

# DARKNESS IN PARADISE

Six days before Christmas, two thugs snatched me off the sidewalk and shoved me into a black panel van.

I would've been terrified if I hadn't been expecting . . . something. Not necessarily a kidnapping, but I'd known there would be a countermove at some point. My main question came from wondering if this was Wedderburn showing me who was boss, the opposition, which meant either Dwyer or Fell, or more mysterious yet—the Harbinger. As I speculated in silence, the iron-faced, concrete-jawed goons gave no sign who'd sent them.

Boston sped by with me pressing a cheek to the window, leaving an imprint on the foggy glass. My heart hammered despite my best efforts to stay calm and my breath came in tiny gulps. *I'm so in over my head.* This time, my boyfriend couldn't rescue me; there would be no more of Kian popping in when I needed him because he was no longer bound to the immortal game—no more access to cool powers—and I'd burned my last favor in cutting him loose.

Eventually, the van parked in a questionable neighborhood not

far from the docks. I glanced between the two men up front. One African-American, the other Nordic looking, they were of similar size and shape, roughly six four, with shoulders that seemed five feet wide. Their demeanor and military haircuts made me think they had law enforcement or Special Forces backgrounds, and the coldness in their eyes assured me there was no point in asking for either answers or mercy.

"Get out of the vehicle, miss." The gravelly command came from the driver. As he glanced over his shoulder to face me in the shadowy interior, his dark eyes seemed, at first, to have no pupils, just like the creepy children that followed the bag man around. I couldn't think about that thing without a shudder of revulsion—and the horrifying certainty that it had my mother's head. A chill swept over me.

"Not until you tell me who I'm visiting."

"I could make you," the other one said quietly. "But that would be . . . unpleasant." A faint accent made me think he was German.

The driver shrugged as he climbed out and opened the back doors, secured from the outside. "Eh. She'll find out soon enough, no?" To me, he added, "The Harbinger requests the pleasure of your company." His faux-courtesy didn't escape me, but since I'd gotten the information I asked for, I hopped down under my own steam.

*Could be worse. But I was supposed to meet Kian ten minutes ago.*

It wouldn't take long for him to realize something had gone hideously wrong. I just hoped he had more sense than to alarm my dad. This wasn't something he could help with, so it was better for him to stay in the lab as he had since my mom's passing, oblivious to the world.

*And to me, I thought.*

The pang as the driver slammed the van door behind me felt more like a chest quake. My cardiac cavity echoed, just a bone cage holding my heart hostage. Intellectually, I knew I couldn't have predicted all possible outcomes . . . and I only ever had three favors. Most of the Teflon crew was dead, and I still didn't know if it had been Wedderburn or the opposition. While I'd managed to protect my best friend, Vi, I didn't realize my mom might be targeted until it was too late. Her death still haunted me. Emotionally, I was all raw meat and rivers of remorse.

The building in front of me seemed like a warehouse, pretty run-down too. Red brick had faded to a rusty orange and at least half the windows were broken or boarded up. Inhaling deeply, I marked the smell of salt water, damp, rotting wood, and a hint of old fish. A newspaper blew across the alley, only to get bogged down in a puddle formed by the broken pavement. It seemed like a major independent player in the immortal game could afford a better hideout, but maybe that was the whole point—misdirection or something. The driver beckoned while the German dude unchained heavy-duty steel doors. They were the newest part of the building, kind of odd.

"Anyone could crawl through one of those broken windows," I pointed out.

Blond Giant offered a scary smile. "That's the whole point."

I thought that was all I'd get, but the driver explained, "The doors are a warning. If people choose not to heed it, then they are, of course, welcome to come inside and play."

"With the Harbinger." I didn't imagine that ended well for random vandals and trespassers but I had problems of my own. "Why does he want to see me?"

The doors banged open as the chains fell away. "Go and find out."

Inside, it was dark in contrast to the relative brightness of a winter day. Shivering, I pulled up the collar of my red coat and took a single step into the overwhelming gloom. The doors slammed shut behind me, and as I heard the men fastening the chains, it was all I could do to keep from screaming for help like a damsel tied to the train tracks. There was no stopping the tremors that worked over me, leaving my legs unsteady.

"Eddie Kramer." The whisper echoed all around me, making my skin crawl.

The shadows were so deep and dark, it couldn't be natural. Some ambient light should've filtered in, however dirty the windows, but this cold, damp space felt like an open grave, as if in the next step, I'd tumble six feet down and someone would begin shoveling loose dirt onto my terrified, upturned face. My breathing became audible, the frightened rasp of a child finding that the light switch doesn't work and there is *most definitely* someone else in the room.

"Yes," I managed to say.

I slowed to near immobility, feeling my way forward with outstretched fingertips. This was every haunted house I ever went in, only without the surety that nobody would hurt me and that whatever ghastly thing I touched wouldn't be real. My hearing sharpened, overcompensating for lack of vision. Something skittered on the floor. I froze as tiny feet ran over my Converse.

*Just one. A rat, probably.*

"I can see you perfectly." It was a light voice, teasing even, and the smile I heard in it made this predicament feel even worse. "Can't you find me?"

"Possibly," I said. "If you keep talking."

"I could guide you. If you trust me."

A startled laugh escaped me. "No. But thanks."

"You'd deny me a spot of entertainment?"

"Unless you find *this* to be the most fun ever, then yeah. Definitely."

"Fine then."

The flare of light made me squint, bringing the room into stinging focus. I shaded my eyes because the sudden shift didn't make it any easier for another minute or two. But soon, I could make out the premises, such as they were. The warehouse looked like a rave was held in 1999 and then nobody cleaned afterward. For all I knew, that might be true, as there was a judicious mix of filth, litter, animal scat, and dangling cobwebs. *This is pretty much the perfect place to dispose of a body.* Briefly I considered going out one of those broken windows, but I suspected if the Harbinger was this scary in a playful mood, I didn't want to test him.

Speaking of which, I still didn't see my host. "Where are you?"

*Maybe he's invisible like the Cheshire Cat.*

"Chin up, dearling."

In reflex, I tilted my head back and spotted a dark figure perched like a bird of prey on the catwalk above. Something in the angles of his knees and elbows reminded me that this creature wasn't human. The Harbinger hammered the point home by taking a running leap and he didn't plummet so much as dance downward, as if stepping on unseen stones that broke his fall. He landed lightly and swept a theatrical bow, garbed in half a thrift shop, including tailcoat, top hat, black feathered vest, satin trousers, and antique gun boots, to say nothing of the gloriously ornate watch chain affixed not to a

timepiece, but a long-necked ceramic cat. Black hair tumbled to his waist, silver strands worked through like starlight.

For some reason, I found it difficult to focus on his face, and it left an afterburn in my mind's eye—a chaotic impression of unearthly beauty married to harrowing despair—scars in the earth full of uncut rubies and holocaust pits with wildflowers rioting along the edges. His eyes twinkled like summer lightning, but I couldn't hold his gaze. Being this close to him made me want to take a step back, as if breathing too close to him might electrocute me.

*Damn. And Kian sought this creature out, bargained with it. For me. I have to be brave.*

Feeling like Alice in Horrorland, I produced an unsteady curtsy, though I really needed a pinafore to pull it off. "Nice to meet you." I suspected the Harbinger knew I felt exactly the opposite, but there was no etiquette guide for an occasion like this one.

"So you're worth dying for, hm?" He circled me in slow, stalking steps, leaning in to sniff at me as if I possessed some exotic aroma.

"I hope it doesn't come to that," I answered, before I could think better of it.

He stilled, head cocking like a bird. "You don't want my protection? And here I've done such a thorough job of keeping nasty things away. Or did you think you'd defeated the mirror creatures on your own . . . through the magnificent advent of a towel?"

*Shit. I had* wondered if that was really enough, but when they didn't come after me again, I thought I must've stumbled on the solution.

"Thank you for keeping me safe," I said around a fear-flavored lump in my throat. "It's not that I don't appreciate it."

"But . . . ? I can taste the question and I'm in a good mood. Because of you, I shall most certainly feast. And soon."

*What does that even mean?*

"Does Kian *have* to die?" It was the stuff of fairy tales. He'd bargained away his last chip, his very life, to protect me. In doing so, he'd offered a gift I didn't want, couldn't exchange, and could never repay.

"You could take his place in the compact." The Harbinger made a smacking noise, uncomfortably between an air kiss and *you look delicious*. "Or you could trick someone else, I suppose. But I suspect your very prickly scruples wouldn't permit that."

Pain flickered to life, a constant heat in my stomach. "No."

"I find that fascinating."

"Do you?"

"Most creatures feel nothing so strongly as the need for self-preservation. Yet humanity occasionally produces bright sparks, capable of sacrifice."

"Is that why you wanted to see me?" I hadn't moved, and the Harbinger wasn't done circling. He put me in mind of a shark. I'd heard that if a shark ever stopped swimming, it would die. This being radiated the same hungry intensity, the same predatory drive.

"Partly. I wonder . . . if you would beg for your beloved's life."

"Would it do any good?" I asked.

"Dearling, no. I have to eat, don't I?"

