing that seemingly set apart the two suites was the painted portrait mounted on the wall above the beds. While our portrait depicted a white rabbit donned in a waistcoat, their portrait was of a ginormous orange cat dressed up like a detective. There was also much evidence to suggest that teenage girls were sleeping in this room, and all those clues pointed to Charlotte. The round table was topped with a variety of expensive-looking cosmetics, and many perfume bottles, with lots and lots of scented lotions. The closet was also filled with all of Charlotte’s many designer clothing, so jammed-packed that the closet doors were stuck permanently open as all her clothes looked about ready to burst free. The nightstand was the only part of the room that seemed to belong to Sam. There I found a great diversity of crystals, all different colors, all different textures. I even spotted a hematite stone, the same one tucked under my shirt. Amongst her collection of exotic stones was her frail book written by Virginia Woolf. An old photograph was being used as a bookmark. The picture was taken of her deceased parents on their honeymoon in Puerto Rico.

Our fellow classmates had made themselves right at home. Billy lay in Charlotte’s bed with his back against a pink sequence pillow, which I safely assumed belonged to Charlotte and not

the hotel. He had an open box of pizza in his lap, with a napkin tucked into the collar of his shirt. He must have been grateful for it, because the napkin had already caught a string of melted cheese along with several dribbles of tomato sauce. Charlotte sat beside him. She enjoyed a Caesar salad after picking out all of the croutons, scooping out a mound of cheese, and avoiding the dressing like the plague. Sam, however, was stationed over on her own bed. She had one slice of each of the several pizzas that were available. I noticed one with mushrooms and olives, another scattered with slices of ham and sprinkles of pineapples, and another one covered with every type of meat known to man. Sam gave Billy a run for his money. She could put away a pizza better than any teenage boy I'd ever known.

We entered the room and Aaron immediately left my side, making a beeline straight for the dresser, which had become home to a towering stack of pizza boxes. He ripped off several slices and stacked them onto his paper plate, and then he found a spot on the floor and began to indulge. I joined Aaron over on the floor with one slice of pizza. It was nothing exciting. Just cheese. But that was perfectly alright by me because that was my favorite kind. I had only finished half my pizza when I picked back up the copy of *'Alice's Adventures in Wonderland'*. Once again I leafed through the frail pages in hopes of discovering a clue to the next part of Dr. Jabberwocker's riddle. Everyone else was so busy enjoying their dinner that the hotel room was left behind in a dreary silence, leaving only the sound of chewing. I was content with the quiet because it gave me the time to reflect. I kept imagining my grandmother Ruby Hart, and it left me pondering over who she really was. All I could remember about her was that she lived in the hotel's penthouse, performed up on the rooftop clubhouse, and had a strenuous relationship with my mom. Besides that, I only knew what my dad had told me. I knew that my birthmother was the eldest of three siblings and that each sister had a different father. That was about it. Dad never really liked talking about mom or my grandma. Come to think of it, my mom's sister—Aunt Rosie, who was my cousin Parker's mom, told me and Parker once that she hadn't spoken to our grandmother since she left home at 18 years old. Mom and Rosie had a younger sister. Her name was Aunt Susie. Last I heard, she moved to Oklahoma and became a Jehovah Witness. No one ever talked about Ruby Hart. To me, she was nothing more than a mystery. I wished I could know more about her, and then it suddenly dawned on me that perhaps I could.

"Hey Sam." I stopped her mid-bite, which left her looking very displeased with me. "Can I borrow your laptop?"

"Sure." She dropped her pizza on her paper plate, then retrieved her laptop from a drawer in her nightstand. She reached over Aaron who was now scarfing down his third slice, and then handed it over to me. I flipped it open, the screen brightening to life. I went into the internet at once, searching the web after typing out Ruby Hart's name in a search engine. A growing list of related links began to populate across the screen. There was one in particular that caught my eye, and it was an article titled: *'The Hart of the Langham Hotel'* I clicked on the link and was brought to a website plastered with old photographs of my grandmother.

Lights. Cameras. Action! It only took a century, but the Langham Hotel finally managed to wrench itself free from its tarnished past. Who would have thought that the building that was first established to house and treat the mentally impaired—a building that has withstood scandals of many kinds, from torture, to maltreatment, to a slew of suicides, would one day become an epicenter of New York City nightlife. Over the years, many investors have taken on the challenge, but all have failed. The reason for the hotel's sudden success was a feat conquered by none other than that of the glamorous Ruby Hart. There's no doubt about it. Ruby Hart is a sensation!

The Langham Hotel first hired Ruby Hart back in 1987, and the hotel's success would soon follow. However, before then, the performer known as Ruby Hart was formerly known as Mary Sullivan.

Mary Sullivan was born in Queens, New York to father Barnaby Sullivan and mother Ada Calderini. Little is known of her early life, as Mary was very secretive about her parents. Even more so, with the estranged fathers of her three daughters. Mary first became a mother at 17 years old. She thereafter was forced to drop out of high school which led to her parents kicking her out of her family home. She was left to fend for herself on the streets of New York City. Mary struggled to make ends meet. During the day, she would wait tables at a local diner, and at night she worked as a bartender for a fancy nightclub in SOHO. It was at this nightclub where Mary caught the eye of a scouting agent. One night, when the club was overwhelmingly understaffed, and the patrons began to grow irritated, Mary took to the stage and entertained the crowd with comedy, then did a dancing number that had them all cheering, finishing it off with a song. Luckily for her the scouting agent had been visiting the club that night. Needless to say he signed her on. Not as Mary Sullivan, but as Ruby Hart. Not long after that, Ruby Hart had become a household name. She performed all over New York City, from nightclubs, to stadiums, to several shows on Broadway, all while raising three daughters on her very own. By the year 1987 Ruby decided to slow down and accept the offer she was given by taking the lead performer at a local hotel—the Langham Hotel, where Ruby spent two decades of her life performing nearly every night at the rooftop clubhouse. Over night, the Langham Hotel became a popular destination. From world travelers visiting the city, to the daily New Yorker looking to unwind after a long day at the office—the Langham Hotel became the place to be. It remained as such until March of 2003 when Ruby Hart took her final bow.

2003, I pulled my eyes from the screen to ponder what I'd just read. In 2003 I was four years old. This means, something happened to my grandma around the time my mom and I stayed with her. I couldn't think of anything that would stop Ruby from performing. There was so little I knew of my grandma, but one thing was clear—she was born to perform. It wasn't what she did, but who she was. The grandma I remembered was young and vivacious. Sure, she was a grandma, but she was nowhere close to retiring. I took another bite of my cheese pizza and then continued to read.

It was March of 2003 when tragedy struck the famed Ruby Hart. Her spotlight went out following a reunion with one of her estranged daughters.

"Boo!" I heard the whisper in my ear and it left an explosion of tremors to prickle all along my flesh. "What are you reading?" Aaron asked me after finishing his last slice of pizza.

"This article, it's about—what the," I lifted the laptop and practically pressed my nose against the screen. The article was gone. The screen left black. I vigorously hit away at the keys, but the laptop remained frozen or off, I wasn't sure. "Sam, your laptop isn't working anymore."

"I know." Sam wasn't bothered by the news. She was more interested in the novel we had found in the vault. "It's been acting wonky ever since we got here." On her bed, beside a plate of pizza crust, Sam delicately leafed through the book's frail pages. Her eyes suddenly bulged. "No way!"

Billy folded a mushroom and olive pizza into a taco, and then took a hefty bite out of it. He spoke with a cheesy mouthful, "What's got you so worked up, Sammy?"

"It's Sam," Charlotte used her plastic fork to poke around her Caesar salad, "you wouldn't want her to bite your head off like she did to me."

Sam was too excited to let it bother her. “I think I found something.” She had the novel in her hands, and it was opened up a few pages from the beginning.

“What is it?” I asked.

She abandoned her plate of pizza crust, and then rose to showcase her newest discovery. Between pages 6 and 7 was a page that didn’t belong. The page had been sewn into the book. In the middle of the foreign page were a bunch of jumbled words that didn’t spell out anything in particular. I joined her on my feet with everyone else, and then I approached her for a better look.

*.moorɔd v ɛɔʒɔɪ ʒɛɪɪt oʃ ʃɛw ll'vooɔ ,ɛɔɪɪo ɣm bniɪ oT
,moorɔ on zɒɪ ʃɛw ɛɔɪɪt v ni ,ɛɔɪɪt v zɒɪ ʃɛw moorɔ v ni mɪ*

“That looks an awful lot like gibberish to me,” Billy noted while standing over my shoulder.

“Let me have a look.” Charlotte wedged herself between us. “Well, that doesn’t make any sense at all.”

Aaron offered a guess, “It looks like it might be in a different language?”

“No. The writing is just reversed,” Sam revealed with a sense of thrill still thick in her voice. “It’s called ‘mirror writing’ because it can only be read through—”

“—a mirror!” I finished.

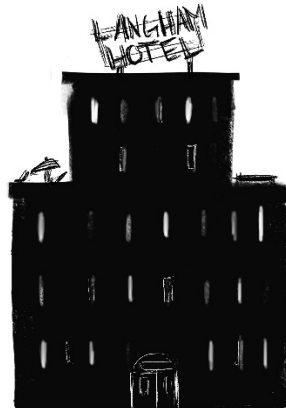
I felt a jolt of excitement rush through me at once, leaving me with goosebumps tingling up and down my arms. I took the book from Sam, then hastily crossed the room until I was standing before a full-length mirror. I placed the inscription on the book up close to the glass. My classmates soon joined me, and together, the five of us huddled around the mirror. We translated the clue left behind by Dr. Jabberwocker.

*I’m in a room that has a place, in a place that has no room.
To find my office, you’ll want to first fetch a broom.*

We all scratched our heads and pondered. I was starting to become irritated. These riddles were only leading to more riddles. There was no conclusion in sight. Just more jumbled words and puzzling phrases that hardly made any sense to begin with.

“That one’s easy.”

We all turned to Billy, a new pizza folded in his hand. “What?” He took another bite, then spoke while chewing, “Isn’t it obvious? The mad chap is talking about a broom closet.”



Chapter 19

“A broom closet?” Charlotte speculated. “What makes you think that the message is referring to a broom closet?”

Billy made a pass for the novel in Sam’s hands, but Sam was too quick and pulled it away. “Dude, your fingers are covered in pizza grease.”

“So what?” he said.

“This book is a first edition copy of *‘Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland’*.”

“Your point being?”

She reiterated, “It’s a first edition copy.”

This went right over Billy’s head. “Well if it gets ruined you can always swing by the local bookshop and purchase yourself a new copy. It’s bound to still be in print.”

Charlotte’s ears buzzed from this. “Can you also pick me up a copy of this month’s edition of *Vanity Fair*? I’m dying to know if Prince Harry is still dating that American actress.” She worried, “I do hope they still are. I love a good royal romance.”

Sam’s face went red. “A first edition copy of *‘Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland’* would be worth a ton of money.” She noticed all our blank expressions. “I’ll try to speak your language. It would be like having a first edition holographic Charizard.”

Billy, Aaron, and I all gasped.

Billy noted, “In that case, Sam, you’ll want to handle that book with much more care.”

Sam gritted her teeth, her jaw popping. “Believe me, it’s taking everything I have not to knock you upside the head with it.” She took a deep breath to calm her nerves. “Now Billy,” she began speaking to him like he were a toddler, “why do you think the message is referring to a broom closet?”

“Well, for starters, the bloody bloke mentions it right there.” He jabbed the book. “*‘To find my office, you’ll want to first fetch a broom.’* He couldn’t have been more clear about it. He even suggests it. *‘In a place that has no room.’* A broom closet would have no room.” He explained even deeper, “Then again right there, *‘I’m in a room that has a place’*. There’s bound to be a secret entrance in the broom closet, a secret entrance that undoubtedly would lead to Dr. Jabberwocker’s office.”

Charlotte was very impressed. “Billy, that was brilliant! How ever did you manage to figure it out so quickly?”

“That’s easy. It’s just like mirror writing. You got to read the message backwards.”

Sam blinked with astonishment. “I got to say, that was pretty impressive. Maybe you’re not so dumb after all.”

“Not too bad, eh.” Billy went to knock on his skull with his fist, but hit his eye instead. “Ouch!” That wasn’t even the first time he had done that.

Sam rolled her eyes. “Never mind.”

Aaron didn’t seem as optimistic as the others were. “That’s great and all, but there’s got to be a hundred broom closets in this hotel. How are we supposed to find the one the message is referring to?”

“The stairwell.”

My classmates turned and looked at me.

“If you take the stairwell, between every floor, there’s a broom closet.”

“Go on,” said Charlotte.

And so I did, the realization coming to me as I spoke it. “The page in the book,” I gestured to the novel gripped in Sam’s hands, “it doesn’t belong. Look,” I showed them how it was sewn in like a badly sutured wound, “it was added to the book. It was added between pages 6 and 7.”

Aaron’s eyes brightened when it came to him. “Which means the broom closet might be on the stairwell between floors 6 and 7.”

The five of us bolted for the door in a stampede. I hopped over Charlotte’s half-eaten Caesar salad, then I nearly slipped on an empty pizza box before I managed to join my friends out of the hotel room. I felt a rush while running through the hallway, my shaggy red hair tousling in the run as I passed hotel suites and portraits of animals posed like humans. The excitement was exhilarating. It was a rush of adrenaline. A type of ecstasy. I felt strangely connected to Ruby Hart. Not just my grandmother, but her great grandmother—the only patient to have ever solved Dr. Jabberwocker’s riddle. Solving this riddle was like stepping into some kind of family legacy I never knew was there. I was starting to think that checking in to the Langham Hotel was no coincidence. I was supposed to be here. Not only to solve Dr. Jabberwocker’s riddle, but also to solve the one of my past.

Near the elevators in the hallway nook, Billy pushed onto an emergency exit to the stairwell. We charged up a flight of cold cement stairs, whipped around a corner, and then charged up another; our pace slowing with each flight we climbed. We were all good and exhausted by the time we reached the landing between floors 6 and 7, and our spirits didn’t feel quite as bright. Sam opened the closet door. It was small. Very small. Inside was a vacuum from the 80s, a dirty mop in an old bucket, a few feather dusters, a tv with a hole in the screen—oddly enough there wasn’t a broom in the closet. Instinctively, I parted the bellhop uniforms hanging off the rod. This revealed another door. Mounted on the door was another plaque, like the one in the lobby between the elevator doors, and again like the one on the stage in the clubhouse. I read the engraved inscription,

*You found me at last, or so you may think,
But there’s more to the story you still have to link.
Now use your mind, and use it well,
Logic and reason is where secrets dwell.
So pick a direction, there’s more than one,
Your riddle has started, its only begun.*

Charlotte stomped on the floor. “I hate this riddle. I do. I really do!”

Billy apologized, “Sorry laddies, but I’m afraid I can’t solve this one so easily.”

Sam seized the doorknob. It had a keyhole, but she hoped for the best. She gave it a vigorous twist, but the knob was locked tightly shut. She then gave it a forceful pull, but the door didn’t budge. “This is so infuriating. No wonder only one person ever solved the riddle. It’s insane!”

I was so excited before, but all that thrill washed away. “I thought we had it. I was sure we did.”

Charlotte complained, “I don’t know why we even bothered to begin with. It was foolish to think we could have ever solved Dr. Jabberwocker’s riddle. The five of us are artists. We think creatively, not intellectually. Leave it to the scholars to solve.”

Sam’s mouth fell open. “You literally just insulted all five of us in one breath. Not to mention yourself!”

“Billy,” Charlotte hugged his beefy arm, “come with me to the bookshop so I can pick up the new *Vanity Fair*.”

He agreed, “Sure. They got comic books there.”

Sam asked, “I can’t believe I’m saying this, but can I tag along? My foster parents gave me a gift card for my birthday present. I was thinking about getting a couple of new books.”

The three of them headed back down the stairwell when I stopped them. “Wait! What about the riddle?”

“Have at it, mate. But I’m afraid you’re on your own.” Billy led the girls out into the hallway on the 6th floor. Still exhausted from the flight up, they called for the elevator to spare themselves from taking any more stairs.

I felt Aaron’s hand on my shoulder. “We might as well take a break from the riddle. Let’s head back to our hotel room. I have *Mrs. Doubtfire* downloaded on my tablet.”

“*Mrs. Doubtfire*?”

“The reception sucks in this hotel. So it’s whatever I’ve got downloaded. It’s either that or *Jumanji*.”

I followed Aaron down the stairs. He was right. We did need a break from Dr. Jabberwocker’s riddle. Thinking about it for too long only came with a headache. And so I pushed the riddle back to the furthest part of my mind where I locked it away. Instead, while we traveled in the elevator back down to the fourth floor, I thought about which of the two movies to choose from. At least that sounded like something I could solve.

Aaron and I spent a night in our hotel room. We hung out on his bed, over the covers, watching *Mrs. Doubtfire*. It had been such a long time since I’d last watched it. I forgot how much I enjoyed it. Aaron and I giggled the whole way through the film. About an hour in, we were feeling a bit peckish. Aaron rang the front desk and soon enough, Mr. Hinkley arrived at our hotel room with a silver platter topped with gummy candy, savory chips, and a bowl of popcorn freshly popped. With it were two piping cups of hot cocoa—extra whipped cream. He even doused it in chocolate sprinkles. Aaron got whipped cream on his nose, but I didn’t tell him. I thought he looked cute and childlike. It turns out, he didn’t tell me I had a chocolate sprinkle stuck to my cheek. We lay on his bed between movies, each of us lying the opposite way while looking up at the ceiling.

Aaron bit off the end of a gummy worm. “So Collin, tell me, what do you think you’ll do after we graduate school?”

“After we graduate?” I put some thought into it while I worked on a tough, gooey caramel chunk from a chocolate bar. “Well, before we left London I opened up my own savings account. I’m planning to put away some money, because what I would really like to do after we graduate is to take off for a few months, maybe a year, and use the money to backpack across different countries and visit the world’s seven wonders.”

Aaron slurped down his gummy worm. “How fun!”

“Yeah. I think so too.” I hesitated to share everything. After all, I hadn’t told anyone this before. Not even Adam. But something inside me decided to anyway. “When I come back, I want to open up my own gallery and call it ‘the Seven Wonders’ or maybe ‘the Eighth Wonder.’ I’m not sure yet...” I got suddenly insecure. “It probably sounds pretty lame.”

“Are you kidding me?!” Aaron spat a new gummy worm out of his mouth directly after putting it in. “That’s awesome!” He dug the now slimy worm out of the sheets and popped it back into his mouth.

Despite his reaction I was still shy and uncertain of myself. “Do you really think so?”

Aaron held up his hand. “Scout’s honor,” he promised. “I really like it. Honestly, Collin. It sounds really cool.” He then inquired, “How are you saving up for this trip? Where do you work?” The look on my face made it all too clear that I didn’t want to share, and that look was so easy for Aaron to read. And then it suddenly dawned on him, leaving a growing smile to slit across his face. “Oh my God, you’re the cafeteria lady!”

“Shhhh!” I hushed him with a face warm with embarrassment. “Why don’t you say it loud enough for the whole city to hear!” My eyebrows then slanted downward while my forehead crinkled. “And also, the proper term is ‘cafeteria person’ not ‘lady’.”

Aaron couldn’t help but laugh. “I can’t believe I didn’t see it before. I mustn’t have recognized you without your hairnet.”

I grabbed a bag of M&M’s and chucked it at him. “It’s not funny!”

“Alright. Alright. I’m sorry. I won’t give you a hard time. After all, I have a pretty embarrassing job myself...”

I took a break from my chocolate bar. I wanted to switch out the taste of sweetness with something salty. And so I reached into the bowl of popcorn wedged between us, and tossed back a few kernels. “Well, you have to tell me now. It’s only fair.”

He paused, thought about it, threw a mini chocolate chip cookie into his mouth, and then revealed, “I’m what is known as a professional dog walker.”

I chortled, “A *what*?”

“Professional dog walker,” he reaffirmed, this time more proudly than the time before. “I’ve been peed on by a poodle, drooled on by a St. Bernard, my ankles bitten on by terriers, and got my leg humped by a miniature schnauzer. Trust me, I would take flipping burgers at the school cafeteria over my job any day.”

“You couldn’t do my job,” I insisted.

“And why not?”

I relayed, “You wouldn’t want to ruin that pretty hair of yours with a hairnet.” I ruffled his hair, but it was held so strongly together with hairspray that nothing changed about it. We laughed, and then I took another bite out of my chocolate bar, this bite more nutty and crunchy than the bite before. “So, what about you? What’s your plan after graduation?”

“We still have four years to worry about it, but I’ve thought about interning for an animation studio. That’s actually why I went to dinner with Professor Skeffington’s former student the other night. He wanted to see my portfolio so he could pitch me to his bosses. Hopefully they’ll think I’m good enough to give me a job after I get my degree...an unpaid job, but whatever. It still beats dog walking. It might not be as fun or as adventurous as traveling the world and visiting the world’s wonders, but I have to draw.” He got caught up in his feelings about it. “I don’t know what it is about it. There’s just something inside me pushing me to draw. It’s the only thing that makes me happy. I *have* to do it. Somehow, I just know I’m *supposed* to do it.” Now he got really lost in his head. “It’s the only thing left in my life that still feels...right.” He came back around and found me with his dark brown eyes. “Does that make any sense?”

“It sure does,” I assured. “That’s exactly how I feel about photography.” I thought about it. “It’s kind of cool. You draw pictures and I take them. It’s like we see the world through the same kind of lens.” I found the last gummy worm in the now empty bag. I ripped it in half, and then I passed a piece to Aaron while I kept one piece to myself. “You know, like two peas in a pod.”

Aaron smirked. “You had me until that pea joke. If there’s one thing I hate—it’s peas.”

“I know. They’re the worst!”

Aaron and I lay there on his bed. We were spread out, his ‘*Power Ranger*’ socked-feet resting on a pillow next to my head, my ‘*Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle*’ socked-feet resting on a pillow next to his head. We gazed up at the ceiling together, taking turns reaching into the bowl of popcorn between us. Then our hands dove in at the same time. Our fingers touched. Our hands stilled. For a moment, we didn’t move. I snapped to my senses, grabbed a handful of popcorn, and then tossed one in Aaron’s face. He smiled, then threw a kernel at me. I ducked, shot back up, and then threw another piece of popcorn at him. Aaron caught it with his mouth, looking pompous as he slowly chewed. I threw another, and then so did Aaron. Before we knew it, we were in a full blown popcorn fight. We laughed and giggled. Our hotel room looked like a movie theater concession stand had exploded, but we kept at it.

I couldn’t remember ever having so much fun. It was definitely the most fun I’ve had since Adam died. This last year, I put all my focus on work and school. I didn’t stop. Not ever. If I did, even if only for a brief moment, I would feel the sadness creeping back up again. It was better to keep myself busy. If I didn’t keep busy I wouldn’t be able to get myself out of bed. But tonight, eating junk food, watching old flicks, hanging out with Aaron...I got a glimpse of what life should really be like. Sometimes you just had to take a break from it all. To stop and have fun. To be silly. No matter your age, be a child again. Aaron was reminding me of that. Come to think of it, I hardly touched my camera this whole trip. Something was happening. I wasn’t sure what it was, but it was there. I could feel it.

Our popcorn fight came to a cease fire. Aaron and I laid back together, side by side. Aaron propped his tablet up on his flat stomach and started the film, ‘*Jumanji*’, another classic childhood movie starring Robin Williams. There was popcorn in the sheets and some hard candy bar I could feel under my pillow, but the mess didn’t bother either of us. Aaron and I lay there watching the movie until we eventually dozed off. Right before I did, I noticed Cheshire on the fire-escape outside our hotel room window. He was perched on the railing while gazing up at the moon above him. The moon was remarkably bright against the dark night sky, and it appeared as though it were smiling down on the Langham Hotel.

That night I had a dream. Well, not so much a dream as it was a memory.

* * *

Almost 3am, and Mommy and I were on an adventure together. She was on a high this early morning, her spirit enthusiastic and upbeat. We roamed the hotel hallway playing cops and robbers. Mommy had committed a heist, and I was running after her. I was laughing so hard my tummy hurt. I couldn’t even hold up my hand which I pretended was a pistol.

I shouted and giggled, “Stop in the name of the law!”

Mommy flipped her long red hair over her shoulder to look back. “You’ll have to catch me first.” She had her leather jacket bundled in her arms, pretending it was loot she had stolen from our imaginary bank. “It’s my money, you hear? It’s mine. It’s all mine!”

I stopped running and held my ground, and then I raised my hand with my index finger aimed at Mommy. “Don’t make me do this.”

Mommy stopped. “You don’t have the guts, copper.”

I made the sound of the gun loading. “Want to bet?”

She ran.

I screamed, “Bang! Bang! Bang!”

Mommy pretended to be shot three times, her body flailing with each imaginary bullet. She stumbled through the hallway, plunged to her knees, then collapsed...dead.

“Mommy!”

I ran to her. Just as I got to her, she resurrected back to life. She grabbed me by the middle, and forced me to the floor where she tickled me. We laughed loudly, our giggles carrying through the hallway.

The door to room 131 opened, and an angry guest in a nightgown stepped out into the hall with an eye mask slapped to her crinkled forehead. She looked down on the floor and found Mommy and I in the middle of a tickle war.

“Have you any idea what time it is?” The woman scolded Mommy, “It’s the middle of the night. People are sleeping. Have some consideration.”

Mommy picked herself up from off the floor, and then assisted me up with her. “Lighten up, you old bat. We’re just having fun.”

The hotel guest gasped. “You rude woman. Get out of here before I call the front desk. And get that child to bed. Honestly. What sort of a mother takes their child out of bed at this time of the night?”

Mommy marched up to the woman. “He’s my child!” She screamed into her face, “I’ll do with him as I please!”

The guest looked at Mommy with complete and utter disgust. She backed away into her hotel suite, then slammed the door in Mommy’s face. Mommy became outraged. Her emotions switched so quickly it nearly gave me whiplash. She threw herself against the door and started pounding on it like a wild animal.

“He’s my son! He’s my son!”

“Mommy.” I could feel the fear vibrating in my little body. “You’re scaring me.”

She slammed her open palm against the woman’s door one last time, then knelt down so that she could look into my eyes. “It’s okay, baby. That woman was just being horrible. Sometimes people can be self-involved. They don’t care about anyone else. They only care about themselves.” She could see I was still shaking. “Come on. Let’s get ice cream. You want ice cream, don’t you, Collin? Cookies N’ Cream—your favorite.”

I nodded.

She scooped me up and threw me over her shoulder. “All aboard the Mommy Express. Choo! Choo!” I giggled as she pretended to be a train charging through the hallway. “Chugga Chugga Choo Choo! Chugga Chugga Choo Choo!”

Mommy kept up the act all the way down to the hotel lobby. She carried on through the downstairs hallway, across the bottom floor, not stopping until we reached the hotel’s restaurant. It was a little cafe. Very quaint. It had a few booths, a couple of tables, and a bar lined with swiveling stools with black cushion tops that faced the kitchen. The restaurant was open 24 hours, but there wasn’t anyone there besides the cook and a patron of the hotel sitting in the back alone in his booth. The patron looked somewhat familiar. He was Turkish. He was clean cut, donned in a tailored suit along with a tie loosened after a long day of work. I assumed he was a businessman from out of town, staying at the Langham Hotel while on a business trip. He had a briefcase, leather shoes that looked expensive, and very tired eyes. He was working on his third cup of coffee. I knew this because two empty mugs were left on the table. The patron ripped a packet of sugar, and then attentively watched the sugar pour out into his cup of coffee. He went for a second packet, rip, pour—he repeated it so many times I was beginning to lose count. I

recognized the Turkish man. Not as a little boy, but as an adult overseeing the memory. He was the homeless man I'd encountered on the first morning in New York City. He was in the alley outside of the hotel. The man with the pit bull. The man who mumbled to me some gibberish about a '*Shadow Man*.' It was him—I was sure of it. Mommy carried me past his booth. There was a napkin tucked under his elbow with a doodle on it. The doodle was of a tall and gangly figure, pitch black and made out of sharp, jagged scribbles. It was terrifying—it was the drawing of a Shadow Man.

Mommy carried me over to the bar and sat me on a stool. "Mimsy," she called into the kitchen, "two Cookies N' Cream ice cream sundaes, extra whipped cream, extra sprinkles, extra nuts," she slapped the bar, "and extra, extra cherries!"

A heavysset Samoan woman came out from the kitchen, donning a traditional white chefs double-breasted jacket. She had a sweet face and a warm spirit, a person who would surely enjoy hugging strangers over shaking their hands.

She threw a dish towel over her shoulder as she approached the bar. "Lacie, what are you doing up so late?" She glanced at the register where the time was digitally displayed. "Are you up early to catch a flight back to California?"

Mommy's mood altered quickly again, shifting from playful to irritable. "Back to California?" She pulled back a runaway strand of red hair, then gnawed on her thumbnail. "No. I'm not going back there. Not again. Not after everything that man put me through."

Mimsy was cautious not to press any further than that. Her attention then turned to me, watching me swiveling around in my stool. "Is this your son? He looks just like you."

"Good. Better that way. Best he look like me than his bastard of a father." She threw in a request, "Coffee," she peeled her camera strap from around her neck, "and the sundaes."

Mimsy hesitated. She glanced at Mommy and then to me, and then back again. "Lacie, are you sure ice cream is a good idea? It's awfully late. Your boy looks tired. Just look at his eyes."

Mommy dropped her camera on the bar. Her fingers stiffened, the veins in her hands prominent. "I'm going to lose my mind if one more person tries to tell me how to parent my own son." She lowered her hands. "I ordered two sundaes and a cup of coffee."

"Coming right up." Mimsy opened a freezer and began to scoop ice cream out of a carton, then dressed it up with all the sugary fixings. She then attempted to lighten the mood with a topic change. "You know, Collin, I first met your mom when she was just a little older than you are."

"Really?" I said.

"Sure did." She plopped a scoop of ice cream into a glass bowl, then gave it a loud squirt of whipped cream. "Your grandmother had just been hired on, and the two of them took over the penthouse. I think Ruby was pregnant with your Aunt Rosie, and then Susie came shortly after." She doused the whipped cream with a rainbow of sprinkles. "Your mom ran this hotel," she chortled. "All the staff knew her. They helped raise her too. Lord knows Ruby needed the help, because your mom was a handful. She was always off exploring the hotel, imaginary playing. I always admired how creative she was. Still is, I see." She caught Mommy prying open her camera. "Lacie, is that the same camera?"

"Huh?" Mommy hadn't been paying that close attention. "Oh, yes. It's the same one." She went right back to opening her camera in a delicate way.

"The same one?" I asked.

"It was a gift...a gift from my father." For a brief moment, Mommy slipped away into the past. "Your grandmother was very secretive about him. She would change the subject anytime I

ever asked about him. Turns out they were high school sweethearts. She got pregnant with me at 17 years old, but never told him about me. He came from a poor family. Apparently, my father wasn't going anywhere and Ruby, well she would say she was destined for greater things, far greater than the wife of a young immigrant. I started asking a lot of questions about him when I was a teenager, and so your grandmother reached out to him. She just told him about me. Told him I was twelve. That I was in 7th grade. That I was good at algebra. And that I wanted to be a photographer. She didn't want him to have any contact with me, but my dad sent me this camera."

"Since the day she got it, I never saw your mom put the camera down."

Mimsy slid our sundaes across the bar. She seemed to have done it many times before, and so she knew the perfect amount of push to give it. The sundae stopped right in front of me. I took a spoon and dug right into the Cookies N' Cream.

I inhaled a mouthful of ice cream. It was cold on my teeth, but deliciously sweet in my mouth. I asked Mommy, "Did you ever meet your Daddy?"

"He died before I got the chance to."

The kitchen telephone rang, and it caught Mimsy's attention. "That darn things been going off nonstop for the last hour. Everyone's been coming back from the bars, now drunk and ordering room service." She reached for Mommy's hand and squeezed it affectionately. "It's good to see you again, Lacie. Don't be a stranger. I'm here if you ever need anything. Anything at all."

"Thank you, Mimsy."

Mimsy went off to answer the phone, jotting the order down on a small pad as she tried to work out what the apparently drunk patron was ordering. It was a large order with lots of greasy foods, judging from the way she scribbled away at her notepad, relaying it back aloud. I continued to indulge in my ice cream sundae. My tummy was already hurting, but it was too good to stop. My face was smeared with sticky cream. My hands as well. I was working on a scoop with lots of sprinkles when I noticed Mommy taking the film out of her camera.

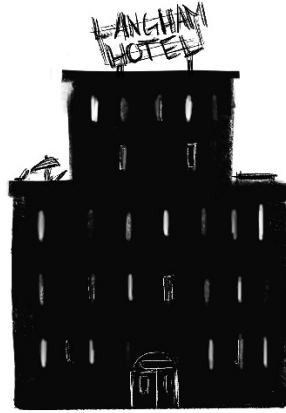
I heard her mumble, "I caught him. I finally caught him."

"Caught who, Mommy?"

"Something from my past, baby." She had a strange twinkle in her eyes that was both wild and mad. "I've been looking for him. That's where I was earlier...I was looking for him. I came back here to prove once and for all that I'm not crazy. That I'm not the lunatic your father tries to make me out to be. It started at this hotel and it'll finish here." She gripped the film tightly in her grasp. "I found him."

"Found who, Mommy?"

"The Shadow Man."



Chapter 20

I woke up with the sweetness of sugar still left in my mouth. I needed to brush my teeth immediately. I could still taste pizza, candy, and popcorn coated on my tongue. I rubbed my eyes open, stretched, yawned, and then realized I had fallen asleep in Aaron's bed. There was popcorn everywhere. It was buried in the sheets, sprinkled on the floor—everywhere. An empty pizza box and countless candy wrappers were also strewn amongst the mess. It looked like a frat house, and last night a raging party. Aaron was passed out in bed, face buried in his pillow. One of his *Power Ranger* socks was still on, the other was hanging off the portrait of the white rabbit. I giggled, and then I saw it, and I was left choking on my own laugh. Amusement was gone and a deep feeling of terror was replaced. All the junk food in my stomach felt as though it had turned to ice. I got out of Aaron's bed slowly, popcorn crunching against my bare feet while approaching the wall where my empty bed was pushed against. There were torn pieces of paper taped to the wall. Nearly every inch of it was covered by them. And on my untouched bed was Aaron's sketchbook—or what was left of it. All the pages had been ripped out, leaving just an empty binding. The pages now coated the wall. Doodled on each piece of paper was the drawing of a humanoid figure, tall and gangly, all black and with eyes so red I thought it might have been painted with blood.

My voice shook, "Aaron..." I swallowed, then tried again, "Aaron, you should wake up."

He rolled over, his eyes slowly cracking open. "Wha—" he grabbed his stomach, winced, then groaned, "Geez, how much junk food did I eat?"

I found my voice, "Aaron, did you do this?"

"Do what?" He raised his arms and was in the middle of a stretch when he saw it—the wall covered in drawings. His eyes shot open. "What the hell is all that?" He lunged out of bed and met me over by the wall. "Who...how..." words tumbled out of his mouth as his mind tried to process what he was looking at, "what is all of this?"

Aaron's confusion was making me even more nervous. "I woke up and found it like this. What is it? What's going—" And then I remembered. I remembered the memory I had in the form of a dream last night. I was a little boy again. Hotel. Cops and robbers. Ice Cream. Mimsy. And then it hit me like a wall I'd accidentally run into. *The Shadow Man*.

Aaron noticed the strange look on my face. "Collin, what is it?"

I studied one of the sketches taped to the wall, the humanoid figure blackened with scribbles along with its piercing red eyes that seemed to look right back at me: *the businessman in the booth pouring packets of sugar into his coffee—there was a doodle on his napkin, a doodle similar to the many taped to the wall. It was the same figure over and over again...a Shadow Man.*

“I’ve seen this drawing before.”

I was so lost in my head that I didn’t even remember saying that. I just held my gaze with the red eyes of the dark figure. There was something so incredibly sinister about it. Something dark and twisted. It felt evil. It made my blood run cold.

There was a knock on the door, so unexpected that Aaron and I nearly screamed. The door swung open, and Billy came sweeping in.

“Can you lads help me with my hair?” He ran a hand through his wheat blonde hair and gave it a good ruffle. “It’s all frizzy.” He then shook his head like a wet dog straight out of the tub. “I woke up early to grab us all some bagels, but it’s so foggy out there. I couldn’t even see the street. Fog does horrors to my hair. I can’t let Charlotte see me like this. Just look at it. I look like a Chia Pet! I tried to ask Sam for help, but she’s no good. Poor thing thought Charlotte’s flat iron was a—*holy shit!*” Billy finally paid attention to the wall in front of him. He wedged himself between Aaron and myself. The three of us stared at the two dozen sketches on the wall, all of which depicted the same dark, humanoid figure. “What the bloody hell is all of this?”

My eyes remained on the sketch in front of me. “We woke up to it.”

Billy took another step closer to the sketch I was looking at. “What the heck is it?”

Aaron shrugged. “I’m not sure, but it looks terrifying.”

“Terrifying?” Billy echoed. “It looks downright ominous!”

The hotel room door was left open, and Charlotte showed herself in. “Billy, I just heard the awful news. Fog does terror to my hair as well. This hair oil will do the—what are you three looking at?” And then she saw it, and when she did, she screamed.

The three of us boys whipped around and found Charlotte covering her mouth to mute her screams from continuing on.

I saw the terror glistening in her eyes and knew instantly that there was something more to Charlotte’s fear. “Charlotte, what is it?”

“That thing.” She lifted a quivering finger and pointed to the wall hung with sketches. “That *thing*,” she repeated, trembling, “I’ve seen it.”

The three of us boys echoed, “Seen it?”

She nodded. “Last night...in a dream...”

Alarmed, I pressed, “A dream? What kind of a dream?”

She relayed over the tremor in her voice, “I was back in high school...in drama class...my teacher, he was awful. I almost quit. He was so mean. I was supposed to perform a skit on pantomiming.”

Flustered, I asked, “Pantomiming?”

She broke from the story to explain, “It’s when actors perform a story with only their bodily movement. A type of miming, if you will.” She returned to her dream. “It was one of the most humiliating things I’d ever gone through, and last night I relived it in a dream. The assignment was to perform a pantomime skit of walking up a staircase, crossing a hall, turning on a light switch, and then crawling into bed. But I’m dyslexic, you see. I mixed it up and forgot the stairs. My teacher stopped me mid performance and ridiculed me in front of all of my fellow

classmates...he made me stay with him after class...I stopped acting for a full year after that. I would have stopped for good had my dad not encouraged me to pick it back up again. But in the dream, while on the stage, I saw something behind the curtain...it was *that*.” She raised her finger and pointed again. “That shadowy thing...I saw it in my dream. It made me feel so awful about myself. Like I was no good. I felt this overwhelming sensation of complete worthlessness.” Charlotte couldn’t stand to look at the drawing any longer, and so she forced her gaze away. “Who drew this?” Something then caught her attention. “Aaron.”

“What?” he asked.

“Your hands,” she said.

Aaron lifted his hands. His palms were coated in black charcoal residue. “But I...but I didn’t draw those pictures on the wall...”

“It would appear as though you had,” Billy noted.

I said, dumbfounded, “I can’t believe I slept through that. You must have been so quiet. I was sleeping right next to you.”

Aaron was at a loss of breath and words. “I don’t remember doing it. Honestly.” His pupils quivered while staring at his blackened palms. “I don’t remember any of it.” He dusted his hands off on his sweatpants.

Sam came barging into the hotel room next. “What was all that screaming about? I heard it all the way down the hall. It freaked me—the hell is that?!”

Billy caught Sam up to speed, “The cliff note version is this, I woke up early to get us all some bagels, but the fog was thick and made my hair frizzle. And so I came to the boys’ room for some assistance. I figured, who better to help me manage my locks than gay fellas such as them? Two better than one, I thought. Turns out, I came to quite the surprise. Someone had drawn sketches of this strange black shadowy figure. Charlotte came next and screamed when she saw the drawings. Rightfully so, too. It would seem she had a dream last night, the reenactment of childhood drama with a twist. This same figure appeared in Charlotte’s dream. After further investigation, it was discovered that Aaron was the culprit. He had done the drawings himself. Why he had done so is yet to be clear, but it seems as though he doesn’t recall drawing this strange figure nor taping them all to the wall. And now you’ve come barreling through the door asking the same questions we’ve all been asking.”

Sam’s face pinched, her voice dripping with sarcasm, “Thanks for the recap.”

“Don’t mention it.”

Aaron was starting to freak himself out. “I don’t know what happened.” He pulled from the sketch-infested wall and sunk onto his mattress. “Maybe I slept-walked? I’m not sure...all I know is that I don’t remember drawing any of those pictures on the wall.”

Billy found it amusing. “You took sleepwalking to a whole new level, mate. By the looks of it, you’ve ‘slept-drawn’. Probably the first bloke to have ever done so, I imagine.”

Aaron was looking troubled. He seemed uneasy, and even a little frightened by the thought of him doing something in his sleep that he was unaware of. I went to sit beside him on his bed. The look on his face was child-like fear. It was like when you’re little and you’re so sure there’s a monster under your bed.

I tried to comfort him. “It’s alright. Don’t worry. It’s just a drawing.”

“A drawing of a creepy-looking monster thingy.”

He did have a point. It was creepy-looking. But I knew that wasn’t what Aaron needed to hear right then.

"It's just a drawing. It's nothing." I wish I could have believed that myself. Truthfully, I was more frightened than even Aaron was. Like Charlotte, I too had a dream last night. A memory, really. Unlike Aaron's drawing on the wall, the businessman's napkin doodle was amateur, but just as frightening. And my mom...she was gripping the camera film. She said she had proof of the—

"*Shadow Man*," Sam uttered the words faster than I could even think it. She approached the closest sketch on the wall. One that was taped eye-level. "That thing is called a Shadow Man."

"What's that?" Billy asked.

"I'm not entirely sure I care to find out," Charlotte muttered.

Sam explained, "After my parents died, I went on a sort of spiritual journey. I've been kind of obsessed actually." Her stone-beaded bracelets and her amethyst necklace, somehow it became more prominent that she was wearing them. "I've read loads of books on the subject, watched documentaries about it as well, participated in lectures, I've even chatted with a lot of likeminded people online."

Charlotte pressed, "About what exactly?"

"*Death*." The word seemed to suck out all the air from the hotel room. "More specifically, what happens to us beyond the grave."

Billy stated, "That's easy enough. Heaven or Hell, simple as that."

"It's not so simple, actually," I said, earning glances from everyone around me. "I did some research a few days ago."

Sam went on to explain in greater detail, "In some spiritual teachings, Heaven is known better as the Other Side. As far as Hell is concerned, it doesn't exist."

Charlotte inquired, "Then where do the wicked go? The murderers and rapists and such. Not to mention my ex-boyfriend from fifth grade. That little tart cheated on me with that floozy Molly Evans. I don't suppose they'll be welcomed through the pearly gates."

Sam clarified, "There are a few things that can happen after death. The first and most common is that you go to the Other Side." While the rest of us sat on Aaron's bed, Sam went on pacing the room as would a teacher to their classroom; the wall of sketches stood in her backdrop where two dozen pairs of red eyes looked back at us. "Now, recounts from near death experience survivors have all noted similar experiences in the moments after death. Some have described seeing a tunnel and others a mystical door, each one leading to the Other Side. It seems to differ depending on the individual experiencing it. If the soul has an unfinished business, however, something that they might have wished to have accomplished when living, but didn't get the chance to, they become a ghost trapped in the physical plane. They linger behind until they've completed whatever that unfinished business was. Their door will appear to them once they do."

Charlotte pressed again, "And the wicked? What becomes of them?"

"Like I said, there is no such thing as Hell. At least, not the way we imagine it. God doesn't punish us. We punish ourselves. When a soul becomes lost, when they've committed great acts of wrong...their soul darkens...they become, well they become a shadow of their former selves." Sam went on, the rest of us hanging on her words. "Much like a ghost, a shadow person lingers behind, usually in the place they died, were buried, or some structure they're drawn to, but they remain in the physical plane with their unfinished business. In the case of a shadow person, their unfinished business is to inflict more harm on others."

Billy stood up and then drifted to a nearby sketch of the Shadow Man. He looked the creature dead in its red eyes. He then uttered in a deep, frightful murmur, "Dr. Edgar John Jabberwocker."

Charlotte gasped.

“What?” Aaron and I both chorused our confusion.

Sam made eyes with Billy. “Bingo!”

Charlotte dropped her face into her palms. “I can’t think before my protein shake.”

“Allow me to explain.” Billy took over the reins as head teacher. “Dr. Edgar John Jabberwocker committed great acts of wrong while living. Sure, his intentions began pure enough. He wanted to cure madness. Who wouldn’t? However, to find a cure he would first need to learn how the mind of the mentally impaired operated. As we all know, he committed cruel acts to educate himself on such things. He tortured the patients of his hospital. Shock therapy, bloodletting, lobotomy—he might as well have stuck a fork in their brains and whisked it around until there was nothing left in their noggins but mashed potatoes.”

