

Passenger

For Mom—

*In all of history, there has never been anyone with a heart as
beautiful and strong as yours.*

QUERCUS CHILDREN'S BOOKS

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It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll.
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.

WILLIAM ERNEST HENLEY

BHUTAN
1910





PROLOGUE

AS THEY ASCENDED, RETREATING FARTHER FROM THE winding trails that marked the way to nearby villages, the world opened to him in its purest form: silent, ancient, mysterious.

Deadly.

Nicholas had spent the better part of his life on the sea, or close enough to catch its perfume of fish and brine when there was a good wind. Even now, as they approached the monastery, waiting for it to appear through the heavy cover of mist and clouds, he found himself turning back, futilely searching beyond the towering peaks of the Himalayas for the hazy line where the sky met the curve of rippling water—something familiar to anchor himself to, before his courage disappeared along with his confidence.

The trail, a winding series of stairs and dirt, had stretched at first through the pine trees dripping with moss, and now hugged the sheer, vertical cliffs into which the Taktsang Palphug Monastery had somehow, impossibly, been built. Lines of bright prayer flags fluttered overhead in the trees, and the sight eased some of the tightness in his chest; it reminded him instantly of

the first time Captain Hall had brought him to New York Harbor and the new frigates had been festooned with flags of every make and pattern.

He shifted again, a small, careful movement that would ease the sting of the rucksack's straps digging into his shoulders, without sending himself plunging over the open side of the trail.

You've climbed the rigging any number of times, and you're frightened of heights now?

Rigging. His hands itched to touch it, to feel the spray of the sea kicked up by wind and his ship charging through the water. Nicholas tried to set his shoulders back, toss sand over the burn of resentment in the pit of his stomach before it could catch fire. He should have been back by now—he should have been with Hall, with Chase, rolling over the crest of each passing wave. Not here in a foreign century—the nineteenth century, for goodness' sake—with an incompetent sop who required Nicholas to help button his new coat, lace his boots, knot his scarf, and position his ridiculous floppy hat, despite having two hands of his own and, to all appearances, a brain in his skull.

The leather sack slung around his neck slapped heavily against his side as Nicholas continued his climb toward where Julian stood, one leg braced against a nearby stone—his usual pose when he thought ladies were around to admire him. But now Nicholas couldn't begin to fathom whom he was attempting to impress—the few birds they'd heard on their walk through the damp forest? Had he always been this way—dramatic, vain, with a complete lack of consideration—and Nicholas so blinded by the wonder of finding a so-called brother, a new life with possibilities of comfort and wealth and adventure, that he'd willingly ignored it?

“Now, chap, come here and take a look—this is the Tiger’s Nest, you know. Damn this infernal mist—”

Nicholas did, in fact, know. He made a point to read as much as he could about whatever location the old man sent them to, so as to figure out the best ways to keep the ever-reckless, ever-stubborn Julian alive. Nicholas was constantly working from a deficit of knowledge, of training. When he’d realized the family would never truly provide a real education for his traveling, he’d begun to wonder if it was intentional, a way to keep him in his lowly place. The thought had enraged him enough to cause him to spend most of his meager funds on history books.

“Bhutan’s Buddhism guru Padmasambhava—according to legend, of course—flew here on the back of a tigress,” Julian continued with a grin that had gotten them out of any number of scrapes and trouble—the smile that had once softened Nicholas’s heart and temper, always teasing out forgiveness. “We should pop into one of their meditation caves on the way back. Maybe you can have yourself a little think. Have a look at that view, and tell me you won’t miss traveling. How, in the whole of your small life, would you ever have come here otherwise? Put that foolish notion away, will you?”

Rather than throw a punch at his smug face, or send the metal tip of the pickax strapped to his back on a similar path, Nicholas shifted the rucksack again and tried not to focus on the fact that he was, yet again, being crushed under the weight of Julian and his belongings.

“It looks as though there’s a storm coming in,” Nicholas said, proud of how steady his voice sounded, despite the rattle and hiss of the resentment he felt building again inside of him. “We should make this climb tomorrow.”

Julian flicked a bug from the shoulder of his pristine coat. “No. I had to leave that bearcat back in the speakeasy in Manhattan, and I want to get back for a quick tumble before returning to the old man.” Julian sighed. “With empty hands, yet again. Sending us out into the middle of nowhere for something that probably doesn’t even *exist* at this point. Classic.”

Nicholas watched as his half brother twirled his walking stick around, and began to wonder what the monks would make of them: the preening, ruddy-haired prince in new mountaineering gear, poking around their sacred spaces looking for lost treasure, and the dark-skinned young man, clearly the servant, trailing behind him like a trapped shadow.

This isn’t how it was supposed to be.

Why had he left? Why had he signed the contract—why had he *ever* trusted this family?

This isn’t who I’m supposed to be.

“Buck up, old man,” Julian said, with a faint punch to Nicholas’s shoulder. “Don’t tell me you’re still sore about the contract.”

Nicholas glared at Julian’s back as he turned away. He didn’t wish to speak of it, didn’t wish to think of it either—the way Julian had shrugged and merely said, *I guess you should have read the terms a bit more closely before you signed it*. He’d escaped enslavement by this family once, yet, in the end, he had only sold himself back into servitude. But the old man had talked of impossible things—of magic, of voyages, of money beyond his wildest dreams. Five years of excitement had hardly seemed like a sacrifice at the time.

The moment he had realized he would only ever be a valet to a half brother who would never, ever, not in a thousand years,

acknowledge him publicly as such, Nicholas had merely swallowed the bile rising in his throat and finished retying Julian's cravat the way he preferred it to be styled. Since then, he'd never felt so aware of time. Each passing second chipped away at his resolve, and he was afraid to find out what disastrous fury might spill out of him when his defenses were whittled away.

"We should turn back and make camp," Nicholas said finally, avoiding Julian's assessing gaze. "Start again tomorrow."

Julian scoffed. "Afraid of a little rain, are you? Don't be such a pill, Nick. The climb's a snap."

It wasn't the climb itself he was worried about. Already, the air felt thin in his lungs; his headache, he realized, had less to do with Julian's incessant prattling and more to do with how perilously close they were now to the heavens. His knees felt as though they'd turned to sand; his hands were drained of any sensation at all.

I could leave him here. Run.

Where could he go that they couldn't find him? Not back to Hall; not back to his own natural time. Not even to find his mother.

Nicholas glanced at the spread of steel-gray clouds rolling through the mountain range, sliced neatly by the Himalayas' long, jagged necks. On a ship, he would use the ocean and the vessel itself to gauge the intensity of an approaching storm, and form a plan to see it through safely. Now he had neither; there was only the faint prickle at the back of his neck to warn him as distant thunder cracked and echoed through the empty mountains.

