

# *Reader's Abode*



## Collection

**Volume 1: March 2017**

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## Reader's Abode Collection Volume 1 March 2017

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# Reader's Abode Collection Volume 1 March 2017

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## Pavlov's Cat

### Pavlov's experiments worked on dogs... but what about cats?

Barbara Russell



The red bulb turns on, casting an eerie halo on the white panel, and I can't sit still. My tail wiggles as if it had a mind of its own, which is something I've always suspected. My paws tap on the shiny tiles of my master's laboratory—Dr Pavlov's.

"Are you ready, Boris?" Dr Pavlov asks from the other side of the room.

I give a happy bark. Ready? I'm more than ready.

This little game we play is fabulous and pretty simple. I don't mean to brag, but I've learned it in less than a day. When the bulb turns red, the panel in front of me opens, and a bowl filled with delicious food appears like magic. Last time it was lamb and rice, what will it be now? Sausages?

I inhale, trying to get a sniff, but I don't catch anything. Anyway, who cares? Whatever it is, I'm sure I'll love it.

Drool is falling down like rain from my mouth, and Dr Pavlov nods with a smile. My master is happy, I'm a good dog, life is great.

The panel slides open in a painfully slow way. My tail wags faster, and my paws go up and down in a flash. C'mon! I'm starving here. Okay, that's a bit exaggerated since I had my bowl of kibbles this morning, but my stomach growls and my mouth fills with saliva. I'm so ready for brunch.

The panel inches away, and... nothing appears. I search the floor, sniffing the tiles with my nose. Where's the bowl? Where is the delicious food? There's nothing here aside from white stones and a faint smell of bacon that teases me. I tilt my head toward Dr Pavlov. The room where I'm standing has three glass walls, so I have a clear view of the rest of the lab. There must be a mistake here. My mouth doesn't stop drooling anyway, but my tail loses its swagger. Something is wrong here.

I frown. Dr Pavlov is nodding and smiling even more.

"Excellent!" He scribbles something on his notepad. "When the light turns red, the subject starts drooling even if the reward is missing. My theory about associate involuntary reflexes is correct."

Huh? What is he talking about? Where's the food?

"Excellent," he repeats, showing off his small teeth.

He walks over to a cabinet and takes out a box of biscuits. Now my tail resumes rolling. Biscuits are coming! I would prefer the lamb, but, hey, since when does a Labrador say no to food?

"Come here, Boris." Dr Pavolv opens the door of the glassy room and offers the biscuit, and I shoot toward him.

See? I'm good with this game. I chomp the biscuits, and some bits fall to the floor. I'll lick them off later.

Dr Pavlov straightens, scratching his grey beard and adjusting his glasses. "Now, we'll try with Munshka." He turns a page in the notebook and writes something on it. "Munshka?" he calls.

Nothing. Munshka doesn't come. I snort.

Munshka is weird. I know, it's not a nice thing to say about a fellow pet, but it's true. She spends hours cleaning herself. I mean, what for? You clean yourself, and after half an hour, you're dirty again. Sometimes she refuses to eat what Dr Pavlov offers, and most of the time she doesn't reply when he calls her, which is rude. Oh, and did I mention that she's a cat? That says it all, right?

"Muuunshka?" Dr Pavlov waves a biscuit, and I drool all over again. I can't help myself. It's a Labrador thing.

Munshka strolls inside the lab in her slow, what's-the-fuss-about gait. Her long white fur and blue eyes make her look pretty, I guess. She yawns, stretches her back, and tilts her ears backward. Why doesn't she run to the biscuit?

I shift my weight from one paw to another, eager to take the prize myself.

"Would you like a biscuit, my dear?" Dr Pavlov stoops and opens his hand where the biscuit lies.

My nose tickles with the scent of meat and liver... Yum.

Munshka twitches her tail, walks past him, and curls over a cushion. My jaw hangs open. Seriously? What's wrong with her?

Dr Pavlov sighs and writes in his notebook. Taking her gently in his arm, he puts her inside the room with the bulb light and the glass walls to play the game. Munshka lifts an eyebrow at him, her claws peeping out.

Then Dr Pavlov closes the door of the room and fusses with the box of wonder—the box that contains the bowl of food under the red light. I tremble with anticipation. What is he putting there? Chicken? Turkey?

Munshka starts her usual grooming activity, licking her paws.

The red light turns on. I drool, you can't blame me. Munshka keeps cleaning herself. The panel opens, and the magnificent scent of roasted turkey hits me like a slap. I'm about to leap forward and dig my muzzle into the wonderful heap of meat and grease, but Dr Pavlov stops me.

"Stay here, Boris. This is Munshka's turn," he says.

Munshka's turn? She doesn't care, she's busy cleaning imaginary dirt from her belly.

The bulb flashes red again. Not a muscle stirs in Munshka's body.

Hey girl! Don't you like turkey?

Dr Pavlov frowns, his smile disappearing. My master is displeased, and it's all Munshka's fault.

An idea strikes me. Maybe we need something stronger. I bark and point to the fridge. Take the bacon! No one sane could refuse that.

Dr Pavlov scratches his beard again and watches the fridge. "Do you think I should change the turkey with something else?"

I bark again. Yes, you should.

Dr Pavlov opens the fridge and rummages in it. I slip my head underneath him and locate the bacon in a nanosecond. I paw at the bag of bacon. *This, this!*

"All right, let's see what happens."

Dr Pavlov discards the turkey—I hope it'll be my dinner—and opens the bag of bacon. Its salty, greasy flavour wafts in yummy waves into the lab. Needless to say, I'm practically drowning in my own drool.

Munshka can't resist this. Nope.

The red light switches on. Munshka looks like she couldn't care less, intent on licking her paws as if her life depends on it. Ha! Just wait and see when the panel opens, and the bacon appears. The sight of the red bulb makes me ravenous. If I were inside the glass room, I would jump on the bacon and finish it before you could say vodka.

Munshka doesn't flinch. Only once, she lifts her head, blinks, and then resumes her cleaning.

That makes it official: cats aren't normal.

Dr Pavlov shakes his head and massages the bridge of his nose. "I have to admit defeat. My theory doesn't work." He sags into a chair and exhales.

Oh, no. My master can't be so sad. There must be something I can do to help him.

So I start to watch Munshka. In the next few days I watch her, day and night, day and night, day and... okay, I need a nap now and then and to eat, and I need my daily walks, you know, to do my things. Also, somebody has to carry on the digging project in the garden, that's important. Not to mention that I have to reply to the neighbour dog's barking. And what about the ball? When Dr Pavlov throws the ball, I must catch it. But aside from these moments, I keep watching Munshka, and finally I find her weak spot. Yes, cats do have a weakness!

I explain my idea to Dr Pavlov, which isn't easy. It takes three attempts to understand each other, and judging by the way he shakes his head and scowls at me, he doesn't think the idea is good. Nevertheless, he follows the plan.

"I must be mad," he mutters as he prepares the box of wonder and places Munshka in the glass room.

The bulb shines red. Munshka is focused on her tail; her head doesn't even turn to the red light. I clench my jaws, and my heart flips. I just want to know if my idea is right. Now I understand the tension a scientist feels.

The panel opens, revealing a full basket. The scent of lavender and lilies wafts around the room. Munshka's eyes narrow as she pivots to the basket. Ha! Her cattitude is changing.

I nibble at my nails. Is it working?

With a "meow," Munshka leaps forward and dives into the sea of soft, scented blankets in the laundry basket. She rolls and rolls and rolls, purring with her eyes closed.

Dr Pavlov claps his hands, delighted. "My friend, you're a genius."

My chest swells with pride.

I, Boris, pet of Dr Pavlov, Labrador almost purebred, has unlocked the cats' secret.

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## A Menu Proposal

**A menu of memories leads to an important question**

Alison McBain

### **L'Aperitivo**

flames on running wax  
over the musk of rose petals  
and flashing white, new  
to end, anticipation

### **Il Primo**

a perfect autumn, crisp--  
flavored with cinnamon  
from the lush deep pockets of  
grandmother's apron

### **Il Secondo**

diving through chlorinated blue  
into the endless summer of youth  
days like lemon drops--  
nights like rain—

### **Il Contorno**

laughing with friends through  
the end of nocturnal revelry  
before the dismal fog,  
the wet slap of morning

### **Il Dolce**

and then the darkness--  
the round rum night  
the night rum round,  
turned over in a salty barrel--  
a flash of castanets

### **Il Digestivo**

aromas like photographs  
blurred through unstoppeder days  
memories cooked to order  
holding back the question:

yes?

© Alison McBain 2017

## Wings of Justice

**Two men journey to their destiny. One of them is dead**  
Alice S. Hill



*Nemesis, winged balancer of life, dark-faced goddess, daughter of Justice – Mesomedes*

A flat tyre. At a time like *this*.

Shaking, I hesitate for a long moment before opening the boot. Maybe I'll wake up and find it's all a dream. Maybe the nightmare will pass and the boot will contain nothing it shouldn't. Just tools and a spare tyre.

It's not a nightmare. The lid swings open, and the moonlight plays on the outline of a hunched shape. I take a deep breath. I'll have to move it to reach the wheel spanner, jack and tyre, and I can't turn squeamish now.

I fumble for a good grip. It's lucky I'm a big man and I've always kept fit, because the thing is a dead weight. Not just a dead weight. Dead. Hamish McIntyre is undoubtedly dead. The plastic wrapped around him falls away a little, revealing his silver hair, matted and congealed with a dark stain.

A moment of panic. I can't leave him lying in the road. What if another car arrives while I'm changing the wheel? Unlikely in this remote area, but . . . no, I can't take a chance. I haul him up and walk the short distance to a thick patch of shrubs. A gust of wind blows the plastic into my face, blinding me for a second, and then flapping back, leaving one slack-fingered hand uncovered. I stumble, half-dropping him into the undergrowth. I waste precious minutes securing the covering and making sure nothing is visible.

Panting a little, I power-walk to the car. Assemble the tools—must hurry. A tendency to drop and fumble doesn't help. At last, the wheel is changed, and I put everything back, not too neatly. Now to retrieve the body. Lifting is harder this time, trying to raise the burden from ground height. Just as well McIntyre isn't big. Small and wiry. And, until this evening, assertive, quick-witted and unforgiving. And loud. Now he is silent.

Careful. Don't let any exposed parts touch the interior of the boot—there must be no trace that the car ever held a body. Make sure the plastic is wrapped tight. He's in, but

the lid won't close. My heart races. I open the lid and rearrange the unresisting mass. Close it.

Car keys. Where are the car keys? Blood pounds through my veins. I pat each pocket in turn, then sigh with relief. Here they are.

Off again. I can't drive fast. Can't use the headlights, in case some remote villager wakes and wonders. Off the road, and onto a rough track heading upwards at an ever-increasing gradient. The track ends, and I slow to a crawl, weaving my way between trees and boulders, until I can go no further.

I sit for some moments, reluctant to move. *I can't do this. It's impossible.* Then panic sets in. A swirling vista of consequences. A filthy prison in this underdeveloped country. Perhaps the hangman's noose. I can almost feel it around my neck.

*I have to do this.*

There is another way. I could just dump McIntyre right here, then go to some remote country and begin life again. But then I'd lose everything, and I've worked hard for it. The mine. It's been my life for the last ten years, and it's just starting to make money. Lots of money.

*I have to do this.*

Cold determination replaces fear. I lever myself out of the car. I open the boot, confronting the silent heap, which, not long ago, was a living, breathing human. I won't think of him that way. He –it—is just a collection of minerals bound together by a departed life force. A collection that needs to be disposed of. It's not going to be easy. A heavy burden, a long climb through rough country. Time is not on my side, and I need to get started. But first, think each step through.

I can manage the weight—they taught us in the army how to do a fireman's lift, leaving one hand free. Getting the dead weight onto my shoulders will be tricky. If I fumble it, I'll get McIntyre's DNA all over my car, and I don't want that. The police in this country may be backward and inefficient, but even they know enough to test for DNA. And they will, if there's any suspicion McIntyre disappeared when he was with me. Which shouldn't happen, but you never know.

First, get the body out of the boot, carefully, so the plastic remains in place. The moon slips behind a cloud, making it difficult to see what I'm doing. I get a good grip, and heave him onto a convenient waist-high boulder. I'll have to remove the wrapping so I can arrange his arms and legs for carrying.

I unwind the covering, and a sudden shaft of moonlight illuminates McIntyre's face. Are his eyelids twitching? No, it's just a trick of the shifting shadows that flutter as an overhead branch sways in the wind. And the slack jaw is not really screaming. It's all in my head, an illusion caused by moonlight, conjuring up ghosts where there are none.

I can't leave the plastic covering here; someone may find it. I fold it neatly, wind it twice round my waist and tie it like a belt. Why do I feel as if it's pulling tighter, squeezing the breath out of me? Is his spirit close by, determined to avenge his passing?

I blink my eyes, trying to rid my mind of phobias. On with the job in hand. I raise him till his head is level with mine, my eyes staring into his. It's like being sucked into a void, and I turn my head away. Steadying him with my left hand, I use my right to pull an arm over my shoulder. Shift my weight forward onto my right leg, turn my head under his arm. Get a grip behind his knees. Squat and pull him over my shoulders. An arm slides down my back. *He's trying to escape.* No. It's only the effect of gravity on slack limbs.

At last I have him balanced, and I wrap my right arm around his legs, reaching across to hold his elbow. Have to leave my left hand free to help with the climb. Stand up, and I'm good to go. But I can't. The close contact is almost too much for me. The mingled smells of McIntyre's brand of soap, aftershave and cigars fill my nostrils, and I want to cry out.

I stifle the scream and force myself to walk forward. I can't give up now. I will lose everything. I set off, finding the path easily, as the moon has emerged from hiding. The going is not too difficult. I can do this. I just have to pretend I'm hiking with a backpack. I even find time to notice the clean, sharp angles of rock and tree glinting in the soft light; listen to the chirp of insects and the occasional eerie echo of a nightjar's call. All familiar sounds.

Time passes. Time to think. Remember.

I'd hit him hard, but I hadn't mean to kill him. Harsh words, snapping tempers, a primeval surge of anger and a crashing blow. I hadn't set out to be a murderer.

McIntyre was my partner in the mine, a distant partner, cushioned in his luxurious Scottish mansion from the dirt, the backbreaking work and the raucous complaints of the labour force. Raking in his share of everything. Yes, he'd put up most of the money, but the vision, the effort and the daily grind were all mine. Once a year, he'd visit, niggling, interfering, demanding tighter controls, more profit. Could anyone blame me when I opened a new shaft and found it rich with gold, much richer than we'd dreamt, that I didn't put it through the books? McIntyre still got his profit, year in, year out. He didn't need to know there was more.

Then he'd phoned me unexpectedly, asking me to collect him from the airport. We arrived at the mine office just as it was growing dark, He sat opposite me and leaned forward in his chair.

"I want to see everything. The books, the mine, the stores. Everything." His cold grey eyes left no room for argument.

I stared at him for a stunned moment. "Why?"