Revulsion flooded upward, nearly choking me. "You mean—"

"I won't be charbroiling him, but life is energy, and there's no one to light candles or whisper my name in supplication. So what else am I to do?" Though his tone was blithe, I had the sense that he minded the latter more than he let on.

"They used to?"

"Once. But I was never popular," he admitted. "And this suits me. The trickster is better as a broker, I think."

"You don't play the game?" I thought I recalled Kian telling me that much.

"Only when I make the rules, which change according to my whim. The others take it all so seriously. Too much competition can be as tedious as too little, you know. Far more amusing to frolic on the fringes, ruining other people's schemes for the pure pleasure of it."

"I'd like you a hundred percent more if you told me you've made Wedderburn's life worse."

A laugh rang out, dizzying me, for it echoed in the warehouse, carrying with it a mad music and the flutter of a thousand beating wings. When I spun about, the Harbinger and I were alone, standing in a spotlight; I couldn't remember if the brightness fell that way before, but now I had the sense of standing on a stage before an invisible audience.

"All the time, pretty one. I complicate his plots and abet the sun god, then turn about as soon as the wind changes."

"I'm starting to understand why Kian approached you."

The Harbinger's tone turned serious like the ringing of a bell. "The only rule I respect comes from such agreements. So I've brought you here to suggest you enjoy the time you've got left with your darling. Don't waste energy seeking after a crack in the wall."

"Don't people usually do that when they're worried about someone finding a loophole?"

"People," he said gently. "Little one, this is me being kind. Your



beloved will not attempt to renege but I fear for *your* prospects if you interfere."

"But aren't you supposed to protect me, no matter what?"

The mad laughter came again, starting an avalanche of pain in my head. A trickle came from my nose, and I tasted copper in my throat. My vision flickered with black spots, the lights brightening until it felt as if my retinas were melting.

"Even from yourself? You do hold me in high esteem. I think . . . I like you, Edie Kramer. In the end, such a small thing may be enough to save you." His tone turned musing. "Or perhaps it'll ruin you entirely."

*Entirely* echoed inside my skull as I passed out. When I woke, the two henchmen were depositing me on the curb near my apartment building. You'd think two giants manhandling a girl in broad daylight would alarm somebody, but no one seemed overly concerned. I'd learned the hard way, however, that monsters could put on a normal face, making the horrific appear ordinary. So possibly to passersby, I looked like a rolled-up rug.

"Do you ever get used to him?" I asked them hoarsely.

The German ignored me, but the driver's dark eyes flickered toward me. Then he gave a minute shake of his head before hopping into the van and merging into traffic. Belatedly I checked my belongings: backpack, cell phone, yes, everything, check. As expected, I had five messages from Kian, wondering why I wasn't at the mall, since we'd planned to meet for some last-minute Christmas shopping.

Sorry, I texted. I'm on the way. Something came up.

Are you okay? Kian's response was immediate. He worried so

much now that he couldn't get to me instantly if shit went down. But to my mind, it made things a little more . . . normal between us, when my life was so many shades of colossally screwed up. There was no way for me to be sure if I was still a catalyst or if I'd end up indentured in a few months, come graduation day. But that didn't scare me as much as the prospect of losing Kian.

*He's terminal, my brain pointed out. Four months to live.*

Fighting back a wave of anticipated grief, I ran for the subway. It was too early for the train to be full of commuters, but there were always students and people who defied description. I sat next to a railing to minimize contact and got off at the stop nearest the shopping center. Running kept me fit, so I wasn't too out of breath when I raced to meet Kian, who was still waiting outside, though I was over an hour late. His hands were icy, his cheeks red with cold, and his beautiful lips had taken on a distinctly blue tinge.

"Why didn't you dodge into a coffee shop?"

"I was afraid I'd miss you."

"Like I wouldn't text you if I didn't find you right away."

"I was concerned about you," he admitted, pulling me into his arms. "And they frown on nervous pacing in most cafés."

"Yeah, true. Are you ready to go in?"

"Not until you tell me why you were so late. I can tell something happened." He cupped my arms through my coat, staring down into my face with a laser-focused concern I'd never talk my way around.

"Don't I get a hello kiss first?" I tried.

His smile could've powered a nearby electrical substation. "Sure. But don't think I'll forget the question."

*So much for that plan.*

Yet I still wrapped my arms around his neck. He pulled me close,

letting me snuggle into the open front of his down jacket. Each time Kian lowered his head, each time his lashes drifted shut, I tried to memorize everything about it—how he felt, how he tasted—because time wasn't on our side. Cupping his slightly raspy cheek in my palm, I stroked his jaw as he touched his lips to mine, so cool I shivered, but quickly warming with contact. Without waiting for him, I deepened the kiss, wanting to imprint on him, so that he'd never forget me, not even in a thousand lifetimes, timelines, what-the-hell-ever. For us the odds absolutely sucked. High school relationships usually crashed and burned anyway—without all of the supernatural death cards stacked against us.

"Wow," he breathed, countless moments later. "So. What happened?"

I stifled a sigh. There was no remedy but the truth, though I didn't imagine finding out would make him feel better. He had less power than ever before. "Promise me you won't freak."

"Conversations that start this way are more likely to agitate me, Edie."

"Okay, well." I led him toward the mall entrance, reckoning he was less likely to overreact with lots of people around. Inside, water bubbled, tinted by changing lights, blue, yellow, red, back again. "Earlier, two guys shanghaied me, and . . . took me to the Harbinger."

Kian's look could've frozen the fountain into a skating pond.

# HOLIDAY HAUNTED

"What did he want? You didn't sign anything, did you? Even a verbal agreement—"

"No. I think he just wanted to get a look at me." *And to warn me that it was pointless to try and save you.* But I didn't say the second thing out loud.

"Were you scared?" Kian threaded his fingers through mine, leading me into the deceptive safety of a throng of Christmas shoppers.

Old women in knit twinsets mingled with younger people in designer labels. A few people already had on Christmas sweaters and sweatshirts, inviting us to deck the halls and share joy to the world. In my current mood I was more likely to win the Ebenezer award.

"These days I pretty much always am," I admitted quietly.

"I'm sorry. If there was anything else I could do—"

"Stop. You already did enough. Too much, in fact. I wish you cared half so much about saving yourself."

Changing the subject, he ignored that. "Have you decided about Vi's invitation?"

My best friend wanted my dad and me to visit for the holidays, but I didn't think he could handle being immersed in a happy family. Our wound had barely scabbed over, and we'd both start hemorrhaging if we had to watch Vi's mom bustle around the kitchen, fussing over our recent bereavement. On the other hand, the idea of spending Christmas in our eternally beige sublet apartment depressed the hell out of me.

"We're definitely not going."

This year, there was no Christmas tree, no decorations or preparation for what used to be a happy occasion. My mom always went overboard with the lights, making it so the tree could practically give you a seizure. I understood why my dad was hiding, submerging himself in work, but his behavior left me alone. Some days I wanted to scream at him, *You're not the only one who lost her.*

*I miss you, Mom.* Tears were always on tap, burning at the back of my eyes. It had been over a month, but there was always this wasteland in my head, just a blink away, and suddenly I was mentally in the cemetery, watching mourners drop flowers atop her casket. Trembling, I ran a hand through my hair, wondering if Kian could tell how much this hurt. Other than my great-aunt Edith, who was ancient when she died, I'd never lost anyone before. My private guilt only made this feel worse.

"I have an idea, if you're interested."

The fact that he never stopped trying to make things better helped . . . a little. "What?"

"We could convince your dad to get out of the city for a couple of days."

"And go where? Most places will be booked."

Kian sighed. "True. I'm not used to limitations like reservations."

Despite my mood, I couldn't restrain a laugh. "You worked for Wedderburn too long."

"Definitely."

"It wasn't a bad plan," I said, mostly to cheer him up. "But my dad wouldn't have gone for it anyway."

It would be a minor miracle if he didn't get up and go to work on Christmas, as if it were any other day. Since he did most of the cooking, I'd probably make a cheese sandwich and call it good. But Kian seemed troubled by the prospects of a bleak holiday, and maybe he had a point since it was our first together, and it might be our last too. That possibility made me clutch his hand tighter, prompting him to take a second look at me.

"Are you sure the Harbinger didn't do anything to you?"

To be honest, I couldn't be positive since I'd passed out near the tail end of the encounter. There was no way I was admitting that, however. "I was just trying to figure out what we can do to make the holidays better for my dad."

Kian paused outside a store but I didn't think he was seeing the mannequins garbed in white gowns with silver tinsel and lights decorating the display window like a winter wonderland. "Sometimes you just have to be patient."

"Well, I can't bring him back magically. But . . ." One possibility occurred to me. "We could decorate. And cook."

"As I recall, my efforts didn't impress you at Thanksgiving."

"Then you're in charge of the lights. You'll need to get them out of storage at the old place, though. Will that bother you?"

A flicker of his green eyes said the answer was yes, but Kian squared his shoulders. "Not a problem. After we're done shopping, I'll drop you off, pick them up, and swing by later."

"Cool. We should split up now." At his frown, I added, "How am I supposed to get you a present if you're right here the whole time?"

