

A movie poster for the film 'Siren'. The central figure is a woman with long, dark, flowing hair, wearing a strapless, light blue floral dress. She is standing on a sandy beach with waves crashing behind her. The sky is dark and stormy, with a bright lightning bolt striking the water to the left. The title 'Siren' is written in large, ornate, light blue letters across the middle. Above the title, the tagline 'NOT ALL PRINCES ARE CHARMING...' is written in a smaller, white, serif font. At the bottom, the name 'JENNIFER MELZER' is written in a white, serif font.

NOT ALL PRINCES ARE CHARMING...

Siren

JENNIFER MELZER

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OceanofPDF.com

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Siren
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For Shiri and Denise, who believed in me even on the days I wasn't so sure.
For Starla, who can take a few pieces of straw and spin them into visual
gold. And to my fellow goat-herding, wordslingers at RoTaNo. You
motivate and inspire me every single day, and for that I am forever grateful.

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PART ONE

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CHAPTER ONE

True love was the stuff of magic, and magic was for fairy tales. That was what Siren Talbot's mom used to say, anyway. Rhetta Talbot said a lot of things, most of them senseless and just a little bit cruel, but that whole thing about love and fairy tales? It sort of stuck. White knights riding in on armor-clad horses to rescue damsels in distress? Nothing like that happened anymore, or so she thought. Then she met Carver Ashmore, who incidentally, was acting very strangely as he fidgeted in the chair across from Siren at dinner.

He was going to propose.

All night she'd been watching him, paying attention to every trembling reach for his water goblet, which he'd drained at least three times, and each fumbling grab for his fork. He hadn't touched the wine, and while he tended to have a rather healthy appetite, his dinner was growing cold in front of him and the melted butter glazing the trout was starting to congeal and harden around the flakes and scales. Such strange behavior for a man so meticulous he had virtually every aspect of his life together, and yet there he was acting like a teenage boy who knew he was going to get laid in the backseat after prom.

A marriage proposal would definitely get him laid, she thought. In fact, she'd worn her sexiest panties just in case. The burgundy, high-cut bikinis—which were riding up her backside at the moment—and matching bra, though if she'd learned anything from Bridget Jones it was that her chances of winding up in bed with the man she'd put off making love to for the last two and a half years would have been much higher had she worn the hip-

hugging, cotton panties with dopey penguins on them. Life was absurd that way, but he was going to propose and she was going to say yes, and the underwear she wore wouldn't matter much at all when she grabbed his tie and dragged him stumbling across the threshold of her apartment after dinner.

In fact, if the waiter brought her a sliver of pumpkin cheesecake with a diamond nestled in the fluffy caramel cream, Siren would probably throw herself at him in the car on the way home.

It'd been a long time since she'd been with a man. Almost three years, actually, and there was only so much pleasure to be derived from self-gratification. She'd learned the hard way that a man who wasn't willing to wait until she was ready wasn't a man who wanted a future with her.

Carver wanted a future. Two and a half years of courting her like a proper gentleman, he'd never once pressured her to jump into bed with him. He kissed her goodnight (with her permission the first few times, of course,) but never dared to ask for anything more than she was ready and willing to give. Sometimes when Carver kissed her, when the firm palm of his hand rested tastefully on her lower back and pressed her just a little bit closer so their bodies were flush and she could feel him growing tight and hungry in all the right places... sometimes when that happened she nearly forgot about her vow to hold out until she knew for sure the man she was with was the one who wasn't going to leave her the minute he got her into bed.

Then Carver would retreat, brushing his lips across her forehead and whispering, "Good night, sweetheart," before leaving her on her own doorstep with a belly full of fire and a palpitating heart.

Definitely too good to be true. She'd spent the first year they were dating trying to find the dangling thread so she could unravel it and discover whatever secret he was obviously hiding, but it was no use. Even if he was hiding something, he was darn good at keeping it covered, and eventually she came to terms with the fact that Carver Ashmore was perfect, and he belonged to her.

And he was going to propose.

"It's really busy in here tonight," she noted.

"Mm," Carver nodded and started to reach for his water goblet once more. The melting ice cubes danced and shimmered, clinking against the crystal.

Sweet mother of pearl, he was going to propose.

Each time that realization dawned on her, it was more severe than the last. Her knotted stomach was so tight she kept lowering her hand over the front of her low-cut blue dress and smoothing fingertips across the pinching agony of her own nerves. Her backside danced in the chair beneath it, the movement garnering a shy grin from her dinner companion before he looked away.

God, how ridiculous they were being.

It was like their first date, when, in fact, they'd had hundreds of dates over the previous two and a half years. They'd been to dinners, movies, theatre productions up in Williamsport. Carver even took her to the opera in Scranton, a ninety-minute drive that had been worth every mile. They hiked on weekends through the Appalachian foothills rolling through every State Park in Pennsylvania

She had thousands upon thousands of dates to look forward to for the rest of her life because he was on the verge of asking her to marry him, and she was going to say, "Yes!"

Possibly too eagerly, but he wouldn't care.

Carver was a reward at the end of a long line of awful boyfriends who didn't want futures. After college, a lesson in humility for both Siren and her best friend Lacey, both girls vowed not to sleep with another guy until he put a ring on her finger and started picking out China patterns with her. Lacey hadn't held out nearly as long, but in her defense she actually thought she and Jeff were going to get married for a while. But Siren... Siren clung to that self-affirmation like duct-tape to the bottom of a shoe. The strength of her resolve was waning, however. She was ready for China patterns and a happily ever after with the man sitting across from her.

"You've been quiet tonight," Carver noted. He glanced nervously across the crowded restaurant, and for a moment his gaze lingered on the door as if he expected someone to walk through it.

Siren tittered and nearly tipped her wine onto the table cloth. "Me?" She steadied her shaking hand. "I haven't been half as quiet as you," she pointed out. "What's going on in that head of yours?"

"I..." She watched his mouth stretch in reaction to her question, the muscles twitching upward and deepening the subtle cleft in his chin. His grey-green eyes shimmered when he returned them to her face, and for what

felt like a lifetime they just stared at each other. “I was writing something this afternoon that’s sort of stuck with me all day, you know?”

“Tell me?”

“No,” he chuckled softly. “You don’t want to hear about it, not tonight.”

“I always want to hear about your stories,” she insisted. “I love listening to you talk about your work.”

“I know you do.” The grin he wore faded just a little, but it was still shimmering in those daring grey eyes of his. “But tonight I don’t want to talk about my books or your paintings, or anything like that.”

“No?”

Shaking his head, a slice of ash-blond hair loosened from the neat ponytail he wore at the nape of his neck and fell across his face. It hung there for a moment, making him look like he’d just walked straight out of some far-too-deep Calvin Klein add for underwear, or men’s cologne, and then he reached up to tuck it almost childishly behind his ear with long fingers that lingered against his cheek before dropping to the tabletop again. Lowering his head a little, he lowered his gaze and said, “I’ve been thinking a lot about what we started talking about a few months ago.”

“Which thing?” Every laugh was nervous and insecure. “We talk about so many things all the time.”

The corners of his lips jerked upright and the chiseled bones of his cheeks flushed a deep pink shade that spread quickly to the tips of his ears. “You know,” he started, “about moving in together. I understand why you don’t want to...”

“It’s not that I don’t want to, Carver.”

“Please, Siren, let me finish?” The left side of his brow lifted in hopeful, silent pleading and his mouth softened apprehensively just before his tongue darted out to wet his bottom lip.

God, was she going to botch her own marriage proposal? That sounded like something she might do—clumsy, dimwitted, stupid—she could almost hear her mother’s distant chiding, an old ghost muttering and cackling in the back of her mind like some witch out of a children’s story.

“I didn’t mean...”

Carver laughed and reached a hand across the table to rest atop her own. His fingers curled around hers, gently squeezing as he shook his head remonstratively, “No, it’s not... it’s just... I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have...”

“We both sound completely ridiculous tonight,” she noticed. “I’m sorry, no... I’m sorry. What the heck is going on with us, Carver?” Underneath his hand, her fingers twitched, as if she needed to tug them free and run them through her tightly-pinned black hair until it was mussed and easily accessible to nervous wrapping and unwrapping.

“I...” Siren’s gaze flitted downward, away from his mouth and to the bobbing of his Adam’s apple as he swallowed. “Wow, I’m so sorry. I am... Whew.” Carver laughed again. “This is so much harder than I thought it was going to be.”

“What?” Her own amusement was laced with nervous energy, the sound of each half-attempt at a chuckle catching in her throat and sticking there like dry bread. Maybe he wasn’t going to propose. Maybe he was breaking up with her, but then why was he holding her hand? She looked down at their clasped fingers just as Carver turned her hand upward so the back rested atop the table and her open palm became a canvas for the soft tracing of his thumb. “What is going on? You’re freaking me out a little bit.”

“I’m sorry,” he stammered and shook his head. “It’s just... I don’t know, Siren. Since the moment we met, I have felt like... I can’t put it into words, but I know inside of me that there will never be anyone for me except for you. But there are things...” He drew in a breath, chest expanding as he held it inside him, loose hair falling across his face again and fluttering in the exhale. “I want to spend the rest of my life with you, but there are things you need to know about me. Things I should have told you from the start.”

The already tight, uneasy muscles of her stomach suddenly felt like a cold pit of snakes writhing, wrapping and squeezing inside her. “What do you mean?”

“I’m not...”

The front doors of Bartonelli’s blasted open, wringing gasps of shock and dismay from every pair of lips in the restaurant. Carver’s hand withdrew from hers, his wide grey eyes centering on the man stalking through the doors. His clothes were tattered. Dark, greasy curls of hair sprang from his head, bobbing and bouncing as every bare foot punched the floor with his forward momentum.

“Carver Ashmore!”

“Sir, you cannot come in here without a tie,” the maître d’ reached out a hand. “You’re not even wearing shoes.”

Siren's gaze fell upon the man's bare feet, filthy and stained with what looked like old smudges of ash. There was a strange marking across the top of his left foot, a tattoo of some sort, but it was buried beneath the filth and she couldn't make it out.

"I know you're in here!" he bellowed. His sharp, rasping voice echoed through the restaurant, which had grown so silent since he barreled through the double glass doors at the front of the house Siren swore she heard a kettle of water bubbling on the stove in the kitchen. "Come out, come out wherever you are, you sick, twisted bastard."

"This is highly inappropriate," the maître d' shrieked, barely catching himself as the lunatic shoved through him and knocked him into a waiter who'd only just emerged from the kitchen with a tray of food. The tray and the waiter flew backwards into the doors, glass and porcelain shattering as colorful bits of expertly prepared dishes rained like confetti. The loud crash caused several people to jump in their seats, gasping, and the maître d' cried out, "Someone call the po—"

Before he could finish his command, the crazed lunatic shot out a hand, open-palmed, and a dark, slithering essence shot forward and curled itself like a python around the maître d's throat. It lifted him from the ground, choking as he gasped and sputtered and desperately stretched the tips of his polished black shoes toward the floor. The man drew back his hand, the vaporous trail continuing to squeeze until he issued another strange hand gesture and shot a red bolt into the headwaiter's chest. His flailing body flew backwards, head colliding with the wall behind him and knocking him unconscious. Siren watched as he slid down the wall and slumped into a puddle on the floor.

Swiveling his head, his piercing hazel eyes moved through the crowd as if scanning every face for recognition, or daring one of them to try and stop him.

Several members of the staff moved together, gathering into a huddled mass in front of Siren and Carver's table, blocking the incident from view. She attempted to sit up straighter, peering over shoulders and ducking her head downward to look between bodies without luck.

"Carver Ashmore!" bellowed the madman. "Did you think I wouldn't master that place? Did you think I'd never get out? That I'd never find you?"

Startled, Siren turned her inquisitive gaze back to Carver, who half-rose in the chair to peer over the milling staff.

He came to his full height of six and a half feet, his shoulders straightening, his head lifting with pride. "Not here."

"Don't you want to know how I escaped?"

"Not particularly."

Siren reached for his hand, his name a desperate breath on her lips, "Carver?"

He didn't respond at first, but lowered something onto the table and then leaned outward. He started walking away as if drawn by some otherworldly force.

She started to stand but sensing her movement behind him, he turned and held a hand up in a strange gesture meant to silence and stop her. He tilted his head, the look he wore pleading.

"Siren, please go sit down."

She'd never been very good at following instructions, and even the severity of his expression was not enough to deter her. "What are you doing?" She was out of her chair, nearly tripping over her own feet as she stepped quickly to catch him. She grabbed the soft black fabric of his jacket sleeve in an attempt to hold him there with her.

"He's paying his dues." The lunatic pushed through the wait staff, arriving in front of Carver. He brought up a hand, static red bolts dancing across the tips of his fingers, crisp and crackling. She felt the energy of them, the sparse hair on her arms rising to attention as chills rippled through her. "Hello, beautiful." The man smiled at her, but there was stiffness in his grin that nullified the sincerity of the gesture. "She's a vision," he turned his wild eyes back to Carver. "A Talbot?"

"Leave her alone."

"I don't think so," he shook his head. "Don't worry, I'll take good care of her for you."

"You won't touch her. Not now, not ever."

The madman threw his head back and laughed, a sound both furious and terrifying. "I'd like to see you try to stop me. Do you think I spent my time in that place sitting idly by? Do you think I learned nothing in the prison you cast me into in hopes I would die?"

"I said not here."

“Carver, what is going on?”

“Sit down, Siren.” It wasn’t a command, but a request. “I’ll be right back and then I’ll tell you everything,” he promised. The look he gave her was sincere and gentle, a silent vow that everything would be all right just so long as she trusted him.

She started to say his name again, but it caught in the back of her throat as he smiled at her, a soft flare of silver light flashing in his pale eyes. It was just a reflection from the chandeliers overhead, she was sure of it, but then she began to question her motive to panic. Everything was fine. There was nothing to worry about, no need to panic.

“That’s my girl.” He watched as she unclenched her fingers from the sleeve of his jacket. “Sit down and wait for me, sweetheart. I’ll be right back, I promise you.” He leaned forward and whispered something in her ear, his hand sliding down her arm. “I’m just going to use the bathroom.”

“Right,” she nodded, “the bathroom.”

She stepped backward, her will to comply easily won. Too easily, and though there was mild awareness of how quickly she’d given into his command, she felt like she had no choice in the matter at all. Somewhere in the back of her mind she felt like she’d been bound and gagged. Head tilted thoughtfully, she watched Carver weave through the staff members, pushing the madman who’d stormed into the restaurant toward the door. The wait staff fell easily back into place after he pushed them aside and maneuvered around them, blocking Siren’s view of the door, and though she felt like she should panic, she was sure everything was going to be okay.

Outside she saw a flash of lightning and thunder cracked the sky.

Funny, she thought. There hadn’t been a cloud on the horizon at all when they were driving to the restaurant.

She was hungry. She should eat. Turning her attention to the salad in front of her, she watched the glossy French dressing drip and slide down a crisp, bold leaf of romaine. She glanced over at Carver’s plate. He’d barely touched his food at all, the seared skin of the trout looked dull as flecks of dill lodged in the cooling butter glaze.

There was no urgency to the moment, no compelling need for her to even look in the direction he’d gone. Instead she found herself drawn to a black velvet box propped on the pristine white table cloth just a reach away from her hand. Fingers twitching, she started to grab it then drew back.

She knew what was inside that box and she wanted to see it, but she had no right to peek—even if his proposal had been ruined. Once more her hand reached for the box, the tip of her index finger stroking the soft velvet before she withdrew her hand and lowered it into her lap to rest atop her napkin.

Another thunderbolt and the building shook. Glasses and dishes and flatware clanged and rattled, but no one seemed the least bit concerned. Siren looked around, mildly intrigued, and when what could only be compared in her mind to a sonic boom shook the ground below Makewell, she reached her hand up to steady herself by holding onto the table top.

And then it stopped.

Blinking her eyes, it was as though time froze and then started ticking again, the commotion thwarted and the restaurant resuming normal dinner service as if nothing in the world were out of the ordinary at all. Siren felt like a rubber band that had been stretched too far then allowed to snap back into the moment just seconds before her resistance yielded and broke. Nervously, she rolled her gaze across the restaurant, eyes flitting over faces and bodies as she searched and tried to remember what she'd been saying before. Only her dinner conversationalist wasn't there anymore. The chair across from her was empty.

She shook her head slowly as she leaned back in her seat and scanned the room again in search of Carver. The headwaiter was admonishing a clumsy server who'd toppled him coming out of the back kitchen with a full tray of food, all the while rubbing his hand along the back of his head as though he'd struck it on the floor in the commotion.

But where was Carver?

He'd gotten up to use the restroom, hadn't he? Or had he gone somewhere else? She couldn't remember and the startling confusion prompted her to reach for the half-empty glass of wine perched near the end of her plate. Tipping it back, she gulped down one swallow, then another. The heat of the alcohol instantly warmed her cheeks and the eerie, cold sensation all tangled up inside her stomach started to lift.

She was so nervous. He was going to propose and she was going to say yes, but she was still terrified. The one thing in her life that had gone right from the start, and he was about to ask her to spend the rest of her days with

him. She was going to get her happily ever after—her mother's bitter warning be damned.

Just as soon, of course, as he came back from the bathroom.

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CHAPTER TWO

The sudden appearance of their waiter startled Siren from her confused reverie. “Will you be having dessert this evening, miss?”

“I...” The only thing she could compare to the feeling she had at that moment was waking up after sleeping for too long. She was groggy and confused, the empty chair across from her staring back in accusation, and even as she tried to shake sense back into her head, there was none. “I’m sorry, my companion...”

“Mr. Ashmore?”

“Yes, have you seen him?”

“No, Miss, I’m afraid not. Is he missing?”

“Strange,” she noted. “One minute he was...” She glanced down at the jeweler’s box again, twitchy fingers curling across the top of it and drawing it over the tablecloth and into her hand. “He was here and now...”

The waiter looked at her as if she’d gone completely out of her mind, offering a forced smile that was in no way reassuring at all. “Perhaps Mr. Ashmore went to the restroom?” he suggested.

“Maybe.” Siren’s throat felt tight and sore as she swallowed against that word. “I’m sure that’s where he is.”

“Then I will check back with you in a few moments,” he said, stepping away and flitting to another table in his section to assure the guests had everything they needed.

She stared after the man for several seconds, watching him bounce like a vibrant black and white rubber ball from table to table, and then she scanned the restaurant again. She was trying to remember if Carver excused

himself before he got up. There was the vaguest of recollections, his hand on her arm as he told her he'd be right back, but as she tried to tune into the memory of it, it flickered and faded like the fuzzy reception on an old black and white television with the rabbit ears wrapped in foil. No matter how finely she tuned those antennas her last solid memory was Carver arriving at the door of her apartment dressed to kill in formal black tie attire and smiling winsomely before holding out his arm to escort her through her apartment building like the perfect gentleman.

Brief flashes of the car ride, nothing solid but the soft scuff of his laughter as he listened to her prattle on about her portfolio.

Panic tingled across her skin, seeping through her blood and buzzing like a host of little bees beneath the surface. They'd walked into the restaurant together, hadn't they? Carver ordered trout while Siren stuck her nose up at the very notion and told him she didn't care if red meat was the devil. "I'm having a steak," she told him. "Bourbon seared, so rare it bleeds all over the plate and soaks into the potatoes."

And he'd laughed at her again, the soft, blissful sound of it as he slightly tossed back his head and told her, "You're like a vampire, I swear."

They'd actually had that conversation... hadn't they? The chair across from her, the plate of scarcely-touched trout seemed to confirm it, but where was he now and why did she feel like something had gone horribly wrong at some point? Her throat felt tighter each time she swallowed against her rising anxiety and her heart pattered so furiously in her chest she was sure it would explode any minute.

Snatching her clutch purse from the tabletop, she unsnapped it and took out her phone. She swiped her fingertip across the touchscreen, but there were no texts or missed calls displayed.

She opened the text screen and tapped her last set of messages from Carver before quickly typing in her S.O.S.

Hey, this might seem weird, so if you come out of the bathroom in like three minutes and get this text, please ignore it... Anyway, where the hell are you?

Hesitating with her finger over the send button, she swung her gaze through the bustling restaurant again. She scanned the tops of heads, seeking out his unnatural height, but not finding him anywhere. She was going to feel like such an idiot if he came out of the bathroom. He would

tease her, tell her she was acting weird and paranoid, but something felt off and she didn't know what.

Her hand was shaking, the tip of her finger tapping the button and sending the message zooming silently through cyberspace. She listened for the vibration of his phone, which was absurd, really, because he would have it on him, but it never hurt to check.

Nothing came and her heart continued to flutter wildly in her chest.

Lowering her phone onto the tablecloth, she scanned the display of dishes and flatware before her again. He'd barely touched his food and neither had she. Had they just gotten started on dinner? If so, where was he? And why wasn't he answering her text? He was usually really good at texting right back, even if she was acting like an insecure psychopath.

Grabbing her phone again, she tapped his name into the screen with a question mark and hit send, waiting for an instantaneous reply that never came.

Her face grew hotter by the second. Both embarrassment and terror tangled together in the pit of her stomach and wrestled one another for dominance. Embarrassment was losing, terror preparing to reign supreme when her gaze fell upon the small black jeweler's box in between their plates again. Had he set that down on the table in hopes that she would open it up while he was gone? Had he changed his mind and just left her there?

Carver was not one of those people who lived to surprise. He was straightforward, to the point. Siren's best friend Lacey had even called him uptight a few times in passing conversation, but she loved how predictable he was. She adored that she always knew exactly what to expect from him, except for right then. At the moment she was completely baffled, and she could barely stand the butterfly effect of her heart fluttering anxiously every few seconds inside her chest.

She checked the time display at the top of her phone screen, compared it to the time stamp on her first text to Carver and cringed. Seven minutes passed. At least nine minutes had gone by since she blinked her eyes and found herself mysteriously seated alone in the restaurant where he was going to propose to her.

There was the little black box. That alone seemed to confirm her suspicions, but his sudden and unexpected disappearance said otherwise.

A breath escaped her as she checked her texts again. Nothing. Eight minutes. No reply. It said her message had been delivered, but there was no way to tell if he'd actually read it.

Had she been abducted by aliens? She'd seen programs on the Discovery Channel, people talking about lost time and mysterious disappearances. They would come awake in the most unexpected places with little to no memory of how they'd gotten there at all. Maybe they'd both been abducted. Maybe Carver was still... there.

It was absurd, and she knew it. The kind of crazy thoughts she avoided entertaining on a regular basis, but something wasn't right. She was smack dab in the middle of the kind of incident her mother had once been famous for, and the niggling fear always just beneath the surface gnawed mercilessly at her psyche. She was going crazy. It was the only rational explanation, even if there was nothing rational about it at all.

But they'd been in the car. They talked about her portfolio, and Carver said something about the chapter he'd been working on that afternoon, hadn't he?

Her phone buzzed, two sharp, short pulses that startled her so severely she physically leapt in her chair and lifted a hand to her mouth to stifle the gasp that escaped her. She grabbed the phone so quickly she nearly tossed it over her shoulder in an effort to read the text reply waiting for her. Relief soothed the edges of her frayed nerves, promising to swarm through her completely the minute she had confirmation that she wasn't absolutely insane.

Only her text to Carver went unanswered. The message came from someone else, and backing out of the screen half-expecting it to be some kind of action movie ransom text, she felt only slightly relieved to see the message at the top of the screen was from Lacey. And all caps: *DID HE DO IT?*

Siren didn't open the conversation with Lacey right away, but tapped over her text to Carver again and typed in another furious attempt at contact in a stream of terse sentences she fired one right after the other.

Come on, Carver.

What the hell is going on?

You just disappear on me at dinner and there's this little black box sitting here on the table.

Am I supposed to open it?

Where are you?

I'm getting a little freaked out. Please answer me.

Why aren't you answering me?

Lacey's unanswered text made itself known a second time, blazing across the screen. Siren pulled up the box and stared at it for several long seconds, then she willed herself to reply in hopes a temporary distraction would take her mind off of what was quite possibly turning out to be the worst date, nay, the worst social experience of her life.

He did not.

The ellipsis bounced across the bottom of the screen, signaling that her best friend was typing a reply. Seconds later the letters *WTF* appeared, followed by: *You aren't supposed to be answering me right now. You're supposed to be at dinner admiring your shiny diamond and gushing about how ridiculously happy you and Carver are going to be.*

Siren's thumbs tapped quickly across the letters.

It's a little hard to celebrate such things when I'm sitting here at dinner by myself.

Wait? What? Where is Carver?

I have no idea... He's just... gone?

Gone? What do you mean gone?

I don't know, Lace. He's just vanished.

You're freaking me out.

You? Imagine how I feel. I'm the one sitting here at a table for two all by myself wondering if he chickened out and bailed or if he maybe got murdered in the bathroom.

Jesus! What the hell is going on?

Your guess is as good as mine.

The shadow of the waiter appeared at the edge of the table and Siren lowered her phone self-consciously into her lap.

"Hi," she forced a smile. "Do you think you could... I don't know do me a favor?"

He looked at her with utter disdain, his upper lip curling derisively as his blue eyes narrowed over her. "What is it, Miss?"

"My boyfriend," she started, the words catching in her throat and sticking there even after she cleared it. "He um... I don't know what happened, but

he's... sort of gone?" And she was mortified. She swore to God at that moment the minute she saw him, she was going to slap him right across the face, and then she was going to hug him. Then possibly slap him again. She wasn't quite sure about the second slap, but it was looking likely. "Do you think maybe you or someone on your staff might check the bathroom and make sure he didn't have an accident or lock himself in or something?"

"Is Mr. Ashmore... prone to having accidents in the bathroom?"

"Is... no, but it's been more than ten minutes and I have no idea where he's gone."

"Ma'am, this is..."

"Please," she pleaded. "Just duck into the bathroom and see if he's there. I've sent text messages and gotten nothing, and I'm worried."

There was no sympathy in his expression, only annoyance. "Oh very well," he agreed before sauntering away from the table and leaving her to her frantic texts again. She'd felt her phone buzz at least four times in her lap while she'd been talking to the waiter and she jumped out of the text box she shared with Lacey to see if Carver replied. He did not. The last message on the screen was her own and cold dread trickled down the length of her spine like drops of ice water.

She reopened Lacey's window and skimmed through the series of nonstop texts her best friend sent, most of them as senseless and frantic as Siren's. She drew in a deep breath and began tapping letters into the box.

I've sent the waiter to check the bathroom.

Good thinking. Is the car still in the parking lot?

I don't know. I haven't checked yet. Should I?

Probably.

This is so unlike him.

Yeah, it is.

Lacey there is a jeweler's box on the table. I don't think he was planning on just leaving me here.

Then where the hell is he?

I don't know. I'm scared.

Check the parking lot.

If he's not in the bathroom, I will.

This is really weird.

Agreed. Also completely unlike him.

What if he's not in the bathroom, Si?

I don't know.

She resisted the urge to repeat her fear in writing. Somehow confessing it, even in a text message, made it feel all the more real, and at the moment it didn't feel like it could get much realer than it already was. She flitted her nervous stare across the faces again, seeking out Carver and finding their waiter walking briskly back toward the table.

"I'm sorry, Miss," he shook his head as he approached. "The restroom is empty."

Siren closed her eyes, battling between humiliation and fear. "Thank you. I'm going to check the parking lot and try calling him, could you please just bring our check to the table?"

"As you wish, Miss."

He left the table again and she thought to get up and check the parking lot, but she felt glued to her chair. It really was unlike him to just up and abandon her somewhere. Carver was polite and sweet and in no way the kind of man who'd just strand a girl in a restaurant by herself. Throat tight and constricting as she breathed in, that breath hitched a little in her chest as she forced herself to stand and take tentative steps through the crowded eatery. It felt like every eye was on her as she walked. Most especially the wait staff, which her own waiter had probably sneeringly informed of the pathetic young woman who'd been abandoned in the middle of what promised to be a perfectly good proposal.

She snatched the ring box from the table and held it one hand while she carried her phone in the other. It buzzed periodically, but she didn't dare check it until she was free of the prying eyes staring her down as she headed for the double doors leading out onto Main Street. Pushing through them, an unexpected blast of hot air washed across her face and there was a faint scent like ozone clinging to the wind. She stepped through it, the cool air on the other side instantly relieving the heat of fear and anxiety burning her skin, but only temporarily. Storm clouds crowded in overhead, muted flashes of lightning making their edges glow as she eyed them.

Rain. A single cold drop splattered against her cheek.

Her nervous heels clicked pavement as she started toward the parking lot. Eyes scanned a street that felt far too silent for so early an hour on a Friday evening, and then she glanced back over her shoulder. There was a man

standing just outside the doors. Dirty, tattered clothes, homeless, she assumed. Ignoring him, she continued to marvel at the lack of cars on the street. Not a single one drove in from either end, and save for the low rumbling promise of thunder, the world was eerily silent around her. It felt stiff, dense like tropical humidity rolling in off the ocean, rather than a stark Northeastern Pennsylvania evening near the end of September.

She lifted her phone up and tapped the screen until it lit before her. Once more she checked Carver's text box and found nothing waiting for her, then she switched back over to her chat with Lacey.

He still has not texted me back.

Call him!

She exited the text app and pulled up the phone. Carver was the last person to call her so she hit the call-back button and lifted the phone to her ear before she started walking again. It rang once. The parking lot was dark save for two lampposts perched on each side and casting a calming warm glow across the asphalt. She couldn't remember actually arriving at the restaurant and the lot was full, so there was no way to tell where they'd parked without walking from one end to the other and taking a look at every silver car until she spotted Carver's BMW. His number rang again, a droning curdle of sound in her ear that ended abruptly after the third ring. There was a hitch of temporary silence that made her gasp hopefully and almost speak his name, but then disappointment followed.

"Hey, this is Carver. I'm not available at the moment, but leave your name and number and I'll call you back." A long beep lingered at the end and she hesitated before drawing in a breath.

"Um, yeah, so I'm at Bartonelli's and I'm uh... here by myself, only I think you were here and then you weren't here anymore. I have no idea what's going on, but you're gone and there was this box on the table... I don't know what I'm supposed to do with it. I'm checking the parking lot right now." She stopped near the bumper of a silver Lexus three stalls from the end of the lot then turned toward the opposite row. "Where the hell are you, Carver? I'm freaking out right now, you have no idea. I've sent you texts and... I don't know. Call me back as soon as you get this. Please."

Several times while talking her text app whooshed in her ear. She hung up and checked them. Still nothing from Carver, but four new messages from Lacey, all of them urging her for an update.

He's not answering his phone either. I am freaking out right now, Lace. This whole thing is too weird.

Did you check the parking lot?

I'm there now.

Spying the BMW, she quickened her steps until she arrived in front of it. She lowered her hand onto the hood of the car and felt no warmth from the engine. Wherever he was, he'd been there with her at the restaurant. He was just not there any longer. Where could he be? It made no sense at all. She closed her eyes and tried to remember the start of the evening, but couldn't recall anything beyond opening her apartment door and seeing him standing on the other side in that sharp suit, hair slicked back into a ponytail on the verge of going rogue and spilling loose strands into his face. The car... they'd been in the car and he'd ordered trout, but...

Fist tightening around the velvet box in her hand, she brought it up and inspected it again, then spun back around to scan the parking lot once more.

Carver was one of the most considerate people she'd ever known. He would never just leave her somewhere and the awful notion something happened to him was almost more than she could stand.

The car is here.

After texting those words to Lacey she just stared at the brilliant white face of her phone screen, her eyes blurring with tears. Another raindrop pelted her from above, splattering atop the crown of her head and trickling through her hair. The feel of it gave her chills, or maybe that was just the rising pitch of her own fear.

I don't know what to do. It's been like twenty minutes. Should I go back inside? Walk up and down the street?

I'm coming to get you. I'll be right there. Keep calm and try to call him again.

She didn't answer after that, just stood there in the parking lot trying to make sense of everything and failing miserably. She dialed his number again, listened to all three rings and didn't trick herself when it grew silent after the first.

"Hey, this is Carver. I'm not available at the moment, but leave your name and number and I'll call you back."

"Carver," she said stiffly, "I have no idea what the hell is going on, but you're scaring me. The car is here, but you're not. Where are you? Why

aren't you answering me?" She paused, as if some part of her expected a reply from the silence. Nothing came. "Lacey is coming to get me. Call me as soon as you get this."

A single tear slipped down her cheek, the warmth of it making her realize just how cold she was all of the sudden. The wall of heat she'd stepped into just outside Bartonelli's dissipated and a whirlwind of autumn chill swirled leaves in a spiraling dance along the sidewalk. Another raindrop. It splashed her forehead. Then another on her arm.

An amalgam of panicked voices sounded near the entrance of the restaurant and when she looked up she saw their waiter and the maître d' standing on the walk, eyes scanning frantically for her.

Lowering her phone to her side, she straightened her shoulders, lifted her head and walked toward them to settle the bill. She was so afraid, but every minute without an answer pushed her closer and closer to anger. Anger made the fear less tangible. It made her feel hopeful as she imagined herself tearing into him and giving him a piece of her mind for the first time since they'd started dating.

By the time she reached the front doors of Bartonelli's she was a ball of fiery rage and she almost hoped he didn't show up because she wasn't sure she could stop herself from going ballistic on him when she saw him, and she really didn't want to break up on the night he was going to propose to her.

The homeless man outside the doors stood with his arms crossed, watching her stalk toward him. He was smiling, the whiteness of his perfect teeth so out of place beyond the grime darkening his skin. Something about the way he looked at her made her uneasy, and she shuddered as the distinct discomfort of nausea trembled through her.

"You look frantic," the man said. His eyes were intense, the most shocking and beautiful blending of color she'd ever seen. Rich greens and browns, golden and grey. "Everything all right?"

Siren looked away quickly, general social anxiety warning her not to make eye contact. She didn't answer. Reaching for the door, she started to pull it open but the man lowered his hand to the bare skin of her arm and curled gentle fingers around her wrist. "Whatever it is," he started, "I promise you it will get better."

The strangest sensation moved through her, something dark and red that felt cold, but electric as it rolled and crackled through her blood. She wrenched her arm away and stalked inside thinking she would never forget the feel of that man's hand on her arm, but as she sat down to settle the bill all memory of the filthy, raggedy man with the most intense eyes she'd ever seen began to wane, and with it the perilous warning signals that coursed through her when he'd touched her.

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CHAPTER THREE

Siren stormed the hallway leading to her apartment, heavy footsteps bounding so loudly poor Mrs. Stubbens downstairs was probably shaking her fist at the ceiling and muttering curses about trying to sleep. She should have cared, but her anger regarding the situation at hand had finally overpowered her fear, and all she could think about in regards to Mrs. Stubbens was that ridiculous little dog of hers and how he only seemed to like yip-yip-yipping on the mornings Siren didn't actually have to get up for work.

Lacey took quick steps to keep up with her, and though several times she'd attempted to reach out and grab her best friend's shawl and draw her back, Siren was not to be trifled with. She arrived behind her just as she was jamming her keys into the lock and turning the knob, the two of them pushing into the apartment and unloading their purses on the small bar separating the kitchen from the living room.

"Si..." she started.

A single look was all it took to pinch Lacey's lips back together.

It was not the first time she'd gotten that look. Lacey arrived at the restaurant shortly after Siren finished settling the bill. The whole thing felt like a scene from a movie, her best friend sweeping in to the rescue and leading her through the maze of tables as people pointed and stared and muttered behind their hands. The dirty, homeless man was no longer standing outside the door when they pushed through and stalked the pouring rain to the parking lot. Three times they tromped puddles before solidly

confirming Carver's silver BMW was still parked there, still cold to the touch and more than likely not going anywhere any time soon.

Once, and only once, did Lacey make the mistake of asking Siren if she was sure Carver had actually been there. The half-spoken words dwindled into silence when the flat of Siren's palm slammed down on the hood of the car and she cut her best friend a glare so sharp and murderous she was actually surprised the other woman hadn't clutched her throat and started gasping for air.

After that, Lacey led Siren to her car and promised to take her anywhere she wanted to go. What she really wanted was to go home. She wanted to crawl into her bed, fall asleep listening to the cadence of raindrops pelting glass as cars whooshed down the street in front of her building. She could sleep off the horror of a very bad day and if the powers that be were feeling kind they'd grant her a do-over on what was turning out to be the worst day of her entire life.

She stood outside the passenger's side door, rain dragging her updo down, making the loose black strands of her hair cling to her forehead and cheeks. The greater part of her did not want to leave the vicinity in case he came back. There was a very tiny voice deep down that told her she was fooling herself if she really believed he was coming back, but she didn't listen. Instead she ignored the loud squawk of the door hinge protesting when she wrenched it open and slid into the seat of Lacey's Volkswagen Jetta and said, "Take me to his house."

It wasn't a long drive. Located six miles outside of town, Carver's mansion was situated on the hill overlooking Makewell, reachable via a winding driveway that rivaled the length of Main Street itself. There was not a single light on inside the house, only the porch lantern glowed and the decorative solar lighting that lined the drive. Lacey barely parked the car when Siren jumped out, raced across asphalt and began pounding on the front door to no avail. She hammered her closed fist against the wood for what felt like an eternity before Lacey intervened, steering her around to the garage where the two of them peered through the glass windows and saw the empty space where he parked his car.

"This is really weird," Lacey said, backing away from the window.

"Tell me about it."

"He was... with you, but then he wasn't?"

“Of course he was with me,” Siren bit back and then instantly felt guilty for the bitterness in her tone. “I’m not crazy, Lace.”

“No one said you were.”

“You saw his car in the parking lot with your own eyes,” she pointed out. “He was there! I’m not having some kind of episode, or...”

“I know, honey.” She reached out, her wet hand landing on Siren’s arm and gently squeezing. “It’s just... where is he? And why isn’t he answering his phone?”

“I don’t know.” Her lower lip quivered as her head moved back and forth. “I’m sorry, it’s just... this whole thing is messed up. It’s crazy, I know it. And I can’t explain any of it. There are...” She was terrified of confessing there was a brief window of lost time, worried her best friend would look at her in that way there was no coming back from. Lacey knew about Siren’s mother, and she’d spent years reassuring her she was nothing like the woman, but sometimes Siren worried it was just a ruse. That Lacey and everyone else was just humoring her, or being polite. “I remember him picking me up. I remember everything he was wearing, and he told me we were going to Bartonelli’s. I was excited, I mean obviously. That was where we had our first date, and he was going to propose...”

“Wait, what do you mean you remember?”

“I remember it.” She swiped the wet hair off her forehead and allowed her hand to fall to her thigh. The dress she wore was ruined, but she didn’t care. “I remember going to dinner with Carver, Lacey. He was going to propose.”

“You sound more like you’re trying to convince yourself.”

And that was the last thing they said to each other before Siren stalked back to the car, got into the passenger’s seat and slammed the door. Lacey slid behind the wheel, the two of them just sitting there in Carver’s long, winding driveway as if waiting for him to return, and then she jerked the car into reverse, whipped around and darted back down and around the curving passage until they arrived on the main road again.

They rode to Siren’s apartment in silence, and after Lacey parked the car Siren got out and began marching toward the building. Several seconds behind her was Lacey, silent, but determined to keep pace with her.

They did not speak until they were inside the apartment, Siren kicking off her heels and narrowly missing the long-haired white cat who’d come

darting into the living room to greet her. She felt instantly horrible about it, chasing after him and kneeling down between the end table and love seat to scoop him into her arms to comfort him. He yowled a little, a deep, throaty sound, and then he tilted his head to look at her. His imploring golden eyes seemed so large, so aware. Siren hugged his body against her chest and lowered her damp forehead against his.

“Look, I know you’re upset,” Lacey started, the words trailing into silence.

“I’m not upset,” Siren told her. “I’m beyond upset.”

“And you have every right to be.”

“Is he missing?” she softened, the anger keeping her from losing her mind temporarily abating and bringing the heat of unshed tears back to blur her vision. “I mean, should I call the police, or something?”

Lacey shook her head and started to walk across the carpet. Arriving in front of Siren, she reached out and stroked her fingers along Mr. Pounce’s back, the cat in Siren’s arms stretching to accommodate the overload of affection. He dug his back claws into her chest and she winced, sucking in breath through her teeth before drawing him away from her body and lowering him back to the floor.

“I don’t know, maybe you should call the police.”

“Isn’t there something about missing person’s reports? Like you have to wait twenty-four hours before filing one, or something?”

“I don’t know,” Lacey repeated. “I could call Jeff and ask him.”

“I thought you guys broke up.”

“We did,” she shrugged, “but we’re still on good terms. I mean, he’s a cop. I’m sure he’ll be only too happy to help out with something like this. He likes Carver well enough. It’s me he isn’t sure about at the best of times.” It was a joke, the slow grin tugging the corners of her best friend’s mouth confirmed it, but Siren couldn’t laugh.

Her eyes lingered on the movement of the cat as he sauntered across the floor. “Why would he do this, Lacey?”

“We don’t know if he’s done anything, Siren. It could be... Maybe it’s... Something might have happened to him.”

Her already unstable stomach clenched inside her, the muscles tightening and trembling anxiously. She was suddenly glad she obviously hadn’t eaten much because she was pretty sure she was going to start throwing up soon.

“God,” she whispered. “If something happened to him...”

“Don’t think the worst. Not yet. Why don’t you sit down and I’ll make you some tea and you can tell me everything that happened tonight, beginning to end. But first, let me give Jeff a call.”

Siren nodded absently, following as Lacey grabbed her hand and led her toward the dining room table just off the kitchen. She dropped into the chair, took out her phone and stared at the one-sided conversation still open when she slid the screen on. Squinting, she felt her eyes start to tear up again and she blinked furiously to avoid the storm about to break. It was still thundering outside, she could hear it through the closed windows and occasional flashes of distant lightning prodded the edges of the window blinds. She felt the draft of cold air pouring in through the ancient windows of her apartment. That air smelled crisp and wet, the musk of autumn clinging to it as it invaded her senses.

The words on the screen glared back at her: *Why aren’t you answering me?*

In the kitchen just on the other side of the wall she heard Lacey talking on her phone, but she didn’t tune into the conversation. She went on staring at her own words and trying to make sense of the senseless.

There was a distinctive gap in time, lost moments she couldn’t recall no matter how hard she squeezed her eyes and willed herself to remember. His arrival, the ride in the car.

There was the faintest memory of walking through the doors of Bartonelli’s, the smarmy waiter gushing over Carver the way people always did when they realized he was someone of importance. The attention made Siren roll her eyes at him when they sat down, and Carver offered an apologetic smile before leaning forward and promising to devote all of his attention to her for the remainder of the evening.

“Adoring fans be damned.” That was what he said to her as he lowered his hand and ushered her toward their table, and Siren laughed at him because she knew as much as he appreciated the support of his adoring fans, he valued privacy. It was why he moved to Makewell in the first place, he told her after they started dating. For privacy, a little peace and quiet.

Outside her reverie she could hear Lacey on the phone, her voice hushed as she spilled the few details she had to her ex-boyfriend, Jeff Lovesee. She reached for her purse, sliding it across the table. The outside material was

wet and it left a damp trail on the wood, but everything inside was dry; the ring box included. She was just bringing it out and lowering it onto the table when Lacey plunked her favorite mug down in front of her and said, “Here you go, sweetie.” The steam rolled upward, the gusting aroma tickling just beneath her nose as she leaned forward. Chamomile with a touch of lavender. She smelled honey too, and immediately found her hands curling around its warmth as if they were freezing and she just couldn’t get enough. “Jeff is on his way over. Do you want me to call Aunt Maisie?”

“No,” she shook her head. “Not yet.”

The last thing she wanted was to worry her aunt. She embroiled the woman in every single one of her problems, and Aunt Maisie said she didn’t mind, but Siren thought if it was her she would mind. She’d get tired of the late night phone calls and the constant stress of a young woman who didn’t know where she wanted to go in the world, or how she was going to get there.

She leaned back in the chair again and flared her nostrils a little as she exhaled. “He said there is a waiting period before a missing persons report can be filed, but lucky for us he’s off-duty tonight. He’s going to get as many details from you as possible and start doing a little early digging on his own.”

“That’s the thing,” she muttered. “I don’t have any details, Lacey.”

How did she explain to anyone, especially a police officer, that she had no idea what happened in that restaurant? She was going to look completely guilty and utterly insane if she told anyone she couldn’t remember the actual moment Carver disappeared. It would be even worse when she confessed that she could barely remember sitting down to dinner with him beyond the gentle promise as he took her hand and told her she was the center of his attention for the remainder of the evening.

Candlelight flickered in the hurricane lamp between them, the golden-white hues occasionally catching in his eyes. She remembered that, but nothing else. She recalled thinking about how romantic it was for him to take her to the place they’d had their first date to propose. Her hand came down on top of the box again, fingers curving around it as she swiped it into her palm and drew it down into her lap.

God, what was she going to do if he was gone for good? If something... No! No, she couldn’t even think it.

“Tell me what happened, Siren.”

“That’s just it,” she hunched over the mug again and let the fragrant steam rise into her face. “I don’t know what happened, Lacey. It’s like I told you before. I barely even remember getting to the restaurant.”

“That’s really weird,” she reiterated for the fiftieth time since she’d arrived at Bartonelli’s.

“It’s like...” Pausing, she tried to stop herself from spilling forth a truckload of crazy, but there was no damper for the words. “It’s like someone took a pair of scissors and cut a chunk of my night out, then spliced the ends back together, and when I think about it, it just loops through things that don’t make sense at all.”

“You don’t remember going to the restaurant?”

“Barely,” she sighed. “Bits and pieces, like my mind wants to reach for them, but the tidbits are so small I can barely grab onto them. I remember him picking me up, and being in the car. I remember walking through the doors and making some stupid joke about his adoring public...” Closing her eyes, the spirals of steam continued billowing against her face. “One minute we’re there, sort of, and the next thing I know I’m sitting there by myself and this box is on the table. He’s nowhere to be found and that’s where you came in.”

Lacey knew everything there was to know about Siren. She knew about her mother, about Rhetta’s voyage off the deep end and the fears she left her daughter with that one day she’d go crazy just like Mommy did. She’d listened to her fret hundreds of times over the years that crazy genes ran in the family, only they’d called them ‘crazy pants,’ and they made jokes about it because it was funny. And Siren wasn’t going to go crazy. Lacey promised, Aunt Maisie too, and yet there she sat feeling completely out of her mind and unable to grasp onto a single tangible thread that made sense.

Drawing the chair beside Siren’s away from the table, Lacey slid into the seat and lowered her hand to her best friend’s wrist in a gesture of comfort. “We will figure this out, Siren. I promise you. And we will find Carver. Do you hear me?”

Siren nodded, but she didn’t believe it. She had the most despairing feeling inside, a foreboding sense of darkness falling in all around her. It was like the sea, that despair, rolling her around in its depths until she couldn’t rise to the surface anymore and take breath.

Outside the thunder's rumble lengthened into a drawn out roar, the sound of it making Siren shudder. "I'm going to call him again," she declared, snatching her phone off the table.

"Do you want me to do it?"

"No."

The sound of his voice each time the greeting message played provided her with comfort, though she'd called and left enough messages, she couldn't guess how long it would be before she got notice his inbox was full.

She lifted her cup and took a sip of tea. The liquid was no longer scalding, but it burned her tongue a little before cooling in her mouth and spilling down her throat. She took another swallow, set the cup down and hit redial. It rang before she even lifted it to her ear and a matter of seconds later the message played. The hitch of hope she clung to earlier in the evening made her feel completely defeated when the momentary pause between rings was followed by his greeting.

She drew in a breath, held it inside herself until he spoke the last word, then she let it go.

"Carver," she started, turning away from Lacey for a little privacy. "I am so scared right now. You have no idea what this is doing to me. I don't know where you are, or what's going on. I'm home now." She paused, as if he was actually going to pick up and stop her if she waited long enough. Cell phones didn't work that way, but she waited for it nonetheless. "Please, please call me as soon as you get this. I don't care what time it is, what the reason for this happens to be. I don't care, okay. I won't be mad. Just call me and tell me you're okay." Another pause, and then she said, "I love you."

Lowering the phone to the table, she touched the tip of her finger to the END button and just stared at the screen until it started to dim.

Lacey waited for her to lift her head, and then she reached out and touched her hand to the tears flooding Siren's cheeks. "It's gonna be okay, sweetie." She still didn't believe that. "I'm sure wherever he is, he's already well aware of just how deep the pile of shit is he has waiting for him when does call."

"He was going to do it," she said. "Just like we thought."

"Do what?"

“Ask me to marry him. He was going to do it, Lacey.”

“I thought you said you couldn’t remember.”

Siren lifted her hand to the table, the one with the black box inside, and then she lowered it between them. For a long time the two women just stared at it, and Lacey started to reach for it. Siren still hadn’t opened it; it just didn’t feel right to open it up and look inside without Carver there to look on.

“Don’t,” she warned in a soft, pathetic voice.

“Is it beautiful?” she wondered aloud. “I bet it’s gorgeous. Perfect for you in every way.”

“I don’t know,” she shrugged. “He never gave it to me.”

Lacey’s brow cocked into an arch over her dark green eyes. “How did you get it if he didn’t give it to you?”

“It was there on the table after he disappeared. Just sitting there in between the wine glasses and the water goblets. I didn’t know what else to do. I couldn’t just leave it.”

“No,” Lacey agreed. “No, you couldn’t.”

Fingers curled around the soft velvet, the feel of it warm and comforting against the stroke of her thumb. When Lacey’s hand came down atop hers again it took everything Siren had inside her not to start crying again.

“What if he’s gone?”

“He’s not gone.” There was lingering doubt in her tone that suggested she didn’t believe her own promise. “I don’t know where he is, Siren, but he’s not gone, not for good. He would never leave you. He loves you so much.”

She nodded agreement.

“We’re going to find him and when we do he’s going to have a lot of ‘splaining to do!” The teasing sound of her Desi Arnez impression was meant to lighten the mood, but all it managed to do was coax a subtle smile from Siren. “Jeff will be here any minute, and when he shows up, he’ll get to the bottom of this. You’ll see.”

“How can you be so sure?”

Lacey shrugged her left shoulder and said, “Because Jeff will do anything for me.”

“Then why did he break up with you?”

“Maybe because I wasn’t ready to do anything for him? Or maybe I wanted more than he did. I don’t know.”

“Maybe we shouldn’t have called him,” she said. “He’s going to think we’re just using him, and he’ll think I’m a nut case when he hears I can’t remember what really happened.”

“Maybe we are using him,” she offered another hitch of her shoulders, her grin deepening the dimple in her right cheek. “Okay, we’re not using him. Not like that, anyway. If he can help us get to the bottom of this in a timely manner, that’s a good thing, right? We need all the help we can get, and the earlier we get started searching for Carver, the sooner we find him and get to the bottom of this whole crazy barrel.”

“It is pretty crazy,” Siren noted, “isn’t it?”

“Oh yeah,” Lacey agreed, “but that’s how our lives have always worked, right? Crazy to the sixth degree and back, am I right?”

Snorting softly, Siren leaned back in the chair again and withdrew her hand from the top of the box. Lacey stared at it, eyes narrowing curiously over it before she lifted them. “Can I at least have a look at it?”

“No,” she shook her head. “No one’s looking inside that box until Carver says it’s okay.”

Lacey didn’t have to say what she was thinking; Siren could see it in her eyes. There was a very real possibility Carver was never going to say it was okay to look inside. The thought was horrifying, and as she sat there fighting the rise of bile burning in the back of her throat it took everything she had not to bolt toward the sink and throw up.

Beneath the chair, the cat circled around her ankles, swaying inward and pressing his soft body against her leg as he purred. If she didn’t know any better, she’d think he was deliberately trying to comfort her. Who knew, maybe he was. They said animals knew when things were wrong, and maybe, just maybe, Mr. Pounce knew just how much she needed him right then.

She bent down and scooped him into her arms again, and he didn’t struggle, just let her hold him like a baby, his whiskers twitching with annoyance. Never once did he squirm in protest or try to get away. He simply let her cradle him and rock him back and forth.

She must have looked like an absolute loon.

CHAPTER FOUR

Siren felt like an idiot when Jeff Lovesee tilted his head to look at her, his round brown eyes searching her face with what she could only guess was pity and a great deal of repressed doubt. Pressing his broad back into the chair behind him, he slid his arm across the table as he stretched and reached for the room-temperature cup of coffee Lacey had given him shortly after he arrived. He took a sip, gulping it down loudly before returning it to the table with a heavy clunk that made her jump a little in her seat.

“Let me get this straight,” he started, his gaze drifting slowly between Siren and Lacey. “One minute you’re having dinner at Bartonelli’s, and the next thing you know he’s just vanished?”

“Sort of.” Siren lifted both shoulders and held them beneath her burning ears. The muscles ached with exhaustion.

They’d gone over the story twice. The first time Jeff just shook his head and asked her to repeat it. The second time she could see the gears turning in his head as he tried to process the nutty story she’d spun for him.

“I don’t actually remember having dinner.”

“See, that’s the part that baffles me. You were in the restaurant,” he tested, “right?”

“Yes, Jeff. I have the credit card bill to prove it. I had bourbon steak and Carver ordered the trout. There was a place setting for him at the table. His car is still in the parking lot at the restaurant if you want to go take a look.”

“I might,” he nodded and jotted something down in the pad he’d taken out of his pocket. “Though I have to say I’m surprised he ordered the trout.

I've heard bad things about Bartonelli's fish."

"Me too," Lacey interjected, "but then I've never been much of a fish person."

"Because you don't know what's good for you."

"Guys," Siren spoke up, the sound of her voice drawing them both back to the moment with apologetic throat clearings and downcast gazes.

"Right," Jeff said, "sorry. Where were we? Oh, yeah. At the restaurant. And you're absolutely sure he was there?"

"Who else would I go to dinner with dressed like this?" she proffered sarcastically, hands gesturing down the front of her ruined evening dress. She hardly looked the picture of elegance, not even half as pretty as Carver said she looked when he saw her. There was a run in her stockings and her dry-clean only dress was still damp, the wet chiffon clinging to her in places it probably shouldn't. The shawl she'd worn across her shoulders piled into her lap like a wet blanket and the cat had made himself at home atop it. She'd unpinned most of her hair, allowing the wet locks to fall in around her face in wispy black waves.

"I don't know, Siren. Maybe you guys broke up. It's been a while since I was given the lowdown on your romantic relations. For all I know, you're seeing someone new..."

She leveled Lacey with a disturbed glare and her best friend only shrugged. "What else do people talk about at dinner, if not the other people in their lives?"

"Carver and I rarely talk about you and Jeff, or you and Stan, or you and anyone else for that matter, and most certainly not at dinner. Come on, you two. This is really serious. My boyfriend is missing, as in he just vanished into thin air."

"I know, sweetie, I'm sorry. Jeff, take this seriously."

His long jaw seemed even longer as he lifted thick fingers to scrape through the dark stubble on his chin. "I'm taking it very seriously," he assured them both. "Unfortunately, there's not a whole lot to go on here, Siren, and I can't call it in until he's been missing for at least twenty-four hours."

"So what can you do now?" Lacey urged him.

"I can call in a few favors. One of the staties owes me big time, and he can get me access to a few things I wouldn't be able to get into with the

limited resources at the station downtown. We can track his cell phone, check his credit cards to see if they've been used, but beyond that there's not much I can do at this point. You say you two went by his place?"

"After we left Bartonelli's," Lacey confirmed. "When we drove back through on our way here his car was still in the parking lot."

"Then I'll swing by both the parking lot and his place after I leave here, see if maybe he's gone back home. I'll also ask the guys on patrol tonight to do a little digging around the area, see if they come up against anything strange or unusual."

"Thank you, Jeff. I really appreciate you looking into this on your day off."

"Yeah," he nodded, "sure thing, Siren. Say, you guys didn't have a fight or anything before this whole thing happened? Nothing like that, right?"

"Jeff," Lacey glared as she growled his name.

"No," Siren shook her head, "he has every right to ask. The answer is no. We didn't have a fight. In fact, quite the opposite. I think he was going to propose."

"Why do you think that?"

She started to reach for her clutch purse, but caught Lacey shaking her head subtly from the corner of her eye. Withdrawing her hand to the cat's back, she said, "Just a hunch. That's all."

"See that? He was ready to make a big commitment, Jeff." Lacey's head wavered back and forth, her subtle dig suddenly reminding Siren of the intimate details of their break-up six months earlier. Lacey wanted to commit, but Jeff had gotten married right out of high school and things with his first wife ended badly shortly after they took vows. Scarred for life, Lacey said, and her pressuring him to commit drove him away. Shame. Jeff was a really nice guy.

Ignoring Lacey's slight, Jeff turned his attention to Siren and said, "To be honest, this whole thing sort of stinks. It doesn't make much sense, but I will do whatever I can to help you find him, all right?"

"Thank you, Jeff. I don't know how I'll ever repay you for this."

"You can repay me when we find that rich boyfriend of yours by convincing him to buy a few tickets to the policeman's ball."

She actually chuckled a little and bobbed her head in agreement, muttering, "I'll see what I can do."

“You find Carver by morning and I’ll break my piggy bank to buy every damn ticket you’re selling to that stupid ball,” Lacey told him. “I’ll even dress real nice and maybe let you walk in with me on your arm.”

“Right.” He released a breath and started to push his chair away from the table. “I should get on this.” Reaching for the coffee mug, he quickly gulped down the contents and then lowered it empty. “I’ll give you a call if I find anything out. I’m sure you’ll be keeping your ringer on tonight.”

“All night.”

Lacey stood up. “I’ll walk you out.”

Siren watched them walk toward the door, the two of them muttering to one another as they left. The last thing she heard before they stepped out into the hallway was Jeff asking Lacey who Stan was.

“You broke up with me, Jeff. Remember?”

Their footsteps faded as they headed toward the elevator and Siren leaned forward to rest her arms on the table. Pulling in a breath, she felt like she was swimming in her own head. Thoughts whirled around inside her skull, writhing against her brain in a dull wash of madness and there was nothing to grab onto for security. Even though she was having a hard time placing herself in the actual evening itself, she was relatively sure the outcome of events was nothing like the night she’d planned when she slid into that sapphire blue dress and twirled in front of the mirror grinning.

She wanted to believe Carver hadn’t planned it either, but where the hell could he be? People didn’t just disappear without a trace, not unless there was foul play involved, or international spy parameters. Try as she might, she couldn’t picture Carver, quiet, sweet and shy as he was, in the man of mystery role. Then again, that was how they got away with it, right?

It had been more than an hour since she’d last tried to call him. Lifting the phone from the table, her battery was nearly dead, but she had to try anyway before plugging into the wall charger near her bed. Punching redial, she brought it to her ear and listened as it rang. Her eyes stung and itched as the sound of his voice greeted her. It sounded so real, as if she might reach through the phone, grab him and pull him back to her.

“Carver, it’s going on eleven,” she said. “I don’t care what time it is when you get this. Three in the morning, whatever. Just call me, okay.” Her voice cracked, weakness bleeding through into the words that followed. “You’re scaring me. If something happened to you...” God, she didn’t want to think

about that. Not anymore. And yet it was the only thing that kept rolling through her mind. “Nothing’s happened, right? You’re okay. I’m not going to believe the worst. I’m just preparing myself for how angry I am going to be when you do call. You hear me? Angry, Carver Ashmore. I’m going to be so angry, and relieved and...” Words lodged in her throat like peanut butter on dry crackers. “Please be okay. Please. I love you so much, and I know you didn’t get the chance to ask, but I was ready to say yes. I will say yes, all right?”

Tears slid down her face again, wetting the dry skin. She set the phone down on the table and reached into the pile of tissues Lacey brought her just before Jeff arrived. She couldn’t stop the onslaught and her shoulders began to shake. Sobs caught in her throat, tightening it until it ached each time she tried to draw breath.

She had a really bad feeling they weren’t going to find him, that he was gone for good, and no matter how many different ways she tried to convince herself to be positive, to hold onto hope and believe he was out there, she just couldn’t. Not on the inside.

She’d seen too much darkness, lost hope too many times in her life. Her own mother left her when she was eleven. She just took off in the dead of night while Siren was sleeping, and when she woke up the next morning Aunt Maisie was there and that was that. A thousand times she asked where her mommy went, and every time her aunt just shook her head and said she didn’t know.

Carver’s disappearance, that was different. At least she thought it was. Rhetta Talbot was crazy, and Aunt Maisie spent the years after she mysteriously vanished convincing Siren that her mother just wasn’t cut out to be a mother. It still didn’t make sense when she considered it, but she hadn’t brought it up in a long time, not to Aunt Maisie, anyway. Carver, on the other hand, knew how much it terrified her to be left alone, how often thoughts of abandonment plagued her as she put a wall between herself and anyone who might want to get too close.

He broke down the wall.

She let him in, and now...

Mr. Pounce was back, circling his body between her stockinged legs and making the effort to purr as he swished back around and fluttered his tale against her knee. She didn’t bend down to pick him up, not that time. She

just pinned her elbows to the table, dropped her chin into her palms and stared at the black box she'd stuffed back into her half-open clutch purse until Lacey came back about fifteen minutes later.

"Jeff's headed over to Bartonelli's now," she announced.

Siren swiped tears from her cheeks and nodded, but she said nothing.

"Sweetie, it's gonna be okay," she promised.

"No, it's not."

"Yes," she nodded, "it will, I swear to you. We're gonna find him, and all of this is... One day we'll be sitting around at Thanksgiving dinner with our children and our grandchildren, and we're gonna laugh about that time Carver got locked in the bathroom at Bartonelli's." Her half-attempt at a smile faded quickly when she saw Siren wasn't willing to believe that. "I know what you're thinking, Siren."

"No, you don't."

"Yes, I do. You're thinking this is all part of some weird curse, like whatever it was that took your mother away from you, but Carver isn't like Rhetta, Siren. Carver's not crazy. He's not into drugs. And I know for a fact he would never just walk away from you without a damn good reason."

"What reason?" The purring cat dropped onto her feet, edging his spine along her ankles until he was comfortable. "What kind of reason could he possibly have to do this?"

Hanging her head, Lacey confessed, "I don't know, but whatever it is I bet it's a good one."

"And what if I'm cursed?"

"You're not cursed."

"How do you know?" Tightening her jaw, it felt unnatural when she spoke, like a puppeteer wagged her lips and forced words from her that weren't her own. "Everything that's ever mattered to me..."

"That's bullshit, and you know it." Lacey's hand came down hard on the table, closed-fist and angry. "I'm still here. Aunt Maisie is still here. Mr. Pounce... There is no curse, Siren. There never has been. Sometimes bad things happen, and I promise you this is not one of them."

She wanted to lean forward and challenge Lacey's conviction, ask her, "What if you're wrong?" But she said nothing else. She just sat there with tears streaming down her face feeling hopeless, helpless, and more than just

a little bit crazy while her best friend implored her silently to listen to reason and her cat went on purring at her feet.

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CHAPTER FIVE

Her mother's wild blue eyes were large and round, staring deep into her soul as she squeezed Siren's hands so tight she felt like her bones were breaking underneath the skin. "Do you know?"

Shaking her head, the black pigtails she wore jostled back and forth, whispering against her cheek and tickling her. "Know what, Mommy?"

"Do you know what you are?"

Again, her head swiveled, round, freckled cheeks disappearing and reappearing as the pigtails swayed. "I'm a little girl."

"No, you're a monster. You look like a little girl, but underneath your thin disguise I see what you really are."

The muscles in her throat constricted, the tightness making it hard for her to swallow the rising acid threatening to spill into her mouth and burn her tongue. "I'm not a monster, Mommy."

"Yes." Rhetta grinned, her teeth looking too large for her small mouth. "Yes, you are." Her face distorted like a fun house mirror image as those tiny lips grew and grew until snakes of laughter slithered between big teeth and flickered forked tongues toward Siren's face.

She tried to scream, but when she opened her mouth the only sound that came out was thunder.

Ominous, boisterous, terrifying. Siren felt the ground tremble beneath her feet, threatening to crack open and swallow her up.

Her mother began to back away, her grip loosening as the snakes retreated back into her mouth.

"A monster," she hissed. "A terrible, wicked little demon."

“Siren!” In the distant a second voice called out over the snarling crackle, barely reaching her ears. “Siren, can you hear me?”

“Carver?”

Siren shot from sleep like an arrow leaving the tightly stretched string of a drawn bow. The whirling dervish of colorful dreams taunted from the edges of her consciousness, but try as she might to grasp at them it was no use. The moment her eyes came open and she sat up in the bed all memory of the night before rushed through her, obliterating the delicate web still tethering her to the dream world.

Groggy, she lifted a hand to stifle the yawn about to escape her when the phone on her bedside table rang again.

The phone.

Mr. Pounce mrewwed bitterly, humphing down onto the hardwood floor as she stretched across the mattress to reach for it. He haughtily glared back at her from the doorway before padding down the hall. For several seconds she held the phone in her hand, blurry eyes registering the words on the screen.

Incoming Call... Carver Ashmore.

Carver!

Her finger was lightning as it swiped across the screen, the words flying from her lips before she even had the mouthpiece close enough for him to hear her. “Jesus Christ, where have you been? Do you have any idea what you put me through last night?”

“Siren,” he breathed her name, relief gripping his tone. “I n—d —u to list — —o —e, Si—n.”

“Where are you?” she demanded. “Where the actual hell are you?”

“...n’t —ow.” It sounded like he was going through a tunnel, the connection disrupted by a thick layer of stone that sliced at every word until all that came through was an odd collection of sounds that made no sense when strung together. “—ay away fr—im. —o y— —r me?”

“You’re breaking up, Carver. I can barely understand you. What? Where are you?”

“Pl— lis—n to me. You have to —ay away.”

“I have to stay away?”

“J—” Chunks of word and phrase crackled through the static, never enough syllables to actually make them out and piece them together. “—ck

to y— but I...—n. I'm —orry.”

“Carver, I can’t understand what you’re saying. Where are you?”

“...t I l— you.”

“Carver?”

The line went dead.

“Carver?”

Nothing.

The phone beeped three long tones, denoting the end of the call, and she drew it out to stare at the screen. She felt her nostrils widen and flare as she breathed in, and her heart rapidly hammered against her ribs. She pressed the call-back button on the touchscreen and it dialed as she brought the phone up to her ear and waited.

“Hey, this is Carver. I’m not available at the moment, but leave your name and number and I’ll call you back.”

“What the hell is going on? Carver, come on. This isn’t funny. Where are you?” She waited until the call ended then immediately dialed his number again. Waiting through the greeting, as soon as it beeped she began a choked tirade. “I am freaking out right now. What the hell, Carver? You just called me. Why aren’t you answering? Where are you? Please just call me back.”

Only he didn’t call back.

She sat on the edge of her bed holding her fully-charged phone in her hand, dialing and redialing, listening to the sound of his voice message on the other end and leaving pleading messages.

But he never called her back.

PART TWO

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CHAPTER SIX

Three Years Later...

“Babe, where do you want this?”

“What is it?”

“I don’t know... It says books on the flap and it weighs about a ton and a half, so I’m thinking that’s an accurate description of the contents.”

Patrick held the box against his chest, the muscles in both arms bulging through the tightly stretched fabric of his dark grey t-shirt. The thick, rakish waves of his dark brown hair sprung out at a variety of adorable curls she wanted to reach out and run her fingers through before tangling them into the hair at the nape of his neck and drawing him into a hungry kiss. There’d be plenty of time for that later, or maybe she should just do it anyway. Reach out and run her fingers into the sweat-damp curls of his hair, fall across the box-littered space between them and into his arms to steal a kiss. Of course, he’d have to put the box down first and take a few more steps to close the gap between them, but he’d do it if she asked him to.

He lived to please.

Studying the box, something inside her tightened anxiously and she looked away, back down into the box at her feet as if the clothes overflowing from it were the most important thing in the world. The books in that box called to her. Made her want to escape into their pages to a place with a narrative voice that made her feel comfortable and safe.

They were Carver’s books.

She knew every one of them page for page, the entire story so much a part of her she could call to mind word for word many of the details, and probably note what page said event occurred on. But it had been a while since she sat down and read through them.

Disappearance Day was coming, she realized.

Maybe it was time.

“Hello?”

Attention snapping back to the moment, she shook her head as she brought it back up to look at him. “Just put it there. I’ll sort through it when I finish with these clothes for Goodwill.”

“If I put it here, it’ll never get moved,” he teased, an eyebrow shooting upward and the corner of his mouth responding in kind. “We’ll be tripping over this box of books for the next six to eight months.”

“No, we won’t,” she snorted. “I’ll go through it as soon as I’m done with this, I promise.”

“How did someone who lived in such a teeny-tiny apartment acquire so much stuff? Where the hell did you put it all?”

Siren chuckled and shook her head, as baffled as he was. “I don’t know. Closets, I guess. Some of it was over at Aunt Maisie’s.”

“Maybe we should take it back to Aunt Maisie’s? Like all of it.”

“Maybe we should throw your ugly brown chair out with the trash on Thursday?”

“Touché.” He squinted and scowled playfully at her threat. Head bobbing in defeat, he lowered the box onto the floor. “I’m just going to set this box down over here and you have at it whenever you see fit, how’s that sound?”

“Sounds good to me. You know,” she started, holding up an old dress and watching it spill down over the front of her body, “I should stop sorting through these clothes and just donate everything in here.” The dress still fit, but the pattern of the fabric was the most unflattering combination of bright angles and shapes she’d ever seen. It promised to make her look as wide as a brick house if she so much as even tried it on. “I don’t think I’ve worn anything in here for years.”