Charlotte winced from the imagery. “I could have surely gone without the visual.”

“Apologizes, my Lil’ Succulent Buttercup.” The rest of us made a face while Billy went on. During which, he was more mindful of his words. “Dr. Jabberwocker performed cruel and unethical procedures, and when they didn’t go as he’d planned, and the patient had died on his table, he had them disposed of. Torture, murder, and then ultimately suicide. Dr. Jabberwocker took his own life on the rooftop of this very building. In death, what would have become of the Mad Doctor?” Billy struck a sketch taped to the wall with his index finger. “Surely, the bloody bloke became a *Shadow Man*.”

“You really think so?” asked Aaron.

“Sure do.” Billy made eyes with the sketch of the Shadow Man. “I’m sure Jabberwocker is here to this very day...roaming the halls of the building he built...lurking in the deepest, darkest corners of this hotel...just waiting for a new victim to *pounce*.”

“I hate that for us,” Charlotte muttered.

Sam took over, “A shadow person is the soul of an evil person. They linger in the physical plane for all eternity, spending that time finding vulnerable people to feed off of. Sadness, depression, shadow people thirst for it.” Her eyes suddenly widened, her eyebrows raising up her forehead where they became swallowed by her beanie. “...the mirror above the fireplace,” she whispered her realization.

I felt my throat tightening. “What is it, Sam?”

She looked me right in the eyes. “*‘Beware those with weakened minds.’*”

Charlotte lunged to her feet. “Stop it! You’re freaking me out!”

“You should be freaked out!” Billy stressed his words, “If there really is a Shadow Man lurking somewhere in this hotel, he’s waiting—waiting for the perfect opportunity to strike! He’s waiting for us to be in our most vulnerable state of mind, and then he’ll do it.”

“Do what?” I croaked.

“He’ll do what shadow people do best.” Billy finished in an ominous tone of voice, “Cling to our minds, darken our thoughts, make us feel so worthless that we’ll commit the deed ourselves—to stop the pain, we’ll wish for death. It’s how most suicides happen.”

Aaron asked for clarification, “Are you suggesting that most suicides happen because the victim was pursued by a...shadow person?”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying,” Billy confirmed.

Sam noticed the fear registered across the rest of our faces. “It’s just a theory. Who knows what’s real and what’s not.”

"I've had enough." Charlotte threw up her nose and marched for the door. "We have four more weeks left at this hotel. The last thing I want to think about is a Shadow Man lurking behind corners."

I ran a hand through my scruffy hair. "I'm pretty freaked out myself."

"Same," Aaron concurred.

"Well, I have the perfect distraction for the five of us."

We all turned to Billy, watching as he fished something out of his pocket. It was a flyer.

"This morning I got as far as the street corner before I turned back. The fog was unbearable. GPS was no good. I couldn't find my way to the bagel shop and so I turned back." He caught his reflection in the cheval mirror in the corner of the room, winched, then patted down his frizzy hair. "Anyways," he snapped back to reality, "I was waiting at a streetlight when I saw this flyer taped to the pole."

"What is it?" I asked.

Billy read off the flyer, "There's a nightclub not too far from here called 'Twin Tweedles'. It's only a 30 minute metro ride away. Tonight they're holding a special event—a masquerade party. It's going to be wild! I read online that they even got a famous DJ flying out from LA."

"Did you say, 'Twin Tweedles'?" Charlotte snatched the flyer out of Billy's hands. "My agent emailed me a week ago about this club. I was offered a sponsorship to attend. Free bottle service and free admission to anyone I wish to bring along."

Billy snatched the flyer back. "Are you kidding me?! How are you just telling us about this now?"

"Because I had to decline the sponsorship."

Billy spluttered, "Decline it? What would ever possess you to do such a thing?"

"Because Twin Tweedles is a 21 and over nightclub. The drinking age in the United States is 21. We're underage."

Billy was shocked and almost appalled. "Have you no faith in me at all? You handle the tickets, I'll handle the IDs."

Charlotte worried, "Are you sure?"

Sam swept between them. "No, he's not sure. If Professor Skeffington catches us at a nightclub, she'll have us expelled from the Art Institution."

Billy countered, "She wouldn't dare. We five marked highest in our major. We're the future, the face of the school."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

Billy explained, "That's what this class trip is all about. The headmaster does it every school year. They take five first year students, each one who's marked highest in their major, and have them study abroad for five weeks. It's always a different place. Last year I heard they went to Milan, Italy. The year before that it was Paris, France. The one before that was Barcelona, Spain. The headmaster wants to invest in our future because it's an investment in the school. In their eyes, we have the most potential to make it big, and if we do, everyone will want to get their education in the same institution we had. That's why they won't risk expelling us. At least, not all five of us. We're the future of the school. Not to mention our parents are paying a buttload for it."

"Some of us got grants," said Sam.

“It could be fun.” Charlotte gave the flyer another look over. “Everything’s been so stressful lately. Between school, that darn riddle, and now the...*Shadow Man*, who knows, maybe a night off is exactly what the doctor has in order.”

“Attagirl!” Billy cheered. He then threw a glance over to Aaron, Sam, and myself all huddled together. “What about you lot? Are you in?”

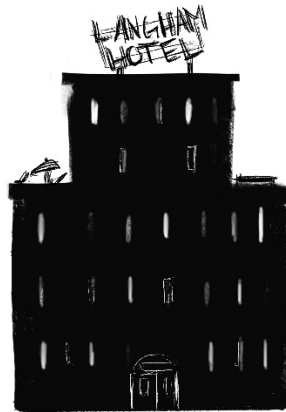
Sam thought about it. “It’s not really my scene, but...sure. Why not.”

Billy ruffled Sam’s beanie so hard that it nearly fell off her head. “Don’t touch it!” She shoved him in the chest, then secured her beanie. Sam always wore a beanie. I wouldn’t even have known that her hair color was black if not for the little strands that poked out.

Charlotte seemed to be getting more excited the longer she sat with it. “Collin, Aaron, please say you’ll come. We’ll have so much more fun with you two.”

Aaron rubbed his lips. “Free drinks? Sure, why not.”

“What could go wrong?” I said.



Chapter 21

Aaron and I spent a relaxing day at the hotel. While Billy was out in alleys hunting for fake IDs, and Charlotte and Sam were out shopping for masquerade masks, Aaron and I spent most of our free Saturday lounging in the rooftop pool. We were up there for hours. Aaron ordered room service, and soon enough Chef Mimsy Browne came up with a silver platter. Aaron got us both cheeseburgers and a basket of french fries to split. I wanted to see if Mimsy would recognize me. It would have been fourteen years since she saw me last, but I wanted confirmation that I wasn’t crazy. I needed to know for certain that my mom and I really did stay at the Langham Hotel, and that my grandmother really was Ruby Hart. It was difficult at times to distinguish what was real from what wasn’t. The line that reality walked was blurry. I wasn’t entirely convinced that I hadn’t made it all up. I thought that if Mimsy recognized me, then that would confirm my memories. But she didn’t. Actually, she was very different from how I remembered her. The Samoan woman from my memory was warm and bright-spirited, but the woman who delivered our lunch was lifeless. She had no expression whatsoever, in fact. I felt not an ounce of warmth from her—just coldness. She seemed no different than the bellhop, the security guard, or even the maid. They all seemed so listless with eyes so vacant, like somehow their bodies were without a soul. Almost zombie-like. I had to get down to the bottom of it. I needed to know

if these memories were really that. And so I planned on calling my dad later on today to ask him about my birth mother.

After the pool, sometime midafternoon, Aaron left for the laundry room on the basement floor. We were going to take turns getting ready. He would start our laundry while I got ready, and then I would move the load into the dryer while he got ready. After he left, I fetched my laptop out of my duffle bag, and then carried it over to my bed. I set it down on my lap and then dialed up my dad. It rang four times before he answered. Dad was cooking in the kitchen of Chateau Du Coeur.

“Hey, Collin. How’s it going, kiddo?”

My tight, serious expression broke with a soft smile. Dad looked so funny. He had on a ridiculous apron. The apron had a male’s torso on it, a male torso with a hairy chest and a six pack. My dad had neither. He had flour powdered on his cheeks and his hair, and smeared all over his apron.

“Hi, Dad.” I giggled at him flipping something on a frying pan. “What are you cooking?”

“Believe it or not, I’m making chicken pot pie from scratch. It’s my great grandma’s recipe. She used to make it for me back when I was a little boy. I was thinking about adding the dish to the room service menu for the guests of the castle. There’s nothing like a good warm chicken pot pie after a cold day skiing on the slopes.”

Maureen popped on the screen, her face now front and center. “Your father *tried* to make his great grandmother’s chicken pot pie, but nearly caught the kitchen on fire.” Unlike dad whose face was covered in flour, Maureen’s was covered in soot. She whispered into the cellphone so that only I could hear her, “I’m afraid he’s now working on making us all his ‘famous’ grilled cheese. Don’t worry, I got poison control on speed-dial.”

Dad flipped the sandwich in midair, then caught it with the frying pan. “I’ll have you both know that these bad boys got me through four years of college. The trick is butter. Lots of it too. Not to mention it’s got four types of cheese melted together—cheddar, bri, gouda, and mozzarella.” He pressed the spatula filmy against the grilling sandwich, the four types of cheeses oozing out of the sandwich and sizzling onto the pan.

I chortled.

Maureen melted at the sound of my laugh, “Oh Collin, I miss your laughter. We can’t wait to see you this holiday break. Which reminds me, have you made your Christmas list yet?”

“It’s not even November.”

“I know, but we’ve been so busy in the castle. We got guests constantly coming and going, a restroom on the third floor getting renovated, Clairs got to be driven down to the village five days a week for her internship at the hospital, and not to mention Charles is becoming more of a handful than usual. If I don’t get a start on Christmas shopping now, there will be no presents under the tree this year.”

“I’ll think about it and get back to you.”

“Perfect.” Maureen got pulled away by a guest asking for towels as she and her friends were headed for the new hot spring my parents had installed out back behind the castle. “Collin, I’m going to pass you back to your father. Love and miss you like crazy. Talk to you soon.”

“Love you too.” I felt a twinge tightening in my belly. Now that I was chatting with my parents, I was realizing that I was a bit homesick.

“Hey, kiddo.” Dad carried the phone and grilled cheese over to the kitchen nook. He scooted into the booth, and then took one big cheesy bite out of his sandwich. “What’s up?” The cheese

was still too hot. He had to swallow the bite down before it burnt his tongue. “Is everything alright?”

“Yeah,” I scratched the back of my neck, “everything’s fine...I miss you.”

“I miss you too.” He blew the steam off the dripping gouda, and then deemed it safe enough to have himself another bite. “I’ve been thinking about you a lot lately. We’ve all been so busy. You in college, Clair in this hospital internship, Charles getting ready for preschool, Maureen and I working on the castle. I feel like we haven’t had enough time together. If you’re up for it, I thought we might take a trip. Just the two of us. You’ll be finishing up with your class trip in four weeks. Your next semester won’t start until February. Maureen and I were planning on flying you home from New York right after your trip, but what if we met up somewhere?”

“Where?”

“I was thinking Rome.”

“Rome?” I repeated.

“They got the coliseum there. It’s listed as one of the world’s seven wonders. I thought we could cross the first wonder off on your list. What do you say?”

I spluttered, “Yeah. Of course. That would be great. I would love that!”

My dad put down his sandwich to be sentimental. “Collin, I just want you to know how proud I am of you. You must have worked really hard in school to be offered that class trip. I know I can be hard on you sometimes, but it’s only because I want the very best for you. I want you to get the most out of life, and I want to make sure I do my job as your father so that you can. I’m sure you’ll understand one day when you become a father.”

“That means a lot. Thanks, Dad.”

He seized his sandwich, and then played hot potato with it until he took another bite. “So,” he said through a mouthful of bread and melted cheese, “what’s going on?”

My face felt suddenly warm. “I wanted to ask you something.”

“Sure. What is it?”

“It’s about mom...my birth mother.”

Even through the screen I could feel the air go stale. “What about her?”

“Well...” I kneaded the back of my neck, “where did you guys meet?”

He kept it short. “High school.”

“Which high school?”

“You already know, we both grew up in New York.”

“But where in New York?” I pressed.

“In the city.”

“New York City?” I pressed, again.

“Yes.”

I felt like a detective interrogating a perpetrator, and my dad looked just as guilty as one. “What made you two move to California?”

“I don’t know, Collin. I suppose there were a lot of different reasons. For one, I got accepted to the University of California. Your mom knew a photographer out in Santa Monica who offered to mentor her. Your Aunt Rosie was already living out here. We wanted, well...we wanted an adventure. Besides that, your mom was looking to get away from home. She didn’t have what you would call a conventional childhood. She and your grandmother never really got along.”

“My grandmother?” I asked.

“She died,” he answered flatly.

“Well, what was she like?”

“To be honest with you, she was a complete narcissist. She cared more about her career than she ever cared for your mother, or for your mother’s two younger sisters for that matter.” Normally I was the one who wanted to get off the phone first, but something was telling me that it was my dad this time. It felt like he just wanted to escape this conversation. He confirmed my hunch. “Collin, I think Maureen needs my help. Can we pick up with this later?”

I ignored him. “How did she die?”

“Who?”

“Mom.” I felt my skin crawling with frustration. “How did she die?”

“You already know how she died.”

“I know she was sick,” I said.

“That’s true. She was.”

“Sick with what?” I was nearly begging him.

“The doctors never established an actual illness. She was sick and then she died. That’s it.” He was very matter of fact about it. “Collin, I’m sorry, but I really have to get going.”

“Wait, Dad!”

He leaned toward his phone. “What is it?”

“When I was a little boy, before mom got sick, did she ever take me here? Did she ever take me to New York?”

The look on my dad’s face was telling. He was burdened by a secret. That much was certain. “Why would you ask that?”

“I don’t know. I just...well, I just started to remember things lately.”

He pried for more, “What sort of things have you remembered?”

“I remember mom...” pieces of my recent memories began to flash behind my eyes in a reel of broken pictures, “I remember a hotel...we stayed at a hotel where my grandma lived...where she performed...there was lots of arguing...mom was acting stranger and stranger the longer we stayed...” and then things I didn’t remember began to spew from my mouth, “the bathtub...there was a bathtub...” I could hear splashing in my mind, far in the depths, echoing then fading away to nothing.

The bedroom door swung open and Aaron came in carrying an empty laundry basket. “I had just enough quarters to get three loads in the wash.” He spotted me on my bed with my laptop open in my lap. “Who are you talking to?”

“My dad.”

“Your dad!” Aaron jumped into bed and waved at the screen. “Hi, Mr. Winters. I’m Aaron. I’m Collin’s roommate.”

“Nice to meet you, Aaron.”

“Likewise.” He threw an arm over my shoulder. “Don’t worry about Collin. I’m taking good care of him.”

“That’s good to hear.” Dad got noticeably awkward. “Collin, about the bathtub.”

“Never mind, dad. I’m not sure what that was all about. I should go. I’ll talk to you in the next couple of days.”

“No. Wait. Collin.”

But it was too late. I already closed the laptop. There were many things I was still unsure about, but I knew one thing for certain. I knew I’d been to the Langham Hotel before.

“Your dad seems nice.” Aaron sprung back out of bed, crossed the room, and went rummaging around the dresser for an outfit worthy enough for a night out on the town. “I’m going to head down the hall and get ready for the nightclub. I’m thinking a black button down, matching slacks, then white sneakers to finish it off.” He picked out his outfit. He tried to be discreet, but I still saw him claim his bottle of depression medication and tuck it between his clothes. In the doorway, Aaron stopped and looked over at me. “Are you getting ready?”

“I guess I should.”

There were a lot of things jumbled up in my mind. If there ever was a night, tonight was it. I needed a break, from life, my thoughts, from everything. I just wanted a moment of relief, a moment to clear my mind and to forget. It was time to be a teenager.

The five of us met up in the hotel lobby at a quarter past 10pm. We were dressed in our best. Aaron was donned in a sharp all black outfit with pristine white shoes, and hair just as stylish as it ever was. Billy had on a flamboyant pink collared shirt with a loud, gold chain adorned with the Star of David. I didn’t even know Billy was Jewish until then. Charlotte sported a fashionable crop top. It sparkled and glittered and revealed much of her toned stomach that she worked so hard to upkeep. Her skirt was tight and her black leather boots were knee-high. I determined, after a quick glance at the weather app on my cellphone, that it was 38 degrees outside. I was cold just looking at her. Sam, however, was dressed appropriately for the weather. She had on tight jeans, ripped at the knees, with a plaid forest green jacket that matched the color of her beanie. Some of her hair was actually coming down. Charlotte talked her into letting her straighten it out with a flat iron and also to add some temporary highlights. She even got Sam to allow her to put eyeshadow on her. Her eyelids had a smoky tint to them. I had no fashion sense whatsoever. But tonight, I wanted to look my best. And so I asked Aaron for help. He dressed me in a classic look: white shirt, jean jacket, black jeans, and then he used several of his hair products to style my hair. It never looked so stylish before. He made it look messy. Not like it normally did, but intentionally messy. Like I was too cool to even bother with it. The five of us stood at the fireplace, leaning forward so that we could observe our reflections in the mounted mirror hung above the mantle, fitting ourselves with masquerade masks. Each of our masks was laser cut to subtly resemble a different type of animal. Charlotte’s mask looked like a swan, Sam’s resembled a rabbit, Billy a bat, and Aaron a wolf. My mask was a raven. I fitted the mask over my eyes and tightened the lace behind my head. I then tucked the hematite stone under my shirt. Billy then began to hand out the fake IDs he’d scouted earlier that day.

Charlotte ridiculed hers at once. “Judith Lawrence. What sort of a basic name is that? And besides, I look nothing like the girl in the photograph.” She suddenly gasped, “37 years old! I can’t pass for a 37 year old. She’s practically a senior citizen!”

Sam then gave her fake ID an inspection. “This chick is Caucasian.”

“So?” said Billy. “What’s your point?”

“My dad was African American. My mom was Portuguese.”

“You’ll be fine,” he assured.

Aaron held his fake ID up to the light like he was authenticating a large bill. “Enrique Castillo?”

Intrigued, I took a look at mine. “Susan Li.” I nearly dropped the ID card. “Billy, you got me a girl’s ID!”

“It was either Susan Li or Mohammed Vahid.”

“Mohammed Vahid,” I stressed. “Next time pick Mohammed Vahid.”

“Too late, I’m afraid.”

We needed a miracle to get into this nightclub. I’m not even sure why we even bothered. I returned to the mirror and finished tightening my mask when a taxicab pulled up to the curb at the roundabout driveway. It was time.

The nightclub was in a sketchy part of the city. I’m not even sure where. The street it was on was dirtier than most. Graffiti was splattered on the surrounding apartment buildings and rundown shops sold merchandise at bargain prices. The nightclub’s entrance was below an old barbershop. It even had one of those red, blue, and white striped barber poles swirling outside the front door. There was a salon stool in the front window where a young boy sat getting his hair cut. The barber was working on buzzing off the side to give the boy a lightning bolt. The boy was watching the cars and taxicabs pulling up to the curb, dropping off young and well-dressed groups of friends, all wearing masquerade masks. The line was around the block by the time our taxi pulled up to the barbershop. We didn’t have to wait. Charlotte had VIP access, compliments of the club owner. We walked right up to the front door. The security guard knew exactly who Charlotte was from her social media channels, and let us all in. Luckily, for Susan Li’s sake, he didn’t even check my ID.

The nightclub was down a steep stone staircase with no railing attached. It was dark and crowded, with spider-beam laser lights flashing red. The music was loud, so loud I could feel the reverberation in the wall. The dance-floor was unseen, overwhelmed by a mass of people in masks bobbing to the beat. Throughout the crowd were several raised platforms where a single go-go dancer was dancing in a cage. The dancers, both male and female alike, were dancing in only their bright-neon colored underwear. I could smell the sweat, the different alcohols, and puffs of fruity smoke from people vaping nearby. I could even feel the stickiness of spilt cocktails beneath my sneakers. I was definitely out of my element.

The club manager came to greet us at the bottom of the steep staircase. He was a hefty man wearing a button down shirt so tight I feared the buttons might pop off and slap me in the face. “Charlotte Rose?!” he shouted over the thumping music and loud chatter of the people in masks enjoying themselves nearby.

“That’s me!” she shouted back.

“It’s good to meet you!” He shook her hand. “The name’s Lorenzo! I spoke to your agent on the phone! We have a private booth waiting for you! Free bottle service all night! The owner just asks that you take a few pictures of you and your friends having fun at the club, post them on your social media platforms, and tag the *‘Twin Tweedles Nightclub’*!”

Charlotte assured him over the blaring speaker overhead, “I’ve already got my first post ready!”

“Perfect! Let me show you and your friends to your booth!”

The club manager showed Charlotte and Billy to the booth, but Sam didn’t follow. She got bumped by a couple heading to the dance floor, and then shoved by a gaggle of girls in a bachelorette party screaming at a hunky go-go boy dancing nearby.

“I’m way too sober for this.” She craned her neck and located the bar, then made a beeline straight for it.

“I’m coming too!” Aaron went right after her.

A young man in a mesh shirt with a buzzed head dyed bubblegum-pink took a hit from his vape, then blew the smoke in my face to catch my attention. It suddenly smelled an awful lot like cotton candy. The smoke dried my eyes and left my throat itchy. He had a lot of facial

piercings: eyebrow, lip, septum, and even a shiny stud on his cheek. He gave me a seductive look, so intense I felt like he was trying to undress me with his eyes.

I fanned the vape smoke away and then chased after my friends. “Wait for me!”

At the bar, Sam ordered us a round of pineapple vodka shots, and then Aaron ordered us tequila with salt on the rim, and then I had another round of pineapple vodka. We were trying to loosen up quickly. Before I knew it, I was sipping on a cocktail that tasted like hot cinnamon. It left my throat burning, but I slurped it down even still. The music was thumping. The more I drank the more I started to loosen up. I started bobbing my head, then I was shaking my hips, and before I knew it the three of us were dancing on the dance floor. Red laser lights were flashing. Music was blasting. The crowd pushed and shoved, but we kept rocking to the beat.

Charlotte spotted us in the crowd. “There you all are. We’ve been looking everywhere for you.” She jumped in the middle of Aaron and me, the two of us dancing on either side of her.

“I come bearing gifts.” Billy passed out more cocktails to everyone. We each took a glass, downed a big gulp, then continued raging on.

Our feet grew sore, but we continued to dance the night away. I was moving and laughing, spilling my drink but just kept dancing. I danced with Aaron, and then with Sam, then with Billy who eventually left me to break dance. The whole crowd cleared the stage for him, and soon they were cheering his name, “Billy! Billy! Billy!” He ended the number by taking Charlotte by surprise and planting her with a passionate kiss that sent the crowd into a frenzy. A few songs later, Sam and Charlotte went back to our private booth to enjoy another cocktail together. Sam was so relaxed and giddy that she even took some goofy pictures with Charlotte. Sam even let her post the pictures on her social media channels. Billy was dancing with girls, boys—really anyone who would have him. Meanwhile, Aaron and I kept dancing. After another shot at the bar we were laughing over the silliest things. We continued to dance in the middle of the dance floor. Aaron grabbed my hips, pulling me towards him, our bodies in motion, hands working toward my lower back, so close our bodies were touching. And then someone bumped me from behind, so hard I flew forward. Aaron caught me. Our faces merely a breath apart. He looked at me, and then I at him, and then I saw him look down at my lips.

Billy cut between us like he was slicing through a birthday cake. “This is my favorite song!” He danced with us, Aaron and I sharing a chuckle at how wild Billy was now dancing, arms flailing like an excited monkey. And then it all started to spin. The crowd, the go-go dancers, the DJ, they all started to bleed with the laser lights. The spinning grew more rapid, more intense. I peered into the crowd, watching the many masked-faces blend together into a blurry image. And then I saw it. In the audience was a figure...a dark figure. It was tall with gangly limbs, and piercing red eyes that sought me out in the crowd. I looked away and then stumbled toward the bar.

Aaron chased after me. “Collin, are you okay?”

I pressed a hand against my forehead, then staggered a bit more. I felt like I was standing still, but my feet were moving. “I feel weird.” And then I became queasy. “I think I’m going to be sick.”

A security guard approached us. “Is he alright?”

Aaron assured him, “He’s fine. We were just leaving.”

Aaron took my arm and threw it over his shoulder. He had me lean my weight against him as he attempted to guide me back up the stone staircase, which seemed awfully more steep than it did back when we first arrived.

“Wait, what about the others?”

Aaron helped me up the staircase, one slow step at a time. “Don’t worry. I’ll send them a text. Let’s just get you back to the hotel.” He gently led me outside.

Aaron went right to the curb to hail down a taxicab. Meanwhile I stood there on the dirty sidewalk welcoming the cold night air, which cleared my queasy feeling away, at least for the moment. I looked out into the city, smiling for no reason. There was just something so magical about it—the towering buildings, the many bright lights, it was the middle of the night but the city was still so alive. Life was moving fast around me, so fast I could hardly keep up with it. I observed it all. The honking cars, the sirens blaring as the ambulance sped through the street, the line of people still waiting in the cold to finally enter the nightclub, and even the young gay couple who passed me on the sidewalk as the two of them headed for the little Vietnamese restaurant next door.

“Enjoy your date!”

The couple was awkward, but kept kind and well-mannered. “Thank you. We will.”

I marched up to them in a drunken stagger, my foul liquored-breath hitting them like a poisonous cloud. “Enjoy it while it lasts...because one day...one of you,” I pointed from one boy to the next, “will die...and the other one will be left...all alone.”

The couple shared an uncomfortable glance.

“Yup. That’s right. We die. We all die!” I slapped one of their ties and it flew up onto his shoulder. “We’re either the lucky one that dies early or,” my chin quivered, the emotion so overbearing that it left my whole body vibrating, “or we’re the unlucky one who gets to live...*alone...all alone*.” I felt a rush of sadness racing up to my eyes where the pressure released in tears. I began rambling off to these strangers as though they were my therapist. “I keep trying to fool myself that Adam’s still here...that because his heart,” I felt the scar through my shirt, “because his heart is still here. But he’s gone.” I slapped my legs. “He’s gone and he shouldn’t be. He wasn’t the monster,” I told the couple while a tear cascaded down my cold cheek. “It was me. I’m the monster. I could have done something more to save him.”

“Are you...are you okay?”

Noticing what was happening, Aaron raced back over. “I’m so sorry. He’s fine. He just drank a little too much.”

“A little?” echoed one of the two boys. “He smells like the whole bar.”

Aaron apologized, “Again, I’m so sorry.”

He then supported me as he guided me to the taxicab he had hailed down. I was telling Aaron all about the nice couple I’d just met when he ducked my head and helped me into the taxi. He let me ramble on as he secured me with a seatbelt, then scooted in after me.

The taxi driver folded down his pink newspaper, ‘*La Gazzetta dello Sport*’. “Where yous two off to dis evenin’, huh? Night still young. Good lookin’ guys. I’m guessin’ yous two either got youselves into troubles or yous lookin’ to get into it.”

I peeked around the driver’s seat. “Pasquale?!”

“Hey, kid. How yous—*holy shit!* Yous breath smells just as bad as my cousin Sals do. He got a liken for the tough stuff. Negroni, especially. Smells as bad as yous do by 9am.”

I introduced Aaron to the taxi driver. “Pasquale, this is my friend Aaron. He’s one of the students on my class trip.”

“Another artist, huh?” Pasquale gave Aaron a good look over with a bushy brow lifted, carefully examining Aaron as would a father to his daughter’s first boyfriend. “Wat yous studyin’?”

“Art,” he answered.

“Not much money to be made tere, huh? Unless of course yous be makin’ it big. How yous expect to support a family, I wonder?”

“I’m only 18 years old.”

Pasquale continued to interrogate, “Come from a good family I hope?”

“My parents are pretty cool.”

“No brothers or sisters?”

“It’s just me.”

Pasquale furthered his investigation, “Yous a good kid? Gets good grades?”

“I do alright.” Aaron began to be playfully snarky, “How ‘bout yous, huh? I sees a weddin’ ring. Yous good to yous wife? Buy her flowers? Treat her right?”

“If I don’t, she brake my neck herself. Ha-ha!” Pasquale found me in the middle of his rumbling chuckle. “Hey, kid. I like tis one.” He finally took notice to our drunken faces. “Wat kinds of trouble yous two get youself into tis evenin’?”

“Just the usual.” The liquid courage had Aaron acting nonchalant about it. “You know, fake IDs, underage drinking, just a typical Saturday night.”

“In dat case, I’ll take yous straight to da police station.”

Aaron and I both panicked, “Police station?!”

“Ha-ha!” Pasquale slapped his knee in the midst of another deep, rumbling chortle. “You tink I’m some rat? Come on!” He shrugged. “I’m Italian. No cops.” He put Ol’ Bertha into gear. “But I’m no fool. Tis one here,” he gestured to me with a cigar he was about to light, “he look ‘bout ready to revisit his dinner, if yous catch my drift. I’ll get yous boys to yous hotel—quickly.”

I reached up for the ceiling handle, got a good and secure grip, then leaned toward Aaron. “You’ll want to hang on.”

“For what?”

Vroom! Pasquale stomped on the pedal and the taxi shot from the curb, so fast Aaron and I both flew back into our taped-cushioned seats. The taxi zipped through the street, dodging cars, racing through yellows, barely avoiding trash cans lining the street as tomorrow was apparently trash day for this area of the city. Ol’ Bertha mounted the curb to avoid a pile up, Aaron screaming as he thought we were going to slam right into a brownstone. I had covered my eyes and so I wasn’t even sure how we managed to avoid the head on collision. Pasquale had the taxi whipping into another avenue, then sailing through a busy boulevard where an off Broadway show was just finishing up, and the audience leaving the theatre came outside just to be met with a taxi zooming by. They all jumped back onto the curb to avoid getting hit.

The ride was so chaotic that Aaron was bouncing in his seat. “This is the worst rollercoaster I’ve ever been on!”

I felt my stomach bubbling. My face felt hot and my cheeks got heavy. “I think I’m going to be sick.”

Ol’ Bertha screeched to a stop, so abruptly Aaron and I both flew into the seats in front of us.

Aaron looked out of the window and saw a convenience store. “This isn’t the hotel?”

Pasquale unbuckled himself. “No, we still gots a ways to go.” He handed Aaron a few crinkled dollar bills. “Do yous friend a favor. Go gets him a bottle of water and bread.”

“Like a loaf?” Aaron asked.

“Anythin’. He needs somethin’ in his belly to absorb da liquor.” He checked me out. “Bests hurry. He’s bouts to blow.”

Aaron swung the door open and then hurried into the convenience store. Meanwhile, Pasquale popped open the driver’s door, then mine, and helped me out.

“Pasquale, I don’t feel so good.”

“I know, kid. It’s no fun. I’ve been dere one too many times myself.” He guided me over to the sidewalk and sat with me on the curb while we waited for Aaron to return with bread and water. My head fell between my legs, mouth hung open and drooling. I must have looked like a fool, but I felt even worse. I didn’t even care that people on the sidewalk were looking at me. I just wanted the alcohol out of my body. I never wanted to drink ever again!

Pasquale noticed a nurse leaving the convenience store with a fresh cup of roasted coffee. She stopped to look at me. “Watcha lookin’ at, huh?” He threw up his beefy hand. “Get out of here already! Yous a nurse. Go save some lives!” He nudged me with his elbow. “Wat, she never seen a drunk teen before? She’s probably got one home right now.”

“Pasquale...” but it was too late. I was puking.

He patted me on the back. “Dat’s it, kid. Let it out.”

“I hate alcohol!” I cried.

He chuckled, “Yous say dat now. Next ting yous knows, yous cousin Sal is invitin’ yous over to watch da game. One beer turns da two...two turns da three...before yous knows it, yous callin’ yous wife Gina to pick yous up from Sal’s house. Now yous sleepin’ on da couch for da rest of the week.”

I threw up dinner, then lunch, and even parts of breakfast. There was nothing left. My skin felt icky. I looked up at Pasquale with a pair of wet eyes. “I hate how this feels.”

“I hate it for yous, but sometimes, young guys like yous, gots to learn da hard way.” Pasquale gave me a bear of a hug and then rubbed my arms until I felt warm. He noticed my demeanor change. I was sitting there on the curb, staring at a manhole in the middle of the street, lost in the steam rising from it. “Wats up, kid? Why yous sad?”

I muttered in a low breath, “I miss him.”

“I know yous do, but its no good dwellin’ on it.” He grabbed my shoulder and applied enough pressure to draw my attention. “Da mind is a powerful place. Lots of nooks and crannies up dere. Yous gots to be careful dough. If yous keep thinkin’ of da past, den yous lose youself in da past. Yous start associatin’ da one yous loved and lost with pain, not love—and pain is no place for da mind to be. Pain leaves da mind sad, and sad leaves da mind vulnerable.”

Pasquale gestured to the convenient store. Through the glass front door we could see Aaron paying at the register. He had his entire purchase spread out across the counter. He was purchasing a bottle of water, a loaf of bread, Skittles because he knew they were my favorite candy, and a box of Bertie Bott’s Beans just because he knew that would make me laugh.

“Dat boy in dere...dere’s no pain dere.” Pasquale continued, his voice distant and yet still so profound, “Da ways yous look at him, even as drunk as yous are, I sees it as clear as I know da Yankees are gonna win da World’s Series. Deres happiness in yous eyes. Hold on to dat happiness, kid. Whenever yous feel sad, hold onto dat happiness. Yous understand me?”

“I think I’m starting to.”

Aaron exited the convenience store with a bag of snacks. He handed me a water, and waited for me to down half the bottle before he switched it out with a slice of bread.

He asked me, "How are you feeling?"

I smiled at him. "Better."

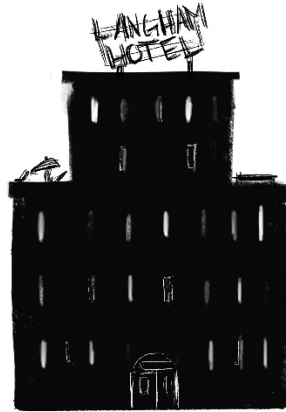
The three of us got back into Ol' Bertha, and before long Pasquale had us once again racing through the city. Aaron and I had a great idea. We wanted Pasquale to play our game of Bertie Bott's Beans. We each took a flavor. 1. 2. 3! We tossed them into our mouths. Aaron finally got lucky with candy-floss, and I was pleased with salted caramel. Pasquale wasn't so fortunate.

He rolled down his squeaky window to spit the bean out into the street. "Dats worse dan Gina's pot roast!" He smacked his lips. "It tasted like feet."

I checked the back of the box. "I think it was."

"Gross!" Aaron cringed and laughed at the same time.

The rest of the taxi drive was a smooth one. There was only a handful of red lights that were ran, a couple of stop signs that were ignored, and only one near miss on a pedestrian's life. All in all, it was a great ride back to our hotel.



Chapter 22

Sunday was a recovery day for all of us. We each did our own thing. Charlotte spent the day online posting pictures from the previous night. My cellphone buzzed with notifications about it. I was surprised that any came through with such a poor internet connection. I scrolled through her feeds. There was a photograph of me and Sam taking a shot at the bar, another one of Billy giving me a piggyback ride, Charlotte and I playing with sparklers, and then one of Aaron and—I zoomed into the photograph—one of Aaron and I dancing intimately. To make matters worse, Charlotte added a heart emoji along with one of a face blowing a kiss, with the following hashtags: #NewYorkCity, #GayBesties, and then #LoveIsInTheAir. I quickly buried my cellphone underneath my pillow so that I wouldn't be tempted to look at it again. Charlotte then spent what was left of the day lounging at the rooftop pool. There she read through this month's edition of *'Vanity Fair'*. Billy was all out of clean clothes, so he got stuck spending the day doing laundry. He wasn't aware that he should separate his colors from whites, and neither was he aware he should separate towels from his clothing. He just plopped it all in and let the machine run. Sam, however, was back on Dr. Jabberwocker's riddle. She had taken a picture of the plaque mounted on the secret door in the broom closet, and was trying to search for the clues in the

riddle that would help to unlock Dr. Jabberwocker's hidden office. I, on the other hand, slept until noon. I then spent most of the day in bed, watching the only two movies Aaron had downloaded on his tablet. By nightfall, I could practically recite both *Mrs. Doubtfire* and *Jumanji* from start to finish. Because of the events that had transpired yesterday morning, Aaron was out of sketch paper. He left the hotel for a few hours to swing by a local art supply store. He picked us up dinner on his way back. They were deli sandwiches. Aaron had a meatball sub and I got pastrami. It was a quiet and uneventful day. It was needed after such a wild previous night. I didn't even get rid of my hangover until Monday morning.

I had to get an early start to the day. I had forgotten all about the drawing of the fruit basket Professor Skeffington had asked me to perfect it before class started on Monday. I got myself up early, showered, changed, and then propped the canvas up on the windowsill. The drawing was just as awful as I remembered. The fruit was all disproportionate. Some looked rotten, others looked deflated. All of it was terrible. I went at it, erasing parts of it so that I didn't have to start all over from scratch. I was growing irritated fast. Really, fast. I didn't care much for drawing. At least, not a fruit basket. Like photography, I enjoyed capturing people, emotions and such. A fruit basket just felt insignificant and so unimportant.

Aaron returned to our hotel room after getting ready down the hall. He found me over at the windowsill, attempting to salvage the awful drawing. I was fighting the urge to pop open the window and chuck the canvas right out of it.

Aaron crept over to me. "Are you still having trouble with it?"

"It looks so stupid!" I said, bursting with exasperation. "I just can't seem to get it right."

He stepped even closer. "Well," he began soft and slowly, like he was working up to something that was difficult for him to say, "sometimes when something doesn't work out the way we hope...we can't fix it. We might want to...but it's too late to go back. Sometimes...we have to start something new." The way he said that, it didn't seem like he was speaking about my drawing, but more like he was speaking about something else...something he might have been internally battling with himself. "We might think that if we start over it won't be as special as the first time, but that's not fair to what we could create if only we gave ourselves a chance. Who knows, maybe...just maybe, it's what we're meant to do." He claimed a blank canvas from out of our joint closet, and then he offered it to me. "What do you say, Collin?" He licked his lips nervously. "Are you ready to try it again?"

For a moment I just gazed into his dark eyes, wondering if the meaning of his words stemmed from something far more deeper than what they may have seemed.

With more reluctance than I could express, I reached out and took the blank canvas. "I don't know." I could feel myself trembling with my words, but I wasn't sure why I was so shaky. "...maybe."

He offered, "We can do it...together."

Together seemed like the most powerful word there ever was. It was strong and reassuring, and it filled me with a confidence I never knew I had. "Together," I repeated, and it seemed that word just doubled in strength.

I replaced my old canvas with Aaron's new one. He stood behind me, so close I could feel his warm breath prickling the tiny hairs on the back of my neck. He then took my hand, our fingers curling until they were enveloped in each other, and then he guided my hand over to collect a piece of charcoal. The motion of our hands was synchronized. He lifted his hand, therefore lifting mine, and then he had me pressing the charcoal against the canvas. Our hands,

totally in sync, glided across the canvas, expressing the lines, shaping the fruits and darkening their shadows. I could hear my own breath shaking, and could feel my heart beating fast within my chest.

Soon the drawing was complete, and it was wonderful. I couldn't believe I created something so breathtaking. I couldn't pull my gaze away. I just kept wanting to admire it.

Aaron finally let go of my hand and then gave me a little nudge. "Check you out. You're not just a photographer anymore. You're an artist, too."

I kept myself modest. "Only because you guided my hand the whole time."

He winked. "I barely did anything."

"You're a good teacher, Aaron."

And then I remembered what he had said about starting new. Although he might have been talking about starting over the assignment, I had an inkling of a feeling that had me thinking he might have been suggesting something far deeper than what I previously suspected.

"Hey...Aaron," I stopped him from placing a textbook on expressive acting into his backpack, "you know how you said that thing about starting something new...how you might think it won't be as special as the first time...but you might surprise yourself if you gave it a chance...what did you mean by that?"

He looked away. "I don't know..." He shoved the textbook into his backpack and then zipped it closed. "I just...I just tried to help inspire you was all."

"Oh. Okay. Just checking." I tried to place all these uncertain feelings swirling around inside of me. I could feel myself bothered by it, like it wasn't the answer I wanted to hear. I just didn't know what it was that I wanted Aaron to have said.

We took the elevator down to the lobby where we met up with the rest of the group, all of us gathered around the scarlet sofas in front of the crackling fireplace. Mr. Hinkley delivered us all a fresh cup of piping hot tea and biscuits, keeping us busy while we waited for Professor Skeffington to arrive. She was running late. Our chaperone was on a call with her wife back home in London. Their son was apparently sick with the flu.

Billy took a loud slurp of lemon balm tea. "I'm not sure about you lads, but I finally shook off that hangover. It was a nightmare. Honestly! I couldn't get myself out of bed for most of the day."

Charlotte chimed in, "I spent the day on a cleanse. I feel good as new because of it."

Sam put down a book to participate in the conversation. "I went to a diner after the club. There's no better cure to a hangover than a double cheeseburger."

Charlotte wondered, "What do you think today's lesson will be on?"

Billy enjoyed a tea-soaked biscuit. "Something about acting, I suppose. After all, this week is on dramatic arts. Right up your alley, eh?" He sat back on the sofa, and was trying to stretch out his legs and plop his feet on the coffee table when he accidentally knocked off the statue of a half-naked man.

Sam caught it before it hit the floor. "Careful, Billy!"

"Well what the hell is that thing doing there?" he complained. "Coffee tables are meant to rest one's feet, not display some tacky trinket of a nude man."

Mr. Hinkley had just been walking by when he caught the conversation. "His name's Apollo." The five of us looked up and found the hotel manager stopped to educate us. "He's a God of Greek and Roman mythology. Apollo is the son of Zeus and Leto, twin brother of Artemis. He shepherds over many things. From music and dance, to healing and disease...even

logic and reason.” He eyed the statue with fascination. “I’ve always found Greek and Roman mythology quite interesting.” On that note, Mr. Hinkley was off. His leather shoes clicked against the marble as he crossed the lobby. He then let himself out of the glass front door where he went to tend to the topiary garden outside.

Logic and reason, I thought. Why did that sound familiar? I looked up and found Aaron staring back at me. We came to the realization at the same time.

We uttered together, “Logic and reason is where secrets dwell.”

“The riddle!” Aaron exclaimed.

“Huh?” Billy flustered.

I relayed to the group, “Upstairs in the broom closet, the riddle—it reads ‘*Logic and reason is where secrets dwell.*’” I gestured to the statue displayed on the coffee table. “Apollo was the God of logic and reason.”

A moment of silence fell over us, and then it broke in a shattering instant. The five of us dove for the statute. We all had a grip, fighting and clawing for the statue even though we hadn’t the slightest idea why exactly it was the piece of the clue.

“Let go!” Sam said.

“You first!” Billy countered.

My elbow was jabbing Charlotte in the ribs. “You’re hurting me!” she screeched.

“Well then let go of it!” I said.

“Not a chance!” she combatted.

Aaron released the statue and stood, hand clasped to his mouth to keep from laughing at the sight of how ridiculous we all looked.

“You guys, there’s a latch on the statue’s head.”

We all released the statue, and then took a step back. Sam unhinged the latch and was then able to twist off the top of Apollo’s skull. We all peeked into the statue and found a long gold key.

My eyes glistened. “We did it! We solved another piece of the riddle.”

We were in the broom closet faster than I could blink. The five of us could hardly all cram inside, but we managed. Sam inserted the long key into the keyhole, gave it a twist, heard a *click*, and then pushed the door open. I parted the hanging bellhop uniforms and followed my classmates inside. We all fanned out to investigate the room.

Charlotte muttered, “It’s positively ghastly in here.”

She was right. It was ghastly. Dr. Jabberwocker’s office was peculiar, to say the least. There was a desk in the middle of the room, beside a display of a real life model of the human skeleton. There was an aquarium packed with algae and murky water, the bones of deceased fish sunk to the bottom of the tank where some kind of slimy creature was slithering beneath the mucky aquarium gravel. The office had a funky odor. It smelled like a rodent had crawled into one of the desk drawers, got trapped and eventually died. I learned to breathe from my mouth quickly. Charlotte crouched at the aquarium, her face twisting as she attempted to peer through the filthy water. Billy kept himself entertained at the model of the human skeleton, bobbing the skeleton’s jaw while lending his voice to it like he were some ventriloquist and the skeleton his dummy. Sam went ferreting through a bookshelf and found old, dusty novels written on the subjects of the human mind: psychology, neural perspective, cognition, emotion and such. Aaron discovered an old box filled with sheets of inkblot testing. He rifled through the content, plucking out a sheet one at a time to test himself on what he saw in the blotches of ink. I went through another

bookshelf, cringing at the row of bell jars that housed pickled brains. There were a variety of different sizes, ranging from the size of a toddler's fist to the size of a basketball. Each brain was marked with a different mental disorder: anxiety, depression, personality, cognitive, panic, eating, and even obsessive. And then another series of pickled brains: substance abuse, psychosis, and Alzheimer. I was peering at the brain once suffered from schizophrenia when Sam creaked open a cabinet door. The sound of the creak triggered something in the depths of my mind.

