

# THE DEFINITION OF INSANITY

For me, the definition of insanity was not “doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results.” Instead, it was getting within a few months of graduation and then enrolling as a sophomore at a different school, especially when I barely made it out of Blackbriar alive. I hadn’t been to public school since fifth grade, and nerves clawed at my stomach lining until I tasted extra bile.

*I can't believe I'm doing this.*

Bitter wind blew, cutting through my jacket. As I studied the building, the parking lot was louder and more chaotic than I expected, guys horsing around despite the January chill. Sock hats, rubber bracelets, plastic chokers, people with words on their butts, bright T-shirts, heavy eyeliner, skater boys, people with un-smart phones—I’d forgotten that the world once looked this way. But when I was twelve, I didn’t exactly pay attention to the details.

The school swam in cement and pavement. There seemed to be two or three parking lots, one dedicated entirely to students.

A couple of fast-food places had sprung up across the street, probably catering to people who left for lunch. As for the building, it was made of faded stone, casting the red trim along windows and roof into sharper relief. Somehow it seemed like the whole place was dripping with blood. *Damn, you're not Carrie. Settle down.* There was also a bizarre sense of déjà vu since I'd skipped back in time; only in this timeline, I was eighteen pretending to be sixteen, and everything was impossibly screwed up. *But I can fix it.* That belief had propelled me to jump, and I couldn't let doubt chew through my resolve. Considering the shit I'd seen in the last six months, I shouldn't be fazed over a new school. But it was difficult in a different way, making myself cross the lot and climb the steps to the front office.

Inside, the place smelled of sweat and industrial cleaners. The gray-speckled tile floors were dingy and scuffed beneath fluorescent lighting, and three-fourths of the space in this entry was devoted to trophy cases. On closer scrutiny, the majority of them came from sports teams. Two shelves offered other victories from other clubs, but I could already see the focus.

Students hurried by, joking and bumping one another. One group that went past definitely smelled like pot. Steeling myself, I shoved through the door marked MAIN OFFICE. There were a couple of girls in here already, one crying, and two people I took to be teachers hurried out with their arms full of papers. This place could not be more different from Blackbriar, but I liked the bustle and anonymity. It took me a minute to catch the attention of the harried secretary. I'd cobbled some transfer documents together, and they should pass inspection long enough for me to do what I had to. Fortunately for me, if not the other students, Cross Point High seemed

both underfunded and staffed, so she barely looked at my forms. For a minute and a half, she clicked rapidly on her keyboard.

"We can't fit you into all your first choices since you're starting in the middle of the year. Better luck next time." She slid my schedule across the counter, picking up a ringing phone with her other hand.

I took it and pretended some concern over my classes. Really this was just an excuse to be here. My only interest in this school came from needing to meet Kian. If I'd planned better, I could've learned Kian's schedule beforehand. Now I had to rely on luck and intuition.

Clearly, the secretary was surprised to find me still standing there when she hung up. "Something else you need? We don't have a welcoming committee, so if you were expecting a student guide—"

"Ha, no. An old family friend goes here too. I was wondering if you could tell me what lunch period he has?"

She sighed, likely weighing whether it was faster to refuse or just tell me. "Name?"

"Kian Riley."

After clicking a few keys on the boxy computer, she said, "Freshman? He's on A lunch, same as you."

"Great, thanks." I waved and headed out before she could ask why I didn't just text him.

There was no reason to spin a story when leaving served just as well. Thanks to the map in my class packet, I found first period while mentally shaking my head. *Sophomore English. God.* On the plus side, I could do the work in my sleep, so at least I wouldn't be distracted by teachers complaining about my performance and wanting to talk to nonexistent parents. Every move in this timeline had to be

cautious and well conceived; I couldn't afford to make things worse and need to leap again, as time wasn't on my side.

I thought I was prepared for everything high school had to offer—Blackbriar Academy had put me through the grinder—but when I stepped into my first class and everyone stopped talking, it was a fresh sort of awful. A quarter of the girls did a lip curl and then deliberately turned away while a portion of the guys sat up straighter and tried to make eye contact. And I'd come in intentional down style, no branded clothes, standard hoodie and T-shirt, cheap sneakers, no makeup, nothing that should make me stand out.

"New student?" the teacher asked, cutting into the whispers. She was a middle-aged woman with salt-and-pepper hair worn in plaits, given to hippie style, if her fringed blouse and swishy skirt offered any insight.

"Chelsea Brooks," I said, offering my schedule.

"Ah, a transfer from Pomona, California. You'll miss the nice weather, but we do have tornadoes." She grinned as if that was funny somehow, and indicated a seat in the third row from the door, near the back. "That one is empty."

"Thanks."

"But before you sit down, introduce yourself to the class."

*Ab, Christ, this really is hell.* Changing how I looked hadn't given me any additional skill at public speaking, and I certainly couldn't tell the truth. Best to pretend apathy, slacker magic at work. With a shrug, I mumbled, "I'm Chelsea Brooks. I used to live in Pomona, now I'm here."

"Sucks to be you," someone called.

I took that as my cue and went to my desk without adding anything. The teacher read the room and started the lesson, likely fig-

uring that if she let them, the class would seize this excuse to delay cracking the books. Around me, everyone opened their copies of *A Tale of Two Cities*, which I read when I was nine and found incredibly boring. With the exception of *Jane Eyre* and *The Count of Monte Cristo*, the classics never interested me.

"I'll share with you," the guy at the next desk said.

Before I could argue, he moved across the aisle and spread out his dog-eared copy of the alleged Dickens classic. Students took turns reading while I stared out the window. There were enough eager beavers that the teacher didn't have to beg for answers, but she apparently enjoyed picking on people. I dodged until nearly the end of the period, but she called me out eventually.

"What are your thoughts on the book, Miss Brooks?"

"It's really obvious that Dickens got paid by the word," I said.

Half the class laughed. I didn't mean to be a smart-ass; that was my actual opinion, but the teacher sighed. "Would you care to elaborate?"

"He wasn't exactly subtle with the allegory. If you want symbolism, the transformation and resurrection motifs are pretty obvious. Carton is meant to be a Christ figure."

"Interesting." But she didn't look pleased with my analysis.

The bell rang, however, freeing me to escape. I rushed out in the first wave, joining the throng of students surging to their next class. The guy who'd shared his book fell into step with me. He was short and thin, had light brown skin, and wore a cream beanie, black skinny jeans, and a cable-knit sweater. I had zero interest in fitting in or making friends, so I didn't speak.

Finally, he said, "You have a serious dislike for Dickens, huh? Mrs. Willis probably won't forget that."

"I'll survive."

"I'm Devon Quick, by the way."

"You already know who I am."

"Right, Chelsea from Pomona." He smiled, and I couldn't bring myself to be a complete icicle in light of such niceness.

So I waved as I cut into my next class. For the next three periods, the teachers seemed content to let me pretend to be a houseplant. And then lunch arrived. All my nerves prickled to life at once. Finally, I had a chance to look for Kian. I raced through the halls, skirting clusters of students, and didn't stop until I hit the cafeteria. My stomach felt too knotted to eat, but it would be weird to sit down with nothing, presuming I could even find him. So I went through the line and got pizza sticks, salad, and a fruit cup, along with everyone else.

From what I knew of being a social outcast—and it seemed like Kian had occupied that stratum as well—I picked a path through the crowded tables. *He'll be near the garbage cans or the doors in case he needs to make a quick getaway.* I spotted him at table in the back corner and headed that way, conscious of my heart pounding in my ears.

I tried to tell myself to calm down, but younger Kian was still Kian. In theory, the fact that I was older and out of my time stream should be enough to keep me focused, but I couldn't stop looking at him as the distance between us lessened. Ten feet. Five feet. His hair was longer than when I knew him and badly cut. From the way he was hunched over his tray, I couldn't see his expression. Thick glasses obscured his beautiful green eyes and half his face. He had problem skin, and he was so skinny it didn't look like they fed him

at home. Oblivious to me, he stared to his left, watching some girl with shiny hair.

*Tanya*, I remembered.

"Is it okay if I sit here?" I asked, setting my tray down.

Kian's head jerked in my direction, and I couldn't help smiling. At this distance, I could see him. His eyes were the same beautiful green, thick-lashed and stunning, but most people wouldn't notice. For a long moment, he stared, mouth half open, and it was like looking into an awkward mirror. Instead of waiting for a verbal response, I joined him.

"You must be new," he said.

"How'd you guess?"

His mouth twisted. "Because you're sitting here. I won't take it personally when you assimilate into a better group."

"I'm not much of a joiner." I poked at my pizza sticks dubiously; they looked like normal pizza cut into thin strips. "Rectangles are better than triangles for some reason?"

He looked puzzled for a few seconds and then a half smile slipped, only for an instant; he swiftly locked it down in favor of the blank expression that I knew from experience hid a lot of pain. He scanned the cafeteria as if my presence heralded some badness he couldn't yet envisage.

My heart pinged. *Been there, lived that*. But I couldn't show any of those emotions as I studied him. *We're strangers, he doesn't know you*.