“You know what I think?” He dropped the box of books near the edge of the shelf in the corner and stood up, both hands perching on his hips as he caught his breath. “I think you should stop wearing clothes altogether.”

“Is that right?”

“Oh yeah,” he wrinkled his nose above his mouth, carrying on with the exaggerated nod. “I mean, you work from home now. You’ve got your own studio. It’s not like you’ll ever have to explain yourself to anyone but me.” He lifted his leg and stepped over the trail of boxes as if navigating through an obstacle course. When he arrived in front of her, he grabbed onto the dress she’d been inspecting, yanked it from her grip and tossed it haphazardly over his shoulder. She watched the colorful fabric balloon and bunch as it drifted to land atop a pile of boxes behind him. Sinking his fingers into her forearms, Patrick tugged her into his chest and looked down at her, his hazel eyes shining playfully. “In fact,” he went on, “I think you should take your clothes off right now.”

“Naked unpacking? Sounds like an Olympic sport.”

“Who said anything about unpacking?” Dipping his head down, his lips brushed across hers as his fingers pressed just a little harder into the aching skin and muscle of her arms. “I’m so bored with this whole process, Siren. Let’s throw all our stuff away and just buy new stuff.”

Drawing her head back to laugh, she tilted it into a stretch along her shoulders before bringing it back down. She leaned upward, stole another kiss from him and said, “I can’t afford all new stuff. I’m a starving artist, remember?”

“I hear they have really nice things at the thrift shop.” An incorrigible grin rose against her mouth. Patrick slid his arm in across her hip, drew her body into his and said, “Or we could just not have any stuff at all. Who needs stuff?”

“I sort of like stuff,” she muttered.

“I sort of like you.”

“Only sort of?”

“All right, quite a bit.”

“I was hoping you’d say that.”

He was kissing her again, mouth softening, opening over hers until she felt the tease of his tongue glide between her teeth in an enticing dance that made her toes curl against the foam of her flip-flops. The bristling hairs of his mustache and goatee tickled and itched deliciously against her skin, and she found her free hand rising to slide down his cheek, resting along his jaw. The muscles in her stomach clenched and tingled with delight,

anticipation of what usually followed such a kiss filling her with excitement.

People said it was like that with newlyweds, the first year a honeymoon that felt like it might never end. They were constantly locking themselves away from the rest of the world, exploring bodies, laying together in the dark and tasting one another's minds as they chattered away into the long hours of the night. She couldn't imagine that feeling ever going away, the need to always be touching him, laughing with him, losing herself in the dazzling amber bursts of his hazel eyes when he tilted his forehead in to rest against hers.

She never thought she'd feel that way again about anyone, but then Patrick happened.

He swept into her life so suddenly she almost couldn't remember a time without him in it. Shortly after Carver disappeared, and Siren convinced herself she was done with love, Patrick Blakely moved into the apartment next door. He inserted himself into her life the way a tornado thrusts itself upon the land, nibbling away at her resolve until one day she realized she just didn't want to be alone anymore. He was a good guy. He adored her. He even seemed to understand the emotional baggage she carried, lending her the strength of his shoulder while she suffered through fruitless police investigations into Carver's disappearance that led nowhere.

She resisted him at first, a near impossible feat considering how charming and persistent he was, but Patrick refused to let go and eventually Siren started to give in. Thirteen months. That was how long it took to convince her Carver was gone, and he was never coming back. As the realization dawned on her, and she began to break down again, it was Patrick who helped her pick up the pieces and start to move on. He dropped by her apartment every day to make sure she got out of bed. He brought her coffee and Chinese food and cheesy movies from the Redbox.

Under the surface, she still ached for Carver. She grieved for him as though he'd died, even though deep down she knew that wasn't true. There was a part of her that still held onto the possibility that he might one day come back, but what then?

Closing her eyes, as if hiding them would make her thoughts disappear, Patrick seemed to feel the shift of her emotions. He tucked his arms across

the small of her back, hugging her before lifting his head and nuzzling the tip of his long nose across hers before tasting her lips again.

“So, I was thinking...”

“Uh-oh.”

Patrick leaned out, swatting gently at her as she chuckled at his expense.

“Never mind, if that’s how you’re going to be.”

“I’m just teasing, what were you thinking about?”

For a moment he pretended he wasn’t going to answer. He tilted his head back, his tight arms tugging her even closer to his body. His arms were comfort, an enticing warmth she never wanted to pull away from for fear it would be lost. Trailing the tips of her fingers up the length of his spine, her hand arrived just below his hairline and disappeared into the loose, soft curls.

“I think...” He drew those two words out slowly, rolling his head forward and resting it against hers. The corners of his eyes wrinkled as he grinned. “I think we should call it day,” he decided. “We’ll go upstairs, jump into the shower and wash the sweat and toil of this day down the drain. Then we’ll order a pizza, flop down in the middle of the bed and just glut ourselves to bursting while watching movies on cable.”

“Pizza in bed, eh?”

The thick angle of his brow shot upward, wagging enticingly as he purred, “Pizza in bed,” as if it was the most romantic thing in the world.

Siren couldn’t stop the giggle bubbling up from her chest. “Is that what you really want?”

“I don’t know,” he moaned, lifted both shoulders into a shrug and rubbed his ear against the left one. “I just know I don’t want to look at another box full of stuff and things and... Ugh. I’m just so tired of unpacking.”

“It has to be done,” she insisted. “We can’t live like this, wading through boxes forever and getting cardboard cuts on our legs. And you know, I haven’t seen Mr. Pounce since yesterday.”

“Good,” he rolled his eyes. “I won’t miss that flea-bitten bag of fur if he disappears forever.”

Siren’s hand batted across his chest. “You’re so cruel. What did Mr. Pounce ever do to you?”

“Before or after he pissed on my favorite shirt?”

“He’s not a Steelers fan, and I still say he was jealous once you started moving on his lady.”

“Either way, I won’t complain if he never comes back.”

“I bet he’s lost in this mess.” Her arm swept outward, gesturing across the piles of boxes on display, stacked on the floor and counter tops, covering the table and the breakfast bar. “We have to do this.”

“Can’t we do it tomorrow? I’m starving and all my muscles hurt and...”

“You’re such a baby.”

Patrick’s lower lip jutted outward in a well-practiced pout that only lasted as long as it took him to start laughing. He dropped his arms away from her and drew in a breath through his nose when he stepped back. “If we don’t stop unpacking right now I’m going to set the house on fire. Everything can burn.”

She watched his eyes shine, amused with his own jest judging from the twitching grin grabbing the left corner of his mouth. Siren sucked her lower lip between her teeth, thinking. “I’ll tell you what,” she started, “let me finish this one last box and then we’ll do whatever you want for the rest of the night.”

“Deal!” He pecked her on the cheek then took another step back. “That dress...” he gestured over his shoulder with a nod of his head, “hideous, by the way. I think we should burn it.”

“What is it with you and burning things? My god! Get out of here,” she snorted. “Go... stand in the middle of your man cave and plot devious things.”

Deepening his voice, he chuckled as he tented his fingers together. “Devious things! Fire,” he grunted. “I’ll be in my den of inequity plotting world domination and thinking of wild pizza toppings you probably won’t agree to.”

“Pepperoni,” she called after him.

“Mushrooms.”

“God, you’re so gross. I can’t believe I agreed to spend the rest of my life with you.”

“Nor I you, you hideous, pepperoni-loving she-witch.”

“Get out of here!”

“Love you!” He blew her a kiss from the other side of the room, ducking when she tossed an old t-shirt from the box in his direction. “Witch.”

The sound of his sneakered footsteps on the hardwood floors echoed, faded and then disappeared entirely as he escaped into the den on the other side of the house. Everything was so loud with nothing but unpacked boxes littering the floors to mute the sound. The spacious loft overhead sent even the quietest sounds reverberating back to her, amplified ten times. She heard Patrick shout from the other side of the house, something about mice and she shuttered.

“Here’s hoping your nasty little fur ball at least shows up to earn his keep.”

“Maybe that’s where he is now. Eating all the mice that used to live in your den.”

As if on cue, Mr. Pounce wound between her ankles purring and rubbing his face on the box flaps jutting open and a few feet away from her.

“There you are, sweet boy. You should go eat all the mice in Daddy’s den.”

He yowled lamenting protest and lifted his face upward, his large golden eyes always seemed like they were staring into her soul. She started to bend down at the waist to pick him up, but he darted away, leaping over a box and scurrying through the maze of their belongings. He leaped up on top of the box of books Patrick dropped several feet away from her, straightened his back and meowed.

“What?” Siren tilted her head at the cat. “Can’t find your food dish?” she asked him. “All full-up on mice, are you?”

Clearly unamused, he stretched his front paws across the box top and began sharpening his claws on the cardboard.

“Mr. Pounce, stop it. There’s nothing in there for you.”

He kept raking and scraping, tiny bits of cardboard jumping up in the air around him and sticking in his long, white fur. Siren shook her head and let him go, reasoning that it was better he scratch up old cardboard boxes than the furniture. Squatting down in front of the box of old clothes, she tugged out one shirt, shook her head at it then dropped it back into the box. She sifted around for several minutes, inspecting items, rolling her eyes and finally deciding she didn’t want any of the things in there at all. She never had wanted any of them, and she was baffled about how they’d come into her possession in the first place.

“Aunt Maisie,” she muttered. The woman had a terrible yard sale addiction.

She stuffed the few loose items that tumbled out onto the floor back into the box, grabbed the Sharpie marker and scribbled GOODWILL across the top. Then she shoved the box out of her way and rested her elbows on her knees as she watched the cat continue to tear and tug at the flaps of that box of books.

“You can’t even read,” she told him.

For a moment he stopped, paw suspended in mid-air and little flakes of cardboard embedded in the curves of his extended claws. The expression he wore was one of disdain, his large eyes narrowing just enough to suggest he did, in fact, know how to read, and she was a fool for suggesting otherwise. Flicking his paw, he lowered it back to the box and flopped down, continuing to stare at her.

Siren nudged the box in front of her out of the way and wove through the organized mess stacked on the floor until she arrived in front of Mr. Pounce. Hunkering down, she reached her hand out and stroked it through the cat’s soft, thick fur until he started to purr. The sound vibrated through her palm, soothing and steadying her nerves, which seemed strange, as she hadn’t even realized they’d felt a bit frayed. It was the box, she realized. Rather, the contents of the box he’d flopped down onto and made himself comfortable.

Carver’s books.

“I know you just got comfortable,” she started, fingers moving along the curve of his spine then rising back up to scratch behind his ears, “but I’m gonna need you to get up.”

Mr. Pounce rose, as if he actually understood her, took two steps forward and rubbed his body along her forearm. He circled back around again, then hopped down onto the floor. She watched him navigate the boxes as if he were making his way through dangerous jungle terrain, and then he disappeared around the stairwell winding up to the second floor.

Tugging open the loosely tucked flaps, there were two copies of the last book Carver wrote positioned on top of the pile, a paperback and a hardcover edition. The hardcover was in pristine condition, but the paperback was worn, well-read, the spine featuring numerous cracks where the paper chipped away from the number of times she flipped through the

pages within. Touching her fingertip to the image, she hadn't even realized she was chewing her bottom lip until her teeth pinched the skin and sent a jolt of pain through her.

She missed Cameron Ellis, the cursed warlock who stood sideways on the cover, black trench coat fluttering in a wind she could almost hear snapping the fabric. Head tilted downward to shadow his face, the streams of his dark blond hair caught the same breeze. The clenched hands at his sides glowed blue with unnatural power he hated unleashing on the world, but often had no choice. It was his duty to protect the world from his own brother, a villain so vile the mere thought of Matthias Edmonton made Siren shudder.

Lifting the hardcover out of the box, she held the weight of it in her hands and allowed the heavy cover to flip open. The pages rose like magic, hanging in front of her as her eyes scanned the dedication in the front:

For Siren, who broke my curse without ever even realizing it.

Her lower lip was between her teeth again, trembling under the pressure as she bit down. Her vision started to blur, but then Patrick was there again, as if he'd sensed her need for comfort, announcing, "I'm not kidding, I give up. I'm done."

Dropping the book back into the box, she glanced up and forced a smile, "Me too."

"That's my girl. You want to just drag it all out onto the lawn and have a bonfire?" He leaned against the wall and crossed his arms over his chest before tipping his head casually into the corner.

"That would probably take care of the overgrowth problem."

"Two birds, one stone," he winked. "I like the way you think."

They'd gotten the house cheap because it was falling apart. It needed more work than two people would ever be able to do, but Patrick was a contractor and he knew people. Every time she started to twist her mouth into a disparaging scowl, he would grip her shoulders from behind, lean into her back and press his cheek to hers as she said, "This place is a hot mess."

He would kiss her then and say, "Yes, but it's our hot mess. We'll have wild dinner parties, invite all our friends, and when they come they'll say, 'Wow, this place is a hot mess.' We'll just smile and nod and tell them, 'Yes, yes it is, but it's our hot mess.'"

His enthusiasm convinced her in the end to go through with it. Well, that and the overwhelming sense of hominess she felt standing in the middle of *their* house. The home of Mr. and Mrs. Patrick R. Blakely, located rather inconveniently in the middle of nowhere just off Route 220 on a seventeen acre plot that was going to be a real bitch to keep mowed. Home. It was a concept she never thought she'd experience outside of Aunt Maisie's two bedroom ranch on the corner of Elm and Water in downtown Makewell, but there she was. Two months of weeds, vines and nettles nearly swallowed the property, the roof was rotting and there were water stains bleeding down the living room wall, but it was... home.

One day their children might run through the carefully tended lawn, even if the very thought of reproducing made her itch under her skin. She'd never wanted children, but Patrick did. He wanted a family more than anything in the world. He'd been orphaned as a boy, though he didn't much like to talk about it. Both his parents died tragically when he was young, and he spent the years of his life longing for the same sense of home Siren herself had felt the absence of after her mom took off.

She tucked the flap of the box in front of her and let a sigh escape her. It lifted the loose tendrils of black hair that escaped her ponytail and made them tickle her cheeks and forehead as they settled back into place. Her hand swiped at them, but it was no use. They drifted back down and wavered as she shook her head.

"This really is a nightmare."

The entire move felt like a hopeless task that was never going to end, and the more she thought about it, the more she started to think maybe Patrick was right. They should just throw everything away and start over.

A dome of a home like theirs couldn't just have any old furniture or decor. It needed extravagant furniture, antique chairs and tables bordering on gaudy. Scanning the piles upon piles of boxes, she exhaled again, her puffed out cheeks flattening as she asked, "Why do people keep every little thing?"

"Enough," he urged. "What do you want on the pizza? Pepperoni?"

"Do they even deliver pizza out this far?"

"I don't know. We'll have to call and find out. Come on," he urged with a jerk of his head. "Forget about the rest of the crap and let's go take a shower."

“Together?” She knitted her brows together, absolutely scandalized. “Why, Mr. Blakely, if you’re insinuating what I think you’re insinuating, well I just don’t even know what to say about that.”

“There’s no insinuation whatsoever. Into the shower with you, you naughty, naughty girl. Two birds, one stone.”

“I love it when you talk dirty.”

He slid around the corner of the wall and began hiking up the stairs that wound around in a spiral until they arrived on the loft landing. Siren watched him run his hand along the wooden railing, then she nudged the box at her feet away before navigating a course to the bottom of the stairway. Hiking them two at a time, he was already in the bathroom just off the master bedroom, stripping out of his grey jersey-style shirt and leaning into the tub to turn on the shower. The water screamed through the pipes, then he swore under his breath and ducked back, crossing both arms over his chest to watch it run thick and rust brown as it spurted against the white-tiled shower wall.

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“The shower downstairs was running just fine when I turned it on this morning to wash the spiders out.”

“It’s probably been a while since someone’s turned this one on,” he noted, a hand rising to rub through his facial hair. “I’ll let it run for a few minutes and see if it clears up.”

She leaned her shoulder into the doorframe and wrinkled her nose. “You don’t think there’s something wrong with the pipes, do you?”

“Probably not,” he shrugged. “And if there is, I’ll fix it. Don’t you worry your pretty little head.”

Dropping her pretty little head back, she stared up at the crack lining the ceiling of their bedroom before closing her eyes and groaning softly.

“This place is falling apart.”

“Siren.” Patrick stepped forward and gripped her arms in gentle hands. They were wet from the shower, soaking hand prints into the sleeves of her shirt. “It’s all right. It’s just a little rust in the pipes. Nothing I can’t fix.”

“With what? Magic? How does rust even get into pipes? Doesn’t that mean they’re... oh, I don’t know, rusted somewhere?”

“Not necessarily. We’re on a well,” he reminded her. “There’s an iron bar that runs through this whole area. The water filtration system in the

basement probably just needs the filter changed.”

“Then why was the shower downstairs fine this morning? The water in the kitchen sink?”

“Stop,” he willed her. “I can fix it. It’s why you love me remember? I fix things.”

“That’s not why I love you.” She quirked her brow at him and smirked.

“Sure it is,” he brought a shoulder upward in a quick shrug. “Well, that and that thing I do with my tongue sometimes.”

“You’re so ridiculous,” she laughed. “*That’s* why I love you.”

Carver hadn’t been ridiculous. He’d been serious as a heart attack most of the time, and that was why she loved him. The moments when he did unclench his fists from reality and let down his hair, she’d lived for those. The sound of his laughter, the light in his eyes as he chased her through the woods lining the Falls Trail at the State Park. Patrick didn’t like hiking. It wasn’t his thing at all, and she was kind of glad for that because there was no one else in the world she wanted to explore those trails with but Carver. It was one of *their* things.

Again, she closed her eyes and stopped herself from dwelling. It was a hard habit to break, comparing every man she met, most particularly Patrick, to Carver. She’d fallen in love with Patrick even though she didn’t want to, and the reasons for it had nothing to do with Carver Ashmore. He was the exact opposite of Carver, and for a while she told herself maybe that was why she loved him, but for the most part she didn’t really think it mattered all that much. She only knew she loved him. And she was spending the rest of her life with him, and that was that.

“Because I’m ridiculous? You love me because I’m ridiculous? That’s a comfort. At least I know I won’t have to try very hard to keep you around. I mean, I’m so ridiculous I’ll probably only ever have to worry about you leaving me if the circus comes to town. All those clowns...” Still gripping her arms in his hands, he leaned back to inspect the running water, still spurting orange into the stained tub and against the wall. “I think it’s starting to clear up.” He let go and moved in to fiddle with the faucet knobs, turning both the hot and cold water on full blast. He tilted his head up a little, watching the water as it sprayed from the shower head then grinning over at her. “Look at that. Clean, rust-free water.”

“What did you do?”

“Magic,” he raised his eyebrows at her.

“Now if you could just magic all these boxes unpacked and all our stuff put away, I’d be really impressed.”

“I’ll see what I can do, but I won’t make any promises. I’m done with boxes for the rest of the day.”

“Are you going to wash out the tub again?” She wrinkled her nose in disdain, not exactly keen to the idea of stepping into a dirty bathtub full of rust water.

Patrick rolled his eyes at her and spun around to dig through the vanity cabinet for the cleaning scrub. Pushing off the frame of the door, she backed into the bedroom, one of the few places in the house that actually looked as if someone lived in it. The first thing they’d set up was their bed and the dressers. Most of the clothes they wore every day were already tucked neatly into drawers or dangling from hangers in the closet and she’d even hung a few paintings on the walls, both her own and her mother’s.

She walked across the rug until she arrived at the window. Peeling back the curtains she peered out at their never ending yard. She spied a doe and her fawns weaving through the thick, golden grass, toward the small slip of stream they had to cross via a ramshackle bridge to reach the house. Another project Patrick would have to devote his time to fixing because she was relatively sure it was only a matter of time and a single heavy rainstorm before that bridge washed out entirely, leaving them stranded on either side of the creek until the water went down again.

“There’s a little deer family walking through our yard right now.”

“What?” he called from the bathroom, the knobs squeaking as he wrenched them closed and shut the water down while he scrubbed the rust out of the tub.

“A deer family,” she repeated, “just walked through our yard. A momma deer and her little fawns.”

“Dinner, you say?”

“No, doe with fawns.”

“Good eatin’,” he called back, the brush he scrubbed the tub with scritch in successive strokes. “I wonder if I’d get fined for shooting a deer on my own property.”

“Probably,” she said, “and to make matters worse you’d be sleeping on the couch because you brought a gun into the house.”

“A bow,” he told her. “I’d use a bow. It’s more sportsman-like. More of a challenge.”

“I don’t even like venison.”

“You just haven’t had it prepared properly. Come look at the tub, Your Majesty, and tell me if it meets your standards of cleanliness.” He squeaked the knobs again, the water rushing out of the faucet first, then spraying downward from the shower nozzle to rinse away the cleanser and rust.

Siren arrived in the doorway again, tilting her head in to inspect the tub and nodding approval as she crossed her arms. “Nice work, knave. When you’re finished, maybe you’ll check beneath the mattress for little peas. I slept like crap last night.”

“As you wish, Highness,” he bowed forward in a dramatic gesture, then stood up straight again. “Now, off with those clothes and into the shower with you.”

“You first.”

Patrick took three steps toward her, gripped her by the forearm and dragged her stumbling across the linoleum floor into his arms. There was laughing which became kissing, his fingers gathering the fabric of her t-shirt into his hand and dragging it softly up the length of her spine before he stepped back, lifted it over her head and pitched it into the laundry basket on the other side of the bedroom. He never took his eyes from hers, staring intently into her as he moved back in to taste her lips once more. Siren moaned softly when the hand on her back slid lower, fingers burrowing into the meat of her backside and squeezing her close enough that she could feel his desire for her through the soft material of his athletic shorts.

“You know what I want?” he murmured into her kisses. “I want to make a baby.”

“A baby?” she whispered, ducking back slightly to look up at him. “Really?”

“Mmmhmm,” he nodded. “Let’s just whip one up right now.”

“Babies aren’t like milkshakes, Patrick. They don’t just get made when you want them to.” She laughed a little.

“Sure they do.” He slipped his fingers into the elastic lining of her sweatpants and began sliding them down her hips, finally letting go and allowing them to drop around her ankles. “Let’s make a baby right now.”

“Where would we even put a baby in this mess?” she snickered.

Patrick shrugged, surging forward with her until she felt the bathroom sink press against her backside. “We’ve got nine months to figure it out,” he grinned. He bent a little, his forearms curving into her knees to buckle her and lift her onto the sink. It didn’t feel stable and her stomach lurched fretfully as she glanced back over her shoulder. She caught their reflections in the mirror, then turned her gaze downward at the wobbly sink.

“I shouldn’t be sitting up here.”

“Shh,” he silenced her with a kiss, his fingers tangling into the hair at the nape of her neck and drawing her head back. His lips trailed downward, delicate chills dancing across her skin. She sighed resignation and closed her eyes, trying desperately not to panic every time she felt the flimsy sink rattle and shake beneath her and then losing herself entirely when her husband’s crafty tongue slipped along the stretched curve of her neck, trailing downward tickling and teasing and making her gasp and sigh when he dropped between her thighs and glanced up at her with devious intent.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Lacey twirled the sapphire ring on her middle finger, a nervous habit she'd had for as long as Siren could remember. "You're so lucky." She watched the blue stone disappear as Lacey looped it around and then closed her hand over it and lifted it back to the top of the table. "Patrick is literally the perfect man."

The smile playing at the corner of Siren's mouth was genuine, but not as wide as it probably should have been. She knew how lucky she was, how great her husband was, but her head wasn't in that space. She'd gone to bed Monday night prepared to wake feeling sullen, and that was exactly what happened Tuesday morning. Rain pelted the roof and windows as Patrick snuggled up to her in bed, his warm body spooning hers as he moaned softly into her hair and said, "I wish we could stay like this forever."

She laid there feeling like an impostor in her own life. She was the undeserving wife who knew exactly how lucky she was, but didn't allow herself to feel it.

It was Disappearance Day.

All of her thoughts, which had been lingering on Carver since she tugged open the cardboard flap on that box of books, would cling to memories and regrets there were no words for until melancholy's grip finally began to loosen its fingers again and Siren actually felt like she could breathe.

"He needs to go back to work," she said. "I need to get back to work. I've got deadlines and a commission I need to finish before the end of next month, but I can't do anything until I can get into my studio."

"At least you have a studio now."

“True.”

Streams of water poured down the stained glass window of The Beanstalk, colorfully distorting headlights and taillights as late morning traffic continued to bustle along Main Street. It was just an ordinary day to everyone else, but Siren felt like she was in a waking nightmare that was never going to end. Just when she started to feel like a person again, the grief came back tenfold. She was raw and agitated, easily annoyed and ready to snap. She hated being that way. A part of her thought she might hate Carver Ashmore for ruining her life, but she could never hate him. Even if he walked through the door of the coffee shop, stalked up to the table and sat down without explanation for his whereabouts for three years, she still couldn't hate him.

The bell dangling from the door clanged against the glass as it opened. Sweeping the smell of autumn and rain in with the cold air, tires whooshed across wet asphalt and she glimpsed the grey of the sky for just a moment before the door banged shut again. She hated to admit it, but the day was fitting for her mood.

“Still, they say absence makes the heart grow fonder. I'm reaching the point where I might just strangle him if we don't get back to our day to day routines.”

Snorting a little, Lacey shook her head and scolded her. “At least he wants to spend time with you. I'm lucky if I can get Jeff to do more than fall asleep on the couch when he gets home. We haven't done anything together in months, since your wedding now that I think about it.”

Frowning at her best friend, she could see how unhappy Lacey was, but it did no good to ask her why she was still with Jeff. “Maybe you guys should come over for dinner on Saturday. You can see how much we haven't done since we finished moving and mock me for being such a lazy vagabond. I swear, we're going to be living out of boxes for the rest of the year.”

“Patrick won't let that happen.”

“No,” she agreed, “he won't. I'm surprised he's let it go on this long, but in truth he's the one who keeps distracting me from unpacking every time I open a box.”

“Oh, poor Siren,” Lacey rolled her eyes as she cooed. “It must be awful for you, on the receiving end of all that sexual attention. Poor baby.”

Guiltily, she looked down at the tea in front of her and sucked her bottom lip into her mouth.

"I'm sorry," she lamented. "It's not your fault I have terrible taste in men. I don't know why I stay. He's not ever going to commit beyond the two of us living together. He's never going to budge on the whole marriage and family thing. You never even wanted to have kids, but you'll probably have a whole houseful of them before long, and I'll wind up a spinster. Maybe I should get another cat."

"I hear the library is hiring."

Reaching across the table, Lacey playfully smacked her arm and the two of them gave way to giggles, forgetting for a moment that the world was a dark and miserable place that revolved heavily around the trappings of the heart.

"He'll come around," Siren finally said. "Jeff loves you, Lace. I think he's just scared."

"Right, scared." She fell back into the booth with a humph. "Because I deserve to pay for the mistakes he made with his high school sweetheart twelve years ago. I realize she did a lot of damage, but come on. I'm not her." As she exhaled her shoulders lowered in unspoken defeat, and then she changed the subject. "We've been here for a whole hour, and I can't believe the fact that today is the uh... anniversary of Carver's disappearance hasn't come up once."

"That's not why I wanted to have coffee with you today, Lace."

"I know... it's just..."

"We have coffee every Tuesday."

"Right, I know, but this Tuesday just so happens to be the anniversary of the worst day of your life."

"Don't call it that," Siren pleaded. "Anniversaries are things people celebrate."

Lacey's round, green eyes were sympathetic as she raised them. "I didn't mean it that way, Si. I just... what else do you call it? Doomsday sounds so... I don't know, inappropriate?"

"Disappearance Day." Siren curled her fingers around the warm porcelain mug in front of her and leaned forward until the fragrant Earl Grey steam wafted up to tickle just beneath her nose. She breathed in, held it inside her and then exhaled a lengthy sigh that spoke of conflict and confusion. "It

still feels like Doomsday though. Every time I think about it.” She brought the mug up to her lips, took a slow drink and savored the taste of it before it slipped down her throat.

“I’m surprised his estate hasn’t gone up for sale yet. Not to be mean, or anything, but it’s been like three years.”

“You know Carver,” she pointed out. “He was so meticulous about everything. All of his bills on auto-pay, royalties direct-deposited, lawyers and accountant working around the clock, though I wonder how long it’ll be before there’s nothing left.”

“Unless they declare him dead, those royalty deposits will just keep going into his bank account, I imagine. I wonder if he had a will?”

“Lacey,” she brought her cup down again and glared across the table.

“I’m sorry. That was really insensitive of me.”

“Just a little.”

The jingling bell chimed again, signaling Siren’s attention. It was an old habit from the years she spent working as a barista behind the counter on the other side of the shop. She knew the man who’d just walked in well enough that even after two years she still remembered his order. A medium double-double, milk not cream, and a blueberry scone. He would slouch down in the corner booth with the newspaper and pick off little pieces of scone, feeding them between his lips while scanning the obituaries.

“You still believe he’s coming back, don’t you?”

Siren didn’t answer at first, watching as Mr. Double-Double shrugged out of his raincoat and slung it over his forearm while he waited for his coffee. He clutched the newspaper in his hand; the little yellow baggie that protected it dripped rain into a puddle around his scuffed brown loafers.

“He’s not dead,” she declared, her eyes bolting across the table and pinning her best friend with another bitter stare. “Sometimes it feels like I’m in the middle of some twisted, dreamy science fiction movie that doesn’t make any sense. Victim of some strange curse...”

“You’re not cursed, Siren. We’ve been over this like a thousand times before.”

“Yes, I know. You seem to think it’s perfectly normal for people to endure this kind of crazy on a semi-regular basis. I don’t agree.” Disappearing behind her mug again, she took several long swallows that

warmed her throat and spread into her chest. “It’s not a normal thing, Lacey, for people to just disappear like that.”

“I know it’s not normal, but it does happen.”

“Twice?” she wondered aloud. “To the same person?”

Lacey didn’t seem to know how to answer that, so she said nothing. Swirling her fingernail through the dwindling foam of her second latte, she made patterns that swept in to devour the pumpkin that decorated it when Chas Grimes plunked it down onto the table not twenty minutes earlier. The liquid continued to swirl, even after she withdrew her fingertip and sucked it clean. “Your mom didn’t just disappear, Siren. She bailed. I know that hurts, but what your mom did and what happened to Carver are not in any way connected and you are not cursed.”

“But how do we know that?”

“For one, Aunt Maisie told you, and she wouldn’t lie—”

“Not even to protect me?”

Siren’s Aunt Maisie had always been there, through thick and thin, holding her hand and leading her through life every step of the way until she was old enough and strong enough to take the reins herself. She was the mother Rhetta Talbot had never been, and she would do anything to keep her niece safe and protected, even lie. “What if everything she said about my mom leaving was a lie?”

“Siren, she wouldn’t lie to you. She loves you.”

“Which is exactly why she would lie. People lie to the ones they love all the time to keep them safe.”

“What exactly is she keeping you safe from? That’s what I don’t understand. That’s what doesn’t make sense. Your mom was an unstable drug addict who couldn’t handle her responsibilities. I know it’s easier to tell yourself some evil curse took her away from you, but you’re thirty years old, Si. It’s time to face facts. You don’t want to hear that...”

“Why do you do that?” She pressed her back into the cushion behind her, the sore muscles pushing into the stiff padding and alleviating some of the pressure, but only until she leaned forward again and shook her head. “Treat me like I’m being crazy.”

“I’m not treating you like a crazy person. I’m telling you what you don’t want to hear and that makes you think I’m attacking you. The only person who thinks you’re crazy is you.”

“So what happened to Carver then? Did he just leave too?”

Lacey pinched her lips together, her gaze dropping to the table again and lingering there as she muttered, “I don’t know what happened to Carver, Siren, but I don’t think the two incidents are related at all. There is no curse.”

The two women didn’t say anything for a long time after that. They just sat there in the coffee shop, Siren watching the customers as they filed through the door and playing a little game inside her head where she guessed their order before they stepped up to the counter. She could feel Lacey looking at her, staring hard as if she were trying to see through Siren’s wall and figure out what was going on inside her head. When at last she gave up it was with a heaving sigh that lowered her shoulders into a hunch.

“Now you’re mad at me.”

“I’m not mad at you.”

“You’re also not a very good liar.”

When she brought her gaze away from the counter, Lacey was waiting to meet her eyes, a tentative grin wrestling against the stern muscles of her mouth. “I’m not mad,” she said again. “I just don’t understand why you don’t believe me.”

“I do believe you,” she insisted, “about Carver. Whatever happened to him was beyond strange. People don’t just vanish into thin air, and the fact that even three years later you can’t remember what happened in the restaurant before he disappeared creeps me out. Don’t think I haven’t run every wacky scenario through my mind at least a hundred times, from alien abduction to fairy circles opening up and swallowing him whole in the middle of the street, but you’ll never convince me the same thing that happened to your mom happened to Carver. Your mom left. Carver was... taken.”

Ignoring her statement about Rhett Talbot, Siren rubbed her loosely clenched fist beneath her chin and muttered, “But by who? And to where?”

“I don’t know, Siren. I wish I did. We’ll probably never know, and I hate that because people need closure in order to move on with their lives, and you need to move on with your life.”

“I don’t think I ever will.” Head shaking back and forth, she racked her mind for a subject, any subject, to change the conversation topic. “Enough

of that. Let's talk about something else."

Lacey stared across the table, her auburn hair falling in around her face as she shook her head. "I'm not attacking you."

"I know, I just don't want to talk about it anymore, okay? Really, that's not why we're here." When her best friend didn't choose another conversation topic, Siren rolled backwards to Jeff, asking, "You really don't think Jeff will ever commit?"

"I don't know. I really don't even know why we stay together. We're probably not gonna make it, and I could be out there looking for Mr. Right, but I keep clinging because I think he's gonna change. People don't change."

"Have you tried talking to him about it?"

"Of course I have, only we don't talk. We fight. Which really just seems to confirm I'm right, right? We're not meant to be. I'm gonna be thirty-one in three weeks. I want kids. I want that stupid house in the country with the white picket fence and a golden retriever running through the grass with its tongue hanging out. The minute I bring up any of that stuff, he just freezes."

"Maybe he just doesn't want to get married. Some people don't need extravagant ceremonies and pieces of paper to know how they feel. Jeff loves you..."

"Says the girl who drug everyone she cares about to South Carolina to marry the perfect man on the beach. God, I hate you so much sometimes when I think about it. You're so lucky it makes me sick."

"Oh, thanks a lot." She leaned across the table and flicked Lacey's arm, making the other woman flinch and snicker.

"All right, I don't really hate you," she confirmed. "But I think I hate Jeff, and I love Patrick. Are you sure he doesn't want a concubine? A spare wife he can woo and take out to dinner whenever you're on a deadline, or feeling too broody to appreciate him for the perfect specimen he is?"

"Jeff loves you, and you don't hate him, no matter what you say. The fact that you love him is why it's so frustrating that the two of you don't want the same things."

"I want kids," she reiterated. "I want to be a family, to have a family with Jeff. You should see him with his sister's kids. He's so amazing."

"I'm sorry, Lace." She drew back her shoulders again. "I wish there was something I could say to make it all better, or that I had a magic wand and I

could just make Jeff be who you want him to be..."

"I want him to be who he is, but I want him to want a future with me. The same future I want to have with him."

She hadn't noticed the person who arrived beside their table until he cleared his throat. She glanced upward, eyes scanning the tattered trench coat and nose hairs curling at the sudden bombardment of overwhelming stench emanating from the man standing there. Eyes lifting upward, he was filthy, his scraggly beard hosting crumbs and twigs and bits of leaf, the wrinkles in his face exaggerated by the filth coating his skin. Siren had seen him around, had even dropped coins into the coffee cup he held out sometimes while panhandling on the corner and muttering things that didn't make sense to passersby.

Trying to veil the overwhelming sense of pity merging with disgust as he reached a dirty hand toward her, her focus lingered on the blackened dirt caked beneath his long fingernails.

"The box!" He pointed the tip of his finger so close to her face she could smell the nicotine that stained his skin yellow. It was a noxious aroma, the overpowering stench of it making her want to vomit. "You have to open the box! The box, the box!"

"Can I help you?" Lacey asserted herself.

"Waiting, he's been waiting and he suffers there. Oh, how he suffers. Sometimes when I dream I see him in the darkness. You must open the box and set him free."

"Booker!" Chas Grimes rushed toward their table from behind the counter, his strong hand coming down on the homeless man's shoulder and drawing him back before his wagging finger could tweak Siren on the nose. "I've told you before that you can't panhandle in here."

"He waits." His eyes blazed like pale white fire, flickering as they widened. "The box is the key. Set him free."

"Come on," Chas urged. "Let me get you some coffee to take with you and a sandwich. I'm so sorry, Siren," he shuffled the man away from the table, turning a disparaging glance back in her direction. "He's not in his right mind."

She nodded, no longer feeling disgusted, but definitely stunned by the strange encounter. "It's all right."

“Your coffees are on the house today, girls,” Chas said. “Again, I am so sorry.”

“It’s no problem,” she waved him off. “Don’t worry about it.”

Once they were gone, Lacey leaned across the table, her mouth twisted and her eyebrows rising high as she muttered the word, “Creepy.”

“He can’t help it.” Her gaze followed the shuffling homeless man across the coffee shop, watching as Chas sat him down on one of the stools near the cash register and told him to just stay there while he fixed him something to eat for the road. “He’s clearly out of his mind.”

“Clearly,” Lacey agreed, gulping down several mouthfuls of coffee. “And suddenly all my petty problems feel so insignificant.”

“Yeah,” Siren nodded. “Totally insignificant.”

“Could you imagine?” Head drifting back and forth in thoughtful repose, she added, “That could happen to any one of us at any time.”

Siren opened her mouth to say something, but before the words escaped her the buzzing of her silenced cell phone bounced the device a few centimeters across the table. Snatching it up, she glanced down at the screen and found the tension of the moment instantly disappearing.

Guess where I am right now?

“Patrick?” Lacey guessed.

Nodding, Siren slid her hand across the screen to open the text window. She didn’t bother typing anything other than a single question mark before she hit send and lowered the phone back to the table. “He took the week off to get the house in order. Right now there are still boxes everywhere, and don’t even get me started on the lawn. It’s rained almost nonstop, and it’s so pretty and green, but it’s like living in the middle of the jungle, I swear.”

“I hate moving.”

“I know, me too. Hopefully this is the last time I move for like the rest of my life.”

“It will be.” She lifted her coffee again and took another drink. “You’re in it for the long haul now, sweetheart.”

Another text buzzed and she glanced down at the screen.

Guess.

She picked it up again and typed: *Are you wearing clothes?*

The continual ellipses signaled him typing his reply and she waited for it to appear. Seconds later the bubble popped.

*Yes, but I can take them off if it will make it easier for you to guess.
Just tell me.*

Spoilsport. I'm in our living room, which is officially a proper living room, btw. Not a single box touching the floor.

Did you pile them all onto the sofa and love seat?

No. I unpacked them all and put everything away in an orderly fashion.

Shut up, you did not.

Shut up? You're so rude. And yes, I did so.

This I have to see.

You should come home.

Will you be naked when I get there?

Do you want me to be?

Absolutely.

Done and done!

I'm on my way.

"Oh the long haul," she grinned. "Apparently he's naked in the living room."

Lacey snorted, her hand rising over her lips as she shook her head. "God, I want what you have."

"I am a lucky girl," she sighed, but somewhere in the back of her mind there was a silent lament.

She was lucky, and she knew it, but how much luckier would she have been if it had been Carver instead of Patrick? Guilt poured in trickles down the curve of her spine, making her shudder and blush. She loved Patrick, and she was a horrible person for trying to imagine her life without him, but sometimes she couldn't help it. And there in The Beanstalk on the anniversary of Carver's disappearance, she really couldn't help it.

She'd woken up with Carver on her mind, and he would follow her throughout the day no matter what she did.

"I should go home," she decided.

"Damn right you should. Naked hottie waiting in the living room... Can I come?"

"Oh, he'd like that," she giggled. Swilling the warm liquid in her mug, she plunked it back down onto the table and stuffed her phone into her purse. "You guys need to come over for dinner after we find the yard. We

can have one last cookout before it gets too cold to stand outside without mittens.”

“I’ll pencil it into Jeff’s busy schedule for this Saturday.”

“Awesome.” She pushed her chair away from the table and started to stand. “Thanks for coffeeing with me, Lace. You know, I really needed... someone today.”

Someone who wasn’t Patrick, because no matter how much he loved her, Patrick wouldn’t understand and the last thing in the world she wanted was to break the perfect bubble of newlywed bliss by bringing up the fact that three years ago that very day the love of her life disappeared.

She wanted to mentally correct herself, scratch out the words and change them to the first love of her life, but even on the inside she couldn’t do it. She loved Patrick, but Carver would always be the love of her life. No matter how much he loved her, how often he accepted her flagrant eccentricities, he would never understand if she said those words out loud.

“One day it will be easier,” Lacey promised. “One day we will forget about the importance of this date until three days have passed...”

“No,” Siren shook her head. “That day is never going to come, Lacey. I don’t think I’ll ever let go.”

“I know you don’t want to, but...”

“Don’t, Lace. Just... don’t.”

“All right,” she agreed, sitting up straight in the chair. “If you need me later, text me.”

“I’m sure I will.”

Because there was no getting through Disappearance Day without some kind of breakdown.

She only hoped Patrick was nowhere to be found when the dam gave.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Patrick traced soft fingers through the loose waves of Siren's hair, the tips drifting along the back of her neck before touching the sensitive nerves at the top of her spine. "You doing all right today?" She shuddered, smiling and tilting her head upward to nuzzle lips across the bristling hair the lined his jaw. His arm dropped behind her, the muscles flexing as he wiggled feeling back into his fingers.

"I'm all right," she nodded.

"I know..." He paused, silently debating whether or not he should go on, then deciding to skirt around the edge of his concern. "I know what day it is."

Siren rested her head against his shoulder, snuggling closer. "Lacey and I chatted a bit about it."

"And?"

"And what? We just chatted a bit, that's all."

Patrick didn't say anything for a few minutes, the return of his fingers against her neck and shoulder was slower, more distant as they teased across her skin. Finally clearing his throat, he must have realized he wouldn't get much more than that out of her so he changed the subject. "So what do you think?" He tilted his head upward, a vague gesture toward the living room around them and she lifted her head to have another look around.

"You did a nice job," she whispered, groaning as she stretched against him and lifted her shoulder so he could retrieve his arm from underneath her. "A very nice job." She rubbed the palm of her hand through the crisp

hairs trailing along his stomach then patted the skin when she arrived at his hip.

“A nice job?” he chuckled. “I guess I’ll take that as a compliment, but I thought I was pretty damn spectacular just now, thank you very much.”

Playfully slapping her palm against his bare skin, he reacted by drawing in upon himself, his legs still tangled with hers and rolling her against him. “I meant with the living room,” she told him. “You did a nice job with the living room. I thought that was what you were talking about.”

“Oh, yes,” he agreed, “that. That was what I meant. I did do a pretty fantastic job, didn’t I?”

“Where did you put everything?” She circled her gaze around the spacious room, tipping her head back to rest on the corner of the couch behind her.

“I dug a hole in the back yard and buried it all,” he shrugged.

“Seriously?”

“No,” he laughed, his lopsided grin brushing against her cheek as he leaned up to kiss her. “I put it all away.”

“There were at least fifteen boxes devoted to the living room alone,” she pointed out.

“Seventeen,” he corrected. “I unpacked them all and put everything in its place.”

There were pictures hanging on the walls, shelves positioned behind the entertainment center displaying Siren’s collection of Thor action figures. She hadn’t noticed them until that moment, a dopey grin teasing at her lips as she studied them. They’d bickered about her dorky Thor collection while helping each other pack their apartments, Patrick telling her she could keep her toy shelf in her art room and Siren flippantly assuring him she’d put them wherever the hell she wanted. It was a stupid fight that ended with her finally agreeing to keep them in her art room. She wondered what made him change his mind.

“Even Thor,” she said, tilting her head in thoughtfully to rest against his shoulder again. “I thought Thor had no place in *your* living room.”

“Is that what I said?” He frowned, the lines burrowing into his cheeks and forehead. “I shouldn’t have said that to you. I know Thor is your hero,” he shrugged. “It’s something you love, and even if I don’t get it, I love it because you love it, so... There it is. In *our* living room.”

“Aw,” she sighed. “That is the sweetest thing I think you’ve ever said to me, but Thor is not my hero. You are.”

“Really?” She lifted her head to look down at him, his forehead wrinkled as he cocked a brow at her.

“Yes,” she declared, “really.”

“Hmm,” he nodded appreciatively. “I don’t think I’ve ever been a hero before. Does this entail any special behavior? Will you expect me to start flying, or shooting lasers from my eyes?”

“No,” she giggled and lowered her forehead into his shoulder again. “Just keep being you.”

“If you insist,” he mocked her with a sigh, wriggling a little as she traced her fingers along his hip again. “But seriously, I figured this is our home. Bits and pieces of each of us should be on display everywhere.”

“Does this mean you’re going to start displaying Steelers paraphernalia?”

“Maybe I will.”

“Go for it.” She pushed up onto her elbow and scanned the living room again. “I still can’t believe you put all this stuff away so fast. I was only gone for like two hours.”

“I’m incredibly efficient.”

“And apparently a magician.”

“I do work a little magic now and then,” he grinned, half-sitting to steal another kiss.

“Yes you do.” She started to sit up, but he grabbed her arm and dragged her back down against his chest.

“What? No cuddles? Where are you going?”

“I have to pee,” she informed him, tugging herself away again. “I’ll be right back.”

“I’m not going to be in the mood to cuddle by the time you come back,” he called after her as she padded through the house and into the bathroom on the other side of the kitchen. “Just so you know. You have to take them when you can get them.”

She flipped on the light switch, lifted the lid and sat down resting her elbows on the tops of her thighs while she waited for her body to yield. The bathroom behind the kitchen was tiny, nothing more than a small toilet and a sink. Patrick called it their water closet, which made her laugh because every closet in the house was bigger than that bathroom. It was also dark,

the burnt sienna paint dulling the four bright bulbs casting brilliance into the room and making it feel like they were shrouded in shadow. It was creepy, but he promised they would start repainting some of the outlandish colors the former owners employed once they were more settled.

The slap of bare feet on the kitchen tiles preceded the jangling of glass jars as he tugged open the refrigerator. Seconds later she heard him gulping loudly, the sound making her roll her eyes.

“You better not be drinking out of the milk carton.”

He gasped with exaggeration, noisily slid the carton back onto the top shelf and slammed the door. “I wasn’t.”

“Liar,” she muttered under her breath.

He leaned into the bathroom, swiping his hand across his mouth when he appeared. “What was that?”

“I called you a liar.”

“It’s my milk,” he shrugged. “I’ll drink out of the carton if I want to. It’s not like people ever come to your house and ask for a glass of milk to drink anyway.”

“It’s still disgusting. Every time I pour myself a bowl a cereal I get a mouthful of your germs in my Cap’n Crunch.”

“The same mouthful of germs you get every time you kiss me.”

“Not the point. Kissing germs are acceptable. Cereal germs, not so much.”

He exaggerated the arc of his eyes, neck rolling along bare shoulders as he hung on the molding around the door. “Are you almost done?”

“You know I can’t pee while you’re watching. Go use the other bathroom.”

“Fine,” he groaned, letting go of the molding and backing out of the room. She tilted her head thoughtfully, watching the taut muscles of his backside tighten and flex as he walked away. Only when he was out of sight was she able to let go, sighing relief.

He was already gathering clothing from the living room floor when she emerged, slipping into his boxers before stretching the tank top he’d been wearing back over his chest and allowing it to fall in around his waist. “I think I’m going to run into town and pick up something for the grill. If it ever stops raining. I guess I could pull it in under the awning, maybe. I don’t know.”

“Oh, speaking of the grill, I invited Lacey and Jeff over for the weekend to cook out.”

“Sounds good.” He tossed her t-shirt across the space between them and she caught it one-handed, shaking it loose and slipping into it before bending down to retrieve the rest of her scattered clothing. “Do you want me to pick anything up while I’m there?”

“Chocolate. Lots and lots of chocolate.”

Bowing before her in exaggerated form, he declared, “Your wish is my command.”

Ten minutes later she was alone in the house, standing in the middle of the immaculately organized living room and wondering again how he’d managed to get so much done in two hours. She’d barely been able to walk through it that morning without tripping over things trailing from boxes they’d started digging through in search of other things they couldn’t find. What felt like a hopeless task didn’t seem so hopeless anymore, but she highly doubted she could get even half as much done as he had in two hours.

She hadn’t been truly alone for more than a few minutes since they’d finished moving in and though it felt comfortable when Patrick was there with her, alone it felt strange and unfamiliar. Pulling in a breath, she unwound the hair tie from her wrist, drew the straight black length of her hair into a ponytail and started through the house. She stopped when she arrived outside the door to the room that would become her studio. It was nothing but boxes and mayhem on the other side of that door, but she was getting anxious. It had been weeks since she’d devoted time to her art and she was coming up on a deadline in a few weeks.

Organizing her workspace was going to have to become a priority—sooner, rather than later.

Turning the knob in her hand, she pushed the door open and flipped the light switch on. Boxes piled against the windows, blocking out the dull grey light streaming through, and her drafting table was collapsed against the far wall. It was chaos, stacks of boxes lining the walls, labeled with her quickly scrawled hand: ART ROOM.

She was finally going to have an art room. A studio all her own she could escape into and lose herself.

Patrick told her she could do whatever she wanted with the room. Paint the walls with rolling waves and sandy beaches, shells littering just above the molding so she always felt like she was sitting by the sea as she worked. They were presently painted a dark, olive green color that reminded her of the deep end of a pool that hadn't been cleaned in years. It lent darkness and shadow to every corner, and had likely served as a bedroom for one of the former owners. They must have been crazy people, she thought. Not only had they let the house go so badly much of it felt irreparable, they also had the worst taste in paint colors. Most of the walls were hideously coated in unusual shades she couldn't imagine ever made the place look comfortable or homey.

Patrick saw so much potential, and only thanks to the power of her own wild imagination was she able to visualize the rundown house they'd bought together becoming an actual home. Glancing back over her shoulder into the living room, which she could see at the end of the hallway, it seemed his vision would have no trouble coming into fruition.

She just had to trust him.

And she did. She trusted him more than she'd ever trusted anyone. Well, anyone other than Carver. Carver was the first person she'd felt implicit trust for, and after he disappeared it was really hard to establish that kind of bond with someone else. Patrick held out though, proving himself time and again and promising with a severity bordering on ritual that he would never, ever leave her as long as they both lived.

Siren never told him as much, but she doubted he could actually live up to that promise. Not because he didn't mean it, or fully intend to keep it, but because despite what Lacey said, she believed wholeheartedly she was cursed. Eventually, everyone she trusted with her heart disappeared.

It was only a matter of time...

Reaching a stack of boxes blocking the window, she peeled back the tape and wrenched open the tucked corner to peer inside. Tubes of acrylic paint lined the interior, haphazardly piled, some squeezed to capacity and promising little more than a single dollop, others full to bursting and barely dented. Dragging the box down, she plopped it onto the floor beside her feet and tackled the next. Another box of paint, oils.

Until Patrick hung shelves and helped her set her table back up, she couldn't do much of anything with it. It seemed pointless to keep opening

them so she tucked the flap back in, stepped backward into the room again and circled once around. She took a deep breath that filled her lungs until they ached, then she found her stare drawn to the closed bathroom door separating her studio from Patrick's man cave, as he was calling it.

She hadn't been in there since they finished carrying boxes and dropping them, but now she was suddenly curious about what he'd done with the place. Opening the bathroom door, the opposite door was closed and she hesitated.

That was his space, his private place to go and do Patrick things.

Funny, she thought, she didn't even really know what kind of things he would do in his own room. Maybe put together model cars or build elaborate Lego fortresses. Since she met him, he spent most of his spare time with her. He didn't talk about hobbies, or things he liked to keep himself busy with on the weekends. He was good with his hands, he liked wood and would probably spend endless hours in the garage workshop once they were settled in, but beyond that she couldn't imagine what he'd do with a man cave.

A yelp escaped her when the cat slipped in and pushed his ribs against her leg. Jumping, she tugged her hand back as if the knob had shocked her. "Jesus, Mr. Pounce. What the hell is wrong with you?"

The motorboat inside him chugged along, vibrating as he began the ritualistic circle between her slightly parted feet. Tail swishing, he batted it against her calf, the tip twitching just enough to make it tickle across her knee. Kneeling down, she scooped him up and walked back out of the bathroom, through her would-be studio and flipped the light off behind her before slamming the door. She carried the purring feline down the hallway, then let him leap from her arms onto the back of the couch.

Her heart was still thumping, the slight tingle of adrenaline pulsing through her as she rocked back onto her ankles and drew in calming breaths. She wasn't doing anything wrong, but she felt guilty about nearly opening the door to his private space and taking a peek inside. They were married. Aunt Maisie teased her months before that she would never know privacy again after taking those vows. Her space would become his space, and vice versa, but she valued her privacy and told her aunt Patrick wasn't that kind of guy. He would never just barge into her personal space just because they shared a roof, and she wouldn't do it to him either.

Still, she felt guilty for nearly having done it.

Residual regret for having woke up with another man on her mind. She'd been walking around all day feeling like she wronged her husband, but she couldn't ignore Disappearance Day even if she tried. Lacey said one day she'd forget, but she really didn't believe she ever would. One did not simply set aside their feelings for a person just because they were absent. She'd gone through all the stages of grief, one by one in an almost clinical fashion, sometimes repeating them again and again and again. Anger, disbelief, regret, blame, outright denial. Somewhere in the back of her mind she actually believed Carver was coming back one day. How long would it take before she actually let go of that notion? Five more years. Ten?

For fifteen years after Rhett Talbot disappeared, Siren clung to the belief that her mother would be back. She'd been wrong, and eventually she realized the woman was never coming back. She stopped holding onto hope and let go of her longing for a day that wouldn't dawn. But it felt different when she thought about Carver coming back. Even lying next to Patrick, who loved her in ways no one else ever had—not even Carver—she found herself imagining what might happen if he did return. Would she be conflicted? Would she find herself in doubt of her own feelings for the man she promised to spend the rest of her life with and ready to run back into the arms of the one she fully intended to spend her days with before he mysteriously vanished?

The worst part was she actually didn't know the answer to that question.

She wanted to believe she could never do that to Patrick, but...

Dropping her arms at her sides she backed up and wound her way upstairs to their bedroom.

At some point, between miraculously unpacking the living room and arranging everything to perfection, Patrick managed to make the bed. Shaking her head, she grinned thoughtfully and went to the dresser. She paused in front of the jewelry box there and silently asked herself what she was doing. She hadn't given it much thought when she hiked the stairs, but standing there in front of the case she knew exactly why. She pulled back the double glass doors and reached inside, fingers searching for the black velvet box she still kept safely nestled beneath the colorful satin bag that held a black pearl Patrick bought her while they were at the beach the summer before. The bag pressed down into empty space, no black box there

to support its weight and she felt a hitch of panic clutch like fingers around her heart.

Prying the doors open further, she leaned in to inspect the interior of the case, eyes flitting avidly across the jewelry hanging from hooks that lined the inside. There was nothing on the bottom of the compartment but the black pearl bag, which she brought out and laid on the top of the dresser. Her hand went to the drawers on the left, opening each one to inspect the contents before jerking them out completely until all four drawers stacked on top of each other in front of her.

Her throat tightened and ached. Had she taken it out? Stashed it somewhere else to keep from offending Patrick on the off-chance he went rifling through her jewelry box in search of a ring for sizing purposes. He wasn't generally offended by her occasional lapses into depression over losing Carver, but she'd never told him she still had the engagement ring that had never actually been given to her. In fact, she'd never told him there was any talk beyond possibly moving in together because there hadn't really been talk. Carver never proposed, and yet she had a ring he'd meant to give her. A ring she'd never even seen because no matter how many times she wanted to open that box, she'd never been able to bring herself to do it.

Slamming the drawers back into the cubbies, she looked in the main compartment once more, eyes furiously scanning every glimmering piece of metal, every shining stone. The black box was gone, and she hadn't moved it, so where was it?

She stepped back, hands rising, fingers tangling into the thrown-back mass of her hair and tugging half of them from their ponytail in a mad sort of panic she couldn't explain. She hadn't touched the box. From time to time she reached into the jewelry case and ran her fingertip along the dusty velvet, but she hadn't removed it in months. Not since just before the final preparation for the wedding. She'd taken it out before they'd left for South Carolina, held it in her hand and debated opening it for almost an hour before tucking it back inside. She hadn't touched it since.

When was the last time she'd seen it? She swore she'd opened the doors and caressed the softness with her fingers before carefully wrapping the jewelry case in her old comforter to keep the glass doors from shattering and the contents from spilling out and getting lost. Patrick had unraveled it

while they were setting up the bedroom. She'd watched him do it, a momentary hitch of panic as she watched him setting it in place on the dresser and making sure the magnetic doors were latched into place.

Had he gotten in there after the fact? Rifled through her jewelry? Taken the box out?

The urge to find it was overwhelming, beads of panic sweat breaking across her forehead as she began opening her dresser drawers and shoving socks and underwear aside, sifting through t-shirts and shorts, jeans and sweaters. Half the clothes were hanging out by the time she realized what she was looking for wasn't in there and began pushing them closed again. She spun around the room, eyes scanning every space in search of a clue as to where it might be. Had she taken it out? She wouldn't. Not even before moving. That was something she'd remember, she was sure of it. That box had been her life for more than a year, the only real tie, beyond the books he wrote, she had left to Carver, and even though she'd never opened it she intended to hold onto it until it finally felt right to let him go.

Turning toward Patrick's side of the room, she stared through narrowed eyes at his dresser, squinting curiously as she began walking toward it. He wouldn't touch something of hers, would he? They'd always been so open and free with each other, which generally lent a certain amount of respect for each other's personal spaces, and as the mental accusations began to fly they were instantly tempered with a familiar lurch of guilt.

Patrick would never invade her privacy, nor would he take something of hers. That wasn't who he was at all.

But still... Her foot edged a little closer, pointing in the direction of his dresser when a loud thud hit the bedroom window and wrenched a shriek from her. Adrenaline sent an army of chills marching through her body, and though she wanted to walk toward the window and look out, she couldn't bring herself to do it. Seconds later she heard the door to his truck slam in the driveway. Her gaze moved to the clock on the bedside table and she tried to figure out how long he'd been gone. Half an hour, maybe longer? She'd been in her art room poking through boxes for a while and the search for her ring had taken only god knew how long before she lost track of time in the crazy haze of anxiety that gripped her so fiercely she almost couldn't breathe.

"Babe?" he called from the front door. "Where are you?"

Swallowing hard against the aching lump in her throat, she looked to the mess she'd made of her dresser drawers and the contents of the jewelry box strewn across the top. She felt like a child who'd been caught in the middle of playing dress-up with her mother's things.

"Upstairs," she managed, rushing toward the dresser and stuffing clothes back inside before pushing the drawers closed again. She began scooping jewelry into the box, tossing necklaces and beaded bracelets into the main compartment and shoving them out of the way so the doors would close. "Are you back from the store already?"

"I got all the way to town before I realized I forgot my wallet. Can you look up there and see if it's on the table beside the bed?"

Dropping the chain from a necklace onto the rug, she bent down to snatch it up before spinning around. He was coming up the steps, the sound of his footsteps evoking a strange sense of dread she couldn't explain. Spotting his wallet, she darted across the room and grabbed it, rushing toward the bedroom doorway and leaning around just as he reached the top of the stairs.

"I can't believe you wasted all that gas," she shot out quickly, a strange smile tugging at the corner of her mouth. She shoved the wallet into his chest and he oofed a little, glancing down at the fast placement of her hand before reaching out to steady himself on the handrail.

"Neither can I," he groaned. "And now it's raining even harder than before." She cast a glance back over her shoulder, toward the window and suddenly noticed how much darker the sky had grown beyond the glass. "Maybe you should just get dressed and let me take you out to dinner."

"I need to jump in the shower first. Make myself presentable."

"You're always presentable."

"You have to say that because you're my husband."

He leaned in and placed a gentle kiss on the corner of her mouth. "No, I don't. Trust me, if you weren't presentable, I'd let you know."

"Well, I still need a shower. I was in the art room, Just standing in there made me feel dirty."

"All right, so shower before it starts storming. I'll wait for you downstairs."

He began backing down the steps one by one, his hazel eyes shining in adoration as he reached the first turn in the spiral staircase. Winking before

he spun around and darted down the stairs, Siren lifted a hand to her chest. Her heart was pounding so furiously inside her it felt like it was bruising her ribs. Releasing a silent breath, it was relief that escaped her even though there was no explanation for it.

She'd done nothing wrong, but for some reason she couldn't shake the notion that she'd violated Patrick's trust somehow. Suspecting him, maybe? Preparing to start digging through his dresser drawers? Whatever the reason, she felt guilty and not for the first time that day.

"Patrick?" she called after him. "Have you seen..." she stopped herself, nostrils flaring a little as she tried to think of an explanation, a potential little white lie. "...my lavender tank top? The one I like to wear with my black cardigan?"

"Did you look in your dresser?"

"Never mind," she said, turning into the bedroom. "I'll find it."

CHAPTER NINE

After playing the *I don't know, what do you want* game for twenty minutes after Siren got out of the shower, they finally decided to drive fifteen miles to the neighboring town of Muncy. Dinner at Orlando's was always pleasant enough. Decent Italian American cuisine, reasonably priced and delicious enough to gorge upon until she felt so bloated she wanted to curl up into a ball and slip into a carbohydrate-induced coma. Shrimp Alfredo was the perfect comfort food, and it was better than driving thirty miles into Williamsport, the closest thing to a city within a hundred miles of Makewell. Tuesday nights at Orlando's were quiet enough that for a while they actually felt like they were the only two people in the restaurant.

Unfortunately quiet dinners for two usually promoted romantic conversation and Siren wasn't in the mood. She honestly would have been much happier sitting at home eating ramen noodles from a cup, but he was making an effort to get her mind off of things, and she would only feel guiltier if she denied him. She got dressed, slapped on the best face she could muster and they rode without speaking to Orlando's.

Then they ate in silence.

Patrick paid the bill and informed her they needed to run out to the mall and pick up a new pair of earbuds for his iPod, and Siren trudged quietly through the electronics store beside him.

She sat in the passenger seat of his truck with leftover boxes warming her lap and her eyes catching the headlights as they streamed across the rain-slick highway. Johnny Cash was singing low, so quiet she could barely hear his voice and the strum of a guitar above the constant rush of water sluicing

beneath the tires. Usually she sat in the middle, belted in beside him and riding with her head on his shoulder all the way home, but they'd both been quiet through dinner and she sat with her forehead pressed against the cool glass of the passenger seat window. There was a dull, throbbing ache thumping in her head.

Maybe if he'd made more effort to distract her with conversation... No. She couldn't blame him. It was her. Always her.

With her melancholy mood swings and distant reveries, it was no wonder he just kept his mouth shut. But he was getting angry. She could actually feel the tension rising in the cab of the truck. More than once she caught him glancing over at her, stare lingering longer than was probably safe before returning his attention to the road unwinding in front of them.

Her emotions, which had been on the low end of the spectrum the minute she opened her eyes that morning, grew only more tangled while she was in the shower. She'd cried a little as she retraced her every move over the last three months, trying to remember an instance when she might have taken the ring box out of her jewelry chest and not finding a single one. She'd barely touched the box, even when the urge to do so called out to her because she'd been getting ready to marry Patrick and part of her was starting to believe that though he was gone and would never be forgotten, it was time for her to stop clinging to the ghost of a man she was still fairly certain wasn't dead.

In her heart she knew she owed it to Patrick to let go of the past, but try as she might she still didn't feel ready. She kept telling herself one day she would be, and on that day she hoped like hell it wasn't too late. She shouldn't have married him. Not yet. It still felt too soon, especially when everything felt raw as the day he'd disappeared—just like it did right then.

Turning her head, she studied the shadow of his profile. The length of his sharp nose twitched a little, right corner of his mouth tight and his jaw clenched as he gnawed thoughtlessly on the skin of his bottom lip. He'd combed the unruly waves of his dark brown hair, attempting to wrangle them into submission with styling gel, but they were always tousled again shortly after the gel began to dry. It was a devil-may-care look, her Aunt Maisie said after she'd met him for the first time. The kind of handsome that made women do double-takes on crowded sidewalks and that would certainly earn Siren her fair share of envious scowls when admirer's looked

down and saw him holding her hand. The high cut of his cheek bones made his face look sunken and severe in the dim streetlights cutting through the shadows each time they drove under one, and that severity worried her that he was angry and biting his tongue in order to keep from arguing with her on what he already knew was a difficult day for her to endure.

Unconsciously, she clicked her tongue against the back of her teeth and turned her head toward the expanse of rolling pines lining the side of the road. It was her fault and she knew it. She hadn't been able to stop the darkness from creeping into her already heavy heart after discovering the ring box was missing from her jewelry case. Her dour mood made her quiet and just agitated enough that he didn't bother trying at more than the barest conversation with her after leaving the house. They were nearing the Muncy/Hughesville exit, and from there it was another twenty minutes to their quaint little house in the middle of nowhere.

Another twenty minutes of intense silence she didn't know how to break now that it had begun, or if she should even try.

That was the weird thing about Patrick sometimes. For the most part he was happy-go-lucky, cracking jokes and quick with smiles, but when his mood shifted into darkness it was a terrifying thing that left her questioning where she stood with him and worrying if he would erupt like a volcano and put an end to everything about them that was wonderful and light.

She didn't know how to talk to him when he was like that, and sadly she'd come to feel it was only her fickle moods that put him in that unpredictable frame of mind.

He coughed a little, turning his face into his left shoulder before refocusing on the road again. Briefly she felt his stare on her once more, as if he were silently willing her to look him in the eye and tell him what was on her mind. She resisted the urge, hard as it was, maintaining her roadside vigil as though she were on the verge of some major find in the spaces between the blur of trees streaming by on her right. He cleared his throat again, hitting the turn signal and veering into the lane leading toward the off-ramp. It wound downward in a loop that made the tires sing like a 1950s movie spaceship, lingering eerily even after they were on a straight road again and heading toward the traffic lights below Sheetz.

Approaching the light, it flashed from yellow to red as he slowed and then stopped, surprising her when he reached across the cab and lowered

the his hand onto her thigh. Siren finally found the courage to meet his eyes, the glow crimson and bold as it spread across his face and made the citrine bursts around his pupils look eerily like fire. The tight corner of his mouth softened, rising toward his ear in a slow draw that further accentuated the sharpness of his facial structure.

"I love you, Siren," he declared in a gruff, soft voice, "you know that, right"

"Of course I know it." She untucked her hand from beneath the takeout boxes and lowered her warm palm onto the tops of his knuckles.

"I don't ever want you to doubt that," he went on, scanning the still-red light before returning his stare to her face. "Not ever."

"I won't," she assured him.

"I know today is a hard day for you," he looked away again, the light switching to green. He hesitated a second, then withdrew his hand and wound left, merging with the traffic at the yield sign and finding a good pace among them. "I try not to get in your way or bother you about it, but I'm here for you."

"I know you are."

"You don't have to talk to me, but you can... if you want to. I know..." His voice trailed off, as if he didn't want to finish that thought, but then he cleared his throat and went on. "I know how you felt about him, how you obviously still feel despite everything, and I know that there is probably no way in hell I'll ever compare..."

"Don't say that," she willed him. The guilt riding low in her stomach rose to a point just under her ribs and tightened the muscles there before spreading into her chest. He eased his foot off the break and advanced as the light turned green, the truck chugging noisily along. "I don't compare you to anyone."

"No?" he wondered, a hint of doubt in his voice questioning the blatancy of her lie.

"Patrick, no." She hoped her tone sounded as steady as she wanted it to, that the falsehood remained believable. "I love you."

"What if he came back tomorrow?"

"I don't think you'll ever have to worry about that."

"Let's just say for a minute I did have to worry about it," he proffered, a hint of cruel curiosity in his voice that made the blood suddenly feel cold in

her veins. “Let’s just pretend for a minute that somehow he found his way back to you. He waltzes into your life tomorrow with a perfectly reasonable explanation about where he’s been for the last three years, would you be able to stay?”

Her hesitation gave her away. “With you?” she asked. “Yes, Patrick. I would be able to stay.” She didn’t believe it, and she couldn’t imagine he did either, but he said nothing and after a few seconds she found the courage to elaborate on her tremulous falsehood. “I would be able to stay because you are here. You’ve been here, and he’s gone. If he came back tomorrow...”

“If he came back tomorrow I’d probably be up shit creek without a paddle.”

“Don’t say that,” she protested, her voice a high-pitched whine. “You know this is a hard day for me,” she went on. “Why do you want to make it worse by picking a fight with me?”

“I’m not picking a fight with you, I just...” His brows perched heavy over his eyes, which he trained attentively on the road, refusing to give her the satisfaction of another look. “Sometimes it bothers me, living in the great hulking shadow of the love of your life.” There was a mild lisp that caught on when he was overly excited or angry; she heard it emerging more prominently with every word he spoke. “Perfect Carver with his house on the hill, lording over everyone like some kind of god up there. With his books and his charm and his perfect manners and... Is it so wrong that I want to be the love of your life, Siren? That as the man you took vows to spend the rest of your life with, I want a little... I don’t know, gratitude?”