"Why? Because I've been doing ma sums." His thin lips twisted. In a tone that could have frozen a tropical storm in its tracks, he itemised the precise amount of chemicals required to refine the gold shown in the sales figures. Compared it to the amounts we'd actually used. "Perhaps ye'd care to explain this to me, laddie?"

He insisted on a tour of inspection. Cornered me and finally, proved his point.

"I'll be prosecuting, of course." His voice was calm.

If he'd shown anger, I might have believed he'd change his mind after he had time to think. I lost my temper, shouted, even pleaded, but he was implacable. And finally, I hit him. Hit him hard. I hadn't meant to kill him.

I'm jolted back to the present when I stumble over a tree root. My burden slips, pulling me sideways and over, and McIntyre and I sprawl on the ground, entwined like a pair of lovers. I curse, alarming some unseen creature, which darts off with a rustle of leaves.

It's much harder to lift him back onto my shoulders this time; I'm beginning to tire, and my muscles shout in protest. I succeed in the end and set off, climbing ever higher. I pass through a tangle of tree branches, ducking and twisting to enable myself and my burden to pass through. The branches snatch at McIntyre's clothes, pulling him backwards so that I almost lose my grip. I retreat a pace, duck lower and try again. Ten minutes of this and I'm exhausted. I'd like to stop and rest, but time is not on my side. I must be back before the mine workers arrive. No-one must ever suspect I've been away.

At last I reach a grassy plateau, and my thoughts drift back yet again. No, I hadn't meant to kill him. Not then, not when I hit him in temper. But afterwards, when he lay on the floor unconscious . . . .

Heart racing, I'd examined him. No blood, no obvious injury. His chest rose and fell slowly, and I gave a sigh of relief.

*He's alive. I thought I'd killed him.*

I stood over him. Watching. And thinking.

*If I had killed him, I wouldn't be prosecuted.*

And then the thoughts crowded in. When we set up the company, we'd included an agreement that if one partner died, the other had first option to buy his shares at current valuation. And the valuation would be low, because no-one but me knew how much gold we really produced. McIntyre knew, but he'd be dead.

*I can do it. The mine . . . I've worked for it, cared for it. It could belong to me. Only me.*

I closed my eyes. Went through the implications. Why not? No-one knew he was at the mine; the workers had all gone home hours ago. I could do it; it only needed a bit of courage. But what to do with the body?

*The chasm.*

I'd found it months ago, when I'd gone deep into the surrounding bush, camping and prospecting for a possible site for a second mine. It's a deep, narrow gap between the rocks, the sides so steep no-one can get down without sophisticated climbing equipment. And no-one would want to get down. There's nothing down there, just a jumble of jagged rocks. You can't even see the bottom without leaning precariously over the edge. No-one would find him.

Ever.

*Be careful. I must leave no trace.*

A stream runs past the mine—that would be the place to do it. Any traces would be washed away, and there'd be nothing for anyone to find.

I snatched up my raincoat and put an old pair of trousers over my clothes—I could discard them later. My heart hammering and my brain flying, I picked up his limp body with muscles super-charged by adrenaline. Stumbled to the stream. Snatched up a jagged rock, and waded in until the cold water reached halfway to my knees. Paused, my heart beating wildly.

MacIntyre twisted a little in my grip and gave a groan. Now. It had to be now, or he would wake and struggle, perhaps escape. I smashed the rock onto his skull, feeling the crunch and the sudden softness, like a boiled egg when you tap it with a spoon. He gave a sound halfway between a gasp and a cough. Blood seeped onto my hands and poured through my fingers. His body went limp.

I don't know how long I stood there. It could have been a minute, or even ten. Water swirled around my ankles and the blood on my hands turned sticky. Then I'd come to myself. I had work to do.

And I still have work to do. I've stopped halfway through the clearing, forgetting my objective in reliving the horrors. I push myself to go faster. Time is short. The memories have made me edgy, and I keep thinking I see something or someone moving. Foolish fancies only. Nobody would come to this wild place at this time.

The moon shines brighter as the clouds shift, and a dark shape moves in front of me. A winged creature—a half-forgotten childhood fear blurring the barriers of reality. I let out a startled cry. As I stop and stare, the shape comes to a halt.

Then my logical mind reasserts itself. It's my shadow, with the hunched load on my back giving the appearance of wings.

Only my shadow.

I breathe deeply and continue, but the night feels full of an unseen presence. What happens to the essence of a person when they die? Where is MacIntyre's soul? Does it lurk in the night, a ghostly *nothing*, seeking retribution?

I curse out loud, needing to hear my own voice. After a little while, I feel calmer, able to continue.

The going gets rougher, rising between boulders and gnarled, stunted trees. I stumble again, and struggle to right myself without dropping MacIntyre. The moon goes behind thick clouds, and soft rain begins to fall, whispering as it strikes the dry leaves. It's dark, and I can't see my way. I use my free hand to test the area in front of me, moving my feet cautiously, feeling for every step. It's no good. I quickly become disoriented. I can't get lost now. And how will I climb the last section of the path, where I'll need both hands to make my way up the rough, rocky incline?

I sink to my knees, exhausted in body and spirit. All around me, the rain whispers, and the sound becomes MacIntyre's voice. No escape, it murmurs. No escape.

I close my eyes. I see the winged creature, the legend that terrified me as a child. Nemesis, the avenger, inescapable. Darkness reaching out for me, darkness with wings, and the sound of the rain becomes the fluttering of feathers. And McIntyre's weight becomes a strong pinion pressing me down. No escape.

A cramp in my leg pulls me back to reality. I am stronger than this. And I am being a fool. I have my mobile phone with me, and it has a flashlight. Enough to show me the way. I reach for it in my pocket, fumble and drop it.

I can't find it.

Stop. Think.

Cut the panic.

I shift McIntyre onto the ground and, on my hands and knees, grope for the phone. I find it. Now to lift him again. My breath comes in short gasps. No good. I'll have to rest for a while. I lie flat on the ground, the rain drumming on my face and creeping under my coat in cold trickles. But my brain is working now. And I know how I will manage the last, steep climb.

The rain eases, and I get to my feet. Untie the plastic which I'd knotted around my waist. Heave McIntosh upright, wrap his arm around my neck, stoop, lift his legs, and, with a superhuman heave, get him onto my shoulders. I arrange him in the correct position, then wrap the plastic tightly around his arm. I tie the other end under his knees, leaving both my hands free. I can do this. I will do it. And when I have done it, the mine will belong to me.

I turn on the flashlight and step forward, checking the way carefully. Not so far to go now, but I mustn't get lost.

Half an hour passes, and I'm on autopilot. Step forward. Check the path. Step forward. The gloom lightens, and at first I think the cloud is thinning, but then a line of muted colour spreads across the horizon. Dawn is coming, and I know where I am. Only the last, and hardest, part of the path to go. And with the daylight comes triumph. New day, new life.

I make my precarious way over boulders, through narrow gaps and up steep, slippery inclines. But determination has returned now I am so near my goal, and I force my hands and legs to move faster. At last I reach the place where the ground disappears into a deep ravine. The perfect place. No-one will ever go there. No-one will ever find a body dropped into that chasm. I stand still for a few moments, triumphant. I have made it.

Breathing deeply, I shuffle forward onto a wider foothold, where I have room to untie my burden and send it to its last resting place. The soft, grey dawn reveals the sharp edges of the rocks, and I shiver as I imagine his body crashing, smashing, disintegrating.

A sharp scuffle to my left. I swing around in alarm. Wings flap towards me, wings rise into the air above me, I scream and step back. One of my feet slips over the edge. As I fight for balance, I see it is only an eagle, a giant eagle disturbed from her nest. I lean

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forward, but McIntyre's weight drags me back. He falls from my shoulders, and his arm and legs, tied in front of me, pull against my neck, taking away my breath. My front foot slides. And MacIntyre and I are flying, flying downwards to the place where no-one will ever find us.

High above, the eagle spreads her wings, circling and rising until she is just a speck in the sky.

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## Driftwood

**A bell on a misty beach summons a ferryman and a life-changing boat ride**

Eddie Cantrell



A woman in a white bikini top and a pair of baby blue hot pants walked to the edge of the slope, fists clenched. She stumbled down its steep gradient. Her tattooed arms spread out like wings as she fought to keep balance.

A man appeared behind her but stopped at the verge. "C'mon, Neave. I'm sorry, okay? Come back to the car." Neave ignored him.

"Where are you going? We're in the middle of nowhere," he cried as she staggered over a tuft of beach grass sticking out of the sand.

When she reached the bottom, she took several quick steps toward the shoreline where she stopped and hugged her arms under her breast. Her striking eyes, one olive green with flints of red, the other light blue, filled but no tear fell. Blinking, she took a deep breath, sucking in the salty ocean air. Her eyes widened as she noticed her surroundings.

*Oh my God, she thought.*

Neave stood on a tiny stretch of beach, only ten or twelve meters wide, flanked between high, jagged rocks. A thin line of waves spread a fine sheen in front of her. She squinted her eyes but couldn't discern much of the sea. A thick mist swirled over the water, making it difficult to see more than four or five meters ahead. To her left she saw the ghostly form of a low, rickety looking pier fading into the haze. It was like standing in a postcard from an enchanted world. A series of small waves rushed out from beneath the mist and scuttled out over the cool, wet sand, embracing her bare feet with their icy touch. She gasped and smiled at the same time.

He walked over the sand behind her. Neave's smile faltered. His hand touched the place between her shoulder blades, glided down over the straps of her swimming top. It moved farther down over a large tattoo of a fire-breathing phoenix and rested on the small of her back.

"Are you alright?" he asked.

Her arms tightened around her chest, her jaw clenched.

"What you said to me in the car, Jim. It," she paused and shrugged, "it hurt."

His fingertips started caressing the lines of her tattoo with a feather-light touch. She shivered and wanted to -

*Don't smile, she thought, but the corners of her mouth pricked up.*

"I'm sorry. What I said was unfair. I was wrong," Jim said in a tender voice. Neave turned to him remaining in his embrace.

He looked as out of place as a banker at a frat party, standing on the beach dressed in his neat maroon cardigan, white shirt and black trousers. A draft rose up and made a mess of his perfect light brown hair.

"You weren't wrong," she said.

His fingertips lingered over her spine for a moment longer and then slowly pulled away. Jim broke their embrace and Neave hugged herself again.

"What do you mean?" Jim asked.

"Maybe it hurt," she said, "because maybe you weren't wrong."

Jim took a deep breath and looked down at his black leather shoes, now covered in wet beach sand.

"Where are you going?" he asked as Neave turned around and walked toward the pier. She didn't reply.

"Check-in is at one, Neave. And we're meeting Gerald and Anne. We shouldn't be late."

Neave rolled her eyes. *Anne and Gerald can wet their lips and kiss my ass*

As she approached, the mist slowly parted like theatre curtains on opening night. The pier came into sight, tapering out ahead of her. She stepped onto the slick, vapor covered boards. Warped planks creaked under her feet as the flimsy structure groaned against the lazy swell of the water. She heard a loud plop here and there. Then something else, something bigger, slowly sloshed through the tide. She glanced around and saw only a slight disturbance in the swirling mist, as if something that was there a second ago suddenly disappeared in a wisp of smoke.

"Did you hear that?" Jim asked. Neave heard the concern in his voice. She also heard that he was still standing at the foot of the pier.

*Never been one for an adventure, Jimmy boy.*

"Probably just a fish. Relax, Jim." Her heart started racing and she enjoyed the sensation.

"I don't know, Neave. That thing doesn't look safe and you don't have any shoes on—" Suddenly Neave cried out and stumbled to the boards.

"What's wrong?"

Neave grabbed her foot. "Stepped on a damn splinter."

"Shit! Are you okay, hon-?" He stepped onto the pier and rushed to her.

She bent over and saw the dark splinter sticking out of her foot.

"I'm fine. It's not deep. Just a small piece," she said and started to pull it out.

"Wait," Jim said. He knelt down and took hold of her foot by gently placing one hand around her ankle and the other supporting her heel.

"Let me do it. You'll just yank it out and there'll be blood everywhere." He looked up at her and gave her a slanted, playful smile. Neave lowered her head, a smile of her own playing on her face.

"Fine," she said. "Hurry up though." He softly brushed the grains of sand away from the spot and before she could raise her head, Jim had removed the splinter.

"A real whopper," he said, holding the sharp piece up to her. He kissed her palm and placed the splinter in her hand.

She raised her head slowly and stared deep into Jim's eyes.

"Are we done, Jim?"

He glanced at her, looked away and then back at her, blinking as if the sand was irritating his eyes.

"I hope so, Neave. We've got to get back to the -"

"Not the hotel. I mean us. Is this it? Are we done?" She did not drop her gaze. Jim did.

"Why would you say that?" he asked.

"What happened in the car just now. That's what it sounded like."

Jim looked up at her and shook his head.

"Let's just go, Neave," he said softly and helped her up.

She smiled, but it felt bitter. "And here I was thinking you were taking me away to propose to me."

"C'mon Neave, we, we can carry on our chat in the car."

"Sure, Jim. Whatever."

He held her around the waist and was about to help her back down the pier, when Neave stopped.

"What's that?" she said and turned out of his hold.

"Ah, Neave, please. Enough already. We've got to go."

"Okay, okay. Just a minute." Neave limped up to the last board on the pier and looked down.

"That's odd," she said, matter-of-factly.

"What is?"

A small bell, about ten centimeters tall, stood on the edge of the pier, between her feet. She bent down and picked it up. It was light and comprised of two finely crafted parts. A delicate, light brown handle joined with a small gold-plated resonator engraved with a string of intricate flowing patterns. Rust had corroded the thin plating in some places and water splotches bruised the handle.

"Maybe you should put it down, Neave," Jim said but came no closer.

"I wonder what it's for?" she asked.

"Some kid's toy or something. They probably just forgot it here." He waved his hand dismissively and shot a glance back the way they had come. "Put it down and let's go. Please."

Neave stared at the bell, ignoring Jim.

"Looks pretty old to be a toy."

"Well, maybe it's an old toy," he tried and then sighed impatiently.

Neave turned the bell in her hand, studying the complicated illustrations that marked its surface.

"I think it's a story or something," she said, noticing that the twirling lines morphed into three people in a boat. Two of the people were sitting while one stood at the edge, steering the boat through an angry tide.

"I'm going to ring it," she said and looked at Jim who just shook his head.

"Whatever," he said. "Ring the bell, if you want and let's go."

Neave looked back at the bell but didn't ring it.

"Well, come on. Ring it then," Jim said, placing his hands on his hips.

Neave gave him a small smile.

"I, I can't," she said, shaking her head, still smiling that confused smile.

It felt easy enough to do but for some reason she didn't want to anymore.

"Are you scared?" Jim asked, a small smile tugging at his lips.

Neave shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know. Maybe."

"Jeeez." He walked over and took the bell from her. He made a show of holding it up and rang it repeatedly. Its ring sounded muted and flat, devoid of the cheerful, jangling vivacity that she would have expected.