Finally, he mumbled, "Maybe the cafeteria supervisor had her heart broken by somebody who played one."

"Could be." Though I hated lying, I couldn't meet him as Edie. Not in this timeline. So I said, "I'm Chelsea . . ." and was about to

let that stand when a better idea occurred to me. "But you can call me Nine."

"Why?" He made eye contact again, his interest piqued by the nickname I'd chosen.

I held up my hand. "It's better not to make a big thing of it. If I act like it bothers me, it'll be worse. You know how people are."

He took in my missing ring finger and seemed to relax a little, as if imperfection was easier for him to process than a pretty face. "Yeah, that's true."

It was too soon for him to ask, but I could tell he was interested. And since he was already firmly set as the skittish, wary one, I'd have to be friendly and open. "It was a dumb accident."

"What happened?" Curiosity evidently got the best of him.

"To be blunt, I stuck my hand somewhere I shouldn't. And I would've died if I hadn't chosen to lose the finger."

"So you did this to yourself?" His face reflected equal measures of awe and horror.

"Not for fun," I pointed out. "But, yeah, to survive."

"Wow. That's hard-core."

"Not really. What's your name anyway?"

The casual question sent his eyes skittering from mine. He ate a few bites of his salad before muttering, "Kian Riley."

"Are you a sophomore too?" I asked.

*Like you don't know.*

"Freshman." By his terse response, he expected me to know something about his family background. And I did, but Nine would remain ignorant of his past until the day she transferred, offering him a clean slate.

"So give me the rundown on the school. Who should I avoid?"

"Me, if you listen to everyone else."

I laughed like he was joking. Since he wasn't, it took a moment for Kian to return the smile, uncertain as sunshine on a cloudy day.

"No, seriously. I can already tell you're awesome."

"Excuse me?"

An exquisite ache went through me as I remembered how I'd felt when he praised my smile, back when I didn't see any good in myself. "It's your eyes. They're fantastic, and they prove you're a kind, honest person." I added some New Agey stuff about how the eyes were the mirrors to the soul and then closed with, "I'm from California," as if that explained everything.

From his bemused expression, it was pretty much exactly the opposite. Yet I was committed to this manic pixie dream girl impersonation. If I came across a bit flaky, that was fine because I didn't want him to fall in love with me so that it would break his heart when I left. Just by *being* here, I'd already changed things.

"Are you on any psychotropic medication?" he asked eventually.

"Nope."

"Should you be?"

I snickered, drawing the attention of the surrounding tables. From Kian's reaction, their stares ranked right below Armageddon, but I made eye contact and offered indiscriminately bright smiles that said I was having a blast. Eventually, they went back to their lunches, and I caught Kian trying to pack up his stuff while I wasn't looking.

"Did I do something wrong?" I asked. "And please don't say, 'It's not you, it's me,' because whenever someone says that—"

"I wasn't kidding about the meds."

"If you're trying to drive me off for some reason, it won't work. I've already decided we're going to be friends."

"How can you just decide that?" He seemed torn between pleasure and irritation. "It's your first day at a new school, so you pick somebody at random?"

"It wasn't random."

Until now, it didn't occur to me how resistant Kian might prove to this idea. I'd thought I could just sweep into his life like the winds of change, and he'd be happy to see me. But he appeared to be getting pissed at my invasion of his silent world.

"Huh?"

"You were sitting alone. Either all your friends are sick today or you could use one." Maybe it was a mistake to be so blunt, so I went from there to straight up lying. "Me, I've been in fourteen schools in the last two years, and I'd rather hang out with someone who's happy to have me. If that's not you . . ." I acted like I was about to leave..

*Stop me, you have to stop me.*

At the last possible second, he whispered, "Wait."

"Okay."

"This is a little weird and really sudden, you know? This . . . Things like that just don't happen to me." He didn't even sound depressed, just . . . resigned, and that was worse. With every fiber in me, I wanted to hold him, but that couldn't happen.

*I can't let it.*

"People transferring to your school?" I kept my tone light and teasing.

"Never mind." But he clearly wasn't thinking about those watching and judging anymore—a step in the right direction.

"Do you want my number?" That was *way* pushier than I'd ever be, but the MPDG part of me didn't blink at the offer.

I could see Kian struggling to frame a reply. Like, *for what*, or *seriously*, is *this a prank*? Because I had been there. So I took his phone and entered my contact info. The thing seemed ancient compared to the smartphone I'd been using, and it actually flipped open. Since I'd acquired mine at a pawnshop two days ago, it looked no better than his.

"Now mine?" he asked, taking my phone like this was some kind of bizarre dark ritual that could only end in blood and tears.

"Yep. It'll make it easier for us to hang out." That was pretty much my whole plan: saving Kian, which would in turn save me, my parents, and all the assholes at Blackbriar.

"I really don't get it. But okay." Kian tapped out his digits with the precision of someone who hadn't done this much.

I tested the number to make sure he didn't give me a fake one, and his phone rang. He stared at it, as if he couldn't believe I cared enough to do that.

I smiled. "Awesome. Everything is working as intended."

# A UNIQUE SORT OF HEARTBREAK

At the moment, "home" was a shit-hole three-story historical building that never got gentrified. In fact, Cross Point had the air of a steel boomtown that lost all hope when the mills closed. The small downtown was more than half boarded up, and the businesses hanging on were mostly liquor and convenience stores, along with a thrift and wig shop. I shivered as I passed the head models draped in other people's hair.

I went to the Baltimore after school because I didn't have a choice. Using cash from Buzzkill's go-bag, I'd rented a room in a no-tell motel that advertised hourly, daily, weekly, and, as it turned out, monthly, as long as you paid up front. I had haggled a deal that offered me shelter, but when I let myself in, it was hard not to let the soul-deep loneliness seep in, just like the brown stains on the ceiling. Looking at the faded red carpet made me think they had chosen it because it could soak up bloodstains.

Peeling floral wallpaper, plastic furniture, and a minuscule kitchenette were only a few of the charms my temporary home had to

offer. I also got bonus screaming from the thin walls and the constant threat of invasion via the rusty fire escape right outside my window. I didn't like cooling my heels here, but I'd already been plenty forceful in the initial meeting. If I called Kian tonight, he'd think I was both crazy and desperate.

*When I'm only the last thing.*

But it was definitely a unique sort of heartbreak, being the only person in the universe who knew my story. I touched the watch on my left wrist; if I could remove it without dying, I'd already have it off, but it was firmly affixed to my skin like a parasite. If the medalion I'd taken from Raoul's body didn't conceal me, my only extracurricular activity would be killing immortals. So far, things had been quiet, but I knew not to get complacent.

I dumped my backpack and headed out with only a few necessities in the front pocket of my jeans, covered by my hoodie. A CTA bus delivered me to the small public library, a cream stone building underwhelming in both size and scope. The librarian at the front desk smiled at me, so I risked a question.

"Do you have computers for public use?"

"To use the print lab, you need a library card, but we do have a couple of old machines in back that are free for anyone."

"Thanks." I followed her directions and found them already occupied.

Slouching into a nearby chair, I waited my turn since the sign said PLEASE LIMIT YOUR USE TO TWENTY MINUTES. I didn't think I'd need that long. Finally, an old man stood up from his hunt-and-peck typing of a Hotmail something or other, and I slid in. Forums were the place to find info like I was looking for, so I dove into local-scene sites and keep going through sublevels until I found a

quasi-underground site that recommended a vintage vinyl shop for "additional services." Memorizing the address, I checked the bus routes and decided I still had time to get there before closing at five.

*Seven minutes, not bad.*

A twentysomething with pink hair was waiting for my machine when I checked over my shoulder. Before I got up, I cleaned the history and cache. She rolled her eyes as I slid by.

"You think anyone cares about your business?" she muttered.

*More than you'd expect.*

Not that the immortals would follow my trail that way but still. Right now I was out of my time stream and off the grid. If possible, I'd stay that way. Since the bus stop was a couple of blocks away and the computer said I had five minutes until the next one, I ran as soon as I left the library. As it turned out, the bus was six minutes late, so I could've taken my time, but missing this one meant putting off my business for another day.

Psychedelic Records had a LEGALIZE MARIJUANA shirt in the front window on one side and a giant poster of Bob Marley on the other. The smell of patchouli nearly knocked me out as I pushed through the front door. Row upon row of old records filled up plastic crates, along with rock-and-roll memorabilia that might've been "classic" when my parents were in high school. A signed guitar hung in a place of honor behind the counter, but I couldn't make out who had scrawled on it from the doorway.

There was no point in pretending I was a retro-music hipster, so I went straight to the guy behind the counter. "I'm interested in your additional services."

He scrutinized me head to toe. "Show me your chest."

"Excuse me?" This reminded me a little too much of the whole *show me your belly button* test I had going before I jumped.

"Just a quick flash. If you're not wired, I guarantee it's nothing I haven't seen before."

"Fine." I lifted my hoodie and shirt, giving him a peek at my plain white bra. "Satisfied?"