I was back in a memory in a flash of white light.

* * *

It was early morning when Mommy and I returned to the penthouse. Mommy creaked the front door open. She held a finger to her lips, and then I held a finger to mine, and then we tiptoed into the living room. We giggled as we snuck in, but then our laughter was abruptly gone. Ruby was on the couch waiting for us, smoking from her long bejeweled cigarette stick.

"Lacie, where have you been?"

Mommy tucked me behind her back like she was trying to protect me from something. "We just went for ice cream."

"You thought it wise to break into my apartment at 3 o'clock in the morning, sneak your four year old son out of bed after abandoning him here, and then take him out for some God damn ice cream?!"

"*Abandon him?*" Mommy pulled her hair back and laughed. "Oh Mother, stop with the performance. I left him with you."

Ruby rose to her feet, her feather boa draped loosely off her bare slender shoulders. "Lacie, you and Callum are more than welcome to stay here, but so long as you are, you can't sneak out for ice cream at 3 o'clock in the morning. He's just a child."

Mommy cracked a crude smirk. "Like you're some mother of the year?"

"Say what you want about me, darling. I know I've made mistakes. Believe me, I wish I could have been a better mother to you and your sisters. Honestly, I do. But I know I did the best I could. It was just me. I was all alone. I was a single mother raising three girls." She took a hit. She didn't even exhale before she got up to face Mommy. "I might not have been there for you before, but darling, let me be here for you now. Let me help you."

"Help me with what?"

She flailed her cigarette around as she spoke animatedly with her hands. "You need to go back on medication, Lacie."

"Unbelievable!"

Mommy scooped me up and then carried me over to the couch where she laid me down. The yelling was loud, but I was so very tired. Mommy tucked a pillow under my head and then draped a throw blanket over me.

Ruby finally exhaled, white smoke left tumbling off her lips. "Darling, this behavior, it's all too familiar. You're having an episode. You had them all throughout your childhood, on and off ever since we moved here. The only thing that ever helped was the medication." She begged Mommy, "Please, Lacie. Let me phone Dr. Cromwell. You remember him, don't you? I'm sure he'll love to hear from you...to learn how you're doing." She paused, and then said, "You'll want to leave some of this out. We want him to prescribe you medication, not lock you up."

"I'm not going back on medication!"

“Lacie, tell me. Be honest with me. How long have you been off the meds?”

“I flushed it all down the toilet two months ago,” she confessed.

Ruby coughed on her own smoke, “Lacie!”

Mommy finished tucking me in, then planted a kiss on my cheek. “I don’t need them anymore.”

“Like hell you don’t!” Ruby had smoked her cigarette down to a stub. She went for the coffee table where she opened a cigarette box adorned with fake glittering crystals. She fitted a fresh cigarette in the holder. “What’s William think of all this? He’s your husband. The boy’s father. You can’t just take a child away from their father.”

“That’s real rich coming from you!” Mommy fought off her leather jacket as she stormed into the kitchen. She opened the refrigerator and helped herself to whatever wasn’t spoiled. Which wasn’t much. What she did find she threw in her purse.

Ruby lit her new cigarette, and then pursued Mommy into the kitchen. “Lacie, I’ve had enough of this. Callum is your child. You’re his mother. Start acting like one! If not, it’s best he be with his father. At least until you sort things out.”

“I’m not losing my son,” Mommy refused.

“You’re not losing him, but darling—honestly, you’re in no mindset to care for that boy.”

“The hypocrisy of it all is truly insane!” Mommy slammed the refrigerator door closed. Her forehead then crinkled with angry lines. “You want to teach me how to be a mother, like you were some prize example. Where were you? Huh? Tell me, mother. Where were you? Who do you think raised your two other daughters? Who helped them with their homework? Who prepared all their meals? Who tucked them into bed while you were out drinking and smoking and partying with your friends? It was me!” She hit herself in the chest with an open hand. “Me, mother! It was me!”

“Partying with friends?” Ruby chortled, “Is that what you think?” She laughed so hard she choked on the smoke in her lungs. “I was out making a living so that you and your sisters could have those books that helped you three with your homework, the food in the refrigerator that you cooked with, that roof over your ungrateful heads while you all slept. I was out making a living until 3, 4, sometimes 5 o’clock in the morning.”

“I’m tired, mother.” Mommy’s eyes conveyed how very exhausted she was from all of it. She wasn’t just tired from lack of sleep, but tired of life and all its hardships. “I’m tired of taking care of everyone...everyone but me. I’m done.” She snatched her leather jacket off a chair in the dining room, and then marched through the living room where I lay almost completely asleep, and then straight through the open front door.

“Where are you going now?” Ruby chased Mommy into the hallway and stopped her in the elevator. “Lacie, where do you think you’re going?”

“You never believed me.” Mommy’s eyes became veiny and red. “You never once believed me.”

“Believed you about what?”

She trembled, “What I saw in this hotel...that *thing* that followed me ever since the day we moved here...I told you he was real...that he was watching me from the shadows...you didn’t believe me...” Her face cracked with anger. “You just sent me to some shrink to have me drugged...” Her face softened by the fear she felt. “But he’s back...you thought I was crazy, and then William too, but I have proof now. I’m going to prove to the two of you that I’m not some nut-job.” She pushed the button for the lobby, and the doors closed right in Ruby’s face.

* * *

“Boo!”

Aaron jumped at me from behind, jostling me so unexpectedly that I was hauled right back to the present.

I gave him a hard shove. “Why? Why must you do that to me?”

He laughed.

I scolded him, “I hope it’s still funny after I die from a heart attack.”

Charlotte overheard. “Don’t even joke!”

Billy stopped dancing with the skeleton to say, “My granddad died from a heart attack. Plopped dead right in the middle of dinner, he did. The whole family didn’t even notice. We all thought he was sleeping. We just went about our dinner. It wasn’t until grandma served lemon meringue pie that we even knew he was dead.”

Charlotte gasped, “How dreadful.”

“Not really.” Billy was cavalier about the whole thing. “Granddad was a bigot. He was terrible. He used to beat my grandmother, too. I wouldn’t be surprised to learn he became one of those shadow people himself. To be perfectly honest, it was more dreadful that we missed out on grandma’s lemon meringue pie.”

Aaron was annoyingly still laughing at how frightened I’d gotten from him jumping out at me.

I narrowed my eyebrows. “Stop laughing.”

He covered his mouth. “Sorry.”

I shoved him again. “No, you’re not.”

And then we both chuckled.

“You guys...”

The surprise in Sam’s voice drew our attention immediately. We found her over in the middle of the office, neck craned and looking up. Across the ceiling, written in a wispy print, was another piece of Dr. Jabberwocker’s riddle. Sam read it aloud,

*“This way, that way, which will it be,
Cast in a bottle, nothing left for you to sea.
Take the course, it needs to be traveled,
The mystery is there, it’s almost unraveled.”*

Billy moaned, “Not another bloody rhyme.”

Charlotte studied the words carefully. “No, it’s not as tricky as it seems.”

“What do you mean?” Aaron asked.

She explained, “It’s just like an escape room. I used to work at one in high school. That’s where I met my ex.”

Billy folded his beefy arms across his chest and huffed, “No one asked about your dating history. Just get on with it already.”

Charlotte continued, “‘Cast in a bottle nothing left for you to sea.’” She massaged her chin and determined, “It’s spelt like the ocean.” She then uttered, “‘cast in a bottle’.” She gave the office a careful look over, her gaze sweeping the bookshelves and all the little trinkets that were displayed upon it. And then she spotted it, and it left her with a growing grin. “Right there!” We followed Charlotte to a display on the shelf. It was a tiny ship in a glass bottle. “The bow is

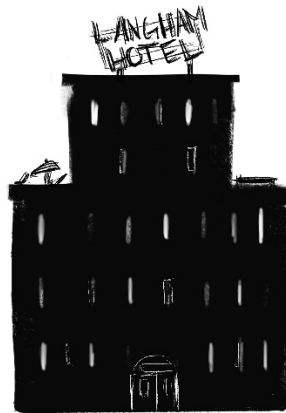
pointing,” she spun and directed her index finger in the same direction, “That way!” And then she took the route, crossed the office, and came to a rolled up scroll displayed in a glass box. “‘The mystery is there, it’s almost unraveled.’ That’s easy enough. We’ll have to unravel the scroll.”

Billy realized that the display opened up. After giving it a quick jostle to release it from the dusty residue, he carefully reached in to claim the scroll. He unraveled it and revealed another rhyme.

*“There’s something hidden in the bones of the dead,
You know the saying, it’s off with their head!”*

Sam’s eyes went round and full. “The skeleton.” And the four of us followed her to the model of the human skeleton. “‘You know the saying, it’s off with their head!’”

Charlotte popped the head off the skeleton. She then flipped the head upside down. We all gathered around her, together peeking in. Another key rested at the bottom of the skull.



Chapter 23

I reached into the skull and claimed the key. It was quite different from the one that unlocked Dr. Jabberwocker’s office. I held it up to the light for further inspection. It was a type of skeleton key: long, bronze, and antique. The bow was shaped into butterfly wings, the blade stretched long and thin, and the bit just a little heart.

Charlotte joined me squinting at the key in the light. “What do you suppose it unlocks?”

“I have no idea.”

She admired it, “It’s rather pretty.”

Aaron was parting the rack of hanging bellhop uniforms in the broom closet, his hefty backpack slung over his shoulder. “You guys, we should head back to the lobby. Professor Skeffington’s probably wondering where we all went.”

He was right. We should probably head back downstairs. I stuffed the old key deep into my pocket, then followed my classmates back through the broom closet. In the stairwell, we headed down a flight of concrete steps, so cold I could feel the chill through the soles of my worn sneakers. We then entered the hallway on the 6th floor. There, we called the elevator and rode it back downstairs to the lobby.

Sam leaned against the mirrored wall. “It’s strange.”

“What’s that?” Billy asked.

“Well...the riddle mounted on Dr. Jabberwocker’s office door gave us the clue that led us to the key that unlocked the door...but now we have another key, but no clue—no riddle.”

I fished the key back out of my pocket. “Maybe the key is the clue...”

The elevator door opened, and there was Professor Skeffington waiting for us. She was dressed in a bright Zulu beaded skirt, and a simple fitted white shirt, and her full hair was accessorized with a colorful silk head wrap.

“There you all are.” We gathered around her beneath the glorious crystal chandelier. “I do hope you’re all well rested from the weekend, because today we start off the first week of,” she threw up her hands, chin up, “the dramatic arts!” She brought her hands back down, and the emotion registered on her face altered from serious to comically silly. “This week we will learn and discuss the five basic acting styles and techniques: practical aesthetics, method, Chekhov, Meisner, and even the Stanislavski’s method.” She wrapped around a pillar, and when she came out from behind it, her facial expression had changed yet again, now registering fear. “We will dive into the history of acting, from the Greeks, to the Romans, to the first ever motion picture.” And then her face became heavy, her eyes watered, her lips quivering while she wept, “We will learn the difference between film and theater and all the genres of dramatic performance.” She waved her hand over her face, and her expression was left serious again. “But for now, we have a show to catch. It’s off to the theater.” She turned on her heels. “Mr. Hinkley,” she called over to the front desk where the hotel manager was polishing the hotel room keys, “have our taxi van pull up to the roundabout.” She reached into her purse and then, ever so dramatically, fitted designer sunglasses on her face. “We’ve got a Broadway show to catch.”

Charlotte’s squeals echoed in the lobby, ricocheting off the walls in loud echoes as we all left the hotel and boarded the taxi van outside.

We had the pleasure of seeing a new musical perform on Broadway. It was pretty neat. I hadn’t been to the theatre before. I had no idea what to expect. The songs were catchy. I didn’t know any of the words, but my foot still went tapping while I hummed along. Charlotte remained on the edge of her seat throughout the entire show, and she was more dramatic than the best actors performing on stage. I had the misfortune of sitting on one side of her. Billy had the other. During dramatically sad scenes, she would cling to Billy’s arm and weep into his chest. On scary parts, she would jump back and flair her limbs. I lost half my bag of Skittles and had to get a refill on my soda after Charlotte had knocked them both over. And then when she laughed, she was so loud I was surprised the actors didn’t break character to shout into the audience ‘*shut up!*’ Billy seemed to find the whole thing boring. His snacks were the only thing keeping him awake. He dozed off as soon as he was through with them, only to be jolted awake by Charlotte jumping out of her chair to start an applause. Aaron enjoyed the show. He thought it was pretty amusing. During intermission, he got us a box of popcorn to share and me a new bag of Skittles after Charlotte had knocked over what was left of my first bag. It was sweet of Aaron to have thought of me. I didn’t even ask him to do it. He just did it. Meanwhile, Sam had spent the taxi drive to the musical surfing the internet on her cellphone for clues to the skeleton key we’d found in Dr. Jabberwocker’s office, but the plot of the show had her hooked. She enjoyed the show and only peeked at her cellphone during intermission.

Soon enough the day was gone, and we were dropped back off at the Langham Hotel to enjoy what was left of our evening. Aaron had already changed into his pajamas. He was now lying in bed watching a movie on his tablet. He had used the theatre’s WiFi to download a film. It was

First Wives Club. His movie taste was odd. It was quite the leap from *Jumanji* to *First Wives Club*, but I found it endearing. He watched films like a child would, snacking on junk food, eyes too close to the screen, so invested in the story that the rest of the world faded away into the abyss. He must have watched the movie a thousand times and yet he still laughed with the same genuine giggles he got the first time he watched it. I didn't want to disturb his trance. And so I changed into my pajamas quietly, and even more quietly crawled into bed. My laptop went *ringing* on the nightstand, but I hit the side switch, and the ringing turned to a humming buzz.

Aaron paused the movie. "Did you want to answer that?"

I fluffed out a pillow and then tucked it under my head. "I wasn't going to. It's just my dad. He's been calling all day. I didn't want to disturb your movie anyway."

"Go for it." He minimized the screen and then slid the tablet on the nightstand where he left it to charge. "Diane Keaton just found out that her husband is dating her therapist." He grabbed his soda can off the nightstand and gave it a rattle. "I'm going to need a fresh one for this." He got himself out of bed and headed for the door. "You want anything from the vending machine?"

"I'm okay. Thank you."

I got my laptop situated on my lap while Aaron exited the hotel room. I popped the screen open, and then clicked on the 'Accept' button. My dad appeared on the screen. It was early morning in France, on the snowy mountains of Mount Blanc, but Dad didn't look like he had slept yet. He was in the sitting room in Chateau Du Coeur, sipping coffee on a tall high-backed chair near the roaring hearth.

"What's up, dad?" The more I looked at him, the more I noticed how exhausted he really was. The bags under his eyes were heavy. He even had a stubbled beard. That was odd. He normally kept his face perfectly shaved.

"Collin, I've been up all night with your mother...with Maureen. She finally went to bed. One of us had to get some sleep. We have a new investor visiting tomorrow morning." He glanced at his wristwatch. "I guess it is morning."

"Dad, have you been up all night?"

He took a sip of coffee, as though the act alone was enough. "We were up all night talking...talking about you...talking about your birthmother..." For a moment, his thoughts slipped away from him. He watched the steam curl off of his hot coffee. And then he came back around. "Collin, about the other day, when you called."

"What about it?" I asked, confused.

"Your mom...your mom—*Lacie*."

I knew something was up. I hadn't heard my Dad say Mom's name in at least 14 years. Not since she died. There was something about the way dad said mom's name. It had weight to it. I could feel the heaviness of it through the screen.

"What about mom?"

He ran his hand through his salt and pepper hair. "There's something you should know about her illness...something I tried to keep from you—only because I wanted to protect you."

My face screwed. "Protect me from what?"

He got all flustered. "Your mom was ill, Collin. She wasn't well." His eyes wandered as though searching for the memory nearby. "Actually, she hadn't been well for some time."

I already knew this. "She was mentally ill?"

"Yes," he confirmed with another sip of coffee. "Your mom suffered from a number of different mental illnesses. Even back when I met her in high school, she would have episodes.

The severity of those episodes was determined by situations she was facing, whether it be her relationship with her mother, her sisters, me, or it could be that she skipped out on her meds. There were good times, sure, but there were bad ones too. The bad ones,” he gripped his mug tightly, “boy were they bad.”

“What exactly did mom suffer from?”

“Anxiety, depression, and was even being treated for schizophrenia. Although she was never diagnosed with it, I wondered at times whether or not she was suffering from an early-onset of Alzheimer’s disease. Sometimes she would forget who I was...that she was my wife...that she was a mother...”

I felt my insides twist. “What do you mean?”

“She was always fine on medication, but sometimes they made her sick. To tell you the truth, she hated the medication. She said it blocked her creativity, and as an artist, well that meant it blocked who she was. She would stop taking the medication whenever she had an artistic block. She would try to hide it from me, but I could normally catch it before she got too out of control.”

“Out of control?”

Dad’s mind slipped away again. It seemed to run off without him. “It started with paranoia. It always started with paranoia.”

I felt all my emotions heavy on my face. “What do you mean? What was she paranoid of?”

“I just always thought she was a little quirky—eccentric, you know? I didn’t take it too seriously. Whenever she was off her medication, she would have these terrible spouts of thoughts.”

“Like what?” I pressed.

“The earliest I can remember had to do with several of the other mothers at your preschool. They were all friends and part of the school’s PTA. For a few months they were inseparable. They held a bake sale on the first of every month, and took lunches together downtown, your mother even had them over to the house every Tuesday afternoon for wine. And then something switched. All of a sudden, your mom wanted nothing to do with any of them. One wrong comment from one of the other mothers and she would blow everything out of proportion. She came up with a whole story about how these other mothers were somehow out to get her. She thought one of them was stealing from our house when she came over for wine. Anytime your mom misplaced something, that friend had stolen it. One time it was her sunglasses. I told your mom, ‘Lacie, they’re right there on the top of your head.’ It never mattered. Even if she knew she was wrong, she didn’t care. Someone was always out to get her.” He dove right into the next story, “One day she got a speeding ticket. You should have heard her. She convinced herself of it. Your mom blamed the whole thing on one of the other mothers.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.”

“That’s the point, Collin. It doesn’t make sense. None of it ever made any sense. But to your mom, it did.” Dad went back to explain, “One of the mothers was married to a police officer, and so your mom thought she asked her husband to get one of the other officers to pull her over for speeding. They didn’t even work at the same precinct let alone in the same city.” The more Dad continued, the more I felt antsy and anxious. “She wanted to pull you out of preschool, but I luckily talked her out of it. She wouldn’t take you to school. I ended up having to drive 45 minutes out of the way just to drop you off.”

I felt this need to protect my mom, and so I tried to give her the benefit of the doubt. “Paranoia doesn’t necessarily mean schizophrenic. Sometimes it just means paranoid.”

Dad pushed on, like he was trying to get me on his side. “Another time, your mom quit her job at the art gallery. It was out of nowhere. She said the owner had been trying to get her to quit and started doing little things to make her uncomfortable enough to do so.”

I still felt the need to protect her. “Have you ever thought that maybe that was true? Maybe he was coming on to her?”

Dad countered quickly, “Collin, the owner of the gallery was happily married to a man. Not to mention, your mom and he had been best friends for over a decade. The owner’s name is Liam and his husband’s name is Mateo. Your mother and I are godparents to their daughter. For Pete’s sake, Liam drove your mom to the hospital after her water broke with you. I was stuck in LA traffic for three hours. I just barely made it in time to see you born.” Dad made sure to stress what he was saying so that I would understand the severity of his words. “Liam and Mateo were good friends of ours. Liam wouldn’t have done anything to make your mom uncomfortable enough to quit her job. He wanted her there. He begged her to come back. Collin, this was nothing more than a story your mother contrived in her own head.” Dad’s face got suddenly very pale. “And then there was the shadow...”

I felt my heart drop. “What did you say?”

“Your mom would sometimes have hallucinations. Not always, but sometimes. But when she had them, they were bad. Really bad. She swore she saw what she called the ‘Shadow Man’, and that this shadowy figure was following her, and had been following her ever since she was a little girl.” He went off into a story, “One day, your mom had a particularly bad episode. I didn’t know this at the time, but I found out later that she was two weeks off her meds. She flushed them down the toilet without me knowing it. Your mom went to surprise me at work, to take me out for lunch. She saw me with another teacher.”

I pried, “I woman teacher?”

“Yes.”

“Dad, are you telling me you were having an affair?”

“Of course not! What kind of a man do you take me for?”

“Sorry,” I apologized, “I had to ask.”

Dad went on, “Needless to say, your mom thought the worst. She fled the school I taught at, drove to your preschool and signed you out without my knowledge. I thought you’d been kidnapped! Which, you sort of were. Your mom took you straight home, packed the two of you a bag, and then went straight to LAX. I was worried sick. I called your mom nonstop for days, but she eventually turned her cellphone off. It was nearly a week later before I learned that Lacie had taken you to New York City to stay with her mother.”

“I sort of remember this...well, some of it. Ever since we got here I started remembering that trip with mom...”

Dad became even more serious. He set his coffee down and looked me directly in the eyes. Even through the screen I could feel the intensity of his stare. “Collin, what do you remember about that trip?”

I tried my best to recollect from the many memories that had started coming back to me. “We were staying with my grandma...Ruby Hart. She lived in the penthouse. It was on the top floor of the Langham Hotel.”

“The bathtub,” Dad stressed, “you mentioned a bathtub.”

I could hear splashing echoing in the far depths of my mind, but I wasn’t sure what it was. “I don’t really remember.”

The hotel room door opened, and Billy came barging in with the rest of my classmates. “You aren’t ever going to believe this, mate.”

“Dad, I’m sorry, but I got to go. But don’t worry. I’m fine. I get it. Mom was sick. It sucks, but I understand. I thought it was weird at first but, I think it’s kind of neat being here again.”

This went right over Dad’s head. “Being where?”

“The Langham Hotel,” I answered. “That’s where we’re staying while in New York City. I thought I told you? We’ve been staying at the same hotel mom took me to.”

Dad spluttered, “Collin, that’s not possible.”

“I’ll talk to you soon. Love you!” And I closed the laptop to find Billy, Charlotte, Sam, and Aaron all congested in the frame of the door. “What is it?”

Sam placed a rolled up poster on the foot of my bed and then spread it open, revealing a detailed blueprint of the Langham Hotel.

“Where did you get that?” I asked.

“Downstairs in Mr. Hinkley’s office,” she revealed. “He’s so predictable! Every night at 7 o’clock, he goes out to the garden to pick roses and leaves his front desk unattended. He’s gone for exactly 33 minutes. It’s actually kind of strange. He’s got it down clockwork to the very second.” She got herself back on track. “Anyway, I snuck into Mr. Hinkley’s office while he was out in the garden, and had Billy keep a lookout just in case.”

Billy picked up the story from there. “She found two blueprints, one of the Langham Hotel, the other of the Langham Hospital of the Mentally Impaired.”

Charlotte wished to be part of the big reveal. “After closely observing both prints, something stuck out to us.”

The three of them had clearly found Aaron at the vending machine, and had yet to fill him in. He was just as clueless as I was, but enjoying his bag of savory chips even still. “Well, what is it?”

“The Billiard Room,” Billy divulged.

“What’s that?” I asked.

He went on to explain, “It’s sort of like a recreation room. It’s for playing games and lounging and smoking and such.”

Aaron was just as lost as I was. “...and this matters to the riddle how exactly?”

Sam jumped back in, “On the hotel blueprint the room on the basement floor is a Billiard Room, but on the hospital blueprint it was a smoking terrace. Back in the day, nicotine was believed to help calm patients suffering from mental illness. It helped to relax them. Keep them focused. They thought it was even healthy for them. So some mental institutions had smoking terraces designed for patients to smoke in.”

Aaron scratched his head. “I’m still lost.”

Sam put her hand out. “Collin, the key.”

At her request, I opened the nightstand drawer. The key had been left in there for safekeeping. I reached in and then passed it off to Sam.

“Butterfly wings.” Sam outlined the way the bow of the key was shaped like butterfly wings. I spluttered, “Sam, have you been drinking again?”

“Don’t you see?” Sam pressed even more, “Dr. Jabberwocker designed the building with themes of *‘Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland’*. The hookah-smoking caterpillar...caterpillars turn into butterflies. The key must open the door to the Billiard Room!”

Billy noticed all of our surprised faces. “What are we waiting for? Let’s have at it then!”

I was out of bed in a flash. Aaron and I were the only ones wearing pajamas, the rest of our classmates were still dressed in the same outfits they wore to the Broadway show. We snuck through the hallway. It was normally quiet, but we were all so chatty. Luckily, the hotel was vacant beside for us. If not, we might have woken up every suite on the 4th floor. Moments ago I was ready for bed, but now I was wide awake. We rode the elevator to the basement, the whole car shaking as it landed on the building's bottom floor. The doors opened, and we all headed through a network of hallways coated in wallpaper designed with illustrations from the classic children's book. We passed the laundry room, the maid's quarters, two different storage rooms, and then a door marked 'Billiard Room'.

Sam looked over her shoulder as the rest of us gathered around her. "Are we ready?" We all nodded. "Here goes nothing." She inserted the key, and then gave it a slow, reluctant twist. *Click*—and we all cheered. Sam pushed the door open, revealing a recreation room where an antique pool table sat beneath a Tiffany pendant light. Circled around the great big pool table were a dozen booths, all with velvety cushioned high-backs. Stationed on the floor in front of each of the booths was a tall stemmed hookah, each with its own individual stained glass vase.

Billy went right in and circled in place. "This place is brilliant!"

"We can have so much fun here." Charlotte went right over to a shelving unit packed with a great variety of different board games still packaged in their vintage box. "Would you look at all this entertainment? They got Monopoly, Scrabble, Clue," she picked through the board games, "Chess, Checkers, a deck of player cards. We could play Poker!"

"Strip Poker," Billy suggested while racking the balls at the pool table.

Sam shot it down quickly, "Not in this lifetime." She claimed a pool stick hanging from the wall and then placed the white ball on the opposite side of the table from where Billy was racking the rest of them. "I'll break." And she did, leaving the striped and solid balls to scatter across the table.

Aaron joined them. "I'll play winner."

Billy was just as cocky and as arrogant as he ever was. "Then you'll be playing me. I'm practically a pro."

Sam went at it again, striking with such precision that she sent two solid balls into opposite pockets with the one hit.

Billy's jaw fell open. "Shit, Sam! You aren't half bad."

"My foster parents have one in their basement."

While Sam put Billy to shame in their game of pool, I ambled through the Billiard Room. Wallpaper adorned the walls, the same as the walls throughout the entire hotel, but these designs were more specific. It was all of the same scene over and over again. The black and white illustrations were of little Alice peeking over the top of a large mushroom where a caterpillar was seated, smoking from a hookah pipe. My eyes became transfixed on the illustration. Something was telling me we were close—very close to solving Dr. Jabberwocker's riddle.

"Shit! I barely got a turn." Billy passed the pool stick over to Aaron, and then drifted over to a booth where he dropped his entire weight into a plop. His sticky fingers went meandering through drawers on an end table beside his booth. He found flavored tobacco, quick light charcoal, and a pair of metal tongs. He got up only to empty the stale, years-old water out from the vase in a sink stationed over in the back corner, then replaced it with fresh water. And then he prepped the hookah.

He asked the group, "Anyone got a light?"

“Actually, I do.” Charlotte emptied out her purse and found a lighter mixed in with a variety of cosmetics. “I always keep one for my eyeliner.”

“Perfect!” Billy lit the charcoal. It instantly lit, sizzling and crackling while the black coal burned red hot. He utilized the tongs, delicately pinching the burning charcoal and placing it on top of the ceramic bowl he had packed with shredded flavored tobacco. He had topped the bowl with a thin layer of tinfoil, and the tinfoil was covered in tiny punctured holes Billy had carefully created with a fork. It was on the tinfoil that the charcoal burned upon, cooking the tobacco—mint flavored. Billy then put the hose into his mouth, took a big inhale, filled his lungs, and was soon belching thick rings of smoke.

Charlotte continued to pick through all the different board games. “Anyone up for a game of backgammon?”

Sam stood back while Aaron leaned over the pool table and closed one eye while the other was left popped open. Then he struck. A striped red ball rolled right into the corner left pocket. “Aaron, I’m impressed.”

“Thanks, my grandpa taught me how to play.”

Their voices, all their chitchatting, drowned in the background. I stood at the wall, my eyes sweeping through the illustration of a mushroom forest. Tall trees, wild mushrooms and weeds of grass, scattered butterflies fluttering in the air...butterflies. There were a total of seven of them. Written in their wings was a word—a single word. I spotted the first one. *‘Find’*. That stuck out to me, and then I moved along the wall in a clockwise direction. *‘the’* and then the one after that, *‘Ace’*, the words progressed into a full sentence that I spoke out loud, *“Find the Ace Without a Face.”*

“Charlotte!” I found her still ferreting through the old, dusty board games. “Is there a deck of playing cards in there?”

“Yes, would you like to play?” She dug the deck of cards out from the pile of board games. “If not Poker, how about Gin Rummy?”

“Not now.”

I snatched the deck from her, peeled open the flap, and then dumped the playing cards out. They all spilt out across the pool table.

Sam threw up her hands. “Hey, what gives?!”

“The butterflies.” I began to flip the cards face up. “There’s a word spelt out in their wings. Together they make a sentence. *‘Find the Ace Without a Face’*.” I went on flipping playing card after playing card. I believed that I was on to something, but I wasn’t certain for sure. “That’s got to be another clue.”

Billy took a deep inhale of smoke, then let it come pouring out of his mouth and nose like some mystical dragon about to blow. “What’s he going on about now?”

I located the Ace of Diamonds, the Ace of Spades, and then there it was—the Ace of Hearts. The number and the symbol were on the top and bottom corners, but the rest of the card was blank. I found it.

Aaron took the playing card and had himself a look. “That’s strange.”

Sam put down the pool stick and then had herself a look as well. “How is this a clue to solving the riddle? It’s just a blank card.” And then she coughed from hookah smoke. “Jesus, Billy! Are you trying to hotbox the room?”

Aaron pinched his watery eyes closed. “Yeah, it’s starting to burn my eyes.”

Smoke. And then it hit me so hard I was nearly knocked out of my shoes. I snatched the playing card out of Aaron's hand and bolted through the cloud of smoke. I then ripped the hookah pipe out of Billy's hands.

"Hey!" he complained. "Give that back."

I took a hit, my throat burning as I sucked the smoke deep into my lungs. All I could taste was some awful combination of mint and rusted metal. Despite the nauseating feeling, I inhaled as much as I could. And then I blew it out, letting the hookah smoke wash over the card. Words began to appear upon the card within the smoke, manifesting as though by the sleight hand of magic. I read it for all to hear,

"Hold on to your top hats, your knickers, your soul,

Just like Wonderland, you can find me down a rabbit-hole."

Charlotte cheered, "Well done, Collin. Well done! Invisible ink, how clever!"

"Absolutely brilliant, mate. But I'll be taking that back now." Billy snatched the hookah pipe out of my hands and then took another hit. He then tried to blow smoke rings around my head like a game of horseshoe.

Sam determined, "That's got to be the last part of Dr. Jabberwocker's riddle."

Aaron asked, "How can you be sure?"

"I can't, but it sure seems like it...*down the rabbit-hole.*"

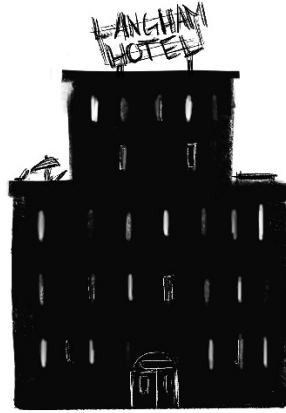
Billy wasn't so convinced. "And where the bloody hell do you suppose we find this rabbit-hole? We are in a hotel, after all. A hotel, mind you, right smack in the middle of New York City. How are we ever going to find a rabbit-hole in a place such as this?"

"I absolutely despise riddles." Charlotte plopped in the booth beside Billy, took the hookah pipe, then had herself a puff. Her twisted expression made it all too clear that she didn't care for it. She smacked her lips to get rid of the taste of metal. "I'll tell you, if I never hear another rhyming word for the rest of my life, it would be too soon."

Billy took back the pipe, and then curled his free arm around Charlotte's neck. "My poor little cherry blossom. I shall spend the rest of my life assuring you don't ever have to read another riddle again."

Sam massaged her crinkled forehead. "I really can't think with the pet names."

The last sentence of the riddle went around and around in my head. *Just like Wonderland, you can find me down a rabbit-hole.* Billy was right. There wouldn't be a rabbit-hole in a hotel. So what could Dr. Jabberwocker possibly have meant by that part of his riddle? He wouldn't have written it for no reason. There had to be a purpose for it all, and yet I couldn't come up with a single explanation. Here we were, yet again, hopelessly stuck on another part of the riddle.



Chapter 24

The entire school week on dramatic arts came and went, and still we couldn't figure out the ending puzzle to Dr. Jabberwocker's riddle. I was starting to get fed up with it. To be honest, I wasn't even sure why we cared so much about solving it. What good what it do? Solving the riddle wasn't going to help us escape the building and gain our freedom by proving our sanity as the riddle was originally intended for. It was just for fun. Mere entertainment. Something to pass the time while we were on this class trip. But it wasn't fun. Not anymore. You might think that would stop us from trying, but it didn't. On occasion, throughout the week, one of us was bound to be working on solving it. The weekend was a good distraction from it. We all decided to go to Luna Park on Coney Island. Aaron spent too much money trying to win a 4 foot tall gorilla, and I ate way too much cotton candy. I was surprised to see that Madame Sheva Wasam had a booth at the theme park, but this time I didn't let her give me a psychic reading. Billy and Charlotte however, did. The joint reading would foresee the two of them getting married in seven years. They would soon after birth three children—all boys. Billy was going to direct his first feature film the year after graduating from the Art Institution, but he wouldn't make it big until his late thirties. Charlotte, however, was going to land a lead role six months after graduation, and it would put her on the path to the frame she knew she was always destined for. I was convinced that it was all a con when Madame Wasam told Sam that Billy was going to pick up her first novel and offer to adapt it for the silver screen. Of course, they both had the talent to achieve it, I just couldn't picture the two of them working so closely together without strangling each other first. Sam would most likely be the murderer, and Billy would have probably deserved it. I didn't expect Aaron to want a palm reading, but he did. He sat down and let Madame Wasam trace his life lines.

"You have two," she said, cryptic as she ever was. "Your lifeline ends here."

Aaron squirmed in his seat, looking uncomfortable. "That line doesn't look very long."

"No, it isn't. You typically see this in people who live short lives."

Aaron pulled back his hand to look at his palm. "I'm going to die young?" He seemed oddly unbothered by it. It's almost as though he welcomed death. Unlike most people, he wasn't afraid of it.

"Not necessarily." Madame Wasam yanked his hand back. "There's a break here."

"Whats that mean?"

“It means you have a choice,” she answered.

“A choice for what?”

“Whether or not you wish to live a long life or a short one. Your soul gets to make the decision.”

That was a little too spooky for me. Madame Wasam gestured for me to take a seat at her booth, but I decided to skip out this time. I didn’t want to know if I was going to live a short life or a long one. I thought it best just to live.

By the time we returned back to the Langham Hotel, I was really regretting the amount of cotton candy I’d scarfed down right before a slew of dizzy rollercoaster rides. I raced to the restroom, swung open the stall door, and spent a good half an hour on my knees with my head hanging inside the toilet. I crossed the checkered floor to wash up in the sink, rinsing my mouth out with faucet water until I got rid of the awful taste of vomit. I was splashing my face with cold water when I caught my reflection in the mirror. Suddenly, I wasn’t looking into the eyes of my 18 year old self, but rather the eyes of my 4 year old self.

* * *

I woke up to an empty penthouse. Mommy was gone. I felt tremendously scared. It might have been irrational, nothing more than a child’s greatest fear, but I was frightened that I might never see her again. I got myself off the couch and peered around. The place always smelled the same: cigarettes, and alcohol, all mixed together with cheap perfume. There was also a sort of hazy cloud that always hung in the air. For a moment, short as it was, I thought I was all alone—my greatest fear came to life. I went out to seek for life. I went through the penthouse and soon ventured off into the master suite. I grabbed the knob and slowly creaked it open. The air was thick with cigarette smoke that dried my eyes instantly. Drapes were drawn tightly shut, so heavy and so dark that not even a ray of sunlight could penetrate. I scoured the bedroom, the walls adorned with more framed photographs of Ruby Hart. She was very pretty. In all her photographs, she was beautiful. I had just determined I was alone when I noticed a big lump on the bed shifting. It was Ruby, but she was out of her sequence dress and into a laced one-piece lingerie and garter. She wore a bedazzled eye-mask while she slept.

I worked across the room and over to the Flapper’s bedside. She was out cold, snoring and lightly drooling on her silk pillowcase. “Grandma,” I shook her. “Grandma, are you awake?”

She peeled the mask up over one bloodshot eye. “Call me that again and I’ll chop off your little fingers.” She slapped her mask back over her eyes, and then nestled her head against her pillow.

“But I’m hungry,” I whined.

She moaned into her pillow, “Well, what do you expect me to do about it? You have a mother. Ask her.”

“She’s not here.”

“Still?!” Ruby shot awake, her eye-mask left lopsided. I had crawled up onto her bed and was now straddling her. We were practically nose to nose. She looked positively grotesque, but that made me giggle. “Get off.” She pushed me away, and I fell right into a mound of silk pillows. “Just look at your little hands. They’re positively filthy!” She ran her hands through her expensive sheets. “I’ll have you know that these sheets are made from 100% mulberry silk.” She tugged on them like she was trying to protect them from me. “And besides,” she made a face, “how do I know that you aren’t diseased?”

I giggled again.

“You find that amusing, do you?” I saw her crack a smile, a very subtle and very quick sort of grin. It was an uncontrollable slip of expression that she corrected swiftly. “You look savage, like you haven’t bathed in several weeks. I’ll now have to put in a request with housekeeping to rewash these sheets since you’ve rolled around in them like some flea-infested dog.”

“Woof!” I barked.

“God help me.” Ruby massaged her temple. “If food is what it will take to shut you up, then let me see what I can find in the pantry.” She peeled off her quilt and then slid her bare feet into a pair of fancy tall-heeled indoor shoes topped with sparkling rhinestones. I followed her back through the apartment, her silk robe billowing as she went. “Why your mother thought it wise to leave you in my care is beyond me.” She swept a carton of cigarettes off the kitchen counter. “How could she?” She flipped open the flap and slid a cigarette out by her teeth, then fit it snugly into her bejeweled cigarette stick. “She likes to let me know what a terrible mother I was. Enjoys it, really.” She lit the cigarette and then took a deep drag that instantly relaxed her. “And yet she leaves her only son with me to care for—*me*.” She blew the smoke away. “The audacity of it all.” She then glided into the kitchen to explore the refrigerator. “What do you want?” She seemed annoyed and irritable.

“My other grandma used to make me waffles for breakfast.”

“*Waffles?*” Ruby cringed. “What do you think this is, the Original House of Pancakes?” She went scouring through the refrigerator shelves, shifting around jars, cartons and makeup as she went. “I wonder why you couldn’t have stayed with your other grandma.”

“Daddy’s mommy died.”

“Lucky girl,” Ruby mumbled.

She opened cupboards, rummaged through drawers, and even ferreted back through the refrigerator that had more cosmetics than anything that was actually edible. On the counter she found a bag of kidney beans, a can of chicken noodle soup, a bottle of gin, Thousand Island Dressing, and one rotten apple.

She took another hit, and then asked through a cloud of smoke, “Can I interest you with chicken noodle soup?”

I made a funny face. “For breakfast?” I shook my head. “Mommy usually lets me have Fruity Pebbles.”

“What the hell is that?”

“Cereal.”

She glanced at the clock on the stove. “The hotel cafe opens in five minutes. Perhaps they’ll have Fruity Rocks there.”

“It’s Fruity *Pebbles*.”

“I don’t care.” She turned for her bedroom when she caught her reflection in a hanging mirror. She fluffed out her bedhead. “God, I look atrocious.” She combed and pulled and tweaked at her platinum curls. “I can’t be seen like this. I have a reputation to uphold.”

I was genuine when I said, “I think you look beautiful.”

She leaned into the mirror while brushing a curl back behind her ear. She then licked a finger and fixed another strand. “Do you think it’s too short? It was my hairdresser’s idea, but I’m starting to second guess it. I think it makes me look...” she cringed, “*older*. You know,” She hesitated, but then finished, “like I was old enough to be in my late forties.”—which was at least a decade younger than she really was.

“I think you look young.”

She whipped around, sporting a smile and a pair of rosy cheeks. “Get your coat. We’re going to find those damn Fruity Pebbles.”

* * *

I was trying to make my way back to my hotel room. I stumbled around the slanted hallway as if I were lost. I felt weak and lightheaded. There was an awful lot of buzzing in my ear and a terrible thumping in my skull. I used the wall for support, my hand grazing along the wallpaper illustrations of *‘Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland’*, nearly knocking over the silly portraits of animals dressed like humans as I went. The pounding, the buzzing, it all persisted. Something inside me was screaming for my attention. All these memories were fighting to come back to my recollection. It felt like these memories were clawing and biting their way through my skull. I had pushed them away, but I couldn’t stand to anymore. These memories were progressing and they were doing so fast. Before I knew it, I was back again.

* * *

The convenience store at the street corner didn’t sell my favorite brand of cereal, so Ruby made a scene. ‘What kind of an establishment are you running here? This boy wants Fruity Rock Cereal. Is the boy to suffer for your negligence? Is it his fault you failed to perform your job correctly by ordering the specific brand of cereal? How you stay in business is beyond me.’ She gestured to the cigarette case behind the counter. ‘A pack of Marlboros.’ She purchased her brand of cigarettes and then went on to ridicule the clerk. ‘I mean honestly? What kind of a convenience store is this? Not a very good one, if you ask me. Can’t even get the damn children’s brand of cereal stocked in your store. What is it? Do children not live in the city? Do they not shop at your store? It’s ignorant for you to even think it. It’s blasphemy, really. Oh, stop your crying. You’re a grown man, for God sake.’ And then the clerk fled five blocks away to purchase Ruby a box of Fruity Pebbles cereal.

I was sitting on Ruby’s bed with my legs dangling as I slurped up the yummy, sugary milk at the bottom of the bowl.

Ruby sat at her vanity applying makeup. The vanity lights were hot and blaring on her, but Ruby welcomed the spotlight. Whether on a stage or not, she didn’t care. She was a woman who needed lights on her.

I slid off the mattress and then ambled over to the vanity to watch her rub a flesh-colored cream onto her cheeks. “What’s that?”

“Foundation.”

I now watched her take a powder and apply it to her face. “And what’s that?”

“Powder.”

She then took a black-tipped pencil and began to draw on her eyelids. “What’s that now?”

“Eyeliner.”

Ruby was so glamorous. I wanted to be just like her. I took the face powder and then started to apply it on my cheeks, but only coughing in a cloud of powder.

“That’s far too much.” She took the brush and dabbed it lightly into the powder jar. “Always remember that less is more.” She began to apply the powder to my cheeks in gentle pats. “You’ll want to accentuate your strengths, but conceal your flaws.” She caught me enamoring her while she applied my makeup. “Your eyes are lovely, you wouldn’t want to hide them.”

I looked up at her with big doe-eyes. "Do I look pretty like you?"

Her expression softened a bit. "You look very pretty." And then she seemed to get stuck on something inside her head. "Callum—"

"My name's Collin."

"Yes, of course." She crossed her thin bare legs, leaned forward and then tried again, "Callum, do you like makeup?"

I shrugged. "I don't know." I picked through all the different types of cosmetics topped on the vanity. To me, they looked more like a witch's potions. "It seems like magic."

"*Magic*," she echoed. "Well, I guess it sort of is." She leaned into the mirror in search of faults. "Lord knows I could use a spell to help rid myself of these merciless crow's feet." She pulled back and then took another look at me. "Do you like pretty things...things that maybe other little boys like yourself don't necessarily enjoy?"

"Sometimes," I confessed. "I have a doll back home that I have to hide whenever my cousin Parker comes over to visit." I felt embarrassed and ashamed, but I wasn't entirely sure why. "He teases me about it. He says dolls are only for girls."

"Parker?" She thought about it. "That's Rosie's kid." She remembered, "I met him once. Vile little thing, he was. Always picking his nose. I wouldn't trust a word that came out of his mouth." She leaned toward me again. "This doll of yours...you like playing with it?"

I nodded.

"Then you play with your doll," she insisted. "And don't you dare listen to a word your cousin says. After all, he'll probably wind up working at some dead end job just to support his kids while his wife has an affair with the neighbor." She looked at me again. Something was different in her expression. It was as though her heart were opening up. "Callum—"

"Collin," I giggled.

"Collin, yes, that's right." She started over again, "Callum," she took my hands and looked me right in the eyes, "when you grow up, you might find that life is different than how you imagine it will be. It might not seem fair, and really it isn't, but you'll find life will be a little more challenging for you...more challenging than the other boys."