"You don't have to—"

"Don't tell me how to Christmas." I cocked a brow, silently daring him to keep talking.

"Fine. Is an hour long enough?"

"It should be." I already knew what I was getting.

Fifty-five minutes later, I headed back to the fountain with a couple of colorfully wrapped packages. Kian hadn't arrived yet, so I perched on the marble lip, absently counting the pennies at the bottom. None of them had been there long enough to turn, offering a constant coppery shimmer beneath the silver ripple of the water. The muted susurrations of other shoppers provided a counterpoint to the rise and fall of the jets, orchestrated with a light show. As I stared, a shadow fell across the water, as if somebody were standing behind me. But when I turned, I saw no one.

A chill swept over me.

I got out my cell phone. Surveying the scene as if I were about to take a picture reassured me. Nothing weird showed up as I panned across. Nothing sinister here, right? There was an animatronic Santa across the way, waving in a merry, if robotic fashion, from his prefab North Pole village. Beside him, they'd posted a sign indicating that you could meet a flesh-and-blood Saint Nick on the opposite side of the mall.

Still, I wasn't at ease when I turned back to the fountain. This time I caught a sliver of movement in my peripheral vision, and I remembered the Harbinger mentioning the mirror monsters. The reflective properties could be similar under the right conditions—did

that mean the creatures could travel through water as well? It wasn't deep here, and I could *see* the specks in the concrete on the bottom.

*There's nothing here.*

"Ready?" Kian asked, startling me. I juggled my phone, and he caught it in a neat midair snatch. "Wow, you're jumpy."

"Yeah." I managed a smile. "Let's get out of here."

He lifted a small bag that looked like it might contain jewelry. "I'm done anyway."

"Oooh. You want to tease me, huh? Well, this one's yours." I showed him the box I'd had wrapped earlier.

"It's been a while," he said quietly.

"For what?"

"Since anyone thought of me at Christmas."

"What about your aunt and uncle?" I asked, before thinking better of it.

"She handled everything, and I always got regifted. Stuff they got the year before and nobody really wanted." His level tone belied how much it must've stung.

I thought of him at thirteen, his father and sister gone, his mother broken. His aunt should've made him feel welcome and loved, but instead, she saw him as a burden and treated him accordingly. Remembering his polyester nightmare of a dress shirt—presumably his best since he'd worn it on picture day—made me want to hug him, right here, right now.

So I did.

Though he seemed surprised, his arms went around me too, and he settled his chin on top of my head. "Hey. It's not a big deal."

"Maybe not to you."



He shifted so that his arm was around my shoulders, and with his other one, he took my bag. "You think there's anywhere we can buy a tree this late?"

"I'm sure we can get a fake one."

"Is that okay with you?"

I nodded. "My mom and dad always went together on December first to pick out a real one. So artificial is probably better."

Kian drove around for almost an hour until we found a six-foot assembly-required tree at a discount store. The box was damaged but all the parts were there. He crammed it into the back of the Mustang, and a surge of warmth quivered through me. *I have to save you*, I thought. *No matter what the Harbinger says. No matter what it takes.*

"I'll help you carry the tree," he offered, oblivious to my silent plans.

"Okay, thanks."

Unsurprisingly, the apartment was quiet and empty when I let us in. The night before last, my dad didn't even come home to sleep. I'd always known they were great partners, but until she was gone, I didn't realize how much my parents completed each other. Without my mom, my father was like a partial equation, a chemical reaction devoid of the catalyst that activated it.

"I need your key, Edie."

"Right." Swallowing a quiet ache, I dug it out for him.

"Be back in a bit."

As soon as the door shut behind him, I sliced open the Christmas tree carton and fell backward in a prickle of fake pine, augmented by aluminum and plastic. *There's no way this isn't a hot mess when I'm done.* Once I got started, however, the tree snapped together easily. It was butt ugly—with immense gaps between the branches. I fanned out

the greenery as best I could, and by the time Kian came back, I had it looking . . . adequate. Not a high accolade, but maybe lights and tinsel would help. We were quiet as we decorated, decking out the tree while I remembered how it was when my mom was around. There should be carols blasting while the scent of my dad's Christmas cookies wafted through the apartment.

"Do you think your father will mind the influx of holiday spirit?"

"I doubt he'll even notice," I said, sadness washing over me.

"He'll snap out of it."

The retort popped out before I could stop it. "Did your mom?"

When Kian stilled, the glittery tinsel draped over his palms like treacherous pieces of silver, I felt like ten kinds of crap. He didn't look at me as he answered, "Not so far. The cycle's unbroken. She started a new rehab program not long ago."

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said that."

"You're hurting. I get it."

"No, it's not okay. Don't make excuses for me."

"All right. But I'm not sorry you mentioned her . . . because I was wondering if you'd go see her with me this week."

"Really?"

"Yeah, on Christmas Eve. It seems like I should try to patch things up." He left unspoken the reason behind that decision, but I knew.

Yet I couldn't refuse. "Sure. What time?"

"I'll pick you up at four thirty. Visiting hours are pretty limited, five to six on Wednesday, and then a few hours on Sunday."

"So you can't even spend Christmas with her."

He shook his head as he went back to twining the garland around the tree. I had been right; the charm increased as we added ornaments. Since we usually got a taller tree, we had way too much stuff

for a fake one this size, but Kian and I layered it until all the boxes were empty. The result was gaudy, for sure, but definitely cheerful. *This place could use more of that*, I thought, plugging in the lights. They were a mishmash of twinkle lights and standard glowing ones, but the colorful shadows moving on the wall behind comforted me a little.

"This was nice," he said, wrapping an arm around my shoulders. "Just like it's been a while since I got a present bought just for me, I haven't put up a tree in forever."

"Your aunt kept you out of that too?"

He shook his head. "It's not that she locked me in my room. I just didn't feel welcome, so I opted out. And once I started working for the company and got my own place, it seemed pointless to go to so much trouble for one person."

"That's why the suicide rates skyrocket during the holidays." Given the circumstances that linked us inextricably, I didn't know if that was a clever joke or a horrible one.

"Been there, done that."

"At Christmastime?" Startled, I blurted the question.

"Nah."

I cleared my throat, deciding not to discuss this further. "You want something to drink?"

Things felt weird between us because I was so conscious of what he'd paid for my safety. At first, I reveled in the fact that he loved me, then the reality sank in. While it was a touching sacrifice, his devotion was also a weight around my neck. How could I be worth what he'd given up? A lifetime wouldn't be enough to repay him and I only had four and a half months.

"It's okay. I should probably be getting home."

I let out an unsteady breath. "Don't go."

"Why not? I can tell you're uncomfortable lately."

"It's not that I don't l-love you." I stuttered a little over the L-word, not quite used to dropping it into casual conversation. "I just feel—"

"Indebted?" he offered.

"Yeah."

Before he could respond, a knock sounded on the front door. My life had gotten twisted enough that I tensed up each time the unexpected occurred. Kian glanced me, then headed to answer it. He peered through the peephole and stepped back.

"Who is it?"

"I don't see anyone."

"That doesn't bode well," I muttered.

The knock came again, louder and more demanding, but it wasn't like the thing that tried to beat down my front door before. With his eyes, Kian asked silently what I wanted to do about it. Nodding, I took a step back, just in case we needed to run. He opened up just wide enough to take stock of who was lurking on the other side. I glimpsed a slim figure in a red uniform, very tailored, with gold braid on the sides. The person seemed to be dressed to deliver a singing telegram, but no burst of song was forthcoming as I stepped forward to get a better look.

At first glance, this was a normal person, but then I registered the unnatural pallor and the too-sharp nails, more like talons than human nails filed to a point. The creature smiled, accenting its angular features, and the longer I looked, the more the features shifted, becoming a triangular blob with nostrils cut into pasty flesh at a bizarre angle. Its lidless eyes flickered once, twice, not blinking, but

vanishing and reappearing, almost like an afterthought. A shiver rolled through me.

"What is it?" I asked, unmoving.

*Your invitation, madam.*

I heard it but not in words because the thin slash of its vestigial mouth never moved. Cold crept toward my feet like an invisible fog as the thing produced an ivory vellum card. Kian snatched it away before the messenger got any closer. A snakelike tongue flickered out through its lip-slit; the thing no longer looked even remotely human, more evidence of the illusions the immortals could summon at will.

*Or maybe this is the lie, I thought, so it can feed on your fear.*

It bowed at the waist, giving the impression of jointed, entomic movement and then it rushed away, moving as if it had more than two legs. I slammed the door closed, more revolted than I could articulate, as Kian skimmed the summons. His eyes widened, then he read:

"The Harbinger demands your presence at the Feast of Fools, fancy dress required. RSVP unnecessary, as you are not permitted to decline."

"When is it?" I stared at the expensive stationery, embossed with what must be real gold.

"January first."

"What does that mean, 'fancy dress'? Like evening gowns and tuxedos?"

"Given what I know of the Harbinger, it's probably costumes." He flipped the invite over and nodded. "Masquerade procession begins promptly at midnight."

"Wait, so the party starts that late?"

"No matter what this card says, we don't have to go."