"Yeah." To his credit, he did seem pretty disinterested in anything but verifying that I was a customer, not a narc. "What can I do for you?"

"I want two IDs, one that says I'm sixteen and, the other, twenty-one."

"That's weird," he noted. "Never had anyone ask me to prove they're underage before."

"What do you care? It's your job to make IDs and collect the money."

Basically, I needed the first ID in case my current identity came into question at school, and if the authorities grilled me elsewhere, I'd whip out the adult ID and make a quick getaway. There was also no telling if I might need to meet someone in a bar. Being a time traveler had ridiculous constraints, as it turned out, since my real self was twelve and completely obsessed with anime and rock tumblers.

"True. Questions are bad for business. How high-end do you want these?"

"Basic is fine, just something to pass first inspection."

"That's easy enough." He named a price that was less than I expected. Buzzkill's cash would pay for this too. "Half now, half on pickup."

"Sounds good." I handed over the money.

"Excellent. Come in back for a minute. I'll take your picture."

He had a compact setup, though nothing so overt that anyone would notice his side business. It was all fairly typical office equipment. The various backgrounds for the photos were hidden behind an enormous framed Led Zeppelin poster. I posed but didn't smile, and he nodded approval.

"Good call. People always look surly in government ID photos. It's because they've all been waiting for over an hour at the DMV or whatever." He smirked at his own joke.

I gave a pity chuckle, no point in pissing him off. "When should I come back?"

"Wednesday, after three."

"Okay, thanks."

"Let me check the front, give me a sec. We'd have heard the bell, but I like to be careful."

I waited in back until he called the all clear; then I emerged. Just in case, it seemed like a good move not to leave empty-handed, so I bought a peace-sign keychain from the counter display. He acknowledged that with a knowing grin as he bagged it up. Since the Baltimore had actual metal keys, I even had a use for this. On the bus back, I snapped the two together. An old man fell asleep on my shoulder, and I stared out the dirty window at the crumbling cityscape, hoping I could achieve all my goals.

Jostling the shoulder sleeper, I got off at the stop that in no way felt like home. My stomach growled, reminding me that I hadn't eaten much of my pizza sticks at lunch and that breakfast had been a granola bar. *There's a bodega on the way.* I was thinking about what I could afford to buy—because Buzzkill's cash wouldn't last forever

and the credit card couldn't possibly work—when I bumped into someone coming out of the thrift/wig shop.

"Sorry," I said in reflex.

I moved to step past, then realized that this was the guy who had shared his Dickens with me earlier. He seemed frozen in horror, like seeing me here was the worst-case scenario. Other people passed us on the sidewalk, collars up, heads down against the wind. *One of us needs to say something. What's his name again?*

*Devon.*

"Don't tell anyone," he finally mumbled.

"That you buy your clothes here or you have a wig fetish?" Since he wasn't carrying any packages, I figured that was a safe joke.

But he scowled. "You think that's funny?"

"Apparently not."

"If people at school find out my mom runs Madame Q's House of Style, I'll know who to blame," he snapped.

*Oh.*

"So this is your family business?"

"Shut the hell up."

Now that was surprisingly rude compared to how nice he was before, but he must think I was making fun of how his mother made her living. Which wasn't my intention at all. But I had no reason to correct his misconception. It wasn't like I'd be here long enough for it to matter.

"Okay, I'll pencil you in as my nemesis. I was kind of hoping I'd find one without looking on Craigslist."

From his blank look, that joke didn't land, either. *Shit, when did Craigslist become a thing?* I couldn't remember, but it must not be

mainstream knowledge yet. With a mental shrug, I moved to pass him.

"It won't help you either if people find out you hang around downtown."

That sounded like a warning . . . or maybe a threat. So I turned. "Are you going to tell everyone I'm poor? And here I'm maintaining my image so carefully with haute couture." I struck a pose, tugging on my hoodie strings so the front conformed to my skull.

He relaxed a little then. "Okay, fine. But you know what dicks people can be."

"Seems like the haves would be pretty fiercely outnumbered in a town like this. Maybe we could organize and burn all their Gucci in effigy or whatever."

"You have *no* idea what's popular, do you? But . . . that sounds magical."

I shivered as the wind gusted stronger, with a frosty edge that hinted at snow. *Please, let this be normal winter, and not the winter king, searching for me.* "Okay, good talk, but I have to go buy dinner at the bodega. So . . ."

His brows went up at that, but he didn't try to stop me. I felt the prickle of Devon watching me until I went into the shop on the corner. This was the closest thing to a grocery store in this neighborhood; there was a small prepared-foods section, packaged so that I was pretty sure the owner's wife must cook it in her home kitchen. A tiny shelf of fruits and vegetables stood in the corner near the back, one section of canned goods, and the rest was liquor and snacks. After crunching some numbers in my head, I bought bread, cereal, apples, milk, peanut butter, jelly, and some instant noodles. Not the best diet, but until I figured out how

to get a little more money, it would keep me alive and on the right path.

It was dark by the time I got back to my room. Putting the chain on helped for psychological reasons, though I could deal with any threat better than the flimsy door. I touched Aegis on my wrist for reassurance and then made a sandwich. Darkness didn't make my room more appealing, so I turned on the old-school, boxy TV for company. No free cable here, so there were four channels, all blurred with static.

I listened to the couple next door fighting until I fell asleep.



In the morning, I did my homework on the city bus, so it was messy but legible. Five minutes per subject did the trick. Another three blocks, and I was crossing the parking lot. Today, it was easier. My hoodie and jeans uniform granted me anonymity, or so I thought, until a group of letter jackets blocked my path.

"Hey, new girl. Hold up. You haven't met me yet." The guy who delivered that deathless classic was clearly the alpha, Cross Point's answer to Cameron Dean.

Though this guy had dark hair and hazel eyes, he radiated the same seamless confidence, as if life had never failed to deliver exactly what he wanted. Yes, he was built. Yes, he was hot. And I kind of wanted to kick him in the shins for assuming that my life couldn't be complete unless he acknowledged me.

I decided to be an asshole. "But we totally met last summer at that party. Remember? And you *never* called me. What's up with that?"

His smile froze. "Uh . . ."

One of his friends nudged him. "She's cute, Wade. Why didn't you call her?"

"Don't worry, I won't hold it against you." I gave a cheerful smile and extricated myself from the biceps fencing me in.

As I reached the relative sanctuary of the front hallway, I noticed Kian watching. No question he'd seen the exchange. I hurried to catch up with him.

"Can you smell the testosterone burning, or is it just me?"

"Did you just screw with Wade Tennant's head?" he asked, looking incredulous.

"Maybe a little. Which is probably cruel and unusual because I suspect he mostly uses it as a counterweight."

"Don't say shit like that. Maybe you can get away with it, but I'll get my ass kicked."

"I'll protect you," I promised.

"Well, that's emasculating." But he was smiling, not as tentative as the day before, either.

"Bullshit. It's way more egalitarian for people to take turns being heroic." I launched into some heartfelt commentary about Hermione and Harry, which Kian heard with growing interest.

"Wait, what did you say? I don't remember that scene."

*Crap. I always get the books mixed up. Has the last one been published yet?*

I hurried to distract him. "Never mind. My point is, it's totally cool for girls to be heroes. See you at lunch," I called as he went toward his first class.

By third period, everyone was calling me Nine. Which was weird, but I figured it was because of my hand, until I heard some guy say, "She's *totally* a nine, all good except for that missing finger. How do you think—"

His friend covered the dude's mouth when he realized I could hear. I raised my brow. "The answer is, obviously, that I crammed it up somebody's ass so far that it broke off. Probably because he was objectifying me, but I forget."

"Bitch," he mumbled from behind his buddy's palm.

As I walked off, the friend proved himself to be an ass too by whispering, "Dipshit, you can't say that in *front* of girls."

*God, I hate high school.*

Only Kian could make me stay here. The classes were no challenge, compared to Blackbriar's curriculum, though, so I coasted to lunch. My pulse ticked like a clock, reminding me that I had a deadline. If I didn't improve Kian's life and his state of mind by his fifteenth birthday, everything would happen all over again. The prospect of getting stuck in a loop as awful as this chilled my blood.

*Not happening, not again.*

After I went through the line, I skirted the room, but before I could reach Kian, Devon stood up at a table near the window. He gave me a tentative smile; his friends looked nice, a mix of smart, friendly people, and if things were different, it would be cool to get to know him. So I was already braced to shut him down.

"Want to sit with us?"

Six pairs of eyes in a variety of hues met mine. Four of six offered smiles that said they were totally okay with making room. So I waved as I said, "Thanks for the invite, but my friend is expecting me."

"Where?" Devon scanned the room, seeming surprised that I'd gotten a better offer.

*Nosy much?*

But there was no point in hiding it because I intended to make

it super obvious that I thought Kian Riley was fantastic. Beaming, I raised my hand. "Over there."

Kian reluctantly waved back, then ducked his head, clearly hating the attention. Style-wise, he looked worse than the day before. I started toward him, but Devon grabbed my arm.