“Gratitude?”

“Maybe that’s not the right word.”

“I should hope not,” she tsked, glaring at the tavern on the right with its blazing marquis lights announcing DJ PHREAK in the house on Thursday night. The flashing rainbow of color made her eyes hurt, burned dark blobs of yellow and green into them even after she turned away from the sign and closed them. “Gratitude. That’s like saying you want me to be grateful to you for putting up with me, or something.”

“Right,” he said tersely. “Then maybe that is what I meant.”

“Jesus, Patrick.” The hiss of her voice echoed through the silent cab, nearly lost beneath the whooshing noise of wet tires on puddled asphalt.

“How do you go from confessing your love one minute to making me feel like I’m completely unworthy of it the next? How do you do that?”

He was tapping the palm of his hand on the steering wheel, the tension building in the cab to near boiling point, and she wasn’t sure if they would make it home before that bubble burst, or not. It was the kind of tension that took hostages and left casualties. His nostrils were flaring with every breath, and though there were no streetlights on the long road to Makewell, a passing car shed enough illumination into the cab for her to see the tips of his ears and his cheeks flushed patchy shades of red.

“It’s a rare gift, I guess. Christ, Siren! I don’t know.”

She didn’t know either, and after that it didn’t seem like there was anything else worth saying for the duration of the ride. As he rolled down Main Street, he slowed to the speed limit, but only just, and immediately sped up again the minute he was outside the township limits. Every perilous turn made her feel nauseous and afraid; every stolen glance across the space between them clenched the muscles in her jaw so tight her back teeth hurt. The music drumming through the speakers was only a mild distraction from the thoughts overrunning her mind. Why hadn’t she just put a good face on for him, or better yet, why hadn’t she been honest with him in the first place when he’d asked her that afternoon how she was managing on a day he knew was hard for her to endure.

There were so many things she kept to herself after they started dating, always bearing in mind the way he’d confessed his feelings for her by starting with, “I never meant to fall in love with you...”

She’d been surprised and just a little bit intrigued, the raw intensity of losing Carver only just becoming easier to endure on a day to day basis, and the first real thoughts that surely there must be life after him unless she planned to spend the rest of her life alone. They’d spent so much time together, as friends and nothing more, then one evening it just happened, and afterward that was what he said to her.

He’d come into their relationship knowing, had said to her more than once that he understood the feelings she had were never going to go away. Still, he must have hoped sometimes those feelings would fade enough for her to see him and love him beyond the shadow of that great love of her life he was standing in.

The truck roared over the dilapidated bridge, bucking and bouncing as he climbed the muddy hill of loose rock leading to their house. She could see the porch light glowing like a firefly in the distance, growing larger and larger as he gunned the engine and battled the slick mud beneath the tires. From the corner of her eye she watched him focus, giving it gas and maneuvering the wheel. It was a silly thing to notice, even sillier that she gave voice to the notion, announcing, “This driveway is going to be a bitch in the winter.”

Softening the tense features of his face, Patrick let go of the lip clenched between his teeth and started to laugh, a wicked glimmer in his eye as he glanced over at her and grinned. “Yeah, it is,” he agreed, returning his focus to the hill they were climbing. By the time he pulled into the empty space beside her car and put the truck in park, Siren wasn’t sure if they were finished with their argument, or if she should leap out and stomp off to the house in a childish display of stubbornness guaranteed to further provoke his temper.

She hesitated before reaching for the door handle, both of them just sitting there in the silence. Even with the windows up she could hear the night sounds of the country, the drone of frog song and chirping crickets against a backdrop of clicking cicadas. There was a lull in the rain, the occasional drops still plunking onto the windshield.

Patrick was the first one to speak, clearing his throat before saying her name. The sound of it just hung in the air for a moment, and then he went on. “Look, Siren, I’m sorry.”

“Me too.” Relief began to loosen the tension in her chest, the muscles still clenched and tight—as if afraid it still wasn’t over. “When I say I love you, I’m not comparing that love in my mind to the way I’ve ever felt about anyone else I knew before you. You have to believe me.” For the most part it was true... in its own way. “I don’t sit around thinking of all the ways you could be more like Carver, or wishing you were him.”

“I know you don’t.”

“Do you?” she asked.

His mouth stretched as he drew his jaw slightly left and then relaxed it again. “I know you still think about him.”

“I probably always will, Patrick. I don’t mean for that to hurt you.”

"I know that too." He stretched his arm across the cab of the truck and spanned his hand over her cheek as he looked at her in nothing more than the vague glow of the porch light several feet away from where they were parked. "I'm an idiot for allowing myself to get jealous about feelings you're never going to act on and an even bigger idiot for trying to make you feel like crap for having those feelings. He was a big part of your life, and I know you loved him very much. I guess I just..." He paused, gnawing at the inside of his cheek while trying to frame his thoughts so she could understand them. "I don't know. I guess I just wish it had always been me."

She curled her fingers around his and turned her face deeper into his palm, kissing the skin as she breathed him in. "It's you now."

He nodded, eyes closing as he relished in that truth, accepting it the best he could. "I know and I'm the one who should be grateful to you for putting up with such an arrogant asshole."

"You're not an asshole," she grinned, kissing his hand again.

"Sure I am," he chuckled, "but they say knowing is half the battle."

"I will be better tomorrow," she promised. "It's just..."

"Today," he nodded. "I know."

"It might take a few days to be normal again, but I will get there. Lacey says one day I might even be a human being again."

"You're already a human being, Siren."

"Come on," she said. "It's getting cold out here, and I want to put my comfy clothes on."

"I'm just going to take them off again." He wagged his eyebrows, making her giggle as he leaned in to kiss her.

"God, you're unstoppable."

"We've got babies to make," he said between kisses.

It was the strangest thing, how quickly the burden of her own feelings began to lift while he was kissing her. She almost, but not quite, forgot that it was Disappearance Day.

CHAPTER TEN

Over the next few days Siren avoided dwelling too much on the unsolved case of the missing engagement ring. It was never far from her mind, but she fought herself each time it pushed its way to the front of her thoughts. She found herself checking and rechecking her jewelry case, perplexed by the sudden disappearance and feeling both panicked and violated. That box had never been opened, and she still believed it should remain unopened unless Carver was standing right there in front of her. After all, he meant for her to have whatever was inside it, engagement ring, or not, but it just wasn't right to open it without him.

If Patrick took it for some reason, if he opened that box...

She couldn't think about it without feeling a little bit sick to her stomach, and that nausea made the guilt turn to mush inside her. It was overwhelming and confusing to a point bordering on silent madness. Always eating away at her, making her feel unreasonable and selfish as she held onto the preconceived notion of how her life was supposed to have played out, she was absolutely terrified that Patrick was right. She would always hold him in Carver's shadow.

If he did suddenly reappear with a perfectly reasonable explanation for his disappearance, what would she do? She wanted to believe she would do the right thing and stand by her husband, but... Carver. He was the love of her life, as Patrick so aptly stated, and the fact that she couldn't say she wouldn't run with any great certainty just made everything worse.

On Thursday afternoon she began the silent ritual of convincing herself that it was time to let go of Carver. He was never coming back. Even if he

did, she'd moved on and she loved her husband. For Patrick's sake, for the sake of her own threadbare sanity, she needed to unclench her fingers from the past and stop being such a bad person who didn't deserve to be loved.

The best way to do that was to immerse herself in creative activities, like getting her studio ready and making their house a home. The shift in her focus would lead her back to her happiest self, and though she was disappointed when Lacey called to postpone their weekend get together until the following Saturday, part of her was actually relieved. That gave them time to get the rest of their house in order.

Saturday morning she and Patrick were up before dawn, out to breakfast at The Nook on Main Street and then on their way to the hardware store in Montoursville to buy the supplies they needed to redo her studio. When they returned home, they moved all the boxes into the bathroom, threw down drop cloths and while Patrick spackled cracks in the walls and ceiling, she sketched out the mural she planned to paint over the next week.

The ocean. She wanted to walk into that room and feel it calling to her, hear the sound of waves rolling ever forward, birds trilling as the wind and water roared. To watch the gulls dip toward the peaks and feel the salted wind in her hair. Something about the ocean had always made her feel safe. It was one of the reasons she'd wanted to get married there, maybe even move there one day.

It was Sunday morning before the primer was dry and they could actually start painting. The eggshell white of the primer brightened the room considerably. The single, uncurtained window along the north-facing wall drew in the pale morning light of what had become an unending tirade of rain showers and storms that promised to carry on well into October. It broke the tenuous hold of September's lingering humidity, creating colder nights and brisk mornings, and she swore she saw her breath when she walked into the room that morning to start painting.

They worked quietly, content in the side-by-side silence of one another's company. Each of them absorbed in their own task—which according to Aunt Maisie was exactly how a marriage was supposed to work—Siren found herself occasionally glancing over at her husband. There were specks of paint in the hair of his goatee, spotting his cheeks and forehead. She watched the faces he made as he stretched the roller toward the high ceiling and found herself grinning appreciatively to herself.

She really was lucky.

He was a good man. A hard worker.

And they went well together most of the time, even if she didn't allow herself to believe she deserved him. Even though he struggled with giving her the space she needed, he still made her feel like an individual with her own life. She was a woman with a husband, yes, but her life didn't stop at her marriage. She had her own career, her own web comic, and maybe she didn't earn big yet, but one day she might. All because Patrick convinced her to take a chance and submit her portfolio to Shard Comics in Lewisburg.

"Opportunity begets opportunity, babe."

In fact, he was convinced that one day she would work for the big boys. She'd have her own superhero.

Sometimes when she tried to imagine what her life might have been like if she'd married Carver, she still saw herself working at The Beanstalk, afraid to look beyond the lens of her own dreams into opportunities that would take her to the next level. Not that Carver didn't encourage her, but Patrick pushed her. He refused to let her stand idly by while her dreams floated away before she could grab onto them.

Patrick was really good for her.

She tried not to cling to him, even though there was a terrified part of her inside that fretted he would one day disappear just like Carver, like her mother. She clung when they were in bed, curling up to him and sleeping with her arm draped possessively across the taut muscle of his waist and refusing to budge from that position until the sun came up and chased the darkness away. It was almost like she believed something would come in the night and snatch him away, but if she was holding on tight enough whatever it was couldn't take him. Fortunately, he didn't seem to mind.

Still, sometimes it took a lot to convince herself she could go places without him. She had to promise herself he would come home from work at the end of every day, refrain from texting him constantly to make sure he was still there. When they first started sleeping together, it was hard for her to sleep alone, even knowing he was just on the other side of her bedroom wall in his own apartment. It was crazy, and the few times she'd broken down with him and voiced her irrational fears, Patrick didn't turn away or

roll his eyes at her. He'd grabbed her face in his hands, looked her in the eyes and promised he wasn't going anywhere. He would never leave her.

She believed him. Sort of.

"Hey." She watched him stretch onto the tips of his toes. They were both in bare feet, shorts and paint-splattered t-shirts. He had a smear on the back of his calf where he'd backed into the paint can and she had one on the back of her arm where she'd foolishly leaned against the wall. He'd actually scowled at her a little before smoothing it over again with another quick layer. "Have I told you lately how glad I am we bought this house?"

He skewed his jaw and wrinkled the length of his nose a little. "I don't think you've ever said you were glad we bought this house, actually. I believe I heard, 'This is the dumbest idea ever, Patrick,' and a few variations of, 'God, what if it falls down on our heads while we're sleeping one night?'"

Siren chuckled softly, the sound lingering as she affirmed, "Well, I am glad. I'm glad we bought it, and I'm glad it wasn't perfect. We can make it our own this way, you know?"

"That sounds like a familiar line of reasoning," he grinned. "One I've offered up more than once."

"I know too many people who've just moved into a new place and picked up right where the old owners left off. They just sort of went on living with someone else's choices, rather than making the place a real home. This is going to be a real home when we're done here. I mean, it sort of already feels that way, don't you think?"

"Wow," he drew his head back, hazel eyes shimmering with amusement. "That's deep, Siren."

When she laughed, the unexpected happiness she felt was so powerful it almost overwhelmed her. "You know what I mean though? Like right now this house is becoming ours. It's like... I don't know. It's like it has a spirit all its own and it's waking and begging to be a part of our life together."

"So deep," he repeated, the thick of his brows rising into twin arches. "So deep, in fact, I think I might need to go get the shovel from the shed."

"Jerk."

She stretched her arm back, reached out to him and touched the tip of her paintbrush to his cheek before he had a chance to duck away. A dollop of sky-blue paint smeared across his skin and slid down into the scruffy hair

on his unshaven face. Patrick's hand shot up, fingers curling defensively around her wrist to hold her away while he brought his other hand in to wrench the brush from her grip.

They were laughing, struggling and wrestling as the drop cloths and plastic crinkled under their bare feet. She nearly slid into the hallway when he began chasing her through the house, more than likely splattering specks of paint all over the carpet and the walls beyond without a care.

Their impromptu game ended in the kitchen when he backed her into the corner cabinet and finally wrested the brush from her hand. There was a wild, provocative look in his dark eyes as he brushed the bristles across her forehead, leaving behind a pale blue streak. The gooey smoothness trickled down her temple as he stepped back to admire her.

"Blue suits you," he declared. "It brings out your eyes."

"And you," she agreed, leaning up onto the tips of her toes and surging forward into his slightly parted lips. They were soft, the perfect contrast to the sandpaper roughness of his goatee, and when she felt his tongue tease outward it sent shivers through her.

She knew in that moment everything wouldn't be perfect. Sometimes it would feel perfect, like it did right then, and that was all that mattered.

"I love you," she breathed across his lips before tasting them again. "I know it won't always be like this..."

Life with Carver wouldn't have been flawless either, but that was still something she needed to convince herself of sometimes. All the things she imaged were clever lies. She and Carver would have had arguments, blowouts and disagreements, though try as she might she couldn't recall a single time she'd ever been anything other than mildly annoyed by Carver, and only for a few minutes. She got mad at Patrick at least once a week, sometimes once a day, and maybe that was normal. Maybe it was healthy.

"Shh," he quieted her with another kiss. "It can always be like this."

"That's not how life works," she said. "I know that."

"We'll make our life work the way we want it to, and it will be perfect, Siren. For you, everything will be perfect. I promise you."

"Yeah?"

Patrick nodded, pecking lips to the tip of her nose. "Yeah."

"You always make me believe you," she told him. "Even when the things you promise me seem like they should be impossible."

“It’s magic,” he grinned. “A rare gift, really. I can make anyone believe anything I want them to believe. Including you.” His lips touched hers again as he said, “Especially you.”

“Well, whatever talent or magic this rare ability of yours is, don’t ever stop.”

“Oh, I’ve no intention of stopping,” he assured her. “We’re in this until the end of days. You and me.”

“Good,” she kissed him again then started to pull back. “We should finish painting.”

“We can paint later,” he shrugged and leaned over her shoulder to drop the brush into the kitchen sink on her left.

The closeness of their bodies was warm and heated, and she felt the ever-constant eagerness of his desire for her. “The walls aren’t going anywhere.” As absurd as those last words sounded, Patrick made them intense and seductive as pillow talk, his soft mouth grazing her cheek as he trailed kisses inward and then down, tracing his tongue along the stretched curve of her accommodating neck. “I can never get enough of you,” he purred.

“Are you trying to seduce me, Mr. Blakely?”

“Is it working?” The tip of his tongue traced the sensitive skin just beneath her ear before he suckled the lobe between his teeth and nibbled.

Siren shuddered, her body growing soft and malleable as well-worked clay. “Yes,” she hissed, trembling as he backed up and slid his warm hand into the front of her paint-dappled t-shirt. He cupped her breast, squeezing just enough to make her moan softly as she pressed her cheek into his hair. “I think it... I think it might be.”

“Good,” Patrick whispered. “Then my nefarious plan to make love to you in every room of this house is well under way.”

“You’re so naughty.”

“Babe,” his voice was husky and alluring, the fingertips across her skin making her shiver and twitch with delight, “you have no idea just how naughty I am.”

“Maybe you should show me.”

Perfect. Everything really was perfect, and she was the only one who could mess that up. She wasn’t going to. She was going to let go. Tear her fingers from the past and start looking to the moment, to the future. Maybe she needed to change her perspective entirely. It worked to get her into the

career she wanted, even if she wasn't flying as high as she eventually wanted to go. It got her onto the right path, into a better frame of mind. Maybe she could shift the other gears of her life as well, finally start letting go.

"Do you really want to have a baby?" she asked as he dragged the loose fabric of her shirt up over her head and let it drop onto the floor beside them.

"I want whatever makes you happy, Siren."

"You make me happy."

The taste of his lips was sugary, hints of cola darting across her tongue as he drank deep from her. The slightly calloused palm of his left hand rushed down the length of her spine as she surged forward to answer his need. "Do I?"

He did. Every time he kissed her she remembered just how happy he made her. How safe she felt with him, how right everything was, how perfect. She could see their future, tucked securely behind a white picket fence. Little dark-haired children with roguish curls and big green eyes chased through the yard, a big dog bounding behind them with its tongue lolling. It wouldn't be so bad, being someone's mother, she thought. She'd be a hell of a lot better than her own mother had been, that much was sure. And Patrick would be such a good father.

"Let's make a baby."

"Yeah?"

She gasped as the hand on her back swept lower, grasping and squeezing and drawing her into his body. He was all muscle, lean, strong and she loved the way he flexed against her as he moved her back against the counter. A teacup clattered, the saucer with it as he swept his arm across the surface to clear it.

"Yeah."

He lifted her against him, hiked her up onto the counter and stood in front of her, forehead to forehead, the tip of his nose nudging hers just before he stole her lips again.

Maybe it was the best thing to do, giving herself completely to the life she had. Maybe looking to the future would finally distract her from the past.

It was certainly worth a shot.

There was a startling clamor on the other side of the kitchen bar, and when she looked over Patrick's shoulder she caught sight of the cat's tail curling with a swish before he leapt off the counter. His body stiffened, head drawing back as he turned to look. She saw the muscles in his jaw clench just before he took a step away from her and walked toward the bar.

The darting of little feet hammered across the carpet and hardwood before battering up the stairs.

"That fucking cat," he snarled, staring at the ceiling.

"He's just a cat. He doesn't know any better." Reaching out and resting her hand on his shoulder, she tried to pull him back in, but he was solid and stiff, still listening to the cat's hasty retreat. "Come on, just ignore him."

Patrick swallowed, his eyes narrowing just before he blinked and then looked over at her. "I know you let him walk all over you the entire time you had him at your apartment, but he's not going to be jumping up on tables and counters here."

"I'll get a spray bottle."

"I'm serious, Siren."

"All right," she leaned back defensively. "I said I'll get a spray bottle. It's not like I can sit him down and give him a good talking to. He's a cat, Patrick."

"Mm..." he grunted. "He'll be a dead cat if he doesn't stay off my counters."

"Stop it. Just stop it."

He started to relax, finally moving back in between her legs and tilting his head down to look at her with those stern hazel eyes of his. "I'm sorry. I know he's your cat, but cats are dirty things. They scrape around in their own shit and piss, and the last thing I want is one of us getting sick because he was up traipsing around on the counter where we prepare food."

"I said all right. I'll train him to stay off the counters."

"Good."

When he came in to kiss her again, the mood was sour—at least for her, anyway. Patrick didn't seem to miss a beat, and while she went through the motions, her mind carrying her away from the moment, he satisfied himself completely as if nothing in the world could possibly be wrong.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

The grocery cart squeaked, the wheel jittering and jutting at odd angles and putting off the most obnoxious sound she'd ever heard in her life. It was embarrassing, and even though she looked around self-consciously, narrowly missing the judgmental gazes she was sure everyone in the store was turning toward her, no one else really seemed to notice. Still, it made for tense shopping, and the fact that she kept tapping her phone screen to check off items on her grocery list did certainly seem to annoy several of the old women pushing quiet and perfectly reasonable carts filled with healthy food like bananas and cabbage around the store.

Makewell was an old town, and during the day while the kids were in school the majority population, which seemed to consist of no one under the age of seventy-five, came out in droves and dominated every place of business.

Turning down the next aisle and narrowly missing a struggling mother with two small children dragging at the hem of her skirt and whimpering over the fact that she'd told them they could not have candy for lunch, Siren and the woman exchanged sympathetic glances. More than once while combing through the aisle and plucking cans of soup from the shelf to layer them into the bottom of her cart, she glanced back at the young woman and tried to imagine a life in which she was forced to drag small, crying children through the grocery store kicking and screaming because their little egos had been denied by the supreme force dictating their lives.

Every time she thought about having a baby, it terrified her.

She never imagined she would actually want to have children on account of her own childhood turning out so badly. Not that it was all bad. Aunt Maisie did everything in her power, even before Rhetta Talbot disappeared, to make sure her niece felt loved and worthy, but something about growing up under the stigma of a mother who didn't want her badly enough to stick around had sort of ruined her. What if, like her mother, she wasn't equipped to handle the needs of someone other than herself, someone helpless and dependent and small? Children were innocent and uncorrupted. They looked to their parents for guidance, comfort and shelter, but what if she flaked out like Rhetta and couldn't handle their needs?

She shuddered and tried to push the thought from her head, but when she rounded the turn into the next aisle she caught a glimpse of that struggling mother again and swore she felt the tightening of a panic attack clenching her rib cage.

Carver didn't want children. He said his memories from childhood were bleak—poverty, an abusive father prone to drink. While they sat on his couch holding hands and talking about what they wanted from the future, he'd gotten a faraway look in his eyes while she spoke of a past that felt like it happened in another world. He was accustomed to only having to look after himself, and though he thought it made him look selfish he confessed that he didn't want to share his time with her with anyone else if he could help it.

Siren knew exactly what he was talking about.

"The things we do with our lives," Carver said, "these artistic choices we've made for ourselves, they do not lend well to children or family lifestyles anyway. There are days I barely even come up for air."

But Patrick was different. He didn't like to talk much about his past, or his life in general before he met Siren. Whenever she tried to open him up to the subject, he told her, "My life begins and ends with you. This life, our life together, that's all that matters."

Eventually she got him to talk about it a little, but only after a brutal argument she wasn't sure they'd recover from. Both of his parents died when he was very young, and he'd lived with his aunt and uncle until he was old enough to run away and make it on his own. After that she dropped the subject, figuring he would come to her when he was ready, but he never did.

Maybe that was why he wanted a family so much, she thought. He wanted to have something he'd never really been given, and though it terrified her completely, maybe she needed to be part of a real family herself—her own family, so she could prove to herself once and for all that she wasn't really broken, or cursed, or undeserving of happiness.

Patrick wasn't artistic. He was a contractor, a carpenter who spent long days during the spring, summer and autumn months making other peoples' houses beautiful. He didn't always understand how Siren could lose herself so deeply in her own work she forgot to eat, or didn't hear her phone ringing on the desk beside her. Would he expect her to set her art aside for motherhood in the event that they did have a baby?

Siren snatched a box of elbow macaroni from the end of the aisle before turning right into the snack and candy section of the store. She thought she'd been paying attention to what she was doing, but her cart came to a sudden halt, a worn leather, booted foot jamming the wheel as a filthy hand came down atop the metal basket of her shopping cart and jolted her to an alarming stop.

Head snapping upward, she gasped a little when she met a pair of eerily lit eyes a deep shade of lilac staring back at her. His wild, tangled hair sprouted from the tight knit fabric of his stained orange beanie cap and mingled with the root-like mess of his greying beard. Her mouth opened in unexpected apology, instinct moving her feet backward, but he grabbed onto her cart and held her in place. The colors in his eyes swirled and danced unrealistically, like the sky in a Van Gogh painting.

Booker something or other. The homeless man who'd approached her and Lacey in the coffee shop.

His filthy hand shot across the basket, dirt-caked fingernails latching onto the sleeve of her cardigan sweater and dragging her slightly forward. She saw the nicotine stains on his fingers, nasty and yellow, but worse was the smell of them. He reeked of recycled tobacco and cigarette butts dug from ashtrays, and even as she turned her head away and tried not to breathe in, the bombardment on her senses made her stomach roll and tremble until she could taste the acidic tang of bile on the back of her tongue.

"The box," he hissed, blackened teeth flashing behind dry, cracked lips when he opened his mouth to speak. "The key is the box."

“Let go of me!” She wrenched her arm from his grip but dug deeper into the knit of her sweater, holding her in place and jerking her forward a little until she felt the shopping cart dig painfully into the bone of her hip. His fingernails pushed into her skin and a thousand paranoid fears raced through her mind, thoughts of hepatitis and impetigo and a thousand other contractual diseases she was sure to walk out of there with if he managed to break the skin on her arm. She struggled, but he only continued to grin, as if he’d been waiting a lifetime to reveal that eerie, senseless secret to her and only her.

“Trapped,” the old man hissed, leaning in closer and whispering, “calling from across the veil. I hear. Do you know what I hear?”

“I...” She was still struggling to free herself from his grip.

“I hear him calling. The siren, he says.” A strange flicker flashed in the depths of his eyes. “Sound the siren. Open the box. The box is the key.”

“Please,” she whimpered. Her jaw tightened again, and once more she tried to drag out of his grip, but failed. “Please, just leave me alone.”

“Free him.” He unclenched his fingers and Siren stumbled backwards, the force of her own struggle propelling her into an elderly woman hunched behind her. The woman growled and grumbled that she should watch where she was going, but Siren ignored her. She was still staring, wide-eyed and horrified, at the man standing at the edge of her cart. “You must set him free.”

“You’re crazy,” she choked.

His mouth stretched wide, the broken, blackened teeth peeking out at her as he began to laugh. It was a cold sound, maniacal and disturbing as it echoed through the supermarket aisle and chilled Siren’s blood in her veins. “Crazy,” he nodded, “truth is always stranger than fiction. Sound the siren.”

Snatching her purse from the front of the cart, she backed down the aisle, nearly tripping over the disgruntled woman behind her again.

“Set him free!”

She never took her eyes from the cackling man, not until she arrived at the other end of the lane and turned, darting carelessly through people until she pushed through the automatic door and into the drizzling September afternoon. Rain blew in under the hood sheltering the shopping cart station just beyond the doors, specking and cooling her cheeks which felt like someone took a match to them and set them on fire. Autumn racked her

senses, the crisp air invading her, filling her and washing the stench of old nicotine and stale breath away. She felt suddenly sick to her stomach, her insides trembling with nausea as she pitched herself over the trash can near the exit and began dry-heaving. Several people coming in and out of the store stared, disgusted and silently judging her, but she ignored them. She let the loose tendrils of her hair fall in around her face, tickling as the wind whispered through them and the pinpricks of rain began to weigh them down until they started to stick to her skin.

Swiping her hand across her forehead, she pushed off the garbage can. Bile burned on the back of her tongue and it was all she could do to keep from losing her breakfast. On legs that felt like jelly beneath her, she wavered as she walked, stumbling toward her car at the opposite end of the parking lot. It felt like it took an eternity to get there, and when she finally arrived she struggled with her keys, jamming and scratching the paint around the keyhole before finally pushing it into place and opening her door.

Sliding in behind the driver's seat she pressed her back against the cool vinyl and tilted her ponytail into the headrest. Closing her eyes, she felt dizzy and strange from nearly vomiting. Her head swam furiously as the world spun around and around. Bringing her hands up, she gripped the steering wheel, her keys digging into her palm as she squeezed. Nostrils flaring with every breath, she muttered under a single combination of words that barely made sense.

"Sound the siren," she whispered softly. "Sound the siren."

What did it mean?

Nothing.

It didn't mean anything.

It was only nonsense.

It was a coincidence.

The man was clearly insane.

"Sound the siren," she murmured.

The rapping of knuckles on the window just beside her head elicited a shriek of terror that made her ears ring as she whipped sideways and glared at the face peering in through the glass. He was grinning stupidly, smile slowly fading as he noticed her state of panic and began reaching for the door handle to let himself into the car. The car door was locked, and she

made no move to unlock it, just stared wide-eyed and unconvinced that he was really standing there outside her door.

He shoved his key into the lock and tugged the door open, dropping down into a squat beside her and reaching a hand in to lower it across her thigh.

“Babe?” Patrick’s voice, so reassuring and calm, his hand on her leg was a comfort, as if some energy he possessed passed into her through touch alone, soothing the frayed edges of her nerves and making her feel almost instantly human and sane again. “Are you all right? What’s going on?”

How did she answer that question without sounding like an absolute lunatic? He must already think she was on the verge of some kind of breakdown, cowering and shrieking in her car, her eyelashes damp with unshed tears. Opening her mouth to answer, no sound came out at first, her throat hoarse and aching as the acid lurking on the back of her tongue burned.

“Patrick,” she put her hand down over his, “wh—what are you doing here? You’re at work today.”

“Well, I was at work doing payroll, but then it was lunch. I didn’t have time to pack my lunch box this morning and I thought it would be quicker to just pop in here and grab something from the deli than trying to run all the way home.” Studying her, he touched his tongue to his lips then drew the bottom one thoughtfully between his teeth. “What about you?” he asked thoughtfully. “What are you doing here?”

She shook her head, imagining the disgruntled grocery store staff glaring at the cart she’d left half-full in the middle of the store when she bolted from the premises like a madwoman. The old lady she’d practically trampled in her haste to escape was probably giving them a statement, cursing the arrogance and rudeness of youth. “I wanted to make sure we had everything we needed for dinner with Lacey and Jeff on Saturday.”

Stretching up onto the tips of his toes he peered into the backseat, brow furrowing with further confusion. “Most people leave the grocery store with a cart of groceries, Siren,” he pointed out. “I saw you come running out and make a mad dash for your car. You look like you saw a ghost or something.” Thoughtfully stroking his hand in soothing movement down her thigh he tilted his head expectantly, asking, “What’s going on?”

She didn't want to tell him. It was pure madness and he would look at her in that way he did sometimes that suggested he had no idea where she was coming from and would probably never be able to grasp onto her meaning even if she gave him a guide book. Head shaking back and forth, she drew in a breath and momentarily relished in the calming of her own heartbeat.

"There was this guy in there," she started, "this creepy homeless guy who came into the coffee shop last week too. He was muttering nonsense, something about boxes or whatever, but anyway he was in there and he cornered me at the end of the aisle and wouldn't let me go."

"Wait, what?" he balked. "Are you talking about Booker? The guy with the crazy beard who wears a bright orange beanie even in the middle of summer?"

Nodding slowly, Patrick's face stiffened, his eyes became two slits as he leaned back on his heels and withdrew his hand from her thigh. Folding his fingers together in front of him, he didn't look at her but instead stared distantly at the open interior of the door as if he were trying to make sense of something.

"What was he saying?"

"I don't know, nonsense," she shrugged. "Ridiculous, terrifying nonsense."

"Like what?"

"I don't know, Patrick. I was too busy trying to get away to pay attention to what he was saying. What does it matter? The man's mentally ill, and he should be in a home, not left to wander the streets harassing people."

Agreeing silently, he finally returned his gaze to hers, his intense eyes softening. "He didn't hurt you, did he?"

"No, he just scared me."

"Good." There was an intensity to that word that made her shudder, an implied warning of vengeance that promised to come furiously rolling outward to destroy anyone who dared hurt her. "Are you okay to drive? Do you want me to take you home?"

"He just scared me," she repeated. "I need a minute to get my head back in order and I'll be all right to drive myself home."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure."

“We’ll go back out together later,” he offered with a curt nod. “Maybe we’ll go out to dinner and then up to Wegman’s. They have better stuff anyway.”

“Okay,” she agreed.

“You should go home,” he told her. “Go home and try to relax, put whatever happened behind you and find your happy place. Right?”

Siren’s head bobbed in agreement.

“Right then. I’ll be home around three, but if you need me call, all right.”

“All right.”

He pushed forward onto the tips of his toes and kissed her cheek. “You’re okay now.”

“I’m okay.”

Only she wasn’t okay. She was shaken and when Patrick withdrew his touch, backing away from the car and closing the door again she swore he’d taken every ounce of calm with him, leaving her feeling like she was literally teetering on the edge of insanity. Several times as he walked toward the store he glanced back at her again, smiling thoughtfully before finally arriving near the automatic doors and disappearing inside.

Siren sat there in the car for several minutes, trying to steady her nerves and calm herself enough to go home. Her hands were still shaking when she turned the key in the ignition, her stomach still a mess of emotion and bile churning inside her as she inched through the parking lot and began making the journey home.

The sound of the Booker’s voice echoed in the back of her mind for the duration.

The box. Sound the siren. The box is the key.

It was crazy and she knew it. He was a deeply disturbed man with no one to take care of him, but there was something inside her that felt certain his ramblings were more than just the insane mutterings of a madman. She remembered the way his eyes had whirled and danced, an unnatural light swirling inside them as he cackled and dug fingers deep into the fleshy part of her forearm.

“Sound the siren,” she muttered as she pulled into the driveway and put the car in park. “The box is the key.”

Booker said he heard him calling from across the veil. *Sound the siren. Open the box. The box is the key.*

“Where is the box?” she whispered, an eerie chill snaking the length of her spine and crawling along the back of her skull. “Where is the box...? That’s a very good question, Booker. Where is the box?”

Reaching for the door handle, she let herself out of the car, feet slipping through the mud and stones just a little as she headed toward the front of the house. She didn’t know why, maybe it was because she was just as crazy as the homeless man who’d terrorized her, crazy like her mother had been, but she thought for a moment she knew exactly what box he was referring to.

The box was the key and the person calling out to him from across the veil was Carver. Sound the siren... It was up to her to unlock the mystery of his disappearance and the only way she was going to be able to do that was if she found the engagement ring that disappeared from her jewelry box.

It was madness. Pure, unadulterated insanity, but it felt right and that terrified her far more than her encounter at the grocery store.

She barely took time to kick off her muddy shoes before storming through the house, around the spiral staircase and up to her bedroom. That ring was in there somewhere. She didn’t know where, but she was going to find it, and open that box, and if nothing happened no one but her would ever know just how close she came to embracing insanity.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Mr. Pounce was waiting for her at the top of the stairs when she rounded the turn. He chirruped and mrowed, slinking between her ankles in a precarious, well-practiced dance as she stalked across the carpet to her dresser and began stripping out of the cardigan those nicotine-stained fingers tugged at in the grocery store. Just thinking about them, the hard edges of his nails burrowing into her skin made her shudder, and she found herself inspecting the bared flesh of her arm for marks.

There were none.

Still, she could feel them, and maybe it was just another crazy thing, but she wanted to burn that sweater. She was certainly never going to wear it again. She balled it up, tossed it through the door and watched it float over the banister into the living room below.

She took a shower that morning after her forty-five minutes on the treadmill, but she needed to shower again. Violated. It felt like something crawled beneath her skin. She wriggled out of her jeans, yanked off the tank-top she wore under her cardigan and went into the bathroom. The cat followed, jumping up onto the rickety sink and watching as she leaned into the tub and turned the nozzles on. The water ran rusty at first, the burnt-sienna color of it gurgling toward the drain actually making her wrinkle her nose and gulp down the bit of nausea still lurking on the back of her tongue.

“Shit.” She stared at the water, the color growing lighter and lighter as the stream poured.

Patrick insisted it wouldn’t hurt her, but she didn’t believe him, and besides it looked disgusting. Rocking back onto her heels, she crossed her

arms and debated calling him at work to ask how long she was supposed to let it run before she gave up and went downstairs. The shower in between her studio and his little man cave was never rusty. In fact, she preferred using it anyway, so she wrenched the knobs closed, yanked her towels from the rack and hiked the stairs.

The cat followed, the little bell on his collar jingling with every step like a jester trotting behind her. He joined her in the bathroom, standing at attention on the toilet seat while she shimmied out of her bra and panties. Wrapping the length of her black hair into a quick twist, she ducked into the clear shower stream and gasped relief as hot beads pelted her body. For a long time she stood under the shower head and let the water cleanse her. She closed her eyes and breathed in the fragrant steam. Sweet pea and lilac body wash clung to the vapor, relaxing her even as flashes of the homeless man's face burst across her veiled eyelids.

Sound the siren.

Was it just a coincidence that his inane babbling came wrapped around her name like a colorfully-disguised Christmas present? He rambled on about a missing box, that box the key and a man trapped beyond some veil, all things that despite their senselessness seemed to make perfect sense to her.

Would finding that missing box and opening it bring back Carver?

God, that was absurd. She knew it, and yet the moment she formed that thought something inside her clenched and fluttered like a fistful of moths flocking to a porch light left on through the night. She needed to find that box. She needed to open it up and finally let go of all the things she'd been clinging to. Even if her crazy notion, brought on by a rambling homeless man, was just that—a crazy notion and nothing more—finding that box would bring her closure. She could sit down, take a deep breath, open it up and finally sever the last tie still holding her to Carver.

Maybe that was what Booker the homeless crazy meant when he said, "Set him free!"

She really was crazy.

Wet hand shot up, wiping the damp tendrils of hair clinging to her forehead away and then she dropped it again and just stood there under the shower for what felt like an eternity.

Crazy, or not, she needed to find that box. That was all there was to it.

Stepping out of the shower, she wrapped herself in towels and stood in the foggy bathroom for several minutes listening to the exhaust fan hum. She'd left the door to her studio open, the soft, peppery smell of fresh paint mingling with the floral scent of body wash was eerily soothing, but she found herself drawn to the closed door on her right. Patrick's room.

Guilt twanged like a guitar string snapping, but she moved toward it anyway. Mr. Pounce bounced across the sink and dropped onto the floor in front of her, shouldering into her wet leg as her hand reached for the door handle.

"I'm just looking," she told the cat.

A low, guttural yowl escaped him, his jaw trembling with the sound as his small mouth gaped open.

"Is that a warning?" she asked. "Are you going to tell on me when he comes home?"

He meowed again, throaty and deep, and then battered his shoulder into her again.

"I'd like to see you try," she smirked. "He doesn't even like you. He'd never believe you."

An eerie sensation moved through her as her hand grew closer to the doorknob. The hair on her arm lifted as chills rippled across the skin, that inexplicable feeling reaching out like a hand to curl around her wrist and squeeze. It was foreboding, something internal warning her not to shatter Patrick's trust by trespassing into a room he sanctioned for his own purpose.

He hadn't asked her not to go in there. Never said she wasn't allowed. He came into her studio without an invitation several times over the last week, stood in the doorway and watched her brush tiny strokes of paint that became rushing, rolling waves pouring toward the shore. He'd crossed his arms and tilted his head while she brought seagulls to life, sending them spiraling toward the deep to fish for their supper.

And yet there was a very distinct warning pulsing through her when her fingers curled around the knob and began turning it to the right. It didn't budge. The door was locked and she lowered her hand to her side with an exhale.

"That's weird," she noted.

Mr. Pounce chirped in reply and slunk across her wet legs again.

“Still,” she answered, as if they were holding an actual conversation, “why would he lock the door?”

Another mewling sound escaped the cat and he darted around her ankles toward the opposite door. He paused there, waiting for her to turn around and look at him. Once she did, he started to walk through the hallway, pausing every few seconds to look back and make sure she was still following.

Absurd. She was being completely ridiculous. Trying to get into her husband’s private sanctuary, following her cat through the house as if he actually had a plan he was about to let her in on. The other door to Patrick’s den was near the back of the dining room, positioned between the sliding glass doors leading onto the deck and the wall closing off the kitchen and the water closet bathroom. Mr. Pounce stopped in the middle of the dining room, just past the table, and held her stare as she squinted at him.

“Is that door locked too?”

He didn’t answer. She wasn’t sure why she expected him to, or why she actually believed he’d been leading her to that door. He was a cat. A clever little manipulative feline who knew exactly how to push all of Patrick’s buttons, while endearing her completely to him, but he was just a cat.

“I’m such an idiot,” she muttered.

Mr. Pounce’s response was a long, throaty meow that sounded almost like admonition.

“Well, thank you for saying so, good sir, but let’s face it, I’m being really stupid right now.”

He yowled, and the fact that she actually debated whether or not it was encouragement or agreement only seemed to confirm just how ridiculous she felt.

“You’re right,” she nodded, taking a step backward into the living room. “I have no right to violate his privacy.”

Staring, round golden eyes focused on her, his head tilting leftward as he studied his mistress.

“I mean, I wouldn’t want him poking around through my stuff, right?”

No vocal reply, he only looked at her.

Sighing, she threw up her arms and said, “Well, you’re no help. Not really. Thanks, Mr. P. For absolutely nothing.”

He followed her when she went back upstairs, perching on top of Patrick's dresser and watching as she finished toweling off and slipped into her favorite sweatpants and a loose t-shirt she stole from Patrick when they first started dating. He made himself at home by batting around a few folded receipts and then knocking them onto the floor before curling into a cozy circle and watching as she pulled out drawers and began taking stacks of neatly folded clothing out to pile them around her feet.

It was futile. She knew it when she began, but if she didn't start somewhere it would never stop chewing at her.

The box was the key.

"Right," she muttered to herself, "because I take the advice of crazy homeless men to heart every day. Jesus Christ, what am I doing?"

A pile she stacked too high toppled over onto her bare feet and with another exasperated breath she began stuffing clothes back into her drawers. She spun around the room, eying her husband's dresser suspiciously, and then turned back around. She grabbed her jewelry case and walked it to the bed. Opening the magnetic doors, she yanked the side drawers out and stacked them on the mattress, then she dumped the rest of the contents into a tangled pile. Necklaces scattered, bracelets rolling like uroboros across the quilt and her grandmother's brooch tumbling off the edge and disappearing under the bed. The black pearl bag laid flat and empty, the necklace itself hung around her neck.

She reached up and fingered that pearl. It felt cold to the touch, and when she let it fall back to her skin she shivered a little.

"What happened to that box, Mr. Pounce?" she posed.

When she glanced up at the cat, his eyes were closed, but she knew he wasn't sleeping. His mouth was stretched into a weird, but familiar expression she liked to call his happy smile. Carver used to say it was more smarmy than happy and Patrick claimed it was a holier-than-thought leer he'd like to wipe off the little monster's face. His whisker's twitched, but he didn't bother opening his eyes, even when she spoke again.

"It didn't just get up and walk away, so where did it go?"

Sifting through each piece of jewelry, she didn't even know what she was doing. Looking for something she'd never seen before? Expecting that it had somehow been removed from the box and tucked neatly in with the rest of her jewelry? Piece by piece she returned it all to the case, then closed it

up to return it to the dresser. After that, she got down on her hands and knees and crawled around the floor, searching under the bed, behind the dressers, the hamper and bedside tables. She yanked those drawers open too, rolling her eyes at the unorganized tangle of electronics cords and headphones in Patrick's side before slamming it shut and dropping back onto her heels with a frustrated huff.

"Did it get left behind?" she wondered aloud. "Is it still at the apartment?"

She already knew the answer. She may not have taken it out before moving, but she had checked on it. She made sure it was tucked neatly into its place within the jewelry box before wrapping the entire case in that blanket.

Her text tone sounded from the belly of her purse downstairs. It was muffled and distant, but the silence of the house was so severe it carried up to her ears. She rolled to her feet and marched downstairs, digging through her handbag on the table just inside the door until she found her phone. A second text came through as she was pulling it out to swipe her finger across the screen.

Patrick checking up on her.

She was just about to start typing her answer when the ringtone blared, their wedding picture blazing across the screen. A perturbed sigh escaped her and she hit the green button before lifting it to her ear.

"You gotta give me a chance to get to my phone," she said before offering a greeting. "I was upstairs."

"I was worried about you, Siren. I thought it was probably better if I called, that's all."

"Well, I'm fine."

Was she? Was she really fine?

The loose tendrils of hair around her face were still damp when she brushed the back of her hand across her forehead. "I was a little spooked, but I'm okay now."

"Do you think maybe you should report that guy?"

"To who?" she snorted derisively. "The cops? I'll call Jeff and tell him the homeless guy downtown is stalking me. I'm sure that'll go over really well."

"I don't know, maybe you could call social services, or something."

“Maybe.”

Silence for several seconds. She could hear him crinkling some kind of snack bag on the other end, the sound of it grating on her nerves the longer it went on.

“I should try to get some work done,” she finally said. “That whole thing threw a kink into my day, and I feel all distracted now.”

“Work would be good, babe. It’ll get your mind off of whatever’s on it.”

The ring box... Crazy homeless men who grabbed onto her with their dirty hands before filling her head with dozens of loony thoughts she didn’t need in there. Sound the siren... What did that even mean?

“I can’t stop thinking about it,” she muttered softly. “The things he said to me made no sense, but he knew my name, Patrick. Sound the siren. That’s what he said to me.”

“Sound the siren?” He seemed as perplexed as she did. “Maybe it’s just a coincidence. I’m sure he hears a lot of sirens, living under the bridge downtown and all.”

“I don’t know, maybe,” she shrugged as if he could actually see her. “It’s just... creepy.”

“I know, but it’s all right now. You’re safe at home.”

“With my vicious attack cat.”

The scuff of his laughter breathed across the mouthpiece of his phone. “Right. Mr. Pounce the guard cat. Anyone tries to get to you, he’ll pee on their shoes.”

“Scratch their face to pieces.”

“There you go.” He paused, waiting for her laughter to subside before going on. “In all seriousness, if you want me to come home, I can. I finished up payroll. I can check in with Paul and put him in charge for the rest of the day.”

“No, it’s fine. I’ll be fine.”

“You sure?”

“Positive. I’m gonna see if I can finish up these panels so I can take them in on Monday to drop them off. If you come home, you’ll just get annoyed because I don’t even know you’re here.”

“All right, but if you need me, I’m just a phone call away.”

“I know.”

“Love you.”

“Love you,” she said, then ended the call.

The cat was already waiting for her when she slipped down the hallway behind the stairs and ducked into her studio to work, and for a time while he curled up at her feet and she lost herself in brilliant color and glorious shape, she forgot about Booker and his strange message, and she forgot that she was probably reading more into it than was actually meant, but from time to time she found herself glancing toward the bathroom at her back, toward the locked door on the other side.

She wondered if the other door was locked, but for reasons she couldn't even begin to comprehend she was too scared to test it and find out.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Lacey leaned forward on the banister overlooking the living room beneath them. She swirled the red wine in her glass, then brought it to her lips, sipping quietly before swallowing. Siren lingered beside her, gazing out through the long window in the living room and the sliding glass doors in the dining room until she came to Patrick. He was wearing a bright red shirt that made him stand out against the yellowing grass in their still-overgrown yard and the sky beyond the two men, though clear, was full of clouds like ashen cotton.

“I swear, it’s never gonna stop raining.”

Her nostrils flared outward as she breathed in. Tipping her head toward her shoulder, she looked away from her husband and studied Jeff for a few minutes. He and Patrick got on well enough. They talked about football, mostly, which was nice because it gave Siren and Lacey the chance to sneak off for girl time when the four of them actually made time to get together. Jeff hadn’t been to the new house at all, so the two of them would be occupied for a while as Patrick walked him around the yard and expressed his plans with wide, enthusiastic arms and an easy smile that made the corner of her own mouth twitch a little.

“I think he’s mowed the general vicinity once since we moved in. Thursday after work he came home and mowed everything real quick before it started raining again. The rest of it will have to wait until spring, I guess.”

“At least you have a yard,” Lacey shrugged and took another drink.

“You say that like I should be out there with a weed whacker gleefully making it presentable.” She snuffled a little, retracting her gaze from her husband and glancing over at Lacey again. There were dark circles under the other woman’s eyes, and the black mascara she wore was slightly clumped, as though she’d been crying. “Come on, Lace, tell me what’s really on your mind?”

“On my mind?” She blinked and shook her head. “The same stuff. Jeff and I got into a huge argument in the car on the way over here. Don’t be surprised if we don’t stay long after dinner. I think we’re on the verge of just saying forget it.”

“Sweetie, I’m sorry.” Lowering a hand onto her shoulder, she squeezed softly and found herself looking out the windows again. Jeff’s arms were still crossed over his broad chest, his face alight with genuine amusement and interest as Patrick rattled on about whatever it was they were talking about. Probably grass, she thought. “I wish...”

“You and me both,” Lacey cut her off. “I wish a lot of things, but wishing doesn’t do any good, and you can’t change other people. I’ve been trying to let him be who he is, but this whole not wanting the same things... Well, people can’t live like that. I can’t, anyway. You wind up stuck with what you don’t want, bitter and always biting each other’s heads off over stupid stuff like passing the butter or leaving the toilet seat up in the middle of the night. Like they become the important things, you know?”

Siren didn’t know. She’d never been in that kind of relationship with anyone, but she hated seeing her best friend that way.

“Right now I can’t stand the way he chews his food. It drives me insane. I just want to reach across the table and slap it right out of his mouth.”

“Wow.”

“Yeah...” She slugged back what was left in her glass, gulping it down in two quick swallows. “So yeah, sorry. We came over here to have a good time, and I’m sorry I had to cancel our coffee date on Tuesday. Stupid work.”

“It’s all right.” Reaching her arm around Lacey’s shoulders, she leaned into her and said, “I just hate it when we don’t get to talk. So much is always going on, and god knows if Patrick walks in in the middle of a conversation he’ll want to know what we’re talking about.”

“Everything okay with you guys?” She leaned out as she regarded her, worry arching her brow and making tiny furrows above her eyes.

“Fine,” she shrugged. “It’s been a weird week. He went back to work, so I’ve been here by myself most of the day.” The cat butted into her ankle, rubbing his head against her as if to remind her she hadn’t exactly been alone. “Just me and Mr. P.” He immediately began purring as she leaned down to pick him up and held him against her chest. “He stands behind me and criticizes everything I do all day.”

“Everyone’s a critic,” she chuckled and reached over to scratch him under the chin.

“Something really weird happened on Thursday, though.”

“Weird how?”

“Like Twilight Zone weird.”

Wrinkling her petite nose, she lowered her hand back to her side. “Do tell.”

“Remember that homeless guy that came up to us in The Beanstalk on Disappearance Day?”

“How could I forget? I had to go home and take a shower just to get the smell of him out of my nose.”

“Tell me about it,” Siren agreed. “Anyway, the other day while I was in the grocery store...”

She told Lacey everything, keeping a steady eye on Patrick and Jeff in the yard, tipping beers and talking about lawn care and tractors and the cheapest place to refill a propane tank in town. She watched them, but she felt Lacey’s gaze on her, staring and occasionally mouthing silent dismay before she finally reached her empty hand out and clutched Siren’s arm. She was trembling, a gleam of fear bordering on anger in her brilliant green eyes.

“Are you serious?” she balked. “He grabbed you?”

“Just my sweater, but that’s not the point. The point is...”

“Um, I think it is the point. Does Patrick know about this?”

Shoulders shot up quickly to shrug off her question. “He knows, sort of. About the confrontation, but not the grabbing. He showed up as I was fleeing the scene and sort of talked me down, but seriously, Lace, that’s not the point. I think he’s trying to tell me something.”

“Who? The crazy homeless guy?” Narrowing her eyes into vicious slits, she shook her head. “What? That he needs a caseworker? A one way ticket to the asylum in Danville?”

“No, he kept saying the same things both times he came up to me. The box is the key. He kept talking about the box, the box. It’s the key.”

“The key to what? His room at the loony bin?”

“He said he could hear him calling across the veil, and he was saying sound the siren.”

Unamused and clearly not following Siren’s train of logic, Lacey stared, unblinking. “I don’t get it. Who’s calling?”

“I think he means Carver,” she said, as if it should have been obvious. “Wherever he is, he’s trapped somewhere, and the box...”

“Okay, Si, just stop.”

“Please, just hear me out. I know it sounds completely insane, but here’s the thing. I came home after our coffee date, and I was thinking about Carver, right?”

“Right. Because it was D-Day.”

“Exactly, so when I came home I went upstairs to take the jeweler’s box out, the one with Carver’s engagement ring in it. I thought... I don’t know, I guess I thought maybe it would bring me some closure you know? If I finally opened it, I could stop dwelling on the past and be a decent wife instead of a crazy lady still pining for someone who isn’t coming back. Like, I really owe it to Patrick...”

“Oh, with that I agree wholeheartedly, but go on.”

“Anyway, the box is gone.”

“Gone?”

“Gone. Just vanished, and I have no idea what happened to it. I mean, I haven’t even touched it since before the wedding, not really. Before we moved I just checked on it, you know? Made sure it was still there.”

“Ahuh.”

“And it was there, but now it’s not.”

“And what does that have to do with the crazy homeless guy?”

“The box, Lacey. He’s talking about the ring box. It’s the key.”

“Honey,” she groaned and rolled her head backward in exasperation. “Honey, no. I know...” Stopping herself briefly, she seemed to regroup her thoughts before going on. “Look, I know this whole thing has been really

difficult for you. I understand, really, I do, and I honestly don't think you are ever going to get over him unless Carver just magically reappears with a really bad excuse for his absence, but you're... reaching. Like, I mean really reaching here, Siren."

"What if I'm not?" she wondered. "I mean, what if..."

"What if there is really some kind of weird, magical portal somewhere and Carver's trapped inside it calling out to the town crazy? Do you even know how that sounds?"

"It sounds crazy when you say it like that, but..."

"But nothing. Siren, you have to stop this. You need to let go. I keep saying that, and you keep ignoring me, and sometimes you get really mad at me for it. Right now you're getting mad. I can see it in your eyes, but I'm only saying it because I love you. I love you and Patrick is so good for you. He makes you happy."

"I know, but..."

"I know you still love him. He was Prince Charming, for crying out loud, so perfect it was practically criminal, but he is gone, and for some reason the powers that be have seen fit to grant you another perfect prince of a man to fill that emptiness. Look at him, Siren."

Lacey grabbed onto Siren and steered her attention back to the men outside. Letting go, she gestured with her hand and Siren just stared at her husband. The way he smiled made something inside her feel lighter, as if nothing else in the world mattered but him. His dark curls caught the light of the sun streaming through the clouds, waking auburn and russet highlights. As he turned his head, laughing at some joke Jeff told him, she watched the edges of his eyes crinkle good-naturedly. Her aunt told her dozens of times that was a really good sign; it meant he was happy, always laughing, and a man who found enough humor in a dark world to keep on laughing was definitely worth holding onto.

"Look at him," she urged again. "I mean really look. He is perfect in every single way and it breaks my heart every time I realize you're not giving all of yourself to him because damn it, Siren, he deserves it. He deserves you, just as much as you deserve him."

Lowering her head shamefully, Siren dropped her lids and stared down at the carpet covering the living room floor below. From above she could see every little stain and imperfection, things not even a steam cleaner would

remove. A defeated breath escaped her. "I know he does," she lamented. "He deserves so much better than I can ever give him."

"No," she refused. "No, Siren, you are exactly what he deserves, and he is what you deserve. It's time to start celebrating that, seeing how luck you are to be the center of that man's world. You are everything to him. Everything."

"I know..."

"He should be everything to you."

Again she said, "I know."

"I'm sorry if I'm raining on your parade, sweetie. I don't mean to, but..."

"But you sort of do?"

"Maybe a little," she shoved into her from the side, the playful collision prompting the cat to jump down from her arms. "But only because that other parade, the one standing out there," she pinched her lips and shimmied a little, "damn girl! That is one fine parade. Celebrate that man!"

"Oh, I celebrate plenty, trust me," she laughed. "I don't think there's been a single celebrationless day since we moved into this house. Sometimes we celebrate twice."

"God, I hate you."

"No you don't."

"No, I don't, but god, I do. What I wouldn't give to be worshiped like that. He'd give you the moon if you asked him to."

"Good thing I'll never ask for it," she said. "I have no idea where I'd put it."

"Patrick would find a place," she mused. "He'd mount it somewhere perfect so you could always see it."

They giggled, both of them staring again at the two men outside on the lawn. When Siren glanced sidelong at Lacey, her face was long and sad, the dark circles beneath her eyes so intense it was a little scary. "I'm sorry things are so messed up with Jeff."

"It's not your fault," she sighed. "I did it to myself. Went back with him, moved in with him even though I knew he wasn't going to change. I thought... I don't know, I guess I thought maybe living together would show him I'm not like his first wife. I'm an adult. She was just a dumb kid who thought she knew what she was doing, but I'm a woman. I know what

I want. I know what I'm doing. Why should I have to pay for her mistakes?"

Siren lowered her arm across Lacey's shoulders again and leaned into her, their heads tilted together as they continued to watch the men beyond the glass.

"Want me to beat him up?"

"Would you?" A soft snort followed and she lifted her empty glass to try and drain the final drop that clung to the bottom. The cup amplified her laughter and for a moment it sounded like she was drowning. She lowered the glass again, finger looped around the delicate stem as she leaned forward onto the railing again and said, "No, what I really want is to live an amazing life vicariously through you. Can you do that? Can you give me that one thing?"

"If you're asking me to have babies..."

"I'm talking about letting go of this Carver thing and doing everything in your power to live the best, most fantastic life possible with that man down there because you deserve to be happy, and so does he."

"I'll tell you what," she started, "I will do whatever it takes to live this happy life with Patrick. I will let go of my crazy notions about Carver, but only if you promise to at least sit down with Jeff and talk to him about what you want. I know you, Lacey. I know how hard it is for you to tell a man what you want because you're so afraid he's going to burn you, or push you away. And Jeff is definitely a pusher. I've known him as long as you have and he's so hard to get close to, you know?"

"Oh, I know."

"Will you just try again? Maybe lay everything on the line. Tell him things have to change. Not him. He doesn't have to change, but things between you do. If you go into it without making it about him, maybe it'll be easier."

"Listen to you, all relationship advice..."

"I've been watching Dr. Phil when Patrick works overtime." She snorted softly. "Just say you'll try, Lacey. Even if it's a lie, say you'll do it for me."

"Why should I lie?" she wondered. "Are you lying when you say you're going to let go of Carver?"

"No."

She edged her chin across her shoulder, head turning in the direction of Patrick's voice as the two of them came through the sliding glass doors. He was laughing again, a sound that never failed to uplift her. She really was lucky, and Lacey was right. It was time to let go of Carver. The ring disappearing... maybe that was the sign she needed from the universe that it was time for her to open her hand and let go. Her life was good, but it could be so much better if she just let go.

"I'm not lying. You're right, Lace. It's time."

"Time for what?" Patrick called up to them.

"Time for Lacey to get another drink. She's been trying to lick that drop of wine off the bottom of her glass for ten minutes now." They fell into step together, circling their way down the stairs until they came to the landing. "You'll help me?" she whispered.

Lacey nodded, "Always."

"I'll help you too," she promised.

They smiled at each other, then went to have dinner with the men in their lives, and though things were tense between Jeff and Lacey at first, by the end of the evening they were both laughing and joking and Siren couldn't stop grinning at Patrick every time he looked at her.

She really was lucky. She just needed to remember not to blow it. Fortunately, she'd have Lacey there to remind her if she started to forget.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Siren was getting used to being in the house alone. Sometimes it still felt strange, just a little too quiet. Aunt Maisie's house was right downtown and she'd grown up listening to the sound of Jake-braking trucks and backseat bass bouncing through the streets at all hours of the day and night. Her apartment offered the same comforting sounds—not quite city, but constant traffic whooshing along the streets. It was how she fell asleep at night. Since they'd moved to the countryside she couldn't sleep without the hum of the fan, which Patrick said was going to get old real fast when the nights were unbearably cold.

He liked silence when he slept, but he tolerated her fan, for the time being.

They were so far away from other houses, from the main road that it was isolating. It was always quiet, and sometimes when she had the window open she could actually hear the cows mooing on the farm about two miles up the road, or the gurgling trickle of the stream at the bottom of their impossible driveway.

She actually sort of liked it. Her and the cat, working side by side. Well, she worked while the cat curled up on top of whatever he thought she wasn't using and slept through the bulk of their conversations. Sometimes she hooked her iPod up to the entertainment system in the living room and blasted her favorite Lenny Kravitz CD. Hips swaying to the sexy beat, she danced through the house because no one else was home. She knew it looked ridiculous, but it felt good, and it was a nice distraction from time to

time to wiggle herself right out of the chair and swagger all the way to the kitchen for a refill on her drink.

Lowering the brush she was using into the solvent, she huffed a sigh and glanced over at the cat. He was a circle of white fluff on a stack of boxes she still hadn't unpacked, his back rising and falling with every slow breath he took. The scene on the walls hadn't reached that side of the room yet, but the gently rolling ocean was all around her. The endless sky stretched on for miles, the palm tree she painted on the wall near the window swayed in the wind and the paint she used for the sand actually sparkled just a little, as if the sun reflected off the tiny particles. She'd been working on it slowly, but it was coming together.

For the moment, however, she was bored with work. She was tired of sitting on the stool and the house was too quiet. Inching backward across the floor, she hopped down, stretched her neck and started walking toward the door just as the timer on the dryer in the basement buzzed. Her movement disturbed the cat, who lifted his head and watched with twitchy brow whiskers as she walked toward the open door. With a squeaky grunt, he dropped onto the floor and padded quietly beside her, as if he didn't dare leave her to her own devices for fear she might do something stupid. God forbid he miss an opportunity to glare with silent glee if she tripped over her own feet.

She stopped in the kitchen to wash her hands before hiking the stairs into the creepy basement to unload the dryer. The rickety stairs bounced noisily as she jaunted down them. They felt unstable, and Patrick promised they were on his list of things to replace, but in the meantime she kept imagining herself crashing through them into some strange hidden lair behind the stairwell.

Ducking under the light string, it tickled through her hair and she reached up to brush it away when she arrived at the dryer. Tugging open the door, she kicked the empty basket into place and began heaving the clean clothes into it. The fabric softener smell invaded her senses, the comfortable clean scent of freshly-washed t-shirts and jeans steeped in Tide and Downy. It was one of her favorite combinations of smells in the world, and while most people groaned about doing laundry, she took pleasure in the mundane task for that reason alone. Shoving the full basket out of the way with her foot, she yanked open the washing machine door and began cramming the

wet, heavy load into the dryer. Finishing the task, she slammed the door shut, set the timer and turned it on, the bouncing raucous of tumbling clothes following her up the stairs as she carried the basket into the living and dumped it onto the couch.

She scrolled through her iPod until she found an upbeat CD to listen to, then she danced while she folded clothes, mostly Patrick's, into neat piles, singing along and swaying her hips. She forgot sometimes when the music was so loud that she was out in the middle of nowhere, relishing when she remembered again in the simple benefit of being able to play her music as loud as she wanted without a single neighbor's complaint. She'd always loved loud music; a habit she picked up from Aunt Maisie, who told her when she was a little girl there was no other way to listen to music.

In fact, that had been one of the selling points Patrick persuaded her with when trying to convince her that house was the perfect place for them. Aside from an epic yard for their future children to play in and plenty of room for an eventual in-ground pool, their nearest neighbor was more than a mile away. That meant even on the quietest day not a soul would hear their music.

Patting the last shirt onto the stack to her left, she sifted through the socks and began rolling them together, scowling as she inspected the small buddy-less collection of footwear piled before her. She stacked the folded clothes carefully into the laundry basket, laying the unmatched socks on top then lifting the basket to her hip as she trotted up the stairs to the loft bedroom.

Plopping the basket onto the bed, she spun right and drew open the top drawer of Patrick's dresser, sifting through loose socks to find matches for the ones in the basket. Only after pairing as many as possible did she begin putting everything away, rearranging the socks in the drawer so everything was in its place just the way he liked it. She closed the drawer and reached for the one below, where he kept his shirts, and began shifting them around to make room for newcomers when something caught her eyes in the back of the drawer. Something black and velvet that made her stop as if frozen, her hand just an inch away from contact.

She knew exactly what it was; she'd spent three years stroking her fingers across that velvet until it was flattened and worn away in some places, dulled and dusty in others. Her hand twitched, fingers wiggling just

a little as she breathed in, air catching in the back of her throat as if something had grabbed onto her neck and started to squeeze.

Her heart sped up so suddenly, it skipped a beat or two and made her gasp, but when she started trying to reach in and retrieve it something stopped her. The cat yowled at her back, a long, throaty sound that startled her a little, and when she looked over her shoulder at him she was surprised to see his hackles up and his large, fluffy tail spiky as a bottle brush. Ignoring him, she looked back into the drawer half-expecting the box to be gone for the whole thing to have been a figment of her imagination, but there it was, the worn edge sticking out and taunting her to reach in and grab it.

An eerie feeling moved through her. Aunt Maisie always used to say, “If you want to find something, stop looking for it and it’ll turn up,” but somehow that little bit of wisdom didn’t seem to apply.

She hadn’t snooped through any of Patrick’s things. In fact, she didn’t let herself think much about the missing ring at all since her talk with Lacey. She made every effort to put the past behind her, to let go of Carver and start focusing her attention on Patrick and the future she committed herself to the day they made vows on the beach.

There was a stunned part of her that didn’t want to believe what was right in front of her. He had taken that ring from her jewelry box and hidden it away from her, which meant he knew about it. Suddenly she couldn’t help but wonder what else he was hiding in there, and a thousand accusatory thoughts raced through her mind. She started to reach out, but she was afraid to touch it and she didn’t know why. Each time she began to lower her hand toward it, she yanked it back again, as if some invisible barrier surrounded it and sent off weird warning pulses each time she got too close. Odd as that sounded, it made her already thumping heart feel like a jackhammer between her ribs, and the blood running through her veins felt like ice.

Shifting the shirts around on the opposite side of the drawer, she found nothing else of value save for a single unrecognizable coin, or maybe it was a token of some sort, but she assumed it fell out of one of his pockets. Her hand and her gaze both returned to the velvet box in the corner, the dread of betrayal rolling in cold trickles down the backs of her arms and neck.

The cat was growling a little, but he hadn't taken another step into the room. His behavior, combined with the eerie feeling each time she put her hand near the left corner of the drawer made her whole body tremble. It felt like a trap, as if some weird, invisible barrier surrounded it. She felt the energy of it—not quite static, something else, something cold and dark, the edge of a blade all sharp and dangerous as it sliced across the skin. Jerking her hand back out, she bent down a little and peered inside the drawer. The same pulsation of dark energy ebbed out to touch her face, the hairs retreating as if they had minds of their own.

“What the...?”

Backing away again, she just stared, the dread coursing through her was unbearable. Something awful was going to happen to her if she reached into the corner of the dresser; she could feel it like tentacles snaking out to poison her resolve. A thousand dark and hideous images flickered through her mind like the frames of an old film set on slow-play. Blood dripping across pavement. Needle flashing in the moonlight. Angry, violent, hateful.

God, she'd never felt anything like that in her life, and the cat rumbling warning behind her only made it worse.

“Stop it,” she barked over her shoulder, causing him to back up several steps into the hallway.

His eyes were so round, the pupils dilated so wide she saw just a hint of the golden irises staring back at her. She'd had that cat for five years, and she'd seen him do a lot of weird things, but she'd never seen him act that way.

“What the heck is wrong with you?”

The sound he made was unidentifiable, a cross between a warning howl and a rumble, but he didn't move from the corner of the doorway.

Siren returned her attention to the drawer in front of her, the indignation of betrayal pushing her fear aside. He had no right to take things from her and hide them. No matter what his intentions were, he had no right to touch that box, that ring. None. She wondered if he'd opened it, violated the sanctity of it with his prying eyes. That thought made her sick, and then it made her angry. Pushing through the unreal terror, she swallowed hard, ground her teeth together and shoved her hand through what felt like a tube of angry hornets to snatch back her ring. A terrible burn crawled like fire along her knuckles, up the back of her hand, along her wrist.

“Jesus!” she hissed and squeezed her eyes tight. “What the hell...”

As soon as she touched the edge of the box the inexplicable barrier dissolved, the pain abating enough that she was able to reach in and grab her prize. Even as she withdrew the box, however, her hand still felt swollen and numb, as if a thousand furious wasps hammered their tails into her skin. When she drew her arm up to inspect it, the black velvet jeweler’s box clutched triumphantly in her grip, there wasn’t a single mark on her flesh to even suggest she’d been hurt at all.

She swore under her breath and took three steps back from the dresser. Her arm still hurt, and her mind was overrun by a thousand thoughts she couldn’t make sense of because the pain made it so hard to think. She kept shaking her head, as if the motion would dislodge the fuzziness and the insanity swarming through her, but neither abated.

She hadn’t imagined it. People didn’t dream up that kind of crazy, not without a full cocktail of hallucinogenic drugs. Bringing her left hand up, she scratched fingernails absently along the skin, then looked around the room with large, terrified blue eyes.

“This is crazy,” she muttered, breath barely a hush breaking the quiet of the room.

Box in hand, she began pacing, the noisy floorboards creaking every four steps and startling her every single time.

The cat finally came in, hackles down, but his eyes were still wide and wary. He jumped up onto the bed and just watched her walk back and forth. She kept looking down at the black box, then squeezing it covetously in her grip before resuming her nonstop pacing.

She felt sick. Sick and betrayed. Crazy, too. She was a mess, an irrational barrage of fear and panic clung to her until she felt like she had to get out of that room, no—out of that house. She needed to get away from things she couldn’t explain, but where should she go?

She fought with herself about running out of the room. She needed to make it look like she hadn’t touched the drawer at all, but the mere thought of going near it again made her legs wobble like jelly. Inching back toward it, there was no eerie feeling coming from it anymore. Whatever strange magic that protected it had been broken, but how. And how had it gotten there in the first place?