"The old man had better be right this time," Julian said, starting up the trail again. From where Nicholas stood, it looked like

an endless ribbon of steps that had been draped over the rough, rocky face of the cliff, rising and falling with the natural shape of the landscape. “I’m tired of this game of his—the blasted thing is lost. Even *he* doesn’t win sometimes.”

He always wins, Nicholas thought, fingers curling into fists at his side. *I am never going to be free of any of them.*

“All right, come on then, Nick. We’ve a journey to make,” Julian called back. “And I’m hungry enough to eat a horse.”

The first fat splatter of rain caught him across the face, sliding down his cheek to drip off his chin. It was a strange, trembling sort of moment. Nicholas felt caught in that instant, glancing around for some form of temporary shelter, which he knew Julian would demand, rather than risk getting his boots wet. Aside from the *choten*—the low white buildings that sheltered the elaborate, brightly colored prayer wheels—there were a few small covered ledges where mourners had placed conical reliquaries of ashes.

“There!” Julian let out a sharp, joyful cry, pumping a fist into the air. The mist shrouding the monastery had settled, as if the rain had dragged it down. It sat like the foggy surface of a lake, disguising the thousands of feet between the ledge and the sheer, rocky drop below. “Where’s the camera? Break it out, will you? No one around to see it anyway—”

The thunder that exploded overhead ricocheted like cannon fire through the mountains. Nicholas’s whole body tensed, cringing away from the deafening roar. No sooner had it faded than the heavens opened up and rain poured down from the clouds, momentarily blinding him with its strength. Nicholas let out a startled gasp as the pounding intensified into a solid sheet of water, a surge he’d only ever witnessed once at sea when his ship had drifted toward the edge of a hurricane. Rivers of rain were

washing down from the ledges above, pouring around him, nearly carrying his feet out from under him.

Julian—

Nicholas spun back toward the edge of the trail just as Julian turned to shout something to him, and watched Julian's left foot disappear as the muddy ledge crumbled beneath it.

As he dove, throwing himself across the distance, a single thought slammed through Nicholas's mind: *Not like this.*

"Nick! *Nick!*" Julian had managed to grab on to the fractured remains of the ledge, his hand already sliding out of his sopping wet glove as his full weight dangled over a vast spread of air, stone, mist, and trees. Nicholas crawled the last few feet between them on his stomach and was reaching, reaching, and the contents of the rucksack were rattling, digging into his back—

Julian's face was bone-white with fear, his mouth moving, begging, *Help me, help me—*

Why should I?

This family—they'd taken everything from him—they'd taken his true family, his freedom, his worth—

A cold, bitter satisfaction filled him to the core at the thought of finally taking something back.

Because he's your brother.

Nicholas shook his head, feeling the force of the rain start to carry him toward the ledge. "Reach up—swing your arm up—Julian!"

A look of determination crossed Julian's mud-smeared face as he thrust his free arm up, trying to catch Nicholas's grasping hand. Julian sacrificed his grip on the ledge to swing himself up; Nicholas lunged forward and caught his fingers—

The weight he'd been holding disappeared as Julian's hand

slipped out of the glove, and his dark shape slipped silently down through the feather-soft mist, parting just enough for Nicholas to see, at the bottom of the ravine, a burst of light as Julian's body broke apart into glittering dust.

There was a boom and rattle from miles away, and he knew the passage they'd come through had just collapsed. Blood roared in Nicholas's ears, chased by his own soundless scream; he did not need to look, to search through the haze and rain, to know that time itself had stolen Julian's broken body, and dissolved it into nothing but memory.

NEW YORK CITY
Present Day





ONE

THE AMAZING THING WAS, EACH TIME SHE LOOKED AT them, Etta still saw something new—something she hadn't noticed before.

The paintings had been hanging in their living room for years, in the exact same spot behind the couch, lined up like a movie reel of the greatest hits of her mom's life. Now and then, Etta felt something clench deep in her stomach when she looked at them; not quite envy, not quite longing, but some shallow cousin of both. She'd done her own traveling with Alice, had hit the international violin competition circuit, but she'd seen nothing like the subjects of these paintings. Nothing like this one, of a mountain with its spiraling, shining path up through the trees, toward the clouds, to its hidden peak.

It was only now, leaning over the back of the couch, that Etta noticed Rose had painted two figures working their way up the trail, half-hidden by the lines of bright flags streaming overhead.

Her eyes skimmed over the other paintings beneath it. The view from the first studio Rose had lived in, off Sixty-Sixth Street

and Third Avenue. Then, the next painting: the steps of the British Museum, spotted with tourists and pigeons, where she'd done portraits on the spot after moving back to London. (Etta always loved this one, because her mom had painted the moment that Alice had first seen her, and was walking over to scold Rose for skipping school.) The dark, lush jungle reaching out to caress the damp stone of the Terrace of the Elephants at Angkor Thom—Rose had scraped together enough money by the time she was eighteen to fly to Cambodia and sweet-talk her way into working on an archeological dig site, despite her complete and total lack of qualifications. Next was the Luxembourg Garden in full summer bloom, when she'd finally studied at the Sorbonne. And below that, perched on the back of the couch and leaning against the wall to the left, was a new painting: a desert at sunset, cast in blazing rose gold, dotted with crumbling ruins.

It was the story of her mom's life. The only pieces of it Rose had been willing to share. Etta wondered what the story was with the new one—it had been years since Rose had had the time to paint for herself, and even longer since she'd used the paintings as prompts for bedtime stories to get a younger Etta to fall asleep. She could barely remember what her mom had been like then, before the endless traveling to lecture on the latest restoration techniques, before her countless projects in the conservation department of the Met, cleaning and repairing works by the old masters.

The keys jangled in the door, and Etta jumped off the couch, straightening the cushions.

Rose shook out her umbrella in the hall one last time before coming inside. Despite the early autumn downpour, she looked almost pristine—wavy blond hair, twisted into a knot; heels

damp but not ruined; trench coat buttoned up all the way to her throat. Etta self-consciously reached up to smooth back her own hair, wishing she'd already changed into her dress for the performance instead of staying in her rainbow-colored pajamas. She used to love the fact that she and her mom looked so much alike—that they were a matching set—because not having to see her father looking back at her from a mirror made it easier to accept life without him. But now, Etta knew the similarities only ran skin-deep.

“How was your day?” Etta asked as her mom flicked her gaze down at her pajamas, then up again with a cocked eyebrow.

“Shouldn't you already be dressed?” Rose answered instead, her English accent crisp with the kind of disapproval that made all of Etta's insides give an involuntary cringe. “Alice will be here any moment.”