"Okay, fair warning. That kid is so freaking weird, he never talks to anyone. I'm not kidding." He invited the table to weigh in with a speaking look. "Nobody's ever heard him say a word, right?"

"He's a future school shooter," another guy agreed.

My heart twisted. If they knew him, they'd never say that. Deep down, he wanted to be a hero, so he'd never hurt people, even if they made him feel like a worthless shit. No, given time, Kian would implode, taking all that pain and turning it on himself. I swallowed hard, fighting sudden tears. God, I wanted instant intimacy so he'd share those feelings with me instead, but we had to build a relationship first, and these jackoffs were standing *in my way*.

"Maybe you should get to know him." With a pointed stare, I added, "Funny how people who worry about being judged can do it to someone else."

*This time I won't fail; this time I'll save the boy I love.*

# MANIC PIXIE NIGHTMARE

At 3 a.m., I woke to find the Harbinger perched at the foot of my bed, head cocked in apparent fascination. At first, I thought I was dreaming, but when he leaned forward, I scrambled back, nearly knocking over the lamp on the bedside table in my hurry to turn it on. But he didn't vanish with the feeble glimmer of light. So close and unexpected, his aura scraped across my nerves like unchained lightning, so I couldn't get my breath.

Terror, dread, and awe fought a cage match until I managed, "Stop."

He dialed it down so I could focus. Dark cloak, red vest. My heartbeat steadied as his boots vanished from his feet and reappeared on the floor. He came up in a crouch, looming in a way that was probably supposed to be terrifying. Without the aura, however, I could cope.

"What are you . . . *how* are you here?" Since I'd jumped, the Harbinger in this time stream shouldn't even know who I was, right?

"Time doesn't have the same hold on us, darling."

"Are you saying you followed me?"

"Not exactly. You know how a rock of sufficient size can be both in a stream and out of it at the same time?"

"Time being the river in this analogy."

"Precisely." He seemed pleased as he went on. "Like that rock, I exist here, just as I do there, and I retain awareness of those connected to me."

"You're asking me to believe in cross-dimensional memory? Or that you can remember things that haven't yet happened, will . . . did happen, or will not have happened . . . ?" I trailed off, giving up on figuring out the correct tenses for this convo.

*It's three in the morning, I can't handle this.*

"Is that so much stranger than nightmares given life by human credence?"

Sighing, I allowed, "Okay then. That doesn't explain how you found me. Isn't the medallion working?"

"Remember, it has limitations and I have eyes everywhere."

"Flipping birds," I muttered.

"Even without them, I'd have located you in time. Our prior exchange did more than just nourish me, and . . . some bonds cannot be broken."

"Awesome, so there's some kind of ethereal tether between us?"

"You could say that." He shifted from the predatory crouch and folded his legs lotus-style, as if settling in for a cozy chat. "Admit it, you're pleased to see me."

I didn't want to give an inch, so I said, "Do you remember how things turned out there?"

"The longer I focus here, the blurrier it becomes. Despite im-

mortality, we are not omnipotent or omniscient. So it's a bit like multitasking. You know how an old woman knits in front of the television, most of her mind on the scarf? Little bits from elsewhere slip in, snips of dialogue, noise from outside, but mostly she only notices what's in her lap."

That actually made sense. Otherwise Wedderburn wouldn't have locked up the Oracle; he would've turned his attention on the future and learned things without needing technology to travel. But fixating on the future would be like disconnecting plugs in the present, leaving the winter king vulnerable to attack, and he had too many enemies to make that feasible.

"Interesting. But that doesn't explain *why* you're here." His arrival felt like a boulder suspended on a fragile chain. After all, the word *harbinger* meant "bearer of bad tidings." At least, I'd never heard anyone called a harbinger of *good* omens.

He leveled an assessing stare on me. "Would you believe it if I said I'm curious? You've done so many foolish and fascinating things. I'd like to know how your story ends."

"I guess that depends on whether you intend to place bets against me, help other immortals track me down, that kind of thing." With Aegis on my wrist, I could probably end him before he realized I'd made the decision.

*But I don't want to.*

"Technically, there's still a contract open between us, you know. Fell made it impossible for me to complete it as originally intended, and that is . . . bothersome. But I *know* you don't believe I'm here as your protection."

"Not really," I admitted.

"Honesty has never been a friend to me," the Harbinger said.

"But perhaps I'll try it this once. The bond I mentioned before . . . you're the closest thing I have to kin now."

"Because you fed from me?" I didn't get it. He took energy from Nicole too, but he wasn't camped outside the mental health facility waiting to see if she recovered.

When I pointed that out, a lopsided smile carved into his lean cheek. "You gave of yourself willingly, dearling. That is the difference. What I have from you is born of free will . . . and that is a sweetness I cannot otherwise experience."

*Oh.*

"I'm glad," I said, though I wasn't sure that was the right response. "But I won't assume you're on my side since caprice is kind of your deal. As long as you don't get in my way, I won't complain if you want to watch the show."

"An excellent summation of my intentions."

"Just to be clear, I don't have to worry about the others finding me like you did?"

"They lack our connection, but they have other resources."

"So don't get comfortable?" I'd already come to that conclusion myself, so that wasn't exactly invaluable advice.

He nodded, letting himself topple sideways on my bed. The light didn't touch him, as if he was a shadow too deep for the photons to penetrate. Really I should get him out of here, but at this hour, the Baltimore was creepy enough that the Harbinger qualified as comforting in comparison. The woman next door had been crying for two hours when I finally fell asleep, and her silence was somehow more ominous than the despairing sobs.

"Why are you staying in such a hovel?" he demanded then.

"It's a protest against our consumer culture."

The Harbinger's look said he wasn't even slightly amused. "Karl Marx would be charmed, I'm sure. Power to the proletariat."

"Okay, this is what I can afford on Buzzkill's stash. And to avoid starvation, I'll need to get a job while I'm here."

"I could help you," he said.

Shaking my head, I backed off that offer so fast I got vertigo. "No thanks. I'm pretty sure I know how it goes, once I start accepting favors from you."

"You wound me with your cynicism." But he didn't deny that there would be terrifying costs associated with his assistance, even given to someone he dubbed "kin."

"Bullshit. I've just gotten better at anticipating the fine print."

The Harbinger snapped his fingers, and the tired bulb on my bedside lamp guttered out.

His voice came soft and low, but also terrible like the groan of a beam before it gave way. "The woman in the room next door . . ."

"Yeah?"

"She's dying." Two words, cool as a sealed tomb.

That launched me from bed, and I went out the door at a run. Though he was the trickster, it didn't occur to me to question. In the hallway, the carpet was gross and sticky beneath my bare feet; nobody answered when I pounded with both hands, so I ran back and dialed 911. When the operator answered, I gasped, "I think my neighbor OD'd," because that would surely get the right people out here. But after the man took all the info, time ticked away. I called the night desk clerk, but he had no interest in the situation and wouldn't agree to unlock room ten so I could check on the tenant.

The Harbinger watched my anxiety with inscrutable interest. Eventually, he said, "Would you like *me* to open the door?"

And then I knew. "She's gone, right? If I say yes, I'll owe you a favor, all for nothing."

"It's like Schrödinger's cat, dearling. You'll never know unless you open the box."

Before I could decide, however, sirens finally sounded and paramedics pounded up the stairs at the end of the hall. My door wasn't the only one that cracked open as they ran into room ten. Five minutes later, they came out with a body, not a patient. Sheer fury sparked inside me. I balled my hands into fists, turning on the Harbinger in the darkness.

"Was that *fun* for you?"

"A little."

"Thanks for reminding me how awful you are. I'd almost forgotten." Even if that woman's life was miserable, it was worth saving. Death was the final answer to second chances . . . because as long as you were alive, you could always turn it around.

"Does that mean you won't pet my hair and assure me I'm not a monster?" He danced out of reach when I swung. "My heart is breaking. *Broken*, even. I want your approval almost as much as I want to sow misery and discord."

On the verge of activating Aegis, I stilled . . . because his final statement carried the unmistakable ring of truth, a sort of hopeless longing. In my life, I'd often felt exactly that, watching people laughing with their friends, warm and effortless. It was like there was an invisible wall dividing me from the things I wanted most. Now I had cast everything off except for this one absurd, impossible mission. The worst part was, even if I succeeded, no one would ever know. At that moment, I understood the Harbinger well enough *not* to kill him.

Again.

"You're such a child," I said.

His tone sparkled with puzzlement and wonder. "Am I? Then . . . will you raise me?"

"Get out."

I didn't wait to see if he'd listen, slamming into the bathroom. The tub was awful and gross with dark stains on the grout, but I climbed into it anyway, fully clothed, and wrapped my arms around my knees. For some reason, it was hard to breathe, as if an iron band had wrapped around my chest, tightening with each desperate pull of my lungs. I didn't even know that woman, but the fact that I didn't save her felt like the promise of failure.