Rearranging the shirts, she tried to put them back exactly as she'd found them, then set herself to the task of putting the rest of his clothes away so the reason for her going through his drawers was ironclad. If it came up... No, when. It would come up, there was no way around it, but until she figured out how to approach the subject she had to do everything in her power to act like nothing had changed. But when it came up, she needed a reason and there it was. She was putting his clothes away. That was all.

Backing out of the room, she jammed the ring box into the front pocket of her hooded sweatshirt, then dragged the laundry basket down the stairs, the back of it thumping like a body on every step until she reached the landing in the living room. Leaving the basket at the bottom of the stairs, she walked into the dining room, jerked one of the chairs away from the table and plunked down into it. She just sat there for a minute feeling stunned and stupid, her mind still reeling through things there was no making sense of.

The cat followed her, leaping up onto the opposite end of the table and staring at her while she stared at the black box she brought out of her pocket and lowered onto the table in front of her.

Craning her head over her shoulder, her gaze lifted along the archway above the kitchen and lingered on the loft walkway outside their bedroom. It wound along the wall and loomed over both the living room and dining room. The plant dangling over the antique chair at the end of that balcony swayed on its macramé hanger, the spidery leaves trembling as if blown by a breeze.

Her hand and arm still hurt. She would be rubbing the feel of that strange magic from her skin for days to come. Magic. It was the first time that word came into play, the realization dripping down the length of her spine like cold drops of water.

Was that what it was? Magic? Had Patrick done it? If so, how? It seemed impossible and terrifying, some inexplicable power there were no words for, and yet...

Her phone sounded off from the kitchen counter, where she'd left it, the distinctive ring tone announcing a call from Patrick.

She couldn't move. Didn't want to, was more like it. What would she say to him?

“Oh, hey, hi! How’s your day? Mine’s been all right except for getting stung by a thousand angry, invisible bees while putting your laundry away. Oh, and by the way, those invisible bees, where did they come from and why were they guarding a box you stole from me?”

Yeah, somehow she got the impression talking to him at that moment was not a good idea.

Instead she reached for a bottle of water a few inches away and dragged it across the table. Twisting off the cap, it felt rubbery and strange in her hand, as if the nerves had somehow been stunned or damaged. She took a drink, but it tasted strange and her uneasy stomach quivered when it went down.

After the fourth ring it went to voicemail, a second tone announcing that he’d left a message about a minute after her phone grew silent.

She just sat there. What else was she supposed to do?

Reaching with her left hand, she lowered it and closed her eyes. The familiarity of an old habit made itself known. She carried that box around for almost a year after Carver disappeared, always with her, in the pocket of her sweatshirt or pants, sometimes in her purse, but usually on her person. It was always just within reach so she could slip her hand in and stroke the velvet of the box out of habit. Crazy, she knew, but she hadn’t cared. It brought her comfort. Each time she touched it, she felt close to him, and that simple act got her through the hardest time of her life.

Caressing the velvet, her fingernail slipped between the spring-held crack. Sometimes while it was in her pocket she would find herself tempted to open it there because she couldn’t exactly see it, but she never did. It always felt wrong, especially after she’d started dating Patrick, even more so once they’d gotten engaged.

But right then... in that moment she didn’t know what to think, whether it was right or wrong. Staring at it with tilted head she silently debating with herself on whether or not she should open it and get it over with.

Closing her eyes, she lowered her palm over it again and remembered that night. The images were muddled at first, as if someone had gone through the reel in her mind and poured oil over the film. There she was opening the door. Carver stood on the other side in black tie formal, his golden hair drawn back at the nape of his neck. His eyes, god how his eyes lit up when he saw her, and the way he grinned as she stepped aside and led

him into the apartment to wait while she ran into the bathroom to make sure she shut off her flatiron—that grin had been the most wonderful part of her day.

She started to dart away but he'd grabbed her by the hand before she could rush off, tugged her across the floor and into his chest. It was impulsive, unexpected, but welcome. "You look stunning," he told her, pinning their loosely clutched hands to his chest between them. "You always look stunning, but tonight..." Head shaking back and forth, he laughed at himself. "Wow, you know I'm rarely at a loss for words, but just... Wow. I am the luckiest man in Makewell, Siren. You have no idea."

"No one is even going to notice me because I'm with you."

"Everyone is going to notice you," he assured her, "and it's going to have nothing to do with me. If... I just... I wish you could see what I see right now. It would take your breath away." The lilting softness of his voice never failed to make her knees feel weak.

"Careful, Carver," she cooed warning as she slid up against him and onto the tips of her toes. Even in heels she had to stretch to meet his lips, but it was worth it, it was always worth it. "You keep talking like that and you might get lucky tonight."

"I'm already lucky," he brushed the soft tip of his nose against her cheek before touching the corner of her mouth with his lips. "Luckiest man in Makewell, remember?"

Her phone was ringing again, wrenching her from the comfort and bliss of a memory so perfect it was hard to let go of. It was Patrick's ring tone again, and though there was no way it could possibly sound any different than the last time he called, it felt like it was shouting at her. Compelling her to answer the damn phone already. She resisted again, pushing the urge away because she was actually a little bit more than terrified, and she didn't know what to say to him.

She needed time to put everything into perspective, to figure out just how she should approach the situation, or if she should avoid it altogether and see if he brought it up. Surely, he would eventually realize the ring he'd taken from her was missing; if he was capable of producing some weird power she had no words for, he was probably equally capable of recognizing when it had been triggered.

He was going to know. Maybe even as soon as he came home.

Maybe she should go. Leave the house and go to Aunt Maisie's, but how would she explain it without sounding one hundred percent certifiable? Aunt Maisie put up with a lot of her shenanigans over the years, but aside from Lacey, her aunt was quite possibly Patrick's number one fan. She wouldn't just think she was crazy; she might believe Siren was deliberately trying to sabotage the biggest blessing she'd ever had in her life. A notion that struck her as odd because before Patrick came along, Carver had been the biggest blessing. After he disappeared, during the weeks that she mourned and struggled and tried to make sense of everything, everyone else who'd loved Carver just sort of let him go, almost as if he'd never been there at all.

The phone stopped ringing again and moments later another voicemail. Siren swore she could actually hear the tension in his voice, asking where she was and why she wasn't answering her phone. She was projecting. There was no way Patrick could even know how angry she was, how upset to have been stung by his trap after discovering he'd taken something he had no right to take.

Peeling her hand back, she glanced down at the ring box and then lowered her fingers to the sides. Tempted, not for the first time, to pry it back and finally take a look at the ring inside, she pinched the edges between her fingers and almost brought herself to do it, but then her phone started ringing again. Patrick's tone. There was a strange sense of fury as each note of music played; she could almost hear him swearing on the other line, compelling her to pick up.

Pushing away from the table, she stalked across the floor until she reached the kitchen bar. She picked up her phone and stared at the call-image, the two of them on their wedding day standing in front of the rolling waves, smiling as they touched their noses. She'd been so happy that day; for a moment she could almost feel the depth and strength of that moment with the same ferocity she'd recalled her last clear memories with Carver and then her anger pushed it away.

Sliding her finger across the screen, she brought the phone up to her ear, gasping as though she was out of breath. "Hey," she said simply, willing herself to remain calm.

"Hey," there was tension, she could hear it in that single word and it made the anxiety roiling in her gut feel tenser, almost painful as it twisted

and churned. "Where were you?"

"Downstairs in the basement," she explained. "I was folding clothes and didn't hear my phone."

"Oh."

"Everything all right?"

"Yeah." Silence. She could hear him click his tongue against the back of his teeth.

"So, how's your day?" It was so hard to stay so calm. She wanted to tear into him, ask him who he thought he was. No, better yet, ask him just exactly who he was that he could set a trap like that. What other things had he manipulated in her life? A cold ripple cascaded through her as a conversation they'd had a couple weeks earlier came flooding back to memory.

"You always make me believe you," she told him. "Even when the things you promise me seem like they should be impossible."

"It's magic," he grinned. "A rare gift, really. I can make anyone believe anything I want them to believe. Including you." His lips touched hers again as he said, "Especially you."

"Well, whatever talent or magic this rare ability of yours is, don't ever stop."

"Oh, I've no intention of stopping," he assured her. "We're in this until the end of days. You and me."

"I don't know," he said tersely on the other line. "Messed up. I'm in a mood."

"I'm sorry."

"Why are you sorry?" he asked, so serious it was scary. "Did you do something to deliberately mess up my day?"

Did she? She didn't know. Maybe. Maybe when she poked her hand through his weird bee trap, he'd felt it.

"No, I'm just sorry you're having a bad day. Is there something I can do?"

"Tell me you love me."

"Is that why you called?"

"Yes," he said. "It was the only reason I called. I'm having a bad day, and everything feels wrong, and I wanted to hear the reassuring sound of the only thing in my life that feels right."

Siren just stood there holding the phone to her ear and blinking as she stared at the refrigerator magnets. There weren't many, it was a small collection of all the places they'd been together since they met. Chincoteague, Myrtle Beach, Edisto Island...

"Are you there?"

"Yeah, I'm here."

She did love him. He'd saved her and made her feel alive again when the greatest part of her wasn't sure she would be able to go on living. Even if he'd wronged her, even if he was some kind of weird mutant like the ones she drew in web comic panels, it didn't matter. He was Patrick and she loved him.

"I'm sorry you're having a bad day, and I love you."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah." How quickly her mood shifted. She felt it, noticed the dwindling tension and abating anger and wondered why it was so easy to forgive him for something she was sure just seconds before hearing his voice was completely unforgivable. "So what happened?"

"We lost the bid for a really big contract, that's all. I was sure we had it, but we lost it."

"That sucks."

"It does suck."

"Is there anything I can do?"

"Just tell me you love me again."

"I love you," she said, a slow smile quirking the corner of her mouth as she added, "again."

He guffawed on the other line, a soft scraping sound that sounded like it caught in the back of his throat. "Thank you. You just made this whole shitty day one-hundred percent better."

"You're welcome."

"How's your day?"

"It's been okay. I got a bit ahead of myself with work."

"That's my girl. I can't wait to see it when I get home."

"What time do you think you'll be done?"

"I don't know," he sighed. "Probably not until five. We're wrapping up a job today and I want to swing by the other site and make sure everything is going according to plan."

“I’ll try to have dinner ready when you get here.”

“Thank you. You’re the best. I love you, Siren. You have no idea how much.”

“I have a pretty good idea,” she said.

Enough to lie. Enough to hide things from me. Enough to protect me from even myself.

“I love you too.” And the worst part was she really did and there was nothing she could do to change the way she felt about him.

Hanging up the phone, she glanced back over her shoulder, half-expecting to find the ring box gone from the table, but there it sat. Black and simple, aloof and tempting. The cat got up while she was on the phone and walked toward it. He sat down in front of it, as if waiting for her to pick it up and show him what was inside. She swiped it off the table and tried to think of a good place to hide it. Somewhere Patrick would never look because he would look. As soon as he realized it was missing from his hiding place, he’d look for it and he’d get angry when he couldn’t find it. She didn’t know what would happen then, but it was a chance she had to take.

She loved him, but she suddenly felt like she had no idea who she’d married, and that terrified her.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Patrick did not arrive home until almost six o'clock. He was in a mood when he came in, slunk his arms around her waist and buried his face in her shoulder to kiss sorrows across her neck. He smelled like outside with a faint hint of sawdust and house paint, and the familiar essence of him made it difficult to detach herself from the comfort Siren felt when he was with her. It was easy to pretend, to become someone else. As the night wore on she realized she'd been someone else since Carver disappeared.

Patrick's wife. That's who she was. The woman who fell in love with Patrick Blakely—a man who might, or might not, be capable of some otherworldly power she couldn't wrap her head around no matter how she tried. As she tilted her head into his and breathed in the familiarity of him, she couldn't even begin to imagine.

Patrick? Capable of drawer full of angry bees? No way.

He was good with his hands, but not that good. Or was he?

God, she didn't know who he was either, and she'd married him.

When he hiked up the stairs to take a shower while she put the finishing touches on dinner, she bit the inside of her cheek as she listened to him open and close drawers. She waited for him to discover that his trap had been sprung, but if he did there was no sign. Moments later the water started running and she just sat down at the dining room table waiting for him to come down again and knowing she'd be able to tell by the look on his face alone whether or not he knew.

After hanging up the phone earlier that afternoon Siren wrapped the box in a plastic zipper back, then she tucked it down into the bottom of Mr.

Pounce's cat food bin. Patrick hated her cat, which should have been her first clue to his imperfection because really, who hated cats? Not perfect people. Not normal people.

By the time he came down to dinner, hair tousled and darkening the fabric of his t-shirt as it dripped, she'd debated with herself at least six different ways on confronting him, finally deciding she would do no such thing. If he brought it up, she would ask him why, but she wasn't going to make the first move.

She smiled across the table at him. She sympathized as he droned on about the horror of what felt like an endless day, and afterward she snuggled up on the couch with him in front of the TV. Part of her felt conflicted about how easy it was to pretend. On the other hand she was impressed with herself. She'd never been a particularly good liar, at least not according to Aunt Maisie. Her inability to act or carry off a falsehood with a straight face had gotten her into plenty of trouble as a teenager, and eventually she learned it was always better not to get caught so there was no need for deception.

But was she really the deceiver?

She never lied to him. She simply didn't tell him about an engagement ring box she'd never even opened because what happened before she met him had already taken up too much of their life together. And there was the whole part about that box being her last solid tie to Carver—something private she didn't want to share with anyone else.

He'd taken it from her. Then he hid it away, protecting it behind some inexplicable barrier that gave her chills every time she thought about it and made her entire hand and wrist feel numb. When he scooted down into the couch and rested his head in her lap while watching TV, she stared at him and wondered what else he might be keeping from her. Her thoughts were absurd as she wondered if his name was really Patrick Blakely. Of course it was. She'd seen his birth certificate and driver's license, his social security card. He was born in Divine Providence Hospital on January 26, 1982, to Catherine and Mason Blakely. There weren't many pictures of his childhood, but she'd seen a few in an old photo album he dug out of the back of his closet while they were packing their apartments together.

If he wasn't who he said he was, he'd certainly gone to a lot of trouble to steal the real Patrick Blakely's identity. She supposed those things could be

well-documented forgeries, but who would go to all that trouble just to lead a mundane life in the country with a woman who was pretty sure she was on the verge of losing her mind?

“Change the channel,” he grumped with annoyance.

She flipped through several stations until he bid her to stop on a channel playing nonstop horror movies leading up to Halloween. There was screaming, running, a masked villain and bloody murder, but Siren wasn’t even paying attention.

She was being ridiculous. What if her husband was a serial killer? A fugitive? A spy? Someone in the witness protection program?

She’d read true crime books, not a lot, but she’d watched enough reality television to know things like that happened all the time.

The wife was always the last one to know.

He started drifting off to sleep. She could tell by the heaviness of his head. Fingers moving through the loose, dry curls of his dark brown hair, she studied the patchy bristle of unshaven beard shadowing his cheek. His facial hair was much lighter, a fairer shade of chestnut bordering on auburn. The rigid angle of his jaw and the sharpness of his nose sometimes lent a serious quality to his face that bordered on severe when he was angry. Dark eyelashes knit together, and the subtle wrinkles carved at the corners of his eyes reminded her of how much time he spent laughing. His hair was shaggy, a rogue curl looping around his ear, stretching straight with the movement of her fingers before springing back inward when she let go again. She liked his hair when it was shaggy, liked how it felt between her fingers.

She loved him.

During that strange ritual she nearly forgot she’d been questioning everything about it.

Twitching a little in his sleep, his bare foot stretched toward the opposite arm of the couch before he retracted his leg and nestled his head deeper into her lap with a deep moan. She stilled her hand, staring across the room at the bag of cat food and then scanning the house for Mr. Pounce. It took her a minute to find him at the top of the steps staring down on them from above. The cat always seemed to run off when Patrick came into a room. If he was curled in her lap, he would jump up and dart away, not coming around again until she was alone. And he *had* peed on Patrick’s shirt,

strange considering she'd had him for years and he'd never once peed anywhere except in his litter pan. He was a good cat. Mr. Pounce loved everyone, everyone except for Patrick and maybe there was a reason.

Maybe Patrick was a bad person.

No. She was being ridiculous. Patrick was not a bad person. He'd been so good to her. He helped her through one of the most difficult times in her life. He was sweet and kind and he loved her so much he said it hurt sometimes. When their bodies were tangled together, when he was inside her and whispering into the hollow of her neck she could literally feel the intensity of his love for her. He was right; sometimes it was so immense it made her soul hurt. She'd never felt that way with anyone, not even Carver.

Why was she trying so hard to mess it all up?

Siren felt her eyes ache and sting, unshed tears blurred his features when she looked back down at him. After everything, how could she vilify him because he'd taken a ring she had no reason to hold onto and hidden it away from her in his dresser drawer? Maybe he had a good reason. Maybe he was trying to save her from returning to an endless heartache that was never going to ease up if she didn't let go.

Reaching for the remote a jolt of pain twinged beneath the skin. Stretching her fingers before curling them around the remote the movement stirred him again and he lifted his head, groggily blinking as he squinted and turned an eye across the room.

He let loose a soft grunt and muttered, "What time is it?"

"9:22."

"How long was I asleep?"

"I don't know, an hour. Why don't you go to bed?"

"Isn't that show we wanted to watch on at ten?"

"I'll DVR it. Go to bed, Patrick."

"You'll watch it without me." He was pouting, his lower lip childishly jutting out and making her instantly feel sorry for thinking a single bad thought about him. Patrick was a lot of things—temperamental, opinionated and at times domineering, but he was not a villain. Pushing himself upward, the mussed waves of his hair stuck out on the right side, barely tamed by the act of running his fingers through them. "Don't watch it without me."

"I won't. Go to bed."

"Why don't you come to bed too?"

“I’m not really tired.”

Tension spasmed along his jawline when he turned his attention toward the TV for a moment, and then he shrugged. “Fine,” he rose from the couch, the joints in his knees cracking with the movement, “suit yourself.”

It bothered him that she didn’t want to go to bed; she could see it in the bloodshot flare of his hazel eyes, the amber and citrine bursts of color surrounding his pupils catching the light from the chandelier hanging above the living room and making them look dangerous. They always went to bed together. Ever since they’d started having sex it had become a ritual, but she wasn’t tired and her mind was a dark, cavernous place full of twisted thoughts and fears that would only grow fiercer if she was forced to lay awake and stew. Which was exactly what she’d do if she went to bed.

Leaning into her, he turned in and brushed a kiss across her cheek before heading up the stairs without even saying goodnight. She watched him, his figure winding around the spiraled staircase, shoulders hitching when he reached the top stair. The cat darted along the balcony, cowering in a shadow under the chair and waiting until Patrick disappeared into their bedroom before coming out again. He crept down the steps, hopped up onto the couch and curled up instantly in her lap.

She stared long after Patrick went into the bedroom and flipped on the light. She listened to the sounds of him shuffling, normal movement, no frantic display that he discovered something untoward, then he turned off the overhead light. The springs of the mattress gave under his weight, squeaking as he shuffled around until he was comfortable.

Only then did she look away, returning her attention to the quiet television on the other side of the living room and staring absently at the moving bodies imitating life inside the rectangle box.

She didn’t realize until she looked down at the remote control still clutched in her hand that she was trembling a little. Had she been shaking all night? Had he felt it when she stroked her fingers through her hair? Closing her eyes, she drew in a deep breath and held it inside her, nostrils flaring wide and stomach pressing outward as she filled herself with air.

She didn’t know how long she could maintain the charade and pretend everything was okay, but she was going to hold out as long as possible. She needed to get to the bottom of whatever strange force she’d felt bristling protectively around the box, but she had no idea where to even start.

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

She woke to the sweet sound of his voice, the nuzzling damp of soft lips nibbling her cheek. “Hey sleepyhead.” Hot breath expelled against her ear, tickling through the loose strands of her hair and sending chills rippling through her. “Why don’t you go upstairs and get into bed? It’s more comfortable there?”

She moaned protest, the stiffness in her back making itself known as she turned her face away and tried to shift her body more deeply into the limited space of the couch.

“Go on,” he urged.

“Mm...”

Her eyes were sticky when she pulled them open and lifted her head to look through blurred lenses. She didn’t remember laying down or pulling the knitted afghan from the back of the couch over her body to ward off the chill clinging to the air. She squinted at the clock. It took a few minutes before the numbers registered that it was quarter after six. She shot upright, Patrick moving aside as she continued to blink and stare. The television was set to one of the local stations, the morning news and the weatherman yammering about rain, rain and more rain in the forecast.

“I didn’t mean to fall asleep.”

Why was she explaining herself to him?

“Go on upstairs,” he said again, “go back to sleep for a bit.”

Nodding, she let her mind settle, the reality of the day before hovering over her like a menacing monster threatening to grab hold of her shoulders and start shaking. Patrick was still on his knees beside the couch, looking at

her carefully. She wondered if he'd opened his dresser that morning to dig a shirt out and discovered she'd found his hiding place.

Lifting a hand to her cheek, he turned her face toward her and said, "Go back to sleep upstairs."

Leaning forward on instinct, she placed a kiss on his cheek. Patrick slid his arms around her. He hugged her close and touched his lips to hers before drawing back. She could smell the toothpaste on his breath, almost taste the cool, minty flavor on her tongue when she touched it to her bottom lip.

"Have a good day."

"I love you, baby." Watching her rise and circle around the staircase, he didn't start to get up until she was near the top.

The words were habit. They escaped her without much thought. "Love you too."

Even betrayed, one didn't just turn those feelings off. After all, without Patrick where would she be? Alone? Empty? Still lingering on a past that could never be brought back no matter how hard she tried to recapture it?

Siren slid into her side of the bed and stretched her bare legs along the cool sheets before curling in upon herself and nestling deep into the pillow. Her eyes felt like they were full of sand and she was hungry in that overwhelming way that sometimes happened when she stayed up too late, then got up far earlier than she should have. Her stomach gurgled. She hadn't eaten much at dinner the night before, claiming she thought she might be coming down with something when Patrick asked her what was wrong after she pushed the same flaked off bite of salmon around her plate for nearly ten minutes.

Downstairs Patrick shuffled around in the kitchen, tugging open the refrigerator, layering items into his lunch box. She heard him make a sandwich, then drop the utensils into the sink before thumping the box closed and lowering it onto the dining room table. The volume on the television rose moments later, the newscaster's voice climbing the stairs to blast dark tidings in her ear.

"...confirmed the identity of the victim of a grisly murder discovered in Lycoming County early Tuesday morning. The body of fifty-six year old Booker Hammond was discovered in the alley behind The Beanstalk coffee shop on Main Street in Makewell by the shop's owner, Charles Nelson.

“I’m just... I don’t even know what to say.” The familiarity of Chas’s voice prodded Siren upright in the bed. Elbow digging into the mattress, she cocked her head to listen. “Mr. Hammond came in here nearly every single day. He was deeply troubled, but he was a good man. There are just no words...”

The cold suddenly felt chillier, and even though the heaviness of the blankets around her trapped the heat of her body, she couldn’t shake the shivers trembling through her.

“Authorities have reached no further details at this time, but the Makewell township police department is currently offering a \$5,000 reward for information...”

There was a hotline number, shocked banter between morning co-hosts, but Siren heard none of it. She dropped back onto the pillow, her head heavy and hollow as a million thoughts swarmed through her. She was terrified, the molasses leak of dread trickling through her blood made it hard for her to focus on a single thought for more than a second before it jumped to the next. The senselessness of her fear and anger confused her. Each time she blinked her eyes she could see the man’s face. Blackened, broken teeth, the wiry hairs of his beard as he leaned toward her. She felt the scrape of his fingernails through her sweater as he grabbed onto her and tried to convey some senseless message meant for her.

The box is the key.

The television silenced. Patrick’s boots thudded across the living room floor, past the stairway and into the short hall leading toward the front door. It opened with an eerie suction that reverberated through the rest of the house, then he closed it quietly behind him. Seconds later his truck roared to life, but she couldn’t move, not until she heard the dwindling sound of the engine as the road swallowed it up.

Throwing the blankets off of her legs, she sat up in the bed and edged her feet along the rug beneath them. She grabbed her smart phone from the bedside table, swiped her finger across the screen and tapped open the browser. She typed Booker Hammond Murder into the search engine and waited for it to load. A small selection of articles filled the first page and she clicked the top search result. After what felt like a lifetime of waiting for it to load, the local paper featured two articles. One described the

murder in minimal detail, stating strange symbols painted around the scene seemed to suggest it was an occult crime.

Siren's brow furrowed. Occult crimes didn't happen in Makewell, not anymore anyway. There was talk when she was a kid about Satanists meeting up to perform rituals in Montgomery battle bunkers. A big stink was raised around Halloween, a bunch of parents boycotted trick-or-treating that year for fear their kids would be abducted and sacrificed, but the novelty of that idea wore off when a couple of teenagers were busted coming out of the bunkers with a duffel bag full of half-empty spray paint cans.

Sure, every once in a while some rare, strange case cropped up on the news about minor occult crimes, but the word occult getting mentioned in conjunction with a murder investigation was strange business.

Her eyes flitted across the second article, an in-depth look at Booker Hammond. There were pictures of a smiling business man with neatly trimmed hair. His wife and daughter hovered close. The article noted both were victims in a tragic hit and run accident in October 2011.

The cold trickle of dread was there, tickling across the back of her neck before dripping down her spine. That was right after Carver disappeared, right around the time Patrick moved into her building.

Crazy thoughts tangled themselves up in her mind. A single act of deception, a TV turned up too loud just before he left for work, and she was placing her own husband at the scene of that crime and imagining the worst. God, what was wrong with her? Was she really that self-destructive?

Patrick was no killer. A liar, maybe, but a murderer? No way.

God, she was losing her mind and all because of that stupid ring. Because the homeless man staring back at her from the browser on her phone said, "Sound the siren," and, "the box is the key." He was crazy. He wasn't trying to tell her anything. She latched onto that desperate idea because she was crazy too. On the verge of ruining a perfectly good opportunity at happiness over an insane hunch.

Each time she tried to push that away it bounced back to her. There were things she couldn't explain. Terrifying things like the prickly barrier of dread in Patrick's dresser drawer, his constant jests that he used magic to fix things, to make people believe him.

“I can make anyone believe anything I want them to believe. Including you. Especially you.”

What if he wasn't just teasing? What if he really did have strange power there were no rational words to explain, and he hid it from her?

“God,” she whispered. “What is wrong with me?”

Mr. Pounce climbed onto the bed and cuddled up to her. He rolled his big head along the back of her arm and started to purr, as if the sound alone would be enough to comfort her and reassure her there was nothing wrong with her. But there was no comfort, no rest for the crazy.

She was back to square one again, wondering what else he might be hiding. Thinking the worst of a man who'd never been anything but good to her, who'd gone out of his way to help her pick up the pieces after her life fell apart and promised to give her the best of everything if she would just love him.

Shaking hand lifted into the length of her black hair, sliding along her scalp until she reached the crown and clutched her skull. She was losing her mind. Going crazy the way Aunt Maisie said her mother had just before she disappeared. Only Siren wasn't a drug addict; there was no reasonable explanation for the sudden lapse in her sanity. Just a stolen ring tucked behind some magical barrier and a television newscast about a homeless man who'd scared the hell out of her in the grocery store a couple weeks earlier.

Some experts claimed a lot of drug addicts were mentally unstable people who attempted to balance themselves out by self-medicating. And Aunt Maisie told her more than once her mother was born unstable. Maybe her instability was hereditary and Siren was on the verge of some kind of breakdown. Maybe she was imagining everything, the ward around the ring box, the mysterious circumstances surrounding Booker Hammond's murder. Maybe she was vilifying Patrick because she was terrified of being happy.

Grabbing the throw blanket from the end of the bed, she wrapped it around her shoulders to ward off the chill clinging to the air in the house and hiked the stairs. She still had her phone in her hand, but she lowered it onto the bar and kept walking until she reached the closed door of Patrick's den.

He hadn't spent much time in there. Just in the beginning. He'd moved a few boxes in, an old desk and chair he'd kept in the apartment and his

favorite armchair, which she threatened to have taken away with the garbage routinely during the move. The cat followed close at her heels, arriving beside her just as she approached the door and lowering onto his haunches to watch fixedly as she held her hand out toward the knob. “If he’s hiding something, it’ll be in here, right?”

Mr. Pounce meowed.

She didn’t know if he was agreeing, or just telling her his food dish was half-empty and she needed to fill it again before he lost his mind. She chose to go with the former, allowing her fingers to curl around the cold metal of the doorknob. Before she could talk herself out of it she turned it, waiting for it to resist. It didn’t. She pushed the door open and allowed her eyes to adjust to the dull light of early morning. Edging past her, Mr. Pounce scampered into the room, but Siren stood on the threshold for several minutes just staring into what looked like little more than a storage space at the moment.

There were only a few boxes piled on top of the desk and in the armchair; the rest of the room was bare. She finally worked up the courage to reach inside and flip the light switch. The cat perched on the desktop, beside a stack of boxes, tail swishing and whirling around his body as those intense gold eyes stared back at her. She felt stupid, almost disappointed as she took tentative steps into the room and scanned the interior.

Each box was neatly labeled in Patrick’s all-capital hand. Books. Magazines. Movies. There was a single magazine sitting on the edge of the desk, underneath the cat’s swishing tail. She didn’t have to nudge him off to know it was a copy of *Sports Illustrated*.

She felt ridiculous.

Backing out of the room, she tapped her leg to urge the cat to follow. He didn’t, so she just left him in there while she walked back into the kitchen, snatched her phone off the counter and opened her contacts. She called Aunt Maisie, the line ringing four times before she groggily answered.

“Siren?” There was worry in her tone. “Are you okay? What time is it?”

“It’s seven-thirty. I’m sorry to call you so early.”

“It’s all right, honey. What’s wrong?”

“I think I’m going crazy.”

She coughed a little, but beyond that Aunt Maisie’s response was just as she’d expected it might be. Silence..

“Whatever crazy my mom had, I think I’ve got it too.”

“You’re not crazy,” her aunt said.

“How can you say that with conviction? You don’t even know the kinds of loony thoughts I’m having right now.”

“I’ll be right there. Don’t go anywhere.”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

“Good. Stay put.”

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Siren was curled up inside the throw blanket and hunched over an untouched cup of tea at the dining room table. Aunt Maisie hadn't said much of anything beyond, "You look terrible, darling. Have you eaten anything yet?"

It was only just past eight o'clock. Most work-at-home artists weren't even out of bed yet, much less full of breakfast, but her aunt wouldn't suffer a single excuse about not being hungry. With little more than a kiss to the top of her frazzled hair, Aunt Maisie ventured into the kitchen and began banging pots and pans around. Within a matter of minutes the smell of frying onions and potatoes infiltrated her senses and made her uneasy stomach growl in betrayal.

How could she be expected to eat?

She'd gone off the deep end, believing her adoring husband was quite possibly a murderer, and he kept some kind of porcupine fashioned from invisible fire in his dresser drawer. Just thinking about the strange ward around the ring box made her arm tingle.

Her aunt brought her that cup of tea, set it down in front of her at the table and went straight back to the kitchen to finish making breakfast. She didn't say a word until she plunked a heaping plate of scrambled eggs, bacon, home fries and toast down in front of Siren.

"Eat." It was an order, not a request.

Then she turned back to the kitchen, fixed herself a plate and took a seat in the chair on the other side of the table. She made herself fresh coffee. Siren could smell it, and for a moment she wondered why her aunt made

her tea instead. Maybe it was laced with something? Maybe she was paranoid. Her money was on the latter.

Fork in hand, her aunt dug into breakfast, shoveling down several bites before finally lifting her steely blue gaze across the table and issuing her niece a fierce look. “Your food is getting cold.”

“I can’t eat right now,” she insisted, reaching up to push the plate away. “I didn’t call you because I wanted to eat breakfast, Aunt Maisie.”

“And I can’t deal with crazy on an empty stomach.” There was a playfulness in her eyes that made Siren feel like a complete and utter fool. “Eat, honey. Then we’ll talk about whatever’s going on.”

The fork was cold in her hand, the stainless steel instantly warming to her body temperature as she pushed the fluffy bits of egg around on her plate like a belligerent child. She was pouting. She felt the weight of her own lower lip jutting out above her chin and kept waiting for Aunt Maisie to ask if she could park her car there. The woman barely even looked at her. She just ate breakfast, nibbling at her toast, taking demure sips of her coffee and bites of bacon. It smelled so good. Her stomach was growling again, the emptiness roiling and reminding her of just how little she’d actually eaten at dinner the night before. She was hungry. It was stupid to deny herself, but when Siren scooped up a pile of eggs and pushed it between her teeth, it tasted like ash.

She chewed and swallowed because she could feel Aunt Maisie watching her, a disapproving scowl prepared to knit her dark black brows together if she even thought about spitting the food back onto her plate. As she watched her wash it down with a healthy gulp of tea cooled to nearly room temperature, she nodded approval and went back to her food.

“Now,” she said, holding a piece of toast between her long fingers, “what’s going on?”

Siren looked down at the food in front of her, suddenly feeling very stupid about having called her Aunt Maisie out of bed. The time it had taken for the woman to arrive coupled with the half-hour it took her to make them both breakfast had given Siren plenty of time to think about the crazy thoughts racing through her brain. She really was nuts. She had to be. She was imagining things that weren’t there, weird, prickly invisible things she could still feel burning through her skin even though there were no marks to prove it.

“I think...” she started, lowering her fork to the edge of the plate and leaving it there. “I think I might be crazy.”

Her aunt’s face was a blank slate she couldn’t read. The dark blue eyes staring back at her didn’t even blink behind the loose silver hair of her bangs. “You’re not crazy.”

“How do you know?” she challenged her. “You don’t even know why I think I’m crazy.”

“I don’t need to know why you think you’re crazy to know you’re not crazy, Siren. Crazy people don’t wonder if they’re crazy. They’re just crazy.”

Her heart tightened like a fist inside her chest, the beat of it so inexplicably fierce it made her feel lightheaded. She was terrified of the words building up inside her, so afraid her aunt would take back her declaration and reassurance the moment she heard them, but would that be so bad? If she was crazy, it was probably better if they knew about it now. It would give them plenty of time to have her committed to a psychiatric facility. It would be quiet there. She could sit in front of the barred windows all day coloring with crayons and laughing at things no one else thought were funny. It didn’t sound so bad.

“I think maybe Patrick killed someone.”

Aunt Maisie didn’t flinch. She didn’t widen her eyes with surprise, or start to laugh. She reached for her coffee, took another noisy sip, then lowered the hand-crafted clay mug back to the table. She kept her fingers curled around it, the nails painted dark blue with elegant diamond sequins on the tips. She tapped those tips against the mug, then allowed her straightened shoulders to drop a little as she released a breath.

“Honey,” she began, “that is... crazy.” A soft snort escaped her, and she shook her head. “Seriously, Siren, why on earth would you even think such a thing?”

She felt abashed. Foolish and stupid, but she drew in breath and spilled out the whole story to her aunt, avoiding eye contact for fear her promise that Siren wasn’t crazy would be quickly rescinded upon hearing the madness unfold. She told her about the homeless man in the coffee shop and then again in the grocery store, then she told her about the ring, but for some reason she didn’t quite understand she left out the part about the strange, stinging lash of invisible protection in the drawer.

“Siren,” she clicked her tongue against the roof of her mouth in dismay. “I didn’t raise you to go snooping around in other people’s things.”

Taken aback by the scolding of her tone, Siren drew into the chair behind her and reached up to pull the blanket a little tighter around her shoulders. “Aunt Maisie, I wasn’t snooping. I was putting laundry away and he took that ring from me. He hid it in his dresser drawer.”

“And that makes him a murderer?” she balked, her voice rising with amusement. She was so amused, Siren thought she was going to burst into laughter, but she didn’t. Instead, she shook her head and reached for her coffee once more. She gulped down several sips, then held the cup between her hands as if warming the chill from her fingers.

“The fact that he took the ring Carver was going to give me is not what makes him a murderer, Aunt Maisie. He deliberately turned the television up this morning so I could hear it.”

The silver cut of her hair ruffled in the exhale of her breath. Aunt Maisie set her mug down with a heavy thunk, then reached forward and gestured with her fingers for Siren to take her hand. “Sweetie, I know this is hard for you. Even after all the time that’s passed it still eats away at you inside, and this time of year is always so difficult for you.”

“This isn’t about Carver, Aunt Maisie.”

“Siren.” Her name was a scolding word on her aunt’s tongue. “I know you like to tell yourself that, but...” She hesitated, as if chewing through the words she wanted to say in order to mince them carefully before spitting them out. “Everything has been about Carver since the day you met him, and after he disappeared... Whew, honey, I didn’t think you were gonna make it. And then Patrick came along just in the nick of time.”

“Don’t you think that’s kind of weird?” she wondered for the first time.

“Weird?” She chuckled and shook her head. “No, I think it’s a miracle, that’s what I think. He takes such good care of you, and he loves you so much.”

“Then why would he take this?”

She brought the ring box out and set it on the table in front of her plate of barely touched food. The black velvet looked dull and soft in the dim light from the chandelier hanging over the table.

“Maybe he thought he was helping you,” she suggested. “Maybe he just wanted you to move on. You’re married now, Siren. That’s a huge step, a

commitment like that. It means you're ready to move forward after stagnating in a pool of fear and depression, and I know you don't want to hear this, but I think he had every right to take it. If I were Patrick, I'd have thrown the damn thing into a field and never looked back, then shrugged my shoulders and acted like I had no idea what you were talking about if you ever asked."

"Really?" she gasped. "You would do that to someone? To someone you're supposed to love?"

"I would do that *for* someone I loved, yes, because it's not healthy to hold onto the past, Siren. And it's not right to keep dragging everything back up from the depths just when it's starting to feel like things are going to be okay."

"That's just wrong. You can't make someone get over..."

"He's not making you get over anything. Maybe he was just trying to give you a little nudge."

"Then he should have nudged me out loud, not reached into my private things and taken it without saying a word. That's sneaking," she pointed out. "And you just scolded me for going through his drawer, but it's okay for him to rifle through my jewelry box and take things that don't have anything to do with him?"

Her heavy lids closed over her dark blue eyes just before she lowered her head. Siren stared at the top of her aunt's head, the dark silver threads of her hair, still entwined with the occasional black strand, fell in to frame her face as she let loose a disgruntled sign. "You just spent the last three weeks moving into this house. There's no telling how he came upon that ring, Siren."

"I know exactly where it was when I was packing, and where it should have been once everything was put away. He went into my things and took it, then he hid it away from me."

She brought her head up again, the bobbed locks of her hair falling back into place along her cheeks. "It's just a box, Siren. A box with a ring inside it. You've never even opened it."

"No, I haven't."

"It's a symbol of something you can't hold onto anymore. You need to open that box, give in to whatever longing you have, then get rid of it. Take it uptown and sell it in one of the pawn shops, or drive down to the bridge

and throw it into the Susquehanna River because as long as you hold onto that sliver of the past, you are never going to move forward into the future you deserve. The future that man has bent over backwards to try to give you.”

“I can’t just get rid of it.” She hadn’t even realized how quickly the subject changed, how cleverly her aunt steered it away from Patrick’s underhandedness to an issue about Carver that needed to be pruned from her life like a gardener with a pair of shears. “What if…”

She’d been about to say ‘What if he comes back?’ But he wasn’t coming back. He was never coming back, and the cold reality of that sunk in so deeply it took her breath away.

“There are no what ifs, honey. You’re on the first page of a second chance, and if you close the book on this before it has the opportunity to unfold there won’t be other possibilities for the kind of happiness Patrick wants to give you.”

Guilt seared through her, burning at her lungs and her heart.

“People are lucky if they get a single opportunity for the kind of happiness you’ve been offered not once, but twice.” Those were almost the exact same words Lacey said to her on Saturday. “Yes, it was tragic what happened with Carver. No one is denying that, but it’s been three years. There’s been no word, and as much as it hurts me to say it, he is not coming back. Even if he did you’re married now. To a man who would do anything to make you happy.”

Siren stifled the urge she felt to ask, “Even kill?” She didn’t think her aunt would be amused, and she already felt bad enough about it.

“It’s time to give yourself permission to move forward. It’s okay to be happy, Siren. It’s okay to be happy without Carver. You’re so close. Right there on the verge, otherwise you wouldn’t have married Patrick, am I right?”

She was on the verge of melting into a blubbery blob in the chair, that’s what she was verging on, but she didn’t say so. Her lower lip was trembling so hard that when she bit into it, she nearly put her teeth through the skin. She didn’t know if she could be happy without Carver. She couldn’t imagine ever feeling the kind of happiness she’d felt with him ever again, and yes, that made her a wretched, awful person who didn’t deserve to be loved at all. Certainly not by someone like Patrick, who, as Aunt Maisie

pointed out, would do anything to make her happy. She was selfish to have married him the way she did, knowing deep down she was never going to love him the way he loved her. She was wicked and so undeserving.

“He has given you so much, sweetie.” Another guilty nail pounded into the coffin of defeat. “He’s encouraged you to follow your dreams, something you always hesitated with before, and now you’re doing what you wanted to do with your life. And this house,” Aunt Maisie’s eyes rolled along every inch of the arched ceiling overhead before she brought her gaze back down to rest on Siren’s, “it might need a lot of work, but it already feels like a home. You’re gonna have babies here.” That prospect actually brought a shimmer of immeasurable joy to the older woman’s eyes. “And one day when you’re both old and grey, you’ll sit out on the deck and watch your grandchildren in the yard and you’ll look back on this time in your life and a part of you is gonna laugh at what a fool you were for being afraid to let love win.”

Siren didn’t bother speaking up or pointing out that she’d never really wanted to have babies at all, and she certainly couldn’t imagine herself ever becoming someone’s grandmother. Everyone else seemed to think this was a fabulous idea, that it was just the thing she needed to make her life complete, and while she certainly wanted to argue that not every woman needed to pop out a brood in order to feel complete, she didn’t have the energy. Even she foolishly gave into the notion that it might very well solve all her problems.

Her aunt’s fingers were twitching again, a gesture that willed her to lift her own hand across the table and take them. Aunt Maisie’s skin was chilly and dry, but soft and reassuring. She brought her other hand in to rest atop their clasped fingers and stroked a gentle thumb across the tops of Siren’s knuckles.

“I know it won’t be easy, darling, but it’s time.”

The soft velvet of the box tickled against her arm, and underneath the chair Mr. Pounce wound in between her feet, rolling his soft fur across the bare skin of her ankles before he threw himself into her in attempt to get her attention. She started to withdraw, but Aunt Maisie tightened her grip, holding her in place.

“Tell me you’ll do it,” she said. “Tell me you’ll open up that box today, that you’ll finally give yourself the little bit of closure you’ve needed these

last three years, and then you'll get rid of it."

"I don't know if I can."

Mr. Pounce was purring so loud she felt it vibrate against the top of her foot when he flopped down atop it. He was warm and reassuring and she wanted to scoop him up from the floor and hold him tight against her chest.

"You can," the other woman assured her. "You are so much stronger than you give yourself credit for, Siren. The things you've seen, all you've been through..."

She didn't feel strong. She felt like a puddle of goo quivering on the floor, like something that would stick to the bottom of someone else's shoe if they tried to tread on her.

"You're gonna get through this too," she promised her, "and so much more. Because life never stops getting hard. It's always one thing or the other, but you don't have to go through it alone. You have Patrick and you have me."

She squeezed Siren's fingers again, one last little pat across her knuckles before she let go of her hand and started to withdraw, back to her plate. While Siren sat there trying to process everything Aunt Maisie said, the other woman picked up her fork and began eating breakfast again, as if the conversation was done and her word was final.

After she finished eating, Aunt Maisie gave Siren another one of those looks when she eyed her untouched food before sweeping the plates into the kitchen and scraping them into the garbage compactor beside the sink. Then she loaded the dishwasher, cleaned up the kitchen and brought Siren another cup of tea.

"My mom," she started when the woman sat down in the chair beside hers and put a comforting hand to her shoulder, "she was really crazy. What if the reason I won't let myself be happy is because I'm crazy too?"

Her tongue tsked across the back of her front teeth before she drew in an exasperated breath that lifted her slender shoulders around her ears. "Siren, you are nothing like Rhetta. Not even close."

"There are different brands of crazy," she suggested, a curious lightness in her tone that brought a grin to Aunt Maisie's dark pink lips. "What if my crazy is different than hers?"

"Didn't you hear what I said earlier? Crazy people don't walk around wondering if they're crazy. They don't even notice at all. They don't feel

themselves being drawn down into the abyss.”

“Mom didn’t know she was crazy?”

“She had no idea, sweetie. She thought everything was sunshine and rainbows, and whenever it wasn’t she stuck a needle into her arm and let chemical euphoria carry her away from it all. She couldn’t deal with anything. Responsibilities, family, life... It was all a big joke to her, something everyone else should manage on her behalf so she could go on partying and living the life she thought she deserved. You’re nothing like her at all.”

Except, she thought to herself, maybe for the part about the life she deserved. But she would have done anything, managed all the responsibilities, taken care of whatever needed taking care of just to have Carver back. It was unfair to Patrick; she knew that, but she couldn’t change the way she felt inside. She couldn’t just turn it off like tap water and pretend the sink wasn’t full of memories she wanted to drown herself in.

“I promise you that if you do this thing I’m asking you to do,” she began, “if you get rid of that ring and just let everything fall into place this darkness will lift away and you’ll be happy.” She tucked the hair behind Siren’s ear, then leaned in to kiss her on the temple. Her lips were soft reassurance, filled with matronly kisses her own mother had been too wild to bestow.

“What if he really is a killer?”

“Siren,” she scolded, leaning back to glare almost playfully at her. “I’ve never met a less likely killer in my life. He’s good to you, and he’s so sweet it borders on disgusting sometimes. There isn’t a single thing in the world Patrick wouldn’t do for you. He could make you so happy if you just let him.”

“Maybe.”

“Most assuredly.” Across the table, her aunt’s cell phone chimed from the depths of her purse. “That’s probably Sophia. I really need to get to work, but I won’t go if you need me to stay. Just say the word and I’ll tell Soph she’s on her own for the day.”

She shook her head before tipping it forward to rest against Aunt Maisie’s shoulder. “I’ll be fine.”

“I know you will. You’re strong, whether you believe it or not. Do what I said and then go surprise your husband with lunch.” She winked when she drew back to look at her. “It’s about time you do something nice for him for a change.”

“I do nice things for him all the time.”

“Do more!” She pushed her chair away from the table and Siren winced a little at the way the feet scraped across the hardwood floor. They needed refinishing, but she knew how Patrick felt about those floors. He wanted them to be pristine and perfect. Bending down after pushing her chair back into the table, she kissed the top of Siren’s head and said goodbye, reminding her with a wink, “You deserve to be happy, and so does he. Be happy together, darling.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Aunt Maisie was gone only a few minutes when the clouds that had been lingering all morning finally decided to show off. Darkness devoured the sky while Siren sat down at the dining room table with her hands flat against the wood. The black velvet box positioned in front of them was just sitting there. Not doing anything spectacular or out of the ordinary. It wasn't humming or putting off some otherworldly vibe that compelled her to open it.

It wasn't a key.

It was just a box.

Aunt Maisie was right. The ring inside was a symbol for something she could no longer hold onto, should no longer hold onto. Opening the box and finally allowing herself to accept that what was inside would never be hers would provide closure. She could finally move on and become the wife her husband deserved.

She was terrified. The number of times she reached for that box, then withdrew her hand again was absurd. Each time her fingertips touched the velvet chills moved up the length of her outstretched arm, along the back of her neck and down her spine. She shuddered through them, shrugged them off and fidgeted wildly in the chair knowing she had to do it.

She had to let go.

Breath expanded her lungs and she allowed it to fill her cheeks, puffing them out before it began leaking in a hiss that shuddered through the loose strands of hair dancing across her forehead. She told herself she would open

it when the last of the air left her lips, but then she inhaled again, resetting the goal until she managed to convince herself she was being ridiculous.

It was just an engagement ring. At least she was pretty sure that was what waited inside the box. She'd spent the last three years convincing herself that was what it was. Part of the reason she didn't want to open it was because she was actually afraid she was wrong.

What if Carver had no intention of proposing to her at all? Maybe it was a cleverly packaged house key. His way of saying he wanted to commit, but they didn't need some piece of paper to make it official. No... That wasn't who Carver was at all. He knew what she wanted, and she needed to do nothing more than look into his eyes to see he wanted those things too. He wanted to spend his life with her.

Open the box.

She was reaching for something that wasn't there, and the homeless man's murder was a coincidence. No one was trying to tell her something, no one was hiding the painful, awful truth from her. It was a fact: The mind was willing to invent all kinds of crazy answers, scenarios to make sense of the senseless, and with no real answers about what happened to Carver what else was she expected to do?

The box is the key.

Nothing amazing was going to happen when she opened it. She would probably cry and feel like she'd been ripped off all over again as she cursed the cruelty of fate.

Another breath.

That time her heart sped up, a sure sign she was close to giving in and taking the plunge. Like a Christmas present—tear into and get it over with. Or better yet, like a bandage. It was going to hurt; there was no doubt about it, but if she just ripped it off it would finally be over with and she could begin the process of finally moving on with her life.

It was time.

Her hand shot forward. She slid the box across the table again. Fingers clamped on either side, she drew in another breath. Thunder crashed, the electricity surged a warning; it was only a matter of time before the power went out. Siren lifted her gaze to the patio doors. Fat pellets of rain were already pelting the glass and the wooden porch, sporadically dropping with heavy thwaps on the skylight and domed roof of the house. A host of black

shade crowded in closer, hovering all around her, and the sky beyond became a stunning shade of aquamarine. Forked, electric tongues lashed out from the clouds, casting eerie light through the darkness, and then thunder shook the house on its foundation.

Siren gasped. Even though she'd been anticipating it the force startled her and lifted all the hairs lining her arms as goose pimples dotted her skin. Mr. Pounce chased in from the kitchen, darting beneath the table and warbling as he slinked in against her bare leg for comfort. There would be no power soon enough. She needed to do it and get it over with. That was all there was to it. And when the storm passed she would take the ring out into the field behind the house and bury it deep, and she would never think about it again.

God. She didn't want to.

There was the part of her that actually believed some miraculous and wonderful light would come pouring out of the box. Carver would be standing in that light, holding his hand out to her before he lowered himself onto one knee and asked her the question she'd been waiting for him to ask three years earlier.

"You're such an idiot," she muttered to herself.

Only the thunder answered.

Fingers positioned on the sides of the box, she took one last breath and then she pried it back, hinge squeaking a little as it popped when she cracked it open.

There was no chorus of angels, no mystical light or revelation. Only a ring nestled into the felt-lined foam pedestal. Simple but elegant, the white gold made the tiny sapphires and diamonds lining the knotwork band shimmer, but that was about as far as she got before the lights went out, pitching her into silent darkness for several seconds. The power struggled to come back on. In the basement below the water pump gurgled and whirled. Overhead the chandelier zapped and buzzed as the bulbs dimmed and brightened. The rain was picking up, thumping off the roof and the porch, slapping the windows. She should get up and light candles, but with the lights back on she was mesmerized by the ring in front of her again. Shards of light shimmered across the center stone, growing and expanding as tears skewed her vision. It wasn't extravagant. Delicate and feminine, he would

never give her something flashy or big because even though he could afford it, he knew she'd hate it.

She blinked, her vision clearing again as warmth trickled down her cheeks and her nose tickled.

It was perfect. It suited her, or rather it would have had she been given the chance to wear it. She would have spent the rest of her life looking down at that ring, relishing in the promises he made when he put it on her finger. Carver got her in ways no one else ever had. Patrick tried; bless his heart, he'd done the best he could, but Carver tried harder, she thought. Lifting her hand to inspect the simple gold band nestled snug against the tiny diamond engagement ring she wore, the guilt she felt was damning. It wasn't about the diamonds. It had nothing to do with the cost. The design was personal, something Carver obviously put a great deal of thought into. Every stone, every angle and curve in the knotwork band was handcrafted with her in mind.

Slipping her right pinky between the ring and velvet cushion, she loosened it until it slid along her little finger and rested above her knuckle. She lifted it, turning and inspecting it and trying to see details through the endless stream of tears painting her face. She pinched it between her fingers, looking over the band and squinting at the inscription inside. The symbols and letters were foreign, and if they made a word she couldn't guess, but as she traced the tip of her finger across them a shudder rolled through her and the lights flickered again. Electric tongues snaked violently through the pitch black clouds, making the whole world bright as midday for a flashing moment before it all went dark again.

It wouldn't be long before she lost power for good. Minutes, if she was lucky.

Focusing on the ring again, she wondered if it would fit her. Had he put the same amount of careful consideration into sizing as he had design? It would be wrong to try it on; she knew that, but she was already twisting off her wedding band and engagement ring. Both of them clanged as they clattered against the wood of the table, reverberating with accusation that made her wince. Blinking the wetness from her lashes, she took Carver's ring between her fingers again and brought it in just above the nail of her ring finger. Everything inside her screamed not to torture herself any more

than she already had. There was no coming back from sliding that ring into place, but she wasn't strong enough to resist.

She had to know what it would have felt like to wear *his* ring, even if she only wore for a few minutes before she set herself free at last.

It glided downward with ease, pushing past her knuckle and nestling perfectly into place beneath it. She twisted and adjusted it, then held her hand out, fingers straight and head leaning toward her right shoulder in admiration. It felt right, as if it had always been there and should never be taken off. Siren's shoulders hunched forward, the itching breath at the back of her throat making it hard for her to swallow. She was relieved and overwhelmed, hopeful and hopeless all once. It was as if she really had found the key, and it fit the lock perfectly, but when she jiggled the doorknob in her hand it still wouldn't turn.

It was too much. She should never have opened the box.

Aunt Maisie was right. She needed to get rid of it.

She was sobbing, her shoulders sagging inward, hitching with every gasping breath. She drew her lower lip into her mouth and bit down with her teeth until it hurt.

Outside the wind was furious, trees bending to accommodate it, leaves spiraling and chasing through the air. Another thunderous crack shook the house, and that time when the lights went out they left her in darkness so severe it was more like midnight than late morning. Mr. Pounce circled the chair, mewling as he pushed his body into her legs then whipped back around and came in again. Rain splattered the windows, bounced off the roof, but she made no move to get up. She just sat there in that unworldly darkness, her own breath a heated rush across her skin each time she exhaled.

A small shriek escaped her when her cell phone began to ring, the tone playing Patrick's song and flashing the picture from their wedding across the screen. It brightened the room like a flashlight game at a sleepover, making shadows of everything around her. The cat shoved the length of his body into her calf, lingering there as the song blared just below the forceful boom of thunder. Remorse gripped her. She stared at the screen, the light of it making her squint her eyes. She didn't want to talk to him, shouldn't pick up the phone in her present state of mind, but if she didn't answer he would

keep calling, and then he'd come home, braving the storm just to make sure she was all right.

Siren cleared her throat, trying to rid the hoarseness of sorrow from her voice. She tapped her finger to the screen, brought the phone to her ear and said, "Patrick, hey."

"Hey, are you all right out there? I have this terrible feeling something's wrong."

Everything was wrong. She was sitting there in the dark wearing another man's ring on her finger.

"Yeah, I'm fine." The sky roared protest to her lies and for a moment she could barely hear anything but the furious hammer of increasing rain and the whistle of the wind. "Aunt Maisie just left," she said when the thunder began to die down.

"There's a storm coming your way," he told her. "It's pretty brutal here in town. They're calling for winds up to 135 miles per hour, golf ball-sized hail, dangerous lightning. They just issued a tornado warning for half of Lycoming County."

"Wow," she gasped, heart flaring an extra, anxious beat. She wasn't surprised. Tornadoes weren't entirely uncommon in the Susquehanna River Valley, but they didn't happen every day. The trees and mountains often cut them off before they could do too much damage, but from time to time they roared through tearing off roofs and demolishing rickety sheds and old barns. They uprooted trees, spilling them over power lines and onto houses. About once every summer a small one tore through. Not too much damage, but it was always terrifying. "I already lost power."

"Shit," he hissed. "I should be there. If I leave now..."

"I'll be fine, Patrick. I'll grab the flashlight and head down into the basement."

"I hate the idea of you being all the way out there by yourself."

"Well, you were the one who thought living in the middle of nowhere was a good idea."

He didn't say anything at first, and she imagined he was scowling at his desk, hand clenching and unclenching a rubber stress ball while thinking about how angry she made him sometimes.

"I should come home," he sounded so afraid, small like a child filled with insecurity when he said those words. "You shouldn't be alone."

“Don’t be an idiot,” she warned. “If there’s a tornado rolling through, the last thing you want to do is drive through it. You’ll get yourself killed, and then what?”

He grunted frustration. “I just... I should be there.”

She was still wearing the ring, the guilt of her falsehood mingling with the tension of the storm and making her more abrupt with him than she needed to be. “Just stop it. You’re not always going to be there for me, Patrick. Sometimes I’m going to have to put on my big girl pants and take care of myself.”

He said nothing, the rumbling roll of the heavens tearing themselves apart would have blocked out the sound of his voice anyway. She thought for a moment, as it abated, that it made her impossible to hear, but then he said, “Is it so wrong to need someone, Siren? It’s all I’ve ever asked you to do. Love me, need me...”

She didn’t know how to answer that question and the shame she felt flushed her cheeks, making them feel like someone had taken a blowtorch to them and blistered them raw. Lifting her free hand, she nestled her face into her palm and closed her eyes, not that it made much difference either way. She couldn’t see a thing, save for when the lightning flashed.

“Is that why you took it?”

“Took what? What are you talking about?”

“I know you took the ring,” she said. It wasn’t the time to talk about it, but she couldn’t stop herself. “I know you took it and tried to hide it from me. I don’t know why you did it, but I know. Did you take it so I would need you?”

“Siren,” he started.

“I took it back, just so you know.”

“You... what? How did...?”

“You had no right, Patrick.”

“What have you done?”

“It doesn’t matter right now, but I thought you should know. I... I don’t know how you did whatever it was you did, but...”

“There’s a lot you don’t know.” His voice was stiff with suppressed anger, a hint of arrogance in his tone she’d only heard come out when he was on the verge of losing his temper. The words he spoke terrified her. “Things about me. So many things, Siren. You don’t remember what really

happened that night. I was afraid you would, but he did something to you. Something that made you forget everything. It worked to my advantage, though I doubt that was his intention. He always was an idiot.”

Her shoulders jerked against the chills rippling across the blades. “What are you talking about?”

“Does it really matter? You don’t remember. It’s better this way.”

“It matters to me. What are you talking about?”

She should have been expecting the thunder when it broke, but it caught her off guard and she jumped in the chair, the cat darting through a room lit by fading flashes of lightning.

“Just forget about it, Siren. Just let it go.”

“I’m not going to let it go,” she insisted. “Not now, not ever.”

“I can make you let go. I can make you forget.” It wasn’t a threat spoken in effort to terrify her. There was gentleness and pleading in those words. “Everything I’ve done, I’ve done for you. Maybe not at first, but...”

“Patrick, did you kill...?” She couldn’t ask. She didn’t want to know, but she’d opened the floodgates. It was all coming through, great rushes of it gathering her up and threatening to sweep her away.

“He hurt you. Terrified you. I don’t know what...”

“You killed someone.” Shaking her head, she tangled fingers through the loose black strands of her hair. All that time she spent convincing herself, and she’d been right all along. Why hadn’t she listened to her gut? She was on the verge of tears again, but she stayed strong. “Why?”

“Because I love you.”

“No...”

“I took vows to protect you, honor you.”

“You killed someone.”

“Does it really matter? He was no one.”

“You’re a murderer.”

She couldn’t breathe. Worse than that, she couldn’t think. At some point she’d pushed her chair away from the table, but couldn’t remember doing it. She nearly stumbled over it, the phone still warm against her cheek and ear.

“He wanted to hurt you.”

“He was trying to help me!” she shrieked into the phone.

“Siren...”

“No!”

“Siren, calm down.” The world lit up, shedding light on the interior of the house that lasted only a few seconds. She was halfway to the kitchen, about to trip over the cat dancing around at her feet. “I’m coming home.”

“I won’t be here.”

“Yes, you will. Don’t go out there. It’s dangerous. I’m coming home, and we’ll talk about...”

“I don’t want to talk to you. Not now, not ever. You’re a killer.”

“I did it for you.”

The sound that escaped her was inhuman, a strangled whine choking deep in her throat as she clenched fingers tighter around the phone against her ear. Something was building up inside her, gathering like the raging storm and threatening to unleash itself. Static crackled, the sound of Patrick’s voice breaking up in her ear. Random words broke through, things she couldn’t understand until finally he said in a tight, angry voice, “You belong to me.”

“No,” she brought her chin up, staring into the darkness as she added, “I belong to me.”

She drew the phone away from her ear, ready to tap the END CALL icon on the screen. She heard him on the other line. “Don’t hang up on me, Siren. Siren! Don’t you dare hang up on me.”

Staring at the image on the screen, a single moment captured, a single lie in the tangled web that was their life together. She screamed, the force of it scraping through her windpipe as she threw her phone into the darkness. It smashed into a wall in the kitchen, shattering as it tumbled to the ground.

As the screen flickered she swore she could still hear Patrick shouting through the speaker, “Siren! SIREN!” The thunder swallowed his voice, and then the screen went dark.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

She didn't know what she was going to do, but she couldn't stay there. In her mind she imagined he was already in his truck, flying through the roaring wind and pelting rain to get home. At least he wouldn't be able to call her back, she thought, glimpsing her shattered phone on the kitchen floor when the power temporarily flickered back on before dying again. All the landlines were portable, unusable without an electrical source. If he was trying to call, it would just ring and ring without any answer.

She inched along the stools lining the bar that separated the kitchen from the dining room, feeling her way around the counter top until she was in the kitchen and felt her fingertips across the front of the dishwasher. There was a gap between the refrigerator and the cabinet above it. Patrick kept the flashlights there. She curled her hand around one, swept the beam across the linoleum floor and gasped as she realized how lucky she'd been not to step on tiny shards of glass and plastic from her shattered phone. Lifting the beam across the kitchen, the iridescent, green glow of cat eyes flashed back at her. Mr. Pounce lurked at the edge of the kitchen, waiting for her. He didn't move when she approached him, but waited for her to kneel down and scoop him up.

Siren hoisted him under her arm as she stood, the position annoying him and making him squirm and dig his back claws into her side. She ignored it as best she could, racing toward the front door and grabbing her purse off the table there. She jammed her feet into her flip-flops and barreled outside through the rain.

The cat was livid, his protests so loud they could almost be clearly heard over the continual hammer of thunder and gum ball pieces of hail falling at random intervals all around them. They pelted off her arms and shoulders, thwapping the crown of her head. It stung, but for the most part she was focused on getting out of there.

Mr. Pounce squirmed to try and get away, but she tightened her arm around him and nearly skidded under her own car as her treadless shoes slipped in the mud. She managed to right herself just as she reached the car. One-handed she grabbed the handle and wrenched open the door. The cat jumped out of her grip and into the passenger seat. He glared at her, tail twitching and mouth partially open as he sucked in exasperated, panicked breaths.

“I’m going to do something really dumb,” she told the cat.

The sound working its way through his throat was strangled and broken, half-meow and half-hairball, she thought, but he didn’t move. He only stared.

“We can’t stay here. He will come home.”

She would probably pass him on the road.

“I can’t,” she said again. “I can’t face him. Not... not knowing what I know.”

He was a killer. Her husband was a murderer, and probably a whole host of other things she couldn’t put into words at the moment.

There’s a lot you don’t know.

Flipping the flap of her purse open, the cat lifted a paw to whack it away before it smacked him in the face. She dug through the contents looking for her car keys. She drew her wallet out, threw it onto the seat and kept digging until the cold metal was in her hand. Yanking them out, she fumbled until she had the right one, then she jammed it into the ignition.

You don’t remember what really happened that night. I was afraid you would, but he did something to you. Something that made you forget everything.

The car roared and she twisted the windshield wipers to life. They arched across the glass in front of her, but even at full capacity the window was a blurred sheet of rain she could barely see through. The hail was getting bigger. Thunking against the roof and the hood, she winced every time one cracked into the windshield and expected the glass to spiderweb or shatter.

There was a moment when she actually debated with herself about waiting until the storm passed, but that moment was gone as quickly as it arrived.

She had to get out of there, away from the man who'd just confessed to her that he killed a man.

Head down, she pinched her lips together and tried to ignore the terror mingling with chills and traipsing across her shoulders. She was wet and cold, the air blowing from the vents making her shiver, but she was too scattered to reach over and crank up the heat at the moment.

Mr. Pounce glared at her from the other side of the car, his dark yellow eyes unblinking, fluffy white fur slicked down and making him look like a wet rat. Cats didn't scowl, but she swore at that moment he was scowling at her. She started to reach across the car to soothe him, but he batted her hand away and hissed, pointed white teeth bared.

"All right," she reasoned. "All right, I'm sorry I got you all wet, but we have to get out of here. It's gonna be dangerous. Just... I don't know, get in the back seat. It'll be safer for you back there." Realizing how dumb she must look talking to her cat, she dropped her head back and groaned. "Right because you're just going to do what I say. You're a cat," she reminded herself. A frustrated breath wavered through the wet hair hanging in front of her face. She pressed her shoulders into the cold vinyl behind her and watched with amazement as the cat climbed up onto the center console and jumped down to the floor of the backseat. He stared up at her as if seeking approval and she blinked. "Good boy," she nodded. "Now stay down there."

Jerking the car into reverse, she stretched her arm across the seat beside her as she turned around to watch out the back window. Tires spun as she gunned it and whipped around until she was facing the hill. The hail grew heavier by the second, and at that point the wipers were a joke, but she was getting out. She'd go into town, to Aunt Maisie's flower shop. She'd figure everything out from there. Maybe she could call Jeff and tell him what she knew, that Patrick confessed to her that he'd killed that homeless guy.

Shifting into drive, she pressed her foot down on the gas and barreled toward the incline leading away from the house. She expected not to make it, but her little Honda was a real trooper. It barely skidded until she crested the hill and began rolling down the other side toward the rickety, makeshift bridge spanning the stream. She was picking up speed, racing toward it

faster than she expected to, but she didn't want to break for fear of hydroplaning and losing control of the car.

She glanced into the rear view mirror and braced herself. Sucking in breath through clenched teeth as she descended the slope, she caught sight of something unexpected behind her. A funneled darkness was closing in on her, clouds coming together and stretching downward like a sliding board, it whipped and danced like a wooden top. Only as she skidded across the slick planks, the wet wood splintering and giving away under the weight of her car, did she realize what that was. The whirling funnel tore up trees, swallowing them up inside it as it grew wider and wider. Plowing destructively forward, Siren actually heard herself squeak a little bit, her foot instinctively pressing the pedal underneath it to the floor.

Water washed over the front of the car, stones and hail battering at the windshield as she thumped down hard into the creek bed. Her fingers gripped the steering wheel so tightly she was surprised she didn't tear it from the column, and then she was spinning out of control, through the mud of the flooded stream that splashed up over her windows in a thick coating the rain tried desperately to wash away. It was like being in one of those teacup rides, reeling and jerking, the steering wheel tugging at her clenched fists. Dizzy, everything beyond the blurred windows whipped by her, and then the earsplitting crunch of impact jolted her forward and slammed her back into the seat with whiplash force as the airbag deployed and sprayed white powder into the air.

Siren coughed and waved her hand furiously in front of her face to clear the air, but it was futile.

The world was a torrent of sound all around her. Crunching, screaming metal, pounding hail and the furious wind shrieking.

"Kitty?" she whimpered. "Kitty, are you okay?"

From the floor of the backseat Mr. Pounce mewed, low and trembly, but she couldn't stretch around to look back at him. She tried to reach her arm back, but it was no use.

"I'm so sorry, Kitten. Sorry." He rowlered at her and then poked his head up and rubbed his wet head against her arm, as if nudging it back into the front of the car. "We should have stayed put, I know."

Tangled in the airbag and seatbelt, she ripped at the band hugging across her chest with a frustrated roar. Wedging her hand down alongside the seat,

she worked the latch on the seatbelt, but it was locked tight.

She'd never been the religious type. Nature was her god, and God was about to sweep her up and destroy her. Through a brief clearing of bent wipers she saw the dancing black funnel swaying closer. It reminded her of some kind of vengeful dashboard hula girl, hypnotic as it wavered and gobbled up everything in its wake.

"Jesus," she whispered. "Buddha... Allah... I don't know, Thor?"

Of course, why would any god listen to her? A real god didn't answer the prayers of someone only reaching out because she was about to die.

"Please, whoever's listening up there... please, please, please."

She was crying, could barely see between her tears and the sheets of ice and hail battering the wipers as they swooshed across the glass. She didn't need clarity to know the blur beyond, the raging tornado was coming straight at her. Wind tore at the trees. Branches and signs whipped past, dragging across the glass and metal and rocking the car. She swore she saw a pig from the farm up the road fly by, hooves kicking and dancing on the open air, wild eyes white with terror as it screamed. The funnel captured it before descending on her, scooping her up like a spoon dipping into a bowl of cereal and lifting her spiraling into madness.

She didn't know what else to do so she closed her eyes and kept on muttering inane prayers to whatever deity might be paying attention. She focused on Thor—his affiliation with thunder and storms making him seem like a solid choice, but every time she tried to put steady voice to her fears only squeaks and whimpers emerged.