While Rose hung up her coat in their small apartment's even smaller coat closet, Etta dashed into her room, nearly slipping on the sheet music spread over her rug and almost tumbling headlong into the old wardrobe that served as her closet. She'd picked out the ruby-red cocktail dress weeks ago for this event, but Etta wavered now, wondering if her mom would think it was too informal, or somehow too cutesy with the ribbons that tied at each shoulder. This was a private fund-raising event for the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and Etta didn't want her mom's bosses to think she was anything less than a true professional.

Etta wanted to see her mom smile again when she played.

She put the red dress away, pulled out a more serious, subdued black dress instead, and sat down at her desk to start her makeup. After a few minutes, her mom knocked on the door.

“Would you like some help with your hair?” Rose asked, watching her in the mirror that hung on the wall.

Etta was perfectly capable of taming her hair, but nodded and handed her the bundle of bobby pins and her old brush. She sat up straight as Rose began to work the tangles out of her hair, smoothing it back over the crown of her head.

“I haven’t done this since you were a little girl,” Rose said quietly, gathering the waves of pale blond hair in her hand. Etta let her eyes drift shut, remembering what it felt like to be that small, to sit in her mom’s lap after bath time and have her hair combed out while listening to stories of her mom’s travels before Etta was born.

Now she didn’t know how to reply without sending Rose back into her usual tight, cool silence. Instead she asked, “Are you going to hang up the new painting you finished? It’s really beautiful.”

Rose gave one of her rare, soft smiles. “Thanks, darling. I want to replace the painting of the Luxembourg Garden with this one—don’t let me forget to pick up the hardware for it this weekend.”

“Why?” Etta asked. “I love that one.”

“The play of colors will work better,” Rose explained as she plucked one of the bobby pins off the desk and pinned Etta’s hair back into a twist. “The flow of darkness to light will be more obvious. You won’t forget, will you?”

“I won’t,” Etta promised and then, trying her luck, asked, “What is it of?”

“A desert in Syria . . . I haven’t been for years and years, but I had a dream about it a few weeks ago, and I haven’t been able to

get it out of my head.” Rose smoothed the last few stray strands of hair back and spritzed hair spray over them. “It did remind me, though—I have something I’ve been meaning to give you for ages.” She reached into the pocket of her old, worn cardigan, then opened Etta’s hand and placed two delicate gold earrings in her palm.

Two brilliant pearls rolled together softly, knocking against small, heart-shaped gold leaves. What Etta sincerely hoped were dark blue beads, not actual sapphires, were attached to the small hoops like charms. The gold curved up, etched in meticulous detail to look like tiny vines. Etta could tell by the quality of the metalwork—slightly rough—and the way the designs matched imperfectly, that these had been painstakingly handcrafted many years ago. Maybe hundreds of years ago.

“I thought they’d go beautifully with your dress for the debut,” Rose explained, leaning against the desk as Etta studied them, trying to decide if she was more stunned by how beautiful they were, or that her mom, for the first time, seemed to genuinely care about the event beyond how it would fit into her work schedule.

Her debut as a concert soloist was still a little over a month away, but Etta and her violin instructor, Alice, had started hunting for fabric and lace together in the Garment District a few days after she found out that she’d be performing Mendelssohn’s Violin Concerto at Avery Fisher Hall with the New York Philharmonic. After drawing out her own sketches and ideas, Etta had worked with a local seamstress to design her own dress. Gold lace, woven into the most gorgeous array of leaves and flowers, covered her shoulders and artfully climbed down the deep blue

chiffon bodice. It was the perfect dress for the perfect debut of “Classical Music’s Best-Kept Secret.”

Etta was so tired of that stupid label, the one that had chased her around for months after the *Times* article was published about her win at the International Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow. It just reinforced the one thing she didn’t have.

Her debut as a soloist with an orchestra had been coming for at least three years now, but Alice had been staunchly opposed to making commitments on her behalf. As a young girl with crippling stage fright, one who’d had to fight with every ounce of nerve she possessed to overcome it at her early competitions, she’d been grateful. But then Etta had grown out of her stage fright and suddenly was fifteen, and sixteen, and now close to eighteen, and she’d begun to see kids she had squarely beaten making their debuts at home and abroad, passing her in the same race she’d led for years. She began to obsess over the fact that her idols had debuted years before her: Midori at age eleven, Hilary Hahn at twelve, Anne-Sophie Mutter at thirteen, Joshua Bell at fourteen.

Alice had dubbed tonight’s performance at the Met her “soft launch,” to test her nerves, but it felt more like a speed bump on the way to a much larger mountain, one she wanted to spend her whole life climbing.

Her mom never tried to convince her not to play, to focus on other studies, and she was supportive in her usual reserved way. It should have been enough for her, but Etta always found herself working hard for Rose’s praise, to catch her attention. She struggled to gain it, and had frustrated herself time and time again with the chase.

She’s never going to care, no matter how much you kill yourself to be the best. Are you even playing for yourself anymore, or just in

the hope that one day she'll decide to listen? Pierce, her best-friend-turned-boyfriend, had shouted the words at her when she'd finally broken things off with him in order to have more time to practice. But they'd risen up again and again as a hissing, nasty doubt in the six months since then, until Etta began to wonder, too.

Etta studied the earrings again. Wasn't this proof her mother cared? That she *did* support Etta's dream?

"Can I wear them tonight, too?" Etta asked.

"Of course," Rose said, "they're yours now. You can wear them whenever you like."

"Who'd you steal these from?" Etta joked as she fastened them. She couldn't think of a time in her mom's forty-four years when she could have afforded something like this. Had she inherited them? Were they a gift?

Her mom stiffened, her shoulders curling in like the edges of the old scroll she displayed on her desk. Etta waited for a laugh that never came—a dry look that acknowledged her stupid attempt at humor. The silence between them stretched past the point of painful.

"Mom . . ." Etta said, feeling the stupidest urge to cry, like she'd ruined whatever moment they'd been having. "It was a joke."

"I know." Her mother lifted her chin. "It's a bit of a sore spot—it's been years since I had to live the way I did, but the looks I used to get from others . . . I want you to know, I have *never* stolen anything in my life. No matter how bad things got, or how much I wanted something. Someone tried to pull a fast one on me once, and I've never forgotten what that felt like. I almost lost something of your great-granddad's."

There was a hum of anger behind the words, and Etta was surprised that her first instinct wasn't to back off. Her mother so

rarely spoke about her family—less than she spoke about Etta’s father, which was next to never—that Etta found herself reaching for the loose thread and hoping that something else would unravel.