"There," Jim said, handing it back to her. "Happy?"

Neave looked at the bell and then out into the mist, hearing the lethargic movement of the water and the creaking pier. At first she found the sounds peaceful. Now shivers spread down her spine.

"Okay," Jim said. "I'm out of here. Stay if you like. I'll be in the car."

Neave put the bell down and scanned the area as she stood up.

"Okay, Jim. Coming," she said and held her hand out to him. She walked past him but stopped when she felt his hand squeeze her own.

She looked up at his face. "What's wrong?"

His eyes strained and stared out into the mist. His lips parted but he didn't utter a word.

Neave followed his gaze. A tall, dark shape emerged from the mist. It made a long, swishing sound as it approached. Her free hand came up to her heart.

"What is it, Jim?"

The shadowlike shape glided closer. Neave wanted to leave but neither her or Jim moved an inch.

"Good maaawning," a cheerful voice bellowed out.

Neave breathed a sigh of relief. A tall, thin old man broke through the mist and floated toward them in a small wooden rowboat. His oars swished through the water. He pushed one forward while pulling back on the other, swinging the boat round so that it steadied, parallel to the front of the pier. He stood up and grabbed ahold of the five-rung ladder fixed to the pier.

"Charles be da name. Ferry rides be da game." He tilted the rim of his scruffy, straw hat and gave the couple a smile so big and bright that Neave found herself smiling back. Course black hair stuck out from under his hat, sprinkled with tight, grey curls.

"Hi," Neave said looking down at the old man, then nudged Jim with her elbow who in turn said- "Uh, hi."

She watched as Charles picked up the hemp rope lying in the boat. His big, leathery hands worked the rope with a series of strong but graceful tugs and loops. He dropped the fisherman's knot mooring the boat and climbed up.

Although very thin, Neave could see the taut muscles in his forearms bulge beneath skin the color of melted dark chocolate. His big coffee-brown eyes and broad smile radiated from a face webbed in wrinkles. He placed his hands on his hips and looked from Neave to Jim and back again, smiling all the while.

"Ah na you two be tha bashiest Romeo and Juliet I ever seen," he said.

Neave didn't exactly know what 'bashiest' meant but she found herself blushing anyway.

"That's the coolest accent I've ever heard," she said and cocked her head. "Jamaica?"

Charles shook his head. "West Indies, born and bred." Charles said and broke-out in cheerful laughter.

"Reddy ti go?" he asked and looked straight at Neave.

The couple glanced at each other and then looked back at Charles.

"Excuse me?" Jim asked.

A little abruptly, Neave thought.

"You rang my bell." He held the bell up and gave it a little ring.

Neave looked down at the boards where she'd left the bell. She frowned. *Never saw him pick it up.*

"No, we—" Neave stuttered

"We were just messing around," Jim said. "I'm sorry, we didn't mean to bother—"

"All dem tourists be saying de same ol'ting," Charles said.

"Aldough it would be bedda if you all come along now. It's bedda sooner radda dan later," he said.

Jim gave Neave a side glance. "Okay that's our cue," he told Neave under his breath. "Guy's a weirdo."

Charles burst into a hearty laugh. "There be nothing weird about it, sir. Only beautiful. Truly beautiful," he laughed. The word 'nothing' came out sounding 'knotting'. Neave felt Jim shuffle from foot to foot as he was probably thinking what she was- *good set of ears for an old fella.*

"Sorry, I didn't mean it like that," Jim said sheepishly.

"Sure you don't want to come for a boat ride?" Charles asked.

"Where to?" Neave replied.

Jim squeezed Neave's hand. "Don't spur him on," he mumbled.

"To the other side of the cove and back. The view be real bashy." He winked at Neave. She still didn't know what 'bashy' meant but had the idea Charles was saying the view was spectacular.

"The place is covered in mist," Jim said, not bothering with mincing words. "You can't see jack-shit," pointing at the haze.

"Jim!" Neave said, glaring at him.

Jim shrugged his shoulders.

"It's true. We go on a little tour, can't see anything but this damn fog and then we'll have to pay the guy an arm and a leg," Jim said.

Charles laughed again, waving his hands in the air in a 'I don't want any trouble' gesture. It was a deep, honest laugh that could probably warm the entire cove.

"Na, na, fren. Misty here jus comes in to say I-ney. She will be off in a few minutes, you'll see. Everything will be bashy, breddas and dawtas."

"And," he continued, "it won't cost you a single penny. Dis ride be free as da wind."

Jim regarded Charles and Neave wondered if he was going to argue but he simply shook his head.

"Thanks but no thanks, Charles," Jim said and gestured back at the slope with a cocked thumb. "We're already late. Maybe next time."

"Won't take long, I tell a *true*," Charles said. "Fifteen minutes, tops."

Neave shrugged. "Why not?"

Jim regarded her. "No, Neave. We're going to be late."

"So what, we're on holiday."

"Good point," Charles said, smile; alive and well.

"Yes, but," Jim tried.

"I'm sure Anne and Gerald can check-in on their own, Jim," Neave said, and the comment came with sharp teeth.

Jim's lips tightened and he gave three short blinks. Neave smiled back at him but she felt anger flaring up on her cheeks.

"It's a bad idea, Neave."

"Well, I'll go on my own then, Jim." Neave said. "I do everything on my own." The bitterness beneath those words bit like frost.

She turned to Charles. "Is there anything I can do, captain?" Her tone was as light as sunshine twinkling on the water.

The old man gave a salute and then turned to Jim, who stood there, nostrils flaring.

"You going to leave your lady princess, my bredda?"

Jim looked at Charles and then back at Neave. "Maybe she's going to leave me." Jim's eyes met Neave's.

"Then this is not the way to say goodbye," Charles said pulling Jim's focus back to him. He put his hand on Jim's shoulder. "And maybe you and da princess got some tings you want to chew." Neave looked up at the old man and saw him give Jim's shoulder a friendly squeeze before letting go.

She and Charles stepped up to the edge of the pier.

"Careful, girly. Those rungs are slippery like jelly."

Neave climbed down the ladder and stepped into the boat.

"Whoa," she cried as the boat rocked from side to side.

"Easy does it, there, there." Charles said.

"Excuse me, Charles," came Jim's voice. Neave looked up and saw him standing behind the old man. "I think, well, may I climb in?"

Charles stepped aside and patted Jim on the shoulder. "You're da boss."

Jim huffed at that and climbed down the ladder and into the boat. He made his way to Neave. She didn't move over.

"Great," Jim snorted, swung around and sat on the center thwart instead, his back toward Neave.

Charles hopped into the boat and plucked the rope off the post. He pushed the boat away from the pier, sat down and placed the oars in the rowlocks,

"All set?" his voice boomed. Neave gave a half hearted smile.

"Wi wan hab a bashment time, my dawtas and breddas," Charles cried as he pulled back on the oars and sent the boat swooshing out into the cove.

"Whooopaa," he shouted from the exertion and exploded with his heartiest laugh yet. The sound of his cheerful voice took the sad out of Neave's smile and made it a shimmering jewel. She looked back and watched as the mist swirled across the little stretch of beach, making it fade out of vision and disappear like a final breath.

#

"Keep your hands inside all di while, okay? At least until Misty clears." Charles said as the rowboat settled into the steady rhythm of rising and sinking over the hypnotic drift.

Neave looked at Jim sitting in front of her. He sat, shoulders stooped and back hunched over.

"Feels like I'm sailing in a dream," Jim said, his voice quiet, distant.

Neave studied him for a moment. "Maybe you are."

Jim turned to her. "Felt that way ever since I met you."

Neave's steely expression faltered, but only for a second. "What's that supposed to mean?"

He didn't answer immediately. Instead his profile disappeared from Neave's vision as he turned to Charles. The old man kept his gaze slightly angled to the sky as if he were daydreaming of faraway places and days long past. Neave looked back at Jim who angled his face toward her again.

"I'm not good with words, Neave," he said.

"I know, Jim. That's why nothing ever gets sorted out between us."

Jim nodded, frowned.

"I'm not good with flowery confessions or tearful apologies, so I'll just come out and say it." He paused and took a deep breath. "I'm an asshole," he said. "I've got no personality, I spend all day crunching out numbers and I'm unhappy all the time," he said and regarded the water. "At least I was until you came into my life."

Neave's lips parted. She wanted to say something but her mouth did nothing but close and open. Something tapped lightly against the side of the boat.

"Jim, what are you talking about?" She ran her hands through her hair gathering her thoughts. "A little while ago you yelled at me for judging you," she said.

Jim nodded. "I know."

"And apparently I was judging you because, because, why?" Neave's face scrunched up in confusion as she searched for the exact words, "because I didn't think a weekend away involved Anne and Gerald." Neave shook her head, "Every time we go away, and I think 'Great!' Some *us* time. Time to talk. Time to catch-up. Time to, I don't know," she lowered her voice, "have sex or something. I get this surprise. Anne and Gerald rock-up." Neave shook her head. "It's like you're running from me or something."

Jim let out a small laugh. It sounded more miserable than good humored.

"It's not funny, Jim. The next thing I know you're going on about how I'm always trying to change you, how I'm always right and—" Once again something bumped the side of the boat and both Jim and Neave looked up at Charles.

He shook his head at them and flashed his big white teeth. "Jus a little driftwood. It floats around all over de cove. Noting serious. Be cool."

Neave looked over the side of the boat and saw a large milky white piece of wood stripped of its bark drifting in the dark water. A mist filtered sunray struggled through and illuminated the drifting pieces of wood like ghosts.

"Jim?"

He didn't reply. She reached forward and touched his shoulder. He felt clammy and shivered under her touch.

"Are you okay?"

He turned around and Neave gasped.

"Holy crap," she said. Sweat streaked down his cheeks and forehead and his face was sickly pale. But-

*His eyes*, Neave thought. *His eyes are brighter than candle flames.*

"You don't look well. You don't look well at all. I think we should turn back," Neave said and looked at Charles. "Charles, I'm sorry but would it be okay if we go back? Jim's not feeling well." The old ferryman gave Neave a sad smile and carried on rowing the boat. She cocked her head and opened her mouth to protest but Jim spoke.

"No. I don't want to go back. Not yet," he said and shrugged. "I feel, I feel great actually."

He was different in a way that Neave could not place. He seemed well. Possibly *too* well?

Neave frowned. "But I thought you wanted to get back to the hotel."

Jim sat forward and took Neave's hands in his own.

"You're freezing," she said, feeling his cold, clammy hands encompass her own. "Jim, I really think we should--"

"What we should do is talk, Neave. I owe you an explanation. I think we need to--" he squeezed her hands and was about to say something more when Neave shut her eyes tight and pulled her hands back from his.

"What's wrong?" Jim asked.

She took a deep breath and kept her eyes shut tight. In a very quiet voice, she said, "I promised myself that I wouldn't become pathetic."

For a moment, all she heard were the oars swishing through the water and the odd piece of wood hit the boat.

"Neave, what are you talking about? You're not pathetic."

She opened her eyes.

"I was so happy when you said we were going away for a week. You know why?"

Jim shrugged. "Because you love beach holidays?"

"Because I convinced myself that you were planning on proposing."

Jim broke eye contact and looked down at his shoes. Neave barked a small laugh.

"All the fighting lately, all the late nights you worked, all the avoiding the topic of marriage, well, I simply ignored all of that and let myself believe that this is what this holiday was all about. And I couldn't help it. Despite everything, I was just so happy."

Another long pause. Jim slowly looked up at her and his face was not just pale and sweaty but miserable.

"Pathetic, right?" Neave said. "How could I, of all people, be so desperate that I totally ignored all the tell-tale signs?" She shook her head. "And I promised myself when we met that I wouldn't..." Her lips tightened.

"Wouldn't what, Neave?" Jim asked and reached for her hands again but she pulled them further from his grasp.

A tear rolled down her cheek that she quickly wiped away but another followed. "That I wouldn't fall for you."

Jim nodded quietly and instead of speaking, looked out over the water. Neave followed his gaze.

The sun finally broke through the mist, reflecting airy rays off the water. The surface sparkled in those ghostly shafts and looked like a long lost Dali painting. She watched as a pale piece of driftwood floated toward the rays. The moment the wood entered the shaft of light, it moved. But not like a drifting piece of wood. It moved like a person. The wood morphed. In a surreal instant, a person was swimming through the light. Neave blinked twice, wiped the moisture out of her eyes and refocused. Another piece of wood glided into the light and it transformed into arms splashing through the sea. Neave held her breath and her eyes grew large. In a matter of seconds she was watching pieces of wood turning into people, all swimming in the same direction- the opposite direction of the boat. It was a sea of migrating souls.

A thought flashed in her mind- *The mist! It's hiding something.*

"Charles!" she called out but froze. Charles smiled at her. There was no evil or malice in the smile. It was as it always had been. Open and honest. Calm and reassuring.

"All will be well, Miss. Don't worry. There be nothing to be afraid of. I promise. All will be well," he said in a voice so quiet it could've been a thought planted in her brain.

Despite the cryptic message, she nodded. Another piece of wood hit the boat and drifted past. When Neave turned to Jim, she found his large blue eyes fixed on her face.

"Did you see that, Jim?" Neave asked but he was staring out the sea. Other than pensive, he seemed fine.

*He can't see them. He can't-*

"Things aren't as simple as you think, Neave."

Her heart pounded in her chest like a fist pounding at a door in the dead of night. She looked away from Jim and back at the ocean.

"We're so different, Neave. We're worlds apart, you know," Jim was saying but although Neave heard the words, they weren't connecting, they weren't real.

Far off on the horizon, she watched as the mist opened and the sun rained down in a golden shower of pure sunlight turning the sea into a shimmering cerulean coat sprinkled with a million diamonds. She heard Jim speaking about how different the two of them were, how he was analytical, logical, boring and she was creative, fiery and spontaneous. She registered all of what he said as if it were an old tune that softly played in the background. She should've been upset but her eyes stared out at the illuminated horizon, alive with all those arching arms and kicking feet.

*Oh my God. This isn't real. This can't be real.*

Her mouth opened to say something but no words came out.

"Neave...Neave...Are you listening to me?"

She turned to him, frowning in confusion and disorientation. She felt like she had just woken up from a strange dream.

"Jim, can't you see them," she pointed and Jim looked out. He turned back to her.

"See what?"

"I, I-"

"Did you hear anything I said?" Jim asked, that dorky lopsided smile of his playing on his face.

Neave shook her head. "Sorry, I-" she lowered her eyes and saw Jim cupped his hands together as if he were hiding a butterfly.

Neave raised her eyebrows.

He slowly opened his hands. A big, gauche, dark brown ring crafted out of wood lay in his palm.

"I made it myself," Jim said, gushing.

Neave frowned. "Great...What is it?"

Jim threw his head back and laughed.

"Well, Neave, it's a wedding ring."

She looked up at his smiling face, her mouth agape.

"A wedding ring," she said as Jim lifted her hand. He slid the chunky trinket onto the ring finger of her left hand.