*You can't do this. Everything will play out exactly as it did before.*

My sense of self receded until I might've been a speck of dust beneath the bed, a small and impotent mote. The tears didn't come, but each gasp shivered through me in dry sobs. Closing my eyes didn't help, either, because I only saw the slim outline of a body, being wheeled away by people who didn't know her or care.

But I should've known a simple door wouldn't stop the Harbinger, though I didn't register him until his hand rested on my hair. "You let me give you so much grief."

I slapped him away. "Leave me alone."

"What a wonder. Why do you care about such a miserable husk?"

"She was a *person*, and everyone matters. Don't you get that? Even if she made bad choices, she mattered, and you made her a damn game or a test or—"

"Eddie."

I stopped talking because I couldn't remember the Harbinger ever saying my name precisely like that. "What?"

"I lied. She wasn't dying before. When I arrived, she was already gone."

My breath went in a wheeze. Hadn't I thought that the silence was worse than her incessant crying? I might have even noticed the moment of her death and counted it a relief—*Thank God I don't have to listen to that anymore*. While the Harbinger did screw with me, I was the one who should've done better. There was no way I could sustain the rage at him, considering the weight of my own faults.

I lifted my gaze to meet his star-shot eyes. "Is this what you wanted to teach me? That I'm awful too?"

Something like regret flashed over his face; then he swept me up in a swirl of dark fabric and carried me back to the other room. "Come away; you'll catch something." Once we reached the bed, he set me down and drew back as if I was a pillar of flames. "You're the only one who would seek meaning in my myriad cruelties."

"I can't know your intentions," I said. "But it felt like a warning. There are lots of ways to become a monster, and the *easiest* is to look the other way when you see people in pain."

"You give me too much credit."

"I'll do better. And . . . I think I understand now. Life is about connections. To save Kian, I have to help him meet other people. Me, alone, it's a start, but not enough."

"Your ramblings have become nonsensical. For you to imagine I'm *helping* you without recompense, that is madness." He sounded annoyed.

I stifled a smile. "Of course not. You're the Harbinger."

"It would behoove you to remember that."

As I glanced at the clock, I sighed. Almost four, school would

suck more than usual tomorrow. "Right. Well, I'm going back to sleep. Either get out or keep quiet."

He stared. "You'd let me stay?"

"What do I care?" It occurred to me that the Harbinger was the closest I had to a friend in this timeline. *Is that awesome or terrible?* Full of bravado, I went on. "Stand guard in the corner, watch TV, or eat my instant noodles. But replace those if you do."

"I'll stay for a while," he said softly.

The TV flickered to life. When he sat down in the grubby vinyl armchair, I didn't expect to sleep. But it was better than being alone, and I was tired. In the morning, he was gone, along with two packs of ramen. In their place, he had left two cherry Danishes and yogurt, along with a note. *Cup Noodles are delicious. Why did no one inform me? See you soon. -H.*

I had the Harbinger's offering for breakfast and then ran for the bus. More homework on the ride to school, and then I pondered the adaptation of my original plan. It wouldn't be easy to integrate Kian with Devon's group, considering what they thought of him, but—

To my surprise, Kian was waiting near the bus stop when I hopped off. I could tell he had tried extra hard since he'd tucked his paisley polyester shirt into his jeans and was wearing a belt. Overall it didn't help much. But it was so good to see him, alive and healthy, instead of dying in my arms that my smile must've been about a thousand watts—to the point that it startled him. He blinked, pausing before he took a step toward me. Awkwardly, he fiddled with his backpack straps.

"I thought we could walk to school together."

"You ride the CTA too?"

He nodded. "Different route, though, I guess, or I'd have seen you."

"Which means you were looking," I teased.

Kian's eyes widened, and he stumbled back a step like I was about to declare him a stalker. "What? No. I mean—"

"Relax." Only by interrupting could I put him at ease. "So what do you do on weekends? I don't know anything about this town." And then I used personal intel to sweeten the deal. "You know what would be cool? A theater that showed the classics." I ached a little, remembering all our dates in Harvard Square, precious memories that only I shared.

But as I hoped, that distracted him. "Are you into golden-age cinema?"

His eyes were so, so bright and hopeful, that I wished I *could* be Nine, not Edie the Echo, out of time. If I really was a transfer student, things would be so different. Getting to know him like this—and not as part of the game—would be incredible. As we walked, I tried not to let the wistful feeling overwhelm me.

"Totally. *Casablanca*, *North by Northwest*." I named movies that I already knew Kian loved. "*Notorious*. *To Catch a Thief*. *Indiscreet*."

"I'm sensing a Cary Grant theme here," he noted.

Of all the old movies I'd watched with Kian before, Cary Grant *was* my favorite. I could understand why people loved Humphrey Bogart, but Grant had a dashing, urbane quality I appreciated more. So I nodded, hugging the truth to my chest—that Kian was the only reason I knew about any of this. Suppressing a smile, I wondered what he'd say if I straight up confessed to being his girlfriend from the future, a la *The Terminator*, and then the dialogue wrote itself:

*Make out with me if you want to live.*

*Okay, maybe not.*

Oblivious to my weird, born-of-desperation humor, Kian was saying, "I've never been, but there's a cool place in Lofton. It's an old theater that's been converted to a bar. They kept the screen and show classics on Saturday nights. It's over twenty-one only, though."

"Not a problem," I said, feeling cool for the first time ever.

He lowered his voice like the students nearby might report us. "You have ID?"

"I'm picking it up tonight actually."

"You move to a new town and, first thing, you find someone to make you a fake ID?" His eyes widened, and he looked like he couldn't decide if that was awesome or if I was the irresponsible maniac who would ruin his life.

But most important, he didn't look sad at all. He seemed . . . intrigued. *Like me, Kian, like me a little. Enough to forget the girl who breaks your heart.*

I grinned. "So? You never know when you'll need to get into a bar."

"If you say so."

"I'm heading there after school to pick up my ID. Come with me. If you do, you'll get yours on Friday, and then we can check out the classic movie joint on Saturday."

We reached the school parking lot, and the warning bell was about to ring. I could predict all the reasons why he couldn't tremble on the tip of his tongue. But what finally came out was, "How much is it?"

I did the math, then said, "Don't worry about it, you can pay me back later."

"Okay. But I don't understand why you're being so nice to me. BT-dubs I'm out of here if you say weird shit about my eyes again."

That sounded so like what I said to him in the diner that I had to strangle the urge to kiss him. "Don't worry about that, either. Just be sure of one thing, Kian Riley." As if he sensed I was dead serious, we locked eyes, so sweet it hurt. "I'm going to change your life."

# ALL OUR YESTERDAYS

After school, we took the bus to Psychedelic Records. The lack of business made think the owner paid his rent with fake IDs. But Kian seemed really into the vinyl, which shouldn't have surprised me, considering how much he loved old movies. So I browsed the store for a few minutes, trying to see the magic through his eyes.

"Oh my God, look . . ." He showed me a beat-up album with three guys on the front, clad in strange costumes sporting facial hair and shaggy beatnik style.

I'd never heard of the band, but apparently they were British, and this was hard to find. "You should totally get it."

"It's twenty bucks."

From what he'd said, his uncle wasn't well off and his aunt disliked him, so they probably didn't give him much allowance, if any. It looked like his aunt had spent five dollars at Goodwill for Kian's current wardrobe. But one problem at a time.

"Maybe he'll make us a deal."

The beardo behind the counter flicked a look at Kian, as if to ask me what was up. "It's cool. I'm here to pick up, and he's interested in additional services."

"Chest," the guy said.

"Flash him," I told Kian.

"What?"

"Come on, hurry up. I'll turn around."

A few seconds later, the owner said, "Okay, what do you need?"

Kian shot me a helpless look, so I answered, "Basic ID, over twenty-one."

I handed over half the cash for Kian's ID and my two, which cut significantly into my stash. At the rate I was spending money, I wouldn't last long on my own. But budgeting wasn't a skill my mom and dad taught me before everything went pear shaped.

The owner handed me an envelope; then Kian headed back for his quick photo session. Afterward, I confirmed, "Pickup on Friday afternoon?"

The guy nodded. "Thanks for the referral, but don't post a flyer at school."

"After this, you won't see me again," I promised. "But I was wondering, is there any way you could give us a discount?" I held up the album.

"Sorry. If this town wasn't such a shithole, I could probably get more than twenty."

"All right. Thanks."

Disappointed, I put the record back. Unfortunately I couldn't grant all of Kian's wishes like a fairy godmother; my resources were decidedly limited. I had to save bus fare to get to school, which was

a huge priority. Skipping would not only get me in trouble but it would also limit my access to Kian. How else could I see him every day without it being weird?

"I'm so excited. I wonder what's playing," I said.

"I can check tonight if you want."

"That would be awesome."

The wind was cold, and we really needed to get on our respective buses. But as we walked toward the stop, I could only think of keeping him with me a little longer. Inviting him to my place would probably make him call family services or at least open the door to some serious concern on his part. Yet I wished we could hang out like we did before, none of the barriers between us. Now I understood how Kian must've felt, falling for someone he'd watched on Wedderburn's orders.