“Was it your foster father?” Etta asked. “The one who tried to steal from you?”

Her mother gave a humorless little smile. “Good guess.”

Both parents gone in one terrible Christmas car accident. Her guardian, her grandfather, gone after little more than a year. And the family that had fostered her . . . the father had never laid a finger on her, but from the few stories Etta had heard about him, his control over Rose’s life had been so rigid, so absolute, it was a choice between staying and suffocating, or the risk of running away on her own.

“What was it?” Etta asked, knowing she was pressing her luck. “The thing he tried to steal?”

“Oh, some old family heirloom. The truth is, I only kept it for one reason: I knew I could sell it and buy my ticket out of London, away from the foster family. I knew your great-granddad had bequeathed it to me so I could make a choice about my future. I’ve never regretted selling that old thing, because it brought me here. I want you to remember that—it’s our choices that matter in the end. Not wishes, not words, not promises.”

Etta turned her head back and forth, studying the earrings in the mirror.

“I bought these from a vendor at an old market—a *souk*—in Damascus when I was about your age. Her name was Samarah, and she convinced me to buy them when I told her it was my last trip, and I was finally going back to school. For the longest time, I saw them as the end of my journey, but now I think they were always meant to represent the beginning of yours.” Rose

leaned down and kissed her cheek. “You’re going to be wonderful tonight. I’m so proud of you.”

Etta felt the sting of tears immediately, and wondered if it was possible to ever really capture a moment. Every bitter feeling of disappointment was washed out of her as happiness came rushing through her veins.

There was a knock at the door before Alice used her keys and announced her arrival with a cheerful “Hullo!”

“Now, get going,” Rose said, brushing a piece of lint off Etta’s shoulder. “I need a few minutes to change, but I’ll meet you over there.”

Etta stood, her throat still tight. She would have hugged her mom if Rose hadn’t stepped away and folded her hands behind her back. “I’ll see you there?”

“I’ll be right behind you, I promise.”

A ROLL OF FIRE BREATHED THROUGH THE NOTES, RATTLING THE breath in Etta’s chest, and sank down through her skin to shimmer in the marrow of her bones as she and Alice slipped inside the still-empty auditorium.

She could admit it; this violinist . . . Etta looked down at the program she had picked up. Evan Parker. Right. She’d heard him play at a few competitions. She could admit that he *was* decent enough. Maybe even a little good.

But, Etta thought, satisfaction slinking through her, *not as good as me*.

And not nearly good enough to do Bach’s Chaconne from Partita no. 2 in D Minor justice.

The lights dimmed and swept across the stage in bursts of shifting color as the technicians in the booth made last-minute

adjustments to match the mood of the piece; Evan stood in the middle of it, dark hair gleaming, and went at the Chaconne like he was trying to set his violin on fire, completely oblivious to everything and everyone else. Etta knew that feeling. She might have doubted many things in her life, but Etta had never once doubted her talent, her love for the violin.

They had no choice which piece of music the museum's board of directors had assigned each of them for that night's fund-raising performance, but some small, sour part of her still stewed in envy that he'd been picked. The Chaconne was considered by most, including herself, to be one of the most difficult violin pieces to master—a single progression repeated in dozens of dizzying, complex variations. It was emotionally powerful, and structurally near perfect. At least, it was when played by her. It *should* have been played by her.

Her piece, the Largo from Sonata no. 3, was the last of the violin set. The piece was sweetly stirring, meditative in pace. Not Bach's most complex or demanding, or even the brightest in its colors, but, as Alice said time and time again, there was no cheating when it came to Bach. Every piece demanded the full force of the player's technical skill and focus. She would play it flawlessly, and then the whole of her attention would be on the debut.

Not on her mom.

Not on the fact that she now had no one to text or call after the event to give an update to.

Not on the fact that one night could determine her whole future.

“You would have done a bang-up job of the Chaconne,” Alice said as they made their way to the side of the stage, heading to

the green room, “but tonight, the Largo is yours. Remember, this isn’t a competition.”

Alice had this magical look about her, like she would be at home in front of a hearth, wrapped in a large quilt, telling nursery rhymes to sweet-faced forest critters. Hair that, according to pictures, had once been flaming red and reached halfway down her back was now bobbed, as white as milk. Turning ninety-three hadn’t dulled any of her warmth or wit. But even though her mind was as sharp as ever, and her sense of humor twice as wicked, Etta was careful to help her up the stairs, equally careful not to hold her thin arm too tightly as one of the event coordinators led them to the green room.

“But also remember,” Alice whispered, grinning broadly, “that you are *my* student, and you are therefore the best here by default. If you feel inclined to prove that, who am I to stop you?”

Etta couldn’t help herself; she laughed and wrapped her arms around her instructor’s shoulders, and was grateful to have the hug returned tenfold. When she was younger, and just starting out on the competition circuit, she couldn’t go onstage until she’d had three hugs from Alice, and a kiss on the head for luck. It made her feel safe, like a warm blanket tucked around her shoulders, and she could disappear inside the feeling if she needed to.

I have Alice.

If she had no one else, she had Alice, who believed in Etta even when she was playing at her worst. Of the two Brits in her life, she was grateful that at least this one seemed to care and love unconditionally.

Alice pulled back, touching Etta’s cheek. “Everything all right, love? You’re not having second thoughts, are you?”

“No!” God, she couldn’t give Alice *any* excuse to cancel the debut. “Just the usual nerves.”

Alice’s gaze narrowed to something over her shoulder; Etta started to turn, to look and see what it was, only to have her instructor touch one of her earrings, her brow wrinkling in thought. “Did your mum give these to you?”

Etta nodded. “Yeah. Do you like them?”

“They’re . . .” Alice seemed to search for the word, dropping her hand. “Beautiful. But not half as beautiful as you, duck.”

Etta rolled her eyes, but laughed.

“I need to . . . I think I ought to make a call,” Alice said slowly. “Will you be all right to start warming up by yourself?”

“Of course,” Etta said, startled. “Is everything okay?”

Alice waved her hand. “It will be. If I’m not back in a few minutes, make sure they let you have your turn onstage—you’ll need the most time, since you couldn’t make the dress rehearsal. And the Strad—which one are they giving you again?”

“The Antonius,” Etta said gleefully. It was one of several Strads in the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s collection, and the very first one she’d been allowed to play.

“Ah, the golden child. It’ll take a bit of work to get him to behave himself,” Alice told her. “I don’t care what your mother says about preserving them for the future. Holding incredible instruments hostage in glass cases. You know that—”

“—the longer you silence a violin, the harder it is for it to find its true voice again,” Etta finished, having heard the argument a hundred times before.