"I don't understand."

"Life is cruel, darling." She squeezed my little fingers. "It's always been cruel to people like you." She stroked my powdered cheek, then pulled a tuft of red hair back behind my ear. "But you know what I say to them?" She pulled me closer so that she could look me right in the eyes. "Fuck them!"

I gasped, "That's a bad word!"

"Keep your chin up." She insisted, "Always, you hear me? When the world is cold, and the people are cruel, keep your chin up and always be brave. You got that? You understand me, don't you, Callum?"

I nodded vigorously.

She pulled back and caught her reflection in the mirror. "Take it from me, darling." She retrieved a tube of lipstick and then began to unscrew it while puckering her lips. "Shine bright in a world so dark." She lifted her chin and smiled at her own reflection. "Be a *star*!"

I was enthralled by her. "Like you, Ruby?"

She smirked, "Call me grandma." The sound of the word spoken out loud left her wincing. "Actually, don't." She applied her lipstick and then said, "Ruby suits me just fine."

* * *

I eventually found my way back to my hotel room. My brain felt like it was pulsing. I rubbed my forehead. The lightheadedness was so strong it was nearly crippling. I could hardly keep myself up. I soon collapsed onto the edge of my bed, my head hanging so low it was practically wedged between my knees. My face felt pale and icky. I wasn't sure if it was because I had been vomiting cotton candy or the surge of new memories...these memories were so emotionally overwhelming. They came in like a tidal wave. For most of my life I had grown up never knowing I had a grandmother, and now I had these feelings for her. *I, dare I even think it, missed her.* Cold as she was, I think I might have even loved her. There were so many unanswered questions. What happened to my mom? She got sick and died shortly after our visit to New York City. Did something in the hotel make her sick? I was so deep in my own thoughts that it took me an extra minute to realize Aaron was in the hotel room with me. He was sitting up in bed. He had abandoned his sketchbook. I noticed it was left open on the foot of his bed. His drawing was a remarkable illustration of an old and decrepit manor, a boy standing in the upstairs window, looking out. Now that his illustration was completed, Aaron was able to put all his energy in to trying to decipher Dr. Jabberwocker's riddle. He had the playing card in his hand, the 'Ace Without A Face', and was apparently reading the last phrase of the riddle over and over again in his head.

He was getting fed up with it. "This part of the riddle makes no sense. None whatsoever!" And then he read the phrase aloud, "*'Hold onto your top hats, your knickers, your soul, just like Wonderland, you can find me down a rabbit-hole'*"—obviously we're looking for a rabbit-hole..." and then his forehead crinkled, "aren't we?" He smacked himself in the head with the playing card. "I'm not sure anymore. It's all so confusing."

I didn't even hear him. The buzzing had returned loud in my ears.

Aaron must have noticed that I wasn't acting much like myself. "Collin, are you alright? You don't look so well."

"I just have a headache."

"I have pain relief medication." Aaron reached for the nightstand drawer for the bottle.

I got up off the edge of the bed, and was halfway to Aaron when everything went dark. I knew I had fallen. In the darkness of my mind I could hear the thud my body made when it hit the floor.

* * *

Ruby put on a vinyl record, and the record player began to play her own adaptation of Tammi Terrell and Marvin Gaye's '*Ain't No Mountain High Enough*'. Ruby was dressed in her trademark garment. She wore her tight, sequenced flapper dress, short and skimpy enough to reveal much skin. She loaned me her feather boa, draping it over my shoulders. It was so long and covered in feathers that it practically swallowed me. The song played, and we danced in the living room to it. I was jumping on the couch, swinging the boa around while Ruby went frolicking into the dining room, singing along to her own voice playing. She swept the porcelain clown off the end table and pretended it was a microphone.

She lip-synced, "*Listen baby, ain't no mountain high, ain't no valley low, ain't no river wide enough, baby.*"

I jumped up onto the back of the couch and got really into it. '*If you need me call me, no matter where you are, no matter how far,*' I shimmied, "*don't worry, baby.*'

She strutted toward me, shoulders popping, hips swaying. *‘Just call my name, I’ll be there in a hurry, you don’t have to worry.’*

And then we both went at the chorus with such passion and drama that one would have thought we were practicing for a duet performance for a live audience. *‘Cause, baby, there ain’t no mountain high enough. Ain’t no valley low enough. Ain’t no river wide enough. To keep me from getting to you, babe.’*

I launched off the couch. Ruby caught me and then swung me around to the beat of the song. We then went dancing through the penthouse, the two of us free and uninhibited. At one point of the song I was kicking my feet and thrusting my hips on top of the dining room table, all while Ruby peeked out from behind the window drapes, using the drapes like they were the curtain on a stage, and the many pictures of herself adorned on the wall were her cheering audience that she was enticing with her song and dance. The song then came to a conclusion, Ruby and I crashing on the couch at the same time.

Ruby was laughing like a child. I had never seen her so smiley. “That song brings me back every time.”

I was all blotchy from over exhilarating myself, and my breathing left shallow. “Bring you back to where?”

Her eyes became transfixed on a particular photograph on the wall. It was, of course, a photograph taken of herself. But she was much younger. She breathed, “Back when I was a child.”

“Like me?” I wondered.

“Older.” Her eyes didn’t stray from the photograph. “I was a senior in high school...barely seventeen years old...there was a boy,” she recalled with a subtle smirk. “There’s always a boy, isn’t there?” She went on, “He was gorgeous—an Italian immigrant from a small town in Sicily.” She touched her lips like she was remembering a kiss he once gave her. “He was the great love of my life.” Ruby was so much in her head that it was as though her spirit had left me alone in the living room. “At the time, he hardly spoke a word of English, but even still, I was head over heels for him. We would sneak out of school and explore New York City together. I grew up in Queens so I knew the ins and outs, but it was all new for him...it was all an adventure. We came from different worlds, he and I. He was an Italian immigrant who came from a poor family. And I...well, I had a different upbringing.” She went off into a side story, “On the outside looking in, we looked like a typical American family. My father was an accountant and my mother was a talented singer who gave up her dreams to become a stay-at-home mom for me while my drunk of a father beat her to a bloody pulp every time he went off on a bender. My greatest fear in life was to become her, weak and dependent on some pathetic man who didn’t deserve me.” She had rambled off, but came back to her original story. “Me and my beau, we were different people with different dreams. For God sake, at the time he strove to become a mechanic. Imagine me—Ruby Hart, wed to a mechanic. No,” she refused. “Not me. I wasn’t destined to become someone’s wife. I had bigger plans for myself. Much bigger plans. I had my eyes set on stardom. Entertainment was my calling. I couldn’t help it. God cast me in the role. That was one thing I was sure of.”

“What happened to him?”

Ruby rose off the couch and then crossed the living room, stopping at the photograph she had been staring at. “The last time I saw him was at a Halloween party.” She plucked the frame off the wall and then popped open the back. There was a photograph hidden in the back of the

front one. This one was old, frail, and very crinkled. She ironed it out with her hands. “We went to the party together. He looked so handsome that night. He was dressed as a Yankee’s baseball player, and I a 1920s flapper girl.” She stared at the photograph, her eyes quivering ever so slightly. “This photograph was taken of the two of us that night...that night,” she suddenly recalled, “we knew it would be the last time we would ever see each other.” She revealed the photograph. The man in the picture was just as handsome as Ruby described. He had dark wavy hair, olive skin, and a chiseled face on a lean body. His smile was very charming. I had obviously never met him, but there was a warmth about him that I felt I knew. “I wish your mother could have met him, but what was I going to do? By the time Lacie started asking questions about her father, he had already moved on. He had a wife and several daughters. His wife was even pregnant with another one. How would that have made Lacie feel? Her father had his own life. Lacie had no part in his world.” Ruby seemed to forget that I was only four years old. That or she couldn’t walk the line between what was appropriate for a child to hear and what wasn’t. “When Lacie became a teenager, that’s when she started to ask a lot of questions about her father. I did the right thing. I reached out to him. He wanted to know everything about her. I told him she was performing well in school, that she loved taking pictures and that she strove to become a photographer one day.” She stopped rambling on to get a handle on the emotions she was suddenly feeling. She located her carton of cigarettes and was smoking before I even had a chance to see her set it up. “I was sorry to hear he died in a car accident.” She looked up into a light to stop herself from shedding a tear. That seemed to do the trick. “Two days after he died a package was delivered to the door addressed to Lacie. It seems her father purchased her a camera, state of the art at the time. Must have cost him a small fortune.” She hardened her expression to keep herself from crying. “The stupid idiot. He should have driven more carefully.” She found me on the edge of the couch listening to her story. “Callum, do me a favor, won’t you, darling?”

“Okay.”

“Don’t you dare give up on love.” Her gaze fell back onto the photograph in her hands. “If you’re lucky enough to find it, grip it tightly and don’t ever let it go. Who knows if you’ll ever find it again.”

* * *

“Collin, are you okay? Collin?!” Aaron rocked me awake.

I awoke with a start. “Wh—where am I?” My gaze worked around my surroundings, the two twin beds, the nightstand wedged between them...the round wobbly table in front of the window that overlooked New York City, the eery portrait of the white rabbit above our beds...the dresser with a broken television set on top of it. I was out of the memory and back in our hotel room.

Aaron’s voice was shrouded with concern. “Collin, are you okay?”

“I’m fine.”

I got up too fast. I shot off the floor just to be met with a splitting headache. I winced, the headache now manifested into a full-blown migraine.

Aaron insisted, “You don’t look fine.”

Light was only making my migraine worse. I lunged for the antique lamp on the nightstand and then tugged on the beaded string. The room was left cast in darkness. All these memories were flashing through my mind: the hotel, the penthouse—Ruby Hart. They were working up to

something, but to what—I didn't know. I kept hearing water splashing. I spun around in search of the source, but it must have only been in my head.

Aaron worried, "Collin, you just passed out." He was starting to think the worst. "Is it your heart? Are you taking your medication? Do you need to go to the hospital?"

I squeezed my skull and focused on the pressure. "No...I'm fine."

His worrying continued. "Collin, you passed out. People don't just pass out for no reason. There might be something wr—"

The pain of the migraine, the sound of water splashing in my head, Aaron interrogating me throughout all the pain and confusion—it had reached a boiling point. "Aaron, just leave me alone!"

Surprised by my outburst, he took a step back. "What's gotten into you?"

Just then, both my cellphone and laptop went buzzing. I ignored Aaron. Too ashamed to even consider apologizing, I instead went for my electronics plugged in on the nightstand. I swept my cellphone off the countertop first. It was my dad. I answered it, "Hey, Dad." It was all crackly. "Dad?" His voice sounded distant along with being jumbled with heavy static. "Dad, can you hear me? Dad?"

Nothing.

I ended the call, and then exchanged my cellphone out for my laptop. I flipped it open and accepted the call again.

"Dad, can you hear me now?" More static, and the video call was all fuzzy.

Aaron noticed my frustration. "None of my calls are going through either. The only time I can catch my parents is when I'm outside. This hotel is like a WiFi dead zone. It feels like the longer we're here the worse it gets."

I was too frustrated to answer him, and too embarrassed for lashing out. I placed my laptop back on the nightstand. My dad had been trying to reach me for well over a week now. I was either missing his call because I was in class or when I did answer, the call would drop and I would lose him.

Aaron tried again, "Collin, are you feeling better?"

"I'm fine," I lied, the tone of my voice sharp and harsh.

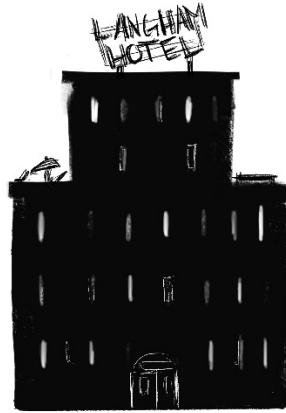
"Great. Happy to hear it," said Aaron, both serious and sarcastic at the same time. He watched me slide my feet under my quilt and then lay my head on my pillow. "Good night then."

"Night."

He shook his head, then returned back to his bed. Now tucked under his own covers, Aaron swept back up the 'Ace Without A Face' and attempted, once again, to solve the ending of Dr. Jabberwocker's riddle. I saw him glance over at me. He opened his mouth to say something, but then he stopped himself. I was too stuck on my own thoughts to worry about how I'd treated Aaron. I opened the drawer of the nightstand and retrieved my camera from inside. The camera was old and vintage. It was practically an antique. I had a new, very expensive camera in my dorm room back in London, but it wasn't nearly as special to me as this one. I always knew it belonged to my birthmother. My dad gave it to me after she died. I just never knew that her father, the man she never got the chance to meet, had bought it for her all those years ago. I never thought this camera could be more special to me, but now it was.

Aaron couldn't sleep. He was stuck on the riddle. I thought I should apologize to him for being rude, especially after he had only been worried about me, but I was so very tired. The

migraine had knocked me out physically, and those memories emotionally. I decided my apology could wait until morning.



Chapter 25

The following morning came faster than expected. I woke up feeling well rested despite the fact that my alarm clock was buzzing on and on. I was feeling refreshed and with my spirits uplifted. I reached over and fiddled with my cellphone, soon stopping the alarm from blaring on any longer. I then rose out of bed, arms up and over my head, and there I stretched, cracking my back while I yawned like a lion. By the time I lowered my arms back down, I noticed Aaron's bed was empty and made, with only Cheshire curled in a ball at the foot of it. I wondered where Aaron had gone off to, but then I assumed he was getting ready for the new day, and so I gathered I should too.

"Hey, Cheshire. Where have you been?" I gave the Maine Coon a good hard scratch under his belly, leaving him flopping on his back and purring loudly. I then went over to my duffle bag left plopped on the floor near my bed. It had been two weeks since I had checked in to the Langham Hotel, and yet I still hadn't found the time to unpack. It was because of this I had to dig around in my duffle bag for a new wrinkled outfit. Not too long after I had arrived in the restroom down the hall. I was wrong. Aaron wasn't there getting ready. I stepped into the shower, the water freezing the same as it always was. Two weeks later, I still hadn't adjusted to it. Now that my headache was gone, I was able to focus on my thoughts much better. I couldn't believe how rude I was to Aaron last night. I soaped up my body while I thought it over. He must have thought I was such a jerk. It's not like I didn't deserve it. I'm not even sure what had gotten into me. The headache, the memories—I guess it was all of it. Now I was left with guilt. I needed to apologize to Aaron first thing this morning.

I finished getting ready, and then I returned back to my hotel room. Aaron still wasn't there and now, neither was Cheshire. I guessed he was probably downstairs with the rest of our classmates, most likely first in line for the breakfast buffet. I located my backpack and slung it over my shoulder. I was just leaving the room when I stopped in the doorway. I noticed Aaron's backpack and sketchbook were left on the round wobbly table by the window. That was odd. Aaron seldom went anywhere without his sketchbook. I shook it off. I left the hotel room and bounded down the hall.

The elevator *dinged* when I arrived in the lobby. Mr. Hinkley mandated the check-in counter, greeting me in the standard way I had grown so accustomed to—always without a smile. “Good morning, Mr. Winters,” said the cheerless manager of the building with a slight bow of his head. “How was your evening?”

“Good. Thank you.” I was about to head for the buffet table when a thought crossed my mind. I approached the manager while he foraged through his heavy mound of paperwork. “Mr. Hinkley,” I caught his attention, “can I ask you something?”

“But of course, young master. Whatever can I assist you with?”

“I hope you don’t take this the wrong way, but why do you still work here?” I thought about it some more. “The hotel is under bankruptcy, right? You told me yourself that the bank is planning on auctioning it off. And it’s creepy.” I glanced around the lobby, skipping from a portrait of a dodo bird reading a book in an armchair, to one of a grizzly bear being tailored a dress by a dormouse, the mural of Alice on the ceiling, the illustrations along the walls, my gaze then finally settling on the sizzling fireplace framed by two tall gold rabbit statues. “It seems like this hotel is in its own little world.”

“I can assure you that no offense was taken.” Mr. Hinkley then began, “This hotel, doomed as it may seem, holds precious significance to me.”

“How so?”

“Never once in this building’s long, but mind you somewhat corrupt history, has it ever been managed by anyone other than a member of my immediate family. In fact, my grandfather, Mr. Bryant Donnelly, was the first manager of this hotel after its renovation from a hospital, and would remain manager under three separate ownerships. Before that, his mother was a nurse at the Langham Hospital for the Mentally Impaired. My own mother, rest her soul, immediately took over in her father’s place. She was so committed to the ideals of this building that she worked here until the day she died, at the ripe age of 83, starting her role as manager back in 1937 and finishing it off in 1975 when I proudly took over her responsibilities. I’ve worked for the Langham Hotel for nearly 42 years now. Nearly half my life, in fact. It’s not just a place of work, you see. In reality, it is my home.”

I realized, “You’ve worked here for a really long time then?”

“I have,” he confirmed.

“In that case, what do you know about Ruby Hart?”

“Ruby Hart,” he appeared taken back. “I must say, that’s a name I haven’t heard in many years.”

“Why is that?” I probed.

“Well, for starters, she resigned from her position back in 2003.” Mr. Hinkley then went on to explain, “Ruby Hart was the hotel’s entertainment. She was hired on back in 1987 by the previous owner, Castle Black Property Management, and was given the penthouse in exchange for a performance no less than five nights a week. She sang, she danced, she even did stand up comedy. Ruby became a household name. Not only did she bring in tourists from around the world, but she also had New Yorkers flocking to the Langham Hotel to watch her performances. Some might even argue, if it had not been for Ruby Hart’s resignation, the current owner wouldn’t have had to file for bankruptcy, and the Langham Hotel would still be welcoming tourists from around the world.”

I dug a little deeper, “Why did she resign?”

“It was after the incident, of course.”

“What incident?” I pressed.

“Back in 2003, Ruby’s estranged daughter and grandson came to visit her when one night, during her performance, Ruby’s daughter Lacie—”

“Gather around, everyone. Gather around.” Professor Skeffington glided out from the elevator and swept right through the lobby donned in an Ankara skirt in celebration of her African roots. “Welcome to the third week of our class field trip where we will be exploring areas of photography. Collin,” she caught me leaning against the half moon check-in counter where I was speaking to Mr. Hinkley, “come join us please as this is your area of expertise.”

My chat with Mr. Hinkley would have to wait until later. I pulled from the check-in counter and then ambled over to the waiting lounge where I joined my fellow classmates on the scarlet sofas.

Professor Skeffington dove right into the lesson she had planned for us. “This week we will be exploring the different areas of still photography—portrait, architect, wildlife, landscape, travel, and even photojournalism. There are many, many expressions of photography, but we will unfortunately only have time to study but a few. Today,” she giddied, “we will be visiting the studio of an old colleague of mine here in the city. Joan Marcus is a good friend and a remarkable talent. We will have the privilege today of not only watching a true photographer in action, but becoming the art ourselves. That’s right! Joan has so kindly offered to take our photographs.”

Charlotte squealed over Sam’s resistance, “Professor, do we have to participate? I would really rather not have my picture taken.”

“I’m afraid, participation is a must if you hope to pass this week’s lesson.”

Billy nudged Sam. “Cheer up, mate. It’ll be fun.”

“We clearly have different ideas of the word fun.”

Charlotte was already checking herself out in her compact mirror. “What was I thinking? I can’t wear this! I’ll have to change immediately.” She wiggled excitedly while she screeched, “I have the perfect skirt!”

“Kill me now.” Sam slouched back on the sofa.

Professor Skeffington suddenly realized she was down a classmate. “Where’s Aaron?”

Everyone turned to me as though I were his keeper or something. “I’m...I’m not sure.” I shrugged. “He was already gone before I woke up...I just assumed he was down here with the rest of you guys.”

Billy took a look around. “We haven’t seen the bloke all morning.”

Charlotte added, “Not since we arrived back from Coney Island last night.”

“Last night...didn’t you two go back to your hotel room?” Sam asked.

“Yeah,” I flustered, “we both went to bed, but when I woke up he was already gone.”

Billy offered an educated guess, “I bet he’s probably still upstairs in the restroom, perfecting his hair just the way he likes it, I’d say.”

“I swear that boy spends more time on his hair than even I do.” Charlotte pulled at a string of her own hair, then twirled it around in her finger. “And that’s saying an awful lot coming from me.”

I dismissed it, “He wasn’t in the restroom. I was just there.”

“It’s 2017. Just call his cellphone.” Sam took out her own cellphone to give Aaron a ring. “Never mind. It went straight to voicemail.”

Professor Skeffingotn glanced at her wristwatch. “Unfortunately, we won’t be able to wait for him. Joan is expecting us shortly. Aaron will just have to make up the lesson on another day. As for the rest of you. Our taxi van should be pulling up any moment now.”

It was a terrible school day without Aaron. It should have been a lot of fun. After all, this was the week that we focused on my major, not to mention getting to spend the whole day with a real photographer. But I didn’t enjoy myself at all. I was too worried about Aaron. I already lost count of how many times I tried calling him. Every call went straight to voicemail. I was starting to feel really awful over the way I treated him. He was just being nice and showing concern for me, and I returned his kindness by lashing out. The knots in my stomach confirmed how guilty I felt. I wish Aaron was here so I could at least apologize to him. I just wanted him to know that it had nothing to do with him. I just wasn’t feeling well last night. That’s all that was. All these new memories were just intrusive thoughts that came with a nasty headache. It was just a lot to deal with. I sure hope he wasn’t mad at me.

I was too much in my head to be having any fun at the studio, but Charlotte had enough fun for all of us. She modeled for the camera, insisting Joan Marcus shoot her in an array of different emotions so that she could use the film as headshots. Billy had fun with it too. He modeled for the camera like he were God’s gift to humanity. He strutted for the camera, then flexed his biceps; he even went as far as flipping his blonde hair while working with his best smolder. Sam, however, was uncomfortable in front of the camera. Joan asked her to take off her beanie, but she refused. She even threatened to walk off set if Joan persisted the matter any further. Sam gave it a go, took a few shots and then was through with it. I was so focused on Aaron that I hardly realized I was having my picture taken. I sort of just stood there, awkwardly twirling with the hematite stone around my neck. Joan had to loosen me up with some fresh jokes. The jokes were inappropriate and unexpected, but they made me giggle and so she got her shot. I became more comfortable, and was soon portraying the feelings she was shouting out from behind her camera. It turns out, I wasn’t half bad of a model. I only knew how to take a picture because I knew what I expected from someone I took a picture of. I was just grateful when the school day was over.

I ran straight for my hotel room the moment we returned back to the Langham Hotel. I didn’t even take the elevator. I was too antsy to wait. I took the stairs instead, charging up the stairwell until I reached the fourth floor. I was opening the door to the hallway when Cheshire bolted through the doorway and scurried down the stairs.

“What the heck?” The cat had run passed so fast that I didn’t even have the chance to catch which direction it had gone off in. Whether up the stairwell or down it—I wasn’t sure.

I followed the illustrated wallpaper through the hallway, then rounded a corner and went straight for my hotel room. I inspected the room, but it was empty. Strangely enough, Aaron’s backpack and sketchbook were still left on the table. I drew my cellphone back out of my pocket and then gave him another call. Straight to voicemail, yet again. I threw my cellphone on my bed then plopped face first into a pillow. *Where was he?* I thought, a sickening feeling bubbling in my stomach in conjunction with the question stuck in my head. I suddenly felt very tired. It was sometime late afternoon, but I still fell asleep.

* * *

“What’s going on? What’s happening on the screen? Why are they dressed in such silly clothing?”

Ruby and I sat on the couch in the penthouse living room, splitting a bowl of popcorn while we watched my favorite television show.

"They're the *Power Rangers*," I said, my stomach full of yummy food that Ruby had room service bring up to us, our picked-over plates left on the coffee table. She had ordered us both a pair of chicken breasts, each of them doused in rosemary and sprinkled with capers, served with half a slice of lemon. We were also delivered a bunch of side dishes: macaroni and cheese, potato salad, green beans, and a slice of New York cheesecake for dessert.

Ruby, glued to the screen, suddenly gasped, "What's that scary-looking thing?!"

"That's Goldar. He's a bad guy."

"Well, he doesn't look very nice." She put a kernel into her mouth while watching the scene unfold on the screen. "Ugly little thing, isn't he?"

I picked a popcorn kernel out of my hair that Ruby had spilt after becoming frightened by the show. "He might be ugly, but he's not nearly as mean as Rita Repulsa."

Ruby whispered so that she could still hear what was happening on the screen. "Who's Rita?"

"She's the main bad guy."

She took another bite of popcorn. "I do enjoy a good villainess."

The front door suddenly swung open. "What's going on in here?"

Ruby reached for the remote control and put the show on pause. "Lacie, there you are. Callum was just showing me his favorite television show. I have to admit, isn't not all that bad." She rose off the couch, then dusted popcorn off her flapper dress. "I'll have to speak to my agent first thing tomorrow morning. Lord knows I could have been cast the lead villainess."

"Mommy!" I hopped off the couch and ran into her arms. "Ruby and I had so much fun today."

"Really?" She lifted me up, our faces left nose to nose. "You did?" She didn't just sound surprised. She sounded shocked.

Not realizing how much more exhausted Mommy looked, I began to list out everything Ruby and I did that day, "We played dress up, and sang karaoke, and then we watched *Power Rangers*. I taught her all about them."

Mommy raised an eyebrow. "Is that so?"

"It was nothing, really." Ruby became instantly uncomfortable. She started to clean up the mess we left on the coffee table, collecting all the dirty dishes from all the meals we'd enjoyed together. "What was I supposed to do? You left him here. No explanation—no nothing." She was putting on a show, trying to act put out when truly I knew she enjoyed herself just as much as I had. "Lacie, the next time you decide you would like a break from motherhood, might I suggest you hire a nanny. At least they'll be paid for their time and energy." She pointed at me. "That child is a handful." She then gave me a discreet wink. Mommy didn't catch it, but I certainly did. I winked back at her just as subtly.

I then went playing with Mommy's long red hair. "We had so much fun, Mommy."

Mommy gave Ruby another look, but Ruby ignored eye contact and continued to gather up the remaining dishes. "What can I say, the boy is easily amused. He's practically a cat with a string." She sauntered off into the kitchen where she dumped the dirty dishes into the sink. "Housekeeping better pay me a visit in the morning or I'll be sure to file a complaint with Mr. Hinkley."

I kept playing with Mommy's long hair. "Ruby said I could come watch her show tonight. She even said I can help backstage!"

Ruby's face twisted. "He'll need a bath, of course. After all, the poor thing smells like something that might have crawled out of a dumpster." And then her face softened a tad. "But I did have a member of the hotel staff swing by the clothing store for an outfit for him. It's quite adorable, actually. Bow tie, little tailcoat, I'm sure Callum will look dashing in it." She swept her carton of cigarettes off the counter. "And where were you all day, Lacie?"

"Getting proof." Mommy set me back down. She then reached into her purse for an envelope of developed film, and dumped all the photographs out across the dining room table. Every photograph was taken of different parts of the hotel: the lobby, the waiting lounge, the elevator, the clubhouse, the rooftop pool, and so many more sections of the building. Each photograph depicted the same dark figure in the far background, humanoid but with no neck. "Collin," she thought of ways to distract me, "go into the other room, will you? Get the outfit your grandma got you. I want to see how handsome you look in it."

I saw Ruby flinch from the word 'grandma'. I then left the room, but stopped in the hall behind the wall. I peeked back out into the dining room to see why Mommy sent me away.

Ruby took a drag. "Lacie, what's this all about?"

Mommy pulled back her hair. Now that the excitement of seeing her was gone, I could see how very exhausted she looked. The bags under her eyes were dark and heavy, and her pupils wouldn't sit still. She looked slightly deranged, lack of sleep paired with the jitters from consuming far too much caffeine.

"Look," she stabbed one of the photographs with her finger, "right there."

Ruby was obviously annoyed, but played along even still. "What exactly am I looking at?"

She aggressively tapped on the photograph, the part that captured a dark and blurry figure. "Right there, mother. Right there."

Ruby swept up the photograph for a closer look. "Darling, I'm sorry, but I don't know what I'm supposed to be looking at."

"You don't see it?" Mommy's voice was shaky.

"See what?"

"*The Shadow Man*."

"Not this again." Ruby dropped the photograph back onto the dining room table. "Lacie, you need help." She took a puff of smoke, then continued on, "Can't you see, darling? You aren't well."

She shouted loud and unexpectedly, "I'm not crazy!"

"I'm not saying you're crazy, dear, but you are unwell. That much is clear."

Mommy's fingers crawled up into her scalp where she squeezed her skull. "You need to believe me..." her face became suddenly a shade of red, "someone needs to believe me..." she cried, her makeup running down her tired face. "There's something in this hotel...he followed me when I left...he follows me wherever I go...he's always there terrorizing me...that's him!" She screamed in an outburst so unexpected that I jumped back in the hallway. Mommy raised her index finger, her finger trembling as she pointed to the blotch of shadow in the far back of the photograph. "He's in my head." And then her hands gripped her skull again. "He keeps giving me these thoughts...horrible thoughts that I know aren't mine..." Her wild eyes found Ruby looking back at her. "Mommy," her body trembled with her words, "Mommy, I'm scared."

The look in Ruby's eyes, the look she got when watching her daughter fall mentally apart, it was a look I'd never seen on anyone before. It was concern and fear a mother felt for her daughter. "Lacie," she kept her voice strong, but there were cracks in it even still, "that's enough."

I'm calling Dr. Cromwell." She raced for the landline, plucked it up and then began to dial up Mommy's childhood psychiatrist.

Mommy rubbed her face, smearing her makeup even more. "Mother," she turned around and found Ruby on the phone waiting while it rang, "he's real...I know you don't believe me, but it's true. The shadow is real."

Ruby put down the phone and then met Mommy in the dining room where she gave her a tight squeeze, an affectionate hug only a mother could give. "I believe you, darling. I believe he's real to *you*." She pulled back to examine Mommy's tear-soaked face. "Go wash up. Get Callum ready. We'll have a marvelous night up in the clubhouse. Just the three of us. Come morning, we'll have you see Dr. Cromwell and see about getting you back on medication."

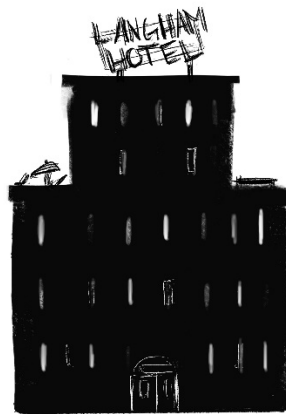
"I'm scared, mom."

"I know you are, darling, but I'm here now. You and Callum can stay here for as long as you like."

Mommy went for the restroom in the hallway. I backed away into a shadow so that she wouldn't see me when passing through. She closed the door behind her, and then I peeked back into the living room. Ruby had abandoned her cigarette to go rummaging through Mommy's leather jacket. She then fished out Mommy's cellphone and went through it. She located what she was looking for, then headed back to the landline and dialed. It rang, and then someone answered.

"Hello, William. It's Lacie's mother, Ruby—Ruby Hart."

I murmured under my breath, "Daddy?"



Chapter 26

I woke up to Cheshire hissing. I was so groggy that it took me an extra few seconds before I even knew it was Cheshire. He was staring into the open closet, straight into a patch of inky black, hairs on end while hissing into the dark. I rubbed my eyes open, then plucked up my cellphone to look at the time—12:21am.

"Cheshire?" I threw off my quilt and got myself out of bed in a wobbly stagger. "Cheshire, what is it?"

I scooped him up and cradled him like a baby, but the Maine Coon kept peeking over my shoulder, still hissing.

“Stop. You’re fine. You’re okay.” I carried him over to my bed and tucked him under the quilt with me. “Ouch!”

He sunk his teeth into my forearm, so hard I felt warm blood trickling down to my elbow. Cheshire then escaped under the sheets. He dropped to the floor with a thud, then returned to the edge of the closet where he went right back hissing into the dark.

I moaned irritably, “Cheshire, come on. Please. It’s midnight. I have to wake up in a few hours for class.” I was just about to force myself back out of bed when I noticed Aaron’s bed was still empty and made. I woke up with a jolt of panic. Aaron was still gone. I picked back up my cellphone and immediately called him. It went straight to voicemail, just like before. I realized Aaron had been gone now for over 24 hours. Something was wrong. Something was *really* wrong.

I jumped back out of bed, grabbed my coat, and then fled right past Cheshire hissing into the closet. I knew it was late, but I had to tell Professor Skeffington that Aaron was still missing. She had to know. It had been too long. I was freaking myself out the more I thought about it. I left the hotel room and began through the subdued hallway. I could feel the ache in my chest, the tightening in my throat—shallow breathing. I was riding the elevator up one floor when I took a second to practice the technique Aaron had taught me. Breath in—1...2...3...and then out—1...2...3...I repeated the steps until the elevator doors opened again. I hurried into the hallway. I knew Professor Skeffington was staying in room 515. She told us all in case of an emergency. This seemed as much of an emergency as any I could think of.

I located her hotel room soon after. The black door was wedged between two portraits. One depicted an orangutan preparing herself for bed in a sheer nightie, the other portrait was of a penguin dressed as a military general, the herd of walruses was the army the penguin was preparing for battle. I threw myself onto the door and started pounding away. “Professor—Professor, wake up! Wake up!” I drummed on the door until she finally answered.

She opened the door in a long robe and satin bonnet. “Collin,” her mind worked slower as she was still waking up, “Collin, what’s this all about? Is everything alright?”

I answered, short of breath, “Professor,” the concern in my voice was notable, “Aaron’s still missing.”

“Missing?” she echoed, her sleepy mind working overtime just to get to grip with the thought. “Aaron hasn’t returned to the hotel?”

The panic was so great I was nearly in tears from it. “I haven’t seen Aaron in over 24 hours. He’s not answering his cellphone. Professor, I’m scared something could have happened to him.” My throat tightened, my airway constricting. “I...I can’t—I can’t breathe.” I backed into a portrait of a lion in a tailored suit, then slid down the wall until my bottom hit the hallway floor.

“Collin,” Professor Skeffington immediately charged after me. She crouched down and put her hands on my trembling knees, “look into my eyes. Hold onto my voice.”

It was like the air was sucked right out of my lungs, and there was now a block from any air coming back through. My whole body stiffened, my chest heaving—my hands shaking so hard they were practically convulsing.

“Breathe in from your nose.” And then she did it with me, “1...2...3... and then out, 1...2...3...again.” And then she repeated it over while I followed along. “Breathe in, 1...2...3...and now out 1...2...3...”

I could feel my lungs opening up more and more after performing the technique. Oxygen was harsh on my chest, but I could breathe again.

Professor Skeffington asked me, "Are you feeling any better?"

Not being able to breathe was strenuous on my whole body. It was exhausting, and my lungs were still sore. And so I only nodded.

"Good." She assisted me back to my feet. "Collin, I need your help right now. Please go and get your classmates out of bed. I want everyone together. You can all wait for me down in the lobby."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm calling the police."

The police, I thought. This was bad. This was really bad.

I left Professor Skeffington to make her phone call, and headed back down to the fourth floor. My body was on autopilot. I don't remember walking the hallway or riding the elevator. My feet just seemed to move without me. Before I knew it, I was banging on Billy's door. He answered in nothing but his briefs, scratching his tushy without any decency at all. I told him about Aaron, how he was still missing, and what Professor Skeffington had instructed me to do. I left Billy to get decent, and then I headed straight for the girl's room and immediately filled them in. Charlotte had an eye-mask slapped across her forehead, and Sam was relaxed in a man's shirt that was three times too big on her. They were equally exhausted with sleepy eyes fighting to stay open, but the breaking news of Aaron still missing woke them up faster than a few shots of espresso ever could. Not too long after, we were all gathered downstairs in the waiting lounge.

"This is madness, I tell you. Just madness." Billy soaked a biscuit into his tea and then took a hefty bite out of it. "Aaron's probably at a bar picking up a nice handsome young gent. There's nothing to worry about. I'm sure he's having the time of his life."

My glare found Billy through the hot steam rising from my cup of tea. "Aaron wouldn't do that."

"Collin's right," Sam agreed, and then she subtly glanced over to me, and in her eyes I could see that she knew something that even I was still unsure of. "Aaron wouldn't do something like that," she made sure to stress to me alone.

Charlotte ripped off the lid of a cookie tin packed with Danish butter biscuits. "Where could Aaron possibly be?" She snatched a cookie and stuffed it into her mouth. "I mean honestly. He couldn't have just vanished out of thin air." She took another cookie and shoved it into her mouth. "He's probably playing some cruel prank on us. Wants to get us all worked up before he makes his big reveal." She was still chewing on a butter cookie when she selected another. "Would you just look at me. Aaron's got me stress eating."

Sam dismissed it, "Do you honestly think Aaron would do something like that? There's no way! Something had to have happened to him."

I felt my skin crawling from all the different outcomes swirling around in my brain. I asked the group, "Do you think he's hurt somewhere?"

Charlotte was working on yet another Danish butter cookie. "Surely he's smart enough to call for help."

Billy guessed, "Perhaps his cellphone is dead."

I added, "I got his voicemail every time I tried to call him."

Charlotte howled over to the front desk with a mouthful of cookie crumbs, "Did you hear that, Mr. Hinkley? The reception here is poor. You might want to upgrade your WiFi services."

Mr. Hinkley ignored her as he was busy on the landline. He had been on the phone with the police department for some time now. It seems the officers were having a bit of trouble finding the hotel.

Billy slurped down his tea loudly. "I'll tell you this, Aaron better have one heck of an alibi. We've all lost sleep worrying about him. For his sake, he better have been kidnapped, arrested, or laying in the hospital with a broken bone."

Sam squinted at him. "Do you ever hear yourself speak?"

Professor Skeffington came back in from outside. It was still dark out and so it was understandably chilly. She had borrowed a bellhop jacket just to keep warm while pacing the roundabout drive amidst the cold night air.

She asked Mr. Hinkley, "Any word from the police?"

Mr. Hinkley had just ended the phone call. "I just got off the phone with the police department. It seems the officers they dispatched can't locate the building." He worked around the check-in counter and met Professor Skeffington underneath the crystal chandelier. "The officers have been out there wandering around for nearly two hours now, but no luck finding us, I'm afraid."

"They can't locate the hotel after two hours?" Professor Skeffington seemed confused by that. "Did you tell them that we're just across the street from Central Park?"

"To be fair, the park is quite large."

She persisted, "The address? You gave the officers the hotel's address, didn't you?"

"Yes, of course," he assured.

"What about the crossing streets?"

"I informed them of that as well." Mr. Hinkley's expression remained stone-chiseled. "Due to the circumstances, I was able to file a missing person's report over the telephone."

A missing person's report. My stomach twisted at the thought of it. This was becoming too real. Aaron was really missing.

"Thank you, Mr. Hinkley." Professor Skeffington then approached us in the waiting lounge. "I have news." She then brought to our attention, "I was just outside on the phone with the headmaster. He is now aware that Aaron is missing, and because of it, he is requesting that we end the trip immediately." She took a deep breath, knowing this would upset us. She then finished, "We are to pack our bags, head straight for the airport, and board the first flight back to London."

I leapt right out of my armchair. "Are you kidding me?! You want us to leave now—without Aaron?"

Professor Skeffington countered, "Collin, I'm afraid we don't have a choice in the matter. These orders come straight from the headmaster himself."

"No way!" I stubbornly refused. "I'm not going anywhere without Aaron."

Charlotte took my side. "Honestly Professor, how can we even think of leaving without first finding Aaron?"

Even Billy agreed. "Yeah, Professor. What if Aaron shows up and we're not even here? The poor bloke. He'd be so heartbroken to learn we left without him."

"It's not right," Sam added.

Professor Skeffington shot us all down, "I'm afraid this matter isn't up for discussion. We don't know what's happened to Aaron, and because of it, the headmaster wants to ensure the safety of everyone else."

I planted myself right back in my armchair. “Well, I’m not going. And you can’t make me either.”

Professor Skeffington didn’t seem to care for my attitude. “In that case, Mr. Winters, if you wish to stay here, and so bluntly disregard my authority, you will no longer be a student at the Art Institution in London.” I opened my mouth, but she was quick to add, “As your chaperone,” she made a point of speaking louder and more aggressively, “I’m ordering you all one last time to head back up to your hotel rooms, gather up your belongings, and join me at the airport where we’ll be taking the next flight back to London.” Her eyes swept across the group of us. “Anyone who refuses can find their own flight back home. And by home, I most certainly don’t mean school. Have I made myself clear?”

“Yes, Professor,” said Billy, Charlotte, and Sam in the same disheartened voice.

Professor Skeffington then narrowed her eyes on me, in my armchair, arms folded across my chest while refusing to look at her. “Mr. Winters, I’ll ask you not to make me repeat myself.”

“I understand,” I spat through gritted teeth.

“Perfect.” She peered down at her wristwatch. “You have ten minutes to gather up all your belongings. If you aren’t back here by then, I’ll be left to assume you wish to be expelled.”

There was no arguing with that. Professor Skeffington had made herself abundantly clear. And so not me, or any of my fellow classmates, uttered a single word back to our teacher. We just picked ourselves up and took the elevator back up to the fourth floor where we all separated and headed off to our hotel rooms.

I returned to my room with the burden of defeat heavy on my shoulders. I stood in the doorway, my feet rooted, unable to get myself to cross the threshold. I used to hate this room, and now I didn’t want to leave it. The matching twin beds, the ugly carpet, the tattered drapes, and even the moldy blankets—all these things, silly as they were, I had grown so accustomed to. Before I knew it, memories of my time spent here filtered across my mind. I could see myself in my bed back on my very first night, hiding beneath a blanket, Aaron creeping through the shadows then springing out and screaming, ‘*boo*’. The vision then changed, altering before my very own eyes into an entirely different moment in time. Now I could see Aaron and myself, in our own beds, eating Bertie Bott’s Beans while laughing through the night. And then it changed again. This time I could see us cuddled on Aaron’s bed, watching his favorite movies on his tablet. I realized that it wasn’t the hotel room I had grown so fond of—it was Aaron. And now he was gone, just like Adam before him, and once again I was all alone, the same as I was when I first checked-in to the Langham Hotel.

I walked into the room, stuck on autopilot while I gathered up all my belongings. I located my duffle bag, then crammed a bunch of dirty clothes inside. It might sound strange, but somehow, I could still sense Aaron near me. It was almost as though he had never left. In fact, I could still smell his earthy cologne—I chuckled silently—along with the tropical scent of his hairspray. It was almost as though he were still here, but I knew my mind was only playing tricks on me. I gathered up a second heap of clothes and then deposited them all into my duffle bag.

“Mr. Winters,” I spun around and found Mr. Hinkley approaching the open door, “I’ve come to collect your roommate’s possessions.”

My face fell. “Oh. Alright...sure.”

I packed up Aaron’s belongings, stopping at the closet in which all his shirts were hanging. There I could smell his earthy scent even stronger. I grabbed a handful and then packed them all

neatly into his luggage. And while I did so, it felt as though a knife had plunged straight through my heart.

Mr. Hinkley seemed to notice my pain. “I can assure you, Mr. Winters, that I’ll make certain that your roommate’s possessions are looked closely after. And should...I mean to say, *when* he returns, I’ll be sure to deliver his possessions back to him.”

“Thank you, Mr. Hinkley.” I gathered up all that was left of Aaron’s belongings. That is, everything but his sketchbook. At that moment, I just couldn’t seem to part with it. And then I handed Aaron’s duffle bag over to the hotel manager.

“Under different circumstances, Mr. Winters, I should think you would have enjoyed your stay with us.” Mr. Hinkley’s gaze wandered off into the suite, sweeping through the room and then to the wall where he gently touched the wallpaper with his white-gloved hand. “It’s a very special building, unique in so many ways.” His eyes found me again. “They don’t make them like this anymore. Not really.” And then he touched the wallpaper again, and seemed to have been swept away into the story the illustrations told. “You might even say that the Langham Hotel is a *looking-glass* into a different time...a forgotten world, perhaps.”

“Yeah...I guess.” Mr. Hinkley seemed very attached to the building. The thought that he was going to soon lose it left me feeling sort of bad for him. “I’m sorry it’s under bankruptcy. Hopefully someone buys it and fixes it up.”

“Even if that were true, it wouldn’t matter. I’m afraid the Langham has lived its prime and has now seen its day. It will never be what it once was. But perhaps that’s for the best.”

“What do you mean?”

“Too much bad energy.” The confused look on my face had him explaining further, “Everything is made up of energy. You, myself—our souls. We are but a single note in a ballad, a key in an instrument, all tuned into different frequencies. Objects and buildings are no different. They too are made up of energy. The Langham Hotel included. Too much pain was inflicted within these walls, I’m afraid.”

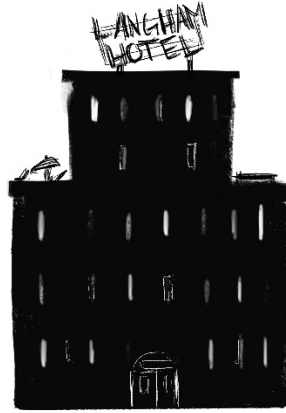
“I’m sorry. I don’t quite understand.”