Chewing my lip, I admitted, "I feel like that would be a bad idea."

"What?"

"Pissing off our benefactor. He doesn't strike me as . . . steady."

"You want to go, then?" He seemed surprised.

"That's the wrong word. More that I'm willing to put in an appearance. The whole mandatory attendance thing is unnerving."

"Then I guess our New Year's plans are set, huh?" Kian produced a wry smile.

Cocking my head, I teased, "Did you want to do something more romantic?"

"Avoiding death while being surrounded by monsters should be memorable anyway."

"There's that," I admitted. "I'm glad you'll be there with me."

"Not sure how much help I'll be, if the shit hits the fan." He didn't seem pleased about his current situation, being cut off from Wedderburn's power. "Okay, I'm really going."

"Are we good?" I put my hand out and he took it, pressing it against his heart.

"Better than. I know it'll take some time to understand."

"I do. It's just . . . I hate that you put me above yourself. I know you feel guilty about the time you spent watching instead of helping. But your hands were tied. If *I* get it, you should too."

He let out a sigh. "Eddie . . ."

"What?"

"It's not that easy. I can't just get over the fact that I stalked you."

Frustration made me want to shake him. I stepped closer, gazing up into his eyes. "It seems like you feel so guilty that you didn't die back then, you're determined to do it now, no matter how *I* feel."

"Let's not think about that right now. Okay?" He leaned down and I met him halfway for the sweetness of a kiss that made my heart ache.

"Fine," I breathed.

His lips always made me not care so much about things I knew were important and worth arguing about. *Stupid hormones*. Kian dropped another kiss, this one on my nose. Then he said, "Lock the door behind me."

"Got it."

There was just no telling what might be lurking in the dark.

# GHOST OF CHRISTMAS PAST

spent the next four days trying to fill the hole my mom left. And failing.

Nothing I did made my dad rouse from his perpetual, absent fog. He gave me a tired smile over the Christmas decorations and thanked me prematurely for the present I'd wrapped and tucked under the branches. *It could be a rotten egg.* But somehow I doubted he'd react, even if he opened the box to find one. He'd just look through me and mumble something, before going to his room to hide, to count the minutes before he could return to the lab.

The one time I'd mentioned how much he was gone lately, he'd snapped, "I'm trying to carry on our work, Edith. Can't you understand that?"

What I understood was that he'd checked out. I was raised, right? No need for further parental supervision. They'd gone on red alert after I started dating, but at this point, I suspected my dad wouldn't even notice if I moved in with Kian. But I couldn't get really mad



over how Dad was handling his grief when guilt played a constant drum solo against the inside of my skull. If I'd been a little smarter, more prepared, more cautious, I'd have saved her.

Or . . . if I'd turned down the deal, which I'd known was too good to be true, I'd be words on a headstone by now, poetry about the beauty of my soul, probably. And my mom would still be around. Yet I didn't let myself think that way for long. Suicide wasn't an option for me anymore. If I quit, it would mean that everyone else died for nothing.

Four p.m., Christmas Eve. And my dad still wasn't home.

Normally, we'd be baking cookies right now. My mom had stopped setting them out for Santa years ago, but the tradition remained. My dad wouldn't be buying the ingredients this year, though, and I knew better than to bother him about it.

As promised, Kian arrived at four thirty, dressed in well-cut trousers and a button-up shirt. His leather jacket might not be the warmest choice but he was even more gorgeous than usual. He'd clearly made an effort since he didn't see his mom that often. I followed him out to his car, pretending I wasn't nervous. I'd rarely been to hospitals—only to visit my great aunt and Brittany—and I'd never known anybody in rehab.

"Don't worry," he said, apparently reading my expression.

"What if I say something stupid? Or insensitive."

"She'll get over it. What's that?" He pointed at the wrapped package in my hands.

"It seemed wrong to show up empty-handed, especially the day before Christmas, so I went out yesterday and got her a little something."

"What?"

"A pair of slippers. I checked online to see what's allowed in most programs."

His green eyes kindled with a warmth that tightened my stomach, every time. "That's amazing, thank you." Patting his inner jacket pocket, he added, "I got her a watch, for basically the same reason."

He led the way out to his Mustang and opened the door for me. I hopped in, restraining my anxiety. This was about as far from normal as any meet-the-parents scenario could be. Somewhere between the facility and my apartment, Kian touched my knee, telling me silently that it would be fine. Weirdly, my tension dissolved. Given his penchant for trouble, he shouldn't be able to reassure me like that but my nervous system was gullible, apparently.

It was snowing slightly when we pulled into the parking lot. I didn't know what I expected, but this place was fairly nondescript, a historic building that had obviously been renovated. A brass plaque on the front read SHERBROOK HOUSE. Yeah, even the name wouldn't tell you what they did here. Kian opened the door and stepped into a tasteful reception area. Behind, there was a bank of elevators.

"I'm here to see my mother," he told the woman behind the desk. "Riley? I should be on the list."

She checked her records, then handed us guest passes, which we clipped on. "Go up to the fifth floor and check in. The floor attendant will show you to the common room."

Nodding, I thanked her and went with Kian, who was fidgeting, tugging at his shirt collar as we waited for the elevator. He offered a sheepish smile when he laced our fingers together.

"Hypocritical, I know."

"Has it been a while?"

He nodded. "We talk on the phone sometimes. But she mostly calls when she needs to get into a new program."

"And so here we are," I said as the doors opened.

He was quiet in the elevator, and as I watched, his shoulders squared. I could practically see him bracing for some kind of damage, and I tensed in sympathy. My free hand tightened so the nails bit into my palm. It couldn't be easy to watch someone you loved fail, time and again. Dashed hope must cut him up inside, until he was afraid to believe anymore.

"You okay?" I asked.

"When I see her number, I'm never sure if it's her," he said quietly. "Sometimes it's neighbors, friends wanting me to know she's strung out. And . . . I'm always afraid when the phone rings in the middle of the night. It's like . . . I don't even expect her to get better anymore, and I'm waiting to hear she's finally checked out."

"Oh, man." I wished I could think of something better to say. He'd never opened up quite this much before, and his words made me think he must feel like he'd already lost her, along with the rest of his family. "You miss her."

His throat worked. "Yeah. I really do."

I held him for a few seconds, until the elevator doors opened. By the time we stepped out, he was calm and collected, striding toward the check-in desk. We signed the visitor log, showed our passes, and then let the lady inspect our gifts. She seemed relieved that we weren't trying to give Mrs. Riley contraband. With the details sorted, she ushered us into the lounge, where a few people were already sitting with their visitors. All of the inpatients had on pajamas or some version of comfy clothes, like sweats.

Since I didn't know how Mrs. Riley looked, I waited for Kian to head toward her. First thing I noticed, she was painfully thin with big, haunted eyes; he'd gotten the green irises from her. Her hair was dull, badly dyed an inky black that made her skin look even more sallow. Her cheekbones were pronounced, as was her chin, and her mouth was pale and chapped, raw even, as if she'd been biting at her lips. Without makeup, she looked older than I expected, deep circles beneath her eyes. Her hands were knobby, raw knuckled, with cuticles ragged from nervous picking. She reminded me of a bird, all hollow bones and ruffled feathers.

He bent and kissed her cheek. "Merry Christmas, Mom."

God, it hurt more than I expected, hearing him say it out loud. Even if he rarely saw her, she was alive, and there was a chance she'd beat the odds this time, astonish him with an awesome recovery. An ache tightened my throat.

"You get more handsome every time I see you," she said with what looked like a fond, if tired smile. "Do you have a stylist or something?"

"I got your genes," he said, which obviously pleased her, based on how she beamed.

Then Mrs. Riley turned to me. "Who's this?"

"I'm Edie Kramer. Nice to meet you."

For clarity, I presumed, Kian added, "My girlfriend."

"Finally." Her eyes took on a teasing light. "You were such a late bloomer. I'm so glad you're here, Edie. Now you can level with me about how Kian's really doing. He's so evasive, especially about his job."

Since that was the last thing I could do, I managed a crooked smile. "Actually, he's taking time off to focus on school."

Kian was scowling at me, as if to say, *Why the hell did you tell her that?* I ignored him.

"Are you okay on money?" she asked, visibly anxious.

*Oh, crap. I forgot he pays for her treatments.*

"I'm fine," he said. "I've got a good amount in savings and I'm looking for part-time work, something that leaves me more time to study."

*And doesn't come with a lifetime servitude clause.*

"Oh, that's good." Relief relaxed her shoulders. "You always were so frugal. Remember how you'd lend money to your sister when she burned through her allowance? You had a ledger and everything. Such a little loan shark."

He shifted, seeming not to know how to respond. During the relatively short time I'd known him, he'd never mentioned his sister. I had the sense it was an unhealed wound, a loss he couldn't process. Quietly I reached for his hand under the table and his fingers clutched mine as if I were a rope that kept him from falling off a cliff.

"We brought presents," I cut in, mostly to change the subject.

"Did you?" Mrs. Riley seemed honestly delighted. "How sweet! And you're so pretty too. I have a good feeling about you."