A Strad—a Stradivarius—one of the stringed instruments crafted by the Stradivari family of northern Italy in the late

seventeenth, early eighteenth centuries. The instruments were legendary for the power and beauty of the sound they produced. Their owners didn't describe them as mere instruments, but like humans—temperamental friends with moods that could never be fully conquered, no matter how skilled the player.

No matter how lovely her own violin was—a Vuillaume copy of the “Messiah” Stradivarius she had inherited from Alice—it was still just that: a copy. Every time she thought of touching the real thing, it felt like sparks were about to shoot out of her fingertips.

“Back in a bit, duck,” Alice said, reaching up to give her an affectionate tap under the chin. Etta waited until she was safely down the stairs before turning back to squint her way through the darkness.

“There you are!”

Etta turned to see Gail, the concert organizer, hustling and wriggling over the stage as best she could in her long, tight, black dress. “The others are backstage in the green room. Need anything? We're running through warm-ups one by one in order, but I'll introduce you to everyone.” She looked around, a flash of disappointment crossing her face. “Is your instructor with you? Rats, I was hoping to meet her!”

Alice and her late husband, Oskar, had both been world-renowned violinists, and had retired to New York City when Oskar became sick. He had died only a year after Etta started taking lessons from Alice, but at five, she'd been old enough to form a true impression of his warmth and humor. While Alice hadn't played professionally in years, and hadn't had the heart to try after Oskar passed, she was still worshipped in certain circles for a breathtaking debut performance she'd given at the Vatican.

“She’ll be back,” Etta promised as they made their way to the green room. “Will you introduce me to everyone? I’m sorry I couldn’t make the dress rehearsal.”

“Evan couldn’t make it, either. You’ll be fine—we’ll get you situated.”

The green room’s door was open, and a current of voices, pitched with excitement, rolled out to meet her. The other violinists studied her with blatant curiosity as she walked in.

They’re wondering why you’re here. She squashed the voice down and sized them up in return as Gail went around the room and rattled their names off. Etta recognized two of the three men present—they were older, near retirement age. Evan, of course, was still onstage. The organizers had balanced out their number with three women: an older woman, herself, and another girl who looked to be about Etta’s age. Gail introduced her only as “Sophia,” as if no last name were necessary.

The girl had tied her dark, nearly black hair back from her face and pinned it up into an old-fashioned twist. She wore a plain white shirt tucked into a long, dark skirt that fell to her ankles, but the outfit wasn’t half as severe as the expression on her round face when she caught Etta studying her, trying to place whether they’d crossed paths at a competition.

“Mr. Frankwright, you’re up,” Gail called as Evan made his way in and introduced himself. One of the old men stood, was handed a gorgeous Strad, and followed.

No one seemed in the mood to talk, which was fine by Etta. She put on her headphones and listened to the Largo all the way through once, eyes shut, concentrating on each note until her small purse accidentally slipped off her lap and the lip gloss,

powder, mirror, and cash she'd shoved into it went scattering across the tile. Evan and the other man helped her scoop it all back up with faint laughter.

“Sorry, sorry,” she muttered. It wasn't until she began to replace everything that she realized there was a small, cream-colored envelope tucked inside.

It can't be, she thought. There was no way . . . her mother hadn't done this for her in *years*. Her heart gave a joyful little bump against her ribs, flooding with the old, familiar starlight as she tore the envelope open and shook its contents out. There were two sheets of paper—one was a rambling letter that, to the casual eye, was filled with chatter about the weather, the museum, the apartment. But there was a second, smaller piece of paper included, this one with the shape of a heart cut out from its center. When laid over the first, the message changed; the heart gathered the rambling, nonsensical words into a simple phrase: *I love you and I am so proud of who you are and what you'll do*.

She used to leave Etta notes like this every time she had to travel for work, when Etta had gone to stay with Alice—little reminders of love, tucked inside her overnight bag or in her violin case. But the longer she looked at it, Etta began to feel herself drift away from that initial burst of happiness. Her mom wasn't exactly a sentimental person when it came down to it; she wasn't sure what to make of this, especially on top of the earrings. Trying to thaw their relationship after freezing it over in the first place?

Etta checked her phone. A half hour until the concert.

No texts. No missed calls.

No surprise there.

But also . . . still no Alice.

She stood up, setting her purse down on the chair and slipping out of the room to check on her. Her instructor had seemed almost confused earlier, or at least startled. It was entirely possible someone had trapped her in conversation, or she was having a hard time getting ahold of whoever she was trying to call, but Etta couldn't turn off the panic valve, the prickle of something like dread walking down the back of her neck.

The auditorium was empty, save for the ushers being briefed on the evening by an event coordinator. Etta hustled up the aisle as fast as she could in her heels, catching the last few notes from the violinist onstage. She'd be up soon.

But Alice wasn't out in the hall, cell phone pressed to her ear. Neither, for that matter, was her mom. They weren't loitering in the museum's entrance, the Great Hall, either—and when she checked the steps, all she found were pigeons, puddles, and tourists. Which left one possibility.

Etta turned back toward the steps up to the European paintings collection and slammed into someone, nearly sending them both tumbling to the ground.

“Ah—I'm sorry!” Etta gasped as he steadied her.

“What's the rush? Are you—” The man stared down at her through silver-rimmed glasses, lips parted in surprise. He was older, edging into middle age, or already there judging by the streaks of gray in his otherwise jet-black hair. Etta took one look at him and knew she'd nearly mowed down one of the Met's donors. Everything about him was well-groomed; his tuxedo was immaculate, a dark red rose tucked into the lapel.

“I wasn't looking where I was going,” she said. “I'm sorry, I'm so sorry—”

He only stared at her.

“Anyway,” she rambled, backing up to continue her search, “I hope you’re okay, I’m so sorry again. . . .”

“Wait!” he called after her. “What’s your name?”

Etta jogged up the steps, her heels clacking loudly against the marble. She made her way through the exhibits, waving at the security guards and curators, to the elevator that would take her to the conservation wing. Her mom might have needed to stop by her office, or maybe she had taken Alice up for privacy.

The wing was all but abandoned, save for a security guard, George, who nodded in recognition as she passed by and continued down the hall.

“Your mom’s in her office,” George told her. “Came up a few minutes ago with a lady blazing at her heels.”

“Thanks,” Etta said quickly, ducking around him.

“Don’t you have that concert tonight?” he called. “Good luck!”

Concert, practice, warm-up—

“—haven’t listened to me in *years!*”

She almost didn’t recognize Alice’s voice in its anger; it was so rare for the woman to raise it. It was muffled by the closed door, but still powerful enough to rage down the hall and reach her ears.