“Energy can never be destroyed. Not really. The pain and torment inflicted by Dr. Edgar Jabberwocker exists to this very day, haunted within the walls of his building. The energy can’t be destroyed. Not ever. In that case, perhaps it best to be left alone.”

I still didn’t understand what he was getting at. Not fully, anyway. But I didn’t want to press any further. I was sure only a headache would come from it.

“Have a good day, Mr. Winters.” Mr. Hinkley bowed his head, then took Aaron’s duffle bag and headed off down the hallway.

Now that Mr. Hinkley was gone, and Aaron’s belongings now cleared out from the hotel room, I headed back to collect all that was left of my things. I soon finished packing. I zipped my duffle bag closed, slung it over my shoulder, then my backpack, and before I knew it, I was ready to leave. I stepped out into the hall, but stopped to look into the hotel room for one last time. I wanted to remember the hotel room, so I picked up my camera, the strap slung around my neck, and then I snapped a photograph. I hit a switch, and all the lights went out.



Chapter 27

The airport was very bright and loud, with many people bustling about, hitting shops, stopping for coffee, and rushing for their flight before it left without them. It was all just noise to me, but in my mind it was deafly quiet. I just couldn't stop thinking about Aaron. *What did I miss?* I massaged my forehead. He must have left when I was in the room. How could I have slept through that? *Did he leave?* He must have. *But where did he go?* Maybe he left the hotel because he was hungry, and then he got turned around and couldn't find his way back. Or maybe he went exploring the hotel when he tripped and broke his ankle, now lying somewhere waiting for someone to come rescue him. Maybe he got mugged, or kidnapped, or maybe he did meet some guy at a bar, just like Billy had suggested, and now the two of them were going to run off and live happily ever after together.

Billy finally joined all of us over on the plastic chairs in our terminal, carrying a greasy bag of fast food. "The only place open this early is McDonalds." He reached into his bag and retrieved a burger wrapped in a yellow jacket. "But they got the McRib back, so I guess all is right in the world again."

Charlotte judged him, "Honestly Billy, our friend has gone missing and you're eating McDonalds. Would it kill you to be a tad more sensitive?"

Billy reached back into his bag and claimed a handful of french fries. "Have some. It'll cheer you up."

"God no," she refused. "I can smell the calories just fine from here."

Sam grabbed a french fry, and was in the middle of stuffing it into her mouth when she noticed Charlotte and myself staring her down. "What? I'm hungry. Starving ourselves isn't going to bring Aaron back any sooner. And besides, we have a six hour flight ahead of us, and airplane food sucks."

"Take one." Billy tossed her a burger. "I got a few extra just in case I got hungry on the flight."

All of this was way too normal for me. Aaron was missing, and here everyone was acting like everything was all fine and dandy. But it wasn't. Our friend was gone, and we didn't know where he was, and we were all leaving him behind. Billy munched on his burger while Sam went diving into her book, leaving Charlotte back on her cellphone now tagging us all at Newark Airport. It was like everyone forgot about Aaron or no longer even cared. The longer I sat there

listening to Billy chew, Sam licking her finger to turn to another page, Charlotte typing, the more and more my heart rate quickened. My palms were sweating, my chest was heaving, and then my breathing started to labor.

I got myself up. "I'm going to run to the restroom real quick."

I began to wander through the airport, amongst a mixture of families, tourists and business people all dressed in sharp attire, all of them rushing around me. I massaged my face while avoiding the crowd, heart pinching, chest heaving. This was such an awful feeling. I didn't know where Aaron was; he might be hurt, he might be scared, and there was nothing I could do to help him. There was a scream building inside of me, but there was nothing I could do to release it. I went into the restroom, right up to the sink, and there I turned on the faucet. I waited for it to run cold, but it was apparently broken. Only hot water streamed out. I went at it anyway, splashing myself in the face with the warm water. Then again, and again, but then I stopped to cry. I grabbed the counter, head dropping, tears flowing, during which the faucet poured on and on. The water was steaming at this point. I could feel the moisture in the air. I lifted my face, a mirror mounted before me, the glass unseen as it was covered in a thick layer of haze. It was so cloudy that I couldn't even make out my own reflection. That is, not completely. I could see movement behind the mist, within the glass. Then suddenly letters began to mysteriously appear tracing out within the steam. B...O...O.

Boo.

I squinted at the word written upon the glass. "Aaron?"

I lifted my hand, ever so slowly, then pressed my palm against the warm glass, thereafter sweeping it down and wiping the steam away. I faced my reflection, my eyes squinting like I was trying to figure out who it was I was looking at.

"Aaron...?" I repeated. "Aaron, is that you?"

My heart stopped, and then it started with a jolt. I bounded straight out of the restroom. I rushed into the crowd where I knocked into a woman collecting her children like a mother hen, then bumped into a businessman and spilt half his coffee all over his expensive-looking suit, then leapt over a luggage cart before finally reaching my classmates back in the waiting area of our terminal. Charlotte was fixing her makeup with the help of her compact mirror. Billy was vigorously playing with his Nintendo Switch. Sam was quietly reading her book.

"You guys," I choked, grabbing one of the plastic chairs and then using it to support my weight. "Mirror...Aaron..." I stopped to catch my breath, "...mirror!"

"Collin, is everything alright?" Charlotte worried.

"Yeah, mate. You look like you've seen a ghost," Billy observed.

"What's gotten into you?" added Sam.

"Aaron's in the mirror," I finally revealed with a shaky breath. "I saw him. I mean...that is...I saw my reflection. He spelt out 'boo'." They exchanged a curious look, then all together shifted their attention back over to me. I knew they were all thinking the same thing—that I was crazy. "You have to believe me! Only Aaron would have written *boo* on the mirror. He was trying to tell me something. He was trying to tell me he's still back at the Langham Hotel."

"*Boo?*" Charlotte questioned, then turned to the others once again. "Perhaps he did see a ghost."

"It's Aaron," I insisted. "I know it's him."

Sam was quick to shoot me down. “Collin, listen to yourself. Aaron isn’t in a *mirror*. You’re tired. We all are.” She glanced at the screen on her cellphone. “It’s already two o’clock in the morning and none of us have slept for more than two hours. You’re probably seeing things.”

I went off in a spluttering tantrum that I hardly understood myself. “I don’t know how he did it...it doesn’t make sense...none of it makes any sense...but I know Aaron is back at the hotel...” And then it hit me like a ton of bricks. “...he solved the riddle.” My eyes widened the more I remembered. “The last time I saw Aaron, he was in bed with the playing card, trying to crack the last part of Dr. Jabberwocker’s riddle. By the time I woke up, he was gone. Oh my God—Aaron solved Dr. Jabberwocker’s riddle...he did it!”

Sam stomped the brakes on my excitement. “Collin, you’re making no sense.”

“None in the slightest.” Billy put down his Nintendo Switch in exchange for another cheeseburger.

Sam made sure to speak over him. “Solving Dr. Jabberwocker’s riddle only leads to a secret exit out of the Langham Hotel. If Aaron had solved the riddle, he would have left the hotel. Simple as that. He could have called us or come right back to the hotel and bragged that he was the one to solve it.”

Charlotte chimed in while working on her eyeliner, “I’m sure he wouldn’t have missed the opportunity for that.”

“I’m telling you guys—Aaron wrote me that message on the mirror. I don’t know how he did it, but I’m sure he did. It’s that hotel...it’s that riddle...it’s all connected.” Every part of me was tingling, from my toes to my skull. I felt just about ready to explode from it all. “We’ve got to get back to the hotel. Now!”

Sam pressed, “Collin, are you sure?”

“Aaron needs us. I know he does. Come on!”

Professor Skeffington then appeared rolling her luggage toward us. She didn’t have much time to get herself presentable for the day, but still managed to sport a fashionable kente print jacket dress. “The plane is boarding. If you want coffee or food, I would suggest you do it now.”

“I’m sorry, Professor,” I came right up to her, “but I have to get back to the hotel. Expel me, I don’t care.” I grabbed my backpack and duffle bag, and was just about to walk off when I heard Sam behind me, addressing our teacher.

“Aaron’s our friend, and we’re not leaving without him.” And then she joined me.

Charlotte sprung to her feet next, collecting her purse and all of her many luggage bags—a hatbox included amongst the mix. “Professor, you wanted us all to be friends. It might have taken a few days, but we are. I’m sorry to say, we won’t be leaving one of us behind. Expel us if you must, but be certain I will be following up with a review of the school on all of my social media channels to ensure my subscribers are fully aware of how wrongly we were treated all because we wanted to see the safe return of one of our dearest friends.” And then she threw up her nose, and with all her luggage bags wedged between her arms, waddled over to us, dropping her hatbox twice on the way over.

We all turned to Billy, sitting there with a cheeseburger halfway inside his mouth. “Oh, alright then. I guess I’m coming along too.” He put down his burger, then swapped it out for his duffle bag. He approached our teacher looking very timid. “If you’re going to expel us, can you just not tell my mum? She’ll have my head if she finds out about this.”

“Billy!” Charlotte screeched.

“Fine, go ahead and tell her. I’ll probably be dead soon enough, I’m sure.” And then he joined us.

We didn’t wait to hear what our teacher had to say. We just headed through the airport in the opposite direction, rushing to find our friend.

Even at this late hour, the airport was filled with a sea of many people, all bustling about as they headed to their destination. Some of them were catching a flight, others just landed and were greeted by families and friends who were all waiting for them with smiles and tears. We pushed our way through the crowd, lost in the maze that was this airport. The long corridor we hurried through had many twists and turns and none of us knew our way around, but we followed the signs marked ‘Baggage Claim’, and eventually we found our way back to the street. I went right to the curb with my thumb out, shouting for a taxicab. None of them stopped. Some zoomed by, splashing us all while racing through puddles, while others picked up passengers waiting for a ride on either side of us. We just couldn’t catch a break. That is, not until one particular taxi spotted us huddled together from up the road. Its headlights were weak, one just flickered, and even from here we could hear how the engine coughed and wheezed like a person who was choking, leaving black smoke trailing behind it as it started toward us. The cab swung into the lane closest to us, wedging itself between cars, causing the one behind it to stomp on its brakes and honk aggressively. It then pulled up, right onto the curb. The passenger window rolled down, and I couldn’t believe who the driver was.

“Pasquale?!” I laughed.

“Hey, kid,” said the fat Italian man with a cigar stuck between his teeth. “Yous lookin’ for a ride, or wat?”

“That would be great.” I swung open the door on the passenger side, then ducked in, leaving my duffle bag on my lap once I situated myself comfortably enough inside. Billy, Charlotte, and Sam filed into the backseat, scooting over for each other until they were squished shoulder to shoulder.

Charlotte examined her seatbelt. She discovered it was missing a buckle. “My seatbelt is broken.”

“At least you have one,” Billy mentioned after noticing that he was without.

“Mine’s covered in duct tape,” Sam said with a nervous gulp.

Pasquale glanced over his shoulder, the moist end of his cigar hanging off his plump bottom lip. He noticed the three of them crammed in the backseat with all their luggage piled on top of them. “Don’t yous worries. If we gets into an accident, Ol’ Bertha would most likely explode. And so it’s best yous be thrown from da car.”

“Is that supposed to reassure us?” Charlotte screeched.

Pasquale turned and faced forward. “So, kid,” he addressed me, “where we headed?”

I braced myself, one hand on the ceiling, the other wrapped around my duffle bag. “The Langham Hotel,” I winced, knowing all too well how this ride would go.

“Da Langham Hotel, huh?” He put the cab into gear. “Wat we waitin’ for den? Let’s go!” He stomped onto the gas pedal, and instantly we went flying through the street, each of us stuck to our sits as the cab went rushing through the terminals like it were taking off on a roadway.

“Pasquale!” I shouted, noticing a woman crossing the street while pushing a stroller with a Siamese cat inside. “Look out!” But he didn’t stop, nor did he even consider slowing down. Instead he pushed his foot harder onto the gas pedal, leaving us speeding right through the crosswalk. The woman jumped back, screaming.

I kept my eyes tightly closed for a great majority of the ride, not seeing what was happening, not knowing where we were headed, but feeling my stomach drop every few seconds or so. A couple of times Charlotte screamed, and she clung to Sam who only shouted at her to let go. Billy hugged my seat, his hands digging into the duct tape infested cushion, and I swear sometimes I could have sworn I heard him whimpering. This only seemed to amuse Pasquale, and it left him speeding even faster. By the time I mustered up enough courage to peel my eyes open, we were racing along the Verrazzano-Narrows Bridge; the stone bridge was lit up in the dark of night. Pasquale changed lanes, zipping in and out of traffic. I glanced out of my window, peering down, gulping after noticing the great distance we were to the ocean below us. But then we pulled back into another lane, and Ol' Bertha went accelerating forward. Soon the bridge was nothing more than a memory behind us now that we were back in the bustling city amongst the cluster of colossal skyscrapers that surrounded us at every sharp turn we took.

"So, kid," Pasquale took a puff of his cigar, and then glanced over to me, chuckling when he noticed me bracing myself with my hands on the dashboard, "Wat brings yous back to da city already?" We were headed straight for a building, but then Pasquale yanked his steering wheel all the way to the right, not slowing down, but speeding up, leaving the taxi to swing quickly into a new avenue.

My face smacked into my window, and then I collected myself. "We're trying to find our friend," I answered, eyes glued to the road unlike our driver.

"Lookin' for a friend, huh?" He nudged me with his shoulder and then cracked a broad grin. "Maybe dat good lookin' guy I sees yous wit da other day?"

"Yeah. That's him." We cut another corner when I closed my eyes again, the whole taxi jostling about after hitting something on the road. "Pasquale, what was that?"

"Come on. Open yous eyes. It was just a trashcan."

I popped one eye open, slowly and with great effort, finding a crumpled newspaper, a tattered shirt, a bag of trash, and a rotten banana peel stuck to Ol' Bertha's windshield. Pasquale put on the wipers and brushed the garbage off. There was then a loud *bang*, and I turned to find a trashcan hitting the street, stopping the traffic behind us.

"Is this driver's license even legit?" Sam inquired, regarding Pasquale's New York identification posted on the back of his seat.

Charlotte's face turned a shade of pea-green. "I think I'm going to be sick."

"Not before me." Billy gagged with his head tucked between his legs.

"We're just gettin' started." Pasquale put the taxi into third gear. "Come on, old girl," he rubbed the dashboard in a loving sort of way, "show dem wat yous got—Ha-ha!" And then he stomped on the pedal once again, the back wheels screeching, leaving Ol' Bertha with a new burst of life that had us blasting out from a cloud of black smog, leaving us all with the scent of burning rubber as she went soaring down the boulevard. During which we all screamed.

My eyes remained on the road—someone's had to—but in the corner of my eye I could see the way Pasquale was glancing at me, almost as though he were studying me.

I asked him, "What is it?"

"Somethin' different 'bout yous," he finally remarked. "Yous ain't da same kid yous were back wen I first picked yous up from da airport, are yous?"

Billy, Charlotte, and Sam were too busy fearing for their lives, bumping heads while rocking in the backseat, that none of them paid any mind to the conversation we were having up in the front seat of the cab.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Back wen I first met yous, yous always had dat sad look in yous eyes, but it’s gone now. Yous look brighter, more confident...more stronger.” He then came to the conclusion, “Yous on da cusp, ain’t yous?”

“The cusp of what?” I wondered, finally pulling my attention from the road and now over to the driver.

He revealed, almost proudly, “Yous almost a man.”

I laughed it off. “Pasquale, I’m eighteen years old. I’m already a man.”

“Yous think da moment it strikes midnight on yous eighteenth birthday yous become a man? Get out of here! It doesn’t work like dat. Becomin’ a man isn’t ‘bout an age. It’s ‘bout wat’s in here.” He poked me in the chest. “I can sees it. It’s always in da eyes.” He pulled his cigar out of his mouth to say, “Yous almost dere.”

There was no time to think that over. A stray dog had wandered into the street, and Ol’ Bertha’s weak headlights shone right onto the timid creature, revealing its wide, petrified eyes.

“Holy shit!” Pasquale yanked the steering-wheel, and once again the cab mounted the curb, and there Ol’ Bertha went racing along the sidewalk. She hit a newspaper stand, then scraped her side along a tall brick building, then cannoned through a mound of garbage bags that all went exploding before our very eyes. The cab pulled back onto the street. There we went, faster and faster, until finally we pulled into a dark, secluded alley. At the end of it was a tall iron-cast gate, and it automatically opened up for us. We drove up onto the property, passing the topiary, pulling through the roundabout driveway until Ol’ Bertha screeched to a halt in front of the tall jet-black hotel with gleaming gold trim.

We were back.

Billy popped open the backseat door. He stumbled out, quickly throwing his face into a planter where a shrub was rooted, trimmed to resemble a running rabbit with a pocket-watch in its hand. Charlotte came out next shaking, using the door to help support her weight. She looked dazed, and her legs were just as wobbly as anyone who had spent weeks out at sea. Sam followed her, scooting out. Just when she rose to her feet, she fell right to the asphalt.

“Thanks for the ride, Pasquale.” I reached into my pocket for some money, but he stopped me.

“Dis one’s on me.”

“Thanks.” I opened the door, but Pasquale stopped me before I got out.

“Be careful, kid.” His tone was more serious than it normally was. “Dat spark in yous eyes, da one I sees in yous now, its yous way to defeat him...its yous way to find yous friend.” He stressed his following words, “Da stronger da mind, da weaker da foe. Sometimes all its takes is internal *reflection*.”

“Internal...reflection?” I asked him.

“Don’t doubt youself. Clear yous mind. Hold on to wat yous love da most. He can only hurt dose wit weakened minds.”

I asked him, “Pasquale, who can only hurt those with weakened minds?”

He didn’t answer, which left me more suspicious than ever. I looked back at Pasquale, his plump face, his kind eyes, his curly hair smushed down by his worn Yankee’s baseball cap. I realized this city was big—very big. There were millions of people in New York City, and yet I couldn’t stop running into the same taxi driver. He picked me up from the airport after I first

landed in LaGuardia Airport as my taxi driver, then the owner of a hot dog stand, a waiter at the Italian restaurant after that, and then again and again as my taxi driver.

I felt my suspicions increasing to a boiling point. "Pasquale, who are you?"

"A friend," he took his cigar out of his mouth, "one dat's been lookin' after yous for a very long time now. I came to yous because I knew yous needed a friend, wen yous didn't want one, but wen yous needed one most." He glanced over my shoulder and through my open door, then gestured to my classmates all waiting for me outside in front of the Langham Hotel. They were all still recovering from the wild taxi ride. "By da looks of it, yous won't be needin' me much longer."

Sam called for me while Charlotte helped her back on her feet. "Collin, come on. We got to go."

"Yes, Collin, do get out of that death cab before it's too late!" Charlotte added with a screech.

"Collin," Billy shouted with his hands cupped around his mouth, "could you be a good lad and check to see if I left a Twinkie in the backseat?" He then pulled his pockets inside out. "I can't find it anywhere."

I didn't move, I just held my eyes with the taxi driver, not fully comprehending who he really was, and yet feeling as though I knew everything there was about him.

"Go on," Pasquale urged me. "Save yous friend." He poked me in the chest. "But wen yous find him, let yous heart love again."

I finally got myself out of the taxicab, more confused than ever before. Ol' Bertha started up, engine bursting to life with a smoggy cough. Pasquale gave a tap on the horn as he drove off, but he didn't get far at all before Ol' Bertha vanished straight into thin air. I rubbed my eyes and then looked again. Pasquale and his taxi were gone. They seemed to have been swallowed up right into the encompassing haze.

"Collin, come on!" Sam opened the hotel's glass front door with Billy and Charlotte following her inside. I shook off my daze, and then hurried after my friends.

It was the dead of night by the time we arrived back at the Langham Hotel. The lobby was empty and dark, with no sign of Mr. Hinkley or any other member of the staff, and the only source of light was provided to us by the moonlight filtering through the glass front door. We unloaded our luggage in the waiting lounge, and then we all gathered together in front of the fireplace.

"What do we do now?" Billy wondered.

Sam gave a suggestion, "If Aaron really did solve Dr. Jabberwocker's riddle, then maybe solving it ourselves would lead us to where he is."

Charlotte inquired, "In that case, where's the playing card we found in the billiard room?"

"Aaron has it, but we don't need it." I paced back and forth through the lobby while tapping my chin, recollecting the last part of the riddle. "*Hold onto your top hats, your knickers, your soul, just like Wonderland, you can find me down a rabbit-hole.*"

"Not this again." Billy threw himself onto the scarlet sofa. "Like I said before, we aren't going to find a rabbit-hole in a hotel in the middle of New York City. It doesn't make any sense."

Charlotte flustered, "None of this makes sense!"

Sam had a difficult time thinking over Charlotte's obnoxiously loud whining. "Calm down. We aren't going to get anywhere if we keep getting frustrated."

She retorted, “Calm down? How do you expect me to calm down? It’s nearly three o’clock in the morning and we’re right back where we started, stuck in this God forsaken hotel trying to solve a nonsensical riddle written by a mad man.”

“I think I might be the one who’s mad.”

We all turned to Billy on the scarlet sofa, face buried in his hands.

He moaned into his palms, “We just got ourselves expelled from the Art Institution. Do you know how bloody hard I worked to get into that school? Now I’ll never become a movie director. Professor Skeffington will probably have us blacklisted throughout the industry. Now what will become of me? I’ll probably spend my life flipping burgers at some takeaway joint.”

This sparked Charlotte into a paranoid frenzy. “I’ll never become an actress now. What producer will cast me after all this? It won’t matter if I’m perfect for the part. The casting director will think I’m just another Hollywood diva too difficult to work with, so why even bother with her? Now that I’ve gotten myself expelled, I’ll have to move back home with my dad. He’ll make me,” she touched her lips, “he’ll make me pay rent.” Her face scrunched up at the idea of it. “Now I’ll be forced to work at some cheap clothing store as the store manager.”

“What have I done?” Billy spoke over Charlotte’s whiny complaints. “My mum was so happy to get rid of me. I never saw her so proud. Not until the day I left for the Art Institution. She already turned my bedroom into a sewing room. I’ll have to live in her basement until the day I die.”

“You?” Sam spluttered, “What about me? At least you have a home to go back to. You think my foster parents are going to take me back now that I’m 18 years old? No way! I’ll have to go straight to some temp agency. I’ll start off with data entry, then before I know it, ten years have gone by and I’m still wasting away at the same office job only getting excited on Fridays because it’s casual dress day.”

I attempted to pump the brakes on their pity party. “You guys—focus,” my voice rang through the desolate hotel lobby, my words resounding all the way up to the mural painted on the ceiling. “We aren’t going to find Aaron if we’re all self-loathing.”

Billy jumped off the sofa. “It’s no use, mate. We aren’t going to find Aaron. The bloke’s gone! He’s either dead in some ditch or laughing at us from some beach in Barbados.”

“Billy!” Charlotte reprimanded.

Just the thought of Aaron hurt knocked the wind out of me.

Billy went pacing through the waiting lounge in outrage, his steps repeating back and forth in front of the fireplace. “What good would solving this riddle do? Honestly! Just think about it for a second. Dr. Jabberwocker designed the riddle for the patients of his hospital. It was a cruel ploy to prove their sanity. Solving the riddle would lead to their freedom. Nothing more. If Aaron was witty enough to solve it, he would be somewhere out of the hotel and yet, we came right back here to solve it. How does that make any sense? It doesn’t. It’s nonsense!” He went to a sparse wall beside one of the two erected rabbit statues that bordered either side of the fireplace and threw his back against it. “I’ll tell you, the whole thing is utter nonsense!” He thrust his head backwards, the back of his skull striking the wall hard—*CRACK*. “Bloody hell!” He pulled from the wall to rub the back of his skull. “That really hurt.”

My eyebrows perked. “That sounded like…glass.”

I ambled over to Billy to examine the illustrated wallpaper. This particular scene was of little Alice pulling back a curtain to find a tiny door. After closer inspection, I noticed that the wallpaper’s top corner was peeled back a smidge. Curious, I reached up for the corner then

ripped it down fast. I was startled at first. After all, I was looking into a pair of eyes. But then I realized, those were my eyes I was looking into.

Sam spluttered, "Is that...is that—"

I cut her off, "A mirror."

I raced across the lobby, passing the long dining room table before I approached a sparse bit of wall between two mounted portraits, one of a pigeon playing croquet and another of a lizard on a ladder while painting a house. I spotted another loose corner, and then tugged on it hard and fast. The wallpaper tore straight down. Once again, I found myself gazing at my own reflection. I then went behind the half moon check-in counter, the others watching me as I went. There I made another dramatic rip. More mirror. I went straight for the elevator next and used a fingernail to scrape a tear in the wallpaper between the gleaming elevator doors. I made just enough of a rip to see one eye looking back at me.

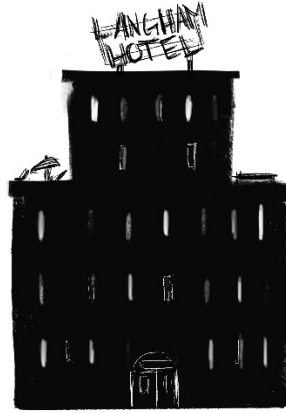
It all began to make sense. "The riddle," I gasped, "the first part of the riddle...it's referring to a mirror."

"What are you getting at, mate?" Billy asked.

My gaze drifted to the plaque mounted between the gold elevator doors. I read the inscription aloud,

*"I show the truth, but sometimes lies,
Look at me and you'll see your eyes.
I can be tall, I can be wide, I can be sizes of every kind,
I show the best or the worst of all of humankind!
I can do many things, but best of all reflecting is what I do."*

"The riddle is referring to a mirror." I swept my gaze slowly across the lobby, starting with the front desk, then moving to the dining room table, the waiting lounge, the fireplace, the elevators, and every other part of the wall that was covered in wallpaper, filled with illustrations from the same book, *'Alice's Adventures in Wonderland'*. And then it clicked. "Dr. Jabberwocker was obsessed with the novel. He even designed his riddle after it...he designed his building after it...his riddle speaks of a mirror..." It all absorbed into my mind. "The novel is about Alice stuck in Wonderland...she's trying to find her way back through the looking-glass...she's trapped in the mirror...we're Alice," I realized. "We're all Alice trying to find our way back through the looking-glass." I turned back and faced the ripped wallpaper, my reflection standing there looking back at me. My eyes were wide and my pupils unsteady. "The hotel *is* the looking-glass."



Chapter 28

“Wait, what?” This went right over Billy’s head.

Charlotte seemed just as confused. “Yes, Collin. What do you mean by that?”

Sam slowly twirled in place, her gaze sweeping through the lobby as she went. “He couldn’t have.”

Charlotte turned to Billy. “He couldn’t have what?”

Billy shrugged. “I don’t even know who ‘he’ is?”

I was still coming to the conclusion, but the realization of it left my mind overloaded. “The hotel...the building...all the walls are covered in the same wallpaper...different illustrations from the novel, *‘Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland’*.”

“Yes, we’re aware,” Charlotte noted, yet still puzzled.

I tried to simplify it, “The wallpaper is hiding a mirror...the whole building is one big looking-glass.”

Sam finished, “Dr. Jabberwocker created his riddle to help his patients escape the hospital...to escape a land of madness...he created the riddle to help them escape *Wonderland*.”

All of a sudden, we heard clapping. The applause was soft, yet loud in the quiet lobby. The clapping came in haunting echoes I could feel in a vibration in my bones. The four of us spun around, and found Mr. Hinkley standing in front of the glass front door.

“Bravo, children. Bravo.”

“Mr. Hinkley.” I felt the blood drain from my face. “Mr. Hinkley, what’s going on?”

“Yeah, what’s this all about?” Billy demanded.

“Allow me to enlighten you.” Mr. Hinkley folded his white-gloved hands behind his back, and then he divulged, “As you all are aware, prior to its renovation into a hotel, the Langham was first a hospital designed and built by Edgar John Jabberwocker. Here, within these glass walls, did the doctor house the mentally impaired. Through torture and torment, the doctor studied the minds of the mentally disturbed.”

Sam narrowed her brow. “We already know all of this.”

“Yes,” said Charlotte, “get on with it already.”

Mr. Hinkley continued, “After decades of abusing and torturing his patients, Dr. Jabberwocker was finally caught. But he escaped justice and prosecution by taking his own life. He hung himself on the Langham sign up on the rooftop of his own building. And in doing so,

Dr. Jabberwocker darkened his soul to no repair. His soul became a shadow, a shadow that has and continues to, haunt the building to this very day.”

We all glanced around like we were expecting some phantom to pop out of nowhere.

Mr. Hinkley pressed on, “Much like ghosts, shadows also have an unfinished business. They are forever trapped in the physical realm due to it. That is, to continue to inflict harm upon the living. And in death, Dr. Jabberwocker continues such work.”

A sickening feeling in my stomach told me I didn’t want to know the answer to the question I was about to ask. “What do you mean by that?”

“I mean, Mr. Winters, that throughout the past century, Dr. Jabberwocker kept to the shadows of this hotel and only creeps out to feed.”

Billy’s words got caught in his throat. “What do you mean...*to feed*?”

Charlotte scooted behind Billy. “I think I’d rather not find out.”

“*Beware those with weakened minds.*” Mr. Hinkley’s face remained just as dull and just as expressionless as ever. “Shadows are succubus. They suck the life force out of the living. They don’t inspire madness, but rather bring about what has always been there lurking in the deepest, most darkest trenches of one’s mind. Shadows feed on one’s doubts...their shame...their insecurities...they feed on the depression-soaked mind. And the more they feed, the more one falls deeper into their own despair, until finally the light within them is swallowed into the dark.” Mr. Hinkley swept his gaze across the hotel’s lobby. “The shadow of the late Dr. Jabberwocker has haunted the walls of this building since the day he took his own life. He lurks in the darkest corners, waiting to pounce on those with weakened minds. Throughout the century he has taken the lives of many.”

Just then, I realized we weren’t alone anymore. People started to appear throughout the lobby, manifesting as though out of thin air: the bellhop, the maid, the security guard, chef Mimsy Browne, a slew of former guests of the Langham Hotel, and even the two models we had drawn up in the clubhouse. They were all translucent. Charlotte screamed when she realized they were all ghosts.

“All of us,” Mr. Hinkley drew my attention back to him, “each and every last one, has fallen victim to the shadow of the Langham Hotel. Throughout the years he found us, in our loathing and self-suffering, and led us to the same fate Dr. Jabberwocker was once doomed himself. We committed an act against nature by taking our own lives.”

The four of us backed into each other, now encircled by ghosts from all angles.

Billy shuddered, “Where’s Scooby and the gang when you need them?”

Sam gritted her teeth. “Not the time for jokes, Billy.”

Charlotte’s fingers crawled into her mouth. “We’re going to die! We’re going to die! We’re going to die!”

Sam pinched her lips. “You’re not helping, Charlotte.”

I kept my focus directed ahead at Mr. Hinkley blocking the front door. The clouds above New York City had parted, allowing moonlight to filter back through the glass door. It wasn’t until Mr. Hinkley was bathed in it, did I realize that he too was transparent.

He continued, “Each of you was invited to check-in to the Langham Hotel for a reason.” He eyed me. “You especially, Mr. Winters.”

Now standing shoulder to shoulder, I could feel my friends trembling against me. “Why me?” I asked him.

“Who knows?” Mr. Hinkley then smiled grimly. “Perhaps he just enjoys the way you *taste*.” He twisted around to deadbolt the front door. “He’s hungry. In fact, he’s been hungry for a very long time.” He faced us again. “And now he needs to feed.”

It got much darker without warning. I could see my own shadow on the floor swallowed by a bigger shadow growing and stretching across the lobby’s marble floor. I swiveled around slowly, my friends following my movement. There, we found ourselves towered by an enormous figure, black as the darkest of nights, with no neck but with limbs so long its hands dragged the floor. I looked into its eyes, red as blood, and watched its thin lips split into an exaggerated grin.

“Mr. Winters, I would like for you to meet Dr. Edgar John Jabberwocker. He’s been *dying* to meet you.”

The shadow roared, the four of us screamed, and before I even had the chance to think what to do, my body took action. We bolted through the lobby, right through the ghosts of the former staff and guests of the hotel. I felt the coldness of their translucent bodies, feeling like mist sticking to my face as I fought my way through them. We rounded a corner, the four of us still screaming, and bolted up the staircase. We rounded the stairwell, then charged up another set of stairs, then another, and then another, finally entering the hallway on the sixth floor.

Billy threw his back against a wall, and it was joined by the sound of cracking glass. “What the bloody hell was that?!”

Sam crouched, side pinching and out of breath. “Would you like me to reiterate Mr. Hinkley’s whole monologue back to you? That shadow was the spirit of Dr. Jabberwocker, and that shadow is trying to kill us!”

Billy grabbed his skull. “That’s what I was afraid of!”

Charlotte started to cry.

“I can’t deal with this shit.” Sam grabbed Charlotte by the shoulders and shook her hard. “Get a grip on yourself!”

She whimpered, so frightened she was shedding tears, “How do you suppose I get a grip on myself when the ghost of a psychopathic murderer is trying to kill us?!”

I hunched forward with my hands on my trembling knees, trying to catch my breath. “We have to get out of here.” I looked up to find myself standing in front of room 602. “The fire-escape.” My eyes widened the more the thought sunk into my brain. “We’ll go down the fire-escape.” I threw myself against the door. I tried twisting the knob, but it was locked.

“Stand aside, laddie.” Billy popped his shoulder and then flicked his nose with his thumb. I cleared the door, and then he charged. He hit the door with such force it swung right open.

Charlotte ran in like she was jumping on board a lifeboat of a sinking ship. She hurried for the window, but no matter how much strength she put into it, the window wouldn’t budge.

“It’s stuck!” she exclaimed.

“No,” said Sam after closer expectation. “It’s nailed shut. Look!” And then she showed us the several nails hammered into the window frame.

Billy gave it a go. He threw all his strength into it, but the window remained shut. And then he came up with an idea, “Let’s try the next room.”

Four rooms later, all the same outcome, we returned to the hallway where we stood defeated.

“How are we supposed to get out of this hotel?” Charlotte started to really panic. “We’re trapped!”

I tried to reassure her, “We’re not trapped. It’s going to be okay. We’re going to find our way—”

The hallway lights flickered, and then they went out completely. The corridor became drenched in shadows. It was completely dark. I couldn't even see my hand in front of my face, but I knew we weren't alone. I could sense a presence. Down the hallway, at the complete opposite end, was an outline of a humanoid figure with dangly limbs.

The figure croaked in an unnatural voice, "*Billy? Is that my Billy?*"

I heard Billy's surprised voice through the darkness. "Mum?"

The light fixtures pulsed back to life, weak and flickering like Ol' Bertha's headlights. The shadow morphed into an old and haggard woman with a hunched back and a whiskered chin.

Billy stepped forward as he squinted ahead. "Mum?" He repeated with even more shock in his voice. "Mum, is that you?"

The haggard woman clutched her knitting bag, her wet tongue sliding across her yellow-stained teeth. She apparently looked like Billy's mom, but her blood red eyes suggested she was the shadow of Dr. Jabberwocker.

She slid her tongue back and forth across her crusty lips. "*That's my Billy.*" And then she went stomping on the needle-felt carpet like a spoiled child with a tantrum. "*That's my fat little Billy boy!*"

Her voice didn't match the body it belonged to. I had never met her, but even still I knew it wasn't hers. The more I listened, the more I realized that her voice was...Billy's! We all huddled close behind him as he faced his shadow mother.

"*You stupid, fat piece of shit! You hear me, Billy?!*" She threw her knitting bag onto the floor and stomped on it. "*You're a fat piece of shit! You're disgusting!*" she spat through crooked teeth, foaming at the mouth as she spat. "*You think I don't know who's sneaking into my kitchen in the dead of night, rummaging my cabinets for snacks like some starving raccoon? I know it's you, Billy! My fat, disgusting Billy boy!*"

Billy started shaking, and his eyes welling up with an explosion of tears. He couldn't move. He couldn't even speak up. His face went pale. He looked like he was about to choke on his own tongue.

Billy's mother lifted a finger and pointed at her son, snarling out of utter disgust. "*Do you know how embarrassing it is to take you to the grocery store with all those people gawking and pointing at us?!*" She mocked them, "*Look at the fat boy. Look at that disgusting-looking fat boy. His mum probably feeds him candy, junk food, and anything he wants. He probably never even seen a vegetable in his life!*" She stomped on the floor again. "*Fat! Fat! Fat!*" She went off, pulling her wild hair as she screamed and shouted, "*You're revolting! I can't even look at you! Of course my sister gets the handsome son while I'm stuck raising Frankenstein's ugly monster!*"

Charlotte took Billy's hand. "Billy—Billy, it's not her. It's not your mum."

He shivered while watching his mom shouting a slew of insults his way. "That's her...that's how she feels about me...that's what she thinks every time she sees me...like I'm just some ugly, pathetic kid she's too ashamed to be seen with."

His mother continued her cruel tirade, "*You're just like your father. A deadbeat! A good for nothing piece of shit! What kind of a man are you, huh? Little fat Billy boy too scared of a spider in his bedroom. He has to call 'mummy' to help him. Stop crying, Billy! Grow a spine, Billy! Be a man, Billy!*"

Charlotte clung to Billy's forearm. "Don't listen to her."

His body shook with his words, "I can't help it."

Charlotte persisted, "You're stronger than you think."

His mother grabbed her stomach and shook it. *"My name's Billy. I'm a fat Billy Boy! A big fat boy! Only my mum can love me because she's forced to!"*

Billy faced his mom. "Shut up!"

That seemed to anger her a great deal. Her neck snapped, her red eyes locked with Billy. A black widow spider crawled out of her mouth, then up her flabby cheek, and disappeared off into her curls. *"You think you're a man now, eh? Like you don't need your mummy to protect you anymore because you got some cheap floozy at your side?!"*

Charlotte outraged, "I beg your pardon!"

"Prove it, Billy Boy." A second black widow crawled out of her closed lips, then worked its way down her whiskered chin. *"Prove you're a man and not some sissy boy!"* She opened her mouth, and a cluster of black widows came bursting out. They showered her feet, the four of us stuck petrified as the clutter of spiders came crawling toward us fast. The closer they got, the bigger they grew.

Sam snapped to her senses. "Let's get out of here!"

My eyes grew as Billy's mom burst into a thousand black widows, hitting the floor and then crawling swiftly toward us. "Run!"

We bolted, charging through the slanted hallway while the spiders chased us. Charlotte took Billy's hand and forced him along with her. Meanwhile, I desperately swatted away spiders as they leapt after me and Sam helped kick them away. Charlotte led us to the elevator. She pushed the button, and while we waited for it to arrive, Sam ripped a portrait off the wall, this one depicting a duck knitting on a recliner, and then went swatting at the onslaught of spiders jumping at us.

Once the elevator arrived, Billy backed into it, his arms thrown over his blonde head as he back-stepped over to the corner. "Keep them away! Keep them away!"

We all rushed into the lift after him. Charlotte pushed the rooftop button without any thought behind it. The gold doors retracted, closing in on the black widows that had grown to the size of newborn puppies. The doors closed, and just when we began to rise up the building, we could hear the large spiders throwing themselves against the elevator, crushing their own exoskeletons as they did, while others fell into the shaft where we could hear them screeching while plummeting to the bottom floor.

Sam dropped the portrait, the canvas nearly shredded. "What the hell was that?"

Charlotte found Billy shivering on the floor in the corner. "Billy, are you alright?"

He looked so utterly ashamed of himself. "Growing up, my mum was cruel to me...very cruel." We let him express his emotions before they had a chance to eat him up from the inside. "My dad suffered from depression, and I think my mum resented him for it. There was no partnership in their marriage. She had to clean, cook, work—everything, all while Dad sat there drowning in his own despair. Over the years he got a little heavy...really heavy, actually...he was practically bedridden. My mum didn't want me to turn out to be like him so she used to stop me from eating too much. Whenever I did gain weight, she used to call me 'fat little Billy Boy'." A tear came tumbling down his cheek. "She was so embarrassed by me."

Charlotte dropped to her knees so that she could look into his tear-soaked eyes. "I'm sure she didn't feel that way."

He looked away, tears flowing now. "I just wanted my dad to get up off the couch, you know. He just laid there covered in food. 'Wake up!' I wanted to scream at him. 'Get off the couch!',"

but he just sat there eating his way further into a deeper depression until eventually he ate himself to death. After he died, I fell in the same habit. I sat on the couch playing my video games, eating junk food...so much junk food. I gained a lot of weight and my mum was disgusted by me. She couldn't even stand to look at me. I lost the weight in high school. I was on the rugby team, and I shed all the weight. I felt like my mum only loved me when I was skinny."

Charlotte took his chin and forced his attention back. "Listen to me, Billy. You are neither your mother nor your father. You're Billy—my kind and handsome Billy, who behind this facade is the most sensitive man I know. I hate that you went through that pain, but thank God for it. That pain is what helped shape you into the man I love. You don't have to pretend to be tough. A man's strength doesn't come from their muscles. It comes from the strength of their heart. And you Billy, have the biggest heart I know. That's why I love you."

He wiped the tears off on his shoulder. "You love me?"

She nodded.

"Are you sure?" he pressed.

"Of course I'm sure."

They helped each other back on their feet.

Billy rambled on, "I can't believe you love me."

I nudged him and whispered, "Say it back."

He scooped her up and swung her around the elevator. "Of course I love her!" And then he hugged her tightly.

"I hate to interrupt, but what now?" Sam gestured to the open elevator doors, the cold night air sweeping in from up on the rooftop.

We all ambled over to the edge of the rooftop, looking down at the great distance to the ground. It was such a long way down, and there were no fire-escapes close enough to access. I looked around the rooftop. It was quiet with only the swooshing sound of the wind. The pool was sparkling, but the water was still. The surrounding lounge chairs and patio furniture were untouched. The four of us scoured the rooftop for possible ways to escape the hotel, beneath the bright neon red bulbs of the Langham sign beaming above us.

Charlotte went to the railing and began to wave her arms in a crisscross above her head. "Help! We're up here!" She shouted down into the bustling street far below us, "Help!"

Sam pinched the bridge of her nose. "Stop screaming! No one is going to hear you from way up here."

Charlotte retaliated, "In that case, what do you prefer we do? Stay up here and wait for the Shadow Man to come find us?"

"Get a grip on yourself," Sam said.

"You get a grip!"

While the girls bickered back and forth, I worked my way around the edge of the pool, searching for ways to escape the building. But then I heard a strange rumble. I followed the sound past the rooftop pool, winding my way through the lounge chairs until I was standing at the door to the stairwell. It was the strangest sound I'd ever heard, some combination of screeching, scraping, and clawing magnified times a hundred. And then the emergency exit burst open, and a hundred black widows came blasting out from the stairwell.

"Run!"

We hurried across the rooftop, Sam leaping over lounge chairs while Billy took Charlotte's hand and tossed patio tables out of their way. I led the way to the clubhouse, where mounted on

the exterior wall was a metal ladder. I climbed, then Billy hoisted Charlotte up after, then lent Sam his laced hands to create a step stool that gave her the extra momentum to skip a few rungs. Billy then leapt up onto the ladder, the cluster of enormous black widows throwing themselves against the wall as we all climbed. We arrived up onto the rooftop of the clubhouse, the spiders now assembling to climb on top of each other to get to us.

“Get to higher ground,” Billy suggested, pointing to the towering standalone letters of the enormous Langham sign. I took to the letter ‘L’ while Billy, Charlotte, and Sam took to the first ‘A’. The spiders chased after me. They leapt up onto the ‘L’. I climbed the metal bars that made up the large letter like I was some gymnastic gold medalist. I utilized the cold metal bars to aid me in my climb, scaling higher and higher with the spiders pursuing close behind. I finally reached the top of the ‘L’ where the cold air lashed me so aggressively that I struggled to keep my balance. I looked over, and there were the rest of my friends working together to climb the ‘A’. The spiders began to lunge up at me, but I kicked them off. The ones I kicked hit the floor, then splattered into a black fog that manifested itself into two more black widows. I carefully looked down, gripping the metal bars as the letter became flimsy and wobbly from all of the extra weight provided by me and the climbing spiders. A loud *snap* then resonated, loud enough to be heard over the swooshing wind. I felt the bars trembling beneath me, and then collapsing. I went down with the letter, the top of the ‘L’ breaking apart as it fell into some strange looking ‘T’, leaving me standing on a small slat of metal left on top. The spiders continued to climb up after me, and what was left of the ‘L’ trembled aggressively.

“Collin!”

I looked over, prepared to fall to my death, and found Billy hanging onto the bar of the next letter over.

“Jump!”

I looked down, the spiders so close I could see their beady red eyes thirsting for me. The letter quaked even more aggressively. It was about to come crashing down. I lifted up, feet placed strategically apart to keep the slat of metal balanced enough for me to stand on.

Billy screamed, “Now!”

I jumped from the piece of metal just as the ‘L’ came tumbling down into a pile of debris. I leapt through the night, Billy snatching me by the wrist just in time. I was left dangling there, suspended high above the ground where the cluster of spiders reassembled, now climbing up onto the ‘A’. Billy’s face tightened as he used his strength to hoist me up onto the bars. I claimed a grip, and then the four of us climbed to the top.