She cursed herself for being so stupid.

Facing Patrick's wrath, whatever that actually meant considering all she'd learned about him in a single phone conversation, would have been far less terrifying than death by tornado.

Her ears popped, the air pressure making her head feel like it was going to explode. Slashes of lighting strobed and pulsed beyond her lids, but she refused to open them. She didn't want to die, and she certainly didn't want to watch as it happened.

A startled scream ripped through her when the cat leapt from the backseat and into her lap, but if he yowled she couldn't hear it over the ferocity of the shrieking wind and battering hail upon metal. He settled in as

if he knew they were both about to die and may as well do it together. Claws dug into her skin, but there was nothing she could do about it.

Finally opening her eyes, she instantly wished she hadn't. After only a brief glimpse at the saucer-eyed cat shaking and burying razor-sharp claws into her chest, her gaze was drawn to the almost peaceful whirling grey and white horror all around her. It reminded her of one of those rides at the county-fair. Not the teacups. The barrel roll. The over-sized wooden barrel smoothly glided along an up and down track while spinning against the two riders whipping the wheel in the center against the ride's momentum.

Nausea battled with heart-pounding terror. It was a small wonder she didn't throw up on the poor cat shaking in her lap as the wind whipped them higher and higher, into the eye of the storm. She leaned forward, Mr. Pounce clutching harder, and tilted her head up to see the strange looming blue sky above. She immediately regretted the decision, the force of the wind throwing her back against the seat again.

There was no coming back from a tornado.

How strange and peaceful that realization was.

It was going to crush her and slam her into the earth so hard she'd be pulp, but there was nothing she could do about it.

She pushed the cat's head into her shoulder and ducked down, as if she might at least shelter him. Cats had nine lives, right? Maybe he'd be okay. Through squeezed lids she caught a glimpse of Carver's ring on her finger and her already out of control heart fluttered inside her chest before serenity washed over her again.

She drew in a breath, closed her eyes and dropped her head back calmly on the seat behind her. At least she would die with his ring on her finger, not that there would be much of her left to identify for anyone to even notice. Still, it would destroy Patrick, who said he loved her, but had done unspeakable things he refused to name.

His words came back to her. Of all the things to think of on the verge of death, her last argument with her husband lurked in the front of her thoughts, tormenting her as she heard him say, "There's a lot you don't know. Things about me. So many things, Siren. You don't remember what really happened that night. I was afraid you would, but he did something to you. Something that made you forget everything."

And then she saw his face—Patrick’s face—streaked with ash and dust, his hair wildly standing on end as he shoved his way through the crowded restaurant. Tattered clothes rippling and fluttering as he strode toward their table shouting at the top of his lungs.

“Carver Ashmore! I know you’re in here!” The voice that spoke those words was familiar, the dirty face of the man who’d crashed through the restaurant one she knew all too well.

When he scanned through the crowd, his hazel eyes momentarily locking on her face, a part of her screamed inside. It was him. All along it had been him. He’d been responsible for whatever happened to Carver, but how? And why?

“Hello, beautiful.” His grin was dark and terrifying, the way his gaze flitted across her features making her skin crawl. “She’s a vision,” he told Carver. “A Talbot?”

“Leave her alone.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll take good care of her for you.”

Why didn’t she spit in his face? Tell him to go to hell? Would things have turned out differently?

“You won’t touch her. Not now, not ever.”

How cruel his laughter was when he threw back his head and said, “I’d like to see you try to stop me.”

Carver had done something to her then. A strange, placating touch of his hand that soothed the frayed edges of her alarmed nerves. Suddenly, everything was fine. There was no need to panic, nothing to worry about.

“That’s my girl.” And then he was unclenching her fingers from his jacket, edging her backward a little as he said, “Sit down and wait for me, sweetheart. I’ll be right back, I promise you.” Just before he backed away, he told her, “You will not remember this. I don’t want you to, but when the time is right you’ll know what to do.” He kissed her cheek and said, “I’m just going to use the bathroom.”

“God,” she whispered. “Jesus!” Her palm slapped down on the steering wheel in anger, but those were her last words on the subject because the car was flying and spinning up and around, and she couldn’t hold onto her screams anymore. She was going to die, and it was Patrick’s fault.

Everything... All the things that had gone wrong in her life were his fault.

And then the car came crashing down, tumbling trunk over hood as it rolled through thick, dark grass, groaning and bellowing, throwing her body around inside and crushing the roof in around her head.

Her last conscious thought before everything went dark was Patrick telling her all he ever wanted was for her to love him, to love her the way she deserved to be loved.

But he lied.

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PART THREE

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CHAPTER TWENTY

Birds chirped in the distance, prodding her from the thick grogginess encasing her like a cocoon. Without opening her eyes, Siren swallowed. Her throat felt raw and angry, as if she'd been up all night screaming, and when she tried to roll onto her side for comfort her body refused to cooperate.

"Yes, I understand," said a voice. It was deep, familiar, those three words echoing like a powerful soliloquy all around her and urging her from the thick-headed confusion pressing in from all sides. She felt like she should recognize that voice, but try as she might to identify it, her mind would not cooperate.

"...know what you're asking me to do. I am, after all, just a cat. My capabilities are relatively limited, as I'm sure you're well aware."

"I'm not asking you to perform miracles, Pounce. Just get out of the car and the way."

"How do I know you're who you claim to be?"

"Pounce, please. She could be bleeding internally. If she dies because you refused to let me heal her, you'll find out in the most unpleasant way that I am exactly who I say I am."

"Tsk-tsk, Master. There's no need to get touchy, really. You can hardly blame me for being cautious."

"Cautious," the other voice said with clipped disdain. "You were certainly cautious about letting her drive off in the middle of a tornado, weren't you? You looked after her really well, I'm sure. Right up until..."

"The moment I let her drive into a tornado, yes, we covered that already, but you've clearly forgotten—even though I just pointed it out to you—that

I am a cat.”

“A cat who had one job.”

“Right, yes, one job,” the second voice purred sardonically. “A simple task for one of the feline persuasion. What was I supposed to do? Throw myself at her legs and yowl until she deciphered my unique code for, ‘Don’t be an idiot! There’s a tornado coming?’ Honestly, you’re expectations of me are...”

“Just get out of the way,” the other instructed. “I need to put the car back on its wheels so I can get her out of there and tend to her injuries. I’m pretty sure you don’t want to be inside for that.”

“Oh, very well.”

Siren felt something brush across her face, a familiar tickle that twitched in whispers and made her nose itch. She started to reach up—no, that wasn’t quite right—she had to bring her hand downward to brush it across the tip of her nose and forehead.

Her head throbbed like an overripe melon threatening to burst in the July sun, and when she brought her hand to her forehead again the tips of her fingers came away wet.

Gulping a little, she opened her eyes. They hurt as she blinked them, the lashes slightly crusty and sticking together. Everything around her was a blur, and her long black ponytail swayed just at the edge of her vision. Those loose strands fluttered against her cheek as the ponytail danced with her movement.

“Oh my god,” she croaked, the panic of her situation starting to slowly sink in. “Oh my god.”

She was upside down. The realization dawned slowly, but quick enough to tighten the muscles in her stomach and make her head feel like someone was thumping it from within. She moaned again, the panic spreading like the wings of a thousand moths fluttering in her chest as awareness began to sink in.

She was upside down. And in a great deal of pain. Electric pulses shot through her neck and arm every time she turned her head, and she swore she couldn’t even feel her leg.

“Oh my god.”

“Siren,” the familiar voice spoke to her from somewhere on her left. “It’s gonna be okay.”

Terror gripped her and a spasm of white, hot pain shot down her neck when she turned her head in the direction of the voice. Bits of broken glass dangled, jutting from the frame of the window and glinting in the light of a strange, angry sun. She was in the car. Why was she in the car? Was the car upside down? Her hand was on her forehead again, the prodding fingers pushing into her brow as if touch alone would bring memory streaming back to her consciousness.

A pair of feet shuffled through the wet grass on the other side of the window, black dress shoes, scuffed and dusty. Mud caked the soles, squishing as the wearer swiffed through jade blades with sparkling, beaded diamonds of water dripping from their peaks.

“Where am I?”

“You’re going to be okay, I promise.” Before the inclination to ask that voice further questions, he went on, “I said back up, Pounce. I don’t want anything to happen to you.” She knew that voice. She knew it well. It was familiar and comforting, but... why?

“Shall I climb the tree on the other side of the field, Master? Would that be far enough for your liking.” The second voice was the one she’d never heard before, but there was also something recognizable about it. The tone was comfortable.

“I have the worst feeling I’m going to regret giving you your voice back, Pounce.”

“Please stop calling me that. It’s humiliating enough when I can’t protest.”

Mr. Pounce? Was the cat talking? That couldn’t be right. Cats didn’t talk.

She started to part her lips, prepared herself to speak, but no words came out.

“Just get out of the way, please.”

“Your wish is my command, oh powerful one.”

Once more she opened her mouth, but before she was able to give voice to the words lurking at the back of her tongue the vehicle around her began to spring and groan. The earsplitting shriek of shifting metal was so loud it drowned out her thoughts and would have swallowed her voice whole had she actually managed to use it. Her stomach felt like it dropped out of her body, the crumpled car rising slowly from its sunken resting place upon the spongy ground in a shower of broken glass and dripping clumps of mud.

Siren's fingers shot out, curling around the steering wheel as if she could actually control what was happening to her. Through the webbed cracks across the windshield, which began to cave in with the car's rising movement and tinkle shattered shards across the hood and dashboard, she could almost make out the familiar scenery of the landscape rising beyond that broken window.

It was the backyard. She recognized the tree trunk, could almost see the shed from the corner of her eye. Maybe her mind was playing tricks on her. After all, hadn't she just heard a talking cat somewhere beyond the dented hunk of metal imprisoning her body? Head jerking back to the left, the pant legs hovering over those scuffed and worn dress shoes were dusty and torn, tatters of black fabric rustling in the light breeze she could feel moving slowly through the car. It carried the smell of rain, the pungency of fresh mud and a hint of manure from the farm just up the road.

There was an accident. No; not an accident. Well, sort of an accident—there'd been a tornado sweeping up on her as she tried to flee. What was she fleeing? She couldn't remember. Everything was so fuzzy and strange, and all she had to answer for her confusion was a pair of torn pants and her car lifting strangely through the air. Gravity tugged at her, making her stomach feel tense and just a little bit more than nauseous. She bit down on her tongue, tight teeth sinking into the meat of it until she tasted salt and copper. She clenched her eyes shut tight, holding back the rising urge to let loose a scream the likes of which would probably tear her throat to shreds.

The car continued to rise. She didn't need to see it, she could feel it. Every inch increased her nausea, making the pressure in her head thump like a drum solo to the beat of her frantic heart. Fingers gripped the steering wheel so tight, she was surprised it didn't break under the pressure, and then the car was shifting, turning and rolling to the right. The motion tugged at her, throwing her hip precariously into the console between the seats. She couldn't stop herself then. The screams began raking through her throat, the sound so piercing and cruel it hurt her ears, but she kept screaming and screaming. She opened her eyes only once, peeking through the wincing lids only to find the scurilous movement of the scenery more nauseating than keeping them closed.

She'd never been a screamer. Spiders? Whatever. Mice? Who cared. Dangerous roller coaster rides? Hell yeah! But this... whatever it was

happening to her was more than she could take. She sounded like the dying victim in a really bad horror movie. The only thing threatening to cut off the sound was the acidic bile she felt inching its way into her mouth and promising to erupt like a volcano. She tried to swallow against it; it was instinct, but there was no stopping it. As the weight of the car shifted to right itself and began descending once more, Siren lost her breakfast. Fortunately she reacted quickly enough to cast her head right and vomit all over the passenger seat of the car, rather than down the front of her shirt, which, incidentally was covered in trails and splotches of blood she realized were her own.

Eyes still squeezed tight, the car came down, settling onto the wet grass with a raucous spring of crunching metal and broken glass. She just sat there for a long time, refusing to open her eyes, not even bothering to attempt to make sense of what happened or the least bit concerned about the shadow that passed across the open space where the window had once been on her left.

“I told you she would be fine,” the deep, aloof voice said.

“Siren?” There was a soft hand against her cheek, careful, prodding fingers crawling across the skin behind her ear before they slipped into the hair there. The palm of that hand urged her face in the direction of its owner, but she still refused to open her eyes. She was dreaming, some horrific nightmare it was better not to wake up from because for reasons she didn’t want to remember, the real world was not a place she wanted to be. “Siren, sweetheart? Can you hear me?”

“I hear you.” A hoarse whisper itched through her throat, spilling into the air around her. “I hear you.”

“I’m going to heal you. It might feel a little strange at first, but don’t move. It’s better if you just stay still, all right?”

She started to nod her head, but never followed through with it because inexplicable warmth began spreading from the tips of the fingers nestled behind her ear and across her skin, into her body and her blood. The warmth of it passed tingling across the pain-filled parts of her body and nibbled at the nerve endings until she felt nothing but calm. Even her mind reacted to the trickle of healing warmth dancing through her in waves. The moan pushing against the backs of her relaxed lips was almost peaceful, accepting and delighted to endure the simple touch of a healing hand.

“Can you feel it?” he whispered.

She could feel it, spiraling peacefully along the points of pain, drawing them away and obliterating them until she felt blissful and almost numb. She drew her lip between her teeth, tasting blood as she muttered, “Mm-hmm.”

“It’s moving through you,” he explained. “White light. I’m directing it through your body and it’s breaking off into tiny pieces to seek out all the places inside you crying out for healing.”

“How?”

“It’s magic.”

“Magic?”

“Very old magic,” he told her. “Passed onto me through my mother.”

Her mind began to protest, even though she knew such things were real. Before encountering the thing in Patrick’s dresser drawer, before remembering the night Carver disappeared, magic was the stuff of fantasy and fairy tales, and nothing more. Her mother once told her magic was everywhere, but she’d long since unlearned all the things Rhetta Talbot taught her. A flicker of memory pulsed through her, her mother’s face—wide smile, perfect teeth and bright red lipstick. There was a tiny mole just above her lip. Siren had the same mole. She told her it was a witch’s mole. Aunt Maisie said she was being absurd. And then she felt the invisible needles pricking into her skin like a thousand angry wasps stinging at her nerve endings and she began to withdraw as panic swept through her.

Patrick...

Her eyelids parted, a fretful protest on the tip of her tongue as she sucked in startled breath. Warning bells sounded in her mind. She was running from him, trying to get away because whatever dark things her husband was capable of—she wanted no part in them. He was not the man she thought he was. He was... a killer.

Drawing back with another gasp, a dirty hand slid across her cheek and down her chin, the outpouring of healing magic receding with it as he drew away. It was pure white, tinged in pale blue that danced across the tips of his fingers as it lingered.

“Don’t be afraid.” His voice was so soft it soothed the fringe of her terror. “It’s a little scary, I know, but...”

“Carver?”

She was dreaming it. She cracked her skull open and the blur of her vision combined with her scattered mind to play tricks on her. Hand lifting toward the face in front of her, she watched the loose gold strands of hair waver in the wind and drift across his cheek before catching the tip of his nose. Calm grey eyes stared back at her. Flecks of green and yellow burst through the irises, lighting up as if a blaze of energy pulsed through them. Then they disappeared only for a moment as he lowered his lids then opened them again.

“Carver.” His name was a disbelieving prayer on trembling lips. The syllables lingered in the air between them as the corners of his mouth twitched thoughtfully. She was touching his face, her fingertips moving through the golden stubble shadowing the area around his mouth and chin. Dirt smudged through the patchy hair on his unshaven cheeks, smeared across his pale brow.

He blinked again and said, “Hello, Siren.”

“Am I...”

She must be dead. She’d been inside the tornado. The memory flowed through her in fractured chunks and pieces that clung to rational thought. Thrown and tossed like a handful of berries in a blender on pulse, there was no way she’d made it through that alive. Dead. She was dead. It was the only explanation that made sense. “Am I dead?”

Amusement leaked through his teeth like hissing steam as he rocked back a little onto his heels and allowed his hands to drop between his knees. “No,” he shook his head. “You’re not dead.”

“But...” she stammered. “Where did... How... How are you here?”

“You brought me back.”

“I did?” It hurt to wrinkle her nose and forehead, and she swore she felt the ticklish trickle of blood running alongside her temple after she did it, as though she’d cracked open a tight wound that started to scab over.

Nodding, his eyes were still shining with that unnatural light, but it was peaceful, calming and she found herself wanting to stare into them forever. “You did.”

The muscles in her chest, bruised around her aching ribs, contracted with a spasm of overjoyed anxiety. He was there, hunkered down in front of her as if he’d never left, and when she opened her mouth to speak all that escaped her was a hitching breath that quickly escalated into painful, quiet

sobs of relief. Few words actually managed to squeak out, things like, “dead...” and “waited for you...”

“Shh, Siren,” he lifted his hand again, smudging his thumb through the tears flooding her cheeks as he cupped her face against his palm. “It’s all right. I’m here now, and I will explain everything, but first we need to get you healed and out of that car. You’ve got broken bones. It’s going to take a lot out of me to mend you.”

“Mend me?” she choked.

“Like a rag doll,” he grinned. “The most beautiful rag doll I’ve ever seen.” He leaned upward, pressed his lips against her forehead and then dropped back onto his heels again, his hand still lingering on her cheek. “Will you let me heal you?”

Nodding, she swallowed hard against her own tears and managed to say, “Okay.”

He drew back again, fingertips crawling along her face until they rested behind her ears again and held her steady. She watched his face, the heaviness of his lids as he relaxed and attuned himself to whatever energy it required to do what he was doing. Warmth began to flow through her again, chasing like a playground full of children playing a game of tag.

Find the pain. Tag—you’re it. Run to the next and make it stop.

Nerves tingled, tranquility flowed through her, and though she knew there was something she was forgetting, something dark and terrifying, something she needed to run from, she couldn’t think about that. She thought only of the spread of melted bliss flowing through her veins, the alleviation of a thousand aches and pains. Carver. She was with Carver, and all she felt was bliss.

Her eyelids grew heavy. Her body surrendered completely to his touch as euphoria wrapped itself around her like a blanket and held her. It reminded her of... Patrick. Sometimes when he made love to her, it felt that way. Like she was lost, wandering through blissful halls, in tune with nothing more than the whisper of his breath against her ear and the gentle scrape of his facial hair across her chin before he kissed her. Somewhere in the back of her mind a part of her protested those feelings, the connection she felt to him. It wasn’t right. It wasn’t real.

“Shh,” he would say. “I’m here. Just me.”

She didn't know what that meant, but it always made her feel conflicted. Part of her wanted it to make her feel safe, while deep down she seemed to know she would never be safe. God, she'd known. All along, she'd known and she just let it all happen. She convinced herself it was just her longing for Carver, but it was so much more than that.

How strange and wrong of her to think of that, she realized, but when Carver withdrew his trembling hand from her face the guilty thoughts of her husband faded. He wavered a little, nearly lost his balance as he came to his feet and staggered near the edge of the car. His hand shot out, long fingers curled around the broken glass, rubber-lined window. He sunk a little, as though the car was the only thing holding him upright.

"Carver?"

"I'll be all right," he uttered those words, unconvincing as he slumped into the car with a soft groan and slid to his knees. "Just... need to... let it pass through me."

She surged forward, ignoring the shards of glass pushing into her palms as she tried to lean over the shattered window.

"You always have to play the hero." It was that other voice again. The one she'd heard him talking to before she came to full awareness, but she couldn't see where it was coming from. "You could have left her with a few bruises and she would have been just fine, but no..."

A strangled chuckle caught in Carver's throat, and he rolled back into view again. Siren saw there was a bright red trickle leaking from his nose. He brought a shaky hand up to swipe it away, smearing blood across his cheek when he dropped his hand. "You know me."

"All too well." The cat came into view, his matted, wet fur sticking out at odd angles, as if he'd been trying to straighten and preen it without much luck. "But you won't do her much good if you manage to kill yourself mending simple cuts and bruises." She watched his small mouth move, the corner of her left eye twitching with stress and disbelief.

"Is that..." Swallowing her apprehension, she shook her head and looked at Carver again. "I think I have a concussion."

"If anyone has a concussion, it's me!" Mr. Pounce declared. "Cracked my head but good on that blasted wheel. I'm lucky I didn't knock myself out. What were you thinking, Mistress?"

“The cat,” she started, staring between Carver and the feline standing tall beside him in the wet grass. “The cat is talking.”

“I can make him stop,” Carver moaned a little and clutched his side, “if you’d like me to.”

“Don’t you dare!” the cat warned. “Don’t you dare take my voice from me again, you wretched excuse for a sorcerer.”

“Then get back up in your tree and keep a lookout, would you?”

“I am not a bird.”

“I can turn you into one...”

The cat chortled, a rich sound so close to laughter Siren didn’t know what to make of it. “Not in that state. Besides, I’ve gotten so used to this form I couldn’t imagine being anything else.” A despairing breath escaped him and it looked as though his shoulders sank. “Unless, of course, maybe... Oh, never mind. I’m not even going to bother. You’ll never have the power to change me back.”

“You don’t know that,” Carver argued, his voice strained with effort. He clutched his side painfully as he staggered to his feet again, another groan of pain he stifled when he exhaled. “I learned a lot of things in that... place.”

“And I’m sure they are all very useful, but right now you’ve got about as much power left in you as a dilapidated balloon caught in a wind. I highly doubt...”

“Could you please just go keep an eye out?”

Lowering his head, the cat said, “As you wish,” then he turned and started walking away.

“The cat was talking,” she said again.

“Yeah,” Carver nodded. “Sorry about that. He’s probably not going to ever shut up now.”

“But... how was he talking?”

“Oh, that? That’s a long story. Right now we need to get you out of that car.”

And then he set about doing just that. Siren didn’t know what she expected. More inexplicable magic, or sorcery or whatever it was he was capable of, but in the end he walked around to the passenger’s side of the car, which was far less dented than the driver’s side, managed to wrench the door open, then he cut the seatbelt free with a strange knife he drew from

inside his tattered pant leg. It looked like it was carved from bone, but she couldn't be sure. He scooped her into his arms, and with pain-filled effort he brought her across the seat and stood up on the other side of the car. Still holding her in his arms, he just stood there with her, the strange wind blowing their hair, their eyes locked. His was the gentlest stare she'd ever seen, and she never wanted to look away, but then the cat was talking again, or rather, he was yelling, and she knew whatever he was saying wasn't something any of them wanted to hear.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

They were wavering a little, Carver's legs unsteady beneath both of their weight, but he didn't seem to want to put her down. He hitched her up a little, arms tightening underneath her, his hand squeezing into the flesh of her arm, but the shift of her weight made him even wobblier than before, and he had no choice but to lower her to her feet.

"Master, we're out of time." The cat streamed toward them like a streak of white lightning, running so fast his body was a blur of pointed ears and fluffy tail.

"Out of...? What is he talking about?"

"The Dark One," the cat told her, his breath rasping as he skidded to a halt in front of them.

"You mean Patrick?" She gulped hard.

"Yes," Carver barely looked at her. Turning his attention downward, he asked, "Did you spot him?"

"He opened up a portal inside the house. I saw it through the window. It's only a matter of time..."

"Got it." Carver nodded, then reached down and took her hand inside his. "Siren, I know I owe you a lot of explanations, but right now I need you to trust me." His other arm lifted. Fingers brushed through the willowy strands of hair dancing against her forehead, tucking them away. "I don't deserve your trust, but it is not safe for you here."

"Master, there is not time for..."

"Pounce."

His tone silenced the cat in mid-sentence. Lifting his pointed chin toward them, Siren watched his large golden eyes narrow in respect just before he looked away again.

“Will you please let me take you somewhere safe? I promise I will explain everything.”

“I trust you,” she said.

The strange thing was, she did trust him. Even knowing he’d hidden things from her, that there were secrets she couldn’t begin to comprehend locked behind the grey eyes looking upon her with reverence. “I don’t deserve...”

“Master.”

“All right!” he raised his voice, something she’d never once witnessed in the three years she knew him. Letting go of her hand, he took a step back and scanned the yard.

Everything about him seemed different. From the scuffs on his shoes to the tattered fabric of his pants and the wrinkles in his shirt, he was uncharacteristically unkempt. His hair was so much longer, she noticed. Ever since she met him, he’d kept it rakishly long; it was the one rebellious thing about him she’d always liked—a promise that there was so much more to him than met the eye. The loose strands that escaped the strip he used to tie it away from his face drifted down past his shoulder. He’d always kept it so meticulous, every hair in place, but he looked like hell. Skinnier than she remembered, and there was a haunted reflection in his eyes as they passed across her face again that reminded her vaguely of Patrick.

How did the two of them know each other? How had she gotten caught in the middle of whatever strange rivalry that seemed to exist between them? Those vague memories that came flooding back to her in the car when she thought she was going to die were clouded again, but Patrick had been there the night Carver disappeared. She knew that now.

“Where are we going?”

“I don’t know,” he said.

“It would be most prudent for you to figure that out.”

The air temperature shifted, the stiffness of it almost crackling as it lifted the hair on her arms.

“Think of a place,” Carver said to her. “The first place that comes to mind.”

“I don’t...”

“Please, Siren.”

“Master, I don’t think you can...”

“I can do it,” Carver said stiffly.

“You’re exhausted.”

“It doesn’t matter,” he insisted. “I have to. Siren?”

“I can’t... I don’t know what you...”

“Close your eyes and think of a place,” he willed her again.

She started to close her eyes, the lashes fluttering across her vision. She was thinking as he’d asked her to do, trying to imagine the details of the one place in the world that had always felt safe. She could almost hear the roaring constance of waves barreling inward to kiss the sand. The flickering light dancing across her eyelids accompanied her favorite scent in the world—saltwater and sun-scorched sand.

“That’s my girl,” Carver muttered, a hint of pride in his tone. “Hold onto my hand.”

She felt his fingers curl around hers again. Strong, he squeezed so tight she almost winced, but she didn’t want him to let go. Even if she was dead, she wanted to be in whatever corner of the afterlife they were going to with him. With Carver.

“Pounce, I’m going to need your help.”

“Master,” the cat hissed, “you know I can’t...”

“I just need to borrow from your energy. I’m weak. I can’t do it on my own. Not yet.”

“Do what?” Siren whispered.

“Shh,” Carver said. “Keep thinking of that place. Keep listening to the waves and the gulls. It’s so strong, I can hear it.” She could hear it too. It was growing louder, and she felt the salted wind ruffling through her hair.

“Mr. Pounce?”

“Oh, very well.”

She felt Carver kneel down, and when she opened her eyes for a second she saw him scooping the white feline into his other arm. The strain on their clutched fingers terrified her. She didn’t want to let go so she squeezed

harder. As he rose back to his full height beside her, she heard the rumbling of the cat's internal motor. It was comforting, familiar, safe.

"Whatever happens," Carver started, "don't let go."

"I won't."

"We need to get on with this, Master."

"I'm ready if you are."

"Ready for what?" she asked.

"He's going to help me open a portal."

"A portal?" She opened her eyes again, her gaze flitting toward the cat in his arms. "What do you mean when you say portal?"

"Time, space... it's irrelevant. We can travel anywhere we need to go by manipulating the energy around us."

"To the moon?" It was a stupid question, but when she glanced up at him he was grinning.

"I wouldn't recommend it, but yes."

"Mr. Pounce is going to allow me to borrow from his energy. My own power is sapped right now because..."

"Because you healed me?"

"Partially. Tearing through the fabric of this realm requires massive amounts of power. Getting back here took a lot out of me, and leaving is going to drain me completely."

"Where are we going?"

"Wherever you take us. Can you focus for me?"

Drawing her lower lip between her teeth, she nodded tentatively and closed her eyes again. She was thinking about the one place she always felt safe: the beach, but the horizon on that beach was growing darker, the clouds rolling in across the waves. Beyond the constant hush she could hear the sky cracking open, feel the wind picking up. It was terrifying, and when through her tightly squeezed lids she saw a brilliant flash of light she couldn't concentrate anymore. A gleaming corona glowed around the edges of their bodies. Even the cat cast a brilliant hue, his whiskers twitching with concentration as tiny pink lips moved over words she couldn't hear. She looked down at their joined hands, the pure light they shared pulsing like the sun cresting over hilltops on a crisp, autumn morning. It spread through her body, electric and certain as it touched everything inside her until she felt calm and safe.

The air in front of them began to waver like a mirage dancing across the pavement on a hot summer afternoon. She watched it ripple, felt her free hand instinctively reaching toward it to see if it was real, but then she dropped it again. It all suddenly felt very overwhelming and the calm she'd experienced began to mingle with fear. She had no idea what was happening, how she was even still alive—if she was alive—but she continued to watch the space directly in front of them whirl and shift. Through the blur of alteration she saw the house in the distance, the dilapidated dome Patrick promised to turn into a home. It was wavering, flickering in and out of existence, and she didn't know if it was because of the strange energy Carver was gathering in front of them, or if it was something else.

In the place where her home stood a dark, terrible chasm flashed into existence. Dark, dripping and oozing, spreading its pitch like so much tar across overgrown yellowed and dying grass, it seemed to crawl slowly toward them like something out of a science fiction movie. There were no walls, no structure but the folds of that darkness stacked together in eerie mimicry that made the breath stick in her throat when she gasped.

Gaping lips moved over unspoken words she found no sound for, and then a tear wrenched through the wavering darkness, a momentary fracture in the absence of light she thought was her home. A figure stormed through that tear, the opening winking out the moment he passed through it and began storming in long strides, steady, but unhurried, as if he had all the time in the world to reach them.

“Don't do it, Ashmore!” he bellowed over the raucous clatter of shifting elements.

She recognized her husband's gait, the stiffness of his broad shoulders as he pushed toward them, the proud tilt of his head as the ruffled, dark-brown waves of his hair swept wildly across his forehead in the rising wind.

“Don't even think about it. She belongs to me.”

Carver didn't answer. When Siren lifted her head to look at him the muscles in his calm face didn't even twitch with acknowledgment. The cat, however, became alert, craning his long neck backwards before whipping his head around in panic.

“Master, we need to hurry.”

The man didn't even flinch, but the odd wavering of the world in front of them stretched longer, wider, like a door growing from nothing. She could see Patrick through it, the blur of him marching anxiously, both fists clenched at his sides. Siren's insides tightened, terror spreading in cold waves along the limbs of her body as he lifted his hand and spread his fingers wide. Something dark and ethereal danced across the tips, like dripping globs of black tar crawling across his digits.

"Master!"

"Pounce!" Carver hissed. "I have to concentrate!" Every word came out with effort through clenched teeth, flecks of spittle clinging to the corner of his tightly pursed lips.

A familiar din echoed from the alteration of the air. Water—no, waves lapping at the land, drawing in like breath before crashing outward in a ferocious exhale that splashed in wide arcs. She could see hints of that place flickering through the strange door in the air, growing more solid by the second, and again she smelled the salt on the dense, humid wind gusting from within.

"You can't take her!" Patrick's voice raked over the sound.

That time she did feel Carver flinch with acknowledgment. A little jump, his fingers clutching her own tighter. It felt like the bones were bruising inside the skin, on the verge of breaking in his grip.

"Siren!" Patrick bellowed. "You made promises to me. You took vows."

It felt like her voice stuck fast in the back of her throat, as if she'd swallowed a whole wad of gum and all the things she wanted to say clung to it, rather than jumping out in her defense. She opened her mouth. It gaped, jaw wagging. She tasted the tang of salt on her tongue. Familiar smells overwhelmed her when she breathed in, that humid wave rushing across her face and nearly blasting back the loose tendrils of her hair.

"You are mine, Siren! You belong to me."

"No!" She surged forward a little, her feet reacting without her permission, but Carver's tight hand squeezed, holding her in place beside him. "Just stay back, Patrick."

"You swore to me," he shouted. "If you do this..." The unspoken warning in his tone was so severe she actually trembled. He left it wide open, a field for the imagination to romp precariously through, unaware of

the beast lurking in the tall grass waiting to leap out and devour her. “If you walk away I will come after you.”

For the first time since he’d begun stalking toward them Carver lifted his head, breaking his concentration as he called out, “You’ll have to find us first, Blakely.”

And then he jerked her hand as he stepped forward, tugging her with him through the whirling mirage of the portal he opened before whipping around quickly to close it behind them.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Pure white surrounded them, so brilliant it felt like she was going blind, and then the sandy landscape gave way beneath their skidding feet as they burst through the other side of that portal into the harsh light of a black-cloud stifled, silver sun. It streamed through the gathering puffs of darkness-tainted, cumulonimbus clouds, wavering like someone cast a handful of glitter across the vast ocean spread out before them. Mr. Pounce leapt from Carver's arms and whooshed across the sand, but Carver dropped to his knees, nearly pulling her with him. Instinct wrenched her hand from his as he dropped into the sand in front of her with a heavy thud.

"Carver," she knelt beside him, turned him over onto his back and stared down at his sand-coated face. "Carver."

"He'll need a minute," Mr. Pounce informed her, trotting casually toward them. He arrived at the top of Carver's head and stood there, staring down at the unconscious man in front of him for a long time before lifting his golden gaze to her face. "He exhausted himself healing you, the bloody idiot."

Guilt pulsed through her and she lifted a hand to her chest as if touching the place it hurt the most would make it go away. "He didn't have to."

"I know that and you know that, but he's never been all that clever in the glow of a pretty face. Your pretty face, most especially."

She reached forward and brushed the sand from his brow and cheek, gentle fingertips touching familiar features she'd never thought to see again. It was Carver. There was no mistaking it, but where had he come from and how had he gotten there? And why was the cat talking?

“Mr. Pounce?” she began.

“You brought him back,” he told her, as if anticipating her first question. “It was you who brought him back. You had the power to do it all along, but I daresay you carried it around in your pocket all those years like a fool.”

“But...” she stammered. “The ring?”

“Yes, the ring. All those times I tried to tell you, you just ignored me.”

“You didn’t... You never... How is it you’re talking?”

“I could always talk, well, not always, I suppose. The master put a spell on me before assigning me to watch over you, didn’t want me giving away all his secrets before he was ready to tell them. He says I talk overmuch, that I don’t know when to keep my teeth together, but in all fairness had he left me with the ability to vocalize my thoughts all of this nonsense might have been avoided. I could have simply told you to open the bloody box, and that would have been that.”

“But...” When she swiped her hand across her brow, grains of sand trickled down her face. “Where was he?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t have the chance to ask him, but I suspect your Dark One knows.”

“The Dark One? You mean Patrick?”

“That is what he calls himself, is it not?”

“His name isn’t Patrick?”

“I... yes, but that is what he is. Darkness incarnate. Decay and misery.”

“Wait a minute,” she interrupted. “Patrick was responsible for what happened to Carver?”

A soft scuff worked through the cat’s throat like an exasperated release. “Ah, now you’re catching up, finally.”

“Wow,” she muttered, leaning back a little. No wonder Carver silenced him. Her cat was kind of a jerk. “I did hit my head.”

“Yes, yes, I recall, though you probably wouldn’t have if you’d just stayed put. Running into a tornado, I have to say, Mistress, not exactly your brightest hour.”

“What was I supposed to do?” she shot back. “I’d just found out my husband was a murderer.”

“It certainly took you long enough,” he hmphed. “I never did like that man. I tried to stop you, did what I could to steer you away from him, but your weakness of will would not be deterred by my subtle warnings.”

“Maybe next time you’ll speak up. Be a little clearer.”

“Maybe... speak up? Very good. Mock the cat who’s only just been given back his voice.”

They probably would have gone on for hours, bickering back and forth that way, had it not been for the soft groan coming from the sand between them. Carver twitched, attempting to roll onto his side, but Siren reached out and pushed his shoulders back to the ground.

“Don’t try to get up,” she said. “Not yet. You’ve... done things that apparently exhausted your... whatever it is you have.”

“Are we safe?” he muttered.

“Safe enough for now,” the cat told him.

“Just let your head clear, okay?”

“Siren,” he whispered. Lifting a hand to rest against her cheek, the gritty feel of sand against her skin made her cringe a little. “I dreamed of you. In the darkness I used to call to mind your face.” She pinched her lips together tight, biting down on them from the inside as fresh tears gathered over her lenses and threatened to spill down her cheeks. “Every thought of you lit my world,” he went on. “You kept me from losing my mind, my hope...”

“Shh.” Touching a fingertip to his lips, she lifted her head to scan the beach. It was empty save for sea birds hopping across the grit in search of wriggling creatures left behind as the tide drifted back out.

“You must have so many questions,” he murmured.

“More than you could probably answer right now.” Her laughter was nervous, uneasy.

“I do hope he doesn’t pick up our trail and follow suit in a timely fashion. If he’s anything, he’s determined, as we know from past experience, and he will stop at nothing to get back what he believes belongs to him.” The cat padded through the sand as if he spent the whole of his life navigating its unyielding depths without issue. He arrived beside Carver’s shoulder, rubbed himself against it and then brought his head up to stare down. “You’re in no shape to do battle right now, Master.”

“I know,” Carver agreed.

“Where are we, if you don’t mind my asking?”

Siren rocked back onto her heels. Shielding her eyes from the piercing light of that silver sun, she turned her gaze across the horizon again and took in the familiar seascape. Deep, dark waves bobbed in the distance, and

on their right she saw a finger of land jutting into the ocean. Thick trees, as far away as they were, swayed as if in hypnotic ballet that swept salted wind in their direction. She knew where they were. It wasn't just familiar, wasn't someplace she saw on a travel brochure or a postcard. She'd been there, and recently.

Parting her lips to answer the cat, it was Carver who blurted out the words, "South Carolina. Edisto Island."

She repeated his words in a whisper, her hand twitching thoughtlessly at her side, grappling the lost fabric of the t-shirt she'd never changed out of that morning when she woke up and began her descent in absolute madness. "Right," she nodded, "Edisto. Good going, Siren. Because he'll never think to look for you in the place where you married him." Those last few words came out in a murmur, one she hadn't intentionally meant to keep to herself.

"I... I didn't know," his voice was soft with lament. "You and I talked about coming here." He spoke in a breathy gasp. She didn't need to look down at him to know he wasn't just looking at her, but staring. "I thought... I followed the signals you sent me and went with them because it was someplace you felt safe."

"Yes well," Mr. Pounce began with a smarmy lift of his pointed chin, "he's a clever one, but not that clever. If you ask me, it's the perfect place to lay low until you get your strength back, Master." The cat brought his gaze to her, asking, "You never made mention that the reason you wanted to get married here was because it was a place you wished to visit with the master, did you?"

Siren shook her head and followed the line of foam cresting and receding from the beach. "No, I never mentioned it, but I'm sure he guessed on his own. Everything I did in some way came back to Carver. My obsession drove him crazy."

"Nevertheless, I highly doubt he'll put two and two together right away. As I said, he's sharp, but he'll be enraged, his thoughts scattered and desperate. Until he can make sense of them he'll search the obvious places, and when he fails to find you in any of them, he'll branch out. We'll be long gone by then."

She was only half paying attention to Mr. Pounce, a part of her not really wanting to yield to the reality of having a meaningful conversation with the white ball of fur who sometimes followed her into the bathroom and

watched her with disinterest while she bathed. Pushing to her feet, she walked toward the water and stood there for a moment, taking it all in.

“This isn’t the same pier,” she said absently. “We came to this beach though, while we were here. We watched the sun come up right over there the morning after we were married.” Patrick stood behind her, arms wrapping her close, the bristling hair of his goatee tickling her cheek as he pressed his face into hers. They watched the sun rise while gulls swooped across the jagged flow of waves and scooped fish into their beaks before flying into the coming dawn.

She turned back to Carver then, head tilted sadly as she watched him watching her. His face was a chiseled oval of confusion and unacknowledged pain he seemed to be trying very hard to hide from her, but he was not a very good liar. He never had been. Which made no sense when she thought about it, because apparently he’d kept a lot of things from her. How? How had he done it?

“I got married here,” she told him. “At the beginning of summer. It was just a small thing. Aunt Maisie... Lacey and Jeff stood as our witnesses.” That confession hung like a wet blanket, weighed down and unmoving in the wind. “I didn’t think you were coming back, Carver. Everyone kept saying I should just move on. I didn’t want to, but...”

“Siren,” he held up a hand to stop her, head shaking back and forth as his nostrils flared wide with his breath. “Please don’t.” He swallowed, turning his head downward as he said, “You don’t have to explain anything to me. You owe me nothing.”

“No... I...”

“I was gone, Siren. I lost track of the days so I don’t even know for how long, but I...” Lifting his gaze again, he stared at her, the silver sunlight glinting in his eyes. “I left you. I disappeared.”

“It doesn’t sound to me like you meant to.”

“No,” he shook his head again. “I certainly didn’t mean to, but it was what it was, and though I held onto my memories of you, let them guide me through the darkest time in my life, I never once expected you to wait for me. Life goes on.”

But it didn’t go on. Not for her. She’d tried to move forward, attempted to give herself room to grow into something else, to set the past behind her and try to let go, but she’d never quite done it. Patrick resented her for it,

the people in her life thought she was crazy to hold onto something that was never coming back—especially when the powers that be saw fit to send her a second chance at happiness. There she was standing on a beach, more than a thousand miles from home and wondering just what it was she'd left behind because the man she'd married wasn't the perfect second chance everyone thought he was. That much was suddenly clear, but she had no idea what he even was. Or what Carver was, for that matter.

The sand shifted beneath her unmoving feet, grains sliding and tumbling away as if the earth itself would swallow her up if she kept standing there that way, staring and thinking and feeling the frustration of it all building up inside her like some kind of bomb on the verge of exploding.

"Not my life," she finally said. "Maybe it looks like it went on, but it didn't. Not really. I waited for you. Even after I let myself love again, I still waited for you."

The muscles in Carver's neck tightened; she watched his Adam's apple bob again as he swallowed. Blinking his eyes, the sun glinted for a second on the moisture clinging to his lashes, but he turned his head away before she could confirm it was actually there. Neither of them said anything else for a long time after that. There was only the constant smash of waves battering at the shoreline, the tide rolling further outward with each advance, inching further and further from where they'd landed.

There were so many things she wanted to know, things she felt like she needed to ask him, but didn't know how, so for the time being she said nothing. She just turned back toward the water and watched as dolphin fins rose in playful arches against the landscape.

It felt like a hopeful sign; of what, she couldn't guess, but she admired their dance until she heard the shuffling movement of footsteps through the sand. She felt him come in behind her and closed her eyes, relishing the feel of his strong hand lowering onto her shoulder. For a time they stood there in silence, and when she finally opened her eyes again it took a moment for her to relocate the pod of dolphins in the distance on her left.

"Ask me," Carver said. "Ask me anything you want to know."

She didn't want to, even as she did. She fretted that having answers to all those questions that pressed down so hard on her over the last three years would be anticlimactic. Answers wouldn't make the pain of those years

disappear. Knowing the truth wouldn't fill in the empty space she'd carved out inside herself, would it?

"What are you?" That question surprised her. Of all the things she could have asked him, she chose to jump on top of the most terrifying one of all and wrestle it to the ground. So much for tiptoeing around the issues after all.

"I'm just a man, Siren."

"No." Head shaking, the ponytail she wore drifted over her shoulder, spilling down her chest and catching the wind. It lifted and fell, tickling her neck and chin each time it rose. She started to reach up, intent on pushing it away, but then she lowered her arm again. Carver's hand was still on her shoulder, and there was a momentary tremor of fear inside her that if she moved too suddenly he would take that hand away. She never wanted him to stop touching her again, never wanted to be more than the length of an arm away from him so she could always reach out and grab onto him.

How desperate and needy was that?

"Yes," he finally said after a long silence. "I know it must not seem that way, but it is true. I am just a man."

"And Patrick?"

"A man."

"But men can't..." She watched the dolphins dip beneath the waves, three simultaneously submerging and not resurfacing again. "Men can't do the things I've seen you do today, Carver. Men don't put weird bee-stinging barriers in their dresser drawers to keep their wives from reaching in there to take back their jewelry boxes. Could you... Were you always able to do...whatever that was?"

"Magic."

"Right, magic." Because that was a very common and human thing, she thought. "Were you always able to do magic?"

"Yes. My family was of an ancient line, my mother said I was born with it, just as she was."

"So, what?" Head swaying back and forth, she tried to shake off the blur between fantasy and reality. "You're a wizard?"

The scuff of laughter quickly died in his throat. "A warlock, yes."

"A warlock." That word just sort of hung around them after she spoke it, like a curse or dirty air the wind wasn't powerful enough to whisk away.

“And Patrick? Is he some kind of warlock too?”

From the corner of her eye she saw Carver’s head bob in silent reply, but he didn’t give voice to the answer. He seemed to follow her original line of vision, staring out to sea as if waiting for the dolphins to return. They didn’t. Finally, he said, “We were both born with these unique gifts. What he chose to do with his... I don’t... Siren, I don’t know how to tell you all of this.”

“How do the two of you even know each other?”

“Our mothers were sisters.”

Past his shoulder, she looked to the place where Mr. Pounce sat perfectly still, the length of his white fur fluttering almost like feathers in the breeze.

“Patrick is your cousin?”

Tipping his head forward once, it was a stiff movement, as if it pained him to make that confession. “We were born less than a month apart. Our mothers raised us side by side for a time, close as brothers. We were seven when tragedy struck our family. The year of the curse, my mother called it. First Patrick lost his father. He was thrown from a spooked horse and trampled to death, the direct result, my mother claimed, of a rival family’s curse upon our houses.”

“A curse,” she muttered softly. The familiarity of the tale struck her like a hand and she took a step forward, spinning around to face him. “I know this story.”

The tight corners of his mouth twitched toward a smile that never quite reached his eyes. “You’ve read the whole sordid tale, or rather my version of it with minor embellishments to protect the innocent.”

“Your books,” a slow, dawning gasp escaped her.

“They’re more like memoirs,” he confessed. “My publisher called it a historical fantasy, but if they only knew...”

“But those stories start in the Seventeenth Century.”

She wished he was still touching her. She felt safer when his hand was on her shoulder, when their bodies were close. The night Patrick burst through the doors of Bartonelli’s they’d been holding hands, he’d been getting ready to tell her something. The truth? She didn’t know. She thought he was going to propose, and maybe he was, but he’d kept so many things from her. He lied to her, or rather he hadn’t been straight with her all that time they were

together. For three years she thought she knew everything she needed to know about him, but she knew nothing.

“How Carver? How is it possible that you’ve been alive for hundreds of years?” She gaped at him. Over her shoulder the pitch of the clouds deepened, swallowing the light of the sun bite by bite as the angry coming of another storm rolled in. “In the books the hero and the villain were cursed by the Carringtons. Immortal sufferance and damnation for the death of Antigone Carrington’s beloved daughter Celeste.”

He tilted his head down and slices of hair fell in around his chin. The gaunt structure of his face was intensified by the growing shadows, and the dark circles beneath his eyes made him look severe in his shame.

“Her real name was Isabela Talbot,” he told her. “She begged our mothers to save her daughter Mary from yellow jack fever, but it was too late. There was nothing to be done by the time she brought Mary to our house, and when the girl died Isabela blamed our mothers.”

“Talbot?” An eerie sensation moved through her that could only be compared to a childish game she and Lacey used to play. Crack the egg, Lacey called it. They would tighten their fists, knock on the crown of each other’s heads and spider their fingers along the scalp like dripping yolk and white rolling through the sensitive follicles of each hair. It always made Siren shudder, shoulders tightening, teeth clenching in anticipation even though it was a wickedly delightful feeling. “My family? My mother’s family...”

“Isabela Talbot was your ancestor.”

The illusion of safety she felt just moments before drained away. Siren found herself stepping backwards without even realizing it, her flip-flops slipping through the unstable sand, the grains of it grinding and itching against her heel and arch as it filled the space between the foam and her foot. Her throat was dry and achy, the humid wind too heavy against her sweat-sticky skin. Even the way her hair whipped across her face like bits of spider web felt strange and unnatural. The clouds at her back grew darker, and she swore she felt the cold prick of a single raindrop splatter across the bare skin at the nape of her neck.

“Were you...” She couldn’t ask, didn’t want to know, but she needed to. “Carver, were the both of you hunting me like some kind of animal?”

His hand shot up to placate her, long fingers reaching out, but she took another step back no longer wanting him to touch her. “Dear God, no!” he exclaimed. “It wasn’t like that, Siren. I promise you. It was fate that brought the two of us together. On my honor, I swear it.”

“On your—” The thunder was nearly swallowed by the rush of constant waves battering at the coastline, but she both felt and heard it; she knew it was there.

A storm was coming. Its intensity prickled at her skin and drew the hairs on her arms to attention in such a way that she actually found herself absently rubbing them to make it go away.

“Your honor? Really? You expect me to take you at your honor, Carver, when you lied to me for three years about who you were?”

“No!” he took another step toward her. “I did not lie. I was always myself with you, and I was going to tell you. The night everything went to hell I planned to take you driving after, and I was going to tell you everything, the whole story beginning to end, before I asked you to spend your life with me.”

“That’s a little convenient, don’t you think? To say you were going to do the right thing in a situation where the opportunity to do so was never made available? You had plenty of time to work through your story over the last three years.”

Carver’s eyes were wide, the rims around his lashes damp with unshed tears that threatened to dribble down his face when he blinked. He didn’t blink. It was almost as if he forbid himself to do it, even though the wind stung and dried his eyes out.

“You’re right,” he agreed. “I had plenty of time to think it all through, and believe me I did just that. I played through this conversation a thousand times. In my head. Out loud. Sometimes I tried to imagine what you might say to me when I finally told you the truth. I have no right to ask you to believe me, but I swear to you there is nothing convenient about any of this. I knew you would be hurt no matter what happened.”

“Hurt?”

It seemed such an inadequate word to describe the sensations roiling through her. Hurt was the stuff of skinned knees and paper cuts, the overly full feeling in one’s stomach after stuffing their face with bad food. It hardly

felt powerful enough to describe the breaking of a heart—or maybe it was just because it was Carver breaking her heart.

“I trusted you.” Her voice cracked a little, the rumbling thunder and the rolling waves nearly swallowing the sound of it whole. “With every part of myself, Carver, all of my baggage and my bullshit, my idiosyncrasies and insecurities... I trusted you with every part of who I am, and you couldn’t be bothered to tell me the truth about who you really are. Everything you said to me...”

“Was true, Siren. Every time I said I loved you, it was true. Every emotion I ever felt with you was real. When I first met you, I didn’t know who you were, or how you were connected to this triangle of insanity. I was absolutely stunned when you finally told me your name. It felt like...”

She stared expectantly, waiting for him to finish that thought. Bringing her arms up defiantly over her chest, Carver shook his head, tendrils of hair falling in to hide his face for a moment before he brought a trembling hand upward to slick them away again. He clenched them in his fist, holding them aloft inside it atop his head while looking over her shoulder out to sea. Raindrops splashed her arms, her shoulders, her forehead like cold kisses meant to temporarily relieve her of the sticky humidity. And then he was looking at her again, searching her face as if the answers to whatever it was he was looking for were in her eyes.

The rising tension in his voice softened, becoming nearly inaudible under the cacophony of waves and thunder breaking at her back. “It felt like destiny to me, Siren.”

“Destiny.” His words were meant to be profound, to touch her in some way that made everything not just better, but right. It didn’t work. “Right.”

“Siren...”

“Master,” Mr. Pounce came up behind Carver at some point during their talk, arriving in between their ankles and lifting his pointed chin upward to peer at them with large, golden eyes. “I hate to interrupt the excitement of this reunion, but that storm...” The cat looked out to sea and both Siren and Carver followed the line of his gaze. Darkness blotted out the light of an already conquered sun as lightning tongues lashed at the water. “I feel it would be in our best interest to take shelter.”

Turning back toward the row of houses lurking on the edge of the beach, Carver scanned them one by one before nodding his agreement. “Tourist

season is ended,” he said, returning his attention to Siren. She refused to meet his gaze, instead staring at the row of darkened houses lining the beach. “Most of those houses are emptied out. We should take advantage of their shelter.”

“Breaking and entering,” she huffed, lifting her crossed arms in a near defiant stance. “Because my life isn’t messed up enough already, I guess adding crime to the mix couldn’t possibly make it any worse.”

“It’s only until the storm passes, Siren. I still have my wallet, all of my credit cards, access to my bank account.”

“I highly doubt you still have access to any of those things. You were gone for three years. Credit cards expire.”

“Well,” he swallowed, the sharp knot in his throat bobbing. He looked away from her and said, “I’ll figure something out. I promise.”

Unfortunately, she didn’t believe him, and that was the most painful thing she’d ever endured in her life.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Siren bent down to pick up the cat. Scooping him into her arms, she held onto the begrudging beast as she slipped through the sand. The thunder grew louder, flashes of violent lightning dancing across the tumultuous waves at their backs as the wind whipped dangerously. The smell of it all was intense, electric and fresh, tinged with an intoxicating hint of salt, it took all she had in her not to turn back over her shoulder and just watch in awe as Mother Nature put on an unforgettable show.

The sand grew damper and damper beneath her flip-flops, the raindrops fattening, increasing as they seemingly skidded away from the wind. It began soaking into their clothes, plastering Siren's hair to her face and the shivering cat in her arms was looking more and more like a drowned rat by the second. Carver limped as he walked behind her, exhausted as he dragged himself along, and though she was worried about him, she avoided looking back. It hurt too much for reasons she still wasn't able to find rational explanation for.

She couldn't decide if it was because he lied to her the entire time they knew each other, or because she built his pedestal so high in the three years he'd been absent from her life. Either way, his fall from grace was devastating, and though there was a part of her inside that wanted more than anything to cling to him and appreciate the fact that he was there with her, she'd always been stubborn.

He guided her with a gesture of his hand to a looming beach house towering over the bar of sand they traversed. Its storm shutters drawn, the bent lamp post perched at the edge of the backyard gate flickered and

dimmed, as if the electrical surges lighting up the sky sapped its energy. Arriving outside the gate, Carver attempted to open the wooden door leading into the yard, but it was locked. He stepped back a moment, closed his eyes and held his hand up to the door. Despite the keening wind and waves battling the thunder in her ears, she heard the metallic thunk of it drawing open and then the door squeaked inward, revealing a concrete patio and an in-ground pool shaped like a kidney, its black cover stretched tight across the surface.

The idea of letting themselves into someone's house made her feel sick to her stomach, the nervous, internal clench so severe she actually shifted the wet cat a little lower, in hopes that the warmth of his body would soothe her. It did not.

Carver stepped aside, holding the gate open and ushering them inside. Siren hesitated on the threshold, staring up at him apprehensively as she asked, "Are you sure no one's here?"

"Nearly every house on this strip of beach is a summer house. I sense no life in this one."

"Sense no life?" Her nose wrinkled, upper-lip curling toward it in a disconcerted sneer. "What do you... never mind."

She followed the outstretched length of his arm, the rough concrete scuffing across the sand sticking to the wet bottoms of her shoes. Mr. Pounce squirmed, but didn't vocally protest. She could feel his back claws burrowing into the skin of her forearm, as if he were about to push off and make a run for it.

Bolting the gate behind them again, thunder's echo made the ground feel like it shook just a little beneath their feet. She didn't shy away when Carver's arm came down on her shoulders, but let him guide her toward the back of the beach house and up the stairs leading to the sun porch. They huddled side by side on the top step, Mr. Pounce pressing his body closer to hers while Carver reached out to test the door handle.

It, too, was locked and he used a similar technique to open it, waving his hand across the surface until she heard the internal click of tumblers aligning, then giving way. She watched for signs of magic, the strange glow of his fingertips, the air wavering, but if it happened she missed it.

"What?" she muttered. "No hocus pocus? No open sesame?"

The cat snorted with derisive delight, but Carver ignored them both and lowered a hand to turn the knob. The door squeaked open to reveal the shadowed interior of a spacious kitchen beyond the darkened sun porch. Wicker furniture was comfortably arranged, positioned facing the tall, shuttered windows overlooking the violent, raging ocean. As she shuffled into that room, leaving her sand-coated flip-flops on the doormat, she was drawn toward the storm shutter-blocked glass to stare between the crack at the raging waters outside.

Their short jaunt from the beach had given the storm plenty of time to gather momentum. Thunder cracked the sky, a white-blue blaze of lightning making the room as bright as midday for a moment as light leaked through the cracks of the shutters, and then shadows fell again. Every hair on Siren's body tingled as they rose. Thunder storms always held a special place in her heart. There was something intense and powerful about them that felt as though it captured her personal essence. She'd never been able to explain it; heck, she hadn't ever tried, but despite their frightful magnitude, something about them made her feel safe.

During their stay for the wedding in June, a single thunder shower struck the Island. They'd been nowhere near the beach when it happened, in fact, Siren hadn't even been conscious for most of it. Tucked away in the massive house Aunt Maisie rented along the saltwater channel, Siren woke only long enough to rise and look out the windows as the angry clouds began their retreat.

The incredible power just beyond those windows was astonishing, and she might have stood there staring much longer had the cat not finally insisted upon being put down with a grunt as all four paws dropped to the hardwood floors.

"Don't run off," Carver said almost absently.

"I'm just going to have a look around."

"Right, but don't go too far. I need to disable the alarm system before we explore the house. The last thing I need is for you to trip it and send the police over here to investigate."

"Oh, very well," Mr. Pounce moaned.

Siren glanced down. The cat was the only thing visible in the shadows around their feet, his stark white fur practically glowing in the dark and his

large, unblinking eyes catching the flickering lightning in an iridescent display when it flashed.

“I’ll just stand here and shiver to death then.”

A perturbed breath lodged in Carver’s throat and he took a step back, blocking out the minimal light streaming through the door behind him. “Oh for crying out loud,” he sighed again. “I’ll take care of the alarm now. I just have to find it first. Nobody move, please.”

Siren had no intention of moving. She felt weird enough as it was, standing in the middle of a stranger’s sun porch with a wicked storm raging just beyond the shutters blocking out the world. The humid air smelled clean, like laundry had only just been taken from the dryer and the owners gave everything a good scrub down with pine cleaner and lemon-scented dusting spray moments before they walked through the door.

In the dark, however, every sound was amplified. Carver’s scuffed dress shoes clomped quietly across the hardwood, and she swore Mr. Pounce was scratching at himself as if he’d come down with a bad case of fleas. The cool floorboards creaked beneath her sandy feet, her knee clicking audibly as she started to turn away from the window to stare into the house around her.

“Is this something you do often then?” she called out. “Squat in other peoples’ homes?”

“Hardly,” the cat drawled. “You know, Mistress, if I were you I’d give the master a bit of a break. I mean, process it all, if you will, then ask yourself just how willing you would be to run around sharing the truth about yourself. His secrets are the kinds of things that get men in this modern world killed, or worse examined like some kind of alien from outer space.”

“How often do I ask you to share your opinion, Cat?”

“All the time, Mistress. Should I have shrimp scampi for lunch, Mr. Pounce? What color nail-polish today, Mr. Pounce? Do you like this dress, Mr. P—”

“I get the picture,” she snapped.

“I have always done my best to supply you with reasonable answers,” he went on. “No answer for no, a healthy meow when I agree. Today I’m asking you to be understanding with him. He’s been through more than you

could possibly begin to imagine while trying to make his way back to you. He deserves the benefit of the doubt, at the very least.”

That time she said nothing, instead silently turning back over her shoulder to watch the flare of lightning flash through the minimal openings in the storm shutters. When the lights in the front room came on, it coincided with the lightning and she almost thought nothing of it until they stayed, illuminating the room in a soft yellow glow that prompted her to glance into the kitchen again just as Carver was returning.

He looked a mess, hair askew and hanging in dark, greasy strips that clung together on account of the rain. His face was smudged with dirt and sand, and he bore scars that hadn't marred his perfect face before his disappearance. Clothing tattered and worn, as she lowered her head to her shoulder it occurred to her that he was wearing the same outfit he wore the night he disappeared. The once immaculately polished black shoes were scuffed grey, his dress slacks tattered and worn away at the knee. The white dress shirt hung open, but it was stained a color beige that mocked sweat and dirt.

Everything inside made her want to go to him, to grip the unbuttoned front of his shirt, hold him out and take him in because she'd missed him in ways there were no words to describe.

But he was a liar. And some kind of wizard. And they were standing face to face in someone else's house because he knew in some way she didn't understand no one would be there.

“I managed to get the alarm system turned off.”

She'd almost forgotten how soft and tentative his voice was, how it sounded almost like he was afraid to speak every time he opened his mouth.

“I'll take a look around the basement once the storm passes, see if I can get the water running so we can wash up.”

Siren looked away from him, muttering, “I must look terrible.”

She hadn't even bothered to fix her ponytail after rolling out of bed what felt like a hundred years ago, and the clothes she wore were the ones she'd fallen asleep in on the couch while trying to figure out what kind of man her husband really was. Her conversation with Aunt Maisie felt like it happened in another life. Then there was the accident, and some strange portal, and the rain, which all felt very funny to her the more she thought about it. She started to laugh unexpectedly, a scuffed chuckle at first and then a titter that

grew into a near-painful belly laugh that made Carver stare at her through narrowed and squinting grey-green eyes while the cat continued to lick his tongue across his uplifted paws in hopes of getting the grains of sand out of his damp fur.

Glancing up between the two of them, pink tongue pinched stupidly between his lips, Mr. Pounce would have rolled his eyes if cats did such things. Maybe he did, she realized. After all, cats weren't supposed to talk, and there he was on the verge of asking a question. She could tell by the look he wore, and that just made her laugh harder.

Without even thinking about the meticulous furniture in the beach house, she backed into love seat and dropped down, heartily laughing as she pushed her back into the cushions and just let it all come out. She laughed until tears started streaming down her face, and the more they fell, the harder she laughed until amusement became the kind of despair one didn't really know how to express in any other way than long, haunting sobs that felt like they were choking and strangling the person releasing them.

Carver started to walk toward her when she finally let loose, but several times he stopped and just stared at her, as if he was terrified she'd push him away when he arrived. Eventually he worked up the courage to drop down in front of her, his elbows perched on his knees and his head leaning leftward as he asked, "Can I get you anything?"

It was a reasonable question, but even that sounded absurd. What would he get her? Her sanity? Maybe a box of tissues and a Valium. She'd only taken Valium once in her life, three days after he disappeared, actually. Aunt Maisie broke the pill in half and pushed it between her lips, insisting she sleep or be forcibly knocked out. She laid there in the bed afterward, staring at the shadows on the ceiling while Mr. Pounce's purring body nestled into the crook between her neck and shoulder. The sound was so loud, but so soothing it eventually drew her out of her body, out of her frantic, terrified mind, and allowed her to sleep.

She would have given anything for that kind of drug-induced comfort right then, but she highly doubted Carver was carrying a Valium inside the pocket of his torn trousers.

Rolling her head along the cushions behind her, she stared up at the ceiling until the tears stopped falling and the only thing escaping her was the occasional spasming breath. Carver stayed where he was, hands clasped

together, head down so the hair fell in around his face. When she finally sat up straighter, he barely moved and she wondered for a moment if he'd fallen asleep that way.

"This is some kind of dream," she finally declared. "Or I really am dead."

"Now is the perfect time to panic," Mr. Pounce said from the other side of the room. At some point he'd leapt up onto the cushion of a rattan ottoman, curled into a ball of matted white fluff and observed—as he was prone to do. Occasionally he attempted to straighten his fur and make himself more presentable, but it seemed a futile effort. "It's the perfect time for the weight of everything to come crashing down. There's no tornado, no psycho killer chasing after us, no monsoon about to wash us away..."

"Pounce," Carver sighed.

"Why is he talking in this dream?"

"This is not a dream, Siren." He chose that moment to lift his head. "I wish it was, if that's what would make you feel better about everything, but I can't give you that. I'm sorry."

"That doesn't explain why the cat is talking," she said calmly. "Or why he's such a smarmy little jerk."

"You know how cats are," Carver shrugged, the barest hint of amusement twitching at his lips. "They're all smarmy little jerks."

"Did you have something to do with it? Did you make him talk?"

"I do so hate repeating myself, but I already told you I could always talk," the cat interjected, "and please don't speak of me as though I'm not right here in the room with you. It's very rude, Mistress."

"Rude," she snorted a little. "Right."

"Pounce has been with me since I was a little boy," Carver explained. "I found him in the woods behind my father's fields, though my mother said it was he who found me. He's my familiar."

"Your familiar?" she shook her head. "Like how that Weasley boy had the rat that turned into the bad guy that betrayed Harry Potter's parents?"

It was Carver's turn to sniff, the amusement of her question lighting in his eyes as he lifted them to her face. "Mr. Pounce won't be betraying me anytime soon, or you. He's sworn to look after you, and he is incredibly loyal to me, even if he is an arrogant little bastard."

"Hello," the cat moaned. "I am sitting right here."

“Sorry, Pounce. You’re a good friend.”

“Better than you deserve.”

“You’re absolutely right.”

“That still doesn’t explain how he can talk. Is it magic? Some kind of... spell? There are spells, right?”

“Sometimes, yes. I don’t know why he can talk. He just always has. The day we found each other in the woods, he just walked up to me and started a conversation.”

“Was he rude back then too?”

Once more, Carver chuckled. “He’s always been rude, but as I said it’s just how cats are. He thinks he’s far superior to the rest of us, isn’t that right, Pounce?”

“I’m not even going to acknowledge you anymore. Just go on pretending I’m not even in the room, insulting and making fun of me. Really, Master. I don’t mind one bit.”

“Sorry, Mr. Pounce,” Siren said, leaning out to look at him. “I love you, you know that.”

“Of course you do, Mistress. What’s not to love?” He got up, stretching and arching his back before hopping down from the ottoman with a thump. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to have a look around, see if there are any mice lurking about contemplating how best to get into the pantry cupboards.”

She watched him saunter off, every arrogant step a deliberate display. Only after he disappeared around the corner and Siren found herself alone again with Carver did she relax and lean back into the couch.

There were so many things she wanted to know, things only he could answer, but then she remembered she was angry with him, that he’d lied to her, and she might not be able to trust anything he said at all. So she said nothing for a long time, her fingers pinching and tugging at a loose thread that stuck out of the love seat cushion. It was just long enough for her to wrap around the tip of her finger twice, tightening it in such a way that she could feel the blood pulsing as the skin turned purple from lack of circulation.

Carver eventually dropped back onto the floor, sitting down with his long legs crossed and his hands folded in his lap like some kind of roughed-up Buddha.

He seemed to be waiting for her to make the first move, to ask the questions she must certainly be dying to ask. And she wanted to ask them, of course she did, but she felt like she was in shock. As if she was going to bolt awake any moment and find herself either lying in bed beside Patrick and feeling mildly relieved to discover he was not, in fact, a murderer, or all wrapped up in a straightjacket and locked away in a padded cell. She wasn't sure which of those things felt like more of a comfort as she thought of them, but either seemed like it might be a relief from the last twenty hours of reality.

The inside of her mouth felt dry, and when she pushed her tongue along the roof she swore grains of sand scraped across the skin there. She needed a drink; maybe something stiff and alcoholic, and that was saying a lot because Siren didn't really like to drink any more than she savored the idea of popping a pill to make everything better. Her mother had been a junkie, or so Aunt Maisie said. She'd spent the majority of her life living a very anti-drug campaign.

"Where did you go, Carver?"

He was rubbing the tip of his thumb along the arch of his palm in soothing strokes, something she'd seen him do so many times it almost felt as if they'd lapsed backwards and the last three years of her life never happened at all. He used to sit that way and think sometimes, especially when he was preoccupied with writing. She wondered what he was thinking about right then. If he was looking for the best lie to tell, or the easiest way to tell the truth.

"I don't know where I was exactly," he finally shook his head. "It was a dark place, I know that much. A dreadful, wicked nightmare of a place I will spend the rest of my days praying I never return to."

Shaking her head, she brought her hand up to twist fingers around the loose strands of her ponytail. "I don't understand. Couldn't you have at least called me, or something?"

"Believe me, I tried," he insisted. "I thought I'd gotten through somehow in the very beginning, but I was never quite sure after a while if it was actually you breaking up on the other line, or if I'd made that memory up along with all the others to content myself in that wretched place. I tried to preserve the battery life on my phone, but three years is a long time and eventually not even my magic could bring it back to life." Lowering his

head again, she watched his shoulders draw back, stretching with the breath he inhaled and held inside him. With a long sigh he added, "I used to reward myself sometimes by listening to your voice mails."

Siren swallowed, "I did that too... Until Patrick got me a new phone. When I upgraded I tried to transfer all the data, but all the voice messages got wiped. I was so upset. It felt like that last little piece of you I managed to hold onto was finally taken away."

"That was how I felt when my battery died. I worried you would never open the box and try on the ring..."

"The ring?" The familiarity of a ring on her finger made her forget she'd taken off her wedding and engagement rings to try it on. Bringing her hand up, she wanted to admire it, but she couldn't let herself no matter how much she longed for it. "That was what brought you back?"

"It's enchanted."

"Enchanted? What do you mean?"

"It's connected to me," he said. "There's an inscription inside the band, a runic enchantment. I know that sounds odd, maybe you even think it was meant as an effort to attach myself to you, but it was my mother's ring. The band, anyway, and some of the stones. It came to me when she passed from this world, and when I knew I wanted to spend my life with you I had it altered a little." She watched him bring his hands up to his face, roll the palms along his cheeks before drawing them back down with a sigh. "I planned to tell you everything before I ever allowed you to put that ring on your finger. I would not have connected you to me in any way without you knowing everything you were getting yourself into."