“You don’t get to make this call, Alice,” her mom continued, sounding far calmer. Etta’s knees felt like water as she stood outside the office door, pressing her ear against it. “I’m her mother, and contrary to your opinion, I do know what’s best for my child. It’s her time—you know this. You can’t just pluck her off this path, not without consequences!”

“Damn the consequences! And damn you too, for thinking

of them and not of her. She's not ready for this. She doesn't have the right training, and there's no guarantee it'll go the right way for her!"

Not ready for this. Alice's words ripped through her mind. Not ready for what? The debut?

"I love you to death, you know this," Rose continued. "You've done more for the two of us than I could ever express or thank you for, but stop fighting me. You don't understand, and you clearly don't know Etta if you're underestimating her. She can handle it."

Between the hummingbird pulse of her heart and the numb shock spreading through her veins, Etta had to replay the words again and again before she could understand that her mom was actually fighting for her—that it was Alice who was trying to hold her back.

She's going to cancel the debut.

"And you clearly don't love her the way I do, if you're so ready and willing to throw her to the wolves!"

Alice is going to cancel the debut.

The one she'd given up real school for.

The one she'd given up Pierce for.

The one she'd practiced six hours every day for.

Etta threw the office door open, startling Rose and Alice enough to interrupt the furious staring contest they'd been having across her mother's desk.

"Etta—" her mom began, standing quickly. "Shouldn't you be downstairs?"

"I don't know," Etta said, her voice thin with anger as she stared at Alice. "Should I be downstairs, or should I just go home? Is *this* too much for me to handle, too?"

Her stomach churned as Alice raised a hand toward her, trying to beckon her into the office, into the soothing trap of her arms. Like Etta was a child all over again, and needed to calm down.

There was something sharp, assessing, in Alice's eyes that instantly brought about a tremor of panic in her. She knew that look. Etta knew exactly what she was thinking.

"I think, duck, we *should* go home." She turned and met Rose's even gaze. "We can finish our discussion there together."

Etta felt her heart give a kick, then another, until she felt her pulse rioting in her ears, and the temperature of her blood start to rise.

"I've given up everything for this . . . *everything*. And you want me to just walk away? You want me to cancel, to delay *again*?" she demanded, trying to keep the pain lancing through her from twisting the words into a whisper. "You don't think I'm good enough, do you?"

"No, duck, no—"

"Don't call me that!" Etta said, backing out of the office. "Do you realize I don't even have a *friend* left? You told me I needed to focus if I wanted my debut. I gave it all up! I don't have anything else!"

Concern broke through even her mother's anger as she shared a glance with Alice. "Darling, that's not true—"

Alice reached for her again, but Etta wasn't having any of it—she didn't even want to *look* at her, let alone be reasoned with.

"Etta—*Henrietta*," Alice tried, but Etta was past the point of listening, of caring what either of them had to say.

"I'm playing," she told her instructor, "tonight, and at the debut. I don't care what you think, or if you believe in me—I

believe in myself, and there is literally *nothing* in this world that can keep me from playing.”

Alice called after her, but Etta turned on her heel and stormed back down the hall, keeping her head up and her shoulders back. Later, she could think of all the ways she might have hurt the woman who had practically raised her, but right now all Etta wanted was to feel the stage lights warm her skin. Free the fire fluttering inside her rib cage. Work her muscles, the bow, the violin, until she played herself to ash and embers and left the rest of the world behind to smolder.

THERE WAS ALWAYS A MOMENT, JUST BEFORE SHE PUT HER BOW to the strings, when everything seemed to crystallize. She used to live for it, that second where her focus clicked into place, and the world and everyone in it fell away. The weight of the violin cradled against her shoulder. The warmth of the lights running along the lip of the stage, blinding her to everyone beyond it.

This was not one of those moments.

A flustered, panicked Gail had met her in the hall, and dragged her backstage as guests began to file into the auditorium.

“I thought you said I’d have time to rehearse!” Etta whispered, nearly stumbling as they took the stairs.

“Yes, *twenty minutes ago*,” Gail said through gritted teeth. “Are you all right to just go out there? You can warm up in the green room.”

Panic curled low in her belly at the thought, but Etta nodded. She was going to be a professional. She needed to be able to take any hiccup or change in plans in stride. What did it matter that she’d never played on this stage? She’d played the Largo hundreds of times. She didn’t need Alice standing by, waiting to give her

feedback. She would give Alice proof that she could handle this. “That’s fine.”

Michelle, the curator in charge of the Antonius, met them in the green room. Etta actually caught herself holding her breath as the Antonius was lifted out of its case and placed gently into her hands. With the care she’d use to handle a newborn chick, Etta curled her fingers around its long, graceful neck and gladly accepted its weight and responsibility.

Ignoring the eyes of Sophia, the dark-haired girl watching her from the corner, Etta set the bow to the violin’s strings, crossing them. The sound that jumped out was as warm and golden as the tone of the instrument’s wood. Etta let out a faint laugh, her anxiety buried under the fizz of excitement. Her violin was a beauty, but this was an absolute prince. She felt like she was about to melt at the quality of each note she coaxed out of it.

She’s not ready for this. She doesn’t have the right training, and there’s no guarantee it’ll go the right way for her. . . .

Etta closed her eyes, setting her jaw against the burn of tears rising in her throat, behind her lashes. What right had Etta had to yell at Alice like that? How could she think *her* opinion was somehow more accurate than Alice’s, when the woman was lauded the whole world over, when she’d trained dozens of professional violinists?

A small, perfect storm of guilt and anger and frustration was building in the pit of her stomach, turning her inside out.

What had Pierce told her? *You’ll always choose playing over everything else. Even me. Even yourself.*

Etta couldn’t even argue with him—she had made the choice to break up with him. She loved him in a way that still made her heart clench a little, from memory alone. She missed the

light-headed giddiness of sneaking out at night to see him, how reckless and amazing she'd felt when she let herself relax all of her rules.

But a year after they'd gone from friends to something more, she'd placed second in a competition that she—and everyone else—had expected her to win. And suddenly, going to movies, concerts, hanging out at his house, waiting for him outside of his school, began to feel like lost hours. She began tracking them, wondering if Alice would let her debut with an orchestra sooner if she dedicated those precious minutes to practice. She pulled herself deeper into music, away from Pierce.

As she had done with everything but the violin, she'd shrugged him off, and expected that they could go back to the way they'd been for years—friends, and Alice's students. The only way to get through the breakup was to *focus*, to not think about the fact that no one called or texted her, that she'd chased away her only friend.