"I wanted to give it to you at the hotel. I booked a table at a restaurant overlooking the ocean, and, well for some reason I put this monster in my pocket this morning

instead of packing it away in my suitcase," Jim said and lowered his head, smiling in a way Neave had never seen before. The way little boys smile when they don't know if they've just done something good or something bad. "Just had a feeling I should bring it a long."

"Are you becoming suspicious in your old age, Mr. Dawson?"

Jim didn't laugh and looked up at Neave. "Will you marry me?"

Neave swallowed, feeling the weight of the ring.

"Well?" Jim gently pushed. Neave looked at him.

"It's hideous, Jim," she said dead seriously.

He burst into laughter.

"Not the answer I was looking for, but you're right," he said and now they both laughed. Tears streamed down Neave's face.

"I told you I made it myself. I'm an accountant, not Michaelangelo."

The couple keeled over into each other's arms as Neave held her hand up displaying the monstrous ring. The laughing dwindled but they remained in a tight embrace. She buried her face in Jim's neck. He didn't smell like cologne or shampoo. His skin had no smell. Instead, he smelt like ocean and fresh air. Her tears wet his skin. She lifted her head and spotted Charles. He smiled at her and nodded. Neave returned the smile.

"So, what's it going to be?" Jim asked.

Charles raised his eyebrows. "You should answer, miss. We're almost at the end of our ride," he said.

"But we've barely begun," Neave replied, her heart skipping a beat. She noticed the mist had disappeared and above was the bluest sky she had ever seen. She slowly straightened out as her eyes focused on something behind Charles.

"What's wrong?" Jim asked.

Neave pointed back over his shoulder.

"Look."

#

The boat slowly drifted toward a small, stretch of beach. Colors alive with vibrancy radiated out toward them. Azure blue waves lapped over a creamy white shore. Further inland, lush, bright green vegetation painted the horizon and exploded with a million brightly colored flowers. Brilliant purple Orchids, huge white Anguillas, Martiniques so orange they looked on fire and sunshine yellow St.Johns all burst out from the vegetation like a Technicolor explosion. Yet the most spectacular sight stood in the middle of it all.

"It's out of this world," Neave whispered in awe.

A colossal waterfall, water sparkling in the sun like a shimmering dream, gushed down a majestic, jagged cliff face and disappeared behind the tree line. A gigantic swirling mist rose-up high from the tropical jungle- a shifting, implacable wall of mist.

"Charles, where are we?" Neave asked.

"Is it not the most bashy place you've ever seen?" the old man asked.

Neave nodded. "It is pretty bashy, Charles. Bashier than anything I've seen."

"Is it a resort or something?" Jim asked.

Charles shook his head. "No, not a resort," he said and gave a hearty laugh, "but something similar, maybe."

Tears welled up in Neave's eyes and she took a slow, deep breath as she fought to keep herself from becoming overwhelmed. Jim moved over and put his arm around her shoulders. He kissed her temple. "It's a dream, Neave," he said and she looked at him.

Jim slowly shook his head. "Are we asleep? It feels like we're asleep." he said.

"Doesn't matter," she answered.

Neave took his face in her hands, closed her eyes and kissed him on the forehead, the tip of his nose and then his lips.

The boat jolted to a stop. Neave looked around as if just woken up from a doze.

"Okay, Tristan and Isolde, out you get," Charles said, standing up. Neave heard the joints in his knees pop.

"Mind your step," he called as Jim jumped from the boat and into the water. He turned around and helped Neave out.

She shivered as the cool water embraced her calves and splashed against her thighs.

Charles pulled the boat further up the shore, mooring it on the beach and wiped the sweat off his brow.

"You two wait here, okay," he said and jogged toward the thick tangle of trees at the end of the beach.

"Where are you going?" Neave called after him. He waved a hand and disappeared into the jungle.

Neave stepped on the beach and the warm sand comforted her feet, sending a tingle through her body. She walked to Jim, who stood staring at the mighty waterfall. Despite the size of it and the sheer amount of falling water, she heard only a distant rumble.

"What is this place?" Jim asked.

"I have no idea," Neave said. She took his hand. "Maybe we should just enjoy the moment while it lasts." Jim turned to her.

"You're right," he said. His forehead creased in an array of laugh lines. "Neave?"

"Yes."

He looked at her, the intensity still on his face.

"Will you marry me?"

Neave closed her eyes, smiled and then opened them again.

"Yes."

The crow's feet disappeared from his face and he kissed her. They stopped for a moment. Neave heard the waterfall in the background and the gentle swirl of the waves, inhaling the fresh brine of the ocean. She kissed Jim again but this time harder, with more urgency and he responded by pressing her tighter against his body.

"Congratulations," a lighthearted voice came.

"I cannot express in words how happy I am for you two." Charles stood by the couple holding a plate with thick yellow orange slices of some kind of fruit.

Neave noticed the intricate web of illustrations decorating the plate's rim. They appeared similar to the ones on the small bell.

*The bell, she thought. Feels like ages ago.*

"Help yourselves," Charles said, lifting the plate to them.

"Is it a mango?" Neave asked.

"No," Charles said. "It's better."

Jim took two slices and gave one to Neave. She bit into the piece of fruit and sweet juice flowed over her chin and through her fingers. She chewed for a moment. The

chewing slowed, her eyes closed and her head tilted up to the golden sunlight. She smiled.

"What is this, Charles?" she asked, opening her eyes. Jim's eyes were also closed, a faint smile tickled his lips.

"I call it Tha Jamaican Kiss. Good, in'it?"

"It's incredible. I've never tasted anything so tasty," Neave said. "It's something like a mango spiked with honey, I don't know." She laughed, shrugging her shoulders.

"I've never heard of a 'Jamaican Kiss,'" Jim said with a frown, studying the last piece of fruit before popping it into his mouth.

Charles, still smiling, gave him a nod. "I'm sure you haven't. Dey on'y found here, my bredda an' sista."

The couple finished the rest of the fruit and scanned the beach, taking in the strange vegetation.

"It's hard to explain," Neave said, looking at a bunch of huge trees with long, slender trunks on the beach line. An iridescent blue hue radiated off the bark but it was so subtle she doubted it was actually there. "But everything here seems to be, I don't know..." Neave's mouth twisted to the side as she searched for the right word.

"Hyper real," Jim said, picking up where Neave left off.

She nodded. "Yes, I guess that's it. Hyper real."

Neave took Jim's hand and kissed it. He smiled and gently ran his hand down her cheek. She returned the smile.

A few moments passed where no one said anything more. Neave listened to the relaxing sound of the waves rushing on the shore and the breeze whispering through the trees. She felt the warmth of the sun blessing her skin and the warmth of Jim's hand, her soon-to-be husband, holding hers. She turned to Charles. His gentle eyes seemed lost in the hypnotic sway of the sea. Something warm and beautiful filled her heart and almost moved her to tears again. Love? Joy? Peace? She didn't know and did nothing more than just enjoy the sensation. She looked back at the ocean. The reflections of light from the water played on her face and lit-up her blue eyes. She took a deep breath.

"We probably need to start heading back," she said.

Jim nodded. "I'm glad we did this. You were right. I should be more spontaneous sometimes." He turned to Charles who was standing a few feet from them.

"Charles, would you be so kind as to take us back?" Before Charles could reply Jim added, "And you're going to get one hell of a tip, my friend. No 'buts'." He laughed and clapped Charles on the shoulder.

Charles didn't respond and brushed past Neave without making eye-contact. He placed his hands on the boat and looked up at Jim.

"Let's go," he said, barely audible over the crashing waves.

Jim offered Neave his hand and the couple walked to the boat.

"Let me climb in first and I'll help you in, hon'," he said.

*Hon'*? Neave thought with a smile. *He hasn't called me hon' since we started going out.*

"No, dat won' do," Charles said. Neave looked at him still smiling. Only Charles wasn't smiling now. For the first time since they met, he wasn't smiling. It made his face look old and haggard and it robbed his eyes of the light they held only moments before.

"How should we do it then, Charles? Oh!" Jim said, smiling his dorky smile and hitting his forehead with his palm. "Right. Sorry, man. I need to help you with the boat," he said. "Neave, You get in now and I'll help Charles get the boat into the water."

"No, won' work," Charles said, stepping up to the couple.

Jim gave Charles a questioning look. The old man took a heavy breath.

"Jim, sir, you and I go back. But the lady has to stay."

The smiles on Jim and Neave's faces slowly vanished as a concerned look passed between the two of them.

"What do you mean?" Jim asked, shaking his head. "Why? Should she come back later? Or is there no place in the boat, what? I don't understand--"

"Da lady, she can't go back, sir."

Jim took a step toward the old man.

"What the are you talking about, Charles?"

"I'm sorry," Charles simply said.

"About what?" Neave asked.

Charles pointed back over the cove at the beach they had just come from. Although it was far back, it could easily be made out.

Neave looked and finally shook her head. "What are we supposed to be looking at?"

"Not at da beach. Look further up. Over da bank. You can't be seeing da road from here but you can picture where it should be."

Neave's eyes narrowed. "What, Charles? I don't know wha--"

"You can't see da road," he interrupted, "but you can see someting else."

Neave studied the horizon for a moment longer and then her face cleared of wrinkles. A little off to the left, from somewhere behind the bank, black smoke rose-up in bellowing puffs and stained the blue sky with dark veins.

"How did I not see that before?" Jim asked quietly.

Neave couldn't place exactly where it was coming from but heard the sound clearly.

"What is it? I mean I know its smoke but—" Neave said.

"It's our damn car," Jim said, sounding more panicked this time. "Someone must've driven into it, after I, after I...I don't remember parking-."

Neave looked at the smoke and then her lips parted. Concern, confusion and horror set on her face like a passing shadow. She turned to Charles who looked at her with a miserable face and slumped shoulders.

*He looks like he's just aged a hundred years.*

"Shit! We need to get back to the other side," Jim shouted. But Neave and Charles did nothing but stare at each other.

"Someone got hurt! They must've hit our car or something. Shit, we really have to go."

A tear rolled down Charles' cheek. Neave looked at Jim who was still shouting, his voice rose in panic. She lightly placed a hand on his shoulder. At first, he didn't notice and continued ranting. After a moment, he stopped, mouth agape, and stared at her. His gaze switched between Neave and the old man.

"What? What the hell are you two standing around for? We need to get out of here. Someone's probably been injured. I might be responsible--"

"I can't leave, Jim," Neave said quietly.

"I mean, I parked the car on the curb. I'm sure I did! I can't remember exactly but--"

"Stop, Jim."

"I can't remember at all actually. Where did we park?"

She cupped his face in her palms and he stopped talking. His concerned, child-like eyes, big and round, stared at her. His nostrils flared and his mouth gaping as if he was silently saying 'OH'. If the situation were different, she probably would've giggled at his comically sad expression.

"Jim?"

"I don't remember parking, Neave. I've struck a blank," he said, like someone who doesn't quite know where they are.

She swallowed. "I'm gone, Jim."

Confusion swirled in his large, blinking eyes. "Excuse me?"

"That's what this is. This ride," Neave said.

Jim looked at Charles then back to Neave.

The old ferryman put his hand on Jim's shoulder. "The two of you were in a car accident."

Jim's eyes darted between the two sad faces staring at him.

"Have, have the both of you lost your minds?" Jim said, pulling Neave's hands away from his face.

"You don't realize it yet. Paramedics are doing all they can to save you, sir." Charles continued.

Jim turned away from the both of them and threw his hands in the air in an exasperated gesture.

"You will survive, sir."

Jim shook his head. "Jesus, I don't know what the hell you two are up to?"

Charles walked over to Jim and put an arm around his shoulders.

"Get your hands off me," Jim shouted and tried to shove the old man but Charles stood firm.

"I'll show you, sir. But ease-up ono self, okay?" The old man looked at Neave, smiled and said, "Please turn around, madam."

Neave nodded and turned so that her back faced the two men. For a long moment, she heard nothing but the waves, the slight breeze rustling the trees and in the faraway distance, the ambulance sirens.

"Okay, you can turn around," Charles said.

When Neave faced them again, Jim's face looked slammed with grief. His legs gave-out and he was about to fall but Charles shot his arms around Jim's chest and held him up.

"What's wrong? What did you see, Jim?" Neave asked.

His lips trembled and he looked at Neave as if she was a complete stranger, a ghost. "Your tattoo...it's gone. And your hair...it's..."

Neave took a strand of her hair and held it out so she could see it. "It's darkening," she said, in something between terror and awe. The blonde dye receded allowing her natural dark brown to reappear.

"What's happening to me?" she whispered

Charles smiled. "What we see is just a perception, madam. But now you are coming to 'True Light'. The way you really are. And you be so beautiful," he said, plainly.

"I don't pretend to know all dem answers but I like to believe it's your purest form dat will transcend," Charles said.

Jim slumped and shook his head.

"It's too much to handle, I know," said Charles and gently pulled Jim back up. "But a time will come when you will treasure dis experience more dan anyting else." Charles looked away for a moment and added, "I know. I've been where you are now, sir."

Neave saw a deep history in his sad eyes.

"What about them?" Neave asked, pointing at the water. Now that the sun was out, the glittering cove was full of those strange swimmers.

Charles sighed and shook his head lightly. "Misty hides all of dem. Dey be de ones dat don't accept what happened. Dey return to de water and spend eternity swimming de cove, searching for--" he paused, "Someting dat doesn't exist."

"I just see driftwood," Jim said in a quiet voice.

"Yes. You haven't passed on. Dat's why you were feeling unwell earlier. Your soul was having 'a jitteree-doo,'" he gave a half-hearted laugh. "Soon, you'll only see me, dat little boat and de water. Den you'll wake up in de hospital."

"No! Wait!" he shouted, swinging out of Charles' arms. "I know what we must do," he said, his voice alive with crazy desperation. "Me!"

Charles shook his head and took a step closer but Jim jumped back. "I'll stay. Let her go!"

"No, Jim," Neave said, also stepping toward him. Charles held his hand up and Neave stopped. The old man turned to Jim.

"It doesn't work," Charles said, his tone calmer than the breeze.

"Of course it will. Just take me instead," Jim said, sounding as if he had worked this all out and it was a case of simple logic. Charles just looked at him.

"She can climb in the boat. You take her back, Charles. I'll stay here. She can, she can, you know, she can go on and do all the things she still has to. She deserves it more than me. Yes! That's, that's the plan," he said in a frantic tone.

"Just take her. I'll stay here. I'll--" Jim paused for a moment. His chest heaved and he fell to his knees. His knees plunged into the wet sand and a small wave crashed up against his thigh. Charles stepped up to him.

"All be okay, sir. You'll see."

Jim looked up at Charles. Sadness crushed his face and his eyes shut tight, squeezing-out an endless stream of tears. Mournful, guttural whines escaped his mouth and sounded out-of-place in the calmness of the lazy swish of waves.

"You don't have much time, sir. You should say your goodbyes."

On shaky legs, Jim rose to his feet.