“The bars are shaking.” Sam braced herself on the top of the ‘A’. “This isn’t going to hold much longer!”

Charlotte cried, “This is it. We’re all going to die!”

I shook a spider off my leg and then kicked another one in the face, sending it falling to the ground where it imploded into a puff of black smoke. Four more spiders emerged from the smoke. “What should we do? They just keep multiplying!”

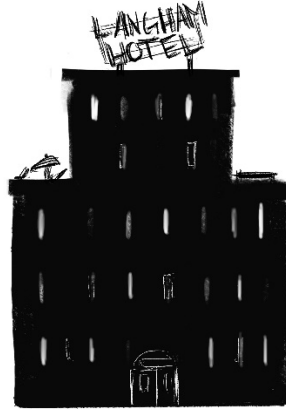
We all heard a sharp snap of metal, and then saw the petrified look on Billy’s face. “Hang on, laddies!”

The ‘A’ began to crumble, metal screeching, bars clanking as they hit the ceiling of the clubhouse, while the remaining bars of the letter crashed down. The four of us were thrown from the letter, landing in the pool with a mighty splash that conjured an aggressive wave to slosh up

onto the cement on every side. We shot out of the water, the ‘A’ hanging by nothing more than scraps of metal, its red bulbs flickering while flaring sparks of electricity.

Sam noticed how dangerously close the letter was to falling into the pool. “Get out of the water! Get out of the water!”

We swam to the edge and hoisted ourselves out. I didn’t look back and so I wasn’t sure if the cluster of spiders were still there. I just followed my friends through the rooftop and back into the stairwell. They ran so fast, skipping steps as they fled for safety. I was at the tail end of the group, passing the penthouse floor, when something stopped me. My eyes fixed on the painted black door. Beyond it, I could hear splashing.



Chapter 29

I stood there stiff and rigid, like my skin had tightened only to keep my soul from blasting free. Everything fell quiet, and the air dry and stale. I could hear my friends hurrying down the stairwell, already several floors beneath me, but at the same time I couldn’t hear them at all. Their footsteps began as a faint drumming, then a whisper...now nothing. I held my ground, my eyes fixed on the single word spelt out across the black door—*penthouse*. Somehow I knew that beyond that door was a secret...a terribly dark secret that would bring forth to the surface a moment in my life I suppressed in the hopes of keeping my innocence from being taken away from me. Whatever was beyond that door would change me. I knew that. I just wasn’t sure I was ready to be changed forever.

The splashing continued, followed by a child’s faint giggle. I crossed the hallway, passing the portrait of the raven and the writing desk, and then I pushed the front door open. I walked into the penthouse, not as it was today, but as it was when I was four years old. The apartment was fixed with lavish furniture and adorned with cheap gaudy trinkets, and the place smelled of cigarettes, alcohol, and cheap perfume. I drifted slowly across the living room, the walls cluttered with countless photographs of Ruby Hart, then made my way through the adjoining dining room. The splashing persisted. I followed it into the hallway where I slowly creaked the bathroom door open. Four year old me was in the bathtub, faucet running, a mound of bubbles up to my chin. Mommy was on her knees washing my scruffy red hair while I played with my *Power Rangers* action figures.

“Mommy.”

“Yes, baby?”

I dunked the Green Ranger into the bath, then shot it back out again. “How come you and Ruby argue so much? Don’t you like your mommy?”

“It’s not so simple.” She made me lean back to wash the shampoo out in the running faucet. “I love my mommy, I just wish she could have been a better mommy to me and my sisters. It wasn’t easy growing up with a mommy like Ruby Hart.”

It wasn’t until then that I saw it. It was the Shadow Man lurking in the corner of the restroom near the sink. The four year old me didn’t see it, but I think my mom did. She kept glancing over her shoulder, looking worried and anxious. The Shadow’s beady red eyes were brighter than usual.

“Can I tell you a secret, Mommy?”

“A secret?” Mommy’s eyes suddenly twitched. She pressed a soapy palm against the side of her skull, then went on to soap up my arms with a loofah. “Yes. Of course. What secret?”

“I like Ruby.”

“You do?” she sounded surprised.

I nodded. “I think she’s funny.” I winced as she scrubbed my arms harder. “When we go home to Daddy, do you think I can call Ruby sometimes? She said she would watch *Power Rangers* with me.”

She scrubbed my arms even harder. “I’m not sure, Collin.”

I peeked my head out of the bathtub, bubbles sticking to my face. Mommy’s cellphone was buzzing on the restroom floor. On the screen read, ‘William’.

“Daddy’s calling.” I stood up in the bathtub.

“Collin, sit down!” She forced me back into the bathtub with such aggression the water lapped out and came splashing onto the restroom’s checkered floor. “Look what you’ve done!” She got soap and bubbles in her hair as she combed her hands through her locks. “Look at this floor, Collin. Look at it. You’ve gotten everything all wet!” She ripped a towel off a towel rack and draped it across the floor.

I started crying. “I’m sorry, Mommy.”

Her cellphone continued to buzz, the screen flashing Daddy’s name again. Mommy kicked the cellphone and it went sliding across the checkered floor, right through the Shadow Man.

The Shadow Man began to speak in Mommy’s voice, “*They’re going to take him away from you... William... Ruby...they’re coming for him...they’re coming for your son.*”

Mommy, on her knees, tucked her head between her legs and clamped her eyes tightly shut, as though she were battling with some terrible thought forming in her mind.

The Shadow Man continued, “*Can you blame them? Surely you can’t...you’re not to be trusted to raise such a sweet and beautiful boy...you’re not capable, Lacie...you’re not capable of raising that boy.*”

Mommy mumbled, “Stop it. Please, stop it.”

“*You’re not well, Lacie...you can’t possibly care for Collin...he needs a mother...a real mother...one who isn’t disturbed...*”

She squeezed her skull while rocking on her knees. “Get out of my head! Get out of my head!”

The Shadow Man pressed on, “*William is coming for your son, Lacie...he’s going to take him away from you...do something...do something now to stop William from stealing your son...your son...he’s your son, Lacie! Don’t let him take Collin away from you...don’t let him...protect, Collin...don’t let William take him away.*”

Mommy struck her skull with her own fists. "Please! Please! Please!"

I peeked out from the bubbles again, finding Mommy on the restroom floor whacking herself in the head. "Mommy, are you okay?"

The Shadow Man crept out from the restroom's dark corner, lurching forward along the black and white tiles, his long black fingers stretching for Mommy's head. *"Either let William take Collin away from you...or raise him to grow up as insane as you...or end it now before it even has a chance to start...don't let your precious little boy suffer as you have...don't let your greatest fear come to life...end it now so Collin will never become you."*

Mommy gripped the bathtub, and then used the porcelain rim to help hoist herself up. She looked at me, four year old me, with tears glistening in her eyes as she stroked my cheek. "It's alright, baby. It'll all be alright soon." She dunked me into the bathtub, holding my little wet body down as I kicked and squirmed and screamed from under the water.

18 year old me stepped away, mouth hung open as I backed into the wall behind me. I couldn't feel my body. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't think. I couldn't comprehend the horror occurring before my own eyes. I slid down the wall, and collapsed on the wet restroom floor in a heap, Mommy's cellphone buzzing between my sneakers as she held my younger self to the bottom of the bathtub.

"Lacie," I could hear Ruby in the living room, rummaging around, "darling, I just came back for my feather boa. Now that I'm here, I thought I would escort you and Callum up to the clubhouse as my personal guests." Mommy didn't hear Ruby in the other room. The Shadow Man had her in his claws, darkening her thoughts and using her as a puppet and he the puppeteer, pulling the strings to have her commit the unspeakable. "Lacie? Lacie, are you even here?" Ruby pushed the restroom door open. "Lacie!"

I covered my ears and pressed my fingers deep into my skull, my eyes pinched so tightly that not a single tear could escape. Even with my hands over my ears I could hear Ruby's bloodcurdling screams striking a cord so deep within my soul it caused my teeth to vibrate. I could feel my toes curling in my sneakers as my little lungs filled with water.

Ruby fought her way to the bathtub. "Lacie! Lacie, stop! Stop, Lacie! Please!"

She ripped Mommy off of me, throwing her to the floor while she scooped me out of the bathtub. Ruby threw my little body over her shoulder as I coughed up water from out of my lungs.

She held me tightly, grasping me, holding me with such strength as though she was prepared to shield me with her own body. Her eyes fell onto Mommy, on the floor, hands convulsing. Her voice shook, "What were you doing? What were you thinking?" And then Ruby screamed, "Answer me, Lacie! What were you doing to your son?!" Ruby backed into a wall, the same as 18 year old me, then collapsed with four year old me cradled in her arms. "What were you thinking?" She clung to me while I still choked on my own cough. "What were you thinking?!"

Mommy crawled across the restroom floor. She buried her face into a bath towel, the initials of the Langham Hotel embroidered into the cotton. She screamed and cried in an almost inhuman sound. She wailed like some strange animal I'd never heard. I could hear her cries echoing from the past and all the way into the present where I sat on the restroom floor, alone.

I wandered back into the living room as though in a drunken stagger. I could still smell the lavender soap...could still feel the water clogged in my lungs...I could still hear my mom's cries after realizing what she'd done to me. I fell straight to my knees. My head hanging low. My tears splashed onto the floor and soaked into the needle-felt carpet. I pushed the top of my skull into

the carpet, then pounded the floor with both fists. I screamed from my soul, so earsplitting it was nearly as inhuman like my mom's cries. I looked up with tears streaking down my face. The penthouse was blurry with a memory coming in and out of the present.

* * *

Ruby sat on the couch with me in her arms. She was numb. Too numb to cry. Too numb to scream. Too numb to move. And so she sat there, staring at the many photographs of herself adorned throughout the walls of her penthouse. Police officers were walking around taking statements, statements from Ruby, from Mommy, from Mr. Hinkley, and even from several members of the hotel staff. It was all just noise. I kept looking for my Mommy. She was in the kitchen, but she wouldn't look at me. She just kept crying to one of the police officers. I already forgot what happened. I couldn't understand what happened. All these thoughts went swirling around in my head. *Mommy was just giving me a bubblebath. I was just playing in the bubbles with my action figures. We were supposed to watch Ruby perform a new song in the rooftop clubhouse. Why wouldn't Mommy talk to me? Why wouldn't she even look at me? What happened? Did I do something wrong?*

A panic-stricken voice pulled me out of my head. "Where is he? Where's my son? I want to see my son, dammit!"

I stirred in Ruby's arms. "Daddy?"

Daddy pushed his way through the horde of police officers in the outside hallway, then fought his way into the penthouse. "Collin! Collin!" He ran toward me in the living room, then dropped to his knees where I threw myself into his arms. I could feel him shaking...could hear him crying... "Are you okay?" He pulled back to check me for scars or wounds. "Are you hurt?"

I shook my head.

He scooped me up and rose, thereafter holding me in his arms close to his chest. He looked across the penthouse apartment, his face hardening when he found Mommy giving her statement to the police officer.

"You're sick, Lacie!" his body trembled with his words. "Do you hear me? You're sick!" He marched through the living room until he was stopped by three more police officers. "I put up with a lot of your crap over the years. First your paranoia, then your anxiety, and then your bouts of depression where you spent weeks refusing to get yourself out of bed. We were a team!" he cried. "I was on your side!" he moaned, his red eyes conveying many nights of tears and lack of sleep. "You kidnapped our son...you took him across the country without me knowing where you two were. And now *this*..." I could feel his body trembling so hard he was nearly convulsing. "Lacie, you tried to hurt our boy...our son!" Mommy cried, now on the kitchen floor, her body folding into a collapsed state. Daddy couldn't scream anymore. He just cried, "You're his mother, Lacie...you were supposed to protect him...you're not supposed to hurt him..." And then he found one last scream that had been building in his throat, "You're his mother!"

"That's enough," said one of the police officers as he began to escort Daddy back toward the living room.

Daddy carried me in his arms, found my little luggage and seized it with his free hand. We were headed for the elevator when Ruby stopped us.

"William, wait!"

He spun around to face the bedazzled flapper smoking a new cigarette. “You should have called me sooner.” He pinched his lips to control the anger building inside of him. “You knew she was sick. You were fully aware she was off her meds.”

“I know, but she’s my daughter. I wanted to help her.” Ruby reached for me, but Daddy yanked me away. “Please, William...please.”

“We’re leaving.”

I reached my arms out for Ruby while Daddy took me into the elevator. He pushed the button for the lobby, and the doors closed right in Ruby’s face. We were down in the hotel lobby, rolling our luggage through the waiting lounge where many guests were all gossiping over what had just transpired in the penthouse. Through the glass front door, I could see all the police cars lined up along the roundabout driveway, their red and blue lights beaming in the night.

Ding.

The elevator opened, and Ruby came rushing into the lobby. “William, please!”

Daddy stopped. He turned to find his mother-in-law standing behind us. “What is it?”

“Please,” she begged him, “just let me say goodbye to my grandson.”

There was pain in Ruby’s eyes, pain that Daddy could obviously feel. “You got one minute,” he said.

Ruby fell to her knees with open arms. I abandoned my luggage and ran for her, then threw myself into her arms.

“Will I ever see you again?”

She squeezed me tightly. “I’m not sure, darling. I hope for it, but I’m not sure.”

I trembled against her, “But you said you would watch *Power Rangers* with me?”

“I know sweetheart, but I’m afraid you’ll have to watch it without me.” She pulled back, then brushed my shaggy red locks out of my face so that she could look into my eyes. “Remember what I told you, Collin. Chin up. We have to be brave, don’t we?” I didn’t take Ruby as a sensitive woman, but in that moment I could see her emotions seeping through her tough outer shell. Her eyes became red and watery. “Remember Collin, just in case I’m not there to remind you later, the world won’t always be kind to you. They’ve never been kind to people like you. You have to be brave,” she insisted with a strong grip on my little shoulders. “You understand me, don’t you, darling? You have to be brave and do what you were born to do.” A tear fell from her eye and rolled down her cheek. “Be a star, my sweetheart. Be the star you were born to be. And don’t you dare...” a second tear streaked down her cheek, “don’t you fuckin’ dare, let the world dim that light that shines so bright in you.”

Daddy swept in and interrupted, “Great, Ruby. Just great. You’ve taught my son a new curse word.” He picked me up and threw me over his shoulder, then carried me through the lobby.

I cried, “Ruby! Ruby!”

“Collin!” Her voice carried through the lobby, “I love you, darling. I love you!”

* * *

The sound of running water snapped me back to the present. The penthouse was filled with water ankle-high deep. I waded through the water and back into the restroom. The faucet was running, the bathtub filled up to the top and now overflowing. I tried to stop it. I twisted the faucet valve in every which way I could, but the water continued to pour free. Then the faucet in the sink went on, and then so did the one in the kitchen, and then I could hear several others going off in the restroom in Ruby’s master suite. The water was rising fast—unnaturally fast.

The penthouse was filled up now to my knees. I waded through the water, fighting my way through the living room and to the front door. I grabbed the knob, shook the door handle, but it remained tightly shut.

And then I heard my own voice speaking, and turned to find the Shadow Man lurking in the kitchen's dark corner. "*Let Mommy finish what she started all those years ago.*" And then the shadow's smile twisted into an exaggerated grin while the rest of him vanished—his smile remaining just a little while longer.

The water continued to rise. In a panic, I trudged through the living room, the water so heavy every step took it out of me. By the time I got to the dining room, I was doggie paddling to the table. The water was rising so fast and seemingly out of nowhere, that I barely had time to wrap my head around what was actually happening. Everything was moving like it was moving in a dream. My adrenaline kicked in. I hoisted myself up onto the table just as it lifted and floated in the current. I used my hand as a paddle, and propelled myself to the window that overlooked Central Park. It was approaching dawn. The sun hadn't yet peeked on the horizon, but the black sky had turned into a smoggy grey. I stepped off the floating dining room table and clung to the windowsill, my sneakers struggling to get a solid grip. I kept slipping, but reclaimed my balance. I desperately grabbed hold of the window knowing this could be my last attempt to escape the rushing water, and used all my might to hoist it up. But to no avail. I tried again, throwing out my back as I pushed. I slipped, falling back into a splash. I shot back out of the water, flailing my arms to grab for anything I could to keep me afloat, but was only met with many of Ruby's useless, gaudy trinkets floating around—her framed photographs somehow still mounted. The water rose even higher, and soon my head was grazing the ceiling. I pushed my hands against the ceiling, hoping deep down that it would pop open and release me from this nightmarish scene that had taken over my reality. But it didn't. I took one last breath deep into my lungs, knowing it might be the last one I ever took. I flipped around, then kicked off from the ceiling, swimming as fast as I could through the living room and straight for the front door. I reached for the doorknob, claimed a solid grip, and then used it to help reel me in. I then clasped my hands together and thrust my elbow into the doorknob. I went at it again. And again. The more I tried the less energy I had to keep it up. And then finally it loosened. Another blow, and the doorknob broke. I pushed onto the front door and it swung open. Water gushed through the doorway, taking me with it. I was thrown onto the floor of the hallway, soaking wet, and yet the water was gone. I let out a huge sigh of relief, my lungs aching as they tried to remember how to breathe again. I then turned back to the penthouse. Everything was dry and in order.

I picked myself up. My clothes were drenched, hair stuck to my forehead. My face was dripping wet. I staggered into the stairwell, my legs feeling so much like jelly that I stumbled around and into the wall. I thought it best to start working my way down, but then I heard Charlotte back up on the rooftop.

"I'm trying. Honestly, I'm trying."

A man's voice replied, "Try harder. It isn't right. The scene needs to be better."

I used the railing to help support me as I worked my way up a single flight of steps in the stairwell. I pushed open the emergency exit, the morning air especially chilly now that I was soaking wet. The clubhouse door was left ajar. I pushed against it, then let myself through. Charlotte stood centerstage, the director standing off to the side ridiculing her.

"Is this better?" She performed a silent scene, relying heavily on her bodily movement and gestures to tell a story without spoken words.

"It amazes me how such a pretty girl could be so stupid." He marched across the stage. He obviously had no concept of personal space as he got right up to Charlotte. Too close for comfort. "Listen, Charlotte. You have to think." He tapped on the side of his skull. "Use your head. Do you think you can manage that?"

Her gaze fell to the floor of the stage as she became too timid to face him. "Yes, Mr. Sanders."

"Now try it again."

Charlotte took a deep breath, and then was off in the scene. Her demeanor had changed as she was now playing a character. She played the role of a young waitress, holding up an imaginary tray while serving food to a table of young men.

"No! No! No! No!" Mr. Sanders swept back across the stage. "You look miserable. Try looking sexy."

"Sexy?" Charlotte looked uncomfortable on stage, very unlike herself. "But Mr. Sanders, why should I look sexy? I'm playing a young waitress who's working three jobs while she puts herself through med school. I wouldn't be looking sexy. I would be looking exhausted."

"Yeah, that should sell tickets to the show." Mr. Sanders rolled his eyes. "Try to think like a guy. You're serving a table of young men. They're whistling at you because you're sexy, not because you got a good head on your shoulders. To them, you're just another cute face. Let your hair down." Mr. Sanders got himself a little too close again. He reached behind Charlotte, his body so close they were touching, all so he could pull out the band holding back her hair. She had a ponytail, but now her locks came tumbling down her bare shoulders. "You look prettier that way. More feminine."

The way he said that, it made my stomach churn.

Mr. Sanders dished out a fresh slew of physical attributes Charlotte could work on. "Stop slouching. Cute girls don't slouch. Next time, put more makeup on. That looks like the start of a pimple on your face. And stop eating so much. More salads, less bread. In fact, no more bread. Bread is no longer in your vocabulary. I don't want to see you eating it again. You want to be a star, don't you? Then lose the weight. You need a flatter stomach if you ever hope to make it in this industry. Gym—get to the gym. You should be at the gym at least two hours a day. Especially if you keep eating the way you do. It's pretty disgusting, actually. Guys don't want to see girls scarfing down a cheeseburger. Stick to greens, got that?" Mr. Sanders crept up behind Charlotte and placed his hands firmly on her hips. "Loosen up. Let go of yourself and become the character." He worked his fingers slowly around to her stomach where they pressed against her belly.

"Charlotte!" I yelled, the two of them now aware that I was standing on the dance floor. I didn't know what to say, but I knew I had to say something. "We have to get going." I thought of a lie and then it came out, "Dad keeps calling me. He's waiting for us downstairs."

Mr. Sanders snatched Charlotte forcefully by the wrist, and then he leaned against her while brushing her hair back behind her ear. "Get rid of him."

"I will."

She walked off stage. I followed her around a corner where she cupped her mouth and collapsed on the floor. She grasped her throat. "I can't...I can't breathe." She clung to my arms as I sunk to my knees beside her. "Collin, I can't breathe."

"It's okay. I'm here. I'm right here. Repeat after me. Breathe in 1...2...3...and then out 1...2...3..." It wasn't until I performed the breathing technique myself that I realized how much

I needed it. “Again,” I said for my sake as well, “1...2...3...and out 1...2...3...” I waited until a deep breath left her lips. “Do you feel any better?”

She nodded.

I peeked around the corner and found Mr. Sanders on his cellphone with his wife, telling her he loved her and couldn’t wait to finish up at work and join her and the kids for dinner.

I wanted to punch him in the face. “Who is that guy?”

“Mr. Sanders.” She forced a deep breath through her nose, and then released it out from her mouth. “He was my drama teacher back in high school...the one I sort of told you and the others about...but left a lot out...” In her eyes I could see the hurt of the past haunting her. I took her hand and squeezed it. That seemed to give her enough strength to finish. “He wasn’t just mean...he was inappropriate.” She bit down on her bottom lip, so hard she nearly drew blood. “He was *very* inappropriate.”

I scooted over, and put my back to the wall next to her. The emotion was building, and it was building to a point that I couldn’t stand to keep it in any longer. I released the pressure out in a secret, “Me too.”

She turned toward me, shocked and yet morbidly relieved that someone else could understand. “You too?”

I nodded. “I never told anyone this before. Not my dad. Not my cousin. Not even the person that gave me his heart.” I pressed the heel of my palm against my chest, comforted by the pressure against my scar tissue. “It was summer break. I was thirteen. He was my dad’s friend. He was my camp counselor.”

Charlotte asked gently, “Why didn’t you tell anyone?”

“I don’t know. I guess I didn’t think anyone would believe me?” I didn’t just not tell anyone what had happened to me, I didn’t even let the thoughts in. I just wanted to forget it. And so I moved on. All these years later, and still I didn’t want to go back to that night in the cabin, when the 13 year old me felt so utterly powerless. “He was one of my dad’s best friends. He coached my soccer team. He volunteered for church. My dad played golf with him every Sunday until we moved to France. How was I supposed to tell my dad that his friend, the guy who was a groomsman at his wedding, who comes over with his family for Christmas Eve dinner every year, whose kids I played with while the grown ups shared a drink, did something unspeakable to me?”

We were still holding hands, but my grip had loosened while recounting a dark moment in my past. Charlotte squeezed her hand harder to remind me that I wasn’t alone.

“I didn’t ask him to stop,” her eyes stung with her words. “I wanted him to stop, but I couldn’t get myself to say it aloud. I was scared, I guess. Too scared to speak up.” She popped her jaw to keep the tears at bay. “Collin, do you know why I want to be an actress? It’s because when I was a little girl, when my dad and I were really poor, he saved money to take me to the movies. He didn’t eat for two straight days just so that he could save up for the tickets. We saw *Supergirl*. It was a rerelease of the 1984 *Supergirl* starring Helen Slater. It was the first movie I had ever seen, and I was enthralled by the magic of it. I watched the film in all its glory, and I thought to myself that one day, that was going to be me, and that little girls around the world were going to sit where I was sitting, and watch me on the screen and know that they too could be a hero. That was my dream. But I’m not Supergirl.” She laughed at herself. “I’m no one’s Supergirl.” And then she cried, “I couldn’t even tell him to stop.”

I squeezed her hand. “I’m sorry that happened to you.”

She squeezed my hand back. "Me too."

And then I realized. "Charlotte, you have to stand up to him. You have to face him."

"No way," she refused. "I can't go back up on that stage."

"This is your chance to be Supergirl."

She shook her head. "Collin, I can't. I just can't."

"You can. I know you can." I grabbed her knees and stressed my words so that she could both feel and hear them, "Do it for *you*, do it for *me*, do it for every little boy and every little girl with the same bogeyman hiding in their closet. Be *their* voice." I caught her eyes and encouraged her with a kind smile. "Be the voice of the unheard."

Charlotte nodded. She stood up with reluctance, her thin legs as wobbly as a faun and yet she kept balanced. "It shall be the performance of a lifetime." She stepped back up onto the stage. "Mr. Sanders, can we start over please?"

He looked at her like she wasn't even a person, but merely another prop on the stage. "Your eyes are red. You look like you had an ugly cry. Get yourself cute before we start over."

"I think I look fine."

He laughed smugly, "Think again."

"Mr. Sanders, tomorrow marks opening night. You haven't an understudy. Good luck finding someone to replace me before then."

She turned to march away, but he snatched her back and forced her into his arms. "There's that feisty energy I want to see." He grabbed both of her wrists and applied enough pressure to give him complete control over her. She fought back, but he kept his grip strong.

Charlotte demanded, "Let go of me."

He forced her forward and pressed his chest against hers. "Who do you think you are, huh? I'm the teacher. I'm the adult. *I tell you* what to do, got that?"

"Not with my body you don't!" Charlotte kneed him in the groin.

I cheered her on from the sidelines, "Yeah, Charlotte!"

"You little bitch!" He snatched her wrists, then imprisoned her in his arms. His eyes then became red, and his voice shifted into Charlotte's voice, "*I'm a man. You're just another cute little girl. There's millions of you in the world. Hundreds in this school alone. I have my pick in the bunch. You're nothing. You're just another pretty face.*"

Charlotte thrust her elbow into Mr. Sander's gut. She then spun around and swung, her knuckles striking his cheek so hard he turned and spat blood.

"Wahoo!" I threw up my arms. "Kick his ass, Charlotte!"

Fresh blood dribbled down Mr. Sander's chin. "*You'll pay for that. You hear me? You'll pay for that. After I'm through with you, you won't land another role again. I know people. Powerful people in the industry. You can kiss your acting career goodbye.*"

"I'll take my chances." Charlotte kicked him again in the groin. She then grabbed a tuft of the theater's curtain and yanked it hard. She threw the velvet curtain over Mr. Sanders, and the curtain flattened on the stage. He was gone. Charlotte's bogeyman was gone.

I ran onto the stage and hugged her. "That was amazing, Charlotte. That was so amazing!" I could feel her body shaking from all the adrenaline pumping through her. "Are you okay?"

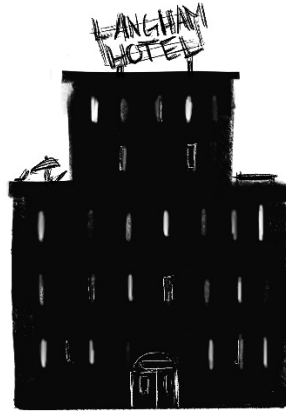
She nodded. "Actually, I think I've never felt better."

She gave me another hug. "Thank you, Collin. Thank you for helping me face my shadow."

"It was all you."

She finally noticed that my clothes were drenched. "Why are you all wet?"

“Long story. I’ll fill you in on the way to Sam and Billy. Let’s go.”



Chapter 30

Charlotte and I hurried down the stairwell, stopping on each floor only to peek into the hallway to see if Sam and Billy were there. No such luck. We weren’t sure where they had gone, but we knew they were somewhere in this hotel, being hunted by the Shadow Man. We understood now that the shadow was the spirit of Dr. Jabberwocker, and he was terrorizing us with our deepest, darkest insecurities, stirring up our pain and making us relive the trauma we left buried in our past, hoping we spiral out of control. There was just one thing the Shadow Man failed to take into account—our friendship. We were stronger together.

The two of us were scaling down the stairwell, passing the broom closet between floors 6 and 7, when we heard a high-pitched scream.

Charlotte and I halted midway down the cement steps. “Sam?”

I grabbed hold of the knob and swung the closet door open. We pushed through the rack of hanging bellhop uniforms, and then went right into Dr. Jabberwocker’s secret office. Except, it wasn’t an office anymore. It was now a two story townhouse. Charlotte and I stood in the middle of the living room, peering around equally dazed.

“How did we?” Charlotte was so puzzled that she couldn’t even finish her thought.

It was a modest house, simple yet cozy. The living room circled into the dining room, and the dining room then circled into the kitchen, and then wrapped back to the living room where a staircase stood by the front door, leading up to the three bedrooms tucked away upstairs. I went investigating through the living room, and soon came to a beautiful antique cabinet topped with framed family portraits scattered around a triangle case that housed the American flag. The first photograph I noticed was taken of a beautiful couple on their wedding day. The man was African-American, big and muscular with a strong jaw and clean shaven face. His bride was of Portuguese descent. She had wavy brown hair that cascaded down her backless wedding dress, and brown eyes so bright they seemed to somehow smile all on their own. The bride was just as beautiful as any runway model I had ever seen. Together, the couple seemed too perfect for words. Almost too happy to be real. I followed the photographs progressing through the years. The woman gave birth, and her husband held in his protective arms a newborn baby girl. He was such a strong-looking man, and yet the photograph captured tears of joy glistening in his eyes. The photographs went on. The new mother was in a rocking chair cradling her baby, and then

the new father was teaching his little girl how to ride a bike. Many family photos were framed, some of holidays, others taken on vacations, dance recitals and karate lessons; these photographs told the story of this family's precious life. Then a particular framed photograph caught my attention. I plucked it up and gave it a closer look. The little girl sat on her father's knee with a book in his hand...a book written by Virginia Woolf.

My eyes squinted as I studied the little girl with long curly hair. "Sam?"

And then a scream was heard from upstairs. I dropped the photograph, the frame breaking and the glass shattering as it smashed against the floor. All of a sudden, the house was filled with smoke. It was cloudy. My eyes were burning. Charlotte was coughing hysterically somewhere behind me.

"Samantha!" The man from the photograph, dressed in a fancy suit, came rushing out of the kitchen choking on the smoke in the air. He rasped, "Samantha! Samantha, where are you?!"

The man didn't acknowledge either Charlotte or myself. In his world we didn't exist. Another scream sent him charging up the staircase. Moments later, he was rushing back downstairs with a little girl thrown over his broad shoulder. He placed her down.

"Samatha, run next door to Ms. Beasley. Tell her to call the fire department."

"But Mommy," she cried, pointing up the staircase.

"I'm going to get mommy now." He crouched to hug her. "Go!" And her father charged back up the staircase, screaming for his wife.

The little girl opened the front door, then stopped herself from fleeing for safety. "Daddy!" she called up the stairs. "Daddy!"

Boom! An explosion of fire burst down the staircase with such force that it knocked little Sam to the floor. The house became engulfed in flames coming from upstairs. The ceiling was swiftly consumed by the fire spreading as the staircase blazed and burst in an inferno of tall, flickering flames. Through the black smoke I saw the Shadow Man lurking in the conjoining dining room, peeking out from behind the wall with a twisted grin on his face.

"Daddy!" Little Sam stumbled back to her feet. "Mommy!"

She went charging up the staircase when I swooped in to block her. "Sam, no!" I looked into her eyes, her tear-soaked face stained with soot. "It's not real. Not anymore. It's in the past."

She screamed over my shoulder, her tiny open hands flailing for the staircase. "Daddy! Mommy!"

Charlotte tried to be brave for her friend, and so she held the tears back the best she could. "They're gone, Sam. I'm so sorry, but they're gone."

Little Sam collapsed to the floor, crying and screaming for her parents. And then she transformed in the blink of an eye. Sam was no longer a little girl anymore. She was a young woman now, wearing her dad's burly military jacket, her stone-beaded bracelets, and her trademark beanie that kept her long hair scrunched up inside. The fire was gone. We were all now standing in the charred aftermath.

She cried, "It's my fault...it's my fault they're gone."

Charlotte and I both lowered to our knees. I reached out and rubbed her back. "You can't think like that."

She was crying so hard that snot was coming out of her nose. "They weren't supposed to be home."

Charlotte asked in a sensitive tone, "What do you mean?"

“It was their anniversary,” she revealed, choking on her own tears. “My dad surprised my mom with tickets to a Broadway show. We already left the house. They were going to drop me off at the neighbor’s, but my dad had just surprised me with a new book. I forgot the book and so I begged him to turn around. We didn’t even know the house was on fire until it was too late.” She was shaking so hard that it was difficult for her to finish. “They weren’t supposed to be home.”

I sat down beside her. “Sam, you can’t blame yourself.”

Charlotte joined us. “You couldn’t have known.”

Sam rested her head in my lap. “I want them back. I want my parents back.”

I leaned over her and tucked my chin on her shoulder. “I want you to have them back too.”

Charlotte collapsed on us, the three of us now in a heap in the middle of a burnt living room. “Out of pain comes strength, and they make the best kind of stories.” She took Sam’s hand and squeezed her fingers. “I just know that one day, the pain of your past will become a masterpiece. You’ll share your story, and that story will help others cope with their own pain. You have the power to change the world, Sam. And I know one day you will.”

“I don’t feel very powerful.” Sam remained lost in a haze of her own depression. “I couldn’t save my parents...everyone who ever loved me is gone...they’re dead...not one of my many foster parents have ever loved me...how could they? How could anyone love me once they’ve seen my shame?” She lifted out of my lap to face us. “Collin, you aren’t the only one with a scar.” She tugged off her beanie and dropped it to the charred floor, exposing the dead tissue on one whole side of her skull. She combed back her hair so that we could see the parts of her scalp that could no longer grow hair now that it had been ravaged by third-degree burns. “I’m a monster.”

Charlotte brushed back Sam’s long black hair and tucked it behind her ear so that we could see her face. “No, you’re beautiful.”

“Scars and all,” I smiled.

Sam sniffled, “You two wouldn’t be saying that if you weren’t my friends.”

“The point is, we are your friends,” Charlotte countered.

And then I finished, “And we love you a whole lot.”

Charlotte noticed a photograph of Sam’s father hung on the scorched wall. The picture was taken of him back when he was in the U.S. Armed Forces, an American flag hung on a pole in his background. “Sam, your dad, he’s very handsome. I mean...*really* handsome.”

“Ew,” she said.

My teeth flashed with a mischievous grin. “He was pretty cute.”

Sam shoved me in the shoulder. “Stop! That’s my dad!”

The three of us shared a giggle on our way back up to our feet. It was during our laughter that I saw the Shadow Man, who had been lurking in the conjoining dining room, wilt away into nothing. Sam’s childhood home then fell away, and Dr. Jabberwocker’s office took its place. Sam was fixing her beanie back on her head when she saw the fireplace behind Dr. Jabberwocker’s desk.

“Fireplace,” she muttered, her thoughts swirling, “the fireplace in the lobby,” she then realized.

I noticed she was somewhere deep in her own thoughts. “What’s up, Sam? What are you thinking?”

She touched her lips. “The fireplace in the lobby...there’s a statue of a rabbit on either side of it...the fireplace—the fireplace is a rabbit-hole.”

I repeated the riddle’s ending verse, “*Hold onto your top hats, your knickers, your soul, just like Wonderland, you can find me down a rabbit-hole.*” I couldn’t help but smile. “You did it. Sam, you did it!” I hugged her and then I shook her. “You just solved Dr. Jabberwocker’s riddle! All along, he was talking about the fireplace. The fireplace is our way out of the hotel!”

Charlotte shared in our thrill. “Now let’s find Billy and get the hell out of this building.”

And so we were off again. The only place we thought Billy might be was hiding in his hotel room. It was the only rational thought. With that in mind, we bounded back down the stairwell, skipping as many steps as we could as we went. We piled through the emergency exit and headed down the slanted hallway on the fourth floor. We had nearly reached Billy’s hotel room when I stepped on something that made a loud *crunch*. I lifted my foot and found an empty candy wrapper. Sam stepped on an empty bag of potato chips and Charlotte on the greasy wrapper of a half-eaten cheeseburger. I scoured the hallway, the light fixtures flickering. Down the corridor was a trail of empty wrappers.

“Billy,” I swallowed, my throat becoming dry.

The three of us followed the trail of empty candy wrappers, rounded the corner and found the restroom door ajar. We could hear gagging and then a terrible splatter, then more gagging followed by another splatter. The light fixtures continued to flicker on and off as we made our way into the restroom. There we found Billy on his knees with his head inside the porcelain toilet bowl, while the Shadow Man hunched over him.

The Shadow Man spoke in Billy’s voice, “*You’re not a cute fat boy...you’re an ugly fat boy...lose the weight...throw it up...you can’t gain a pound or Charlotte with think you’re just as disgusting as everyone else does...you mother thinks you’re fat...your friends think you’re fat...don’t become your obese father sitting on the couch stuffing your fat face with more sweets...*”

Billy choked, and then he spewed more into the toilet. His eyes were red, his mouth quivering from the amount he vomited.

The Shadow Man continued, “*Your weight is your burden, Billy...its always been your burden...not just for you, but for everyone else...who could love a fat boy like you? Not your mother...not Charlotte...keep stuffing your face and you won’t be able to walk anymore...you’ll become your father...your fat, fat father...bedridden you’ll become...you can’t have children...you can’t even get your enormous body up off the couch to do your own laundry...your mother will be stuck caring for you the same she cared for your pathetic useless father...you like diabetes? So did your father...they had to chop off his legs to save his pointless life!*”

Billy spewed again, and again, crying harder the more he did.

“Billy,” Charlotte made her way through the restroom, then dropped to her knees beside him, “Billy, what’s going on?” She combed his hair back. “Are you sick?”

He turned to her with tears in his eyes. “I don’t want to be him.”

His pain became her own. “Who don’t you want to become?”

“My dad,” his whole face puckered up. “Little boys are supposed to want to grow up to become their dad...they aren’t supposed to grow up wanting to be someone else...*anyone* else. I don’t want to be him, Charlotte...I’m so scared that one day I’ll grow up to be just like him...”

Sam and I stood in the doorway, supporting Billy from a distance while allowing Charlotte to take the reigns.

She inquired, "You don't want to become your dad?"

He shook his head, his red face wet with tears. "He was always there, but he was never there. He was constantly on the couch, sitting there stuffing his face and watching television. I just wanted him to get up and play with me, to go to my rugby games, to help me with my homework, but he only sat there eating himself to a slow death. In the middle of the night I would find him passed out in another food coma. I thought he could be dead so I would check his pulse. I was only nine years old." He went on, body shaking the more he did. "He got bigger and bigger. He developed diabetes, but that still didn't stop him. The only time he ever fetched me out of my bedroom was after he was out of junk food. He would send me out of the house to buy him more crap. What was I supposed to do? He was my dad. I didn't make him happy. Food made him happy. And so I got it for him. He lost his legs...and then he died...I helped kill my dad." He cried, "I don't want to be him, Charlotte. I can't. I can't be him."

Charlotte let him fall into her arms, crying. "You're not him. Billy, you're not your father."

"How can you know I won't become him? How do you know I won't do what he did and ruin your life like he ruined my mother's?"

Charlotte rocked him in her arms. "Billy, it wasn't the food that killed your father. It was depression. He was depressed. He couldn't fight his shadow, but you Billy can. Do you know why that is?"

He shook his head.

"Because you have me, and I'm not going to stand aside and allow you to ever spiral out of control. You hear me? Do you hear me, Billy? You have *me*."

He pulled back to look her in the eyes. "I don't want to hurt you."

"Just be happy with me and you won't."

They shared a smile, and then they fell back into each other's arms. From the doorway, Sam and I watched the Shadow Man disintegrate into thin air.

I suggested, "Come on guys. Let's get out of here."

Now back together again, the four of us left the restroom and set off for the hotel lobby, during which we filled Billy in with what we believed was the answer to Dr. Jabberwocker's riddle. We rode the elevator back down to the lobby. The doors retracted, and the elevator began to descend through what was left of the building. We were only four floors up, and yet it felt like an eternity. I just wanted to get out of this building as fast as possible. The walls felt like they were closing in on us. It felt like the Shadow Man had me by the throat.

Ding.

The elevator opened. My friends went rushing out into the lobby, Billy leaping over the scarlet sofa as he and the girls bolted for the fireplace. I went after them, but stopped right outside of the gleaming elevator doors.

"Collin. Collin, don't leave."

My eyes widened. "Adam?"

I went to the start of the hallway lined with black doors and curious animal paintings. The light fixtures flickered again. One moment the hallway was cast in darkness, the next it was illuminated. And then I saw Adam standing there, his bald head and once beautiful face riddled in so many brutal sutures.

I trembled, "Adam?"

He didn't speak in Adam's voice, but my own. "*Are you going to leave me again?*" He took a step toward me, and then I retreated a step back. "*You're scared of me, aren't you? You're*

scared of me because you think I'm a monster...I thought you were different...I thought you were different than everyone else..."

My legs were so weak I thought I might collapse. "It's not you. I wish it was, but it's not."

"It is me!" he cried. "Don't you remember me, Collin? I'm the one you left behind...I gave you my heart and you left me..." he started to shout, "I'm the reason you're still alive...me...I am...you would be dead if it wasn't for me...and now you so easily move on...like I meant nothing to you...you think I loved you, but I just pitied you...you were nothing to me but a bird with a broken wing...how could I have loved you—you, some scrawny little nobody? I could hardly stand to look at you...you're pathetic...you're nothing...why do you think Aaron left? He's not missing...he was never missing...he was just trying to get as far away from you as he possibly could."

"Collin!"

I spun around, and there were my friends gathered in the mouth of the fireplace, eyes wide with terror.

"Run!"

I turned back to Adam, but it wasn't him anymore. It was now a seven foot tall humanoid figure, black as night with beady red eyes, his limbs so long his claws dragged across the needle-felt carpet. The Shadow Man threw his body into a deafening scream so high-pitched it shattered the mirror mounted above the fireplace. My friends threw up their arms to shield themselves from all the showering glass. The Shadow Man charged. I took off through the lobby running for my life. The Shadow Man rammed into the wall, then took off after me again, his screams vibrating my bones as I fled for the fireplace. My eyes were open, set on my friends, but in my mind I was holding onto my happy thoughts to keep the Shadow Man away. I had no control over my thoughts. Happy moments just filtered through my mind. *I was back on the first night in the Langham Hotel. I was tucked in bed, Aaron creeping through the shadows and screaming, 'boo!'. The memory shifted. We were in our hotel room, laughing through the night while playing with Bertie Botts Beans. And then a new memory surfaced. I was taking pictures of Aaron on the Alice statue in Central Park, then dining with him at Sal's Lil Cucina, the memory then forming into one of us playing in the pool.* My time with Aaron was happy and pure. Death had not tainted those memories as they did with Adam. The Shadow Man could not twist happy thoughts. As long as I held my thoughts on Aaron, the Shadow Man had no control over me.

The Shadow Man lifted the grand piano and chucked it across the hotel lobby, then belched a scream so shrill the chain holding up the crystal chandelier snapped, and the chandelier came crashing down on the lobby's marble floor, right on the initials of the hotel. I leapt over the chandelier and dove into the fireplace after my friends, broken glass crunching at my hands and knees.

"Go! Go! Go!"

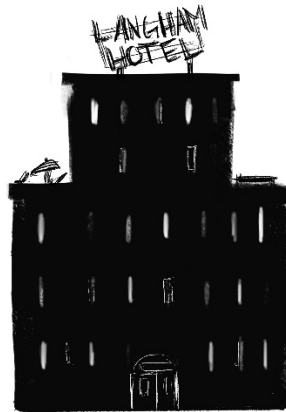
We scrambled into the dark when suddenly I felt a hand snatch my ankle. It tugged on me hard, my face smacking the floor of the hearth. The Shadow Man dragged me back. I clawed the floor as I was hauled through the soot and broken glass. In one last desperate attempt, I snatched up a jagged shard, gripping it so tightly I drew blood from my filthy palm, just as the Shadow Man ripped me out of the fireplace and suspended me into the air. He hung me above his mouth and screamed the pain of all those he ever tormented. I thrust the shard of broken mirror right through his beady red eye. He dropped me, and I hit the marble floor while the Shadow Man

lurched and flailed and continued to shriek in agonizing pain. He collapsed, his shadowy face hitting the floor with a thud.

I stared into his one good red eye, and he looked into mine. That's when I knew. "You can't hurt me anymore." Specks of broken glass fell from my clothes as I rose. "I'm not scared of you."

The Shadow Man screamed, but his scream was weak. He tried it again, but the shriek came out in a whisper that almost made me laugh. The Shadow Man was once seven feet tall, but it was shorter now, and the longer I stood there, the smaller the shadow shrunk. He went to grab my leg, but I just stepped back and let his claw flail and flounder for me to no avail.

"You'll never hurt me again." I ducked through the fireplace, the Shadow Man flopping and thrashing as he kept failing to rip the blade of glass out of his eye. I dropped to my bloody hands and scraped knees, and then went right back through the darkness. This time, I wasn't afraid of the dark.