Just a few weeks later, she'd run into Pierce in Central Park, kissing a girl from his school. Etta had spun on her heel to walk, and then run back up the path she'd just taken, cut so neatly in half by the sight that she kept looking down, as if expecting to see her guts spilling out of her skin. But instead of letting herself cry, Etta had gone home and practiced for six straight hours.

Now not even Alice believed in her.

She should have asked Gail for a minute, a second, to get her head and heart straightened out. Instead, when the woman appeared, chattering into her headset, Etta found herself following her, walking out into the flood of soft blue light on the stage. The applause rolled over her in a dull wave.

Don't drop it, don't drop it, don't drop it. . . .

Etta found her mark and took a moment just to study the violin, turning it over in her hands, fingers lightly skimming its curves. She wanted to still everything that was hurtling through her as she stood under the stage lights; to freeze the fizz of disbelief and excitement, remember the weight and shape of it in her hands.

The Grace Rainey Rogers Auditorium in the Metropolitan Museum of Art wasn't the grandest venue Etta had ever performed in. It wasn't even in the top ten. But it was manageable, and more importantly, hers to command for a few minutes. Seven hundred faces, all masked by shadows and the glare of the lights high overhead as they shifted into a final, rippling blue that reminded her of the ocean, with wind moving over the surface.

You have this.

The applause petered out. Someone coughed. A text alert chimed. Instead of sinking into that calm, the deep concentration, Etta felt herself hovering on the surface of it.

Just play.

She dove into the Largo, pausing only for a steady breath. Seven hundred audience members stared back at her. Two bars, three bars . . .

It crept up on her slowly, bleeding through her awareness like light warming a screen. Her concentration held out, but only for another few seconds; the sound that began as a murmur, a growl of static underscoring the music, suddenly exploded into shrieking feedback. Screams.

Etta stumbled through the next few notes, eyes frantically searching the technician's booth for a sign about whether she should stop or keep going. The audience was still, gazing up at her, almost like they couldn't hear it—

It wasn't a sound a human could produce; not one anyone could get without ravaging an instrument.

Do I stop? Do I start over?

She crossed strings and flubbed the next three notes, and her anxiety spiked. Why wasn't anyone doing anything about that sound—about the screaming feedback? It crashed through her eardrums, flooding her concentration. Her whole body seemed to spasm with it, the nausea making sweat bead on her upper lip. It felt like . . . like someone was driving a knife into the back of her skull.

The air vibrated around her.

Stop, she thought, desperate, make it stop—

I'm messing up—

Alice was right—

Etta didn't realize she'd stopped playing altogether until Gail appeared, white-faced and wide-eyed at the edge of the stage. Pressing her face into her hand, Etta tried to catch a breath, fighting through the sensation that her lungs were being crushed. She couldn't look at the audience. She couldn't look for Alice or her mother, surely watching this play out in horror.

A nauseating wave of humiliation washed over her chest, up her neck, up her face, and for the first time in Etta's nearly fifteen years of playing, she turned and ran off the stage. Chased by the sound that had driven her off in the first place.

"What's the matter?" Gail asked. "Etta? Are you okay?"

"Feedback," she mumbled, almost unable to hear herself. "Feedback—"

Michelle, the curator, deftly plucked the Antonius out of her hands before she could drop it.

“There’s no feedback,” Gail said. “Let me get you a glass of water—we’ll find a place for you to sit—”

That’s not right. Etta swung her gaze around, searching the faces of the other violinists. They would have heard it—

Only, they clearly hadn’t. The sound of the feedback and her own drumming heart filled the violinists’ silence as they stared back with blank faces.

I’m not crazy, I’m not crazy—

Etta took a step back, feeling trapped between their pity and the wall of sound that was slamming into her back in waves. Panic made the bile rise in her throat, burning.

“Go!” Gail said frantically to one of the older men. “Get out there!”

“I’ve got her.”

The dark-haired girl, Sophia, stepped out of the green room, reaching out to take Etta’s arm. She hadn’t realized how unsteady she was until the arm Gail had thrown around her lifted, and she was forced to lean on a stranger a whole head shorter than her.

“I’m . . . I’m fine. . . .” Etta muttered, swaying.

“No, you’re not,” Sophia said. “I hear it, too. Come on!”

The easiest explanation was that she’d snapped, that the stress had gotten to her, but . . . someone else had heard it, too. It was as alive and real for her as it was for Etta, and it flooded reassurance through her system to know she hadn’t lost it, that she hadn’t just crashed and burned because her stage fright and anxiety from childhood were colliding with the way Alice had doubted her.

Etta thought, just for a moment, she might cry in relief. The sound moved like burning knives beneath her skin as Sophia

expertly wove them through the dark backstage area and out a side entrance that dumped them directly into the dark, silent museum, just at the entrance of the Egyptian wing.

Wait, Etta wanted to say, but her mouth couldn't seem to catch up to her mind. *Where are we going?*

"It's coming from over here," Sophia said, tugging her forward.

Etta took a step toward the Egyptian wing, and the sound grew more intense, the oscillations quicker, like she was working a radio dial and tuning until she found a signal. Another step, and the pitch rose again into a frenzy.

Like it was excited she was paying attention.

Like it wants me to find it.

"What is that?" she asked, hearing her own voice shake. "Why can't anyone else hear it?"

"Well, we're going to find out—Etta, right? Let's go!"

In the dark, the Met wore a different, shifting skin. Without the usual crush of visitors clogging the hallways, every small sound was amplified. Harsh breathing. Slapping shoes. Cold air slipping around her legs and ankles.

Where? she thought. *Where are you?*

What are you?

They moved beneath the watchful gaze of pharaohs. In the daytime, during the museum's regular hours, these rooms radiated golden light, like sun-warmed stone. But even the creamy walls and limestone gateways were shadowed now, their grooves deeper. The painted faces of sarcophagi and gods with the heads of beasts seemed sharper, sneering, as the girls followed the winding path through the exhibits.

The Temple of Dendur stood alone in front of her, bleached

by spotlights. There was a massive wall of windows, and beyond that, darkness. *Not here.*

Sophia dragged her past the pools of still waters near the temple, and they ran past statues of ancient kings, past the gateway and temple structure, through to the small gift shop that connected this section of the museum to the American wing. There were no docents, no guards, no security gates; there was nothing and no one to stop them.

Nothing and no one to help her.

Go find Mom and Alice, she thought. Go home.

But she couldn't—she had to know. She needed—she needed—

The blood drained from her head, until she felt as dizzy and light as the specks of dust floating through the air around her. It was like passing into a dream; the halls were blurring at the edges as she walked, devouring the gilded mirrors, the rich wooden chests and chairs. Shadows played with the doorways, inviting her in, turning her toward one of the emergency stairwells. The sound became a pounding, a drum, a call louder and louder and louder until Etta thought her skull would split from the pressure—

A deafening shot ripped through even the feedback, startling Sophia to a skidding stop. Etta's whole body jerked with the suddenness of it. Awareness snapped against her nerves; the stench of something burning, something almost chemical.