Neave swallowed and her lips quivered uncontrollably. Jim moved close to her, the tears bright as a spring morning's dew drops in his eyes. He put his hands on her shoulders and looked as if he wanted to say something but instead he embraced her. She squeezed his trembling body close to hers. She wasn't sure how long the moment lasted before Charles gently placed his hand on her arm.

"It's time," he said.

"Just a moment longer," Jim sobbed but Charles shook his head.

He pointed his chin at Neave's feet. She looked down and saw the grains of sand through them.

"I'm disappearing," she said.

"No," Charles said. "I think you are reappearing. Somewhere else. A place even more beautiful than here."

"No!" Neave said in a small voice. "I don't want to. I want to get married and have a fam—" But Charles was already backing into the water, holding Jim close. He whispered something to Jim, but Neave couldn't hear what the old man said.

"No, don't leave me here," she screamed but Charles ignored her and focused only on Jim.

The boat drifted out and Neave stepped further into the water.

"Wait," she screamed, following the boat as it slowly began to drift out. Then she noticed the swimmers. She stopped, stepped back onto the shore and wiped the wet streaks from her cheeks. Something between resolution and peace settled on her face. The boat became smaller.

"I love you, Jim. Always."

Her legs tingled and her back broke out in pins and needles. She looked down and there was now a very slight white glow where her lower body used to be. She looked up. The boat was now a small speck in the setting sun.

*Always?*

Her vision narrowed. Sunlight seeped in from the sides, from above, from below, blowing everything out. More and more light bled into her scope of vision leaving only a single clear spot in the center, where she saw the toy boat and the shape of miniature Jim in a world of shimmering white. The spot became smaller and smaller. More light filled in. More light. More white. More...

<<<<>>>

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## Franken White

Carly Marino

### A clumsy mortician meets an undeniably-challenged Snow White



Andrew Littleton swiped peppermint oil under his nose before he slipped on a pair of blue latex gloves and secured his surgical mask. His hands quivered as he aimed the metal sprayer over the girl's abdomen. Why were his hands shaking? He'd embalmed plenty of dead bodies, not counting the ones he'd helped his father with as a child.

But this one was different.

Andrew sighed and turned the device handle. Water rained down, cleaning the blood that still stained her wrists.

Tonight, Fiona Burke wouldn't celebrate her twenty-fifth birthday.

Neither would Andrew.

When he heard she was returning to Eastmerrow, he'd spent weeks "bumping" into her sister, Blair, hoping for an invitation to Fiona's surprise party. After eight run-ins and six painful glasses of wine, listening to Blair babble about her ex, Andrew finally got one.

Andrew and Fiona hadn't spoken since graduation. Well, aside from a quick "hello" in passing, they hadn't spoken much before that, either. He'd always been too shy to ask Fiona out.

As the son of the town mortician, not many girls wanted to hang around a funeral home, waiting for their date's father to deliver a corpse so that they could borrow the hearse to dinner and a movie.

But now, Andrew was a few years shy of a medical degree, had traded his coke-bottle glasses for contacts, and grown into a pretty okay looking guy. Women always complimented his light blond hair, dark eyes, and long lashes.

Andrew rinsed the peppermint shampoo from Fiona's ebony locks, and the suds circled the drain. He lifted one of her eyelids before he sealed them shut, and then frowned at the creamy white that had stolen the vibrant electric blue.

He had admired Fiona as much as he found her beautiful. Despite her mom's psychiatric hospitalization and her father passing away a year later, Fiona still managed to sparkle upon entering a room.

But Andrew had always known better. Behind the fake smile, Fiona had a buried sadness he'd seen many times in grieving families.

Now he'd never know why.

Everyone had secrets, even someone like Fiona.

Hell. Andrew had his share of secrets too. One in particular—a big one—that would change his life forever.

After his father's lawyer had called him, Andrew should've left the small town. He no longer had to care for his father or hold up the family business.

But he couldn't bring himself to move. Not until he at least tried to find Fiona.

Now that he had the means to take care of her, he'd hoped she might've considered dating a dorky guy like him. He could've whisked her away from whatever led her to end her life.

He could've changed everything.

Andrew's shoulders drooped, and with an ache in his chest, he finished prepping the body.

After completion, he readied the formaldehyde mixture, and hummed, an annoying habit he'd picked up from his father. But, the little tune did help lighten the morbidity of his job. Usually, anyway.

This next step would be the hardest. He reached for the embalming machine's hose to replace her blood with the chemicals, but paused to gazed at her. She slept peacefully on his table like one of those princesses from the books his mother read to him before she died.

The fluorescent lights gleamed on Fiona's porcelain face, highlighting her cheekbones and lips that had a surprising amount of color. Rose red—a feature Andrew had found extremely attractive in high school.

He placed a quick kiss on her lips. "I hope the next life is better to you than the first."

The lights glowed brighter, zapped, and then flickered. Andrew snapped upright, shuddered, and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. His stomach wrenched. Why had he done that? He was losing it.

He peered at Fiona. "You'd gotten away from here. Why did you return to Eastmerrow?" It didn't make sense.

He swiveled to the metal table behind him and picked up the clipboard to further investigate the coroner's findings as well as the police report.

Doctor McGraven had ruled Fiona's death a "classic" suicide but she hadn't conducted any additional tests. In fact, from the time stamps, she'd preformed the autopsy way faster than normal.

Andrew tapped his pen on the table. Something didn't feel right.

He flipped the page.

Mrs. Marshall-Burke had found Fiona on the bathroom floor, wrists slit, eyes open.

The tile had been scrubbed with bleach prior to the 911 call. Mrs. Marshall-Burke claimed the maid, Catalina Johnston, had cleaned it in respect to the family before she reported the suicide.

She was apprehended at her home and was now in custody at the Eastmerrow police department.

Andrew scanned the sheet and read aloud, "Family stated Fiona showed symptoms of schizophrenia similar to her mother, Angela Burke."

The mental disorder was hereditary. So the possibility was—

A scream from behind jolted his heart. The clipboard clattered to the ground along with the medical tools on the table.

He whipped around. Eyes wide and pulse racing to the max, he stumbled backward.

Fiona sat up, her fingers searching her face. "My eyes. I can't see."

Andrew shuffled toward the door but tripped over a bulky extension cord. He collided with a metal pole, which rattled and clanged onto the floor. "Shit."

"Who's there?" Fiona didn't flinch when she ripped the tubes from her jugular and carotid arteries. Blood seeped from the wounds. She smeared the crimson liquid across her collarbone and then inched off of the table. "I can hear you."

Andrew scrambled to his feet. Sweat beaded on his forehead and dripped down his temples. He rubbed his eyelids, but Fiona still staggered closer.

Had he fallen asleep?

He glanced at the wall clock. Six a.m. He'd been here all night. He pinched his arm and patted his cheeks. Wake up, Andrew.

This was ridiculous. There had to be a scientific explanation. Maybe he'd missed something. Rigor had set in prior to her body's arrival, but his father always told him to check the vitals, anyway, just in case.

Once he'd ruled her dead, Andrew massaged her limbs to break up the stiffness. His stomach rolled over, hot flush rushed to his face, and he put his hands behind his back. Now he felt like he'd violated the poor girl. He removed his latex gloves and tossed them into the trash.

No. Fiona Burke was dead.

Andrew gripped the side of his head. Yet here she was, knocking into medical equipment and tripping over her feet. She'd been much more graceful in high school.

What the hell was he thinking?

"Marco," she whispered.

A chill swept up his spine and prickled the nape of his neck. Deep breaths. He'd check her again. To prove to himself this whole thing was a fluke.

"F - f - Fiona, I - I . . ." He cleared his throat. Get it together, Andrew. You're almost a doctor for Christ's sake. "I'm Andrew Littleton. How are you feel. . ." Great. Real smart. Why not ask her how her day is going too?

Fiona put her hands on her slender hips. "How am I what? Feeling? Like I got hit by a bus and woke up blind."

Andrew averted his gaze from her naked body. He removed a folded white sheet from the cabinet and wrapped the fabric around Fiona's shoulders. She huddled, hugging it closer to her chest.

"You're not blind. I," Andrew scratched his head, "your eyelids are glued shut."

"What?" Fiona's eyebrows furrowed. "Why? What happened to me? Are you some kind of psychopath? I'm not one of those stupid girls that run up the stairs when they should go out the front door. I'm a fighter."

He didn't doubt it. "I'm not a . . . psychopath."

Andrew guided her back to the table, her icy skin cooling his fingers. He examined the glue, exhaled, and touched her lashes. He'd have to soak it off.

As if she heard his thoughts, Fiona groaned. "Let me do it." She tucked the sheet around her breasts and with her index fingers and thumbs, she pried open her eyelids.

He cringed.

"See, no biggie." She opened and closed her eyes. "Why is everything so blurry?"

Andrew rushed to the sink, grabbed a cloth, and dampened it with hot water. He dabbed Fiona's eyes to wipe off the remaining residue and fallen lashes, and then cleaned the blood around her chest and neck wounds.

He set the cloth down. "Better?"

"Much."

Andrew motioned to the table, and Fiona arched her brow. "Seriously? You want me to climb back up there?" She glanced about the room. "I told you. You're not going to do any sicko things to me."

"You're joking? Sicko things? I have to close your wounds. Unless you don't mind blood leaking everywhere."

She huffed, and Andrew struggled to tie the vessels closed and suture the incisions, while steadyng his twitchy muscles.

He tossed the sealant onto the counter.

"Not the best doctor, are you?"

He scowled. "I'm a mortician."

Her mouth gaped, and she maneuvered until the table wedged between them. "A mortician?"

"Yeah, you're—"

Voices echoed from the hallway. Moisture gathered on Andrews palms. What would happen when they walked in and saw Fiona alive? Well, somewhat alive, anyway.

He directed her to the table. "Lay down."

"What? No."

"You've got to. You're dead."

"I'm what? You're mad, and I'm—"

"I'm sure Andrew won't mind if I pop in and say hello," the female voice said from the hallway.

"He doesn't usually like visitors, but if you let me . . ."

Fiona's white eyes blew wide. "Shit. That's my step-sister. Hide me."

Andrew massaged his forehead, then gestured to the table.

Fiona scooted and lay flat on the aluminum. "Cover me."

Andrew spread the sheet over her. His heart raced, and his hands wouldn't stop trembling.

"Ma'am, please."

The door burst open, and Blair Marshall sashayed in—literally, she sashayed.

Andrew's Uncle Dave mouthed the word, "Sorry," before closing the door and leaving Andrew with a walking, talking, corpse, and her intolerable sister.

Blair's honey-blond hair swished over her shoulders in big curls. She wore a heap of black liner around her green eyes, and her pink lipstick was blinding in the artificial light.

She was the stereotypical beauty: large breasts, skinny waist, curvy hips, shiny hair. .

. The list went on. But Andrew never found her attractive, not in the slightest.

She was cold and unkind.

Blair stepped around turned-over tables, machines, and medical tools. "What the hell happened in here?"

"I . . . tripped."

She brushed her French manicured hands down the seams of her white pants. "Oh. I wanted to stop by to ask you . . ." She craned her neck. "Is that her? Can I see?"

Andrew shifted between Blair and Fiona. Or whatever one would call her. Zombie? No. That was insane. Was he insane? He could be. His psych professor had said mental illness often showed signs later in life.

It had for Fiona.

"Andrew?" With a challenging raise of her brow, Blair cupped her hips.

Andrew blinked. "Uh—sorry. No. She's not finished yet. Did you . . . Um, need something?"

Blair flashed her six-years-of-braces white teeth and ambled to Andrew. "So, you're coming. Yes?"

"To where? The funeral? I was planning on it."

She toyed with the badge secured to the pocket of his light green scrubs. "No, silly. Fiona's birthday."

"You're still throwing it? Why? What about her funeral?"

Blair jerked back her hand. "Who cares about some boring funeral? I have tons of RSVPs. Guests are traveling in from everywhere to see me. Just because Fiona," she waved a hand, "chose to do this to herself doesn't mean she's going to ruin my party."

Andrew gaped. How could she talk about her sister this way? Fiona had just died.

"I think you should go, Blair."

She touched his face, and his cheek tensed. "I hope you come."

This woman would never take no for an answer. He lowered her arm. "Yeah, sure. I'll be there. But I have to finish my work first. So, if you don't mind."

She held up her hands. "Okay, doctor, I get it. I'll see you tonight. And... take a shower, a long one. This place smells awful."

He scratched the back of his head. "Uh - yeah."

Blair paused before striding into the hall. She set a piece of paper on the table by the door and tapped her finger on it. "My mother decided to cremate her instead. A funeral would've brought too much gloom to my party." She winked. "Get a tux for tonight. It's a black tie event." And then she disappeared into the hall.

Andrew exhaled and braced himself on the metal table. Too close. Seconds earlier and she would've walked in on Fiona. Fiona. He turned to the exam table and peeled back the sheet.

She lay peacefully, her arms folded across the y-shaped stitches that curved under her breasts to her navel.

Andrew rested his finger under her nose. Nothing.

He fumbled for his stethoscope on the counter. After putting the earpieces in, he placed the cold chestpiece to her breastbone. No heartbeat. He moved it around, listening for anything.

He laughed out loud. What the hell was he doing? He'd been up way too late. Fiona Burke was dead, and he was obviously crazy.

He shook his head and hummed his father's tune as he knelt and collected the arterial tubes from the white tile floor. Yep, lack of sleep. He was suffering from exhaustion. Everything made sense now. He just needed sleep.

He rose, and the table was empty.

Chills quivered his limbs. He lifted the crumpled sheet.

No. No. This wasn't happening. His breath hitched.

"Fiona?" he whispered.

"You're dating Blair? She's such a bitch."

He jumped, spun, and collided with the embalming pump. It rattled, and the wheels scraped on the floor. "How did you get over there? You're..."

She snatched the sheet and wrapped it around her chest. "Alive. I think we've established this already. I can't believe you're dating Blair."

"I was going to say dead." He crossed his arms. "And I'm not dating her. I wanted to... Never mind. Listen, I have a job to do. So you need to, I don't know, get dead again so I can do it." Andrew pinched the bridge of his nose. "How am I going to explain this to your family?"

She laughed and hopped onto the table. "My family doesn't give two shits about me. They're probably throwing that party to celebrate my death."

Andrew blew out a quick breath. "This is so messed up. How are you not freaking out?"

Fiona shrugged. "Not sure. Maybe it's because I don't have a brain or a heart, or well, anything, really."

Andrew breathed into his hands. "They put the organs back in after the autopsy, but the possibility of them functioning is... Why am I even contemplating this? It's impossible. This can't be happening."

"Get it together." She tapped her index finger on her lips. "I have an idea, but I'm going to need something from you."

"Oh, yeah. What could you possibly need?"

"Well, clothes for starters."

Andrew gawked. "Clothes? You aren't leaving here? If anyone sees you... No. Out of the question. Lay down."

She slid off the table and moved closer to him. Close enough, he smelled the peppermint lotion he used to mask the "dead body" smell.