Chapter 31

I trudged through the thick and dank darkness, feeling old cobwebs sticking to my face the deeper I ventured. It was too dark to see, and so I felt for the soot-coated walls to help guide me along my way. I shouted for my friends. No one answered. They mustn't have known I was left behind. I felt the bones of a deceased rat crumble beneath my bloody palm, but I pushed on through the dark. Soon I could hear music, a faint melody playing with no words. Then chatter, soft and indistinct. There was a murmur of people talking. I couldn't make out any words, but I could hear them. I crawled deeper into the abyss, and a dim light shone in the distance. The darkness wilted as I emerged out of the hearth. I was back in a hotel lobby. Except, it wasn't the lobby of the Langham Hotel.

I stood up, so shocked I forgot to breathe. I was in a hotel—a modern, very state of the art hotel. And it was loud and bustling. Three young clerks were checking-in new arrivals at the front desk. A musician played the piano in an intimate lounge filled with chattering patrons all enjoying a tasty beverage and exotic hors d'oeuvres, all while fancy waiters went winding through the cocktail tables. The elevator *dinged*, and a sharply dressed bellhop emerged from inside. He rolled a luggage cart across the lobby. The cart was piled with designer luggage owned by the middle-aged couple following the bellhop out of the front door that automatically opened for them. The bellhop then loaded their luggage into the trunk of a taxicab pulled up along the

curb of the roundabout driveway. On one side of me, I saw into the fitness center through glass walls, watching people exercising on treadmills. To the other side of me, through another set of glass walls, was a room filled with charging stations where some guests worked on their laptops, charged their cellphones, and played on their tablets, all enjoying the amenity of free WiFi. A pair of young siblings then passed me with beach towels draped over their shoulders, sharing excitement over an epic waterslide they couldn't wait to go down. I overheard a group of other students visiting from the Art Institution of Louisiana, stationed out of New Orleans, on the same program my classmates and I were on but with a sister school. The five students huddled around a pamphlet of city attractions, all excitedly speculating what the next five weeks would be like in New York City. In my daze and head-splitting confusion, I spotted Billy ordering a beer at the sports bar with his fake ID, then Charlotte looking over the menu posted in front of the spa in plexi glass, and Sam joining her to look over the reiki and chakra realignment.

I touched my forehead, my face smudged with soot. "I feel like I've just fallen into an episode of the *Twilight Zone*."

Billy joined me with his beer. "There you are, Collin. You finally made it." He took a swig and then burped from the fizzy carbonation. "Would you like a sip? I assure you, it does wonders for the headache."

Charlotte came over gasping, "They have a massage parlor! Do you know how badly I've wanted a massage?"

Billy took another swig. "All you had to do was ask. I'd be happy to oblige, my feisty little firecracker."

Sam joined us now with her nose in a pamphlet. "The hotel offers yoga, meditation, and even private crystal healing sessions—they have everything!"

I threw up my bloody, soot-stained hands. "You guys, where are we?!"

Billy downed what was left of his beer. "We haven't the slightest idea, I'm afraid."

Sam stuffed the pamphlet away into her back pocket. "We arrived an hour before you did, but we're all just as confused as we were when we first crawled out of the fireplace."

"Not as dazed as we were, but still quite baffled," Charlotte added.

"You arrived an hour ago?" I scratched my head, realizing then how dirty my scruffy hair was. "But that doesn't make any sense...I was just barely behind the three of you..."

"You guys finally made it!"

The four of us spun around. There was Aaron with a bright smile. He was wearing a snug pair of colorful swim shorts, a hotel towel draped over his bare shoulder, and smelled tropical from all the sun tan lotion he had smeared into his skin.

"Aaron?!"

We all raced to hug him, the five of us crammed in one big squeeze. We released him only because we realized he couldn't breathe.

Aaron couldn't stop smiling. "You guys aren't going to believe this. I have so much to tell you." He scoured the waiting lounge filled with patrons enjoying their cocktails, and spotted a cushioned booth in the far back, vacant and secluded. "Come on! This way."

We all scooted into the booth. I didn't even realize Aaron was carrying around his tablet until he propped it up in the middle of the table.

I couldn't wait any longer. I exploded with questions. "Aaron, what's going on? Where are we? Is this where you've been all this time?"

“There’s so much to explain. I’m still trying to figure it all out myself.” Aaron dove into an explanation, “It all starts with the Langham Hospital for the Mentally Impaired. Billy’s story was right.”

“Told you. Read the story on the internet, I did.” Billy raised a hand to catch the waiter walking by. “Another beer, please.”

Charlotte put in a request as well, “I wouldn’t say no to a sparkling water with a lemon wedge on the side.”

Aaron began, “Dr. Edgar John Jabberwocker built the hospital back in 1865 to house the mentally disturbed, but more especially, to search for the cure to madness. He created his riddle for those who thought they had been cured, but there was only ever one patient who did solve it—the original Ruby Hart. It wasn’t discovered until early *this* century, that the riddle led to a secret tunnel beneath the hotel. The entrance was the fireplace, and then the tunnel connected to a sewer system that led Ruby Hart to Central Park near the Alice statue.” He spotted me in the sea of puzzled faces. “Collin, that was the monument we visited together. It was suspiciously placed there back in 1959. Supposedly, there’s a manhole near the statue that Ruby Hart came out of after she solved the riddle in 1903.”

“But the tunnel didn’t lead us to Central Park. It led us to,” Sam threw a glance around the modern lobby, finding the name of the hotel plastered behind the check-in counter, “*the Beaumont Hotel?*”

Aaron finished, “That’s because the Langham Hotel was demolished back in 2004 and replaced with a new hotel called ‘the Beaumont’.”

The four of us spluttered, “*What?!*”

“There’s more.” Aaron continued his story, “There’s a conspiracy about the Langham Hotel...I guess you can say it’s more like an urban legend. All around the world, since the beginning of time, people have witnessed apparitions—ghosts. I’ve read loads of stories and watched tons of documentaries about it. Some people swear they saw a deceased loved one visiting them at their bedside in the middle of the night. Others have spotted someone they loved and lost sitting in the backseat of their car that they happened to spot in their rearview mirror, only to turn back and their loved one is gone. Other times—”

Sam cut him off, “We get it. We know what ghosts are.”

Aaron got himself back on track. “What is less common, but equally a phenomenon, are the apparitions of objects.”

“I’m lost,” I said.

“Not as lost as I am, I’m sure,” said Billy as the waitress returned with his second beer.

Aaron took a different direction and revealed, “Abraham Lincoln’s ghost train.”

“Okay, now *I’m* super lost,” Sam admitted sourly.

“Wait a second, I’ve heard of that urban legend.” We all turned and found Charlotte enjoying her sparkling water. “My dad loves urban legends. The one about Abraham Lincoln’s ghost train happens to be his favorite.”

I urged her, “Go on. Tell us.”

She took a sip and then dove right into it, “Six days after his assassination, a steam train took Abraham Lincoln’s body from Washington D.C. to Lincoln’s home in Springfield, Illinois, stopping in cities along the way for people to come and pay their respects.”

“That’s a little disturbing,” Sam noted.

“I thought so too.” Charlotte went on, “The urban legend goes as such, every year since, on the anniversary of his death, the steam train takes the same route. Eyewitnesses have reported seeing the locomotive, and it always matches the same description as the one that transported Abraham Lincoln’s body.”

“Like the ghost ship.” Our attention swept across the table and settled now on Billy. He lowered his beer and said, “It’s an urban legend shared by sailors out at sea. Supposedly, a wrecked ship has been witnessed sailing in the distance on especially foggy nights. That’s an urban legend told for centuries.”

Still baffled, I asked Aaron, “What do these urban legends have to do with the Langham Hotel?”

He divulged, “The Langham Hotel is a phantom building.”

“A what?” I spluttered.

Billy leaned toward me. “He said a phantom building.”

“I heard him, I just can’t wrap my mind around it.”

“This will explain everything much better.” Aaron hit the play button on his tablet, and a video he had pulled up started.

A young couple appeared on the screen. I recognized them. Their names were Darren and Christine. They were renowned social media influencers who filmed themselves visiting locations of paranormal activity, from ghosts, to skin-walkers, to the sites of UFO crash landings. The video began with the couple standing on the sidewalk outside of Central Park, the two of them bundled up in long heavy coats. They held their cellphone raised and with the screen directed at themselves. They were front and center with towering skyscrapers in their backdrop brightly lit against a starless night.

Darren began, “Hey guys, welcome back to an all new episode of *Our Haunted Honeymoon*, featuring yours truly, Darren and Christine.”

Christine took over the screen. “Tonight we invite you to New York City where we explore the century old story of a mad doctor who tortured and tormented his patients in search of the cure for madness.” She went on to tell the story of the original Ruby Hart, my great-great grandmother, how she was wrongly committed to the hospital, and how she, above all odds stacked against her, cracked Dr. Jabberwocker’s riddle and freed herself from the building. Christine spoke of Dr. Jabberwocker, his early childhood raised by an abusive father and a mentally disturbed mother, and how he took his own life by hanging himself up on the rooftop of his building. She then dove into the story of the building renovation—the birth of the Langham Hotel. All seemed lost for the building, until the rise of a star. Mary Sullivan would take over as the hotel’s entertainment, honoring her great grandmother by giving herself the stage name: Ruby Hart. The Langham Hotel saw its prime in the following three decades, just to be demolished during the turn of the century. The Langham Hotel was torn down to rubble, and with the same bricks that built the Langham Hospital for the Mentally Impaired, the Beaumont was born like the birth of a phoenix from its own ashes.

Darren wrapped up the story after Christine’s lengthy recap with a chilling anecdote, “Some New Yorkers have said, that on certain nights of the year, when the fog rolls in from the harbor, that if you look up into the cluster of skyscrapers, and if you squint just right, you can still see the neon red lights of the Langham sign blazing in the sky.”

Aaron ended the video. “The Langham Hotel is what is known as a phantom building. Think of it like a radio. We’re on one station, and the Langham Hotel is on another.”

Charlotte dropped her cheek into her open palm. "I can't even begin to comprehend what any of this means."

Oddly enough, it made a bit of sense to me. "It just means we somehow got stuck on the wrong radio station."

"Exactly," said Aaron. "And we aren't the only ones either. We're just the lucky ones."

"What do you mean by that?" Sam inquired.

Aaron explained, "Every once in a while, throughout the last decade, some new crazy person is found wandering the streets of New York City, screaming and blundering some nonsensical talk about the Langham Hotel...how they checked-in and were terrorized by some kind of a Shadow Man."

The rest of us shared a look.

I remembered, "The first day of class...Professor Skeffington took us to Central Park...on the way I saw a homeless man in the alley...he warned me...*beware those with weakened minds*." And then I realized, "He must have gotten stuck in the Langham Hotel too...but he wasn't as lucky as we were. He must have been captured by the Shadow Man, ravaged of his sanity, then thrown back onto the streets of New York City."

Sam's eyes grew with alarm. "Professor Skeffington! She's still stuck in the Langham Hotel! We have to go back for her!"

Aaron shot it down, "There's no way to get back. Believe me, I tried. Ever since I solved the riddle, I've been trying to get back to you guys. It's no use. The fireplace is sealed up from this side."

And then we heard our chaperone, and we all lifted out of the booth to have ourselves a peek across the lobby. The bellhop was rolling in a new pile of luggage, and Professor Skeffington, donned in a colorful dashiki, strolled alongside him.

"Five weeks," she relayed. "We'll be staying at the Beaumont Hotel for five weeks. My students should be arriving shortly. When they do arrive, can I ask you to please inform them that class will start tomorrow morning promptly at 8am."

We sat back in the booth, flopping into the cushions as we all tried to make sense of it. Looking at my friends was like looking into a mirror. Our faces were equally puzzled, and so it was like looking into the baffled eyes of our own reflection.

Aaron relayed, "Time seems to work differently on this radio station."

Charlotte scooted out of the booth. "I need to shower."

"I need a nap." Billy scooted after her.

"Both sound great to me." Sam joined them.

"Wait!" I squeezed my head. "Are we really supposed to just act like everything that just happened to us is okay? Are we just going to move on and start this whole class trip over?"

Billy downed what was left of his beer. He then patted me on the shoulder. "No point trying to figure it all out, mate. It's enough to make anyone a little mad."

The three of them then headed off to check in at the front desk. I felt about ready to pull out my own hair. I didn't just need a massage. My brain needed a massage! My head was spinning. My thoughts were swirling. How was any of this real?

"Do you want to check out our new hotel room?" Aaron took a keycard out of his pocket and flashed it. "We got a jacuzzi tub."

That sounded like just what I needed. "Yeah. Sure. Let's go."

"Let's get you your own keycard first."

We scooted out of the booth, and made our way through the lobby loud with music and the chatter of a tourist group so thrilled to be in such a unique and magical city. We waited in line at the front desk. One clerk was helping Charlotte check-in, the other was assisting Sam, and the last one was answering Billy's questions about what was stocked in his suite's minibar. We were up next.

"I'd be happy to assist you over here." The clerk summoned us over after he logged in on a vacant computer.

I followed Aaron over to the clerk. Aaron put in a request, "I'm already checked-in, but my roommate just arrived. Any chance we could get one more keycard? It's for room 427."

"Certainly." The clerk went typing away on his keyboard.

The clerk was well dressed, fancy suit, a neat tie, perfectly groomed curly hair. It wasn't until closer inspection that I realized he was dressed sharper than all the other clerks, and then I came to the conclusion that he must have been the hotel manager. The bright overhead lights then hit his name tag, and the gold plate glistened in my eye.

"Mr. Hinkley?" I said.

"Yes, that's right. I'm the hotel manager."

I inquired, "Any relations to the former manager of the Langham Hotel?"

"Well, yes. That was my father." He handed me a keycard that was now activated and linked to my specific hotel room. "I'm sorry to say he passed away thirteen years ago, in February of 2004, shortly after he was let go from his position. He proudly served the Langham Hotel nearly all of his life, and didn't leave the building until the day it was scheduled to be torn down. Oddly enough, he died on the very same day, at the very same hour that the Langham Hotel was demolished. There was no cause of death, but I always imagined he died from a broken heart. After all, that building was his life."

Aaron sympathized, "I'm sorry for your loss."

Meow.

I peeked over the counter, and found a familiar grey Maine Coon curled up beside Mr. Hinkley's computer. The marble countertop pressed hard against my belly as I leaned in for a closer look. I spotted the cat's black collar and the shiny gold tag that hung from it, his name engraved across it.

"It can't be."

Mr. Hinkley gave the cat a good hard scratch under his chin. "Allow me to introduce to you both our hotel cat. His name is Cheshire. He's been with us since the very beginning. He was a stray, found in the rubble of the Langham Hotel. He made friends with the construction crew while they were building the Beaumont, and after its unveiling, the hotel staff decided to keep Cheshire on staff. He comes and goes as he pleases, but he always eventually finds his way back." He chuckled, "Probably because our chef feeds him plenty of tuna and salmon prepared in our kitchen." Mr. Hinkley was then struck with an idea. "Would the two of you like for me to go ahead and make you a reservation? Our chef is superb and the roasted salmon is delicious. It's a perfect setting for an intimate date."

Aaron and I shot a good few feet apart. "We're not together!"

Mr. Hinkley apologized, "Oh, forgive me. I'm mistaken. I just thought...well, I guess I just thought wrong."

"Very wrong," said Aaron.

"Very, *very* wrong," I added.

Aaron peeked over the counter while smacking his lips. “But that restaurant...how delicious is that roasted salmon?”

Mr. Hinkley enticed, “It practically melts in your mouth.”

Aaron turned to me. “Friends can enjoy an intimate meal together at a fancy restaurant, can’t they?” He glanced down and was reminded he was in nothing but his swim shorts. “...and dressed for the pool.”

I glanced down at my own ensemble, my filthy clothes stained with soot, dirt, and blood. My stomach then grumbled. “I don’t see why not.”

“That settles it then.” Mr. Hinkley picked up the phone and began to dial. “Why don’t you two head over there now? I’ll call the hostess and have her set a table for two.” He gestured across the lobby to a charming little restaurant scattered with little tables draped with white table clothes, topped with fine china and tea candles flickering. The name of the restaurant hung above it in standalone letters, lit with neon red bulbs—*Through the Looking-Glass*.

Aaron and I enjoyed a meal together. Aaron ordered the roasted salmon and I ordered tortellini. We were nice and full by the time Aaron led me upstairs to our new hotel room. It was a very beautiful room. There were two large beds, each one topped with a fluffy white blanket, and stacked with three rows of plump pillows. A huge smart television was mounted to the wall. We each had our own nightstand that housed a charging station for all our electronics. The restroom was my favorite. There was a marble-topped vanity, a shower installed with a rainfall shower-head, and a whirlpool bathtub large enough to accommodate many people at once. Aaron ambled across the suite and tugged back the drapes, revealing a marvelous view of Central Park.

My face beamed with a smile. “Now this I could get used to.”

I then spotted a pair of cotton bathrobes hanging off a hook behind the front door. I ripped one off and then wrapped myself up in it, and then I threw myself onto my bed. The mattress was so soft I actually bounced a little.

Aaron swung open the walk-in closet. “Look. All our things are here. I found our duffle bags sitting here in the closet after I arrived a few days ago.”

I melted into the mattress. “I don’t even want to try to understand how that’s possible.”

Aaron leapt up onto his bed, jumped, and then flopped back onto the mattress. He then fetched the television remote from on top of the nightstand. “What do you want to watch?”

“I don’t care. We have a tv...we have a tv that works. I could kiss the screen.”

Aaron giggled as he turned it on. A movie popped onto the screen—*Mrs. Doubtfire*. We shared a laugh. Aaron was about to change the channel, but it was already too late. We were hooked. And so we laid in bed watching the film over again for what seemed like the 100th time. After the movie, while the credits played, Aaron turned on his Nintendo Switch while I took the best bath I had ever taken in my entire life. I just sat there soaking in the hot water, the jets massaging my back. My skin was just as pruny as an old man by the time I climbed out. I dried myself off with a soft towel, and then I slipped into a clean pair of pajamas. I was just about to crawl back into bed when my laptop buzzed. I went into the walk-in closet and fetched my laptop out of my duffle bag. My dad was calling. I couldn’t believe it. I had reception again!

I carried the laptop back over to my bed, passing Aaron as he hopped into the shower to give me some privacy. Once there, I accepted the call. My dad and Maureen were cozied up in the kitchen nook at Chateau Du Coeur, sipping hot cocoa in their matching plaid pajamas.

“Hey, Dad. How’s it going?”

Dad went right into scolding me, “Collin, I’m glad to know you landed safely in New York.” He fumbled with his cellphone, handling it so amateur-like that I wasn’t even sure he was aware that he had video called me. “Your plane landed *three* hours ago! Maureen and I have been calling you ever since. We’ve been up worried sick about you.”

I laughed over the lightheadedness that came with déjà vu, “Dad, lift *up* your phone. I can only see your necks.”

He readjusted his phone, giving me a much better view of their faces.

“How’s it going, sweetheart?” I could see Maureen looking me over. “You look tired. Are you taking your anti-rejection medication?”

I recited, “I take them every day with breakfast. Never on an empty stomach. And I absolutely never miss a single day.”

“That’s good to hear,” she said.

“Collin,” Dad still clung to his argument, “We’re paying a lot of money for you to go to college, and even more for this class trip to New York. The very least you can do is answer your phone when we call you. We are still paying for your cellphone, and so long as we’re paying, the least you can do is answer when we call you. We’re not asking a whole lot. Just every once in a while, let us know you’re still—”

I stopped him. After all, I heard this spiel before. “I remember, dad.” I’d caught him by surprise. “I remember what happened when mom took me to New York...back when I was four years old.” My throat constricted, but I forced the words out anyway, “I remember the bathtub.”

His face drained of color. “You remember?”

I nodded.

“How?” He looked so confused. “Collin, how did you suddenly remember after all these years? Did something happen?”

I tried to be as vague as possible. “I don’t know...maybe it’s just being back in this city...I can’t explain it. I just remembered.”

Silence, but then Maureen took Dad’s hand to support him. That seemed to give him enough strength to continue. “Collin, your mother loved you even more than I can express.”

I felt a sting in my eyes. “I know she did.”

“She was sick, Collin. Your mother was very sick.”

“I know that too.” I tried to be strong, but my body felt just about ready to fold into itself.

He went on, like he was finally free to share, “She was always a little quirky, but when she was off her medication she was...well, she wasn’t well.” Dad combed a hand through his salt and pepper hair, his wet eyes burdened by all the emotions he felt. “What she did to you...what she *almost* did to you...Collin, that wasn’t your mother...that was her illness. It took me many years to forgive her. It was difficult for me to accept, but with the help of Maureen, and a good therapist, I came to the understanding that your mother deserved forgiveness.” Even through the laptop’s screen I could feel how strongly he was looking at me. “It wasn’t her. Collin, I promise you, it was the illness.”

“I know it was. And I know why you kept it from me. You were just trying to protect me.”

Dad and Maureen shared a look. It was suspicious and telling. I knew that they were both burdened by another secret.

I pressed, “What’s going on? What was that look you two just gave each other?”

Maureen gave Dad’s hand another squeeze. “It’s time, William. It’s time he learns the truth.”

I felt my heart fall right into my belly. “The truth about what? I don’t know if I can handle another revelation after everything.”

“I’ll give you two some privacy.” Maureen stood and walked off the screen.

I started to get really nervous. “Dad...dad, what’s going on?”

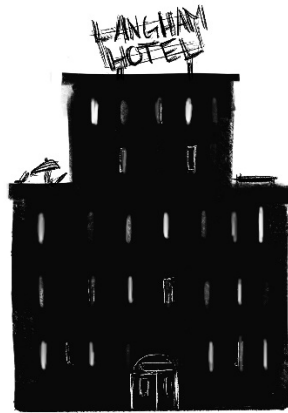
He began, “You’re right, Collin. I was just trying to protect you. But I think, even at four years old, you were trying to protect yourself.”

My forehead crinkled from his response. “What do you mean by that?”

“You blocked it out. You blocked all of it out.” He then dove into it, “After what happened, your mom was checked into a mental institution about 45 minutes outside of New York City, down in Lake Parsippany, New Jersey. We lived across the country in Los Angeles. In the beginning, we would fly out once, sometimes twice a month to visit her. She looked worse every time we saw her. She was deteriorating. Her mind, that is. Eventually, I couldn’t even recognize her. She looked like Lacie. She appeared to be the woman I fell in love with, but it was like her soul was gone. Her eyes seemed vacant...they seemed empty...” He took a second to catch his breath. “One day, a few days after we landed back in California, after yet another visit to see your mother, your Aunt Rosie dropped off your cousin Parker for a playdate. The two of you were playing with your action figures while watching an episode of *Power Rangers*. I was in the kitchen, making the two of you your favorite meal, peanut butter and jelly sandwiches with a side of Oreos. I overheard you tell your cousin that your mommy died...you told him she was sick and then she died...you even told Parker that we went to your mommy’s funeral in New York City. You made up this whole story, and then you started to believe it.”

I felt my whole body tingling. “Dad, what are you saying?”

“Collin,” he took a deep breath and then finished, “your mom is still alive.”



Chapter 32

I felt like I had just been punched in the stomach. My brain felt cloudy and my vision hazy, like I was stranded in a dream I couldn’t find my way out of. It felt like the whole world was crumbling around me. My laptop was in my lap, and my dad was on the screen, but I might as well have been looking into the eyes of a stranger.

“What did you say?” I could hear my own voice shaking. “Dad, what did you just say?”

He had been holding onto this secret for so long, that I could tell he felt some sense of relief by finally coming out with it. “Collin, you started to hate visiting your mom. All those trips we

took, they seemed to be counterproductive. After a year of flying back and forth to the east coast you started to not even recognize her. You even stopped calling her mom. The last time we visited her you even looked at me and asked me who she was. I thought that by letting you believe that your mom had died, I was protecting you...I wanted to protect your memories of your mom...I didn't want those good memories to be spoiled by her illness."

I yelled out in pain and heartbreak, "So you let me think my mom was dead?!"

Aaron popped out of the restroom. He was now in his cozy pajamas, but his hair was still wet from the shower. "Collin, is everything okay?"

"No..." my voice continued to shake. "No, it's not okay. Nothing is okay." I looked at the screen again. "All this time...all this time my mom has been locked up in some hospital? All this time, Dad...all this time you let me believe my mom was *dead*."

"I know you must think I'm a monster, but you have to understand that I was only trying to protect you."

"You weren't protecting me!" I outraged. "You were lying to me! My mom's alive?" I had to say it aloud again just so that I could both understand and accept what that meant. "All these years my mom has been *alive*?!"

Dad stressed, "Your mom is physically alive, yes, but mentally she has been gone for fourteen years."

"Don't give me this mental crap! You don't get to use her mental illness as an excuse for lying to me. Mom's alive?!" And then I realized, "I can go see her. You said she's in New Jersey. I want to see her."

"Collin—"

"You're not talking me out of this. She's my mom and she's alive. I'm going to see her whether you like it or not."

He gave in, "Then go ahead and see her, but just prepare yourself for what to expect. Your mom isn't the same woman who gave birth to you. Her mental illness has stripped her of her identity—of her soul. She will never be the same woman again, so in a way she has died." He warned me, "Collin, seeing your mother will change you. It will change the way you think about her...the way you remember her...if you want to see your mother, I will give you the address of the facility she's been living at, just be prepared that seeing her might spoil the memories you have of her forever."

I thought about it. I saw my dad's point. Really, I did. I just didn't think I could live with myself knowing that I let this opportunity pass me by without taking advantage of it. And so I determined, "I want to see her."

Five days flew by. During this we concluded art week all over again. I had to wait until the weekend before I could sneak off to New Jersey. I couldn't believe that all along my mom was just a 45 minute drive away. I took the greyhound first thing Saturday morning, and Aaron, who had endured me flip-flopping back and forth all week long on my decision to visit her, offered to tag along to support me. 45 minutes had never felt so long. The greyhound eventually pulled off the freeway, and made its way through a green suburban city. The closer we got the more I could feel my anxiety kicking in. I focused on my breathing, taking in small breaths at a time, holding it in, and then letting it go slowly. Lately, it felt like I needed to let a lot of things go.

The bus finally pulled up to a little lake house. It was a type of bungalow in a quaint neighborhood filled with similar homes, all originally built as vacation homes for those who lived in the sky-rises back in New York City, but had become desirable to young couples starting

new families. Aaron and I exited off the greyhound, then stopped to face the bungalow. It was a charming little home. It was two stories, had a detached one car garage, and with close neighbors. Behind the bungalow was a beautiful sparkling lake, gentle waves lapping upon the pebbled-shore where the home sat only inches from. The home was modest, but cute. For a moment, I even imagined what it would be like to raise a family there. I then spotted a sign on the front porch. It read,

Liddell Home Healthcare
Hospice, Caregiving, & Mental Health Services

My feet were planted. They felt just as heavy as stone. I stood there staring at the home. Joggers had to maneuver around us, and then a biker had to swerve out of the way, all while a champagne-colored Toyota Prius honked its horn after becoming frustrated that we blocked the road.

Aaron apologized to them for the inconvenience, and then directed his attention back toward me. He found me frozen like a statue. “You don’t have to do this, you know? There’s no shame in turning back. No one would ever blame you. No one would even have to know.”

“No one, but myself.” My eyes remained fixed on the little bungalow, the motor boat propelling along the lake behind it, the gaggle of geese nestled in the bed of green grass in the neighbor’s front yard, the young couple balancing on the algae-coated rocks near the water to skip stones along the lake’s calm surface. It felt peaceful, and yet in my mind, I was screaming. “If I don’t go inside that house, I’ll regret it for the rest of my life.”

Aaron encouraged me with a smile. “You aren’t doing it alone. I’m right here.”

It was time. I unplanted my feet and began through the mulch that blanketed the front yard. Aaron followed close behind. We made it up a rickety porch where I knocked on the cloudy glass front door. A lovely woman soon answered the door with long greying red hair cascading all the way down to her lower back. She had a kind smile that gave me instant comfort.

She knew who I was. The sight of me left her close to tears. “Collin, it’s so good to finally meet you.” She gave me a hug, a hug so tight it was as though she missed me. “God, you look so much like her.” She released me so that she could wipe away the tears. “I’m sorry. You must think I’m crazy. I’m your mother’s sister. I’m your Aunt Susie.”

I was taken aback. “My Aunt Susie? But I thought you and my mom stopped talking years ago...before I was even born.”

“Right after you were born, actually. We had a falling out shortly after your baptism. I’m sure you don’t know this, but I’m your God Mother.”

“You are?”

Aunt Susie’s smile was broad, but terribly sad. “I am, sweetheart.” She pressed a hand against her chest, and then stole an extra breath. “It’s so good to see you.” She cupped her mouth to hide her trembling lips. “I’m so sorry. Please, come in.” She ushered Aaron and myself into the bungalow, taking us right into the kitchen where she had pastries waiting for us in the nook. “Help yourselves.” She gestured to the pastries. “After I found out you two were coming, I snuck off to the city to buy some goodies for you both to enjoy. It’s a fantastic restaurant called ‘Sal’s Lil’ Cucina’. They have the best cannolis in the tri-state area.”

“Thank you so much.” Aaron pulled out a chair and dropped into the seat, thereafter helping himself to a cannoli coated in dark chocolate.

I joined him. “You really didn’t have to do all that. I hope it wasn’t any trouble.”

“Please.” She didn’t want to hear a word of it. “I haven’t seen my nephew since he was only a few days old...the least I could do was drive 45 minutes away to pick up some pastries.” She fell right into it, “I’ll tell you, I couldn’t have been more surprised when I got that phone call from your father. I haven’t spoken to him in 18 years. Your mom and I had some terrible falling out. To tell you the truth, I can’t even remember what it was all about. It seems so silly now...such a waste of time.”

I picked the chocolate chips out of my cannoli. “How is she?”

Aunt Susie seemed as though she were carrying the weight of the world on her shoulders. “Collin, I wish I could tell you that your mom is doing well, but I don’t want to lie to you. She’s just not there, you know?” She reached across the table to touch my hand. “Sometimes...very rarely, but sometimes, when we’re alone together...out of nowhere, it’s like her soul jumps back into her body and she’s my sister again. She’ll say something like, “Susie, do you remember when we were little girls, back when we were living in the Langham Hotel? Mommy was working upstairs in the clubhouse, and you and I snuck off with Rosie to steal a gallon of ice cream from the hotel restaurant when Chef Mimsy was distracted? Mommy came back to the penthouse to find the three of us circled around the toilet throwing up. She thought we were possessed.” Aunt Susie then shared another incident of when my mom was lucid, “Or just the other day, when we were watching an old rom com, and a trailer came out for the new *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers* movie. She said, ‘Collin loves the Green Ranger. That one is his favorite.’” Aunt Susie’s eyes teared up. “And then she’s gone again.” She reached for an Italian cookie and broke off a sliver. “I guess we’ll never know where she goes off to.”

“Aunt Susie, what happened after...well, after my mom lost her mind?” I said for a lack of better words.

“After the bathtub?”

I nodded.

Aunt Susie revealed, “She was committed to a mental institution. She was there for about a year. That was the facility where you and your father would go to visit her. After your grandmother passed away—she’s probably rolling in her grave from me saying the word aloud—after Ruby Hart passed away, I decided to change my life. I turned my home into a healthcare facility and had your mother move in with me. I’ve taken in a few other patients over the years, but mainly it’s just been your mom and I.”

“Can I see her?”

“She’s out back on the terrace. Go on ahead, Collin. Your mom’s been waiting for you.” Aunt Susie then got herself up to rummage through the refrigerator for a jug of milk. She poured Aaron a glass. “Don’t worry about your friend. I’ll keep him well fed and entertained.”

Aaron lifted a half-eaten éclair. “You got anymore if these bad boys?”

“I’ve got plenty.”

I scooted out of my chair and headed through the kitchen and out the back. Aunt Susie was already teaching Aaron a new card game. He bet her he’d do the dishes if he’d lost to her, and she bet ordering takeout for everyone if she happened to lose instead. It was all just noise in the background. I went through the bungalow, so slowly I felt like I was a baby crawling. I opened the back door at the end of the living room, stepped out onto the terrace, then froze in the doorway. My mom was out there in a wheelchair, her long red hair was lighter and washed out in the years since I’d last seen her. Her wheelchair was parked at the railing. She was so still and

so emotionless. Her eyes, empty as they were, stared out across the lake's calm surface. It was peaceful and serene.

I let go of a heavy breath, my words releasing with it, "Hi, Mom."

She didn't acknowledge me. She just sat in her wheelchair gazing out across the still water. 14 years she hadn't seen me. 14 years and she couldn't even look at me. There was no emotion, no expression, not even a simple 'hi' back. There was nothing. Nothing never felt so loud. Nothing never felt so hurtful. Nothing never felt so lonely before. I had this desire. Crazy as it seemed, I wanted to grab and shake her. *'Look at me! I'm your son! Your son is here! Don't you care?! I'm here, mom! I'm here! Look at me!'* But all that pain remained in my head, though felt in my heart like the sting of a sharp blade.

I tried again, "It's me, mom...it's Collin." I crossed the terrace, then dropped to my knees on the wood-planked floor so that I could look at her up close. I was so close. I was right there. I couldn't have been more in her face and yet she didn't even acknowledge me. She didn't look like a person, but rather an empty shell of a person. Her eyes were the same color as mine, but they were empty. They were so incredibly empty. "Do you remember me? Do you remember me, Mom?"

Nothing.

I wanted to remind her of who I was. I wasn't going to leave that bungalow until my mom knew who I was. "Do you remember when Dad thought you were at work, but you played hooky and pulled me out of school? You took me to the movie theater. It was one of those really fancy ones with the recliner chairs. There was even a button you could press on the armrest to call the waiter...I remember you bought this huge bucket of popcorn. I had to peek around it just so that I could watch the movie...I think it was *'The Grudge'*. Yeah, it was. You wanted to see it in the theatre and dad wouldn't go with you because he hates scary movies...so you took me, your four year old son." I was laughing from it, but my mom remained blank. "You thought I would be scared and so you went to cover my eyes, but by the end of the movie I was covering your eyes on the scary scenes. I wanted to protect you...I was supposed to protect you. I'm your Power Ranger...don't you remember, Mom? I'm your Power Ranger."

Nothing.

I picked my brain for another memory. I had it, "Or remember when you were in the basement developing film? You'd taken a bunch of pictures that day and you taught me how to develop the film in the black room. We were working until late in the night, eating Oreos until our tummies hurt. You told me," I looked into her empty eyes and saw nothing, "you told me that eyes were the windows into the soul."

Still, nothing.

I felt the urge return. I wanted to grab my mom and shake her. *'Why don't you remember me?! How could you forget your son?! Wake up! Snap out of it, Mom! Come back! How is this fair?! How is any of this fair?! Most boys get their mom, but mine was stolen from me by some cruel disease?! I hate this disease! I hate it! I hate it! I hate it! It wasn't fair! I want my mom! I want her back...'*

From the moment I stepped foot inside the bungalow, I had this wall built up around my heart—to protect it from my mom. The longer I stayed there, the more I felt the wall breaking. The bricks were loosening, but I couldn't let it fall. I couldn't let myself feel all of what would come from that wall being torn to the ground.

I had to speak my peace and leave before it was too late. “I just came to tell you that I’m sorry.” I felt the tears burning in my eyes, but I kept them back. After all, I wanted to be strong. I wanted to be strong for *her*. “I’m so sorry, mom.” I bit down on my lip to keep it from trembling. “I’m so sorry I couldn’t protect you...I’m your Power Ranger,” I could feel the tears, but I refused them to fall. “I was supposed to be your Power Ranger. I was supposed to protect you...you warned me *he* was coming...you warned everyone that *he* was coming for you...and I didn’t protect you from him. I couldn’t protect you from your *shadow*. I failed you, Mom. I failed you.” I reached for her long hair and played with it like I did when I was a little boy. “What happened that night in the bathtub...it wasn’t you...I know it wasn’t you.” I looked into her eyes. I couldn’t see anything there. I wanted to find something there—some spark of life, but there wasn’t anything to find. She was gone. She was looking right back at me, but I knew she was gone. There was nothing there. “I’m going to be alright.” My whole body, so near convulsing, wanted to give up and fold into itself. I wouldn’t let it. Not in front of her. Not in front of my mom. Not when she needed me most. “You don’t have to hold on for me anymore...I don’t want you to feel like you have to stick around for my sake...just to make sure I’m alright. I’m going to be fine.” I reached for her listless hand and squeezed it so tightly I feared I could break her. “If you’re ready, you can go...your little Power Ranger is going to be okay.” I tried to hug her, but there was nothing to hug me back. I peeled the necklace from around my neck, then secured it around my mom’s, leaving the hematite stone right at her chest. I then kissed her cheek. “I love you, mom.”

I didn’t want to cry. Not in front of her. I wanted her to know that everything was going to be alright. If I stayed there any longer I would break. And so I ducked out without another word.

I rushed through the bungalow and back into the kitchen where I found Aaron and Aunt Susie in the midst of a heated game of ‘Go Fish’. I interrupted them, “Aunt Susie, thank you for the pastries, and thank you for everything you’ve done for my mom. I’ll see around.”

She rose out of her chair. “You’re leaving already?”

“I’m sorry.” I came up with a lie, “I thought we would have more time, but Aaron and I have a project to finish up before Monday. We’re already really behind.”

Aaron’s eyebrows lifted. “We do?”

I was blunt, “Yes—we do.”

Aaron finally caught on. “Oh yeah. I forgot about that project.” He got up and joined me over at the front door.

Aunt Susie stopped us from opening the front door. “Wait, please. Before you leave, I have something for you.” She went to the kitchen counter where an old shoebox was left. She claimed it and then passed it over to me. “These are some of your mother’s possessions. I thought you might want them.”

I took the shoebox. “Thank you.”

It was abundantly clear that Aunt Susie saw right through my lie. “I know it’s a lot. That is, seeing your mother like that. If you want to try again, please feel free to visit any time you like. The two of you are always welcome here.”

“Thank you, Aunt Susie.”

“And Collin,” she stopped me one last time, “if it’s not too much trouble, maybe I could come visit you both in the city before you leave?”

“Yeah..sure—that should be great.”

We left on that note. I hurried down the rickety porch, the gaggle of geese fleeing in a flight as I rushed into the street. I took a deep breath, 1...2...3... and then again, 1...2...3... welcoming the fresh air in my lungs. I was trying to convince myself that Aunt Susie's bungalow was too stuffy, that I had trouble breathing in there. It felt like I was choking inside her home. I tugged on the collar of my shirt to help me breathe better.

I went right over to the bus stop and read the posted schedule. "The next greyhound to New York City doesn't stop here for another four hours!" I scoured the street and located another bus stop posted across the way. I charged for it, Aaron following after me. "This bus won't arrive until midnight!" I ventured into my pocket for my cellphone.

"Collin."

I paid Aaron no mind as I flicked through my cellphone. "If we walk thirty minutes that way," I pointed in one direction lined with more bungalows edging the lake, "we'll hit another bus stop. The next greyhound stops there in just a little over an hour."

"Collin."

Again, I ignored him. "But that bus will take us to Brooklyn...and we don't want to go to Brooklyn..." I scratched my head while I searched the GPS for alternative routes back to the Beaumont Hotel. "We can call a taxi and have them drop us off at the Newark Penn Station and then take the Port Authority of NY and NJ back to the city where we can—"

"Collin."

I turned to him and exclaimed all my built up frustration, "What?!"

Aaron had this look in his dark eyes. It was a kind and sympathetic sort of look. He marched over to me and surprised me with a hug. All this time, I felt like I was holding onto a breath, and just then Aaron helped me release it. His hug tore down that wall around my heart in an instant. At first, my body started to shake. I'd been holding onto this cry, pushing it back behind that wall, and now it was free. I collapsed into Aaron's arms, weeping on his shoulder.

"It's okay. You can let it go." I was sure he could feel my body trembling against him. "Collin, just let it go."

It started with a shiver...a single tear, but it worked itself into a full on cry of agony, of heartbreak. I couldn't hold myself up any longer. My legs buckled. Aaron took me to the ground of the bus stop. He cradled me in his arms while I sobbed against his chest, crying my heart out. I was crying for me...I was crying for my mom...I was crying for that little four year old boy who would be forced to grow up without her. Bikers passed us, joggers had to go around us, and strangers in cars gave us strange looks when stopped at the streetlight. We must have looked odd. The world was alive and moving while I felt stuck in time. All these strangers passed us on the street, feeling awkward and uncomfortable by the 18 year old boy crying in the middle of the day at the bus stop, they were all so caught up in their own lives. I'm sure they were juggling work and figuring out what was for dinner, on top of getting the house ready as the in laws were expected to visit this holiday season. They couldn't have known that the boy crying at the bus stop was crying because he lost his mom. If only they knew, maybe they would have cared.

Four hours later, after I was all cried out, our greyhound picked us up. Aaron and I sat in the back of the bus, my red eyes exhausted from all the tears I had shed. Emotionally defeated, I leaned against the window and looked out at the approaching city, the cluster of so many skyscrapers. And then a song came on the overhead speakers. *'Listen baby, ain't no mountain high, ain't no valley low, ain't no river wide enough, baby. If you need me call me, no matter*

where you are. No matter how far, don't worry, baby. Just call my name, I'll be there in a hurry. You don't have to worry.'

Up near the front row, a passenger raised a hand adorned with glittering rings. "Driver, stop this vehicle immediately. This is my stop, after all." The woman stood, dressed in a glamorous flapper dress that clung tightly to her petite figure. She strutted down the aisle, dress sparkling, hips swaying, the dangling beads rocking as she went. Despite the posted 'no smoking' sign, the Flapper held a long bejeweled cigarette stick loosely between her fingers. She gave the driver a tip. "I'll take it from here, darling." And then she caught my eyes and smiled. "The show must go on, and darling, there ain't no show without a *star*." She took a hit from her cigarette, blew a thick cloud of white smoke away, and then descended the stairs and off the bus.

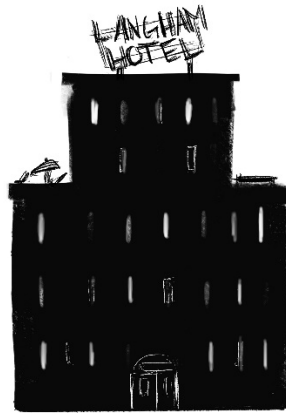
I peeked out of my window to catch another glimpse of her, but the Flapper was gone. She seemed to have vanished straight into thin air. The bus driver yanked on a lever, and the door folded closed. The greyhound then pulled from the curb and continued toward New York City. I tried to hold back my chuckles, but Aaron overheard them.

"It's good to hear you laughing, but what's so funny?"

I figured that some things were better kept a secret. "You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

I sat back and listened to the rest of the song. *'Remember the day I set you free I told you you could always count on me, darling. From that day on, I made a vow. I'll be there when you want me. Some way, somehow. 'Cause, baby, there ain't no mountain high enough...'*

We had just crossed over the George Washington Bridge when I received a phone call from Aunt Susie. She gave me the news. It seems that my mom had passed away shortly after we left the bungalow. It was as though she had waited all these years for that moment we shared, like her soul was clinging on just to make certain that I was going to be alright.



Chapter 33

Four weeks later, our class trip to New York City was finally coming to an end. My friends and I all passed each week, starting with art week and finishing off with creative writing where each of us was expected to write a short story with ourselves as the main character. It could be fiction or non-fiction. That was left for the reader to decide. My story was nearly finished, but I left it open ended. I wanted to hold off. After all, my story may have been ending, but it felt like my life was only just beginning. Professor Skeffington enjoyed that, and my finished project—or should I say, *unfinished* project, landed me an A+. Our time here was through, and we were

all now headed home to enjoy the holiday break. Sam was meeting her foster parents in Chicago, Illinois, where she was originally from. She was surprised to have been invited back. After all, she was 18 years old now, and so her foster parents had no further obligation to her. They wanted Sam to come back home, and that seemed to make her smile. On top of that, her short story seemed to inspire her. She was now working on her first novel. She planned to write the first few chapters during the break.

Billy was headed to Glasgow, Scotland to celebrate the holidays with his mom and two elder sisters. He planned on playing a lot of video games, but I did overhear him on the phone with his mom the other day, talking to her about how he wanted to chat with her about his dad, and how she made him feel after he died. Billy also promised Charlotte that he would video chat with her twice a day, first thing when he woke up and the last thing he did before bed. Aaron bet me that Billy would forget after three days. I bet against him as I thought Aaron was being a little too generous. I was sure Billy would forget on the flight home.

Charlotte was off to York, England where she planned on celebrating the holidays with her dad and his new girlfriend. Charlotte was excited to finally meet her. Not only because her dad couldn't stop raving about her, but because she was a casting agent for some top tier media group. Charlotte also had three sponsorships lined up this holiday break, a new podcast she was launching with Sam about unsolved mysteries, and had just gotten the next month's edition of *Vanity Fair*. She couldn't wait to start reading through it on the flight home.