The concept was a confusing one, and she found her hand rising so she could look at it again. It seemed so perfect when she first laid eyes on it, as though he'd spent an eternity crafting it so it would suit her. Not that it meant any less that he'd wanted to give her his mother's ring. If anything, it felt even more personal, but she couldn't help wondering how it was connected to him, what that runic inscription meant. Was there a part of him inside it? Had that been how it brought him back to her?

On the other hand, the very notion of the ring on her finger binding her to him in some way was disconcerting and uncomfortable. Six months earlier she would have marveled at the idea, wanting him back so badly she would have been willing to try just about anything if it meant bringing him back.

Now that he was sitting in front of her, a fountain of lies and deception who could heal wounds, lift cars and unlock doors with little more than the flick of his wrist... Well, she didn't know what to make of that and she wasn't sure she wanted to wear that ring on her finger any longer.

"Siren, I know I owe you so many explanations..."

"Yes," she cut him off. "You do, but I don't think I want to hear any of them right now."

Leaning forward on the love seat, she planned to get up and leave him alone with his thoughts, but where would she go? Deeper into that house she had no business being in? Should she seek refuge in the unfamiliar rooms of someone else's summer home, just for a little while until the storm passed? And then what? Where did she go from there? She was almost a thousand miles from home, and as that thought occurred to her it came with the notion that she didn't even really have a home. She'd come to think of her place with Patrick as home, that the quaint little dilapidated dome in the middle of nowhere would be the safe place they put a white picket fence around so their children could run through the grass playing kickball and tag.

God, she had actually considered having children with him.

But Patrick wasn't safe.

Nothing was.

"I think I need to be alone for a while," she declared, the soft tone of her voice nearly swallowed by the bellowing thunder outside.

"I understand."

Carver moved aside, staring straight ahead at the seat she'd occupied only seconds before when she moved past him and headed into the vast kitchen just beyond the sun porch.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The grittiness of sand rubbed her bare feet as she walked, scanning the shadowed interior when she peeked into the small bathroom just off to the right and past the kitchen. There was another doorway on the left, a bedroom she caught a glimpse of as a wicked flash of lightning strobed through the slats of the window blinds on the other side of the room. At the end of that hallway and to the right, there was another entryway that opened up into a dining room and a set of stairs leading upward.

She didn't know what compelled her to take those stairs, but one by one she climbed them until she reached the landing and scanned the myriad of closed doors darkening the hallway. A single night light plugged into the outlet, casting a dull white glow onto the sea foam green walls and dark blue trim that made the hallway feel foreboding and filled with shadows. She was tiptoeing, she realized as she kept to the linear rug stretching the length and snugly covering every stair behind her. There were still grains of sand stuck to the sides of her feet, itchy and coarse as they rubbed with each step she took.

Opening doors to peek inside the rooms, she had the foreboding feeling someone was inside one of them, hiding from the intruders with a gun or a baseball bat, waiting to be discovered, but they were all empty—black-edged furniture outlines made visible by the pale greyish light eking through the tight spaces of the storm shutters covering the windows. Occasionally the glass in the paintings decorating the walls caught the pale illumination of the hallway, or picked up the flashes of lightning enough to increase visibility, but she never reached for the light switch in any of the

rooms until she arrived at the door opening into the master bedroom at the back of the second floor.

Even in the dark she could tell it was huge. In the center was a four-poster bed draped with sheer curtains that caught in the breeze when she'd opened the door. Tall windows spanned the easternmost wall. There was a bathroom to the right, the door open and the dull glow of a second night light creeping out from within and defining everything in the room around her as her eyes began to adjust.

She found herself reaching to her left until her hand brushed gently along to the wall, the light switch answering to her touch. She flipped it on, squinting her eyes just a little as she brought her gaze down toward the bed. The bright colors on the walls only intensified the addition of that light, and she felt for the briefest of moments like she was standing on the beach itself in the midst of a brilliant summer day.

In a fashion she could truly appreciate, there was a mural painted along the side walls, leading up to the vast, darkened windows. The lower half was painted to resemble the beach, glittering sand littered with shells, discarded flip-flops, a half-formed castle rising out of the sparkling grains. The upper-half was the most enticing blue, the clearest of skies and she knew that when the storm shutters were open and the ocean breathed in and out beyond the glass, lying on the bed in that room would feel exactly like sleeping on the beach. She had a vague suspicion and wondered if the lamplight was charging glow-in-the dark constellations that would further add to that illusion by night. She reached for the switch again to turn it off and her notion was confirmed as the pale white glow of hand-painted constellations and clusters strategically placed in their summer resting positions in the sky dully shimmered overhead.

A tiny piece of home, she thought as it captured exactly what she'd wanted to do in her studio and made her feel safe even though she knew she shouldn't feel comfortable in someone else's house. For the moment there was no fear, or the lurking dread of multiple betrayals pressing down upon her until she couldn't breathe.

Flipping the light on again, she made her way toward the opposite side of that vast room and touched her finger to the automatic switch that opened the storm shutters. They groaned and creaked, retracting upward to reveal the raging ocean as forked tongues lashed across the jagged peaks and

waves. Sideways rain splattered across the glass, instantly blurring the world outside, but even through the haze that troublesome landscape was beautiful and enticing and dangerous.

Resting her hand on the window frame, she leaned into the glass, pressed her forehead to the cool surface and just watched the storm rage on outside. Part of her never wanted to leave the safety of that moment. Another part of her wanted to go back to the place she'd started to think of as home. Mostly, she wanted Carver to step in behind her, lower a hand to her shoulder and rest his chin atop the back of her head, whispering the words, "I'm sorry," into her hair.

Would she forgive him? Was that kind of forgiveness even a possibility? He'd lied to her about who he was in the worst way, and though she still wanted to believe in him, she wasn't sure she could.

She didn't know why, but she still wanted to feel his arms around her, to escape into the illusion of comfort she'd found in both the reality and the memory of him she'd carried so close to herself over the last three years. She could lose herself in it for a little while, couldn't she? She could let go of all the anger and fear clinging to her like a cold, wet blanket, right?

In letting go, there was forgiveness—that's what Aunt Maisie always said—but how could she forgive him when she didn't even really know who he was? What if his secrets were dark, like Patrick's? What if every single thing he ever told her was a lie?

"He was telling the truth you know?"

The cat's intrusion on her silent reverie brought a clutching hand to her breast, the startled breath that caught in her throat nearly choking her as she stepped back from the window and swallowed a squeaking shriek before it could escape her. She wasn't sure what was worse—that he'd sneaked up on her in typical Mr. Pounce fashion, or that he seemed to know exactly what she was thinking.

"Why do you do that?" she admonished him, glaring down at the pretentious ball of white fluff positioned near her feet. "Especially if you have the power to just... oh, I don't know, shout out that you're coming up behind someone."

"And miss moments like this?" he tsked. "Perish the thought."

She swore he was grinning, the pointed tips of his teeth sticking out as he kept his lips parted.

“Apologies however. I didn’t mean to frighten you, not that time anyway.”

“The fact that there have been times you meant to frighten me...”

Shaking her head, she moved back to the window, pretending to ignore the cat behind her. She felt him staring up at her, the narrowed intensity of his bright golden eyes trailing like shivers up and down her spine. She refused to give into those chills, and for the moment she refused to further acknowledge Mr. Pounce at all. The cat seemed perfectly content to linger at her back, probably staring outside at the storm beyond the windows as well.

“Patrick is really bad,” she said after a long bout with silence, “isn’t he?”

Mr. Pounce was yawning, his mouth gaping wide, pointed tips of his canines like little white pins jutting from pink gums. He didn’t attempt to answer until he finished and began stretching his front paws. His belly sunk toward the floor, tail whipping lazily across the polished wooden planks before he dropped down. When he spoke, it was in a slow drawl, almost as lazy as the movement of his body. “I’m sure he had his good qualities... once.”

“Why did you let me marry him?” she wondered.

“My duty was to watch over and protect you, Mistress. There was nothing I could have done...”

“You could have said something.”

“Said something?” The pale whiskers above his eyes twitched the way an eyebrow might jut upward in astonishment. “Would you have listened even if I had the power of my voice at the time, which I did not?” he wondered aloud. “Would you have finally believed you’d gone off the deep end? Maybe had yourself committed?”

Outside the wind was a furious breath, palm trees bending, the fronds whipping wildly as torrents of rain danced sideways to the whistling tune of its anger. Siren watched, pretending once again not to care much what the cat was doing. Hand perched on the window frame, she tapped the nail of her index finger against the wood three times then took a step back. She turned away from the window, still ignoring Mr. Pounce as she made her way toward the four poster bed. It had no sheets, no comforter, just a bare mattress and those gauzy curtains she could easily see swaying in the night breeze with her mind’s eye.

“You’ve spent your whole life believing that was what you deserved, Mistress. Thinking you were going to go crazy just like your mother.”

“You haven’t even known me my whole life,” she pointed out. She trailed her hand through the sheer fabric, watching it shiver against her touch.

“Six years is a long time, and though you may think you hide and guard yourself well, you let your guard down around me because I’m a cat. I listened to everything you said in my presence. I drew my own conclusions. Even if I could have done it, revealing my true nature to you would have been catastrophic without the master there to reassure you that you hadn’t gone mad.”

Laughter scuffed through her throat, a soft hiss of it spilling into the air. “He’s right downstairs,” she noted, “and I’m pretty sure I’ve gone completely out of my mind.”

“Are you sure?” he asked. “You seem to be holding yourself together rather well for someone out of her mind.”

“I think that’s what scares me most. I married a psychopath who apparently has magic powers,” she said. “And I spent the last three years pining for a man I thought for sure was my knight in shining armor, but it turns out I know less about him than the murderer I married.”

“The master never lied to you.”

“No?” She finally turned to look at the cat again, but it was his turn to feign disinterest. “He kept important information about himself, about his life, from me. If that’s not the same thing as lying, I don’t know what else to call it.”

“And had he told you from the start,” he drawled, “if he had held his hand out to you in the coffee shop that night and said, ‘Hello, my name is Carver Ashmore and I’m a sorcerer,’ what would have happened then? I’ll tell you,” he went on. “You would have laughed him right out of the booth and onto the streets, and that would have been the end of it.”

“Maybe it would have been better...”

“Better?” he scoffed, a strange sound coming from a cat, which could only be compared to an arrogant, but mild hairball cough. “Do you really believe that?”

She didn’t believe it, but she kept that to herself.

“How many times over the years have I heard you say to anyone who’d dare to listen before gagging themselves with a sharp object that my master was the one and only good thing to bless your life. You couldn’t even convince yourself that the man you married—as disgustingly sweet as he pretended to be—came close to filling in the shadow Carver left behind.”

“So what, Mr. Pounce?” she wondered. “What are you saying? That because he made an impact, because he made me happy I’m supposed to just overlook all the things he left out?”

“Yes, that is exactly what I’m saying. Maybe he wasn’t as forthcoming as you would have liked him to be. Maybe he withheld important information, but he was always genuine with you, Mistress. The way he made you feel, that was real.”

“Was it?” Narrowing her eyes toward the window again, she watched the trees bend at insane angles, as if they were stretching toward the horizon like reaching arms begging to be embraced. “And what about the curse? I read his books. I know the only thing that can break this curse of immortality he and Patrick share is the love of a Talbot woman...”

“He never enchanted you,” Mr. Pounce insisted. “Not the way your husband did.”

“Patrick enchanted me?”

“And everyone around you. The magic he worked on you, on all the people in your life so they would love and accept him...”

“Oh my god...” She started to lift her hand to her gasping mouth, stunned nearly speechless as realization dawned. So many times Lacey argued with her about letting go of Carver once Patrick became a permanent fixture in her life. Even Aunt Maisie seemed to forget how much she adored Carver, favoring Patrick as though he was the only man in the world who could possibly be good enough for her niece.

“My god indeed. Fortunately for all of us, your feelings for the master were true. The magic that is true love cannot be thwarted. There is nothing in the world more powerful than it. He tried,” the cat said. “Oh, how he tried to make you forget, to fill your mind with other things so you would let go. He started planting seeds inside you, trying to convince you to have children with him, filling your life with all these mundane things that revolved around him so there was no time to dwell on the absence of your heart, but in the end true love always wins.”

“You make it sound like a fairy tale.”

“Isn’t it?”

It was Siren’s turn to scoff, a haughty breath of disbelief that made her feline companion click his tongue against the back of his tiny white teeth. “Fairy tales are happy things...”

“Mistress...” he droned, “fairy tales are rarely happy events. They’re dark and twisted, wicked tales of woe and struggle with the faintest strands of pure light woven through them.”

He was right, and she knew it. Cartoon companies had twisted fairy tales into family friendly displays of righteous goodness where everyone got a happily ever after except the villain—who always got his or her just desserts. But the real fairy tales, the ones that inspired those adaptations were shadowed stories that left an empty feeling inside the soul as hard truths about the world became disturbingly evident.

“So what?” she asked the cat. “Are you saying there are no such things as happily ever afters?”

“No, Mistress, I’m saying it’s up to you to make your ever after a happy affair. Only you have the power to do that.”

Looking down at her hands, she hadn’t even realized she folded them in her lap. She was tracing the tip of her right index finger across the stones in the ring she was still wearing. Even after everything, she hadn’t even thought to take it off. It felt right on her finger, and not because it was enchanted, but because Carver meant it for her. There was a piece of him attached to that ring—though maybe that *was* the enchantment after all, compelling her to hold onto it, to keep it close so they were never parted again.

“It’s been a long time since I was like you,” Mr. Pounce said thoughtfully, “but I still remember how hard it was to turn away from something that felt right.”

“You...” she glanced up at him again, her eyes squinting curiously. “You were human once?”

“Not quite human, but close enough. I barely remember it.”

“What happened?”

“That’s a story for another time, Mistress. For now, maybe you should go back downstairs and hear the master out,” he suggested. “Hear everything

he has to say so you can decide for yourself whether or not your fairy tale gets a happy ending.”

Siren looked toward the door, an anxious feeling swelling in her chest. She wanted a happy ending, but she was so afraid to give Carver the chance he probably deserved. Pushing up from the mattress she’d only just sat down on, she lingered at the edge of the bed for a moment. Once more she found herself drawn to the trees beyond the window, how agilely they bent against the ferocity of the raging wind.

Aunt Maisie used to say something, she thought, something about the difference between a strong tree and a weak tree... something about the strong ones being willing to bend.

“I guess I should bend,” she muttered.

The cat stared at her as if he couldn’t even begin to guess what she’d said, and then he yawned again, swaying his own head toward the tall windows beside him to stare out into the storm beyond the glass.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

While she was gone, Carver moved from the floor in the sun room to the living room just off the kitchen. He turned on a single light, a small table lamp on the other side of the room that barely put a dent in the darkness that seemed to hover over the beach house like some magic curse. For all she knew, that was exactly what it was. That thought did very little to assuage her apprehension when she arrived in the doorway and just stared at the disheveled remnants of the man who'd haunted her every waking moment for the last three years.

She hadn't given herself much time to process any of what happened. The truth about Patrick was still murky, and there was a part of her that wanted desperately to believe it was all just some kind of misunderstanding. He never said he'd killed the homeless man. Siren worked herself up to the point that she wanted to believe the worst about the man she married, and she was relatively sure there was a perfectly good psychological explanation for her reactions. Carver—everything came back to Carver in the end, just like Patrick said, and she wasn't sure if her willingness to believe the worst about her husband was because Patrick was right, or because he really wasn't who he'd been pretending to be all along.

So confusing; it made her head hurt—the lingering effect of her accident, she guessed.

While she was upstairs Carver made himself at home, sinking into the corner of the tan leather couch and stretching out his long legs until he was able to prop his sand-crusting shoes on the coffee table. Particles littered the oak finish, piling up around his feet as grain by grain they loosened and fell

away. Arms crossed loosely over his chest, he tipped his head along the back of the couch and closed his eyes. The sweat and rain-damp locks of his blond hair rested against his cheeks, nearly hiding the features of his face.

He looked exhausted, as though he was barely holding himself together at all.

She felt guilty for not putting more thought into what he must surely have been through in the last three years. He hadn't said much about it, but it changed him. She could see it in the occasional paranoid widening of his grey eyes, the cautious way he seemed to scan the beach as if looking for danger.

Siren stood in the doorway for a long time wondering if he was asleep and debating with herself on whether or not she should just go back upstairs. The part of her that never stopped waiting for him wanted desperately to cross the space between them and lower a hand to the hair clinging to his forehead so she could brush the strands away and really look at him. There wasn't a single doubt he was the man she fell in love with six years earlier, but what if he was some painful illusion she conjured to placate herself in the state between life and death? What if he was simply waiting there with her before her end came?

Shifting the weight of her body from one hip to the other, her knee sounded with a sharp pop that brought Carver's eyes open with a start when he drew his legs from the table and firmly planted both feet on the floor as if expecting to run for his life. He stared in drowsy paranoia, scanning every shadow in the room until his gaze finally came to rest on Siren.

"I didn't hear you come down the stairs," he said. "I must have drifted off."

"I didn't mean to startle you. I'm sorry."

"No," head wagging back and forth, he still hadn't relaxed the tension in his muscles. "It's not your fault, I'm..." There didn't seem to be words to complete that thought, not at first anyway. Silence lurked between them until he cleared his throat then finally lowered his raised shoulders. "I'm not sure I'll ever sleep comfortably again. The last three years were... Well, it doesn't matter."

"Yes, it does matter." Tentatively stepping into the room, her feet moved so slowly, her trick knee sounding a subtle pop with each step she took until she arrived at the arm of the matching love seat backed up against the wall

cattycorner from the couch. "You must be exhausted, especially after... you know, after everything you did to save me."

"You'd be surprised at what you're capable of when someone you love is in danger," he mused. Siren watched as he brought a hand up to scratch through the pale stubble on his chin. She could hear the scritch-scratch sound of fingertips moving through it before he started to lean back again. "I'd do anything to protect you."

"Even risk serious injury?"

"If it meant saving you, I'd throw my life on the line."

"Which wouldn't really mean much, considering you're immortal."

"About that..." he started, then thought better of it. He closed his mouth and nestled his broad shoulders into the back of the couch, avoiding Siren's eyes as she stared.

"What do you mean?"

"It's nothing, I'm sure. I don't want to confuse you anymore than I already have."

"You might as well." She shrugged and slid around the arm of the love seat, dropping with a whoomph onto the soft cushion and sinking deep. "I'm not entirely sure, but I think I'm so confused that you could say anything and it couldn't possibly confuse me more."

He breathed out a chuckle, the sound little more than a simple puff of air passing between his slightly parted lips. "The thing is I don't know for certain, but I believe the curse has already been broken."

"What do you mean?"

"Everything in the books I wrote was true, as you've no doubt guessed. Matthias and Cameron were Patrick and me. I only changed the names of the people in the story, but all of the events were true. Isabela Talbot cursed us both when our mothers failed to save her daughter. The girl was already at death's door when the Talbots brought her to our mothers, but grief does funny things to people. Goodwife Talbot blamed the healers, and when cries of witchcraft went unheeded, she resorted to a little witchcraft of her own. They say she called a demon from the pits of hell and through his power she cast a curse upon both of our houses. The line would stop with us, and we would suffer her wrath for all eternity. Our torment would be everlasting."

"Immortality," she muttered. "Like a vampire."

“Just the immortality part,” he laughed a little. “And the suffering, I guess.”

“But your mother called upon forces of her own,” Siren remembered the story. She’d read all of Carver’s books after she met him, never imagining how important they would be to understanding who he was as a person. After he disappeared she used to lay in bed and read them all cover to cover, again and again as if the words on the paper were a last tie to him. She supposed they were, in their own right; she just hadn’t realized how much of him was in those pages. “She wasn’t able to break the curse, but she altered it.”

“That’s right,” he nodded, a slow, appreciative smile drawing at the edges of his lips. “The curse could be broken, but only if peace could be made and our houses united.”

“The love of a Talbot woman...”

“Yes.” As Carver stretched his head back, eyes scanning through the shadows on the ceiling, Siren watched the muscles in his throat tighten and clench as he swallowed. “Of course, you give a man a challenge like that and he’s going to take it, but the thing is Isabela Talbot had only one other daughter and she was already married. There were sons, of course, but there was no direct hope of breaking that curse and the rivalry between our families only continued to grow. Patrick’s mother, my Aunt Hilde, was murdered when we were fourteen, and while there was never any proof there was no doubt in my mother’s mind that the Talbots were involved. Patrick went crazy.”

“He found her body,” Siren remembered.

“It did something irreversible to his mind and his magic. My mother said he embraced darkness that day and no matter how I tried to save him, I could not. He resented me because my mother lived and our rivalry was born the day he backed his mother’s sister into a corner and threatened to tear out her heart if she didn’t delve into the dark arts of necromancy to bring his mother back. I stopped him from hurting my mother, but he ran. I lost track of him for many years after he fled. We both grew, we came into our power and when next we met it seemed we’d taken opposite paths. He refused to forgive my family for allowing his mother’s death to go unpunished.”

“But your mother included him in her counter-curse, right?”

“She did, but no matter how he tries it seems he cannot honestly win the love that would break the curse. As for me, it never felt right to manipulate those factors to my benefit. If I one day met a woman with Talbot blood in her veins, and that woman fell in love with me for who I am, then I would gladly see the curse ended, but Patrick will not allow it to naturally unfold. He forces it, and you cannot break a curse by forcing it.”

“What do you mean he forces it?”

“Exactly what it sounds like. He uses his magic to manipulate emotions and feelings. He victimizes the women he attempts to break the curse with. In fact, that is what started all of *this*.” He held his hands up to encompass more than just the room around him, but she didn’t need him to elaborate. She knew he was talking about the situation, their situation. “Over the centuries we often lost track of one another. I went about trying to live lifetimes, while Patrick attempted again and again to break the curse. About seventy-five years ago I sent him into a portal and imprisoned him in another realm after he brutally tormented a young woman named Sarah Talbot.”

“Tormented? How?”

“He used his darkness to imprison her against her will, toying with her emotions and her mind until she was confused about who she was and what she wanted...” The words trailed into silence that begged to be filled with words, but Carver didn’t seem to have any.

“Did you...” Siren’s heart clenched a little inside her chest as she realized she didn’t want an answer to that question. The notion of Carver and Patrick fighting over a woman, a woman who wasn’t her, made her feel dizzy and sick to her stomach. “Were you and Sarah...?”

“No, nothing like that.” Carver chuckled a little. “I never even knew her before I came upon him quite by accident. It was the draw of his power that pulled me toward him for the first time in decades. The darkness of it, I can feel it, you know? It swells and burns, itching beneath the skin.”

“I’ve felt that,” she agreed with a dismal nod.

“You have?” Tilting his head curiously in her direction, he didn’t seem to believe her. “That’s odd.”

“He took the ring, your ring, I mean. He stole it out of my jewelry box and tried to hide it from me. There was some kind of... I don’t know, enchantment around it, or something. A hex, or a curse or... Anyway, when

I tried to take it back it burned and stung so bad it felt like I'd held my arm in a pot of boiling, angry bees with stingers made of fire."

"I'm sorry."

"Why? It wasn't your fault."

"Well, in some ways it was. You were caught in the crossfire of our rivalry. I never wanted that for you, Siren. I should have protected you better."

She bit her tongue, pushing down the urge to remark that she might have better protected herself if he told her the whole truth from the start. Instead of saying what was really on her mind, she steered the subject back to their rivalry. "This Sarah Talbot," she changed the subject, "what did he do to her?"

"He made her into something there are no words to describe. He destroyed her mind, twisted her thoughts. She barely knew who she was, much less that what he'd done to her was wrong. She was a slave to his whims. It was vile." When he exhaled, there was a lingering, painful hitch that made her long to reach out and comfort him. "I couldn't let him go on with it, so I stopped him. I shattered the spell she was under and when she came back to herself the consequences were severe. She couldn't handle the truth, or the memories of all the things he'd done to her. She went insane when she saw him for what he really was. She didn't..." Again he seemed at a loss for words, as if the memory of that poor girl was too painful and he wasn't able to go on.

Siren gave him a moment, waiting for him to continue, but when he didn't she prompted him with another question. "What happened to Sarah Talbot, Carver?"

"She killed herself right in front of us. And Patrick laughed."

"Oh my god." Those words were little more than a disturbed whisper of dismay. She could only visualize moments of Patrick's anger, the speed at which he lost his temper and how he'd clench his fist at his side while staring upward and trying to get his rage under control again. He was many things, she thought, but deliberately cruel? Try as she might, she couldn't imagine it, and yet she was relatively certain he'd brutally murdered an innocent homeless man trying to *protect* her.

"I opened a portal to another realm and I imprisoned him there because that was what he deserved, but I always knew he'd come back one day, that

he'd find his way back to this world. I just didn't know when. I took precautions after I met you. I enchanted my familiar with an illusion spell so he would not be recognizable in the event that we were separated and you found yourself under Patrick's spell."

"So he didn't recognize Mr. Pounce?"

"No."

"He didn't like him though."

"But he was protected from his magic and his eye nonetheless. The ring I was going to give you that night was enchanted as well. I didn't know what he would do, but I believed that I could stay connected to you, protect you... especially if you accepted me after you learned the truth. But there was no time for the truth, and I did the only thing I could think of. I left it on the table and hoped you would at least open it and set me free, even if you couldn't accept who I was."

"If you had told me maybe I..."

"I know you don't believe me, but I was going to tell you everything that night because you deserved to know the truth and..." Drawing in a deep breath, he held it inside him for what felt like an eternity before exhaling a long sigh. "The curse, Siren, I think it was broken."

"Wait, what?"

"I don't know for certain, but in that dark place I was near death for the first time in my life, so weak I was unable to heal myself and thought I'd finally met my end. Your love for me, Siren, it broke the curse, but it was also the thing that saved me as I lay dying. I stayed alive for you. I realize that must sound crazy, but I couldn't die, not without telling you the truth. Not without saving you from whatever darkness he tried to wrap you up in."

An odd feeling swept through her, marching chills dancing along the length of her spine before circling around the nape of her neck and traipsing back down again, causing her to shudder.

"Carver... he was..." It was her turn to suffer loss of words, a thousand thoughts working through her, trying to make their way out of her mouth, but they didn't come. Not at first. It took several minutes for her to make sense of them all and finally say, "He never hurt me. He was angry sometimes, really jealous of the fact that I couldn't let go of my past, but he tried to balance it the best he could. He tried to understand, I think. He

was..." She didn't want to cause him pain, but somehow she felt the words about to leave her would do just that. "He was good to me, Carver. Maybe there were illusions, I don't know. Maybe he messed with my thoughts, my family, but he... he loved me. I know that doesn't excuse the things he's done, but—"

"Siren," he started.

"I always felt like I was a terrible person because no matter what he did for me it was never enough because he wasn't you."

"I'm not saying he wasn't good to you, but please, Siren, think about what you just said. He manipulated your thoughts, your family. You can see, even if it's not entirely clear, but you saw it. Maybe you sensed something was wrong. Maybe you could feel on some level you didn't understand that the way you felt was outside your control."

Carver leaned forward again and lowered his hand atop hers. His palm was warm, not unnaturally so; it was comfortable and familiar, reminiscent of staring across dinner tables and getting lost in each other's presence. God, she missed that. Patrick never wanted to just be silent together, not that way. The only time he wasn't talking to her, it seemed was when he slept, and in those moments she'd always found herself mesmerized while she watched him, as if she were under the suffocating blanket of some spell that compelled her to notice all the adorable little things about him that made him endearing, that obliterated the strange and occasional irrational fear she felt when he was angry.

Tiptoe around the monster, don't ever wake it because waking it would be bad.

"Patrick was the one who caused your pain in the first place. You can be angry with me for not telling you all you needed to know. I accept that, but please don't allow his manipulation to cloud you from the truth. The things he got angry with you for? It was he who brought them on. He sent me away from you. He tried to work his way into your life to take my place in your heart, but it doesn't work that way. Hearts don't work like that at all."

"You don't just stop loving someone," she muttered, remembering the hundreds of times over the last three years she'd said those words out loud, to Patrick and anyone else who'd listen. His fingers squeezed hers, and then he started to withdraw. She brought her other hand in to stop him, drawing

him back in, much to his surprise. “Look me in the eyes and tell me you never once manipulated my emotions to your benefit.”

He was hurt, she could see it in his expression and that was the only piece of honesty she truly needed, but he said it anyway. Eyes narrowing just a little, he touched his tongue to his lips for a second then said, “I never manipulated you in any way, Siren. I protected you, yes, but I never manipulated you.”

“And when we met you really had no idea who I was? Who my family was?”

“No, I never knew. It was a strange, but glorious coincidence.”

“I believe you.”

“You do?”

Nodding her head, she tightened her hand across the top of his knuckles just a little. “I probably shouldn’t. You lied to me, but I sort of understand why you did it.”

“I only wanted to protect you,” he muttered. “I never wanted you to be hurt or scared, most especially not because of me, and in the end I paid a price most severe because of it. Had I told you everything from the start...” Carver’s head swept back and forth in silent self-deprecation, his lips pinched tight together as if there were no words to express just how sorry he was, how guilty he felt. “I was so afraid of losing you, but my fear was the very thing that put you in danger. I lost you because...”

“You haven’t lost me, Carver,” she insisted, not realizing how severe those words were until she spoke them. But they were true. Even amid the absence of truth, she knew the man in front of her more intimately than anyone she’d ever known. And the truth had been there, in its own way, in the pages of the books he shared with her and the rest of the world. Perhaps if she’d paid closer attention she might have realized it on her own, drawn conclusions and made sense of everything, but none of that really mattered, not anymore. “I’m right here,” she promised. “I’m with you, and no matter what happens I will not let you out of my sight ever again.”

How expressive his face was in that moment, eyes blinking furiously as if he were battling a flood of tears, nostrils flaring wide as the corners of his mouth stretched slightly downward in reproachful disbelief. “You really do love me.”

“Of course I love you.” She narrowed the space between them, rested her forehead to his and closed her eyes. She instinctively moved inward to touch his lips. They were soft, an old familiar memory she’d indulged only in her dreams those last three years. Carver gasped a little at the unexpected display and then he brought his hand up to cradle her cheek as he drew her in deeper.

The tips of his fingers inched forward, into the loose strands of hair beyond her ear as her lips parted to invite him to taste her. She felt so many things, emotions never quite forgotten, a subtle tingling centered in the lowest part of her stomach like the flutter of so many wings inside her, an outpouring of warmth bordering on eager desperation. He needn’t speak a single word, his sentiment matched her own. She didn’t know how she knew, maybe it was the connection to him through the ring on her finger, but she felt what he felt for a moment. How long he’d waited to indulge in the taste of her lips again, to feel the tight squeeze of her fingers wrapped around his and the slow exhale of her breath across his cheek when she nestled her face alongside his and tried not to give into the overwhelming sense of emotion rising through her.

If that was not a magic all its own, she didn’t know what else to call it. Lifting her hand from atop his, she brought fingers up to curl around his wrist, holding his touch to her cheek. The question was, if magic really did happen every time Carver touched her, was that his doing, or was it just the way things were? She drew back, resting her forehead against his again and closing her eyes as she breathed in. Everything was familiar and right, just the way it was supposed to be, and though she knew they couldn’t sit that way in someone else’s house forever, she didn’t want the moment to end.

“So,” she started, “what happens now?”

He remained soft, attentive, touching his lips to the corner of her mouth again before he started to withdraw to look at her. “Honestly?” he quirked an eyebrow. “I don’t know what happens now. I know we can’t stay here forever.”

“No, I don’t think the people who actually live here would appreciate that.”

“Once the storm passes, we should move on, but I don’t know where to go from here. Do we go back and face him, or do we run?”

“He will come after us,” she said with grave certainty. “I’m his wife.”

Carver's head dropped, lazy lids falling over both eyes to disguise the disappointment that reality brought to him.

"I'm so sorry," she lamented. "I should have waited. I should have known you'd find your way back to me no matter what."

"Don't be sorry." Drawing his head back up, there was sincerity in his gaze, understanding she surely didn't deserve. "You had no idea what happened, for all you knew I could have been dead."

"I knew in my heart you were still out there..."

"Well, I'm sure he worked diligently to urge you to move on."

"He showed up in my life just a few days after you disappeared, moved into the empty apartment next to mine and just... I don't know, he was a nice guy. I thought he was anyway. He didn't start pursuing me until about a year after you were gone, but before that he was just... I don't know, there for me, I guess. He was a friend, always trying to cheer me up, sometimes with Chinese takeout and stupid comedy movies. One day we were just hanging out in my apartment, and the next thing I knew we were bouncing back and forth between his place and mine making wedding plans and looking for houses. But underneath it all, I knew. I kept telling myself it was only temporary and I wouldn't really have to go through with any of it because you were coming back."

"I'm sorry."

"Any minute," those two words felt like a lozenge stuck in her throat. When she swallowed it was painful and the next words she spoke were little more than a whisper. "Any minute he'll come charging back in on a white horse and spirit me away from the madness that became my life." The warmth spilling down her cheeks was unexpected, and when it dripped off her chin to splash across the top of her thigh, it startled her a little. She reached up quickly, brushing away the tears and straightening her back. "I should have waited."

"Siren," he reached for her again, "sweetheart, I'm so, so sorry."

She let him hold her. His arms around her were the only safe thing she'd ever known beyond the comfort of her aunt's love, and in the time he'd been gone she forgot what it felt like to be secure. Outside, the world was raging, she could hear it in the whistling, angry wind and furious hammer of raindrops against the siding. The ocean ranted, throwing itself like a spoiled child upon the sands, but inside a house that belonged to strangers she was

safe as Carver ran fingers through her hair to comfort her and promised without words he was never going to keep anything from her or allow anything to come between them again.

And maybe she shouldn't have felt comfortable, but she never wanted to leave the safety of that living room where she'd found her sanity and peace of mind again after what felt like a lifetime without it.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

At some point while the storm raged on, Siren crawled up onto the couch beside him and snuggled into his chest. With Carver's arm around her, their hands tangled together atop his thigh, the two of them sat there for a long time, neither of them speaking as they held each other. Eventually the exhaustion of near death and unburdened truth lulled them into a state comfortable enough for them to fall asleep. The beating of Carver's heart was a placating drum when she nestled her ear against his chest and closed her eyes.

She hadn't meant to fall asleep, but it drew her in like a crooked finger beckoning a child toward a candy house in the middle of the forest.

Dark and terrifying dreams plagued her. A red and black swarm chased her screaming through the pouring rain, a gaping maw of anger and accusation flinging curses and devastating words as her bare feet slipped and skidded through the mud.

She woke with a startled, gasping breath, fingers clenching the soft pillow tucked beneath her head. She was on a couch in an unfamiliar house, and the gentle sound of rain pattering against glass and siding only further added to the sense of panic clinging to her awareness. Reality sunk in. She was torn between relaxing and promoting the anxiety fluttering through her chest. She was in South Carolina in a stranger's house, and the black edging at the glass of the windows told her night had fallen. The continual patter of rain tapped like plinking stones, and though a part of her was terrified, she knew she was safe. She could feel Carver's presence nearby, though she

couldn't explain exactly how or even why she felt it. She just knew he was there.

Lifting her head from the pillows, she heard the sound of muffled voices coming from the well-lit kitchen, the loudest and most dominant of them belonging to her self-important cat.

She groggily scanned the room until her gaze rested on the small, blurred green numbers on the entertainment center beside the wide, flat screen television taking up the far wall. 8:17. Hunger gnawed at her insides as she realized she hadn't eaten anything since she poked at the big breakfast Aunt Maisie made her in another lifetime.

She willed herself to sit upright, dangling her legs over the edge of the couch and rubbing her bare feet along the carpet beneath them. She could still feel the grains of sand clinging to her skin, making it feel itchy and uncomfortable, and she was relatively sure the tangled mess of her jet black hair had never looked worse in her life. The ponytail was maladjusted, hanging limply to the left. Every time she moved her body, that collection of hair shifted and fell over her shoulder.

Her head ached a little and every one of her muscles felt so stiff it was a small wonder she didn't crack into a million pieces when she stood up and stretched her body. Blood rushed into her head, making her feel just a little faint, and with that sense of dizziness the panic came back. It was a dark, brooding sensation prickling at her from all sides and it brought with a terrible amount of guilt she couldn't explain.

She wasn't supposed to be there.

Siren blinked and saw Patrick's face flash across the backs of her lids.

It was surprising how calm that image of him made her feel, and there was a subtle tug at her insides, as though an invisible rope looped around her waist and sought to draw her home.

Yes... home.

She needed to go home.

Aunt Maisie would be so worried about her. Lacey was probably there with Jeff. Patrick was more than likely distraught, pacing the floors and clenching his fists as he tried to draw breath and calm himself. She could picture it clearly, see the little wrinkles at the corners of his eyes, the ones that were really visible when he was smiling, or when he was on the verge of emotionally exploding in a devastating rage. She could almost hear Aunt

Maisie trying to calm him as she set mugs of tea on the dining room table, shaking her head as she muttered, "This is so unlike her. Siren wouldn't just take off this way."

No, no she wouldn't. She may have been reckless at times, a little rebellious when it suited her to be so. It was the artist in her, Aunt Maisie said, but she wasn't irresponsible. She wasn't the kind of person who deliberately caused others pain.

God, Patrick was in pain and it was all her fault. She gripped the arm of the couch beside her to steady herself, the overwhelming sensation of that agony rolling through her like the angry waves smashing the sandy shore during a storm. She almost sat back down because it was too much, her knees threatening to buckle under her weight.

Carver must have sensed her guilty panic. His shadow darkened the streams of light from the kitchen and when she looked up she felt conflicted and afraid.

"He's hurting," she said. "I've hurt him. I don't know how I can feel it, but I feel it and it's awful, Carver. So much pain," she gasped, blinking back the heat of tears rising to blur her vision. "And it's my fault."

"No, Siren," he started to come into the room and for a moment she didn't want him there. She didn't want the anxious confusion that came with being torn between two men who loved her more than life itself. "Siren, he's reaching out to you, manipulating your emotions in an effort to get you to give yourself up."

Shaking her head, the loose ponytail flopped across the backs of her shoulders. "You don't know what it's like, Carver, to lose someone you love that much. You can't imagine what it feels like to be left stranded without an explanation..."

"He knows you left with me," he pointed out. "He watched you go, and now he's reaching out to you, he's using his power, his connection to you to twist the things inside your mind."

Desperation gripped her, a sense of painful realization so strong she couldn't imagine ever being able to shake it. Once, after Carver disappeared, she laid in bed for an entire day with a box of tissues and her best friend curled up beside her. Lacey wiped her tears and stroked attentive, loving fingers through her hair while she sobbed and moaned

about how she would never, ever wish the kind of pain she was feeling on her worst enemy.

Was Patrick her enemy? He'd been her lover. She'd taken vows in front of God and her family while the very same ocean rushing across the sand beyond the doors whispered at their bare feet. She said she loved him when she kissed him goodnight, and she thought she meant it at the time, but there was always doubt.

Even still, he loved her. She saw it in the shine of his eyes, and she'd left him without explanation.

How cruel was she to subject him to the same kind of pain that destroyed her after Carver disappeared?

Siren shook her head fiercely, denial and woe rushing through her in cold rivulets that reached the tingling tips of her toes. "You don't know what it was like to lose you."

"No," Carver agreed. His face was all shadows, only his eyes picking up the barest hint of light from the lamp on the other side of the room, and for a moment she was terrified of him. "I only know what it felt like to lose *you*, Siren. It was the most painful thing I ever endured, and I've been subjected to some hideous things in my lifetime, most especially in the last three years." He took another step toward her and as she attempted to shy away, the couch cushions pushed into the backs of her knees, nearly nudging her to sit down again. His hand stretched outward, resting on her shoulder as he tilted his head to look at her. She could finally see his face, finally look into his eyes and they were calming—unnaturally so, but she didn't care. Just looking into them made her feel better, lifted the burden of guilt tearing at her from the inside out. "He's trying to reach you, Siren, through whatever enchantments he placed upon your mind and heart. Until that enchantment is broken, you will feel him. His anger, the guilt of his manipulation."

"I don't..." The words got lost for a moment, confusion mangling them inside her head until she had to shake it a little to make sense of everything again.

"You can only fight him for so long. He'll use your family, your friends to get to you. He will appeal to your sense of duty to them, and then he'll make you think they're in danger."

“What if they are in danger?” That realization was hot spikes of terror, the perfect contrast of pain to the cold dawning of desperation of her soul. “What if he hurts them to get back at me?”

Carver didn’t say anything at first, his silence confirmation that her fear was a very real possibility. One hand still resting on her shoulder, the other lifted through the disheveled blond hair framing his face. He held them away, his high forehead furrowing into a series of worried lines as he shook his head. “I won’t lie to you, Siren. I wouldn’t put anything past him at this point.”

“Then I have to go back,” she insisted. “I have to go home. I belong to him...”

“No!” The hand atop his head dropped, the rogue strands standing at odds like the jutting straw of a scarecrow’s mockery of hair. “You don’t belong to anyone but yourself, Siren. You are stronger than that, he just has his claws in deep right now, and he’s going to try to poison your mind in any way he can to get you to come running back to him.”

“But Aunt Maisie... What about Lacey?”

“Aunt Maisie is one of the toughest birds I’ve ever met,” he mused thoughtfully. A slow smile drew at the corner of his mouth, a silent attempt to dispel her fears. “Without you there to buffer his magic, she will see right through him.”

“And if she doesn’t?”

Blinking, he took another step toward her and brought the hand on her shoulder up to rest just beneath her chin. He tilted her face upward and implored her to trust him. She wanted to, but she’d trusted him before and he’d withheld things. Maybe he’d done it to protect her, but it didn’t change the fact that he did it. What if he was protecting her then, too? What if he was telling her what she wanted to hear just to keep her from running headlong into danger?

“Listen,” he pleaded softly, “I can’t promise you everything will be all right, but I will tell you this: If you go running back there right now, he will see how deeply he’s gotten under your skin and dig deeper until you can’t fight him at all.”

She wanted to wrench her face from his grip, but she couldn’t look away. She wondered if it was some magic that compelled her to hold his stare, or

if she really felt that safe just looking into his eyes. “What are we supposed to do then, Carver? Just run away? Leave my life behind and run forever?”

“Running won’t solve anything,” he told her. “I know that, and so do you, but we can’t go back and face him until the spell he’s cast over you has been broken and we have a plan of action.”

“How do we break the spell?”

“I don’t know yet,” he shook his head and started to withdraw his hand. It dropped to his other side, both arms hanging loose, his shoulders sagging just a little, as though a part of him had already given in to defeat. “I can feel the magic. I felt it inside you when I was healing you, but it’s unlike anything I’ve ever felt before. It’s far different than the spells he worked on Sarah Talbot.”

“What do you mean? How is it different?”

Once more, his head bobbed back and forth and for a moment he tilted back to stare up at the high ceilings above them. “Like I said, I don’t know. It’s dark, possession of the most intimate kind, but the components of it make no sense to me. I wasn’t trying to understand it at the time, but it stuck with me after, and the only way for me to understand it is to take another look. You would have to allow me to poke around inside your head, and if you don’t want me to do that, I completely understand.”

“I want him out of there.” There was a sense of defiance in her tone that surprised even her.

She was angry, and in that brief moment of clarity she was certain she had every right to be furious. As she’d come to understand things throughout the course of the longest day of her life, the man she married had been directly responsible for the disappearance of the man she loved. He’d manipulated her and everyone in her life, and he’d killed at least one person in an attempt to prevent her from discovering the truth. And to make matters worse, every time she thought about cutting him out a part of her tensed up so tight she felt like she might implode.

“Carver, there was this man,” she started, avoiding the subject of him prodding around in her thoughts for the moment. “A homeless guy who came to me twice in the last few weeks. He was the one who reached out to me and told me the box was the key.”

He shook his head, eyes squinting a little as he tried to make sense of what she was saying.

“Did... did you have something to do with that?”

“I was in no way connected to this realm, save through that box and you, but sometimes people who toe the edge pick up things.”

“Toe the edge?”

“Between realms,” he explained. “A lot of people who lose their minds have the ability to reach beyond this world into other realms. They see things, hear things. Maybe he was able to cross that line, I don’t know.”

“Patrick killed him.”

She watched the thin line of his brow drift upward as the corner of his mouth tightened. “To stop you from finding out the truth?”

“I don’t know. I found the ring in his dresser after my last encounter with the guy. This morning it was on the news. He’d been brutally murdered and the cops thought it had ties to the occult, or something.”

A long breath escaped him as he shook his head. “That sounds exactly like something he would do.”

That confirmation was like a sledgehammer dropping down on her. She hadn’t wanted to believe it, even though something inside her knew it was true. Hearing Carver, who’d apparently known him for hundreds of years, confirm that Patrick was capable of such a thing was devastating.

“I want whatever hooks he has in me out.”

The hand on her shoulder tightened a little. “Are you sure about this?”

Siren drew her lower lip tentatively between her teeth and stared up at him. A fist of uncertainty tightened around her heart, squeezing in the most terrifying display she’d ever felt. She nodded her head, even though she wasn’t really sure and said, “Yes. I want my life back.”

“Oh sweetheart,” he muttered, lifting his hand to her cheek. “There is no going back. We can only move forward.”

“Then we go forward,” she gulped hard against the jagged lump lodged in her throat. “Together.”

“Together,” Carver agreed.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Carver led her into the kitchen, where the cat had made himself at home atop the long, tiled breakfast bar stretching the length of the room. He was curled into an oval, chin rested lazily across his paws. His ears twitched a little when they came into the room. Carver tugged one of the wooden stools away from the tile-decorated bar and patted the cushioned seat for her. Siren climbed up onto the stool, her feet swinging several inches from the floor before she tucked them into the middle rungs and situated herself as comfortably as a barstool would allow.

He positioned himself in front of her, edging close and between her parted thighs where she'd planted her hands, as if holding herself upright. He studied her for a moment, the grey of his eyes darkened by the black pupils that widened within the irises.

"Are you really sure you want me to do this?"

"It's the only way, isn't it?"

"To break his hold over you," he nodded, "yes."

"Is it going to hurt?" she asked. Her bottom lip caught in her teeth again, her apprehension rising to a point that threatened to make her heart explode inside her if it beat any faster than it already was.

"It'll probably hurt him far more than it hurts you," the cat intoned.

He shook his head, wisps of golden hair spilling across his brow. She wanted to reach out and brush them away, but more than that she wanted to lean forward and kiss him again. In all that time they were apart, she daydreamed the moment his lips touched hers after so long apart, imagined the feel of his body conforming as he took her in his arms and just hugged

her. Such a powerful thing, that kind of contact, but only half as powerful as what they shared beyond touch. Just looking into his eyes, Siren saw all the things about herself that made her feel whole staring back at her. Carver reflected all the good things she was otherwise afraid to see inside herself; he magnified them and made them seem larger than life.

She'd never felt that way with anyone else. She didn't want to hurt him.

"If..."

"It won't hurt," he promised her. "It may feel strange," he went on. "Think of it like water running through a pipe. There will be a part of me inside you, fluidly moving through you and disentangling bits and pieces of magic that have no business being there. You might feel a little pressure as I approach those things, and the urge to protect them from me will crop up because they are more than likely deeply implanted. It will be your instinct to push me away, but I need you to let go of that notion."

"Okay," she nodded.

"Tell me when you're ready."

Siren pulled breath into her lungs, expanding them beneath her squared shoulders and holding it inside herself until the speeding thump of her heart was almost unbearable. She exhaled, the reach of her wind whispering through the stray hair on Carver's forehead.

"You promise it won't hurt?"

Nodding again, his eyes implored her to trust him. She watched him watching her, waiting for her signal, and though she was frightened, she trusted him. Maybe after everything that was foolish, but she rationalized inside herself that Carver would never do anything to intentionally hurt her. He'd lied to her to protect her, an action that obviously backfired and nearly cost him his life.

"I'm ready."

He started to lift his arms, long fingers wiggling just a little, as though he was stretching them in preparation before placing the index and middle finger of each hand on either side of her temples. There was a strange, unexpected jolt of electricity that could only be compared to the kind of shock a person got after scuffing their shoes along the carpet on a dry winter day. It didn't hurt, but it startled her enough that she nearly pulled back. She stopped herself though, relaxed her shoulders and stared up at Carver's face.

So much about him had changed in the last three years. The addition of scars made his once smooth features appear almost grizzled and hardened. Even after he closed his eyes and drew in a deep, relaxing breath, the muscles in his face smoothed, but hints of age lingered. Worry lines marred his forehead, disappearing as his nostrils flared with calming breath, but only just. The reminder of them remained permanently etched into his skin. Beneath pale brows, there were tiny lines etched beside the corners of both long eyes, and the heavy pouches beneath them were dark as bruises. She wondered how long it had been since he slept and had to fight the urge rising inside her to reach up and touch his cheek. He needed to rest just as much, if not more, than she did.

Maybe she should stop him, she thought. Put it off until later, when he'd given himself time to recover from the trauma of the day, but no sooner had that thought infiltrated her mind than did she feel the warmth of him spreading through her skin and into the strange and tangled recesses of her mind. It wasn't much different than when she felt the white stream of his healing energy pouring through her, massaging the frayed nerve endings that signaled pain before mending the broken parts of her and making her whole again. The energy pouring into her didn't feel white though, it was golden, bordering on yellow and tinged with caution. It was tentative and curious, sifting through thoughts and moments that Siren could see moving through her mind the way images flicked across a movie screen.

She was in the middle of that night, standing on the sidewalk in that strange, heated moment her entire world started to crumble around her. She smelled ozone and autumn, the crisp and pungent smells mingling together to invade her senses, but underneath it was another familiar scent that both enticed and deterred her. She wanted to close her eyes and stop herself from breathing it in. Oak and cedar, the faint aroma of sawdust and new paint—what an odd combination of smells to find enticing, and yet they had drawn her in the same way Carver's scents had. Carver smelled like ink and pages, the faint, lingering taste of roasted coffee beans on her tongue whenever she breathed him in. Funny how stark that awareness became as he drew it to the surface. She'd never given it much thought before, the different sensory identifiers each of them possessed, but it was so clear, and in the memory of that night she could barely smell Carver at all as traces of wind tickled across her face.

But Patrick was there. He stood outside Bartonelli's with his arms crossed as he watched her heels click along the concrete blocks paving the sidewalk. She'd barely noticed him there, but in that memory she saw him smiling, a triumphant twitch at the corner of his mouth that made her stomach shudder with nausea.

She wanted to pull out of that moment, but Carver held her gently suspended, guiding her through the discovery of his absence, following as she headed back into the restaurant to settle their bill, pausing with her at the door where Patrick still lingered. She felt the raindrops specking her cheeks, gliding like cold tears down her skin.

The maître d' and the owner both went back inside to wait for her, so she was alone with him just outside the door for only a moment. Concern etched into his features, his dark brows knitted together sympathetically as he started to reach for the door for her.

"Everything all right?" he asked.

Siren barely even looked at him, the familiar self-conscious apprehension she generally felt in those kinds of situations amplified by the fact that her boyfriend had vanished into thin air.

"Well, whatever it is," Patrick went on, his hand lightly brushing across the bare skin of her arm before she passed through the doors, "I'm sure it'll be fine." The touch of those fingers sent a bursting shock of red through her that made her body physically jump in the chair.

The sound of Carver's distant voice soothed her as he acknowledged the scene, "That was his first attempt. Unsuccessful, but there it was."

She started to pull away, not sure anymore she wanted him to see her life unravel the way it had after he disappeared. Inside her mind, he would have access to every moment she spent with Patrick, including the embarrassing intimacies she'd never committed herself to sharing with Carver because she'd always felt like they were so much more than just two bodies coming together. She'd fallen into bed with Patrick the first time he kissed her, an explosion of sparks erupting as his touch slid beneath the loose fabric of her laziest t-shirt. It had been so long since she'd been touched that way it set off a hundred different alarms inside her, while simultaneously daring her to go on. The taste of him on her tongue—reminiscent of peppermint and chocolate chip—as he eased her into the corner of her own sofa and came in

above her like a dark wave threatening to snuff out every bit of light she'd clung to over the last year.

"Patrick," she meagerly tried to push her hands between their chests as drifting kisses tickled across her cheek, his soft tongue tickling at her neck before he drew the sensitive lobe of her ear between his teeth and nibbled. She arched into him then, defenses dwindling as heated breath whispered across damp skin and made her shudder delightfully beneath him.

"You feel it," Patrick said softly. "The connection between us."

It was bursts of light all around her, both burdening and relieving as years of tension melted away in the heat of two bodies coming together. She closed her eyes and thought of Carver, burying her forehead against Patrick's shoulder and daydreaming something she was never going to have. It was wrong—red waves swept through her and guided her back into that moment, into Patrick's arms. She belonged with him. Not just with him, she belonged to him. She was his and the fact that she was pinned to the cushions, crushed deliciously beneath the weight of his body and gasping shuddering release was proof. She had never given herself to Carver, but the first time Patrick kissed her she'd given in to something there was no turning back from.

When all was said and done, she laid beside him in the dark, the movie they'd been watching returned to the main screen and looped through a series of comedic clips. She felt lazy and confused, too lethargic to reach for the remote and at least mute the sound. Patrick propped on his elbow beside her, watching the lights dance across her face. He was smiling in that way he often did that made her feel attached to him—as if loving him would never be an option, but making him happy might not be so bad. Everyone deserved to be happy.

He swooped in and kissed the tip of her nose before touching lips to hers and murmuring across them, "I never meant to fall in love with you, you know?"

Siren closed her eyes and started to turn her head away. She had no plans to fall in love with anyone, not ever again. "Patrick..." she started.

His hand swept along the bare skin of her arm and she shuddered, the feel of it at the time had been teasing and blissful, but from the outside looking in it was jagged and dark, like tar dragging across her body. He brought that hand up and turned her face back toward his, and even though her eyes

were closed she'd felt the intensity of his stare. "I thought love was something that happened to more deserving people."

Her throat tightened, and when she swallowed it felt like she'd tried to choke down a handful of nails. Clearing the phlegm away, she opened her eyes but avoided his stare, saying, "Everyone deserves to be loved."

"That's right." Fingertips traced smoothly along the curve of her chin. "You deserve to be loved, Siren, and I'm going to love you with every part of me. I know maybe you're not ready for that, but I will wait. Forever if I have to."

"I'm sorry, Patrick," she muttered. "I'm... I don't know if..."

"Shh," he quieted her with the tip of his finger. "It's okay. I'm a very patient man, especially when something is worth waiting for."

And then she was learning to laugh again, to genuinely smile when she heard the sound of his knuckles rapping on her apartment door after a long day apart. He came in smelling like wood and outside, and the eventual familiarity of it began to feel like home even though she never wanted it to. Every time he reached out to tuck the loose strands of hair behind her ear, each time he kissed her, made love to her, endeared her to him, she could feel the pulses of that magic. It was conflicted in its nature, darkness tangled with the light. He loved her. They weren't just words when he said them, the emotion was a part of his every action. The vows he spoke on the beach that day came from the heart. He would love her, cherish her, hold her above all others until the day he died.

Siren felt the salted wind whispering across her face, the loose, soft curls of Patrick's hair brushing across her forehead when he sealed the promises he made to her with a kiss. "I love you, Siren, so much."

And she smiled against his lips while the official who married them pronounced them bound together. There was actually a part of her that meant it when she told him, "I love you too."

They were standing in the box-cluttered living room of their new house throwing banter back and forth, and then he chased her up the stairs where he lifted her onto the rickety bathroom sink he'd promised to replace and told her he wanted to make a baby with her. The notion terrified her; she'd never wanted kids, but there was a flashing moment when she thought maybe that would fix what was obviously broken inside her. A baby, Patrick's baby... She'd look at him differently. She'd see him holding their

child in his arms, smiling in that way she was so ridiculously attached to, and she would slowly start to let go of Carver.

If she had a baby, she would love him and she would slowly forget.

The moment nearly swallowed her like a black hole, devouring her and drawing her deeper and deeper away until the distant sound of Carver's voice pulled her back. His soft fingertips slipped away from her temples, his worn shoes shuffled across the tiled floor beneath them as he withdrew.

"I'm..."

Siren had been so embroiled in those memories it was like living through the last three years again. She could feel the nuzzle of Patrick's nose against her cheek, still taste him on her tongue, the smell of him invading her when she breathed in, but then it was gone and the startling sound of Carver's voice opened her eyes. She felt her face flush, the heat of shame burning along her cheeks and neck. Blinking the memory away, she dropped her head and refused to look up at him.

"I'm sorry, Siren," Carver said. "I can't sever his connection to you."

She said nothing. She knew nothing about magic or what he'd done, but she understood in that moment why. Carver couldn't break something that wasn't there. Patrick tried, in the beginning the evidence of it was there, but her love for Carver thwarted his magic. Over time, however, her defenses came down and she began to lean on the man who was there, the man who'd fallen in love with her even though he didn't mean to, and she'd fallen in love with him too, in her own way.

She felt sick upon realizing it, her feelings tangled with the dark threads of all Patrick had done.

Dropping down from the barstool, she edged past Carver and darted left toward the small bathroom just off the kitchen. She didn't even bother turning on the light. She just threw herself at the porcelain bowl, the minimal contents of her stomach purging in loud, acidic retching sounds that reverberated through the house. Carver's footsteps thumped quickly across the floor but she felt behind her with her foot, pushing the door closed with a ricocheting slam that made her head pound.

"Siren," he pleaded through the wood. "It's all right." His voice was soft and comforting, but she would find no comfort. She wouldn't allow herself. "You didn't know."

“Didn’t I?” She clung to the cold porcelain, the feel of it eerily comforting against her feverish skin. “He was there that night. I saw what you saw, Carver. I remember everything.”

“You were afraid,” he answered. “I felt your fear, your sorrow, every moment of it pressing down on you, suffocating the minutes of your life and making it so hard for you to live.”

“And that makes it okay that I sought comfort in the arms of the man who made me feel that way?” She choked. The tears pouring from her eyes were hot, her sinuses drained down the back of her throat as she sobbed and made her gag again. There was nothing in her stomach to throw up, but it didn’t stop her body from heaving violently.

The cause of her anguish, the darkness that descended on her life—she’d married that darkness, planned a future with him, thought about having his children.

She retched again as Carver opened the door. He knelt on one knee beside her, gathered the loose strands of hair falling in around her face and held them away. His touch was so gentle, so understanding, so undeserved. How could he touch her after everything he’d seen? Why would he want to? She’d all but betrayed him, just allowed another man to slide in and take his place.

“Don’t blame yourself, Siren,” he begged her in that gentle, understanding tone. “I left you.”

“No,” she insisted, hand reaching up to try and push him away. He held himself firm and steady, refusing to budge. “You were taken.”

“And you were alone. He manipulated you.”

“You saw everything,” she shrieked at him. “He didn’t manipulate me. I went to him of my own free will.”

Brushing her tears away with his hand, he cradled her cheek against his palm and tilted his head down to look at her. His face was a blurred mess through her tears, but he didn’t move. “You were broken and alone,” he finally whispered. “And it was my fault. If I’d told you... If I had prepared you, warned you...”

“It doesn’t change the fact that I went to him. That I married him, Carver! He is a vile, terrible man!”

“You said yourself he was good to you.”

“He’s a killer.”

“I know,” he finally lowered his head at that, his cheeks flushing pink with untold anger. Through the blur of her vision, she could see he’d closed his eyes, the lids lowering heavily atop his cheekbones. “But what’s done is done, Siren. You can’t destroy yourself over things you had no hand in. You didn’t know who he was. He obviously hid himself very well.”

“But I should have seen...” It was an absurd statement, one she regretted before it even finished leaving her lips. She wasn’t thinking clearly; she could barely even think at all. She was confused and angry, tired and hungry, but so sick to her stomach she couldn’t imagine ever being able to eat again. She wanted to sleep, or pitch herself into the raging sea and allow it to swallow her whole.

As if he’d read her thoughts, Carver gripped both of her shoulders and held her upright. “Listen to me, Siren. There was no way you could have known what he was—” She started to interrupt him, but he brought a hand from her shoulder, holding up a single finger as if silently pleading for her to give him one more minute. “You can’t blame yourself for falling in love with a man who made you feel good and special, especially when you were vulnerable and feeling so alone.”

“But...”

“Please,” he whispered, the tips of his fingers tightening on her arm. “I know it’s going to take a long time before the pain of this goes away...”

“Then use your magic,” she challenged him. “Use your magic to reach inside me and take it away. I don’t want it.”

“Magic doesn’t work that way, Siren.”

“No?” she started to turn her tear-stained cheek toward the shoulder of her shirt instinctively, intent on brushing the tears away. “If it doesn’t work that way, then how was I so easily manipulated by him? You said he...”

“I thought he had, but I was wrong. You’re too strong for that, and even if I wanted to reach in and take every ounce of your pain away, I couldn’t. You’d cling to the very last strand of it because that is who you are. You know you need to feel this. You need to get angry. You need to be afraid and filled with rage because you’re the only one who can break the magic between you.”

She was shaking her head. She barely felt the movement of it and her eyes were still awash with lingering tears so his face was a blur in front of her. “What are you talking about?”

“He fell in love with you,” he said. “And you fell in love with him in your own way.”

“But I never stopped loving you...”

“I know,” he nodded. For a moment it looked like he’d allowed himself the tiniest hint of a smile as his tear-damp fingertips moved through her hair. “But you’re emotionally bonded to him and only you can break that bond.”

“Are you... are you saying I have to face him?”

“Not right now, but eventually, if you want to sever whatever it is tying you to his emotions, yes. You will have to face him. We both will. I have to put a stop to this once and for all. The chapters of my story, the ones with him in them, they need to close.”

She wanted to run away and never look back. Far, far away. Just the thought of facing him... Her head shook back and forth again. She didn’t even notice she was protesting. “I can’t...”

“You can,” he insisted. “I believe in you. I’ve always believed in you, and I always will.”

“But I... I betrayed you.”

“No,” he denied her. “You didn’t betray me. I won’t ever believe that.”

“I fell in love with someone else.”

“Only because you’d lost hope.” Leaning forward, Carver touched his lips to her forehead, allowed them to linger there a moment before he finished his thought. “Had I never been sent away, had he tried to insert himself into your life while I was still here, he would have failed because the way you love me...” He was quiet, as if searching for the right words to finish his thought. “The way you love me, the way I love you, it’s the kind of love so few people manage to find.”

“Destiny,” she whispered.

“That’s right.” He drew back again, and that time she could clearly see he was smiling. “You, Siren Talbot, are my destiny, and I am yours.”

She threw her arms around his neck, buried her face in his hair and just hugged him.

She didn’t know how she would face Patrick, or what would happen when they did, but she knew one thing for certain: Nothing was ever coming between her and Carver, not ever again.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Carver convinced Siren to relax in the bathtub after she finally calmed down. Her muscles ached fiercely, and she desperately needed to unwind, so she agreed, even though the idea of slipping back into the clothes she'd been wearing when her whole life fell apart was absurd. They were filthy and tattered, bloodstains brown as rust seeped into the cloth of her t-shirt and jeans. As she stripped out of them and allowed them to fall into a heap on the floor of the bathroom in the master bedroom upstairs, she stood in front of the wall-to-wall mirror behind the vanity and stared at her body. A battlefield of fading bruises spread across her pale skin, painted bluish-purple and yellow marks beneath healed cuts and scrapes. There was a small gash on her forehead, just above her eyes, and when she leaned inward to further inspect it, it was tender beneath the prodding touch of careful fingertips.

For the first time all day, she reached back and dragged the elastic band from her hair. Shaking the black tresses loose around her shoulder, stray hairs fluttered down her chest and across her stomach before falling to rest on the vanity. She felt guilty again about making herself at home in someone else's summer house, leaving her dirty clothes on their bathroom floor, her stark black hair littering their sink.

Steam from the running bathwater began clouding the mirror, casting a silver hue over her face until all she could see was the pale outline of her own reflection moving across the frosted glass. She stepped back, spun around to face the bathtub, then lifted herself inside. Sliding down into the water, the heat devoured her skin, turning it instantly pink as she sunk back

and down until her hair floated all around her shoulders. She used to like to pretend she was a mermaid when she was little girl, a Siren who could only be her true self while in the water. She would dip beneath the surface and puff her cheeks out while she held her breath. Eyes opened, she'd watch the swirling pieces of her hair float and dance around her face. Sometimes she felt like she was down there for an eternity, and Aunt Maisie would come bursting in and scare her half to death, reaching into the water to pull her up, asking if she was crazy.

She wondered if she could still hold her breath that long. It'd been years since she tried it.

Arching her back, she slid beneath the water. She could still hear the rushing gurgle of it pouring in from the faucets. It tickled at her feet and along her calf. Under the surface, she closed her eyes at first and just listened to that sound, and then she blinked them open and nearly leapt out of the tub screaming when she saw a pair of blurred golden eyes and a round white face peering in at her from the edge.

"Relax, Mistress." She swore there was the faintest hint of a repressed chuckle in the cat's voice. "It's only me."

"What are you doing in here?" Her arms moved instinctively to cover her naked breasts, legs crossing as she edged her way into the corner of the tub. Water splashed up the curved edge, wetting his paws before splatting onto the tiled floor below. "Jesus, what is wrong with you?"

He eyed her through slightly narrowed lids, then walked carefully along the lip before perching near the far corner. "I used to sit on the toilet and watch you bathe all the time," he pointed out. "No need to get modest on me now."

"That was before I knew you could talk. Now you sort of give me the creeps."

"The creeps," he hissed, seemingly put out by the notion. "Please, Mistress. Don't flatter yourself."

She didn't let her guard down, but hugged herself a little tighter with one arm as she reached across the spacious tub and turned the knobs until the water stopped flowing. It bloomed and dribbled atop the surface, before silencing with one final drip. Withdrawing back to her guarded position, she avoided staring at the cat even though he had actually watched her bathe more times than she could count over the last six years.

“Please stop staring at me.”

“I’m simply wondering what you were doing?” He tilted his head curiously. “I’ve never seen you do anything like that before. You weren’t attempting to drown yourself, I hope.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she scolded. “I was trying to see how long I could hold my breath. It was a game I used to play when I was little girl. Don’t change the subject, what are you doing in here?”

“The master sent me up to check on you and let you know he walked to the store just up the road for food and to see if he might find you something else to wear. Your clothes are most unsuitable, torn and bloody as they are.”

“It’s late, after ten o’clock. Nothing’s going to be open at this time of night.”

“Gas stations.”

“Maybe,” she shrugged.

She imagined he’d return with armloads of too-big t-shirts in neon colors boasting seashells and flip-flops and with the words *Edisto Island, SC*, emblazoned across the chest. Not that she cared much, but she was having a hard time imagining Carver decked out in bright pink.

“All right,” she waved at the cat with her hand. “You’ve informed me, now go on. Get out.”

“Don’t be that way,” he harrumphed, jumping down from the edge of the bathtub. “It used to make you feel safe when I would sit with you while you bathed.”

It had, she realized. Something about the way he curled up on the oval lid of the toilet and rested his chin across the tops of his paws while staring out at her unblinking had been a comfort, but it really was creepy now that he’d started talking. A sharp shiver danced across the blades of her shoulders as she watched him walk toward the narrowly opened door on the other side of the bathroom.

“You said before you weren’t always as you are now,” she called after him. The cat stopped just in front of the door, but didn’t turn back. He was silent, and she wondered what he was thinking. When he didn’t respond verbally, she prodded him again, asking, “Were you human?”

“In a sense, but not entirely.”

“In a sense?” she shook her head. The wet tendrils of her hair stuck to her skin, sliding like little snakes with the movement. “What do you mean, in a

sense? Either you were human, or you weren't."

"What I was before is not really important. I will never be what I once was. This is who I am now and it does not do to dwell on that which cannot be changed."

"Well, no, but... I'd like to know who you are."

She'd never thought of Mr. Pounce as anything other than a cat. He wasn't an individual beyond that. All the traits she believed he had, she'd transposed upon him. The personality she attributed to him, she'd given him, or so she'd thought. She loved that cat, but she'd never really thought much about what he might like or dislike beyond his finicky appetites. She never wondered if the sound of his own ridiculous name made him shudder and cringe each time she adopted that sing-song, dopey voice while scratching under his chin and behind his ears and asking if he wanted to lick the corners of the tuna can while she was making herself a sandwich.

"You are your own... person," she realized for the first time. "Aren't you?"

"Of course I am my own being," his deep voice was snappy and impatient and she found herself shrinking back a little deeper into the tub as if he'd physically threatened to attack her. "But who I was is not as important as who I am now, is it? If you humans spent even half as much time living in the moment as you do dwelling on the past, I imagine your lives would be a great deal different, wouldn't they now?"

"I..."

He spun around, his tail a whoosh of fluffy, white fur that curled and writhed like a hypnotized cobra as he walked back toward her. "That is all that matters in the end, Mistress. The moment. This moment. Not the one behind you, nor the one in front of you. Just this one."

"That's... a bit ridiculous, don't you think?"

"Ridiculous?" he bared his little white teeth a little, mouth agape as if shocked by her implication. "You don't think it's ridiculous to waste time fretting about what happened yesterday, or what might happen tomorrow?"

"I don't know, what happened yesterday might affect the things that happen tomorrow."