Despite a rocky few years, her demeanor showed glimpses of the grace she must've exuded when she was still a socialite. I could picture her in better clothes with hair and makeup done just so, wearing a designer dress and holding a flute of expensive champagne while gossiping with moneyed guests. In fact, she could still fit in among the Blackbriar parents. I figured a bunch of them had been to rehab.

"Thanks." Producing the gift, I offered it to her with a smile.

She wasted no time in tearing into her package and she appeared pleased with the lavender slippers I'd bought, just simple ballet-style ones but since I'd never met the woman, I had no idea of her tastes. I'd gotten a medium, hoping for the best. She pulled off the somewhat worn ones she had on and slipped into them right away. Wriggling her toes, she beamed at me.

"With socks on, they fit beautifully. Thank you, Edie."

I took that to mean they were a little big, but she was nice enough not to complain. "You're welcome."

Then she unwrapped Kian's present. She had tears in her eyes when he fastened the dainty bracelet watch on her wrist. Leaning forward, she pressed a trembling hand to his cheek, and I had to look away. *My chest hurts.* For multiple reasons, this was turning out to be a lot harder than I anticipated.

The hour passed quickly, though. Too soon, the other visitors packed up, giving hugs and saying Merry Christmas for the last time. Mrs. Riley wasn't allowed a cell phone, so we couldn't offer to call her tomorrow. She hugged me, which startled me, but I went with it.

The woman held on a little longer than was comfortable, whispering, "You'll take care of him for me, won't you?"

*I'm trying.* I imagined facing this broken woman to tell her she'd lost her son—the only person she had left in the world—and every muscle in my body locked in denial. *No way. She's barely coping as it is. For her that would be the end.*

"Okay," I said.

Kian gave us a weird look as I hurried past, alarmed in every possible way. I knew him, there was no way he'd bring up such a

convoluted issue with her. So she'd just get blindsided in four and a half months or whatever. I steadied my breathing.

*That won't happen. I'll figure something out.*

"You ready?" Kian asked, once he finished saying good-bye.

"Yeah."

There was a line downstairs to turn in the passes and reclaim our IDs. I didn't say anything until after we got in the car and had been driving for a while. Kian broke the silence first, letting out a long sigh.

"She looks pretty fragile, huh?"

I nodded.

"For the last eight years, I've felt like I'm the parent. And I'm tired. But . . ."

"You can't give up. I love that about you." Though I didn't say so, I wished he had that kind of determination when it came to his own self-preservation.

He smiled, reaching for my hand. The snow had accumulated a little while we were inside, dusting the trees and sidewalks. Passing cars had the wipers on and the street was dark with melting snowflakes. I put on the radio, wondering if I'd ever feel better. Between my mom, the dead Teflon crew, and the sword of Damocles hanging over Kian's head, fear felt like a permanent fixture, needles constantly digging into my spine.

Half an hour later, he pulled up in front of my building. "What time should I come over tomorrow?"

"Noon?"

"Sounds good. I'll see you then."

I didn't invite him inside because I saw my dad shuffling up the

sidewalk toward us. He wasn't dressed for the weather, wearing only an old tweed jacket my mother had begged him to throw away years ago. His shirt had stains on the front, and it looked as if he hadn't shaved in at least a week. His beard was more gray than brown, something I never noticed before.

Kian kissed me quickly, then I climbed out of the car. He waited until I went in before pulling away. Dad followed a couple of minutes later. I hugged him and was alarmed to feel how skinny he'd already gotten. He'd always leaned more toward reedy than Mom or me, but I could tell he hadn't been eating during work hours. Shit, it was all I could do to make him have dinner after he got home.

"What did you have for lunch?" I asked.

He made a vague gesture that was supposed to reassure me. "One of the grad students brought me a sandwich. I'm fine."

*That doesn't mean you ate it.*

"You're not. Promise me you won't go to work tomorrow."

At first he gave me a blank look, edged in frustration. "Why—oh."

"It's Christmas Day. Kian's coming. And I need you to help, or all the groceries I bought a few days ago will be ruined."

He exhaled slowly, and it was like watching a light come on in his head. "Right. I guess I'm not doing very well, huh?"

*Finally. I was afraid the fog would never lift.*

"I want you to be present when you're here. I still need you." Since I wasn't used to saying stuff like that, it was hard, and the words came out choky.

"Okay." Awkwardly, Dad reached for me, offering a one-armed hug. "I promise. We just need some time to figure out how the pieces fit now."



*Badly*, I thought. *You only see me half the time.*

Still, I was relieved he'd be around tomorrow. Maybe, if we tried really hard, we could coax a smile out of him. The new apartment came with a TV and I could hook up my laptop for a holiday movie marathon. Given his status as a classic-movie nerd, Kian probably adored *It's a Wonderful Life* and *Miracle on 34th Street*. I'd seen both—didn't love them—but I was willing to sit through them if Kian and Dad wanted to.

I chilled with my dad while he paged through a scientific journal. But an hour later, he murmured, "We should get some sleep, if we're making a feast tomorrow."

It was eight o'clock.

But I couldn't *force* him to talk to me. Maybe the progress I'd made was as much as I could hope for so soon. Tired, I trudged down the hall to wash my face and brush my teeth. My room was still devoid of personality, most of my things still boxed up in the closet. This didn't feel like somewhere I actually lived, more that I was killing time.

When I popped my laptop open, I had a message from Vi waiting. She was still online, so I pinged her for a chat. As usual, her room was a mess and beyond her closed door, I could hear her mom yelling at Vi's brother. Then her dad rumbled something while she made an OMG face.

"Sorry about that."

"It's okay. I envy you the noise, actually."

"Oh. Yeah, I bet." She changed the subject swiftly, probably guessing I didn't want to go farther down that road. "Did you get my package?"

"Not yet."

"Crap. It's probably hung up in the Christmas mail rush."

"Thanks for thinking of me. I forgot to send you anything." *Yeab, I'm definitely winning the cruddy friend award this year.*

"I didn't expect you to. Merry Christmas, Edie."

"Thanks. Give my best to your family."

"Oh, if your invitation still stands, I'm talking to my parents about coming to see you. Maybe for a few days during spring break?"

Since I'd mentioned that a while ago, long before the supernatural shit hit the fan, it was probably a terrible idea for all the reasons. But she seemed so bright and hopeful that I couldn't say no. Maybe her parents would do that for me. I'd used a favor to protect her, so Wedderburn should honor the deal.

"I'd love to see you," I said honestly. "I miss you."

"Me too."

Just then I heard Vi's mom yell, "Are you coming down to wrap presents or not?"

Visibly exasperated, she shouted back, "Give me a minute!"

"It's fine. Go do family stuff."

"Sorry. We all have to wrap junk for the relatives. Grandparents, cousins, nieces, whatever. God, it's such a pain."

Vi might think so, but if it went away, if her house got quiet, I bet she'd feel differently. "Say hi to everyone for me."

"No problem." With that, she signed off.

There was no word from Ryu, but it hadn't been long enough since we talked for me to worry about him. That left me sitting in my room, wishing Kian could pop in secretly like he used to. But some things couldn't be undone.

In my darkest moments, I wondered if it would've been better for everyone if I'd stuck with the original plan . . . and jumped off the bridge.

# MONSTER'S BALL

Christmas wasn't bad.

With my dad checked in, we made enough food for the three of us and it wasn't depressing or lame like Thanksgiving. There was ham, mashed potatoes, and green beans—not a feast—but better than the frozen junk we'd been eating since my mom's funeral. Afterward, we exchanged gifts. I was astonished my father remembered to buy me anything, even a bookstore gift card. He seemed to like the blue scarf I got him.

Kian offered me a small box. I'd guessed right when I speculated he'd gone for jewelry. Excitement flooded through me as I peeled away the shiny paper, revealing a delicate silver chain threading through the center of an infinity symbol. Instinctively I curled my right hand, fighting the urge to check whether the sigil on my inner wrist was hidden. Casting a glance at my dad, I was reassured to see that he was reading a magazine. I had mixed feelings about the gift, considering what it represented.

He could probably tell that because he leaned forward to

explain, "That's not supposed to represent interminable servitude. I could talk geometry and calculus, add in topology and Möbius transformations, then move on to fractals and the Koch snowflake, but in reality, it's much simpler. It just means 'endless.' And that's us, Edie. So this necklace, it's how I feel about you."

I let out a little sigh, not exasperation, but more like the sweetness was escaping from my body in tiny gulps. He was doing this so the mark on my wrist wouldn't feel like a brand anymore. Instead, I could look at it and think of Kian rather than his former masters.

"Thank you," I whispered.

"Want me to put it on you?"

"Absolutely."

He stood up and I shifted enough for him to reach, lifting my hair so it didn't get tangled in the clasp. The chain was the perfect length, settling into the hollow at the base of my throat. For a few seconds, he just gazed down at me with the look that said he'd be kissing me if my dad wasn't sitting here reading *Scientific American*. In response I touched his hand.

"My present probably won't seem as cool by comparison."

"If you picked it out for me, I'm sure I'll love it."