"I can't believe we're doing this." His words came out in a rush. "It's like something I'd read about, happening to *me*."

"Life should be an adventure," I told him.

*Not a constant struggle for survival.*

"It must have been awesome in California," he started, and then he appeared to remember the lie I'd told. "Oh, wait, fourteen schools, two years. So you probably didn't leave a ton of friends behind."

"Not many. Do you still have time tonight? There's somewhere else I want to go."

He raised a brow at me. "How exactly do you envision my social calendar looking?"

"Well, you might get in trouble for being late."

"It's fine. I already texted my uncle that I was hanging out after school, and my aunt probably wouldn't care if I didn't come back at

all." Those words should've been laced with bitterness, but instead, there was only this matter-of-factness that bothered me more.

I ignored the implications, however, because he didn't want sympathy. "On the plus side, it means you can do what you want, right?"

But I'd been on that side of parental freedom, and it sucked because it meant nobody gave a shit.

"I guess. But mostly all I do is go to school, read, and watch movies in my room."

*That's a lie. You write poetry too.* But that wasn't something he'd tell me so fast because it wasn't cool and he was probably still focused on how I might judge him, like friendship was a chipped porcelain cup—one wrong move, and it would all be shards on the floor.

"Come on." I dragged him on the bus and dinged my pass twice.

Since he had no idea where we were going, there was no reason for him to pay. Hopefully, this idea wouldn't hurt his feelings. It wasn't like I planned some big makeover or that I didn't like him exactly as he was. But to fit in a little better at school, he needed to dial down the vintage.

"You know, I'm not big on surprises." But he settled beside me without further complaint, and I totally noticed when his knee brushed mine. He jerked back, though. "S-sorry. I didn't do that on purpose."

"Relax. A little human contact won't hurt us." Teasing, I tilted my head to the side to let it rest on his shoulder for a few seconds.

Kian froze. Then he slowly turned his face toward mine, so I could see the ridge of his nose, his inky lashes, all the imperfections in his skin. Mostly, though, I saw the stunning disbelief in his jade eyes behind those lenses. I didn't pull back, though I shouldn't be

close enough to kiss him. It was kind of weird, and he was too young, which made me feel like a creeper. I mean, obviously *he* thought I was only a year older, not four. *Okay, three and a half.* At Blackbriar, there were seniors who dated freshmen, but everyone kind of side-eyed over it because it seemed like they only did it because it was easier to get into their pants.

But he didn't lean in, exactly. He rested his head on mine briefly and then dug into his backpack. "Not sure if you're interested but I have some music we can listen to . . ."

I took the earbud and put it in my left ear, leaving him the right. It didn't surprise me to learn that his favorite listening could've been featured on the soundtrack of *Fallout: New Vegas*. As the bus carried us closer to our destination, I listened to a mad soulful version of "I Had the Craziest Dream." The song would've been the perfect choice for him to make a move, but Kian didn't have the confidence for that. His gaze lingered on my lips for a few seconds, but I made the decision to shift away.

*You can't.*

"You like it?" he whispered.

"It's fantastic. Who is this?"

"Nat King Cole. He's best known for 'Unforgettable.'"

"Oh yeah. I've heard that one."

We listened to another song before I nudged him that we had to get up. Kian glanced out the window in surprise. Apparently, he would've been happy to ride around the city with me all night on this crappy bus. My heart turned over. *Don't let him fall for you all the way.* But I didn't listen to that cautionary voice; I grabbed his hand and towed him toward the doors. The solitary point of contact made me feel like singing. His fingers were cold when he wrapped them

around mine. *He's holding my hand. Not dead. Not gone. Not in extremis.* The tears I couldn't cry in the tub last night threatened at the worst possible time. I couldn't let him think I was unstable; it might scare him away.

"This way," I said, swinging our hands like little kids.

*There, that's the opposite of romantic.*

When he saw the neon MADAME Q'S HOUSE OF STYLE sign, he paused. "Are we actually going in here?"

The wigs in the window were a little creepy, but . . . "My wardrobe could use some augmentation, and my budget doesn't stretch to the mall. I didn't want to go shopping alone, though. Do you mind?"

"I guess not," he said.

The bell tinkled when we stepped inside. A willowy woman wearing one of her wigs—or so I suspected—came out to greet us in a drift of colorful scarves and lilac perfume. *This must be Devon's mom.* She beamed as she realized she had two customers.

"Anything I can help you find?"

"T-shirts, if you have any."

"Sure, over here." She forged a path through the racks to a table near the back.

The store was crammed full to the point it was hard to maneuver with racks of old dresses rubbing up against vintage suits. If I ran the place, I'd organize the clothes by style instead of putting all the pants together. But maybe space didn't permit a better system. I glanced at Kian, still standing awkwardly by the door, and beckoned.

"Help me pick something out."

"You don't want *my* help," he mumbled.

But he still came over as I picked through the offerings. Eventually, I dug up a couple of cool ones near the bottom, one black Grand Funk Railroad, one white Who shirt. They were priced at five bucks each, though, so I hesitated.

"I need to move some merchandise to make room for stock in back," Mrs. Quick said. "So if you want them, I can cut you a deal. Two for six?"

That seemed like a good deal. "You have three bucks?" I asked Kian.

He nodded. "But I don't listen to either of those bands."

"It's a shirt, not a testimonial." I paid for my part in crumpled singles; then Kian added his bills.

"Need a receipt?" Mrs. Quick asked.

"No, it's fine. Do you take stuff as trade-in or on consignment or . . ." I was already plotting to get Kian into some better-fitting jeans.

"As long as the clothes are clean, I can sell them for you on consignment or I can give you store credit."

"That would be cool, thanks."

"Do you want a bag?"

I shook my head, taking the Who shirt and stuffing it into my bag. Kian did the same with his black one. With a pair of Chucks instead of those grubby white Walmart sneakers, skinny jeans, and that band shirt, he'd fit in better at school. A wardrobe change didn't require a ton of money, but I could tell his aunt didn't care by what she bought for him and Kian probably felt too guilty to object.

As I headed for the door, I had to step out of Devon's way. He looked straight up horrified to see me here; then he noticed Kian. "Can I talk to you?"

He dragged me out the door into the bitter wind before I could protest. "What?"

The neon threw an orange glow over us, making our skin look ruddy and weird. It was starting to get dark, and a few flurries swirled down, shining as streetlights caught them. I rubbed my hands together and stuffed them in my jacket pockets. Gloves would've been a smart investment; I didn't even think to look. *Next time.*

"How come you're here?"

"I got a shirt. Is that okay?"

"You promised you wouldn't tell anyone."

"And I didn't. We're shopping. But you acting like this is more likely to tip Kian off than anything I say. Plus, it's kind of weird that your friends don't know—"

Devon sighed. "Of course *they* do. But assholes like Wade Tennant give people shit all the time for less."

Since I had been the Teflon crew's favorite target, I understood his concern. Once bullies locked you in their sights and saw wounds appear, it was like some kind of collective madness infected them. Individually, they might not even be that bad, but combine mob mentality with peer pressure and shit got scary.

"I understand, but we're just shopping. I swear."

Since it was true, I had no other defense. Devon studied me for a long moment, then appeared to believe me. "Okay. You like my mom's store?"

"She's got some cool stuff."

"Vonna and Carmen shop here too, to be honest."

"So you're protecting them. Well, no worries on my account."

We exchanged a tentative smile then. Kian stepped out and pulled up the hood on his puffy maroon jacket. He started to ask me a question, but it was like his voice shriveled up and died when he realized I wasn't alone. *Wow, he really can't talk to people. So why didn't he clam up at lunch that first day?*

To smooth the awkward moment, I said, "Devon's in my English class; he had a question. Do you know him?"

Kian shook his head, not making eye contact. The pavement might've been inscribed with hieroglyphics based on his intent fascination. I stepped closer so he had no choice but to look at me, and I tipped my head in encouragement.

"Hey," he finally mumbled.

Devon's eyes widened. "Hey."

"Happy shopping," I said. "We're out of here."

Devon waved, seeming surprised. "See you."

Kian let out a long breath as we moved away. "I hate seeing people from school. It's like, I don't know, a sudden punch in the face when you least expect it."

"I'm from school," I pointed out.

His eyes lit on my face, skimming my features like he still couldn't believe I was real. "You're different."

"How?"

"I'm not sure. Just . . ." He stopped talking and shrugged, unable to put it into words.

It seemed better not to press, as he was just getting comfortable with me. "Okay. I live near here, so I'll walk you to the stop."

"Wouldn't it make more sense for me to see you home?" he asked.

"It's okay." *Because then you'd see where I live.*

We walked in silence for those two blocks, his expression pensive. Finally, he said, "So we're going back to Psychedelic on Friday . . . and to the movies on Saturday. Right?"

"That's the plan."

"Sweet." It was like he just wanted verbal confirmation or something.

Though he said I didn't have to, I waited with him. The bus shelter was open to the wind on one side, so after he sneezed the first time, I huddled against him, remembering when he held me like it was the most natural thing in the world. But he was so nervous with each puff of breath that I feared he'd hyperventilate.