"That's like saying you might eat a ham sandwich tomorrow because you ate eggs and bacon this morning."

"No," she shook her head again. "It's not like that at all," she insisted.

“Isn’t it?”

“Actions directly influence reactions,” she pointed out. “The things we do right now will have a direct impact on what happens ten minutes from now.”

“Poppycock!” the cat hissed. “That’s the most absurd thing I’ve ever heard. The moment is the moment. And the present one is all that matters. In this moment you are nothing more than a woman taking a bath. There’s no telling who, or even what you’ll be in ten minutes time. You could be turned into a rabbit, or a pancake, or some other equally absurd, inanimate object. The point is...” he turned back over his slender white shoulder to look at her. “All I am saying is the only thing that should truly matter at any given moment is the moment at hand. Nothing more, nothing less.”

Siren’s lips parted, the words on the tip of her tongue stopping short from spilling out. She shook her head again and pressed her warm back against the cold porcelain and tile behind her and allowed her arm to slide slowly away from her chest and into the water. The white cat blinked, and then he resumed his journey toward the slightly opened door.

“Mr. Pounce?”

“Yes, Mistress.”

“You don’t have to go. Not if you don’t want to.”

“I wouldn’t want you to get the wrong idea.” There was a rumbling hint of amusement in his suave tone.

“Well, it’s as you said, isn’t it? It’s nothing you haven’t seen at least a thousand times.” She was conflicted in her discomfort, her other arm slipping with a ploinking splash into the water. She rested her forearm across the top of her bare thigh and watched a follicle of her hair float and capture the overhead light as it whirled and danced through the clear liquid. “I’m sort of used to you being with me in the bathroom, now that you mention it.”

“Master gave me strict instructions to follow you everywhere you went. I’d have gone to work with you in those early days, most especially after the master disappeared, but I could never convince you to take me along no matter how I yowled before you departed every morning.”

“So that’s what you were saying,” she tittered. “God, this is so weird. I can’t believe I’m having a conversation with my cat. Are you sure I’m not dead?”

“Weird?” he tested thoughtfully. “Perhaps a little strange, yes, but I can assure you that you are far from dead.”

“And you couldn’t say anything?”

“No,” he brought a paw up toward his pink lips, studied it as though he expected to find hidden specks of dirt or sand that escaped his meticulous grooming. “The master’s magic forbid me from doing so, even in the event that he was taken. Only in the most extreme case of emergency would the spell be broken.”

“Wait, he didn’t seem to think disappearing was an extreme emergency?”

“He might have,” it almost looked like the cat shrugged, “but the magic never responded. When the Dark One started coming around, it was probably for the best. It would have put both of us in danger if he’d ever come to suspect I was anything more than a simple house cat.”

“He wasn’t always around.” She squinted across the tiled floor at him, watched as he lowered his paw again and brought his head up to meet her stare.

“Wasn’t he?” he wondered. “You don’t think he employed a variety of clever means to keep tabs on you while he wasn’t with you? He was always watching you.”

That notion disturbed her almost as much as realizing the man she’d married was a cold-hearted killer who sent the man she loved into some dark place she couldn’t even begin to understand. Patrick... always watching her. Did that mean he’d known about her going through his dresser drawer that day? That he knew all along she’d found the ring he took from her and had taken it back? What else had he witnessed. Did he sit in his work office all day spying on her at home, watching her every move on some bizarre, magical surveillance monitors he’d set up? She suddenly felt like a lab rat, all poked and prodded, experimented on and observed. And the water she soaked in didn’t feel like it would ever be hot enough to wash the darkness of his love from her soul.

“Really?” That single word felt lodged in her throat, and for a second it was almost impossible to breathe as she grappled with the notion once again that the man she spent the last two and a half years of her life slowly, accidentally falling in love with was a sliver of something so wrong he was like an infection.

“Always, Mistress.”

A veil of chills danced over her naked skin, prickling like the sharp touch of a thousand pins. Her body reacted in a violent jerk that sent water splashing and whooshing through the tub and the cat only stared. The rawness in her throat made it feel like she gulped down lava by the bucket all day, so when she cleared it it burned and her voice took on a froggish croaking sound when she said, "God, why didn't you find a way to tell me. I would have run. I would have..."

"I'm sorry," Mr. Pounce actually lowered his round head, the pointed tips of his ears twitching with remorse. "I wish I had done more, but I am not a great sorcerer like the master, and I have not been able to reach the magic that lives inside me for more than a thousand years. I'm afraid I'm just a cat with the unfortunate burden of a voice in a world where action speaks louder than words."

"I shouldn't have fallen in love with him," she muttered, more to herself than her companion. Her hand swooped through the water, a loud swoosh that made waves lap at the sides of the tub. "Deep down I always felt like it was wrong, but I started to believe everything Lacey and Aunt Maisie said about being afraid to move on. He manipulated them, used my love for them against me because he knew eventually I would listen to their reason."

"You're clear now," he said. "Free from his influence."

"But I can feel it inside me, Mr. Pounce. I feel him in there..."

"I imagine you do, but it's up to you now to cut the ties." He allowed her to sit with that for a while. He stood there in the middle of the bathroom, tail swishing with agitation across the cold black and white tiled floor beneath his paws.

Finally, she asked, "How?"

"I can't answer that, I'm afraid, but I can say this: listen to your heart. Really listen. The heart knows, my lady. It always knows."

With that as his final impartation of wisdom, he turned and stalked out of the room without looking back. She watched the last flourish of his tail disappear through the meager crack between the door and the jamb. Downstairs she heard a door open and close and knew Carver had returned from his walk. There were footsteps, soft but deliberate upon the hardwood and tiled floors, and she felt oddly at ease knowing he was down there.

Once more relaxing against the back of the tub, she slid a little further down until the bulk of her hair whirled around her shoulders, catching tiny

bubbles beneath the surface of the water.

The heart knows...

But her heart hadn't known, not when all was said and done. For three years her heart listened to the lies, made them truth and eventually gave in, even though she never wanted to. Now she would have to face the man who'd manipulated her, tore her whole life to pieces in the name of love.

Closing her eyes she clearly saw that smile again, the one that made her feel attached to him, and for the first time since she'd met him, the one part of him that had gotten under her skin and made her feel soft actually made something tighten inside her.

She'd lost three years because of Patrick Blakely. She'd lost a part of herself she might never recover. Her mouth tightened into a scowl as she muttered, "He'll be lucky if I don't kill him."

And the severity of that utterance scared her more than just a little because in that moment she meant it more than she'd ever meant anything else in her life.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

At some point while she was bathing Carver brought an overly large, powder blue t-shirt that fit her like a dress after she dropped it down over her head. It rustled across the tops of her knees, and though he wasn't able to find clean underwear, he did manage a two-piece bathing suit and she gratefully shimmied into the bottoms. When she turned toward the windows scaling the wall behind her, the minimal light cast upon them mirrored the room and her own reflection back to her. Her dark hair hung in tangled waves around her shoulders, the pale shade of the shirt she wore making it look blacker than black.

Bare feet padded across the hardwood floor until she arrived at the rain-specked window and leaned forward to peer out into the darkness. She shaded her hands around her face to block out the light of the room and watched the angry, black clouds roil over the raging sea. A sliver of moonlight eked through, the barest hint of silver catching the waves. Their peaks were monstrous, leaping dangerously high as they carried themselves in flailing tantrums to the shore. She didn't need to see clearly to know it was still raining.

At least it was no longer thundering, though the pale streaks of lightning painting the bottoms of those angry clouds seemed to assure her the gods had more punishment planned. It was going to be a long, stormy night.

Perfect, it would match the turmoil of her mood.

The bottom of her shirt opened up like a bell around her thighs when she spun away from the window and headed toward the open door. She could hear water running through the pipes, and wondered if Carver was taking a

shower in one of the rooms downstairs. Shuffling through the hallway, she took the stairs one by one until she came into the landing beside the dining room.

Lit up like a Christmas tree, the warmth of the lighting in the house made her feel comfortable and at home, even though she knew she shouldn't, and as she turned toward the well-lit kitchen she tried to imagine the people who spent their summers in that house. Did they have children? Did they spend their evenings putting puzzles together on the unused table in the dining room while cooking crab in the black, cast-iron pot hanging from the rack over the breakfast bar?

There was a light on in the room just off to her right. A bedroom, she remembered, and the soft golden glow beckoned her like a tempting hand to grip the knob and step inside. She heard the running water of the shower within, the slapping issue of it pelting the walls as he washed the soap from his hair. Stepping away from the door, she went into the kitchen and began opening cupboards, inspecting the collection of dried goods and cans lining the shelves. There were unopened boxes of crackers and gummy fruit snacks and a carton of Whoppers, which made her shudder a little, even as her empty stomach gurgled at the thought of filling it with malt chocolate. Closing the pantry cabinet door, she moved onto the refrigerator. There were bottles of open wine, their corks stained rich, purplish-red where the barest amount leaked through the hole from the corkscrew. Plastic bottles of water filled the bottom drawer, along with an unopened bag of wilted spinach and two wrinkled apples.

She drew open the drawer and grabbed a bottle of water, then closed the refrigerator and spun back into the kitchen. She glimpsed a greasy white bag on the edge of the counter and started toward it, the aroma of the food within finally wafting out to tempt her. Carver hated fast food, but he knew greasy burgers and wilted French fries were one of her weaknesses. He used to tease her about the clogging of her arteries every time she insisted they stop at the McDonald's in Hughesville on their way back from a long day hiking in Ricketts Glen State Park.

Opening the bag, she was suddenly aware of how hungry she was for the first time since she'd rolled out of bed that morning to call Aunt Maisie in a panic once Patrick left the house. It was hard to believe, she thought, digging into the bag and drawing out a paper-wrapped cheeseburger, that

only about sixteen hours had passed since she realized her husband was not the man she thought he was. She peeled back the paper, the sesame seed bun stuffed with unidentifiable brown meat, wilted green lettuce and tomatoes so pale they may as well have been pink. She took a bite without further inspection, moaning blissfully as the dill-pickles mixed with mayonnaise and ketchup.

There was another burger in the bag and two sleeves of fries surrounded by a handful of napkins and several packets of ketchup. She took the whole bag to the breakfast bar that lined the kitchen, yanked out a stool and climbed up to devour the meal. She was licking ketchup from her fingers when Carver stepped out of the room in nothing more than a pair of dark blue, palm-tree patterned swim trunks, his golden hair wet and dark and still dripping down his scarred, bare chest. Finger still suckled between her lips, she stared at him, oblivious for the moment to the fact that she was practically mesmerized.

“You have no idea how good it felt to take a real shower. I could have stayed in there for hours.”

“There were no showers where you were?”

“No,” he shook his head as he walked toward the counter and grabbed the greasy white bag. He dug his hand into the wrinkled opening and pulled out the other burger from within. She honestly thought he’d just assumed she was starving. She never imagined she’d see the day that he practically tore the greasy wrapper away and begin taking large, appreciative bites. It was with a half-chewed mouthful hidden tastefully behind his burger he confessed, “There wasn’t much of anything in that place. Scarce food, little water...”

“I thought you hated food like this?”

Wide-eyed as she watched him devour the rest of his burger in four gaping bites, he crumpled the paper, tossed it into the bag and pulled out the second sleeve of fries. He swallowed the food he was chewing and said, “You’d be surprised how much you miss things like greasy burgers and French fries when you know you’ll probably never see a single sesame seed coated bun for the rest of eternity.”

“I think I may have finally seen everything there is to see in this world,” she chuckled. “First strange and inexplicable acts of magic, now Carver Ashmore is eating a greasy, fast-food cheeseburger.”

“And French fries!” He pinched several fries into his mouth, grinning as he chewed.

“Is this real life?”

She lifted her half-eaten burger to take a bite, a pickle falling out and landing on the paper beneath it. Carver eyed that delicious green sliver, then looked in silent pleading toward her. She wondered what kinds of things he’d been forced to eat in the place he’d been sent and realized he probably needed sustenance far more than she did. He certainly looked thinner, though not starved. She couldn’t see his ribs beyond the carved definition of his abs and chest, which was certainly a good sign, but he did look hungry.

“Here,” she held the rest of her burger out to him and he just looked at it.

“It’s okay,” he shook his head. “You’re probably hungry too. You’ve been through a lot today.”

“Not half as hungry as you are,” she insisted. “Go ahead.”

Hesitating only a moment longer, he took the burger, his pale grey eyes searching her face before he nodded soft agreement and took a much smaller bite. He seemed to savor it as he chewed, his eyes disappearing behind long lashes and heavy lids while slow, appreciative moans echoed in his throat before he swallowed. Siren dragged French fries through ketchup, feeding them one by one through her lips as she watched him push the last bite of her burger into his mouth and practically swallow it without chewing.

“Thank you,” he managed, reaching for a napkin and swiping the crumbs and a tiny blob of mayonnaise from the corner of his mouth.

“You saved my life today,” she shrugged. “It’s the least I could do to repay you.”

A soft snort of laughter escaped him. “You don’t have to repay me.” Crumpling the napkin, he tossed it into the bag and grabbed a fry. He swiped it through the ketchup on her wrapper and popped it into his mouth, once more savoring it the way a dehydrated man in the desert might savor a single drop of water. “I never much liked ketchup before,” he noted, “but right now it is the most amazing thing I’ve ever tasted.”

“Wherever you were,” she started, dancing a fry through ketchup and then resting it near the edge of the paper thoughtfully, “it must have been pretty awful there.”

Silent and thoughtful, he only nodded while pushing another bite between his lips.

“What was this place?”

“It’s hard to explain, but... It’s like the space between the darkness.”

She couldn’t even begin to imagine what such a place might be like, but the thought of it made her shudder anyway. “What was it like there?”

“Terrifying.” Carver swallowed, his long neck stretching through it as though the food had gotten stuck for a moment. He brought round and tentative eyes upward to look at her, and in that moment he looked so innocent, almost like a child staring back at her.

Siren reached her hand out, her warm fingers coming down atop his and curling inward to gently squeeze. “But you’re back now.”

Blinking, he looked down and nodded agreement, but he didn’t say anything else for a long time after that and neither did she because she didn’t know what to say. Finally, he drew his hand out from under hers and lifted it to her cheek as he brought his gaze up once more. “I really did think about you every minute I was gone. You were like the lighthouse in the distance, shining,” he swallowed again and looked away briefly before returning his eyes to her face, “always shining.”

The sound of his voice sent trembling emotion shivering through her, the chills rising along her arms. “Carver...”

“I never stopped believing you would set me free. Not for a single second.”

A bead of water dripped from his hair and trickled over his shoulder, down the front of his chest and she watched it fall before finding his eyes again. They were so sad, so beautiful and there was a part of her that knew it was her fault he was in pain. She hadn’t waited for him, hadn’t tried hard enough to find him. Maybe that meant she didn’t love him as much as she said she did; maybe it meant she’d failed him.

“I’m sorry I took so long.”

And then the pain was gone, replaced by a flash of brilliance and softness as he shook his head and smiled, “No, no, Siren, no. Don’t be sorry. I’m the one who should be sorry.”

“Oh for crying out loud.” Neither of them heard the cat as he sauntered into the kitchen. “You’re sorry, he’s sorry, we’re all very, very sorry. Now

can please move on with our lives and get everything back to the way it's supposed to be."

She touched the tip of her tongue to her dry lips and leaned back, Carver's hand dropping away from her face and onto the counter beside his fries.

"And how exactly do we do that?" she asked.

"We have to go back, of course." His statement was matter-of-fact, as if it was the most obvious and simple answer in the world to a question that didn't even border on complicated.

"Right, we just pop in and tell the psychopathic murderer that I want a divorce on grounds of... oh, I don't know, murder. Because that won't upset him in the least, and we all know how well he controls his temper."

"Love is the most powerful weapon in the world, Mistress."

"Pounce is right," Carver acknowledged. "His feelings for you run deep, deeper than I imagine he ever expected them to. He was willing to kill to protect you, to keep you from leaving him."

"And you don't think that's a problem?"

"Of course it will pose problems," Mr. Pounce agreed, "but face to face and with you fully aware of whom and what he is, he won't be able to hide anymore. Not from you. If you take away the one thing you've given him, it will destroy him."

"It will push him over the brink, which I'm pretty sure he's been dangling from the edge of for pretty much his whole life. Me telling him I don't love him will do nothing but make him mad."

"I can handle him when he's mad. I'm prepared for him this time."

"What are you going to do to him? Send him back into this place between the darkness?"

"No," Carver shook his head. "That won't work. He's already escaped that place once and it would do no good to send him back there."

"So what?"

The cat leaped up onto the counter top and sat down at the edge of the greasy paper smeared with ketchup and French fries in front of her. "I hate to say it, Mistress, but with the curse broken the best course of action would be to do away with him once and for all."

"You mean kill him?" she balked. Siren leaned so far back in the stool she near toppled off of it and had to grip the edge of the bar in front of her

to steady herself.

Carver looked away when she silently implored him, answering her question without a single word. For several minutes after the silence in the kitchen was so severe, so thick she could have snipped through it with a pair of scissors and sewn the pieces of into wearable clothing.

"If you kill him," she started, "you become him, Carver. You are nothing like him."

"What else am I supposed to do, Siren?" he implored her. "Allow him to go free? To run through the world killing and taking whatever he wants... manipulating and brainwashing... No!" That declaration was firm, his resolve stiff as his hand came down on the counter top in a startling slap. "He has done too many things that can never be forgiven. To me, to you, to your family..."

"I don't know what else to do, but you are not a killer," she said, and then brought her apprehensive stare to his face, asking, "are you?"

The lines that furrowed his brow etched deep as he turned his head down while shaking it and muttering the words, "No, I'm not."

"Then we have to find another way. There must be something, some spell or curse or something, Carver. Anything but murder."

"You are both forgetting the one thing that gives you an advantage," Mr. Pounce said, his tail swishing across the stark white and blue tiles lining the breakfast bar. They both turned to look expectantly at the cat, his eyes widening before rolling leftward in exasperation. "Regardless of how awful he is, he is in love with Mistress. Love is powerful magic, yes, but I daresay she loves the master more."

"You are clever, Kitty, but you are forgetting how far he was willing to go in the first place to get back at Carver. He fell in love with me by accident..."

"Perhaps, but he fell in love regardless, and there is no turning back from that. If you were to deny him outright, the pain would be immeasurable. It would make him weak and vulnerable enough that the master could perhaps manipulate his mind and his magic so that he can never harm anyone again, including either of you."

"Wait a minute," Siren leaned inward again, elbows planted on the counter in front of her. "Mr. Pounce you said you weren't always a cat."

"I don't see how that's relevant..."

Carver's head snapped up, his thoughts falling in line with her own in a moment of realization. "The magic that changed you, Pounce," he began, "can you explain it to me? Tell me how it worked?"

"If I could, don't you think I would have done so already and had you reverse this infernal curse?" he said. "Besides, I barely remember..."

"That's not true," Carver insisted. "You remember everything, every little detail of every moment of your life. You could probably tell me what you had for lunch on October 24th, 1895."

"Sardines, but what does that matter?"

"Sardines," Siren chuckled. "Really?"

Neither of them acknowledged her disbelieving amusement, instead focusing on the conversation at hand.

"It matters because if I can understand the magic that was used on you, perhaps I can work the same spell on Patrick."

"You mean to turn him into a cat?"

"Or a rat," Siren suggested with a delicate sneer. "Or some other animal appropriate to his behavior. A snake, maybe?"

"And then what?"

"I don't know." Carver shrugged his bare shoulder toward his ear and shook his head, "Not my problem."

"Right, so you just set a seething, yammering rat free on the world. I'm sorry, Master, but I don't know how I feel about this plan," Mr. Pounce declared. "It is dark, ancient magic..."

"But I could go in there," he gestured toward the cat with his hand, "back to that moment and see how it was done."

"And if I say no?"

"Then I guess I'll just have to figure it out for myself."

"Mr. Pounce," Siren implored him, "please. This is a solution I'm not comfortable with, but not half as much as the idea of killing him."

"You don't think killing him would be a kindness in comparison?"

"He would have his life."

"And all of his woes to carry with him for the rest of his days. Do you think I like this?" he posed, lifting his chin in an arrogant gesture. The tone he spoke with made her feel instantly guilty, but she couldn't see any other way around it. "Do you think I've enjoyed walking this earth in this pathetic, useless excuse for a body for the last twelve-hundred years?"

“No, but...”

“There are no buts,” he refused, jumping down from the counter with a double thud of paws to hardwood floor. He darted away, leaving Siren and Carver alone to process his quick departure, and for a long time neither of them said anything at all.

“Can you...” she finally began, lifting her eyes across the counter to meet his. “Can you figure out how magic like that works?”

“It will take time,” he shrugged a shoulder, “and it might not work the way we want it to without full understanding. He could end up dead and I know you don’t want that.”

“Then what else do we do?”

Releasing a slow breath, Carver’s chest deflated as he sighed and shook the wet hair dangling just above his shoulders. “Let me talk to him,” he suggested. “Maybe I can convince him or something, I don’t know.”

“Do you know his story?” she wondered, watching as he pushed off the counter and rose to his full six and a half feet. “Do you know what he was before?”

“He’s never said and after the third time I stopped asking, but perhaps it’s time I ask again.”

“Maybe,” she agreed.

“I’ve borrowed from his power before,” he went on. “The way I did this afternoon when I was trying to open the portal that brought us here, but there are barriers in him I’ve never been able to break through. His past has always been hidden from me, and I always felt it was his right, but now... I don’t know.”

“Everyone has their secrets,” she shrugged.

“True, but look at what secrets did to us.” His fingers twitched atop the tiles, as if he was trying not to reach out and touch her, but then instinct won out and he brought that hand up to her cheek. Warm palm nestled against her skin, fingertips spread touching just near her temple. She closed her eyes and let the feel of his nearness move through her.

“We can be saved, Carver,” she whispered.

“Can we?” For the first time since they’d been reunited there was uncertainty in his voice, and that doubt niggled at her like sharp, pointed teeth. “Even after all the lies, the years apart...”

“You were inside my mind,” her voice was so quiet, meant only for his ears, “and maybe you didn’t like what you saw there. Maybe I don’t deserve you anymore, but I never let go of you.”

“I know.”

“I never will.”

“But can you let go of *him*, Siren? When the time comes to stand face to face with him again, can you walk away from him?”

Her lower lip disappeared between her teeth, the pressure of them biting down nearly drew blood. Every one of her instincts said yes, but there was something deep inside, beneath the surface like a thorn trapped under the skin and festering, and that something made her hesitate. Face to face with Patrick, looking him in the eye after everything, could she let him go? Could she take her heart back and tell him it never belonged to him?

In a hoarse, trembling whisper she said, “Yes,” and lifted her eyes to Carver’s.

The color inside them was so vivid and bright, a backwash of grey alight with brilliant green and yellow flecks that seemed so alive it nearly took her breath away.

“It will be hard,” she went on, never looking away as she spoke. “It will hurt because there were moments that didn’t feel like a nightmare, but I know who he is now. I know what he’s done, what he’s capable of, and I want no part of him.”

“And me?”

“I have never wanted anything more than you.”

Carver swept forward so quickly the feel of his lips on hers took her by surprise. She gasped a little, her mouth relaxing under the crush of his kiss as fingers crawled and tightened along the back of her neck to draw her in deeper. It was a desperate kiss, far more impetuous than the one they’d shared earlier, and Siren swore she could feel the blood inside her body rising to a point near boiling as the playful tip of his tongue sought hers. He drank deep from her, neither of them daring to pull away even as they clumsily stumbled closer together, Siren nearly tipping from the stool in her attempt to find the floor, Carver bruising the bone of his hip on the corner of the bar. And then she was standing in front of him, one of his hands tangled in the still damp tendrils of her hair, the other pressed firmly against the base of her spine and sweeping her even closer still. She touched his

bare chest, fingertips curling into the muscle of his breast and collar bone as she stood on the very tips of her toes to reach him.

He was so much taller than she was that the muscles in her body ached delightfully as she stretched onto the tips of her toes, and in an effort to alleviate the strain he lowered both of his hands to the backs of her t-shirt covered thighs and lifted her against him. Once more she endured that strange and comfortable sensation, like coming home after a lifetime away.

Carver was everything and he always had been. He was the moments of her life that mattered, and she was not ever letting go again.

"I will do anything," she said as he went on kissing her. "Anything for you."

"No," he murmured. "Not for me. For you. Do it for you."

"For us," she said, tipping her head forward and resting it against his cheek. "Whatever it takes to get back to where we belong, I will do it."

"I'm with you," he promised, squeezing her tighter against him. "Every step of the way."

"One of us should try to talk to Mr. Pounce," she said, regret flooding through her as he loosened his arms and gently lowered the balls of her feet back to the floor.

"I'll do it," he decided. "You should get some sleep. It's been a really long day."

"It has," she nodded agreement and felt a yawn drawing her lips apart against her will. She buried it in her shoulder and waited until it passed before returning her attention to him. "You look really tired, Carver. Maybe we should give Mr. Pounce some time to think. We can both talk to him in the morning."

"Okay."

"I saw a comforter in the upstairs linen closet, tons of sheets."

"I can sleep in the room down here if you want to take the master bedroom upstairs."

Siren stepped back, regarding him with quirked brow. "If you think for a single minute I'm sleeping alone while you're in the same house, you're out of your mind."

"I didn't think..."

"You didn't think what? That I wanted you within reach? Are you crazy? I don't want to let you out of my sight ever again. I told you that already."

A nervous laugh escaped him, the light catching his eyes as he dipped his head to the side and shrugged. "All right then."

She grabbed his hand and began leading him toward the stairwell, the two of them climbing the steps until they reached the landing.

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CHAPTER THIRTY

Siren threw open the linen cupboard doors and they found sheets for the king sized bed. Carver carried everything into the master bedroom, setting it on the end table while she grabbed the pillows and lowered them into the chair at her back so they could make the bed. They were silent, working together as they stretched sheets into place as if they'd made the bed hundreds of times. Carver tucked meticulous hospital corners and she laughed, promising to kick them loose the minute she crawled under the blankets, and it was then she realized she was actually trembling a little.

Shaking the comforter into place, he sat down on the edge of the bed and told her to use the bathroom first. Behind the closed door all of the nerves in her body felt electric and strange, and a droning voice in the back of her mind repeated the word betrayal.

Even if nothing happened between her and Carver, she was already an adulterer. She'd kissed another man, and it had always been her philosophy that cheating wasn't just a physical thing. It was the heart that was the true factor, and she'd been unfaithful to Patrick since she'd met him. In fact, if anyone had been cheated it was Carver. And easy as it was to say she was never letting him out of her sight again, she knew it wasn't going to be that simple.

Sighing, she positioned both hands on the vanity in front of the mirror and studied her own reflection. Loose waves of drying hair hung in her face, swaying slightly around her cheeks. Was she going to walk back into that room and make love to a man she'd never been with because her heart knew it was the only place she belonged, or could she still hold onto the

notion that they were more than just two bodies? That what they shared went well beyond the physical?

Lifting a trembling hand into her hair, she raked her fingers through it like a comb until she'd gathered and twisted it into a sloppy bun. Ten minutes later she was tucked beneath the covers trying to ignore the insane field of butterflies that had taken up residence in her stomach. Carver sauntered toward the bed, his gaze on the reflection cast over the windows, and then he stopped to draw the blankets down and knee his way up onto the mattress. It creaked softly under his weight, the springs bouncing with his movement until he'd situated himself on his back and stared up at the ceiling above them.

Golden hair fell in across his brow. It drifted over the bridge of his nose in such a way she wanted to roll onto her side and tuck them back behind his ear. Everything about him was exactly as she remembered, and yet he looked so different. Older, somehow, more refined. The scruffiness of his beard made him look a little wild, she thought, and she liked the way it felt against her skin when he was kissing her before.

Edging onto her hip, she propped her hand under her head and lifted onto her elbow to stare at him. His eyes met hers. The whites were pink from exhaustion, but in the dull light of the bedside lamps the grey of his irises looked almost blue. He was a dream. He had to be. Any minute she was going to wake up disappointed and on the verge of a mental breakdown, but for the moment he was there and the corner of her mouth twitched with unspoken joy.

"What?" he asked, rolling onto his side so they were face to face. "What are you thinking about?"

"You," she said.

"Yeah?"

Nodding, the grin grew wider.

"What about me?"

"Just that... I don't know, I just can't believe you're really here."

"Every time I look at you, I think the same thing." His arm slid up his side, hand drifting forward to cup her face. She closed her eyes as he began to trace the tip of his thumb across her cheek in gentle strokes. "Whenever I found shelter in the darkness I would close my eyes and remember every detail of your face," he told her. "The curve of your eyebrows, the shape of

your eyes and the adorable way your nose dips upward. I thought about your skin, how soft it was and how good you always smelled. Like pears and sunshine,” his voice was soft and sleepy, the sound of it lulling her into the deepest state of relaxation she’d felt in years, “and the wind when the air temperature shifts as a storm’s rolling in.” She felt his finger trace her lips as he said, “Is it wrong that I want to kiss you?”

She didn’t answer with words, but felt herself drifting forward on instinct until their lips touched. His were so soft, a memory come back to haunt her so many times over the last three years, but it wasn’t memory anymore. He was there, and even if it was only a dream she never wanted to wake up to a world without him in it again.

“I missed you,” she murmured, the words lost in the growing hunger that defied reason and exhaustion to be fed. The hand that touched her face drifted down to rest upon her shoulder, but only for a moment before gliding over her arm to rest on her hip. Almost unconsciously, that hand edged her onto her back and he moved with her, coming in above her and holding himself up on one arm as he kissed her with a lingering slowness that seemed to suggest there was nothing in the world more important to him than the taste of her lips.

The strange thing was that as arousing as his touch was, neither of them went beyond the realm of playful caresses and long, deep kisses. She wanted more, and so did he—she could feel it—but they were both so tired that eventually the length between kisses grew so long they fell asleep cuddled up together with the lights still on.

Siren’s dreams were dark and relentless. Through an endless parade of crying babies, Patrick’s anger slithered behind her giving chase. Pitch black, it oozed like a thick vine bedecked in blood red briars as it writhed and snaked, rising and whipping furiously at her back until she stumbled and tripped. The palms of her hands skidded across sand, she felt it fly up into her face and blind her as the vine snaked around her ankle and began drawing her away. She dug fingers into the unyielding earth, felt it slipping away as she screamed and kicked until her terror wrenched her from sleep and pitched her forward in the bed with a heart-pounding gasp that echoed through the early morning darkness.

Barreling thunder cracked the sky, the sound of it jolting Carver awake with a strangled breath. His hands reached for her, grasping at the fabric of

her shirt and clinging as she leaned back to comfort him.

"It's all right," she told him.

Turning into him, she edged him into the bed and stared across the space between them into his wide, exotic eyes. They flitted across the features of her face, as if he didn't really believe she was there. She watched his shoulder and chest rise in quick succession, breath so furious it was impossible for him to catch it.

"It's just another storm. It's okay."

"Are you really here?"

"I'm here."

"You're not a dream?"

"I'm not if you're not."

That actually made him smile, and he rolled onto his back beside her with an exasperated moan. "I was dreaming about you," he told her. "They were chasing me through the darkness and I was calling out your name because I could see you in the distance. I'd done it a thousand times, and you never answered, but that time I heard you. 'Carver,' you said. 'Carver, I can hear you.' And I ran toward the sound of your voice even though I couldn't even see the ground beneath my feet. I ran because I wanted to save you, I needed to save you, but in the end it was really you who saved me, Siren. You reached your hand through the shadows and grabbed onto my shirt, and then you pulled me back into your arms where I was safe."

"Shh," she murmured, her hand trailing down the familiar structure of his face. She traced the tip of her thumb over the cleft in his chin before rolling it back across his lips, and then she closed the space between them again as she kissed him. "You are safe now, Carver. I'm here."

"Siren, I love you." His hand fell in to rest atop her thigh, which he hadn't even realized was bare until skin touched skin. Her t-shirt had gotten bunched up and tangled around her midriff while she slept. The feel of his fingers was electric, and in answer tiny chills danced along every inch of her flesh. She leaned inward and kissed him again, slower that time, her half-open mouth lingering against his parted lips and prepared to taste the words as he spoke them. The soft hair around his mouth and shadowing his chin brushed deliciously against her. "I love you so much." That proclamation was sweet and slow, and his hand on her hip felt like the whispering wings of a butterfly as they fluttered.

It tickled, but she never wanted it to stop because it woke something inside her she thought she would never feel again. It was more than desire, more than physical longing. Her heartbeat escalated, racing madly inside her like waves of panic. She didn't think she was dead anymore, but by God if she was, she never wanted to be revived. She wanted to stay right there in the dull light of purgatory, Carver's arms around her, his mouth tasting hers.

"I love you," she told him.

It wasn't a conscious thing when she slid her leg along the length of his, it was instinctual. Her bare thigh rested comfortably atop his as he snaked fingers into her hair and pulled her into deeper kisses. They were insatiable, those kisses, his hungry mouth drinking deep as teasing fingers danced the skin of her hip and pulled her tighter to him. Damp lips and ticklish hair drifted across her cheek, down her chin and into the hollow of her throat, which she bared for him as if he were some creature of the night desperately seeking to drain her blood. He suckled at the skin there, his soft tongue tracing patterns that made her whimper and writhe against him as if she'd never been touched by a man before.

It made her ache, the sudden awakening of her need for him so intense she felt it streaming like fire through her veins. They had never been so close before, not with so little clothing between their bodies. Every moment they spent had been thoughtful, romantic, holding hands, cuddling close and running fingers through each other's hair, but this was different. This was everything that lay hidden underneath, the promise of a lifetime in each other's arms and they had nearly missed it.

"Love me, Carver," she whispered as he drew his mouth to hers again and tasted her bottom lip before suckling it gently between his teeth.

It was painful, yet glorious, how much she wanted him. She wanted to know what it felt like to truly make love with someone, to lose herself in the ebb and flow of their souls colliding.

"Love me," she murmured between kisses.

Carver's knee came between her parted thighs, his shoulder edging her onto her back as he rolled in above her. "I do love you." He shuddered, his weight writhing against her body as her hand trailed the length of his spine until her palm rested on the small of his bare back.

It shouldn't have been important; they were more than just two bodies. But she'd lost him once, and while she had no intention of ever letting go of

him again, she wouldn't underestimate Patrick. Without a solid plan, there was a strong possibility things could end badly for both of them. She didn't want to leave the world, not until she knew every inch of Carver Ashmore, body, mind and soul and there might not be another chance for that.

Beneath the comforter, which smelled like salted fabric softener and the fresh breeze blowing in off the ocean, they explored one another. He helped her wriggle out of the overly large blue shirt and then came back inward, bare skin rolling across bare skin. She swore there were sparks, hints of static electricity that danced between their bodies as he moved onto his back and drew her with him, perching her above him and allowing the blankets to fall away so he could see her in all her glory.

"I dreamed of this so many times." His hand brushed through the loose, tangled pieces of her hair, swiping them from her cheek before bringing her downward to kiss him again. She felt his desire for her, the certainty of it physically and emotionally entangled with every gasping breath as they scrambled to shed the last obstacle holding them apart.

Carver's lips touched her throat, her shoulder, her collarbone before he rose into her, cupped her breast and suckled the taut pebble of her nipple between his teeth to nibble gently. Siren's body tensed and shivered, a soft moan spilling from her lips as she tangled fingers into his hair and held him close to her heart. And then he was inside her, their bodies joined in a slow ritual that transcended appreciation and mere desire. Every movement was drawn out, experienced the way one might savor every aspect of two-hundred year old wine. The smell of their love, the flavor of it, every touch, every image that flashed through her mind, she wanted to lock it away inside her for safekeeping.

It was running through the woods on midsummer's eve, the light of the swollen moon pouring through the trees. It was the wind kissing their naked skin as the electricity of a storm scorched the air around them. She threw her head back as he drew her body downward and rose into her. Her name on his lips, she kissed it away and swore she could feel the night wind passing across their sweat-slick skin. Beyond the windows lightning lashed at the dark, morning sky and she felt it moving through them both.

She knew nothing about the power that swelled inside him, but what transpired between them was magic in its purest, most unadulterated form. Every time she looked into his eyes they whirled and glowed with pure,

white light, star bursts of color and beauty and she felt that same light inside her. It was perfect and it was right and she understood now why they'd waited. She could have waited an entire lifetime for that moment to transpire—because it was worth it. Every breath of it, every taste, every touch, every kiss. That moment, that was exactly where she belonged, where she'd always belonged, and though some part of her felt like there should be guilt when she lay cradled in his arms later and delighting in the feel of his soft fingertips dancing across her shoulder, there was no guilt.

The vows she made, they were false. The love she felt for Patrick, it was wrongly won and she would not allow the small thorn of it to fester in her heart another second.

Curling her body closer to Carver's, she closed her eyes and let love carry her away and the sound of thunder as the waves battered mercilessly upon the shore.

They both slept and did not wake again until a familiar weight leaped onto the bottom of the bed and padded across the comforter until he was perched atop their entwined legs and lording over the two of them like some majestic beast. She started to reach for the blankets, then realized it was futile. That cat had seen her in far more compromising positions—the mere thought of the number of times he'd glared from the top of the dresser while she and Patrick had sex made her cheeks flush with the heat of unspoken embarrassment before her arm dropped onto the mattress at her side and she brought her head up to look at him.

The early morning sun, obscured behind the violent clouds, cast the darkest silver hues through the room, but there was no mistaking the golden gleam of Mr. Pounce's eyes as he peered down at them.

"I regret to disturb you, Mistress, Master," he began in a regal tone. He lowered his small, pointed chin in arrogant submission, and then made a sound like clearing his throat. "I spent the night thinking and it has occurred to me that I owe you both a great debt, one I wish to repay. You've done well to take care of me all these years, Master, and even when you were unable to look after me you gifted me to my mistress and she loved me better than I daresay any other living being has loved me in the span of my vast lifetime."

Siren started to lift her hand toward him, wanting to scratch under his chin in that way that always made him purr, but she didn't want to offend

him, especially now that he could voice his objections.

“I believe it is only fair that I do this thing you ask of me, Master Carver,” he went on. “When you are ready, I will grant you the access you require to my memories so that you might better understand the magic I endured, but before I do, I must ask one thing of you both.”

Carver groggily lifted his head from the pillow, propping himself up on his elbow in a fashion Siren mimicked without even realizing she’d done it. “Pounce, I understand that you don’t want to do this. I would never ask you to do something...”

“Master,” he cut him off, “please. That is the very reason I am agreeing to do this—because you would never ask, not after I already said no. You are a good man, for a sorcerer.”

“Thank you.”

“And Mistress Siren is an extraordinary creature. I want you both to know I would do anything for you.”

“Mr. Pounce, I think that’s the sweetest thing you’ve ever said to me. It’s making me want to scratch behind your ears until you let me rub your tummy.”

“You may scratch behind my ears,” he conceded, “but I will not succumb to the dreaded rubbing of the tummy.”

She finally brought her hand up to his head, her fingers working attentively between his ears until he tilted his head into her touch affectionately and filled the silence in the bedroom with the soothing sound of his purring.

“Are you sure about this?” Carver asked, his own hand stroking down the length of the cat’s white back with great affection. “You have been guarding your secret for a long time.”

“Far longer than you’ve been trying to weasel it out of me,” he said stiffly. It didn’t have quite the effect he was aiming for, as the purring seemed to interfere and his body gave into the attention, flopping onto the tops of their legs and stretching himself out. “But it is time. Who knows, perhaps you will be the one strong enough to reverse the magic worked against me. It would do nicely to walk on two legs again,” he rolled onto his back, all four feet twitching and stretching into the air. “To not find myself at the mercy of this delightful stroking, sweet mother of mercy stop, both of you. Do you have any idea how humiliating this is?”

Laughing softly, Siren withdrew her hand and lowered it to the top of the comforter. “And yet you love it so very much.”

“Why do you think it’s humiliating?” he yowled, the purring query escaping him as he whipped back onto his side and bared teeth she’d felt nip playfully into her flesh upon more than one occasion. “Anyway, that’s all I wanted.” He righted himself, pushing up onto his feet and sitting tall again atop Siren’s legs.

“What was the thing?” Siren asked. “That you wanted to ask of us?”

“Oh, right,” he remembered, “only that the master uses what he learns to find a way to reverse this. That’s all.”

“Of course, Pounce,” Carver agreed.

“Anyway, that was all. I shall leave you to your napping.”

“Right,” Carver snorted, “because going back to sleep is going to be a piece of cake now.”

“Perhaps you should entertain yourselves quietly for a while,” he turned away from them, padding softly across the blankets until he arrived at the edge of the bed. Before leaping back to the floor, he glanced over his shoulder at them again, noting, “Lord knows you both deserve a little peace and quiet entertainment after everything you’ve endured.” He hopped down with a thump, then silently strutted across the floors and back through the door.

Siren dropped back against the pillows, staring up at the shadowed ceiling above her until Carver rolled in to hover directly in her line of vision. He was grinning, almost to a point veering on absurdity as he brought his hand down to touch her bare shoulder and leaned in to kiss her softly on the lips. “I don’t know about you, but I could use a little more quiet entertainment.”

“I don’t think we were very quiet earlier,” she pointed out, rising to meet him.

“No?” he quirked an eyebrow thoughtfully. “I was lost in the moment and didn’t really notice. Maybe you should refresh my memory.”

“I’d be happy to,” she kissed him again, and it wasn’t long before they were lost in another series of moments, completely oblivious to the rain pelting the windows and the roar of waves battering at the land as the wind howled and whipped trees in a furious display bordering on unnatural.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Mr. Pounce didn't want Siren to watch while Carver delved deep into his memories to retrieve the information he needed about the spell once cast against him, so she took a steaming cup of chai tea out into the sun room and made herself comfortable on the sofa.

The rain stopped shortly before she and Carver got out of bed, but the clouds still hung threateningly over the world. Every time the waves came barreling in to slam against the beach, she let the sound carry her away. She could hear their voices, even though they were upstairs, and though it was quiet conversation she didn't really try very hard to make out the words. The cat claimed there were things in his past he was not proud of, things he felt terribly ashamed of having to share with Carver. She granted him his privacy, though she would never deny she wasn't just a little more than curious about what events transpired in his distant past to land him on all fours and with nine lives.

She wondered if cats really had nine lives, made a mental note of asking him about it later and then pondered how many of those lives he'd likely used up over the last twelve-hundred years.

It was hard to believe that her cat was twelve-hundred years old. Almost as difficult to swallow as discovering her boyfriend had been trapped in some portal between the darkness and it had been her husband who put him there. She raked a hand through her hair, fingers disentangling it as they worked through and coming away with a few loose strands still clinging. She shook them free and smoothed her palm along the bare skin of her leg.

They really did need clothes before they went back to Pennsylvania. And they still hadn't discussed how they were going to get there when they did make the trip. She assumed Carver would open up another portal and tug them through with him, though a part of her really hoped not. It had been disconcerting, squeezing through time and space and stumbling out into the sand. Her stomach felt tight and a little bit queasy just thinking about it, and she rolled her hand upward to quiet the unease stirring inside her.

Since she and Carver got out of bed and feasted on bottles of water and a box of unopened Apple Jacks left in the pantry cupboard, she hadn't once thought about Patrick, or what it was going to be like having to face him. Alone now, and staring out at the raging sea, she couldn't help but think the storm that followed them was the embodiment of his anger. Bellowing thunder, wicked forks of lightning lashing the sky, the water rising and slamming itself in a tantrum against the shore...

She'd seen Patrick that angry before, and the thought of coming face to face with him and using the feelings he had for her against him made her already uneasy stomach feel that much tighter and just a little bit sore as the contents gurgled and spun inside her.

She worried about her family, about Lacey and Aunt Maisie, whom he'd obviously used to keep her in line and on his side during the two years of their unbelievably smooth courtship. She'd moved through life with Patrick in a way she could only compare to picking up a book and starting to read from chapter seventeen. They'd built a friendship in those unbearable and bitter days after Carver's mysterious disappearance, but it hadn't been real. For Patrick it was a means to an end, and nothing more. The sudden realization that it had all be part of some elaborate ruse to make her fall in love with him to break some stupid curse actually angered her.

The resurgence of her memory the night before, while Carver sifted through the moments of her life with Patrick, was difficult to stomach. Now, knowing everything she did only seemed to make it worse.

Was his hatred for Carver really so severe? If so, why? She tried combing through her recollection of Carver's fantastical memoirs for a reason beyond jealousy, but according to Carver's account of events, Patrick's loathing was spurred on by his family's refusal to avenge his mother. Their bitter acceptance of a curse that affected him for what might have been

eternity if one of them hadn't won the heart of a Talbot woman infuriated him.

And yet, knowing all she did know about Patrick, she could see his irrational temper driving him to do things no sane person would ever do. He'd tortured people. Murdered innocents.

She wanted to hate him for all the things he'd done, but that thorn under the skin, the festering part of her that actually loved him, couldn't do it. The way she felt about him was like a sickness, and though coming together with Carver was certainly healing her in all the ways she'd fantasized it might, she still closed her eyes and saw the innocent side of Patrick so few others had witnessed during the course of their interactions with him. She heard him laughing, saw the way his eyes shone with devotion as he tucked the wayward strands of hair behind her ear and leaned in to kiss her on the forehead, and the memory of it made her heartsick.

He'd wanted a family with her.

A life.

Had she never known Carver, could she have loved Patrick the way he wanted her to? The way some errant part of him believed he deserved.

Everyone deserved to be loved... didn't they?

Bringing her hand up to her forehead, the tips of her fingers pressed into the dull, aching throb and rested there for a moment as she tried to will thoughts of him away. Facing him would be the second hardest thing she'd ever done. He would feel betrayed, and perhaps that was exactly what she was doing to him, betraying him, but wasn't that what he deserved after everything?

She rolled the back of her head along the couch cushions behind her and kept her eyes closed. She was still tired, her muscles were still sore from the accident and probably for other reasons that brought a daring and devilish smile to her lips. Thoughts of Carver's touch alleviated her fears, and for a time she forgot she was supposed to be afraid of standing face to face with her husband and telling him she didn't belong to him.

Outside the faintest hint of thunder rumbled beneath the violent waves, and she had a feeling if she opened her eyes again, it would be just in time to see lightning illuminate the dark clouds. She focused on the constance of the waves, the repetition of their roaring music drawing her away from the

moment and into a peaceful state where she was safe and suspended beneath the water.

She was dreaming, she knew she was even though a part of her was still awake and aware of her surroundings, and in that dream she was underneath the waves and she was safe there. They lifted and carried her, spiriting her further and further out to sea. A hand held onto hers, fingers loosely tangled together, gently squeezing. A soft voice murmured her name like tiny bubbles bursting against her cheek.

“Sweetheart,” he kissed her before backing away and she slowly blinked her eyes open, momentarily disoriented by her surroundings then drawn back in by the comfortable sound of the ocean. “I’m going to walk to the shopping center.”

The shadow of his full height before her blocked the sun’s attempt to break through the angry clouds. He looked like a disheveled surfer standing in front of her in those navy blue Hawaiian swim trunks and a loose-fitting tank top with a tribal turtle painted across the front of it. She’d never seen him so casually attired, his hair loose and askew, hanging in haphazard chunks on account of the makeshift side part.

“Hmm,” she started to sit up. “Do you want me to come with you?”

“I want to take you with me everywhere, but it’s probably better if you stay here. I set a protective enchantment around the house. You’re safer here.”

“Are you going to be safe?”

Carver nodded earnestly, the hair rustling across his high forehead. It lifted and wavered as he dropped down onto one knee in front of her and rested a hand on her bare knee. “I’ll be okay.”

“And if you’re not...?” The thought of him walking through the door and never coming back was like a cold hand tightening around her throat. “We should go together, Carver. There’s no telling what’s out there.”

“Siren...”

“Carver.” His name was a sharp edge pushing through her lips, and the glare she leveled him with was enough to lift his brow in shocked appreciation. “I don’t like the idea of you going alone. What if he’s here? What if he comes after you and I’m not there and I’m left sitting here in a stranger’s house for days on end wondering where you are and if you’re ever coming back. I don’t think I can... No, I know I can’t do that again.”

The furrows in his brow softened, his forehead a smooth canvas again as his soft, beautiful eyes flitted across her features. He swallowed and then acquiesced with grave apprehension. "All right. We go together, but if anything happens I don't want you to get caught in the middle."

She scuffed disbelieving laughter, the sound of it catching in the back of her throat briefly before freeing itself. "I'm already in the middle."

He smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes. "You're right. I'm sorry."

Leaning forward on the sofa, she swung her arms over his shoulders and hugged his neck. He squeezed her tight, burying his face in her hair and breathing her in before he kissed her cheek. "It's gonna be a really long time before I let you out of my sight again."

"I understand," he started to withdraw and held his hand out to help her to her feet. She bounced forward and smiled up at him.

At least it wasn't raining anymore, she thought.

Slipping into a pair of flip-flops he'd picked up for her at the gas station the night before, the two of them clasped hands together and headed out of their stolen refuge. The wind was a conflicted blast of humidity, damp and heavy as it moved through them and rushed their hair from their faces as they hiked the stairs together and navigated the wet-sand walkway leading toward the road.

They didn't say much at first. Carver had to consciously remind himself her legs weren't even half as long as his. Slowing his steps so she could keep up with him, she felt him gaze down at her from time to time and wondered without looking back what he was thinking. His eyes, as bright and beautiful as they were, seemed so haunted and again she found herself trying to imagine what things he'd seen in that dark place. She wanted to ask him, but she was afraid the answers would match the nightmares that taunted her sleep in the dark hours of the morning.

Was it silent there? Had he been afraid? Of course he had. She didn't know how powerful he was, what he was capable of in terms of magic, but everyone had something they were afraid of, and while Carver clung to her in the shadows through the night, his shoulder pitching from the mattress as a stifled cry escaped his lips, Siren knew he feared the dark.

They walked several blocks in silence until they reached the busiest intersection, neither of them paying much attention to the increase in traffic. Edisto Island was like a ghost town in late September, especially

considering it was the middle of the week. Tourist season was over, and save for a loose handful of passing cars, it felt like they had the whole island to themselves.

When she glanced up at his face, she watched his eyes widen at the bustle and busyness of it, and a sense of estrangement from the world seemed to lengthen his face.

“It must be strange,” she said, “being back here again.”

“It’s the most beautiful place I’ve ever been.” That time when he smiled it reached his eyes and he squeezed her hand inside his own.

There was a thrift store beside an old ice cream shop that was closed for the season, and they dug through racks of clothes that smelled like moth balls and age until each of them found suitable clothing. She remembered walking briefly through that same shop with a dawdling Aunt Maisie and an incredibly impatient Patrick just months earlier, but the woman behind the counter wasn’t there. The bustling throwback shop had been staffed by teenagers who’d probably spent every summer of their lives coming to the island with their families. The old woman at the counter was bored. Siren could tell by the way her eyebrow shot up with intrigue when the two of them approached and laid their items out so she could ring them up.

“It’s not often we get tourists this late in the year. November is always busy,” she remarked, unwinding the tag-string from the faded black polo shirt Carver had chosen for himself. “December it’s darn near bustling like July, but October’s usually pretty quiet.”

Siren glanced up at Carver, who was smiling pleasantly at the woman. “The quiet is nice this time of year.”

“It is, isn’t it?” Plucking another tag from a pair of khaki shorts, she folded them and stacked them on top of the shirt before attending to the flowing sun dresses Siren picked out for herself. “Oh that’s pretty,” the woman admired the brightly colored fabric as it unraveled to its full length. “It’s really going to bring out the color in your eyes.”

“She has amazing eyes,” Carver noted, flashing a grin down at her. “Doesn’t she?”

“Are the two of you newlyweds?”

“Recently engaged,” he reached down and brought Siren’s hand up to show off the delicately designed ring she hadn’t taken off her finger.

“That’s a stunning ring,” the woman remarked, reaching out to take a hold on Siren’s hand. She drew her closer to the counter, ogling the knotwork and the sparkling stones as she ran a careful fingertip across the design. “What a lucky girl you are.”

“The luckiest of the lucky,” Siren agreed awkwardly.

Carver had cash in his wallet, and she wondered if he’d been carrying it since before he disappeared, or if he’d somehow managed to bewitch a local ATM machine that refused to accept his expired debit card. They stopped next at the Piggly Wiggly, stuffing bags with so much food she wondered how they’d manage to carry it all, but Carver carried everything as though none of it weighed a single ounce.

They were headed back to the house, the absence of his hand in hers more noticeable than she liked to admit as her arms swung free at her sides. They’d spoken very little on that excursion, and while all those silent moments they’d once shared together had been the very thing that made her feel close to him to begin with, Siren had so many things she wanted to talk to him about, things she needed to know.

It took her several steps to work up the courage to break that silence. She cleared her throat, turned her gaze upward and squinted at the silver sun just over Carver’s shoulder. “So, are we recently engaged then?”

A sheepish twitch edged the corner of his mouth, his smooth cheeks reddening beneath the patchy stubble that decorated them. “I just told her that because it was what she wanted to hear.”

“And you know what she wanted to hear how?”

“I could sense her thoughts a little. We reminded her of herself, of the love she once shared with her husband,” he explained. His tone was sadder as he went on to add, “He passed away recently.”

She blinked, her shoulders stiffening a little as she drew her head back in surprise. “You can read people’s minds?”

“Not like that. It’s just a thread,” he told her. “Some threads are easier to grasp onto than others and all it takes is a little tug for all their thoughts to come spilling out into the air around them.”

“Do you read my mind?”

“I wish I could read your mind, but at the same time I’ve always been a little glad I couldn’t. I like the mystery of you.” He winked at her, then turned his stare to the road in front of them again.

“So we’re not engaged then?” She was still watching him, so focused on the man beside her she nearly tripped over her own feet twice while waiting for him to meet her gaze.

“Not if you don’t wish to be.”

“And if I do?”

“Then we’ll cross that bridge when we come to it. There are a lot of factors that need to be attended to, Siren. We need to take care of Patrick, and as much as I want to just grab your hand and run for the hills until the end of my days, I don’t want to have to run. Not anymore.”

Neither did she. “What happened with Mr. Pounce?”

“It turns out his name’s not Mr. Pounce at all,” he grinned playfully.

“No wonder he was so perturbed when I chose that name for him.”

“I always just called him Cat before you named him,” he shrugged.

“Cat is so much easier to take seriously.”

“And Auberon is even easier than that.”

“Oberon?” her eyebrow shot upward. “Like Shakespeare’s fairy king?”

“Auberon,” he corrected her. “Apparently he knew Shakespeare,” Carver shrugged.

She blinked disbelief and returned her gaze to the damp sidewalk beneath her feet. A trail of ants gathered around the corpse of a squashed worm, the tiny soldiers lining up along its sides and preparing to carry it back to their hill, she assumed with a shudder.

“Did you figure out his magic?”

“I’m processing everything I learned, but it’s not going to be easy. It was fey magic.”

“Fey?” she repeated. “As in faeries?”

Carver’s lower lip jutted outward as he nodded, and he quickly sucked it back in, allowing it to pass between his teeth before running the tip of his tongue along the frayed skin. “Our sarcastic friend of the feline persuasion was some kind of denizen of the faerie kingdoms.”

“Faeries, magic...” Siren’s head shook back and forth. “What else is the world hiding from me?”

“Did you know about the vampires and werewolves?” He looked so serious when she returned her stare to his face, the thin width of his pale pink lips barely giving away his jest. “I’m just kidding,” he finally said.

“There are no vampires, at least not that I know of. I’m not entirely sure about the werewolves.”

She released a breath of relief, glancing up just in time to see their stolen beach house rising into view. “Is there any way he can help you? I mean beyond allowing you to study the memory of the magic?”

“Probably not. His own affiliation with magic was severed when the curse was cast. He can barely wrap his mind around the concept, and it’s been so long for him, you know?”

“Great,” she muttered with a half-hearted nod.

“Don’t worry, Siren,” he willed her. “I’ll figure it out. I’m not letting him hurt you again.”

“And if he hurts you? Then what?”

“That’s not gonna happen,” he said, though she could tell his confidence was wavering just a little. “I’ll be ready for him this time.”

“You were ready for him last time,” she pointed out, then asked, “weren’t you?”

“Sort of. I mean, I always thought he’d figure out a way to escape the darkness. I just never knew when. It was coincidence that he showed up the night I was going to ask you to marry me. If he’d come the day before, while you were at work, I would have been completely unprepared and you would have never been able to bring me back.”

She shuddered at the thought, suddenly longing to reach out and grab onto him and never let go. “Thank God for small coincidences.”

“Agreed.”

“What if you can’t figure this magic out, Carver?”

“I don’t know, Siren. I’ll figure something out.”

“You can’t kill him,” she declared.

He didn’t meet her imploring stare, and she tried not to let the fact that he was seriously considering it get under her skin.

“I mean it, Carver. That’s not who you are. You are not a killer, and I won’t let you become one, not because of Patrick.”

He looked momentarily defeated, as if her refusal to give into necessity had foiled some plan he clung to out of desperation. Finally he did turn his head, his eyes more green than grey as he nodded agreement and said, “I won’t kill him. But if he lays a single finger on you, I can’t make any promises.”

Closing her eyes, they stood in the shadow of the beach house. The fierce wind felt cold against her skin and goose bumps rippled in raised patterns like braille up the length of both arms and legs. “There has to be another answer. Murder is never the answer.”

“I know,” he agreed, his hand resting on her shoulder. When she opened her eyes again, she saw sincerity in his expression. “We’ll figure it out, I promise. Come on. I’m dying to put real clothes on.”

Carver gestured with his head toward the gate before she could reach for it. The lock unlatched and the wooden door swung forward on its hinges with a rusty wail that was like fingernails scraping down a chalkboard. Neither of them said anything else as they hiked the stairs to their safe little hideaway.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Once inside the sitting room Siren slipped out of her flip-flops, grateful for the feel of the gritty sand littering the welcome mat as it scuffed across the bottoms of her feet.

The energy in the house felt heavier than it had when they left, like it had hands and the fingers of those hands were covetously grabbing at her skin. Carver didn't seem to notice. He carried their bags into the kitchen and lowered them onto the breakfast bar. Siren lingered near the door, feeling stiff and frozen as she watched him sift through the bag with their clothes inside. He drew out the polo shirt and khaki shorts, folding them over the length of his arm before swinging his head over his shoulder to look back at her. Tilting it in curious, silent question, a shadow lurking in the dining room swept in behind him with dangerous speed, a blast of solid black colliding with his shoulder and sending him sprawling through the bar stools tucked beneath the counters. He slid across the tiled floor, the wall of darkness shoving him with great force just out of sight. The clattering of barstools quieted with a heavy thud against the wall and the shattering of glass as the painting knocked loose and tumbled to the tiles.

Siren couldn't move and she couldn't see Carver, save for his bare foot jutting just on the other side of the door frame. The gaping darkness that manipulated him was the most terrifying thing she'd ever witnessed, and it drew back like a shadow fleeing the sun as its summoner approached. Her head snapped toward the sound of boots clomping in slow precision across the floor. She knew the sound of those boots, his meter of every step.

"There you are."

He stepped into the room, the light streaming in from the windows on her right illuminating every detail of his face, most especially the dark flare of unbridled rage in his wild hazel eyes. His dark hair was askew, as if he'd run his fingers through it thousands upon thousands of times while pacing the floor in a brooding downward spiral into pure madness.

"Did you really think I wouldn't find you?" Every word was slow, accentuated as he stalked step by step toward her. "The thing that gets me though is why here?" he asked. "Of all the places in the world, why here?"

Siren swallowed hard against the tight anxiety threatening to suffocate her where she stood. "Patrick." His name was a hoarse whisper that barely cut through the silence, but the sound of her voice stirred movement just beyond the wall to her left. That movement distracted Patrick's attention and she darted in the direction, quickly throwing herself in the path of his raised hand and the crumpled and disoriented body on the floor.

"Get out of the way, Siren."

"Let him go." There was more conviction in her voice than she ever imagined she could muster. "It's me you want, not Carver."

"Oh that's not true at all," he shook his head and took a step toward her, his arm still stretched toward her and the body at her back. "I want both of you. I need him."

"You don't need him," she shook her head. "You just want me."

"And how will I ever put you in your place if you don't learn, Siren? I have to teach you, you know?"

"You don't have to teach me anything, Patrick."

He'd been angry before, on the brink of explosion to rival Mount St. Helens, but the flare of temperament went well beyond simple anger. It was insanity wrapped in strings of possession and she knew there would be no reaching him.

Her own feet surprised her, moving forward against her will and without her permission, her outstretched hand bobbing just a little as she tried to calm him. "You don't want to hurt me."

"Don't I?"

"No," she said softly. "You don't want that, Patrick. You love me."

Throwing back his head a little, sharp peals of laughter erupted from his chest and throat. They were deep and ragged, filled with sounds that

terrified her more than she could ever express in mere words. “And look what loving you got me.”

She was nearly standing in front of him, just two, maybe three steps away. Her entire body was trembling so severely she thought for sure her knees would give out and she would fall in submission at his feet. “I didn’t want to hurt you. I wouldn’t have... But you...” Her lower lip was like a jackhammer above her chin, trembling so severely she could barely get it in check and it was hard to make words come out. Her eyes stung, and the longer she avoided blinking, the more tears gathered there. “You’re a killer.”

“Oh god,” he threw up his arms. “Are you gonna start crying? You know I fucking hate it when you do that.”

“Because you don’t want to hurt me.”

“I didn’t,” he agreed. “You were so precious to me, but all you ever wanted to do was hurt me. *‘You’ll never be Carver, Patrick. You’ll never take his place in my heart.’* You know, I don’t even think you have a heart. From the very beginning I brought you flowers, I laid them at your feet like some supplicant at an altar and how do you repay me, my goddess?”

She started to open her mouth to reply, but he cut her off, shouting, “How?”

Shrinking back, something unexpected caught her eye. The pantry cupboard just over Patrick’s shoulder was slowly rolling forward, a white shade shifting carefully behind its doors. Her perspective shifted, the sudden, overwhelming hopelessness and despair that gripped her upon entering the house wavered, and a hint of momentary calm washed over her.

“I’m sorry, Patrick.” Her eyes flitted back to him quickly, fear worrying her that he would notice she’d been watching something come to life just behind him. “It was wrong of me to hold you at arm’s length.”

“You think?” He wrinkled his long nose in that sarcastic fashion of his, his tongue pushing against his bottom teeth as his mouth gaped a little. “After everything I gave you, after all I did for you. I gave you my heart and a home. I stood behind you and encouraged you to do the things you were always so afraid to do when you were with him. I convinced you to paint, Siren. And you said you loved me. I believed you.”

“I do love you, Patrick,” she nodded furiously and bid her left foot forward again. “Maybe not the way you think you deserve, but I loved

you.”

“No you didn’t.” His eye twitched. “They were only words to you. Something you gave me to quiet the beast you always knew was just under the skin.”

“I never knew it was there.”

“Don’t lie to me,” he droned, taking another step toward her. “You felt it in there and because it was there you couldn’t love me. You never will, not as long he’s alive.”

“Don’t you dare touch him.”

Flicking his hand over her shoulder, she watched the tips of his fingers drip flame and her instincts threw her into him. The gathering of fire he was drawing into his hand snuffed out, she launched her small body into his chest.

Siren weighed about sixty pounds less than Patrick, but the sudden impact of her charging him caught him off guard and the two of them stumbled backward into the breakfast bar and the rest of the stools still neatly tucked beneath it. Patrick lost his footing and grappling with her arms to try and control the force of her, the two of them went down. She was straddling his hips, holding herself back even as he tried to pull her laughing into his chest.

She struggled to free herself, his grip tightening around her wrists and burning into her skin as she wrenched and tore herself in attempt to hit him. She was screaming at him, a deluge of words and phrases that in retrospect she’d never be able to recall. All the pent up rage she’d held inside herself after Carver disappeared, anger she’d never been able to direct at anyone came spewing forth in a flourish of angry slaps clipped by the sound of his continued laughter. The lines crinkling the corners of his eyes were wet with leaking tears of amusement and when she drew her hand back with the intent to slap him across the face, his grip shot out again and snared her wrist in mid-swing. Fingers bruised bone as he squeezed and started to sit up, her weight falling precariously into his lap as he flashed clenched teeth at her and bellowed, “Enough!”

Ragged gasps of breath, the wheeze of laughter still eking through his windpipes as he grinned uncannily up at her. There was fire in his eyes, dancing flames of madness and hatred so severe she could feel the heat of it lapping at her insides like hungry tongues. He wanted to burn her to ash.

“You can’t do the things you’ve done and say you still love the person you did them to,” she rasped.

“That’s rich coming from you.”

Her emotions surged again, the pain and barrenness of losing Carver rising to the surface once more. She surged toward him, teeth clenched and screaming, “You took him away from me!”

He shoved against her, putting enough space between them that when the cat leapt silently from his hiding place in the cupboard and landed on Patrick’s face, she was able to pull away. Claws digging in deep as a yowling hiss screamed in her ears, Siren detached herself from the fray and scrambled backward through the tangled mess of barstools and spilled groceries littering the cold tiles beneath her hands and knees. She watched a granny smith apple roll toward the hallway from the corner of her eye, but she never turned her back on Patrick as she crawled to where Carver lay unconscious and pressed seeking fingers into the hollow of his throat until she found the faint, steady tick of life pulsing beneath the skin.

Alive.

Breath left her body in an exhale of relief so profound it occurred to her she must have been holding it in the entire time she’d been trying to talk to Patrick. “Carver,” she nudged his shoulder, shaking him tentatively. “Carver wake up.”

Over her shoulder the cat was still hissing and screaming, and Patrick’s pain-filled roars were so terrifying they made her blood feel like cold cottage cheese chugging through her veins. She brought her hand up to Carver’s cheek, fingers tapping and prodding without response. Under her breath she muttered the word please so many times it ran together in a stream of sound that almost made no sense.

She’d lost him once; she wouldn’t do it again.

Leaning downward, she touched her lips to his in a gentle kiss, whispering that word one last time, “Please, Carver. I need you.”

The yowling stopped, followed by a feral hiss of warning that stiffened the air like sheets left out in the sun too long. And then something thumped into the wall over her head. It dropped with a dull thud on the floor just behind her and Siren’s heart was in her throat. She was choking on it, and she couldn’t breathe as she squeezed her eyes tight and turned away from Carver to confirm that which she did not wish to see.

White fur, long and still rustling like grass in the wind, and then it stopped. He was still and broken, paws painted red and a slow trickle dripped into a tiny puddle on the stark white tiles beneath his slightly parted lips.

“No,” she whimpered. “No, no, no.”

Patrick’s movement signaled her attention, boots scraping across the floor as he scrambled to his feet and started dusting himself off. His face was like a child’s finger painting, blood smears trickled from the deep scratches that dug into the skin and his already disheveled hair was like a mess of tangles clotted together with his own blood. He started toward her, every boot step making her shudder.

“I always hated that cat.”

“You killed him,” she whimpered.

“Again with the crying,” he growled.

Clomp, clomp, clomp. Boots on the floor, and then his shadow darkened over her huddled frame. His hand reached out to her. She stared at the fingers, bloodstained hand of a killer, and when she blinked fresh tears spilled down her flaming cheeks. He wiggled those fingers impatiently.

“Come on,” he urged in breathless command.

“I’m not going anywhere with you,” she glared up at him defiantly.

“Siren.” Head tipped the way a serious parent might will a child to do his bidding, his wild eyes implored her silently. “Don’t make me any angrier than I already am.”

“You killed Mr. Pounce.”

“Jesus Christ,” he sighed. “I’ll get you a puppy.”

She reached out and slapped his hand away, but he was quicker than she was. He grabbed onto her wrist and yanked her to her feet.

“Let me go!”

He took two backwards steps and swung her around with him before shoving her toward the sun room. She felt the tug on her body when he turned over his left shoulder, pausing for a moment to lift his hand. She couldn’t see what he was doing, but she felt the air around them shift. It was as though he’d somehow managed to suck all of the sunshine and happiness from the world with a single flex of his fingers.

“What are you doing, Patrick?”

He didn't answer and she couldn't see beyond the span of his shoulders what he was doing with his hand.

"Patrick?" she clipped his name like a round from a gun, but the sound barely distracted him from his task. Ducking around, she watched the dark energy gather in the palm of his hand, and then he winged it with all of his might toward the dining room.

Siren screamed, deliberately wrenching herself from his tenuous grip and darting after that eerie ball of tumbling black. She could see flares of energy wavering through it, deep purple, rich blue. It reminded her of one of those toys they used to sell in the novelty gift shop at the mall when she was a kid. Electricity whirling and dancing to the tune of the fingers that danced atop the glass ball housing it. Only there was no glass ball, that energy was live and it was headed straight toward Carver.

His fingers grasped the loose fabric of her overly large shirt and when he jerked her backward the collar dragged across her neck. It choked her and she gasped, instinct bringing her hand up to try and loosen it so she could breathe. Patrick didn't unclench his grip. He dragged her, bare feet skidding across hardwood, through the rough materiel of the welcome mat. She screamed, not even caring in the least bit that she sounded like some kind of damsel in distress, but no one would hear her. Edisto Island was a ghost town, there wasn't a neighbor on the entire block and when Patrick reached forward with his free hand to jerk the door open, the ocean's virulent and chaotic rage drowned out the sound of her voice.