"What will people think if I waltz out of here all Walking Dead? Do you really want the start of the apocalypse on your conscience? You're going to help me find my murderer and straighten all of this out."

"You're blackmailing me? What about the cremation, huh? Your family expects your ashes."

She smirked. "Burn me. I dare you."

"I'm not going to burn you, Fiona." Andrew dropped his head back. "But you should know this is pointless. You weren't murdered. You committed suicide."

Fiona examined her wrists. "You should know better than anyone what a post-mortem wound looks like, and these, my dear Andrew, are post-mortem."

He couldn't deny the signs. There skin surrounding the edges of the wounds wasn't stained, and the clotting... No. The coroner hadn't mentioned anything about post-mortem wounds in her report. Doctor McGraven usually took extra care in her findings. Andrew had never found a discrepancy before.

This was mad. If he helped Fiona, he'd be giving in to his delusions.

He paced. Paused. Paced. "I try not to question the coroner. It's not my job."

Fiona raised her eyebrows. "Well, it should be. Maybe that's why I'm here. To, I don't know, straighten your moral compass."

He massaged his temples, then observed the gashes on her wrists. "What's your dominant hand?"

"What? I'm a lefty. Why?"

"You're not ambidextrous?"

"No."

Andrew's gaze drifted upward, and he blew out a long breath. The horizontal slit on her left wrist was as precise as the one on her right. In theory, her left cut should be deeper or uneven. Both of hers went straight across, evenly from one wrist to the next as if someone had held both hands side-by-side and dragged a blade across.

Fiona was right. She'd been murdered.

When Fiona stepped out of the master bathroom in Andrew's apartment, he covered his smile with his hand. He couldn't help himself. In his royal blue college hoody, running pants, and baseball cap, she looked adorable.

Her red lips stretched into a crooked smile. "What are you laughing at?"

Andrew shrugged. "Do you want to go to the women's clothing boutique in town? I can... buy you some clothes in your size."

She shook her head. "I can't waltz in there, not in this small-ass town. Sneaking me out of the morgue in a body bag was hard enough. Thankfully, I don't have to breathe."

He coughed. "Yeah, thankfully. So what now?"

"For starters, you can get me a pair of sunglasses." She examined her eyes in his closet mirror. "These eyes are a dead giveaway. Pun intended."

He stood from the bed, searched his dresser for a pair of aviators, and handed them to her.

She slid the glasses onto the bridge of her nose and exhaled. "Much better."

Andrew strolled into his small living room. He could afford much better, especially now, but he preferred simplicity. Neutral colors, big windows with a view of the mountains, and an updated kitchen to prepare gourmet meals.

He opened the stainless steel refrigerator. Stacks of leftovers in clear containers crowded the shelves. Sadly, most of the food he chefed-up went to waste—the downfall of cooking for one.

He closed the door and glanced at Fiona, still lingering outside the bedroom. "You hungry?"

"I don't think so." She arched an eyebrow. "Can I even eat?"

Andrew drummed his fingers on the gray speckled granite countertop. "Probably not. But, you also shouldn't be standing in my living room. So it's a possibility."

Fiona laughed. The sound tickled in Andrew's ears. "True."

Andrew shifted to the cupboard, grabbed a granola bar, and met Fiona in the living room. Two of his cats weaved through her legs, nuzzling her ankles. She patted another stretched out on the back of the couch, and then lifted a frame from an end table.

His mouth curved down. The photo was of his father and him before his father's diagnosis. Andrew had gotten into med school, and they went out to celebrate.

Fiona's perfect front teeth nibbled on her lower lip, then her mouth gaped. "Wait a minute. Andrew Littleton. Holy shit. It's been what? Ten years?"

He cleared his throat. "Eight."

"Huh. So you took over the family business?"

His neck heated. "I wanted to be a Forensic Medical Examiner, but midway through med school, my father got sick. Cancer." He swallowed the lump in his throat. "I dropped out and helped him at work. He passed away a few months ago."

Fiona lowered her sunglasses. "I'm so sorry."

"Thanks." Andrew raked his fingers through his blond hair. "So... what's the last thing you remember, before," his gaze flicked to her wrists and she rolled her hands over them, "before that happened."

She hummed. "The cab dropped me off at my house around eight-thirty p.m. Florists were loading huge bouquets of white flowers into a van parked in front."

"Flowers? For what?"

"Hilda stages all of her parties the day prior. Heaven forbid the guests didn't like the damn flowers." Fiona scowled. "Anyway, she was admiring her reflection in the hallway mirror, talking to herself, like always. So I snuck past and nearly knocked over her maid as she rushed a bottle of white wine into the sitting room.

"Then I dropped my bag in my bedroom, came back downstairs, and," her gaze drifted to the right, "I found a glass of cider in the kitchen with a sticky note. It said: Welcome home, Fiona." A soft smile rose on her face. "My mom's favorite time of year was fall. She loved apple cider and always had a fresh batch in the fridge. She wasn't the greatest mom, but boy did she make a good cider. I thought maybe Hilda was actually glad I came home." She scoffed. "Joke's on me, huh?"

"No, Fiona, the joke's on them. Because here you are."

She fiddled with the ends of her hair. "I guess."

Andrew spun the decorative glass bowl that his grandmother had given him on the kitchen table. "Do you think she poisoned the cider?"

Fiona pinched her lower lip. "It's possible. Except, you said the coroner didn't find traces of anything."

"You'd have been sick, too."

She gasped. "I do remember feeling dizzy. I crawled to my bathroom and yelled for help, but all I heard was Hilda cackling with her friend downstairs. What a bitch. I'm dying in my room, and she's drinking wine, laughing."

Andrew's gut squeezed. "I'm sorry, Fee."

Her head tilted slightly, and her lips curved into a soft smile. "My dad used to call me Fee."

Heat circled Andrew's cheeks and nipped at his ears. He averted his gaze as he made sense of the dead girl drowning in his clothing. "I have to deliver your ashes tomorrow. Any thoughts?"

"Call Blair."

"Why?"

"I bet they don't even want them."

"Your mom might."

"Step-mom, and Hilda Marshall-Burke doesn't care if I'm dead. She's at the top of my suspect list."

He sighed, picked up his cell phone, and then swiped the screen to find Blair's number.

She answered on the first ring. "Andrew! I'm so happy you called. I forgot to tell you this morning that I'm free for lunch after your appointment."

Shit. He forgot about his doctor's appointment. He swallowed. "Uh. That's not why I'm calling."

"Oh. Then what is it?" she snapped.

"I was curious what you wanted me to do with Fiona's ashes. I can drop them by your house if you—"

"Ewe. No. Toss them. We have plenty of photos to remember her. We don't need a jar of dirt."

Andrew's heart sank. He sighed heavily. "All right."

Someone yelled in the background.

"Coming mother," Blair called back. "I gotta go. See you soon, love."

Andrew's shoulders tensed, and he hung up the phone. He hated he had to tell Fiona her family didn't want her ashes. Well, someone else's ashes.

The morgue had a closet full of unclaimed urns. Some families just didn't want them. But he'd never had to break the news to the deceased.

"Stop looking so glum," Fiona said. "I knew they wouldn't want them. The Marshalls hated me. They wanted my father's family money, and he left it to them. I couldn't afford college, so I moved to New York City and waited tables."

A chorus of meows came from the bedroom. Three more of Andrews cats trotted into the kitchen. He opened the pantry, grabbed the dry food from the shelf, and shook the box into the small dishes lined against the wall.

Fiona chortled. "How many cats do you own?"

Warmth tingled on Andrew's ears. He massaged his neck. "Seven."

"Seven? I can't lie, Andrew. That's a little creepy."

He chuckled. "Yeah, I guess it is. I was never a cat person, but when people die, their cats go to a shelter. These kittens were only a few weeks old. I didn't want to separate them." He pointed at each one. "Blick, Flick, Glick, Plick, Snick, Whick, and Quee."

Fiona brushed her hair from her face. "Those are the strangest names I've ever heard."

He lifted a shoulder. "Snow White was my favorite fairytale as a kid."

"Oh, so they're supposed to be the dwarfs? I'm pretty sure there was a Dopey and Bashful."

He smiled. "The names are from the Broadway play."

"You're very strange, Andrew Littleton."

"I can't argue that." He circled the counter and rested his back on the edge of the breakfast bar. "Why'd you come back to Eastmerrow?"

She crossed her arms. "Blair called and said her mother forged my father's will. I came back to get what's mine. The house, my father's art gallery, and my mother's freedom. I know Hilda had her locked up. Then she murdered my father and me. And

now that I'm dead, she has power of attorney over my mother, and she'll probably kill her too."

"What about Blair? Isn't it suspicious you died shortly after she called? Why didn't you talk to her earlier?"

"When I was naked and covered in autopsy battle wounds? I'm sure she would've given me a big hug."

Andrew nodded. "Good point."

"Blair didn't kill me. She's terrible but not the devil. Hilda on the other hand. . ."

Andrew rubbed his throat. Hilda was pure evil.

Andrew trembled the entire walk to his optometrist and not from the chill in the autumn air, but from the dead body strolling, head down, next to him. Fiona had insisted on tagging along, which seemed silly considering she wouldn't even go to the clothing store. Why was the eye doctor any different? Especially since her step-sister worked there.

He angled to look at Fiona. She'd tucked her hair inside one of Andrew's winter hats and wrapped a belt around his running pants to hide the boxers with cartoons of Santa-in-a-hot-tub. Not that the embarrassing underwear would show, anyway. She swam in his puffy jacket.

With each of her steps, she dropped her shoulder in a jerky, unnatural, motion and pulled up her pants. . . By the crotch.

He spat out a chuckle. "Stop walking like that."

"I'm imitating a dude."

"No. You're imitating a zombie, and people are staring."

Fiona turned her head slightly as Mrs. Glover—the sixty-five-year-old woman known for her elaborate stories at the hair salon—scooped up her Maltipoo. She gave them a pointed look. "Andrew, who is this hooligan? Did he get shot in the leg?"

Andrew scratched his temple. "Mrs. Glover, this is my cousin, Frankie."

"What up, Mrs. G. I ain't gonna cause no trouble," Fiona said in a deep voice, and then did an awkward hand gesture.

"We don't need trouble in our town, Andrew." Mrs. Glover cringed and scurried past. Andrew whispered to Fiona, "Mrs. G?"

"Well, she bought it." She quickened her pace, dropping the zombie strut.

He caught up to her. "Thankfully."

She paused and peered into a large window. "Yeah."

Andrew followed her gaze to the gallery. In middle school and high school, he'd dropped in many times to get a glimpse of the beautiful dark-haired girl, working behind the counter.

Paintings still decorated the white walls. High-top tables dotted the once vast light wood floors, and a wine bar lined the far corner. No one appreciated the art. They simply flicked a hand to the wait staff for another drink.

"My dad loved abstract art, but he had a knack for portraits. He could evoke emotions by creating subtle shadows." Fiona placed her hand on the glass. "Before my dad died, this place buzzed with buyers from all over."

Andrew's chest clenched. "Your dad was really talented."

She inhaled a deep breath and continued down the cobblestone walkway. "He was."

Her fingers brushed his and warmth soared up his arm. His heart thrummed. But despite the flutters in his chest, Andrew inched away.

Fiona was dead. Having feelings for someone with no pulse was unnatural. His insides roiled, and he swallowed. Wasn't it?

No. Corpses didn't talk.

He stopped at the entrance to his optometrist. "Where do you want me to meet you? This shouldn't take too long."

Fiona adjusted her winter hat. "You're not going to your appointment. You need to get Blair outside to talk."

"Now, you want to talk to her?"

"I'm not going to. You are."

"But what about my appointment? It takes a month to get one and—"

She groaned. "Fine. Do your appointment and then get Blair to meet you out back, in the alley."

His jaw dropped. "The alley? No way. Blair will think I'm crazy."

"Good point. You are talking to a dead girl." Fiona gave him a slight shove. "Just go."

Doctor Sanderson waved at Andrew, and then disappeared into another patient room. Andrew ambled toward the front desk. Blair wasn't there when he arrived. Maybe she'd taken her lunch break early. Man, would he be in luck.

"Rachel, can you hand me Mr. Harris's chart?" Blair barked from around the corner.  
"Um, now."

Andrew's breath hitched. Dammit. All right, if he kept his cool no one would notice the quiver of his hand or the dark spots that dampened the back of his shirt. He clenched and unclenched his fists, then shook them.

No big deal. He would waltz up to Blair and ask her to accompany him outside. Easier said. The closer he staggered to the reception desk the more the striped wallpaper rippled in waves. He wiped the sweat from his brow and stumbled into a table nearly spilling the decorations. He steadied the wood-carved anchor on top and crept to the reception desk.

"Name," Blair mumbled without glancing up.

Andrew cleared his throat. "A-Andrew Littleton."

"Andrew! Hi." She fluffed her hair. Her eyelids hovered halfway over her eyes. "How can I help you?"

Andrew rubbed his hands together. "Uh, I need. . ."

She licked her teeth. "Anything, darling."

"Um." He pointed at the pile of small, rectangular boxes next to her mouse pad. "Are those the trial ones?"

"What?" She glanced down. "Oh, yes."

"May I have a few?"

"For what?"

"I'm thinking about getting colored ones."

She nibbled her bottom lip, leaned forward, and squeezed her breasts together with her arms. "Well, unfortunately, all we have right now is brown. And seeing as you have—"

"I'll take them! All of them."

"All of them?"

Andrew coughed into his fist. "Yes. Please."

Her fingers trailed her collarbone. "We still on for Fiona's party?"

Andrew glared. "It's not Fiona's party, seeing as she's dead."

Blair bit her fingertip. "Good. Do you want to go to lunch? I can get out of here in five."

Blair was really pushing hard today.

Andrew blew out a breath. Desperate times.

He arched over, attempting a seductive smirk. Girls liked cocky guys. Right? "I can't do lunch today, but can you meet me out back? To talk."

Her eyes lit up as she stood and pulled down on her low cut shirt. "Oh, yes. Of course."

"Great. And Blair?"

"Hmm?"

"You can put those boxes in a bag. Please."

She scurried back to her desk, opened a paper bag, and brushed the boxes inside. Andrew smiled. He strolled into the hallway, and Blair Marshall emerged from around the corner.

She handed him the bag, and slid her arm in his. "This way."

They walked out the side door and into the alley. After the metal latch clicked behind them, Blair dove at him.

He stumbled backward. "What are you doing?"

She snuggled uncomfortably close. "I'm cold." She peeked up. "What did you want to ask me?"

His heart pounded. He tried to wriggle away, but her fingernails clutched his lower back. He winced. She rubbed her body against his and Andrew's stomach rocked. Fiona hid somewhere nearby. She didn't need to see this. Shoot. He didn't need to see this.

"Uh. It's about," Andrew gulped, "about..."

Blair's hands glided to the front of his jeans. Her fingers toyed with the button. What was she doing? His skin crawled.

She jerked backward. "Ouch!"

Her butt hit the pavement, and Fiona loomed over her.

Andrew pressed against the brick wall. Spots danced in front of him. His pulse thrashed in his ears, and his throat ached from his excessive swallowing.