Aaron was headed back home to Los Angeles, California. His mom and dad wouldn't be home to greet him, as they were on set up in Vancouver, Canada filming a new movie. Apparently, Aaron's father made it big as a playwright, and several of his published works were now being adapted into film. His parents were even producing one of them. They would be home in time for Christmas, so luckily Aaron wouldn't have to spend the holidays alone with their butler. I was shocked to learn that he had a butler. All this time together, and still Aaron was a mystery to me. He was excited to see his friend Kaeli, sleep in his own bed for a change, and Professor Skeffington, impressed with Aaron's work, had arranged a meeting for him with Woggle-Bug Animation Studio in Burbank.

I, however, was headed for France, back home to Chateau Du Coeur. I was excited to spend the holidays with my family and to see all the changes they had made to the castle. It had been a year since my parents had turned the place into a bed and breakfast. And now that the ski park was open, business was booming. That morning, when I was packing up my duffle bag, my dad surprised me on the phone. Our father and son trip to Italy had to be postponed until spring break. Maureen and my dad had a new business meeting coming up with some big shot investor who wanted to discuss opportunities in turning Chateau Du Coeur into a franchise. The idea was to find old historical buildings around the world, and renovate them into a bed and breakfast. Dad felt guilty for having to push back our trip, and so he arranged for my cousin Parker to come fly out for Christmas. I couldn't wait to see him. It would be his first time visiting Chateau Du Coeur. Parker was a horror film buff, and so I knew he was going to lose his mind the moment he walked through the doors of the gothic castle. I couldn't wait to show him all the nooks and crannies and secret passages. It was going to be a lot of fun.

The five of us enjoyed one last breakfast together down at the hotel's restaurant, *Through the Looking-Glass*. It was our last meal together. Aaron and Billy couldn't decide which pancakes to order. They all sounded so good. And so they decided that Aaron would order a stack of chocolate chip pancakes and Billy would order a stack of banana nut, and they would

split it. That nearly turned into a pancake eating contest. Charlotte ordered a protein shake, but Sam urged against it. After all, it was the last day of our class trip. It was time to celebrate. And so they put in an order of omelets with a pair of mimosas they purchased with the fake IDs Billy had found for them. I ordered coffee. Simple, just black. In memory of my mom, I also put in a request for an ice cream sundae. It reminded me of her. It reminded me of the night we stayed at the Langham Hotel, when she snuck me out of bed and we went off on an adventure through the building, just to sneak off to the hotel's diner where Chef Mimsy Browne prepared us ice cream sundaes. Sure, it wasn't traditionally a breakfast food. I even knew it would give me a tummy ache. But I didn't care. I looked around the table, the five of us laughing and joking while we enjoyed our breakfast. Who would have thought, when looking back on the first day we checked-in to the Langham Hotel, after many spats and countless arguments, that the five of us would turn out to be the very best of friends.

Billy and Charlotte were taking the same flight to Heathrow Airport, and so they shared a taxi to their first destination, Newark Airport. The rest of us had some time to spare, so we headed for the pool for the last time. Aaron wouldn't go down the waterslide because he didn't want to ruin his hair, but Sam and I did. She was free without her beanie, comfortable in her own skin. For the first time throughout our class trip, she let her burn scars show. Sam's taxicab showed up, and she was off to the airport to catch her flight to Chicago. Aaron and I took one last trip to Central Park, where we both climbed the Alice statue like children in a playground. This time, I didn't hide myself behind the camera. I wanted to enjoy it. I wanted to live it. Aaron's taxi would be arriving shortly, and so we headed back to the hotel lobby. We stood on the sidewalk of the roundabout driveway, beneath a canopy that read 'the Beaumont', looking out into the topiary garden that somehow managed to survive the destruction of the Langham Hotel, and then the reconstruction to the Beaumont. We sat on the curb, and while new guests came to check-in to the hotel, and others left after a wonderful stay, Aaron and I played a round of *Bertie Bott's Beans*. This time, neither of us were so lucky. It was the strangest thing. It was like we had gotten a rotten batch. Not a tolerable flavor in the bunch. But then we found a little note folded up in the tiny brightly-colored box tucked away underneath all the candy beans. We unfolded it. It read, 'Ha-ha,' signed Billy, Charlotte, and Sam. We laughed just as Aaron's taxicab pulled up. The driver came out of the cab to help Aaron with his luggage.

Aaron swung open the passenger door, and then stopped himself. He looked back over his shoulder, looking like he was ready to tell me something that had been weighing on his mind. "Hey, Collin?"

I felt a surge, a sort of uplifting of my spirits. "What's up?"

"Did you—" he cut himself off, thought about it, then changed the subject, "We'll stay in touch, right? You won't forget about me during holiday break?"

"I couldn't forget you," I tried to protect my feelings with sarcasm, "You're too annoying to forget."

"I'm annoying?" he giggled, "I'm not the one who—"

I stuffed him into the passenger seat before he got the chance to blurt out something that might embarrass me. "Have a safe flight! Miss you already! Try not to annoy anyone at the airport!"

And then the taxi pulled from the curb and headed into the bustling street, leaving me alone on the curb to watch it take Aaron away. I had the worst pain in my stomach. I passed it off for all the bad flavored *Bertie Bott's Beans* swirling around inside my belly, mixed with an ice cream

sundae for breakfast, and then headed through the revolving doors and back into the Beaumont Hotel.

I took the elevator back up to the fourth floor, and then began through the hallway. One moment, I was walking along the freshly polished wood floors through the modern hotel with bright lighting and accented walls. The next, I was walking along the needle-felt carpet of the slightly slanted hallway of the Langham Hotel, passing the quirky portraits of animals posed like humans hung on the wall lined with wallpaper filled with illustrations from the novel, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. It was enough to make anyone feel a little bonkers.

I reached my hotel room and then finished gathering what was left of all my belongings. I had just collected my toiletries from the restroom counter, when I turned and found a familiar Maine Coon curled up in a ball at the foot of my bed.

"Well, look who came to say goodbye."

I sat down beside Cheshire, and gave him some good scratches while he purred loudly. He then went swiping at the strings dangling from my hoodie.

"Now Cheshire, I'm going to be leaving soon. I don't know when or if I'll ever come back. Do me a favor while I'm gone." I spoke to the cat as though I were sharing a secret with him. "If you catch someone wander off into the Langham Hotel, maybe help them find their way back before it's too late. I wouldn't want anyone else to go through what my mom went through." Cheshire bit me. "Ouch!"

The cat leapt off the bed and bolted across the hotel room, then fled underneath Aaron's empty bed.

I rubbed my hand. "I was just trying to be sentimental. You didn't have to literally try to bite my hand off. Bad kitty! Bad, bad kitty...Cheshire?" I flattened my stomach against the carpet for a peek underneath the bed. Cheshire was purring on the shoebox Aunt Susie had given me. I reached under and claimed it, then dragged it out. I forgot all about the shoebox. That day was such an emotional one that I'd decided to save opening it for later. I just wasn't in the right headspace. I was about to open it for the first time when my cellphone rang.

"Mr. Winters?"

"Yes, that's me."

"This is Mr. Hinkley from the front desk. I just called to inform you that your taxi should be pulling up any minute now. Can I send the bellhop to fetch your things?"

"That's alright," I said. "Thank you. I'll be right down."

I ended the call and stowed my cellphone back into my pocket. I unzipped my duffle bag just to shove the shoebox inside. I then slung my duffle bag over my shoulder, retrieved my backpack, and then my camera. I worked the strap over my head. Cheshire joined me out of the hotel room, then went off to roam the building. He was such a curious cat. I chuckled to myself while I headed for the elevator. For the last time, I rode the lift down to the lobby, then waved goodbye to Mr. Hinkley as I went back through the revolving door. There, I posted myself up on the curb, looking out at the line of taxicabs leaving the roundabout driveway as one came up it. It was a battered old thing with weak headlights and a cracked windshield, coughing black smoke as it pulled up onto the property. I spotted the New York license plate still screwed on crookedly. It read, 'Ol' Bertha', and it left me with a broad grin.

The taxi pulled up to the curb and a familiar Italian man rolled down the window. "Hey kid, yous lookin' for a ride?"

"I sure am." I popped open the backseat, threw my duffle bag and backpack inside, and then scooted into the seat where a spring poked me in the behind.

Pasquale took a hefty bite out of a hot dog dripping with mustard and sauerkraut. "So," he began with a mouthful, "where you headed now?"

"Home," I said with a smile. "Could you drop me off at Newark Airport?"

He put the cab into first gear. "In dat case, yous better hang on."

We were off through the city, Ol' Bertha zipping in and out of traffic as she drove through the modern jungle packed with skyscrapers. I peered out of the window, already lost in all the twists and turns, but I didn't care. I knew where I was going, but I enjoyed the feeling of not knowing how to get there. I enjoyed the ride, and what a ride it was. Pasquale honked the horn and shouted out of his window, cursing someone out just for going as fast as the speed limit allowed. At least, I assumed he was cursing. It was always difficult to tell when he yelled in Italian. Ol' Bertha continued fast through the city, weaving through cars, zipping down avenues, turning sharp corners into boulevards so fast that she nearly tumbled right over.

Pasquale took the last bite out of his hot dog, mustard left smeared on his prickly face. "So kid, tell me, yous enjoy yous stay in da city?"

"I can't complain."

"Made some new friends, I sees."

"A couple," I said, watching the tall buildings zoom past my window.

"Life's too lonely without friends. Dey important. I tinks maybe even more important den family sometimes. Dey say blood is thicker den water, but I never tink so. Sure, it can be. Dats great if it is. But wat yous calls da person yous fall in love wit? Dey ain't blood, but dey da most important person in yous life. Wat is a spouse if not a friend."

I popped up an eyebrow. "Pasquale, what are you getting at?"

"Just dat love usually comes in da most unlikely places. Da best kinds of love always starts first as friends, and dat friendship, if yous lucky, continues throughout yous whole life. Something da tink about on yous flight back home."

I sat in the backseat, watching my taxi driver pop open the glove compartment for a cigar. My brain went suddenly foggy. I had all these different memories pushing against my skull simultaneously. I remember a moment back when I was two years old, and my mom and dad took me to Santa Monica Pier. My dad thought my mom was watching me, and my mom thought my dad was watching me. I wandered off. I saw another little boy enjoying cotton candy. It looked yummy. I went through the pier, stumbling through the legs of all the adults passing by. I was almost to the railing; the mighty waves crashing on the shore beneath me, when a stranger suddenly appeared. 'Go back dat way. Yous parents lookin' for yous.' And the fat Italian man took my little hand and guided me back to my parents, just to vanish once he knew I was safe. And then a new memory appeared within my mind. I was four years old, and my dad and I were visiting my mom's empty grave. My dad had gotten a call from work, and he wandered off to take it. I sat on my mom's grave playing with my Power Ranger action figures, when that same fat Italian man appeared. Just like before, I didn't know where he came from. He stopped to crouch beside me. 'Which one's yous favorite?' I went through all six Power Rangers, then selected the Green Ranger. This one wasn't as scratched nor as well-played with as all the other rangers were. That was only because my dad had bought me a new one after I'd left the old one back at the Langham Hotel. 'Dat's a good one.' He sat on my mom's grave and played with me, and by the time my dad returned, the stranger was gone. The next memory played. It was barely

a year later, and I was getting ready for my dad's wedding. My dad had gone off into the next room to chat with Maureen's grandpa while I stayed in the hotel suite trying to fix my tie. One of the wedding guests—at least I thought it was a wedding guest—was just passing through the hallway when he spotted me through the open door. He asked me if I needed help. I was only about six or seven years old and so I didn't know how to tie a tie. He crouched and helped me out. 'Every man needs da know how to tie one of dese. No matter wat kind of a man yous are, yous need to learn it. Cross it. Loop it. Now pull. Dere yous are, kid. Yous lookin' real smart now.' And then another memory, this one suppressed only because I didn't want to remember it. I was thirteen years old, even more scrawny than I was now. I had just returned home from summer camp. My dad and Maureen wanted to take me and my sister Clair out for ice cream. I went, but I was in a funky mood. I picked a fight with my dad at the ice cream parlor. I just wanted to tell him something...something that happened to me at camp...from someone who I trusted...from someone my dad trusted...I just couldn't get it out without feeling so utterly ashamed, and so I picked a fight with my dad instead. We were so mad at each other that I ended up walking home from the ice cream parlor. I found my way to a bus stop where I sat gazing out at the empty street. It was dark, but I wanted to be in the dark. I wanted to lose myself in the night and forget what had happened to me. I had some really bad thoughts that night. *Really* bad. I didn't know how to make those thoughts go away. 'Hey kid.' I didn't even see the middle-aged Italian man take a seat at the bus stop. I wasn't even sure how long he had been sitting there. 'Sometimes bad tings happen in da world. Terrible tings. If we let it, it can tear us apart. We can spiral. We can lose our way in da dark. But we can choose better for ourselves. We can choose to not let it eat us up alive, but make magic from it.' My young teenage mind took best of me. *This guy didn't know me. No one knew me. Nobody could understand what I was going through. I was alone. I had nobody. There wasn't anyone who could understand what I was going through.* I played along, 'What do you mean?' He answered, 'I mean yous been touched by darkness, but yous have da opportunity to take dat darkness and change da world through yous art.' A bus pulled up, and by the time the doors unfolded like an accordion, I turned and found the stranger was gone. Only fog rolling in the night.

I came back around to the present, breaking away from the flurry of memories. I caught the taxi driver's hazel eyes in the rearview mirror. "Pasquale," I said, short of breath, "who are you?"

Ol' Bertha hit a pothole, causing my mother's shoebox to bounce right out of my duffle bag. Pasquale swerved, and while he steadied the cab, I reached for the shoebox and placed it on my lap. I removed the lid. There was a stack of old photographs, a bunch of handwritten letters, my first pair of shoes, and my Green Power Ranger I'd left back at the Langham Hotel 14 years ago. I felt my eyes well up as I leafed through the old photographs. All the pictures were taken of me. Every one of them throughout my whole life. The letters were written by my dad to my mom, each letter dated January 31st—my birthday. Every year, my dad sent my mom a letter about what I did that year, and then pictures to coincide with the letters. She saw me dressed up for Dad's wedding in a little suit and tie. She saw me going on my first roller coaster ride and another of me dressed in a Dracula costume for Halloween. She saw me in karate and in the Boy Scouts. There was a photograph of me accepting an award at school. Pictures with Santa Claus. With the Easter bunny. She saw me in the school play. My graduation. These photographs told the story of my life. I realized my mom had been with me my whole life, cheering me on from her wheelchair in that bungalow back in Lake Parsippany. She was there for it all. Then a photograph slipped out of the mix, and fell to the floor of the cab. I bent over to pick it up. It was the only

photograph that wasn't taken of me. It was a picture taken of teenagers at a Halloween party. The girl was dressed as a 1920s flapper, and her boyfriend dressed as a Yankee's baseball player. I could hear Ruby Hart's voice ringing to me from the past. *'The last time I saw him was at a Halloween party...we went to the party together...he was dressed as a Yankee's baseball player, and I a 1920s flapper girl.'* My eyes fell on the teenage boy with dark curly hair and hazel eyes. It felt like he was looking right back at me. Ruby Hart's voice continued, *'This photograph was taken of the two of us that night...that night, we knew it would be the last we would ever see each other. I wish your mother could have met him, but what was I going to do? By the time your mother started asking questions about her father, he had already moved on. He had a wife and several daughters...I was sorry to hear he died in a car accident...two days after he died a package was delivered to the door addressed to Lacie. It seems her father purchased her a camera, state of the art at the time. Must have cost him a small fortune.'* I reached for the camera around my neck. It once belonged to my mom. My dad gave it to me after she was committed to the hospital. Ol' Bertha jerked into another lane to miss colliding head on with another taxicab. During which, Ruby Hart's voice finished, *'The stupid idiot. He should have driven more carefully.'*

I dropped the photograph back in the shoebox, then again I caught eyes with Pasquale in the rearview mirror. "It's you."

Something Madame Sheva Wasam said to me came back to mind...something she said when she gave me a tarot card reading. *'The Emperor...this card represents a protector...your protector...those who pull this card can be assured that their spirit guide is near...call upon them to help you...you'll feel their presence when you do.'* I could hear myself asking her, *'What's a spirit guide?'* And then she replied, her voice an echo in the far depths of my mind, *'A spirit on the Other Side who watches over you. They can be a deceased friend, family, lover or, as far as this life is concerned, a complete stranger. Every person is assigned at least one spirit guide per lifetime, but they can be assigned as many as three.'*

Still looking into the rearview mirror, I repeated myself, "It's you."

Ol' Bertha pulled up to the curb in the terminal. "Take care of yourself, kid. Be good. I'll be watchin'."

The police officer directing traffic was blowing his whistle and shouting for me to get out of the cab. I couldn't unhinge myself. I sat there looking at Pasquale's eyes through the rearview mirror, my mind spinning so fast it couldn't catch a single thought.

"You're my spirit guide?" I said.

"Not anymore."

My thoughts steadied. "What do you mean?"

"I was only doin' it until she was ready." Pasquale looked away, his gaze sweeping the terminal until landing on a vibrant young woman standing at the bus stop, luggage in hand. She had long and beautiful red hair, a snug leather jacket, with the same color eyes as mine.

Pasquale spoke up, "I'll be retirin' now dat she's ready to take over da reigns. You're in good hands, kid...da best of hands...yous new spirit guide is goin' da help yous soar. And I'll be watchin' it all from da sidelines, cheerin' my grandson on. Make me proud, kid."

I was enamored by the woman, her soft smile, her red hair blowing in the wind. I popped open the door and scooted out of the backseat of the taxicab with my duffle bag squeezed in my arms. By the time I hit the street, the woman was gone, and Ol' Bertha was driving through the terminal, vanishing out of sight.

The police officer broke me out of my daze. “What are you, stupid or somethin’? Get out of the street!”

“Sorry!” I shook it off and ran for the curb.

I had to file all that away in the back of my mind. The airport was too chaotic to think about anything else. I went in the hustle. I checked-in my duffle bag, retrieved my boarding pass, then I went through the long line at security. It was all taking so long. I was getting antsy that I might miss my flight, just to get through security to be told by the overhead intercom that flight 1022 to Charles De Gaulle airport in Paris, France was delayed an hour. With time to spare, I went to grab a coffee and a lemon blueberry muffin from a little cafe. I was just passing a broad window when I caught a glimpse of New York City lit magically in the night. I took my camera and snapped a picture. Then another, this time from a different angle.

“Boo!”

I jumped, nearly right out of my shoes, then turned and found Aaron hunched over laughing at me.

I spluttered, “Where did you—how did you—Aaron, what are you doing here?”

“My flight got delayed a couple of hours.” He glanced at his cellphone to read the time. “It should be boarding soon. Hopefully. I’ve been stuck here for hours.”

“My flight just got delayed too.” I held up my boarding pass, along with my coffee and muffin. I didn’t even realize I had spilled some of the coffee when Aaron scared me.

He asked, “Do you want to hangout until our flights are ready?”

“Sure.”

We sunk down at the window to sit on the glossy floor, passengers, pilots, and flight attendants all passed us by as we split the lemon blueberry muffin.

“Aaron, I just realized, there’s something I never got the chance to ask you.”

“What’s that?”

“After you solved Dr. Jabberwocker’s riddle, you crawled into the fireplace and couldn’t get back.”

“Yeah,” he said.

“Well, we didn’t know what happened to you. Professor Skeffington called the headmaster of our school and he instructed that we return to London immediately.”

“Yeah, so?”

“We were here...at Newark Airport. I went to the restroom.” I then noticed the same restroom across the corridor. “That restroom right there...I went inside it...I splashed myself with water...there was steam on the mirror...my reflection spelt out the word ‘boo’...how did you do that?”

Aaron confessed, “I’m sorry, Collin, but I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

I rubbed my face. “That’s so strange.”

Then the intercom came on, and a woman spoke over it, “Final boarding call for flight 1333 to Los Angeles, California.”

“I should go.” Aaron got himself up, then reached for his backpack and flung it over his shoulder. “Don’t forget to text me,” he said.

“I won’t.” I joined him on my feet. “And you don’t forget Billy is sending us an invite tomorrow night to some new game he wants to try out with us. It’s called Fortnite.”

“I wouldn’t miss it.”

Aaron looked at me, and then I looked at him. It was like we both wanted to say something else, but neither of us could think of what it was that we wanted to say.

"I guess I better catch my plane before it leaves without me." Aaron turned to walk away.

I blurted without thinking, "Aaron, wait!"

He stopped at the window that overlooked a majestic New York City. "What's up?"

I joined him at the window. "After holiday break, when we get back to London for school," I ran a hand through my scruffy red hair then scratched my scalp, "did you want to maybe grab dinner...together sometime?"

Aaron's dimples caved into his cheeks with the crack of his smile. "Collin Winters, are you asking me out on a date?"

"No!" I needed to damage control and I needed to do it fast. "I mean, not really. I was just asking you if you wanted to grab food when we get back to school. I didn't necessarily mean—"

Aaron stopped me from rambling on any further, "Because if you were asking me out on a date, I would have to say yes."

"Yes?" I smiled. I didn't even realize how much I was smiling. I must have looked so goofy. "Really?"

He smiled back. "Really."

"Groovy." And then I smacked myself in the face. *Why God? Why did I have to say that? Not even just once—I've done it twice already!*

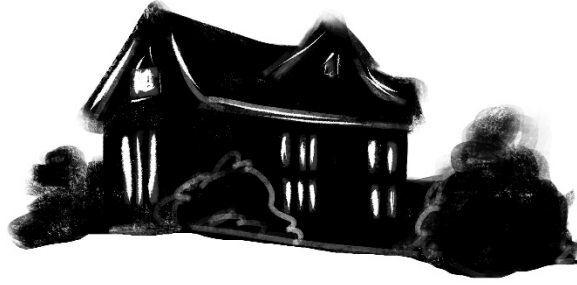
Aaron couldn't stop smiling. "I'll talk to you soon. Have a safe flight."

"You too."

Aaron headed off for his flight. I watched him board the plane, and once I was sure he was gone, I did a little wiggly dance. *I had a date!* I couldn't believe it. *I had a date!* My dancing was awkward and foolish, so much so that it drew a lot of unwanted attention. I stopped dancing and played it cool. I retrieved my backpack from off the floor. Just as I slung it back over my shoulder, I caught myself once again gazing out of the window and onto New York City. It was truly a unique and magical city. The buildings were tall and bright against the starless night, the streets packed with cars and taxicabs. Millions of people wandered the streets, and yet from here they looked so tiny. I realized then that I wasn't the only one who was drawn to this city. People felt the magic just as much as I did. I drew closer to the glass.

I'll tell you, if I looked hard enough...if I squinted just right...I swear I could see the neon red lights of the Langham sign, blazing in the night between the skyscrapers. It left me thinking. Did it happen, or was I only just mad?

Stay tuned for the finale,
when Aaron returns to Buxton Manor.
And now, a sneak peek into the final book of
The Ghost of Buxton Manor series...



Prologue

We arrived in Epping Forest early that morning, stopping for a croissant at a cafe in a humble village outside of London. It was a charming street, lined with quaint boutiques, cozy restaurants, and a delightful little bookshop that had been there ever since the town was first founded. Being the time it was, the sun had not yet risen, and because of it, the street was left cloaked in a mysterious morning mist. It was chilly, but still my grandson and I sat at a table outside the cafe, enjoying our pastries before it was time to hit the road again.

I warmed up with a fresh cup of hot cocoa, eyeing my grandson from across the table, reading a book that he just couldn't put down. At least, not since we boarded the plane. I couldn't help but smile as I watched him. He just looked so very much like I did when I was his age: dark eyes, dimpled cheeks, and with stylish hair that he always spent far too long to get just right. Caleb was that perfect age, just barely seventeen; the last year before innocence washes away. He was growing up fast—too fast, and so I asked him to join me on this trip so that we could have some time together before he left for college after the summer break was over.

"Grandpa Aaron," Caleb peeked out from behind his book, "I don't understand. If you're really the same Aaron in this book, and everything written in here *really* did happen, how could Rupert leave after everything you two had gone through? Didn't he love you enough to stay?"

Rupert—the name alone pulled me into a daze. "Love isn't perfect, Caleb. Sometimes to love someone is to have the courage to let them go. Perhaps that's the greatest lesson of all."

"It just doesn't seem fair." He looked down into his open book, lost in the words, lost in the story. "Michael gets murdered by a lunatic, Rupert commits suicide because he can't image life without him, and so he comes back as a ghost, trapped for a century, then finds him years later just to have him ripped away again. Where's the justice in that?" Having enough, he closed the book and left it on the wrought iron patio table. "You don't expect me to believe this story was really written by a 17 year old ghost, do you?"

"You don't believe?" I asked him.

"Grandpa, I'm not a kid anymore. I've grown up. I'm not the same boy you used to read stories to at night. I'm not so easily fooled, and so I can't believe in things that aren't really there."

"Of course you can't. Not with that attitude, at least. Stories can't be real unless you believe them to be."

"You know, Dad told me all about this story." The apprehension in his voice was notable. "He told me, that for a short time, back when you were my age, your parents moved you to an old manor in England, but you moved back to California shortly after. He said that even though your parents kept the title of the house for decades after, neither you nor your parents ever moved

back.” He picked away at the story as though he were some kind of detective. “You sold the house a few years back, and the company who purchased the house began to renovate it into a bed and breakfast. During construction, one of the workers found a book that was supposedly written by the *ghost* of the boy who lived there before you had. The book was submitted to a publisher who immediately sent it to print.”

“That’s true,” I said.

Caleb folded his arms across his chest, and there, in his expression, I saw the stubbornness of his father. “He also told me that it was all a lie. Dad said the book wasn’t really written by a ghost, but must have been written by you when you lived there, and that Rupert Buxton never really existed.”

“That doesn’t surprise me,” I said with a sip of my drink. “You see, your father grew up too fast, and unfortunately, he lost something along the way—his imagination.”

Caleb didn’t care to entertain the idea any further than he already had. “Come on, Grandpa. Surely, this story is only a story. It couldn’t have been real. There’s no such thing as ghosts?”

“Just because you can’t see something doesn’t mean it isn’t there.” My eyes fell back onto the book, and before I knew it, my old withered fingers grazed across the title, *The Ghost of Buxton Manor*. I just stared at those words, heavy as they were, and while doing so, time seemed to stop altogether.

I shook it off, pulling my attention back to my grandson. “Would you look at the time,” I said without so much as a glance at my wristwatch. “We should get going. We are expected, after all.”

I fetched my wallet from out of my back pocket and retrieved enough pounds to cover the tip. I then scooted out of my chair, Caleb following my lead, and together we began to head up the street. It was still quite early, and due to this, all the boutiques had still not yet opened. We passed the closed shops, one after the next, until soon the town was nothing more than a memory behind us, and in its place rose a forest of trees on either side of us, with great Victorian manors tucked away within the thickets. We wandered through the mist, keeping to the sidewalk, making our way up the street where the fog thickened the higher we went. It was during our trek that I was reminded of my age. My aching bones agitated by the cold air brought nothing but clarity to this painful truth. Despite it all, I continued on, admiring the grand estates we passed along the way.

“Grandpa Aaron,” Caleb pulled my attention back, “do you think, that after your interview, we can stop by London on the way back to the hotel? I was hoping to get some sightseeing in before dark. We might even have enough time to visit Kensington Gardens,” he offered. “Supposedly, you can find a statue of Peter Pan on one of the garden trails.”

His excitement filled me with joy. “I don’t see any harm in that, so long as you don’t tell your father. He was very strict about us spending most of our time at the Art Institution, but if you would like, we can tour the campus first thing tomorrow morning instead.” Caleb’s expression faded with my words. “You still want to attend the institute, don’t you?”

His head began to hang as he walked. “Of course I do, I just don’t think my art is good enough to get me in. The only reason why they’re even considering me is because I’m *your* grandson.”

“Caleb, the Art Institution would be lucky to have someone as talented as you.” My words of encouragement did nothing to affect his mood. “Doubt and insecurity are pure poison to the artistic soul, and that, as an artist, you can do without. Your line work is impeccable and your

shade and coloring are far more advanced than someone your age. You have a bright future ahead of you. It's yours to grab so long as you want it."

We continued to make our way through the neighborhood, distracted by our discussion, neither realizing how very far we had traveled.

"Grandpa, you graduated from the Art Institution in London with honors, started working for an animation studio not too long after, opened up your own gallery, then founded your very own studio, thereafter spending what was supposed to be your retirement years as a professor for the Art Institution of New York. How am I ever going to live up to that?" The more he drank the poison of self-doubt, the more his insecurities grew. "Sometimes I feel like I'm lost in your shadow...so lost that I'll never find what makes me special...or if there is anything special about me at all. I'm just, and always will be, the grandson of a world-renowned artist."

I halted, and turned sharply, leaving Caleb with no other choice but to look me in the eye. "You can't expect others to believe in you until you first learn to believe in yourself." I grabbed him by the shoulder and then looked him in the eye. "Every shadow can be wilted, every monster can be slain, and every Lost Boy can be found. What you're lacking, my grandson, is simple, and you needn't look far to find it. What you're missing is faith, trust—"

"I swear, if you say *pixie dust* I'm going to vomit."

I chuckled, "That wasn't what I was going to say at all, but to tell you the truth, a bit of pixie dust would do you good." I gave his hair a little ruffle, and just when he was good and annoyed, I noticed we were standing in the shadow of a tall majestic gate.

Caleb fixed his hair. "If you weren't going to say that, what were you going to say?" he asked, but to me his voice was no more louder than a whisper. "Grandpa?"

I hobbled forward, weakened by age, and soon I found myself standing outside the gate. I peeked through the bars, squinting through the mist, waiting for the smog to clear. Over half a century later, and still Buxton Manor looked just as I'd remembered it, a three-story relic of Nobel society, standing lost in a fog that seemed just as much a part of it as the very land it was built upon. My eyes began to tremble, and yet I couldn't will myself to look away. I just stared, as though peering into a dream, and while doing so, I could have sworn I saw the ghost of a boy standing at the second floor window, looking back at me with a smile.

"Grandpa," Caleb crept up from behind me, straining to see what it was that I looking at, but only finding an empty window, "are you alright?"

"I'm fine," I assured him, and then I looked back again. In that fraction of a second I had looked away, the boy in the window was gone.

Caleb, now standing beside me, joined me in my gaze. "So, this is it, huh? The famous Buxton Manor from the book." He seemed rather unimpressed. "It looks more like a dump, if you ask me."

"You know, I was your age when my parents forced me to move here, and when I saw it for the first time, I thought the very same thing." I leaned in with a subtle smirk, "Little did I know how very wrong I would be." I then gestured to the gate. "Now, be a good lad and come help me with these gates. I'm not as young as I look."

Caleb, being the respectful boy he was, untangled a long metal chain wrapped around the center bars. He then pushed it open, sending out a wave of fog on either side of its parting middle. A driveway then laid before us, its long asphalt path snaking off into the distance, coming to an end at the Manor's front porch. We stepped onto the property, and the very moment we did, it felt as though we had crossed through the threshold of an entirely different world. Up there, high

in the hills and deep in the forest, the fog was so heavy that it felt as though we were fighting blindly through its thickness. We didn't let it stop us, nor even to slow us down. We continued on with our eyes set on the old Victorian home.

Caleb gave a glance around, looking rather uneasy in the environment we were in. "I remember those woods from the book." He pointed to the timber cluster beside the Manor. "That's where Rupert is buried, isn't it?"

"It is," I said with longing eyes gazing into the thicket.

"And that must be his mother's rose garden over there." He then pointed to the maze of rose hedges that took up a great majority of the courtyard, spotted with brilliant red buds strikingly vibrant in the season. "It's exactly how it's described in the book."

I lifted a brow. "You seem to recall a great deal of a book you say is utter nonsense."

He shrugged, then followed me through the courtyard. Not too long after we were standing at the Manor's front steps.

Caleb offered, "Should we knock?"

"Where's your sense of adventure?" I went for the doorknob, and just as I reached for it, the door lurched open—alone and with a scraping creak. I could hear Caleb's gulp, followed by a gasp of breath directly after, but this I ignored as I stepped inside.

It was exactly how I remembered it, not a thing out of place, as though time was nonexistent. I strolled through the foyer, beneath a gorgeous Tiffany chandelier, and there my eyes settled on the very heart of the Manor. The foyer opened up into a grand sitting room with tasteful furniture arranged throughout, but none could compare to the beauty of the daybed which sat focal and center. The sofa was made for a family to gather, proud parents surrounded by playful children, but a family this house had gone without. Directly behind it was a regal bookcase that took up the entirety of the wall, and displayed along the shelves were trinkets and heirlooms belonging to all those who had ever lived there before. The most precious among them was a collection of porcelain figurines.

I entered the room, slow and steady, then noticed something that wasn't there before. Up on the wall a portrait was mounted, depicting a mother, a father, and seven children. I remembered that portrait from when I lived here, but back then it was torn and damaged and buried deep in the attic. Now it was remastered, hanging proudly in its rightful place. I pulled forward, lost in the eyes of the youngest member of the family: a little boy sitting on his mother's lap. My hand lifted without me, fingers stretching until delicately pressing against the boy's painted face.

"It's freezing in here," said Caleb, and I turned to find him shivering over my shoulder. He blew on his hands, hoping for warmth, but only cold air bloomed from his mouth.

"Sorry about that. The heater's been a bit wonky ever since we got here." A young girl caught us by surprise as she emerged from out of the dining room. "The generator should kick in shortly, so I expect it to be nice and toasty in here soon." She went right up to me and shook my hand. "I'm Paige Powell, and it's a real honor to finally meet you."

"...you're Mrs. Powell?" I asked, confused. "I don't mean to be rude, but aren't you a tad young to be a reporter?"

She smiled, "My mother, Patricia Powell, is actually the reporter. I'm only here to shadow her for school credit." Poor thing must have been nervous. She kept shaking my hand without realizing she was doing so. "I have to tell you, I've been a fan of *the Ghost of Buxton Manor* ever since I was a little girl. I can't even tell you how many times I've read it. When my mother told me she would be interviewing the *real* Aaron from the book, I just knew I had to tag along."

She released my hand, becoming somewhat uncomfortable after noticing the way Caleb was gawking at her. There was no denying that the young girl was beautiful. Her skin was soft, fair as snow, and complimented nicely with her long chestnut curls. But it was her emerald eyes that held my grandson captive.

“Hi,” he breathed, goofy and melty all over. “I’m beautiful. I mean *you’re* beautiful!” He slapped himself in the face, cheeks flushed and beet red. “What I meant to say was that I’m Caleb, and you’re *not* beautiful, you’re Paige. Not that you’re not beautiful, that’s just not your name. Clearly you’re beautiful...I just meant that—”

I jabbed him in the ribs with my elbow. “Stop talking,” I suggested firmly, but I feared I was already too late. In typical Compton-Winters fashion, he’d already made quite the fool of himself.

“You’re very sweet. Thank you.” Paige blushed, then shook his hand, and for a moment, they just gazed into each other’s eyes.

I didn’t want to interrupt, but I also didn’t have the luxury of waiting. “So Paige, tell me, will your mother be joining us this morning?”

Just then the front door opened, and in entered a woman who I could only assume was her mother.

“Sorry to keep you all waiting. I was just finishing up a phone call with the new owner of the house.” Patricia, a perfect replica of a middle-aged version of her daughter, swept across the foyer, and then joined us in the sitting room. She took my hand and grasped it tightly. “Thank you so much for agreeing to this interview. I can’t begin to tell you how thrilled I was to learn that you had accepted the invite.”

“The pleasure is all mine, Mrs. Powell.”

She then spotted Caleb. “And this must be your grandson? What a handsome boy you are.” She looked over at her daughter. “Isn’t he handsome, Paige?”

“Mum!” Horribly embarrassed, Paige adjusted her long locks until her rosy cheeks were hidden behind it.

Patricia didn’t seem to mind that she had humiliated her daughter. “The two of you must be exhausted after such a long journey,” she said to both Caleb and myself. “Could I fetch you anything? The refrigerator is stocked with plenty of goodies. Compliments from the BBC. Tea, cookies, whatever you like.”

I politely declined, but Caleb heard nothing, seeing as how he was busy exchanging smiles with Paige.

“I would hate to take up too much of your time, so let’s get this interview started, shall we?” Patricia gestured to the couch. I quickly obliged and took a seat. She then sat in the cushioned throne facing me.

Patricia signaled to her daughter, and immediately, Paige pulled away from Caleb and went over to a set of studio lights stationed around us. She switched them on, and in turn, a powerful light glared in my eyes.

“Too harsh?” Patricia queried.

“Just a bit,” I grumbled.

Paige adjusted the brightness to a lower setting, then switched on the camera; a red dot blinking, telling me it was ready.

Patricia began to speak directly to the camera, “I’m Patricia Powell, and on today’s episode we are celebrating the grand reopening of Buxton Manor; a historical home best known today

for its affiliation to the New York Time's best selling novel, *The Ghost of Buxton Manor*. It was 15 years ago today, when during renovation, a book was discovered in this very home. It was sent to print, becoming an overnight best seller, capturing the hearts of readers and fans from across the world. But it has, and continues to, spark speculation for this reason, and this reason alone—the author is unknown. Some believe it to have been written by the book's main protagonist, a 17 year old boy by the name of Rupert Buxton, who also so happens to be the seventh and youngest son of the original owners of the house." She continued on, poised and without a breath, "Rupert Buxton died in a mysterious drowning accident back in 1917, and those who believe he wrote the book, believe he did so a full century later as a ghost while haunting his family's home. Others believe in a more practical outcome, insisting that the book was actually written by Rupert's love interest in the book, a Mr. Aaron Compton; an American boy who, for a short time, lived in the house after his parents had purchased the estate back in 2016—over half a century ago. Mr. Compton is here with us today to finally put the rumors to rest."

Patricia then reached into her purse and retrieved a notepad scribbled with notes, and then a pen she readied with a *click*. "Mr. Compton, you've lived quite an extraordinary life, haven't you? You've worked on several animated films as an artist, a producer, and occasionally, a director; two of them even a nominee for a Golden Globe. And yet today, what you are best known for is your mysterious affiliation to the book that was discovered in this house. Up until now, you've declined all interview requests, and when asked by reporters in regards to your connection to the book, you've neglected to respond." She leaned forward, her eyes wide and strong with intent, "Mr. Compton, the world wants to know, are you or are you not the true author of *The Ghost of Buxton Manor*?"

I could feel the heat of the studio lights on my face, mixed with the anticipation from Patricia, her daughter, and even Caleb. Not to mention, the entire world for that matter. The most precious moments of my entire life, the darkest and the sweetest, reduced now to a spectacle which was being judged by all.

The answer was simple. It wasn't something I was trying to hide. "No, Mrs. Powell, that I cannot take credit for."

Patricia barked, "Stop the camera!" At her request, Paige obediently stopped the film from rolling. Patricia then pulled a hip flask out from her purse. She twisted the seal and took a huge gulp. "Mr. Compton—"

I interrupted, "Aaron will do just fine, thank you."

"Suit yourself." She again took another swig, and then instantly relaxed. "I appreciate you coming here. Really, I do. I, myself, am a fan of the book, but I'm not here as an admirer which I'm sure you have many. I'm here as a reporter, hunting for the truth. As we know, the book was discovered hidden in this house, no author and no hint of one either. And although the book is clearly a work of fiction, the fact that several of the book's characters are based on *real* people, most of which have lived in this very home, has brought nothing but mystery and speculation."

"I can assure you, Mrs. Powell, I'm quite aware of the characters of the story."

"Which brings me to my next point." She reached into her purse and placed two more novels on top of the coffee table wedged between us. "One year after *The Ghost of Buxton Manor* was printed, another book was mysteriously discovered, this time in an old castle out in France, a castle belonging to a family that, I understand, you knew quite well. The book was titled, *The Monster of Chateau Du Coeur*, and was believed to be a direct sequel to the one found in this

home. And just like the first book, *The Monster of Chateau Du Coeur* features a cast of real-life characters, including a boy you knew very well...the late Collin Winters. Six months after the publication of that book, a third book was discovered in New York City, on top of a statue in the middle of Central Park. This book, appearing as the third installment in the series, titled *The Shadow of the Langham Hotel*, features you again as an apparent love interest to the main character. Now Aaron, you are the last living character in the trilogy, the only one left alive who could answer the series mystery. The readers want to know the truth. They want to know *who* the author is."

"I'm sorry to disappoint you, but my answer hasn't changed." I stressed, "I'm not the author, and I've never pretended to be either."

She looked into my eyes, strong and intimidatingly. "If you didn't write it, then *who* the bloody hell did?"

I didn't care much for her tone, but I still played along. "I believe you already know my answer to that."

She rubbed her temple, and then took another swig. "Listen. The book is a success. People love it. There have been plays and screenplays. Hell, Paige played the Weeping Bride in her High School production of *The Ghost of Buxton Manor* while her best mate played the role of Aunt Fanny in their rendition of *The Monster of Chateau Du Coeur*. But the readers want more. They want to know who wrote it, and no one is believing that it was written by a 17 year old ghost."

"Why do you say that?" The entire room shifted in Caleb's direction, surprised to find that he had spoken. "Just because you can't see something doesn't mean it isn't there." He looked over at me, "Isn't that right, Grandpa?"

I smiled, proud as ever. "I couldn't have said it better myself."

Paige chimed in, "There was some speculation regarding your father, a Mr. George Compton. Some people have thought that it might have been *he* who wrote the book. He was a playwright after all, so may it have been possible for your father, when you and your family lived here, to have been inspired by the house and its history, thereafter writing the novel without your knowledge?"

Simultaneously, the whole room shifted back in my direction, and so I had no choice but to follow up. "There are events written in the book, specifically in regards to Rupert and myself on our journey to Oxford, where plenty of eyewitnesses have since testified that they had in fact seen two boys matching the same description as the two characters in the novel. Considering that, how would my father have written it? Not to mention, the other two books. My father wouldn't have been present in any of those novels, and so there would be no way he could have written either of the two sequels."

Patricia swept back into the conversation with her eyes narrowing at me. "Do you honestly believe that *The Ghost of Buxton Manor* and its two following sequels were written by the spirit of a 17 year old boy?"

"It is the truth," I said.

"No one will ever believe it." Patricia leaned forward, her breath enriched with the stench of alcohol. "Tell me, Aaron, if you had no insight into the author of the stories, why did you agree to this interview? Fifteen years since this book was published, and you've declined all requests to speak publicly about it. So why did you agree to meet with me now?"

“Because, Mrs. Powell, Rupert’s story was never finished.” It was as though the entire room was sucked dry of air.

“...never finished?” Patricia echoed with her pen at the ready.

Caleb was just as eager as everyone else in the room. “Grandpa, what do you mean by that?”

I began, “You’ve all read the original book. You know who Rupert was, the boy, the poet, the remarkable man he could have been. He was, and will always be, a writer. As you already know, he’s written far more than just one book, a whole series in fact, written through the eyes of other lost boys like himself.” I paused for a moment and stood, then began to make my way over to the portrait of the Buxton Family, eyes held with the painted face of Rupert himself. I took hold of the frame and then popped it up and off the wall, then set it down beside me.

Paige whispered to Caleb, “What’s he doing?”

He whispered back, “I think he’s lost his marbles.”

I grazed my hand along the wallpaper until I felt a subtle tear. I took hold of it, and then ripped it down, exposing a patch of brickwork previously concealed beneath it.

Patricia enraged, “Those walls were just finished!”

“This house has many secrets, Mrs. Powell.” I made a point in speaking over her. “For me, it has always been more than a manor...much more than just a home. It is a place where I spent the most significant moments I had ever lived; it was a place where I lived and loved to the greatest meaning of the words.” I located a specific brick, then began to scrape it loose until I was able to haul it free, thereafter leaving it on a small table beside me. Within the crevice of space was a hidden compartment, and inside it: a stuffed bear, withered photographs, a few other trinkets, with an old book left forgotten amongst them. I reached inside and seized the novel, ripping it free from the cobwebs that had covered it. With it, I turned back to face the room. “I agreed to this interview because I didn’t want this secret to die with me. I want someone to know that there was more to the story. Specifically, what happened after the events that took place at the end of *Rupert’s* third book.”

Patricia sprung to her feet to flick on the camera, and then she quickly stowed away her hip flask. She sat back down, composed and proper, and again her voice returned to its once professional tone. “Mr. Compton, are you telling us that there is another book in the series...a fourth story?”

“Yes.” I sat back down. “Now, if you don’t mind, I would like to share with you *my* story.” I used my hand to clean away the years of dust from off the cover. I then looked up with a mischievous grin. “Shall we begin?”

To be continued...



Jonathan L. Ferrara is an author of young adult and children's fiction. At home in California, you'll find him working on his next installment of his current two series of stories, 'Buxton Manor Collection' or 'Nick'. Whether he's lost in a compelling haunted mystery or off on a silly adventure with a boy who will become Santa Claus, Jonathan continues to lose himself in fantastical worlds of his own creation. When he's not writing heartfelt, emotional stories, he'll be curled up in a blanket on the couch, cozied up with his husband (Aaron) and dog (Bandit) and cat (Merlin), most certainly scared out of his wits watching a new horror film/series that they happened to stumble upon.