He shoved her through the door. Stumbling down the steps and onto the screened in porch, Siren barely caught herself before she crashed into the table.

"You killed them!" She screamed at him, turning inward and smashing the backs of her fists into his chest. "You killed them both!"

Patrick said nothing. He only tightened his grip on her shirt. It dragged across her shoulder, exposing her bare skin, but at least he'd loosened the collar enough with all that tugging and pulling. She could breathe, and when she drew in copious amounts of air, each time she exhaled it was a hitch of sound tormented by grief and rage.

"Let go of me."

"No." It was the first thing he'd said to her since he'd unleashed his fury on the love of her life. She hadn't seen the body, but she'd felt the powerful

force of Patrick's dark magic. Carver was unconscious; there was no way he could have protected himself from it.

Siren kicked her foot out, pain ricocheting through her toes as they connected with her husband's shin. He didn't even acknowledge it. He just tightened his grip on her and began tracing his other hand through the open air in front of him. Black essence leaked from the tips as he drew through the air, a wide, gaping circle that began to devour everything it came in contact with. Instinct edged her away, and for a second she thought she might actually break free from his grip, but the cockeyed chair behind her tripped her up and she nearly fell into the seat of it.

Patrick reached for her, grabbing onto her arm that time and jerking her back to her feet.

"Don't do this," she whimpered. "Just let me go."

The portal hummed and whispered, a sound so severe and terrifying it made every hair on her body stand on end. Patrick smiled at her and brought an adoring hand to her cheek. "Don't be afraid," he willed her.

"What are you doing?" Her eyes weren't just leaky faucets, they were a torrential downpour of terror and anger and hopelessness. "Please, Patrick..."

"I'm taking you home, baby," he said simply. "Just close your eyes. It'll be over before you know it."

The hand on her cheek dropped onto her shoulder, and he steered her past him. Holding on tight to her, fingers pressed hard into muscle and bone. He shoved her into darkness and then stepped in behind her before closing the gateway at their backs.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

She could no longer hear the ocean. It was the first thing she noticed in that dark space between worlds. Its absence was severe, and all the comfort that wrapped up inside its endless rage was lost. She heard her heartbeat like a drum inside both ears, like thunder inside her chest as it crashed frantically against her ribcage. She heard Patrick's boots and the rattling exhale of his angry breath, but she couldn't see anything. Not even her own hand, which she brought up in front of her face, fingers wiggling. She felt the absence of light all around her, oppressive shadow that wanted to lap at her skin like eager little tongues until it devoured the very last part of her that was filled with hope and light.

No, wait. That part of her was already gone.

Mr. Pounce was dead. Carver was dead.

There was nothing left for her but Patrick.

Still gripping her arm like an angry parent jerking a wayward, tantrum-throwing child to punishment, Patrick pushed in front of her and tore through the black with a striking wrench of his hand. Light spread quickly, reaching for her eyes and making her wince away from it. They'd only been in that place a matter of seconds, but the pitch of it was so obscure the sunlight streaming through the opening made her vision blur and burn.

Or maybe it was just her tears.

She squinted anyway, blinking and shielding her face with her free arm as her feet stumbled and Patrick dragged her forward with enough force to send her sprawling to the middle of their living room floor when she fell. The carpet burned bare knees and the palms of her outstretched hands, but

before she had time to acknowledge the agony of it with more than a whimper, Patrick was grabbing at her again and yanking her to her feet in front of him.

“You’re all right,” he told her. His voice was surprisingly calm, but it did little to assuage her fears or placate the tight ball of anger mingling with defeat at the cocktail party of hate in her stomach.

Pushing him away from her, she glared and said through clenched teeth, “I am not all right!”

“Don’t be such a drama queen. You’re fine.”

Mouth opening to retort, there were no words. It was like his eyes were phasers set to stun, and she was his target. She just stood there like a zebra that’d been stumbled upon by a lion. She wanted to dart left, to flee for her life, but where was she going to go? She’d make it over the couch, maybe, partway to the door before he caught up to her and dragged her back. And then what? There was no telling what he’d do to her then, though she was relatively sure none of it would matter. She had nothing left for him to take.

“What are you going to do to me?”

Patrick was grinning at her again, a terrifying smile that spoke of madness beyond comprehension. “Do with you?” The tight fingers burrowing into her shoulders began to loosen, but she could still feel the bruise of them pulsing painfully beneath the surface of her skin. “Why would I do anything with you? I brought you home, Siren. I brought you back because this is where you belong. Here,” he said, “with me.” He leaned forward to stress his point, his shapely mouth slightly open as he processed his next thought before sharing it with her. “You are my wife.”

Breath pushed through her lips, an unexpected exhale caught between a whine and a sob. “I want a divorce.”

He snorted, the hand on her left shoulder sliding down the length of her arm until it rested on her elbow. “No you don’t,” he shook his head. When he blinked, head still wavering back and forth in front of her, Siren swallowed against the sharp thing like glass that lodged in her throat. “We’re going to talk about all of this and it’s going to be fine. We’ll sit down at the table. I’ll make you some tea and then we’ll talk about it, okay?”

It was not okay. There was nothing okay about any of it, but she couldn’t find her voice. Her body just shuffled forward after he helped her to her feet

and guided her toward the table in the dining room. When he reached out to grab the back of the chair and tug it across the hardwood floor, it scraped and grunted as it bounced over the wood. She imagined he was cringing and screaming on the inside. There was nothing in the world he hated more than disrespecting wood. He was a carpenter, after all. She studied the chair on her right, not wanting to sit down, but completely unable to resist when he lowered her into it and hunkered down in front of her.

“Where’s Aunt Maisie?” she asked when she finally found her voice.

“I imagine she’s at home pacing the floors and awaiting my call.” He folded his hands together between his parted thighs, his elbows rested across the tops of them as he twisted his expression into one of scolding and derision. “She was terrified, you know. Worried sick about you.”

“You didn’t kill her?” Her cheek surprised even her.

Patrick swept back his head a little and twisted his mouth into a disapproving grimace. “Now why would I kill Aunt Maisie? She’s on my side, Siren. Her and Lacey both, and frankly neither of them could understand why you’d just abandon me like that.”

“Of course not.” She felt her nose twitch above her lips, a tiny trickle of moisture beading just below her nostril as the sting in her eyes grew. “I’m sure you’ve done quite the number on them both.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. They adore me,” he reminded her. “I am the best thing that’s happened to you since... what was his name again? Neither of them can really remember, but I guess it doesn’t matter. They both agree I’m the best thing that’s happened to you since old what’s his name disappeared. I’m more inclined to think I’m the best thing that happened to you since, well, ever, but then I’m a little...”

“Crazy?”

“No,” he grinned. “I was gonna say biased.”

She bit back the urge to spit in his face. Drawing her lower lip between her teeth, she sunk their sharpness into the fat flesh until a sharp issue of pain followed the copper certainty of blood on her tongue.

“You know this will go so much easier for you if you just cooperate with me, Siren.”

“I know about what you did to Sarah Talbot.”

“And...?”

“Did she cooperate with you?”

“I didn’t love her.” He brought his shoulders up a little and then reached out to lower a hand in gentle mockery atop her bare knee. “I don’t think there has ever been anyone in this whole world I love as much as I love you.”

“You don’t understand love at all.”

A disapproving scowl knitted his dark eyebrows together, the lines in his forehead deepening with dismay. “You’re supposed to say you love me too,” he told her. She said nothing, and after a while he grew tired of waiting, his thin patience stretched to its limit. “I love you so much I would do anything for you.”

“Like kill people?”

She couldn’t look at him when she asked that. Gaze drawn toward the place he’d opened the portal into their living room, she wanted to dart out of the chair, scramble over the couch and dive back into that portal. She wanted to run straight to the stolen beach house where it was safe, where Carver was and where the sound of the ocean wrapped them in its cocoon and kept them out of harm’s reach. But she didn’t know how to open portals; that realization made her throat ache and as she gulped down air in an attempt to keep herself from breaking down again it felt dry and empty in her lungs.

“I killed your cat, Siren.” Patrick grabbed her chin and jerked her face back to his. “I know you liked him, though for the life of me I could never understand why, but he was a cat, not a person.”

“You killed Carver!” She shrieked, surging forward until her face was less than a hair from his, their noses practically touching.

He didn’t flinch. In fact, her scream barely fazed him at all. He swallowed, smacked his lips in annoyance and drew his head back to glare at her. “I will kill anyone who tries to come between us.”

“You killed that homeless guy.”

“He tried to hurt you.” How strange it was when the features of his face softened, as if bloody murder was the easiest way to get a point across and she was just being daft for doubting that.

“He scared me.” She leaned back in the chair again, crossing her arms over her chest. She felt so cold, unnaturally chilly, and the fact that she was wearing little more than a t-shirt and bathing suit bottoms didn’t help matters much. Patrick left the windows open and the cold September wind

streamed through the trees and into the house to nibble at her bare skin like tiny teeth. “He was trying to help me find Carver.”

“I couldn’t take that chance, Siren.”

“So you just killed him?” she baled.

“Why does it matter so much to you?” He clearly didn’t understand why it was such a big deal, she could see it in his eyes—which were calm in the oddest sense of the word. She’d never seen anything like it, and it was terrifying. “Who was that guy to you? You didn’t know him. He was just some guy.”

“You could go to jail, Patrick. You will go to jail because I will tell the police.”

“No you won’t.” He was grinning again, head bobbing back and forth as if he thought she was a silly little bubble head who needed to be set straight. “What are you going to tell them?” That the husband you ran out on so you could shack up with your old boyfriend killed some strange homeless man in the alley behind the coffee shop where you used to work?” Leaning further back, he crossed his arms in an authoritative stance and said, “They’ll never believe you.”

Helplessness flooded through her, and she wasn’t sure if it was because she knew she was truly defeated, or if he was somehow working his magic against her to keep her under his thumb.

“Look, I’m willing to forgive and for—”

Her hand shot out, open palm cracking across his cheek in a stunning maneuver that widened his eyes and stung through her like pinpricks of flame. Patrick tightened his jaw, his tongue poking into his cheek where she struck him. The strike broke open the skin on several of the gouging claw scratches on his face and made them bleed again, a trickle of blood dripping into the hair of his goatee.

“I will never forgive you!” she hissed at him. “You killed Carver and Mr. Pounce and god only knows who else!”

“I did it for you!” he roared. “Everything I’ve done since I met you, I did for you. To keep you centered and sane so you didn’t wind up in the nut house like your psychopath mother.”

“My mom was not a psychopath.”

“Wasn’t she?”

“She ran away.”

“Of course that’s what Aunt Maisie told you. She didn’t want to break your little heart.”

“Leave Aunt Maisie alone.”

“She was just protecting you, Siren.” He shrugged and rocked back onto his heels. Arms crossed arrogantly over his chest, he tipped his head back to look down his nose at her. She watched the blood stop short just above the dimple slice in his right cheek. It just lingered there, clotting and hardening as it dried. “I would have done the same thing. She never wanted to hurt you. She didn’t want you to know you drove your mother crazy with your incessant wanting and needing. Crying, always crying.” Patrick’s head wavered back and forth again, as if he couldn’t believe he’d allowed himself to get reeled into her crazy. “You were just a kid though, right? It wasn’t your fault. Kids have needs, but you never quite grew out of it, did you? So fragile, Siren. So insecure and unsure of yourself until you latched on to that idiot cousin of mine. He manipulated you. Would have let you go on as you were forever, never encouraging you to be who you were meant to be. And after he was gone you just sort of hovered there, always on the edge, one step closer and about to tumble over and let the madness sweep you away. I saved you.”

“You’re crazy.”

Patrick ignored her. “And that’s why I have to take care of you. You can’t take care of yourself. You don’t know what’s good for you.”

“I was taking care of myself just fine before you came along and ruined everything.”

“Leeching off of Carver?” he asked. “Planning to spend the rest of your days in that coffee shop mixing salted caramel mocha cappuccinos and passing out blueberry scones on those stupid little plates with paper doilies? He would have let you stay there forever. He encouraged your mediocrity, but not me. I got you out of that place. I helped you focus on what you really wanted, on the thing that was most important to you.”

“You know nothing about what’s important to me,” she murmured.

The hand he reached out to touch her with was stained with blood. The fingernails were black, and she wondered if the fire he’d called to the tops had scorched them, or if that was his darkness lurking at the edge in case he needed to summon it again. She didn’t want him to touch her with that hand

and she flinched when he brought it against her cheek and tucked an errant strand of hair behind her ear.

“Baby,” he said softly, “I know what’s good for you. I know because I love you so much it destroys me inside.”

Her eyes were blurring over again, hot tears that cooled as the breeze danced through the house and passed once more across her face. “Patrick, if you really love me just let me go, please.”

When she blinked the tears spilled down her face. Salted lava burning into her skin as he leaned in close and said, “I can’t do that, Siren. You don’t let go of the things you love. I learned that from you. I learned so much from you. Things I never expected.” She sniffled a little, more tears dripping over her cheeks and chin before splashing onto the pale blue shirt she wore. “Come on, enough with the fucking waterworks already. Really, Siren. It’s old. It’s tired. You’re not a baby. Can’t you just be happy? Just this fucking once? For me?”

She raised a defiant hand to swipe away the tears, and that time he did flinch a little at the unexpected lifting of her arm. She clenched her teeth together to keep herself from screaming. In her mind’s eye, she saw herself launching at him again, tackling him to the floor and pounding away at him with all her might, but what good would it do? She had no idea what he was capable of. He was unhinged, and he was some kind of warlock or sorcerer or something, which only made everything worse. One wrong move on her part and he could turn her to dust, or ash, or send her into a dark portal where was no light or hope—but would such a place be any different than where she was at that moment.

Without Carver, there was no hope.

“I will never love you,” she shook her head and ignored the stiffening of his shoulders. “Not the way I loved Carver.”

“What’s it gonna take?”

“This is not a negotiation,” she screamed at him.

“You’re goddamn right it’s not a negotiation!” He surged forward in an attempt to terrify her, his voice booming through the dome around them.

Lucky for him it worked. Siren shrank back so far in the chair the wood creaked with her movement. She’d crossed her arms in front of her as if warding off an attack and he grabbed them, jerking them downward and yanking her forward so they were face to face again.

“Jesus.” The fire burned more brilliantly within his eyes, the little flames rising until they all but consumed the beautiful pair of hazel irises that used to beam down at her while they lay together in bed with the sun streaming through the windows. “My god. You think I’m gonna hit you?” The gentleness in his tone was confusing. “You’re my wife, Siren. I’ve told you so many times how much I love you. I don’t ever want to hurt you.”

“You’re hurting me right now!” she squalled, trying to tear her arms away. “Our entire relationship was built on hurt, Patrick. Everything in my life that mattered, you took it away!”

“Not everything. You still have your family, your friends. And besides, I gave you so much more,” he pointed out. “Doesn’t any of that matter to you?” There was a whiny sense of desperation in his tone as he implored her. “I gave you everything you could ever want. I still want to give you everything. Won’t you let me? Please?”

Closing her eyes and turning her head away, she couldn’t stop the tears even if she wanted to. The fact that they only seemed to make him angrier just made her cry harder. “Patrick, please just let me go.”

“I can’t.”

He was still holding onto her arms, his grip softening as he brought them down to rest in her lap again. He traced the tips of his fingers along the insides of her forearms until he came to the meat of her palms, and then he held her hands in his.

“I spent hundreds of years looking for you, did you know that?” His voice was patient then, thoughtful. “You were going to be my curse breaker, but it turned out you were so much more than that. You were... everything that was missing in my life. Don’t you remember when we used to sit in your apartment and watch those stupid movies?” He stopped, as if waiting for her to answer, but when she didn’t he went on as though she was raptly engaged in their conversation. “The first time I heard you laugh, that was when I knew I loved you. Did you know that? That was when I fell in love with you, Siren, and I couldn’t stop. I mean yeah, I did some really shitty things to get myself to that place, some truly unforgivable things—I know that, but I kept telling myself if she loves me those terrible things won’t matter to her because love fixes everything.”

“No it doesn’t.” Her voice cracked as she whispered those words, mostly because she didn’t believe that. Love was the one bit of magic she actually

believed in before she found the men in her life could tear portals through the fabric of space and time and throw balls of fire and lightning at one another.

“It does, Siren. Love fixed me. You fixed me.”

“You killed people, Patrick.”

Throwing back his head in exasperation, he growled as he withdrew his hands from hers. “Are we gonna keep coming back to that?” Running his fingers into the wild mess of his dark brown hair, he pinned them back and held them away from his forehead. She watched a loose curl spring free and slide down his temple. “That whole killing thing, I won’t do it again, okay? I promise. You have my word. Would that make you happy?” When he let go of his hair it stood out like he’d just walked out of a bad science experiment or unsuccessful electroshock therapy. It made him appear even crazier than he looked before, and that was saying something because when they were face to face in the beach house he was madness personified. Siren trembled, both inside and out, remembering her mother’s mania and feeling instantly like the needy child he’d accused her of being. “Would you stay with me then? If I promise not to kill anyone else?”

“Patrick...”

A shadow passed across the sun, large heavy clouds that blotted out the light streaming through the windows and the skylight overhead. It was the first time since he’d plunked her down in that chair that she’d really noticed it was blissfully sunny outside when they came barreling through the portal. She looked around, trying to see through the veil of illusion, and for a moment she thought reality itself flickered.

Clouds were rolling in, darkening the house all around them and bringing with them smell of rain on the wind. Crisp, clean and tinged with just a hint of autumn oak musk. There was something eerily familiar about that smell, and in the back of her mind she could almost hear the angry roar of the ocean. That sound placated her while she was tucked away in that house on the beach that belonged to someone else. When Carver was with her. It felt so long ago they’d been safe there, years and years ago.

“Well,” he began, slapping his palms across the thighs of his worn and faded jeans. “I’m not letting you go,” he declared. There was paint on those jeans and blood; it was still bright red, darker in some places than it was in others and she wondered if it was his, or the cat’s or someone else’s. It was

growing ever more impossible to tell. “I know you think you want me to let you go, but I know you don’t, not really. Not deep down, and if you give me the chance I deserve, I will make you so happy.” Hands still positioned on the tops of his thighs, he used them to push himself into a standing position. “And I’m gonna start by making you a cup of tea.”

Siren said nothing.

She sat in the chair and watched through the blur of her tears and the heaviness of her lids as he walked into the kitchen, his heavy work boots thumping with every step. The familiarity of him moving from stove to sink as he filled the stainless steel tea kettle from the tap was almost as disturbing as the ever-increasing storm gathering around their house outside.

Was that storm somehow connected to Patrick? Was that how he found them? It had followed her everywhere, or so it seemed. It was there when she sat down to peel back the box Carver’s ring for her was in, and when they passed through the portal to the beach it gathered there as well, hovering at the edges of the never ending waves, the lightning always lashing and filling the sky with flashes of brilliance as thunder resounded in answer. The thing was, aside from the whole tornado sweeping through and nearly smashing her to a bloody pulp in her own back yard, it didn’t feel threatening. It just felt powerful and really, really angry.

Was Carver coming?

No.

She was being stupid. Carver was dead. She’d watched Patrick throw something awful and inexplicable at him before he shoved her through the portal. The thought of it tore through her, her body violently reacting as a gasping sob escaped her lips. After everything, all they’d been through and she finally got him back only to have him torn away from her again. This time for good.

Both hands clenched into fists at her sides, the sharp moons of her fingernails digging deep into the fleshy part of her palm until the pain guaranteed she’d drawn blood. She was biting her lip again too, she could taste the slippery copper on her tongue and for a moment that was the only reason she even knew she was still alive. The dead didn’t taste blood. They didn’t taste anything. Or smell anything.

Again she felt the familiar, comforting scent of autumn tickling beneath her nose and she wished she could turn it off. She didn't want familiar things; she didn't want to be comforted by flashes of her childhood...

Running through mud puddles with her bright yellow rain boots on, splashing down and scattering the brilliant gathering of leaves floating atop the water. The air was cold and crisp and perfect, and she could hear her mother's laughter, see the trailing spirals of her cigarette smoke climbing toward the hovering grey sky that loomed above them.

"Stay away from that big puddle," Mommy said. "It'll suck you straight down into the ocean."

She'd teetered on the edge of it, staring down at the toes of her leaf-plastered boots, at the rain drops making ripples across the mud-swirled surface of the puddle. She remembered wondering just how deep it really was and if it would actually suck her straight down into the ocean like her mother said.

"Don't tell her things like that," Aunt Maisie scolded. "It's all right honey. It's just a puddle. Go ahead."

Her mother laughed again, the obnoxious roil of it throbbing in Siren's ears. Somewhere overhead thunder sounded, maybe in the treetops, she didn't know, but it was rumble and just angry enough to prompt a few bright leaves to jump from their branches and spiral suicidally to their death. A red one landed at the tip of her boot and she'd kicked it, and she smelled October on the tips of September's wings.

She didn't know why, but that was the last safe moment of her life, and it stuck with her, probably always would. And when she met Carver it was raining outside the coffee shop window, the specks of it slapping the glass as if trying to reach him. She remembered that. It was October and it was raining, subtle strobes of lightning probed the sky while the clouds scraped together in rumbling display of their power.

Carver was the rain in October. He was everything familiar and safe and wonderful about fall. The brilliance and beauty, the destructive, necessary force of it sweeping through to prepare the world for winter's touch.

"He's coming for you," she said, lifting her gaze to the kitchen again.

Patrick leaned his back into the counter and crossed his arms over his chest. Head tilted, he looked like a monster as the blood dried on his face. The scratches were swollen and pink, even more irritated was the skin

where she'd slapped him. He studied her, the corner of his soft, beautiful mouth twitching into a sharp sneer that made her shudder. "I'd like to see him try."

"He's coming," she said again. "And he will kill you."

"We'll see," he nodded once, his nose twitching arrogantly.

She sat there in the chair and listened to the thunder overhead. She was terrified, and there was a part of her that didn't know if she could believe, but there was an even bigger part of her that knew she had to.

Carver would always come for her.

He promised.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

The tea was still steaming, but only just. She could smell the herbs and spices in it, the intriguing scent of chamomile with just a hint of rose and jasmine. The promise of soothing flavors enticed her, but she refused to touch it. She wasn't drinking or eating anything her husband put in front of her, and she wasn't going to answer the silent urging of his stare either. She felt him imploring her to acknowledge him with such silent intensity it was difficult to resist, but she remained focused on the crackling roll of thunder and the building wind raking through the trees outside.

A solitary sliver of hope flickered inside her like a candle. Carver was coming.

She refused to believe he was dead, even though all the evidence suggested otherwise. Her mind could not handle that thought. Patrick was right; she was crazy. She was too fragile.

If Carver wasn't coming back...

No.

She wouldn't think about it. Wouldn't allow herself to even entertain the notion. He was coming. He had to be.

Her hand lifted to scratch an itch tingling at the nape of her neck, then she brought her forearm down to the top of the table. Patrick's unyielding stare never faltered. Not for a single second. In fact, the intensity of it built to a fever pitch; she could almost hear the ceaseless anger of his thoughts churning violently inside his mind.

Look at me, it seemed to say. *See me*.

He wanted her to let go of her frivolous notions of running away (which she was entertaining by the bucket-load,) and give into him. He wanted her to roll back in time to a place where she teetered on the brink of giving in. It was easier to manipulate someone who didn't know any better, someone who closed their eyes and refused to see.

But she could see. She knew. Everything about him he'd hidden from her, she knew now and there was no unseeing the things he'd done. There was no forgiveness.

"Are you going to drink your tea?"

Siren said nothing.

"It'll make you feel better." How soft his voice was, completely lacking the madness of a man capable of murder. That terrified her the most.

From the corner of her eye she saw his twitching hand move toward her, hesitating and then withdrawing before it even came close. She didn't move. She didn't shrink away. She just sat there saying nothing, staring down at the mug in front of her and watching the last spirals of steam evaporate into the air.

The sky sounded like it was cracking open just over their house. She half expected the rain to flood down in a rushing wall, but it wasn't ready yet. It was hesitant. Waiting for something, but she had no idea what. She needed that rain to start falling. She needed the wind to scream like a banshee through the trees as it spun and gathered momentum. It would make her feel better if it just unleashed its fury.

Shaking her head, she finally lifted her gaze from the tea in front of her, but still avoided Patrick's face. She could still see him. He was still staring at her with those half-narrowed hazel eyes so wicked they gleamed. She saw the smug pinching of his lips as he held them together, pushing them slightly outward into a scowl so arrogant it should have made her shudder. It didn't.

She cleared her throat. It felt raw from so much screaming, tight from all those tears.

"Are you just going to sit there?" They were the first words she'd spoken to him since she issued warning that Carver was coming.

"I thought we'd wait together." His eyes flashed amusement when she met them. "For your boyfriend to come. Though I have a feeling we're going to be sitting here for a very long time."

“No we won’t.” She regretted baiting him, but she didn’t back down.

She held his stare, found herself searching the hazel irises of his eyes for the flame and darkness she’d seen inside him. How had she missed it before? How could she have been so blinded by her own grief that she allowed the psychopath in front of her to just walk right into her life and turn it upside down? And how had she managed to fall in love with him through all of it?

The thought made her ill. Her stomach actually churned and rumbled uneasily inside her, the gas of nerves and fear pushing on her organs painfully. All she’d eaten had been those Apple Jacks. She should have been hungry, but she couldn’t imagine she would ever want to eat again.

“He will come.”

Patrick blinked, the sharp angle of his jaw tightening with tension before he offered a bemused grin. “We’ll see,” he said once more, and then he slid his arms across the table, gripped the edge and started to push his chair out. Siren watched him rise with a little effort, a hand going to his lower back to sooth the muscles there once he reached his full height. Without another word he stepped away from the chair and walked toward the sliding glass doors on the other side of the table.

He was limping a little, she noticed, that hand—all covered in bright red cat scratches—still pinned to his lower back. When he arrived at the doors he just stood there, fingers tentatively moving in circles through the stained white fabric of the t-shirt he’d been wearing since he left for work the day before.

“It’s gonna be a big one,” he mused, finally drawing his hand away and allowing both arms to hang loose at his sides. “I doubt we’ll see another tornado, but you never know.”

“I hope so,” she muttered to herself, glaring at his back through fierce narrowed eyes.

Her answer amused him. Turning over his shoulder to look at her, he grinned again, the brow over his left eye rising in question as he asked, “Hoping it’ll sweep you away to Oz?”

Swallowing against the tightness in her throat, she said, “I’m hoping it’ll tear you to pieces.”

His mouth formed an appreciative circle. “Ooh,” he pushed that utterance through them and nodded his head. Grinning, he said, “I like this feisty new

you. So fierce.”

Turning back toward the window, he brought a hand up to rest against the frame of the door and just stared out into the yard. There were scratches up the length of that arm, pink and swollen, beads of dried blood lining them. She should have kept attacking him when the cat dived in. Maybe she could have spared poor Mr. Pounce and done more damage. Maybe she could have killed him, saved Carver...

She needed to get out of there, but where was she going to go? Her own family was on his side, so enamored with the very idea of Patrick Blakely they would never open their arms to take her in if she was running from him. Maybe Aunt Maisie would lock her away in the nut house, the way Patrick said she'd done to her mother. She wondered if that was really true, or if he was just digging at a thread he knew unraveled her every time she thought about it.

She'd spent her whole life worrying she'd turn out like her mother. That one day she'd just snap and go crazy, the rest of the world be damned.

But she wasn't really crazy. Aunt Maisie told her crazy people didn't have any idea they were nuts. They didn't sit around worrying they were going to snap. They just cracked, sort of like Patrick had cracked, though Siren imagined the thin thread of his sanity snapped centuries ago—if he'd ever been sane at all.

The portrayal of his character in Carver's books suggested he'd not only been sane, but endearing. She'd felt sorry for the character in that book when his life fell apart. She understood the reasons for his actions and reactions, but standing there in front of the man that character was based on, the man who'd taken everything that mattered to her and crumpled it up in his hand like an old sheet of paper he planned to toss into the fireplace, her sympathy was nowhere to be found.

The woman who pleaded with Carver just hours ago not to kill her husband was gone.

Maybe she was crazy after all.

Siren started to push her chair away from the table, the legs scraping across the hardwood floor making him wince and grind his teeth together. She watched the blades of his shoulders pull together just before he dropped his arm and spun around to look at her.

“What are you doing?” When he spoke, it was like a parent preparing to berate a child who clearly knew better.

“I’m going to the bathroom.”

His lower lip nearly swallowed the top one as he closed his eyes and shook his head. His lips smacked a little when he parted them before saying, “No.”

“No?” she balked.

“No.”

“You can’t keep me from going to the bathroom, Patrick. That’s ridiculous.”

“I can, actually.” He started to bring his hand up, twitching fingers dancing as he lifted his arm. “You can’t even begin to imagine what I’m capable of.”

“Maybe not,” she shrugged, trying to maintain a veneer of calm in hopes that her refusal to give into fear unsettled him enough to throw him off his game. “But it doesn’t change the fact that I have to pee.”

She had no idea what she was even going to do in the tiny water closet behind the kitchen. She didn’t actually have to go to the bathroom, but she needed to get away from him. She needed a minute to clear her head and think, and she couldn’t do that with him looming over her.

“I’ll come with you then.”

“What are you afraid of?” she challenged. “There isn’t even a window in there, Patrick. What am I gonna do? Where am I going to go?”

That seemed to give him pause. Siren watched him contemplating, though his eyes never once left her face. After what felt like an eternity he finally took a step toward her, closing the distance between them in a matter of seconds and clamping an almost painful hand down on her shoulder.

“If you’re not planning anything stupid, it won’t hurt if I come along.

“Jesus,” she sighed. “You know I can’t go when you’re watching me.”

“I won’t watch,” he promised. “I’ll turn my back.”

“Is this how it’s gonna be?” she asked. “You following me everywhere I go for the rest of my life.”

“If that’s what it takes to keep you.”

The heaviness of her lids darkened her vision as he began steering her toward the kitchen and the bathroom. She shuffled her feet, too slowly for his liking. He pushed her faster and she stumbled a little, her hand

instinctively reaching for the counter to keep herself from pitching forward across the kitchen floor.

“I do know how to walk,” she pointed out. “I’ve been doing it for nearly thirty years.”

Squeezing his fingers deep into the already bruised muscle of her shoulder, she winced and rolled forward in an attempt to free herself from his grip.

“You never say thank you,” he noticed aloud. “I’m helping you get to where you need to be, and instead of saying thank you, you bitch at me. I give you everything, Siren, and all you ever do is complain.”

“Thank you?” she snorted against a maniacal laugh threatening to erupt from so deep down there would be no stopping it if she let it out. “Thank you for ruining my life, Patrick. Thank you for that.” He shoved her toward the bathroom and her hand shot out to catch the molding around the door frame. He let go of her at last, and she nearly stumbled into the tiny little closet with a toilet and rickety old vanity he’d promised to fix. “I’m closing the door.”

“I don’t think so.”

She growled a little, the breath catching in the back of her throat as her nostrils flared. “What? You’re just gonna stand there?”

The corner of his mouth stretched as he brought his shoulder upward in a shrug. He caught his own reflection in the mirror pinned behind the sink and the sarcastic smile he wore quickly faded. Siren crossed her arms over her chest and jutted her hip to the side in exasperation, watching him poke and prod at the claw marks carved into his flesh. He opened his mouth a little, as if he was about to say something and then he winced as his prodding fingers passed over a sore spot.

“I should have gotten rid of that cat right after we met. I never liked the fucking thing.”

Her heart thumped harder in her chest, the distant ache of all she’d lost nagging at the numbness she’d encased herself in. She hadn’t even realized how much of it she’d turned off, how much of herself she’d shut down in order to keep from losing her mind. Hearing him talk so flippantly about killing Mr. Pounce brought things to the surface she hadn’t appropriately processed yet, and when she blinked she could see his still body lying

beside Carver's on the kitchen floor of the beach house. She kept her eyes closed while Patrick poked and inspected his own face.

She nearly leapt out of her skin when he said, "I thought you had to go."

Her eyes shot open and she glared at him. "I told you I can't go while you're in here."

Shaking his head, the hazel irises below his lashes arced toward the dull, uncovered light bulb jutting from the ceiling fixture above. "What if you were in a do or die situation?" he posed almost casually. "What if it was the zombie apocalypse and the only way you could use the bathroom was if I watched your back?"

Upper-lip stiffening into a scowl, she leaned back a little, the arms across her chest tightening. "You think all of this is funny, don't you?"

"Funny?" When he grinned at her, it made her feel like the blood was boiling inside her veins, rushing against her skin with furious and violent heat that tempted her to do dark things. She wanted to do more than just slap him. "No, Siren. I don't think it's funny."

That part of the house felt isolated, the insulation in the walls padding it securely and dulling the sounds beyond that tiny room they packed into, but she heard the thunder. The house seemed to tremble in answer to it, and she studied him to see if the increase in its fury worried him in the least. He would understand Carver's power better than anyone, she reasoned. He would know if thunder and lightning were to be expected from his greatest rival, wouldn't he? He seemed completely oblivious.

"I think it's pitiful," he went on, dropping his arm and stepping back into the doorway. "I think it's ridiculous that we even have to have this conversation. If he would have just stayed where he was, none of this would have ever happened."

"That hideous, dark place you sent him?" she asked. "Before you killed him, I mean?"

"I should have killed him a long time ago." He sounded so calm, as if acts of murder were the most natural, commonplace things in the world. "And before you get all high and mighty, you should know that place, the dark and hideous one I sent him to? He sent me there first."

"I wonder why."

His fingers twitched at his side, curling into a partially clenched fist.

"I can't imagine you deserved it," she sneered.

“I was imprisoned there for decades. Do you have any idea what that was like?”

“Am I supposed to feel sorry for you?”

“Oh, but you feel sorry for him.” He was so smug then, that wild look in his eyes doubling with a telling grin that chilled the marrow inside her bones. “You think you know him,” he told her. “You think one night and every one of his secrets was laid out on the table all neat and tidy.” Siren shivered, the chill spreading from her bones to her blood. “You think he hasn’t taken lives? That he hasn’t done his fair share of things that can never be forgiven?”

“He was a soldier,” she tilted her chin toward him. Carver’s fantasy fiction books had spanned the Revolutionary War, the Civil War and early World War I, and he’d taken part in all three. The book he was working on before he disappeared centered around WWII, but she’d never gotten to read it because he never finished. She also knew he’d served two tours in Afghanistan, a time in his life he didn’t like to talk about. “I imagine he’s taken plenty of lives for whatever causes he backed over the centuries. Soldiers kill.”

“And that isn’t murder?” His eyelids were heavy when he blinked, the left eye twitching beneath the surface scratch carving across the thin skin just below his lower lashes. “Funny how that works.”

They just stared at each other, the house trembling once more in the thunder’s wake. Siren shook too, and then she cleared her throat, saying, “Please get out so I can use the bathroom.”

“I’ll be standing right here.” And then he turned his back to her. Arms still crossed, he planted his feet shoulder-width apart and stared forward at the dark paint on the wall. When she didn’t move, he turned his head slightly and said, “For someone who has to go, you’re sure taking your time about it.”

She didn’t. Not really. She just wanted time to herself, time to think. She couldn’t have either of those things with him hovering over her like a prison guard. She lifted the shirt she’d been swimming in since she got out of bed that morning and tugged down the bikini bottoms before taking a seat. Lowering her elbows to the tops of her knees, she leaned forward and stared at his back. His white shirt was stained, flecks of blood, dirt and mud. The backside of his faded jeans was dusty, the left back pocket worn white

where he kept his wallet. Her gaze flitted down to the frayed edges clinging to the back of his tan work boots, then shot back up to the breadth of his shoulders.

Siren was not a powerhouse. She weighed all of about a hundred and twenty-five pounds sopping wet. She barely reached five feet and five inches, so even standing in front of Patrick, who was just around six feet tall, she felt small. She knew his body. He worked hard every day, was pure muscle, and she knew what he was physically capable of. If she attacked him and didn't manage to knock him unconscious with the first blow, he'd crush her like a piece of stale bread and scatter the crumbs of her into the wind.

She couldn't even begin to fathom what he could do to her on a magical level.

But she couldn't just fall in line. Over and over she kept hearing Aunt Maisie rooting for Patrick. She would probably tell her she was certifiably insane for wanting to run away from the man who'd given her so much—never mind all the things he'd taken away from her.

She was strong. She'd been through so much and managed to come through it.

Losing Carver.

God, she couldn't even think about the fact that she'd lost him again. The mere mental note of it made her eyes sting with unshed tears again and the thunder roared.

Surviving her mother's abandonment.

Though if what Patrick told her was true, her mother hadn't abandoned her at all. She was institutionalized somewhere. Again, her eyes stung.

She wanted to call Aunt Maisie, reason with the woman until she saw the truth and beg her for help. Aunt Maisie had always been a superhero in Siren's eyes. She swooped in and saved the day every single time. She looked after and raised her when her own mother was unable. But her aunt had been duped, just like everyone else.

She was on her own, unless Carver came back.

She really hoped Carver was coming back.

Her heart thumped. She closed her eyes and folded her hands together between her knees. What could she do? How could she escape him? Her car was toast. She couldn't drive Patrick's truck to save her life. She'd never

learned to drive a stick, though at least three high school boyfriends and Patrick himself tried to teach her. She could run, but only if she managed to knock him out cold, and how far was she going to get before he caught up to her?

And what would he do once he caught her again?

She had a feeling she'd used up all her escape attempts when she ran off with Carver. There was no telling how he'd make her pay for trying to run away again.

Maybe he'd kill her.

Maybe that would be better than spending the rest of her life living in some magic-induced stupor and going through the motions like a puppet answering to his whim every time he yanked on her strings. Happy little Stepford wife. PTA mom of the year. Making wholesome dinners every night and then settling down in front of the TV with a pair of knitting needles and not a single thought of her own in her head.

"Patrick?" she started, her thumb tracing along the meaty flesh of her palm. "What is it about me?"

Her question seemed to throw him off for a moment, his shoulders tightening and then relaxing as he glanced back at her again. "What do you mean?"

"Why do you love me?"

He scoffed, his amusement mingling with genuine curiosity at the nature of her question. "That's a pretty stupid question, Siren. Isn't it obvious?"

"Not to me, no."

"Is that what you really want to talk about right now?"

"Yes, because I don't understand it. I'm not a conformist. I don't do the things you want me to."

"That's what I like about you," he said. "You're a challenge. Conquering you was one of the hardest things I've ever done, and that's saying something because I've done a lot of things. Things you couldn't even begin to imagine."

"So that's it then?" She watched the thickness of his eyebrow rise into an arch and then he turned his attention back to the wall in front of him again. "I'm just a conquest? You don't really love me. I'm just a challenge to you? Something you needed to conquer?"

“Don’t be stupid,” he hissed. “Of course I love you. I love you because I had to work really hard to win you. I cherish you most of all because of that. And I did win you in the end.”

“Maybe,” she brought both shoulders up around her cheeks and hung her head. “Maybe for a little while.”

He turned around to face her, the nervous hitch that always got to her when she wasn’t in the bathroom alone tightening the already fist-clenched muscles of her stomach when he tilted his head to look at her. It was less than two full steps before he was standing in front of her, hunkering down so they were face to face.

“Forever, baby.”

It was that smile again, the one that made her feel so connected to him that for a moment she actually wanted to lift her hand sympathetically to his cheek and run fingertips through the coarse, sparse hairs on his unshaven cheek. But the connection was cracked. She could feel the trail of it rolling through her, the pieces of it crumbled away like the breaking rock of a cliff tumbling into the sea that kept battering at it forever and ever until the stone was no more.

“You and me,” he leaned forward and tilted his forehead into hers.

She thought about drawing her head back and cracking the front of her skull against his like she’d seen brawlers do in at least a hundred movies, but she was no brawler, and she needed her wits about her if she was going to get away.

“You know,” she started softly, “I really can’t go with you in here.”

“I’m sorry.”

How calm his voice was, almost soothing. It was the tone he sometime spoke to her with when they were in bed. Early mornings, bodies fitted together like two spoons all snug in a drawer. Even then she’d been staring at the sunlight streaming through the windows and wishing it would rain. Sometimes because the rain would wash the melancholy away, other times because she liked the way his arms felt around her. She could pretend those arms belonged to someone else and feel silently guilty that she wasn’t appreciating who she was with.

“I can’t take any chances, Siren. Not now. Not with everything the way it is. Even if you promised me you wouldn’t run, I couldn’t believe you.”

“Where am I going to go? Down the sink? Through the mirror?”

Beyond his shoulder lightning flashed bright enough to swallow the meager light of the overhead chandelier in the dining room and the buzzing white tube in the kitchen. The bulb above them flickered, the power threatening to give in to the storm.

“I don’t know how to open portals.”

Drawing back to look at her, the muscles around his eyes tightened, creating tiny wrinkles that disappeared when he relaxed and nodded his head. “Fine. I’ll go out into the hall and close the door.”

“Thank you.”

“But when you come out, we’re really going to talk about all of this. About what you did and what we’re going to do to make this work.”

The sound of her swallowing was so loud, she was surprised he didn’t notice the apprehension in it. Siren agreed with little more than a bob of her head, and then she watched gratefully as he rose and clomped back out through the door. He paused for a moment to look at her, saying, “I mean it, Siren. We’re going to talk about this.”

“Okay.”

And then he closed the door, the hinges shrieking in the most unsettling way as the light overhead wavered again and threatened to pitch her into darkness.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Alone.

She sat up straight and drew in a deep breath. There really was nowhere to go, not at the moment, but she could finally think with that door separating them. Beneath the small crack she could see his shadow, boots edging along the boards and making them creak. She reached over and turned on the faucet. The sound of water trickling actually made her have to pee—an old trick she learned from Aunt Maisie.

She needed to get out of those clothes. Into something comfortable. Maybe if she could talk him into taking her upstairs, she could change and buy herself more time. Stretching her arm to turn off the water again, she brushed the back of her hand across the glass soap dispenser and shuddered against the idea that flashed through her. That thing was heavy. She ought to know. She'd knocked it over onto her toe and hopped around her apartment for twenty minutes whimpering and feeling more than just a little certain she'd broken bones as it swelled. It was heavy and solid and if she could hit him with it just right, it'd be enough to knock him out... maybe.

If it wasn't, then what? She'd be standing face to face with an angry warlock who had the power to draw on darkness and shadow, who might very well send her to the horrible place he'd sent Carver to give her a time out so she could think long and hard about what she'd done.

But if she didn't try... If she submissively followed his lead, how long before the poison of his love seeped into her heart again and made her forget?

Siren shook her head, the guilty, sympathetic feelings she'd been experiencing just moments before when he'd tilted his forehead into hers sizzling through her. She'd felt it for a moment, a connection to him born from the necessity and loneliness he'd brought into her life in the first place. She couldn't let those feelings back in. She had to get away from him, and once more she found her lips moving over silent prayer as she begged Carver to come and save her.

Only it had been too long, she realized. The storm rolled in, but it hadn't brought Carver, and she was terrified because she was starting to doubt he was coming at all. Once more her eyes stung with unshed tears and her shoulders shuddered as the chill of despair danced across them in tiny pirouettes that threatened to hold a production of Swan Lake over the stage that was her spine.

She was on her own.

She had to be brave.

No one else was going to save her. Not this time.

She was in front of the sink again, washing her hands and staring at the face in the mirror. She looked like a ghost. The hollows beneath both eyes were dark as ash smudges. The thin band of freckles that pricked across the bridge of her nose and lightly specked her cheeks were the only hint of vibrance in her pale complexion. Even her eyes, usually the blue of denim, seemed too dark, the pupils so wide they practically devoured the iris. She looked like a junkie, she thought. Like her mother staring back at her, only there was no half-cocked smile to greet her, no fool's grin. There was only desperation and fear, but underneath it there was something else.

Resolve.

She was getting away from Patrick. If it was the last thing she ever did, she was getting away.

Curling her fingers around the narrow neck of the soap dispenser, she lifted it like a weapon. It was heavy. Full of lilac and lavender liquid she'd bought from one of the vendors at the Apple and Cheese festival in Canton. She'd bought the dispenser there, too, last October. Patrick picked it out. Funny that it would be his undoing... maybe. If she actually found the strength to wield it.

When she lowered her arm, the weight of it tugged. She twitched and curled her fingers around it, tightened them and squeezed the neck, then she

took a step toward the door. Gripping the knob in her hand, it moaned quietly when she swung it slowly open and met eyes with her husband.

“Do you think we could go upstairs?” she asked, the weapon in her hand feeling heavier and heavier with every second that ticked slowly by. “I really want to change into something else.”

Patrick looked down at what she was wearing for the first time since he’d stalked into the kitchen of the beach house, and then he nodded. “We’ll never go back there now,” he told her. “Not for anniversaries, or any other occasion. You’ve ruined it for me, which is really sad because it was a beautiful place.”

“We’ll find other beautiful places,” she told him.

That made him smile, the smile that always stuck in her heart like a barbed hook. She felt it tugging on her, and then she smiled too. “Yes, we will. Maybe on the west coast.”

“Maybe.”

He turned into the hallway, waiting for her to file in behind him. The steps she took were tentative, terrified. Her knees were practically knocking together like clackers, soundless, but so difficult to walk. The muscles felt weak, as if they would give way at any second and she would tumble forward into him, the weapon in her hand rolling noisily across the tiles of the kitchen floor.

“Do you think I could call Aunt Maisie?” she asked, inching down the hallway. She was walking as close to him as possible, trying to hide the wavering terror in her voice. He had to hear her shaking, had to feel her nervous energy. Wasn’t that the kind of things magic-adept people were always doing in stories? She didn’t know. She’d not read much fantasy, only Carver’s books and *The Hobbit* when she was in high school. Maybe she should have read more. They might have prepared her for the inexplicable reality that was her life, though Carver’s books, which should have explained everything, hadn’t done much in the way of preparing her for Patrick, or even Carver himself.

“Not now,” Patrick said. “After we talk,” he decided. “Once I know everything is going to be okay again, then maybe.”

“She needs to know I’m all right.”

“She knows you’re in good hands with me. I promised her I would take good care of you, and that’s just what I’m going to do.”

As they rounded the corner that opened up into the kitchen before passing into the dining and living rooms, the power went out, pitching them into total darkness until their eyes began to adjust from the grey hues streaming through the skylight and the sliding glass doors on their left. It took a moment for Siren to make out his shadow, her mind urging her to take the chance while it was dark. It was the perfect opportunity, but she was so scared.

Do it.

Just do it!

Her arm felt heavy. She clenched the glass neck tighter, lifting her forearm then lowering it again.

"I'll have to grab the flashlight," he noted. "I'm surprised they got the power back on as fast as they did after yesterday's little fiasco, but they were surprisingly efficient about it."

"You must have felt so alone here," she said.

"For a little while."

"I'm sorry I left you like that."

"Are you?"

"Yes, Patrick. I am sorry. I should have tried to talk to you about everything, instead of just taking off the way I did."

"You should have," he agreed, "but I know how much he meant to you. I should have killed him a long time ago. It would have made everything so much easier for us, you know?"

That pushed her over the edge, granting her the courage she needed to strike. Her arm swung, she didn't even realize she was doing it until the sound of that thick, heavy glass connected with the back of his skull with a dull, heavy thunk.

He exhaled surprise, his shadow wavering on his feet, and then he fell forward like a sack of potatoes dropping off the back of a truck. The room lit up with a wicked flash, granting her enough illumination to see both of his eyes closed, his mouth open just a little.

He was still breathing; she was actually disappointed.

But there wasn't time to dwell on disappointment. It wouldn't be long before he came to again, groggy and angry she lied to him and tried to run away again. She had to get out, and she had to do it now.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Why had she agreed to move out into the middle of nowhere? Running for help was a joke, but what choice did she have? Navigating through the house like an obstacle course, she slipped into an old pair of Crocs she never wore, pushed through the front door and cut across the rain-slicked front yard at a frantic run. The path the tornado took the morning before was clearly defined, torn up trees carving a clear view to the distant road. If she could make it to the farm before he regained consciousness, maybe she could use their phone to call the police, though what the cops were going to do about her magic-wielding, psychopath husband, she couldn't begin to guess, but what else was she supposed to do?

The ground thumped beneath every gaping footstep, her lungs drawing in as much air as she could fill them with each time she inhaled, she huffed her way toward the muddy driveway that would carry her down to the washed out bridge where the creek was no doubt flooding along at an insane pace. Her knee cracked and popped with every downward thrust of her foot. Each time she noticed the hammer of her heart, it thundered, and though it hadn't started raining when she pushed through the front door with a bang of wood and metal, the drops were falling against her cheeks one by one like fat, sloppy kisses from the sky.

Her Crocs slipped as she stumbled up the hill. Siren fell forward, hands squishing painfully through mud and rock before her stomach collided with the earth. All that breath she was pulling in tightened painfully in her chest, her diaphragm spasming as she gaped and gasped. Her knees slid through the muck as she scrambled with great effort back to her feet. She couldn't

start running again until she got her breath back, and that felt like it was going to take forever. She might even suffocate and just fall dead right where she stood.

Lightning tore through the ominous fabric of the sky, its brilliance as severe as the noonday sun. It felt like time stopped, tiny forks breaking off to stream away and taste the air before it went dark again and the rumbling answer of thunder echoed off the foothills all around her. The sound was so loud it made her eardrums feel like they would pop inside her head and leave her deaf.

And then she could breathe again. Gulping great breaths, inhaled, exhaled. Her legs began pumping up the hill just as she heard the screen door slam at her back. Panic nearly took her breath away again, but it pushed her faster. Beneath the rumble she heard Patrick bellow her name, but she didn't dare look back. She ran harder, the muscles in her calves and thighs screaming with fury, her aching knee promised to bring the pain the moment she stopped running. All those afternoons she'd passed up the treadmill, they were kicking her ass now. She should have been more vigilant, should have spent more time strengthening her body, but then how many people really imagine they'll wind up fleeing their own husband just a handful of months after the wedding?

Not many, she guessed.

The darkness grabbed onto her from behind, snaking around her waist like a tentacle and wrenching her backwards. The tips of her toes dragged through the mud as she kicked and tried to free herself, and when she glanced down at what snared her it was all she could do to keep from screaming. It was black as tar, viscous and writhing as it snaked in tighter and squeezed while simultaneously pulling her through the air. Her hands went instinctively to the thing that coiled around her like some python of shadow, but try as she might to find purchase her hands seemed to move right through it.

Siren screamed. Bloody murder—her aunt used to call it. The sound of shrieking children playing monster tag as they chased one another through the shadows with flashlights.

I found you.

And when the beam of the flashlight touched skin the screaming began, followed by frantic running and flailing, only Siren was just flailing. She

couldn't run. She couldn't even touch her feet to the ground. It was like swimming upstream without any water, the current dragging her backward to certain death. Then his hands were on her, whipping her around and shaking her as thunder drowned out the sound of his words. The shadow thing still tightening around her body, she couldn't even draw her head back to avoid the scrunched tip of his angry nose as he poked closer to her, screaming obscenity and betrayal.

She was going to die. He would kill her now. But maybe that was okay.

No! A voice somewhere deep inside her cried out in protest, she ignored it.

Yes, maybe it was okay to just give up, to give in and let him do what he needed to do.

Carver wasn't coming. Aunt Maisie wasn't coming. No one was coming.

For the first time in her life she was truly on her own.

The clouds collided, the friction of their coming together crackling all around her as she gasped and writhed, still struggling to free herself even though she'd all but given up. Rain spilled in gusting sheets, striking up so suddenly it was like stepping into a cold shower. The shock of it woke her up, stiffened her resolve and made her scream in his face through clenched teeth.

"No!" she shrieked. "NO!"

"Siren!" The sound of her name somewhere in the distance barely turned her head. It wasn't Patrick, he was still bellowing an unending tirade of madness just beside her thumping ear. "SIREN!"

The call in the distance distracted him and Siren kicked her foot out. It connected with Patrick's shin. He roared, his clenching fingertips burrowing deeper into her arms before he threw her aside with so much force she dropped to the ground with a skidding thud. The snake of shadow wrapped around her waist loosened its grip and slithered across the muddy grass to rejoin with its master. Patrick stalked with purpose through the never ending sheet of rain pouring down on them, his wet hair curling and matting against his face, white t-shirt clinging to muscle. Siren couldn't see what he was charging toward, not at first. The rain was too heavy and she could just barely make out a figure darting across the grass, running toward her.

Lightning flashed.

She dug her fingers into the grass and pulled herself upright, trying to regain her breath. Every bone and muscle in her body felt as if it had been pulsed through a blender on puree, especially the uneasy mess that was her roiling stomach. In the absence of thunder, just above the downpour thumping in her ears she heard more shouting. Two voices and when she looked toward Patrick again she saw two bodies collide as his outstretched arms shoved his enemy backward. His hand shot out, but Carver blocked whatever attack he was preparing with a strange shield of energy Siren couldn't see, but that held the rain at bay.

"Carver," she whispered his name, disbelief mingling with hope again.

A small, soaked white ball raced toward her, and for a moment she thought it was a rat fleeing the flooding creek bed, but then the hope was near to bursting as he drew nearer and nearer.

"Mr. Pounce!" She cried.

The cat chased toward her like a dog after a ball, skidding to a halt in front of her and shaking his long, white fur loose. He was instantly soaked again, but she didn't care. She dragged herself into a seated position and reached for him, pulling her into her chest.

"Mistress, please," he protested.

"I'm not ever putting you down again."

"There are more important things at hand at the moment. Putting me down would probably be wise. We need to get you to safety."

"I'm not going anywhere."

Snuggling his wet body closer to her chest, she tried to see through the downpour. There were strange streams of light writhing with darkness, fire battling ice as steam put up a wall between them on the battlefield, making it difficult for her to see.

"I have strict instructions from Master Carver—" Mr. Pounce told her.

"I don't care!" The sky exploded, the sound ricocheting off the hills around them, but no one seemed to notice.

The portal Mr. Pounce and Carver came through was a thin veil still torn through the fabric of reality, wavering and flickering and she swore she saw the kitchen counter from the beach house shine through before it winked and the rain obscured it from view.

"Get away from him, Patrick Blakely!" She screamed. Another roar as the clouds collided and the rain fell harder. Pellets and chunks of hail

started striking the ground and she instinctively curved her body around the squirming cat, clutching him tighter to her body. "Patrick!"

It was constant, the endless cannon fire sound of the heavens cracking open. Lightning flashed so often it reminded her of a graveyard scene from a play she'd gone to see when she was in high school. Was it Tom Sawyer? She couldn't remember, only that it captivated her, hypnotized and nearly blinded her as it continued to strobe like a nightclub dance floor. The wind was furious, railing against her body, dragging the loose, wet fabric of her shirt as she walked against its force. Her plastered hair streamed behind her, slapping at her cheeks and shoulders as it whipped around her face.

The chunks of ice falling from the sky avoided her, thudding to the ground. But Siren walked as if there was a shield protecting her. Only the rain and wind got through.

Voices swallowed by thunder, the two men grappled physically. Carver, so tall and lean, he bore down on Patrick, shoving him backward. Patrick plowed forward again, his shoulder connecting with Carver's chest and sending them both sprawling into the mud with a sluice of water that skidded several feet across the yard. Patrick punched him, fists rising, battering as a stream of violent promises issued from his tightly pursed lips with flecks of spittle that flew and mingled with the rain.

Carver was gathering his energy. She saw the aura of it glowing around him, but he wasn't fighting back. His only defense was a raised forearm Patrick easily hammered through before connecting a clenched fist to Carver's jaw and then his nose.

"Stop it!" she shrieked. The thunder roared in answer, but Patrick did not heed her warning.

He drew his fist back again, but Carver managed to lift his arm to block, his pinned hand breaking free and shooting forward. A blast of energy danced across the palm, spreading quickly into Patrick's body and sending him sprawling backward. He skidded through the mud again, but Siren had enough time before he gathered his wits to run to Carver. She knelt down beside him, clutching the cat in one arm and reaching down to touch him with the other.

"Carver."

"Siren, run." She could barely hear his voice over the hammer of rain on the earth and slapping at their skin. Blood streamed from his broken nose,

trickling over his lips in a continual river the rain kept trying to wash away.
“Go! Get out of here.”

“No! I’m not leaving you.”

Gasping, he half sat, his elbow digging into the earth for support. “I’ll be right behind you.”

Shaking her head, she squeezed the cat and he dug his claws into her skin in warning. “I’m not leaving you, not now. Not ever again.”

Patrick’s boots splashed through the grass, heavy stomping, water spraying with every step. She didn’t have to look over her shoulder to see how far he was, or that he’d stretched his hand out and issued a shadowed blast that Carver barely had time to defend himself against. The shielding of his arm sent the attack bouncing through the grass, the slithering black magic gathering and returning to its wielder.

“Get back in the house, Siren!”

Nostrils flaring, each breath she drew in brought water into her nose and made it sting. She wanted to do more than scream at him. She wanted to destroy him. She was squeezing Mr. Pounce again, and that time he did dig in deep, pushing off of her and wriggling out of her arms to the ground with a sploosh. Arms free, she stood up and spun around to face him.

“I am done with you, Patrick,” she shouted over the howling wind.

The sky boomed with her anger.

One step forward, she could no longer feel the shaking of her legs. She was not afraid anymore. “I am finished!” she hollered.

The next boom was more vicious and wicked than the last, the lightning that preceded it striking so close to where they were she swore she could smell the burning of the earth when she breathed in.

Another step and they were near to colliding. “You do not own me.”

“I beg to differ.”

He reached for her, intent on grabbing her, but she brought up her arm and extended her hand, jolts of electricity streaming from the tips of her fingers. He was unprepared, the unexpected burst of power hitting his chest and sending him flying backward through the air. But she didn’t stop the stream flowing through her. The lightning followed, flooding through his body as he landed. He writhed and shuddered as it burned through him. There were no screams; the only thing she heard was the sound of thunder in her ears until the rain began to slow enough that Carver’s voice calling

out to her from somewhere over her shoulder startled her back to the moment and the forks of lightning jetting from the tips of her fingers.

“Siren, stop!” Carver rasped. “He’s dead.”

She didn’t know how to stop. She didn’t even know how she was doing it.

“Breathe in,” Carver called out to her, as though he’d read her thoughts. “Take a breath and tell yourself to calm down.”

Her feet began carrying her forward, the lightning still pouring into Patrick’s lifeless body. “I can’t.” Her voice was frantic, vocal cords trembling with terror as the unexpected power continued to pour through her. The thunder’s bellow was quieter in her ears, it no longer shook beneath her feet.

“Breathe in!”

Was she holding her breath? She hadn’t noticed. She told herself to breathe, but the body was supposed to do that on its own and the command went unheeded.

“It’s okay, Siren,” Carver said, his voice was louder, or was the rain getting quieter? The hail was no longer falling and from the corner of her eye she saw the drenched cat running up beside her.

“Mistress,” he said, “everything’s going to be all right.”

“I can’t make it stop.”

“You can,” the cat promised. “The threat is gone. There’s nothing left to fear. The Dark One is dead.”

“Dead?”

Again her eyes swept toward Patrick. His clothing was blackened and seared, still smoldering as the rain fell to douse the flames lapping at his charred remains. She stopped walking. The electricity swarming through her still tingled beneath the surface, but she could feel it recoiling like a placated bear slinking back into its cave once certain the threat was gone.

“Are you okay?” When his hand came down on her shoulder the fingertips of her outstretched hand sparked, a thin blue stream of lightning passing from tip to tip. “It’s all right,” he told her. “It’s just me.”

Turning into him, she buried her forehead against his wet shirt and started sobbing. She wasn’t sure what happened, or why the storm began to recede when the threat was eliminated. “What’s happening to me?”

Carver's arms came around her. He drew her close, tilting his chin into the top of her head before lowering his cheek and squeezing her closer. "I don't know, Siren, but it's over now."

"Is he..." She started to back away, intention turning her head toward the body again, but Carver steered her back, lowering his arm across the backs of her shoulders. "He's dead..."

"And with it, all his spells were broken."

She knew that was true the minute he said it. She felt relieved, as if the splintered shard of her love for him had finally been dislodged from her aching heart. The inclination toward guilt wavered, the habit of her pity for him clinging to her like a winter cold that didn't want to let go. "I killed him."

"I know you didn't want it to end this way. I'm sorry, sweetheart."

"I killed him," she muttered again. "I can't... How?"

From the ground beneath them, the cat cleared his throat and said, "You really don't know much about your own family, do you?"

"What do you mean?" she asked, leaning into the comfort and familiarity of Carver's chest again as she peered down Mr. Pounce.

"The curse that tore these two apart," he started, "was cast by a witch, Mistress."

"So... I'm some kind of witch?" Everything inside her willed her to glance back again at the still-smoking body of her husband, but each time she started to turn around Carver caught her and held her from doing it.

"Long, long ago, when the world was a much different place than it is now, the Talabod rose up from the sea. My people called them the great destroyers, for that is what they were born to do. Centuries of dilution have dwindled the power, but every hundred years or so a Talabod is born with all the power of the ancients, a force so powerful she cannot be destroyed."

Swallowing hard against the ache in her throat, she shook her head and stepped out from under Carver's arm. "I'm not some powerful force..."

"I beg to differ, Mistress," the cat purred. "You just destroyed the one thing that dared to stand in the way of your happiness."

"Why didn't you tell me about this?" She shot an accusing glare at Carver, who held up a hand to placate her and took a step back.

"I had no idea, Siren. I swear to you."

Turning the fire of her glare toward the cat, he didn't budge from where he sat, only stared up at her with those brilliant golden eyes, unblinking under scrutiny. "You knew," she accused him, crossing her arms.

"I've had my suspicions for a while," he said. "Every time you felt blue, the rain came. It rained for three weeks straight after the master disappeared. The flooding was disastrous. Each year on Disappearance Day, a thunderstorm in honor of your loss. And then the day you realized that skeeving husband of yours was something other than what he seemed, the tornado came. The storm at the beach house..."

"All right," she sighed. "I get the point."

She didn't, not really. She wasn't sure she'd ever get the point, but for the moment there were far more important things on her mind. She'd killed her husband.

"I didn't mean to... I just... I just wanted him to back off."

"No one will blame you, Siren."

The thought of blame was the furthest thing from her mind before he said that. Guilt gnawed away at her from the inside like so many sharp and tiny teeth.

"He was struck by lightning during a storm," Carver said.

"It doesn't change the fact that I killed him," she pointed out, returning her gaze to Carver's face and feeling the strangest sense of calm for the first time in a long time. "He didn't have to die."

"No," he agreed, "he didn't, but it is what it is, and you can't change it now."

The wind rustled through her hair, slow and soothing as the few dry strands danced across her forehead. The rain was still falling, just a mist of it beading across her face. She felt cold and strange, but for the first time in her life she didn't feel crazy.

"Should we call for an ambulance?" she wondered.

Carver lowered a hand across her back and began steering her toward the house. It looked more dilapidated than ever, the tiles hanging from the domed room, the siding split. It would be a blessing to get away from that place, she thought, and then glanced back over her shoulder one last time at the place where he lay.

She wondered if she'd miss him.

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EPILOGUE

Sunlight rippled like gold across the waves sweeping in at her feet. Shell debris tickled the tips of her toes before sweeping away when the ocean inhaled. The shoulder-length cut of Siren's hair rustled across her cheek, and even when she reached up to tuck it away behind her ear the gentle, constant wind drew it back into her face. The balls of her feet sunk deeper into the wet sand, making a soft sucking sound as she pulled them up and wandered further up the shore.

She glanced back over her shoulder and smiled when she saw him walking steadily toward her, long, bare feet slipping through dry sand that kicked up in a spray behind him with every step. She stopped to wait for him, returning her gaze to the waves rocking toward the land. It was calm, like her. Each time she breathed in, the ocean inhaled, and when she exhaled it sent the water rushing toward the shore again.

She was in sync with its rhythms, at least that's what Mr. Pounce told her.

It was the cat who finally convinced her to let Carver make an offer on the beach house—their beach house, he called it. The place where they'd found each other again, where she could paint and he could write and the sound of her ancestral home would carry on forever just outside their door.

She still didn't believe everything Mr. Pounce told her, about the Talabod and the power she knew lived deep inside her. It hadn't surfaced again; there was no threat, no need to protect herself, but sometimes when the storms rolled in she could feel it deep inside herself. It tingled and made her stomach tighten like she was racing downward at top speed.

She spent days like that inside, but today wasn't one of those days. Today was good. The ocean was at peace, and so was Siren.

"Lacey just called from the car," he announced, reaching out to grasp for her loose hand as he caught up to her. She relished the feel of his fingers tightening around hers as he fell into step beside her. "I honestly don't know how we're going to survive the next week. It was so loud I could barely hear her, so much screaming."

A soft laugh escaped her, the ocean gurgling and burbling around her feet. "It won't be too bad," she shrugged a little and lifted her free hand to tuck the hair behind her ear again. "Toddling twins running around, touching all your things..."

He shuddered at the thought, nudging into her playfully and steering her footsteps toward the water. "I'll be sure to let them finger paint all over Auntie Siren's studio walls."

"That's a great idea."

"No, it's not."

Laughing, she edged into him, the warm sand sticking to her wet feet and ankles. "You're right, it's not. Though I can almost guarantee we'll be cured from those weird, random notions we get from time to time."

"The ones where we think we're missing out by not having kids?"

"Those would be the ones."

Carver let go of her hand and slid his long arm across the small of her back before sweeping her body into his. The sun beamed at his back, making his windswept blond hair look like fine-spun gold. She squinted to get a better look at his face. "Sometimes I think it wouldn't be so bad," he shrugged, "if they were ours."

"Sometimes," she agreed, and slid her arms in around his waist before leaning in to hug him. "But then I remember how difficult it is to talk to Lacey on the phone for more than five seconds these days and my longing disappears."

Something strange and inexplicable happened with her best friend right after Patrick died. Maybe it was the distress of everything Siren went through that finally brought Jeff to reason, or maybe it was Carver's inexplicable return. She wasn't sure, but less than a month after Patrick's funeral Jeff and Lacey returned from Vegas, married and ready to start the family Lacey wanted so very badly. They had twin boys, and Lacey was

pregnant again and there was talk of building some kind of white picket fence around the yard of their little ranch in the country.

Carver chuckled and tightened his arms around her.

Beyond the comfort of his shoulder she stared at the distant finger of land poking through the water, watching the gulls sweep in formation across the water before heading back up the beach. The water lapping at that part of the island was so deep and green, and sometimes in the morning the two of them would stand in front of their bedroom window watching the dolphins play.

It was a good life, better than anything she'd ever imagined she would get, but she never forgot.

Every once in a while, when she woke up alone, with Carver already hard at work in his little office at the other end of the upstairs hallway, the keys quietly clacking beneath his fingers as he poured his story into pages, Siren felt like maybe she didn't deserve that happiness. Not after what she did. Nibbling teeth of guilt, a painful gnawing at her heart—the place where Patrick's love for her had been. She would close her eyes then, remember what it felt like when they stood on that same beach the day after they were married. His arms around her felt so safe that day, the way he loved her felt so real. She didn't doubt his love for her, sometimes she even missed him just a little bit, but she was coming to terms with her guilt, and the strange awareness of a power inside her she couldn't explain.

"You know Aunt Maisie is going to nag." She kissed Carver's shoulder and took a step back. "Every time she's around those two she starts giving me those looks, like she's willing me to reproduce with the power of her stare so she can play Granny."

His grin faded, a grim seriousness washing over his face as he drew out to look down at her. She knew what was coming, the same thing he always brought up whenever Aunt Maisie came to visit. "Are you going to ask her this time?"

"About my mom?"

Carver nodded, his grey-green eyes staring into her, almost imploring her to satisfy the curiosity that had been eating away at her ever since Patrick told her that her mother wasn't dead. That her aunt spent all those years letting her believe her mother abandoned her. In a lot of ways, Siren resigned herself to the simple fact that the woman abandoned her. She

hadn't been strong enough to be a mother. Maybe her checking out was the best thing she could have done for her daughter.

"I don't know," she shrugged. "Maybe."

"Don't you want to know? Maybe take a ride up that way and see her again someday?"

Siren shook her head, her gaze shifting away from his face. "Maybe she doesn't think I need to know," she hitched her shoulders again. "Maybe she's right. And as far as seeing her again... No. I don't think I need to."

"As long as you're okay not knowing." His long fingers were drawn to the hair that kept drifting across her cheek. She shuddered with delight as he tucked it behind her ear and ran the backs of his fingers down to her chin to lift her gaze back to his. "Are you okay?"

"I'm better than okay," she smiled.

"That's what I like to hear."

"Come on, let's go back and make sure all the breakable stuff is out of reach."

"Mr. Pounce is begging that we take him to a kennel until the tiny screaming humans are gone."

"He loves all the attention."

"Yes," Carver agreed, "yes he does."

She reached for his hand again and they turned back toward the beach house, the sound of the ocean following them all the way home.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jennifer Melzer spent the majority of her life as a writer denying she actually liked to write romance, only to wake up one morning and discover that every single tale she'd ever written had somehow revolved around the heart.

She has since given into the whim, spinning yarns of love and firmly believing that everyone deserves a happy ending.

Jennifer lives in Northeast Pennsylvania with her husband and daughter, but dreams nightly she is laying on the beach watching the stars fall over the Atlantic Ocean.

Subscribe to the newsletter on her official website: JenniferMelzer.com for news and updates on upcoming books.

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