Fiona whipped out the scalpel his father had given him when he got into med school. Where had she found it? Now his precious memory was pointed at Blair's neck.

Blair squealed.

Fiona nicked her skin. "Listen here, bitch," she said in her terrible man-voice. "What do you know about Daniel Burke's will?"

"Let me go," Blair whimpered.

Fiona unsnarled her fist from Blair's blonde strands. "Fiona told me about your conversation."

Blair stood and brushed the alley-grime from her knees. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Fiona jabbed the blade toward Blair's heart. "I have nothing to lose. Don't test me."

Blair scoffed. "You won't get a dime of our family's money. I only called Fiona to get her here for Andrew, since he was searching for her."

Andrew's neck itched and heated. He scratched the side of his head and shrugged. Fiona angled her chin at him, and he envisioned a quizzical look behind her aviator sunglasses.

Fiona redirected to Blair. "Why would you care if Andrews was looking for me?"

"Can you put down the knife? Please."

Fiona dropped her arm.

Blair patted her chest and blew out a breath. "My mother is insufferable. Did you know my father had a heart attack like Fiona's dad? I know Hilda murdered him, too."

"Not surprised. Albert was an asshole," Fiona mumbled.

"What?"

Andrew cleared his throat. "What did you think would happen once Fiona came back here?"

"I read your father's will."

"Oh." He adjusted his shirt collar. "I forgot you worked part-time at my father's, lawyer's firm."

Blair shivered, and Andrew slinked out of his coat, but Fiona shook her head. He sighed and yanked on his jacket.

Blair hugged her arms around her chest. "The firm was transferring their files to digital when I found your father's will; I saw an opportunity to finally be free of my mother. It was obvious you had a thing for Fiona since you hounded us for her address after your father died."

"So I called her, knowing she'd reject you, and you'd need someone to pick up the pieces. That, someone, was going to be me." Her shoulders curled forward. "I wanted to

leave Eastmerrow. Ever since Angela moved in a few weeks ago, things have gotten worse.”

“Wait. A few weeks ago? But I - Fiona just got home a few days ago. Her mother was released and didn’t call her?” Fiona asked in her real voice.

Blair squinted. “What did you say your name was?”

Andrew pivoted between them. “Frankie. My cousin. I’ll see you at the party.”

“Whatever.” Blair shuffled toward the door and disappeared inside.

Andrew exhaled, his heart racing and his head spinning. “That was close.”

No answer.

“Fee?” He glanced at the alley’s opening as Fiona plodded around the corner.

Fiona hadn’t spoken the entire walk to Andrew’s apartment. So instead of following her inside, he’d handed her his keys to give her time to process the truth: she’d returned to Eastmerrow for nothing, and now she was dead.

Andrew’s chest tightened, and he moseyed outside Sneewittchen’s, the quaint woman’s clothing boutique in town. Fake red roses decorated baskets in front of the black-shuttered windows. Birds chirped from a constant audio track that played from speakers above the entrance.

He beamed at the shopping bags in his hands, proud of Dorothea, the shopkeeper’s, choices. He couldn’t wait to show Fiona what he’d gotten her. He hoped the surprise would cheer her up, make her smile, and put light back into her creepy white eyes.

The wooden shop door swung open and Dorothea blew out a breath. “Andrew, thank goodness you haven’t left yet.”

He turned to the short German woman, who then passed him a black garment bag. “You almost forgot the most important purchase. Lovely choice. This dress was meant for a woman with skin white as snow, lips red as blood, and hair black as ebony. Your Fiona, yes?”

He shuddered as a cold draft lifted the hairs on his arms. “How’d you . . .”

Dorothea winked. “Stories such as this were my Wilhelm’s passion. May he rest in peace.”

He adjusted his weight from one side to the other. “So you know how this happened?”

“The same as every story, I assume. But that’s something you’ll need to discover on your own.”

He scuffed his shoe on the pavement. “Thanks.”

“Oh, one more thing.” She retrieved a palm-sized, emerald ring box and dropped it into one of his bags. “You’ll need this.”

“Dorothea!” The front door cracked against the yellow shingles, and Doctor McGraven burst through, her floor-length gown hitched up to her knees. “I need another size. I don’t have much time to. . . Andrew?”

Andrew cocked his head and squinted at the middle-aged woman. Oversized glasses held back her muddy-brown hair, and she'd fake-tanned to a radioactive shade of orange. "Doctor McGraven? What are you doing here?"

She straightened, dropped the hem of her dress, and smoothed the beaded bodice. "Fiona's party is tonight." She glared at poor Dorothea. "Which is why I need a smaller size, now."

"I hope you get your happily ever after, Andrew." Dorothea patted her silver hair and ambled on leaden feet back into the store.

Doctor McGraven nodded at Andrew. "Good day."

"You're actually going to this party?"

"Are you dense? Of course, I'm going. I'm Hilda's sister."

"You're Fiona's aunt? I'm so sorry for your loss. Doing the autopsy must've been hard. I'm surprised they allowed it."

"Yes, well, Fiona was a troubled girl, and her death was an open-and-shut case."

He set half his bags onto the cobblestone walkway. "Before I head home, I have a question about the report."

Doctor McGraven lowered her glasses to the bridge of her nose. She pursed her thin lips. "Do you, now?"

"Why didn't you test Fiona for other causes of death? Her wounds seemed post-mortem."

"Like I said, open-and-shut case. And what would you know about post-mortem wounds? You're a med school dropout." She threw her arms up and opened the shop door. "Dorothea, just put the dress on my sister's account. I'll have her maid alter it." She narrowed her eyes at Andrew. "Hilda owes me."

Andrew entered his apartment to find Fiona hunched over his desk in the living room, staring intently at his laptop.

He dropped the bags in his room and then placed the small ring box on the edge of the desk. He waited, but Fiona didn't acknowledge him or his gift. She didn't even peek from the screen.

A hollowness built in his chest. Was she mad at him?

He settled onto the couch and did everything he could to get comfortable, but his leg wouldn't stop jiggling. He held his thigh to refrain from pacing the room.

Act casual.

Andrew lifted a medical journal from the coffee table. He leafed through the pages but kept his eyes on Fiona.

What could she possibly be feeling?

He vowed, right then, to get her out of that town and give her a better second life.

Fiona spun in the desk chair. "You're not going to believe this, but Hilda went to high school with my mother. It says they were on the cheer squad together."

The tension in Andrew's shoulders released. She wasn't mad. "Small world."

She tapped her foot. "Why would my mother move in with Hilda? Better yet, why would Hilda check my mom out of the mental hospital?"

"I'm not sure."

"She had to know Hilda killed my dad. Blair's too. I can't believe I didn't put it together sooner. Both of Hilda's husbands died of a heart attack. She should be in prison."

Andrew stood from the leather sofa and ambled to Fiona. His throat burned from the sadness on her face. He knelt next to her. "She should, but unfortunately, money can buy freedom."

"No crap." Her front teeth bit into her crimson lips. "Andrew, why were you searching for me? What was in your father's will that made you want to find me of all people? We rarely spoke."

He rose and strolled to the wall of windows. Outside, the snow-peaked mountains touched the puffy clouds, and orange, yellow, and cardinal leaves shaded the forest below. He loved this view.

Fiona's father had painted a scene like this, almost as if he'd stood in this exact spot. Andrew had walked past the gallery a hundred times, contemplating on buying it.

Peppermint shampoo awakened his senses. Warmth ignited in his chest as Fiona's arms wrapped around his waist. He slacked. His heart throbbed, and his breathing slowed.

She hugged him. "You can tell me."

He turned to her and cradled her face with his hand. His thumb circled the rosy apple of her cheek. He wanted to kiss her. His entire body wanted to kiss her, to touch her. But how could he?

Scientifically, Fiona was dead. But did her standing before him change things?

He drew her closer, inhaling her dark hair. She didn't smell dead.

"Andrew?"

He shimmied out of her embrace. "I'm not a stalker if that's what you're asking me. I just always felt connected to you somehow." He plopped down onto the couch. "God, maybe I am a stalker."

"You're not." Fiona stepped around the glass coffee table and slid in next to him. "Truthfully, I thought about you after I left Eastmerrow. I guess, I thought maybe you understood me."

Andrew's hand cradled his forehead. "Why's that?"

"Hilda did everything she could to make my life hell in and out of our home. But I refused to let her get to me. At least, on the outside, anyway."

I remember bumping into you in the hall just before graduation. The way you looked at me. You saw me. Really, saw me. Didn't you?"

Andrew met her eyes and nodded. He remembered that moment too. She wore a canary-yellow t-shirt that brought out her eyes. They didn't speak, but stood there a moment. He'd felt it too—the connection and the understanding.

Fiona pursed her lips. "I think you're right about us. We have some kind of bond." She winked. "You did wake me from the dead. That's got to mean something. Right?"

He chuckled. "I always did like zombie movies."

"Ick. Don't call me that. The PC term is undeniably challenged."

He laughed. "That makes no sense, but it's cute as hell."

Her hand drifted down his arm until she laced her fingers in his. He adjusted until he faced her.

Fiona Burke might be dead by definition, but Andrew couldn't deny the tingles he got from her nearness or the excitement in his chest when she smiled. Her touch warmed his body in ways he couldn't explain.

His fingers stroked her dark hair. He arched over, brushed his mouth across hers, but instead of taking her in his arms and enjoying the taste of her lips; he kissed her cheek. "Even in death, you are the most beautiful woman I've ever seen."

Her fair skin brightened to a sweet pink. She covered her mouth and snickered. "Well except for these freakish white eyes."

Andrew's heart leaped, flip-flopped, and danced in his chest. A huge grin stretched on his face. "That reminds me." He hopped to his feet, skipped to his computer desk, and retrieved the untouched, velvet ring box.

He fumbled, almost dropping it onto the floor. His muscles twitched with nervousness. Yet, an excited giddiness also put a pep in his step. Part of him wanted to laugh; the other part wanted to run out the door.

Goosebumps prickled his arms, and his hands shook. He knelt on one knee in front of Fiona.

She scooted backward, her hand flush to her chest. "Uh . . . what are you doing?"

He beamed.

Andrew carved paths in the hallway of his apartment, pausing once or twice to straighten the black bow tie choking him. His fingers fidgeted with the cufflinks on his tailored shirt, and his dress shoes tapped on the floor.

Tonight would go as planned. Fiona would get her justice, or at the very least, she'd escape this town.

After weeks of worrying, he'd finally called his family, and they'd made all the arrangements. His nerves still bounced around from the conversation. It could've gone very badly, but instead, they had welcomed him. They'd do the same for Fiona.

What was taking her so long?

She hated the dress he bought her. Maybe he'd gotten a size too large. He froze. Or too small. Both would insult her. He should check to be sure.

He crept to the bedroom door. It swung open, and Fiona glided outside. He sucked in a breath. She was stunning. The classy, floor length, navy-blue gown accentuated every curve of her body. Pearls rested on her collarbone and matched the teardrop earrings. She had gathered her hair into an up-do of black curls that exposed her sensual neckline.

Her eyes connected with his, and he nodded. "The contacts look good."

"I could get used to brown eyes." She spun. "Can you zip me?"

Andrew blew out the air that burned in his lungs. He stepped behind her and heat flooded his lower body. Her lacy bra and underwear peeked from the opening.

He blushed, turned his head, and closed the zipper. His fingers lingered on the nape of her neck, and she sighed.

"You look lovely," he whispered.

She smiled. "Thank you. You don't look so bad yourself, Mr. Littleton. Let's get this show on the road."

Andrew held her lower back, and they made their way to the lobby. When they exited the apartment building, Fiona huddled in the pea coat he'd bought for her. He cradled her shoulders, and she nestled closer to him.

A black town car pulled up to the curb. Andrew guided Fiona to the door, opened it for her, and she slid inside. He circled the trunk and climbed into the other side. The driver glanced in the rearview but stayed silent as he drove toward Fiona's childhood home.

She alternated smoothing her dress with nibbling on her thumbnail.

Andrew lowered her hand and clasped it in his. "Nervous? What happened to that spunky girl from earlier?"

Her lips rolled together. "Are you sure we should do this? Maybe we didn't think this through. I'm dead. I'm not sure I want to be on the cover of The National Enquirer."

His mouth slid to the side. He leaned toward the front seat. "Did you get what I asked?"

The driver retrieved a box from the passenger seat and passed it to Andrew. He opened the emerald green and gold box and peeled back the tissue paper. Inside were two masks. One made of silver and navy satin with a black lace overlay, the other a simple black. Andrew handed the navy mask to Fiona. "It's a masquerade ball. Since your eyes are brown now . . ."

"No one will know me. Or at least I hope they don't." She traced the almond-shaped holes in the mask. "What will we do once we find the poison? We can't call the police."

"We won't have to. The police chief will be there. Once he sees you, it'll all be over."

"But what if . . ."

Andrew squeezed her hand as the town car turned into the gated driveway. "Everything will change after tonight. I promise." He nudged her gently. "As long as you don't try to 'cut' anyone."

"Yeah, sorry. I probably shouldn't have stolen your scalpel."

"Nah, it's fine. I enjoyed the rush."

"Rush?" She laughed. "You looked horrified."

"Well, I was at first," he said. "But afterward, I felt alive."

"Maybe because you hang around so many dead people."

His lips curled upward. "You make me sound so charming."

"You're a regular ole prince charming, Littleton."

His shoulders tensed, and he straightened his bow tie, which seemed to squeeze on his pulsating jugular. "Something like that," he replied, his voice cracking like a teenage boy.

Fiona chortled softly, slipped on her mask, and peered out the window. Andrew followed her gaze.

Lights on the ground illuminated manicured bushes and trees in the vast lawn. A valet waited at the base of the stone steps on the other side of a circular fountain. The driver stopped at the curb, and an attendant opened Fiona's door.

Andrew hurried to meet her as she exited the vehicle. He glanced into the car. "Stay close. We won't be long."

The driver nodded, and Andrew escorted Fiona through the crowd. The town's sheriff, his brother, and the elementary school principal chatted in front of them about Fiona's involvement in local charities. On either side of them, Fiona and Andrew's high school classmates laughed as if Fiona hadn't just died yesterday.

She flinched.

Andrew gritted his teeth. He couldn't wait to leave this town. He drew her in tighter as two men directed them through the double doors.

They handed their jackets to the coat checks and sauntered deeper into the entryway. A quartet of violinists played a classical melody, and as Fiona had predicted, huge bouquets of white flowers decorated the tables.

Guests flooded every nook and cranny. They ambled on the curved staircase, tittering about trivial things. Andrew searched the horde for Hilda, but he made contact with Blair instead. Her eyes narrowed behind her purple mask at the gorgeous girl by his side.

Fiona went rigid as her step-sister meandered down the stairs.

Blair smiled at guests as they passed, sipping champagne, and plucking hors d'oeuvres from circular trays.

She stopped in front of Andrew and Fiona. Her pink lips twisted into a snarl. "Who's this?"