"This was the best day of my life," he whispered.

I said that once too. Because of him. Lights appeared in the snowy night, bus brakes screeching as it slowed. It was hard to let go of him. Kian stepped away and climbed aboard, and each step felt like a thousand miles. He pressed his face against the window and waved for much longer than made sense. But then, I could've turned and walked off. The sidewalk was slick with new snow by the time I raced back to the Baltimore. Passing through the grimy gray lobby always made me feel dirty by association. So far, I hadn't seen the clerk wear more than a stained undershirt and tan trousers; the only way the place could be more disreputable was if they had Plexiglas on top of the counter.

I meant to pass through quickly, but the guy stopped me with a phlegmy throat clearing. "You're the one who called about the woman in ten." It wasn't a question.

"So?"

"Better mind your business." That sounded like a threat, and I wouldn't get a refund if he kicked me out.

"Okay."

If he planned to say more, I didn't wait for it. I ran up the stairs to the second floor and locked myself behind the chain, like *that* was secure. The pleasure I'd gotten from hanging out with Kian chilled like the lonely swirls of snow frosting my window. My reality was bleak; the best I could hope for was to return to my time, but I didn't even know if this device worked that way. By leaving my world, I might've erased it and replaced it with this reality.

I sighed. The weather made me want to buy a mask and cape, then go loom broodingly—or brood loomingly—atop a tall building. The note the Harbinger had left was still on my pressboard table. Reading it again cheered me a little. Since he was right, and Cup Noodles were delicious, I had some for dinner, along with an apple and a slug of milk. *I should buy a multivitamin. Can time travelers get scurvy?*

After waiting an hour, I texted, *Did you get home okay?*

*No problems.* Kian responded fast enough that I wondered if he was holding his phone, thinking about me.

Probably I should let it go for now, but my room was so quiet, hard not to think about the woman next door who died alone. So I sent, *today was fun*, just to keep the conversation open. My phone was silent long enough that I felt like a dipshit staring at it.

Kian: *You wearing your shirt tomorrow?*

Me: *Definitely. We should clean our closets and go back there. I bet she has some cool stuff buried.*

Kian: *I'm up for it.*

Me: *We could go Saturday, before the movie.*

I stared at the screen, wondering if that was too much. Maybe he'd think it was weird that I wanted to glom on to him constantly.

Normal people should have other stuff to do, family activities, but Kian must be lonely too. And I'd go crazy if I hung around the Baltimore all weekend. Damn, just the prospect of Sunday made me want to crawl back in the tub.

*K. Meet you at the Broad Street stop? Not that we couldn't plan this at school.*

Laughing, I sent, *See you tomorrow.*

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow. The full speech from *Macbeth* popped into my head, so I murmured it aloud.

Shakespeare was wrong. Life was far more than a shadow, and it signified everything.

# WINTER'S WRATH

Friday I went with Kian to Psychedelic Records. He'd scraped together the other half of the cash somehow, which was good, as I couldn't have paid for the rest. *I need to quit being so impulsive.* He also had an extra twenty for the record he'd wanted. The guy behind the counter smirked at us.

"Pleasure doing business. Remember, if someone realizes your IDs aren't kosher, you never heard of me."

"Got it," I said.

He bagged Kian's album and offered the colorful plastic sack. "Thanks for your patronage. Stop by again."

The owner followed us to the door and flipped the sign to CLOSED as we stepped out. There were only a couple of other businesses still open on this street. The weather was colder than it had been, more snow piling up in the streets. It would probably affect the buses until the plows went around. From what I'd noticed, Cross Point didn't have enough equipment, nowhere near as efficient as Boston. Shivering, I grabbed Kian's arm.

"We have twenty minutes until the next bus, assuming it's not late. Let's not wait here."

I slipped and slid across the street, weirdly deserted for six on a Friday night. But the better parts of Cross Point lay farther from the town center, subdivisions and malls built away from evidence of industrial failure. The flickering lights from the convenience store offered a welcome oasis, and I sighed as the warm air rushed over me.

The girl behind the counter spared us a glance but not a smile; she was watching a small black-and-white TV. I paid for a packet of sweet rolls and two cups of bitter coffee. I added nondairy creamer and packets of sugar to mine until it turned caramel instead of sludge brown. There were three plastic stools near the far window and a narrow counter where you could set Cup Noodles or a beverage, so we went over there to wait.

"It's kind of amazing," Kian said, stirring his coffee.

"What?" I split the cinnamon rolls down the middle and slid his half toward him.

"This should be awful." He glanced around at the dingy store with a half shrug. "With someone else, it probably would be. But anything *we* do seems like an adventure."

"It's all about the company," I agreed.

Sipping the coffee, I decided it was just below adequate with all my additions. More important, it was hot and it warmed me up from the inside out. I nursed it, suspecting the clerk might ask us to leave if we weren't eating or drinking items purchased in the store. For the same reason, I pecked at the sweet bun in tiny bird nibbles. It didn't taste as delicious as I remembered from childhood, gummy more than yummy.

*Maybe it's stale.*

"Do you think the buses will be on schedule tomorrow?" he asked.

"I hope so. Otherwise my weekend will suck."

He paused, studying me intently. "Mine too."

Since I didn't want him to fall for me all the way, I nudged him. "Are those headlights?"

Peering through the slanting snow, the shine resolved into a bus shape, still about a block away. He nodded, and I raced out of the store, determined not to miss it. The snow in the street was above my ankles, and my fabric sneakers were sodden. I made it to the bus stop with Kian right behind me a few seconds before the bus groaned to a stop, sliding as it did.

Probably because of the awful weather, there was nobody else on board. The driver said, "You're lucky, kids. The CTA ordered us back to base, so this is the last run of the night."

Kian's eyes widened. "But I need a transfer to get home."

"Sorry. Your family will have to pick you up."

The bus started with a jerk, and the floor was slippery. I'd have fallen if Kian hadn't grabbed me. We tumbled together into the nearest seats. He didn't immediately let go and since the bus wasn't that warm, I couldn't object. I shoved my hands in my pockets, trying to ignore the fact that my feet were freezing.

"This sucks," he murmured.

"You can't get a ride?" I already had an idea of the answer, but Nine didn't.

"Probably not. My uncle is away this weekend for work and my aunt . . . well, she won't go out in this weather." He didn't say *for me*, but I sensed the unspoken addendum.

Before I could think better of the offer, I said, "You can stay at my place if you want."

He glanced at me, eyes wide. "Are you sure? Won't your parents mind?"

"My mom is . . . gone," I said. "And my dad doesn't pay much attention. He's not around tonight anyway."

That was surely pathetic enough to discourage questions. A flash of sympathy glimmered in Kian's green eyes. Then he said, "That's my situation in reverse. My dad's dead and my mom has . . . issues." A polite way to describe her drug habit. "But I'm with my aunt and uncle. How come . . ." He trailed off, likely unable to figure out how to frame the question.

"We don't stay in one place long enough for anyone to notice," I said softly, expanding on my *fourteen schools in two years* story.

This might be a bad idea, if feeling sorry for me made him want to save me. I wasn't sure if his white-knight complex had emerged yet. But it was my fault we'd come out tonight to get his ID, and I couldn't let him sleep in the bus station. My room might be shitty, but it was better than that. Probably.

"If you're sure it's cool, I'd appreciate it. I'll text my aunt." From his expression, that was more of a courtesy than necessary for permission.

And sure enough, five minutes after he sent the message, he got back OK, and that was it. No questions about his friend or the family he'd be staying with. I had the feeling he could text *Moving to Siberia*, and the response would be the same. Though I'd never met this woman, I already didn't like her. Even if she hated Kian's dad, that wasn't *his* fault.

With the bus creeping through the snow, it took half an hour

longer than usual to get to my stop. The snow was coming down even harder, nearly blinding me as the wind whipped it sideways, catching the light from the streetlamps so it looked like a white stream. Kian grabbed my hand, probably so he didn't lose me. A few cars parked on the street had six inches on them, and if it wasn't for the fact that the whole city was caught in this, I'd think Wedderburn had something to do with it.

*Maybe he does.*

Kian was a catalyst he hoped to acquire. So Raoul must be watching and reporting. By hanging out with Kian, I'd certainly expose myself if Wedderburn focused on the future at all. The snowstorm seemed like a reflection of ire more than a planned attack, though. So that meant he was pissed that Kian had stopped inching toward extremism.

*It's working. I'm changing things.*

So despite the shitty weather, I was smiling when I led Kian into the Baltimore. For once, luck was on my side, and the front desk clerk was in the toilet or something, so I didn't have to face his leers or gross remarks when I went up to my room. Kian was trying not to look horrified, I could tell, but he kept glancing over his shoulder like something terrible was chasing us.

I unlocked the door and gestured. "Home, sweet home."