With an eager expression, he tore the wrapping like a little kid to reveal the Alfred Hitchcock box set I'd gotten, five classic films. He'd probably seen them but based on my covert observation of his DVD collection, he didn't own them. I knew he loved *Notorious*, so maybe he liked *Spellbound* too. Nervous, I waited for his reaction.

"This is great," he said softly.

"Why don't you play one of them?" Dad suggested without glancing up.

Yeah, maybe suspense would be a better move than a holiday

flick we'd all seen ten times. I got the right cable and hooked up my laptop to the TV, then Kian chose the movie. *Spellbound*, probably because of Ingrid Bergman. We settled on the couch together to watch. After a while, my dad put down his magazine, drawn despite himself.

Once the movie ended, I asked, "Can I go out on New Year's Eve?"

"With Kian?" Dad asked.

"Yeah."

"Then it's fine."

My mom would've demanded to know where we were going, at what time we'd be home, and when she was around, Dad would've been right there with her. But he'd abdicated since then, trusting Kian to the point that it worried *me*. Not that there was anything to fear, but still. Fathers were supposed to be fearsome and protective, right?

"I'll take good care of her," Kian promised.

That rallied my dad enough to add, "No drinking."

"I promise." Considering that we were going to a party hosted by the Harbinger, getting shit-faced might be the last mistake I ever made.

Soon after, Kian collected his movies and headed home, freeing my dad to retire. I stayed up late reading, which set the tone for the rest of my break. Probably I should be studying, but school had lost its urgency. If I retained my status as a catalyst, Wedderburn would make sure I got into the right college to stay on the path. If I'd already lost, then I wouldn't have the freedom to do as I pleased anyway. Consequently, I felt pretty zen about *my* future. Other people, like Kian and my dad, however, might worry me to death.

The rest of the week was pretty chill. I did a little assigned reading, scrawled some homework, chatted with Vi, and answered an e-mail from Ryu, who'd gone to Sacramento for the break to see his grandparents. The time difference from East Coast to West was better than Boston to Tokyo, so we did a video chat too. At some point since I last saw him, he'd had the blond tips trimmed off, so he looked less J-Pop and more straight-edge handsome.

"How's your friend?"

"Hanging in there." Which was truer than he knew.

The convo didn't last long because it was getting late here, and I had the Feast of the Fools the next day. I still didn't have a costume and I doubted going as a mad scientist like I had at Cameron's party would cut it. After disconnecting with Ryu, I fiddled around online, looking for DIY ideas. I couldn't decide if it would be better to go nondescript or to pick something monstrous. Maybe the immortals would think I was one of them?

In the end, I decided on silent movie actress. A trip to the thrift store the next day hooked me up with a flapper dress, and I did my makeup so I looked pale and otherworldly, which also gave me an inhuman vibe. I used black on my lips and eyes, dark gray on the lids, then I put on a floppy velvet hat and draped a bunch of long beads around my neck. My shoes were plain flats because it made sense to be cautious when going into a situation like this.

My dad was reading in the living room when I came out. "It's a costume party?"

"Yeah." I waited for him to ask something else.

"Make sure you're home before one."

That was much later than he'd have allowed before. But I told

myself it was a special exception for New Year's Eve. *It doesn't mean anything bad.*

Kian arrived just before nine. My nerves had escalated to mountainous proportions, as all the horrific possibilities raced through my head. I'd messaged Kian about my costume earlier, so he had on a black suit and tie with a white shirt. Quickly I did his face to match mine; people might take us for a couple of ghosts instead of what I had in mind, but that might even be better.

"Ready?" he asked.

*Not really.*

But my dad would think it was bizarre if I didn't want to go to the party I'd requested permission to attend. So I nodded, we said bye, and headed for the Mustang. In the car Kian got his phone out, tapping GPS for a clue how to find the address. Leaning close, I saw it was outside the city. *Worrisome.* Chickening out wasn't an option, though.

*Attendance is mandatory.*

Negotiating city traffic on New Year's Eve took a while, so I was tense by the time we cleared Boston. The route map seemed to be taking us along the coast. We drove for nearly an hour when the GPS lady warned us we were getting close to our destination. Which turned out to be a creepy-as-hell pile of stones with jagged rocks and an angry ocean instead of a pretty beach. There weren't many cars, something that shouldn't have surprised me, because most of the guests wouldn't require transportation. Most could terror-travel—through sewers or mirrors or electrical lines—and were probably already lurking inside.

"Awesome," I said aloud, gazing at the Gothic architecture.

If some eccentric tycoon set out to build a terrifying house, he couldn't have achieved his goal better. From the mullioned windows to the flying buttresses and gargoyles perched on the roof's edge, the place radiated ominous. The lawn was overgrown, bordered by hedges so wild that they encroached on the view. Ivy ran amok on one side of the foundation, digging in its roots so the stones would crumble sooner or later. I breathed in, conscious of damp and salt and something else, sharp and wild, nothing I'd ever smelled.

"This is so his style," Kian said.

"That's not very reassuring."

With a faint smile, he took my hand. *Yeah, you're relaxed. You've got nothing to lose, you already bargained it away.* I wanted to yell at him—to ask him how he thought his mother would take the bad news. Now that I'd met her, I felt even worse.

"Come on."

When we approached the door, it opened in the kind of spooky-squeaky slow motion from haunted houses, but when I checked, there were no wires or sensors I could see. Inside, it felt ten degrees colder, and it was chilly enough to snow outdoors. I huddled deeper into my coat as my breath misted white. The ornate marble floor was chipped, the pattern obscured by years of neglect. Here and there, tiles were broken, as if from great impact, and ominous stains discolored the lighter squares. This place only needed the classic warning sign: ABANDON ALL HOPE, YE WHO ENTER HERE.

"This party sucks," I muttered. "Where's the evil butler to take our jackets?"

"You'd freeze without it."

"True." I didn't hear any music, but really, what did I know about the Feast of Fools? An Internet search had only uncovered a bunch



of stuff about the Catholic Church. And that definitely didn't apply here.

Kian navigated the warren of hallways as if he'd been here before. We passed shadow-drenched parlors that were sinister in their silence, especially when I registered the flickers of movement within. My heart kicked into overdrive as we rushed past. Sometimes I shut my eyes against the sensation of something standing directly behind me: scrape of unseen claws on my jacket; brushing chill on my cheek. I shuddered as Kian quickened his step.

"This is just the gauntlet. We'll be there soon."

"Sounds like you're a pro."

"Wedderburn's sent me before when he didn't feel like putting in an appearance."

"Kind of like his emissary?"

He nodded, tightening his hold on me. "Don't let go, okay?"

"Are you kidding? Let me guess, in this scenario, *we're* the fools they're feasting on."

He ignored my nervous wisecrack. "Seriously, Edie. Not even if you think I'm on your other side. You might feel someone take your hand, it might even look like me, but *don't* let it lead you away."

I swallowed hard. "I promise."

By the time we got to the heavy double doors, I'd probably put bruises on Kian's fingers, but he didn't seem to mind. "This is the ballroom. I can't even *begin* to explain what it's like inside, so it's easier if we just go in and get this over with."

"Confidence, I am now full of it."

In response he kissed my forehead. "Stay close. I've survived two of these, one entirely on my own. So if you stick with me and don't

draw attention, you should be fine." With that, he held out a hand. "The invitation. You brought it, right?"

"Yeah, here you go."

While I watched, partly in fear and the rest fascination, he set the vellum against the wood, which rippled like flesh, then a mouth appeared, grotesquely misshapen, and the thing devoured our card. Only when every morsel was gone did the doors pop open. As requested, I was Kian's shadow as we slipped inside. It scared the crap out of me when the whatever-that-was made a . . . digestive sort of noise as it shut.

"Did we just get *eaten*?" I whispered.

"It's one of the Harbinger's parlor tricks."

"Then I'd hate to see a real application of his power."

I was trying to be funny, but Kian nodded. "You really would."

At first the ballroom was too dim for me to get a sense of what I was seeing. My eyes tried to adjust to the darkness but a blinding strobe flooded the room at random intervals, leaving me purblind. Audio tried to compensate but the room was full of echoes and reverb, disorienting me further, so I could only parse the scene in staccato flashes, imprinted in an inverted color spectrum, so I felt like I'd fallen into negative space.

That went on for what felt forever. It got hard to breathe for the panic tightening my chest, and I held on to Kian as hard as I could. Thin cool fingertips trailed over my other hand, but I knew it wasn't him. I jerked away and strained to see exactly what was touching me. The creature twirled away in a flutter of inky hair, ragged clothes, and the shine of too bright eyes, like a cat in the dark.

"What was that?"

"Harmless. Mostly." That didn't really answer the question.

But before I could press the point, the shadows dispersed to normal levels and the strobe stopped. I blinked, repeatedly, adapting to the candlelight. It was hard to tell what was costume and what was reality, though even if something seemed human, it probably wasn't. The strong smell I'd noticed outside intensified; it reminded me of a deep, dark wood, dense with trees and ancient things, unknowable but earthy too. It also held the essence of a storm—lightning splitting the sky, ozone, dirt, and decay—wrapped around a desiccated bone.