She cocked an eyebrow at Fiona, who stiffened next to him. He rubbed her lower back, more to keep her from assaulting anyone than to protect her.

Andrew squared his shoulders. "This is my date. Now if you'll excuse me, we have some mingling to do."

She glared but kept her mouth shut. Word-wise, anyway. Her gaped lips spoke to her disbelief, and Andrew smiled, satisfied with himself.

He led Fiona through the crowd to the edge of the party. As usual, no one noticed the mortician's son. For once, he was relieved.

"Did you see the look on her face?" Fiona whispered.

Andrew waved in Blair's direction. "Seems she's frozen like that."

Blair sneered and stormed away.

The music stopped, and heads turned. Guests hurried out of the way as Hilda and Fiona's mother, Angela, emerged from an upstairs room.

They glided to the balcony that overlooked the large entryway. Both women wore similar sleek gowns. Fiona's mother radiated in a champagne-colored silk that suited her auburn hair and dark eyes.

Hilda wore all black.

Fiona lunged forward, but Andrew held tight to her wrist. He couldn't have her exploding. Not yet.

Her "mothers" peered over the wooden railing. Hordes of townsfolk clustered together to listen to whatever speech they had planned.

Andrew couldn't wait to hear, either. What could they possibly have to say? He doubted they had a sentimental eulogy for Fiona.

Hilda tapped a fork on her champagne flute. "First, I would like to thank Cathy's Flowers for the gorgeous oleanders and her husband's catering company for the delicious refreshments."

The crowd clapped.

Hilda raised her glass. "Friends and family, we are not here tonight to mourn the death of young Fiona."

Murmurs reverberated in the room. Fiona jerked from Andrew's grasp but didn't move.

Hilda held up her hand. "We are here to celebrate the union of Angela and myself. For years, we've awaited this day. And now we have the opportunity to share our love with everyone. So drink. Laugh. And join us in our day of happiness."

An influx of gasps mixed with whispers resonated around Andrew and Fiona. He stared, flabbergasted. Had Hilda planned this since high school? Why would she lock up Angela? To trick Fiona's father?

Disgusting.

Maybe Angela had second thoughts, so Hilda committed her. Either way, they killed Hilda's husbands to build wealth for their union. Now that Fiona was dead, they had the motherlode. Her trust—the one he just realized she'd have received on her twenty-fifth birthday.

Fiona growled. Uh-oh.

She yanked off her mask and charged toward the balcony. "You bitch!"

Screams, loud gasps, and cries echoed. People scattered to the door, the walls, and the kitchen.

A shriek came from above. Fiona's mother leaned over the banister. "You're alive!" Fiona touched her heart. "You tried to kill me?"

The sheriff climbed the stairs. He shook his head at Hilda and Angela. "Is this true?"

Hilda's eyes turned to slits. "Well, Angela? What do you have to say for yourself? She's obviously crazy, sheriff. Arrest her."

Angela's lips parted. She stumbled backward. "No. You... You have no evidence. Fiona slit her wrists. Ask the coroner."

"She was poisoned." Andrew pushed through the huddled mass of gossiping ladies and their grumbling husbands to stand next to Fiona.

"Prove it," Angela yelled.

Andrew turned away from them. He glided his hand along a vase. Hilda's smug expression reflected in the porcelain. His gaze lifted to the arrangement of white flowers, and his lips twisted to the side. "Oleanders."

"What?"

"You poisoned her with oleanders. The apple cider. Your specialty?" Andrew snapped his finger toward Doctor McGraven as she crept toward the door. "And Hilda's sister covered up the evidence."

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Fiona gently pulled on Andrew's arm. "Let's go."

"Don't you want to stay? Isn't this why you came back here?"

Fiona squeezed his hand. "No. I came back for you."

His stomach fluttered in sheer happiness. He beamed, and they weaved through the crowd to the exit.

Blair stood outside the car, her face contorted in fear. "You're dead."

Fiona touched Blair's arm. "And you're finally free from that witch. The house is yours."

"What? Why?"

Fiona didn't respond. She slid into the backseat, laughing. "I can't believe we did that."

Andrew wiped his brow. "I can't believe it worked."  
The car sped from the house and barreled onto the road.  
"Now what?"

Andrew's fingers wrapped around hers. His heart swelled, and his head spun with an elation he never knew existed. He couldn't wait to give her everything.

After zooming through town, the car swerved into the private airport. Fiona grunted as the vehicle slammed through the chain-locked fence. A private jet hummed on the tarmac, stairs already descending to the black pavement where a man in a white uniform waited.

"What's going on?" Fiona peeked out his window. "Are we going somewhere?"  
"We're getting out of this town."  
"What about my father's gallery?"  
"I bought it. All the paintings are already onboard."  
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Fiona's death had brought him to life.

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His hands stroked her back and heat fired through his body. She tasted like heaven and smelled of peppermint from the lotion he'd bought for her. He drowned in the sweetness of her kiss. With each feverish slant of their mouths, she sighed softly.

He'd do this all day if they didn't have to disappear before the mob of press, townspeople, and police found them.

Reluctantly, he broke from her.

She gazed at him. In the glowing street lamps, a strange bluish tint circled the edges of her brown contacts.

He squinted. "Take out your contacts."

"Why?"

"Trust me."

She removed them. Vibrant, electric blue eyes stared into his. He rolled his hand up her arm and touched the side of her neck. A faint throb tapped under his fingertips.

"Fiona... You're alive. Your heart's beating."

She lifted on her tip-toes and kissed him. "How'd you do it?"

Andrew chuckled, and they strolled toward their destiny. "Do what?"

Fiona paused at the bottom of the jet's stairs. "Wake me from the dead... all of this."

The nape of his neck tingled, warming his ears and nose. He let go of her hand and withdrew a piece of paper from his jacket's inner pocket. His fingers trembled as he unfolded the truth about his life. "Sometimes, in royal families, if there are twin boys, the queen must pick one to be the king's successor. Apparently, this country had problems with feuding brothers in the past. So they sent one to America for adoption.

"Once I found out the truth, I searched for you because I finally had a way to give you everything. I hoped you'd overlook that I was a college drop-out and a mortician's son."

"Andrew, I didn't need material things to like you. Or whatever this 'secret' truth is. You're a great guy."

He passed her the sheet of paper.

She angled her chin. "What is this?"

He tucked a strand of ebony hair behind her ear to showcase her smooth, snow-white skin. "My father's will."

Her blood-red lips parted, closed, and then parted again. "Holy shit. You're... you're a prince?"

"True love's kiss." He winked. "That's how I did it."

"Fiona Olivia Burke, will you do me the honor of—"

"Andrew. I don't think you should—"

He opened the box. "Accompanying me to this terrible party tonight?"

Her red lips parted. She retrieved the box and opened one of the green and white circular containers. Her nose crinkled with her smile. "They're brown."

Andrew grinned and shook his head. "It was all they had."

Andrew carved paths in the hallway of his apartment, pausing once or twice to straighten the black bow tie choking him. His fingers fidgeted with the cufflinks on his tailored shirt, and his dress shoes tapped on the floor.

Tonight would go as planned. Fiona would get her justice, or at the very least, she'd escape this town.

After weeks of worrying, he'd finally called his family, and they'd made all the arrangements. His nerves still bounced around from the conversation. It could've gone very badly, but instead, they had welcomed him. They'd do the same for Fiona.

What was taking her so long?

She hated the dress he bought her. Maybe he'd gotten a size too large. He froze. Or too small. Both would insult her. He should check to be sure.

He crept to the bedroom door. It swung open, and Fiona glided outside. He sucked in a breath. She was stunning. The classy, floor length, navy-blue gown accentuated every curve of her body. Pearls rested on her collarbone and matched the teardrop earrings. She had gathered her hair into an up-do of black curls that exposed her sensual neckline.

Her eyes connected with his, and he nodded. "The contacts look good."

"I could get used to brown eyes." She spun. "Can you zip me?"

Andrew blew out the air that burned in his lungs. He stepped behind her and heat flooded his lower body. Her lacy bra and underwear peeked from the opening.

He blushed, turned his head, and closed the zipper. His fingers lingered on the nape of her neck, and she sighed.

"You look lovely," he whispered.

She smiled. "Thank you. You don't look so bad yourself, Mr. Littleton. Let's get this show on the road."

Andrew held her lower back, and they made their way to the lobby. When they exited the apartment building, Fiona huddled in the peacoat he'd bought for her. He cradled her shoulders, and she nestled closer to him.

A black town car pulled up to the curb. Andrew guided Fiona to the door, opened it for her, and she slid inside. He circled the trunk and climbed into the other side. The driver glanced in the rearview but stayed silent as he drove toward Fiona's childhood home.

She alternated smoothing her dress with nibbling on her thumbnail.

Andrew lowered her hand and clasped it in his. "Nervous? What happened to that spunky girl from earlier?"

Her lips rolled together. "Are you sure we should do this? Maybe we didn't think this through. I'm dead. I'm not sure I want to be on the cover of *The National Enquirer*."

His mouth slid to the side. He leaned toward the front seat. "Did you get what I asked?"

The driver retrieved a box from the passenger seat and passed it to Andrew. He opened the emerald green and gold box and peeled back the tissue paper. Inside were two masks. One made of silver and navy satin with a black lace overlay, the other a simple black. Andrew handed the navy mask to Fiona. "It's a masquerade ball. Since your eyes are brown now..."

"No one will know me. Or at least I hope they don't." She traced the almond-shaped holes in the mask. "What will we do once we find the poison? We can't call the police."

"We won't have to. The police chief will be there. Once he sees you, it'll all be over."

"But what if..."

Andrew squeezed her hand as the town car turned into the gated driveway. "Everything will change after tonight. I promise." He nudged her gently. "As long as you don't try to 'cut' anyone."

"Yeah, sorry. I probably shouldn't have stolen your scalpel."

"Nah, it's fine. I enjoyed the rush."

"Rush?" She laughed. "You looked horrified."

"Well, I was at first," he said. "But afterward, I felt alive."

"Maybe because you hang around so many dead people."

His lips curled upward. "You make me sound so charming."

"You're a regular ole prince charming, Littleton."

His shoulders tensed, and he straightened his bow tie, which seemed to squeeze on his pulsating jugular. "Something like that," he replied, his voice cracking like a teenage boy.

Fiona chortled softly, slipped on her mask, and peered out the window. Andrew followed her gaze.

Lights on the ground illuminated manicured bushes and trees in the vast lawn. A valet waited at the base of the stone steps on the other side of a circular fountain. The driver stopped at the curb, and an attendant opened Fiona's door.

Andrew hurried to meet her as she exited the vehicle. He glanced into the car. "Stay close. We won't be long."

The driver nodded, and Andrew escorted Fiona through the crowd. The town's sheriff, his brother, and the elementary school principal chatted in front of them about Fiona's involvement in local charities. On either side of them, Fiona and Andrew's high school classmates laughed as if Fiona hadn't just died yesterday.

She flinched.

Andrew gritted his teeth. He couldn't wait to leave this town. He drew her in tighter as two men directed them through the double doors.

They handed their jackets to the coat checks and sauntered deeper into the entryway. A quartet of violinists played a classical melody, and as Fiona had predicted, huge bouquets of white flowers decorated the tables.

Guests flooded every nook and cranny. They ambled on the curved staircase, tittering about trivial things. Andrew searched the horde for Hilda, but he made contact with Blair instead. Her eyes narrowed behind her purple mask at the gorgeous girl by his side.

Fiona went rigid as her step-sister meandered down the stairs.

Blair smiled at guests as they passed, sipping champagne, and plucking hors d'oeuvres from circular trays.

She stopped in front of Andrew and Fiona. Her pink lips twisted into a snarl. "Who's this?"

She cocked an eyebrow at Fiona, who stiffened next to him. He rubbed her lower back, more to keep her from assaulting anyone than to protect her.

Andrew squared his shoulders. "This is my date. Now if you'll excuse me, we have some mingling to do."

She glared but kept her mouth shut. Word-wise, anyway. Her gaped lips spoke to her disbelief, and Andrew smiled, satisfied with himself.

He led Fiona through the crowd to the edge of the party. As usual, no one noticed the mortician's son. For once, he was relieved.

"Did you see the look on her face?" Fiona whispered.

Andrew waved in Blair's direction. "Seems she's frozen like that."

Blair sneered and stormed away.

The music stopped, and heads turned. Guests hurried out of the way as Hilda and Fiona's mother, Angela, emerged from an upstairs room.

They glided to the balcony that overlooked the large entryway. Both women wore similar sleek gowns. Fiona's mother radiated in a champagne-colored silk that suited her auburn hair and dark eyes.

Hilda wore all black.

Fiona lunged forward, but Andrew held tight to her wrist. He couldn't have her exploding. Not yet.

Her "mothers" peered over the wooden railing. Hordes of townsfolk clustered together to listen to whatever speech they had planned.

Andrew couldn't wait to hear, either. What could they possibly have to say? He doubted they had a sentimental eulogy for Fiona.

Hilda tapped a fork on her champagne flute. "First, I would like to thank Cathy's Flowers for the gorgeous oleanders, and her husband's catering company for the delicious refreshments."

The crowd clapped.

Hilda raised her glass. "Friends and family, we are not here tonight to mourn the death of young Fiona."

Murmurs reverberated in the room. Fiona jerked from Andrew's grasp but didn't move.

Hilda held up her hand. "We are here to celebrate the union of Angela and myself. For years, we've awaited this day. And now we have the opportunity to share our love with everyone. So drink. Laugh. And join us in our day of happiness."

An influx of gasps mixed with whispers resonated around Andrew and Fiona. He stared, flabbergasted. Had Hilda planned this since high school? Why would she lock up Angela? To trick Fiona's father?

Disgusting.

Maybe Angela had second thoughts, so Hilda committed her. Either way, they killed Hilda's husbands to build wealth for their union. Now that Fiona was dead, they had the motherlode. Her trust—the one he just realized she'd have received on her twenty-fifth birthday.

Fiona growled. Uh-oh.

She yanked off her mask and charged toward the balcony. "You bitch!"

Screams, loud gasps, and cries echoed. People scattered to the door, the walls, and the kitchen.

A shriek came from above. Fiona's mother leaned over the banister. "You're alive!"

Fiona touched her heart. "You tried to kill me?"

The sheriff climbed the stairs. He shook his head at Hilda and Angela. "Is this true?"

Hilda's eyes turned to slits. "Well, Angela? What do you have to say for yourself? She's obviously crazy, sheriff. Arrest her."

Angela's lips parted. She stumbled backward. "No. You... You have no evidence. Fiona slit her wrists. Ask the coroner."

"She was poisoned." Andrew pushed through the huddled mass of gossiping ladies and their grumbling husbands to stand next to Fiona.

"Prove it," Angela yelled.

Andrew turned away from them. He glided his hand along a vase. Hilda's smug expression reflected in the porcelain. His gaze lifted to the arrangement of white flowers, and his lips twisted to the side. "Oleanders."

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## Reader's Abode Collection Volume 1 March 2017

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