She saw the blood first as it snaked across the tile to her toes.

Then the milk-white head of hair.

The thing was a crumpled body.

Etta screamed, screamed, screamed, and was drowned out by

the pulsing feedback. She pushed past a startled Sophia to get to the body on the cold tile, heaving, a sob caught in her throat, and dropped down to her knees beside Alice.

Breathing, alive, breathing—

Alice's pale eyes flickered over at her, unfocused. ". . . Duck?"

Blood sputtered from her chest, fanned out against Etta's hands as she pressed them against the wound. Her mind began to shut down in its panic.

What happened? What happened?

"You're all right," Etta told Alice, "you're—"

"Shot?" Sophia said, leaning over Etta's shoulder. There was a tremor of something in her voice—fear? "But who—?"

A shout carried to them from the other end of the hall. Three men in tuxedos, one of them the man in glasses she'd bumped into in the Great Hall, followed by a security guard, seemed to come toward them in slow motion. The emergency light beside them caught a pair of glasses and made them glow.

"Call 911!" Etta yelled. "Somebody help, please!"

There was a slight pressure on her hand. Etta looked down as Alice's eyes slid shut. ". . . the old . . . familiar places . . . run. . . ."

Her next breath came raggedly, and the next one never came at all.

The scream that tore out of Etta's throat was soundless. Arms locked around her waist, dragging her up from the ground. She struggled, thrashing against the grip.

CPR—Alice needed help—Alice was—

"We have to go!" Sophia shouted into her ear.

What the hell is going on?

The door to the stairwell directly behind them scraped open.

Loose hair floated around Etta's face, clinging to the sweat on her cheeks and neck.

The stairwell was so brightly lit compared to the rest of the building that Etta had to hold up her hands to shield her eyes.

The humming . . . it was as if the empty air on the edge of the landing, just above the stairs, was moving, vibrating in time with the sound. It shimmered the way heat did when it rose from sidewalks on an unbearably hot day. The walls leaned in toward her shoulders.

“Sorry about this.”

She was shoved forward, and the world shattered. A blackness ringed the edges of her vision, clenched her spine, dragged her, tossed her into the air with crushing pressure. Etta lost her senses, her logic, her thoughts of *Stop, help, Mom*—she lost everything.

She disappeared.

ETTA DIDN'T SURFACE BACK INTO REALITY SO MUCH AS SLAM INTO IT.

Hours, days—she wasn't sure—a small forever later, her eyes flashed open. There was pressure on her chest, making it difficult to draw a breath. When she tried to sit up, to open the path to her lungs, her joints cracked. Her arms and legs cramped as she tried to stretch out, to feel in the darkness—they struck something hard and rough.

Wood, she thought, recognizing the smell that filled her nose. *Fish*.

She coughed and forced her eyes open. A small room unfolded around her. The wood floor dipped violently to the right, as if someone had upended one side of it.

As the bright sparks cleared out of her vision, and her eyes

adjusted to the dark, Etta dragged her legs in and her chest up, so she could sit up in—what was this? A large cradle, a bunk bed built into the floor and bolted to the wall.

The museum . . . what was going on?

There had been some kind of . . . some kind of an explosion. . . .

Where were the cold tile floors of the stairwell? Where were the fire alarms? Her heart was in her throat, fluttering like a desperate animal. Her muscles felt like they'd been carved out of wood. She reached up, trying to scrub the burning sensation from her eyes, erase the black spots still floating there.

Alice. Where was Alice? She had to get to Alice—

The fuzz of static in her ears burst like the first clap of rain from a thundercloud. Suddenly, Etta was drenched in sound. Creaking, groans, slamming footsteps, pops of explosions in the air. Screams—

“—forward—!”

“Behind me—!”

“—the helm—!”

The words took shape, strung together like dissonant chords, smashing cymbals. The room was clogged with silvery smoke.

This wasn't the stairwell; this wasn't any office in the Met. The walls were nothing more than panels of dark unfinished wood. When she turned, she could just make out the shape of a chair and a figure cowering in it, arms clasped over her head.

“Hello?” she scratched out, surging forward on unsteady feet. She was caught again by shock, the feel of rough fabric against her arms and legs. For the first time since she'd come to, her adrenaline slowed to a complete stop.

She wasn't wearing her black dress.

This was . . . it was floor-length, some kind of pale shade Etta couldn't make out. She ran her fingers over the bodice, tracing the embroidery in disbelief. The dress had her upper arms and chest in a chokehold, making it difficult to move.

“Oh!”

A girl's voice. The figure in the chair moved, rising to her feet. A trembling memory flickered through Etta's mind. *The girl*. The girl from the concert. Etta charged forward, knocking her aside to get to the crack of light she could see just beyond her—a door.

She pushed me in the stairwell, she shoved me forward—once she had the first glimmer of memory in place, the rest fell into line behind it.

“No—no—we must stay down here!” the girl cried. “Please, listen to me—”

Etta's fingers ran along the wall until they found a latch, and she burst out of the cramped, dark room. A thick cloud of smoke rose up to meet her, and light flooded her eyes, bleaching the world a painful white. Etta felt hands at her back again, which made her fight harder to move forward, to feel her way through the smoke until her foot caught something and she went tumbling down.

Don't think, just go! Etta reared up, then stopped. Her wide, white skirts were spread out over a man, flat on his back.

“I'm sorry, I—” she choked out, crawling over to make sure he was all right. “You—”

His pale blue eyes stared up at the ceiling, shock and anguish twisting his features into a stiff mask. A trail of gleaming buttons on his absurdly old-fashioned coat had been torn open and the shirt beneath was splattered with—with—

Oh my God.

“Sir?” Etta’s voice cracked on the word. He wasn’t moving. He wasn’t blinking. She looked down, mind blank as it took in the dark liquid coating her skin, her chest, her stomach, the dress.

Blood. Her snowy white skirt was drenched with thick, crimson blood. She was crawling through that man’s blood. *I’m crawling through his blood.*

What is this?

Etta was up and on her feet before her mind registered moving, and headed toward the source of the light from above. The smoke reached out to smother her, locking tight around her neck. Glass lanterns crashed around her, exploding like pale fireworks. She kept going toward the light until her knees struck something—stairs. Etta grabbed her skirt, hauled the thick layers of it up around her waist, and started to pull herself up, not caring that she was crying, just looking for fresh air and a path out of this nightmare.

Instead, she climbed into the mouth of another one.