Then the Harbinger appeared before us, defying gravity in a slow drift to a dais I hadn't noticed. This time, he was dressed as a mad harlequin, complete with belled hat and pointy shoes. His hair hung in multiple braids, each adorned with some crazy icon. The cat statue had vanished, and in its place, he carried a carved walking stick topped with a dog head.

I pressed closer to Kian, who was watching the show. He wrapped an arm around me in response but he never looked away from our benefactor. A show of respect, maybe. I followed his example and waited to see what would happen next.

"All of my esteemed guests have now arrived," the Harbinger said. "Which means the entertainment can proceed." That prompted a wave of applause, and like any good showman, our host paused to permit the revelry. He went on, "There stands among us one who is willing to die for love."

Hysterical laughter echoed throughout the room, gaining volume until it assaulted my eardrums in maniacal crescendo. Four creatures slunk toward us, until it was all I could do not to slap them away. I'd been told not to draw attention to myself, and starting a fight would definitely qualify. My eyes couldn't decide what they

looked like—sometimes they were arachnid and other times they were feathered head to toe like avian demons. There was probably some awful story to explain their creation, but I was more concerned with keeping them from touching me.

I'd learned my lesson with the thin man.

The Harbinger continued the show, once the derision subsided. "I think we can all agree that such a one must be honored tonight, for there is no greater fool than that."

"Crown the king!" came the thunderous response.

*What the hell.* I remembered something, but so many hands were already pulling at Kian, tugging him away from me and toward the dais. The chant gained ground, coming in hisses and moans, ecstatic screams and hoarse croaks. Kian tried to fight the mob's will, but our hold broke and then there was only the endless tide of monsters surrounding me.

I went up on tiptoes to watch him being shoved upward until he was standing at the Harbinger's side. He clapped Kian on the shoulder. "Tonight, you are king and I, your fool." To the audience, he added, "Behold your liege, the Lord of Misrule."

Four pairs of hands settled on my shoulders, keeping me from moving toward the stage. I tried to shake them off, but the more I struggled, the less it seemed worth it. My mind went strange, fuzzy and indistinct. The scent of cut flowers filled my head and I relaxed. Suddenly, this seemed like the best party I'd ever attended.

"Kian is really hot," I told one of the shadows nearby.

It drew me close with a whisper I didn't catch. *Seems really important. I should—*

"What would you have me do, sire?" The Harbinger broke the spell, and something slithered away from me with a frustrated snarl.

But I was shaky as hell, like I'd gone days without eating, and my mouth was dry as a bone. When I touched my lips with trembling fingertips, they felt like leather. *How long have I been here?*

"I led the procession, like you wanted," Kian said. *What? I don't remember that at all.* "Now I need to find Edie."

"Ah, yes. Your beloved queen. Go to her, then. I'm certain sure she's unharmed."

I suspected his definition and mine were much different. The crowd gave way, letting me meet Kian halfway. He wrapped his arms around me, and I smelled blood on him. His shirt was stained dark with it, and his beautiful face bore streaks of grime. When he lifted a hand to touch my cheek, I saw that his knuckles were scraped raw.

*Damn.* I didn't even know what to ask.

He beat me to it, swearing viciously. "Something fed on you."

I stared up at him, confused. "Are you sure?"

Reflexively I flinched when he touched a sore spot on my neck. "Yeah. Right here."

That was when I realized I wasn't wearing my coat . . . or the dress I had on before. But sadly, starting with that lost time, my Feast of Fools troubles had only just begun.

# DEATH MATCHES ARE NOT PARTY GAMES

A smoothly sinister voice spoke from behind me. "Introduce us." Kian kept his arm around me as we turned. I still hadn't recovered from realizing I couldn't remember what happened; it was too soon for another complication, but from Kian's expression, I didn't have a choice. The person who'd addressed us, well, he was radiant. There was simply no other word. Garbed in shades of bronze and gold, he should've looked tawdry, gaudy even, but instead he radiated an aura of majesty. I fidgeted, as if I were staring into the sun.

Unlike the Harbinger, I had no problem focusing on these princely features. Everything about him was beautiful, perfectly sculpted. Hollywood would instantly plaster his face all over billboards and make him model underwear, if they ever saw him. But this creature also radiated an uncomfortable heat. Sweat broke out on my forehead and beneath my armpits the longer he looked at me without speaking.

Finally Kian said, "This is Edie."

I wasn't sure if that was the best move, but unless they were asking for your head on a stick, maybe it was best to be polite? Somehow I managed a sickly smile. It made my cheeks feel swollen and my lips felt like they might crack. My throat was so dry I could hardly swallow.

"You need to take better care of her." So far the creature hadn't addressed me.

I was mesmerized by the inhuman spikes of hair that somehow looked more like precious metal. Even his eyes were golden. As if reading my mind, he swiveled his head in my direction, reminiscent of a hunting hawk. The intensity of that stare rocked me back a step.

"She's protected," Kian replied.

A graceful gesture, indicating disbelief. "And you trust her to that one?"

I followed his gaze to the Harbinger, spinning madly across the room, for no reason I could discern. It did seem like a bad bargain, but if there had been anyone more powerful, who wasn't also part of the game, Kian would've approached him instead. Sparks of light prickled in my field of vision, giving the creature before me an odd ambient glow.

"Do you know who I am?" His voice sounded strange.

"Dwyer." I rasped out my best guess. "Formerly known by many names, most of whom were sun gods."

The resultant smile was blinding. "I see why you treasure her," he said to Kian. When he turned to me again, his face fell like sunset, darkening, threaded with orange and scarlet, bright notes amid the shadows. "Mark me. I will destroy you." He might've been commenting on the weather. There was no malice, no hostility, and that made it worse.

Anything I said would sound like bravado because I had no idea what his weaknesses might be. He had so much power, and I felt like a flea in comparison. Once human belief created such a creature, I understood why they'd worshipped him. Even knowing the truth of his origin, I was barely resisting the urge to take a knee.

So I just murmured, "I understand that we're on opposing teams."

"Do you think you're a player?" Dwyer asked, obviously amused.

*No. I'm just trying not to be played.*

Kian saved me then. "She needs a drink. I'm sure you understand."

With that, he swept us away from whatever bad intentions the sun god had. I didn't see Wedderburn anywhere, but I recognized one of his minions in the crowd. The peeling white face and the smeared red mouth, along with the frizzy hair, could belong only to the terrifying clown-thing that had been called to execute Kian a few weeks back. I pulled on his arm.

"Is that—"

"Buzzkill," Kian supplied. "Works for Wedderburn, one of his trusted mercenaries."

"I can't even imagine how it gets paid."

"Better if you don't."

The bruise on my neck throbbed, as if reacting to the implicit threat. From across the room, the monster's eyes met mine, yellow sclera with red veins prominent throughout, and it lifted a gloved hand to blow me a kiss. *Yeab, Wedderburn wants me to know he's still watching.*

As promised, Kian found me a bottle of plain water, and it hurt to swallow. I downed all of it so fast my stomach sloshed afterward. I leaned my head on his shoulder, miserable as I'd been since we



put my mother in the ground. Yet both symbols on my wrists were quiet, so this must be part of the plan. I *bated* that I had supernatural guidance systems imprinted on my skin.

"Better?" he asked.

"A little. How long have we been here?"

"I'm not sure. But probably not as long as you think."

"More of the Harbinger's tricks?" I tugged at my clothes, only to notice that they'd shifted back at some point. So . . . was I wrong before? *Am I wearing the same dress?* The constant unreality might wreck my brain.

"Mostly. I think."

The Harbinger stopped his bizarre frolicking to clap his hands, and the sound rang out like thunder, much louder than anyone else could achieve with two palms. "We have one final diversion before the feast is ended. Shall I show you?"

Like before, the mob practically destroyed the ballroom with enthusiasm. By then, numbness had taken me over; I could only exist in a state of abject terror for so long. Along with everyone else, I watched as two giant amorphous moth-beasts dragged someone up onto the dais. At first glance, I thought it was a girl but when the person rolled over, I realized it was a boy, probably fourteen or so, and small for his age. Definitely human, unless this was the best illusion ever. His terror was palpable, and it made the immortals nearby stir with avid anticipation.

"*Delicious,*" something with sharp teeth hissed.

The boy came up onto his knees, resting delicate hands on the floor before him in a posture of defeat so abject that I took a step forward. Bruises ringed his throat and his wrists, and what he had on could barely be called clothes; the shirt was torn in three places

and the pants had frayed until they hit his knees, revealing filthy calves and feet that were sliced up as if he was routinely forced to walk across broken glass. On his right hand, two of the fingers were bent at unnatural angles, either broken now, or they had been, then they healed badly afterward.

"Kian . . .," I whispered. "I don't like where this is going."

"This one has a most impressive survival instinct," the Harbinger said, indicating the cowering boy with a flourish. "He's been my favorite pet for some time. But his luck might run out today. Shall we find out?"

The audience rumbled in agreement, and the room changed. I had no explanation for it, but suddenly it seemed as if we'd moved from the ballroom entirely. We were standing outside an arena now with a blood-stained pit below. Bones littered the floor of it, along with broken weapons. Snarls came from the sublevel, enough to chill my blood.

"Time for a bit of fun," the Harbinger said.