Through his eyes, this must be one of the lower levels of hell, though I'd gotten used to the awfulness of it. I showered on a towel, not wanting to put my bare feet in the tub, and the only good thing that could be said about the sheets was there were no bedbugs, though they certainly didn't believe in discarding stained linens here. I went inside first, seeing his hesitation.

"If you're uncomfortable, you can call for a ride," I said.

"No, sorry. I was just wondering if this would be okay. I mean, there's no privacy."

I smirked. "If you were expecting your own room, I have to disappoint you. But the radiator works pretty well. Usually."

"It's fine," he said.

Shrugging out of my damp jacket, I tinkered with said radiator until a blast of hot air caught me in the face. Then I hung up my coat by the door and stripped out of my shoes and socks, arraying them by the heater to dry. My hoodie was damp too, so I hung that up as well. Kian just watched me, mouth half open.

"You should dry your stuff too. Otherwise it'll be awful in the morning."

"Right." He followed my lead until he was barefoot.

The plain gray T-shirt he had on was better than the polyester stuff he usually wore, and it made me think I was influencing him subconsciously. When you liked someone, you wanted to fit in with them better. *A good sign*, I thought.

"Are you hungry? I have ramen."

By the way his eyes lit up, you'd think I had offered filet mignon. "That would be great."

So I boiled the water in my kettle and filled the cups to the line. We waited three minutes, then added the season packets. I'd done this a lot alone since my kitchenette didn't lend itself to fancy cooking, nor did my budget, but it was a little better with Kian perched on the other side of the bed mixing his noodles with complete concentration.

We slurped them down in unison, and he looked into his cup, wistful, when they were gone. Thanks to the Harbinger, I couldn't

offer seconds, but . . . "Want something to drink? I have apples and yogurt too."

"I can't eat all your food."

"It's okay. I can buy more."

"If you're sure."

By recent standards, we had a feast. I made cups of hot tea, lightly laced with milk, and we had those, along with the apples and yogurt. If we ate the granola too, that would be pretty much it, except for the makings of a few PB&Js. *That'll be breakfast.*

"Better?" I asked.

"Much."

The black tea perked me up considerably in conjunction with the bad coffee, so I wasn't remotely tired. Plus, it wasn't even nine. Without asking his opinion, I switched on the TV. "Don't expect much, I only get four channels."

On one of them, an old movie was about to start, one I'd never heard of called *The African Queen*. The picture was shitty, but Kian seemed excited. "You'll love this."

I almost said, *Will I?* like a smart-ass and then recalled that I was supposed to be a classic-film buff. "I've wanted to catch it; this must be my lucky night."

For some reason, that pulled his attention from the screen and he flushed. "I think that's my line."

"Really? You wanted to be snowed in at the Baltimore with ramen for dinner?"

"Remember what I said before—you, me, adventure? Still applies." With the sweetest, easiest smile I'd seen from him, he bumped his shoulder lightly against mine.

"Then let's get comfortable."

I climbed into bed and pulled up the covers because the radiator wasn't winning against the storm outside. Pillow tucked behind me, I settled in to watch the movie. Kian followed suit, though I could tell he was nervous, pretending to be nonchalant. But I acted oblivious, and he soon relaxed, swept into the adventure unfolding on screen. Truthfully, it wasn't the most riveting thing I ever watched, mostly because World War I wasn't my jam, so I got sleepy as I warmed up. My mind wandered to the nights I'd spent in Kian's apartment with his arms around me, dozing through something he loved.

"How do you like it so far?" he whispered.

"It's good."

"You've been asleep for the last five minutes."

"I was watching with my eyes closed. To better engage my imagination."

Kian laughed. "Ah, so that's where they lost you—all the visuals. Maybe we should check into some old radio shows."

"Maybe."

"Seriously, though, you can sleep if you're tired. Just tell me where I'm supposed to—"

"Here is fine. I trust you not to do anything, but if you try, I'll kill you." Because I smiled when I said it, he couldn't tell if it was serious.

"I w-wouldn't," he stammered.

"Kidding. I do trust you."

Somehow I stayed awake for the epic conclusion where Charlie and Rose escaped execution via torpedoes or something. By then it was after eleven, so it didn't seem as lame to call it a day. I went to

the bathroom first, brushed my teeth, then waved Kian in. "You can use some of my toothpaste if you want."

"Thanks."

By the time he came out, I was already snuggled in bed under the blankets. They were thin and raspy, and I'd piled all of them on the bed. At least the much-washed top sheet was soft, if pilled with age. Kian slid in on the other side as if we did this all the time.

*And in another world, another life, we might.*

"The mattress is kind of lumpy, and there's one spring—"

"Found it," he groaned.

"I'd offer to flip the mattress, but the other side is worse. Just take my word for it."

"Nine . . ." He sounded like he wanted to ask something.

"What?"

"I noticed there's only one set of everything in the bathroom. When you said your dad doesn't pay much attention . . . I mean, how long has it been since you saw him?"

"Three weeks? Maybe a month." I kept my voice matter-of-fact.

"So who pays the rent on this place, buys food . . ." Kian seemed to realize the answer was obvious, so he let that go. "Are you even *safe* here?"

"Maybe not, but I prefer this kind of danger to living under somebody else's roof, where they have all the power, and they can do anything they want to me. I'm emancipated, okay?"

He paused, probably calculating the likelihood that I had actual documents putting me in charge of my own life. "You mean you ran away."

"It's basically the same thing."

He made a sound that said he disagreed with me, but he finally

whispered, "I can see your point. Sometimes I'd rather be alone than burden my uncle anymore. It's really hard when you feel so unwelcome."

"You don't get along with your relatives?"

"My younger cousins are okay, but I get stuck watching them whenever my aunt feels like going out. And that's the only time she ever talks to me—to tell me to do something. It's like she thinks I work for her."

"People are assholes," I muttered.

"No, that's seriously *it*." He sounded like he'd come to some realization. "I'm in her house, eating her food. So she figures I should pay it back. No wonder she gets mad that I spend so much time in my room. She wants me doing housework when I'm not at school."

"Your uncle is nicer?"

"Yeah. He was my dad's younger brother, and I always liked him. But he's gone two or three days a week. He's in sales and the market is tough, so . . ."

"That might be part of why your aunt is so awful. If they're strapped for cash already."

In the dark, I sensed more than saw him nod. "Could be. Doesn't make living there any less awkward. Sometimes I pretend my dad didn't die and I have my old life back. Other days I imagine my mom getting her shit together and coming for me."

"Does it help?" I whispered.

"Not really. Because I know nobody's coming to save me. I just have to stick it out until I graduate. College will be better, right?"

"Definitely."

"Tell me something?"

"Depends on what it is." I rolled over because it felt weird not to face him when we were having this intimate conversation.

"Why don't you just drop out? Isn't it hard moving all the time?"

"It's a milestone. And it's come to mean something to me. If I quit, then that's like accepting I don't have a future."

That was the one true part of these lies, back when the headmaster had agreed to let me finish my senior year on independent study at Blackbriar, I'd known I could pass the equivalency exam right then and save myself the bother. But I couldn't, not after everything that happened. It was too much like giving up.

"You could get your GED and still go to college. It would be better if you had roommates and a nice place to stay."

"Places like this don't care, as long as you can pay. I can't get into college or an actual apartment with a fake ID." Luckily, there were logical reasons to back up my presence in his life.

"Right, you need to be eighteen. So you might as well graduate while you're waiting?"

"Basically."

"I really respect you. Nobody's looking out for you and yet you're still doing everything you need to. So many people would do crazy shit in your situation."

"You mean like invite guys to sleep over?" I said, smiling.

Kian laughed softly. "Okay, you got me. But I appreciate you taking the risk. I might've frozen to death waiting for my aunt . . . and I'm actually having an awesome time."

"Here?" My skepticism was obvious.

"Hey, I live in an attic. It's not a cupboard beneath the stairs, but it's freaking close. My aunt wants *me* to nail up the paneling to cover the insulation."

"So she wants you to build yourself a room to live in?"

*Damn, it's worse than he ever told me. Oh, Kian.*

"Basically. I keep telling her I don't know to hang paneling or dry wall, and she's all, *You're supposed to be a genius or something, right? Figure it out.* Like I have nothing better to do than teach myself DIY construction."

"Isn't that kind of hard to learn from a book?"

"Probably. And if I don't keep my grades up, I'm not going to college; that simple." His voice contained all the yearning in the world, picturing his escape from Cross Point.

*Time to plant a seed.*

"There are a lot of great schools in Boston," I said.

Kian sighed. "Harvard obviously. But there's no way I'm getting in there."

"It's not the only one, though, and Boston is a cool city. I lived there for a while. It was probably my favorite out of everywhere I've been. I'd like to go back someday."

"I'll bear that in mind. So . . . how long will you be here?" Somehow he seemed to realize there was a certain transience about me, maybe from the room I was staying in.

"Until the end of the term." It was better if he knew up front not to get too attached; I had to change his life just enough, not imprint on him.

"But you'll keep in touch, right?"

The vulnerability in his voice made me reckless. "Definitely."

With deepest winter setting in, I wasn't sure if I could keep that promise.