Before I knew what I planned to do, I broke away from Kian. He reached for me but I wasn't stopping. I'd been passive for too long, waiting and hoping that things would get better. It was time for me to fight, even if I didn't know how. Yeah, there might be fall-out, but the Harbinger *had* to protect me, right? Even if I interfered with his grisly show.

Scared didn't cover how I felt just then. *This is a death match, a gladiator fight, and you've never even played Mortal Kombat. You don't know shit about knives or swords or whatever. You're probably going to lose. Horribly.*

But I wouldn't be able to live with myself if I stood by and watched.

When I climbed up on the stage, the Harbinger was a statue, lightning eyes flashing astonishment and displeasure. But he held still and waited for me to play my card. Maybe Dwyer was right, and I'd end up broken if I participated in their game. I only knew that I was sick and tired of being moved on the board.

"He's pretty beat up," I said. "So let me go instead."

Kian immediately protested, but the crowd drowned out his yelling. If I knew him, he was volunteering to fight in *my* place. The Harbinger, however, appeared to be considering my offer with a narrowed gaze. On the floor, the boy cowered, staring up at me with bewildered incomprehension. I wondered where he'd come from, how long he'd been an immortal's plaything. That torture might've left him unable to function, yet I wasn't sorry that I'd stepped forward. It felt like the first clean, brave thing I'd done in ages.

After a moment of consideration, the Harbinger turned the question over to the mob. "Let the audience decide. Who will fight to close the feast?" He pulled the boy to his feet, shoving him toward the edge of the dais. "Show your support."

The crowd responded with a modest round of jeers.

I didn't wait to be dragged forward. Stepping up, I tried to look bold and daring instead of terrified out of my mind. Raising both arms, I struck a champion pose. This was so far outside my comfort zone that it had a different zip code. But my swagger seemed to be working. In response, the monsters hooted and screamed for me; clearly, I'd won this popularity contest.

The Harbinger quieted everyone with a gesture, then he turned to me. I couldn't look directly at him but he had to be beyond pissed. He didn't strike me as the kind who enjoyed being thwarted when he was staging a show.

"You'll fight in his place. Your wish is granted," he intoned, loud enough for the whole arena to hear. Softer, he added, "'Ware that you don't regret your altruism."

I had a moment to be glad I was wearing flats before the two giant moth-things each grabbed one of my arms and flew me toward the pit. My head was still spinning from the suddenness when they let go, about six feet from the bottom. I hit the ground hard, I tried to tuck and roll like in the movies, but I ended up hurting my shoulder. And the snarling intensified, along with a wet, slaver-ing sound.

The creature that slunk out of the shadows had the wings of a bat, a goat's head, and the rest of its body appeared to be serpentine with vestigial limbs that ended in razor-sharp claws. It was roughly three times my mass, and I was already calculating all the ways it could kill me when a black bag dropped at my feet with a clang. My mom would be horrified that I'd gotten myself into such a mess. *There's no excuse for violence, Edie. It's always better to talk things out logically.* Somehow I didn't think this monster would be interested in chatting.

It snuffled through gaping nostrils as I edged toward the sack. Best guess, these were weapons or tools I could use. Even the Harbinger wouldn't expect a human to fight barehanded. Would he? My hands trembled as I lunged, then scrambled back. I was struggling to unfasten the ties when the creature charged. Breathless, I spun to the side. Blindly I reached into the pack and pulled out . . . a heavy stick. On closer inspection, I realized I was holding a spiked flail, a weapon I recognized from playing D&D with my parents in junior high. It was also much heavier than pen-and-paper adventures had led me to expect.

Part of me wondered if this was an elaborate illusion. In role-playing games, if you disbelieved a spell and made your saving throw, the danger disappeared. So I tried that first as the monster turned, clumsily, for another go. *I don't believe you exist. You're not real.* But the thing didn't fade; it ran at me and the claws that raked over my back as I dodged felt pretty damn real. So did the blood trickling down my spine. I'd never known pain quite like the hot stripes etched across my back; even the work Kian had done on me didn't compare.

*The claws must be poisoned.* As that thought occurred to me, the monster lashed out with its tail, sweeping me at the knees. I bounced forward, my weapon clattering beside me. Pure instinct drove me to roll again and again, until I was far enough to get to my feet. The spikes on the heavy metal ball sparked on the rocks. From above, I hadn't noticed any particular geographic features but there were niches in the stone that let me play a terrifying game of hide-and-seek. I found a crevice too narrow for the monster to follow, slid sideways, and ran all the way to the back.

Judicious maneuvering let me wriggle around to face the beast, now mindlessly slamming at the stones. More terrifying, the wall gave way in small avalanches each time it swung its tail. It tore at the channel with its claws while I weighed how badly I was screwed. Fear made it hard for me to think straight; I had no combat abilities to speak of and I'd dropped the sack that might have something helpful besides the flail. Since I could barely lift the thing, it was hard for me to picture doing any damage with it.

Above, I heard the audience booing my careful, chicken-shit tactics. They wanted blood. Shivering, I factored the rate of excavation against the estimated distance the monster needed to travel.

Math affirmed that if I just crouched here against the wall, I'd die five minutes from now, give or take a few seconds.

*I have to make a move.*

In retreating here, I'd thought only of momentary safety, nothing about strategy that might let me defeat the thing. Did monsters like this die? It was probably created by our stories, which meant there *might* be gryphons, hydras, and unicorns running around somewhere too. I didn't recognize this thing from the legends I knew, which sucked because stories might've built in an Achilles' heel, like how unicorns could be tamed by virgins. Obviously purity had no impact on this demon's desire to rend my flesh and gnaw my bones.

*Four and a half minutes left. Do something.*

But sheer fright had my brain on lockdown, so I could only think of how the time was ticking away. More of the stone barrier between me and it sheared away; it lashed out with its claws, slicing the air no more than five feet away. Two or three more solid hits and—

"Get the bag." That eerie whisper belonged to the Harbinger, but he was nowhere nearby. I shouldn't be surprised that he could throw his voice since he had all kinds of other illusions at his command. Yet if I could figure out how to get past the thing, I'd already be doing it.

A flash of light to my left drew my eye. Peering closer, I saw divots in the rock that could be used by a desperate girl as handholds. Holy shit, I was so limiting the way I considered my escape routes. I was focused on 2-D, only forward and back. *But I can totally go up.* My skirt wasn't long enough to hinder my movements, so I twisted around in the niche and set my feet in the outcropping. For a few seconds, I feared that my upper body strength wouldn't let me do this—while the monster smashed ever closer—but I strained with

all my strength and went up a couple of feet. Two more, and two again, until I was out of its reach.

Fifteen feet up, I found the tiniest of ledges, imperceptible in the gloom. Like a tightrope walker I crept around the edge of the pit, searching for the bag. It took the beast a little longer to realize I wasn't trapped anymore, then it snarled with rage. The ground trembled as it wheeled. The thing sniffed the air in my direction, suggesting it couldn't see too well. *There's the bag.* But now I was up too high to reach it easily. Climbing down would be too slow.

*I have to jump. Before it spots me.*

Crouching, I dropped. Somehow I held on to the flail, but the impact hurt my ankles and I fell over when one of them twisted with a painful crack. *Broken?* I had no idea; I hadn't been the type of kid to play outside and injure myself. But now I couldn't even run, and my back was still bleeding. I grabbed the bag and used the handle of my weapon to shove to my feet. With frantic hands, I dug through, finding blades and bottles, but I had no idea what item held the key to stopping this creature.

Just before the beast trampled me, the whisper came again, exasperated. "Red vial."

It was dark enough that it took me critical seconds to figure out which one that was. Distracted, I took another talon slash, this one across my shoulder. The pain made me drop my weapon. Now that I was bleeding in two places, the monster's sounds grew . . . voracious. Long skeins of drool drizzled from the goat's jaws, and when it opened its mouth to bite, the thing had fangs, not the flat teeth of an herbivore. I had no idea what I was supposed to do with the red vial, but there was no time to think. Impulse made me chuck the glass into the open maw lunging at me. My aim wasn't good enough to

make a basket at normal distance but since it was on top of me, the vial skimmed right into its mouth.

Reflex made it bite down. I stumbled away as it growled and spat slivers of glass. A few seconds later, it tumbled forward and hit the ground. And with a distinct edge, the Harbinger proclaimed me the winner. When the moth-men came for me, I almost passed out from the pain in my back and shoulder. Somehow I held on until they set me on the edge of the pit. Then the pain flourished into three-point agony. My ankle would barely hold my weight, but against the odds, I was standing in the ballroom again.

"We must have a serious chat," the Harbinger said, clamping my arm with steely fingers.

Kian shoved to the front of the crowd pressing around us and pulled me away. "Another time. We're done here."

The intended victim was still cowering; he stared up at me as I quietly offered a hand. But I didn't have the strength to pull him up. Kian saw what I was trying to do while the monsters around us got increasingly restless, probably sensing the Harbinger's discontent, and he hauled the kid to his feet.

Then he knelt, his voice more commanding than I'd ever heard. "Get on."

Before the rioting started, we ran for our lives.